



# **Diasporic Longing And The Search For Home: A Comparative Analysis Of Remnants Of A Separation And Tomb Of Sand**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **CHAPTER 1:**

#### **Material Symbolism and Memory in *Remnants of a Separation and Tomb of Sand*.**

Materials often take the form of memories. Material memory, imbued in preserved objects, either erupts or quietly settles as the trauma of Partition. Objects often transform into powerful symbols that encode personal and collective experiences. This chapter is rooted in material culture and memory studies. The theory of material memory posits that tangible items, such as clothing, utensils, or heirlooms, are not merely passive remnants of the past but rather active participants in one's memory and identity. Material memory is the ability to recall the past using items or things. Several people who crossed the border didn't have much time to pack their stuff, so they brought only what they felt they would need, such as cooking cutlery to survive, jewellery to sell for cash, swords and knives to defend themselves from assaults, etc. Some items may be centuries old, passed on to generations, so these items ought to be preserved and honoured because of the amount of history and memories they contain, especially those serving as Partition memorabilia. Despite the fact that things are inanimate, memories and tales or experiences associated with it may give them life. Later, when the thing is seen or handled, these materials produce memories and situations that they have absorbed.

Aanchal Malhotra, an author and a historian, presented a unique approach in *Remnants of a Separation*. Rather than relying on historical narrative and giving a fictional form, she chose to interview those people who outlived the Partition and used some personal artifacts to recount the Partition story, that acts as physical remnants of past life and lost homes. The objects, ranging from photographs and clothing to kitchen utensils, are not mere remnants of a bygone era but vivid symbols of their fragmented lives and severed homes. The intense attachment that the migrants express toward these seemingly mundane items is deeply symbolic.

For instance, a simple *ghara* (claypot) seems a utilitarian object. However, for the family that carried it from Lahore to Amritsar, the pot is a semblance of life left behind and continuity amid chaos. Aanchal Malhotra provides her own account, “A *Gaz* for My Father and a *Ghara* for My Mother,” and shares about her ancestral house on her mother’s side of the family-*Viji Bhawan*, which stood as a strong symbol of family heritage, unity, and legacy. The villa did house many material markers of the passing of time, like an old and quaint lock and key, and a few photographs, but the most treasured hoardings of the house included a *ghara*, or a vessel used to churn buttermilk, and a yardstick, or *gaz*. Both of these items made the journey from Lahore to Amritsar during the chaos of the Partition, serving not just as utensils but as silent witnesses of family migration and resilience.

This was the first time, Malhotra realised the power of an object to retain memory. The texture, scent, and surface of these belongings became vessels of memory, preserving the essence of a painful yet important historical chapter. As Orhan Pamuk insightfully notes in *The Museum of Innocence*: “We can bear the pain only by possessing something that belongs to that instant.” These everyday objects, which were once tools of domestic life, now served as portals to memory, embodying both the pain of displacement and the endurance of familial identity.

Another narrative, “The Inheritance of Ceremonial Servings,” unfolds the family history of Narjis Khatun, who was born at Patiala, India. Her family stayed with her maternal grandfather, who was a revenue collector. She vividly shares her childhood memories spent at her Nana’s *haveli*. During Partition, Narji was only ten years old, but she clearly remembers how the Maharaja of Patiala sheltered Sikhs and Hindus and urged unity, but amidst the widespread bloodshed, her family had to flee to Lahore. Among the kitchenware carried from Patiala was also a *khaas-daan*, which consisted of two dome-shaped, beautiful, and intricately carved vessels cast in bronze. The *khaas-daan* was used to make and serve *paan*, a digestive made with betel leaves, areca nut, tobacco, and an edible mixture of slaked lime and *kattha* or catechu. The *khaas-daan*, was a part of Narjis’ bridal trousseau that holds a nostalgic value for her. This *khaas-daan* thus becomes a powerful symbol of nostalgia, continuity and loss. A vessel that was once held as an heirloom, passing onto generation from Narji’s *Nani* to her *Ammi* and then to her own, now becomes a vessel of longing for home.

