The Absent Family: Migrant Modernity and the Affective Cost of Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

This paper examines the trope of the absent family through the lens of affect theory to illuminate the emotional and psychological terrain of migrant modernity. Reading Sunetra Gupta's *The Glassblower's Breath* (1993) and *So Good in Black* (2009), alongside Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), the study traces how transnational migration, so frequently framed in terms of opportunity, modernity, and cosmopolitan belonging, carries with it a quieter, more enduring cost. While migration may offer new beginnings, it also creates deep ruptures in intimate ties and leaves behind an emotional residue that is not easily resolved. Drawing on affect theory, particularly Sara Ahmed's work, the paper reconceives familial absence not just as physical separation, but as a condition of affective disorientation where closeness and intimacy take the shape of memory, silence, or withdrawal. These texts show how diasporic subjects carry the weight of emotional absences that shape their identity through what remains unspoken and unresolved. Rather than offering narratives of return or reconciliation, Gupta and Lahiri present diasporic narratives as marked not only by hybridity and movement, but also by the ache of what is no longer within reach. In doing so, their works call attention to the affective underside of cosmopolitanism, urging one to think: what is the hidden cost of belonging everywhere and nowhere at once?

Keywords: Affect Theory, Diaspora, Emotional Dislocation, Cosmopolitanism, Familial Estrangement, Migrant Subjectivity, Postcolonial Fiction

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Introduction

> *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, rainbowed 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*
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> —Sunetra Gupta

The ability to travel, reside, and work across national borders has become an increasingly prominent marker of success and modernity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. According to the United Nations, the number of international migrants reached an estimated 304 million in 2024, up from 275 million in 2020, and nearly doubled from 154 million in 1990. This dramatic rise not only reflects the expanding scale of global movement but also signals broader transformations in identity, belonging, and the politics of citizenship. Within this global context, the South Asian diaspora, often referred to as the *Desi* diaspora, has emerged as one of the largest and most complex diasporic formations in the world. Over 25 million individuals of Indian descent currently live abroad, alongside millions more with ancestral ties to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (Chatterji and Washbrook, 5).

Cross-border mobility is often associated with cultural sophistication and cosmopolitan openness. The ability to move between different cultures is seen as a sign of being globally smart and modern. However, postcolonial and diasporic writers have regularly questioned this view. Rather than supporting celebratory narratives of global citizenship, they explore the difficulties and contradictions that exist within the in-between spaces of diasporic experience. In this context, Gilles Deleuze's ideas become particularly relevant. In *Negotiations*

(1997), he notes, "It was no longer a question of starting or finishing. The question was rather what happens in-between" (Deleuze, 165). Although Deleuze's remark pertains to philosophical inquiry, it resonates powerfully with the condition of the diasporic subject. It is in the "in-between" between departure and arrival, between memory and assimilation, between homeland and host land that the migrant negotiates the emotional and cultural terrain of displacement. And this liminal space becomes the site where questions of alienation, identity, hybridity, and belonging are actively encountered and contested.

To better understand these questions, this paper draws on affect theory, a body of thought that emerged in the late twentieth century at the intersection of cultural studies, psychology, feminist theory, and queer theory. Affect theory is a way of understanding how feelings and emotions shape our lives, actions, and relationships. It looks at how emotions, like love, fear, sadness, or joy, are not just personal, but also social and political. A foundational figure in this field is Silvan Tomkins, the American psychologist, whose work *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1960) laid the groundwork for understanding affect as a distinct domain of experience separate from cognition. More recently, theorists like Sara Ahmed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Brian Massumi have expanded this framework.

Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of emotions in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) offers a critical theoretical terrain for understanding diasporic experience. She writes:

> the word 'emotion' comes from the Latin, emovere, referring to 'to move, to move out'. Of course, emotions are not only about movement; they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that. The relationship between movement and attachment is instructive. What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence, movement does not cut the body off from the 'where' of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others. (Ahmed,11)

Ahmed's insight that "what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place" captures something essential about diasporic existence. Migrants carry with them emotional imprints of family relationships that continue to shape who they are, even across vast distances. They exist in a kind of emotional suspension and are never fully present to either the world they have left behind or the one they now navigate daily. Family members in this situation become what Ahmed calls "affective objects", people and memories that carry an intense emotional charge regardless of physical presence.

