

Phenomenon of Cultural Displacement in Sunetra Gupta's *The Glassblower's Breath*

¹A. Arun, ²B. Karthikeyan

¹Ph.D Research Scholar (External), Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram

²Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor, Annamalai University, Chidambaram

Abstract

This paper is a critical study of cultural identity in Sunetra Gupta's *The Glassblower's Breath* focuses on issues such as frustration, arrange marriage, racial discrimination, cultural alienation, east-west discord, identity crisis, intercommunity, cultural rootness. Culture, cultural identity, and literature are inseparable. Like literature mirrors different cultural traits, social institutions, stratifications, power structures and power relations of a particular society. Any literary text more or less tries to discover the whole panorama of human life with similarity and differences. The tremendous difference between two ways of life leads a person to a feeling of depression and frustration. Various themes like immigration, cultural conflict, identities, religion, class, race, gender, nationalism, multiculturalism, feminism, rationalism, frustration, caste system arrange marriage, love and hate relationship are reflected in the fiction. Gupta's fiction has been interpreted in various ways.

Keywords: Culture, identity, Diaspora, Multiculturalism.

INTRODUCTION

Sunetra Gupta, an accomplished novelist, essayist, and scientist, has been cruising with poise and skill, whether it is across languages, disciplines, continents, or genres. Gupta remains a rather unenthusiastic member in the boldly publicised clique of Indian English Literature. She never shares its anthropological fixation over the nostalgic re-creation of home, nor does she commemorate the mongrel dilemma about identity. Her explanation of diaspora is along the more nuanced emotional and moral axes rather than the angst of sheer physical displacement. A crucial difference between Gupta and many Indian writers in English is that she is not a full-time author. She is both writer and researcher. Professionally an academic, Gupta is in a position to unabashedly defy the pressures from the market and flaunt the freedom to write purely at her will and rhythm and according to her ideals and ethics.

Sunetra Gupta relates to an iteration of Indian English authors whose linguistic and cultural affinities are primarily cosmopolitan. Its leading figures are from the family of Bengali. They have the stereotypical education. They are highly educated. Their education allows them to decide the course of their action without giving up their respect for themselves. In the worst situations, they show their instinct of survival. They can live without being irritated or mentally stranded throughout their lives. The whole has been concentrated in *Memories of Rain* within one day. Monideepa is its main character. She's an Indian female. After marrying the Englishman Anthony, she came to England. Then she chooses to leave her unbelieving husband with her daughter and come back to India.

Moni and Anthony's relationship introduces the usual inter-cultural divisions and racist paraphernalia. The novel shows the indifference between two different "cold"

nations, England and Rabindra's customarily wealthy Bengal. The reminiscent of a blessed and captivating voice of a majority ethnic female captured among India and England marks the victorious debut. In fact, Sunetra Gupta built a new tradition and made captivating in the novel. A single weekend is the action of Sunetra Gupta's mesmerizing novel. Moni is a woman born in Calcutta. She is disgusting about the unfaithfulness of her English husband. On the sixth birthday of the child, she plans secretly to take her daughter to India.

For Gupta being a diasporic writer, her subjectivity is complicated by her multiple subject positions. And such is the case with other diasporic writers equally. It is quite a characteristic of migrant literature that certain things become both objects of exploration and tools of exploration. Even the English language is used both as a tool to explore the diasporic situation and being the prime language in the diaspora is an object of exploration. Gupta's world is a hybrid one; her writing is preternaturally sensitive to the trajectory of individual lives, of migrations across continents, of lower- and middle-class post-Partition Bengali culture; but it is also open to excess, to stereotypes and archetypes, to the vague, intense longings of the feminized, adolescent imagination. These psychological dichotomies mirror the two cultures - Bengali and English - that have shaped, vivified, and also fractured Gupta's sensibility, a sensibility, thus, in which nothing is ever finally resolved.

The concept of displacement is pre-eminent in history and therefore it is fundamental to all spheres of study. In fact displacement as a concept shows amazing interdisciplinary applications. In "Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon," John Durham Peters writes that through the ages the vocabulary of social description has been dominated by mobility and displacement:

Consider some of the personae characterized by their mobility: Abraham, the sojourner and a stranger, never to return to His home; Odysseus, who finally returns to Penelope after

his odyssey; Oedipus, an outcast from his city; the legend of the wandering Jew; flaneurs, loafers, and bohemians; gypsies, gypsy scholars, sea gypsies, and gypsy truckers; hoboes, tramps, drifters, vagabonds,

and flimflam artists; sociologists, private eyes, men and women of the street; sailors, soldiers of fortune, adventurers, and explorers; border crossers of all sorts; gauchos, cowboys, and guerrilla fighters; pioneers, pilgrims, and crusaders; knights errant, troubadours, minstrels, charlatans, and journeymen; Huns, Vandals, Goths, Mongols, Berbers, and Bedouins; tourists, travellers, hajji, refugees, immigrants, the stateless and the homeless; commuters, telecommuters, jet-setters, migrant workers, and Gastarbeiter; automobilists, bikers, and circus people. Movement is one of the central resources for social description. (The Glassblower's Breath, 18)

Dislocation/migration/exile/expatriation - whatever may be the mode of displacement, the basic idea of movement itself defines an individual. It is not the static state, but the temporality of all such conditions that becomes evident when a telescopic view of the demography of the world is taken.

