

Dynamics of Migration: Memories, Unhousing and Unhappiness

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Abstract

Ethnic identity, in the context of immigration, shifts and evolves under multicultural influences. The concepts of “identity” and “difference”, informed by historical, economic, political parameters, are crucial to a discourse on ethnicity. In the context of transcultural migrations, women live through the vagaries of double marginalisation of cultural dissonance and gendering. Consequently, Indian diasporic women’s writings give voice to the vicissitudes of ethnic existence and gendered experiences, thereby showing how the images of women in South Asian novels have changed in the last three or four decades.

Key words: Ethnicity, double marginalisation, diasporic angst, gendering

Ethnic existence, in the context of immigration, is marked by the dynamics of identity, which constantly shift and evolve under multicultural influences. The multicultural trajectory of thought involves the prospects, promises and anguish of inhabiting two or more distinct worlds simultaneously, which is often accompanied by the emergence of a sensibility that, sometimes, accepts home and abroad alike, or sometimes, reverses or inverts the one for the other. The concepts of “identity” and “difference”, informed by historical, economic, political parameters, are crucial to a discourse on ethnicity. The academic discipline of diaspora studies was established in the late twentieth century with the word taking new meanings and dimensions. The classical model of diaspora is associated with migration or movement from the home topos to a new host topos resulting in trauma, alienation, rootlessness, nostalgia and the longing for the ideal homeland. Barker defines diaspora as “a dispersed network of ethnically and culturally related people” [1]. In the present context, the term implies a positive and ongoing relationship between the migrants’ homelands and their places of work and settlement [2]. The word has come to mean any deterritorialised population that seeks to reterritorialise itself. Hence, the subtleties of “difference” need not entail inferiority in diasporic writings which involve a powerful “presencing” of both native and host cultures.

In the context of transcultural migrations, women live through the vagaries of double marginalisation of cultural dissonance and gendering. Consequently, Indian diasporic women’s writings give voice to the vicissitudes of ethnic existence and gendered experiences, thereby showing how the images of women in South Asian novels have changed in the

last three or four decades. These women writers have moved away from the demurring images of women to the evolution of women, who are assertive, gifted and independent.

Sunetra Gupta’s debut novel, *Memories of Rain (MR)* (1992), depicts the cadences of diasporic angst resulting from cross-cultural differences, and the subsequent experiences of “unhousing” [3] and “homelessness” which immigrants, sometimes, encounter in the host topos. The events described in the novel take place within the span of a single day. Moni, an Indian woman living in Oxford, is deeply rooted in her native cultural norms, and finds it unable to bear the wilful and liberal lifestyle led by her English husband Anthony. Unable to bear the onslaught of culture shock, she decides to leave him and returns to India with her six year old daughter. She is haunted by the return-home motif until it becomes a reality. This paper is an attempt to trace the emergence of the diasporic self of Moni in *Memories of Rain*.

The immigrant experience of “unhousing” is not always self-destructive, as seen in Moni’s life. Though Moni seems unable to maintain her cultural and psychic equilibrium in the “new space”, her self-discovery happens simultaneously. Her recuperative spirit emerges from the nuances of love intricacies, culture clash and her nostalgic memories of her homeland. The whole narrative, built upon ‘memories’, shows that nostalgia is not just a feature of diasporic writing, but it is also the site from which the diasporic self rises.

In the face of the increasing pressure exerted by the dominant host culture, the women in diaspora

resort to a wide range of survival strategies. "Recreating icons of their own religion and rehearsing rituals, therefore becomes a sort of defense mechanism in their lives. The past that they left behind is preserved in the form of an icon, a symbol, a ritual or a talisman" [4]. Thus, in *Memories of Rain*, Tagore songs, which depict the dependence of Bengali culture on the poet, become the much needed anchorage to Moni and a means by which she recreates her homeland in her host land. This becomes a powerful mode of resistance to her, by which she overpowers her husband Anthony, who as a representative of the host culture, approaches her with "the smell of another woman thick on his fingertips" [5]. She recreates her roots symbolically when she alludes to other icons of Bengali literary culture: Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Jibananda Das, Satyajith Ray and Shantiniketan.

The docile, introverted Brahmin girl, and wistful student of British literature, Moni faltered in understanding that the passion that her white lover felt for her was only an infatuation inspired into his mind by the romantic Calcuttan rain. She had believed leaving India could be the best thing that could happen to her. Initially, Moni is seen subjugating herself to the Indian patriarchal tradition, which upholds male as a protector. Moni finds in Anthony, "the first time she ever set eyes upon him . . . for this was in the flood of 78, and he had just waded through knee-deep water . . . revealing his alabaster calves" [5], a protector who will rescue her "from a bizarre and wonderful land" [5], a land where "they still burn their wives, bury alive their female children" [5]. A Tagore song depicts Moni's elation at having met the man in her life. She sings:

It has been many years since that spring day, when there came a young wanderer and immersed my parched soul in an endless sea of joy;

.....

