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Locating the female subject in diaspora: A reading of Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* and Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*

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Abstract

The globalised world has witnessed the emergence of the immigrant communities who are carrying forward the legacy of the age old dispersal of the people from home country to a foreign land. Mass mobility has become a frequent postcolonial phenomenon that associates itself with dislocation, rootlessness, alienation, racial subjugation and search for identity. These immigrant

experiences have been effectively recorded and theorised in various creative as well as in critical writings. The diasporic female authors and critics too have stepped forward to reflect the women's perspective regarding the struggle of the immigrant women who are trying to adjust in their new settlements fighting against both the racial and gender biasness to find a dignified way of living. The present paper will attempt to discuss two novels — Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* and Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* — for the illustration of such experiences.

Keywords: diaspora, dislocation, subalternity, identity, female subjectivity

The emergence and popularity of the diasporic study highlight the growing impact of the immigrant communities in the twentieth century in the spheres of economics, politics, cultural studies, sociology, literature etc. The basic concept of diaspora has obviously been derived from the age old dispersal of the Jews from Israel, though the modern diaspora is very much different from the Jewish Diaspora in its essence as well as in enormity. It is perhaps for this reason that Nikos Papastergiadis begins his celebrated work *The Turbulence of Migration* with the comment: "Migration, in its endless motion, surrounds and pervades almost all aspects of contemporary society" (1). The changing world with its overwhelming global economy, politics, communication etc. has affected human life greatly and prompted the citizens to embark on voluntary migration for better prospects of living. The different diasporas of the world with their distinguished cultural inheritance have produced a cross-cultural hybrid existence and hyphenated identity that are quite unique. Such phenomena have inspired the academicians to exploit the field of diasporic study in order to explore its enormous possibilities.

Diasporic experiences are best expressed by those authors who themselves have been members of the diasporic communities. They have thoroughly studied the life of the first generation immigrants along with the life of the subsequent generations of diaspora, whose dilemma to choose between the inherited and acquired cultures, life of in-betweenness have put a question to their identity. The modern diasporic experiences are more intricate than the simplified theorisation of identity crisis in diaspora. One of the reasons behind this is the heterogeneity in the diasporic communities. Even a single diasporic group is constituted of people of different genders, ages, races, ethnicities, languages, cultures etc. which make it perfectly diverse in nature. Avtar Brah rightly points out in this connection that "all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common 'we'" (184). Each member of the diaspora possesses different identities and their experiences differ from the other fellow members. In this way, a generalised theoretical discourse of diaspora cannot claim to encompass the entire picture of their life.

A major part of diasporic study deals with the relation between the people of the hostland and the migrants who settle there. It is often noticed that this relationship is based on the self/other or the centre/periphery binaries where the diasporic people are considered to be the 'outsiders' or the 'marginals'. Explaining this idea of 'majority/minority' Brah elaborates:

> The term 'minority' was applied primarily to British citizens of African, Caribbean and Asian descent — a postcolonial code that operated as a polite substitute for 'coloured people'. The elaboration of the discourse of 'minorities' marks the fraught histories, now widely documented, of immigration control, policing, racial violence, inferiorisation and discrimination that has become the hallmark of daily life of these groups. (186-87)

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The consciousness of being a marginalised group in the host country is always present among the diasporic communities. As most of the migrations have taken place from the Third World countries to the Euro-American nations, the people of colour have to negotiate with the cultural shock in the settlement process. Moreover, various discriminatory national laws and economic policies curtailing some rights of the migrants, racial violence, religious discrimination etc. emphasise the migrants' 'otherness'. As a result of all these, the diaspora people continue to live the life of subalterns in the host country. John McLeod aptly comments in this connection:

> Although migrants may pass through the *political* borders of nations, crossing their frontiers and gaining entrance to new places, such 'norms and limits' can be used to exclude migrants from being accommodated inside the *imaginative* borders of the nation. The dominant discourses of 'race', ethnicity and gender may function to exclude them from being recognised as part of the nation's people. Migrants may well live in new places, but they can be deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking the new land as their home. (212, original emphasis)

A generalised notion of diasporic experiences faces challenge from within when it is contested on the ground of its gendered nature. The feminist theorists and the women writers contend the discourse of diaspora claiming that the representation of the women of colour is either negligible or stereotyped in it. According to these critics, diasporic women are the doubly marginalised members of diaspora as they have to face racial subjugation as well as patriarchal domination simultaneously and such unfavourable conditions and prejudiced attitudes have made

their struggle for existence in the host country more challenging than that of their male counterparts. C. Vijayasree writes:

> Migration and relocation may be better conceptualized as cases of rupture and disjunctive crisis. This rupture and crisis acquire an extra poignancy in the case of female immigrants because for them diasporic living entails double distancing/double exile. Women are born into an 'expatriate' state (the term expatriation is itself conjoined to patriarchy) and they are expatriated in patria, hence a geographic movement away from home to an alien country is only an accentuation of gendered exile that they have all along borne. It is this sense of perpetual elsewhereness that steadily reinforces the woman's need for survival and self-preservation. (130-31)

Differentiated at home and outside, diasporic women felt the need to adopt a different approach to voice their experiences of dislocation and subaltern status. Indian female diasporic voices have also emphasised this condition of diasporic women in their creative as well as critical works. Diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meera Syal, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni etc. have concentrated on these issues by portraying various experiences of diasporic women, and at the same time, tried to subvert the identities preserved for them by the patriarchal and racial discourses. Yasmin Hussain precisely comments on this self-consciousness of the diasporic South Asian women as:

> The majority culture harboured notions about South Asian communities and the place of women within them which frequently distorted by stereotypical images and ethnocentric perception of women in the context of western values of

> independence and individuality, which South Asian cultures were seen as denying. However, from within the minority groups themselves, inherited ideas of South Asian identity and women's roles were also being questioned, not only by the men who were supposedly the privileged guardians of imposed identities but also by the women themselves who rejected the identities prescribed for them. (1)

Diasporic experiences vary for each woman, but still, there are some shared experiences that bind the diasporic women together as a group. A comprehensive analysis of the fictional representations of these experiences makes this idea clear. In this paper, two novels by two celebrated Indian diasporic women authors, Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* (1992) and Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997), have been taken up for discussion focusing on the aspect of diasporic female subalternity. The discussion will attempt to explore the dislocation of female body and psyche that tends to bring back the memories of home, the protagonists' sufferings in the dislocation process and the final attainment of self-realisation that promises them a dignified and meaningful life.

Memories of Rain is the story of Moni, a Bengali girl, a student of English literature and an ardent lover of Tagore's poetry, who marries her brother's English friend Anthony and leaves her city, Calcutta. For a romantic and sensitive girl like Moni, it is a much-desired escape from the poverty-stricken land of cruel social systems and hardship to the beautiful country of her dream, to which she has got acquainted through the literary works of the great English writers. Anthony for her becomes the rescuer, her way to access the world of liberty. Memories flood her mind, in retrospect, as the narrative presents:

> It strikes her suddenly, in the same way it had done many years ago, … that there was an immense pleasure to be found in escaping her present circumstances, in leaving the country forever. Ten years ago, he had … implored her to marry him, to come back with him to his home across the seas …. And suddenly, it became clear to her that this was the disaster she must embrace …. (MR 19)

In *Manhattan Music*, Alexander's protagonist Sandhya too tries to find respite through migration from the painful memory of her lover's death and the coaxing of her mother to get married to the man chosen for her. Torn by personal tragedy and detested to embrace a life of traditional matrimony she seeks freedom by marrying Stephen Rosenblum who comes on a trip to India. She hopes her marriage will make her forget the pangs of memory and offer her a chance to lead life on her own terms. For Sandhya, marriage to Stephen will be a new beginning of her life:

> She would be his wife …. The thoughts, which did not seem daring in themselves, merely necessary steps to straighten out her torn life, seemed in retrospect to have occurred in strict sequence, a way of conducting a woman's life. He is a stranger to her, but a kind one, and what more could she ask. She would arrange her own marriage, leap over the terrible wall her mother had erected; foil her parents at their own game. (MM 34)

Both Moni and Sandhya are the contemporary women who wilfully accept the life of exile. In order to live life following their own wishes they are eager to overcome the pull of their roots. They represent the new generation of middle-class Indian women who, according to Mala Pandurang, "anticipate the possibility of emigration as a given" (88). But their wilful dispersal

fails to provide them the happiness they have desired. In the case of Moni, it is Anthony's unfaithfulness that shatters her dream. His affair with Anna and her constant presence in their married life make Moni melancholic, indifferent and cold towards Anthony and compel her to ponder over the situation she is in:

> Why should she not be happy? The sadness of his infidelity should not cripple her, she no longer feels attraction for him, this he is painfully aware of …. She has a job, … she has a life, she has a daughter, what more could life have offered her, there, behind decayed shutters, from where he had rescued her, a more faithful marriage perhaps …. (MR 44)

Sandhya's frustration, on the other hand, is caused by her disappointment for being an ordinary purposeless housewife that she has always wanted to escape. Her wish to begin a new life full of promises remains unfulfilled and she continues to get confused how to find a meaningful life in the new place. A good establishment in Manhattan, a successful husband and a lovely daughter are not sufficient to satisfy her. Her cousin Jay wonders to see her "bent over the kitchen table .... His cousin Sandhya Rosenblum doing her own kitchen work" (MM 22). She remains conscious of the life that has engulfed her as she "felt an odd bitterness fill her at the lot she had chosen, her life as a woman thrusting her almost into the very role her mother would have picked up for her" (MM 23). America fails to dispel her painful and bizarre memories. Feelings of dislocation, frustration and loneliness complicate her confusion and lead her to despair. Sandhya feels that "the emptiness was growing in her" like "a gnawing hunger, a desperation even" (MM 42).

Diasporic life cannot provide a meaningful existence for both Moni and Sandhya. While the former is disillusioned by her partner's disloyalty, the latter feels deceived by the dreams of an untroubled life. Anthony prefers his desire for Anna to Moni's love as for him the termination of their relationship is the end of "their tropical lust" (MR 84). Sandhya suffers from loneliness having nothing substantial to do or no one to share her emotions. Stephen, though caring, has little time to spare for his wife and gradually, though unknowingly, they move apart from each other. In contrast to the "memories of shared emotion" (MM 38) of their early days, Sandhya only finds that "now she couldn't even speak openly with him, locked as she was into a world she felt she had not chosen" (MM 38). Stephen's decision to remain "absent" from her life to give her space and to encourage her self-sufficiency does not solve her problems that she faces due to her "dark femaleness" (MM 39) in the American society.

Diaspora has made the women conscious of their marginal status in the foreign land. The unpleasant moments they experience in the host society remind them of their 'otherness'. Anthony's friends, who consider England to be "demi-paradise" and India to be "a bizarre and wonderful land" where people "still burn their wives, bury alive their female children" (MR 6), reflect the colonial psychology of superiority of their ancestors. Moni recollects how "the city had remained stately and aloof" (MR 80-1) when she desired to embrace London. Even Anthony thinks that Moni belongs to a different world; she is "his tropical dream", the "Beauty that must die" (MR 82), a memory that can be cherished but cannot be lived with in real life. Vijayasree rightly comments that "Anthony's fascination for the wild exotic flower of the East fades as fast as Moni's illusions about the wonderland of the west evaporate" (134). The violent process of uprooting from home and grounding in alien land is quite clear in Anthony's thoughts as he figuratively broods over Moni's condition in England: "he has sheltered her within his palms as

the bud he had plucked, untimely, intoxicated by its incomplete scent, he had treasured in his glass house until he found that she would not bloom in her new surrounds" (MM 81-2).

In *Manhattan Music*, the situations of life make Sandhya contemplate whether her coloured identity obstructs her merging with the American life:

> Supposing she were to swallow the green card, ingest that plastic, would it pour through her flesh, a curious alchemy that would make her all right in the new world? She gazed at her two hands, extended now in front of her. What if she could peel of her brown skin, dye her hair blonde, turn her body into a pale, Caucasian thing, would it work better with Stephen? (MM 7)

The sense of otherness haunts the lives of two other women too. Sandhya's friend Draupadi is the second generation of Indo-Caribbean diaspora. Though born in New York, Draupadi has not been able to escape the racial hatred of the Whites. In her words: "I was trying to people the North American continent, but what sense did it make? I felt like a jot of black pepper sneezed out by an irritated god, flung into the flat, burning present" (MM 93). Sandhya's cousin Sakhi, who thinks that she "had become an American" (MM 132), is stoned and abused by some racist youths in the marketplace. All such instances hint at the marginalised status of diasporic people that affects the immigrant life physically and psychologically.

