



CONFLICT BETWEEN EAST AND WEST IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known name in diasporic literature. As an Indo-American diasporic writer she interlaces her stories around the themes of diaspora, identity crisis, cultural conflict and constant search of home in the new migrated land. She breathes into her novels her unparalleled insight into an immigrant's daily struggle to adapt to the new culture without sacrificing her own tradition and culture. Since most of her characters are immigrants to US trying to adapt to the ways of the new migrated land, there is always a constant tension; they dwell in a space that is marked by strong cultural conflict; constantly in search of their new identity. This paper attempts to examine cultural conflicts between the East and the West in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's two novels, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*. This article thereby will also examine the influence of the cultures on the other leading to alienation and loss of identity and again how each of these cultures help to interrogate, create and recreate their cultural identity.

Key words: Diaspora, immigration, identity, cultural conflicts.

Diasporic literature is a new literature that centres round issues related with immigration and a constant emotional engagement with the host country on the part of the immigrant. Diasporic literature or Immigrant literature therefore, captures the emotional dynamics involved in relocation in an alien country for the immigrant. The obsession to depict the nostalgia for the home country and the guilt for leaving the tradition behind invariably introduces this new literature to east-west conflict leading to cultural conflicts. Divakaruni like other diasporic writers like Hanishkureshi, Bharathi Mukherjee, focus on the mental trauma, cultural alienation and identity crisis of the

dislocated people from their homeland India. Besides this, as an immigrant woman Divakaruni strongly believes that the impact of dislocation because of immigration is more on immigrant Indian women; giving them an opportunity to reconstruct their challenged identity and evolve into a new being.

The Bengal born diasporic writer, Chitra Banerjee often focuses on immigrant characters balancing the two worlds that are culturally at two poles. In her novels the United States of America is often depicted as a land of opportunities and a multicultural society, a kind that opens up avenues for economic stability for the immigrants. As she focuses on the

young aspiring and ambitious individuals who uproot themselves from their cultural tie-ups and migrate to the West- the land that promises them better living condition and comforts, she delves deep into their reluctance to shed their native identities, The East-West cultural conflicts and yet ready for assimilation in their new land. In this journey from the known to the unknown, it is the women who encounter the differences more and in fact from the time they step into their new dream land. The dream land soon loses its attraction and becomes a battleground contesting their cultural and religious difference. In this context Divakaruni states:

My characters struggle in the balance between family responsibilities and Individual happiness which is in away, at the centre of conflict between our Hindu culture, which always shows the mother as the giver, nurture and sacrificing herself for the good of the family and the western concept of self-happiness. (8)

In her novel *Sister of my Heart*, Divakaruni tells the story of two cousins Anju and Sudha who are born on the same day, been brought up together only to be separated by their marriages; while Anju flies to America with her husband, Sudha stays back in India at her in-law's place. Anju is happy to be a part of the fairy land, a land of opportunities as described by her husband, "You can be anything in America, Angel... You can be what you want" (16) only to realise later how her marriage to Sunil bring unexpected twists and turns and ruins her imagined stay in America.

After her immigration to America, Anju realises that living in America is not that easy and comfortable as one perceives it sitting in India. Been brought up in a joint family where all the chores of household are shared by all the women of the family, Anju feels exhausted in handling each and every work of her household all alone. In America she starts her day with dropping Sunil to the station; attend her own classes followed by library

and then the grocery, the dry cleaners and after returning home engage in the most hated work, that is cooking the meal, "Of the many realisations I've had since I came to America the fore most thing is that I hate cooking. It is not what I imagined my American life would be like" (186). Her longing for everything Indian is also revealed through her desire to wear Kanjivaraam sarees, cook authentic Indian dishes and listen to old movie songs.

The novel *The Vine of Desire*, a sequel to the *Sister of My Heart* is a novel that covers the two cousins' stay in American more in detail. *The Vine of Desire* is about the two cousins' troubled marriage, Sudha's divorce and ultimate immigration to America on Anju's invitation to find a job for herself. The sisters reminisce their childhood days when after reading books like *Anna Karenina* and *Sons and Lovers*, *The Great Gatsby* and *A Room of One's Own*, they dreamt of moving to far off lands, especially to America that always seemed to be one beaming with new opportunities for a comfortable materialistic life and recalls those days as, "They filled me with dissatisfaction with my own life, and a longing of Places. I believed that, if I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn't easy, is it? (14)

Most of the Indian immigrants are brought up in a very traditional middle-class way in Indian society and Anju and Sudha are no exception to it. However, Anju feels the pull of Western influence and the Westernization on Indian women like her more strongly compared to Sudha. She feels the conflict between her traditional roots and desires of independence that she harboured after coming to America. This resulted in not only asserting her position in her troubled marriage but also support her cousin Sudha by convincing her to immigrate to America. However, she is not without a sense of guilt and constantly doubts her

decision “Did I make the wrong decision for Sudha, misled by my American - feminist notions of right and wrong? Have I condemned her to a life of loneliness?” (Divakaruni 1999: 250).

