

THE MATRIX OF CULTURAL MIGRATION STUDIES IN SEVERAL NOVELS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

Abstract

Literature has an unrivalled ability to support and shape society. The representation of reality and reflection of society in literary fictions are two overlapping concepts. Literature depicts the culture, society, politics, economics and spiritual broadening of a society. Culture is mainly a civilization of a society that includes beliefs, customs, traditions and philosophy which are considered important for the development of human being. India is a multicultural land with strong belief and customs. In India women play an important role in performing and following the culture of their society. The women who are displaced from their homeland either due to force, marriage, migration or for seeking higher opportunities suffer the dilemma of cultural crisis.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who is the most prominent Indian - American author pens the position and identity of the immigrant characters and focuses on the study of culture in her works. She is a perfect voices and interpreter of cross culturalism. The present paper focuses on the cultural issues in the selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In her novels, she focuses on the concept of culture studies and traces the cultural crisis, beliefs and customs faced by the immigrant women in an alien land. She profoundly handles the issues of the Indian women immigrant who struggle to assimilate themselves into an alien land. The science of literature makes the identity for the cultural, economic, social, political and linguistics dimensions of Indian people.

Keywords: culture, multicultural, displaced, migration, cultural crisis, immigrant, cross culturalism

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I. FULL PAPER

Literature plays an important role in depicting the cultural, political, economic, social and spiritual broadening of a society or a nation. India is a land of multi culture which has an ancient lineage of culture and it is known to be rich in cultural and spiritual wisdom. The cultural heritage and spiritual wisdom of India credited a lot in the development and growth of world literature. In the recent scenario most of the Indian English novelists incorporate the themes of two opposite cultures. They depict the East and West or Indian and American values in their works.

The word 'Culture' means traditions, politics, literature, art, languages, religion, believes, customs, history and economic background of a society or a nation. Culture is said to be a system of knowledge which is shared by a large group of people. It is a nominal process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development of a society. Culture is a term that accumulates many social cultural antiquities like language, class, clothes, race, culinary, tradition, customs which are being shared by a particular group of people. It is believed that women are emotionally cling towards their culture. Therefore, it is very difficult for the first generation women immigrants to shed their motherland's culture and adapt a culture of an alien land. It is difficult for the women to mingle with the alien culture and people as they are strictly stick to their own culture. They like to live in their own memories, myths and dream.

The immigrants have to face a dual trauma, first is of being away from the native land and the second one is a cultural crisis. The women immigrants have to bear the sufferings of being away from the homeland and trying to adopt the new culture of an alien country. They sacrifice their ethnicity, identity, habits and culture to adjust themselves in an alien land. When immigrant women move to an alien land either forcefully or willingly, they carry away with them their certain customs, traditions and cultural identity.

The re- location of the immigrants brings a fear among them that their culture is being threatened by the culture of the alien land. They face the cultural dilemma which gives rise to the feelings of rootlessness, nostalgia displacement, dislocation and isolation. Homi Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*: "Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational. The translational dimension of cultural transformation- migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation...makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification.

Now a day, the study of culture has become most important. Cultural study has become prominent in the field of arts, social sciences, humanities and also in science and technology. Culture studies is concerned with the study of communication, popular culture, the mass media, post modernism and the sociological and literary theories. Thus, cultural study is an interdisciplinary approach which is associated with all the fields. Culture Studies is not a single thing to study, rather it has accumulated many things in it. It does not require any methodology or set of rules for investigation. It is rather flexible and changes according to the needs and requirements of the discipline. It follows or adapts the methodologies of different streams like popular culture, cultural anthropology, ethnography, cultural materialism, media and audience studies. In Culture Studies, many theories are used such as Historicism, New Historicism, Marxism, Structuralism, Post Structuralism, Deconstruction, Post Modernism, Feminism, Post Feminism and Post-Colonial Theory. The novelists usually delineate the cultural life of the immigrant to depict the cross cultural issues in their works.

