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UNVEILING VULNERABILITY: RESILIENCE AND TRAUMA IN GEETANJALI SHREE'S TOMB OF SAND[1]

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Abstract: Vulnerability is a multi-dimensional concept that has many facets especially recognized as an inherent part of human existence. Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* (Reth-Samadhi) presents a compelling narrative of an aged woman's confrontation with her past which mainly adds on to her vulnerability, trauma, and identity reconstruction reflecting her as a partition survivor woman. This paper explores about how she challenges the conventional ideas of age, identity and gender, embodies vulnerability not only due to her age but also as a woman navigating personal and historical wounds. However, rather portraying vulnerability as a limitation, the novel redefines of transformative events – one that helps her to reclaim agency and her identity beyond societal expectations.

By engaging with trauma and vulnerability studies, this paper seeks to understand the life of a partition survivor with a major focus on how vulnerability in the novel is not merely a condition of suffering but a means of empowerment, allowing to rewrite the past and embrace an unconventional future. Also, we will see how vulnerability plays a major function and a key element in the protagonist's journey which will also compel a re-examination of personal and collective histories empowering the protagonist to transcend the lost narratives.

Keywords- Tomb of Sand, partition survivor, vulnerability studies, trauma, identity

Introduction: "Vulnerability is not a choice, nor is it a virtue: it is a condition of human life." (Butler 43)

Vulnerability, a complex and multi-faceted concept refers to a state of complete risk to harm in any form whether physically, mentally, emotionally, socially etc. which was seen as a sign of weakness, but modern perspectives recognize it as an inherent part of human personality and a part of human existence. It has long been a subject of critical inquiry in fields of postcolonial and feminist literature. Vulnerability is also seen as a potential source

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of strength and transformation. Not only one needs to understand what vulnerability is but also what cultural vulnerability is and how it impacts individuals psychologically. Cultural vulnerability, as discussed by Yasmin Gunaratnam, refers to the "ethical and emotional exposure individuals and communities experience when their deeply rooted cultural values, traditions, and identities come into contact with larger structural forces such as migration, colonialism, or social care systems." (Gunaratnam). This implies that understanding cultural vulnerability requires attention not only to harm and loss but also to the capacity for empathy, care, and connection across cultural.

Critics like Homi K. Bhabha explores the vulnerability of colonized cultures through his theory of hybridity. This space produces new, hybrid identities that resist both the colonizer and the colonized fixed positions. Cultural vulnerability emerges when identities are neither entirely preserved nor wholly lost, creating a state of continuous negotiation (Bhabha 56).

This concept highlights how individuals and communities experience it as not just as loss, but it can also lead to cultural adaptation, hybridization shaping new forms of identity. Especially women, they often face vulnerability as their identities are both shaped by patriarchy and society. Theorists like Spivak have discussed how subaltern women struggle to have their voices heard in many cultural narratives. Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* is a powerful literary exploration of vulnerability, memory and trauma particularly through the exploration of an elderly Partition survivor who defies all the cultural constructs around her made for women. The novel's protagonist Ma, an 80-year-old woman, challenges traditional understanding of vulnerability by looking past at her trauma after the death of her husband, her own displacement during Partition re-engaging with it long after it was buried. Her journey from being an almost dying woman to gaining strength coming back to her senses, being friends with Rosie and fighting her long-lost life. Through a deeply layered narrative*, Tomb of Sand* offers and raises critical questions like how vulnerability is explored in the novel and how an 80-year-old woman claims her agency or how Partition and death impacts people and their lives. It will also investigate the demonstration of the role of elderly women as agents of change.

This paper explores vulnerability as both psychological and transformative source within the cultural construct. Also, it will assess about how her circumstances shaped her personality and perceptions of self, making herself from an instrument of oppression to that of power. It is in this middle initial space of oppression and power; her character evolves on the common ground and emerges cathartically as forceful and dynamic. This has been a long subject of debate that how vulnerability persists across generations by also investigating the impact of partition, borders and boundaries into the lives of the characters. By putting the text into the framework of Butler combining with the concepts of Brene Brown and Menon and Bhasin's we will explore more about vulnerability as a critical concept experienced obliquely.

