

Exploring the Interactions between Memory and Melancholy in Romesh Gunesequera's *The Match*: Negotiating Sri Lankan Cuisine and Cricket

Abhisek Ghosal

Abstract

Romesh Gunesequera's *The Match* turns out to be an intriguing novel, for it probes the conflict between mourning and melancholy that restrains the protagonist, Sunny, from coming to terms with the culture of hostland and how Sunny's subjective dilemma pertaining to the cultural gap puts him in limbo, awaiting for a resolution. The protagonist is born and brought up in Sri Lanka and later, migrates to London to pursue higher studies. During his short stay in London, he tries to adapt to the new cultural milieu but he fails to mix up with the culture of hostland and is reminded of his native culture, repeatedly, causing him constant discomfort. Sri Lankan cuisine and memories associated with cricket keep him reminding of his own native culture that he has left behind. These memories which he wants to him but cannot, adds to his misery. The tension between mourning and melancholy gets worsened during his stay in London. This paper is intended to explore the interactions between mourning and melancholia so far Sunny's attachment to his homeland is concerned, taking relevant theoretical insights into account.

Keywords: Memory; Melancholy; Cuisine; Cricket.

I

In contemporary times, diasporic experiences have received critical attention from critics across the world and are being discussed extensively, for these experiences have manifold dimensions and implications. Critics are generally of the opinion that if someone is keen to comprehend the loaded term, i.e. diaspora, he needs to take into cognizance the subjective experiences of people dwelling in diasporic conditions. Diasporic experiences do not consist of mere happy stories; these also expose varied struggles of people for acculturation in hostland. It is supposed that the conflict between mourning and melancholy in one's memory serves to worsen diasporic experience and makes it all the more, a course of despondency. The constant

and consistent efforts of diasporic people to come to terms with the culture of hostland have become a matter of critical exploration. It invokes critics to probe painful and troublesome existence of diasporic people from multiple points of view.

The word diaspora¹, originally, refers to the dispersal of Jewish people but nowadays the meaning of the term has been modified to an extent. Nowadays, diaspora is understood as a multifaceted term which is referred to various kinds of human migration, across the globe. For instance, Tölölyan argues, "diaspora shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrants, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (Tölölyan qtd. in Kar 1). In *Diaspora Studies*, the roles of memory and melancholy are of profound import and draw critical attentions from critics following the shades of meanings that memory and melancholy bear. The prolonged tension between the memory and melancholy does not let people stick to one particular culture and subsequently puts them in a state hanging in psychological abeyance. It is supposed that the tension between memory and melancholy unsettles the minds of diasporic people and pushes them to strive to get acculturated in hostland. Whereas memories of past incidents haunts such displaced people, melancholy does not let them forget those incidents which are incited by the memory. In other words, a diasporic person keeps pining for his homeland and ultimately yields to melancholy. Subjective experiences of diasporic people reveal their own struggle for striking a balance between memory and melancholy, which in most cases they find it difficult to attain.

Romesh Gunasekera's *tour de force*, i.e. *The Match* explores how the conflict between memory and melancholy triggers psychological turmoil in Sunny's mind and feels him up with sheer distress. Sunny, the protagonist of the novel, is born and brought up in Sri Lankan ambience right from his childhood; he is an ardent admirer of cricket. Gradually, his love for the game makes him spend his vacation playing cricket. Sunny finds his interest mostly in cricket. And along with, he becomes fascinated also with Sri Lankan cuisine as time passes. This fascination turns into a passion. When he is young old, he leaves for London to carry on higher studies. Landing down in London, he first feels a sense of segregated isolation which is intensified. When Sunny visits restaurants in London he looks up for Sri Lankan dishes, and when he does not. His psyche is ceaselessly lashed and lacerated by the conflict between memory and melancholy. Theoretical insights are to be resorted to delve deep into the conflict to unearth the roles of Sri Lankan cuisine and cricket in exacerbating the sufferings of the protagonist, in London.