Preet Singh of “The Pashmina Shawl of Preet Singh” too yearns for her lost home in the mountain trails of Quetta in the Balochistan region. She treasures fondly her pure Pashmina shawl with Kashmiri embroidery on it, as the shawl reminded her of her mother. In the summer of 1947, the family’s holiday in Mussoorie turned into a refuge when Partition cut off their return to Quetta. It was only Preet Singh’s shawl that survived with her because she’d wrapped it around herself on the journey. She still recalls her eldest brother, Waryam Singh, who was separated from them for months amid the chaos. For Preet, every Partition memory is woven with the presence of her late mother and brother, and she cherishes their presence in these memories. Material objects in literature often function as symbols—that is, they stand beyond the physical form, carrying emotional, historical, cultural, or psychological meaning.

Geetanjali Shree’s *Tomb of Sand*, translated from *Ret Samadhi* (2018), is a remarkable work of fiction on the Partition that traces the porous, transgressive edges of borders. The narrative follows the transformative journey of Ma (Chandraprabha Debi), an octogenarian woman who plunged into depression following the death of her husband. Isolated and withdrawn, she cuts herself off from the outside world. Gradually, she re-engages with the world when a spark in her life is inflamed by an unexpected companionship with Rosie, a transgender woman whose presence challenges societal norms and reawakens Ma’s dormant sense of self. To the astonishment of her children, Bade and Beti, Ma sheds the passive role she had long inhabited and embraces a renewed zest for life. What begins as a quiet rebellion soon evolves into a bold, symbolic act, that is, a journey across the border into Pakistan to confront the buried traumas of her Partition, especially her scarred youth. In reclaiming her voice and agency, Ma not only retraces her personal history but also challenges national, gendered, and familial boundaries.

*Tomb of Sand*, while not specifically endorsed with material objects in the same way, employs symbol-laden objects and spaces (such as the border, a grave, or clothing) to explore memory, gender, and identity. The concept of “material memory” can be seen in a crucial analytical lens, extending beyond the conventional understandings of remembrance to encompass the mnemonic capacities of objects and built environments. Shree, from the start of the novel, insinuates various symbols that are intricately interwoven with memory, playing a crucial role in shaping personal identity, cultural history and intergenerational trauma.

One of the most prominent material symbols in the novel is the “border”. The India-Pakistan border is not just a political line but a material and emotional marker of Partition and trauma. It serves as a reminder of the painful fragmentation of lives and communities, representing both a physical divide and an emotional barrier that shapes the protagonist’s journey. As she navigates her past, the border embodies the longing for a lost homeland, highlighting the ache of displacement and the intricate ties to cultural heritage. “Anything worth doing transcends borders” (Shree13). For Ma (Chandraprabha Debi), the protagonist, the border evokes painful memories of separation from her homeland and first love. Her decision to cross the border in old age symbolizes confronting the repressed memories and reclaiming of

fragmented past. Moreover, the border also symbolizes the generational borders between Ma and her children and also the boundaries of relationships. In this sense, the border stands as a material reminder of dislocation and fragmentation, embodying the collective memory of Partition that still shapes identities across generations.

Another recurrent symbol is the “door” in *Tomb of Sand*. The symbol of the door plays a powerful and multi-layered role throughout the narrative, serving as a threshold, a barrier, and a portal for transformation. The door marks the boundary between the interior and exterior, past and present, life and death, and identity and reinvention. The symbol of the door transits within the span of the novel. In the first section, the protagonist (ma) lies inert behind a closed door, symbolizing her inner confinement, after her husband’s death. The house’s walls and doors become a metaphor for her isolation.

“This particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please... The door to the home of her eldest son... generations had dwelled within the walls it upheld” (Shree 6).

