

Challenging Tradition in Memories of Rain by Sunetra Gupta

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Abstract

Culture, the cornerstone of human refinement, stands as the pivotal force shaping our evolution into civilized beings. Its intricate framework commands us to transcend the instincts of creatures devoid of love, identity, and intellect. The intercultural union of Moni and Antony lays bare the tension between two contrasting worlds, as they belong to vastly different cultural paradigms. Moni, the central figure, endures a harrowing post-marriage trauma, rooted in betrayal and cultural estrangement, which underscores the oppressive grip of hegemonic masculinity. The infidelity of her white husband compels Moni to retreat to Calcutta, seeking solace in the nostalgic embrace of her homeland amidst profound despair. Her audacious decision to abandon her husband and return with her daughter to her roots signifies a revolutionary defiance, shattering the rigid cultural norms that have long confined women. Through metaphorical brilliance and lyrical imagery, the author crafts two distinct cultural tapestries, vividly mirrored in the characters' dispositions. Moni emerges as a paragon of self-respect and dignity, embodying a progressive ethos that transcends societal constraints, even as she parts ways with her spouse.

Keywords: Identity formation, Cultural intersection, patriarchal dominance, racial inequality, and displacement.

Introduction

Human beings are often regarded as urbane and refined only after embracing the profound evolution of civilization through culture. It is culture that channels our thoughts, refines our habits, and imparts a sense of direction to our existence. Across the globe, countless customs emerge from diverse communities, each uniquely defining the identity and practices of its people. These cultural distinctions demonstrate the myriad ways one can lead a meaningful and harmonious life, rooted in the natural laws of coexistence. At the heart of every culture lies the universal foundation of humanity and respect. A person's cultural sophistication is measured by how they honor and value the traditions of others.

The poignant theme of diaspora encapsulates the experiences of alienation, dislocation, and perpetual wandering endured by immigrants estranged from their native lands. This cultural phenomenon revolves around the loss of a homeland, the uprooting of individuals, and their subsequent relocation to foreign terrains. Indian English literature, deeply embedded in

the geographical and cultural ethos of India, captures the essence of such diasporic journeys. Eminent immigrant writers like Amitav Ghosh, Raja Rao, Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Sunetra Gupta vividly portray the lives of Indian-born characters, illustrating their traditions, struggles, and aspirations.

Sunetra Gupta's mesmerizing novel, *Memories of Rain*, a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, is a literary masterpiece imbued with rich references and eloquent prose. It delves into the intertwined lives of two young protagonists, Antony and Moni, who hail from contrasting nations and cultures. Set in 1978 India, particularly in the vibrant city of Calcutta, the narrative brings together the perceptive and imaginative Antony with Moni, a culturally anchored student. The novel's intricate style evokes echoes of Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique, weaving together vivid memories and profound reflections on human nature and cultural traditions.

Anthony, an Englishman, arrives in Calcutta to conduct research on Bengali theatre. It is Moni's elder brother, referred to as 'Dada,' who introduces him amidst the rain-drenched chaos of a Calcutta flood storm. Moni, captivated by her literary aspirations and a deep-seated allure for European culture, finds herself drawn to Anthony.

"We talked, this afternoon, as everybody else snored away, we talked of poetry as it thundered outside. It has been raining all day, it is driving me insane..." (Gupta, 1992:26)

The two explored various places together, including the iconic Citizen Kane Theater and Amrita's home, which deepened their acquaintance and brought them closer. Eventually, the young couple began their life in London, a move that marked a stark contrast to Moni's expectations of a romanticized foreign land. Her initial enchantment was soon replaced by disillusionment as she encountered an alien culture rife with contradictions to her literary ideals. The clash of traditions and the stark reality of cultural dissonance left her estranged in this unfamiliar environment.

Anthony, once captivated by Moni, began to drift away, his desire for her waning as he grew indifferent to the purity he once admired. Their relationship fractured irreparably when Anna entered their lives, disrupting whatever semblance of harmony remained. Despite Moni's efforts to assimilate into Anthony's tastes and habits, her sacrifices went unnoticed, and her longing for his attention remained unmet. The author masterfully portrays the anguish of a displaced mind, highlighting the complexities of diasporic identity and the alienation brought about by geographical and cultural boundaries.

