

# Subjectivity and Cultural Hybridity in the Novels of Sunetra Gupta

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**Abstract –** *The hybridities narrated in the texts of Gupta represents examples of interculturality personified. Once such mélange –save taken into account, self – fashioning becomes relatively easy and hybrid existence less painful. Defining selves in dislocated existence is an ever changing process. The process leads from one's initial definition of self to an adopted definition of hybridity. Only by going through the pain of living in hybridity can one hope to reconcile with one's dislocation and arrive at a new definition of self. This condition of increasing hybridity of the Indian diaspora is brought about by individual self – fashioning and the relationships between the protagonists of the texts discussed are part of this phenomenon.*

**Key Words:** *Interculturality, Hybridity, Diaspora, Dislocation*

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Indian Diaspora pertains to Indian migration, their socio - economic and cultural experience, experiences of adaptation and assimilation in the host societies. The pain of migration and displacement felt by these writers flows in their narratives too. Novels and stories are the tales of deep anguish, nostalgia and of rootlessness where characters feel more emotionally and mentally tortured than physical fatigue. Predicament of dual identities ie of their homelands and of nations they migrated too, corrodes their psyche. In a cosmopolitan world one cannot be a cultural and social outside in a foreign land for long. Sunetra Gupta in her novels like Memories of Rain and A Sin of Colour presents the intercultural relationships. In this article the Indian Diaspora and reading Gupta argues that displacement produces a point of encounter between the alien and authority.

As women Gupta has carved out a niche for themselves in Britain and have dealt extensively with women's experiences, longings, lapses and their changing position and status in their new land and also in the homeland. With her subtle sense of humour Syal laments the loss while counting the gains of diasporic existence. On the other hand, for Gupta, the world around is never real, rather a lyrical vision of reality transformed to the fabric of her texts. However as a true transnational writer the locales of all her novels are several cosmopolitan cities around the world. The calm flow of language, the soft pouring out of emotions, the expression of

complexities newly arisen due to stay in a new land, all come to the fore in her brilliant experimentation with narrative. What comes out of the interaction between East and West for the characters of Gupta, is a failure, resulting in doom, death and separation. Gupta's characters are soaked in indigenous spirit and hardly show any sign of acculturation. The characters' encounter with the West is brought in only to show the harm done to the Eastern sensibility by its encounter with the West. On the other hand Gupta's novels focus on first generation mostly.

Gupta's second novel The Glassblower's Breath (1993) follows a similar pattern as Memories in theme, spirit and technique. However though it ponders on the subtleties of a woman's heart, it nonetheless counts the restlessness of a soul that looks for its alter ego, yet finds no resemblance of the same in the prosaic world of men. As the protagonist shifts between self love and search for the perfect love, the mind is wrenched between love for the homeland culture, and the spirit of an alien land. A 13th-century Jelaluddin Rumi poem acts as the epigraph to this book giving an exotic ambience to the anonymous "you"'s unformed experiences. An exquisite modern lady from India, presently habouring in London, her expressions however call back to the uncurbed instincts of the unconscious. The time frame of the novel is a single day and throughout the day the protagonist engages in her deep attachment for three people,

Jonathan Sparrow with whom she feels an intellectual affinity, and the others a butcher and a barber. The anonymous narrator claims how “you,” had loved the three and had felt a deep sense of physical attraction for them. She is guided by the noose of her passions as she looks for a safe haven for an intimate proximity with the butcher, while the baker follows the two (the lady and her lover), being madly in love with the “you” in spite of the fact that he is a married man with a son of six years. She ultimately finds a safe passage in her Kensington house where she lives with her orphaned niece and her half Iranian, half English husband. The novel is covered under the pall of memories of the death of her sister and frequents between Calcutta, London and New York, the metropolises. Gupta’s third novel *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1995), somewhat different from her first couple of novels, centres on the life of Promothesh and his wife Esha. Promothesh’s curious 118 discovery takes him and Esha from the Calcutta garage to the metropolis of London. The disturbance incited by the shift and the mysterious turn of events reach in the death of Esha which turns Promothesh’s life to an exile. *Moonlight into Marzipan* is interspersed with Bengali characters like Yuri, Luna and Sputnik Sen and British characters like Sir Percival Partridge and Latino lover like Juan Gorrion. The story shifts between Orissa, Shantiniketan and Oxford. The indigenous flavour returns in *Ramayana* and *rosogollas* and joint family, etc.

