

Revisions, Reroutings and Return: Reversing the Teleology of Diaspora in Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain*

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There is significant agreement among theorists of diaspora and migration that the teleology of diaspora and a search for home is necessarily linear. Vijay Mishra writes about “the hybrid experience of diaspora people for whom an engineered return to a purist condition is a contradiction in terms” (Mishra 421) and Avtar Brah argues that home for diasporic people is “a mythic place of desire” and therefore it is “a place of no return” (Brah 192). William Safran describes the ‘return’ of most diasporas as “a largely eschatological concept” that is used “to make life more tolerable by holding out a utopia—or *eutopia*—that stands in contrast to the perceived *dystopia* in which actual life is lived” (Safran 194). Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson write in the introduction to their collection *Migrants of Identity*,

...there is the paradox concerning whether the movement to which home is party is linear or circular. Chambers (1994) is definite that the migratory processes of the world are linear, since no returns are possible or implied. The journey of our lives is not between fixed positions, and there is no itinerary affording routes back again. And yet, while it may be true that “the destiny of our journeys” is not circular, still home represents both “the place from which we set out and to which we return, at least in spirit” (Hobsbawm, 1991 65). We engage in ongoing transgression partly out of a desire to overcome it, and find our end in our beginning. (Rapport and Dawson 23)

The editors of the recent collection *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, write in their Introduction:

The literature emerging from ... diasporic experience tends to be a remembering of the world through a backward glance. In a Hindu wedding ceremony, the bride throws a fistful of rice over her shoulder as she leaves her natal home. The Hindu traveller in the 19th century touched the soil of the mother country to his forehead before boarding a ship. These gestures denote a *permanent* departure in the sense that the journey would be transformative and *irrevocable*; its narratives henceforth would dwell in the realm of the imaginary. The diaspora functions through much the same sentiments, those that speak of a voluntary movement ahead with the inevitable baggage of a given up past clinging somewhere in memory (Lal and Paul Kumar ix, my emphasis)

Despite such agreement against the myth of return, in Sunetra Gupta's novel, *Memories of Rain*, we see the protagonist returning to the city she

had left ten years ago. For Moni, a spiritual return to her originary home is not enough. She must return in body to Calcutta, thus making her journey a circular rather than a linear one. In this article, I will examine the reasons for and implications of Moni's return to the homeland after her rejection of the space of diaspora. I consider this return and reversal of diaspora teleology as a move that unsettles and seriously disturbs dichotomies of colonialist and heterosexual desire that are firmly established earlier in the novel.

The reversal of the linear teleology of diaspora into the circularity of return is something we are increasingly seeing in non-theoretical diasporic writing. For example, Prasenjit Gupta's collection *Brown Man and Other Stories* is described as arising out of the writer's experience of being a brown man living in a predominantly white society for many years. This experience "often causes fundamental, tectonic shifts in character and outlook. His characters remain suspended between two continents, two cultures, two different lives. All too often, migration to the West results in the realization that one's existence in another culture is compromised in many ways, that one was much happier back home. But by the time this realization occurs, it is too late to return" (Prasenjit Gupta back cover). Again, in Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin is the migrant who returns at the end. More recently, in Kiran Desai's award winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, the cook's son Biju returns after living as an illegal immigrant in New York, as does Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. This tendency, coupled with the actual return to the homeland of writers like Amit Chaudhuri who returned to and now lives and writes in Calcutta after spending several years in Britain, makes this an important aspect of diasporic writing that deserves further scrutiny.