In *The Glassblower's Breath* (1993), Sunetra Gupta's second novel, the rather erratic father proposes an antidote to his young daughter - the cryptic protagonist "you" - in order to overpower her desolation in England in the first few months after she journeys away from her home, Calcutta. This blatant bilingual exercise, written from the two ends of the book, is metonymic of a snug ease of the author with travel across diversified registers - whether they be cultural, geographical, or linguistic. At home with the world, it has none of the frightful overtones of expatriation and forced dispersal connected with the Judeo-Hebraic origins of the word "diaspora."

Fortuitously, Gupta has affirmed this fictional father of *The Glassblower's Breath* to be influenced by her own father whom she intensely adores: "The other key character is you's father who is very much like my own"

(9). And she herself never holds very various ideas when it comes to travel and negotiating across cultures and geographies. In the novel, where Gupta moves closer to her theorising about home and diaspora, exemplified by the novel's transnational characters seeking the healing-space of home in the very condition of being unhoused. As she suggests in an interview, "A State of Perpetual Wandering: Diaspora and Black British Writers": "Well, I was quite keen to live here, again because I considered London to be an international city ... The truth is I don't live in England in a way. That's just how it is. That's what I have chosen to do is create a space that is somewhat outside of being anywhere" (web).

The characters in *The Glassblower's Breath* appear to defy any sense of geographical or even emotional belonging. The plot details a single day in the lives of a butcher, a baker and a candle-maker and the unnamed woman referred to as "you" whom all the three men love. All these principal characters happen to be in London that day. One of them is a man called Jonathan Sparrow, her college friend, with whom she has an extraordinary intellectual affinity. She loves him very intensely, more than anyone else in the novel. As the novel begins Jonathan Sparrow is because of leave London where he has been visiting "you." She takes him to Heathrow, but he determines he cannot bear to flee to New York. Without her knowledge he returns back to Central London. Sparrow happens to be a candle-maker and the other two men happen to be a butcher and a baker. The baker is Bengali and has been living in England for a long-time; he has put to an arranged marriage but is totally in love with you. He views her as she comes from a bookshop with the butcher and follows them for the rest of the day as they (you and the butcher) seek a place to make love. The butcher, who is from South London, is on a day out with his six-year-old son. "You" feels a mind-boggling physical attraction towards him, so much so that she forgets everything she is supposed to do that day. Finally they converge upon the Kensington town house where "you" lives with her wealthy half Iranian, half English

husband and her orphaned niece, who has recently arrived from Calcutta.

Such dislocated, fractured sensibilities play a crucial role in all of Gupta's novels, especially in her early work, as in the novels *Memories of Rain*, and *The Glassblower's Breath*. Modernist aesthetics celebrates the ordinary with a mode of articulation that is far from ordinary, that which Astride identifies as "its willed interference with the

transparency of discourse", and this arguably heightens the dichotomy between the familiar and the alien. This 'alienness' of discourse is striking in Gupta's fiction, in a profound sense of the aesthetic craft, an Empsonian ambiguity and a complexity of prose, richly figurative, full of myth and the heavy shadows of memory, a brooding interiority of consciousness. Modernist fiction is sometimes considered to move between two poles the extreme subjectivity of Lawrence and Woolf on one hand, and the clinical detachment of Joyce's artist paring his fingernails on the other. Gupta seems heavily tilted to the direction of the subjective, an inclination which goes with the relative lack of humor in her fiction. A figure like, for instance, Malik Solanka of Rushdie's novel *Fury*, Cambridge academic turned maker of Little Brain dolls, protagonists of his popular TV program on the history of philosophy, seems unlikely in her world. Gupta seems neither capable of, neither inclined towards that kind of mockingly self-ironic gesture that is so representative of postmodernism.

But even this foregrounding of subjectivity, intense and liberated within the fictional paradigms, remains true to the construction of alterity, mainly in the location of the Indian woman, as with the characters of Niharika in *A Sin of Colour* and the nameless female protagonists of *Memories of Rain* and *The Glassblower's Breath*. Attridge's claim of the potential relation of modernist aesthetics and the ethics of altered becomes especially relevant with the dynamics of style and subject in Gupta's fiction, but what is perhaps more intriguing is the way an essentially modernist foregrounding of subjectivity seems to

constitute an ethical awareness of the ‘Other’ through such subjectivity rather than against it.

Take for instance the passage where the narrator-protagonist of *Memories of Rain*, a Bengali girl from a middle class Calcutta family, appears before her brother’s English friend, Anthony, whom she is later to marry and the way her own appearance, distanced and desubjectified, is refracted through her own consciousness:

“...and she was summoned to take out to her brother and his white friend a kerosene light. And so she appeared to him a second time, lantern-lit, in the damp darkness, a phantom of beauty, and his eyes roamed for a time after she had disappeared inside, the ghost of light that her presence had left, there beside him, in the rain-swollen dark” (2).