The diaspora writers like V.S.Naipaul, Shashi Tharoor, Bharti Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portray the cross-cultural conflicts in their works.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who is an Indo-American author pens the experiences of the immigrants in U.S. As she lives in America and is an immigrant, therefore her works reflect the sense of rootlessness, alienation and nostalgia, which are prominent to Indian diaspora. Her novels truly depict the cultural hybridization of women immigrants. Manju Kapoor says in *Desirable Daughters*, as immigrant fly across, they shed their old clothing, because clothes maketh the man, and new ones help ease the transition. Men's clothing has less international variations, the change is not so drastic. But those women who are not used to wearing western clothes find themselves in dilemma. If they focus on integration, conversion and conformity, they have to sacrifice habit, style and self- perception.

Divakaruni is the most prominent voices of Indian diaspora writing. As a diasporic writer, she pictures the position and identity of her immigrant characters. She is a perfect voice, interpreter of cross- culturalism. She depicts the Bengali Indian culture in her novels. In her works she depicts the issues of cross- culturalism faced by the Indian women immigrants. The women characters of Divakaruni works feel homesick, nostalgia, alienation and identity crisis in an alien land.

Divakaruni novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004) depicts the cultural identity crisis faced by the second-generation immigrants. The novel focuses on the women protagonists who are caught between cultures, struggling to establish their identity. Divakaruni novel *Queen of Dreams* is the story of a mother Mrs. Gupta and her daughter Rakhi. Mrs. Gupta is a dreamer. She is gifted as a dream teller. She deciphers the dreams of local people and tries to solve their problem. Rakhi, the second generation, is a young girl who lives with her divorce mother in Berkley. Rakhi's mother is an immigrant from India. Rakhi does not know anything about India. India is a dreamland to her. Rakhi married to Sonny, and Indian - American man but after some time their marital relationship broke, she leads a broken life, however her six-year-old daughter Jona keeps a link between them. Rakhi runs her small business to earn her livelihood.

Divakaruni in *Queen of Dreams* portrays the struggles of women in United States and their search for cultural and self-identity in diaspora. Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths Gareth and Tiffin Helen in their *Key concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (1998) write, Diaspora studies are generally concerned with cultural dislocation examining the effect of displacement in relation to a new constitution of cultural meanings". (Ashcroft et al. 1999).

The novel, *Queen of Dreams* also explores the racial issues encounter by Rakhi, the daughter of Mrs. Gupta. Rakhi finds difficulty in reconciling her American identity with her parent's Indian identity. She feels her existence as hyphenated as she is born in America and her parents belong to India. In America Rakhi owns a Kurma House that sells Indian food. To make it homelier, she adds Bengali snacks to the menu that attracted the Indian visitors and thus she gets more involved in her business.

In Kurma House Rakhi notices the dresses of the Indian visitors. She notices that, 'While some wear western clothes and some are in kurta-pajamas. Lined faces showing their

age, giving hints about their living in alien land in many difficulties and less triumphs.” (QD193-4). Rakhi realizes that although these people have adopted the American life style, still they are attached to their homeland. They are the people who have same color of the skin. Rakhi while adopting the culture of America connects her identity with the Indian community settled in US. Rakhi is a second-generation immigrant woman who adopted the American lifestyle. She realizes that, “a land that seemed to me to be shared with unending mystery”.

