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(Re)Tracing the Partitioned Histories: Exploring Memory, Identity and Body Politics in Select Partition Literature

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Abstract

The Partition of India in 1947 stands as a momentous juncture in South Asian history, marked by displacement, pervasive violence, and trauma. This article explores Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* and *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, within the broader context of Partition literature and feminist discourse. Both the novels offer a nuanced and multi-layered portrayal of gender dynamics in the aftermath of Partition, foregrounding the agency and resilience of their female protagonists. The narrative techniques employed—characterised by metafictional elements, nonlinear structure and vivid characterisations—provide fertile ground for an exploration of the complexities of memory, identity, and trauma. This article examines how these authors navigate the intersection of gender, nationhood and memory paying particular attention to the ways in which the female body becomes site of contestation and resistance in the aftermath of communal violence. By juxtaposing these texts, it aims to contribute to an in-depth comprehension of the complexities of gender, memory, and power-dynamics in the context of historical trauma.

Keywords:
Partition, memory, trauma, gendered identity, nationhood.

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Bölünmüş Tarihlerin (Yeniden)İzini Sürmek: Bölünme Edebiyatında Bellek, Kimlik ve Siyasi Yapıyı Keşfetmek

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Özet

1947'de Hindistan'ın bölünmesi, Güney Asya tarihinde yerinden edilme, yaygın şiddet ve travmanın damgasını vurduğu önemli bir dönüm noktasıdır. Bu makale Geetanjali Shree'nin *Kumdan Mezar* adlı romanını ve Shauna Singh Baldwin'in *What the Body Remembers* adlı romanını Bölünme edebiyatı ve feminist söylem bağlamında incelemektedir. Her iki roman da Bölünme sonrasında toplumsal cinsiyet dinamiklerinin incelikli ve çok katmanlı bir tasvirini sunmakta, kadın kahramanlarının eylemliliğini ve direncini ön plana çıkarmaktadır. Kullanılan anlatı teknikleri -üstkurmaca unsurlar, doğrusal olmayan yapı ve canlı karakterizasyonlarla karakterize edilen- hafıza, kimlik ve travmanın karmaşıklıklarının araştırılması için verimli bir zemin sağlar. Bu makale, bu yazarların toplumsal cinsiyet, ulus ve hafızanın kesiştiği noktalarda nasıl gezindiklerini, toplumsal şiddet sonrasında kadın bedeninin nasıl bir çekişme ve direniş alanı haline geldiğine özellikle dikkat ederek incelemektedir. Bu metinleri yan yana koyarak, tarihsel travma bağlamında toplumsal cinsiyet, hafıza ve iktidar dinamiklerinin karmaşıklığının derinlemesine anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Introduction: Partition Narratives

The Partition of India in 1947 was a cataclysmic event that left an indelible mark on the subcontinent, leading to widespread displacement, violence, and trauma. Violence is an integral aspect of all narratives associated with the Partition. In this context Yasmin Khan notes in her book *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, "Violence must sit at the core of any history of Partition" (Khan 129). However, the narratives of women's experiences during Partition are particularly harrowing, as "Women occupy a special place – and space – in such enactments of violence" (Menon and Bhasin, 40). Women's bodies were perceived as symbols of the community's honour, thereby making them targets for violence inflicted both by the 'Other' forces seeking to humiliate and by their own families aiming to prevent dishonour. In their book *Borders and Boundaries* (1998) Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon reflect on the objectification of the women's bodies in the dominant discourses of the Partition as, "shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male constructions of their own honour" (43). The female body was therefore seen as "territory to be conquered, claimed or marked by the assailant" (43).

