



Emancipating the Bracketed Self: Articulating Transcultural and Transnational Identity in Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain*

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Abstract

The postcolonial diasporic writers' favourite trend is diaspora, dislocation, and memory. Women Indian writers living in host countries are far more advanced in this discipline than male writers. Their narratives are reminiscent of the past they left behind, as well as a reflection of the challenges they face in articulating new identities in the host country. *Memories of Rain* (1992) by Sunetra Gupta is a complicated and difficult postcolonial novel about numerous facets of migration and diaspora, including displacement, acculturation, transculture, and transnationality. Gupta illustrates interculturality and cultural hybridity through the protagonist's marriage to a foreigner. The goal of this research is to investigate the transcultural and transnational aspects of Gupta's *Memories of Rain* by applying postcolonial cultural theory of Homi K. Bhabha and Avtar Brah.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Diaspora, Migration, Acculturation, Transculture, Transnationality.

In the milieu of postcolonial British literature, there is a growing academic interest in contemporary South Asian diaspora literature and transnational women writers like Monica Ali, Kamila Shamsie, and Sunetra Gupta, whose works offer a gendered perspective on migration and relocation, the politics of belonging in various cultural spaces, and the effects of transnationalism on a person's everyday life and subjectivity. From a position of location, the women writers of South Asian diaspora seek to transform their double subaltern ethnic and gendered other identities into a transnational multiple subjectivity. The woman characters of their novel strive to break the captivity of their male dominated culture and society. Doing so, the marginalised women migrated to another country with a hope of obtaining new identity and make it their home long away from home.

Sunetra Gupta, a nomadic Indian English writer and scientist, has written her prestigious national literary award-winning debut novel *Memories of Rain* (1992) for which she was honoured with Sahitya Academy Award for the year 1996. Gupta's fame for this novel is lying in the authors intricate writing style and diasporic angst or for the passion of presenting the ideas and culture of Calcutta in particular and of India in general before the Western culture that embodies her all works of fiction. In this novel, the novelist has employed the flashback technique to create a vivid vision of the past and weave it into the present. As the previous events of a diasporic text take place in a location different than the present location, such work combining past and present into a unified narrative of diasporic texts shows overlapping of two or more location and culture, articulating cultural hybridity and transnationality. As Homi K.

Bhabha points out:

...its progressive, future drive is staged, revealing 'everything that is involved in the act of staging perse'. This slowing down, or lagging, impels the 'past', projects it, gives its 'dead' symbols the circulatory life of the 'sign' of the present, of passage, the quickening of the quotidian. Where these temporalities touch contingently, their spatial boundaries metonymically overlapping, at that moment their margins are lagged, sutured, by the indeterminate articulation of the 'disjunctive' present. Time-lag keeps alive the making of the past. As it negotiates the levels and liminalities of that spatial time... (Bhabha, 1997, p. 254)

Sunetra Gupta has denied belonging to any literary school, including multiculturalism and postcolonialism, although her novels can be regarded as experimental works of transnational and hybrid identity formation strategies. In her first work, *Memories of Rain*, she explores this form of postcolonial diasporic identity. The novel depicts a week of bewilderment prior to the protagonist, Moni, an Indian girl from Calcutta, making the decision to return home, but the narrative also includes all the events of the past through a flashback of Moni's marriage to Anthony, an Englishman.

This astounding novel of East-West conflict consist very limited characters- Moni, the protagonist, her husband Anthony, a Ph.D. scholar of Bengali Theatre, and Moni's brother who is Anthony's friend too. On a rainy evening Anthony arrived Calcutta as an enthusiastic student of Bengali Theatre. He became friends with Moni's brother and paid a visit to Moni's house on a rainy evening. The mild light drizzle that Moni sees in London reminds her of Anthony's first arrival in Calcutta in the monsoon of 1978. This is how she recalls those days-

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 mould... (Gupta, 1992, p. 17)

Anthony first meets Moni at their home and then again at supper, and is blown away by her gorgeous appearance and exotic beauty. He desperately longs to have her. Moni, on the other hand, is an English Literature student with a strong desire to visit England; England is a dream destination for her. Her longing for England is particularly Romantic, because she believes everything, she learned in class about England is true, and she sees London as a safe haven from the perilous poverty and misery of Calcutta. As a result of Anthony's fascination to Moni's exotic beauty and her desire to visit a fantasy realm, they marry. Moni's marriage life, however, became disastrous after ten years, when she became the mother of a six-year-old girl. The plot of the novel does not follow a strict chronological order of events, but instead swings back and forth in time and space, leaving the reader puzzled.

