



Beyond the partitioned self: Diasporic longing and the fluidity of home in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract

This paper examines the profound themes of diasporic longing and cultural fragmentation in Geetanjali Shree's International Booker Prize-winning novel, *Tomb of Sand* (Ret Samadhi). Utilizing a qualitative, textual analysis framework informed by postcolonial and feminist theory, the study investigates how the novel subverts traditional narratives of home, exile, and belonging. The analysis focuses on the protagonist, Ma, whose journey from the confines of her North Indian home to the porous borders of Pakistan becomes a metaphor for the fragmented South Asian psyche post-Partition. The findings reveal that Shree moves beyond a binary of home and exile, instead proposing a fluid, permeable concept of identity where borders are psychologically and emotionally transgressed. The paper concludes that *Tomb of Sand* offers a radical reimagining of diaspora, suggesting that healing and wholeness are found not in rootedness to a single nation, but in the acceptance of fragmentation, mobility, and the continuous, border-crossing search for self.

Keywords: Geetanjali Shree, *Tomb of Sand*, Diaspora, Post-Partition Literature, Cultural Fragmentation, Home and Exile, Border Studies, Postcolonial Novel

Introduction

The experience of diaspora, characterized by a poignant longing for a lost or imagined homeland and a pervasive sense of cultural fragmentation, constitutes a central concern in postcolonial literature. This literary tradition grapples with the enduring psychological and social legacies of colonialism, Partition, and displacement, continually probing the complex interplay between memory, identity, and place. Geetanjali Shree's magnum opus, *Tomb of Sand* (translated from Hindi by Daisy Rockwell), emerges as a seminal text within this discourse, offering a radical and exuberant deconstruction of entrenched notions of home, exile, and belonging. Unlike conventional narratives that often posit a stable, geographical homeland as the object of diasporic yearning, Shree's novel challenges this very paradigm, arguing that in a world shaped by violent borders and mass migration, identity itself is inherently fragmented and multiply situated. This paper, therefore, seeks to conduct a critical analysis of *Tomb of Sand*, positing that through the labyrinthine journey of its octogenarian protagonist, Ma, the novel transcends the binary of home versus exile to articulate a more fluid, permeable, and ultimately liberating conception of selfhood that is forged in the very act of crossing borders—both physical and metaphysical.

The critical framework for this analysis is rooted in the theoretical intersections of postcolonial studies, particularly the work of Homi K. Bhabha on the "third space" and hybridity, and feminist critiques that reimagine space, mobility, and the agency of the marginalized. The novel's setting, straddling the heavily fortified border between India and Pakistan, immediately invokes the traumatic history of the 1947 Partition—a cataclysmic event that created not two nations but millions of exiles, permanently instilling a sense of loss and fragmentation into the subcontinental psyche. Ma's initial state of depression and her literal turning towards the wall at the novel's beginning symbolize this internalized exile, a retreat from a world defined by

partitions. However, her subsequent rebellion—her decision to travel to Pakistan—becomes the central act through which Shree explores her thesis.

This paper will argue that Ma's journey is not a simple return to a point of origin but a deliberate embrace of fragmentation. Her exile is not from a singular home but from a monolithic identity. By crossing the border, she does not merely traverse geography; she navigates memory, language, and trauma, piecing together a self that is consciously assembled from the fragments of both sides of the Radcliffe Line. The "tomb of sand" of the title thus becomes a multivalent metaphor: it is the suffocating weight of borders, the erasure of history, but also the shifting, unstable ground upon which new, non-nationalist identities can be built. Through a close reading of key narrative sequences—Ma's transformation in Delhi, her interactions with the transgender character Rosie Bua, and her pivotal experiences in Pakistan—this study will demonstrate how Shree recasts diasporic longing not as a pathological condition to be cured by return, but as a generative state of being. The conclusion will assert that *Tomb of Sand* offers a vital contribution to contemporary literary studies, presenting a vision where home is not a place to be possessed, but a dynamic, ongoing process of becoming, found in the courageous acceptance of one's own fragmented and border-crossing nature.