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In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree employs an unconventional and experimental narrative structure that challenges linear storytelling. The novel blurs boundaries between genres, voices, and timelines, using fragmented narration, shifting perspectives, and metafictional elements to reflect the protagonist's emotional and psychological journey. This stylistic approach invites readers to actively participate in constructing meaning, mirroring the fluidity of memory and identity. Such a complex narrative technique aligns closely with the principles of narratology—the systematic study of narratives and their structures. Coined in the 1960s by Tzvetan Todorov, narratology draws from structuralism, linguistics, and semiotics to analyze how stories are constructed, how they function, and how they are interpreted. By applying narratological analysis to Tomb of Sand, one can uncover how the novel's fragmented plot, shifting narrative voice, manipulation of time, and metafictional commentary serve to deepen its thematic exploration of trauma, memory, and rebirth.

Butler's theory of precarity explains how some lives are more vulnerable than others due to social, political and economic inequalities. She connects precarity with grievability—the idea where the loss of marginalized are ignored and privileged people get all the attention determining power structures. Her theory acts as a foundational lens to examine vulnerability in the novel through the character of Ma. This notion aligns with Brene Brown's concept of vulnerability, where she defines it as the courage to be seen, to take risks and to embrace uncertainty and imperfection explaining that vulnerability is not a weakness. Accordingly, as we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we open the door to personal growth and meaningful experiences but now it is considered as a sign of weakness to which Brown says that by avoiding it can lead to shame, disconnection and more. Ma's journey unfolds not through acts of defiance, but through a quiet, embrace of vulnerability. Her decision to leave behind her widowed life, an openness to unknown – shows her willingness to feel deeply, to remember painfully and reconnect with lost histories. Her transformation is what others perceive as fragility. The novel reveals that true strength comes from the courage of facing fears and not by running from it.

The protagonist's emotional disruptions like grief, separation, pain — serve as a collective memory and studies how it shapes experiences of vulnerability. Furthermore, Menon and Bhasin's, *Borders and Boundaries* exposes how national constructs and patriarchy impose identities upon women, especially those affected by Partition. Ma's defiance of these borders — both literal and metaphorical illustrates how vulnerability act as a side of radical oppression and a space of resistance.

Moreover, in the novel Partition is not merely in the backdrop of the story but rather an intrinsic part of its structure, themes, and characters. It is not something that happened "in the past"- rather, it is a living, breathing trauma that continues to shape the lives of the people in the present especially the life of the protagonist, Ma. There are two ways to represent the exploration of Partition – mimetic representation, referring to the direct, show-not-tell style – where the narrative tries to create similarity.

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On the other hand, Diegetic representation involves more of an argumentative mode, highly abstract, concrete ideas. The novel falls under the diegetic representation which occurs through Ma's reflections, silences and slow revelations from her past – including the fact that she had to leave a child behind in Pakistan. Not only these concepts will help explore about Partition the novel but also how it is not only acting as the backdrop but running throughout the narrative which will be explored further in detail.

Together, these theoretical frameworks illuminate the novel's interrogation of precarious womanhood, memory and more with a major focus on her vulnerability and arising challenges withholding that. The protagonist's journey in the *Tomb of Sand* is marked by the imposed restrictions of Partition, or also the socio- political structures of the time. This paper aims to explore these conditions and a woman's survival beyond borders.

Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* offers a powerful reimagination and whole new perspective of a woman's journey. The novel challenges conventional ideas about gender identities, restrictions or vulnerability often seen as a sign of weakness – becoming a sign of transformation. Scholars have long debated on the role of memory, trauma and partition literature highlighting major factors around women that how social and political and historical structures affect them. This review examines them using insights from the various academic perspectives

Kavita Daiya, in *Violent Belongings,* examines how Partition's violence is inscribed onto women's bodies, turning them into the carriers of historical trauma where she explains how memory functions where personal narratives challenge the history of displaced and violated women (Daiya, 2008, p.76). This resonates with Tomb of Sand, where the protagonist, an octogenarian woman, reclaims her past by confronting and revisiting places of her trauma.

Also, Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin's Partition gendered violence further reveals how women bodies remain a site of political and communal violence, reducing them to victims. However, in Tombs of sand we see an elderly woman who rather succumbing to memory of partition or being a victim of her situation, embarks on a journey of self-discovery reclaiming her agency and lost histories.

