

Embodied Histories and Cartographies of Memory: Trauma, Borders, and Healing in Gitanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

Dr. Poonam Verma

Assistant Professor

Department of English

D.A.V. (P.G.) College, Karnal

Email: davpoonam89@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper examines Geetanjali Shree's International Booker Prize-winning Hindi novel Ret Samadhi (2018), translated into English as Tomb of Sand (2022) by Daisy Rockwell, as a significant intervention in contemporary Indian partition literature that redraws conventional understandings of historical trauma and national boundaries through a metamodern framework. Situating the body as an archive of historical memory and trauma, the paper explores how partition violence remains inscribed within embodied consciousness and resurfaces through fragmented recollection, silence, dissociation, and delayed recognition. Through the journey of its octogenarian protagonist Ma, who undertakes a transformative return to Pakistan and revisits her ancestral home in Lahore, the novel reimagines partition not as a closed historical rupture but as a living psychic inheritance capable of healing and renewal. This movement across literal, emotional, and symbolic borders destabilizes rigid nationalist divisions and constructs alternative cartographies of memory that foreground remembrance as an active site of resistance and self-reclamation. Shree's nonlinear and metafictional narrative strategy, interweaving modern urban life, folklore, environmental consciousness, womanhood, and historical remembrance, reflects trauma's recursive temporality while simultaneously offering pathways toward resilience and transformation. Oscillating between postmodern irony and modern sincerity, Tomb of Sand proposes a new ethical imagination in partition literature where memory becomes emancipatory, borders become porous spaces of reconciliation, and healing emerges through the reclamation of fractured histories.

Keywords

Embodiment, Cartographies of Memory, Trauma, Partition, Borders, Healing, Metamodernism, New Sincerity, Post-Irony, Resistance.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 11.05.26

Approved: 20.06.26

Dr. Poonam Verma

*Embodied Histories and
Cartographies of Memory:
Trauma, Borders, and Healing
in Gitanjali Shree's Tomb of
Sand*

Notions Jan. - June 2026,

Vol. XVII, No. 1,

Pg. 007-014

Article No. 02

Similarity Check: 09%

Online available at :

<http://anubooks.com/journal-volume/notions-vol-xvii-no1-jan-june-2026>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/notions.2026v17i01.002>

Introduction

The relationship between bodies and borders in Gitanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* reveals an intricate interplay of historical violence, gendered subjectivity, and psychological negotiation. Borders in the novel are never merely political markers; they function as dynamic structures that regulate identity, enforce separation, and produce embodied suffering. The female body, particularly as represented through Ma, becomes a site upon which historical displacement and patriarchal authority are inscribed. By examining the body as a repository of trauma and the border as a symbolic marker of rupture, Shree extends partition discourse beyond official nationalist historiography and privileges intimate experiences of fragmentation and renewal. The movement across borders—literal and metaphorical—signals acts of existential reclamation, suggesting that crossing imposed thresholds enables the reconstitution of selfhood. The fragmented narrative structure mirrors the discontinuous architecture of traumatic memory, reinforcing Cathy Caruth's notion that trauma is not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly in haunting repetition. This delayed recognition structures Ma's psychological evolution and informs the novel's nonlinear unfolding. Shree's declaration, "This is not a history, just a herstory" (*Tomb of Sand* 394), radically shifts partition discourse by privileging women's experiential truths over official historical narration.

The narrative architecture of *Tomb of Sand* unfolds across three interconnected movements that gradually expand from domestic intimacy to historical transcendence, reflecting the novel's metamodern oscillation between realism and self-reflexive reinvention. The first movement immerses readers within the everyday domestic world inhabited by Ma, her son Bade, daughter Beti, daughter-in-law Bahu, and grandsons Sid and Overseas Son. Through the mundane rhythms of family life revolving around the aging Ma, the text maps the subtle tensions of fear, resentment, silence, obligation, and social conformity while simultaneously registering the wider cultural anxieties of contemporary India, including shifting customs, environmental decay, social alienation, and political unrest. These seemingly ordinary familial interactions establish the psychological terrain upon which Ma's later transformation becomes possible. The second movement marks a decisive transition when Ma leaves the structured domesticity of Bade's household to reside with her socially estranged daughter Beti. Here readers witness her metamorphosis from physical fragility and emotional withdrawal into an assertive and rejuvenated selfhood. This transformation is accompanied by explorations of female agency, bodily autonomy, sexuality, and non-normative identity, particularly through Rosie Bua, whose transgender presence destabilizes rigid gender binaries and broadens the novel's discourse of liberation.