The *Glassblower’s Breath* Gupta’s novel recounts one day in the life of a young Indian woman: her physical and mental movement between various locations haunted by memories of love and death. Hers is a movement driven by lust and a desire to re-write fate, resulting in the collision of three distinct yet at times intertwining parts of her life, which Sushelia Nasta (“Homes” 99) identifies as the physical, embodied in Daniel, the butcher, whom she has a brief impulsive sexual affair with; the emotional, represented by Avishek, the baker, his cousin and first love; and the intellectual, in the figure of Jonathan Sparrow, “itinerant candle-maker” (*The Glassblower’s Breath*, 220), her best friend from college. The novel is told in second-person narration, focalized through the female protagonist; for the most part, the homodiegetic narrator is (probably) the protagonist’s husband, the immunologist Alexander, who uses the pronoun ‘you’ when talking about and addressing the heroine, and ‘he’ when referring to all the male characters, including himself (Reitan, 165). On the other hand, the fact that the husband is not present during the heroine’s wanderings suggests the combined use of a number of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators (the lovers), who tell her stories:

And here you are now, in the city of your dreams, in a houseful of mirrors that each scream your story ... Some fissure your gaze into a thousand threads, others curve your smile into cruel rain bowed horizons ... Somewhere, among these, hide the lineaments of your destiny, that you will always search. Yet, every one of them, my love, down to the last looking glass, will tell your tale differently, as we will, my love, all of us who have loved you. (*The Glassblower’s Breath*, 123)

The quotation draws attention to the central concerns and tropes of the novel right at the start: the inter connectedness of space and identity, the mirror as the symbol of (self-reflection and multiplicity, fate versus (female) agency, love as a means of claiming agency but also of patriarchal control, and, less obviously, the trope of death as well. The fact that the heroine’s own experiences and thoughts are filtered through male narrators signals the problematic nature of female agency in the novel: due to the male-dominated second-person narration, the location the heroine may speak from is considerably threatened; yet, by experimenting with several identity positions (as we shall see later), she subverts the patriarchal system, and may even overrule the male/patriarchal voices narrating her story. The “houseful of mirrors,” as we shall claim later on, not only implies the multiplicity of perspectives but also that of identity, while the narrative technique signals the authority that these men strive to have over the female protagonist in an attempt to control her life, to keep her in a subaltern position and a confined space; meanwhile, it also suggests the possibility for the female protagonist to re-write her tale by finding other locations to speak from.

Another fascinating aspect of second-person narration is that it may not only interpolate the female protagonist but the reader as well, putting her or him in the position of a female main character and inviting a gendered viewpoint while reading.

However, this gendered viewpoint is strongly controlled by the male narrators, who hardly ever let the heroine 'speak up,' and even in these rare instances (e.g. "New York, you say ... ties with Calcutta for my second most favourite city in the world" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 105), her words appear to be a somewhat censored fragment of the heroine's thoughts consciously chosen and repeated by the male narrators rather than an original, spontaneous utterance less of a direct than a reported speech. This reparative character of second-person narration is emphasised by Mary Frances Hopkins and Leon Perkins who claim that the "you-utterance is neither command nor accusation, nor yet generalization, but report" (122) and that the narrative 'you' is an "an actant by definition ... internal to the story" (121). Being an actant or 'doer' in my view suggests to a certain degree the heroine's agency over the narrative –the male narrators may appear to be omniscient and in control of what is being said, but they have no power to change the course of events. This also means that, although the male perspective may not let the female protagonist's actual words surface in the text, her actions and various forms of movement speak for themselves and become non-verbal signs of her subjectivity and agency.

The heroine's tale is set at various locations which both define her by the various degrees of attachment and belonging she has with them and liberate her by the very movements made to, from and within them. Born in Calcutta, "the City of Pain" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 41), she "would sit late into the evening, in mirror less, moth strewn, tropical dark" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 43), lonely and isolated from reality in the "marbled halls" of her parental home (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 14). As opposed to her London house full of mirrors, the mirror less home (land) does not reflect a myriad of possible identities but suggests one pre-given identity for the heroine, imposed on her by her nationality and geographical location. However, coming from a middle-class intellectual family, her individual identity and experiences of urban space may considerably differ from those of the average Indian/Calcutta. On one hand, owing to her

class status, she is shielded from the harsh realities of the metropolis: the poverty, illiteracy, and immobility of its slums; on the other hand, from the point of view of intellectual and personal growth, the city has nothing to offer but "the meagre advantage of an exotic past which you have exploited so shamelessly in your prose" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 225), as well as asituatedness generated by location, locale and an allegedly stable identity, un-mirrored, singular and restricted to fixity. Therefore, the young protagonist and her father's immigration to Birmingham becomes a means of escaping the "festering," "decaying city" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 41, 225) for the sake of knowledge a journey to discover further aspects of their identity.