Although women's narratives are increasingly being included in official accounts of Partition. They are often condensed into brief sections detailing gruesome events, relegated to a chapter or two within the larger context of the political and social histories of the Indian Independence and Partition. In response to the historical oversight and marginalisation of women's experiences, a wave of feminist literature centred on the Partition of India emerged in the 1990s, notably exemplified by Urvashi Butalia's seminal work *The Other Side of Silence* (1998). This body of literature actively places women at the centre of the narrative, thereby fundamentally reshaping our understanding of Partition. By foregrounding women's voices and experiences, Butalia and other scholars/authors like her offer readers a more nuanced and empathetic perspective on the human toll of Partition. Not only non-fiction and scholarly works, but also literature addresses the issue of the silencing and erasure of women's voices from Partition histories.

Novels such as, *Clear Light of Day* (1980) by Anita Desai, *The River Churning* (1967) by Jyotirmoyee Devi and *Tomb of Sand* (2018) by Geetanjali Shree each address the specific violence endured by women during Partition, as well as their subsequent marginalisation in dominant historical and literary accounts. Through the foregrounding of female characters and their perspectives, these texts inherently amplify and validate women's experiences of Partition, thereby giving space to their voices within the dominant narratives. As Ritu Menon states, the alternative histories "may query the political, may subvert it, may rephrase it, may even rewrite or reconfigure it" (4). It is within this framework that this article intends to examine Partition literature,

particularly Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* by analysing its representation of memory, female body both corporeal and symbolic, and the idea of nation.

Susan Sontag was one of the pioneering theorists to link male dominance with colonisation. In her essay "The Third World of Women" (1973), she argues that "all women live in an 'imperialist' situation in which men are colonialists and women are natives" (184). Sontag's Western feminist perspective uses the context of colonisation to illustrate the unequal power dynamics between men and women, portraying women as symbols of innocence similar to native populations, who are powerless against a controlling oppressor. She further suggests that the condition of women in "economically advanced countries" is "neo-colonialist," indicating that despite improvements in the overall status of Western women, "the same basic relations of inferiority and superiority, of powerlessness and power, of cultural underdevelopment and cultural privilege, prevail between women and men in all countries" (185).

Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) also examines the connection between patriarchy and colonisation, particularly in the Indian context. She proposes that alongside India's patriarchal traditions, male dominance over women may stem from the sense of inferiority experienced by Indian men under British rule. Loomba argues that colonialism intensifies patriarchy in colonised countries, attributing this heightened authoritarian behaviour to the exclusion of native men from the public sphere, a domain dominated by the colonisers. This exclusion leads to social frustration among men, which exacerbates existing patriarchal norms in India. According to Loomba, "patriarchal relations provide a model for colonial domination" (161), indicating that these concepts are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. In this context, the article also delves into Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999), which leverages feminist perspective of the Partition to challenge the patriarchal narratives that frame the deaths of women during this period as acts of bravery and martyrdom. Baldwin's novel portrays a Sikh family grappling with the complexities of a polygamous marriage amidst the harrowing events of the 1947 Partition of India.

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, initially published in Hindi as *Ret Samadhi* in 2018, was translated into English by Daisy Rockwell and released by Tilted Axis Press in 2021 with support from English PEN's "PEN Translates" program. In May 2022 *Tomb of Sand* won the International Booker Prize, an accolade shared by both Geetanjali Shree and Daisy Rockwell. This international recognition of an Indian novel, especially one written in a regional language, brought significant attention to contemporary Partition literature. *Tomb of Sand* follows the story of an octogenarian woman, referred to simply as Ma, who rejects the conventional roles of an elderly widow, mother, and grandmother. Choosing instead to live life on her own terms, Ma becomes a symbol of

resistance against the societal expectations imposed on women, particularly in the context of historical and cultural narratives. The novel serves as a feminist allegory, a political commentary on Partition, and a sharp critique of the upwardly mobile middle class in India.

