

**Emotional Urban Spaces: Atmosphere, Fascination, and Phantasmagoria  
in Sunetra Gupta's *The Glassblower's Breath* (1993)**

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Part of a conversation between the heroine of Sunetra Gupta's 1993 novel, *The Glassblower's Breath*, and her friend calls attention to both emotional attitudes towards urban space and the special significance journeys and destinations have in novels by transnational/translocal women writers.

New York, you say . . . ties with Calcutta for my second most favourite city in the world . . . what is Calcutta like? he asks . . . Calcutta is like New York, you tell him . . . what is your favourite city, then? Paris, of course, you tell him . . . When I get tired of London, I go to Paris . . . 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. (105–07)

Whether the female protagonists in these novels (im)migrate in hope of a better future or are driven by wanderlust, the places they settle in, temporarily or permanently, often generate feelings that determine the degree of their attachment to them and have a considerable influence on their identity.

To untangle the complex psychological and emotional relationship between the heroine and her simultaneously beloved and hated cities in *The Glassblower's Breath* I examine Gupta's literary representation of the atmosphere of urban spaces, revealing the emotional tones or affordances, as well as the emotional work of urban imaginaries related to London, exploring the city's state of mind and the city as a state of mind. A close reading of Gupta's novel reveals how fascination is linked to the characters', and especially the heroine's emotional responses—her dreams, desires, and fears. According to Gernot Böhme,

Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze. (114)

The atmospheres of urban spaces in Gupta's novel are both manifested in the heroine's emotional responses and created by her presence and memories, her affective relationships, and her cosmopolitan identity. There are

inextricable links between the identity of the city and that of the heroine as well as between their respective perceptions as phantasmagorias, created through fascination, emotions, and dreams.

*The Glassblower's Breath* recounts one day in the life of a young cosmopolitan 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: the physical, embodied in Daniel, the butcher, with whom she has a brief impulsive sexual affair; the emotional, represented by Avishek, the baker, his cousin and first love; and the intellectual, manifested in the figure of Jonathan Sparrow, the "itinerant candle-maker," her best friend from university (220). In the grand finale of the novel, the three men end up in the heroine's house with her husband, the immunologist Alexander, where they all die. The novel is narrated in second-person, focalized through the female protagonist; for the most part, the homodiegetic narrator is (presumably) the protagonist's husband, 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). Therefore, the initial quotation is practically the only instance when the heroine's words and experiences are not mediated; that is, they directly signal her own lived experience of metropolitan spaces.

The female protagonist's tale is set in several cities including Calcutta, Birmingham, New York, Paris, and London, which both define her by the various degrees of attachment to and belonging with them and liberate her by the very movements made to, from, and within them. Born in Calcutta, "the City of Pain" (Gupta 41), she "would sit late into the evening, in mirrorless, mothstrewn, tropical dark" (43), lonely and isolated from reality in the "marbled halls" of her parental home (14), which at this point suggests that her emotional responses to Calcutta are not generated by the urban space *per se* but by the boredom experienced in the private/domestic space. As the city has nothing to offer to either the protagonist or her father, their immigration to Birmingham becomes a means of escaping the "festering," "decaying city" (41, 225) for the sake of knowledge and driven by wanderlust, which "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" (42). As a desire for wandering, wanderlust is linked to German Romanticism and its vagabond literary heroes of rootless, restless character. Since rootlessness and restlessness are attributes of western traveler-migrants and what James Clifford calls "travelling cultures" (17), the

heroine's fear of ignorance and her wish to avoid "knowing more than [she] had seen" may 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.

Wanderlust and traveling in the novel derive from the heroine and her father as *eastern* (that is, Indian) traveler-migrants: wealthy diasporians with the possibility to travel extensively and settle temporarily at several urban locations, thereby constructing a certain traveling identity. For Clifford, travel dissolves spatial boundaries and constructs "social, political and cultural identity as an amalgam" (Smith and Katz 76). The traveling immigrant's movement to and within various places and spaces may offer the sense 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 through the experience of what Clifford calls "traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling" (36), an alternative attitude and sense of belonging to a place. For Clifford, the concepts of traveling 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). By definition, a traveling identity is in a direct collision with the concept of translocality, which "insists on viewing [spatial] processes and identities as place-based rather than exclusively mobile, uprooted or 'travelling'" (Oakes and Schein 20). Given the heroine's emotional attachment to various metropolitan spaces (as reflected in the opening quotation), her emotional relationship with them arguably forms an important part of her identity, which may not be place-based but is strongly affected by places and locations—it is decidedly "place-influenced."

