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Ageing, Borders and Female Subjectivity: Reimagining Partition Memory in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand

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Abstract

The Partition of India in 1947 has been one of the most traumatic and transformative events in the history of South Asia which caused tremendous displacement, broken identities, and memories that continue to echo across generations and impact on literary and cultural discourses. The Partition narrative was one that predominantly explored issues of violence, migration, and national attachment in the initial years, but the present day fiction has shifted its focus to the more intimate spaces of memory, ageing, gender and subjectivity. This is the place where Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand (2022), translated from the Hindi Ret Samadhi by Daisy Rockwell, is decidedly most innovative – with the ultimate and unlikely quest of a 80 year old woman across geographies, psychology, and ideology to find a lost past. An old woman is the main character, which offers a subversive portrait of old age, nationhood and historical trauma as seen through the lens of an international travelogue. This paper looks at the ways Tomb of Sand performs Partition memory in relation to the interwoven modes of female subjectivity, ageing, and border-crossing. Based on theories of performativity from Judith Butler, postmemory from Marianne Hirsch, trauma from Cathy Caruth, border consciousness from Gloria Anzaldúa, ageing from Kathleen Woodward, age ideology from Margaret Morganroth Gullette, imagined communities from Benedict Anderson and cultural memory from Jan and Aleida Assmann, the study suggests that old age in the novel is not a symbol of decline but rather a position of resistance, discovery and historical recovery. In the end, Tomb of Sand is a strong statement in modern south Asian literature, in which growing old is seen as emancipation, remembering is a form of resistance, and transnationalism is a way of reclaiming selfhood.

Keywords; Ageing Studies; Female Subjectivity; Partition Memory; Trauma Theory; Border Consciousness; Postmemory; Feminism; Geetanjali Shree; Tomb of Sand; South Asian Literature.

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 has been one of the most traumatic and transformative events in the history of South Asia, resulting in tremendous displacement, broken identities and memories that continue to reverberate through future generations and have been a part of literary and cultural discourses. In the first few years the Partition story was primarily located within the fields of violence, migration and national (dis)attachment, whereas today's fiction moves to the more confined arena of memory, old age, gender and subjectivity. This is where

Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand (2022) (Ret Samadhi, 2014), translated from Hindi by Daisy Rockwell, is certainly the most innovative, as the ultimate and unlikely journey of an 80 year old woman through geographies, psychology and ideology in search of a lost past. The main character is an old woman which gives a subversive understanding of old age, nationhood and historical trauma in the eyes of an international travelogue. This paper takes a look at the ways in which Tomb of Sand practises Partition memory in relation to interwoven modes of female subjectivity, ageing and border-crossing. The study argues that old age in the novel is not a sign of ageing but as a position of resistance, discovery and historical recovery as explained in the theories of performativity (Judith Butler), postmemory (Marianne Hirsch), trauma (Cathy Caruth), border consciousness (Gloria Anzaldúa), ageing (Kathleen Woodward), age ideology (Margaret Morganroth

Gullette), imagined community (Benedict Anderson) and cultural memory (Jan and Aleida Assmann). Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* is a compelling novel in contemporary south Asian literature in which ageing is a form of empowerment, remembrance a practice of rebellion and transnationalism a means of appropriation and appropriation.

More specifically, the book explores the themes of Ageing Studies, Female Subjectivity, Partition Memory, Trauma Theory, Border Consciousness, Postmemory, Feminism, Geetanjali Shree, *Tomb of Sand*, and South Asian Literature.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 was and remains one of the ruptures which defined modern history. One of the largest in terms of immediate human effects, what started as a redrawing of political boundaries was inherently one of the most violent forced migrations of the twentieth century. It is estimated that in the weeks and months after Independence almost 15 million people moved across the newly-drawn lines, and hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives during the communal violence accompanying the division. But outside the realm of statistics and official historiography, there were inextricable numbers of intimate histories of Partition, of oblivion and absence, of yearning and trauma, of geography and ontology - of being cut off from one's own past, from the places of origin of oneself, from one's sense of what one had been, before a political line was drawn through one's own life's geography. This embodied, intimate and endlessly unresolved aspect of Partition experience has proved most captivating to South Asian writers over the past seventy years. The literature of Partition has grown over the years, as the mood and location of the writers, as well as the cultural and historical gaps between them and the event, have shifted: from Saadat Hasan Manto's bloody short stories to Amrita Pritam's melancholy poetry, from Bhisham Sahni's social realism to Bapsi Sidhwa's novelistic panorama.

