

Unbordering Womanhood: Mobility, Memory, and Feminist Resistance in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract

Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand shatters fixed structures of gender, nation and identity through its feminist reinvention of ability and memory. The recent scholarship on the novel has largely focused on Partition memory, narrative experimentation and border politics. The inter-related relationship between ageing female subjectivity, movement and fragmented memory has received relatively little attention. This article contends that Tomb of Sand cultivates an "unbordering" feminist consciousness by its portrayal of later life, spatial transition and narrative instability. Using Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of liminality, and Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity, the article shows how the novel resists patriarchal and nationalist containment by reimagining womanhood as fluid, relational, and always in flux. The article explores through close textual analysis how ageing becomes a site of transformation rather than decline, how mobility deconstructs stable notions of home and nation, and how fragmented narration destabilises coherent historical and patriarchal narratives. The article concludes by contending that Tomb of Sand exceeds the limits of postcolonial feminist discourse by presenting identity as dynamic, fluid, and in perpetual flux.

Keywords: *Tomb of Sand*; feminist subjectivity; mobility and borders; memory narratives; postcolonial feminism; ageing and resistance

Introduction

South Asian fiction has, in the last few decades, revisited themes of memory, displacement, fractured belonging and historical violence to interrogate the lingering afterlives of colonialism and Partition (Pandey 9). Such narratives frequently challenge stable notions of nation, identity, and home through fragmented forms of storytelling and gendered experiences of memory (Menon 14). In recent years, writers have begun to investigate the lasting effects of borders on emotional lives, domestic spaces and gendered identities long after political histories seem to have passed. What makes Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* such a striking presence in this literary landscape is the way it blends narrative experimentation with an intensely human exploration of ageing, movement, grief and female subjectivity. The present article examines *Tomb of Sand*, the English translation of Geetanjali Shree's Hindi novel *Ret Samadhi* by Daisy

Rockwell. While the analysis focuses on the translated text, it also acknowledges that translation mediates certain linguistic and cultural nuances that shapes the novel's reception. Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* is a reimagining of later life, not as decline or withdrawal, but as a space of possibility, where identity, memory and belonging are renegotiated.

The novel begins with elderly widow whose withdrawal following her husband's death initially appears to affirm conventional assumptions about ageing femininity, only to transform that apparent stillness into the starting point of a radical reconfiguration of identity. In this way, the text works subtly to destabilise patriarchal assumptions about ageing femininity, domesticity and nationhood. Existing scholarship on *Tomb of Sand* has primarily focused on Partition memory, border politics, narrative experimentation and feminist resistance. Critics including Deng, Tayyab, Akram, Tripathi, Sharma and Kaur have examined the novel through queer remembrance, spatial politics, liminality, fragmented narration and patriarchal resistance (Deng 54; Tayyab 112; Akram 67; Tripathi 89; Sharma 41; Kaur 103). However, relatively little attention has been paid to how ageing female subjectivity, mobility and fragmented memory collectively produce a distinct feminist mode of subject formation that cannot be fully explained through existing postcolonial or feminist frameworks. This gap is significant because, although postcolonial literary studies have extensively examined migration, nationalism, exile and trauma, they have paid comparatively little attention to ageing female subjectivity despite the novel placing an elderly woman at the centre of transformation, mobility and narrative agency. The article argues that *Tomb of Sand* creates a feminist consciousness that can be described as "unbordering" in its representation of ageing, mobility and fragmented memory. "Unbordering womanhood" does not signify the complete destruction of boundaries or historical differences. Instead, it is about the constant disruption of structures that seek to confine female subjectivity within rigid categories of age, domesticity, nation and identity. Repeatedly unsettling these forms of containment, the novel reconstitutes womanhood as a continually negotiated mode of subjectivity rather than a fixed social identity. While this formulation resonates with existing feminist discussions of mobility, border-crossing and relational subjectivity, the idea of unbordering womanhood proposed here is analytically distinct. Rather than describing movement across national or cultural boundaries alone, it conceptualises a mode of feminist subjectivity that emerges through the simultaneous negotiation of embodied ageing, Partition memory, emotional attachment and spatial transition. Emerging inductively from *Tomb of Sand* itself, unbordering womanhood is not offered as an alternative to existing feminist frameworks but as a complementary critical vocabulary for understanding forms of female becoming that cannot be fully explained by nomadic subjectivity, border feminism or transnational mobility alone. It is precisely this convergence of ageing, embodiment, memory and movement that constitutes the originality of the concept developed in this article.

