

Cultural Confrontation In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels

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Abstract:

This paper captures the quintessential concept of culture and the dilemma faced by women in a diasporic situation. It further focuses on the lure and revulsion of culture and examines the predicament and complexities of the South Asian women immigrants who are in exile. Cultural practices comprise the approaches of how people act specifically in each culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni residing in America far away from her land of birth has lent a new facet to Indo-American literature. Her main concern is to delineate the challenges of cross-cultural conflicts encountered by Indian women immigrants. She deals with her Indian women immigrants, predominantly their cultural blow that overthrows them in life directly or indirectly. Her apprehension for women is spread not only through her award-winning works but also her involvement with organizations like Maitri that seek in aiding South Asian or South Asian American women who are in grief. Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. The novel *The Vine of Desire* highlights the cultural adaptation of the characters. The immigrants acquire the powerful potentiality for adaptability and stand on firm reasons to alter their lives and if required, acknowledge the bitter truth of their lives.

Keywords: Culture, immigrants, attain, South Asian Women, predicament

Introduction

India is known for its vast treasure of spiritual astuteness and cultural heritage that has extensively contributed to the escalation and development of the world literature. Global interpretation of culture has given new dimensions to literature in the current decades. Literature is a manifestation of the cultural, communal, political, and divine expansion of a nation. The Indian Culture and American Culture serve as prompt to Divakaruni's writings. In today's globalization, her creative mastermind is principally entrenched in the assessment of cross-cultural studies. As a first-generation immigrant and a woman between cultures and traditions, her writings are fuelled by her personal experiences. Each of her novels present memorable immigrant women protagonists who dwell in separate, closed, sequestered worlds of existential predicaments, passion, love, and revulsions.

The process of migration to foreign countries that started in the mid nineteenth century has a new height in terms of immigration population within a span of one hundred years. People from all over the world are drawn towards America for innumerable reasons. Those who choose to sojourn and finally settle down, experience qualitative cultural transformation and under go

trans-culturation. T.S. Eliot opines, “Culture may even be described simply as that, which makes life worth living”. Culture is a quest for virtuous, but it is not respectable if the quest is not for unrestricted choice. The people of India are divided according to culture, tradition, caste, and religion. They adhere to the practice of not permitting their girl child to marry strange men. They sometimes exploit their culture for their own reasons. The study of culture differs from parameters to regulations, bestowing to its own trepidation and stimulation. It adapts methods of examination from diverse disciplines such as media, audience, cultural anthropology, discourse scrutiny and customary culture studies.

The Vine of Desire continues the story of Anju and Sudha, in America after years of the sisters living discrete lives. Though, Divakaruni depicts America as the terrain of golden opportunity, she delineates the affluent cultural inheritance of India, specifically the Bengali culture. The protagonist, Sudha suffers a lot in her mother-in laws home. Since she is forced to abort her girl child, she resolutely leaves her husband. With the moral support of Anju she goes to America. She is greatly spellbound by the American proverb “Live for yourself” (VD 177). Wherever Sudha moves and with whomever she communicates in America the people repeat ‘Live for yourself’. She takes a resolution not to be concerned about others inclusive of her past. On the other hand Anju becomes a confident survivor and conqueror of the host culture after her miscarriage. She adjusts well with her husband’s support in the U.S, a place wholly foreign to her personality, culture and tradition. She leads a more independent and self-determining life believing that one should not tag on to any form of relationship which lacks overhaul and compatibility. Simone de Beauvoir opines about the female in *The Second Sex*, “The situation of woman is that she is free and autonomous being like all human creatures- nevertheless finds herself living in a world when men compel her to assume the status of the other.” (301) Yet the arranged marriage process and the need to have a child though she actually isn’t ready is a consequence of traditional values inculcated in her. Sudha and Anju are raised by their three mothers and aunt. The three elderly women make the two girls to realize the significance in ensuing the customs and rituals of their religion. They inculcate in them regarding their culture and tradition and edify them to sacrifice their lives for the sake of others happiness. C. Bharathi States, Chitra Banerjee’s characters, especially women, feel ensnared in arranged marriages, because they haven’t married following the preference of their hearts but that of tradition and hence yearn for liberty. Anju picturizes her vision of married life, “They showed a stick figure woman in a traditional, red-bordered sari with a big bunch of keys tied to her anchal” (SH89).