In the long and rich tradition of Indian literature, *Tomb of Sand* (Ret Samadhi, 2018 – translated into English in 2022) by Geetanjali Shree, is of an exceptionally unique and unique significance. The novel, which has just won the International Booker Prize, for the first time, as the first Hindi-language book, was well received in the reviewing world for its formal ingenuity, exuberance of language, the playfulness and seriousness in its dealing with the themes of history, gender, and cultural memory. But what distinguishes *Tomb of Sand* from all the major Partition fiction that came before it is its focus: whereas in all Partition fiction with the

exception of the author's novel, the experience of the young (displaced child, violated woman, idealistic youth undone by communal violence) is at the core of the narrative, the novel is about the experience of the very old. At the novel's heart, there is a journey undertaken by its protagonist: almost 80-year-old Ma, who put him out to sea years ago, and now returns to reclaim her right to look after him. It is through this special vantage point of old age – with all its losses, its proximity to the mortal and the memorial, its weakening of social obligation – that Shree examines what the Partition has meant, and continues to mean, as a living force in the lives of those who carried its consequences across decades. One of the most arresting beginning lines in modern-day narratives, the novel makes its central concerns known.

A story does tell itself. It may be entire, but can be partial also as all tales are. This is a story with a "border" and the women just come and go. A Story can write itself, once you have a women and a border. (Shree 3)

This is a statement on the one hand, and political intervention at the same time. Shree's positioning of women and a border at the very center of the narrative's self-proclaimed "structure" challenges two assumptions that hold significant power in the conventional nationalist narrative; one that borders are used to curtail movement and delineate belonging and another that women are best curtailed by the edges and the most frequently reinforced structures of patriarchy. The word "please" is especially important, as it claims women's "autonomy of movement" – a claim that has been previously resisted by dominant cultural and political discourses. This is a novel that does not just cross the border, it does so with desire, and the border is not a place of closing, it's a place of possibilities. This is the political epistemology to be detailed in the novel's six hundred or more digressive, joyous and profoundly serious pages.

Ma's Withdrawal: The Wall, Refusal and Performativity

Depicting Ma's secluded life at the start of the novel is done with simple deceptiveness. In the wake of her husband's death, she slowly moves towards the wall of her room and backs her family. One of the novel's pivotal images – it is rich in symbolic meaning – is the description of this withdrawal:

This was the type of wall, that Ma, just on the verge of eighty now, was creeping towards, slowly. But during those winter days, a cold wall – a wall full of cracks (ordinary walls are like that) – a wall that stopped many from coaxing and cajoling: Get up, Ma, Get up! – Ma just kept getting closer and closer to the wall... (Shree 18)

The back towards the world is not just the image of grieving, the image of an ended physical life, but an image of radical refusing. Although the setting is the traditional mould and Ma's character the bereaved elderly widow, she refuses to undertake the usual social obligations. The family see this withdrawal as signs of collapse, but Shree has always viewed it as more nuanced, more subversive – a temporary withdrawal to actually be a first step towards renewal – paradoxically. The wall Ma slides into is called 'riddled with cracks' which now are the avenues through which the new life, the new possibility, the suppressed memories of a pre-Partition past begins to seep back into the present.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is best suited to the current theoretical understanding of Ma's withdrawal, and subsequent transformation. According to Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, gender is not a pre-given, fixed thing, but rather is a cultural production that is constantly being reproduced, through reiteration and its social expectations:

The expression of the gender is the gender itself, there is no hidden gender identity behind such expression, rather, gender is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are described as its 'expression'. (Butler 25)

Butler's theory works well for the *Tomb of Sand*, explaining the radical aspects of Ma's refusal. Over the past decades, she has been playing the role expected of her: wife, mother, daughter-in-law, widow. Such continuous and full performances are all considered family fare that has become Ma's nature instead of her roles. As she stops to perform -- when she backs out, grooms into the wall, doesn't get up -- she displays the constructedness of the identities she has been inhabiting. But that withdrawal (against performance) is, paradoxically, her most authentic act – by this means she is without a doubt the most authentic man. But the metamorphosis that ensues - the little by little blossoming of a new Ma who travels, cross-borders, packs on an old lover, and faces the suppressed memory of her Partition past - is not a disavowal of some more authentic identity but the advent of a series of new performances that produce a different kind of identity, a less constrained one, a not other.