The constant pull between the East and the West in Anju can be seen in her desire to empower herself without damaging family ties and marital bonds. Been brought up under the guidance of three strong women both Sudha and Anju have internalised patriarchal influence on women. However, the beauty of Divakaruni’s novels lies in the way she depicts these women, who are torn between the East and the West, after reaching a certain point of tolerance decide for themselves and are successfully able to pave the paths of their own empowerment. As an Indian, Sudha honours and appreciates all that is Indian. From a woman who had a subordinated life in her in-law’s place, she gathers courage to empower herself, confronts and comfortably tackles the problem of her pregnancy and abortion; thereby drawing a line separating her past from the present.

The journey from the East to the West had been full of ups and downs for both Anju and Sudha. Though the more educated Anju had her own ways of dealing with her troubled life in America, Sudha tries to hold on to US that promises certain amount of anonymity that would in turn help her to bring up her daughter with ease. She adds a positive angle to her immigration to America and justifies it saying:

No-one in America would care that I was a daughter of the 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. (Divakaruni 294)

However, the process of assimilation into American culture for both Anju and Sudha had not been easy and

comfortable. Sudha whose character is deeply rooted in Indian tradition, in spite of all her conscious efforts to embrace American culture remains an outsider in the adopted country. Not a very well-educated immigrant woman, Sudha fails to find a dignified job for herself and consequently fails to adjust in the new land. She expresses her desire to return to India and observes:

America isn't the same country for everyone, you know. Things here didn't work out the way I'd hoped. Going back with you would be a 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 fat, or serves her right." (Divakaruni 320-21).

The journey from East to West had been full of ups and downs for both Anju and Sudha. In contrast to Sudha, Anju stands for liberty, escape without guilt, exploration and immaculate balancing of the East and West.

Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* is an unparallel story revolving round the theme of diaspora. This masterpiece highlights the struggles of immigrants in western countries, especially, the US. It etches the rich heritage of Indian culture through the meaningful uses of spices and successfully reproduces the Indian essence in every character of the novel, especially the protagonist Tilo. Culture is vividly focused as a central theme in *The Mistress of Spices*.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo is the priestess of spices. She possesses an unimaginable magical power over spices and shows her expertise in predicting future. Initially, Tilo was named Nayan Tara by her parents. Since her birth she was gifted with the enchanting power of finding lost objects and predicting forthcoming risks. This magical power led to lots of losses, out of hope and rage once when she falls into an ocean, she was later

found on the shore of Spices Island and was named as Tilo (after Sesame seeds) by her first mother. Later she turns her magical power to sustain a living in the new land; treating immigrant Indians of homesickness, alienation and identity crisis.

As the novel, *The Mistress of Spices* unfolds the desires and dreams of Indian migrants in the United States, it also like many other novels of Divakaruni records the novelist's personal experiences as an immigrant. The novel is her attempt to infuse the cultural conflicts confronted by immigrants from East to the western countries. Tilo, the mistress of spices who is gifted with the magical powers of Indian spices, after moving to US opens a shop called "Spice Bazaar", meeting, counselling and treating her clients from the far East with her wide range of spices. In her spice shop she meets various Indians who are struggling to make their space in the western society. One of them is Haroun a young Indian in California who struggles to establish himself in American society, often being the victim of physical assaults frequently visits Tilo to know his future. Another visitor to Tilo's spice shop is Lalita is often identified as "Ahuja's wife" rather than as "Lalita". She visits Tilo to bring happiness in her loveless, unhappy married life with the magical powers of Tilo's spices.

However, when Tilo meets Raven and develops a liking for him, it is her spices that restrain her from expressing her emotions. Whenever she thinks of Raven, a Native American, and her longing desire for love, the spices warn her and suggests a corrective measure for love. The spices dominate and dictates her mind and enslaves her forever. Even her First Mother warns her saying, "Don't let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don't rouse the spices' hate" (TMOS 140). She is torn between her magical power of spices and her craving for carnal desire.

Eventually, as she struggles to establish her commitment to her spices, and when asked "What kind of name do you want" (TMOS 337) Tilo replies, "One that spans my land and yours, India and America for I belong to both" (TMOS 337). In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni carves the constant encounter of the East vs the West. The conflict of cultural clash in an alien land explains the trauma faced by the immigrants of the East. While the immigrants in the western land identify themselves with tradition and culture and community of their native land in the East, they are ever ready to assimilate the western culture and embrace a transformed identity in their new lands.

In the above discussed novels of Divakaruni, she gives an unparalleled description of alienation, isolation, mental agony and longing for the East in West; a desire to assimilate the Western culture and constantly fighting the internal conflict between the two different cultures. Mental trauma is inevitable, yet Divakaruni's main women protagonists show their determination to fight till the end and make judicious decisions for their own emancipation. Cultural conflict or longing for the roots in their native soil do not make them crippled beings, rather help them to grow as more matured women.

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