Sunetra Gupta's novel, *Memories of Rain*, tells the story of a Bengali woman Moni, who comes to live in England after marrying an Englishman, Anthony. The entire time span of the novel is a single weekend during which time Moni contemplates leaving Anthony (for he is having an affair with another woman) and returns with her six-year-old daughter to Calcutta. The flashbacks set in Calcutta delineate the fervent and passionate relationship that develops between Moni and Anthony. These flashbacks, juxtaposed with scenes from Moni's present life in England, mirror the split in identity that Moni feels herself. Gupta's novel sets up a series of binary oppositions, the incompatibility of which ultimately leads to Moni's fragmentation and inability to form a diasporic identity for herself. These binary oppositions are many: her idealised memories of India and the reality of the middle class life she has escaped; her colonial education and the reality of English life as she experiences it after her move to England; the identities other people, like Anthony and her brother, have tried to impose on her and her own aspirations for who she is; Moni's perception of Anthony when she falls in love with him in India and the man he turns out to be once they are in England. These

oppositions mirror the larger oppositions between Moni's two homes that are delineated in the novel: Calcutta and London.

These binary oppositions also establish gendered dichotomies of colonialist and heterosexual desire; in doing so, they contribute toward Moni's inability to shape her own diasporic identity and necessitate her return to Calcutta at the end of the novel. However, before her final return to her originary home, she must be re-educated. The diasporic space of London becomes the site for this re-education. In this space, she comes to recognize the incompatibility of the binary oppositions that govern her life; she also comes to revise her memory of her former home, Calcutta. Once she is able to do these things, her re-education within the space of diaspora is complete and she recognizes that she cannot form a diasporic identity for herself within it.

Moni's return to a reimagined Calcutta facilitates her acquisition of agency and individuality. However, this new circulatory nature of diasporic journeys may also suggest a larger desire for return and an anxiety about the diasporic existence. Certainly Prasenjit Gupta's characters' verdict that "it is too late to return," hints at an unalterable and irreversible series of circumstances that makes return impossible. The anxiety could be about change, both in the diasporic individual who makes the journey back, and in the place to which she returns. It could also be about the fear of disappointment that the homeland has changed beyond recognition. I wish to suggest that Moni's return to a reimagined Calcutta—to a Calcutta that has been significantly revised in her memory—is one way of avoiding this anxiety. Moni also uses the space of diaspora to radically re-evaluate her own identity so that her return is not about recuperating an ossified past, but rather about a new beginning. Consequently, the Calcutta she returns to is considered the ambivalent space where she can now attempt to disrupt the binaries that have dominated her life as well as the binary of home and away.

Homi Bhabha has proposed the notion of the Third Space as an ambivalent space where the act of cultural enunciation and of interpretation can take place. 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 nation (Bhabha, 1995 206)

As the space of articulation, the Third Space problematizes all hierarchical notions of culture and identity while also rendering any claims of authenticity and purity untenable. I would like to suggest that Moni's return to Calcutta helps create this kind of a Third Space where she can disrupt the dichotomies of colonialist and heterosexual desire that characterized her within the space of diaspora.

Keya Ganguly has studied the role of memories of the homeland in Bengali middle-class diasporic families. She argues that memories form a crucial part in the way selfhood and identity is reconstituted in diaspora. However, recollection of the past is not a simple process. Ganguly argues that it often involves a renovation and selective appropriation of certain memories. Her study is important to my argument since she claims that the selective recollection of the past helps diasporic populations to cure painful fragmentations of the present:

...for these particular people memories have taken on a special import because they represent the only set of discursive understandings which can be appropriated and *fixed*; disambiguating the past permits people to make sense of uncertainties in the present (Ganguly 93. My emphasis).

The key to understanding Moni's motivations for reversing the predictable teleology of diaspora lies in her recalling of the past and ultimately revising memories of the past that are intimately tied to her hometown Calcutta. While at the beginning of the novel her recollections are largely negative, as the novel progresses we begin to detect a gradual shift in Moni's recollections.

