



A Colonized Dream: Fragmented Identity and Betrayal in Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain*

Liton Baron Sikder

Associate Professor, Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh

Corresponding Author: litoniu2014@gmail.com

Abstract. Sunetra Gupta's debut novel, *Memories of Rain*, explores the complexities of cultural dislocation and the lingering effects of colonialism through Moni, a Bengali woman who migrates to England. This essay examines Moni's struggle to forge an identity amidst conflicting emotions and a fractured sense of belonging. It analyzes how her romanticized view of England, shaped by English literature, collides with the harsh realities of life as an immigrant, ultimately leading to her disillusionment and return to Calcutta. This article draws on critical scholarship to explore themes of "colonized otherness," memory, nostalgia, and the search for a hyphenated identity. Moni's journey reflects the challenges of navigating cultural clashes, betrayal, and the enduring power dynamics between colonizer and colonized. The analysis reveals how Gupta utilizes literary elements and the power of memory to portray Moni's search for self-discovery and reclamation of her Bengali heritage.

Keywords: Colonialism, Cultural Dislocation, Disillusionment, Hyphenated Identity, *Memories of Rain*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sunetra Gupta's debut novel, *Memories of Rain*, is a poignant exploration of cultural dislocation and the lingering effects of colonialism. Set against the backdrop of Calcutta and London, the story follows Moni, a Bengali woman who migrates to England with her English husband, Anthony. However, Moni's dream of a new life unravels as she confronts cultural clashes, disillusionment, and ultimately, betrayal. This essay delves into the complexities of Moni's experience as a colonised subject navigating a foreign land. It argues that Gupta masterfully utilizes the theme of "colonised otherness" to portray Moni's struggle to forge an identity amidst conflicting emotions and a fractured sense of belonging. The essay examines how Moni's romanticized view of England, shaped by English literature, collides with the harsh realities of life as an immigrant. Through a close analysis of the text and drawing on critical scholarship, the essay explores various facets of Moni's journey. It examines how her cultural dislocation and Anthony's infidelity shatter her illusions about England and expose the enduring power dynamics between colonizer and colonized.

Furthermore, the essay investigates the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping Moni's sense of self. It analyzes how her yearning for her Bengali roots provides a source of solace and ultimately propels her decision to return to Calcutta. Finally, the essay explores the concept of a "hyphenated identity" in the context of Moni's experience. It argues that despite failing to

fully establish herself in London, Moni's journey reflects a complex negotiation of cultural influences and a search for self-definition beyond the confines of colonial legacies. By delving into these themes, the essay offers a nuanced understanding of *Memories of Rain* as a powerful exploration of migration, cultural identity, and the enduring scars of colonialism.

2. METODOLOGY

This research article employs a multifaceted approach to examine the complexities of cultural dislocation, betrayal, and the enduring impact of colonialism in Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain*. Through a close reading of the text, the study delves into key passages that illuminate Moni's experiences as a colonized subject navigating life in England, paying particular attention to the portrayal of cultural clashes, her disillusionment with the English society, and her longing for her homeland. To enrich the analysis, the research draws upon established literary criticism on *Memories of Rain* and postcolonial literature, referencing works by scholars like Marie Gottschalk, Mujaffar Hossain & Prasenjit Panda, B.R. Lakshmi et al., T. Manjula, and S. Tomkins. The concept of "colonized otherness" serves as a central theoretical framework, exploring the power dynamics between colonizer and colonized and the ways in which the colonized are often perceived as outsiders in the colonizer's society. By combining these elements, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Moni's journey and its connection to broader themes of colonialism and cultural identity.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Sunetra Gupta, a physician by profession, made her mark as a Bengali diaspora author in the late 20th century with the release of her debut novel, *Memories of Rain*, in 1992. Despite her medical background, Gupta is primarily celebrated for her fiction, which delves into diaspora sensibilities and postcolonial themes. As a Bengali-born British author, her works are infused with the experiences of Bengali characters who struggle to preserve their cultural identity and heritage within a foreign land. *Memories of Rain*, narrated through flashbacks and the stream-of-consciousness technique, oscillates "between Calcutta and London, between passion of first love and pain of a passionless marriage, between the familiar and the foreign, between happiness and despair" (Gottschalk 49). The novel has gained significant recognition as a Bengali diaspora fiction, depicting the journey of Moni, a Bengali woman who relocates from Calcutta to London with her English husband. Close analysis suggests that *Memories of Rain* is a complex postcolonial novel exploring various dimensions of migration and diaspora, such as displacement and acculturation (Hossain and Panda 149), and illustrates cultural

