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From Fracture to Wholeness: Reimagining Partition through Love, Memory, and Borders in *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract: The novel *Tomb of Sand* charts the transformative journey of an 80-year-old woman, Ma, and her daughter, Beti, presenting Ma's life in reverse chronological order—from old age back to adolescence. After the death of her husband, Ma undertakes a daring journey to Pakistan, confronting traumatic memories of the Partition riots she survived as a teenager. Unlike traditional Partition narratives that foreground violence and communal hatred, *Tomb of Sand* moves from fracture to wholeness, focusing on personal healing, love, and human connection. It critiques the artificiality of man-made divisions such as borders and highlights the enduring resilience of fellow feeling, even amidst tyranny and bloodshed. Through Ma's journey of self-reclamation and her reunion with her Muslim lover, the novel challenges dominant narratives of trauma and loss, offering instead a vision of hope, courage, and borderless humanity. It reimagines Partition not as an irreparable rupture, but as a space where empathy and the human spirit can ultimately triumph.

Key Words: Borders and Identity, Love and Reconciliation, Trauma and Memory, Self-Reclamation.

Tomb of Sand, originally titled *Ret Samadhi*, is a 2018 Hindi-language novel by Indian author Geetanjali Shree, translated into English by Daisy Rockwell. In 2022, it became the first novel translated from an Indian language to win the International Booker Prize and also won the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation the same year. The novel unfolds a profound and thought-provoking tale of reaffirmation, rediscovery, and exploration, set against formidable odds, rigid conventions, and historical traumas. It challenges the boundaries that divide families, religions, and nations, while critiquing the profound individual trauma inflicted by the Partition of India and Pakistan. As a postcolonial text, *Tomb of Sand* shifts the focus of Partition narratives from collective societal experiences to personal journeys, moving from hatred and anger

toward love, reconciliation, and healing. It offers a radical reimagining by portraying not the romantic love of the young, but the courageous, enduring love of an old woman.

The story follows an eighty-year-old woman's intensive and risky journey in search of her first husband, whom she left behind in Pakistan during Partition. In doing so, the novel overturns traditional stereotypes: it is not a man in pursuit of a beloved, but a woman — aged and fearless — in search of lost love. Instead of centring on the usual themes of hate, revenge, massacre, fear, and trauma, *Tomb of Sand* foregrounds hope, fearlessness, support, cooperation, and human connection. It even presents Pakistani Muslims in a favourable light, emphasizing reconciliation, compassion, and the possibility of healing across borders.

The novel follows the transformative journey of an eighty-year-old woman, Ma, and her daughter, Beti. Ma's story unfolds in reverse, moving from old age back to her teenage years. After the death of her husband, Ma falls into a deep depression, but ultimately finds new purpose by deciding to travel to Pakistan. This journey forces her to confront long-suppressed memories of the traumatic Partition riots she survived as a young girl. *Tomb of Sand* examines how significant historical events like the Partition of India profoundly shape individual lives and personal relationships. It traces a storied past and highlights the ultimate futility of borders in dividing human connections. As Urvashi Butalia notes in *The Other Side of Silence*, the deep, personal meanings and profound ruptures caused by Partition continue to live on in the memories and lives of individuals (8). At the novel's beginning, the author frames the story as one centred around borders and women: "A tale tells itself. It can be complete, but also incomplete, the way all tales are. This particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please. Once you've got women and a border, a story can write itself..." (*Tomb of Sand* 11). These lines suggest that Partition left a lasting scar not only on the collective history of nations but also on the personal memories and lives of individuals, intertwining historical trauma with deeply personal narratives.

The novel addresses the Partition not as a political or historical event but through the intimate, romantic journey of an eighty-year-old woman. Unlike traditional Partition narratives, which primarily foreground senseless violence, the collapse of communities, and the psychopathic elements of brutality, *Tomb of Sand* brings a love story to the forefront — one that moves from fracture toward wholeness. As Kamla Bhasin writes in *Borders and Boundaries*, "In a sense, it is the collective memory of thousands of displaced

families on both sides of the border that has imbued rather an innocuous word—partition—with its dreadful meaning: a people violently displaced, a country divided. Partition is a metaphor for irreparable loss” (xi). Similarly, Debjani Sengupta notes in *Partition Literature* that this body of literature challenges dominant narratives of identity, power, and belonging, revealing the true legacies of 1947 across successive generations (xiv). However, while much of Partition literature foregrounds trauma and loss, *Tomb of Sand* reimagines it as a space for healing, reconciliation, and the rediscovery of love, highlighting individual resilience over historical tragedy. As Urvashi Butalia reflects in *The Other Side of Silence*, “It brought untold suffering, but it also showed the strength of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable horror” (8).