Methodologically, this article employs close textual reading as its primary mode of analysis, combining feminist literary criticism with postcolonial literary inquiry. Rather than treating these theoretical perspectives as explanatory models to be imposed upon the text, this article employs them as complementary interpretive frameworks through which the novel's own insights may be more clearly articulated. An important framework to understand the protagonist's refusal of culturally prescribed widowhood and passive ageing is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which exposes the instability of patriarchal gender norms (Butler 191). Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of liminality sheds light on the unstable spaces in the novel where identities are fluid and negotiable, especially by constantly reworking borders, memory and belonging (Bhabha 2). Equally important is Rosi Braidotti's notion of nomadic subjectivity that conceptualises identity as relational and as constantly reconfigured through movement. This perspective supports the article's analysis of mobility as an embodied and emotional process

rather than merely geographical transition (Braidotti 3). Accordingly, this article develops the concept of unbordering womanhood through the protagonist's negotiation of ageing, memory, Partition and movement, while Butler, Bhabha and Braidotti provide a critical vocabulary for interpreting these interconnected processes. The literary text therefore remains the primary site from which the article's central argument is developed.

Ageing and Feminist Subjectivity

One of the most striking interventions made by *Tomb of Sand* is its redefinition of ageing female subjectivity. Within patriarchal social structures, old age is frequently associated with silence, passivity, physical decline and social invisibility, particularly in the case of women whose identities have been historically linked with domestic and familial roles. The expectation is that old women will retire quietly from public life, desire and selfhood. Shree challenges these assumptions by presenting ageing as transformation, rather than disappearance. The death of her husband first sends the protagonist into silence and retreat, but the quiet around her starts to take on a different meaning. The recurring image of the protagonist lying "towards the wall" (Shree 15) foregrounds both exhaustion and refusal. This gesture initially appears passive, even symbolic of an emotional breakdown. But as time goes by, the wall becomes more than a symbol of despair. It becomes a quiet refusal of the roles that have long dictated her life. Her silence is a disruption of the domestic order around her, because it interrupts the expectations through which ageing femininity is culturally managed. The protagonist's refusal of conventional domestic expectations reveals the extent to which gendered identity is predicated on repetition and performance. In this sense, the relevance of Judith Butler's theory of performativity is particularly obvious. Butler argues that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time" (Butler 191). Gender is not an essential identity but is continually produced through repeated social practices. By refusing to perform the anticipated roles of widowhood and passive ageing, the protagonist exposes the instability of patriarchal gender norms. At various points the narrative associates the protagonist with lightness and unpredictability, suggesting that she is slowly slipping out of the bounds of socially recognisable categories. The daughter's inability to recognise the transformed mother illustrates how ageing unsettles socially intelligible forms of feminine identity, rendering the protagonist increasingly resistant to patriarchal definitions of womanhood. The novel notes that she had started "shrinking and expanding at the same time" (Shree 76), capturing the paradoxical nature of later-life transformation. Likewise, she becomes unexpectedly "light" (Shree 82), suggesting a gradual loosening of socially prescribed identities. Together these recurring images trace the emergence of what this article terms unbordering womanhood. Rather than functioning as isolated metaphors, they mark successive stages in the protagonist's movement away from culturally prescribed forms of widowhood and ageing. This progression from withdrawal to instability and finally to lightness suggests that the novel imagines transformation as a gradual loosening of inherited social identities rather than a sudden act of liberation. Through this cumulative pattern of bodily gestures and recurring images, the text itself develops a model of female subjectivity that exceeds fixed categories of age, gender and belonging. It is this process that this article conceptualises as unbordering womanhood.