The unique mixture of cosmopolitanism and translocality thus both determines and is determined by the heroine's emotional responses to cities. After the dullness and isolation experienced in Birmingham, the female protagonist and her father return to the "the difficult embrace" of Calcutta (38), then years later, pulled by "the magic of a foreign land" (156), she goes to university in America and lives in New York for a while; in the breaks she travels with Sparrow as tourists to London and Paris, the latter journey compensating for the uncompleted 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" (107). Before returning to Calcutta from

their immigration, the father takes the heroine for a first visit to Paris by train. They arrive in the evening, check into an expensive hotel, then at dawn, the father wakes her up and tells her they need to leave—on a whim, they fly back to Birmingham. Instead of disappointment, the heroine feels “romantic” anguish and declares Paris to be her favorite city, despite the fact that she did not actually experience its atmosphere—the atmosphere which can only exist when directly, physically experienced.

This contradiction implies that as a child the heroine had a preconception about what Kurt Koffka refers to as the “demand character” or “invitation character” of the French capital: an image of Paris as the city to love. In this case the valence, that is, the emotional value of Paris is not—cannot be—associated with a stimulus of the environment but with a simulacrum of the metropolis (compare Baudrillard), thereby creating an “imaginary atmosphere” that would propel her later to return again and again: “Years later . . . you sat at the window and waited, studying the cauliflower buttresses of the Notre Dame. People, like scraps of coloured paper, floated pleasantly around you” (106). Her second visit to Paris already involves an emotional response to the metropolis, which, instead of imagined emotions, strengthens or justifies direct experience. This situation may be explained by Steve Pile’s theory of the cognitive and emotional aspects of the urban experience and the claim that city living has its imaginative or phantasmagoric sides—the heroine’s first “real” experience of the city may thus feel like “a dream come true.” The sight and sense of people floating pleasantly around her generate a feeling of being together, which, on the one hand, signals that “[t]he *experiencing* of a spatial environment is characterized by *emotional participation*” (Hasse 52). On the other hand, the experience of “togetherness” also implies the concept of a cosmopolitan identity, which on a basic level may be interpreted as being at home in any city in the world and having a “relationship of love” with cities in general.

Whenever the heroine returns to her birthplace, Calcutta, she realizes the “inadequacy” of her relationship with the city (14): “you returned the following summer to the city that had shaped your tender doom, you returned brimming with grave resolve, stern desire that led you to walk for hours, sandal-footed, in the stark heat brine, you were determined to experience all that you had been shielded from in the marbled halls of your grandfather’s home” (14). The narrator’s words suggest that the heroine arrived in Calcutta with the desire to get to know and re-connect to her roots but the description of her behavior evokes the figure of the tourist instead: starting out with her relatively short stay, walking and getting to know the city, and her tourist gaze

mediated through a frame, that is, the lens of a camera. Instead of an emotional bond, a rather superficial relationship is created, and the heroine returns from her walks “always disappointed” (109). But what exactly hinders or disables her emotional bonding?

First, the heroine’s tourist behavior suggests an emotional distance from the place she could/should call her home and a deliberate one at that, since looking at the city through the frame of a camera necessarily disables direct personal experience and creates detachment. This implies that the heroine experiences Calcutta as a city with limited “atmospheric affordances”—a term Tonino Griffero interprets as an emotional tone, as the messages spaces send out about their possible uses and functions (“Architectural Affordances” 4). In Griffero’s view, “to an atmospheric affordance indeed one reacts not necessarily with a behavior” but “at times also with an aesthetic distance,” that is, “the perceiving of an atmospheric affordance seems to ‘demand’ a special objectivity” (4). Drawing on this claim it may be natural that the female protagonist distances herself from the city for the sake of experiencing what it could afford, but if she suppresses all affective relations, the atmosphere her objectivity creates will not be the kind that could turn urban space into home.