Tomb of Sand is divided into three sections: Part one titled "Ma's Back," Part two titled "Sunlight," and Part three titled "Back to the Front." Part one introduces Ma who is suffering from depression following her husband's demise, leading her to withdraw from her family and remain confined to her bed. In the first part, Ma disappears, taking along with her a small stone idol of Buddha. Part Two chronicles Ma's reappearance and her relocation, along with the Buddha, from her son Bade's conventional household to her daughter Beti's non-traditional home. The names of these central characters—Ma (mother), Bade (elder brother), and Beti (daughter)—are relational nouns in Hindi, thereby underscoring the significance of family bonds within the narrative. Ma's transition to Beti's residence in Part Two symbolises her departure from the fetters of traditions to a phase of liberation, meanwhile the narrative delves into the notion of fluidity of boundaries through the introduction of Rosie Raza, a hijra (transgender). In the second part, Ma suffers two falls resulting in her hospitalisation, and Rosie becomes victim to murder at the hands of her tenants.

Part three, wittily plays with its title "Back to the Front," which signifies a return to the inception of Ma's story ('back') and the resumption of the Partition violence ('front'). This juxtaposition marks the structural 'back' of the novel as the narrative's 'front,' symbolising Ma's reemergence into the world after her withdrawal in the part one titled "Ma's Back." Despite her children's ignorance of her personal history, Ma and Beti venture across the border into Pakistan, retracing Ma's trails of memories to her ancestral home in Lahore. Further walking down the lane of Maa's memory, they visit Thar desert where Ma was once abducted and the Khyber Pass, where they uncover the origin story of the Buddha's idol, which Ma always carries with her. They also search for Ma's first husband before Partition, Ali Anwar. Part three directly confronts both the historical and contemporary violence along the India-Pakistan border, grappling with the representation of marginalised and alternative versions of Partition histories.

(Hi)Story-telling: Women Narrating and Reclaiming their own Histories

Tomb of Sand employs a self-aware metafictional narration that delves into the complexities of storytelling and the documentation of marginalised versions of histories. Part one sets the stage by exploring how the medium of storytelling can adapt to capture the legacies of Partition. The text begins with the phrase "A tale tells itself" (11), highlighting the narrative's awareness of its own constructed nature. This self-reflexive approach permeates the entire text, consistently

reminding the reader that the story is being actively shaped and mediated. The novel's usage of metafictional narration supports its self-conscious witnessing and documentation of previously unrecorded Partition histories, which becomes particularly evident in Part Three, "Back to the Front." The narrative actively grapples with the complex nature of historical recording, acknowledging that "Some records were never written in the first place, some were burnt to ash in the sinful fires set by humans" (684). Although the novel serves as a record of Ma's story, it frequently challenges its own role during critical moments in Part Three, asserting that such records exist "Nowhere" (697). This approach creates space for an alternative method of documentation through the self-reflexive storytelling.

The text records three significant events using distinct methods of documentation: Ma and Beti's journey across the border into Pakistan along the Grand Trunk Road, Ma's recollection of her abduction amidst butterflies in the Thar Desert, and the observation of Ma and Anwar's reunion by two birds in Khyber. These elements—the road, the butterflies, and the birds—embody fluidity and motion, serving as custodians of memory and history. Their roles in witnessing and conveying these personal events underscore the enduring nature of memories, particularly those of the marginalised "little people" (551), insinuating women's experiences, often overlooked in official records because they are deemed too insignificant and trivial. These unconventional means of recording events present an alternative understanding of the impact and legacies of Partition. Through metafictional narration, the text consciously contributes to what Pallavi Chakravarty describes as an "alternate archive" (91), challenging conventional historiography and offering new avenues for interpreting historical narratives. By incorporating these symbolic elements, the narrative delves deeper into the complexities of memory and representation, enriching our understanding of the human experiences embedded within the broader historical context of Partition.