The gradual reconfiguration of subjectivity traced through these images can be further illuminated by Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity. Braidotti is against fixed and unitary notions of identity and prefers fluid and relational subjectivity (Braidotti 35), a view that resonates strongly with *Tomb of Sand* where ageing is a process of continual reconfiguration and not closure. Instead of remaining confined to the roles of wife, mother, or widow, selfhood is produced through movement, uncertainty, memory, and relational experience. The text also

reconfigures domestic space itself. The home seems initially to be a site of enclosure where ageing femininity is managed through routine, dependency and silence but then it becomes a space where inherited identities begin to loosen. The mother–daughter relationship further reveals how patriarchal expectations are internalised and reproduced across generations. The representation of memory also destabilises linear identity. Emerging as flashes, emotions and reverberations rather than orderly recollections, it collapses distinctions between past and present, revealing subjectivity as recursive, layered and continually reconfigured. Importantly, Shree's narrative refuses to romanticise ageing. The protagonist is still in the process of transformation, made out of grief, vulnerability and uncertainty but also moments of liberation. Importantly, *Tomb of Sand* refuses to romanticise ageing. The protagonist's transformation remains incomplete, shaped by grief, vulnerability and uncertainty alongside moments of liberation. Precisely this incompleteness gives the novel its feminist force, reimagining later life as an ongoing process of becoming rather than disappearance.

Mobility and the Unbordering of Womanhood

In *Tomb of Sand*, movement is both physical and symbolic, continually reshaping identity, memory and belonging. Mobility is inseparable from the afterlives of Partition, which persists not merely as historical memory but as an emotional condition embedded in gestures, relationships and inherited anxieties. At one crucial moment, the narrative declares that “borders are not walls” (Shree 201). This statement line reflects the text's broader rethinking of borders. The borders in the text are porous, unstable and emotionally negotiable rather than absolute divisions between identities and nations. Instead of abolishing difference, the text invites readers to rethink the function of borders themselves. A wall exists to prevent encounter, fixing identities on opposite sides and denying the possibility of exchange. A border, by contrast, is meaningful exactly because it can be crossed, negotiated and reinterpreted through lived experiences. Shree thus makes the border a space of encounter where memory, loss and human relationships defeat the political logic of territorial division. This difference is especially important for the protagonist whose journey demonstrates that the most profound borders she faces are not geographical, but those of widowhood, ageing, familial expectations and inherited memories of Partition. This understanding of the border as a negotiated space finds a useful theoretical parallel in Homi K. Bhabha's concept of liminality, where the most productive forms of identity emerge in unstable in-between spaces (Bhabha 2). These crossings create such spaces of uncertainty in *Tomb of Sand*. The boundaries between home and exile, self and other, past and present are always collapsing. The protagonist's border-crossing, therefore, is more than a geographical crossing, it is a symbolic crossing in which fixed forms of identity begin to disintegrate (Shree 205).

This process becomes especially visible during the protagonist's return journey to Pakistan and her reunion with her husband Anwar. This episode illustrates how the journey functions not simply in the act of crossing an international border but in the transformation of what the border itself comes to signify. The ageing woman does not travel to recover a lost homeland or to reclaim a broken past. Instead, the journey reveals the impossibility of political cartographies to contain emotional histories that have remained unresolved since Partition. The landscapes of Pakistan bring forth memories that had long been dormant in silence, and the distinction between “here” and “there,” “past” and “present” begins to destabilise. Rather than restoring an original sense of belonging, the journey reveals that belonging itself is relational, produced through memory, affection and shared vulnerability rather than territorial possession. The protagonist's movement across the border thus reconfigures ageing from a condition of withdrawal into a form of historical agency, enabling her to confront memories that had remained inaccessible within the limits of domestic life. Through this convergence of mobility, Partition memory