The novelist divides the location of origin and settlement through the protagonist's description of her past and present. Moni's current physical location is London, where she lives with her spouse. It is her place of residence, where she has a diaspora identity and is dealing with the anxiety and crises of relocation. Diaspora, according to William Safran (1991), is "that segment of people living outside the home land" (p. 83). Calcutta is her birthplace, and the memories of it make her feel at ease. While she feels estranged and rootless in England, and is displeased by her husband's promiscuity, she returns to her homeland through recollections, creating an "imaginary land." Docker (2001) defines diaspora as "a sense of belonging to more than one history, to more than one time and place, to more than one past and future" (p. vii).

Transnationalism and transculturalism are significant aspects of postcolonial diasporic study. Such notions of cultural identity offer individuals, a way to move out from a monolithic confined identity that make an awareness of globalism to destabilize the static cultural practices. Transnationality, emerged to dominate postcolonial studies and its principal aim is to dismantle the national and cultural orthodoxy that draw boundaries and kept the drifters apart

from their home. Therefore, contemporary diaspora can cross the geographical borders and enter into the space of a country other than his/her country of origin and participate to their culture. Now, it is taken for granted that no culture is pure and it became porous and the international immigrants belong to more than one space. For the contemporary diasporas, identity becomes fluid and hyphenated where any territorial or cultural border cannot maintain pure existence. In this stage of identity construction, diasporic people choose a middle passage keeping safe distance from the homeland and the host land by articulating an ambivalent identity. The politics of location may be best understood through James Clifford's interpretation, according to Clifford location is dynamic and multiple:

'Location,' here, is not a matter of finding a stable 'home' or of discovering a common experience. Rather it is a matter of being aware of the difference that makes a difference in concrete situations, of recognizing the various inscriptions, 'places' or 'histories' that both empower and inhibit the construction of theoretical categories like 'Woman,' 'Patriarchy,' or 'colonization' ... 'Location' is thus, concretely, a *series* of locations and encounters, travel within diverse, but limited spaces. (Clifford, 1989, p. 82)

Moni, is a romantic girl of Bengal who has ardent love for English language and literature. She read Austen's novel as much as that Moni fell love with the protagonist of Austen novel and "had loved Heathcliff before she loved any man" (Gupta, 1992, p. 177). Her bookshelf is full of English and Bengali literatures book. She reads Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Hardy, Keats and many other along with Tagore's songs and poetry. When she reads English literature, Moni thought England as "demi-paradise" and dreams to go England. She failed to understand that she has learnt about England and its society through the text of colonizers who always make their image superior than the colonized people to whom she belongs. Obviously, she responds positively, to Anthony's proposal of marriage and offer of taking her abroad in London with him after marriage. Moni, considers Anthony as her rescuer rescuing her from a life of patriarchal dominance and middle-class misery, from – "a bizarre and wonderful land – to England – "this island, this demi paradise" (p. 6). For many middle-class Indians, England is a cultural and spiritual space rather than merely a physical space. In Moni's subconscious mind England is a space where she longs all the time when she was second year student of English. However, her adolescent romantic image of England from her English literature class makes vast difference with the England, Moni arrives with her husband. As a result, Moni confronted an irreconcilability situation of replacing her old beliefs with new one. This complete reverse of state compounds Moni's exile condition. The discovery of her husband's extra-marital relationship with an English woman, Anna after ten years of their marriage and having a girl of six year makes her life unbearable in London. Anthony does not represent the hero figure Heathcliff of Austin's novel whom Moni admires and her dream of "Wandering as a spirit with her beloved upon English moors" (p.177) remains unfulfilled. Anthony's intense love for Anna, makes him indifferent towards Moni, which isolates Moni from his life, and England and its culture and a desire to come back home is aroused in her inner soul.

Thus, it is observed that the protagonist identity is not stabilized by any single space or nationality. She belongs to multiple space at a time. When she was in Calcutta, she belongs to an imagined space of England, that she constructs from the texts of English literature she had read. As Arjun Appadurai remarks-

The image, the imagined, the imaginary- these are all terms that directs us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice...the imagination has become an organized field of social practices...and a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organised practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility (Appadurai, 2011, p. 31).