Geetanjali Shree anthropomorphises the Grand Trunk Road portraying it as a guardian of memories. Spanning across borders and centuries, the Grand Trunk Road stretches from Afghanistan to present-day Indian state of West Bengal, serving as a vital artery in the Indian sub-continent's historical landscape. In addition to its expansive reach and historical legacies, the road holds a particular significance in the context of Partition. The caravans replete with migrating people, who all of a sudden found themselves displaced from their ancestral lands, traversed this route in both directions, i.e., towards India and Pakistan, symbolising the movement of people and the impact of Partition on the lives of those who travelled along it. When Ma and Beti traverse the border into Pakistan at Wagah, the Grand Trunk Road is depicted as observing their journey: "The road observes two women alight upon its surface. And off they go" (559). This road, with its

extensive history, has witnessed numerous significant events and exoduses that have shaped its identity, thus establishing a connection between Ma and Beti's narrative and the road's historical legacy.

Likewise, Shree personifies butterflies as historians in chapter thirteen of part three which narrates Ma's initial account of being abducted in the Thar Desert during Partition. Here Shree employs butterflies as conduits to listen to and document Ma's personal history while acknowledging the lack of official historians, "no one to witness, no historian to see and note down what is happening" only "two women in their own world" (597), however, "there's no need for historian or witness. The butterfly floats upto tell the tale" (598). While the Grand Trunk Road endures as a historical record, the butterflies symbolise the dispersal of history into the earth itself. However, this alternative history is subverted by the self-reflexive narration, which resists its own act of recording through the metaphors of the butterflies and the road. The text contrasts these unconventional techniques of observation with traditional methods of documentation. This tension exemplifies the challenges of capturing such uniquely personal experiences in traditional historical archives. Through its metafictional narrative style and metaphors, the novel underscores the difficulty of integrating Ma's memories into conventional historical records. The Grand Trunk Road and the butterflies serve to recognise the existence of these histories without claiming full comprehension. Ma's memories, therefore, become a crucial element of the narrative, illustrating the refusal to contribute explicit testimony to the official historical archives.

Shree also introduces another perspective i.e., through the eyes of birds, which allows for a unique method of witnessing the events within the narrative, thereby altering our conceptualisation of testimony. For instance, a crow and a partridge observe the secret rendezvous between Ma and her first husband Anwar, akin to "Jayant or Jatayu, the one who recognized Sita and passed on the details to Ram, etc." (395). This allusion to the *Ramayana* positions the birds not only as witnesses but also as messengers, reflecting their role in the historical and cultural context of South Asia. By incorporating the birds' perspective, the text intertwines these mythological references with the contemporary story, emphasising the enduring nature of these archetypes. The birds' presence as witnesses to Ma and Anwar's encounter serves to deepen the narrative's exploration of memory and testimony. This layered approach enriches the text, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which history and personal stories are recorded and remembered in South Asian culture.

In a similar vein, *What the Body Remembers* intricately explores themes of female identity, polygamy, inter-religious violence, and patriarchal constraints. Set in the pre-Partition Punjab, the narrative follows Roop, a young woman who becomes the second wife of a man in Rawalpindi, sharing the household with his first wife, Satya. From the outset, the novel highlights the inferior

social position of women in 1930s India, where women are transferred from fathers to husbands through arranged marriages, a hallmark of classic patriarchy. In this social structure, girls are "given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband's father" (Kandiyoti 278). A woman's social status is precariously tied to marriage and conditional upon her fertility. Within this context, Baldwin unfolds the lives of Roop and Satya, illustrating the complexities and struggles they face, and how they navigate while asserting their identity as women. The text delves into the gendered dimensions of identity formation, focusing on how men and women are obligated to 'remember' their community through both storytelling and embodied actions. The novel's final moments of violence are contextualised within this framework, as Baldwin explores the various forms of memory work performed by gendered bodies for the collective community.