*A Sin of Colour* (1999) is a mysterious family story, where the protagonist Debendranath suddenly disappears and is supposedly drowned in Oxford. His etiolated wife clings to his memories, who is joined by Niharika, the protagonist’s niece. While in Oxford, she fails to unravel the mystery but returns with the memory of a broken relationship with an already married man, Daniel Faraday and his friend Morgan, the last to have seen Debendranath alive. Niharika begins residing in her family mansion, where Debendranath returns, so long an exile to himself. The return brings forth memories of loss and uneasiness of an unconsummated love for his (Debendranath’s) brother’s wife Reba, Niharika’s mother. The novel explores the ruin of love and the beginning of longing in between the gaps and movements from one nation to another. Gupta’s fifth and latest novel *So Good in Black* (2009) begins with the mysterious death of Damini in Calcutta and concerns with the life of Byron Mallick, Ela, Damini’s cousin, Max the narrator, Barbara, his first wife, Nikhilesh Mukherjee, Byron’s friend and sister’s husband; Shankar Kanjilal, Damini’s father; many others and Adrija. The novel studies the curious relationship patterns that connect and complicate these lives. When the American travel writer Max Gate returns to India after a 15-year absence, to attend the funeral of a prominent advocacy journalist and activist named Damini who had died in a mountain cycling 119 accident, he stays at the seaside villa of long-time friend Byron Mallick, who is

a high profile industrialist and student of history. As Max entangles the confusion created by the encroachment of past on the present, Byron’s responsibility in the alleged murder comes to the fore revealing the turmoils of life. Gupta’s characters mostly of the first generation are imaginative about their origin and consider it romantically. Their stay in Britain, more than creating Britishness in them, generates a strong sense of nationhood. Sandhya Shukla writes, “Indians were not the only ones on the move; India, too was travelling” (Shukla 33). Gupta explores a similar engagement with home and homeland India in her novels. However Gupta’s novels put up a wide range of characters who are rooted in their native lands but surround the lives of the main characters who are mostly diasporic. In Sunetra Gupta’s novels, memories of Calcutta, London and New York all come together and form a mosaic. The mind flutters between these lands making infinite comparisons, unintended. The images strikingly bring to life all the countries in a single instance.

In *The Glassblower’s Breath*, while New York comes alive in its bitter chill, the anonymous protagonist immediately recalls of her lover buying a hard-back of Mann’s *The Holy Sinner* at a second-hand bookstall in Calcutta. Calcutta here stands live in reminiscences. Calcutta had been the city that had shaped Gupta’s personality and so is it for her protagonists. The “inadequacy of your relationship with the city” (Gupta, *Glassblower’s* 33) was thought to be the result of much internal disturbances in the psyche and the cause of failure in relationships 120 of the protagonists. As Somdatta Mandal writes in her article “Sunetra Gupta,” “Steeped in Bengali culture, especially the Calcutta of the 1950s and 1960s that she nostalgically recreates in her novel, her writing reveals that she cannot forget the city that she left behind. Also, she had known the city in both good and bad times and even at a distance has been loyal to it...” (Mandal 165). Sunetra Gupta’s characters live a cosmopolitan existence and move either from Calcutta to London and New York (in the first four of her novels) or vice versa (in her fifth novel). In the *Memories* Moni’s homecoming from her husband’s land is seen as a return from exile. However Gupta gets over her bias towards the hostland on rare occasions where the homeland is also seen as a site of exile for a woman. A parallel of such an exilic state for a woman, brought into vogue with her marriage, becomes evident in the homeland context, in the life of Byron Mallick’s mother who is “exiled by her marriage to a small village before she could finish her degree in English literature” (Gupta, *So Good* 42). Gupta’s reaction to the hostland or homeland as an exile, seen from a woman’s point of view seems dubious. In this regard it can be said that the foreign land seems alien because the land is seen as one with its people who harbour a sense of difference with the East. But life seems beautiful when accosted

by the land alone. Only when the people with their numerous problems and disturbances come in, do they face a hard fortune. Their lives attain the fulfillment which was never possible in the prior land. Here in the West, a new expanse opens up to the people as soon as the sense of betrayal is gone. In Memories the umbilical cord is broken in the breaking up of the connection with the person who had brought Moni to this land. She is born into a new existence. However this trance is only for a brief moment. Though Moni waits with her toes buried on the alien shores she is all lost until she returns to her land. Every attempt at further invoking the relationship is not possible for she brings her 126 only daughter back to India with her, who could have been a bridge between the couple and two countries as well. For her the ultimate truth remains the homeland she had forsaken. Though Moni returns with the Goddess, unlike Durga she would not return to her husband. The omen in the stepping on the crow flesh suggests nothing holy or beautiful could occur to her. Her journey to the land is not a dream come true, or coming to all goodness and peace. The cited instances of Naxalite's brain transformed to porridge by the torture meted out by the police, the human skulls clogging the ponds or even in the present broken state of her family all prove home is nowhere.

Gupta's female characters whether Moni in Memories, the anonymous protagonist in The Glassblower's Breath or Reba in A Sin of Colour, reflect an orientalist discourse. They go back to the days of colonialism and hence Gupta succumbs to racialist/patriarchal Western discourse.

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