Being a young child, the heroine's experiences of migration are mainly restricted to the feeling of loneliness, although, as one of the narrators recalls, "You knew how to amuse yourself, perhaps that was why your aunts had agreed that your father take you with him to the lonely chalk shores, to grow alone into adolescence" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 61). This quotation has several implications in terms of the knowledge of both the narrator and the writer, and concerning the motivations for and consequences of the heroine's migration. First of all, it must be noted that the narrative does not detail the family's immigrant years or provide the usual accounts of their experience (e.g. the feeling of displacement, rootlessness, homing desire), which may be because, unlike many of the first generation immigrants portrayed in the previously discussed novels, Gupta's characters are predominantly not economic migrants but appear more as travellers who intend to discover a new culture out of curiosity and a hope for enlightenment which is an inversion of the occidental mystique of travelling to exotic places as a means of the traveller's self-discovery. On the other hand, although it is the author who indirectly speaks here, these are the male narrator's words, which may signal his limited knowledge: he obviously cannot know everything about the heroine's past, and even the knowledge he possesses is necessarily conjecture or second-hand, coming from the

heroine, that is, in an indirect way she becomes a co-narrator of her own story, the story that the male narrators strive to take hold of and control by telling it to the heroine, that is, they claim authority over the narrative and, by extension, the female protagonist as well.

Secondly, the female protagonist's memories here are also considerably influenced by her father's immigrant experience, thus the account of their migratory movement may possibly be viewed as filtered through a triple perspective the father's experiences as perceived by the daughter, then passed on in parts to and reported by the narrators. In light of this, it is well worth considering the following lines that discuss the father's motivations for migration:

It was only in his later years that he had come, ostensibly in the pursuit of higher education, to Birmingham, leaving behind your sister safely settled at school, he had arrived with you, his younger daughter, to these long sought shores, lands that he never might have seen save in the shifting moods of Hardy's moors, Wordsworth's impoverished clouds. And you, his daughter, had inherited this horror, that others affectionately dubbed wanderlust, it was this horror ... that had driven you from your city, compelled you to rip away the bonds of stone and sweat and travel heedlessly into the unknown, lest you too become trapped in that disgrace of knowing more than you had seen: a madwoman in the

attic, furiously scratching tales of vicarious misfortune. (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 42)

The quotation implies three important aspects of the heroine's identity in relation to movement. Firstly, Gupta's inter textual reference to the raging mad woman may point to the works of several nineteenth-century women writers depicting madness as a psychological response to patriarchal control. By juxtaposing madness and travelling, the latter may be perceived as the manifestation of a desire to break free from the confines and restraints of patriarchal society, and of the possible means to achieve female agency and an individual feminine identity, which is underlined by the female protagonist's free-

spirited, transgressive nature, most visible in her attitude to love, marriage and adultery. However, this interpretation does not take the possibility of a triple perspective into account and suggests a strong female voice which is not present in the novel after all, it is the male narrators who tell the heroine her story; the protagonist's perspective may influence that of the narrators but is more likely to be 'stuck between' or overwritten by those of the father and the male narrators. Therefore and this is my second interpretation since the heroine's desire to travel is proclaimed to be not innately her own, but "inherited" from the father, the madwoman reference may also be read in terms of the father's apparent interest in romantic English literature and his wanderlust his appropriation of a western conception of travelling and thus as the signifier of a female identity condemned to stay put, to be static, unmoving and unmoved, like Tennyson's (1842) *Lady of Shalott*, who eventually chooses death over being isolated from the rest of the world.

Owing to the triple perspective in action here, it is difficult to decide whether this inter textual reference to the "madwoman in the attic" actually comes from the father, or is made by the heroine later on, as a reverberation of her childhood experiences and influences, or whether it is the narrators choice to describe either the female's protagonist's restlessness or her defiance. Although the phrase as quoted here may evoke the figure of the Lady of Shalott more strongly, in my view it may also be a reference to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and, as a tribute to post colonial women's literature, to Jane Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), in which Bertha's madness is inseparable from the fact that she was forced to travel and live in an alien cultural space. In some respect, Gupta's heroine becomes an immigrant by coercion as well; yet, she does so with an inverse result in her case it is the prospect of stasis which is maddening, while travelling turns out to be liberating and enlightening. One could argue that Gupta's reference to the "madwoman in the attic" may be directly linked to the rich and highly controversial tradition of the rope of the

madwoman. Nonetheless, the father's wanderlust, a romantic male position as it is, has inevitably had a great impact on the daughter and thus, in my view, has also eventually contributed to her wanderlust as a form of a female agency. By extending the madwoman metaphor and its implications to diasporic consciousness, the heroine's desire to travel may thus point to the need for movement as a means of self-discovery a search for identity, as well as for an existence in movement as a form of diasporic subjectivity a mobile subjectivity and, by extension, back to an individual female identity, defiant and autonomous, with a distinct female agency.