II

Romesh Gunsekera's *The Match* turns out to be a *tour de force* in the domain of South Asian Literature in that the author painstakingly narrates the poignant tale of Sunny right from his early boyhood up to his settling in London, and subsequently, leaves readers with a number of loose ends to speculate on the pivotal role of melancholy memory that triggers despair and distress in his life. Gunsekera invests an entire chapter to put emphasis on the formative years of Sunny, which have relevant bearings to the subsequent years in his life. These years of growth and development have been meticulously sketched by Gunsekera intending to sunny's growing prodivity to Sri Lankan cuisine and cricket. Sunny lost his mother early in life, and since then he has been battling against all odds. Though he has been earned for by his father and other people around him, he feels intensely his mother's absence. In order to cope up consolidation, he seeks to explore options available to him, and finally finds in Sri Lankan cuisine and cricket. His obsession, slowly but surely intensifies, from which, somehow, he begins to draw comfort. His father buys him all the necessary cricket equipments. In the meanwhile, sunny develops an attachment with his coach's daughter, Tina. He leaves the games. His fascination with Sri Lankan cuisine is intricacies and with the passage of time, also increases his fascination for food.

When he grows up, he leaves for London to pursue courses in engineering, planning to build up an academic career for himself. Upon lauding in London he realizes that he is in an alien laud and a deep charm between his and London's culture and finds himself unable to find a go between the two. The situation gets worsened when he is served Sri Lankan dishes in a restaurant in London, which was way different than what he was accustomed to, it enkindles his memories related to his motherland and generates a strong desire to turn back to homeland. He tries to stay indifferent to their unsettling memories but his efforts fall flat miserly. He becomes a prey to melancholy and suffers an inexplicable distress in mind. In addition to it, the visit of Sri Lankan national cricket squad in London to play a test match against the host country revives buried memories of his past, and he lenkes for his homeland. He cannot restrain himself from watching out for that air of his homeland Sri Lankan cricket squad who, perhaps would bring and his experience of the Sunny falls in a dillmma in that he gets stuck in his liminal space, as it were. In other words, while memory drags Sunny to his homeland, the melancholy of the reality spark, melancholy that throws him back to the hostland.

III

A number of critics have contributed to shape up the notions of memory, melancholy, homeland, hostland, among others, and their perspectives are very important in this regard to comprehend the workings of memory and melancholy as far as diasporic experiences are concerned. Freud in his seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia" puts forward:

Melancholia, therefore, borrows some of its features from mourning ... It is on the other hand, like mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object; but over and above this, it is marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning . . . (Freud 250)

He has meant to say that one mourns for something that he has either lost or is detached from it for long time. The act of mourning includes one's keen desire to meet the lost object. Jasbir Jain is one particular critic who has pertinently observed in "Overwriting Memory: The Diaspora and Its Present":

Vijay Mishra takes up the Derridean reference to mourning, signifying a total finality and the impossibility of retrieval. Derrida's *Work of Mourning* is about the loss of his friends and consists of addresses delivered in their memory, mostly as memoirs and are adieus and recollections: as such the finality of death is what is considered. Mishra by using 'Impossible Mourning' also indicates a definite finality of the past which can never be recovered or excised either physically or emotionally or kept alive through an unchanged memory. It is a loss which has to be remembered as loss; the journey has been a linear one . . . (Jain qtd. in Kar 17-18)

Jain has rightly pointed out that mourning for the past induced by memory does not facilitate one to reach past incidents physically. Melancholia, like mourning, is a response to a lost object with a difference and the difference lies in that it is regulated by a determinant. In *Diaspora Studies*, mourning for homeland is quite common and it is supposed that melancholia is an inevitable consequence of it. One mourns of attachment and is left with melancholia at the end because mourning cannot help him reach the lost object. The idea of mourning is attached to homeland. Avtar Brah is one particular critic who is of the opinion that theoretical conceptualization of "home" is very problematic because it can neither be reached nor can be absolutely forgotten. In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah foregrounds how "homing desire"² problematizes one's memory of "home" followed by the impetus of melancholy. Brah goes on to argue, "The homing desire, however, is not the same as the desire for a 'homeland'. Contrary to general belief, not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return . .

