

Home Thoughts from Abroad: A study of Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* and *A Sin of Colour*.

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Abstract: Diasporic writers mainly deal with the swinging between the memory of homeland and the new land in the lives of their characters. The migrants undergo a constant mental and emotional struggle between the customs of the old world and the freedom and attractions of the new world. Diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity. The characters find comfort in thinking of their life in their homeland. The pleasant memories of their past life give them a sense of satisfaction. Sunetra Gupta, a prominent writer of Indian diaspora presents the condition of the immigrants through her female protagonists. An attempt is made in this chapter to analyse the problems undergone by Moni the heroine of the novel *Memories of Rain* and Niharika and Debendranath of *A Sin of Colour* in accommodating themselves in an alien home through their home thoughts.

The very thought and longing for belongingness forms the core to search for the original root. The notion of home is not restricted to a bounded space and territory. This home place is the "root" from where people get dispersed and to which they long to return. Migration and diaspora generate "the desire for home" (Davies 113). As individuals move across borders because of migration, home becomes a more complex notion. Hooks for instance, defines homes as locations;

Indeed the very image of 'home' changes with experience of decolonization, radicalization. At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is location. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers and difference. (155)

Another element that is closely associated with this attachment to home place is memory. An immigrant never forgets his home place. The thread which connects the past and the present is "recollection". This reduces the distance between the alien country and the home land. The past incidents of the native land are recaptured through flash-back technique. Memory which acts as a kind of lens helps to recapture the fragmented bits of the past. Nostalgia which refers to homesickness and a yearning for home entwines the notion of 'home and memory'. Through nostalgia one is able to construct an 'imagined world', a new cultural third space.

The alienated, dislocated, transplanted and rootless diasporas usually find some comfort in recollecting the past experiences in their home land. Diasporic Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Gosh, V.S. Naipal, Bharathi Mukherji, Jhumpa Lahiri and Sunetra Gupta make their characters think of their past in their native land. An attempt is made in their paper to study how Moni the female protagonist of Sunetra Gupta's novel *Memories of Rain* and Niharika of *A Sin of Colour* tries to overcome their problem in the third space by recapturing the pleasant memories of their homeland Calcutta.

The immigrants feel isolated and alienated mainly because of the absence of their own native culture. In the new place, they feel like a fish out of water and a state of mental imbalance is created. Robert Gnanomony points out that "diasporic sensibility is not something permanent, it keeps changing as time and place change. It is one thing to the first generation expatriates and another to the second generation immigrants" (56). The main ingredients associated with one's home place like language, cultural, food, religion, dress, and rituals form a part and parcel of a human being. As the homeland occupies a vital and dominant place in one's life, one is forced to search for one's identity. We can notice a gradual change from the first generation diaspora, to the second diaspora and to the third generation. The third generation usually spare no time to think about the past memories.

In *Memories of Rain*, Sunetra Gupta brings together two youngsters, Anthony and Moni, from disparate worlds in a Calcutta rainstorm in 1978. Anthony is English and he has come to Calcutta in order to do research on Bengali theatre. He is highly intelligent and artistic. Moni is an undergraduate of English for whom England is a collage of romantic imagery of her text books. So far, she has led a sheltered life and is steeped in traditional cultural protocol. They fall in love, get married and make their home in London. Moni meets disappointment once she arrives in "cold" London. Caught in the clash of two cultures, their marriage becomes mired in the pain of infidelity and non-communication. She has to encounter prejudices and betrayal by the husband who had seemed so captivated by her beauty. She is reminded of the words of her friend Sharmila "What is it like to sleep with a white man" (*Memories of Rain*, 22). Her ideas about London life are not to her expectation "for she had come to this island, this demi paradise, from a bizarre and wonderful land so Anthony's friends called it, , was it true, they asked, that they still burn their wives, bury alive their female children".(6). She thinks that, "from such a land Anthony had rescued her."(6). She is haunted by her life in Calcutta and she yearns to go back there. "And now on Oxford street watching a woman crush ice cream comes to feed the pigeons, she is seized by an overwhelming desire to return to that world, although she knows it is there for her no longer [...]" (15). She seems lost between antithetical emotions and interpretations of both her past and her present.

Moni believes that in order to begin her quest for her personal identity, she must go back to the lost place and the lost time. She still possesses an identity. She dives into her subconscious and tries to resurrect the roots of her present crisis, as well as to resurrect her former self before it was crumpled and paralyzed by Anthony. By reconnecting the past, she aims to find a solution to her present. To make matters worse, Anna becomes a constant source of nuisance to Moni by being very friendly with Anthony and Moni's child. Anna convinces the child that her buried tooth would burgeon into a tooth tree. In order to prove this she brings a pomegranate, whose seeds, little teeth are buried in sweet gums flesh. As Moni helps the child bury the tooth, she is reminded of the words of the grandmother to her in Calcutta.