Content: Introduction (Context, Problem, Research Question)

Context: The 1947 Partition of India remains one of the most catastrophic events in South Asian history, creating not just two nations but a diaspora of millions whose sense of home and belonging was irrevocably fractured. This historical trauma birthed a rich literary tradition preoccupied with themes of displacement, memory, and the violent drawing of borders. Within this canon, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (translated by Daisy Rockwell) emerges as a radical and postmodern departure. The novel,

through the journey of an eighty-year-old woman simply called Ma, moves beyond elegiac nostalgia to challenge the very definitions of home and exile.

Problem: Traditional diasporic narratives often operate within a binary framework: a lost, idealized homeland versus a present state of exile, with longing oriented towards a return to a geographical and cultural origin. This framework can be limiting, as it risks reinforcing the very nationalist ideologies that often cause displacement in the first place. The problem, therefore, is that critical discourse needs new models to understand diasporic identity in a globalized world—models that account for fragmentation not as a loss to be mourned, but as a potential site of generative and fluid identity formation.

Research Question/Hypothesis: This paper argues that Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* deconstructs the binary of home/exile by presenting diasporic longing and cultural fragmentation not as pathological conditions, but as agential forces that enable a transcendent, border-crossing identity. It hypothesizes that through Ma's journey, the novel proposes that a whole self can be assembled precisely by embracing one's fragmented parts and that "home" is not a place to return to, but a dynamic, ongoing process of becoming.

The central research question is: How does *Tomb of Sand* use narrative form and character journey to subvert traditional diasporic binaries and reconceptualize "home" as a fluid and permeable concept?

Methods: Research Design, Subjects, Materials, and Procedures (Word Count: ~1,200)

Research Design: This study employs a qualitative research design centered on critical textual analysis. This methodology is chosen for its depth and suitability for interpreting complex literary works, as it allows for a nuanced examination of narrative structure, linguistic style, symbolism, and character development. The analysis is guided by a postcolonial theoretical framework, specifically drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of the "third space" and "hybridity," which challenge essentialist notions of culture and identity. Furthermore, a feminist epistemological lens is applied to analyze the subversion of patriarchal and nationalist narratives through the agency of an elderly female protagonist.

Subjects of Analysis: The primary "subject" of analysis is the literary text itself: Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2018), in its English translation by Daisy Rockwell (2021). The analysis focuses on several key elements within the text:

1. **The Protagonist (Ma):** Her psychological state, transformation, and actions serve as the central case study for the argument.
2. **Supporting Characters:** Characters like Rosie Bua (the transgender hijra) and the Border Guard are analyzed as symbolic foils that illuminate different aspects of border-crossing and identity.
3. **Narrative Structure and Style:** The novel's non-linear plot, digressions, playful language (preserved skillfully in translation), and metafictional elements are examined

as formal expressions of its thematic concerns with fragmentation and multiplicity.

Materials: The research utilizes the following primary and secondary materials:

- **Primary Source:** Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Penguin Random House, 2021.
- **Secondary Sources**
- **Theoretical Texts:** Foundational works by postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*), and feminist geographers like Doreen Massey on space and place.
- **Literary Criticism:** Scholarly articles and books on Partition literature, contemporary Indian fiction in English translation, and critical reviews of *Tomb of Sand*.
- **Historical Context:** Historical accounts of the 1947 Partition to ground the literary analysis in its socio-political context.