Second, since the city is relatively unknown to the heroine, who is a complete stranger, it cannot offer her anything that may generate a sense of home. So when she opts for the detached experience that the frame of the camera enables, she is, in a way, trying to protect herself from the (unavoidable) disappointment, that of loving a city that does not “love her back.” Her inadequate knowledge of, and the ambivalent emotional relationship with, the city thus renders it impossible to love, to belong to, to call it home, thus “the agonies of an unanchored soul, a rootless being, spurned by the very city of her birth” (Gupta 40) affect her emotions, bodily reactions, state of mind, as well as her behavior and judgments (compare Griffero, “Architectural Affordances”). Her performance as a tourist contributes to the production of an atmosphere (Griffero, “Architectural Affordances” 4) in which Calcutta is not and cannot be home, but a chaotic place of smells, sounds, and sights: “rancid fumes of smoked fish and old diesel,” “the potters’ quarters in the North [humming] with activity,” “the antiseptic green of the Tollygunj Club,” “a clay forest of idols” (Gupta 39). This description of Calcutta underlies Böhme’s claim that the atmosphere of the city is mainly sensually perceived, and intrinsically, bodily felt since it is, in Nora Plesske’s words, “scripted in emotional states of being” (139).

There is, indeed, another layer of emotions to consider here, an emotional state which may explain the heroine's attitude to and production of the atmosphere of the city: her unfulfilled love for cousin Avishek. According to the narrator, the heroine blames the inadequacy of her relationship with the city for "the death of this love" (Gupta 14). When she first returns to Calcutta from university, feeling that her love for Avishek is "ruined," she "stood face to face with the city, and conceded that there had been no blood and no moss" (38)—that is, she realized that she has no roots in the city. Instead of place attachment, the heroine's physical and emotional reactions to the city give away a different kind of bond:

You stood before the city that had once celebrated your passion in sudden strokes of foxthorn and pale purple madder between cracked stone and betesplit, circled warm wet winds upon your neck where his lips might have stayed if he had dared, the city that had wept with you after he had gone . . . Two years later, your passion spent, you ventured forth once more into the winds that had not sustained your desire, declaring that your acquaintance with the city had been hopelessly inadequate . . . you scored the city for those sombre shadows that might have secured your passion . . . Within a clay jungle of broken limbs, your camera shutter jammed, and its fierce final rasp ran like a shiver of cracked glass into the pit of your stomach . . . you threw up your lunch into a nearby drain . . . When you came to, you were between clean sheets, worried faces around you, the kindly family doctor thumping your chest, and what troubled you more than your fever was the sense of alienation that your disease made complete, your illness, which . . . became the immediate metaphor for your isolation from the city that you longed to love. (38–40)

The physical experience of the city is strongly linked to the physical love that she used to yearn for, being painful yet desired. Through this connection, the city comes to life and echoes the heroine's sorrow as they weep together. The city seems to have a dual symbolic function: on a physical level, it symbolizes Avishek, and on an emotional level it becomes the mirror image of the heroine. Secondly, the female protagonist's wish to rekindle her passion upon returning to Calcutta and her directionless wandering resulting in her becoming sick and feverish indicate an emotional state that is both felt and reacted to bodily. Her sickness is not only a metaphor of isolation but also the physical manifestation of dislike, rejection, and fear, which may mean that the emotional context of the heroine's presence and movement in Calcutta is that of fascination—a psychological link between her and the

environment (Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 7), simultaneously involving and triggering positive as well as negative emotions.

In a similar fashion, London, her current residence is postulated as the city she both hates and loves but is also indifferent to. As I shall argue later, this complex emotional relationship is further complicated by ways of fascination and various phantasms of both the heroine and the British capital, the final (?) destination of her journey. As the narrator recalls the heroine's journey: "You have come a long way, my love, a long way from home, you have found your way into a houseful of mirrors that each tell your tale, but none as well as you might have, if you have looked within, instead of among your myriad reflections, for the shape of your destiny" (42-43). These "myriad reflections" may be interpreted as the different images the men in her life have of her and their respective claims to shaping the destiny of the woman who refuses to be controlled by fate and to be pinned/"penned" down by merely one way of identification.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the multitude of reflections is not only the metaphor of the multiplicity of identities, but also the compound of her several selves as reflected in their eyes. Furthermore, by extension, it is the various levels and degrees of affective relationships that the heroine has with the men in her life that seem to influence her emotional attitude and responses to London primarily, which indicates that, as in the case of Calcutta, despite the negative emotional and felt body involvement the city *is* "something atmospheric" (Griffero, "Architectural Affordances" 14).