In America, Anju leads her life all by herself with her husband Sunil. She observes her culture and tradition and leads a peaceful life with their family. The dislocation from one country to another and acquiring the ethnic culture holding the native culture brings a steady impasse and sense of rootlessness in Anju’s and Sudha’s lives. Though Anju at once tries to embrace the American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords, she feels poignantly having lost her baby. During moments of nostalgia, she recalls her old mansion where the Chatterjee’s family had lived for generations. Though the women characters in Divakaruni’s novels are geared up to play a dynamic role in the new ethnicity their custom still peeps alive in their dressing, food habits and even in their home decor.

The two sisters make their own choices regarding their lifestyles, their individual matrimonial alliances and ultimately their echelon of association with the host land. In the interim, the rapport the cousins build up with men and women in the America as well as the immigrant Indian community with their families in India profoundly transforms them. They encounter clashes in values at several levels across the novel, the most crucial one being between the notions inculcated by cultural traditions of India and the forces of advancement unleashed by the Western technology.

In America, Sudha feels lost as there are no rigid rules to follow in that society. She acquires the freedom that she requires for no reason. She experiences a sense of autonomy in America which changes her attitude as she is weighed down by both social relationships and communal identities that prevailed both in her pre and post marital lives. She goes through a lot of transformation in her mode of living due to the impact of American culture. This cultural impact transforms Anju too in her welfares and character after her settlement in America. Anju's shrinking memories of India makes Sudha become conscious that even their memories are secluded on separate islands. Sunil, though outwardly assimilates in the American culture is unable to tolerate Lalit's intimacy either with Sudha or with Anju.

The strange land seems to create the need of incorporation and transformation for the immigrants. But behavioural changes are hardly acceptable in harmony with the new culture for the characters. Sudha realizes that she cannot go back to the old forced customs of the Indian way. She somehow feels secure regarding the unfriendly customs of America to commence a new life. She thinks standing at the crook of a road, "I must be emanating some type of distress signal, because passer-by stares at me strangely. If this were India, at least half of them would know me. They'd ask me a thousand questions, offer to help, give advice, may be even escort me back home"(VD 178). As a single parent, Sudha presumes that she will be competent enough to raise her daughter Dayita in a liberal society like America. She thinks optimistically about America and its culture in *The Sister of My Heart*. She assumes it is much easier in the U.S. to bring up her child independently in an enhanced style.

In Indian society 'infertility' is well-thought-out as the vital issue for women. Only women face this delinquent biological discrimination. Neeru says, In India, to study female psyche is an effort to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them; it is also an attempt to reinterpret their status in the world----A woman's experience of lie as a member of a gender biased society formulate her psyche". (172) The acquaintance between Sudha and Anju are shaken to the core when Anju confronts the deep passionate feelings that her husband has for Sudha. She decides to leave her house to resolve the issues.

A male child is given importance than a female child. Vrinda Nabarsays,....there is no gain saying the fact that the typical Indian girl-child---has to learn quite early on that she is a second-class citizen even in her mother's home. If she has brothers, she has to play second fiddle to them ----Her breaking -in is all the more rigorous if she happens to belong to an economically deprived class, for even in the best of world, the girl-child's need is generally regarded as dispensable. (64). Sudha's mother-in-law, Mrs. Sanyal expects her grandchild to be a boy baby. She compels Sudha to undergo abortion elsewhere she must react against her married life. She informs to Gourima, "If not, she is afraid she will have to set the divorce proceedings in motion." (267). As Sudha had always conferred patriarchal pressures, she

doesn't believe that marriage is the ultimate destiny for her. She comes with big dreams to America but ends up doing odd jobs. She is dissatisfied with her life in the U.S. and ultimately desires to return to India. Intentionally or unknowingly, Sudha emulates an ideal woman due to her customary upbringing. She comes to America after defying the traditions of an arranged marriage but does not want to deceive her cousin. Sudha experiences clash in her own culture as she carries the cultural values of her society along with her life, making it more complicated for her to amend. She tries to fine-tune herself to the alien culture. Instead of disposing the Indian culture on the whole she tries to assimilate her Indianness by reinventing her identity. She never compromises her orthodox Indian ways and even cooks Indian dishes to sustain her culture. The key characteristics of diaspora, culture and food occupy a strong sense of connection to the homeland and are continued through cultural practices in the alien land. Culinary culture too has an imperative part to play in diasporic identification.

