

Crossing Borders, Resisting Rupture

Storytelling in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand: A Novel*.
Translated by Daisy Rockwell.
HarperVia, 2021. 624pp., \$30 cloth.

IN HER BOOKER PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH, GEETANJALI SHREE describes her 2018 novel, *Tomb of Sand*, as “an elegy for the world we inhabit, a laughing elegy that retains hope in the face of impending doom.” Translated by Daisy Rockwell from the Hindi original, *Ret Samadhi*, *Tomb of Sand* catapulted to global recognition for being the first Indian-language book to win the Booker International Prize in 2022.¹ This novel draws from a deep reservoir of Indian heritage, culture, folklore, social customs, practices, the volatile Partition history of the Indian subcontinent, as well as its rich literary traditions. Divided into three parts and an epilogue, it is about an elderly woman, referred to as Ma (Hindi designation for mother), an octogenarian who has recently lost her husband and sunk into depression despite a large brood of children and grandchildren showering “bucketloads of compassion” on her. Unbeknown to her family, Ma suddenly rises from her state of *samadhi* (a Hindi expression for a meditative trance) holding a cane. Through the imagery surrounding the cane, magically conjuring rainbow butterflies in a dreamlike haze, the novel transforms the cane into a symbol of agency and resistance, strengthening Ma’s determination to cross all the boundaries that have held her dreams and desires hostage. In course of time, Ma becomes an embodiment of rebuttal, healing her internal ruptures through small but culturally powerful acts of dissent whereby the “tale of a dying woman evolves into a story about her thriving and flourishing.” The novel is “soaked up in the stuff” but also anchored in empathy and resilience.

1 “Why *Tomb of Sand* Won the 2022 International Booker Prize and Why You Should Read It.” *The Booker Prizes*. May 27, 2022. thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/why-tomb-of-sand-won-the-2022-international-booker-prize-and-why-you

Ma's defiance grows over time, emerging from small acts such as turning her back literally and metaphorically towards her family, leaving the eldest son's house and staying with her self-willed daughter, harboring motherly affection for a transgender person, and finally, going to Pakistan without a visa. These acts unfold within the framework of emotional healing that entails transgressions- physical, metaphorical, emotional, societal. The novel ends with Ma's death right after she unites with her first husband, Anwar in Pakistan. In the following pages, this essay will explore in detail the symbolic and narrative elements of the novel that mediate between rupture, resilience and freedom.

The narrative opens with a metafictional acknowledgment of the endless possibilities of storytelling— "A tale tells itself. It can be complete but also incomplete, the way all tales are." The narrative includes the "stirring and whisperings that float on the wind" along with the past boiling forth into the present and bringing "steam, embers, and smoke" and in doing so it opens the readers to the liberatory force of storytelling. When the narrator muses that every story is a story of partition—"love, romance longing courage pain in separation bloodshed...lost souls flitting about in the ether," it acknowledges not just the layered complexity of life but also of storytelling. In the third part of the novel comes a brief but powerful perspective from the playful narrator on the role of literature in times of despair: "...Literature has a scent, a soupcon, a je ne sais quoi, all its own." Realities seep into literature hoping for redemption, hoping of blossoming of "green patches of shoots and leaves" "amongst the rubble of destruction." "The world is in dire need of literature because literature is a source of hope and life."

In the episode of the recently widowed Ma crossing the territorial borders in search of her first husband in Pakistan, the novel connects the looming past of Partition to the vagaries of modern India, and highlights Ma's rebellion against the conventions associated with widowhood. In its juxtaposition of personal lives full of humdrum conventions with national historical traumatic events, the novel takes a long view of rupture as a state of continued negotiation with life. The novel affirms that anything worth pursuing necessitates crossing borders, upsetting boundaries, shaking the customs, cultures and practices that have rigidly shaped a group of lives. As Ma forges "a path toward the forbidden," it appears to her daughter "as though she'd removed all her layers, one by one, wife, mother, aunt, this that, now at last she was simply herself, laid bare apart, her own, untouched by thoughts and concerns of any other. At eighty, Ma had turned selfish... Ma rising again contrary to the expectations of all."

The walls, windows and doors in this story emerge as regimes that steer the course of human lives. The narrator is quick to introduce the wall playing "a special role in our story." The wall becomes a conduit for Ma's defiance. It sieves out "everyone's dishonor, rage, comprehension." Ma slides towards the wall every day till "her back became the wall itself, keeping at bay those who came to coax and cajole." While Ma refuses to get up from

her bed saying Nyooo, nyooo" like a stuck record to every passerby, it gradually snowballs from endless No, no, Nyoooo, noooo...to "Now, I'll rise anew." The walls and doors are also personified to denote mindsets and customs that travel with their inhabitants and structure new spaces. As Ma's eldest son braces for retirement and impending relocation, Ma's sudden departure from his house denotes her refusal to be bound by the walls that harbor patriarchal values or feudal mindsets. As Ma's journey of transgressions is peeled layer by layer, one learns that "A path opens with no. Freedom is made of no." Ma's symbolic passing over the wall paves her way to crossing borders. The novel conceptualizes a border as connective instead of divisive—"A border is a horizon. Where two worlds meet. And embrace." Ma's three-page-long soliloquy on the border, beginning with, "Border? Do you know what a border is?" during her confrontation with the border police in Pakistan, culminates in the narrative emphasis that "a border is not created to be removed. It is meant to illuminate both sides."