Gupta's novel provides little description of the landscape or the architecture of London, so to feel the atmosphere of the city the reader has to rely on the characters' opinion. For them, London is "the wide imperious city," the "despised city," or "the Leid-Stadt, the City of Pain" (57, 22, 237)—with a reference to Rainer Maria Rilke's city of suffering, where pleasure masks pain. The "emotional context" that these perceptions indicate presents a kind of fascination with the city which, according to Heiko Schmid, Wolf-Dietrich Sahr, and John Urry, "incorporates fetishism, preference, but also dislike, rejection, or fear" (7). There is, indeed, not much to like about the London described here; it is bleak, tyrannical, and painful. Drawing on Pile's assertion that the city has its own state of mind—"its sentiments, its attitudes, its sense of self, its mood" (2)—it may be argued that London shows a different face to the heroine.

The negative image of the despised city is nuanced by the heroine's attitudes and feelings toward it. The first time she visits London she is at university in the USA from where she flies to Britain with Sparrow for their spring break. The narrator recalls the heroine's fascination with London as

the “city of your combined dreams” and how she “lay insensate upon the soil of Great Britain” (10). The heroine’s seemingly positive emotional and physical response to London may signal a case of enchantment, a sense of fascination deriving from antiquity and referring to the state of being bound by magic or witchcraft (Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 2). Moreover, the heroine’s reaction may also be associated with the twentieth-century interpretation of fascination: “attractiveness of things and events of all types” (Hahnemann and Weyand trans. in Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 3). Another aspect of Gupta’s portrayal of London as a fascinating place manifests by the way the heroine’s outings with Avishek and her long stroll in the city with Daniel are depicted, where the narrator mostly mentions tourist attractions, such as Primrose Hill, Charing Cross Road, and Trafalgar Square. This makes the female protagonist’s movement in London more like a sightseeing tour, while the palpable sense of her non-attachment and unbelonging practically renders her a tourist in her own place of residence, a tourist who may be fascinated by and experience city space as a dream.

There are, in fact, only three places in London described in detail in the novel: Alexander’s residence in one of the Royal Boroughs of London, the Council flats where Daniel lives, and a “young blue hotel” (185), where the heroine and Daniel make love. With its “mirrored hallway, a mirage of plaster icing,” a “palace of kitsch” (67), Alexander’s house is a “voluptuous hostelry,” an “ornate parody of Victorian opulence that fills the inflexible spaces of your existence” (6) and makes the impression of glamour and unhomeliness—it does not sound or feel like home, but like a hotel or an enchanted castle. The visual richness of the house stands in direct opposition with the Council flats, characterized by a “grim nudity,” “a long stretch of naked corridor, a wall of flapping laundry,” and a “vermilion door” (150)—images that signal poverty but may also generate associations with death and sexuality. The female protagonist and Daniel’s affair becomes physical in the hotel, described as having “a wreath of delicate neon,” “licorice doors,” a “garish foyer,” “dark blue velvet” walls and green rooms (185). While the house and the flat are described as places to mainly observe and to take in through sight, the hotel appears to be a more complex space with its colors, feel, and tastes which engage more senses and thus invite a deeper phenomenological perception.

The three places comparably generate a fascination in the sense that Schmid, Sahr, and Urry describe as being nested in emotional attitudes, such as “fear, rejection, and repulsion on the negative side, and relaxation, comfort, and attraction on the positive side” (2). The complex experience of



fascination explains the dichotomy of detachment and attraction, fear and desire that the heroine feels at these places, and it helps us understand how she can simultaneously love and hate London: these two emotions indicate the two extreme poles of emotions and attitudes inherent in fascination, thus they necessarily go hand-in-hand in the experience of being fascinated by the British capital. Furthermore, as the heroine travels and walks through London with Daniel, her fascination with the city somehow intertwines with her growing desire for the butcher and becomes the kind of fascination that Peter Sloterdijk refers to as “a magical state of being enraptured in mutually erotic enchantment” (trans. in Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 4).

Consequently the actual or factual description of the city becomes far less important here than the states of mind and emotions that London influences and is influenced by, creating the unique atmosphere that makes it a metropolis “in a class of its own” (Gupta 107). Drawing on Schmid, Sahr, and Urry’s claim according to which “[a]n atmosphere is an emotion with spatial character” (58), I argue that the atmosphere of London in the novel is created in two ways primarily: first, through the heroine’s ambivalent emotions for the city, the various levels and degrees of affective relationships that she has with the men in her life, as well as her lust for Daniel, death, and fate. Second, it is also largely determined by the men’s perception of, and emotions toward, the female protagonist.