Moni's ambiguous attitude toward India is expressed in a passage early in the novel:

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? And she would nod numbly, although she had known only of those children that had escaped death, whether deliberate or from disease, those that had been sent out to serve tea in tall grimy glasses in roadside stalls...From such a land Anthony had rescued her...(6)

Moni's description of India as "a bizarre and wonderful land" in the first line of the above passage and its contrast with the "demi-paradise" that is England is quite telling. Moni is made the native informant by Anthony and his friends, but she is unable to fully endorse their views given the racist and ignorant nature of their comments. However, despite the narratorial irony here, Moni fails to defend her country against the barbaric accusations made by her husband's friends. She feels that Anthony has "rescued" her by bringing her away from India. The rain becomes an apt metaphor for Gupta to convey the contradiction Moni feels in her attitude toward India. Rain is a symbol of rebirth, fertility, cleansing and rejuvenation. But it also has a destructive power. Gupta, in repeated passages, describes the incessant rain that falls in Calcutta. The above passage continues,

... a land where 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 onto the streets, sprinkle the pillows with the nausea of mould, and yet the poet had pleaded with the deep green shadows of the rain clouds not to abandon him... (6-7)

In yet another passage, Gupta emphasizes the nauseating odour of rain: “from the damp sheets a queer alkaline odour is rising, the rain-swollen doors, that no longer close, reek of rotting termite eggs, a sea of filth laps at the walls outside” (27). For Moni, the rain is relentless, oppressive and nauseating but also awe inspiring and sheltering as in Tagore’s songs.

Moni views her relationship with Anthony as her way of escaping the daily grind of middle class life in Calcutta. At first, he is a saviour to her who has rescued her from a life of patriarchal domination and middle-class angst. She muses upon the plight that he has saved her from:

What would have been her fate, tainted by his merciless passion, would she have resisted marriage, surrendering finally to some prearranged match out of sheer loneliness, some unknown customer of her body, she would remain, a timid teacher of English in some girls’ school, mother of two, on humid holiday afternoons she would dust her brass knickknacks, her framed portrait of Tagore, teach her children how to sing, and on some unpleasant evenings, the children would peep from the bedroom door to see her standing in tears, as her husband firmly wheeled her drunken brother out of the door...he had saved her from such a sterile existence, from the disaster of a secure and meaningless life...(44-45)

Recurring musings of this nature suggest that Moni is well aware of the dreary life that awaits most middle class women like her who are unable to fulfil their aspirations and quietly follow the expected route of marriage, children and meaningless lives. She thinks of her aunt who left a loveless and abusive marriage to live a life of loneliness until she died “alone, in the dense dark of a village night” (98). However, although Moni fears a life of marital drudgery, marriage is important to her. Her aunt, who had the strength to leave a bad marriage, as well as her unmarried English teacher, who relinquished marriage in the pursuit of her academic goals, could be seen as strong and positive female role models for Moni. Instead she portrays them as lonely, isolated and unfulfilled figures. She describes their sexless bodies in great detail. In these passages, the barren female body becomes the metaphor for all that Moni fears most as a woman. While describing her aunt she says,

Death had always lurked in the slow circles of her calcified breasts, flesh that might have remained pliant under a man’s touch had hardened and decayed, so she had felt, every time her aunt held her in glad embrace, her dry lips upon her forehead, in her breath, there was the desiccation of death, not the moist, voluptuous death that she had dreamt of last night, but a death like hot salt, burning upon the tongue. (98)

Again, while describing her teacher, she says, “she had recognized upon those charred, emaciated limbs the absence of a man’s touch, in the wooden anguish of her voice, droning on...” (147). Thus for Moni, a woman who does not have sex, is robbed of her femininity and even of her life. Words like “hardened,” “decayed,” “calcified,” “desiccated,” “charred” and “emaciated” show the extent to which Moni perceives these women not just as sexless but as decrepit and dying. Although she is sympathetic to their plight and recognizes them as victims of patriarchal

control and is even admiring of their actions and achievements, she is unable to reconcile their asexuality with their femininity. Ultimately, she sees them as pathetic hollow creatures, representing a fate she wants to avoid at all costs.

