

Burdensome Borders: A Diasporic Study of The Novel Memories of Rain by Sunetra Gupta

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Abstract

It becomes a burden for an individual to leave the land of his birth behind and move to the unknown lands. This element of ‘unknown’ creates a sense of fear for the new lands and a longing nostalgia for the land which is left behind. Diasporic studies have created a special niche for themselves in the field of English Literature. It focuses on the experiences of People living in diaspora as mentioned in the literature. It showcases the pain and elements of loss, alienation, memory, fluid identity, an undaunting feeling of otherness and many more factors which differentiate them from the native people of the host land. This research paper focuses on the pain and loss of a diasporic character Moni as represented in the novel *Memories of Rain* by Sunetra Gupta. Moni is the protagonist of the novel, who is represented as an icon for individuals in Diaspora, her pain and misery of being away from the homeland presents mental makeup of diasporic communities.

Keywords: Burden, Nostalgia, Diaspora, Memory, Loss, Pain, Host land.

*“This is home. And this the closest
I’ll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won’t be so brilliant,
the Jhelum’s waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.”*

-A Postcard from Kashmir, Agha Sahid Ali

The term ‘Diaspora’ comes from the Greek word ‘Diaspeirein’ which stands for disperse (Dia, across+ speirein, scatter) to scatter across. This term was first used in 5th C. by Greek historian Thucydides to describe the dispersal of Ionian Greeks after the War of Persia. Diaspora also has a theological beginning, we can trace it from the (Septuagint) Original work of Old Testament, written in Hebrew for Jewish People, (Deuteronomy 28:25) in the phrase, “thou shall be a dispersion in all the kingdoms of the Earth.”

Diaspora is a Greek term, which also owes its origin to Jewish religious beliefs. The original Hebrew word for Diaspora is Galut (exile). In 2nd C. BC it was used for Jewish Population and since then it has been seen in a negative light. It stands for the dispersion of Jewish people scattered in Exile. It stands as a synonym to loss and pain, nostalgia, dilemma and quest for identity. The term was also used to refer Protestants living in Catholic areas. It came in prominence in the 17th C. In 1960’s Robert Cohen described Diaspora as, “Diasporas are not only communities of Exile, but are communities of creativity and resistance.” (Cohen 123)

Diaspora can easily be understood by the statement, “diaspora denotes any population that is deterritorialized or is transnational.” (Cohen 45) An easier explanation of the same could be, a population that has originated in the land other than in which they are currently residing. According to Osten Whalbeck, “It is believed that the concept of diaspora, understood as a transnational social organisation relating both to the society of origin and the society of settlement.” (24) This term is associated with dislocation, pain, memories and trauma.

According to Gheoghe Mosneaga,

“Diaspora appears on the basis of ethnic groups that reside outside of their “titular” states. It is characterized by a multiple identity; ethno-cultural ties to both its country of residence and to the country of origin; the presence of social institutes that provide the maintenance, development, and functioning of the Diaspora.” (Ch 1)

he further adds that, “those groups that deliberately maintain their ties and strengthen their relations with the motherland are considered Diasporas and members of Diasporas.” A Diaspora is a group of individuals who despite being dispersed from their original homeland, dispersed from the land of their birth and ancestors due to various reasons, maintain a continuous effort to regain a strong relation with their homeland. With the passage of time the meaning associated with the term Diaspora keeps on changing, as in 5th C BCE, it was used to show dispersal of Greeks, then in 2nd C. BCE, this term denoted dispersal of Jews from their home land, in 1900’s various theorists including Robert Cohen and Martin Paul described this term not only as a reflector of pain and loss but as an amalgamation of creative and resistant community, and now a days this term has been invariably used to denote the movement of population from one place to another with complex experiences.

Today the Diasporic communities are held together by the concept of Fluid Identity (an identity that is always changing and evolving as per the need and situation of the individual). They all share a common strain of not being common. There is always a sense of loss and nostalgia prevalent in these communities. These communities put efforts to create an influencing cultural, ethnic and religious identity similar to the one they or their ancestors had in the homeland. They try to build up an emotional connection with their homeland in every possible way. Michel Bruneau proposed typology based on the diasporic organization. He defined three major types of Diasporas,

“The entrepreneurial diaspora: in which people migrate for the development of their business.

The religious diaspora: this diaspora confines to immigrants who migrate to new lands to propagate about their religion and for the freedom of their religious purpose like Jews this type of Migration, it could also be termed as Forced migration.