In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree offers a deeply humanistic understanding of Partition, portraying it not only as a site of trauma but also of love, longing, and courage. She writes about Partition tales as narratives of “love, romance, longing, courage, pain-in-separation, bloodshed? It’s an absent presence: lost souls flitting about in the ether” (*Tomb of Sand* 535). While much of Partition literature emphasizes betrayal, and the vile distortions of love, *Tomb of Sand* stands apart by foregrounding devotion, hope, and reconciliation. In contrast, novels like *Ice-Candy-Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa depict Partition’s brutal realities through tales of communal hatred, such as the betrayal of Ayah, a Hindu woman, by her Muslim lover, who ultimately facilitates her kidnapping, forced prostitution, and assault. Such narratives highlight the collapse of personal loyalties under communal pressures. However, *Tomb of Sand* radically reimagines this dynamic: here, the devotion of a Muslim man is shown in his efforts to save and protect his Hindu wife, ultimately sending her back to India for her safety. Rather than sacrificing love at the altar of communal animosity, the novel celebrates its enduring power. By following the courageous journey of an eighty-year-old woman seeking reunion with her lost husband, *Tomb of Sand* introduces a ground-breaking theme into Partition literature — deconstructing borders not just of territory, but of gender, age, and emotional possibility. The trauma of Partition is revealed, but it is intertwined with memories of resilience, connection, and the persistent human desire for wholeness.

The novel underscores that all forms of division and segregation are human-made constructs, not natural realities. Where rupture characterizes the human world, rapture defines the natural world. *Tomb of Sand* highlights the noble side of humanity, emphasizing fellow feeling, love, and compassion even during times of upheaval. It critiques the artificial constructs that define nations—borders, visas, and passports—

while reminding readers that nature remains untouched by these separations. As the novel poignantly observes, “The winds don’t recognize such things as visas” (*Tomb of Sand* 578). While man can carve borders into the earth, the sky remains free and indivisible: “They gaze out at the sky that canopies both sides and can’t detect the border anywhere” (*Tomb of Sand* 539). Instead of dwelling on communal clashes, bloodshed, and hatred, the novel celebrates the persistence of sympathy and human connection. It asserts that despite tyranny and violence, the seeds of hope, love, and shared humanity endure. Geetanjali Shree’s narrative thus reaffirms the idea that, while human history may be marred by divisions, the essential spirit of community and coexistence cannot be extinguished.

The novel also portrays regions of Pakistan, such as Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa—often stereotyped for terrorist activities—through a more nuanced and humanizing lens. While acknowledging it as a place “where murder, mayhem, and marauding are the custom” (*Tomb of Sand* 632), Geetanjali Shree simultaneously highlights its celebrated tradition of “Pakhtun hospitality” (*Tomb of Sand* 626). Rejecting long-standing bitterness and hostility toward Pakistan, the novel emphasizes the warmth and generosity shown to travellers: “We had arrived in Torkham. We weren’t even tired. All along the way, we met with such love from everyone; they took us into their homes—their hujras—and invited us to relax against bolsters, fed us dry fruits and kahwa” (*Tomb of Sand* 626). In doing so, the novel transforms the imagery of terror and fear into one of friendliness, understanding, and shared humanity. Ma, the protagonist, voices her deep aversion to the border that divides India and Pakistan, lamenting its brutal legacy: “You’ve made the border a source of hatred. Not an exquisite border-enhancing beauty on both sides, but one that kills them both—a murderous beast cutting the artery” (*Tomb of Sand* 654). Once again, the novel critiques the concept of borders, presenting them as artificial constructs that foster hostility rather than harmony, while reaffirming the possibility of compassion and fellow feeling across divides.

From India, Ma travels with her daughter Beti to Lahore, the city where she once lived as a young girl. Their journey then extends to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, a region marked by risk and tension, as Ma searches for her long-lost first husband, Anwar. Throughout most of the novel, the protagonist is simply referred to as Ma—a figure defined by her role as a mother, stripped of personal identity. However, in the novel’s final pages, she reclaims her true self, transforming from Chandra Prabha Devi to Chanda, in the arms of her first

love. This reclamation of identity marks a profound personal awakening, highlighting the individual beyond societal roles.