The door becomes a literal and symbolic barrier and a way of possibilities. It acts as a barrier, where ma detaches from the outside world, but metaphorically it stays open. Someone may come in, and Ma would recognise instantly, this acts as a symbol of transcending personal boundaries and intruding into personal space. In the next section, when Ma moves into Beti’s apartment, the door becomes a portal to rebirth. Beti’s door opens onto light, warmth, and emotional possibility.

“This is the door that opens to reveal a world created by Beti alone” (Shree 76).

However, as Ma gradually re-engages with life—ultimately embarking on a journey back to Pakistan—the door transforms into a threshold for new beginnings. It marks a crossing over into realms previously unexplored: emotional, geographic, and existential.

Throughout the novel, Shree assigns agency to architectural elements. Doors are described as observers, capable of sensing disturbances, almost living entities within the narrative. “...door that sees all, hears all, records all, and has been doing so long...”. It is a symbol of metamorphosis, echoing the novel's central themes of identity, loss, gender, and historical rupture. It asks whether we close ourselves off from the past or walk through it to transform who we are.

Another key material symbol is the “burqa”, which Ma wears during her journey to Pakistan. It acts as a veil between past and present, safety and exposure. The burqa becomes a material symbol of identity, erasure, protection, and transformation. By wearing it, Ma is not retreating from the world but rather claiming a new space for herself both physically and emotionally. Furthermore, it reveals how memory can be cloaked yet simultaneously reclaimed.

Material is the pathway, if memory is the destination.

Other material symbols serve as conduits of gender, identity, and transformation. Such as the protagonist’s sari, walking stick, or even her shadow, become extensions of her identity and resistance.



The sari becomes a powerful symbol of subverting patriarchal and ageist notions. A sari worn during a specific time or event serves as a mnemonic device, much like the objects in *Remnants of a Separation*. For Ma, certain saris are linked to her life before Partition, including her identity as a young girl in Lahore. When she reclaims that part of her identity, the sari becomes a bridge between past and present, India and Pakistan, and trauma and healing. Moreover, Ma's "walking stick" is a literal marker of her physical frailty, a tool of movement and autonomy. Ma's shadow in *Tomb of Sand* is a potent symbol of her split identity and suppressed history, the trauma and unresolved memories of Partition, also the self that resists erasure by age, gender, or societal norms, and her psychic journey toward wholeness and transformation.

The title *Tomb of Sand* itself is deeply symbolic. "Sand" often symbolizes the passage of time, impermanence, and the vastness of existence, and can represent the granular nature of time, slipping away like sand through an hourglass. In the context of a "Tomb" of sand could suggest the erosion of memory, the decay of physical forms, or the return to dust. A tomb is inherently symbolic of death, burial and the past. It can represent a resting place, a hidden secret, or a monument. In literature, a "Tomb" might also symbolize a psychological state of being trapped, buried under memories, or confined by societal expectations.

Objects and spaces are fluid, resisting fixed meanings- just like identity and history. They allow the novel to play with temporal and spatial boundaries, offering a feminist and transnational rethinking of Partition.

In both texts, material symbols act not just as background objects but are central to the storytelling, memory, and identity formation. Malhotra uses them as archival touchstones, while Shree uses them as fluid metaphors to explore how the past continues to shape and reshape the present.

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Objects often hold a strong voice of unspeakable memories.

Memory plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and shaping identities.

## Chapter 2- GENDERED MEMORIES AND TRAUMATIC LEGACIES

Memories dilute, but the objects and sites weaves around them some unforgettable episodes. Memory is shaped by different social structures, interpersonal dynamics and crucially by gender. The Partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 is not an isolated event of population movement, but rather accompanied by the displacement of memories and material possessions. In this context, the significance of the personal belongings that are imbued with life, contested meanings and emotional resonance, which then takes a critical dimension in memory work. This chapter examines how gendered memory operates as both a site of resistance and a conduit of traumatic legacies passed down onto generations, and how such dynamics have implications on the process of confronting the trauma of the past and healing or reconstructing.