While the heroine's unfolding tale points increasingly to a certain feminine diasporic subjectivity, the father's perception and preliminary images of England posit him rather as a colonial subject yearning to return to the 'motherland.' Monica Fludernik refers to such characters/individuals as "travelling Indians" who, due to their colonial British education, possess "romanticized versions of England ... on their exotic, 'occidental' other, thereby inverting the orientalist gaze and subjecting England to an inauthentic stereotyping" (81-82), in this case, based on literature. Similarly to the female protagonist's father, Chanu of Brick Lane, a diaspora subject in England, appears as a colonial subject visiting the motherland. With a degree from Dhaka University and various certificates received in England, Chanu is introduced as an educated man, feeling and acting as superior to the working class Bangladeshi of the community. He is the figure of the babu an anglicized clerk during the Raj, and as such he is the embodiment of colonial mimicry:

a great admirer of English literature, a genuine Englishman in terms of his clothing and language, yet an imperfect reflection of his former colonizers. His appearance and behaviour point to a mimicry which is not necessarily a sign of assimilation or a defensive strategy to avoid racism, but a tool to conform, to blend in; it is an imitation of a simulacrum of Englishness. Although his travels only take him as far as London, his figure corresponds to that of the father in Gupta's novel, at travelling

Indian by definition. What traveller-migrants such as these two characters go through is not a desired enculturation at the heart of the world that has provided their education, but an unavoidable acculturation in an alien host country, which constructs their identity as British-Asian or, at best, cosmopolitan. The latter may apply to wealthy diasporas with the possibility to travel extensively and settle temporarily at several urban locations, thereby constructing a certain travelling identity. For Clifford, the concepts of travelling identities, travel and displacement represent the fluidity of (social) identity, a cosmopolitanism which disrupts spatial boundaries and, in Smith and Katz's words "moves us beyond the fixity of singular locations" (77).

The cosmopolitanism of father and daughter – the third possible interpretation of the identity of the latter may be underlined by their wanderlust, that is, their desire for authenticity, discovery and adventure, manifested in perpetual movement in and towards unfamiliar places and spaces. In tourism studies, wanderlust is defined as a "spirit of serendipity" in the traveller, which is "born out of a yearning to acquaint oneself with the unknown physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually" (Singh and Singh 138). The term wanderlust, which, according to Online Etymology Dictionary, was coined in 1902 and is a loanword from German meaning "desire for wandering," is linked to German Romanticism and its vagabond literary heroes of "rootless, restless" character (Cf. Gish, 1964; Cusack, 2008).¹⁴⁵ Since rootlessness and restlessness are attributes of western traveller-migrants and travelling identities, the heroine's fear of ignorance and wish to avoid knowing more than she had seen may also indicate that the yearning to explore other places is also a yearning to discover the self or other selves, to leave the 'mirrorless' family home and thereby find the opportunity to view herself as reflected in other mirrors, that is, in other situations, localities and in relation to other people.

Whether due to the termination of the father's studies, to homesickness or disappointment with England (possible reasons which the novel does not reflect on), father and daughter return

to India after a few years. Nevertheless, wanderlust continues to play an important part in the heroine's life: pulled by "the magic of a foreign land" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 156), she goes to college in New Jersey, where she experiences "the disorienting weight of the vastness to the West, the uneven pull of the great mass stretching to the Pacific" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 163).

Besides temporarily satisfying her wanderlust, America offers the female protagonist a different sense of space from the one that she has had before. In contrast with the crowdedness of Calcutta and her isolation in Birmingham, which may have both generated a sense of space as restricted and suffocating, the vastness of the land in the USA evokes the sense of an open space as the Western symbol of freedom and opportunities that "invites action" (Tuan, *Space and Place*, 54). Indeed, it is during the college years that the heroine makes friends with Sparrow, with whom she experiences the freedom to try out new identities and wandering/travelling freely, and she also manages to break the love-spell his cousin had cast on her for years, thereby liberating herself from the burden of pain and sorrow, which she projects onto her native Calcutta. On the other hand, her 'spatial liberation,' that is, her breaking away from enclosed places and constricting locations, which goes hand in hand with her sexual liberation manifested in a brief affair with an American fellow student involves the danger of being driven by lust rather than wanderlust, and thus becoming emotionally constrained (as opposed to her feeling that, having "severed all links with the miserable athlete, the ridiculous David, life now stretched limitless before you" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 30). According to Tuan, "to be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable. Open space has no trodden paths and signposts" (*Space and Place*, 54). Sexual liberation thus may be viewed here as the metaphor of open space as freedom and freedom as "a threat," (Tuan, *Space and Place*, 54), while the open space of America and college life provides alternative paths for the heroine: the unrestricted and not pre-determined routes of the traveller self, and the

dangerous, curvy roads of a woman in love. When the female protagonist meets her future husband, Alexander, with whom she will settle both physically and emotionally in London, she unknowingly exchanges the former for the latter, inasmuch as she risks becoming the object of a man's desire yet again and thus being subject to the "oppressive containment" (Tuan, *Space and Place*, 54) of this desire.

