

Border Literature: Identity, Migration and Cultural Hybridity in Tomb of Sand by Geetanjali Shree

Komal Karmdev Duhan¹ Dr. Harish G. Tapadia²

Submitted: 10- Mar -2026 Revised: 18-Mar-2026 Accepted: 15-Apr 2026 Published: 30-Apr-2026

Manuscript ID:

IJEWLPSIR-2026-030213



Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0):

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work no commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20914191

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20914191>

Volume: 3

Issue:2

Month: April 2026

E-ISSN: 3065-7873

^{1,2} Department of English, Vasantrao Naik Government Institute of Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur
Email: komalduhan1024@gmail.com

How to cite this article:

Duhan, K. K., & Tapadia, H. G. (2026). *Border Literature: Identity, Migration and Cultural Hybridity in Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree. *International Journal of English and World Languages & Literature Paradigm Shift in International Research*, 3(2), 47–49.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20914191>

Address for correspondence:

Komal Karmdev Duhan
Department of English, Vasantrao Naik Government Institute of Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur
Email: komalduhan1024@gmail.com

Abstract

Border literature explores how identities are not fixed but constantly changing, especially in situations shaped by migration, displacement, and political divisions. It focuses on the emotional and psychological impact of crossing borders and highlights how people create new cultural identities in such conditions. Tomb of Sand (2022) by Geetanjali Shree, translated by Daisy Rockwell, is an important postmodern novel that revisits the memory and trauma of the Partition of India from a unique and gendered perspective. The novel challenges traditional ideas of nation, identity, and belonging by presenting borders not just as physical divisions, but also as emotional, cultural, and personal experiences.

This paper examines how the novel breaks rigid boundaries and presents identity as fluid and evolving. It shows how migration, rather than being only a painful experience, can also become a journey of transformation and self-discovery. The protagonist's journey across borders reflects both a literal movement between nations and a deeper, symbolic crossing of social, cultural, and psychological limits. Through this narrative, Shree presents hybridity—the blending of cultures and identities—as a powerful form of resistance against fixed and narrow definitions of identity.

Using postcolonial theory, especially Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity and the "Third Space," this study argues that Tomb of Sand redefines borders as spaces of interaction, negotiation, and creativity rather than separation. The novel ultimately suggests that identity is not bound by geography or history, but is continuously shaped through movement, memory, and human connections.

Keywords: Partition, Migration, Third Space, Performativity, Borderlands, Identity

Introduction

With its strong engagement with issues of migration, displacement, and identity construction, border literature has become a prominent topic within postcolonial studies. Particularly in the South Asian context, the Partition of India in 1947 has served as a foundational moment for narratives that explore trauma, loss, and belonging. Nonetheless, a large portion of Partition literature has historically emphasized violence and disruption, frequently perpetuating divisions between identities and nations.

Tomb of Sand departs from this conventional approach by presenting a narrative that is playful, fragmented, and deeply philosophical. The protagonist of the book is an eighty-year-old woman, commonly known as Ma, who experiences a life-changing event after her husband passes away. Her final crossing of the India-Pakistan border serves as a potent metaphor for overcoming limitations imposed by gender, age, and memory in addition to geographic limits. By redefining identity as flexible and portraying migration as a process of self-recovery rather than just displacement, this paper aims to examine how Tomb of Sand contributes to border literature. The study examines the novel's use of hybridity, liminality, and performativity using postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks.

Deconstructing Borders: From Division to Continuum

In Tomb of Sand, borders are not merely physical demarcations but symbolic constructs that shape and constrain human experience, borders are symbolic constructions that influence and limit human experience rather than just being physical boundaries. Due to colonial partition, the India-Pakistan border has historically been linked to violence, displacement, and irreversible division. Shree, on the other hand, presents the border as negotiable and fluid, challenging this narrative.

The protagonist's journey across the border is imbued with a sense of curiosity and defiance rather than fear. Her crossing turns into an act of regaining control, implying that boundaries are places of interaction and change rather than impenetrable barriers. The story frequently challenges the legitimacy of borders by emphasizing how arbitrary they are. Furthermore, the novel blurs the distinction between past and present, suggesting that temporal boundaries are as fluid as spatial ones

Memory serves as a bridge that connects different geographies and histories, enabling characters to transcend the limitations imposed by borders.