Procedures: The research procedure was conducted in four sequential phases:

1. **Close Reading:** The primary text was read multiple times. The first reading was for overall comprehension, while subsequent readings were analytical, focusing on highlighting passages, motifs, and narrative techniques relevant to the themes of diaspora, home, exile, and fragmentation. Particular attention was paid to sections detailing Ma's depression, her rebirth, her journey to Pakistan, and her interactions at the border.
2. **Theoretical Application:** The highlighted sections from the close reading were then examined through the selected theoretical lenses. For instance, Ma's existence in the "third space" of the borderland was analyzed using Bhabha's framework. Her reclaiming of agency as an old woman was interpreted through a feminist lens, challenging patriarchal expectations of passivity.
3. **Secondary Research Integration:** Scholarly criticism and historical context were integrated to strengthen the analysis. This involved situating Shree's novel within the broader genre of Partition literature to highlight its unique contributions and deviations from the norm.
4. **Synthesis and Argument Formation:** The insights from the close reading, theoretical application, and secondary research were synthesized to form a coherent argument. This involved identifying patterns (e.g., the recurring metaphor of borders as permeable), drawing connections between character development and thematic expression (e.g., how Ma's fragmentation leads to wholeness), and constructing a logical progression of ideas to answer the research question. The procedures ensured that every claim was supported by direct evidence from the text and contextualized within the relevant theoretical and critical discourse.

Results: Key Findings and Analysis (Expanded Outline for 2,500-3,000 words)

Note: This section provides a detailed outline of the key results and the analysis that would form the body of the paper.

1. **Ma's Initial State:** Embodied Fragmentation and Internal Exile

- **Analysis:** Ma's profound depression and her act of turning to face the wall are not merely symptoms of old age but represent a deep, internalized cultural fragmentation. She is exiled within her own home and her own body, symbolizing the silent, intergenerational trauma of Partition.
- **Evidence:** The narrative description of her as a "crumpled heap" and her family's inability to comprehend her withdrawal. The wall becomes a metaphor for the mental and emotional borders that confine her.

Argument: This establishes the problem: a self partitioned by trauma and social expectation.

2. **The Reversal: Agency, Playfulness, and the Dismantling of Binaries**

- **Analysis:** Ma's rebirth is marked by a subversion of expectations. She sheds traditional widowhood (the white sari), embraces a mischievous sensibility, and forms a bond with Rosie Bua, a figure who herself exists outside rigid societal categories.
- **Evidence:** Her demand for a "cane with a dragon's head"; her playful, cryptic dialogue; her relationship with Rosie, which represents a community based on chosen affinity rather than biological or national identity.
- **Argument:** This demonstrates the initial stage of overcoming fragmentation not by erasing differences but by celebrating a hybrid identity. It challenges the binary of respectable/transgressive, home/street.

3. **The Journey to Pakistan: Transcending the Geographical and Psychological Border**

- **Analysis:** The core of the results. Ma's physical journey to Pakistan is the literal and metaphorical enactment of crossing the border. The analysis focuses on the border scene, where the geographical line is revealed to be absurd and permeable to human connection.
- **Evidence:** The prolonged, almost ritualistic scene at the Wagah border; the interaction with the Pakistani Border Guard, which transforms from official hostility to human recognition and empathy; Ma's calm insistence.
- **Argument:** This section proves the hypothesis that borders are psychologically constructed. Ma's longing is not for a nation-state but for a wholeness that requires acknowledging the other side of the partition. The border crossing becomes an act of healing historical trauma.

4. **The "Tomb of Sand" as a Multivalent Metaphor**

- **Analysis:** Interpreting the novel's central metaphor. The "tomb of sand" represents multiple, simultaneous ideas: the erasure of history and memory (sand covering the past), the instability of borders (shifting sands), and the potential for new life and growth (as sand is also an

element in which things can be buried and from which things can emerge).

- **Evidence:** The title itself; references to sand throughout the novel, particularly in relation to borders and memory.
 - **Argument:** The metaphor encapsulates the novel's central thesis. One is not imprisoned by the tomb but can use its materials to build something new. Fragmentation (sand) is the basis for a new, fluid form of belonging.
- ### 5. **Narrative Form as Thematic Expression**
- **Analysis:** The novel's style—its digressions, footnotes, playful language, and metafictional moments—is not merely decorative but is intrinsically linked to its theme. The fragmented narrative form mirrors the fragmented experience of diaspora and history itself.
 - **Evidence:** The narrator's self-conscious interruptions; the long digressions on minor characters or objects; the linguistic creativity that blends languages and invents words.
 - **Argument:** Shree demonstrates that a story about fragmentation cannot be told through a linear, monolithic narrative. The form itself argues for a multiplicity of perspectives and the impossibility of a single, authoritative history, further deconstructing the idea of a singular, monolithic "home."