Baldwin's novel consistently explores the significance of storytelling in shaping the Sikh communal identity. Incorporating a variety of sometimes conflicting narratives, it early on suggests that "stories are not told for the telling, but for the teaching," highlighting its didactic purpose (Baldwin 46). In this text, men predominantly dominate the narrative, even when women recount stories, it is often under the control of men. During Roop's childhood, she witnesses her father narrating tales of Sikh martyrs, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the struggles of the Sikh community under Indian nationalists to her brother Jeevan, aiming to instil in him a strong sense of Sikh identity. However, the novel itself endeavours to disrupt the traditionally masculine domain of storytelling by appropriating and reinterpreting the narratives circulated by men within its own feminist fictional framework. In exploring the psychological impacts of such storytelling on the community, the novel also emphasises that the stories shared among men, and those heard or transmitted by women, carry significant physical and emotional consequences for all involved.

Elusive Memories: The Acts of Remembering and Forgetting

The first chapter of *Tomb of Sand* intertwines memory with time while establishing the groundwork for storytelling. It conceptualises stories as emerging from within a volcano, symbolising the inexorable, potent, and compelling essence of natural forces. The narrator observes, "Stories emerge from within a volcano, swelling silently as the past boils forth into the present, bringing steam, embers, and smoke" (11). This imagery highlights how history's pervasive presence influences shapes and informs the creation of stories. Memory acts as the channel through which the past resurfaces into the present, effectively making history come alive in the form of stories. The intersection of time and memory is crucial, as it creates the experiences that one refers to as 'stories.' This interplay suggests that the entire narrative can be viewed as a relationship between time and memory, where past events continuously influence and shape the present through the act of storytelling.

The novel skilfully blends themes of memory, women, and wind to explore its unique portrayal of women's experiences during the Partition. This intricate connection is established right from the opening paragraph, which states, "Women are stories in themselves, full of stirrings and whisperings that float on the wind" (11). Women are thus portrayed as living embodiments of their own stories, with their essence intricately linked to the movement of the wind. This association with the wind expands into a multifaceted network, offering various ways to comprehend the interplay between memory and women. Also, the introduction of Beti in Chapter Nine further solidifies the connection between women and wind. The chapter begins simply with the statement, "Beti. Daughters are made of wind and air" (37). Thereby drawing women and wind closer together in the narrative's exploration of their intertwined roles and significance.

While this chapter primarily focuses on Beti, it also highlights the relationship between Beti and Ma, observing that "All women, don't forget, are daughters." This emphasises that women, whether as daughters or mothers, embody stories carried by the wind. The narrative further explores this idea, showing how the wind changes its form: "Wind changes its disguise again and again. Memory pain desire faith charisma beauty imagination fragrance" (327).This metaphor illustrates how our understanding transitions as the wind transforms into various states, including memory. The phrase "Wind is memory" (474) underscores this connection, reinforcing the idea that both women and their stories are fluid and ever-changing, much like the wind. The narrative thus deepens our comprehension of how women's experiences and memories are intertwined, evolving continuously and carried forward through time.

Memory is often elusive and intangible, described as a 'wisp' that easily slips away whenever we try to hold onto it. Yet, it continues to wander the earth, subtly accompanying and guiding the living. As the narrator observes, "When the body has withered and surrendered to the fire vultures and dust, then all of existence will wander in the cosmos with the mind becoming a mere memory. Memory is the soul that wanders the earth, we reach out to grasp a wisp only to feel it slip away" (439). In *Tomb of Sand*, this elusive quality of memory is embodied by the wind. The wind, much like memory, is ever-changing and difficult to capture. As the wind shifts its form, so too do memories and the experiences of women within the story. The novel portrays these winds, symbolising women and memories, as roaming freely like tales. They are unstoppable and cannot be contained or confined: "They can't be suppressed by lids or shut up in boxes" (580). This highlights the persistent and expansive nature of both memory and women's experiences, suggesting that they are inherently free and beyond the constraints of any physical or metaphorical boundaries.