This section culminates in Ma's startling declaration of her desire to visit Pakistan, signaling the eruption of buried historical memory into present consciousness.

The third movement begins at the Wagah border, where Ma and Beti's crossing initiates a dramatic shift from domestic sensibility to historical confrontation. Their journey through Pakistan transforms the border into, "a horizon. Where two worlds meet and embrace" (*Tomb of Sand* 653), thereby dissolving the binary logic of nationalist separation. It is at this stage that the novel's deeper metamodern impulse fully emerges, revealing how Shree has consistently invoked this porous understanding of partition through post-ironic and credulous metafictional gestures embedded throughout the text. Daisy Rockwell notes that the narrative incorporates "modern urban life, ancient history, folklore, feminism, global warming, Buddhism, and much more" (*Tomb of Sand* 732), a layered interweaving that produces both narrative playfulness and historical sincerity. These interspersed metafictional episodes and subsidiary narratives never overshadow Ma's central journey; rather, they amplify its emotional force and collectively fulfill what Toth describes as the "promise ... that the trauma of the past can be healed, or known — reformed at last" (46). Through this tripartite structure, Shree reconstructs partition not as a static historical rupture but as an evolving site of remembrance, reconciliation, and self-renewal.

The body in *Tomb of Sand* emerges as a repository of historical witness, carrying within its wrinkles, silences, and scars the memory of displacement and violence. Martin observes that "Forced migration often involves trauma, dislocation, and abrupt change in life. At a minimum, the displaced may face emotional problems and difficulties in adjustment resulting from the loss of family and community support. More serious mental health problems may arise from torture and sexual abuse before or after flight" (Martin 65). This insight illuminates Ma's physicality as a mnemonic surface bearing traces of partition's unresolved violence. Elaine Scarry similarly argues that "Whether or not it is verbally memorialised, the record of war survives in the bodies, both alive and buried, of the people who were hurt there" (Scarry 113). Ma's widowhood becomes the catalyst for the resurfacing of dormant historical wounds. Shree writes, "As though her body is a coat, she used to wear right side out, but now wears inside out" (*Tomb of Sand* 269), a metaphor signifying radical introspection and self-reclamation. Her transformation demonstrates how trauma becomes a condition of renewal rather than paralysis. Her declaration that "At eighty, Ma had turned selfish" (*Tomb of Sand* 529) reveals not social selfishness but existential liberation.

Borders in the novel exceed political significance and become emotional and psychological thresholds. Shree writes, "Those who consider death to be an

ending took this to be hers. But those in the know knew that this was no ending; knew she'd simply crossed yet another border" (*Tomb of Sand* 14). This destabilizes notions of closure, transforming death, displacement, and migration into transitional states rather than terminal conditions. Though burdened by widowhood and partition's psychic residue, Ma prepares herself to revisit submerged memories. Her return to Pakistan signifies much more than geographical relocation; it becomes an act of existential reclamation through which she actively reinterprets her fractured history. By crossing emotional and political thresholds, she contests the presumed permanence of borders and reclaims agency beyond age, gender, and societal expectation. Aparna Aggarwal notes that "Ma succeeds in creating a route to the forbidden, comparable to the window that opens out towards the guava orchard" (Aggarwal and Naik 1736), a formulation that captures liberation through transgression. Likewise, Ramani's assertion that "In a male-dominated environment, women's emancipation and equality are achieved through unwavering work" reflects Ma's transformation as a profoundly political act of resistance.

