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Ageing Bodies and Bordered Lives: The Poetics of Border-Crossing in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

Dr. Raj Sree M. S

Associate Professor of English, All Saints College, University of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Geetanjali Shree's *Ret Samadhi* (2018), translated by Daisy Rockwell as *Tomb of Sand* (2021) and awarded the International Booker Prize in 2022, has generated a rapidly consolidating body of criticism organised around trauma and memory, decolonial form, and material culture. This essay argues that the most generative direction now available is not ageing-and-trauma treated as a single undifferentiated theme, but a comparative reading of the novel's two most boundary-troubling bodies: Ma, an octogenarian widow whose depressive withdrawal gives way to border-crossing renewal, and Rosie, a gender-nonconforming figure whose presence has typically been treated as secondary to Ma's Partition memory. Reading the two together, this essay proposes the category of the marginal body as border-crossing body: a figure whose social illegibility, rather than disqualifying it from agency, becomes the very mechanism by which the novel dismantles the border as a organising logic of nation, gender, and generation. The essay further argues that the novel's own digressive, non-linear form does not merely represent border-crossing thematically but performs it structurally, refusing the containment that both ageist and nationalist logics depend upon.

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Introduction

When Ma, the eighty-year-old protagonist of Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand, turns her back on her family and retreats into bed following her husband's death, the novel appears at first to be staging a familiar clinical narrative: bereavement giving way to depression, and depression to decline. Shree, however, uses this apparent movement toward death as the hinge for its opposite. Withdrawal becomes incubation; incubation becomes a slow turning outward, first toward memory and eventually toward the physical crossing of the India–Pakistan border in pursuit of a wound the novel has kept in reserve since childhood. The overall shape of the narrative, then, is not decline but a five-part arc: loss, withdrawal, remembering, border-crossing, and reclamation.

This arc has already drawn substantial critical attention, and for good reason. But the field around *Tomb of Sand* is filling quickly, and it is filling along a small number of well-worn paths. This essay argues that the most defensible way forward is not to abandon ageing and trauma as coordinates, but to route them through a body the existing scholarship has consistently under-read: Rosie, the novel's gender-fluid or transgender figure, whose relationship to Ma has typically been treated as a secondary thread in an argument primarily about Partition trauma. Read together, Ma and Rosie allow the novel's border imagery to be understood not as a metaphor applied to individual experience from outside, but as something bodies themselves accomplish, or are forced to accomplish, when the categories available to them (respectable widow, legible gender) no longer fit.

Methodology

Four broad directions currently organise the criticism on Tomb of Sand, and each has matured to the point of internal density. The first, and by far the most populated, treats the novel through the classical vocabulary of trauma studies: latency, belatedness, and traumatic return, generally by way of Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an event that is not fully known at the time of its occurrence and returns unbidden. Work in this vein reads Ma's withdrawal as somatised historical memory and her journey to Pakistan as a delayed encounter with an event her body has carried in silence for decades. This is a well-supported reading, but its very plausibility has made it crowded; a straightforward trauma-and-memory argument now risks restating claims already established in the literature.

A second direction, closer to gerontology proper, has begun to appear only recently. It reads Ma's late-life crisis through Robert Butler's concept of the life review and Dan McAdams's narrative identity theory, situating the novel within narrative and critical gerontology and treating widowhood as the stressor that

reactivates dormant conflict for reworking rather than mere retrieval. This scholarship is valuable precisely because it takes ageing seriously as a psychological process in its own right rather than as a passive container for historical trauma. It also means that "ageing and trauma," proposed without further specification, is no longer an unclaimed research gap.

A third direction reads the novel through decolonial and translingual theory, arguing that its digressive, pun-driven, boundary-refusing prose enacts a kind of epistemic disobedience toward colonial and nationalist categories of knowledge. This is a formally sophisticated argument and, again, a recent one, which means new work needs to avoid simply re-describing digression as decolonial repair.

A fourth direction attends to material objects within the novel, principally the Buddha statue and the saris belonging to the character Chanda, reading them as repositories of memory that circulate between private recollection and national history, inflected by questions of ownership, heritage, and museology. Objects, on this reading, are what allow speech to fail without memory disappearing.

Each of these approaches is defensible and none is exhausted, but each has also begun to accumulate enough scholarship that a paper adopting any one of them alone would be entering a crowded room. The task, then, is not to reject these frameworks but to combine elements of two of them — ageing studies and the novel's sustained interest in the body as a site where categories are contested — around a relationship the criticism has left comparatively undeveloped: the pairing of Ma and Rosie.

