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Rebirth Across Borders: Aging, Partition Memory, and Feminist Selfhood in
Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract

Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* (2022) shows how an old woman finds a new sense of self. The protagonist, Ma, an 80-year-old widow, navigates profound loss, resurfacing memories, and a transformative change. This paper analyses Ma's change in three steps. First, she rejects the conventional widowhood norms that society expects widows to stay quiet and secluded. Ma says no to that and claims her own power. Second, she goes back to Partition-traumatized places, where she confronts long-repressed anguish. Third, she makes relational bonds, which go beyond family rules and country borders. The paper uses ideas from feminist aging studies, colonial trauma theory, and transnational feminism. Ma's new sense of self emerges from caring for others, historical confrontation, and border crossing solidarity. Ultimately, the novel reconfigures how we see old age, women, and life after colonies. It connects and individual's growth to the enduring wounds of nation. *Tomb of Sand* makes aging a story of memory, empathy, and expansive human connections.

Keywords: Old-age self, feminist aging, partition memory, colonial trauma, aging identity.

Introduction

Ma's Late-Life Rebirth: Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, winner of the 2022 International Booker Prize, marks a milestone for Indian literature in translation. The novel follows Ma, an 80-year-old widow. After her husband's death, society expects her to live quietly and without presence. The novel captures her transformation as she moves "gliding into her own arteries and aerosols" (Shree 56), emphasizing Ma's reclaiming of life and vitality in old age. Ma travels, makes new friends, and returns to Pakistan, her home before the Partition, challenging aging stereotypes and confronting India's deep historical wounds.

While much scholarship has presented the narrative, Partition, and gender roles, less has been focused on Ma's inner psychological and ethical growth. Critics highlight metaphors of confinement such as walls and doors, which frame women's roles within society. Others address borders and memory in the novel. This paper attempts to analyse Ma's feminist selfhood in three parts. First, Ma resists the traditional widow's role, symbolized in family dynamics where "shouting is a tradition, an ancient Indian custom upheld by eldest sons" (Shree 45). This reflects the patriarchal control Ma rejects. Second, she confronts Partition trauma by revisiting her past, navigating complex histories of displacement. Third, she forms new relationships beyond the expectations of family which is evident when Beti asks, "When did I become me, or have I become Ma?" (Shree 465), signalling shifts in identity and kinship. These moments contest ageism and individualism, showing selfhood as relational and historical.

To understand Ma's rebirth, this paper explores the intersection of aging, postcolonial trauma, and feminist perspectives that cross national borders. It unfolds in four parts: first establishing these frameworks; second, exploring Ma's refusal of widowhood as self-care and political resistance; third, analysing her return to Pakistan as reclaiming history; and fourth, examining her bonds with Rosie, a trans-woman, and Beti, as expressions of queer and cross-generational solidarity. The novel celebrates freedom from boundaries, stating, "this particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please" (Shree 11). The recurring image of renewal appears when "The sunlight arrived each morning, kissing Ma's face...and the two of them would sit and gaze affectionately at each other" (Shree 248), symbolizing hope and connection. Through these interactions and histories, Ma's transformation is ethical and relational rather than solitary triumph. *Tomb of Sand* offers a novel way to understand aging, memory, and identity in the postcolonial Indian context.

Theoretical Foundations

Feminist gerontology offers a new way to understand aging. It moves beyond the usual idea that growing old means decline and loss. Instead, it sees later life as a time when women can resist limiting gender roles. Margaret Morganroth Gullette explains that society often combines ageism and sexism to make older women invisible. Their power and choices are denied. In South Asia, this is clearly seen in widowhood rituals. Widows are expected to step back from life, stay quiet, and live in confinement (Gullette 23; Didur 45). Ma's story in *Tomb of Sand* challenges these expectations. She chooses to be "selfish" by following her own desires instead of only family duties. This is a vivid expression of independence, standing in contrast to a culture that often pressures older women to sacrifice themselves. Importantly, Ma's new sense of self grows through her relationships with others rather than being isolated. This fits feminist arguments that selfhood isn't just about independent freedom but about connections and interaction.