Dr. Madhavi Apte (2023) in her piece *"Fragmented Memories and Feminist Agency in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand"* discusses how the novel uses fragmentation and digression as structural devices to reflect the breaks brought about by historical trauma. She notes that vulnerability in the novel is not weakness but turns into a narrative power that allows Ma to recreate identity beyond normative gender. Apte observes, "Ma's belated facing of her past permits a non-linear feminist reimagining of selfhood"

Referencing trauma studies, Ruchi Singh (2022) analyzes *Tomb of Sand* in the light of Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. Singh observes that Ma's silence, memory loss, and

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belated recollections are the signs of post-traumatic narrative. Singh also situates Ma's recovery in Judith Herman's phases of trauma recovery – safety, remembrance and reconnection – pointing out how Ma employs storytelling and emotional bonds (especially with Rosie) to reclaim her repressed past.

Discussion: The revolutionary representation of vulnerability in *Tomb of Sand* remaps how we understand gendered suffering, particularly in the case of post-Partition trauma. The transformation of the protagonist Ma from a state of emptiness to a self-defined woman navigating literal and metaphorical borders is key to recognizing vulnerability not as passivity but as an active space of resistance and reclamation.

At the novel's outset Ma's is shown in a state of complete grief after her husband's death representing her life's emptiness. Her withdrawal into silence and immobility of not getting out of bed symbolizes a traditional view of vulnerability as weakness. Ma's journey in the novel represents a radical departure from traditional views and portrayals of elderly women in Indian Literature. Each act of movement in Ma's life like moving out of her bed, moving from his Beta's house to Beti's house and eventually leaving the country signifying the disruption of societal norms and the redefinition of her vulnerability. Rather than being a symbol of decay, she transforms her vulnerability into power and strength. Ma's decision in revisiting her past, reliving the trauma and its memories.

"a history that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Caruth 4). Ma was able to confront the reality of her wound only in her old age. Her journey subverts patriarchal expectations, particularly concerning age and gender. Her actions defy societal norms that often render elderly women invisible or irrelevant. Shree quotes "Once you've got women and a border, a story can write itself. Even women on their own are enough." (Shree 11)

This metaphor underscores the inherent power within women's experiences, suggesting that embracing one's vulnerabilities can lead to rich, transformative narratives. Borders, both literal and metaphorical are recurring motifs in the novel. The title *Tomb of Sand* is "rich in symbolism" and carries multiple layers of meaning. First, let's understand and break the title individually to know more about it. Traditionally, Tomb represents death, or something buried – physically and metaphorically. In the novel it symbolizes the death of the protagonist's old identity – as she transforms after her husband's death. Memories buried deep in her psyche, especially those linked with Partition. It reflects that rather than staying buried, the protagonist resurrects from this "tomb" which acts as a place of rebirth.

Further, Sand is loose and shifting, it can bury or reveal. It represents fluidity of borders in context to India Pakistan Partition. Also, it echoes the transient nature of memory and time representing something that can slip through your fingers. Together the title *Tomb of Sand* captures the central paradox of the novel juxtaposing the two – tomb (something fixed or related to death) and sand (ever-moving or shifting) meaning that the protagonist

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didn't succumb or gave into her grief – she reinvents herself. She crosses the borders and tomb rather becoming an end point becomes a starting point for her. In keeping with the novel's theme of vulnerability leading to empowerment through openness and interconnectedness, this viewpoint reinterprets borders as places of connection rather than divide.

One of the novel's most striking events in the novel is when Ma befriends a transgender woman, Rosie. This relationship further emphasizes the empowerment in vulnerability by transcending societal norms, defying binaries illustrating openness to diverse identities which can lead to growth and understanding. In a society where both elders and gender-nonconforming are marginalized Ma and Rosie's friendship become an act of solidarity rooted in shared vulnerability. By aligning herself with Rosie, Ma rejects the notion of 'grievable' subject limited to socially privileged. As Butler states, "those we are asked to regard as disposable can become the very basis of our ethics" (Butler 43).

Ma and Rosie are often talked about by others which illustrates the dismantling of hierarchy of support – suggesting mutual independence, affection and strength. It is not Rosie helping Ma or Ma rescuing Rosie—it is a shared journey of dignity. Further, the novel uses magical realism and metafiction with the reference to talking crows, disjointed time aligns with the structure of trauma and affect. As Sara Ahmed explains emotions are "not simply something 'we have' but something we do" (Ahmed 8). The strange tone of the book reflects Ma's internal changes and conflicts. Following it, the narrative delves into the complexity of memory and trauma, particularly concerning the Partition since it is intrinsic to the story. Ma uses her own memories as a means of resistance against collective amnesia. She reclaims her story by facing her history, illustrating how historical discourses may be challenged and reshaped by personal vulnerability.