It is not surprising, then, that Anthony's passionate love for Moni presents itself as the key to freedom and a new and fulfilling life for her. She recalls the intense passion she had felt in the first flight of their love:

once his lips had gorged upon her, sucked her dry, she began to cry, slowly, and, strangely, he found comfort in her tears, for her stormy gasps carried the exhaustion of lovemaking, stroking her wet cheeks, he asked, will you marry me, please, you must marry me... (111)

While physical passion is so important to her at the beginning of their relationship, once she moves to England and Anthony begins his affair with Anna, Moni gradually begins to realize that she cannot achieve meaning and individuality in life merely through the fulfilment of her sexual desires. Thus, she moves from an apprehension of her female body as the source of her identity, to craving something much greater—a sense of worth and identity that is not dependent upon the female body—in seeking that identity. This is something that both England and Anthony are unable to provide for her, thus necessitating a return to Calcutta at the end of the novel.

The gendered dichotomies of colonialist and heterosexual desire that the novel sets up are perhaps most obviously delineated in Gupta's depiction of Anthony and Moni's relationship and the violent ways in which Anthony essentializes her. While Moni perceives Anthony as having rescued her from the possibility of a loveless and barren life, she fails to realize until much later in the novel that he does not love her for who she is but rather for what she represents to him—the exotic east. This brings us to yet another binary opposition in the novel: between Moni's own sense of herself as an individual and Anthony's colonized notion of her by which she comes to represent India to him. Anthony is a student of Bengali theater who had gone to India to study the art and work with Moni's brother. He is very enamored of all that India has to offer. His preconceived notion of what he wants from India is misguided from the very beginning: "He had come to this land, as his forefathers had done, with a conviction that all he wanted would be his, he had not come with greed, only a desire for knowledge, for experience, and he had known that these would be there for him..." (40). Anthony is a neo-Orientalist of sorts whose deep sense of entitlement to India as an Englishman is disturbing and alerts the reader to his naïve idealizing of India. It soon becomes apparent that Anthony represents the white male tourist's or even the colonizer's gaze. He is not content to simply admire the beauty and character of this vibrant country, but rather wants to possess and dominate. This becomes clear early in the novel when Gupta writes, "and suddenly he was no longer content to be a detached observer, the gentle anthropologist, it was a role that had become bitter to him. For one bleak

instant, as he dissolved sterilizing iodine in his lassi, he felt a wistful urge to be part of them” (38). The absurd naivete of this thought is encapsulated in his action of dissolving sterilizing iodine in the yogurt drink he consumes to guard against the possibility of contamination from the water to which he presumably has a low immunity, unlike the Calcuttans that surround him. This simple unconscious act on his part belies his inability to survive physically in India let alone become one with the people. This brief passage renders his desire fetishistic rather than noble or lofty in any way.

Anthony’s feminization of India and his orientalist perspective is not uncommon. In discourses of colonization, the feminization of the land has been a common metaphor. The Indian subcontinent has often been exoticized and characterized as feminine in orientalist narratives. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said has interpreted the orientalist will to sexualize the colonized nation as a manifestation of the anxiety of empire. He writes,

The relation between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization of cultural monument, the orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object... The cultural, temporal and geographical distance was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy and sexual promise: phrases like “the veils of an Eastern bride” or “the inscrutable Orient” passed into common language. (Said 222)

Sara Suleri has criticized subsequent discourses that have not heeded the implications of Said’s reading and have replicated the Orientalist desire to shroud the East in a veil of mystery. Suleri suggests that “the continued equation between a colonized landscape and the female body represents an alterist fallacy that causes considerable theoretical damage to both contemporary feminist and postcolonial discourses” (Suleri 18). In Gupta’s novel, Anthony takes on the role of the postcolonial Orientalist who perpetuates the fallacious equating of the formerly colonized nation with the female body.

