

Bodies and Borders in Geetanjali Shree's *The Tomb of Sand*

Megha Patil¹, Dr. Stella Steven²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Karnatak Arts and Commerce College, Dharwad
Email: [meghapatil005\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:meghapatil005[at]gmail.com)

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Karnatak Arts and Commerce College, Dharwad

Abstract: *It is an undeniable fact that over years more and more borders, barriers, divisions, groups have emerged between countries, within countries, states, religions, societies, generations, genders, homes and more. These borders have always been legitimized or governed by either state repressive apparatuses or ideological repressive apparatuses which always go unquestioned. Geetanjali Shree writes, "Anything worth doing transcends boundaries". Shree's novel Ret Samadhi (Hindi) translated into English as The Tomb of Sand by Daisy Rockwell has created history by being the first South Asian novel to win the International Booker Prize. It focuses on an octogenarian, Ma, who is seen to have lost the will to live in the beginning of the novel after her husband's death, sheds away from the conventional roles she has been playing that of a wife, mother, aunt and takes on a path of self-discovery leaving behind all the layers one by one that has ever defined her, stands on the threshold, traversing borders. Ma's embarkment of journey to Pakistan without a visa confronts her with several questions from the Pakistani officials at the border. Ma's answers to the questions reveal a new gaze of what a border should be further questioning the curtailment of individual's freedom because of increased polarization and of borders and boundaries being legitimized by institutional violence. The present paper tries to look at how bodies (especially that of a woman) transgress crossing boundaries that are laid down to them not only by the patriarchal system within but also boundaries between nations. It also looks at how from times immemorial a country's border has never been defined through a woman's gaze. The paper also attempts to look at how language, body, border and memory all become 'doors' through which a country as a whole and characters transcend anew in the novel.*

Keywords: bodies, borders, repressive apparatuses, gender, nation, transgression

The Tomb of Sand by Geetanjali Shree is a novel that celebrates transgressions – that of bodies and of borders. It is well said that 'change is the only permanent thing in life', and in this novel we see characters, places, thoughts, borders of countries, days, language and narrators of the novel continuously changing throughout the novel thus embracing the very concept of non-fixity.

Frank Wynne, Chair of Judges for the 2022 International Booker Prize calls it "sui generis" and states 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 Marques". (The Booker Library)

The paper tries to look at three aspects by taking into consideration the first South Asian novel which has won the International Booker Prize in 2022 and has created history – *The Tomb of the Sand*, written originally in Hindi titled *Ret Samadhi* and translated into English by Daisy Rockwell. Firstly, the paper looks at how the bodies (especially that of a woman) transgress crossing boundaries that are laid down to them not only by the patriarchal system but also the political boundaries between countries. Secondly, it sheds light on how from times immemorial a country's border has never been defined through a woman's gaze. Finally, it shows how language, body, border and memory – all become 'doors' through which a country as a whole and characters transcend anew in the novel.

The novel begins by focusing on an octogenarian, Ma, Amma, Granny, Mata-ji, Baji, whose family resides in Delhi, is seen to have lost the will to live in the beginning of the novel after

her husband's death. Ma's back in the first part of the novel becomes one with the wall towards which she lays facing, putting the family members into a worrisome situation as they could only hear her say "No, I will not. No, nyo, nyoooo..." (19). As we move towards the end of the first part, Ma is seen to get up with the help of a (magical) walking stick.

The second part of the novel greatly deals with the daughter-mother bonding. After Ma moving from her son's house temporarily to her daughter's place, embarks on a 'new life' – shedding away from the conventional roles she has been playing that of a wife, mother, aunt and takes on a path of self-discovery leaving behind all the layers one by one that has ever defined her, stands on the threshold, traversing borders. It is here that we can see transfer of roles between mother and daughter. Beti to the readers is introduced as a character who has run-away and has brought shame to the family, who has now become a freelancer, feminist and a Women's Rights activist. While Ma is seen to have found a new rhythm in life, we find the daughter cooking and looking after Ma which she was just wasn't used to. It can be said that when Ma and Beti reverse roles, Beti is enveloped with a certain gloom of imposed motherhood where 'no other desire, besides the desire to give one's child (Ma) everything' (241) exists. We see that Beti soon realizes that her mother's appetite for transgressions is much stronger than her own. Along with Ma and Beti, yet another important character is introduced who stands at the borders of the defined gender roles that the society assigns - Rosie Bua/ Raza Master, a transgender character who becomes a symbol of transgression with 'a body unrecognizing of the legitimacy of any borders' (423). All these three characters Ma, Beti and Rosie are seen to have transgressed the borders that the society has imposed on