hybridity through the protagonist's intercultural marriage. Written in evocative prose, the novel is rich with Moni's intense emotions and turbulent experiences. Initially captivated by an idealized vision of England, Moni finds herself disillusioned and ultimately returns to her Bengali roots. The England she imagined through her study of English literature contrasts sharply with the reality she encounters, shattering her romanticized expectations. Through its portrayal of cultural dislocation and loss, *Memories of Rain* resonates with themes prevalent in diaspora literature.

Sunetra Gupta views herself as part of the ancient Bengali diaspora, a perspective that profoundly shapes her novels. Her own statements reveal that the Bengali literary diaspora has had a major influence on her life and career as a writer. Her literary development owes much to Rabindranath Tagore, whose work played a crucial role in her exposure to literature and writing, deeply shaping her appreciation for Bengali literary traditions. Through her novels, it becomes evident that this literary diaspora also shapes the cultural identities of the Bengali characters she portrays. As a first-generation diaspora writer, Gupta centers her focus on the experiences and longings of women immigrants, capturing their dual attachments to both the homeland and their new country. Her approach to these immigrant characters is distinctive, as she delves into their feelings of yearning and deep-rooted connections to their origins.

Set against the contrasting landscapes of Calcutta and London, *Memories of Rain* explores themes of colonialism, cultural dislocation, and the notion of "otherness" through the experiences of its protagonist, Moni. Moni's journey begins when she meets and falls in love with Anthony, an Englishman, during a torrential rainstorm in Calcutta in 1978. This initial encounter, marked by the intensity of the storm, is more than a simple romantic meeting; it becomes symbolic of the tumultuous path her life will take as she moves from the familiar world of Calcutta to the unknown allure of London. Through her study of English literature, Moni constructs a romanticized image of England, imagining it as a land of elegance and cultural sophistication. Her admiration and desire to visit England are fueled by the fantasy she has woven from her readings, viewing the country as "particularly Romantic, because she believes everything she learned in class about England is true, and she sees London as a safe haven from the perilous poverty and misery of Calcutta" (Hossain and Panda 150). For Moni, England is not just a geographical destination but a place of dreams and possibilities—a stark contrast to her homeland, which she views as entangled with challenges and limitations.

Sunetra Gupta skillfully narrates the evening of the rainstorm when Moni first meets Anthony, capturing not only the physical storm but also the internal upheaval it foreshadows. In vivid detail, Gupta describes the rain pouring "not to purify the earth, but to spite it to churn

the parched fields into festering wounds, rinse the choked city sewers on to the streets sprinkle the pillows with the nausea of mould..." (Gupta 17). This imagery encapsulates the intensity and complexity of Moni's emotions, hinting at the challenges she will face in her pursuit of love and cultural belonging.

In creating Moni's character, Gupta appears to project certain elements of her own life onto her protagonist. Like Moni, Gupta also migrated to England and established a life there, yet the similarities end with migration and settlement. While Gupta's experiences may have informed her portrayal of Moni's emotional journey, Moni's specific experiences and struggles are unique to her as she oscillates between her memories of Calcutta and her life in London. This "swinging" between two worlds—the homeland and the land of migration—frames Moni's ongoing internal conflict as she attempts to reconcile her Bengali heritage with the allure and cultural influences of her new environment.