Ageing as Cultural Construct: Woodward, Gullette and Age Ideology

Equally important to the understanding of why the cultural change for Ma is so disruptive is related to the work of Kathleen Woodward, who also has a background in ageing studies. Refusing to accept that ageing is simply a biological phenomenon, Woodward has been tirelessly arguing that the ageing process is just as much a cultural one

as it is a natural one, and that certain attributes of old age – passivity, dependence, decline and invisibility – have been imbued and are being perpetuated, and are serving the interests of a culture so focused on youth. Ma's refusal to conform with these expectations is not only an eccentric cultural behavior, but it is an attack on the culture system. Ageing is the object of Margaret Morganroth Gullette's further discussion of age ideology, which can be seen as the idea that ageing humans are inevitable victims of narratives of decline in modern cultures. The radical nature of the novel's 'transformation' of Ma is perhaps best explained by her observation that aging is not necessarily a biological fact but a cultural discourse: Shree is doubly rebellious, casting a challenge at social convention but also at an underlying ideology that helps to define aging. And the book itself renders explicit how far Ma embarking on her journey moves away from the cultural constructions of old age that the story keeps presenting by repeatedly juxtaposing the image of the aged, withdrawn and diminishing woman with the actual woman, increasingly mobile, wily and historically-engaged, with whom Ma becomes. The mother is "growing smaller by the day" (Shree 15) – cat-like in becoming so small and tiny that she can "slip through tiny cracks and escape" (Shree 15), as the narrator—a playfully mischievous storyteller—watches. On Shree's view diminishment is a kind of liberation too.

Postmemory and the Journey to Lahore

It is the nature of this transformation, in the case of Ma's voyage in search of her former lover across the border of India and Pakistan, which makes the novel come in direct conflict with a theoretical tradition, that of Partition Studies and Memory Studies. The most fruitful approach to thinking about the ways in which Partition exists today, and how its impacts are carried forward to future generations is that of postmemory as coined by Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch had developed the concept in association with the Holocaust survivors and the descendants of the Holocaust, that such historical traumatic experiences can be transmitted in a viable manner through stories, silence and emotional atmospheres, such that the descendants of the Holocaust become part of it:

Postmemory refers to the relationship the generation after has to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of the preceding generations and this relationship I call the imaginative investment, projection and creation. (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 22)

It is a concept that is given a special impetus in the context of *Tomb of Sand*, as the novel is also concerned with

the passing on of Partition memory to the younger generation – Ma's daughter, Beti – as well as the belated return of Partition memory in the consciousness of the survivor herself. As we slowly realize, Ma has been hiding a lot about her time around Partition: youthful love that ended with Partition, life in Lahore that was separated from her with the creation of a new national border, life's potentialities that were cut short before they could ever be fully realised. This initial part of the novel, in which Ma is shown to be withdrawn and unresponsive, can be interpreted from Hirsch's framework as a time of mnemonic pressure – the suppressed memories are always there, underneath the surface, setting up a distress which is manifested in the seemingly misplanned withdrawal from the world. The return of the postmemory is most literally embodied in the journey from Wagah to cross the border and then to Lahore.

One of the best parts of the novel—certainly one of the most powerful—takes you on the path to the border, through a strangely familiar blend of the mundane and the mythic, done in Shree's signature style. The novel has one of its most focused, and most poignant moments, when Ma and her daughter arrive at the Wagah border crossing, and witness the milestone that indicates the distance to Lahore:

A Milestone was able to halt these little people when they arrived at Atari like the Mona Lisa does in the Louvre. Thirty kilometres' was written on the milestone to Lahore. The road extended to either side; in both directions. The female into her stride, seems to walk across a full century. (Shree 297)

Perhaps the most obvious formulations of the connection between movement and history in the novel is the image of Ma walking “as though traversing an entire century with each step” (280). Every stride into the new is a stride back into the past and every stride into the new is a step across the border, in which decades of suppressed and denied past comes back to haunt us. What the border between India and Pakistan is also is the border of the passing of time, the passing of Ma from India to Pakistan, from the present to 1947 and the recovery of the self in what looks like the “night of the jungle” in the “wilderness of the cosmopolitan,” in a landscape of the familiar and the unfamiliar, since a political line has been drawn between this self and its past.