Tomb of Sand's depiction of identity as dynamic and complex is among its most captivating features. The protagonist's transition from a bereaved widow to a daring wanderer serves as an example of how identity is malleable. Her path is characterized by rejecting the social norms around widowhood, a rediscovery of passion and uniqueness, reconnecting with her history. The idea that identity is solid and cohesive is called into question by this change. Rather, identity develops as an ongoing process of reconstruction and negotiation. The character of Rosie further complicates the understanding of identity. As a transgender figure, Rosie embodies the idea that identity cannot be confined within binary categories. Her presence in the narrative disrupts normative frameworks of gender and highlights the performative nature of identity.

Theoretical Framework: Hybridity, Performativity, and Borderlands

The idea of cultural hybridity, given by Homi K. Bhabha, is important for understanding Tomb of Sand. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" explains how cultures do not remain separate or pure. Instead, they meet, mix, and create something new. In the novel, this idea is clearly seen in the journey of the elderly protagonist, often referred to as "Ma." After the death of her husband, she undergoes a transformation that is both personal and cultural. Her decision to travel to Pakistan—a place associated with the trauma of Partition—symbolizes a movement into this "Third Space," where past and present, India and Pakistan, memory and reality come together. Her identity becomes multifaceted and flexible, no longer limited to being an Indian woman or a widow.

In a similar vein, Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps us understand how gender works in the novel. Butler argues that gender is not something natural or fixed; it is created through repeated actions and social behavior. This idea is powerfully represented through the character of Rosie. Rosie questions the binary conception of male and female and does not conform to conventional gender norms. Her presence in the book demonstrates how gender identity is malleable and may be represented in a variety of ways. It is possible to view Ma's metamorphosis from a quiet, bereaved widow to a fearless, self-reliant lady as an example of "performing" a new persona. She progressively rejects the socially prescribed role of an elderly woman and develops her own identity.

The concept of "borderlands," developed by Gloria Anzaldúa, further deepens our understanding of the novel. According to Anzaldúa, borders are places where various identities coexist, frequently in conflict but also in harmonious creativity. The India-Pakistan border becomes an emotional and psychological area in Tomb of Sand rather than merely a political one. Later in the book, Ma travels across the border, but it's more than simply a physical trip—it's a voyage into grief, love, and memory. The border turns into a site where she reconciles her past and present selves. It demonstrates that identities are not constrained by boundaries but can exist beyond them.

When taken as a whole, these three theories enable us to understand Tomb of Sand as a book that questions established notions of gender, identity, and country. The book demonstrates that identity is neither constant nor unique. Rather, it is ever-evolving, molded by connections, migration, and memory. The story emphasizes the diversity and complexity of human identity by showcasing characters that transcend ethnic, gendered, and geographic limitations.

Migration Beyond Trauma: Memory and Healing

In many Partition narratives, migration is shown mainly as a painful experience. People lose their homes, families, and sense of belonging. This creates deep emotional trauma. However, in Tomb of Sand, migration is not only about suffering. It is also shown as a journey that can lead to healing, understanding, and personal growth. The protagonist's journey back to Pakistan is very important. She does not go there just because she misses the past or feels nostalgic. Instead, she wants to face her past directly. For many years, she has carried memories that she avoided or suppressed. By returning, she gives herself a chance to deal with those memories instead of running away from them.

This journey helps her in several ways, Revisiting suppressed memories: She remembers experiences and feelings that she had hidden deep within. Although it hurts, facing these memories is essential to recovery. Reestablishing lost connections: People were cut off from their loved ones during the Partition. She attempts to mend those damaged relationships by returning, even if it's just symbolically or emotionally. Memory plays a very important role in this process. It acts like a bridge between the past and the present. Through memory, the protagonist connects her current identity with her past experiences. At the same time, the novel shows that memory is not fixed or unchanging. It keeps evolving as people grow and as they see their past from new perspectives. In this way, Tomb of Sand presents migration not only as a source of trauma but also as an opportunity for healing. By confronting the past and reshaping memory, the characters are able to move forward with a stronger and more complete sense of self.