Moni's journey is marked by continuous mental and emotional struggles as she tries to navigate the traditions and values of her homeland while confronting the realities of life in England. Initially, her marriage to Anthony represents her desire to belong to English culture, symbolizing her aspiration to integrate into the world she admired through her academic study of English literature. However, her idealized vision of England quickly unravels as she grapples with cultural alienation and betrayal. Anthony's affair with an English woman named Anna exposes the fragility of Moni's dreams and her sense of belonging. This betrayal deeply affects her, intensifying her feelings of alienation, displacement, and rootlessness. At this point, Moni becomes nostalgic for Calcutta, seeking solace in memories of her homeland. She finds comfort in reflecting on her past, as pleasant memories of Calcutta offer her a sense of satisfaction and emotional security amidst the unfamiliarity of London.

This return to her memories of Calcutta becomes a pivotal aspect of Moni's identity formation. Despite her efforts to adapt to English culture, Moni's deep-seated yearning for her roots and belongingness surfaces, driving her to reassess her values and place in the world. Her marriage, initially a pathway to belonging in England, ultimately reveals itself to be an illusion, highlighting the limitations of her integration and underscoring the cultural divide she cannot bridge. Moni's search for identity thus evolves as she turns back to her Bengali heritage, recognizing that her sense of self is inherently connected to her homeland. The story of *Memories of Rain* becomes, in this sense, a narrative of self-discovery and reclamation as Moni seeks to reconcile her fragmented identity, balancing her personal aspirations with the cultural roots that define her.

Moni's romanticized notions of "Englishness" are deeply influenced by her immersion in English literature, which shapes her idealized view of England. Throughout *Memories of Rain*, it becomes clear that Moni's fascination with England stems from her literary studies, which have constructed a dreamlike vision of the country. However, upon arriving in England with her husband, Anthony, Moni faces a harsh reality: this England "does not coordinate with the England of her creative ability shaped by the study of English writing. She takes her failure like any of her disillusioned literary women" (Lakshmi et al. 301). The real England starkly contrasts with her idealized version, leaving Moni disillusioned and profoundly disappointed.

As a self-respecting woman, Moni experiences intense heartache due to Anthony's betrayal and his disregard for her pride and identity. Yet, instead of perceiving this as a curse, Moni finds strength in returning to India, which ultimately empowers her to forge an identity of her own. Initially, Moni had viewed love not just as a romantic ideal but as a vehicle for escaping the chaotic, "wonderful" land of India and for establishing her sense of self in the England she had imagined. This perspective is hinted at in Gupta's narrative, where we see that Moni "had loved Heathcliff before she loved any man" (Gupta 177). However, in stark contrast to the intense passion she admired in Heathcliff, Anthony lacks any of the romantic vigor she had dreamed of. He neither wanders with her like a lover nor expresses his affection in the intense, soulful way she longs for. Moni's desire to "wander as a spirit with her beloved upon English moors" (Gupta 177) thus remains a fantasy, unrealized and ultimately shattered.

Moni faces a profound internal struggle in her quest for self-identity in London, feeling like an outsider amid the unfamiliar culture. This new society, which detaches her from her Bengali roots, offers no sense of belonging, making her relocation more complex than she had envisioned. Though she has migrated from Bengal to build a life in London, her new "home" remains ambiguous. Here, "the very image of 'home' changes with experience of decolonization" (Manjula 541). For Moni, home in London becomes synonymous with estrangement and alienation, and her marriage to Anthony only deepens her feelings of dislocation. Her attachment to her Bengali roots emerges as her true "home," and memories of her homeland become her only connection to Calcutta. These memories bridge "the distance between the alien country and the homeland," resurfacing through flashbacks that, in turn, "recapture the fragmented bits of the past" (Manjula 541). This nostalgia constructs an imagined world where Moni, dislocated and isolated, finds solace by reliving her past in Calcutta.