Coming to the other side of the border is as complex as the border itself with its recognition and strangeness:

They're on the other side of what they call the border, the little woman spins around slowly, as the earth spins, and wonders where should she go? She was dressed, as if she was

wearing her dervish clothes just for this day. Her clothes cause her to spin as well. Her daughter stops its spin, and turns her mother frontwards. And looking the way towards Lahore. (Shree 305)

The thought of the “spinning slowly like the earth” is quite profound. It recalls the dervish's mystical spin (which is a form of spiritual transcendence); it implies disorientation in the face of an unfamiliar territory, and one that is at the same time also very familiar; and it brings up the novel's often ambivalent sense of the border crossing as a liberating act. The return which Ma is taking is a complex one and she is spun on the other side of the border in her new clothes and doesn't know which way to turn — but this is not failure, it is honesty.

Trauma, Belatedness and Working Through

Cathy Caruth's discussion of trauma helps enlighten this temporal complexity of this return. Caruth feels traumatic experiences are out of time; one has not been able to fully master them when they happen so the need for them to be acknowledged in that moment that they were not occurs later, sometimes in fragments, repetitions, and indirect forms.

Trauma does not lie in the original violent or primary event in a person's history, but in how it returns to haunt the survivor later on by preventing its incorporation in the first place, or by being known in the first place in some other way. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4)

Ma's Partition experience is a perfect fit to this model. Losses suffered in 1947 – loss of place, loss of love, loss of possibilities in life were not fully recognized or mourned. There was little opportunity for long-term recognition and mourning of traumatic experience due to the need to adapt, survive and fulfill their social roles. Decades later, when the social forces in society are relaxed, and with death looming, the suppressed returns when self-confrontation is possible in a new way. Ma's journey is not only the belated resumption of a wound that's never healed, but also – importantly – a chance for what Dominick LaCapra terms “working through” instead of “acting out” – a true reckoning with the past that allows for compulsive repetition to be replaced by reflective understanding.

It's a process of work through that goes most intimate in Lahore. On her visits to the places of her past life, Ma oscillates between recognising and grieving, and in a familiar manner, she has a mix of equanimity and grieving:

But, where is the water in Lahore, she wondered? She said that she used to visit here a lot; as if she remembered. (Shree 332)

One of the most accurate and most significant expressions of the novel is 'as though remembering'. It is a portrait of the strange state of things in Lahore; an "and" city, a "and" time in the past, an "and" self as a young woman strolling down the streets. The conditional nature of the remembering "as though" is a rejection of sentimentality, and an acceptance of feeling the strength of the memories that come back. Both Lahore and the water from the river are real and present; the links between time, place, and loss are real and absent.

Border Consciousness: Living Sin Fronteras

Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical work of border consciousness of both theoretical and conceptual frameworks best fits the page to understand what the India-Pakistan border means and does within the novel. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa's work emphasizes that borders are not only political constructs, but are complex sites of struggle and negotiation which involve psychological, cultural, and identity struggles; they are places that challenge the categories of inclusion and exclusion and open the possibilities of new forms of subjectivity.

She writes: To re-survive the *Borderlands* you must be "crossroads," live sin fronteras. (Anzaldúa 217)

Everything in Ma's life in the novel moves towards just this state "living sin fronteras", beyond the boundaries that have partitioned her life as an adult. India's national border with Pakistan is one of those borders, but the boundaries featured in the novel are continuous with others that have shaped her life: the border between Wife and Person, the border between Mother and Woman, the border between the socially respectable and the personally desirable, the border between past and present, the border between a Self shaped before Partition and one remade in its aftermath. Ma's crossing of the physical border marks the culmination of a series of border-crossings that starts with her rejection of widowhood and extends to her newfound liberation from domesticity followed by her remembrance and retrieval of the memories and desires that social convention had suppressed.