[...] Her grandmother had, many years ago, in the stony patch of land beside the verandah of the Ballygunge home, for rats to carry away, and with the rat's blessing, sharp rodent teeth would sprout upon your tiny gum, her grandmother had explained, touching the tender gap between her teeth with a horny finger, they had knelt by the stairs to the veranda, scratching in the hard soil, and years later, where the area was cemented over, playing a miniature hopscotch, she would think of her many teeth that lay trapped under the hard cement, had the rats ever found them (*Memories of Rain*,154)

The image of the many teeth that lay trapped under the hard soil reveal that Moni's roots lie entwined with the foundation of her family. Moni disconnects from the present in the contemplation of her youthful romantic reverie. She resurrects her identification with the Calcutta house as a personal space. After many years, her imagination becomes her refuge once again. In her adolescence, with her face against a rancid pillow, she would shut out the morning sounds, the cryptic shrieks of the hawkers, the violent slaps of the wet clothes upon the bathroom floor; she would surround herself in the dense meshes of her fantasies. Fantasy is the insubstantial realm in which she constructs herself. She is reminded of "wandering as a sport with her beloved upon English moors, her hot tears had spilled upon the yellow pages, she had loved Heathcliff before she loved any man." (177)

Disgusted by her life with Anthony who cares more for Anna than herself, she decides to take a different path. She chooses to "burst the bubble" (81) and live in reality, in Calcutta "When she goes back she can work for a charity, expunge her sins of having lived in a land of plenty by devoting her life to the poor, the diseased, the hungry, she can see herself, clothed in dull white, soothing a sick child, a new energy seizes her that is what she must do, it is clear to her now, that is how she will spend the rest of her life" (108) She exits both the imprisoning domestic space of the English house and the safe insularity of her imagination and chooses to continue the self construction in a new space.

In "*Memories of Rain*". Tagore's songs in Bengali are used to express Moni's cultural and communicative dislocation in England. Her anguished passion and dark thoughts are expressed through Tagore's songs. To her, Tagore is a living God, the ideal beloved to whom she dedicates her poems, her suffering and her being. In fact, his songs set the rhythm to her world. Her emotions and fantasies are to a large extent shaped by Tagore's works. Tagore is a religion for Moni. She fondly remembers the pilgrimage of her family to Tagore's house every year to commemorate his birthday. The novel is replete with Gupta's poetic translations of Tagore's songs. His songs provide her a magnificent and exaggerated metaphor for her adolescent pain, romanticism and sexuality. Her husband Anthony expects her to translate Tagore's songs into English in order to comprehend the mood of her song. During the sad years of their marriage, the "excruciating grief of her untranslated songs" (17) communicates to him her silent misery.

When Moni decides to live in London, she hoards Anthony with her hysterical "torrent of anecdotes" (123) based on memories of Calcutta. Literal translations of Bengali proverbs like "picked snake gourd" meaning "died" and "moon of a moonless night" meaning "someone we do not see often or with funny local superstitions" are used by her to express her experiences in Calcutta.

In *A Sin of Colour*, Debendranath thinks about his house in Calcutta from London. His thoughts linger over every aspect of family space and life. They are centered on his brother's wife Reba's figure. "He had with him a photograph of his brother's family upon his desk, taken shortly after the birth of their daughter. In the photograph Reba held Niharika wrapped tightly in a shawl, while her twin sons stood on either side of her, and her husband behind her, gripping the back of her hair" (*A Sin of Colour*,5). He has particularly chosen that photograph because Reba's face was more visible in it. He also recollects the way in which Reba played the musical instruments. "In the morning, she would clean their gentle flanks herself and practise upon her delicate esraj for many hours, her dark eyes focused upon a point so distant that when he had first watched her perform, as a young college student, it had given meaning to the peculiar notion that infinity was where two parallel lines meet" (6).

Debendranath has kept a photograph of his mother in open view upon his desk. When Jennifer his landlady's niece asks him about the lady in the photograph, he replies that she is his mother. He gives an elaborate description of his mother. He tells that his mother was indifferent to all household matters. She had hardly any taste at all when it came to material things. "She had gone through life without the burden of decorating her own home, or even selecting her own wardrobe, most of her clothes were gifts, or had been chosen by her mother-in-law many years ago" (7). He explains in detail to Jennifer, how his father Indranath Roy was attracted towards his mother when she was studying in a school. Her mother wished to send her to a college in Dhaka. Her father and her neighbours decided to give her in marriage to Indranath Roy. It was arranged that she would appear as a private candidate for her school leaving exams in Calcutta. According to Debendranath, though she loved her children, there was

no tenderness that he had associated with motherhood. She read them endless fairy tales, guided their homework, watched over them when they were ill, but her concern for them never seemed to stray beyond the rational” (11).

Debendranath thinks about his sister-in-law, particularly as to how she differed from her mother-in-law Nirupama. “Reba, he felt was no less composed than her mother-in-law, but hummed with temperate womanly energy, transforming her corner of the great house into a region of easy beauty, with flower pots on the balcony, and framed Moghul miniatures on the walls.” (14). At the same time, Debendranath did not like her alien presence in their household “and when she (his mother) too began to crumble under the spirit of this strange woman, he locked himself in his room, and gave himself to intense study [...] outside his barred door” (15).