To understand this emotional terrain, we need to situate it within broader theories of diaspora itself. Etymologically rooted in the Greek "dia" (over) and "speirein" (to scatter, spread, or disperse), diaspora originally captured the specific Jewish experience of exile from ancient Israel, but has since expanded to encompass diverse communities dispersed from their homelands. This expansion reflects not merely semantic evolution but a deeper recognition of how displacement operates as a fundamental condition of modernity. Contemporary theorists have transformed the understanding of diaspora from a purely historical or demographic phenomenon into something far more complex and nuanced. William Safran, Robin Cohen, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Homi Bhabha have collectively opened new pathways for exploring how identity is constructed, contested, and transformed under conditions of displacement and transnationalism. Their work reveals diaspora as a site where cultural, psychological, and political dimensions intersect in ways that challenge traditional notions of belonging. Particularly illuminating is Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space", a hybrid, counter-aesthetic zone where migrants gain the agency to express, intervene in, and initiate cultural change (Bhabha 53). His theoretical intervention legitimises transnational subjectivities and highlights the fluid, negotiated nature of diasporic identity. Yet this optimistic reading finds its counterpoint in Avtar Brah's more ambivalent perspective. In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Brah presents diaspora as simultaneously a site of traumatic alienation and a space where individual and collective memories collide and reconfigure within conflicted cultural and political zones (Brah 193).

Within this contested terrain, home and family emerge not as simple terms but as what we might call "affective anchors" or emotional structures that migrants actively construct and maintain as sources of continuity and stability. These anchors function as symbolic refuges against the fragmenting forces of displacement and provide crucial psychological resources for navigating the existential uncertainty of migratory life. But what happens when these carefully constructed anchors fail? When does family become the site not of presence but of profound absence? The result is what we might term as "affective rupture", a tear in the emotional fabric that manifests as grief, longing, ambivalence, and existential displacement. This rupture reveals the precarious nature of diasporic belonging and shows how the very structures that promise stability can become sources of profound instability. This rupture is not merely personal but structural, embedded in what Ahmed calls the "inherited affective logics of postcoloniality"(Ahmed, 10), circuits of pain, nostalgia, guilt, and hope that circulate through

collective memory and political history. The absent family becomes a symptom of larger historical forces and the ongoing effects of global capitalism that fragment communities and scatter families across borders. Understanding these affective ruptures as structural rather than individual allows seeing how diaspora theory must grapple with the emotional costs of the very mobility it often celebrates.

The works of Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri offer particularly illuminating case studies of how the absent or fractured family functions as a critical site for understanding these affective consequences. Both writers, despite their positioning within the cosmopolitan literary canon, resist celebratory narratives of global mobility. Instead, their works foreground the emotional and ethical costs of migration that remain largely unspoken in dominant accounts of cosmopolitan sophistication.

Gupta's *The Glassblowers Breath* (1993) and *So Good in Black* (2009), alongside Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), create literary worlds where characters inhabit cross-cultural zones and where home becomes elusive and a fragment of memory. Their cosmopolitan mobility hides deeper wounds created out of the erosion of familial coherence.

Sunetra Gupta, an Indian-born British author and Professor of Theoretical Epidemiology at the University of Oxford, is known not only for her scientific contributions but also for her richly textured literary voice. Born in Kolkata in 1965, Gupta has received numerous accolades, including the *Sahitya Akademi* Award, for her exploration of diasporic consciousness. Her fiction probes the complex emotional lives of Indian immigrants in the West, where identity is negotiated through memory, longing, and cultural displacement. Employing non-linear narrative structures and lyrical prose, she often uses memory and nostalgia, especially through flashbacks, as tools to excavate the past and reveal how personal history continues to shape diasporic identity. In Gupta's hands, diaspora is not merely a spatial dislocation but a profound reordering of emotional life, where intimacy, belonging, and memory are in a constant state of negotiation.