I feel I will follow you to the depths

Of uncharted dark. [5]

Against the backdrop of the inexhaustible Calcuttan downpour, Moni marries Anthony and deep in her heart, she expects that England would be a haven for her.

However, Moni finds it difficult to accept the liberal values and norms of her "new space" on the very wedding night, when she tells Anthony that she is hungry and he immediately replies: "love making made one hungry, and for the first time, like a slap of wet fish, the realisation that he had made love to many other women came down upon her. . ." [5]. In deep distress,

she realises: "In the dying light of that March day/I saw in your eyes, my doom" [5]. Moni realises the gravity of the presence of Anna, the other woman in her white husband's life, and that his passion for Anna, "the green-eyed daughter of the poet" is "no temporary lust, no flitting desire worked by the lavender breezes and the moon light, no mild weekend enchantment" [5], but a deep seated passion, "his final passion, one from which he would not return" [5]. She gradually comes to accept the reality that her marriage is over.

At this stage, Moni belongs to the model of the diasporic formation proposed by William Safran which holds the view that the immigrants "believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel alienated and insulated from it" [6]. Return-motif becomes a push factor in her diasporic existence and she revisits her homeland through a Tagore song:

Who knows where, I must wander now, in this dense dark

But perhaps the thunder speaks of a new path

One that will take me to a different dawn. [5]

But the thoughts of the humiliation that women involved in a failed marriage will have to go through in her homeland puts her all the more in anguish. The "sense of desiccation" that the native culture attaches to women without men and the ignominy that she will have to face in the upbringing of a six year old daughter without father, petrify her. She ruminates about the sad homecoming of a married daughter, thinks of her parents thus: "And now, she will go back to them, bring to them a daughter rejected, a daughter spurned" [5]. Further, she thinks of how her relatives will react. They will tell her parents: "You alone are to blame for the ruin of your children, her uncles would tell him Moni's father" [5]. Moni desperately thinks of the reactions of her "irate uncles, their disgusted wives" [5] and the "snickers of the neighbors" [5].

Moni's predicament, at this stage, shows how the homeland of the immigrants changes in their absence. The description of the familiar place through a Tagore song shows the uncertainty that Moni feels about the prospects of her homecoming:

Why does the sky stare like that upon my face

And why do sudden fits of madness grip my

heart?

I set sail upon seas whose shores I know not. [5]

However, Moni's identity emerges to give her the vision to do what she feels is right. She decides to return to her native land, though full of apprehensions as she realises that her homeland has changed in her absence. Her identity is fractured as she is torn between both the spaces-native and foreign. As Shiva Kumar Srinivasan says: ". . . there is no existential guarantee that returning home will suture the gap that the diasporic subject has inadvertently experienced in its encounter with the real of diaspora The subject ceases to feel "at home". Home itself is imbued with fear and terror . . ." [7].

Imaginary revisitations of the past, nostalgic memories and the symbolic recreations of native cultural icons empower Moni's diasporic self. She makes all the arrangements for her return journey herself, taking "her destiny into her own hands" [5]. She even thinks that "she must go where he [Anthony] will never find her, never set eyes again upon her, upon their child" [5]. Moreover, after returning to the homeland, she decides to work for a charity thereby expunging "her sin of having lived in a land of plenty by devoting her life to the poor, the diseased, the hungry . . . 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. . ." [5]. As Krishna R Lewis says, the novel:

. . . an emancipatory narrative recording the emergence of Moni's self and voice, in great part is a genealogy of her oppression in which each revisit to the past is an alternative reconstruction yet another insight, into the origins of her present and thus simultaneously visions of the future. [8]

However, the return is not an ecstatic affair as Moni finds herself in a precarious position. She feels that she is a misfit in her native place which, in her absence, has transformed into "a mythic place of desire in diasporic imagination" [9]. However, an empowered self is what she evolves into, after traversing the trajectories of different cultures. Her diasporic self becomes empowered in her homeland when she decides to devote the rest of her life to help

the poor and the downtrodden of her native place. Here, Moni awakens to the realities of existence of native culture, which she will have to confront in her homeland, and takes a firm resolve to strive to improve it. Self-discovery on the part of Moni makes her realise that though she is mired in a state of "unhappiness", she has been delivered from the darkness of "unhousing".

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