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ENCOUNTERING BORDERS: CHALLENGES OF ADAPTABILITY AND CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract

Like many other diasporic writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a poignant Indo-American diasporic writer, spins her stories around the themes of diaspora, identity crisis, culture and quest of women in the patriarchal structure. However, her novels are marked distinctly by the author's diasporic experiences. As an Indian writer who had migrated to a foreign land, she has an unparalleled insight into an immigrant's daily struggle to adapt to the new culture without sacrificing her own tradition and culture. This struggle gets tougher and more challenging as her immigrant women characters combat with racial discrimination outside and patriarchal values inside the house. In an intricate long narration, Banerjee's heroines as they travel from ignorance to experience, discover their real identity and shed the outer shell of expected performance to have a more independent and satisfying life. Her major novels such as *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, and *Queen of Dreams* have gained recognition because of her bold female characters who constantly negotiate for a new space in the foreign land with their traditional roots in their native land. This paper attempts to evaluate the multitude of challenges that these women characters face, explores the strategies of negotiating their space by judiciously assimilating with the new culture and recreating an identity for their own selves.

Keywords: Tradition, immigration/immigrant, culture, assimilation and identity

In postcolonial discourse, the term Diaspora has a special significance; it means 'scattering or dispersion'. It refers to a group of uprooted people who were forced to leave their homeland and settle in another cultural region for various reasons; caught physically, emotionally and intellectually between two cultures--- their own and the adopted one. Colonialism in a way gave birth to many diasporic Indian society. One can never forget

the major diasporas of the past that include the Aryan, African, Jewish, and Palestinians. In the present age of globalization, with migration becoming a common phenomenon, terms like diaspora, expatriate, etc. have managed to make its place in our living room conversation. The issue of diaspora invites a stimulating discussion on culture, tradition, assimilation and acculturation, death and recreation of identities. These concerns have given

birth to a branch of literature called Diasporic or Expatriate literature. Meena Alexander defines it as, "writing in search of the homeland" as it has been observed that the main trend of this literature is to deal with 'home and foreign country' and between the 'familiar and strange'. It also engages with themes of rootlessness, racial discrimination, identity crisis, dislocation, cross-cultural encounters, nostalgia and marginalization. Famous diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri are some Indian writers who had migrated to the US, Canada and other European Countries and have faced cultural shocks but adapted as perfectly as possible. They have to face various cultural conflicts. Their works beam with amalgamation of cultures along with their longings for the distant homeland.

Diasporic literature highlights on the tedious process of acculturation, assimilation and cultural identity. Acculturation is a process in which the immigrants who have got separated from their own culture are under the compulsion to swing between the two different or varied cultures. As they encounter the challenges of new culture, behavioural modes and unfamiliar values, they land in a world of trouble. Gradually, the expatriates as a survival technique try to recognise and realise the new norms and the new social, political and economic structure of the foreign land to get accustomed to them. The adjustment process is known as acculturation. Marden and Meyer defined acculturation as "the change in individuals whose primary learning has been in one culture and who take over traits from another culture" (36).

Cultural identity refers to a person's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group. It is about the accepting traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture. A group of people believes the values, norms, and social practices of their culture and identify themselves with that culture. Divakaruni's characters which consist of both first generation and second-generation immigrants constantly negotiate with their existing identity to create a more balanced socio-cultural space for them along with a new identity of their own.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an award-winning Indian American author and poet, who is recognized as a diasporic writer, exploits her experiences as a first generation expatriate in the Western soil. Her literary works that are largely set in India and America are coloured with expatriates' experiences in the new land, their emotional crisis and racial discrimination that affect their very existence in the new land. Chitra's first collection of short stories 'Arranged Marriage' (1994) won her an American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, and the PEN Josephine Miles Award for fiction. Her other major works include *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Palace of Illusions*, etc. Divakaruni who was born in Kolkata, India moved to USA for higher education. Her literary output is a manifestation of her experiences, her keen observation and her ability to empathize with the expatriates, especially immigrant women.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels provide an opportunity to explore critically the question of identity, immigrant experiences, multicultural society and its variegated complexities, dissolving boundaries, inter-generational and cross-cultural crisis, and transnationalism. Divakaruni explicitly throws light on the term and concept of 'diaspora' in her works. Her diasporic experiences, sense of displacement, alienation but also a strong desire to integrate into a new culture are reflected in her works. Her characters are shown fighting with these issues of displacement, cultural conflicts, marginalization in a new land on one hand and on the other hand a strong desire to adapt to the new culture through assimilation and acculturation; thereby creating a new paradigm.