As an immigrant in England, Moni feels an intense sense of alienation due to the absence of her native culture, customs, and traditions. This cultural void creates an internal imbalance,

though she does not openly display it. Her diasporic sensibility evolves as time and place shift, a natural experience for first-generation immigrants. Yet, it is worth noting that Moni is not precisely an immigrant; she is more accurately an expatriate. However, after migrating to England with her husband and facing disillusionment and neglect, she ultimately returns to her roots. Throughout the novel, Moni searches for identity, but her homeland remains a vital, grounding force in her life.

In contrast, Anthony does not experience this profound sense of diasporic rootlessness, as he is not culturally dislocated. He went to Calcutta for research on Bengali theatre, and as such, he does not endure the deep-seated pain of alienation. He is neither an immigrant nor an expatriate but a traveler whose country once held colonial authority over India for nearly two centuries. Moni and Anthony come from different worlds, and this divide becomes painfully clear.

Moni's initial shock and disappointment begin upon her arrival in England. In Calcutta, she led a secure life deeply connected to Bengali traditions, but upon arriving in London, she is struck by its cold, harsh weather—a stark contrast to her homeland's warmth. Disconnected from her roots, Moni feels she belongs nowhere in this foreign culture. She becomes “caught up in the clash of two different and opposite cultures,” and her marriage descends into “the pain of infidelity and non-communication” (Manjula 541). Anthony's betrayal of Moni adds to her disillusionment, as she realizes he was likely drawn to her only for her exotic beauty. She begins to feel that Anthony has treated her as a “colonized other,” exploiting her much like the British once exploited India. To him, she is simply an outsider, an “other” in this new world.

Moni's friend Sharmila confronts her with the harsh reality of the deep divide between the colonizer and the colonized, questioning her about the experience of intimacy with a white man whose worldview starkly contrasts with her own: “What is it like to sleep with a white man?” (Gupta 22). Moni's relationship with Anthony symbolizes the complex split between East and West, the colonizer and the colonized. Initially, Moni's romanticized notions of England as a paradise are shattered by Anthony's betrayal, as cultural clashes and diverging values emerge between them. Coming from a land still regarded by the English as exotic and backward, she is repeatedly reminded of such prejudices when asked, “Do they still burn their wives, bury alive their female children?” (Gupta 6). At first, Moni believes that Anthony has rescued her from the perceived “strangeness” of her homeland, but London soon reveals its unromantic, unwelcoming face. As her disenchantment deepens, she comes to feel that London is little more than a quagmire. Haunted by her past in Calcutta, she experiences an overwhelming longing to return: “...on Oxford Street, watching a woman crush ice cream cones to feed the pigeons, she

is seized by an overwhelming desire to return to that world, although she knows it is there for her no longer” (Gupta 15). In this emotionally charged state, Moni reflects on her past and present and ultimately concludes that she is, indeed, a stranger in London.

Moni’s efforts to establish her identity in England are undermined by her husband’s betrayal and his failure to understand her inner world. This leads her to the realization that her journey toward self-discovery requires a return to her roots, to “the lost place and the lost time.” She begins to delve into her subconscious, reconnecting with her past to understand the crisis that now defines her life: “She still possesses an identity. She dives into her subconscious and tries to resurrect the roots of her present crisis, as well as to resurrect her former self before it was crumpled and paralyzed by Anthony. By reconnecting the past, she aims to find a solution to her present” (Manjula 542). With Anthony’s evident affection for another woman, Anna, Moni grows increasingly disillusioned with her life in England and resolves to “burst the bubble” and devote herself to a life of service. She imagines herself dedicating her future to “the poor, the diseased, the hungry... clothed in dull white, soothing a sick child, a new energy seizes her... that is how she will spend the rest of her life” (Gupta 108). This new mission compels her to abandon her lonely, alienated existence in England and embark on a journey of self-renewal, constructing a life where she is no longer an outsider or a cultural “other.”