Moni's emotional turmoil and despair found expression in the soulful poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, whose *Gitanjali* earned global acclaim with a Nobel Prize. Through these songs, she voiced her profound grief and loveless existence, embodying the pain of cultural collision and the emotional chasm between East and West. Her disillusionment with the reality of England, fortified by her literary grounding in the works of Tagore, Agatha Christie, and Jane Austen, underscores her inner conflict. A devoted reader of romantic literature in both Bengali and English, Moni's favorite novel, *Wuthering Heights*, profoundly shaped her notions of fervent, destined, yet angelic love-a vision that clashed tragically with her lived reality.

She had dreamt then of wandering as a spirit with her beloved upon English moors, her hot tears had spilled upon the yellowed pages, she had loved Heathcliff before she loved any man, and she had let sweet weakness grow within her, she had convinced herself... (Gupta, 1992:177)

Moni's profound emotions are deeply shaped by her immersion in literature and the ideologies of Romanticism and Modernism. Her thoughts frequently drift to characters and works that resonate with her own life experiences: memories of childhood, Anthony tenderly caressing her dark hair in a blissful reverie, his passionate love for Anna echoing the themes of Tagore's *Banalata Sen* and the imagery in Sukanta Bhattacharya's poetry. Yet, Moni struggles to articulate her feelings adequately in English, or even through translations of literary works, revealing how language becomes an insurmountable barrier in her attempts to communicate with Anthony. Resigned to this limitation, Moni chooses silence as her means of expression-a poignant yet futile effort, as Anthony fails to grasp her emotional language.

Although Moni aspires to write in English and dreams of publishing her work in journals or books, her proficiency falls short of the standards set by her friend Sharmila, whose mastery of the language far surpasses hers. Sharmila remains the only person with whom Moni can exchange letters, blending English and Bengali. Moni pours her experiences into her writing, particularly using black ink, but she avoids chronicling her life with Anthony, unable to confront the embarrassment of revealing such personal pain to others or even to herself. This cessation of writing during her turbulent years with Anthony stifles her creative spirit and distorts her true character. The growing anguish leads her to distance herself emotionally from both Anthony and Anna.

In an attempt to reclaim her autonomy, Moni seeks employment to bolster her resilience in the challenging landscape of London. She secures a temporary administrative role at a library, a position that rekindles memories of her school and college days spent in the quiet solace of libraries, particularly during the summer of 1976. As an assistant to Gayathri at the Institute Library, she finds a semblance of familiarity but continues to face financial difficulties, relying on Anthony's credit cards to supplement her meager salary. Despite her efforts, Moni remains deprived of moral support and security, as Anthony's affections are solely reserved for Anna.

Anthony and Anna share a harmonious life, even in Moni's presence, along with her daughter, leaving her isolated and neglected. Sunetra Gupta's narrative seamlessly shifts between past and present, unraveling how Moni's initial days of hope and curiosity in London devolve into a harrowing reality of cultural alienation, emotional rejection, and betrayal.

Anthony's ongoing relationship with Anna reflects a Western cultural inclination toward polygamy and a life driven by desire rather than one grounded in philosophical principles or ancestral traditions. Anna, a tall and strikingly beautiful woman, is the daughter of a poet and was captivated by Anthony's intellectual interests, particularly his affinity for books and writing, as well as his fair complexion. Anthony, in turn, developed an emotional bond with Anna, reminiscent of his earlier romantic entanglements with white women during his university years. For Moni, this infidelity was the ultimate betrayal, plunging her into a state of loveless despair with no one to support her in an unfamiliar land. The marital betrayal forms the central conflict of the novel, shaping its subsequent developments. To Anthony, love and marriage are not confined to a single partner, a justification that becomes the tragic flaw-or hamartia-in Moni's life.

Moni finds herself grappling with the clash of cultures and traditions. While adopting elements of Western culture-such as attending parties and wearing modern attire-seemed like a potential bridge to connect with Anthony, these superficial gestures did little to foster intimacy. Her heart clung to the emotional bond forged in India before their marriage. Moni's reluctance to share her role within the family stems from her deeply ingrained cultural values, a reflection of her upbringing. However, Anna's intellectual and emotional connection with Anthony usurps Moni's place, leaving her feeling displaced. Moni often recalls the mythological character Satyavati when reflecting on Anna's illicit relationship with her husband, drawing parallels between their situations. Gradually, she comes to see Anthony for what he truly is-a quintessential Western man whose love is conditional and rooted in shared cultural ties.

Realizing the emptiness of Anthony's affections, Moni contemplates retaliatory actions, such as gifting Anna her wedding saree or harming her daughter to disrupt their lives. Yet, her cultured upbringing prevents her from resorting to such crude measures. Ultimately, Moni decides to leave Anthony permanently, a resolution she reaches on the day of her daughter's sixth birthday party. Despite her longing to return to India, Anthony forbids her, fully aware of how deeply her nostalgia for her homeland affects her daily life. Moni often reflects on her position within the family, finding it increasingly intolerable not just because of the lack of love but due to the absence of respect. As the years pass, the strain of her humiliating status grows unbearable.