This aspect of the narrative is encapsulated in the novel's exchange at a border crossing in a very contracted fashion. Ma responds to border officials' objections both comically

and philosophically accurately. "You're on trespassing," they scold! "She laughs, 'Anything worth doing is not confined to borders--should I do nothing at all?' (Shree 17). "Anything worth doing transcends borders" is not only a good rejoinder but also an ethical and political core tenet of the novel. Borders are man-made and they can and should not be a limitation on the extent of possibility that humanity can achieve. The aged Ma is, in a way, a slippery stay between the two border officials, who haven't really considered her as a possible trespasser, and her innocence-repugnant attitude, combined with her deliberate refusal to stay, is a performance of living sin fronteras as theorized by Anzaldúa. This is exactly what the narrator's subsequent report on a newspaper headline in the novel does: Crossing the Border: An octogenarian lady from Delhi crosses the border on foot without a Visa to find an old lover" (Shree 397). The title "Impregnable? The Western Borders of the Empire" highlights the disconnect between the official concept of borders and the reality of those who live on them: the act of "border reading", as it is called in the book, is very much understandable in the novel's moral terms.

Imagined Communities and the Nation

The notion of the nation as an 'imagined community' as presented by Benedict Anderson has a direct bearing on the criticism that the novel poses against the boundaries of the nation. Nations are artificial or cultural entities, "The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). Tomb of Sand constantly reveals the fabricatedness and 'nationalness' of the national narratives that the India-Pakistan border represents and has become a symbol of, and personal memory often transcends this. The emotional bonds, relationships and cultural ties prior to Partition still make claims that states claim to be decided by borders. Ma's journey, amongst other things, is a testament to the fact that Anderson's imagined community (always) exists in competition with the lived communities of personal experience and that the lived, personal, community of belonging is not amenable to any nationalized geography of belonging.

Cultural Memory and Intergenerational Transmission

Finally, the theoretical space of Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory is useful to understand the novel's workings with the Partition's afterlives. Assmann suggests that communities keep their sense of historical identity alive with the use of shared memory systems — texts, rituals,

narratives and cultural practices — that are used to remember the past on a daily basis:

A cultural memory is the repository of the knowledge that enables a group to have an awareness of its 'oneness' and its 'otherness'. The objectivated culture of a society affords the medium for the externalisation and lifeworld-transcendence of social knowledge, and its build-up across the generations. According to Assmann, it is the right of both individuals and groups to have a memory. (Cultural Memory and Early Civilization 37)

Tomb of Sand is an active agent of such a cultural 'memory passing'. Ma's work is not just her personal work of self-recovery, it is also a part of the cultural work of preserving and passing on memories of the Partition that will speak to new generations and new audiences. This novel's playfully digressive and self-conscious narrative is also cultural memory; it is a rejection of a monolithic, authoritative, linear line of narration and a repudiation of all historical knowledge, of which of all things is plural, is embodied, is experiential, but also is incomplete and incomplete. The parallel evolution of memory consciousness in literature as a medium for transmitting cultural memory contributes by another layer of meaning to this aspect, highlighted by works such as Aleida Assmann's. She believes that texts may be able to give new life to dormant memories when they are 'activated' by new readers in new context in a new historical situation. How Ma and her daughter Beti relate in the novel exemplifies this: Beti may not have had the direct experience of Partition, but she shares the emotional and cultural impacts through the connection she shares with Ma, through the stories she hears and those that she doesn't, through the silences that inform the family's sense of its own history. Hirsch's term postmemory is applicable to this inheritance, with his reading of this inheritance as postmemory, the Partition is hence living in the consciousness of Beti, rather than being history.

The Tomb of Sand: Entombment and Preservation

The novel title — Tomb of Sand — has its complete meaning no longer the novel does not exist. Perhaps the most striking section of the novel is the way in which Ma's withdrawal can be considered an act of entombment: a self-chosen confining of herself within the wall's wall of silence and stillness, and, at once, an act of preservation:

There is a sweet scent in the air: clay jugs and pitchers; cool entombment in cool earth. Stay lying down. I am stumped for words and I am on my own and I pause, and I pause, and I pause, just a little... Let this be my tomb, O my God! My God, let this be my tomb! There falls into her heart

coolness is pleasant, calm... The ticking away of the hours placed the tomb of sand. (Shree 38-39) "tomb of sand" is not only the metaphor of death but also the figure of the suppressed self lives beneath the sands of the memory for decades and becomes ready for resurrection, when the atmosphere allows it. That "sand" that is the title of the poem isn't just dirt—it's the sand of life--the sediment of a lifetime of "living in the project and fulfillment of rote roles". And as the tomb moves (Ma starts to move slowly towards the world, away from the wall), the buried self starts to emerge. The whole way to Pakistan is the return of this emergence, the return of the whole of what the tomb has been keeping safe.