The Partition of India deeply affected women, whose bodies became sites of violence and suffering. Their experiences were often left out of official histories and public memory. Trauma from partition continues across generations, passed through bodily memories and family stories (Butalia 67; Das 112). It is not just a past event but a shaping force in the present. Ma's memories of partition come not as clear stories but as physical sensations, nightmares, and unease that reflect this ongoing trauma. Her journey back to Pakistan is an act of 'archival recovery,' where forgotten histories are reclaimed and national narratives of erasure are challenged. This return helps Ma to bring together parts of her identity fractured by the partition borders.

Transnational feminism looks at how people create solidarities across differences like nationality, culture, race, and gender. It questions the nation as the main unit for belonging. Ma's relationship with Rosie, a transgender woman from another country, and Beti, her daughter, show how new forms of kinship go beyond traditional family or citizenship rules (Mohanty 89). Rosie's presence challenges dominant ideas of respectability and reveals how feminist solidarity can be complicated and

difficult. The bond between Ma and Beti shows how trauma can be passed down and also worked through across generations. Their connection models how selfhood can be created through ethical relationships across borders and identities rather than fixed political identities.

Rejecting Widowhood: Self-Care as Resistance

Tomb of Sand opens with Ma withdrawing from life after her husband's death. Her family views this as proper mourning for an elderly widow. The narrative uncovers a deeper cultural pattern. Widowhood functions as a living death in South Asian society. Women face strict rules about food, dress, and movement. These practices force self-erasure and confine widows to the home (Didur 45). The novel's title *Tomb of Sand* captures this perfectly. It symbolizes burial within domestic walls while still alive. Ma complies with these expectations initially. Her silence and immobility nearly complete the cultural erasure. A turning point comes when she discovers Rosie's photograph. This image awakens memories of her vibrant pre-marital self. The moment catalyses her refusal of widowhood. Rather than accepting it as inevitable fate, Ma recognizes widowhood as a social role she can reject. Ma begins reclaiming space through movement. She starts with local outings around town, which evolve into her major pilgrimage back to Pakistan. Feminist theory identifies mobility as essential to personal autonomy (Hooks 78). Elderly widows face double oppression, gender limits, plus age restrictions. Ma's travels break both forms of containment at once. Her journeys emphasize bodily pleasure and self-nourishment. Ma eats the rich food she craves for and wears colourful clothes that please her. These choices directly oppose the ascetic discipline demanded of widows. Audre Lorde describes this sensual self-care as 'the erotic as power.' For women pushed to society's margins, such acts become political resistance (Lorde 54). Ma transforms cultural expectations of 'selfish' old women. She uses them as weapons against the very system that created them. Importantly, Ma's transformation develops through relationships, not isolation. Rosie's photograph provides the initial spark. Family members respond in complex ways that propel her forward. Beti experiences anxiety about Ma's changes. Bade gradually accommodates her independence. These interactions create a dialogue. Ma attends to her own needs through others' reactions. This process aligns with care ethics. Connection and mutual response matter more than solitary independence.

Partition Reckoning: Return and Memory Integration

Ma's identity before Partition, known as 'Chanda,' surfaces in fragments, experienced more as bodily pain and trauma rather than clear memories. Her separation from her childhood friend Rosie, who later becomes a trans woman, reveals the deep personal costs of the violent national division (Butalia 67). This overlapping selfhood, where Chanda is overwritten by the roles of wife and mother, reflects the ongoing damage of Partition's disruption in time. The drawing of national borders breaks her personal continuity, burying the girl she was in Lahore beneath the domestic life she leads in Delhi. Ma's journey back across the Partition border surprises and unsettles her family since the wounds of Partition remain raw and unresolved. Her return is not a nostalgic trip or a way to find closure but an act of ethical witnessing. She encounters her childhood places now as ruins, and in doing so, she reclaims a geographical self that history tried to erase. This pilgrimage acts as an 'archival recovery' that challenges official narratives by bringing silenced personal stories to the fore (Das 112). By physically crossing borders, Ma asserts a belonging that goes beyond legal citizenship and questions the nation-state's monopoly on identity and history. Her daughter, Beti, inherits much of this trauma indirectly through silence rather than direct stories. As Ma's past surfaces, it disrupts Beti's sense of herself as a progressive woman and forces her to confront her family's role in forgetting and silencing historical wounds. Beti's decision to accompany Ma on the journey represents a feminist passing down of trauma and memory across generations. Together, they acknowledge inherited pain while building new ethical bonds that open possibilities for healing and change.