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Much "like musical notes that go in several directions in a single raga," the novel captures the polyphony of *dhwani* (Hindi for sound) in the form of the rhythmic intermingling of human and bird sounds, expressions in Hindi, Urdu and English; sounds of mundane routine, the bickering of a multi-generational family—all of which build the milieu of the novel. The novel's translator, Daisy Rockwell, defines *Dhwani* as "an echo, a vibration, a resonance...alliteration and assonance...a mystical reverberation" that could be accidental or deliberate. The sounds of routine acquire a new meaning in Ma's life as her story begins to dwell in her liberal daughter Beti's house. Her breathing, laughter and giggling, snoring, slurping, lip smacking, yawning, fluttering of the shawl, the jingle jangle of her bangles result in a curious role reversal. The mother starts to become more of a daughter to her *Beti*, discarding the societal expectations of widowhood in the process.

The narrative voice slides in time and again to remind the readers that understanding is to "displace meaning" and not establish meaning. The pace and essence of the narrative is its "dollop of the unfathomable and a dash of the riddle" that delights in its own existence. Referring to this novel, Frank Wynn, a Booker judge, notes that, "in its linguistic contortions

it evokes *Don Quixote*, in its discursive digressions it is reminiscent of *Tristram Shandy*, in its sense of the magical there are echoes of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez—yet the voices, the story, the novel are unique.” The novel captures moods, and as it declares the boundless possibilities of a tale, it also immediately changes gears to introduce the circularity of this story and its binding elements—“There were two women and one death”—and proceeds with enthusiasm—“So there’s no harm in starting the story right here, that is, the way we’re doing it right now.” And even after the narrative zooms into the life of one of the two women in a chaotic household, it digresses into back stories, long tedious descriptions of a single mood, a single event, or chapters with a single sentence, even a two-word telegram. The narrator doubles up as different characters and also addresses the reader. The narrator hops between pages claiming new roles and functions—“But I’m not here to talk about myself. This isn’t my story...I’m not even a character. And yet—the page is a stage!” to “I take a bow and leave these pages. Whatever comes next won’t be said by me.” The narrator bids adieu in the final pages of the novel by leaping out of the window, “filled with longing,” looking at “plethora of new stories and characters” waiting to take shape.

The novel, in its translated version, retains the local flavor of a joint middle-class family in suburban north India whose members coexist grudgingly in spite of each other’s hypocrisies. The array of characters is introduced by their familial roles and social identifiers instead of actual names, casting satire on how individual identity gets subsumed in the vortex of social expectations. There is Bade (meaning eldest)—Ma’s eldest son and a retired Government officer who holds a typical patriarchal haughtiness; his wife, the Bahu (meaning daughter-in-law) oscillates between compliance and subtle inconsequential rebellion—wearing a pair of Reeboks, for instance, as a flight to freedom. There is Beti (meaning daughter)—Ma’s daughter and Bade’s sibling who represents the “free spirit of the new age,” writes “totally incomprehensible books” and gives interviews on “women’s consciousness, sexuality, the female orgasm, what gibberish, good God.” While her lifestyle is not legitimized by her family, she finds mild acceptance after she is invited to the President’s house. Ma herself is introduced through several names, coming through the perspectives of different characters. She is called Ma, Amma, Granny, Mata-ji, or Baji, Granny Chill, Kalpataru—The Wishing Tree. It is only after she returns to her place of birth in Pakistan that we discover Ma’s real name—Chandraprabha Devi. Amidst all this, Ma’s relation with Rosie, the transgender character, stands out. Rosie’s relation with Ma goes back to the harrowing experience of escape during the Partition of India. From Beti’s perspective, Rosie is described in metaphors of duality. She represents the futility of drawing straight lines, border, boundaries, neat outlines or categories. She is both Rosie, who calls Ma Baji, as well as Raza the tailor, who addresses Ma as Mataji. While everyone calls her Rosie Bua, she is a body that defies the legitimacy of borders—“Flowing this way and that.”

The novel employs a range of narrative styles where stories are nested within each other, yet retains a sense of incompleteness. For example, one does not know about Rosie’s past in pre-partitioned India, or about the incidents that led to Anwar’s paralysis. We never learn whether Anwar the junior officer accepts Ma as his mother, or whatever happened to Bade and Bahu in their post-retirement apartment, or about the statue of Buddha that represented Chandraprabha’s life with Anwar but was finally confiscated by Pakistan. One does not what lessons Beti learns out of her Ma’s daring act of unearthing her first family. Through an elliptical and layered narrative form, the novel sustains interpretive openness. Ma’s grand odyssey to Pakistan and her reconciliation with her past complicates the notions of home and belonging in the face of disruption. This confusion finds expression in the scene where Shree brings together stalwarts of Partition literature and their iconic characters at the Wagah border. This scene brings to life writers such as Krishna Sobti, Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, and Intizar Hussain, among others who have shaped narratives on the Partition of India. These figures and their iconic characters appear as if they are stepping out of their texts, assembled in a literary afterlife causing them to wonder where they belong and blurring the boundaries of fiction, history, non-fiction, fantasy and the act of writing itself.

The Booker Prize committee recognized Shree’s *Tomb of Sand* as “An urgent yet engaging protest against the destructive impact of borders, whether between religions, countries or genders.” *Tomb of Sand* truly crosses the boundaries of artistic expression, and its value lies in its thematic, symbolic and narrative richness that takes the readers through a maze of emotions, engaging with unhealed wounds of personal and historical, individual and collective ruptures and finding new ways of living. ¹