

**Discourse of Alienation, Rootlessness, and Loneliness in Sunetra Gupta's***Memories of Rain***S. Kaliamoorthy**

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This paper explores certain important facets of diasporic life such as alienation, rootlessness, and loneliness in Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain*. It further goes on to show how human relationships act as an antidote for such conditions. Sunetra Gupta problematizes the concerns of identity, loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, and so on with issues of history and culture to make them tangible in the context of displacement. Sunetra Gupta living abroad has first-hand knowledge of displaced existence and often her works have manifestations of her own conditions. She has highlighted through a spectrum the changes that have taken place in relation to the diasporic Indians and their acceptance in the West over the years.

**Keywords:** Loneliness, Culture, Alienation, Diaspora, Rootlessness, Identity

Sunetra Gupta belongs to a generation of Indian English novelists whose members are basically cosmopolitan in their linguistic and cultural fondness though they are mostly read and marketed as widely Indian novelists in the West. She has dealt with individual characters and human relationships in her fiction but if sought there can also be found in her works social, political, historical, and other aspects of exploring the themes of displacement and identity. She provides the women's perspectives spanning over two generations on themes that have for long been dominated by male views. A great advantage of studying her in conjunction is the insight it gives of the difference in their approach towards a common goal. It not only widens the scope of exploration but also shows the immense potential of literature to depict reconciling views through differences.

For Sunetra Gupta being a diasporic writer, her subjectivity is complicated by her multiple subject positions. And such is the case with other diasporic writers equally. She presents in her first novel *Memories of Rain* the breaking of the romantic illusion of dislocated existence. Her works have a visual richness and a poetic grace that gradually uncovers the human condition cutting across geographical boundaries. It is here that her diasporic consciousness comes to the fore.

The diaspora's sense of alienation and rootlessness stem from geographical and social dislocation, and from cultural and emotional displacement. The Indian migrants to the West, first of all, have suffered a geographical displacement and hence there is a physical detachment from their country, but physical displacement need not necessarily mean that migrants are also emotionally displaced. Secondly, the diasporic Indians' sense of being outsiders in an alien land gives them a cultural detachment from Western society, but being cultural outsiders does not necessarily imply that they are also social outsiders in their adopted country. The anxiety arising out of these conflicting situations makes one ambivalent.

Loneliness is a manifestation of both inner and outer conditions and hence its sense can be evoked even in the middle of society. The diasporic Indian community is not exempted from being a victim of the sense of loneliness. The Indian diaspora, unlike some other diasporic communities, was not forced to flee their country of origin and never harboured any hostile feelings towards any regime there. Hence, the diasporic Indians' longing for their homeland is more acute. Diasporic individuals face the dilemma of allegiance to their native country and to their adopted country. It is a tantalizing position and it accentuates the ambivalence.

The sense of non-belonging has different connotations for first generation immigrants and for second generation immigrants. The second generation diasporic Indians do not have

any extrinsic cause to feel like outsiders because they live within a milieu in which they are born and bred. The second generation diasporic Indians have by birth one nationality due to their immediate ancestors' immigration to the West, but by ancestry they can also identify themselves with their ethnic origin. Even if they have little emotional investment in the country of their parents' origin they cannot deny the fact that they have inherited traits that give them their ethnic identity. It is this state of duality - when the mind is undecided about one's place of belonging - that has the germ of the sense of rootlessness. It is as if the sense itself is inherited by the second generation diasporic Indians from their ancestors.