Theoretical Framework

Critical gerontology, as developed by scholars such as Kathleen Woodward and Margaret Cruikshank, resists the assumption, dominant in both biomedical and popular discourse, that ageing is primarily a story of loss, diminishing capacity, and narrowing possibility. Woodward's work in particular has argued that old age is culturally scripted as a kind of premature death, a foreclosure of futurity that occurs well before biological death itself. Critical gerontology asks instead what is made possible, rather than merely lost, in later life, and it is attentive to how gender, race, and social class shape whose ageing gets to be read as decline and whose gets to be read as wisdom, freedom, or reinvention.

Trauma theory, meanwhile, offers a vocabulary for understanding how historical violence persists in a subject who did not, or could not, fully process it at the time: through silence, somatic symptom, involuntary repetition, and delayed return. The two fields do not automatically align. Trauma theory has tended to treat the traumatised subject as suspended in a kind of psychic present tense, endlessly revisiting an

unmetabolised past; critical gerontology has tended to treat the older subject as capable of a forward-looking reworking of the past that trauma theory, in its classical form, is reluctant to grant.

Tomb of Sand is unusually well positioned to hold both claims at once, because Ma's story refuses to resolve into either a pure trauma plot or a pure gerontological growth plot. Her withdrawal is legible as traumatic latency, but the direction her renewal eventually takes, toward mobility, desire, and boundary transgression, is legible as exactly the kind of late-life reconstruction of identity that critical gerontology insists is possible and that ageist narrative convention normally forecloses. The novel does not choose between these framings; it makes the ageing body the site where an old wound and a new future occupy the same flesh.

Discussion

Read through critical gerontology alone, Ma's turning to the wall could be mistaken for a culturally sanctioned script: the widow who withdraws from social life because that is what widows, especially ageing widows, are expected to do. Read through trauma theory alone, the same gesture becomes a textbook case of traumatic shutdown, the body's refusal of a world that has become newly unbearable because an old wound has resurfaced under the pressure of a new loss.

The more productive reading holds both at once. Ma's withdrawal is doubly determined: by a society that treats old age itself as a kind of social death, expecting little from an ageing woman beyond passive endurance, and by a psychic history of Partition loss that her body has stored for six decades in a language other than speech. What makes the novel's subsequent movement so striking is that it does not treat these two determinations as opposites to be resolved in sequence. Instead, the very passivity that ageist convention expects of Ma becomes, almost by stealth, the condition for a different kind of attention: turned away from her family's demands, she is finally alone with the material that has been waiting for her, and it is from that aloneness that mobility eventually emerges.

This matters for how we understand the border crossing that follows. If Ma's journey to Pakistan were read purely as trauma theory would read it, as compulsive return to the scene of an unprocessed event, her agency in undertaking the journey would be difficult to account for. If it were read purely as gerontological reinvention, the specific historical content of what she is returning to, and the intergenerational politics of Partition memory more broadly, would risk being flattened into a generic story of late-life self-discovery. Held together, the two frameworks allow the crossing to be read as what it is in the text: a historically specific reckoning that is also, unmistakably, an old woman's claim on a future her society had already decided she no longer had.

Shree's novel multiplies the border well beyond the Radcliffe Line. Within the text, the boundary between India and Pakistan sits alongside others: past and present, life and death, male and female, young and old, mother and daughter, home and nation, memory and forgetting, self and other. Commentary on the novel's Booker win has described it as a protest against the borders that divide countries, religions, and genders, and as a meditation on loss, exile, homecoming, and the limits placed on human beings more generally.

What this multiplication of borders makes possible is a reading in which Ma's crossing into Pakistan is never only a literal act of travel. It is also, simultaneously, a crossing of the border her society has drawn around old age itself, the line past which a woman is assumed to have no further business with desire, movement, or self-invention. The geographical border and the generational border are not analogies for one another in this novel so much as different faces of a single logic: the insistence that certain lines, once drawn, must not be re-crossed, whether the line in question separates two nation-states or separates a woman's youth from her old age.

It is this multiplication that opens space for a third border to enter the analysis on equal footing with the other two: the border of gender legibility, embodied most fully by Rosie.