The novel's structure is divided into three parts. The first part, titled "Ma's Back," introduces readers to an 80-year-old woman sunk in depression after her husband's death. Living in a bungalow with her elder son Bade, a civil servant in North India, and his family, Ma appears as a mere shadow of her former self—a "half-dead bundle" (*Tomb of Sand* 27) and a "living dead mother" (*Tomb of Sand* 30). Her identity is initially confined to the role of a dutiful wife and mother, her individual desires and history buried under familial responsibilities. However, the courageous journey to find Anwar—undertaken despite age, risk, and social expectation—becomes a symbolic act of self-assertion. In seeking love, Ma reclaims her individuality, asserting her existence not just as a mother, but as a complete, desiring, and independent being.

Everyone in Ma's family, including the servants, tries to comfort her, but their efforts to rouse her from her deep depression prove fruitless. She has lost all will to live: "No eating, no drinking, not even touching tea to mouth" (*Tomb of Sand*, 25). For the first 100 pages, Ma's "lifeless back turned towards the world," (*Tomb of Sand*, 27) lying face-down against the wall. There is a crevice in the wall of her room, symbolizing her desire to sever all ties with the world. She refuses to leave her bed. Her eldest son, Bade, and his dutiful, "Reebok-sporting" wife, Bahu, cater to her every need, while her cheerful grandson, Sid, attempts to lift her spirits with his guitar.

At first, it appears that the death of Ma's husband has profoundly shattered her psyche, pushing her to the brink of wanting to end her life. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that she is not seeking an end but rather a new beginning. Her apparent disinterest is not a sign of loss, but a shift toward something deeply buried within her memory. There is a hidden yearning within her consciousness. The author poignantly conveys her emotional turmoil through the metaphor of a tree that, in its quest for new experiences, becomes disenchanted with its surroundings: "A tree grew, took root. But tired of the circling shadows of familiar faces, of the embrace of leaves of familiar fragrances, of the chirping on the branches, of the same old vibrations" (*Tomb of Sand*, 23).

Ma's desire to reunite with her first husband emerges later in the narrative. The title of the first part, "Ma's Back," symbolically indicates her rejection of the roles imposed upon her by society—those of mother,

wife, grandmother, and so forth, expected of an eighty-year-old woman. She becomes indifferent to these roles, as expressed by the lines: “mother wife widow, mother-style wife-style widow-style, or wrap them all into one: family-style role and fed up with all of them” (*Tomb of Sand*, 27). Ma defies the societal expectations placed on her by a patriarchal world, seeking instead to reclaim her true identity.

The novel is the story of two women, Ma and Beti: “One mother, one daughter, one growing downwards, the other growing upwards.” (*Tomb of Sand*, 12). The leading characters are identified by their relationships. Ma’s daughter, Beti, is an unconventional and free-spirited woman. Since her youth, Beti’s “misspent youth” (*Tomb of Sand*, 408) and numerous friendships with men have been the subject of town gossip (*Tomb of Sand*, 53). She left home but maintained her “bizarro lifestyle” (*Tomb of Sand*, 332), often raising society’s eyebrows with her free spirit and liberalism. Despite Bade’s attempts to restrict her live-in relationship with KK, Ma was always supportive, seeing no fault in Beti’s free thinking. Like her daughter, Ma is also passionate and romantic. Driven by love, this elderly woman takes the risk of crossing the border to meet her first husband, from whom she was forcibly separated due to the Partition. The novel emphasizes that true love transcends the borders created by man: “One can speak of love at any time because love is lovely. It is natural. Also tempestuous. When love is boundless it breaks out into the cosmos. Its essence reaches a pinnacle and the drive to overpower one another flames out.” (*Tomb of Sand*, 39)