Anthony finds the perfect medium to fetishize and capture India in his imagination through Moni. She is young, beautiful and sensual. Almost every time he thinks of Calcutta, it is in conjunction with Moni, and we gradually see the two becoming one for him:

it had become clear to him then that he could not leave this putrefying city without her, that it would not be enough to cherish the beauty of their unconsummated passion, alongside his memories of this unashamed city, its gorged pavements, the tired faces of colonial buildings, jostled by indifferent, insect-eyed multistoried flats, the patient streets lacerated by the construction of an underground (38)

He feminizes an entire nation and a people while substituting them for the woman he purportedly loves. His allegorizing of Calcutta as an “unashamed” woman waiting to be consumed suggests a rape fantasy on Anthony’s part, belied by words like “gorged” and “lacerated.” The

“streets lacerated by the construction of an underground” creates an image of a subway train ripping through the deep tunnels of the city—clearly a sexualized image of rape and penetration. Rape is often used as a metaphor of exploitation in phallocentric discourses of nationalism:

The prevalence of this metaphor is evident in the anti-imperialist rhetoric of such Indian nationalists as Nehru, who described the colonization of the subcontinent in terms of stereotypical sexual aggression: ‘They seized her body and possessed her, but it was a possession of violence. They did not know her or try to know her. They never looked into her eyes for theirs were averted and hers cast down through shame and humiliation.’ (Suleri 16-17)

Similarly, Anthony does not try to get to know India or even understand the people. He tries only to violently possess the nation and its people through Moni, the woman he exoticizes.

The obsessive, violent and fetishistic nature of his passion for Moni, equated in his mind with his desire to possess and occupy the nation, becomes abundantly clear in the following passage, which merits being quoted at length:

for his eyes, keen with new exhilaration, had seen much more than his camera lens, the cold precise objectivity was gnawed by a sense of the unreal, for he felt on that day that he had penetrated the very spirit of life in this city, the very essence of their culture had been revealed to him in the few dense hours he had gazed upon the rain-swollen curve of her mouth, this was what he had come to discover, to feel, the inebriation of tropical rain upon his skin, the sensual exchange of poetry on a thunderous evening, oh, if he could only draw his lips through the velvet valley of her hair, his experience of the tropics would be complete, if he could only once graze the succulence of her lips (124)

In this passage, India and Moni become one in Anthony’s imagination and he longs to possess both in equal measure. Relinquishing the objectivity of the camera eye, he is transformed from the tentative tourist to the confident and aggressive colonizer whose gaze seeks to conquer and dominate. Gazing upon “the rain-swollen curve” of Moni’s mouth, the “essence” of an entire culture is revealed to him and he feels that he has “penetrated” the very spirit of Calcutta. While the sensuality of Gupta’s language in passages such as these can lead a reader to rhapsodize about the depths and heights of Anthony’s passion for Moni, read in another light, they acquire a sinister tone. The passage suggests several violent acts on Anthony’s part: a complete sexual objectification of Moni, and a negation and appropriation of her personhood and a violent conflating of land and woman with the avowed intention to occupy and dominate both. The images in the final lines of the passage—Anthony drawing his lips through the “velvet hair of her valley” and his lips grazing her “succulent lips”—are highly sexualized since both images can be read as symptomatic of the sexual act. Masculine rape fantasy, as well as the colonizer’s violent desire to conquer, becomes inextricably linked in the metaphorization and conflating of India and Moni in the above passage. Such a representation is in keeping with the literary and pictorial tradition prevalent from the beginning of the colonial period till its end, where

“native women and their bodies are described in terms of the promise and the fear of the colonial land” (Loomba 151). The violence of the language makes it transparent to the reader that what Anthony feels for Moni is not love, but a fascination with and aggression toward the exotic other who is imbued in his imagination with all that is exotic, erotic and waiting to be conquered. Inherent in his words is a psychological violence, for he expresses a desire that completely negates her individuality.

Through Anthony’s fetishization and orientalisizing of Moni, Gupta sets up gendered dichotomies of colonialist and heterosexual desire early in the novel which begin to be dismantled as Moni revises her memories of Calcutta and contemplates returning. While she is in London, Moni’s recollections of Calcutta are deeply fractured and tainted by the contradiction she feels about what the home she has left behind represents for her; so, her memories of the past fail to give her any kind of solace. Her memories are also deeply fissured by the paradoxical nature of what her life might have been had she not married Anthony and come to England. For Moni, the past is related to the privileges acquired through her marriage to Anthony. Due to this fissured and paradoxical nature of her memories of the past, she is not able to claim the past as her own. It is only after revising and reimagining the past that Moni is compelled to finally return to Calcutta and physically reinhabit the space where she lived that past.