Debendranath fondly recollects his visit to the house of his sister-in-law. He is reminded of the scene where Reba seated on a rush mat with her father's tanpura sang a Tagore's song about the devotion of a dancer to the Lord Buddha. “He thought of her as she might have been, in her secluded and lonely girlhood as the only daughter of a renowned professor of Ancient Indian History and his ailing wife” (17).

When Debendranath decides to marry Jennifer, he wonders as to how he could inform his father and his brother. He thinks of different options and finally decides to write to his sister-in-law. “You will be pleased to know that I am marrying an English girl. I am relying upon you to break this news to my father. You have always managed these things better than the rest of us” (22). He also remembers his wedding. On the eve of the wedding, after Debendranath had gone to bed, Jennifer and her aunt decorated the wedding cake. “While she piped roses on to the uneven icing, her aunt produced from a paper bag a small plastic tiger to place next to the figures of the bride and groom, seeing as he is from Bengal, she said” (23). At the same time, he thinks of Reba. He feels sorry that he is not able to have Reba as his wife. “Could it be, he wondered, some hideous remnant of a factory local consciousness that Reba was already part of his family, and belonged in some sense collectively, to them? But no, it would not have mattered if she were the wife of a friend or even an enemy [...]” (25)

When Debendranath goes punting with Amira, she tells him “You punt extremely well” (27). He replies, “I come from a land of rivers. I learnt to punt before I could say nursery rhymes” (27). He tells her about life in Calcutta. They were forced to vacate their home fearing the Japanese would bomb Calcutta. When the Japanese bombed Calcutta he lay safe in his ancestral cot guided by water, far far away. “For him there was no peace such as that in the dividing of water under one's oar, the scorings of the pole upon the soft waves, the darkness of the sky reflecting upon the surface with the promise of more rain.” (27). He describes to her in detail his experiences in Bengal. Moreover, sitting up on the river bank, he thinks of the various options before him, studying for a D.Phil from Oxford, pursue his relationship with Amira, to “continue to worship her, to hold her sacred, his brother's wife, Reba, who could never belong to him in any other way” (28).

While in London, Debendranath is haunted by the memory of his dear ones in Calcutta, particularly Reba's mother. He first saw her “ghostly pale beside her daughter, when they had arrived to examine Reba as a candidate for the hallowed position of his brother's wife” (39). He also remembers how Reba's mother would draw him aside from the crowd of young men to follow her into the dining room. She would offer him some delicate sweetmeat or a fried piece of fish. “Do eat, she would coax, unfortunately I do not have enough for everybody there” (40). His father, watching his son grow more distant every day, felt that “he had lost him, not to Reba but to her father, the old professor in his dusty flat, from whom he had taken a most beloved daughter” (41).

Niharika, too during her stay in London thinks of her homeland. When she goes out for a walk, she sees a blackbird. She is reminded of the mynah in her native place. “A black bird was looking at her boldly from its perch on a nearby bush, it reminded her of a mynah that she and her aunt had fostered in the year that she lived with them in Calcutta” (71). The mynah had amazed something of a vocabulary. “After the aunt had gone, the bird would speak to her in her aunt's voice, or what she imagined was her aunt's voice, which always made her run into her room and cry” (71). She is also reminded of how she and her friends in Calcutta to celebrate New Year's Eve by “trekking to Sandakfu in the Himalayan foothills, from there to see Everest by the first rays of the first dawn of the decade” (76).

At Oxford, during the night when she was alone, Niharika would listen to the songs of her mother. “She returned to fire and the bottle of wine and since the house was empty, she turned up the volume of the tape that she was playing of her mother singing some of our favourite songs, that she had put together in the few weeks that she had visited them last summer” (76). She also recalls how her brothers and cousins listen to the fantastic tales told by her mother. She also thinks of their favourite game ‘Rigmarole’. She also imagines “Jennifer and her friend in the crumbling mansion in Calcutta” (113).

Debendranath dreams that he is at the gates of Mandalay. The gatekeeper refuses to admit him saying “I cannot let you in and it is not just because I threw away the key to that lock a long time ago, but because you are dead, you are dead Debendranath Roy” (127). The gatekeeper also tells him that it was he who took the telegram to his father and his brother. He has been in Mandalay longer than Debendranath for he had come there the year that Debendranath's father got married. He was recruited from Debendranath's mother's household in North Bengal to accompany her to her new home in North Bengal. Even when Debendranath loses his sight he would be happy in Mandalay. “That night, I dreamt I was in Mandalay again, as I often did, but this time I could not see, and yet it did not seem to matter, for I still knew where everything was, could smell each of the day, feel

the dusk deepen into night, and then I knew that I had to come back, that life would be bearable, even in blindness, within the walls of Mandalay” (150).

Thus, the past home thoughts help Moni to a great extent to practically nourish and sustain a hopeful if not a successful living in London. While she is transferred as a new comer to London, her home thoughts of her previous landscape help her to supplement a new pattern of existence. Moni who withdraws herself in isolation derives a sense of release in recollecting the past walking down the memory lane. Similarly, Niharika and Debendranath find consolation from their home thoughts.

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