Throughout *Memories of Rain*, Gupta integrates Tagore’s songs to underscore Moni’s cultural dislocation in England. Tagore’s music becomes a source of solace, mirroring Moni’s inner turmoil and anguish. These songs not only set the rhythm of her inner world but also shape her emotional and imaginative landscape, with Tagore becoming almost a spiritual guide for her: “Her emotions and fantasies are to a large extent shaped by Tagore’s works. Tagore is a religion for Moni. She fondly remembers the pilgrimage of her family to Tagore’s house every year to commemorate his birthday... His songs provide her a magnificent and exaggerated metaphor for her adolescent pain, romanticism...” (Manjula 542). Stripped of her illusions of an ideal England, Moni returns to the reality of her life and decides to leave for Calcutta, seven days before Durga Puja, symbolizing her deep connection to Bengali culture and traditions. Gupta draws a parallel between Moni’s return and the annual homecoming of the Goddess Durga from Kailash, each visit reaffirming the goddess’s ties to Bengal. Moni’s memories carry her back to the vibrant Durga Puja celebrations of her childhood, where the entire city of Calcutta would come alive with joy. She sees herself as a daughter of Bengal, returning to her roots.

Moni’s journey back to Calcutta symbolizes her spiritual reawakening and reconnection to the India she had distanced herself from. Despite enduring years of emotional turmoil in

England, she realizes that her true self was stifled in this foreign land. “The mental imperative of being denied of the aesthetic reaction that one aches for in torment makes Moni’s outcast intense” (Lakshmi, et.al 302). Feeling estranged and rootless in England, her illusions now dissolved, Moni decides to return to Calcutta, reclaiming her identity. While her experience in England has hybridized her, her bond with Bengal remains unbroken. Through her marriage to an Englishman, Moni has reshaped her identity, yet this newfound self ultimately leads her back to her origins in Calcutta, where she feels she truly belongs.

Moni’s bookshelf reveals her dedication to both Bengali and English literature, featuring works by Tagore alongside Shakespeare, Austen, Keats, and Hardy. However, this literary exposure fosters a distorted perception of England in her mind. She fails to recognize that her understanding of England is rooted in a colonial legacy, shaped by the narratives of colonizers who portray themselves as superior to the colonized Indians. This colonial dynamic eludes Moni, as she subconsciously views England as an ideal space that she yearned for since her second year studying English: “England is a space where she longs all the time” (Hossain and Panda 151). Her response to Anthony’s marriage proposal is one of eager acceptance, as she perceives it as her chance to escape the constraints of patriarchal dominance and typical middle-class values.

To Moni, England embodies a cultural and spiritual promise—a fantastical realm crafted from her adolescent romantic imagination. However, this fantasy quickly crumbles, resembling Eliot’s concept of an ‘unreal city.’ The disillusionment intensifies as she discovers that the man she envisioned as her ideal partner is as illusory as the England she romanticized. Anthony’s affair with an English woman named Anna delivers a devastating blow, forcing her to confront the painful reality of both her husband and the society she longed to inhabit. The vision of “wandering as a spirit with her beloved upon English moors” (Gupta 177) remains unfulfilled, shattering her dreams.

As time passes, Anthony’s affection for Anna deepens while his interest in Moni wanes, leaving her feeling increasingly isolated from him, from England, and from its culture. This growing detachment stirs a desire within her to return home. Moni’s inability to perceive Anthony and England through a postcolonial lens stems from her education in English literature, which she has approached from a colonial perspective rather than a postcolonial one. Had she been able to view Anthony through this lens, she might have recognized the unreality of her idealized perceptions of him. This fundamental oversight ultimately leads her to adopt a skewed understanding of both England and Anthony, deepening her sense of disillusionment.