Sunetra Gupta has shown with candour both the unpleasantness and the pleasantness of intercultural relationships through characters like Moni from *Memories of Rain*. In *Memories of Rain*, the protagonist Moni is torn between the pull of longing and belonging. Moni, a Bengali, belongs to India, but her literary leanings give her a romantic longing for England. She marries an Englishman, Anthony, and migrates to England. On reaching there, she finds a changed England; very unlike the image visualized through English literature texts she studied in college. She consoles herself in the fact that her romantic longing is there to sustain her. But when her husband betrays her, her personal tragedy taints her private imagination. Her romantic longing then turns towards her homeland and she decides to return to India. So it is seen that it is not only social and cultural aspects that cause alienation in diasporic life. Personal relationships and private imagination play as vital a role as any other extrinsic cause. Sunetra Gupta's works show an inter-mixing of Western and Indian influences. In *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*, Lorna Sage writes, "Her first novel, *Memories of Rain* is a post-colonial reinterpretation of the Greek *Medea*. It is the story of a marriage between the Indian Moni and her English husband who is having a long-running affair with another woman" (296). Moni intends Anthony to suffer from the pain of estrangement by taking away their daughter back to India with her.

In *Memories of Rain* the diasporic Indian character Moni's mind is constantly flooded with "gray-feathered memories" (128) of her native land, India. Although, Moni is inflicted with the pain of having an unfaithful husband, who is quite indifferent to her feelings, her grief gets resonated in her mind through Tagorean lyrics of nostalgia, remembrances, and a "song of rain" (7).

In the dense obsession of this deep dark rain  
you tread secret, silent, like the night, past all eyes.

...

the heavy eyelids of dawn are lowered to the futile wail of the winds  
clotted clouds shroud the impenitent sky  
birdless fields  
barred doors upon your desolate path.

...

oh beloved wanderer, I have flung open my doors to the storm  
do not pass me by like the shadow of a dream. (10)

Moni's recollection of that day in "the flood of '78" when Anthony had first come to their Ballygunge home in Calcutta initiates the process of recalling the past. Moni's sense of identity is Lockean because it is a construct based on memory. The metaphor of rain becomes a Lockean substratum of memories for Moni. Moni's dominating memories of India pronounces her Indian identity and helps her to decide to leave Anthony and come back to India.

Globalization has ushered in a new world order where it is not always the big issues of racial or religious discrimination that affect the migrants. It is the small things that stoke the soft embers of non-belonging in the diasporic Indian's mind to keep it burning. Displacement causes loneliness but individual actions may as well cause loneliness.

Sunetra Gupta's Moni goes to London after marrying Anthony. The London of her imagination built on the study of English literature does not match the London she encounters for real. What Anil Ramdas, in "Madam Bovary," writes about Madam Bovary is equally true for Moni: "To read is to experience things in the imagination. And a person who wants to actually go through the imaginary experiences first-hand is bound to be disappointed" (17). Yet, it is not only the "unfriendly city" (*Memories of Rain* 46), "cruel London" (47), the main cause of her loneliness - rather it is Anthony's betrayal and indifference. Anthony not only proves to be an unfaithful husband to her but also makes his mistress, Anna, virtually a member of their household, showing indifference towards Moni's feelings. Moni suffers silently in her loneliness: "Silence her mute companion of lonely evenings, a discerning audience of her song, silence had been an elusive spirit in her metropolitan childhood, had befriended her in North London..." (*Memories of Rain* 96)

Moni's decision to return to Calcutta secretly with her six-year-old daughter is another pointer to her lonely state in displaced existence. Moni cannot confide about her escape to anyone in London because in that city she can find no confidante. It was Anthony who was to make Moni at home in London, so when Anthony betrays, London forever remains alien for Moni. It shatters her romantic notion of England that she had harboured because no matter how much people love literature, they can never become literature. This alienation isolates her in the English society and kindles sense loneliness in her.

