

HOSTLAND VS HOMELAND IN SUNETRA GUPTA'S *MEMORIES OF RAIN*

A. Kavitha, Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 21

Dr. A. Vigneshkumar, Assistant Professor of English, The Madura College, Madurai – 11

Abstract

Migration has become a universal occurrence in the current world and it has happened everywhere. Humans have always been on the go since the beginning of civilization. This immigrant nature not only gives them a fresh experience and exciting memories, but also makes them struggle hard, feel alienated, and get the feeling of nostalgia as they miss their culture, tradition, family and their home land. The immigrants attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their hostland. Their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity of their homeland. This paper explores the immigrant experiences in hostland and homeland depicted by Indian immigrant writer Sunetra Gupta in her novel *Memories of Rain*.

Key Words: *hostland, homeland, immigrant, memories, identity*

Humans have always been on the go since the beginning of civilization. Sweeping changes affecting the world politically, economically, socially and culturally have redefined boundaries, compressed ideas of space and reinterpreted the perception of 'Nation', 'Home' and 'Identity'. Many people have the desire to visit one country or to the other for a holiday, for a career, for the study purpose or to even to get settled. This immigrant nature not only gives them a fresh experience and exciting memories, but also makes them struggle hard, feel alienated, and get the feeling of nostalgia as they miss their culture, tradition, family and their home land.

Migration has become a universal occurrence in the current world and it has happened everywhere. Immigrants are the people who wish to be settled permanently in an alien land, whereas a diaspora is the group of people who are living away from their original homeland and share common experiences. Since literature is a mirror which reflects the trends and cultures of communities, it also becomes a vehicle to express and understand the feelings of immigrants and diasporas of various countries around the globe. According to Hirimuthugoda, "Diasporic literature or immigrant literature is generally referred to the literary work done by immigrants. ...There is a significant place for diasporic Indian English fiction in portraying mainly about Indian diaspora in a wide span" (135).

Immigrant literature captures the migrating lives of those that have moved to other countries. Uma Parmeswaran observes four phases of migrant literature: "First is one of

nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves ethno-cultural issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues” (165). Thus, the immigrants try to absorb, acclimatize and integrate themselves with the culture of their hostland, yet the original culture and identity of the homeland haunt them and they oscillate between crisis and construction. As Salman Rushdie observes, “...one physical alienation from India at almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of redeeming precisely the thing that was lost, that will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of mind...the past is a country, from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity” (Rushdie 87). Commonly, immigrant literature speaks of isolation, dislocation, rootlessness, reminiscence and quest of identity. In Sunetra Gupta’s novels it is often seen that the physical shift from one’s place of origin to a new place of residence seen as dislocation in the lives of immigrants.

This paper explores the immigrant experiences in hostland and homeland depicted by Indian immigrant writer Sunetra Gupta in her novel such as *Memories of Rain*. Gupta’s remarkable and dazzling first novel *Memories of Rain* has become a gate way for Gupta to enter into the vast ocean of literature. It is a representation of both the Eastern and the Western culture through the marriage of a beautiful Indian girl Moni with an Englishman Anthony. Gupta presents the immigrant experiences of the Indian settlers in an alien land. She has also brought out the truth that the immigrants no longer wish to tolerate the customs and practices of the host land and they always find a chance to escape from the weirdness of the western culture and look forward to unite themselves with their own tradition and culture. Sunetra Gupta writes mainly about homeland and the generational conflicts and differences among three generation immigrants looking at the diasporic and home realities. The diasporic situation provides her a fertile ground for ethnic identities.

Sunetra Gupta’s novel *Memories of Rain* move between London, Calcutta, Paris, and New York, however none of these cities become the proper home of any of the characters in the novel at the same time staying at diverse places of the world. In *Memories of Rain*, Migration plays important role in the construction of Gupta’s protagonist Moni’s identity and selfhood. Moni is born in Calcutta’s middle class Hindu Brahmin family and her roots are firm

in her Indian cultural upbringing. Due to her puritanical habits of the Brahmin caste, she refuses to eat anything in the company of his artist friends: “Gayatri, swinging her legs from the stage, asks her to eat something, but she shakes her head, she suspects that the meat is beef, she knows that they all eat beef, and that the food has been brought from the Muslim restaurant down the road. Her brother teases her about her conservative Brahmanic habits, and embarrassed, she retires to a corner of the vast hall ... and yet she feels detached, she is part of another world” (*Memories of Rain* 5).

Moni feels ensnared by the complexity of London. Her geographical displacement becomes metonymic of her emotional and moral suffering. Her father agrees to the marriage with condition that it should be a proper Bengali wedding and she marries Anthony with purely Brahmin rituals. Gupta captures the angst and desolation of immigrants who are trapped within a foreign culture having true dilemma, anxiety and agony. When she goes to England after her marriage her basic habits of dress, demeanour and language do not change and remains a sari clad, shy, gentle, half graduate, Indian middle class woman with her cultural traits. Moni’s affiliation to her identity and the culture of her mother country is very much seen in her devotion to Tagore’s songs which she remembers and sings at each and every situation of her life. When Antony is in love with another woman Anna her songs reflect only an alien language communicating a silent pain: “The dry words would stick in her throat, her demand of the language would fail her” (*Memories of Rain* 95). Bhikhu Parekh opinions, “In multicultural society pluralism and difference are something that cannot be avoided since globalization and modernization enable fast mobility of human and culture. As a consequence the values held by a certain community tend to easily change” (Parekh 1).