Anthony effectively undermines Moni's identity as a woman, rooted in a lineage tied to British colonial power. Although British colonial rule has ended in India, the colonial mindset persists, and Anthony embodies this attitude towards Moni, perceiving her as a colonized subject who has migrated to England in search of identity and belonging. Despite her aspirations to establish a new home in London, Moni's efforts ultimately falter; she finds herself fragmented and unable to cultivate a stable identity in the host country. Her longing to make London her home clashes with the reality that she remains a colonized 'other': "All this she has loved, all this she will leave" (Gupta 93). Gupta's *Memories of Rain* highlights the insurmountable divide between colonizer and colonized, echoing Rudyard Kipling's assertion in *The Ballad of East and West* that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling 245).

The East-West divide is a palpable reality in the relationship between Moni and Anthony, mirroring the dynamics of colonizer and colonized, master and slave. Moni is victimized by this divide, and Gupta suggests that their marriage—representing the East-West relationship—remains precarious and ultimately collapses under the weight of their colonial past. Moni's elder brothers oppose her marriage to Anthony, viewing him as a modern colonizer who seeks to exploit their sister emotionally. Their skepticism is justified; Gupta notes that Anthony "had come to this land, as his forefathers had done, with conviction that all he wanted would be his" (Gupta 40). Moni's brothers foresee that Anthony intends to sever her ties to both Bengal and England, viewing him through a practical lens that reflects historical colonial dynamics.

Gupta critiques Anthony's inability to appreciate the depth of their relationship, illustrating how he fails to value Moni as a person, instead desiring her as a projection of his fantasies. To Gupta, Anthony embodies the colonizer, viewing Moni as utterly vulnerable; he has never genuinely loved her, but rather the image he has constructed of her. Moni emerges as a victim of Anthony's colonial lust and sensuality, existing not only as a cultural 'other' but also as a sexual 'other.'

Moni's colonized identity is fluid and hyphenated, as the boundaries of territory and culture become blurred. In London, she attempts to forge a vulnerable identity, but this fragile construct crumbles once her illusions are shattered. Rooted in imagination, this identity fails to provide her with a stable sense of home. Anthony, embodying the archetype of a colonizer, exploits Moni's emotions and romantic feelings, ultimately illustrating that a colonizer cannot be a true rescuer; Moni remains nothing more than a colonized 'other' in England.

4. CONCLUSION

Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* paints a poignant portrait of cultural dislocation and the lingering scars of colonialism. Through Moni's journey, Gupta explores the complexities of navigating a foreign land as a colonized subject. Moni's disillusionment with her romanticized vision of England exposes the enduring power dynamics between colonizer and colonized. Her fragmented identity, a product of cultural clashes and betrayal, reflects the search for self in the aftermath of displacement. Ultimately, Moni's return to Calcutta signifies a rejection of her colonized "other" status and a tentative step towards reclaiming her roots. By weaving together themes of memory, nostalgia, and the quest for belonging, Gupta's novel offers a powerful commentary on the enduring impact of colonialism on the individual and the complexities of forging an identity in a globalized world.

5. REFERENCES

- Gottschalk, Marie. "First Love – Memories of Rain." *Far Eastern Economic Review*, vol. 155, no. 34, August 1992.
- Gupta, Sunetra. *Memories of Rain*. Grove Press, 1992.
- Hossain, Mujaffar, and Prasenjit Panda. "Emancipating the Bracketed Self: Articulating Transcultural and Transnational Identity in Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain*." *NEW LITERARIA: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 2, Aug.-Sept. 2022, pp. 149-155.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling*. Wordsworth Edition, 2001.
- Lakshmi, B. R., G. Hampamma, and V. B. Chitra, editors. "Identity Crisis in Sunetra Gupta's 'A Sin of Colour' and 'Memories of Rain'." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 299-303.
- Manjula, T. "Home Thoughts from Abroad: A Study of Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* and *A Sin of Colour*." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 5, no. 11, Nov. 2018, pp. 541-544.
- Tomkins, S. *Affect Imagery: Negative Affects*. Springer, 1992.