Towards a Feminist Philosophy of History

The personal moral and political issues on Ma's journey go beyond them into what could be termed a feminist philosophy of history. Although a powerful and moral compact, the great Partition narratives of the immediate post-Independence decades, such as Manto's Toba Tek Singh, Sahni's Tamas, and Pritam's Pinjar were, by and large, preoccupied with the immediate violence of 1947 and its most visible victims. They were honest and compassionate about the horror they recorded, and were instrumental in making Partition a topic for the serious literature of successive generations of writers from South Asia. What they could not entirely consider, since the time lapse from the event was not yet enough, is the long aftermath: what happens to people who have overcome the years of repression, adaptation and performance that followed the event, as well as the event itself? What happens to the memories and desires and possibilities that were shelved and to the memories and desires and possibilities that were put away, as the obligations of survival and social respectability took over? Tomb of Sand is one of the first major works of South Asian fiction to seriously explore this question on its own terms - and to do so by the most unlikely of characters: an old woman who has seemingly retired from the world, only to be preparing for her most important interaction with it. The feminist philosophy of history, which the novel exemplifies makes all of this history the focal point, not the margins: that the intimate and the specific and the full-bodiedness of their encounter with history memory is "historical knowledge" which official history archives can't deliver; and that literature in its capacity to depict and describe with precision and emotional honesty is an irreplaceable culture.

Indeed, the association of story-telling to historical survival in Tomb of Sand throws light on this aspect of the novel which links it to the larger tradition of South Asian

women's Partition writing. Authors like Ismat Chughtai, Krishna Sobti and Amrita Pritam introduced a kind of writing that focuses on the female voice, and is specific and emotional, rather than more official, that is impossible to incorporate in official histories, during the time of historical disaster. In *Shree*, the two women of the traditional stories are joined by another, older woman who managed to survive and find a way to live, who was able to suppress and forget, or only look back at it now, towards the end of her life, facing it. Throughout the novel, telling stories as such is made a prominent means of bringing about this confrontation. This simple but forlorn errand, this most ordinary of story reasons, imbues Ma's journey with the fullness of broken lives, unfinished journeys and undone relationships created by Partition. The chironji nuts are a symbol of all that was left over, of all the broken relations, of all the interrupted continuities, carved by the border. To bring them is to argue that these continuities are important, that there are elements of the past which have something to say to the present, that no political boundary can ever put out.

Rosie, Gender and the Ethics of Remembrance

The character of Rosie, the transgendered girl who is a friend of Ma's, is an extension of the novel's critique of national and generational boundaries to that of gender and sexuality. Like Ma, Rosie lives in a body and an identity that is transgressive and can't be contained by the dominant social order. They are friends because they both have a sense of transgression, they haven't lived in the same way as everyone else, they are both willing to live in those places that social convention has deemed off-limits to them. Rosie's familiarity with Lahore and her assurance to take Ma there before her death initiates the journey; and it is Ma who ends up crossing the line because of Rosie's chironji, which Rosie was supposed to bring her, that creates a great continuity between the two women, across the barriers of death itself. In this case, memory is not simply a result of the past and its conservation but is also a matter of fulfilling an obligation which is beyond national boundaries, beyond death. The novel's vision of ethics of remembrance is that of the living continuing unfinished projects of the dead, making the unfinished trips of the dead complete and restoring at least some of the broken connections.

