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TRANSGRESSION AND IDENTITY: MIGRATION, EXILE, AND THE QUEST FOR BELONGING IN GEETANJALI SHREE'S TOMB OF SAND

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Transgression and Identity: Migration, Exile, and the Quest for Belonging in Geetanjali
Shree's Tomb of Sand

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Abstract:

This paper explores the complex interplay of transgression and identity in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand, with particular attention to the motifs of migration, exile, and the quest for belonging. By analysing the protagonist's late-life journey across borders both physical and psychological this paper argues that Shree dismantles traditional narratives of age, gender, and nationhood. Employing feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, especially the works of Homi K. Bhabha and Judith Butler, the study reads Tomb of Sand as a subversive and transformative narrative that interrogates fixed identities and celebrates fluidity, resilience, and the power of re-imagining one's selfhood.

Keywords: Transgression, Identity, Partition, Migration, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Belonging, Geetanjali Shree, Tomb of Sand

Introduction

Winner of the 2022 International Booker Prize, Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand (translated from Hindi by Daisy Rockwell) reconfigures the Partition novel through an elderly woman's journey into her past. This journey, far from a linear recollection, is one of reclamation, resistance, and redefinition. The novel transgresses the boundaries of genre, gender, geography, and age, offering an audacious reconsideration of identity as something mutable, performative, and politically charged.

Transgression as Narrative and Theme

The protagonist, referred to mostly as "Ma," shatters stereotypes of old age and womanhood. Her refusal to remain within the confines of domestic widowhood is the novel's first act of transgression. As Butler notes, "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990), and Ma's refusal to perform the culturally sanctioned role of a grieving widow becomes a political act.

When Ma chooses to travel to Pakistan, the site of her Partition trauma, she not only crosses international borders but also emotional and existential ones. The journey challenges nationalist constructs, repositions the female voice in historical discourse, and dissolves binaries of us/them, Hindu/Muslim, India/Pakistan.

Migration, Memory, and Rewriting History

The act of migration in Tomb of Sand is not limited to physical relocation but becomes a mnemonic pilgrimage. As Homi Bhabha writes, “Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (The Location of Culture, 1994). Ma’s journey to Lahore complicates her nation-bound identity and offers an alternative history that is intimate, painful, and incomplete. Shree writes:

“Borders running across her chest, slicing her memories, stitching and unstitching her identity...” This metaphor captures the trauma of Partition as a wound that remains open. The border becomes a character a manipulative force that carves up geography and identity alike.

Exile and the Feminine Voice

Exile is both literal and metaphorical. Ma’s departure from home is viewed with suspicion by her children and society, echoing the exile experienced by many women who reject domestic roles. Through Ma, Shree reclaims the maternal body not as a site of sacrifice but of reawakening. “She was not returning to the past. She was folding it into herself and becoming something new.” This folding becomes symbolic of feminine re-creation, aligning with Luce Irigaray’s notion of the female body as cyclical and regenerative.

Belonging and the Post-Nation Self

Belonging in Tomb of Sand is not about rootedness but about relation. Ma forges connections across religions, generations, and even death. She befriends Rosie Bua, a hijra character, further broadening the novel’s vision of inclusive identities. Rosie tells Ma:

“Who decides what is real, Ma? The people in power? Or those who live it?”

This question destabilizes the legitimacy of hegemonic history and echoes Spivak’s concern: “Can the subaltern speak?” Shree allows the subaltern not just to speak but to re-author the narrative.

Conclusion

Geetanjali Shree’s Tomb of Sand is a radical, genre-defying work that speaks to contemporary anxieties around identity, migration, and memory. By making an elderly woman the central figure of transgressive self-discovery, Shree subverts patriarchal and nationalistic narratives. The novel ultimately offers a vision of belonging not rooted in territory or conformity, but in empathy, fluidity, and self-assertion.

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