and late-life self-revision, this transformatoin articulates what this article conceptualises as unbordering womanhood: a mode of female subjectivity that emerges not by erasing historical divisions but by refusing to allow those divisions to determine the limits of identity, attachment or belonging. The protagonist appears to become increasingly estranged from the rigid social meanings that once structured her existence. As the narrative observes, she had “started walking away from definitions” (Shree 214). The phrase foregrounds a refusal of inherited identities rather than identity itself. By questioning categories such as wife, widow, mother and citizen, the protagonist’s journey reimagines subjectivity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed condition, exemplifying what this article terms unbordering womanhood. Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity helps explain this mobility as a relational process of becoming rather than rooted identity. Yet *Tomb of Sand* goes further: movement remains inseparable from memory, Partition and ethical responsibility. For this reason, unbordering womanhood foregrounds the reworking of inherited boundaries rather than mobility alone.

Crucially, Shree does not represent mobility as simply freedom. Grief, vulnerability, memory and hesitation inform movement, as well as transformation and freedom. Shree thus rejects romanticised stories of emancipation. Home consequently becomes more than a singular location, continually reconstructed through movement and remembrance. Recent studies of the novel have focused on its engagement with spatial transgression and fluidity of borders. For example, Musfira Tayyab argues that spatial movement and border crossing are transgressions in the novel that disturb fixed geographical and ideological boundaries (Tayyab 112). The novel’s recurring border-crossings transform movement into a form of resistance, a point also emphasized by Ayesha Akram, who reads spatial transgression in the text as a challenge to fixed structures of gendered and social identity (Akram 72). Their observations help to illuminate the novel’s wider politics of movement. But mobility in *Tomb of Sand* is not merely spatial, it is also deeply gendered. The protagonist’s journey specifically unsettles patriarchal expectations around ageing femininity and domestic attachment.

This narrative form reinforces this sense of instability. Like borders, its narrative structure does not contain identity; it does not accept coherence or linear progression. Memories break the chronology, voices change unexpectedly, stories are told in fragments rather than sequentially. So spatial movement and narrative fragmentation work together to destabilise fixed systems of meaning. By the end of the novel, womanhood emerges as a continually evolving mode of subjectivity shaped through movement, memory and relational encounter, exemplifying what this article conceptualises as unbordering womanhood.

Feminist Resistance and the Fragmentation of Memory Narratives

Memory seldom arrives in plain or perfect form in *Tomb of Sand*. It comes unexpectedly, in fragments, in gestures, in silences, in emotional echoes that blur the line between past and present. Shree’s fragmented narrative form reflects this emotional and historical dislocation, eschewing smooth chronology and coherent resolution. Through discontinuous narration, recursive memory and shifting voices, Shree constructs a feminism of resistance that interrogates patriarchal certainty and nationalist historical closure. This narrative instability is haunted by the afterlives of Partition. The text does not treat Partition as a closed historical event, but as an open emotional condition that continues to inform relationships, embodiment, and memory over generations. It is a repeated interruption of the present by the past, an indication that historical violence cannot be neatly contained within chronology. The assertion that “memory walks ahead of us” (Shree 167) also disrupts linear notions of time and memory. The formulation of memory “walking ahead” is especially important because it challenges the usual notion that memory is just following on behind the past. Memory is not a passive act of recollection of past events, but

an active force in shaping present perception and future action. The protagonist does not simply remember the Partition; she encounters it repeatedly in moments that break into ordinary life and require new ways of understanding oneself. Memory therefore functions less as an archive and more as a living presence, continuously re-working the relations between past experience, present identity and future possibility. This temporal reconfiguration of memory finds a productive theoretical parallel in Homi K. Bhabha's conception of liminality as a condition that destabilises fixed identities and historical certainties (Bhabha 4). The past is never behind; it continually shapes the movement of the present. Recollections emerge spontaneously in fragments of conversation, sensory impressions, emotional reactions, recurring images. The fragmented emergence of memory is not merely a stylistic feature of the novel but a challenge to systems of authority that depend upon coherent and unified narratives.