It must be noted here that, although compared to the transgression adultery entails in contrast to the static commitment of marriage, the heroine's relationship with Alexander initially appears to be neither physically nor emotionally restricting. Apart from the very day the heroine wanders around in London with the butcher, she is also mentioned to be on several outings with Avishek when she would "drive out with him to the country, or simply laze in some London park" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 46), that is, she might not leave England on her own, but she is decidedly free to roam around in London and the surrounding area without having to report her deeds to her husband. On the other hand, the liberal values and nature of their relationship are questioned and the dangers inherent in the husband's possessiveness are foreshadowed when, for example, one of the narrators is contemplating the possible scenario of the heroine revealing her adultery:

"Will you tell Alexander, will he not merely laugh ...? ... He will shake his head and smile, well, don't run away with him, my love, you know I would kill myself ... more likely I would kill him, I suppose, he will say, laughing" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 212).

Before the relative physical stasis that her marriage and settling in London involves, America offers her a chance to indulge in various forms of movement in transnational (urban) spaces: walking among the "Gothic arches" of the campus and the "snow fields of your youth" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 58); commuting, i.e., "ferrying back and forth from New York to New Jersey, the three of you living mainly in Vladimir's mother's apartment, returning to college only for the odd lecture" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 135); and

travelling to London and Paris with Sparrow as tourists, the latter journey compensating for the briefness of a childhood visit which made her feel that “the anguish of coming so close to seeing Paris, and not seeing Paris, became as romantic as having seen Paris” (*The Glassblower’s Breath*, 107). The heroine’s images of these metropolises evoke their perception as transnational spaces, which are both “the material geographies of labour migration” and “the symbolic and imaginary geographies through which we attempt to make sense of our increasingly transnational world”.

Transnational spaces may be occupied for a short time, as is the case with tourism, or inhabited for a longer period as immigrants/temporary residents, roles which the heroine of *The Glassblower’s Breath* hall performs as a student. The novel’s portrayal of entering transnational space as tourists and temporary inhabitants makes it a pioneer of diaspora novels of mobility and movement, such as *Tourism* and *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and also the precursor of the post-ethnic novel by offering alternative ways of identification for the diaspora subject. The travelling immigrant’s movement to and within transnational spaces may offer the feeling of belonging nowhere and everywhere at the same time and thus lends itself to the formation of a cosmopolitan identity and a mobile subjectivity, calling for the reconsideration of traditional ways of belonging and rigid conceptions of home.

Two of the several transnational trips the female protagonist takes during her years at college take her back home to Calcutta, to her alleged home and roots. Whenever she returns to her birthplace, she realises the “inadequacy” (*The Glassblower’s Breath*, 14) of her relationship with the city, which makes her decide to finally get to know it by wandering; as the narrators recall, “you scoured the city for all that had been hidden to you, returned always disappointed” (*The Glassblower’s Breath*, 109). The reason for the heroine’s disappointment may in fact lie in her changed concept of home having lived in England and the USA for years and travelled to various other locations, she has both lost touch with her birthplace since

her “acquaintance with the city had been hopelessly inadequate” (*The Glassblower’s Breath*, 39), and experienced what Clifford calls “traveling- in-dwelling, dwelling-in-travelling” (*Routes* 36), an alternative attitude and sense of belonging to a place. For Clifford, travel and travelling identities dissolve spatial boundaries and suggest “social, political and cultural identity as an amalgam, the intricacy of which defies the comparative simplicity of ‘identity’” (Smith and Katz 76).

When the narrator compares one of the heroine’s journeys to a “pilgrimage that filled all crevices of their existence” (*The Glassblower’s Breath*, 79), his words imply the necessity of movement in identity formation and point to Victor Turner’s (1973, 1974) concept of pilgrimage involving rites de passages in the act of movement. For Turner and John Urry, rites of passage proceed in three stages:

“first, the social and spatial separation from the normal place of residence and conventional social ties; second, liminality, where the individual finds him/herself ... out of time and place ... and third, reintegration ... with the previous social group” (*Tourist*, 10).

In the case of Gupta’s heroine this final stage does not take place; yet her migration and transnational travels indeed involve separation and liminality, as well as “an attempt to identify and place the self” (Parsons, 41). Through her travels, the heroine takes up various identity positions as immigrant, student, tourist and traveller; daughter, friend and lover; Indian, diaspora subject and tourist positions which signal an unavoidable process of identity formation in, and due to, both movement and various locations “as a part of travel, as entailing movement or multiplicity” (Kaplan, 168). What follows is that the female protagonist’s supposedly fixed cultural identity as Indian becomes fluid, enriched by layers and layers of new selves and identity positions, developed at a number of locations until the notions of both identity and home become multiple and subject to change, indicating Doreen Massey’s positionality (being “of and in a space, while at the same time not quite

belonging to it" [Puwar, 7]) and a Probynian belonging (belonging as becoming and belonging in movement). Furthermore, Gupta's heroine's embodies a cosmopolitan identity which is constructed not only in a series of different spaces but predominantly during travel in-between and within these spaces.