Language, Translation and the Border

The issue of language and translation is another layer of border and memory on top of this novel. *Ret Samadhi* is first translated from the Hindi literary tradition into English on the other side of the borders and into the global literary marketplace, by Daisy Rockwell. In his translation of this

novel, Rockwell is faithful to the novel's unique prose style, a digressive, recursive, self-reflexive narrative movement, which critics have rightly praised. But in the translation, the novel's main theme—communication between people of different cultures and languages is not a matter of eradicating difference but of patiently negotiating it—is also at work: a desire not to make the other person speak or think as one does, but to live in the middle ground between the languages, in the space of translation. In a small, but significant, way, the Booker Prize's decision to honor a novel in translation from Hindi is exactly what Ma does, albeit on a more visceral and embodied level – cross cultural and linguistic boundaries to reconnect, recognize and reclaim what is missing.

Return and Transformation: The Shifting Sand

The knowledge that the Partition memory project, as a whole, that *Tomb of Sand* in particular, ends up with Ma, herself, may be a key to answering the question of what the project accomplishes. In the end of the novel, Ma takes her journey to the border and back to Lahore to drop her chironji, though she does not fully come to terms with the desires and memories which the Partition has buried. She comes back to India as a different woman not a woman who has come to closure because as the novel makes clear, this is a kind of history that cannot be closed, but a woman who has accepted that history that she carried with her, and in accepting it, found, to some degree at least, a peace. The sand that makes up the title of the novel — the sand in which the tomb is created — is not a fixed thing, but continually moves and is formed again, each time a wind blows. The self buried in decades of social enactment, mnemonic repression has changed, has changed places, has taken on new formations. This is not rubbish but a change; not an end of suffering but an alteration of it: an unburdening of it, a carrying of it more consciously, more deliberately, more with understanding the nature of what is being carried, and the purpose of carrying it. In the truest meaning of the word, it's a working through — the work of an older woman (nearing eighty years old) whose courage was to face what she had a lifetime experience of avoiding.

CONCLUSION

The overarching importance of *Tomb of Sand* is that it is critical of prevalent ways of thinking history. Political history, the boundaries of nations, and institutional history have tended to be favored in traditional histories. Instead, *Shree* emphasizes on personal memory, embodied experience and every day acts of resistance. The novel shifts the focus of history to that of an old woman which is not

given enough attention in official history. In *Tomb of Sand*, one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman – and at the age of eighty is not quite finished with becoming. While describing the process of becoming, or the performative constitution of identity which Butler theorises, Ma's transformation shows that it doesn't stop during the process of becoming and may actually become more intense when happening at the very end. Obviously, the social retreat that appears to be a close to death, is in reality, a preparation; the tomb of sand is not a grave, but a chrysalis.

The Butlerian performativity, analyses of ageing, postmemory, trauma theory, border consciousness, imagined communities and cultural memory posited by the Assmanns in this paper suggest that *Tomb of Sand* is an intellectually ambitious and emotionally rich work. The novel shows that Partition was not only an event of a particular moment and generation, but one that has an impact on generations and decades of lives, that has existed in the lives of eighty-year-old women who lived as a "no" defined by others, and that suddenly, close to death, they have emerged as a "no" claiming herself. In this novel old age is not the finality of possibilities, but its most radical expression; the border is not a line of separation but a space of encounter; and memory is not a burden to be managed but a living force which comes back to claim his or her space in the present.

Through this novel, Shree ultimately offers us an image of human life that is a violation of all kinds of boundaries: national, generation, gendered and temporal and which illustrates the contingency of each of these boundaries as well as their permeability. "Anything worth doing transcends borders," Ma tells officious officials who oppose her crossing, and across her long life, it's been every border trying to contain, define and diminish her at the geopolitical border at Wagah. What happens when such borders are denied? *Tomb of Sand* is a novel that explores that "other" – when an old woman determines to be a traveller, a border-crosser, a seeker of suppressed memory, a person who insists on the right to remain, even at the end of life, unfinished. Its merit lies in the fact that it shows that such refusal can be not just a personal act of rebellion, but a cultural and historical and political gesture, one of the most important in its own right, that has added to the unfinished process of coming to terms with what the Partition was, is, and might one day become – forget, imagine, and then be brave enough to cross the border and reimagine. In the novel old age is a freedom, memory is a resistance and storytelling is a survival. In doing so, it asserts the continued freedom of remembrance, and the importance of a recovery of forgotten histories to an ongoing

project of understanding what it means to belong, to survive and ultimately, to become.

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