Tomb of Sand's Cultural Hybridity

One of Tomb of Sand's most significant themes is cultural hybridity. The book illustrates how various identities, cultures, and languages blend together rather than being distinct or pure. This concept is particularly evident in the novel's use of language and narrative. There is more than one type of language used in the book. It creates a complex and multilayered form of expression by fusing Hindi, Urdu, and English. The ordinary reality of the Indian subcontinent, where individuals frequently speak numerous languages and switch between them with ease, is reflected in this blend. This makes the book more relatable and realistic. The concept that one language or culture is better than another is likewise called into question by this linguistic mixing. The narrative demonstrates that all languages are equally valuable rather than favoring a single dominant language. This disrupts the established order and creates room

for a variety of viewpoints and views. The shared cultural history of Pakistan and India is also reflected in the usage of several languages. People on both sides still use comparable vocabulary, idioms, and cultural customs even after Partition. This demonstrates that governmental boundaries cannot fully separate cultures. They continue to have profound and subtle connections. Hybridity is not only present in language but also in the narrative style of the novel. The story does not follow a simple or linear structure. Instead, it mixes different styles such as: Realism, which shows everyday life and real experiences, Fantasy, which adds imaginative and symbolic elements, Metafiction, where the story becomes aware of itself as a story. This combination creates a unique reading experience. The reader is constantly moving between reality and imagination, past and present, truth and fiction. As a result, the boundaries between these categories become unclear. This blending of forms creates what theorist Homi K. Bhabha calls a "Third Space." This is a space where fixed ideas about identity, culture, and meaning are challenged. In this space, new identities and new ways of understanding the world can emerge.

By challenging the patriarchal structures that restrict women's independence, *Tomb of Sand* offers a powerful feminist viewpoint. Because she chooses to live according to her own terms and rejects conventional expectations, the protagonist's journey turns into a sort of resistance. Additionally, the story questions how women are typically portrayed in Partition literature. Geetanjali Shree depicts women as powerful people who actively address and transform their circumstances rather than just as defenseless victims. A woman's body is frequently controlled or exploited to symbolize national identity in numerous historical and political contexts. Nonetheless, the female body is recovered in this book as a place of autonomy, self-expression, and identity. The protagonist's movement across borders is not just physical but symbolic. It represents her breaking free from both social restrictions and rigid ideas, ultimately asserting her independence and sense of self.

Conclusion

By portraying borders as places of opportunity and connection rather than merely boundaries, *Tomb of Sand* makes a significant addition to border literature. Geetanjali Shree challenges rigid notions of identity through the story, demonstrating that identity is malleable and constantly transformed by movement and experience. Additionally, the book presents a fair assessment of migration, showing it as a path of self-discovery and metamorphosis as well as a cause of suffering and loss. Furthermore, it emphasizes cultural hybridity as a source of strength and innovation rather than conflict through its rich use of language and narrative style. All things considered, *Tomb of Sand* offers a positive vision in which boundaries are transformed into bridges, promoting a more inclusive conception of identity, culture, and belonging. It reminds us that even in divided spaces, there is always room for connection, growth, and renewal.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who supported me in the completion of this study on *Border Literature: Identity, Migration and Cultural Hybridity in Tomb of Sand by Geetanjali Shree*.

I am deeply indebted to my mentor/guide for their invaluable guidance, insightful suggestions, and continuous encouragement throughout this work. Their intellectual support enabled me to critically engage with the themes of identity, migration, borders, and cultural hybridity as depicted in *Tomb of Sand*.

I also extend my heartfelt thanks to my teachers and the department for providing the academic environment and resources necessary for this research. Their encouragement played a vital role in shaping my analytical perspective.

I am grateful to my friends and peers for their support, meaningful discussions, and motivation during the course of this study. Their perspectives enriched my understanding and made the research process more engaging.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support, patience, and belief in me. Their encouragement has been a constant source of strength.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

References

1. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990.
4. Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, 2008.
5. Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
6. Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. Granta, 1991.
7. Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Penguin Random House, 2022.
8. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988.