The Political Diaspora: as the term indicates, the reason for the immigrants to search for new lands is political power and control, for instance Palestinian Diaspora.” (Bruneau 67)

According to report of United Nations, “India has the largest diaspora population in the world with 18 million people living outside their country.” It also states that UAE, US and Saudi Arabia hosts the largest number of migrants from India. The Indian diaspora is one of the largest in the world, with people of Indian ancestry living in countries all over the globe. This has led to a rich and diverse body of literature that explores the experiences of being uprooted from one's homeland and living in a new culture. There might be different causes for people to move from their ancestral or homeland, to a new unknown land. It might be a choice or compulsion but a common thread among all the diasporic communities is the thread of memory, trauma and pain, sense of loss, alienation, deformed identity, quest for identity and the exhausting process of finding or creating one’s place in the host land. This movement

from one place to another, introduces many changes such as cultural changes, political changes, economical changes, social changes and psychological changes as well.

The Indian diaspora was produced through a scattering of people rather than an exodus of population at a certain period in time, as in the Jewish meaning. If a telescopic view is used, this random movement does not follow a consistent pattern. If studied in detail it will show the origin from the enslaved Girmitya labourers of the past to the IT technocrats of the present.

Diasporic groups give an outlet for their wit via many ways, and fiction is one way to retain their identity, resulting in diversity occurring at varying levels throughout the world. The writer begins with a set or burden of real-life material and resolves it into a creative, but along the way, some of that material becomes absorbed into other, parallel, and personal recollections. Literates born and raised in England, Australia, the United States, or Canada have little ties to their home countries but have a distinct voice within the host country's multicultural design. They are skilled in putting a wide range of ideas on paper. They take satisfaction in declaring themselves inhabitants of the host nation, yet they constantly seek raw material for their work from their home country. Diasporic works depict indigenous culture. It is unquestionably a reflecting resource of the psychology and behaviour, problems, answers, and adjustments of the migrants, who are widely dispersed. Their capacity to influence political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances should not be underestimated. As a result, they have an indelible place in the literature that they have created through their exemplary literature.

other cultures. They ask their readers to experience life 'on the hyphen.'" (pp. 14-15). This pain of being on the hyphen is described in the novel "Memories of Rain" by Sunetra Gupta. Gupta was born on March 15, 1965, in Calcutta, India, and spent her infancy in Ethiopia and Zambia. As a teenager, she went to Calcutta and began writing, supported by her father, who exposed her to the writings of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. She earned a Ph.D. in biology from the University of London after studying biology at Princeton. She is a Professor at University of Oxford of Theoretical Epidemiology. She is the author of five books, including *Memories of Rain* (1992), which was inspired by Brendan Kenelly's version of *Medea*; *The Glassblower's Breath* (1993), which is about a single day in the lives of a butcher, a baker, and a candle maker, as well as the woman they all love; based in Calcutta, New York, and London; *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1995), the story of a stunning narrative of three generations of a rich Indian family from Calcutta and received the Southern Arts Literature Prize, and *So Good in Black* (2009), which was longlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. Sunetra Gupta, her husband, and their two daughters live in Oxford. A diasporic individual is depicted by Sunetra Gupta as being in an equivocal position and unable to identify oneself in accordance with an elite notion of self. The near closeness of two distinguishing identities highlights the personality emergency, which is a natural norm for diasporic existence. Most crucially, depending on the circumstance, the self is viewed as both a local and an outsider. These evidently diametrically opposed viewpoints induce emotional distress in diasporic living. Self-moulding, however, enables the condition to endure. An analysis of Sunetra Gupta's numerous works also shows how this diasporic Indian adjusts to such a shifting plane of recognition through the never-ending process of identity building. *Memories of Rain*, Sunetra Gupta's first book of fiction from 1992, which earned her India's Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996, best captures the author's early desire to share her views on Calcutta with a western audience. The lure of accurately portraying her culture to a foreign audience was first too high for this Bengali novelist residing in Oxford to refuse. *Memories of Rain* delivers image-clusters essential to the modern life and ethos of the middle-class Calcutta Bengalis through a collage of personal recollections from the 1960s and 1970s. In this literature, which is firmly

rooted in Bengali culture, Rabindranath Tagore, the legendary author of the Bengali canon, naturally takes centre stage. The three themes of dispersion, displacement, and remembrance are favourites of postcolonial diasporic writers. In this field, female Indian authors who reside in host nations are significantly more evolved than male writers. Their stories serve as both a reminder of the history they have left behind and a reflection of the difficulties they have in developing new identities in the host nation. Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain*, published in 1992, is a complex and challenging postcolonial book that explores a variety of aspects of migration and diaspora, including as displacement, acculturation, trans culture, and transnationality. Through the protagonist's marriage to a foreigner, Gupta depicts interculturality and cultural hybridity. This study aims to look at the transnational and transcultural characteristics.