Rosie enters the novel as a figure whose gender presentation and history unsettle the categories the other characters, and to some extent the narrative itself, try to apply to her. Existing criticism has tended to fold Rosie into a supporting role within an argument centred on Ma: important as one more instance of the novel's interest in boundary transgression, but not examined as a figure whose own embodiment does comparable theoretical work to Ma's.

This essay proposes reading the two together as instances of a single category: the marginal body as border-crossing body. Ma's body is marginal by virtue of age; it is assumed by those around her to be past desire, past mobility, past narrative interest, and it is precisely this presumed exhaustion that renders her subsequent crossing so disruptive to the expectations of everyone around her, including her own family. Rosie's body is marginal by virtue of a gender presentation that resists the binary categories through which respectability, family, and social visibility are normally organised in the world the novel depicts. Both bodies are treated by the society around them as bodies that should stay in place: the old woman in her room, the gender-nonconforming figure at the margins of polite recognition. Both bodies, instead, move.

The theoretical payoff of pairing them is that it reframes what "crossing a border" means in the novel. If only Ma crosses, the border-crossing plot can be assimilated to a single, historically bounded story about Partition memory and an individual woman's belated reckoning with it. Once Rosie is read alongside Ma,

border-crossing appears instead as a structural possibility that opens up specifically for bodies the social order has already marked as marginal, deviant, or spent. The novel is not simply saying that an old woman can surprise everyone by having one great adventure. It is proposing something closer to a theory of embodiment: that the bodies a given social order works hardest to render invisible or immobile are also, for exactly that reason, the bodies best positioned to expose the border as a construction rather than a natural fact, because they have never been permitted to take that construction for granted in the first place.

This reframing also allows trauma and ageing to be brought back into the argument without repeating the existing scholarship. Ma's trauma is not merely something that happens to an old woman; it is something her ageing, marginalised body is uniquely positioned to finally metabolise, precisely because the same social order that inflicted the original wound also assumed her too old and too irrelevant to still be capable of confronting it. Her invisibility, in other words, becomes the cover under which a reckoning her family did not expect becomes possible. Read next to Rosie, this dynamic looks less like an idiosyncratic feature of one character's arc and more like a pattern the novel is interested in establishing: marginality as a paradoxical condition of possibility.

Tomb of Sand's style, its digressions, wordplay, shifting perspectives, and refusal of a single settled narrative voice, has already been read as a formal enactment of border-refusal, particularly within the decolonial criticism discussed above. Daisy Rockwell has written and spoken about the specific difficulty of translating the novel's puns and alliterative play, difficulty that is itself evidence of how tightly the novel's meaning is bound to its refusal of linear, easily contained storytelling.

For the argument advanced here, the significance of this formal restlessness is slightly different from the decolonial reading, though compatible with it. If Ma and Rosie are read as marginal bodies whose movement exposes the constructedness of the borders imposed on them, then a narrative form that itself refuses to stay within conventional lines of plot, chronology, and voice is not simply decoration or local colour. It is the novel's structural agreement with its own characters: just as Ma and Rosie will not remain confined to the roles their society has assigned them, the narrative will not remain confined to the shape a conventional Partition novel, or a conventional novel of old age, would take. Form and character are, in this sense, making the same argument by different means.

Conclusion

Tomb of Sand has, in a short span of time, generated criticism substantial enough that several of its most obvious interpretive angles, trauma and memory, ageing and life review, decolonial form, material memory,

are no longer unclaimed territory. This essay has argued that the most promising way forward is not to search for an entirely new theme but to recombine two of the novel's most productive concerns, ageing and embodied marginality, around a relationship the existing criticism has under-examined: the pairing of Ma and Rosie as figures whose bodies are read by their society as bodies that should not move, and who move regardless.

Reframed this way, the novel's much-discussed border imagery stops being a metaphor imposed on the text from outside and becomes instead something the text's own bodies enact. Ma's ageing body and Rosie's gender-nonconforming body do not merely illustrate the theme of borders; they generate it, because it is precisely their marginal status, their presumed unfitness for movement, desire, or narrative centrality, that gives their eventual crossings their disruptive force. A gerontological poetics of border-crossing, in this sense, would treat old age not as a late addition to an argument primarily about trauma or nation, but as one instance of a broader category, embodied marginality, that the novel uses to interrogate the border as such. Further work along these lines might extend the comparison to other marginal figures in the novel, or test the framework against other Partition narratives in which ageing and non-normative embodiment intersect.

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