In the time of psychological turmoil, it is the home, the place where they can comfort their troubled souls, where both Moni and Sandhya desire to return either through mental or physical journey. Though earlier, Moni has tried to severe her emotional connection with Calcutta, she has never succeeded in it. Her watch that indicates time of her old world reminds

her the activities taking place there: "it was six in the morning in Calcutta, her father would be stretching his limbs in preparations for his journey to the market, her mother … is boiling the water for his morning tea, her grandmother … has bathed and prayed at her small household shrine, her brother, asleep in her bed" (MR 104). And in the moments of intense pain, she realises her inseparable bond with the city, a truth she has ignored earlier, and looks back again to it for shelter as she thinks that "she had been too proud then, to share her pain with the city, would the city allow her now to tend its sores …" (MR 112). This typical diasporic mood of alienation is prominent in Sandhya too who considers her visit to hometown Tiruvella as an act of rejuvenation for her weary self; here "she felt she had shed a second skin, an itchy nasty thing. She could breathe a little better …" (MM 105). The house, along with its vast garden, connects her body and mind strongly with her own history and root and frees her from all anxiety of dislocation. The novelist comments: "In her mother's garden she could breathe deep, feel the warmth of her own flesh …. Even the heat haze that had driven her indoors … could not exile her now from these acres of wild grass and flowering trees" (MM 103).

The desire for rejuvenation is also prominent in Moni who feels like the thirsty pigeons that "quench their thirst by opening their beaks to drops of rain" (MR 3). She realises that returning home, in the same way, can regenerate her exhausted, tormented spirit, as the tropical rain do to the pigeons. Thus, Moni plans to leave the world of her dream and "fantasy of marriage" (MR 140) to find solace in social work for the distressed people of her city whom she has left one day to live in "an exotic land" (MR 108). The idea inspired her, as the narrative presents: "perhaps, when she goes back, 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 diseased, the hungry, she can see herself, clothed in a dull white, soothing a sick child, a new energy seizes her …" (MR 108).

Sandhya's depressed mind seeks peace in Rashid's passionate love. She is charmed by his scholarship and intellect, and perhaps, she has thought an immigrant like Rashid can understand the pain and anxiety of her fragmented existence in a better way. But Rashid's betrayal causes Sandhya the unbearable pain of rejection and the shame of being an unfaithful wife that drive her to find ultimate freedom from all worldly affairs. She is supported in her distress by Draupadi and Sakhi, the two women who themselves are striving to find meaningful expressions of their lives through art and social work respectively amidst the confusions and difficulties of diasporic women's life. Sakhi sympathises and encourages Sandhya by saying that, "You and I have to fight against that. There's no reason why women should pay this terrible price. A price for having been born, for feeling passion, for bearing life" (MM 210). Sandhya's gradual recovery from the shock makes her determined to stay and fight. It gives her confidence to survive and find a purposeful life in America. She feels: "She was racing into America from the dark vessel of the past and she could hear it singing in her, ready to break free, the load of her womanhood, of the accumulated life, breaking free into an inconceivable sweetness" (MM 219).

The gradual assertion of female subjectivity emerging from the odds and wounds of being treated as the marginals or subalterns sans any voice informs both the narratives. In *Memories of Rain*, Moni ultimately snaps her deceased relationship of matrimony and comes away with her daughter. For so many years she has been living in a house where her presence is not desired by her husband Anthony. Rejecting the life of an 'other' among strangers in England, Moni's return to Calcutta to lead a life on her own terms is the final assertion of her free will. In *Manhattan Music*, Sandhya finally decides that she will "live out her life in America" and confront the challenges of life because she knows that "There was a place for her here" (MM

228). To get accepted in the American society is a challenging job for a migrant woman of colour, as Alexander elaborates in her *Shock of Arrival*: "The shock of arrival forces us to new knowledge. What the immigrant must work with is what she must invent in order to live. Race, ethnicity, the fluid truths of gender are all cast afresh. Nationality, too, that emptiest and yet most contested of signs, mark us" (1). At the end of the novel, we find Sandhya confident enough to consolidate herself as she declares several times to Draupadi, "I don't want to speak your words. I have to find my own" and "I have to find my own way" (MM 222). Sandhya tries to create an identity of her own, subverting the one imposed upon her. Marginal as citizens in the foreign world and as female members in the male-dominated society, all the diasporic women in the novels — Moni, Sandhya, Draupadi and Sakhi — try to seek a solution that can provide their fragmented selves a sense of completeness.

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