The parent-child relationship is the basic human relationship, and when it forms the premise for discussion and is redefined it does not lose its inherent characteristics despite being coloured by diasporic situation. In *Memories of Rain* the character Moni's relationship with her six-year-old daughter is poignant in this respect. The novel is seen as "a post-colonial reinterpretation of the Greek Medea" (Sage 296) with a twist to the tragedy. Like Medea Moni uses her child as a tool to punish her unfaithful husband though through less

extreme means. Moni is betrayed by her English husband, Anthony, who is having an affair with a woman called Anna. Anthony's infidelity impels Moni to "take her destiny into her own hands" (*Memories of Rain* 23) and she decides to return with her daughter to India from England. Moni's decision to estrange the father and the daughter is mainly to hurt Anthony, to cause him pain in order to ease her painful situation. But Moni's decision of escape is not solely based on her situation but equally on her daughter's situation. Moni, in England, not only feels insecure for herself but also for her daughter. As a mother her concern for her daughter is natural, irrespective of any diasporic or non-diasporic circumstances, but displaced existence does heighten her concern. In this way diasporic life gives an added depth for exploration of the fundamental human relationship.

Anthony in *Memories of Rain*, despite being Moni's husband, cannot satisfy her emotional needs. Anthony provides Moni with all sorts of physical and material comforts but wants her to compromise on the emotional front: "he (Anthony) had long come to terms with his infidelity, he implored her silently, ever, to accept it, to reconcile the poetry of his passion for Anna with his deep affection for her and her child" (11). Anthony fails to understand that it is his indifference to Moni's emotions that gives her more pain than his actual infidelity. So, when Moni breaks her favourite blue bowl, it is "her first concrete recognition of approaching disaster, her first rebellion" (94). It is also a secret sacrifice that foreshadows the greater sacrifice of leaving Anthony and England that she is going to make. Moni's emotional craving has given her complex feelings of anger and frustration, and she has to escape from such mental turmoil.

In *Memories of Rain*, Moni, since her marriage with Anthony and her migration to England, has been on a constant process of realization and compromise. In the act of love it becomes clear to Moni that Anthony must have made love to many other women before her. She wonders "why she has not come to terms with this obvious fact before" (33). Later,

Anthony realizes “that the unadulterated passion he had felt for her under tropical skies was not to last forever” (82) and Moni appears to him as “a small, soft bird, in his arms, he does not dare to attempt to make love to her” (17). Hence, while Moni spends her evenings alone, Anthony makes “violent love” (18) to Anna in her studio flat. Moni in her loneliness seeks refuge in “darkness, her first lover, engulfing her in secret embrace, grainy kisses upon her burning lips, darkness, her accomplice” (30). Moni committing adultery with darkness is a representation of the extremity of her emotional and sexual wants. The idea of the sanctity of love has been lost on Moni. Even when she recalls the memory of “the frustrated eyes of a young American who had pleaded with her to follow him across the Atlantic” (95) she muses not on the happiness of love but on “what new pain might have awaited her in that vast land” (95). Anthony’s betrayal has made Moni’s diasporic condition painful. Anthony’s lack of response to Moni’s emotional needs makes Moni’s alienation due to displacement more complete.

For Moni the thought of displacement becomes associated with the divorce of love. In a multicultural global society that strives to preserve discrete ethnic identities, the case of second generation non-resident Indians is really a peculiar one. They take pride in their cultural heritage yet are at odds with its stereotypical beliefs and, in distancing themselves from such cultural stereotypes; they partake of selective acculturation within the host society. It is an ambivalent position but it is the only position they can reconcile themselves to despite facing a crisis of identity in doing so. Being brought up in the liberal atmosphere of the West, they have a sense of claustrophobia when their ethnic identity curbs their Western lifestyle. Wracked by a tiring condition they seek refuge in the sense of freedom that the Western world affords - liberties of thought, speech, expression, lifestyle, sexuality, and so on. It is as Westerners then that the second generation diasporic Indians are most potent in expressing the angst of their dual identity. Diasporic Indians, both of first generation and second

generation, are equally victims of the sense of alienation and rootlessness. Their hope of escape from such a situation is not by returning to their homeland because that will question the very purpose of migration. The only possible solution that seems at all credible is if the diasporic individual becomes an itinerant citizen of the world.

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