Trauma frequently manifests through quiescence, a silent dormancy in which emotional pain remains inaccessible until circumstances trigger its return. Cathy Caruth explains trauma as deferred experience, registered belatedly through repetition and fragmentation rather than immediate comprehension. Ma's silence embodies this unresolved rupture. Her apparent passivity conceals a process of psychic reconstruction. Shree captures this withdrawal through Ma's declaration: "But I am the Goddess of Solitude" (*Tomb of Sand* 334). Solitude here becomes not alienation but chosen refuge, a psychological sanctuary in which traumatic memory can be silently confronted. Closely linked to quiescence is dissociation, the psychic distancing through which individuals survive overwhelming realities. Ma's refusal to engage with her surroundings signals fractured identity, yet her eventual crossings become acts of reintegration. Her resistance to awakening transforms into rebirth through the extraordinary linguistic sequence: "No, no, I won't get up. Noooooo, I won't rise nowwww. Nooo rising nyoooww. Nyooo riiise nyoooo. Now rise new. Now, I'll rise anew" (*Tomb of Sand* 21). Here language itself enacts transformation, moving from refusal to renewal.

Trauma's effects extend beyond the individual survivor and shape future generations through inherited silences and anxieties. Cathy Caruth writes, "The repetitions of the traumatic event which remain unavailable to consciousness but repeatedly intrude on sight-thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive

seeing” (92). Elissa Marder similarly emphasizes “The importance of finding a new way to acknowledge the impact of events that can only be known belatedly and of listening to the power of experiences that can only be expressed indirectly” (2). These insights illuminate how Ma’s displacement reverberates through her daughter Beti, whose uncertainties reflect partition’s psychic inheritance. Sobti and Kumar observe that “Women were reduced merely as bodies, carrying the burden of honour of their community” (731), exposing the reduction of women into symbolic vessels while erasing individuality. Toni Morrison’s observation that “a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum” (11) further captures trauma’s paradoxical presence as absence that nonetheless shapes identity and memory.

The articulation of trauma in *Tomb of Sand* depends fundamentally upon Gitanjali Shree’s experimental narrative style. Urvashi Butalia argues that partition was “surely more than just a political divide, or a division of properties, of assets and liabilities,” but fundamentally a “division of hearts” (7), while also emphasizing the “untold suffering, tragedy, trauma, pain and violence” endured by communities long bound by coexistence (7). She asks, “Is there such a thing, then, as a gendered telling of partition?” and notes that women frequently narrate partition through intimate fragments of loss rather than political abstraction (12). Shree’s fragmented and playful prose reflects this instability of memory. John Hersey observes in *Hiroshima*, “And now each knows that in the act of survival, he lived a dozen lives and saw more death than he ever thought he would see. At the same time, none of them knew anything” (4), a paradox that captures Ma’s condition as survivor and witness.

Healing in the novel is mediated through symbols of renewal. Weiling Deng notes that sand symbolizes empathy dissolving boundaries and enabling shared recognition of suffering. Ma’s healing begins when Sid gifts her the butterfly-adorned cane, initiating transformation. Soon after, the rainbow emerges as renewal: “And from there it twinkled in Granny’s eyes. Rainbow here, rainbow there, rainbows, everywhere! And the one reflected in the eyes the sparkiest of all” (*Tomb of Sand* 96). Her delighted response follows: “Nooo noooo, Sid’s Granny made some nu nu-type noises and sort of smiled and up it jumped the rainbow, that is” (*Tomb of Sand* 96). This radiance marks her reentry into life. Bodily acceptance becomes central when Shree writes, “Your body is your body, whether it’s your sixteenth year, seventeenth, or seventy-eighth, you prance about strutting your burgeoning blossoming shape” (*Tomb of Sand* 260). Her return to origins culminates in the realization: “The beginning begins at the beginning” (*Tomb of Sand* 324), suggesting that healing emerges not through forgetting but through revisiting and reclaiming memory.

Post-war literature has often been preoccupied with the haunting residues of violence and loss; however, Gitanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* transcends the conventional representation of suffering by foregrounding resilience, transformation, and the possibility of renewal. Rather than presenting trauma as a condition of irreversible devastation, the novel reconceptualizes it as a dynamic force capable of generating resistance, self-discovery, and healing. Through Ma's extraordinary journey from silence and withdrawal to self-articulation and reclamation, Shree demonstrates how the body becomes an archive of historical memory and a site where fractured histories can be confronted and reimagined. Her transformation affirms that resilience is not the erasure of pain but the capacity to endure rupture while forging new meanings of existence and belonging. As *Love, Life, and Beyond* observes, *Tomb of Sand* is "not just a story to read but a journey to embark on" ("Book Review: *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree"), and this journey becomes a profound meditation on partition, ageing, motherhood, womanhood, love, memory, and liberation. The novel redraws the cartographies of memory by dissolving rigid national, gendered, and psychological boundaries, revealing that borders are never absolute but remain porous spaces of encounter, reconciliation, and becoming. In doing so, Shree redefines partition literature through a metamodern sensibility that oscillates between pain and hope, irony and sincerity, rupture and repair. Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* emerges as both witness and guide, affirming that memory is never silent, history is never fully sealed, and healing remains possible even within the deepest fractures of embodied and collective experience.