Since her hometown loses its status as the primary and sole place of her belonging, the female protagonist's attempts to reconnect with the city are not those of an immigrant returning home after years of self-imposed exile, but of a second-generation diaspora subject visiting his or her parents' roots. As she walks around Calcutta for hours, "sandal-footed, in the stark heat brine" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 14), discovering its previously hidden face, she has a sense of alienation, which is further intensified by gazing at the city through the lens of her camera, and which forces her to face the fact that she is isolated from and rejected by the city of her birth that she "had longed to love"

(*The Glassblower's Breath*, 40). The heroine displays several basic characteristics of tourist behaviour here, starting out with her relatively short stay, walking and getting to know the city, and her tourist gaze mediated through a frame, i.e., the lens of the camera. Her tourist behaviour in the city of her birth is, however, by no means a leisurely activity; it signals a detachment from the place, both physically, as a result of her immigration and transnational travels, and emotionally, by equating the city with her painful memories of love lost. Her inadequate knowledge of and ambivalent emotional relationship with the city thus renders it impossible to love, to belong to, to call home.

Although the heroine has roots to return to, the city is no longer the home, but one of the many locations that serve as temporary abodes for her travels, a transitory and transient place, that is, a location in and generating motion a home among the many for her cosmopolitan self.

The female protagonist's tourist behaviour and movement in urban space exhibit several similarities with Puppy's identity performance

as a tourist in Dhaliwal's novel and thus casts doubts on the authenticity of her behaviour. Just as Puppy's tourist self is a mask hiding a diasporic flamer, her tourism might be seen as the mask of the diaspora subject no longer at home in her place of birth. And this is where the difference is revealed: while Puppy's identity performance betrays a complete non-attachment to place to any place, for that matter the heroine of *The Glassblower's Breath* behaves like a tourist because of her detachment from one particular place, her hometown. Yet, as her relationship with the other locations in the novel reveals, she does have certain emotional ties with several cities: she claims Paris to be her favourite city, the place to go to when she gets "tired of London" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 107); while New York "ties with Calcutta for my second most favourite city in the world" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 105), and she has an ambivalent, yet decidedly emotional relationship with London, "city of your combined dreams" (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 10). The female protagonist's emotional ties suggest that she has not only got to know but also learned to love these places, that is, what she refuses is not attachment to place per se, but being attached to, and characterised by situations in, one fixed place, the place of her origins.

Contradictory as this may seem, detachment and multiple belongings may prove to be correlative categories in her case: due to her perpetual movement between and within various places, to a certain extent she has developed a sense of belonging to all of them as opposed to the unhomeliness of her native city, the homeliness of the city as such means that each of them could be her home but none of them really is. This way, we argue, she extends Puppy's tourism and postmodern flanerier to what Deborah Parsons refers to as "international flanerier" (14), in other words: cosmopolitanism.

Although Parson's study focuses on modernist cosmopolitan identity, her findings are applicable to Gupta's contemporary character, whose cosmopolitan identity involves a detachment which "works against social participation and agency" in her native city,

while her wanderer self away from Calcutta “never escapes completely from the cultural systems of her origins (be it class, gender, or national identity)” (Parsons 14). Apparently, throughout the novel the heroine’s cultural identity is presented as both undoubtedly Indian and noticeably cosmopolitan. Since cosmopolitanism “foregrounds mobility” (Shukla 230), these joint ways of representations point to her identification as a “travelling Indian,” the member of cosmopolitan diaspora elite. Despite the fact that the notions of national identity and cosmopolitanism may seem contradictory and irreconcilable, the definition of cosmopolitan as an elite traveller “focused on novel experiences and incapable of forming lasting attachments and commitments” (Bhimji, 17) is generally accepted in, and frequently applied to members of, Anglophone societies, suggesting the possibility of this duality.

The most significant aspect of the heroine’s cosmopolitan identity here is that it is gendered, and thereby, by implication, it challenges women’s outdated identification with private and domestic space as opposed to the male privilege of appropriating public space and travelling abroad. In her insightful study of women’s place and position in modernism, Parsons challenges the exclusivity of this male privilege and argues for the presence of the female urban walker and observer, “for whom the city operates not just as a setting or image, but as a constituent of identity” (7) and who is characterised by a “desire to escape the confines of the domestic environment, coupled with a wanderlust expressed through forays into the city” (27). Transplanting Parsons’s figure of the modernist flâneuse into a twenty-first century postmodern context may give birth to the female cosmopolitan diaspora subject manifested in Gupta’s heroine, whose national identity is manifested in roots, diasporic identity in location, and cosmopolitanism in movement, thereby constituting separate yet correlative parts of a multiple and fluid identity. Since she is searching “not for a place but for self and identity” (Parsons 41), I interpret her story not as an ethnic but as a female Bildungsroman.

The protagonist of this novel is a young Bengali woman in search of ideal love and companionship, and the novel presents her relationships with a range of people and places. Though locales switch between Calcutta, London, New York, and Paris, none of these metropolises can be regarded the real home of any of the characters. Like ideal postcolonial emigrants, the characters themselves, though born in one of these metropolises or somewhere else, wander through these metropolitan locales, living in each one at some time or the other and yet always detached from them. The landscapes of these four great cities, full of urban menace, thus form an almost surreal backdrop for this unsettling tale of an intelligent woman who struggles but fails to conform to society’s blueprints for marriage, family, and friendships.