In the week leading up to her daughter's birthday, Moni's despair becomes palpable, intensifying in the final three days. Her silent anguish is evident in her withdrawn demeanor, as even her moments alone with her pillows reflect her mounting sorrow. This climactic period underscores the depth of her emotional turmoil and the inevitability of her decision to seek freedom from a loveless and oppressive existence.

Moni's adherence to traditional paradigms appears to be the underlying catalyst for her existential afflictions in London. Her emotions and worldview, profoundly influenced by the literary profundities of Tagore and sacred epics such as the Mahabharata, were further shaped by mythological narratives, veneration of myriad deities, and the rigid observance of conventional lifestyles. Her reminiscences are imbued with the sanctity of her childhood-her camaraderie with Gayatri, Tapan, Manash, and Amrita, the ethereal embrace of sacred rivers like the Ganges, and the intoxicating fragrance of hyacinths.

In stark contrast, Anthony epitomizes the Western lens of cultural myopia, serving as a mouthpiece for the stereotypical occidental disdain for Eastern traditions. His reductive perception of the East as a barbaric realm where widows are cruelly immolated with their deceased husbands epitomizes a grotesque misapprehension of cultural complexity. This myopic ideology aligns with the imperialistic constructs critiqued in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*. These seminal works illuminate how Western hegemonies engineered the subjugation of the East, relegating culturally sophisticated societies to subordinate status and institutionalizing colonial dominion.

Moni's plight is exacerbated by racial discrimination, a dynamic Anthony appears to enjoy as a beneficiary of his whiteness. Within the imperialistic dogma that underscores their relationship, Moni is stripped of agency, left to endure the silent torment of her anguish with no confidant to share her despair. In her isolation, she metaphorically embraces darkness as her sole companion, signifying the depth of her alienation. The narrative underscores the fraught psyche of a woman grappling with emancipation from the multifaceted chains of subjugation, only to confront humiliation, indignity, and societal relegation. It elucidates the entrenched patriarchal order that confines women to domestic servitude, barring them from surpassing the omnipotence ascribed to the male as the archetype of global leadership.

Moni's resolve to sever ties with Anthony, while liable to be condemned as an affront to traditional norms, emerges as an act of defiance born from the imperative to reclaim her dignity. This decision signifies her awakening to the realization that existence is not contingent upon a husband's validation. By transcending the confines of matrimonial dependency, she affirms that a life of substance and purpose lies beyond the parameters of familial subordination. This epiphany encapsulates her journey from subjugation to self-assertion, heralding her liberation from the oppressive vestiges of imperial and patriarchal chains.

"when she go 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 dull white, soothing a sick
child,
a new energy seizes her...(Gupta 1992:108)

Moni's decision to return to her homeland, India, serves as a powerful reclamation of her identity and self-worth. The thought of reconnecting with her native Calcutta fills her with a profound sense of joy and completeness. Her departure from England, alongside her daughter, symbolizes an emancipation from the chains of mental and physical anguish inflicted by a faithless husband who failed to acknowledge her suffering-a torment born of dislocation and the severance from her roots. This act of liberation resonates with the voices of literary icons and activists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Virginia Woolf, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker, who have championed women's autonomy and the fundamental right to self-determination. Their work asserts that a woman's freedom lies solely within her own hands, beyond the constraints of religion, culture, or societal constructs imposed by a patriarchal world that deems her "the second sex." Moni's resolution to rebuild a life of dignity, love, and kinship in her homeland underscores her rejection of a life marred by subjugation.

Conclusion

Culture and character are inextricably linked, each shaping and reflecting the other. A person's essence is defined by the culture they embrace and the customs they embody. However, the experience of crossing borders and traversing foreign lands often leads to a profound sense of cultural dislocation. For Moni, the choice to return to her homeland signifies the unshackling of a woman's spirit-an assertion that no chain can bind her once she awakens to the true essence of womanhood. The human pursuit of meaning, whether through grand ideologies or simple principles, is antithetical to the notions of slavery, subjugation, and discrimination. Through Moni's journey, the author conveys a poignant message: the ultimate purpose of a woman's life is to lead a culturally enriched and authentic existence, one that honors her intrinsic nature without succumbing to the corrupting forces of oppression.

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