Although at first Moni is relieved to have escaped the drudgery of life in Calcutta, there are subtle suggestions that her relationship with the city is more complicated than she allows us to believe. Upon her arrival in London, she leaves the time in her watch to continue to indicate the time in Calcutta.¹ In an extended section of the novel, she looks at her watch and imagines what might be happening in her home at that moment:

it was six in the morning in Calcutta, her father would be stretching his limbs in preparation for his journey to the market...Anthony woke, you’re jet-lagged, he told her, ten o’clock, her brother swings his cloth bag over his shoulder and leaves for the day...come back into bed, Anthony said,...she looked at her watch, eleven o’clock, the girls were rising from their chairs to greet the lecturer...twelve o’clock, the curtains were pierced by a cold winter light, in Calcutta, the noon sun is caressing the pitted pavements (104-5)

In this passage, the juxtaposition of Moni’s current reality with her imagined portrayal of life in Calcutta creates a temporal disjuncture between the present and the forced imposition of an imaginary present time and space upon the real present. Such a disjuncture highlights the rupture felt by Moni as she is pulled between her two homes: Calcutta, the home she has left behind, and London, her diasporic location.

¹ This image is reminiscent of Mr. Pirzada, the protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” (from her collection *Interpreter of Maladies*), a Bangladeshi immigrant who carries a pocket watch that perpetually shows the local time in Dacca.

As the stark contrast between London and Calcutta in Moni's consciousness becomes evident, her memories of Calcutta are revised, and despite the filth and the chaos which she still vividly recalls, she longs to return. While at the beginning of the novel, Anthony feminizes Calcutta equating it with Moni, in a similar move at the end of the novel, Moni characterizes Calcutta as her abandoned lover to whom she must return. She decides that charity work in Calcutta will now be her calling. Thus, while London is the liminal space where she endures her own violent rupture, brought on by the twin assaults of patriarchal control and the pressures of diasporic assimilation, it is also a space of transformation and re-education for her as she journeys between the violated and feminized Calcutta of her homeland and the reimaged Calcutta to which she must return:

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, the dispassionate streets look upon her now, silent, ignoring the secret they share, and yet, ten years ago, every alleyway in Ballygunge had trembled with the heaviness of her departure, weeping puddles upon the cracked pavement they had turned away, indignant, betrayed, she will go back to them, the narrow pitted streets, cloaked in a miasma of car fumes, the dung smoke of a thousand clay ovens. (81)

Thus, while London can offer her no solace, Calcutta is portrayed as a betrayed and devastated lover, longing for Moni's return. Despite repeated references to Calcutta as her lover, the gendering of Calcutta continues to be feminine (evident from the use of words like "trembling," "weeping," "alleyways") in passages such as the one above. By "entering" Calcutta, Moni is masculine in her action; this act of penetration on the part of a female protagonist renders her gender ambiguous.

In her theorization of migration, Sara Ahmed posits that migration is felt at the level of embodiment and bodies (re)inhabit space in their quest for homes. She claims that "[w]hat migration narratives involve, then, is a spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self: a transformation of the very skin through which the body is embodied" (Ahmed 342). Through the metaphor of Calcutta as Moni's abandoned lover to whom she must return, Gupta captures the sensory aspect of Moni's search for a home as well as problematizes the gendered binaries established earlier in the novel. By charting the course of Moni's return in terms of a non heteronormative romance, Gupta is able to disrupt the binaries that dominated Moni's life, and Moni is now able to reinhabit the space of Calcutta.