She investigates this type of postcolonial diasporic identity in her book *Memories of Rain*. The narrative also covers all the past events through a flashback of Moni's marriage to Anthony, an Englishman, however the novel only shows a week of confusion until the heroine, Moni, an Indian girl from Calcutta, decides to return home. The only characters in this amazing East-West conflict storey are the protagonist Moni, her husband Anthony, a Bengali theatre scholar with a Ph.D., and Moni's brother, who also happens to be Anthony's buddy. Anthony came in Calcutta on a soggy evening as a passionate Bengali theatre student. He made friends with Moni's brother and went to see Moni one rainy night. Moni compares the gentle rain she observes in London to Anthony's initial visit in Calcutta during the 1978 monsoon season. As she remembers such times,

“The rain poured from the skies not to purify the earth but to spite it, to churn the parched fields into festering wounds, rinse the choked city sewers on to the streets, sprinkle the pillows with the nausea of mold...” (Gupta 17)

When Anthony first sees Moni at their house and again at dinner, he is completely taken aback by her stunning looks and exotic attractiveness. He yearns for her so terribly. Moni, on the other hand, is a student of English literature who has a strong desire to travel to England because it is one of her ideal vacation destinations. Because she thinks everything she learnt in school about England is genuine and because she views London as a refuge from the dangerous poverty and suffering of Calcutta, her love for England is particularly romantic. Moni and Anthony are married as a consequence of Anthony's obsession with her exotic beauty and her wish to travel to a dream world. However, after 10 years, Moni's marriage broke down when she gave birth to a six-year-old child. The novel's storyline does not follow a regular timeline of events, but rather jumps back and forth in time and space, confusing the reader.

Through the protagonist's descriptions of her history and present, the author distinguishes between the place of origin and settlement. London is where Moni now resides, along with her hubby. It is where she lives, where she has a diaspora identity, and where she is coping with the stress and crises of moving. Diaspora, according to William Safran, is "that segment of people living outside the home land" (p. 83). She feels at comfortable when she thinks of her hometown of Calcutta, where she was born. She creates a "imaginary place" in her mind to transport herself back to her own country when she is unhappy with her husband's promiscuity and feels alienated and rootless in England. Similar to this, following Moni's marriage to Anthony, the literary setting of her dream becomes her "actual home" and a physical location for herself. However, Moni's envisioned place of diaspora did not succeed in giving her a place of tranquilly and pleasure. Despite having strong assimilation and adaptation skills, Moni feels out of place in her new London home. Despite being in a relationship for 10 years and having a daughter who is six years old, her marriage becomes unbearable and sad owing to Anthony's womanising nature. She misses

her own country and hometown of Calcutta in this situation and thinks back to the time when Anthony adored her fervently and terribly. Why Moni believed Anthony had saved her from a "bizarre country." She pictured England as a place where people and culture were refined. Nothing meets her expectations or the mental image she took with her from Calcutta since everything has changed since she arrived. As a result, Moni is discouraged and refuses to stay there, even though she is in England and is a Calcutta native. Therefore, when one plays on imagination, geography of culture or nationalism persists regardless of a concrete wall or other physical borders. In the book, Moni also imagines and acts her identity as a transnational and transcultural figure who simultaneously belongs to two different cultures.

In *Memories of Rain*, Gupta describes a string of confrontational events that cause Moni to become fragmented and fail miserably to forge a diasporic identity. There are several examples of these binary oppositions, including her idealised recollections of India and the reality of her middle-class existence, her knowledge from colonial schooling and the reality of English life as she encounters it in London with Anthony. This conflict exemplifies the larger disparity between Moni's two homes, Calcutta and London, as shown in the book. Moni gains autonomy and a sense of self via her return to a remade Calcutta. On the other side, this new circular structure of diasporic excursions may point to a stronger yearning for home and concern about living in a diaspora. If too many unavoidable and irrevocable things happen, it could be too late to turn back. The voyage could be about change—change in the diasporic person who travels back and change in the location to which she returns. It could also be a fear of disappointment if her own country has undergone significant transformation that is unrecognisable. Without a true identity, Moni roams the cultural landscapes of both her own country and the place of her diaspora.

In conclusion, we may say that although though Moni returns to Calcutta at the book's finale, she was unable to mentally leave the country. Gupta constructs a transnational figure who travels and engages in transcultural behaviours via the principal character of her book. When Moni studied English literature in college, she learned about England and thought of it as a promise land that may provide her a safe haven from her male-dominated society, unsanitary environment, and poverty. Therefore, Moni belongs to the area of land that is not her home since she is a young amorous girl. After she wed Anthony, an Englishman, she took out for England, but after a few years she realised that England was not the promise land she had hoped it would be, and she began to long to go back to her native country. To abandon our definite sense of "home" and "abroad" and embrace a more fluid, transnational identity, the transnational places of the novel allow the female protagonist and the reader to be "something outside of being anyplace." Moni is able to escape the constrained identity that is bounded by national, geographical, and cultural place because to her transnational fluid identity.

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