The heroine of *The Glassblower’s Breath* is thus caught between her own almost boundless power for experience intellectual, emotional, and sexual - and the aspiration of the men in her life to seizure and defines her. In spite of her education, freedom, social position and the privileges she enjoys, she is condemned to repeat her gendered functions as daughter, wife, or lover. She becomes the quintessential Indian woman, experiencing emotional and intellectual deprivation. This is also evident in the way her voice has been usurped by the omniscient narrator who decides her life for her forms her and finally destroys her.

The Glassblower’s Breath has something of the quality of myth; her narrator floats freely through every character’s mind. Moreover, here, as in Gupta’s other works, even the quotidian gets imbued with a melancholic mysticism. The protagonist does not have a name and is addressed throughout by the second person pronoun “you,” maybe because, her identity can never be fully grasped. As in a house full of mirrors, her image is viewed through different perspectives, none of which is satisfactory or permanent. All the dislocations of life are articulated in this novel by multiple male narrators who trace the adventure of the female protagonist; the reader has to reconstruct her personality by stitching together these shards of narration. The possibility of

authentic knowledge about the self is lost, as lost as the possibility of returning home.

Most of Gupta's women characters are extraordinary, if not exceptional; and nearly all of them have unfortunate ends in the traditional sense of the term. "you" in *The Glassblower's Breath* is deep, sensitive and academically brilliant women. However, they all share a sacrificial/suicidal streak and no overtly feminist agenda to follow. Her women veer between control and passivity or self-surrender. Even "you" who seems so fiercely, even selfishly, in control most of the times cannot control the narrative about her. Bengaliness in Gupta's fiction is not a carefully constructed identity that finds reassurance in difference with others but rather a function of her poetic self that is formed out of diverse, often contradictory influences deriving from place, history and culture. *The Glassblower's Breath* predominantly focuses on women's experience of displacement and relocation, and the lot of women, whether living in Bengal or as immigrants in the West. A parallel narrative featuring the anguish and consequences of a historical home leaving is not so marginal in these novels; this is the sub continental diaspora created post-partition the diaspora of the millions of refugees who dispersed or were forced to migrate from their homeland to the "promised land" of India or Pakistan. Sunetra Gupta's novels engage with the hidden angst, anger, and decadence of well-off East Bengali Hindus who had to start afresh and build everything anew as refugees in India.

In the final analysis, in *The Glassblower's Breath*, there is no ideological agenda either to retain a nostalgic, essentialist conception of ethnicity or to co-opt her characters into the hegemonic western discourse of complete assimilation. Instead she seems to forward a case for integration in the dominant culture without any intervention of the subtly marginalising aspects of the prevalent "melting pot" and multicultural politics.

In other words, there is neither an uncritical acceptance nor an endorsement of the hegemonic ideology of assimilation embedded in British/ American/ Australian

multiculturalism as these authors are only too aware that the dynamics of fluidity and contingency inherent in the melting pot does not really inculcate the idea of tolerance towards racial and cultural diversity, that the exclusionary underpinnings and racism inherent in the western discourse of multiculturalism obstruct attempts of "ethnic" citizens like them and their characters from staking a claim to a home in the mainstream spaces of the British/ American/Australian nationhood. As Gupta explains:

I find multiculturalism - as it is currently practiced - to be the product of anxiety. Multiculturalism is used as a label for marketing purposes . . . Implicit within it is the concept that it is better to be multi rather than mono, which is the biggest lie I've ever come across ... If anything, multiculturalism ghettoises people and stops them from building a culture. (*The Glassblower's Breath*, 99)

In opposition to the adoption of a ghetto mentality the text under study generally affirm the need for such negotiation, assimilation, and acculturation that do not object preserving distinctive cultural traits; and they appear to discourage exclusivist adherence to what is perceived as native culture as it only makes existence at home and abroad unusually and uselessly complicated. Indeed, the biggest challenge for the authors here is to convey the need for change within their community without seeming to play into the hands of their "racial enemies." In fact, the texts appear to highlight the need to change and acculturate, and not to complicate things in the new land too much by sticking to the continuous nostalgic return to the old world. Authorial rejection of myopic nationalism, and identity assertion based on mutual hatred rather than mutual difference or tolerance has also been obvious in the text. Gupta do not indulge in promotion of ethnic glory. Although their instinct, thought, and memory are always quintessentially Bengali, they clearly have not taken up the responsibility of building up positive images of her native land and culture to the west.

Reference

- [1] Gupta, Sunetra. *The Glassblower's Breath*. London: Orion, 1993. Print.
- [2] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. 392-403. Print.
- [3] Peters, John Durham. "Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon." *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*. New York: Routledge, 1999. 17-41. Print.
- [4] Ramraj, Victor. "Diasporas and Multiculturalism." *New national and Postcolonial Literatures: An Introduction*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1996. 214-29. Print.
- [5] Williams, Bronwyne T. "A State of Perpetual Wandering: Diaspora and Black British Writers." *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 3.3(1999). Available at <<http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v3i3/con33.htm>>.