In her work, *The Glassblower's Breath,* Gupta traces the circulation of emotional damage through family systems and across generations. The novel's most striking feature is its use of second-person narration, where the protagonist is addressed as "you." This narrative strategy helps in positioning readers within the protagonist's fractured subjectivity rather than observing it from outside. The protagonist "you" experiences this affective rupture first when her father decides to migrate to London following his wife's death. Believing that Calcutta has nothing more to offer and pulled by "the magic of a foreign land" (Gupta,156), the father decides to relocate to Birmingham as a means of escape from a "festering, decaying city" of Calcutta (Gupta, 41). "You" is also compelled "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 mad woman in the attic, furiously scratching tales of vicarious misfortune" (42). The father's migration narrative follows familiar patterns of diaspora as escape: fleeing what he perceives as a "festering," "decaying" Calcutta for "the magic of a foreign land." But Gupta contradicts this escape fantasy as something liberating and presents it as a sort of loss. The protagonist "you" is compelled by her father to "rip away the bonds of stone and sweat and travel heedlessly into the unknown," yet her mobility only deepens her affective displacement. Even when she grows up into a successful academician in the UK, she remains unhappy. Her academic and worldly success does not bring her liberty or peace. Her absent family members, the dead mother and abandoned sister, function as what Ahmed calls "sticky objects," accumulating emotional intensity that influences her present immensely. And their memories keep haunting her, which creates an "affective void" in her personality that no amount of material success can fill.

In this context, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions do not simply reside within individuals but circulate between bodies and spaces, "sticking" to certain objects, people, or places over time. In this context, migration to the UK becomes an emotional investment for "you." She feels sad even in her "city of dreams." (Gupta, 100) "London, you say, is in a class of its own, it is a city I would say I both hate and love, if the large part of our relationship were not indifference" (Gupta,107). Despite getting married to a prominent English doctor in the UK, she is never able to assimilate into his culture. Instead, she involves herself in multiple extramarital affairs, culminating in their murder by her husband. Her getting engaged in multiple affairs can also be seen as a desperate, albeit destructive, search for connection and a means to fill her affective void. Her affairs are not just acts of infidelity but are symptomatic of internal disarray, a chaotic attempt to find wholeness. Her inability to form stable, fulfilling relationships is a direct consequence of her initial familial rupture and the psychological burden of her diasporic existence. Her actions are driven by a deep-seated longing for a "home" that no longer exists in a singular, tangible form for her. Her relationship with people from different backgrounds, like a butcher, a baker and a candle-maker, becomes symbolic of her emotional needs at varied levels. Her affairs also reveal how certain people become charged with emotional intensity that exceeds their actual capacity to provide healing. Avishek, the baker, sees her as a "bride of the underworld" (Gupta, 203),

Alexander, the butcher she calls her "a runaway dream ... a delectable mirage, an abandoned myth, emerging from childhood to garnish the future" (Gupta, 45), "an unanchored soul, a rootless being" (Gupta, 40) with "a taste for fantasy," and a "desire for destiny" (Gupta, 93); a "need for pain" (Gupta,186) and an "addiction to the absurd" (Gupta, 203); with an identity split by lust and "disastrous insecurity" (Gupta, 214). Sparrow, the candle maker, perhaps sums up the heroine's fluid identity in the best possible manner:

> a month after you had met, he had told you … that within you, he saw qualities of the undead, of a spirit that had travelled vast lengths of time, accumulating experiences that there was none left to share with, a peripatetic vampire, that is what you might have been if your existence were not governed by ordinary consideration of space and time" (Gupta, 117-18)

The novel thus critiques a simplistic view of "migrant modernity" and "cosmopolitanism" as purely liberating or beneficial. While "You" achieves academic success and lives in a global city, the narrative unveils the hidden, often devastating, emotional price of such mobility. It highlights how the physical journey of migration can trigger profound and enduring affective disjunctions and leave individuals adrift.

Sunetra Gupta's second novel, *So Good in Black* (2009), also demonstrates how migration creates lasting emotional wounds that shape characters' lives and relationships. Using affect theory, this analysis examines how feelings in the novel move between people and places, creating patterns of attachment and loss that extend beyond individual experience. In this novel, Sunetra Gupta explores the emotional toll of migration through the story of Ela, a young Indian girl whose father, Nikhilesh, moves to Ghana to work as a professor. Initially, Ela lives abroad with her parents, but later they decide to leave her in India in the care of a family friend, believing that this will keep her rooted in Indian culture and traditions. Gupta writes:

> Nikhilesh was keen to return and re-establish himself in Calcutta, desperately worried that his daughter would not identify with their culture if she did not grow up in Bengal. His wife, however, was clearly determined to remain in West Africa for much longer, she told him proudly that she had learned to drive, and how easy and wonderful life was for them out there within their cosmopolitan university community, how pleasant it was for the child to grow up in such an intellectually stimulating and yet peaceful environment. (Gupta 2009, 26)

Ela's mother wishes for their daughter to stay with them in Ghana, but her father, Nikhilesh, does not agree to it and leaves her with Byron Mallick, with the intention that Ela can be trained in classical dance. This decision of leaving or taking children to new cultures reflects an emotional conflict between the parents and also reveals a central tension in diasporic life: the impulse to root one's child in the cultural authenticity of the homeland versus the appeal of cosmopolitan life abroad. The father's attachment to Indian culture carries the weight of postcolonial anxiety about cultural loss. In contrast, his wife's enthusiasm for their life in Ghana represents a different emotional orientation, where the diaspora offers freedom and intellectual stimulation. If for Nikhilesh, Bengal represents a site of cultural continuity and identity preservation, then for his wife, the diasporic setting in West Africa offers a space of self-reliance and ease within a modern, intellectual community. That is why, as parents, they hold differing ambitions for their daughter's future and turn distinct geographical locations into emotionally charged spaces filled with conflicting hopes, fears, and attachments. Ultimately, Ela becomes a medium through which these opposing emotional logics are played out. Ultimately, Ela grows up in India and is abandoned by both of her parents. This leaves a lasting wound on her psyche and evolving sense of self. She starts missing home and family at every step of her life. Even in seemingly mundane moments such as watching a labourer's family sit and eat together at an unfinished construction site, she is struck by a deep sense of absence of familial intimacy:

> As they were leaving the site, she caught his arm and boldly said - look, Byron, look drawing his attention to another building in a slightly more advanced stage of construction where a homeless family were making use of an apartment, perfectly formed except for its exterior walls, they were going about their business pretty much as they would had the walls been in place, some were sitting ma circle upon the floor to eat the food that was being prepared on a makeshift…Byron watched the little girl as she picked her way through the maze of concrete, trying to define and imagine the outlines of what would later be her parents' home. He watched her as she skipped from brick to brick, immersed in her own game, and his heart filled with an unexpectedly tender awareness of her uncertain plight. (Gupta,24)

Ela then grows up into a beautiful professional dancer and gets married to an Indian doctor, Arun. She then migrates to the UK for better economic opportunities. In the foreign land, she achieves a lot of success, yet she remains emotionally unmoored. She develops an extramarital relationship with Max, who is not only very elderly to her but also a friend of her foster father, Byron Mallick. This relational disarray stems from affective gaps left in her personality caused by her early abandonment by her parents. Unable to address the fundamental wound of abandonment, it shapes her relational patterns

and life journey. Ela's story illustrates that professional success and cultural mobility cannot compensate for the emotional displacement that occurs when traditional structures of care and recognition are missing.

The same pattern can be observed in the life of Max, with whom Ela develops an extramarital affair. He returns to India after many years to settle down permanently in Calcutta with his wife, Barbara. But he remains torn between a desire for intellectual freedom and a yearning for emotional rootedness, just like Ela. The absence of a coherent family structure in his childhood days led to a perpetual state of estrangement in his life, which also resulted in his strained marriage with Barbara. Thus, both characters demonstrate that people may cross borders with ease, perform well on global stages, or inhabit multiple cultural worlds, but haunted by the family's absence, they always remain emotionally unmoored.

The second author taken for the study is Jhumpa Lahiri, a celebrated Indian-American author, widely recognised for her poignant and insightful explorations of the immigrant and diasporic experience. Born in London in 1967 to Bengali Indian immigrant parents and raised in the United States, Lahiri herself embodies the complex cultural in-betweenness that defines much of her acclaimed work. She delves into themes of identity crisis and cultural hybridity, as her characters often grapple with a sense of not fully belonging to either their ancestral homeland or their adopted country. Generational gaps and strained family dynamics are also central to her oeuvre, highlighting the tensions between parents who cling to traditions and children who embrace, or struggle with, new cultural norms. Her works, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies* and the acclaimed novel *The Namesake*, have cemented her status as a crucial voice in contemporary diaspora literature.