The testimony scenes in *What the Body Remembers* draw significantly from the testimonial accounts of Partition survivors found in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*. These scenes highlight what feminist historiographers describe as a "gendered telling of violence," which contrasts men's dominant narratives with those of women, where silences often convey more than words (Menon and Bhasin 54). Typically, men's stories within the family or community constitute the master narrative and are told in a heroic mode, emphasising the valour of the deceased woman while disavowing fear and pain. In contrast, women's narrations, though they may seem to echo the dominant male stories, differ significantly by challenging male perspectives, often implicitly. Ethnographers note that women's silences—signalling non-agreement, for example—can diverge from male narratives. Thus, as oral historians Kathryn Andersen and Dana C. Jack suggest, understanding women's perspectives requires listening "in stereo," attuning to both the dominant and muted channels to grasp their interrelationship accurately (quoted in Butalia 280). Baldwin's depiction of the testimony scenes encourages readers to adopt this dual reception by textually presenting both dominant and muted narrations of violence.

The novel employs four key devices to deconstruct the eyewitness accounts of men, revealing them as subjective and self-interested narratives rather than objective chronicles of fact. One primary technique Baldwin uses is the complex manipulation of male and female perspectives during the testimony scenes. Here, the eyewitness accounts of the male testifiers are primarily focalised through their female listener, Roop. While the men control the narrative in these scenes, it is Roop's perspective that often prevails. The second device Baldwin employs is inserting italicised text to present Roop's contrasting viewpoint alongside the dominant male narratives of characters like Jeevan and her father. This juxtaposition highlights the interpretive nature of the male testimonies and emphasises Roop's alternative perspective. Thirdly, the testimonial accounts of the men contain internal inconsistencies, raising doubts about their reliability both in terms of interpretation and factual accuracy. Lastly, Baldwin employs a motif of ambiguous evidence throughout the testimonies to challenge the straightforward portrayal of violence as external to familial, communal, and individual identities as presented in the men's narratives.

Fluid Bodies and Partitioned Borders

Tomb of Sand delves into the complexities surrounding borders, examining both their limitations and potential. While the physical border dividing India and Pakistan stands at the forefront of the narrative as a quintessential element of Partition literature, Shree interrogates deeper, exploring borders that transcend geographical confines. This exploration is exemplified through the character Rosie Raza, a hijra, whose fluidity of gender and identity challenges the arbitrary nature of boundaries, giving rise to new identities that exist both within and beyond

defined limits. As the narrative progresses into part three, the focus shifts to Pakistan and the Partition experience, particularly through the lens of the physical border. These moments of connection and disconnection underscore our understanding of Ma's journey and the broader context of Partition. The opening chapter of part three vividly depicts the chaos at the physical border, laying the groundwork for subsequent events. Ma herself embodies a symbolic representation of Mother India, transcending borders and boundaries, yet becoming deeply connected to the land and its history, which extends far beyond the confines of Wagah.

Rosie Raza's character challenges the notion of fixed boundaries, particularly in the context of 'women's histories.' As a hijra, belonging to a community of gender minorities known as the 'third gender' in South Asia's historical context, Rosie embodies the complexity and defiance of traditional gender norms. Although introduced briefly in part one, Rosie assumes a more prominent role within Beti's household in part two, where her presence is likened to "a fresh gust of wind" (310), adding depth to the dynamic interplay of women, wind, and air. Throughout the novel, Rosie's character is depicted through Beti's cautious and conservative perspective, which contrasts with Beti's own self-proclaimed liberal values. Despite Beti's belief that her home is free from strict rules, allowing individuals to dress and speak as they please, she becomes unsettled by Rosie's increasingly frequent presence and her deviance from the norms, feeling that Rosie is becoming overly liberated. Although Beti reprimands herself for her preoccupation with Rosie's identity, she continues to ponder over Rosie's non-binary body, particularly when observing Rosie accompanying Ma on walks. She wonders, "What is that body holding onto Amma?" (423).