Sudha's loneliness in a new country and her attempt to earn money for her return journey forces her to take up a job. She looks after Trideep and Myra's laid up father. A job she obtains with the help of Lalit. She intends to return to India with the old man. She says, "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 ways 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" (VD 320-321). To Sudha, her identity is no immense a concern as she sustains most of her Indian culture and tradition and finally returns to her homeland.

Divakaruni portrays the cultural dilemmas, the generational differences and transformation of the immigrant women identities during dislocation in her novels. Her novels prove that Indians have taken foremost efforts to celebrate their cultural traditions in the United States. Her characters are dynamic and aware of acculturation. They optimistically choose the integration stratagem as their acculturation choice. Acculturation theories potentially propose insights into multifaceted and adaptable interactions between immigrants and the dominant culture.

Berry and Castro define acculturation as the cultural interaction between an immigrating person or family and the new host country that the person or family is immigrating to. This interaction is felt on a societal level, both on the host country, and the individual, i.e., the immigrating individual. Acculturation strategies have an extensive relationship with positive adaptation. Adaptation, in terms of acculturation, is the extended approach which can transform their immigrant lives and settle down in a more or less reasonable existence. There are four explicit acculturation strategies, with which an immigrant can choose to adapt. These include: integration, marginalization, assimilation, and separation.

Hence not only Sudha but Anju and Sunil also outline new paths after deciding for a divorce. Both Sudha but Anju are modern Indian women who aspire to lead an independent life devoid of male influence. The course of incorporation into American culture for both Anju and Sudha is distinct. Diaspora has changed the lives of Indians massively. Divakaruni, in an interview with Neila C. Seshachari says: I do find myself torn between the two cultures especially now that I'm bringing up children here, and I'm torn by the desire to go back to India for long or short periods of time. I'm conflicted by the fact that my mother is alone in India. All her children are here [in the United States]. I think the idea of the diaspora is very

imperative to me and in my writing it comes up many times because I'm aware of other people whose entry into America was even more diasporic than mine. And I write about them too; their stories are significant to me. (Seshachari)

Anju begins her self-searching journey maintaining distance with all closed ones. She shares room with one of her friends from writer's club but as they belong to different countries they could not make a comfortable companionship between them. She always needs Sudha to share and understand her fully. Anju feels forlorn among her American friends as their everyday talks are so diverged. They criticize about the heritage which she loves a lot and it makes her shiver in fingertips like pins and needles. She realizes that, "...large chunks of herself will always be unintelligible to them: the joint family she grew up in, her arranged marriage, the way she fell in love with her husband, the tension in her household, that ménage a trios Indian style"(VD 98). Anju intentionally decides to reside in America acknowledging the changes that have taken place in her life. Certain changes have thrown her into profound misery and others have given her the trust to reposition herself. Her stay in America helps her to adopt a more westernized way of philosophy. It persuades her to think that she owes something to herself.

Chitra Banerjee dexterously exposes the feeling of the society in a substantiate way. For instance, Pishi the cousins' aunt is widowed at an early age and is even denied the opportunity to continue her studies, and is for eternity ordained to the kitchen. Tradition of a country becomes a prey for women, which is clearly revealed in the novel. Sudha stands for deep-rooted viewpoints with the security, the pull of the native land and the buried past. She remains an outsider in the adopted country. On the other hand, Anju stands for exploration, emancipation, and an eye-opener for balancing new heights, beliefs and desires. The Vine of Desire exemplifies the consequence on a person's uniqueness and notion of becoming adapted to a conservative American culture. The altercation between the East and the West at cultural, societal, and opinionated levels has been perceived from various perspectives. Divakaruni explores the struggle of individual predicament and proclaims that their poignant experiences bring a transformation within them.

Divakaruni's approach towards cultural identity is accountable in the view of south Asian Diaspora that deems in the obligation of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience. Her novels portray the likelihood for establishing a bicultural identity. She tries to blend the oriental ideals with the occidental ethos. She focuses on characters balancing the two worlds, particularly Indian women immigrant's struggle through life in America.

Though Divakaruni's women characters ensnare in the web of their own psyche intuitive out of the pressures of a society which is both and cosseted and patriarchal ultimately, all of them sever the strongholds of their society and discover new avenues. Almost all the key characters in her novels try to negotiate with the newly found American culture. Divakaruni puts forth her innermost consideration in the cultural heritage of her native land to bring about alterations in human consciousness. She recommends through her novels that both cultural fusion and conciliation between the two modes of living are always feasible.

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