As Divakaruni's novels focus on the journey across the seas, she delves deep into the ocean of creating characters, especially immigrant Indian females, who engage in the tedious exercise of assimilation in the foreign land. This inevitably leads to the point of clashes, one of dilemma and series of interrogation that lead to many different notions of identities, roots and existence. The constant battle between the values of their origin, and that of the new culture that they have adopted force them to construct an identity of their own; sometimes an

amalgamation of the traditional and the adopted one, whereas sometimes going back to the roots and strongly holding back the customs of their native land. However, in both the cases metamorphosis of identity takes place.

Hence, Divakaruni's famous novels like *Sister of My Heart*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams* and a collection of short stories in *Arranged Marriage* portray the problems faced by the Indian immigrants on the grounds of identity, racism, and acculturation. She mainly shares her views on women searching for her identity. Divakaruni's characters reflect the predicament of being caught between two conflicting cultures the Indian and the American, two different approaches to life, the internal and the external, and how the immigrants try to assimilate and acculturate with their new identity and the new culture, coping with the new language, culture and environment.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni deals with Indian American experiences of a second-generation immigrant and focuses on Rakhi's endeavours in balancing two worlds, social space in the new country as well as the native ties with country of her parents' origin. Rakhi is an American by birth, but she is brought up in a set up with high doses of Indian culture. Her access to different worlds of culture and tradition creates a new world of confusion for Rakhi and as an educated, focussed as she is, she brilliantly trapezes between the two cultures to minimize her world of confusion. However, before reaching this realization of balancing it, she is often tossed to and fro, and Rakhi interrogates her own identity. It is only after the sudden death of her mother in a car accident when her father tries to revive the chai House into an Indian snack shop, a 'chaer dokan', in a true Bengali style, that provides an insight into Rakhi's position as an US citizen born in an immigrant family.

Post terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 when Rakhi's family is branded as a terrorist for keeping the shop open, Rakhi and her family are pushed into a dark hole where they start doubting their own identity. are thrown into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. As a very good friend of Rakhi, Belle while consoling her

advises her to put a flag in their shop on that terrible night. But the totally confused and shattered Rakhi mentions, 'Bella, I don't have to put up a flag to prove that I'm American! I'm American already. I love this country-hell; it's the only country I know. But I'm not going to be pressured into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passer-by' (QD).

As this terrible event affects Rakhi, her family and her other immigrant friends Rakhi reflects "But if I wasn't American then what was I?" (QD 271). Gradually they are pushed to compromise on their identities as Americans and ultimately realize, "And people like us seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of stranger who lost a sense of belonging" (QD 272). Rakhi, like many other immigrant friends of her suffers from multiple stresses, tactfully deals with dark new complexities to evade the position of an outsider. As a diasporic victim, she is compelled to live in a perpetual state of tension and irresolution because she is unable to sever her ties with the imaginary homeland though she has accommodated into the host culture. As Muthyala states about Rakhi: Assimilation into the host culture does not fully restore a sense of equilibrium that balances or rather harmonizes the experience of alienation and loss engendered in the experience of travel and relocation and neither is sustaining a pure unadulterated native culture and identity in foreign location a fully realizable possibility (98). But such experiences invariably push one to a conscious creation of a new identity to merge with the main stream existence.

Here, with reference to Rakhi's behavioural disposition, it is also important to mention the observation made by Rama Nair on the process of acculturation and assimilation. Nair observes, "acculturation and adoption of changes in external behaviour begin early but assimilation or the ability to react instinctively and emotionally to a culture is a far slower process. Breaking away from one's ethnicity and absorbing a new culture is the only way of survival" (Nair 82). Though Rakhi's adoption to America starts as early as her birth but her assimilation to American culture is a highly difficult one. However, as a second-generation immigrant she is find ample scope to create her own identity as Nair observes: "Through assimilating and

acculturation an Indian immigrant woman in America can create an identity for herself. But this is an identity that is constantly evolving being open to change and perpetual motion (QD 83).