In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri examines the intergenerational affective consequences of migration through the story of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who, after their Bengali traditional marriage, relocate from Calcutta to Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the process of relocating to a new land, they must leave behind their parents, siblings, and cultural roots in Calcutta. This loss intensifies the sense of cultural dislocation and isolation in them. The loss of familial support structures makes them alienated, especially at the birth of their first child. Ashima, as a new mother, goes through a lot of mental pain and feels:

> That was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, which had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows little, where life seems so tentative and spare." (Lahiri, 6).

Ashima's life in America is shaped by this enduring sense of loss and longing. She realises that "being a foreigner… is a sort of lifelong pregnancy, a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (49). Meanwhile, her children, Gogol and Sonia, also grew up in the United States in the absence of a traditional extended family structure. Ashima keeps telling her husband that "I'm saying don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back." (33) But he refuses and continues to raise them in the host land. As a result, children become emotionally and culturally distanced from their parents. Although they live together under one roof, a quiet emotional absence marks the Ganguli household. Gogol's discomfort with his name "sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity of gravity." (76) He does not want to read Nikolai Gogol because he thinks it "would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow" (92), his rejection of Bengali customs, and his romantic relationships with American women all reflect his desire to escape the cultural and emotional world of his parents. Yet the emotional gap between generations is not caused by a lack of love, but by a failure of recognition, of shared context and experience. Gogol does not initially understand why his name holds such profound meaning for his father. Ashoke, on the other hand, carries the memory of trauma and survival silently, revealing the story behind Gogol's name only years later. His silence mirrors the emotional restraint common in many diasporic families, where pain and history are not spoken aloud but carried quietly, deeply felt, and often concealed. He maintains this silence, yet within his heart:

> To this day, he is claustrophobic, holding his breath in elevators, and feels pent-up in cars unless the windows are open on both sides. On planes, he requests the bulkhead seat. At times, the wailing of children fills him with deepest dread. At times, he still presses his ribs to make sure they are solid" (21).

Ashoke's bodily responses reveal how deeply the past clings to Ashoke's present, how trauma continues to live on as an affective residue that is felt rather than spoken. His silence becomes a private archive of fear and survival. Ashoke's unexpected death later becomes the most profound moment of absence in the novel, marking a decisive emotional rupture. For Gogol, this loss initiates a painful yet transformative reckoning. He thinks, "Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all" (Lahiri 289). The absence of the father becomes a powerful void

in which Gogol is finally able to confront the emotional weight of his name and begin to make peace with his identity. Thus, it is only in the wake of death that the significance of Ashoke's silence, and the love it masked, begins to take shape for Gogol. He comes to see the name not as a burden, but as a bridge to his father's experience and an affective legacy shaped by survival, memory, and loss. Ashoke's trauma, long embodied in silence and gesture, ultimately finds meaning in the emotional inheritance he leaves behind.

Emotions experienced are what make one act and move from one physical and psychological reality to another. Ahmed writes:

> In affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities or bodily space with social space–through the very intensity of their attachments…. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social. (Ahmed, 119)

Ahmed's theory argues that affect itself, when far from the original event, attaches to other things, events, or ideas. Indeed, "some signs…increase in effective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more effective they become, and the more they appear to 'contain' affect" (120), but in reality, they are effective in their circulation, not in their arising in the subject herself.

Gogol's name functions precisely in this way; it gathers emotional force as it is repeated, questioned, rejected, and eventually reconsidered. For Gogol, its meaning is not static but dynamic, shifting as he moves through different stages of life. As a child and adolescent, the name becomes a strange, inexplicable, and alienating thing. As an adult, after Ashoke's death and the revelation of the story behind the name, it takes on new affective meaning: it no longer remains just a burden but becomes a memorial link to his father's survival and love. Ultimately, it is through the absence of family that Gogol begins to reorient himself emotionally. His return to Bengali rituals after his father's death is not a reversion to tradition, but a re-engagement with loss. The novel depicts that the promise of migrant modernity, that geographic mobility will resolve the contradictions of identity and belonging, remains perpetually deferred. Instead, migration amplifies rather than resolves the affective disruptions embedded in familial separation and creates subjects who remain suspended between competing demands for authenticity and adaptation.