Similarly, when the literary landscape of her dream, becomes her "real home" (Gupta, 1992, p. 174) a real location for herself after Moni's marriage to Anthony. However, Moni's imagined

turned real location of diaspora failed to provide her a space of peace and happiness. In spite of her good adaptive and assimilative skill, Moni feels a sense of alienation at her new home in London. Despite, having a relationship of as long as ten years and having a daughter of six year, her marriage life turns to be unhappy and intolerable due to Anthony's womanising character. In this circumstance, she longs for her home country, her home city Calcutta and reminiscent the days back, when she was affectionately desperately loved by Anthony. How Moni thought that, Anthony has rescue her from a "bizarre land". She imagined England the country of civilized people and culture. Everything changes here as she arrived nothing matches her imagination, and with the picture she has brought in her heart from Calcutta. So, Moni feels dejected and, denies to stay there, in this way though she in England she belongs to Calcutta. So, geography of culture or belonging to nation continues irrespective of concrete wall or boundaries when one performs on imagination. In the novel, Moni too performs and create her identity on imagination, like transnational and transcultural character belongs to two nations at a time. As Avtar Brah (1996), a postmodern cultural theorist, works on diaspora locates "diaspora space" in the "intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychological process" (p. 178).

The speedy progress in the hi-tech telecommunication and social media on internet contribute significant role to liberate immigrants from their stagnant existence. This ultra-modern communication system in the forms of cinema, phone call, photography, and video conference work as tools of "time-space comprehension" (Harvey, 2011, p. 5). As this medium makes the journey faster and enable people to travel more places at a short span of time. Therefore, these tools assist the diasporic people to maintain an incessant connection to their homeland. In the present novel, *Memories of Rain* Gupta too used such trajectory to make the protagonist, Moni's connection with her home city Calcutta from her husband's city London. Her parents sent her photographs of her cousins and their children:

He believes they have color television now, in Calcutta, that her parents have bought one with the money she sent them last year, they sent a photograph of her cousins and their children, seated around the television, it occupies the space where the lumbering old radio cabinet stood, as he remembers it, ... (Gupta, 1992, p. 58).

In the above passage, we find another trait of transnationality that is contributing to the development of home country. Anthony mentions that Moni's parents must have bought colour television with the money Moni sent them. Moni's monetary help to her family in Calcutta, the home she left behind is confirmed her as a transnational character. On the other side, Anthony feels uneasiness in Calcutta for the reason of his inability to understand Tagore's song sung by Moni; he finds solace by watching serialisation of Emma on TV that instantly transported him to the Eighteenth-century England where Anthony belongs to - "he watches her, as she grapples with his history, the black and white shadows upon the screen are his world, somewhere across the ocean" (Gupta, 1992, p.58).

Through many trials and contemplation Moni decides to return Calcutta her own city to devote her rest of life as a social worker. She elects to work in the field of woman emancipation by educating them to live against the patriarchy in the male dominated society of India. Moni remembers her aunt's painful loveless life who married a stranger man who is indifferent to her. Her aunt used to live a secluded life until she died "alone, in the dense dark of a village night" (Gupta, 1992, p. 98). Moni has also great concern about the poor hungry children who are forced to work in the house of rich people. Being a diaspora and living in a country other than her home country she thinks about her country of origin, of its subjugated women and poor children is a substantial characteristic behaviour turns Moni from a mere diaspora or immigrant to another country, to a trans local or transcultural character.

Intertextuality is a characteristic element in Gupta's novel. Sometimes she uses epigraph from other writers another time use variety of text of various writers hailing from different age and country. In the present novel Gupta, make references to numerous texts than

in her any other work. Present study does not required attention to all the texts mentioned in the novel. Moni as a student of English literature is familiar to many English writers such as William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, John Keats, and so more. She also well versed in the songs and poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. It is through the writings of Austen and Hardy; Moni creates a space for England in her mind she draws a vivid picture of England according to the texts she reads in her class. On the other hand, through Tagore's songs, Moni express her joy and sorrow. Admiring, two nations literary personalities articulate two different cultures simultaneously in Moni's mind constructing hyphenated identity. In Neil Smith and Cindi Katz's (1993) words she "moves beyond the fixity of singular locations" (p.77).

When Moni decide to say final goodbye to Anthony and the street of London, her heart was crushed. She grumbled, waiting for one last letter from him urging her to come back. Her eyes filled up with tears when she thought of the old lady who lived on the same street as her. She does not want to see her in grief. As she was going to the airport, the grey streets of London annoy her since, she had intended to make this land her home ten years ago, and now that she is leaving, the quiet calm streets look upon her with grief and reproach, remembering all the secrets they have shared.