For Alexander the heroine is “a figment of [his] untrustworthy imagination,” “a runaway dream,” “a delectable mirage, an abandoned myth,” whom he adores with “unfathomable desire” and kisses “with a reverence that is boundless, a reverence accorded only to fantasy, only to the image of flesh, and never to flesh itself” (45). The husband perceives the heroine as a phantasmagoria, a real or imaginary image seen in a dream—a concept applied by Walter Benjamin and explained by Pile as something “beyond the immediately visible or tangible” (3), a dream the underlying processes of which are imperceptible (19). The husband’s description of the heroine suggests not just the fragility of their lopsided relationship and the obsession it is based on, but also that the depiction makes the heroine desirable and ghost-like at the same time, thereby evoking contradicting emotions such as respect and the desire to control, fear, and lust.

For Sparrow, the heroine is also an ambivalent and illusory figure:

[H]e 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 considerations of space and time, and at this you took umbrage, for it was an image that was in conflict with your prevailing compulsion to martyrdom. (117–18)

Sparrow also describes the heroine as if she was a mere fantasy. In this dream, however, she appears not as a ghost but a vampire, dangerous but irresistible. The vampire is an idiosyncratic figure of the city, who, similarly to ghosts, “simultaneously reveal[s] and conceal[s] desires and anxieties”; it is an “intensely ambivalent figure . . . a dream-like element in the phantasmagorias of modern city life” (Pile 21, 97). Although both the ghost and the vampire are first and foremost associated with fear and danger, in the heroine’s case, the desire and fascination she generates become much more emphatic attributes of her phantasmagoric character. Therefore Alexander’s and Sparrow’s desire for being fascinated is “a desire for arrest . . . in which the subject of fascination is at once enthralled and aroused” (Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 6).

The narrator offers a third perception of the female protagonist as well and depicts her as a woman with “a taste for fantasy” and a “desire for destiny,” suggesting that “the only purpose of Daniel’s insular being is to have illuminated your senses for a few hours” (93), although eventually “the fullness of this lust . . . splits your life in half, where before it was only fissured at the level of your dreams” (161). The strong emphasis on destiny and lust, as well as the fact that the three men (Avishek, Sparrow, and Daniel) are brutally murdered in the end—a fate they are bound to meet—create the phantasmagoria of the heroine as a *femme fatale*. Investigating the figure of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*, Slavoj Žižek asserts that she

. . . ruins the lives of men and is at the same time victim of her own lust for enjoyment, obsessed by a desire for power, who endlessly manipulates her partners and is at the same time slave to some third, ambiguous person . . . . We can never be sure if she enjoys or suffers, if she manipulates or is herself the victim of manipulation. (65)

Žižek’s definition could explain both how and why the men perceive the heroine as dangerously attractive, as well as her claims that she is characterized by a certain “compulsion to martyrdom” (Gupta 118). Throughout the novel, the female protagonist appears to have free will to decide about her actions and directions, yet she attributes these to fate, a desire that controls her, and a lust that positions her in-between chaos and order, in which she is doomed to fall towards “the glassblower’s breath.” By

doing so, she becomes both the “queen” and the victim of fascination which can be understood as “an aesthetic experience that is based on an inner restlessness” (Hahnemann and Weyand trans. in Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 5) and “includes attraction, desire, and mystification, but also terror and fear” (Schmid, Sahr, and Urry 5), while it may also be interpreted as a fatal attraction. As Žižek argues, “what is really menacing about the femme fatale is not that she is fatal for *men* but that she presents a case of a ‘pure,’ nonpathological subject fully assuming *her own* fate” (66, emphasis in original)—a punishment far worse than death: ultimate submission, which means having to help get rid of the dead bodies of the men she loved and who died for her.

This figure of the femme fatale has two important implications. First, it indicates that fascination is “highly gendered . . . it first and foremost derives from a male projection of disempowerment and effemination, expressed in the attempt to demonise the female sex” (Baumbach 43). Second, as Sibylle Baumbach points out, men may also have the power to fascinate—think of the figure of the Byronic hero or *homme fatale*: “a cunning, cynical, sophisticated, mysterious, magnetic, seductive, but often also self-critical character” (44). Daniel, the butcher, is repeatedly portrayed in the novel as a man who could bring death to the heroine through the lust he triggers in her; he is “immune to the mutilation of flesh” (96) and he is “[her] last encounter with destiny . . . [her] final experience of the dignity of fate” (155)—yet, he is anything but sophisticated and cunning. Baumbach’s description of the *homme fatale* fits Alexander the best—he is the “ambiguous person” that the heroine is “slave to” (Žižek 65).