Lahiri's second work, *The Lowland,* presents a very interesting character, Gauri, whose life is deeply impacted by the Naxalite movement. "I mean, she's a 23-year-old woman. She's in love with her revolutionary husband. She watches him shoot in cold blood. She discovers after the fact that she is carrying his child. How does one move on from that? (Neary, 2013). After the death of her first husband, Udayan, who is a Naxalite revolutionary, she is offered marriage to his younger brother, Subhash and starts afresh in the USA. Despite feeling that "she cast no shadow of her own" (Lahiri, 91), Gauri develops a sense of self through Udayan's love. Her daughter Bela, born there, is adopted by Subhash. But a strange transformation overcomes her. She completely immerses herself in academic life, and she dissociates herself from her marriage and even motherhood. Lahiri writes, "She remains Indian in many ways, yet she cannot become a good Indian mother who would never abandon her daughter (28). Some years later, without notice, Gauri moves to California and severs ties with Bela and Subhash. When asked about her past, Gauri refuses to share her story with anyone, not even with her student Dipankar, for his book on Naxalites, saying: "I'm sorry, I don't want to be interviewed" (Lahiri, 340). Nonetheless, news of Kanu Sanyal's (the erstwhile Naxal leader) suicide affects her and "She could not rid herself of the emotion it churned up" (345)

Looking at Gauri's character, it becomes evident that her affective responses are shaped by political forces that led to the murder of her husband and social reasons that led her to migrate to a place she never chose. She is not able to process or narrativise her trauma in conventional ways. Instead, it becomes embedded in her body and reshapes her relation to time, intimacy, and nationhood. She adopts an affective silence reflecting her suppression and incommunicability of political grief. As Ahmed writes, "emotions do things", and in this case, her refusal is a protective wall against a world that continues to demand her trauma be made legible. Her immersion in academic life is not a simple career move; rather, it is a rechanneling of affect. She makes knowledge a substitute for emotional entanglement. Gauri's case also reveals that despite moving to the US and becoming a self-reliant woman, Gauri is never able to articulate her trauma, which results from her early days. So, she chooses to embrace an academic identity and discards the traditional role of wife and mother along the way. Her not being able to embrace motherhood also comes from the fact that she had never experienced a proper mother–child relationship in her life. "In childhood, Gauri had not known who she was, where or to whom she'd belonged" (Lahiri, 91). Handed over by elderly parents to old grandparents, and upon the latter's death, living unobtrusively in her maternal uncle's home, Gauri "had no memory of spending a moment ever, alone with her mother or father" (91). As a result, she struggles with her role as Bela's primary

caregiver. She retires into her study whenever possible: "Isolation offered its form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquillity of the evenings" (Lahiri, 165). Aligning with what Sara Ahmed characterises as a "wilful subject" (2014) by challenging "the sovereign will of family" (Nadiminti, 247). Gauri's trajectory reveals that cosmopolitanism is not always liberating; it can sometimes come at the cost of personal relations and emotional ties. Her global mobility leads her only to withdraw and sever bonds with even those who are closest to her. Gauri's emotions are thus profoundly shaped or misshapen by affective intensities rooted in political loss, gendered expectations, and diasporic displacement.

Conclusion

Through the narratives of Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri, the trope of the absent family emerges not simply as a motif of loss but as a subtle and persistent critique of the fantasies that underpin migrant modernity. While dominant discourses celebrate mobility, global opportunity, and cultural adaptability, Gupta and Lahiri turn our attention to the silences, ruptures, and emotional fissures that such mobility often leaves in its wake. In their work, the pursuit of cosmopolitan success is shown to be intricately bound to forms of affective displacement, those quiet but enduring absences that linger behind the façade of integration and progress. These are absences that material prosperity cannot resolve, and which, instead, deepen with time and become part of the emotional fabric of diasporic life.

Ultimately, their works compel one to reconsider what it truly means to belong in a transnational world. They urge us to look beyond the surface of visible achievements and attend to the quieter emotional undercurrents, grief, longing, and love that shape human lives in migration. In a world increasingly marked by movement, rupture, and distance, Gupta and Lahiri's stories pose a poignant question: How does one learn to live with the absences that never fully fade?

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