Moni is in a fragile position as an ambiguous foreigner with her homeland abandoned. Anthony’s friends echo her stay as transported her from the barbaric East to the enlightened West: “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?” (*Memories of Rain* 6) At the outset, Moni feels that Anthony has really rescued her from India. “From such a land Anthony had rescued her a land where the rain poured from the skies not to purify the earth, but to spite it, to chum the parched fields into festering wounds, rinse the choked city sewers onto the streets, sprinkle the pillows with the nausea of mild and yet the poet had pleaded with the deep green shadows of the rain, clouds not to abandon him” (*Memories of Rain* 6-7).

Moni is reassured that she had run away from the drudgery of life in Calcutta. Her arrival in London, we are told of a “fearful emptiness within her” (*Memories of Rain* 104). Gupta reveals Moni’s predicament in a series of sparkling pictures that cut back and forth in time and place: “From time to time she had looked at her watch whose hands still marked the time of a world she had left behind, it was six in the morning in Calcutta, her father would be stretching his limbs in preparation for his journey to the market, her mother wiping the night sweat from her brow with a stale sari, is boiling the water for his morning tea, her grandmother has been up since four, she has bathed and prayed at her small household shrine, she will touch the blessed flowers to their foreheads, her brother, asleep in her bed, will stir in his sleep as the wet petals graze his skin” (*Memories of Rain* 104).

Moni is dragged between her two homes: Calcutta, the homeland she has left behind, and London, her diasporic site, her hostland. Sunetra Gupta writes on clash between East and West or the clash between native cultures and foreign ambiances. Moni’s memories of India articulate her Indian identity and help her to decide to leave Anthony and come back to India. Ashok Chaskar rightly observes: “Race and colour consciousness create a gap between the Oriental and Occidental culture. The Asian immigrants are not accepted as equal members of society in the western land. This kind of treatment gives birth to social resistance and conflict. Asian immigrants always become the victims of racial bias in the West. They get discriminated with unequal and imbalanced treatment from the natives of their adopted land in the western world. It results in producing a deep sense of separation and estrangement among those immigrants staying on the foreign lands” (Chaskar 70-71). Mswood Akhter writes, “The disturbing experiences of the immigrants in the host country and the feeling of alienation permit them to remember their warm experiences about their homeland. They experience the deep sense of rootlessness and marginalisation in the land of their adoption. Gupta has successfully presented these feelings in the novel. As she herself migrated to England and underwent the experiences of immigration, some of the incidents in the novel are strongly autobiographical” (Akhter 86).

Thus, for Moni London is the luminal space where she endures her own violent smash, forced on her by the twin assaults of patriarchal control and the pressure of diasporic dislocation. She journeys between the violated and feminized Calcutta of her homeland and the re-imagined Calcutta. Gupta writes, “And among the dusky streets of London, she feels reproach, she had wanted to make this her home, and instead the city had remained stately and

aloof" (*Memories of Rain* 81). Moni imagines herself in idealized roles. Gupta states, "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 deceased, the hungry, she can see herself, clothed in dull white, soothing a sick child . . . that is how she will spend the rest of her life... She will give her life to the city that she left behind, so many years ago, before its wooing of her was complete, she had crept away, before she might have shared the deathly pain of dying desire with its forlorn streets" (*Memories of Rain* 109).

In the novel's closing lines, Moni has arrived in Calcutta and her memories collide with the present in an overwhelming wave of nostalgia, as the novelist leaves us on the brink of a new day and presumably a new and better life for Moni. Moni's reminiscence of England continues to haunt her even after she arrives at her homeland. She cannot forget Anthony and the pain of leaving him gnaw her mind. "A deep nostalgia had taken root in her" (*Memories of Rain* 197). Moni is jolted down to the reality of Calcutta and memory of England.

Moni choosing not to walk the path of rebellion, reconciliation or stoic resignation any longer, she makes a bid to escape and acts decisively to salvage herself from the meaningless existence in an alien land. The past becomes the present, the present pales into an insignificant past, and the future looms as a ray of hope for Moni. A resurrected, empowered, and determined Moni with reflective feeling wants to renew her sacred intimacy with Calcutta, her own homeland which she wanted to escape from. The decision to leave Antony is the solution which transforms Moni's fragmented self into a sense of completeness. Moni is an example of how immigrants go through traumatic experience after the marriage, away from their homeland. Though she feels her physical presence in London, but her emotional self remains in the homeland Calcutta, unable to live between two countries, two identities, two cultures and two ways of living. And when she returns to India she is haunted by the memories of England.

Though immigration form a new identity in a new space as a result of displacement, but they long for the homeland have a stronger bonds with the traditions and cultures of the homeland. Immigrant's final goal is to achieve integration in the new society by forming a new identity which can fit to the new social structures. To achieve this end immigrant always compares them with the foreign standards through a self-verification process so that they could attain acceptance and thus fight against discrimination.

WORKS CITED

- Akhter, Mswood. "Sunetra Gupta's Memories of Calcutta and Tagore." *South Asian Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2011, pp. 85-112.
- Chaskar, Ashok. *Multiculturalism in Indian Fiction in English*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2010.
- Gupta, Sunetra. *Memories of Rain*. Orion, 1992.
- Hirimuthugoda, Hasara Dasuni. "Diasporic Female Indian Writers in Diasporic Indian English Fiction." www.repository.kln.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/Prabha%20134-141.pdf? Accessed 14 September 2017.
- Nasta, Susheila. "Birds of Passage: The 'Rooms of Memory' in Romesh Guneseckhara, Sunetra Gupta and Omer Hussein." *Home Truths: Fiction of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*, Palgrave, 2002.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*. Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Parneswaran, Uma. "Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too." *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, edited by Jain Jasbir, Rawat Publications, 2003.
- Rushdie, Salman. "'Commonwealth Writers' Do Not Exist." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*, Penguin, 1991.