The second part of the novel, titled “Sunlight,” describes Ma’s life in the house of her daughter Beti. Here, Ma and Beti enjoy life together: “Ammma has got a brand-new atmosphere of freedom to lead her own life of her own free will.” (*Tomb of Sand*, 361). Beti’s care revives Ma’s deadened and numbed spirit. Beti observes, “...she’s fine now. She’s got better since she’s been living with me. She walks around, eats, drinks, and chats merrily.” (*Tomb of Sand*, 335) With the help of Rosie, Ma starts working on her tattered, dried-up old body, dealing with her warts, moles, pimples, and constipation pain. She even changes her outfit from a sari to a gown. Rosie, a hijra who had visited Ma for years and called her sister, plays a significant role in this transformation. The origin of their friendship is shrouded in mystery, but under Rosie’s supervision, Ma’s attire, lifestyle, food, and beauty products drastically change. Beti, the bohemian daughter, is shocked to see such a transformation in Ma and feels neglected by both Ma and Rosie. Ma’s obsession with Rosie and an old statue of Buddha is connected to her traumatic past. The faded statue of Buddha was an integral part of Ma’s life as well as the lives of her children.

The mystery of Ma's obsession with the statue is disclosed later in the novel. It reminds her of Anwar. She felt safe and secure holding this statue since she ran away from Pakistan to save her life. Ma's life receives a jolt with the sudden death of Rosie: "...when her husband had departed, Ma too had departed, and they'd worked to pull her back, and now again they were busily pulling her back, because Ma's head departed again." (*Tomb of Sand*, 517) Bade wants to bring Ma back to his house, but Ma asks him to make a passport so she can go to Pakistan. Beti complies with Ma's desire and decides to take her to Pakistan, thinking, "Even at this age, desire is desire, and why should anyone die without giving it a shot." (*Tomb of Sand*, 526)

Part three, titled "Back to the Front," chronicles Ma's journey through Pakistan as she searches for her husband. The word "front" evokes her teenage years, a time when she lived a carefree life surrounded by her large family. She had married a Muslim man, Anwar, and their world seemed idyllic until the sudden upheaval caused by the Partition of India and Pakistan. The border left an indelible scar on Ma's life.

During the Partition, Anwar went out to search for a house in Lyallpur, planning to bring Ma there later. While she was cooking chapattis, unaware of the surrounding chaos, she was abducted by masked assailants. In the midst of this, the fire from the hearth consumed the house, turning it to ashes: "Homes, in flame. Dark shadows dance in the fire... Oh dear, I have set the house on fire! Ashes Aunty, Uncle, Uncle! She screams" (*Tomb of Sand*, 597). The tragedy unfolded so swiftly that she never had a chance to reunite with Anwar. Partition caused immense suffering, tragedy, and trauma to communities that had once lived together in relative harmony. It arbitrarily severed families across a newly drawn borders, often overnight, leaving people in the agonizing uncertainty of not knowing whether their loved ones were alive or dead.

After her abduction, Ma was loaded onto a truck along with other Hindu girls: "Suffocating, suppressed. Dying. Unconscious. Some crying. Some silent. Blind. She too" (*Tomb of Sand*, 598). They were taken to a large, prison-like building. In one of the rooms, Ma found a statue of Buddha—the same one she had once seen with Anwar at a museum. Believing Anwar had placed it there to give her courage, Ma clung to the statue as a symbol of hope and protection. As long as the Buddha, her silent savior, remained with her, she felt shielded from harm.

Eventually, Ma and the other girls were brought toward the border. The Muslim men wanted to save the Hindu girls from the cruelties of their own community and urged them to run away: "People have gone mad. Run now. Then return. Quickly. To your home." (*Tomb of Sand*, 607) The narrator emphasizes the

enduring goodness of people even amidst violence and destruction, affirming that the human heart ultimately triumphs over savagery: "Oh, such good people in bad times, saving the girls from the savagery of their own kin. ...no matter how evil the times, never abandon the hope for goodness. Inscribe this on your wings." (*Tomb of Sand* 609).

Beti, observing her mother's boldness, is astonished by Ma's deep knowledge of Pakistan and her eagerness to explore a land long deemed hostile. She realizes how little she truly knows about her own mother. Initially, Beti believes that Ma's journey is merely an attempt to fulfil a promise made to Rosie Bua. However, as events unfold, it becomes clear that Ma's voyage is far more personal—a quest to reclaim a part of herself long buried under the roles of wife, mother, and widow. Ultimately, the two separated lovers, Ma and Anwar, reunite in a moment of emotional wholeness. After this poignant reunion, Ma chooses not to return to India, instead bringing her journey to a dramatic close by ending her life. In doing so, she transcends the physical and political borders that once tore them apart. *Tomb of Sand* thus asserts a powerful truth: that borders, no matter how rigid, can never separate the souls of true lovers.

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