In *Tomb of Sand*, Partition is intrinsic to the narrative which embeds trauma and memory of it throughout the story telling. Diegesis – the mode of 'telling' rather than 'showing' is used by Shree to illustrate how Partition trauma is not always visible or performative but frequently hidden in memory, voice and silence. It is revealed through storytelling, narration, recollection all which are essential features of a narrative. The frequent digressions, narrative shifts highlight the storytelling process itself and helps the narrator to articulate feelings, emotions, history as a part of changing cultural and personal memory. Partition is simply not "what happened" but also "what is told, retold and even often hidden". Ma, the protagonist recalls Partition in her own way which is revealed in fragments as part of the narration and not as a way of explaining past but unfolding the struggle overtime.

For example- Ma's decision to travel Pakistan is described through her internal changes and memories rather than explained. Even the truth about her past comes only though narration, storytelling, often embedded in conversation instead of mimetic re-enactment. To show how Partition haunts the present, the novel emphasizes interiority and

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narration, making it not just a background but a central theme to the story and is part of the narrative core. Additionally, the novel's flowing, non-linear narrative which not only influence the lives of the characters but also the way story is told. The trauma of Partition does not reside in significant historical occurrences but in ways that are repressed, recalled and passed on through the voice and path of a female protagonist. Moreover, by confronting her past and visiting Pakistan, she reclaims her narrative, illustrating how historical ideas can be challenged and reshaped by personal vulnerability.

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin would describe this as the dismantling of "national and patriarchal constructs that assign women to fixed roles" (Menon and Bhasin 62). Her vulnerability shaped by aging, widowhood and displacement – becomes the driving force behind her ability to reclaim herself. The feminist overtones in the book are significant to understand how women's trauma is sidelined frequently in historical and familial discourse. In a patriarchal setting, Ma's past – her child, her lover and memories around it – all embodies guilt and secrecy. Instead of ignoring it, Ma embodies it, talks about it, faces it and ultimately reclaims it implying that she is no longer silenced by vulnerability; rather, it becomes her voice. It allows to rewrite her own story in her own way without any restrictions for herself.

In one of the scenes at Beti's house during Ma's first night at her house she didn't say, "No, I won't get up. She said, Yes. And began attempting to rise all by herself". (Shree 245) This incident reflects the starting point of Ma's reawakening, where she is not physically trying to rise but is also symbolically beginning to take initiatives for herself. This moment can be taken as subtle rebellion against the societal expectations – an assertion of autonomy that may appear minor on the surface but holds deep psychological scars. It is the first of many acts where she reclaims her agency and redefine her identity outside traditional and patriarchal roles.

Geetanjali Shree's use of poetic, flowing language that is laced with imagery enhances the idea of vulnerability as strength. Boundaries between literal and symbolic, present and past are regularly blurred by the narrative voice. Age, too, is a critical aspect where vulnerability is re-evaluated. She desires, travels, rebels and ultimately rewrites what it means to age. In doing so, she reclaims not just her youth but also her existence proving age has no limits and her body doesn't limit her. The structure of the novel, non-linear, mirrors the fragmented ways in which trauma is processed and remembered. Ma's vulnerability does not exist in isolation – it is entangled with political and historical trauma. Here Partition is not treated as an historical event or background but rather as a living wound which migrates across time.

Her sudden detachment to everything in her life, her breakdown all stems from history and Partition imprinted on her. The moment she admits abandoning a child is a historical resurrection and not just a confession. Through Ma, Shree explores how trauma is stored, inherited and eventually spoken. Further, Ma's journey to Pakistan is a significant

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turn in the story. In literature, travel has always represented change, thus it is groundbreaking that an 80-year-old woman take a revolutionary initiative. This occurs after her revelation of her abandoned child in Pakistan born in secrecy, brutality and silence.

In one of the novel's most brutal scenes, Rosie Bua (transgender) and a close companion to the protagonist, Ma – meets a tragic and a symbolic end in which she was discovered brutally murdered, with her body hidden in a box.

