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**RE-LOCATING 'HOME' THROUGH MEMORIES IN  
 SUNETRA GUPTA'S *SO GOOD IN BLACK***

*Ms. Neelu Jain, Research Scholar, IISU, Jaipur, Rajasthan*

*Dr. Rani Rathore, Sr. Asst. Prof. & Head, Department of English, IISU, Jaipur, Rajasthan*

**Abstract:**

*The notion of Homeland, the place of birth finds a lot of importance in Diasporic literature or expatriate writing which is either experienced by the diaspora in present or through their ancestors in the past. The people in diaspora are born in homeland and brought up in foreign land due to some or the other reasons which are the push and pull factors of diaspora. Memory dwells on these images and carries a dual sensibility of mixing the past with the present. In spite of globalization and transnationalism on its peak, the sense of homelessness in a foreign land and even when the migratory birds return to their homeland, is interspersed with nostalgia which gives way to creating images thus locating the image of home through memories. The proposed paper would examine with ample textual details the role of memories in creating the image of 'Home' in Sunetra Gupta's *So Good in Black*.*

**Keywords:** Home, Homeland, Memory, Globalization, Transnationalism.

The power of the moment is not realized in the immediate perception but only later in the imagination. The epiphanic imagination fills in the details that memory neglects and creates a unit of fragmentary 'dead' details from the past (Nichols 1987, 74).

Sunetra Gupta an acclaimed novelist, essayist and scientist was born in Calcutta on 15 March, 1965. In 1987, Gupta graduated from Princeton University and went straight from PhD into a three-year Training Fellowship from the Wellcome Trust in 1992 and was awarded a Wellcome Senior Fellowship in 1995. Later she was appointed to her current post in 1999 and was honoured with the title of Professor in 2006. Presently she is working as a Professor of Theoretical Epidemiology at the Department of Zoology, Oxford University and lives in Oxford with her husband who is an Irishman and two daughters.

Gupta is a fiction writer who is at ease writing both in English and Bengali. For her first work which was a science fiction in Bengali. She was encouraged as a child genius by Adrish Bardhan, the editor of a local science-fiction journal 'Fantastic'. Her father Dhruva Gupta had a profound influence on her literary activities who developed in her an interest for Rabindranath Tagore, the glimpse of which can be seen in each of Gupta's work. Thus, she became an accomplished translator of Rabindra Sangeet, the songs of Tagore. Her father's teaching jobs at Ethiopia, Zambia and Britain had a great impact on Gupta's childhood. Her family's migrant lifestyle had a great impact on her writings as the characters in Gupta's novels are seen to move between different countries. The initial years of her childhood were spent in moving between different countries with her family. At the age of eleven she returned to her hometown Calcutta, which later came to be the lyrical city of Tagore's songs in her dreams. Her father tried his hand not only in writing on cinema and creative criticism but also divided his time between lecturing on African History at the University of Calcutta. It was her father's influence that Gupta was exposed to all types of art and criticism with an ability to move between the areas of Arts and Science with ease. Gupta portrays her own mother, Minati Gupta, as a typical Begali house maker in her works.

A diasporic writer, Gupta belongs to the younger generation of immigrants whose characters are essentially cosmopolitan in nature and are always on the go crossing frontiers, seldom at ease with

themselves. In Gupta's novels one can see several cosmopolitan cities together, making her a true transnational writer. Gupta's characters' lives a cosmopolitan existence and moves according to the purpose either from Calcutta to London in her previous novels as *Memories of Rain* (1992), *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1995) or from west to east as *So Good in Black* (2009) sharing the bond of deep idealistic engagement with their homeland which is tied to their memories. Memories play a vital role through which the characters find themselves present in the city of their homeland as well as their physical presence in the foreign land. Gupta makes the flashback technique seamlessly wield with the narrative thereby bringing the effective role of memories in her works. Such narratives framed "in the context of transnational, transcultural metropolises" (Williams, 1999) demand a technique that can represent the fluidity of the movement in time, space and memory in which Gupta is well-versed. She uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to catch the flight of her characters, thoughts in the past, present and future which justly entitles her to be a young successor to Virginia Woolf.