Such fractured temporality undermines nationalist narratives that depend upon coherent histories of origin, division and closure. Through shifting voices, recursive narration and disrupted chronology, the narrative refuses narrative closure, thereby resisting patriarchal and nationalist demands for coherent historical meaning. Fragmentation, then, is one of the text's most potent modes of resistance in its refusal of the certainty and closure upon which patriarchal and nationalist narratives often rely. At certain points silence itself assumes interpretive importance. Words often seem to overstep their own meanings, or dissolve into playfulness and ambiguity. At one point the narrative notes that words 'scatter like sand' (Shree 233), a metaphor that encapsulates the novel's resistance to fixed linguistic structures. The metaphor suggests that language, like identity itself, resists fixed meanings. Rather than offering definitive statements about womanhood, the novel keeps meaning open to reinterpretation through memory, context and lived experience. Linguistic instability thus reinforces the article's concept of unbordering womanhood by refusing the closure imposed by patriarchal and nationalist discourses. This openness of language finds a productive theoretical parallel in Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity, which emphasizes becoming, mobility and the rejection of fixed identity structures in favour of fluid and relational modes of existence (Braidotti 36). Most importantly, the novel resists closure. Stories are cut short, perspectives are shifting, and certainty is always deferred. This openness is indicative of the broader feminist politics of the text.

Fragmentation in *Tomb of Sand* functions as a feminist challenge to authoritative systems of meaning. Its fractured narration repeatedly disrupts chronological continuity, reflecting the emotional dislocations of Partition and personal trauma (Shree 173). This refusal of narrative closure keeps both identity and memory interpretively open (Shree 245), while resisting fixed definitions of femininity, widowhood and ageing. Butler's understanding of gender as constantly produced through repeated social practices in this context sheds light on the novel's feminist rethinking of subjectivity (Butler 198). Ultimately, fragmentation becomes an ethical refusal of closure, allowing womanhood to remain open beyond the fixed boundaries of nation, gender and history.

Conclusion

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* is one of the most arresting feminist reimaginings of ageing, mobility and memory in contemporary South Asian literature. Drawing on the inter-related dynamics of embodiment, mobility and fragmentary memory, the article has argued that the novel engenders an unbordering feminist consciousness. The protagonist's metamorphosis subverts patriarchal constructions of ageing femininity by refusing the passivity and silence allotted to old women. Through subtle shifts of emotional and spatial passage she begins to move beyond the social categories that once defined her being. Mobility in the novel further dislodges fixed structures of identity and belonging. Borders are not seen as fixed demarcations but as

emotionally negotiable spaces that are formed through memory, grief and human connection. By centring on a border-crossing movement of an elderly woman, Shree critiques patriarchal assumptions that associate old age femininity with immobility and domestic enclosure.

Tomb of Sand's fragmented narrative form furthers this resistance by not allowing coherent systems of historical and patriarchal meaning. In this way the novel contests hegemonic narratives that require closure and certainty. Crucially, the text expands the possibilities of postcolonial feminist discourse by making ageing and embodiment central categories of analysis. While postcolonial literary studies have often focused on migration, nationalism, and collective trauma, the narrative demonstrates that these histories are not separate from personal memory, bodily experience, and emotional transformation. By the end of the novel, womanhood emerges not as a fixed social identity but as an open, continually evolving process shaped by movement, memory, loss and relational experience. Beyond its interpretation of *Tomb of Sand*, this article advances unbordering womanhood as a distinct feminist critical framework for understanding how female subjectivity is continually reconstituted through negotiations with patriarchal, national, temporal and linguistic boundaries. Rather than describing movement alone, the concept foregrounds the specifically gendered processes through which women unsettle inherited structures of identity, memory and belonging. Although developed through a close reading of *Tomb of Sand*, unbordering womanhood provides both a critical framework and a conceptual vocabulary for analysing female subjectivities in contemporary literature that emerge through negotiations of ageing, memory, displacement and gendered belonging, privileging relational becoming over fixed identities and essential categories. In this way, unbordering womanhood contributes not only to the interpretation of Shree's novel but also to broader postcolonial feminist debates by foregrounding the continuing reconfiguration of women's identities across social, historical and political borders.

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