The narrator reflects on how cultural depictions often portray a different type of body crossing boundaries, citing examples like Shankar and Parvati, whose union is celebrated for its transformative power. This cultural context extends Rosie's significance into the broader fabric of South Asian society, highlighting the beauty and resilience inherent in transcending traditional boundaries and binaries. Rosie's character challenges stereotypes and defies categorisation, embodying a fluidity that refuses to be confined by societal norms or borders. Rosie is portrayed as "A body unrecognising of the legitimacy of any borders. Flowing this way and that" (425). Rosie Raza embodies a fluidity that transcends traditional notions of gender and identity. Within her single being, she seamlessly transitions between personas and essence, shifting from the nurturing presence of Rosie to the stoic demeanour of Raza. Rosie and Raza are intricately intertwined, challenging both conservative Indian and Western binaries that dictate one must be either 'this' or 'that,' nothing beyond. Through Rosie Raza's character, Shree disrupts the rigid boundaries associated with the category of 'womanhood' while still acknowledging its importance in understanding marginalised histories. Rosie Raza's existence does not diminish the significance of

womanhood as a perspective through which to explore history; rather, it expands upon it, offering a more nuanced understanding of gender and identity.

The physical boundary separating India and Pakistan plays a significant role in shaping our understanding of Partition within the text. However, the concept of Partition itself remains largely elusive until it is explicitly mentioned for the first time in part three, a considerable 537 pages into the novel. The nature of the text necessitates an approach that eschews traditional linearity, as indicated by the statement, "So there's no harm in starting the story right here, that is, the way we're doing it right now" (14). Wagah, the famous border between India and Pakistan, a sort of liminal space plays a crucial role in the narrative. Part two concludes with Bade reaching "as far as Wagah" (534), while part three begins by straightforwardly stating, "Here we are at Wagah" (537).

Wagah, situated on the Grand Trunk Road connecting Amritsar and Lahore, holds immense historical and contemporary significance. Its very name conjures images of both the tumultuous history of Partition and the ongoing political tensions between India and Pakistan. Even before Partition is explicitly addressed in the text, Wagah contextualises the narrative within the backdrop of communal violence and the inherent strife of the physical border. The opening sentence of part three further emphasises this dramatic backdrop, describing Wagah as a place "where the tale is drama and the story is partition" (537). This echoes the narrator's contemplation of the "Dramatic" frontier, particularly following Ma's expressed desire to cross "Over the border" (524).Wagah, in its dual role as both a geographical location and a symbol of historical and political turmoil, encapsulates the complexity and significance of the Partition narrative. The narrator pertinently muses, "Is this the chronicle of the getting smaller woman or is every story really a Partition tale – love romance longing courage pain-in-separation bloodshed? It's an absent presence: lost souls flitting about in the ether" (537).

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry observes that "what is 'remembered' in the body is well remembered" (109). She aims to highlight "the political identity of the body," which is typically learned unconsciously and effortlessly at an early age (109). Scarry suggests that "the presence of learned culture in the body" is not merely inscribed upon or imposed externally but also emerges internally, given the body's "refusal to disown its own early circumstances," and its insistence on absorbing the signs of its environment into its rhythms and postures (109). A similar notion of bodily memory operates in *What the Body Remembers*, where memory is embedded not only in narrative but also within the body of the listener. The novel explores how "the political identity of the [Sikh] body" is cultivated and reinforced through a repertoire of stories, especially those of embodied suffering, as the stories that endure in the body are fundamentally about bodies (109). These stories range from Bachan Singh's recounting of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and its

martyred Sikh bodies to the Sikh Aardas, which includes narratives of "the forty Sikhs who stood by the Guru at his last battle against a Mughal tyrant; Sikhs cut limb from limb by Muslim tyrants; two sons of the tenth Guru bricked up alive in a wall for their refusal to convert to Islam; martyrs whose scalps were removed; men who were tied to wheels and their bodies broken to pieces; men and women who were cut by saws and flayed alive by Mughal emperors for their faith, but did not convert to Islam" (Baldwin 50).