The relationship of 'home' and 'memory' is central to diaspora. The image of home in the form of memories interspersed with nostalgia is common among the members of diasporic community which appears to be distinct in the works of Sunetra Gupta where the notion of nostalgia is tangled up with the memories of the past, the physicality of the homeland. Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands" states "The Indian writers who write from outside India...is obliged to deal with broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost...create fiction, not actual cities or villages, but invisible Imaginary Homelands, India of the mind" (Rushdie, 1991). It refers that imagination plays a major role in recalling memories of the homeland as well as of the foreign land and this aspect of diasporic writing is in full sway in Gupta's works in which the memories are collected like broken pieces of mirror by the protagonists in which we can see only fragmented memories of the past interspersed with the present. The memories in Gupta's novels are covered by nostalgic imagination where the writer recreates memories based on past experience of places and people. The 'absence of home' and the 'presence of home' generate a rich ground for creativity for the migratory birds to construct an 'imaginary homeland' (to use Rushdie's Phrase). Thus, a sort of fragmented memories are created and evoked of bygone times in which the image of home is created by creative, innovative, progressive interaction of the past, present and future to satisfy the demands of the diasporic subjects. As to where her home lies, Gupta does not suffer any postcolonial confusion and in an interview with Kim Nagy she says: "As far as where home is or where I come from, to me that is securely Bengal. My roots in the Bengali culture are very deep, my father having been very connected with it . . . Since then I have lived in places that are not home and continue to live and probably will spend the rest of life in a place that's not where I come from. But that doesn't pose any problems for me." Thus, securely rooted in Bengal, she hardly suffers any diasporic uneasiness in teaching at Oxford and possibly knows that she would not return home. Cosmopolitanism is an inevitable characteristic in her works due to her belongingness to the Rushdie and Post-Rushdie generation, yet she has carved a niche for herself among prominent Indian writers in English. This transcontinental mobility of theirs easily puts them in the class of post-colonial subject; one without homeland and forever adrift.

The paper would be highlighting the nostalgic recreation of homeland with the help of memories in Sunetra Gupta's latest and fifth novel, *So Good in Black* (2009), where images begin to unroll out of the dark recesses of memory. The layering of events through memories is done so grippingly that they reflect on one another. The novel is a character driven literary fiction exploring the market of ethical imperialism which highlights moral and emotional displacement across time and space. Told in memories and fragmentation it narrates the story of a group of friends who meet after a long time on the sea-shore of Bengal where the reader gets the full-textured tapestry of each person through the narrator Max Gate and how do they connect to one another with the help of memories throughout the novel.

The novel begins with, on the eve of transit of Venus in 2004 - a day astrologically associated with transformation of consciousness when the character Max Gate an American travel-writer, returns to his

homeland after fifteen years and meet his friends at the sea-shore of Digha, West Bengal and for the first time we see the power of memory engulfing the whole atmosphere where Max notices a child named Adrija whose mother he loved once and feels nostalgic, "Child on the sea-shore. I loved your mother once. How cruelly these words pound through my blood as I walk..." (3). This reminds him of his romantic relationship with Ela, Nikhilesh's daughter who turns to be an extremely beautiful dancer and gives performances in New York, London. But this view is trampled when he gets the news of death of one of their close friends Damini, who is killed in an accident. Damini was a crusading journalist who used to run a women's shelter. Byron Mallick is a Bengali businessman who supplied milk adulterated with chalk powder to Damini's orphanage and is suspected behind Damini's death. He says "Better surely for them to drink something resembling milk than no milk at all" (5) through which Gupta reflects a sort of ethical imperialism pervading these days where the rules are manipulated for selfish gains. When Damini came to know the adulterated milk being served to her orphanage, she says that she will bring it to the media. Mallick pleaded Damini not to destroy his reputation and the whole story revolves round solving the mystery behind Damini's death. Max Gate is nostalgic throughout the novel and looks back at the past with the passport of memory when he was more capable, loving and innocent. Sometimes as a narrator he even swallows others past. Thus, we get to know only 'fragmented memories' as narrated by Max. He reminisces his romantic relationship with Ela, and recalls how he used to find out ways to spend time with her, "None of it is, as I might have predicted, too inconsequential, these old spaces become ransacked of memory by the very condition of my being there again, my passing my hands over the teak that Ela and I had both breathed upon once, the wall still bleeding chalky distemper against which I first pinned her to take her face in my hands and kiss her lips, the same crowcalls and rude noises of transport that had somehow insulated us in this heaven." (251) The flashbacks set in Calcutta delineate the fervent and passionate relationship that developed between Ela and Max Gate and juxtapose with scenes from the characters present which mirrors their relationship in the novel. Ela is caught between her faithfulness towards her husband Arjun and the first love of her life, Max. In the meantime Max's former brother-in-law and Barbara's brother Piers O'Reilly, is resolute to bring Byron to justice. Max recalls how Ela was worried for her cousin Damini and would ask him to see that she was fine, "Regularly, Ela would telephone me at work late in the afternoon to say that she was worried for her cousin, and I would pick her up from wherever she might be whether a rehearsal nearby or at the university where she had just started her graduate studies in dance...our hands aching to touch" (9). He also remembers of how even he was guilty of using Damini in his books when he used to dream of becoming the novelist. For most part in the novel, Gate spends the Calcutta summer on the beach in an armchair. He experiences a heightened sense of wonder and chill towards the landscape which is tied to his memories. Max Gate is truly transnational in the sense that with the help of memories he is at once in the homeland and on the other in the foreign land, settled in Calcutta from Fair Haven, New Jersey. Max recalls how Barbara his ex-wife, "saw it as a wonderful way for us to be truly together, a foreign environment serving both to insulate us and possibly throw some surreal grist into the mill of our marriage" (37), thus entreating the colorful India. However during his journey, he becomes acquainted with the realism of "the pungent heat-twisted winds of the city (Calcutta)" (30). The novel is surrounded by the memories of people in Calcutta, London, New York and the mind makes adjustments between these lands thus making endless comparisons unintended and the memories bring to life all the countries together in a single instance. Gupta beautifully describes the sea-shores of Bengal and the paths of Calcutta as she describes the country house in Ireland. The narrative with the help of flashback technique shifts from east to west and vice-versa and the plot turns around the fulcrum of these cities.