women in the name of gender, family and the system of patriarchy – some being imposed to us through ages of practice, ideologies and some through state repressive apparatuses. So it can be said that through this story Shree tries to throw light on how imposed borders/barriers – be that of physical or psychological, not only limits to the physiological landscapes but also limits the movement of body by setting limits – as to what is and is not permissible, further imposing limitations on language and stories or voices - as to what can be and cannot be said aloud.

Furthermore, it is an undeniable fact that over years more and more borders, barriers, divisions, groups have emerged between countries, within countries, states, religions, societies, generations, genders, homes and more. These borders have always been legitimized or governed by either state repressive apparatuses or ideological repressive apparatuses which always go unquestioned. Althusser in his essay, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses”, argues that ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. In other words, ideology has the function of constituting concrete individual as subjects. For Althusser, ideological discourse constructs subject positions or places for the subjects from which the world makes sense. Therefore, subjects are the effects of discourse because subjectivity is constituted by the positions which discourse obliges us to take up. Thus it can be said that, discourse constructs, defines and produces objects of knowledge in an intelligible way.

Geetanjali Shree writes, “Anything worth doing transcends boundaries”. Whether borders are based on physical, ethno-cultural or strategic – they are just not lines on a map, they are social and discursive constructs which reflect political strategies and ideologies. They have important implications in people’s lives and the existence of some borders can have serious effects both materially and psychologically. On the other hand, while some welcome borders as they act as barriers and separate the ‘other’ from oneself; for others, they might be scars on the landscapes as they act as barriers through which people endeavor to break through. Hence, we can say that borders are always contested and gives rise to different narratives. For some they are there to protect against external threat while for others they are impediments locking them out of certain spaces. Apart from the immediate material losses that individuals face because of creation of boundaries, there is also fracturing of place-based identities and psychological lacunas which often go unheard. Geetanjali Shree in her novel creates the space to hear the suppressed voice of a woman which in turn adds to the creation of a feminist historiography during the time of partition of India. Ma who had kept buried within her about her lost love because of the partition of India gathers lot of strength, not only breaks the boundaries laid by the patriarchal family system, of gender, of age and of responsibilities laid down upon her, but also leaps to go beyond the boundary laid by countries. It is in her 80s that Ma decides to go on search of her husband Ali Anwar, whom she had married when she was sixteen in Pakistan. Ma’s desire to visit Pakistan is met with a lot of apprehension by the family members. Without legal documents and without a visa, with a ‘heart of stone’, Ma and her daughter take up the adventure of going to Pakistan only to end up behind bars in Khyber. On being confronted with the officials in Pakistan for having crossed the border, Ma is

seen to question the very basis of such territorial and ideological divisions. It is here that her past is revealed and her desire to unite with her lost love, with land and people who she claims to her own brings in or redefines the laid in assumptions of the self, identity, borders and of love. Ma’s answer to the questions by Pakistani officials unveil a new gaze of what a border should be – spaces for meetings, friendship and love because angry and bloodied lines that divide geographies cannot exist as it is ‘the no man’s land’ and a border does not have religion; further questioning the curtailment of individual’s freedom because of increased polarization of borders and boundaries being legitimized by institutional violence. Ma says borders are only meant to “illuminate both sides”. Though at the end of the novel, when we see Ma’s body being hit by a bullet, she falls down with her face facing the limitless sky upward in the land that she claims to be her own irrespective of what the legal-political discourse of countries say.

Thus, the novel tries to weave the past into the present, this side of the story and that of the other side, life and death by creating subversions that flow in all directions defying time, space and borders of all sorts. Along with the socio-political borders, the novel also exposes many borders and limitations that men and women lay down for themselves in Indian families through their self-imposed responsibilities and the fear of transgressing the laid down boundaries by the societal norms. Quoting Frank Wynne again, the novel is just not another addition to the literature of India and Pakistan but “it speaks to readers around the world about loss and love, exile and homecoming, the borders that constrain us – personal, political and geographic – and how they can be overcome”. (The Booker Library)

References

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