Rakhi attempts to discover her identity. She discovers her mother’s dream Journals. Rakhi’s mother writes in her journals, “A dream is a telegram from the hidden world.” Rakhi longs to know the identity and the existence of her mother in India. But her mother passes away in a freak accident. The dream journals provide information to Rakhi about the past secret of her mother’s life in India and US. When Rakhi is just discovering, her life is shaken by new horrors by the terrorist attack of 11 September, 2001. Divakaruni attempts to focus on the ugly violence that happened in US in 2001 which had a great impact on the immigrants who emigrated from India.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* depicts the cultural and racism issues of the immigrants. After the incident of 9/11, Rakhi feels like an outsider in America. She begins to think upon her identity. She thinks: “But if, I wasn’t American, then what was I?” In the novel, the Chai House, serves the place where much of the action takes place. It is a coffee shop in Berkeley, California. “The Chai House into an Indian snack shop, a chai dokaan, as it would be called in Calcutta. They are going to model it after the shop the father work in so many years ago, with a few American sanitary touches thrown in. He’ll teach Belly and her to brew tea with coffee the right way, and he’ll cook the snacks himself. He lists them on a sheet of paper: pakora, singara, sandesh, jalebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana. The Coffee Shop is jointly owned by Rakhi and her sikh friend Belly. The Chai House has been drawn as a place of living and sensitive environment.

Divakaruni in *Queen of Dreams* focuses on the bicultural identity of the first immigrant woman, Mrs. Gupta. Divakaruni presents the conflict of the protagonist and her refusal to shed her traditional culture completely or to alienate from the new culture. Klarina Priborkin says that, “Divakaruni’s approach to ethnic identity is condiment with the view of South Asian Diaspora that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience”. (South Asian Review 2015). Thus, Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams* presents the psychological complexities of Rakhi’s life as well as the secret life of Mrs Gupta in the form of ‘The Dream Journals’, unfolds the dreams experienced by Mrs Gupta. The journals are in Bengali and Rakhi never learnt Bengali, therefore, how her father promises her in translating them. Mrs. Gupta’s Dream Journals show that she was not satisfied with the choices she made in life. She was not happy with a with her marital life. Divakaruni beautifully incorporates the enigma of Indian women immigrants and presents the authentic firsthand experience as she herself is a part of Indian diaspora. The cultural upbringing of her native land and the experiences of the immigrant land make her work livelier and more authentic.

Divakaruni’s works are filled by her own experiences and exploring the cross-cultural conflicts, she delineates the cultural life of the immigrants. Her works exposed the issues of cross-cultural conflicts faced by the the women expatriates. Her novel, *The Vine of Desire*

(2002), the sequel of *The Sister of My Heart* (1999) is the continuation story of two cousins Anju and Sudha who reunited in America. The novel portrays the cross-cultural conflicts of the Indian woman immigrant, Anju and Sudha. Both the cousins struggle for their identity in the post-colonial world and present the enigma of the modern woman who try to make all the efforts to adjust in the new environment of an alien land.

Sudha gets a job in America to make a life for herself and her daughter Dayita. She gets acquainted with American life which is different from Bengali cultural life. She visits America to become free and independent. The bond between Anju and Sudha is shaken when they came to know about the secret passion of Anju's husband for Sudha. Therefore, she left Anju's house and tells Dayita, "Dayita none of the choices ahead of me are good ones. This one just seems a little less bad then the others."

The two cousins made their own way of living the life, their lifestyles, and their relationships with the people of America and with the Indian immigrant community in US. Anju adapts herself to the culture and traditions of an alien land but after the miscarriage, she feels nostalgic and alienated. Divakaruni writes: "With the something she heard a long time ago, another country, when she was not much more than a child herself: the dead are not irrevocable dead as long as one refuses to let them. "She feels loneliness and becomes homesick. She thinks about her home in India: "It's gone now, Demolished... I used to hate that house, how ancient it was, how it stood for everything ancient. I hated being cooped up in it and not allowed to go anywhere except school. But now I miss it! I think of my room with its cool; high ceiling, and my bed sheets, which always smelled clean, like neem leaves- and which I never had to wash myself and the hundred-year-old people trees that grew outside my windows."

Sudha comes to America with a thought of bringing up her daughter Dayita in a better way. For this she defies the Indian culture and breaks her marriage life and leaves her husband to bring up her child independently in America. Sudha in *The Sister of My Heart* thinks about America. "America has its own problems she said, but at least it would give me the advantage of anonymity. No- one in America would care that I was a daughter of Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, give Dayita everything she needed. Best of all, no one would look down on her for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man.