As the story moves to and fro, Byron is impeached in the court followed by many witnesses but is released at the end. But as his health deteriorates, he is hospitalized and after a few days comes the loss of another good friend of theirs, Byron Mallick. The novel ends on a mournful note where Nikhilesh, Arjun and Max Gate are sitting together in Mallick's villa, searching for his photograph to be given for the

obituary notice in the newspaper and Nikhilesh finds out an old black and white photograph of Mallick and says "He always looked so good in black" (287) reminiscing how good Mallick was in the earlier days when he wanted to be a Professor of History but time has made him a corrupt person. Gupta has highlighted the market of ethics that prevail these days and the novel forces us to look back even at our past and to notice the differences that has taken place thereby feeling nostalgic. In the end as many characters orbit around the enigmatic Byron Mallick, only memory has the power that seems able to heal the scars of loss and betrayal met in the present.

Sandhya Shukla writes, "Indians were not the only ones on the move; India, too was travelling" (Shukla, 2003). Sandhya Shukla, the critic on Indian Diaspora in the West, observes that in Gupta's novels the same spirit and intensity of attachment with the homeland gets visualized in her novels. Still, in her work, there is a large spectrum of characters, who in spite of being attached with their native lands, typically justifies the lives of the essentially main diasporic characters. The characters in *So Good in Black* are freely moving with fluid geographies, highlighting transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. An essential characteristic of diasporic writing depends on the push and pull factors that determines the nature of diasporic community in foreign land. Gupta shows mysticism in referring to the factors responsible for attracting the attention of the common people towards the east, including better options for education and income, as is evident through the characters of Nikhilesh and his wife who go to Africa, leaving their family behind which justifies the current trends in migration. Gupta undergoes the memories of home through the materialistic things, such as the sea-side resort of Mallick where Max feels nostalgic on an arm-chair recollecting the past memories. The entire novel deals with the incidents firmly rooted in Calcutta, New York, Africa, Britain which capture the sights and sounds as authentically as possible. Somdatta Mandal in her article "Sunetra Gupta," writes "Steeped in Bengali culture, especially the Calcutta of the 1950s and 1960s that she nostalgically re-creates 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, 2006) The novel *So Good in Black* abounds in the image of Calcutta which truly reflects that the image of home has always been dear to her. In an interview with Amit Shankar Saha Gupta says that "It was very valuable to me to have a book launch in Calcutta, the city that occupies so much of my being. But not having my father around anymore he died five years ago has made it difficult for me to want to return; this was a good way to break that pattern." This clearly implies that her longing, loyalty and engagement with the culture back home is too strong. Also her father was an important figure in her life who introduced her to the different areas of Arts and criticism, with the help of which she is able to rekindle the memories left behind. Gupta is equally adept in both the cultures that of Calcutta and Oxford and the 'desh-pardesh' syndrome as said by Somdatta Mandal fits well as she manages to bridge the gap between the two (Mandal, 2006). Her love for the home land is reflected in each of her novels and she maintains the connection with the 'roots' as well as the 'routes'.

### **Conclusion:**

Memory becomes a vital player in many of Gupta's novels, be it *Memories of Rain* or *So Good in Black*. Memory demands an experimental narrative technique through which it blends fantasy with the past and thus keeps intervening in the linear flow of the plot as we see in *So Good in Black* in which the minor plots become decisive while solving the major mysteries of the deaths, disappearances of certain characters. Gupta uses highly evocative and at times intense lyrical prose that fuses time, space and memory in her transcontinental narrative. It is this quality that sets her apart from other writers of her generation. In the novel, Gupta makes a collage of the city of Calcutta and she uses it as a tool to revisit her memories which are left behind. Her engagement with the culture back home is too intense and continues for a long time as is the trend with many NRIs writing in English. Although all the characters have become truly global but the image of homeland is never out of their minds which bring out the autobiographical element in the novel in which even Gupta has travelled to different places due to her father's teaching job



but the association that she has with her homeland is reflected in each of her novels and she uses memory as a medium to bridge the gap between her homeland and the foreign land. In *So Good in Black*, we do not see racism, culture-conflict, and identity-crisis. The characters are freely moving in different parts of the world turning cosmopolitan but at the same time are attached to their homeland and thus feel nostalgic which brings in the idea that no matter however globalized or modern we become but homeland always holds a special place in our hearts, mind and soul. Throughout the novel the characters are reliving their homeland memories and take it as a ray of hope to connect the present with the past which has forced even me to live those memories which I have left behind with my near and dear ones.

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