Conclusion of Results: The analysis concludes that Ma achieves what traditional diasporic longing cannot: a form of belonging that is dynamic and transnational. Her exile ends not by returning to a point of origin, but by moving forward and integrating the fragmented pieces of her personal and collective history. The novel ultimately posits that identity, like borders and like sand, is not fixed but fluid, and that true home is found in the continual, agentive process of crossing and re-crossing the boundaries that seek to define us.

Discussion

The results of this analysis affirm the initial hypothesis: Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* fundamentally subverts the traditional diasporic binary of home and exile. Ma's journey demonstrates that cultural fragmentation, rather than being an obstacle to a coherent identity, is the very ground upon which a new, fluid, and transcendent self can be assembled. Her longing is not for a return to a pre-Partition utopia but for a wholeness that acknowledges and integrates the trauma of division. This aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," a liminal zone where cultural meanings and identities are negotiated and hybridized. Ma's entire arc—from her internal exile facing the wall to her literal stand in the third space of the border—embodies this negotiation, suggesting that agency and identity are found in the interstices, not in the center of pure, nationalistic categories.

This finding stands in productive tension with earlier Partition literature. While foundational texts like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* or Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories masterfully depict the immediate, visceral horror and moral chaos of 1947, they often leave the binary of "here"

and "there" intact. Shree's novel builds on this tradition but moves beyond it by focusing on the long-term, intergenerational psychological fallout and proposing a path forward through active reconciliation, not just remembrance. Similarly, compared to other diasporic narratives that center on the experience of immigration to the West (e.g., in works by Jhumpa Lahiri), *Tomb of Sand* focuses on an internal diaspora within South Asia, highlighting how the most profound borders are often those between neighboring nations and shared cultures.

The implications of this study are significant. Firstly, it offers a new critical lens for reading contemporary South Asian literature, one that is attuned to narratives of reconciliation and border-crossing beyond nostalgia. Secondly, it contributes to feminist and postcolonial theory by showcasing how an elderly, female body can become a site of radical resistance to patriarchy and nationalism. Ma's age and gender, often markers of marginalization, become her greatest strengths, allowing her to defy expectation and authority in ways a younger, male protagonist might not.

However, this study is not without limitations. The analysis is inherently interpretive and focused on a single, albeit complex, literary work. The findings are therefore not generalizable in a quantitative sense but are intended to provide a deep, theoretical reading. Furthermore, the reliance on an English translation, however brilliant, inevitably misses some nuances of the original Hindi wordplay, cultural context, and rhythm. While Daisy Rockwell's translation is widely acclaimed, a full appreciation of the novel's linguistic innovation requires engagement with the source text, which was beyond the scope of this paper. Future research could pursue a comparative analysis of the original and translated texts to explore how the themes of diaspora and fragmentation are nuanced through the very act of translation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* is a monumental work that redefines the terms of diasporic longing. This paper has argued that through the transformative journey of its protagonist, the novel rejects the notion that home is a fixed geographical location from which one can be exiled. Instead, it presents a powerful vision of home as a dynamic and ongoing process of becoming—a process forged in the courageous acceptance of one's own fragmented history and identity. Ma does not find wholeness by retreating into the past or by choosing one side of a border over the other. She finds it by moving forward, by crossing the physical and psychological borders that seek to define and divide her, and by assembling her self from the pieces of her partitioned world. The novel ultimately suggests that in a globalized age marked by displacement and division, the most radical act of belonging is to embrace a fluid, permeable, and border-crossing identity. The "tomb of sand" is not an end but a beginning—the unstable yet fertile ground from which new forms of connection and selfhood can emerge, offering a profound sense of hope and possibility for reconciling with a fractured past.

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