Relational Selfhood: Rosie, Beti, and Queer Kinship

In *Tomb of Sand*, relational selfhood is vividly expressed through Ma's relationships with Rosie, her childhood friend and a trans-woman, and Beti, her daughter. Rosie's life as a Partition survivor and trans-woman places her at multiple margins. Their reunion sparks Ma's transformation from withdrawal to active engagement in life. Their friendship models solidarity that goes beyond conventional respectability and social acceptance (Kaplan and Grewal 6). Instead of needing to explain their bond, Ma and Rosie share mutual recognition and loyalty. This connection defies rigid social norms and highlights acceptance across profound difference.

However, Beti struggles with Rosie's presence. Her discomfort shows the limits of liberal feminism when encountering real radical difference. It suggests that true openness demands more than intellectual agreement; it requires facing personal biases and expanding the understanding of kinship. Ma and Beti have a complex and evolving relationship. At first, conflict arises because Beti worries about her mother's rejection of social norms regarding propriety and widowhood. Beti's anxiety reflects deeply internalized ideas about maternal sacrifice and social respectability. Ma's determination to live authentically and resist confinement to traditional roles forces Beti to confront the complexity of her mother's identity beyond motherhood alone. This relationship explores feminist intergenerational ethics of respecting parental autonomy while negotiating inherited trauma. Beti's gradual change marks a feminist awareness that embraces historical and emotional complexity in identity formation.

The friendship between Ma and Rosie is deeply transformative and even more significant than family ties. Philosophical traditions often undervalue friendship compared to family or romantic bonds (Helm 10), but Shree places friendship at the heart of ethical relationships in the novel. This friendship exemplifies selfhood emerging through generous acceptance of otherness and mutual care. The novel presents selfhood as a relational process rooted in solidarity and crossing social divides. Together, these relationships emphasize a feminism based on relationality rather than isolated individuality. Ma's selfhood arises in continuous encounters that challenge boundaries of gender, nation, generation, and social conventions. This relational selfhood rejects a fixed, autonomous self and instead honours identities as fluid, historically situated, and ethically interconnected.

Narrative Form: Enacting Fluid Selfhood

Tomb of Sand uses a fragmented structure that matches Ma's inner world. The novel includes long digressions, moments where the story breaks to talk about itself, and time that jumps around instead of moving straight forward. This broken form mirrors Ma's consciousness perfectly. A simple linear story cannot contain her complex selfhood. Ma's identity works like layers of writing on top of each other. It holds many different times, identities, and histories all at once.

The novel's playful style proves the main argument about selfhood. A neat, organized narrative cannot show the fractured reality of postcolonial life. People's identities get broken by history and borders. The wandering voice in the novel shows relational selfhood. Instead of giving power to one main narrator, it weaves together many different perspectives. Readers see Ma's story through family members, friends, and even the storyteller itself. This form makes the reader feel the connections between people and histories, just as Ma experiences them.

Conclusion: Feminist Implications

Tomb of Sand completely changes the way we understand aging. It turns old age into a powerful political space instead of a time of decline. Through Ma's late-life transformation, the novel rejects stories that say getting old only means loss and weakness. Ma's personal growth connects directly to Partition trauma. This link shows that historical memory lives in the body. It continues across generations. Dealing with this pain requires ethical witnessing and responsibility.

The novel offers new models of family and belonging. Ma's transnational relationships cross national borders and traditional family rules. They show that solidarity can work across big differences of gender, generation, and nationality. In today's world of rising borders, nationalist politics, and fixed identities, *Tomb of Sand* points toward feminist futures. These futures build on relational ethics, taking responsibility for history, and creating solidarity across boundaries.

Ma's complete journey takes her from the 'widow's tomb' of silence and confinement to becoming a bold border-crosser. This path moves beyond the idea of individual freedom and success. Instead, it shows selfhood that grows from deep roots in history and strong connections with others. *Tomb of Sand* makes important contributions to feminist studies, postcolonial literature, and research on aging. It offers fresh ways to understand identity, memory, and transformation in contemporary South Asian writing.

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