Divakaruni's characters irrespective of their generation experience this issue of identity crisis, and gradual adjustment by acculturation and assimilation of the host culture and customs. In contrast to Rakhi, her mother Mrs. Gupta is the first-generation immigrant in the novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004). She is a dream teller "I dream the dreams of other people, so I can help them live their lives" (QD 7). Her life and problems in the new land of California with her husband Mr. Gupta is not the same experience as her daughter Rakhi faces. Born in India and in possession of miraculous power of foretelling the dreams of other people and interpreting them to help the people, she feels her powers coming to an end after marrying Mr. Gupta and migrating to America. In America as she loses the power of interpreting the dreams, she starts losing her identity as a dream teller. The only alternative that she can see then is to find her way back to the caves (India) to regain her identity as a dream teller. However, her moments of happiness are short lived as she realises that she was pregnant with Rakhi and cancels the plan "Next I let go the possibility of return". (QD 295) After Rakhi's birth she slowly regains the lost powers and gradually returns to her dream work of interpreting the dreams of people, she modifies her work to make a space in that area.

Mrs. Gupta focuses on the two opposing traditions and cultures that she is exposed to by segregating and integrating in order to insist on an existentialist sense of identity. She balances her roots with the new culture for an easy accommodation into a new society which openly and implicitly proclaims her roving existence in an extraneous soil. According to Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*, "an exile is tender in the beginning, becomes stronger in the process and then becomes perfect. The person who finds his homeland sweet is still tender beginner, he to whom the entire world is foreign place" (407). Mrs. Gupta fits perfectly into what Said observes. She remains highly amenable of complying with the

most of the radical changes that she comes across in the foreign land. Instead of getting overwhelmed with the changes, she constructively uses the new culture. She weaves a cagy world which did not allow entry of anyone, even of her own husband and daughter; it is revealed posthumously through her dream journal.

Finally, though Mrs. Gupta had regained her power of interpreting dreams, the art of dream telling was lost; she had lost the power to reveal the entire truth to their clients and gave solutions for their problems. Hence, in order to survive in an alien land (America), she adopts a different technique of just knowing the dreams of people and advise them by prescribing precautions.

The novel *Sister of My Heart* that is divided into two books - the first as 'The Princess in the Palace of Snakes' and the second with a title 'The Queen of Swords' propagates immigration to a foreign land that provides anonymity to troubled souls. The protagonists of the novel Anjali better known as Anju and Basudha as Sudha are distant cousins but share a deep bond of sisterhood since their birth on the same day. Sudha has been brought up as an ideal Indian woman by her very traditional and doting mother Nalini. She teaches her daughter and Anju, the acceptable and perfect behaviour and mannerisms in a patriarchal society. She imbibes in them these patriarchal values and moral lessons through rhymes and lullabies as in "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are fire brands, scorching their family's fame". (23).

However, their marriage weaves a different story for them. While Sudha stays in India post marriage, Anju leaves for US with her husband. She finds a life starkly in contrast to that of Indian society. She is overjoyed to find it more liberating and fuller of promises. Anju's changed lifestyle, language and dress indicate the impact of the new culture on her. On the other hand, Sudha who stays in India had a troubled marriage leading to a divorce. After her divorce her life with her little daughter is full of criticism, estrangement and emotional turmoil. In contrast to US, Divakaruni depicts the stringent, critical Indian society that instead of

empathising with Sudha makes her life more unbearable. The novel ends with Sudha migrating to US to stay with Anju, thereby authenticating the fact that foreign land does provide more anonymity to individuals like Sudha and a scope for self-reliance and independent existence.