References

1. Aeur, Lauren. "How Trauma Impacts Memory: Understanding the Brain's Response." *My Therapist*, Substack, 25 Nov. 2024, <https://mytherapist.substack.com/p/how-trauma-impacts-memory>.
2. Aggarwal, Aparna, and Gowher Ahmad Naik. "Narratives of Indian Women and Their Catastrophes: A Study of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*." *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 12, 2022, Pg. 1735–1741.
3. Arshi, Arshdeep. "Partition Was Never Complete, Border Was Created Politically." *Firstpost*, 18 Oct. 2022, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/partition-was-never-complete-border-was-created-politically-says-booker-prize-winner-geetanjali-shree-11468921.html>.
4. Balliro, Matthew J. *The New Sincerity in American Literature*. 2018. University of Rhode Island, PhD dissertation, https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1789&context=oa_diss.

5. "Book Review: *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree." *Love, Life, and Beyond*, 10 Aug. 2023, <https://lovelifeandbeyond.in/2023/08/10/book-review-tomb-of-sand-by-geetanjali-shree/>.
6. Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Penguin Books India, 1998.
7. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
8. Deng, W. "Death and Life in the Bordersands: On the Queer Remembrance of Partition through Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*." *South Asian Review*, vol. 45, nos. 1–2, 2023, Pg. 66–76.
9. Gibbons, Alison. "Postmodernism Is Dead. What Comes Next?" *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 June 2017, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/>.
10. Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. A.A. Knopf, 1946.
11. Hutcheon, Linda. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern: A Dialogue." https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266871259_Irony_Nostalgia_and_the_Postmodern_A_Dialogue.
12. Konstantinou, Lee. "Four Faces of Postirony." *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker et al., Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, Pg. 87–102.
13. Lang, Berel. "The Limits of Irony." *New Literary History*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1996, Pg. 571–588. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.1996.0042>.
14. Marder, Elissa. "Trauma and Literary Studies: Some 'Enabling Questions.'" *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, edited by Judith Greenberg, U of Nebraska P, 2006, Pg. 1–13.
15. Martin, Susan. *Forced Migration and Mental Health*. Cambridge UP, 2004.
16. Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1989, Pg. 1–34.
17. Ramani, V. "Writers First, Women Later." *The New Indian Express*, 2011, <http://www.cscsarchive.org>.
18. Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford UP, 1985.
19. Sehgal, Parul. "Seventy-Five Years after Indian Partition, Who Owns the Narrative?" *The New Yorker*, 26 Dec. 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/>

- magazine/2023/01/02/seventy-five-years-after-indian-partition-who-owns-the-narrative-saadat-hasan-manto-geetanjali-shree-tomb-of-sand.
20. Seth, Abramson. "Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism." *HuffPost*, 27 Apr. 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ten-key-principles-in-met_b_7143202.
 21. Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Penguin Books, 2022.
 22. Sobti, Pragti, and Dinesh Kumar. "Partition as Memory: Construing Women Narratives." *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 9, 2022, Pg. **731–738**.
 23. Toth, Josh. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the Rise of Historioplactic Metafiction." *Metamodernism: Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker et al., Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, Pg. **41–53**.
 24. Toulmin, Stephen. *Return to Reason*. Harvard UP, 2009.
 25. Vermeulen, T. "Wallace After Postmodernism (Again): Metamodernism, Tone, Tennis." *English Literature*, vol. 8, 2021, Pg. **105–124**.
 26. Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1993, Pg. **151–194**.
 27. "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young." <https://neugierig.org/content/dfw/ffacy.pdf>.