Although Moni is not able to claim the past for herself, it remains alive in her consciousness throughout the novel. Toward the end of the novel, she is able to disambiguate the past in the manner suggested by Keya Ganguly and her memories are no longer replete with the angst and failed dreams of Bengali middle-class life, but rather come to be imbued with a sense of loss and nostalgia, further compelling her return. She metaphorizes Calcutta, imagining it to be darkness and also her lover, who

quietly awaits her return. Such a portrayal is in direct contrast with Anthony's characterization of Calcutta as a woman waiting to be conquered. This metaphorization of Calcutta enables Moni to re-evaluate her life as well as her memories, and ultimately drives her to reverse the teleology of diaspora and to return to the homeland.

Throughout the novel there are repeated references to darkness, Moni's childhood companion and true love. Darkness hovers around her, protecting and shielding her, and she even commits adultery with darkness. Darkness is repeatedly described as a hovering presence, a jealous lover, standing by silently when her relationship with Anthony is consummated. Darkness even follows her to England, where we are told she had "battled with darkness, darkness had become an indifferent enemy" (30). This image echoes her failed attempts to reject Calcutta and her memories of her life there. Significantly, as she finally contemplates returning to Calcutta,

she makes peace with darkness, and...darkness, an old lover, seizes her again from behind, enfolds her in desperate embrace, her fingers stream across her hair, her arms, her breasts, on the shadowed landing, she commits adultery with darkness. (30)

The ambiguity of the gendered pronoun "her" in the line "her fingers stream across her hair, her arms, her breasts, on the shadowed landing," suggests that darkness is not necessarily masculine here. Rather, the ambiguity of Moni's lover serves to counter Anthony's earlier projections of orientalist, heterosexual desire upon Moni. Darkness is the metaphoric signifier of Moni's problematic and unresolved relationship with Calcutta. Her identity is tied up inextricably with Calcutta, her originary home; once her selfhood has been fractured by the experience of diaspora, she must return to Calcutta and embrace her childhood companion and lover—darkness. In order for her to be healed, she must return to Calcutta and resolve her relationship with this city. The consummation of her relationship with darkness signifies Moni's return to India and her acceptance of the part of her identity that is tied to her homeland and cannot be rejected in favour of a life lived elsewhere.

Moni's ultimate return at the end of the novel is again equated with the reunion of separated lovers:

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 (109)

It is hard to tell whether Moni will be able to construct an identity for herself, now that she has returned to the place she feels is her home. She imagines herself in very idealized roles:

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. (108)

Moni is re-figured as masculine when she *enters* the city again; yet, she imagines herself in the feminine saintly role of charity worker, again seriously disrupting the gendered dichotomies of colonialist and heterosexual desire. She is no longer defined by Anthony's violently essentialized construction of her. By reversing the teleology of diaspora, Moni is able to disrupt the gendered binaries that had dominated her within the space of diaspora. Her reverse move also centres the marginalized space of the formerly colonized metropolis while decentring London, making it, in fact, the marginal space she had occupied for a while: the space of the hyphen where she was able to re-evaluate her identity.

Avtar Brah has written about the positive potential of diaspora:

The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure. (Brah 193)

Moni is able to only partially fulfil this positive potential of diaspora by re-evaluating her identity within the space of diaspora. Her inability and ultimate failure in forming her subjectivity in London also helps her to understand that in order to form an identity she must return to Calcutta. However, this is not the Calcutta she had left but a new and refigured Calcutta, a third space significantly different from the two spaces she occupies in the novel—the Calcutta of her pre-immigrant days and London—where she undergoes her re-education.

Brah argues against the search for absolute identities within the scope of diaspora. She writes,

the concept of diaspora should be seen to refer to historically contingent "genealogies" in the Foucauldian sense of the word. That is to say that the term should be seen as conceptual mapping which defies the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity; for pristine, pure customs and traditions or unsullied glorious pasts. (Brah 196).

Throughout the novel, we see Moni re-evaluating and rejecting the pre-given identities of wife, mother, sister, and daughter that have been imposed upon her by Anthony and her family members. While she had come to accept these roles as unchanging and even idealized them to an extent, her diasporic experience in London enables her to re-evaluate and finally reject these fixed social identities in favour of a more dynamic identity. Although at the end of the novel Moni returns to Calcutta, the site of her past, this is not a return to a pristine, glorious and unsullied past. In returning to Calcutta, Moni has revised her memories and acknowledged previously unacknowledged aspects of her relationship with this place.