Daniel’s character may be associated with death itself, with his “corpse-green brow” (Gupta 193), “eyes like distant spasms of darkness,” and “hollow cheeks creased in smile,” which makes the heroine feel that “the enigma of all existence is in the curve of that smile . . . . You have searched long for this smile, a smile that swells now with meaning, without sound or fury” (65). These images call attention to the surprising fact that the heroine actually yearns for death—since her sister’s sudden death a year before, it is all she has thought and dreamed about; she wants to “defeat and possess” it (Gupta 195), but she can only achieve this by allowing “the rule of disorder, the disenfranchisement of chaos” (201) infiltrate her and the dream-like city:

Last night the moon . . . came dropping its clothes in the street, I took it as a sign to start singing, falling *up* into the bowl of sky. The bowl breaks. Everywhere is falling everywhere. Nothing else to do. But here’s the new

rule, my love: Break the wineglass, let the shards swallow your palm, fall, fall, gently now, down the verted chute of time, towards the glassblower's breath. (155–56)

What the narrator suggests here is not simple transgression but subversion *par excellence*. The dream of “a new rule” is born as a wish to disobey, to break out of the dream but attempting to do so has a reverse effect: instead of defying death, she becomes death herself; by subverting the laws of gravity—that is, the rules of patriarchal society—she becomes the ultimate femme fatale, responsible for the death of the three men. She is frozen forever into her phantasmagoric image and trapped in the city of London, a lived phantasmagoria, the spatial embodiment of the femme fatale. Thus the city becomes a state of mind. When everything feels like a dream or phantasm, then phantasmagoria is the only reality one knows, and the city becomes “a dream-like site of memories and wishes” (Pile 57) with fascination on the surface and “hauntings . . . hidden from sight” (Pile 8) but felt deeply and painfully, like a Freudian total love of simultaneous loving and hating (133). But then again, if both love and hate are painful, if both transgression and submission result in entrapment, indifference proves the only possible way out.

Realizing that her sister's death “had been the passing of an image in the mirror” (185), a reality she could accept and live with, the heroine's state of mind and attitude change: “Death had left unquenched your need for pain, a rich dry laughter that was the indifference of the universe had come to fill the shell of your being” (185–86). Being indifferent means becoming blasé, withdrawing emotionally instead of suppressing what is impossible to wish for and feel any longer. Indifference may also be interpreted as “a special case of hate” (O'Neill 118), the ultimate revenge and survival tool, the opposite and refusal of total love (Quinodoz 87).

Whether embraced, rejected or ignored, the urban spaces portrayed in the novel appear to have atmosphere that is both embodying and created/influenced by the heroine's emotional responses and affective relationships, experiences and memories, her identity, her love, rejection, and loss. The novel is a love letter to cities she loved and cities she “had longed to love” (40)—cities that let her love them and cities that did not. As Pile (discussing Benjamin's theory) asserts: in the modern city people “sleepwalk their way through their lives, unable to wake up to their desires” (20). The female protagonist of Gupta's novel is forced *by her desires* to wake up from her dream and realize that she is but a dream, a phantasmagoria. Whether perceived as

a ghost, a vampire, or a femme fatale, it is the fascination she generates in men and the fascination that binds her to dangerous desires that she is primarily identified with. Likewise, London becomes phantasmagoric because of the characters' and, especially, the heroine's lived experiences, dreams, and emotions, as almost each different perception of the city is filtered through the perceptions of the heroine, as well as her sentiment and mood, her identity and image. The inextricable links between the city and that of the heroine are thus created by these very approaches, whereby Gupta's female protagonist and London are phantasmagorias, which could not have come to life, nor dreamt on without one another.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In their influential feminist study, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar make the following claim about the connection between authority and gender: "The roots of 'authority' tell us, after all, that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property. As a creation 'penned' by man, moreover, woman has been 'penned up' or 'penned in.' . . . [B]oth patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women" (13). Drawing on this assertion, it may be argued that Gupta's heroine refuses to be imprisoned by both the men in her life and the narrative they author.

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