Through rituals of remembrance and storytelling, the memory of historical violence and other violated bodies becomes ingrained in the listener's body, hardening into instinct. It effectively portrays how Sikh communal culture's representational framework fosters a "martyrological consciousness," crucial to Sikh (particularly male Sikh) subject formation during a period of violent political upheaval (Misri 6). As the narrative unfolds, Sardarji's body exemplifies this process, embodying ancestral fears ingrained through lullabies sung by his mother, artworks in the Golden Temple Museum, and tales passed down through generations. In this way, the body not only absorbs but also preserves the collective memory of past traumas, becoming an archive in its own right.

In the text, while men adhere to a regulated set of narratives to preserve memory, women 're-member' the community through reproduction. Throughout *What the Body Remembers*, women are frequently reminded that their primary role is to bear children—an ideology that leads to the death of Roop's mother during childbirth, the introduction of the young and fertile Roop into Sardarji's household, and the eventual expulsion of the barren and 'unwomanly' Satya. This reproductive imperative, which dominates women's everyday lives, makes them especially vulnerable during times of communal conflict. The most tragic consequence of this reproductive mandate is starkly revealed at the novel's conclusion, where the women of Pari Darwaza face various forms of violence based on their reproductive potential.

Conclusion

Both *What the Body Remembers* and *Tomb of Sand* serve as a compelling illustration of how literature can broaden and deepen our understanding of women's experiences during Partition. Their narrative style, which is expansive and self-reflexive, goes beyond the confines of official records, offering new avenues for exploring marginalised and gendered histories. Through the concept of alternative documentation techniques, the novels unveil untold stories that reside solely in memory, much like the small stone idol of Buddha that persists despite attempts to bury it: "They just won't die, nor will they remain buried forever" (Shree 163). In essence, literature becomes a tool for unearthing these buried memories, avoiding reductionist portrayals of women's

roles during Partition and delving into the complexities of their lived experiences. In *Tomb of Sand*, borders take on a new significance, representing not only physical divisions but also points of connection and fluidity. Despite acknowledging the violence inherent in these borders, the novel explores their complexities. While historians struggle to access authentic testimonies from women, *Tomb of Sand* challenges traditional notions of literature's role in documenting Partition's history.

In *What the Body Remembers*, gendered bodies are portrayed not just as passive recipients of violence, but as dynamic archives that actively retain memories of trauma. Unlike traditional views that see bodies merely as sites of violence, the novel suggests they function as living repositories of memory. Furthermore, it explores how feminist storytelling can challenge and subvert patriarchal representations of memory, which often perpetuate violence against women's bodies. By highlighting the textual violence inflicted by patriarchal memory on women's bodies, the novel seeks to reconstruct a memory that acknowledges these embodied injuries differently. For instance, Roop's reflection that she is spared from the violence of a sharpened kirpan underscores the novel's attempt to reclaim and remember the physicality of women's bodies. Through Roop's perspective, the novel uncovers the silenced materiality of Kusum's body, which has been overwritten by the narratives of her male relatives. In emphasising the materiality of the body rather than its symbolic representation, the novel aims to rescue women's injured bodies from being reduced to mere symbols of suffering.

Together, these novels not only redefine the role of women in Partition literature but also compel readers to reconsider the ways in which history is recorded, remembered, and represented. By emphasizing the material, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of women's lives, *Tomb of Sand* and *What the Body Remembers* transform Partition narratives into spaces of resistance and reclamation. In doing so, they offer a vital feminist intervention into the historiography of Partition, ensuring that the complexities of women's lived experiences are neither overlooked nor reduced to simplistic binaries. This intersection of memory, gender, and narrative innovation highlights the enduring power of literature to engage with historical trauma and expand the possibilities of how it is understood and remembered.

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