In *The Vine of Desire*, Divakaruni portrays the opportunities and threats that Sudha and Anju meet in the new land. Both the sisters in this novel are caught between the domestic tension and traditional expectations, Indian domestic ambience and the conservative attitude of first-generation Indian immigrants. It strongly depicts the multicultural conflict of the Indian immigrant women Sudha and Anju, determined to create an identity of their own in the postcolonial world. Born and brought up in a very traditional family system, Anju's notion of a marital life is challenged as she lands up in her husband's home. Constantly battling with an indifferent, insensitive husband who fails to understand her emotional requirements and sexually torments her, she takes one of the boldest decisions on her life to leave her husband's home and find peace for herself. Handicapped by domestic hurdles, emotional crisis and constant sexual abuses, Divakaruni's women characters like Sudha and Anju decide to take the path of compromises and negotiate a life of peaceful singlehood. Both of them struggle to assimilate in an alien land of their unfulfilled longings; as they find themselves trapped in the middle of nowhere, they desperately try for a way out and suffer in the process of cultural dilemmas and displacements in the newly adopted land.

The journey as an immigrant and the process of assimilation into American culture for both Anju and Sudha had been different. While Sudha stands for deep-rooted viewpoints, family background, one's in born personality, the pull of the native land and the buried past, remaining an outsider in the adopted country, Anju stands for independence, escape, exploration, discovery, revelation and removal of the imagination, for balancing new heights, for thoughts and aspirations and achievement and for facing the test of the indefinite.

The central debate in the narrative, however, revolves around its female protagonist, Tilo, who is both empowered and oppressed as she grapples with the east-west binary. Notably, while Tilo upholds the mystical powers and tradition of India that in turn grant her supernatural abilities as a healer and a nurturer, ironically, it is these powers that entrap her under stringent gender norms emanating from traditional Indian value-systems. Likewise, while America bestows upon her the independence and autonomy to run a spice shop, it nevertheless exoticizes her. Tilo, the magical healer, therefore, inhabits a liminal space between the east and the west where she constantly negotiates with cultural codes in order to attain autonomy and identity

The Mistress of Spices is Divakaruni's another enchanting novel that depicts the story of Tilo. It deals with the complexities, cultural tensions, and identity crisis of the marginalized and racially segregated immigrant Indians in a foreign land but also creates an imaginary homeland tossed with dilemma, pain and anxiety. Divakaruni's diasporic status that leads to such spaces can be best summed up in Rushdie's words as (1991, p. 11), "when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal with broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost." Born in India, Tilo is trained in the ancient art of spices and ordained as a mistress discharges her special powers in a foreign land. When she travels to Oakland she opens a shop dealing with ancient spices and administers them as curatives and healers to her customers. The central debate in the narrative revolves around Tilo, who is both vested and oppressed as she wrestles in a space tightly marked with the east-west binary.

Notably, while Tilo sustains the mystical powers and customs of India that in turn allow her to practice her supernatural abilities as a healer and a care giver, ironically, it is these powers that pushes her into a strong gender biased value system of Indian tradition. The beauty of the novel lies in depicting how Tilo uses the spices of her homeland and their curative powers to create her space as a recognized 'mistress of spices' healing and curing the whites. As Tilo possesses an amazing control

over spices, she uses their magical power to alleviate the miseries of others as a mystic spice seller in Oakland, California. She heals immigrant Indians who experience discrimination, othering, racial violence, and anonymity in an alien world. However, America that bestows upon her the independence and autonomy to run a spice shop, it nevertheless exoticizes her, thereby forcing her existence to be limited to a liminal space between the east and the west where she gets an opportunity to play with cultural codes in order to attain an autonomous existence.

A close reading of Divakaruni novels indicates that her novels are full of immigrant characters who strongly feel their Indian roots while staying as immigrants in America. Their lives are marked by a constant tussle between two contradictory cultures and lifestyles. However, it is their strong memory of their native land, buzzing with its customs and rituals that relieve them of their stress as immigrants and soothes their pangs of alienation. Unlike the first-generation immigrants who deftly handle the two different cultures, the case with the second-generation immigrants is more complicated as they end up having a more compromised hybrid identity. Most of the characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels struggle to establish their roots by treasuring cultural heritage and exalting the past. The most amazing part of her creation of her characters is the enthusiasm that she shows in them to assimilate with the western society even when racial discrimination constantly interrogates their identity. In spite of several diasporic dilemmas experienced by the characters, her characters like Rakhi, Anju and Sudha successfully assimilated the western culture and created their own identities in the new land.

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