They say goodbyes, is this the last she will see the old lady, crinkled cheek brushing against hers, perhaps a long letter will arrive, word-processed, pleading her to return... before she is engulfed once again by her cavernous home, will she wonder now, switching off the lights that they have left on (Gupta, 1992, p. 80).

In a similar way, Moni felt the same feeling as she left Ballygunge, her hometown for London. As she left her home, the alleyways trembled with heaviness. She reminisces that day as following manner "...ten years ago, every alleyway in Ballygunge had trembled with the heaviness of her departure, weeping puddles upon the cracked pavements, they had turned away, indignant, betrayed..." (Gupta, 1992, p 81). The protagonist's self is divided equally to the land of origin and land of settlement and emotionally connected to both the lands resulting in the articulation of third space rather than a single space of belonging. Moni left her nation as a married woman to an English man and has lived in London for the past ten years, indicating that she has a strong ability to adjust to new cultures. Her psychological development during his trip to the airport plainly demonstrates that she has built a new space in British society and made it her home. She does not want to leave her new home in this new space as a true diaspora member. "All this she has loved, all this she will leave" (p. 93). Their unhappy marriage is the reason she is leaving London. Actually, she wants to leave Anthony, her adulterous husband; Not London not because of London's un-adjustable culture. Moni felt the same sense of bondage and emotional attachment when she left her home in Ballygunge for London and when she returned home from London to Ballygunge. Moni's Such dangling self between two location is closely linked to the new diaspora's transnational identity.

In *Memories of Rain*, Gupta presents a series of oppositional encounters that lead to Moni's fragmentation and complete failure to establish a diasporic identity. There are many of these binary oppositions: her idealised memories of India and the reality of her middle-class life; her knowledge from colonial education and the reality of English life as she experiences it in London with Anthony; Moni's perception of Anthony when she falls in love with him in India and the man, he turns out to be once they arrive in England. This antagonism reflects the wider contrast between Moni's two homes, Calcutta and London, as shown in the novel. Moni's return to a reinvented Calcutta aids her in gaining agency and personal identity. This new circulatory nature of diasporic excursions, on the other hand, may indicate a greater desire for return and apprehension about diasporic existence. It may be too late, and a succession of unchangeable and irreversible events occur, making a return impossible. The Journey could be about change, both in the diasporic individual who makes the journey back, and in the place to where she returns. It could also be a dread of being disappointed if the homeland has changed drastically beyond her recognition. Moni's return to a recreated Calcutta- a Calcutta that has

been greatly changed in her memory. As a result, the Calcutta she returns to is regarded as an ambiguous place in which she might now strive to break the binaries that have controlled her existence, as well as the binary of home and away. Such ambivalent space where cultural articulation and interpretation take place is conceptualized by Bhabha as "Third Space" that rightly indicates the destabilized diasporic identity of Moni. As he writes:

The intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code...the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the western (Bhabha, 1997, p.206).

The hierarchy of culture and identity as well as the authenticity and purity of individual's national and cultural identity are denied in this Third space of articulation, participants are free to link their self to various identity simultaneously. Moni's return to Calcutta, thus considered to be the creation of a Third Space in which she had demolished the colonialist dichotomies, the binary of East and West obtaining a transnational identity. As a result, now she is no more confined to any particular identity linked to a particular nation and culture. Thus, through the in-between approach, Moni wanders in the cultural space of both her homeland and the diasporic land without having any authentic identity.

In conclusion, we can proclaim that, though Moni returns to Calcutta at the end of the novel, she could not leave England mentally. Through, her central character of this novel Gupta creates a transnational character who wander and participates in transcultural practices. When Moni was a college student of English literature, she learnt about England and considered it a promise land which can provide her a safe sanctuary from her male dominate society and unhygienic environment and poverty. Hence, as an adolescent romantic girl Moni belongs to the space of land that is not her home. And after her marriage to an English man, Anthony she flew away to England and in few years, she finds that the promise land of her dream fails to full fill her dream, and then she yearning for return to her homeland. So, the transnational spaces of the novel offer the female protagonist and the reader all together to be "somewhat outside of being anywhere," to lose our concrete sense of 'home' and 'abroad' and, embrace a more fluid, transnational identity. This transnational fluid identity helps Moni to break the confined identity which is bracketed by national, territorial and cultural location.

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