"Rosie was found inside, stuffed into the box portion of the box bed." (Shree 506)

This haunting image serves as a metaphor to society's tendency to marginalize and silence those who go against mainstream norms, particularly those who go against traditional norms. It also serves as a commentary the systematic erasure of marginalized societies – particularly transgender lives as shown in the novel. Even authorities take less interest in solving this case relating to Butler's notion of 'grievable' where some lives are less important than the others. Rosie's death is met with silence by the general society, and this is that very condition. She is not publicly remembered or ritually mourned; instead, her absence is accepted in quietness—as if she was always on the fringes. Ma does not accept this cultural erasure, though. Her sorrow is uncooked, immediate, and political.

Ma's reaction to Rosie's death is a key shift in her vulnerability. From being initially weak and inward, her vulnerability shifts outward—now a grieving revolt. Her grief does not isolate her but sends her deeper into resistance. Rosie's death in Ma provokes a more profound awareness: that love and liberty, particularly for those who live beyond the lines of societal normativity, typically come with the cost of invisibility. Additionally, Rosie's death serves as a catalyst acting as Ma's final act of resistance, her journey to Pakistan, her confrontation with her past and redefinition of self. Vulnerability becomes a space for rebirth, and not just grief.

The revelation of Ma's past as Chanda, a woman who lived in Pre-Partition Lahore, married Ali Anwar who she had to left behind including a child whose name is not revealed in the novel – serves as a powerful source of vulnerability and transformation rather than an act of weakness. Her return to Pakistan is not just geographical across borders but is a deeply personal act and a meeting with trauma, loss and memory that has been buried and silenced for ages. No one really wants to dig up their past or return to those long-lost memories just to feel overwhelmed all over and trying to bring the fragmented pieces of identity together. The embrace of reuniting with her past is a radical act of vulnerability where she deliberately chooses to reopen her wound demonstrating an inner strength that defies the quiet suffering traditionally associated with aging women.

Her transformation from "Ma" to "Chanda" and ultimately to Anwar-Chanda represents the layering and integration of identities over time, space and experience. Chanda does not deny or hide her past but rather utilizes it to reconstruct herself showing how

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memory can be painful but can be a powerful site and source of healing. Here, in this light, vulnerability is not surrender; it is a mode of reframing history according to oneself with courage and power.

"So, everyone in their own orbit. But these two are so much so that nothing else can compare. Nothing compares to two pure hearts. (Shree 694)

This quote reflects how Ma is now embracing her identity of Chanda as a whole reuniting with her past and ultimately dying in Pakistan brining all her fragmented identities as one. It is not a tragic conclusion but a culmination of her emotional journey. In taking the risk of crossing borders, finding her first husband, she gains freedom – freedom of weight, silence and suppressed emotions. The book implies that to accept even the most painful recollections is for a woman to die complete. Her vulnerability—the openness to recalling trauma, to reclaiming a name, to recalling a child left behind—is not her defeat but her elevation.

As told by Shree "An octogenarian lady from Delhi crosses the border on foot without a visa in search of an old lover" (702). It implies how Ma defies all the barriers by society, age and social norms. In a world where older women are supposed to fade into invisibility and obedience, Ma claims her rights by crossing the boundaries without official permission and not merely a physical transgression – it is an act of emotional and existential rebellion signifying her refusal to stay within the limits of the society. The border she crosses at the end is no longer a symbol of division, but of healing – a final merging of herself in terms of starting her life as "Chanda", then being "Ma" and finally ending it as "Chanda".

Conclusion: Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* beautifully captures and demonstrates how vulnerability, usually perceived as fragility, can appear as one's strength at times. Ma's confrontation with her past, then reclaiming her name as Chanda, recognition of her lost child, her refusal to live within the limits and expectations of the society and borders. Her death also represents that how healing can come even during the final stages of life, and that embracing vulnerability, confronting memory, loss, pain and identity can lead to peace.

Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* redefines survival, healing, and resilience, proposing that authentic freedom is not in forgetting but remembering, not in concealing wounds but respecting them. In Ma's narrative, vulnerability is not just survived—it is chosen and turned into a victorious claim of self, rendering her story one of the most profound investigations of strength in contemporary literature. More importantly, she dies in the country of her birth, which she had previously been from during Partition.

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