.. I argue for a distinction between ‘feeling at home’ and declaring a place as home” (194). Anita Mannur is another important critical theorist who in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Fictions* reminds us of that food³ is one of the important reminders, which incites one’s memory of “homeland” when he is away from it, and is undoubtedly an identity marker. She is of this view that it seems often impossible for immigrants to stay indifferent to the cuisine of their “homeland” simply because like other reminders, cuisine enlivens one’s faded memory of past and consequently, forces him to yield to the back pull of memory.

Sri Lankan cuisine has been widely acclaimed for its varieties and is very much associated with the lives of people in Sri Lanka. Romesh Gunsekera’s *The Match* exposes how the protagonist of the novel desperately tries to connect himself to his homeland while staying in London, by means of delicious Sri Lankan dishes. Sunny, the finds his homeland through Sri Lankan dishes and is time and again reminded of it. Food, says the author is one of the significant identifiers, which facilitates Sunny to meet his homeland in mind. The distinctive culinary culture of Sri Lanka plays a vital role in enkindling his suppressed memories of homeland in abroad. This intimate association of sunny, reminds one of Triton in *Reef*, who is appointed in Mr Salgado’s home as a cook. Triton forges a distinctive identity as a cook through his rigorous practices:

Along with it, cricket is another identity marker by means of which Sunny tries to understand his homeland. Cricket is his favorite sport and he used to play. He was encouraged to play cricket to forget the absence of his mother in his life and thus cricket has become intimate in his life? His father made all the arrangements for playing cricket at their garden:

There had been a time when Sunny and his father had played garden cricket on a strip on lawn barely wide enough to swing a bat. Lester favoured leg spin; Sunny wanted to be a fast bowler. Sunny wanted to get it back ... a makeshift pitch. (*The Match* 17)

Another instance from the text can be drawn in this regard to show Sunny’s passionate enthusiasm for cricket:

*1After a while Herbie admitted that he had played cricket in junior school when he lived Hong Kong and that he was pretty good with the googly. Sunny yelped, thrilled, when he heard the word: *googly*. ‘Fantastic’. It was the kind of bowling he wished he could perfect, alongside the bouncers and bodyliners he’d spent so long practicing. (23)

Cricket provided him comfort and room for relaxation. Cricket had always been a source of pleasure and thus, whenever he was reminded of cricket;

he immediately recounts memories related to his homeland where he used to play cricket. Therefore, memories associated with cricket are ever green in his mind and make him feel that he is close to his homeland although he lives away from it in reality. When Sri Lankan national team visits England, he feels excited and decides to come to watch his national cricket team play against the host England:

... Aravinda de Silva was hopping like a bird, patting the earth with his bat, casting quick furtive glances around the field, getting ready to fly. Watch out, Sunny wanted to yell ... 'Cheers' ... sunny stood with the rest of the stadium to give the batsman his standing ovation as he took off his gloves and shuffled into pavilion and a page in sporting history. (263)

IV

Sweet memories of homeland seem bitter to Sunny when these are recalled from a distant place. Sunny cannot stay calm and composed in London because these memories keep reminding him of homeland and inciting his cravings for it. It is, as if, that Sunny is pushed by circumstantial compulsions to think of his past, and at one point he decides to comply with them being unable to restrain himself from taking a plunge into the memories of homeland. Sunny might have thought that memories of those days spent might help him bring comfort in his present days in London. All his assumptions are proved wrong when Sunny meets self-disillusionment. Gradually, he understands that memory is deceptive in nature in that it does not really help him find comfort in it. On the contrary, it makes him feel deluded, in that memory compels him to think of his homeland but does not help him get back at the days of his childhood. Sunny feels that he has got stuck in between memory and melancholia. Whenever Sunny tries to recall his homeland, he finds melancholia at the end each time. Slowly but surely, he comprehends that he can neither get back at his homeland by the help of cricket and cuisine in reality nor can stay indifferent to those haunting memories. Here one may be reminded of the following passage from the text to substantiate this observation:

When lunch was called, the pair in front opened a bottle of red wine and started to munch corned beef sandwiches. Sunny took a quick nip of gold and went down to see if he could find a Sri Lankan snack. He came across fish and chips, crepes, burger and a tikka masala stall. (263)

It shows that Sunny cannot come to terms with the pressing memory and he has to indulge in melancholia. In other words, melancholia deflates all the

expectations generated by diaspora memory in Sunny's mind and, in turn, adds misery to his life.

Gunasekera might have intended this novel to point out psychological trepidations experienced by Sunny in particular, thereby dragging attention of readers to the fact that acculturation in diasporic condition is contingent upon how well an immigrant strikes a balance between memory and melancholy, and failure to do so, it causes misery and anxiety to an immigrant. Sunny's acculturation in London gets affected when he understands that the conflict between the duos will never cease to happen until his death. Sunny's failure to settle down in London is indicative of that the memory of homeland has been perturbing the mind of Sunny ever since he left for London.

V

Thus, at the close of this account, one may pertinently put forward that the tension between memory and melancholy is intensified by the constant impetus of cuisine and cricket thereby making it difficult for Sunny to negotiate with the culture of hostland in so far as *The Match* is concerned. This article thus seeks to underscore the importance of taking cuisine and cricket into account while exploring the plural significations of the interaction between memory and melancholy.

Endnotes

1. Brah observes in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*: First, a note about the term 'diaspora'. The word derives from the Greek — *dia*, 'through', and *speirein*, 'to scatter'. According to Webster's Dictionary in the United States, diaspora refers to a 'dispersion from'. Hence the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs. It invokes images of multiple journeys. The dictionary also highlights the word's association with the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian exile. (178)
2. Brah puts forward in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*: The concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*. The problematic of 'home' and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition, but how, when, and in what form questions surface, or how they are addressed, is specific to the history of a particular diaspora. Not all diasporas inscribe homing desire through a wish to return to a place of 'origin'. For some, such as the South Asian groups in Trinidad, cultural identification with the Asian sub-continent might be by far the most important element. (189)

3. Anita Mannur, in the opening chapter entitled “Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism and Diaspora” of her work *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Fictions*, observes: As its focal point, this chapter examines the discursive and affective place rather than the symbolic or semiotic value of food in nostalgic narratives of dislocation. The desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather, such nostalgically framed narratives must also be read as a metacritique of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one’s relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which unflinchingly yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices. By elaborating on the varied logic of what I call “culinary citizenship” – that which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain identitarian positions via their relationship to food – I explore how reinterpretations of official and traditional models of national definition are scripted in a culinary idiom. To negotiate how divergent but related models of “culinary citizenship” cast food into a complex web of affiliations mediated by class and sexuality, I consider how vestigial nostalgia for homelands among communities of recent immigrants who maintain financial and affective ties with their “homelands,” for instance, can lead to the creation of distorted fictions, which imagine cuisines as discrete, immutable, and coherent expressions of unflinching national essences. (29)

Works Cited

- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.
- Gunesequera, Romesh. *The Match*. Bloomsbury, 2006.
- . *Reef*. London, Granta, 1994. Print.
- Jain, Jasbir. “Overwriting Memory: The Diaspora and Its Present.” *Contemporary Indian Diaspora: Literary and Cultural Representations*, Ed. Angshuman Kar. Rawat Publications, 2015. 13-28.
- Kar, Angshuman, ed. *Contemporary Indian Diaspora: Literary and Cultural Representations*. Rawat Publications, 2015.
- Mannur, Anita. *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Fictions*. Temple University Press, 2010.
- Strachy, James. Ed. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. The Hogarth Press, 1920.