In her book *States of Exception*, Keya Ganguly posits that the reconstitution of selfhood in diaspora through the recalling of memories of

the past is a distinctly gendered enterprise. While men are sometimes nostalgic about the past, they romanticise the present, emphasize the material benefits of their immigrant lives and downplay the initial hardships and marginality they encountered in the host nation. Women on the other hand, remake and romanticize the past in an attempt to come to terms with the present. Ganguly writes,

Women seem to (mis)remember the past in sublated terms, confusing the privilege of being secure in one's sense of self with material security. There are some things money cannot buy; women attest to this truism and compensate for their lack of place and voice by remembering a fabricated past. (Ganguly 106)

In Gupta's novel, Moni does not conform to this gendered model of recalling memories. At the beginning of the novel, Moni, like the male subjects of Ganguly's study, idealizes her immigrant condition and even feels relieved for having escaped the drudgery of middle class life in India. However, once she is denied selfhood and has been disillusioned by Anthony and all that he represents, she begins to idealize the past and ultimately decides to return. Middle-class Bengali society, with all its angst, mediocrity, detritus of dreams and gender biases, comes to be idealized in the concluding pages of the novel.

In conclusion, Moni's return to Calcutta is not an uncomplicated one. Her shifts in outlook might suggest that one can never truly return. It might also be suggested that Moni is not leaving England for India, but is rather leaving her unfaithful, orientalist husband and returning to the space of postcolonial India. Finally, what are we to make of a novel that ends with a Western man falling in love with a Western woman and an Indian woman having to return to her native Calcutta? It could easily be argued that such an ending neatly re-establishes binary oppositions of center and margin, colonizer and colonized. In response to such an oppositional reading of the text, I posit a more nuanced reading where Moni's re-education and revision of her memories of the homeland allow her to chart a teleology of self-realization that culminates in a diasporic circularity of return. Despite a heightened nostalgia about the homeland that permeates most diasporic texts, ultimately these texts also seem to suggest that the home left behind is decidedly *not* the place to be. Citing many such examples, Sonya Dutta Choudhury writes,

Chanu in *Brick Lane* is muddled and misguided in his quixotic intent to return...Gogol and Sonia in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* dread their holidays to Kolkata, the crowds and the discomfort, and rejoice in their return, "once again free to quarrel. To sleep for as long as they like." Immigrants like Hanif Kureishi's Karim in *Buddha of Suburbia* or Frank McCourt in *Tis* bring with them a whole new perspective on the structure of society, this brilliance of perception probably being possible only by virtue of their exclusion...there is complete validation of the Promised Land...stories of oppression and unhappiness are safely told from the haven of the New World. (Dutta Choudhury)

Thus, much of diasporic literature, in its tacit celebration of immigrant life, forecloses the possibility of return. In Gupta's novel, on the other

hand, the protagonist must reverse the teleology of diaspora in order to reclaim her agency in defining and constructing who she is, in rejection of her husband's essentialized construction of her within the space of diaspora. 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. The enigma of her life in London has been shattered, the power the British poets held over her colonized imagination has been dispelled, and the romance of her marriage has tragically ended. All that remains is the everyday pathos of life in Calcutta and the omnipresence of the great poet, Tagore:

Intoxicated by nostalgia, she leans out to contemplate the skies, from beyond tall shutters, the reluctant strains of a thin child voice float down, faltering in the crevices of one of the poet's most difficult songs, shrill, flat, it fades pathetically away into the paused sunshine, the taxi grinds to a sudden halt, upon Rashbehari Avenue the water main has burst again, they say it is the curse of the Ganges...the wheels rock upon a bird carcass, crushing crow flesh into hot tar, upon the streets, early crowds are gathering, she looks upon the faces of a generation who knew the poet only by the dregs of his dreams. (198)

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