Aanchal Malhotra vividly presents how *Remnants of a Separation* presents the material objective in vivid light. She attempts to revisit the Partition in a unique light, drawing on materials or articles that refugees carried with themselves. These belongings absorbed the memory and trauma of a time and place that remain dormant and unshaken for generations. Malhotra collects various objects carried across the border during Partition and uses them to recover personal histories of their owners. These items then become mnemonic devices as they trigger memories of pre-Partition life and the trauma of migration.

*Hereditary Keepers of the Raj*, narrates the life of Englishman John Grigor Taylor, whose early years unfolded in Pre-Partition India. A son of British Army Officer, born in 1921, in Ahmednagar, near Bombay. Though India is a second home to him and he remembers with fondness, but he prefers to forget the memories of India, seething in pain and hatred during the days of Partition and loves recollecting his childhood. Sophia, notes that many British citizens struggled to adjust to life in England after Indian Independence. Later on part of the diplomatic service John was deputed to set up the first British High Commission in Delhi, getting a chance to revisit. Now ninety-four years old John still yearns for the unforgettable scent of *geeli meeti* (petrichor), a lasting memory of his Indian childhood.

The impact of Partition affects subsequent generations through intergenerational trauma that shapes identities and lives. The trauma immerses deeper into the mind and pains such that the wounds never subside, but rather pass down throughout generations. It is in such a tale *The Dialects of Stiches and Secrets* introduces to the *Phulkari Bagh*- a richly embroidered traditional dupatta of Hansla Chowdhary. Similar to the “quilt” in Alice Walker’s *Everyday Use*, the prized *bagh* symbolizes a deeply gendered form of storytelling, where every stitch was sewn to hold the cultural history and to preserve their heritage, to pass on to generations. For Hansla, it is the only remnant of her maternal grandmother’s life

in Pakistan. As her finger glides over its intricate embroidery, she embraces it as the spirit of all the women in her bloodline who wore it before. In the history of Hansla, one finds it is the women's tradition that is passed down to the lineage. They become an active member to preserve their sense of tradition for generations. But this passing down also accompanies trauma, the fragmented pieces of memory that are passed down to the upcoming generation when they also suffer a trace of that trauma.

### Chapter 3

#### **Fragmented Self: Partition Impact and Shaping of Postcolonial Identities.**

The narratives in *Remnants of a Separation* decode how the objects as reservoir of memory and experience, unearth the social culture of those terrible times and detangle the hidden, unspeakable feelings of sadness, shame, and trauma that the victims experienced. Through oral testimonies, the text foregrounds the contemporary significance of these objects, which bear the “weight of the past” and emerge as affective companions in the migrants’ journey toward redefined identities and citizenships.

One such narrative in *Remnants*, “The Hockey Field I Left Behind: The Photographs of Nazeer Adhami” is the story of Nazeer Adhami whose parents were staunch followers of Muslim League, and yet believed in the solidarity of Hindu-Muslim peaceful coexistence.

After migrating from Aligarh to Pakistan in 1953, Adhami reflects on the political anxieties of Muslims during the lead-up to Independence, particularly their fear of marginalization in a Hindu-majority India. Nazeer Adhami’s account reveals the duality of a family that supported the Muslim League yet believed in communal harmony that embody the hybrid identities shaped by colonialism. He identifies this fear of being “drowned in an unseeing, uncaring sea of majoritarianism” (Singh 58)-underscores the postcolonial anxiety of marginalization and the struggle for political voice. Besides all this crisis, Nazeer recounts with much fervour his university days at AMU, the hockey field, the campus, and his most beloved possessions are the photographs from that period. Adhami’s story thus becomes a lens to view the dislocations, inherited trauma, and contested belonging of postcolonial subjects.

The personal artifacts (in *Remnants*) weave the narrative stories of tragedies of dislocation, the heartbreaks of losing loved ones, and the resilience required to forge a new beginning.

The constant struggle to reconcile and heal past wounds is ongoing. Malhotra’s work underscores the indispensable role of memory in maintaining cultural integrity and personal identity amidst the chaos of displacement.