After coming to US, Sudha realizes that she has multiple shelves in her, the rejection or acceptance of Indian and American culture. She faces the unjustified and violence of the people. She thinks when an old man spits on her face. "So many violence done to me. My mother-in-law wanting to cut from it whatever she considered unseeingly. My life backing away, with his narrow, apologetic shoulders. Sunil plunging into the center of my body, corrosive with need. Each time, I made myself pliant I gave a bearable name to what they did. Duty. Family honor. Filial respect. Passion. But today... The old man's spit on my face so frank in its hate. I could not pretend it meant something else.

Sudha while living in US faces the issues of cultural crisis. She tries to adjust and assimilate herself in an alien culture. While living in US she sticks her Indian culture and traditions and follows the Indian ways of living, eating and dressing. She mostly cooks Indian

food and plays; “I find a cassette of Hindi music...I remember a cassette from the streets of India, blasted from this speaker of hundred shop, whistled by cheerfully unemployed young men who stood on street corners, smoking and spitting... Pyaar Dwanahota hai goes the song... I’ve left door open so our Myra's sparkling modern kitchen. I prepare an old dish. Bhatebhat...when we were sad, Pishi used to make it because we loved it so much.

Sudha, nurses Mr. Sen an old man as she was not well educated to get big job and also she was on a tourist visa. She feels loneliness and she fails to adjust in the new culture of the alien land. She desires to go back to her homeland and tells Mr. Sen, the old man that “America isn’t the same country for everyone, you know. Things here didn’t work out the way for me to start over in a culture I understand the way I’ll never understand America. In a new part of India where no one knows me. Without the weight of old memories, the whispers that say, we knew she’d fail, or serves her right.” (VOD 320- 21).

The old man Mr. Sen, shocked to hear the desire of Sudha’s leaving America, and he says, “Young people who come to this country never want to leave.” (VOD 320). Sudha’s loneliness inculcates the desire of returning to India. Her mother blames her of breaking her marriage in a letter. She writes, “Once a woman leaves her husband, she doesn’t hesitate at anything. Even the most immortal acts come to her with ease. I shudder to think the effect your behaviour will have on your daughter’s character.” (VOD 272). Sudha returns to India with her daughter, Dayita and Anju remains in America. She separates from her husband and cannot forget and forgive him.

The two cousins, Anju and Sudha are different and their assimilation in American culture is different. Sudha has emotional attachment towards the homeland, deep rooted and sensitive touch whereas Anju stands for exploration, liberty, freedom, independence, discovery and strength of facing the sufferings and difficulties. Sudha always felt and outsider in an alien land, whereas Anju adopted the cultural of the host land.

II. CONCLUSION

Divakaruni beautifully juxtaposes the culture in her novels. She portrays the dilemma, experiences and struggles of the Indian women immigrants in a foreign land. She directly portrays the theme of East – West in her novels and the experiences of the immigrants who inherited the cultural values of their homeland by birth and by choice the American values. She speaks and write the language of women. She presents the view points of the Indian women immigrants in her works and depicts the authentic picture of the Indian women immigrants as she herself is a part of diaspora. The culture of India and experiences of US mingle to present and express the lives of immigrants in US. Thus, the present paper focuses on the importance of Cultural Studies in humanities. Cultural Studies help the author to present the cultural issues of the people and it is also connected to different disciplines. In this age of globalization, the terms like transnationals, diasporas, expatriates, migrants, etc. have become very common phenomena and the difference between them is often blurred. In the galaxy of women writers Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the diasporic writer. Diaspora is a new literature of immigration which springs from a thorough going engagement with the host country on the part of the immigrant. Immigrant literature captures the wrenching experience of relocation in an alien country for the immigrant. In today’s literary field, it is accepted by all that diaspora or expatriate writers are those writers who have

preferred to settle in countries other than home country distinguishing them from Desi or rooted always tackles a number of buzz words like diaspora, immigration, nationality ethnicity counterparts. The expatriate writer marginality hybridity.

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