

FORTITUDE OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN FROM CULTURE TO TRANSCULTURE IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVELS

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Abstract

*In the world of globalization and competence, migration has become the colossal need for human life. Migration can be viewed as a part of the general evolutionary process. Exile, migration and diaspora offer sundry and composite environments for the renegotiation of social and cultural identities. This paper aims to examine identities of women, both within and beyond the confines of our society through the characteristics of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's protagonists. The women characters of Divakaruni foster multiple consciousnesses, which result in a self that is neither unified nor merged, but rather fragmented. Divakaruni's protagonists voyage from re-embodiment towards eminent and new geographical locations. In Divakaruni's novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* it is very apparent that hybridization gradually starts and Americanization creeps in as cultural indicators have no distinctive marks. Both Anju and Sudha, become archetypal in the dichotomy of cultures, the east and the west.*

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Migration is just not an utter physical movement of people. Migrants bear with them a socio-cultural baggage, which consists of language, food habits, old religious beliefs and practices, a predefined social identity, a framework of norms and values governing family and kinship. Some of these elements endure, some wane, others experience syncretism or change and a few elements get rejuvenated with time and social interactions. Though migration is an innate and incessant phenomenon, the notions of migration keep changing with time. The concept of migration has become more effervescent with people migrating for personal enhancement in their lives irrespective of geographical and social conditions.

The evolution of every new culture roots back to the integration of the spatially displaced individuals (migrants) who share a distinct space at a distinct period of time. Thus, each new culture is a constructive by-product of migration. Hence, culture as a stratagem of survival, is transnational by nature. Bhabha proposes a "translational culture" thus revealing its potential to construct culture. He expresses:

Culture [...] is both transnational and translational. [...] The transnational dimension of cultural transformation – migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation – makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural (ized), unifying discourse [...] cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition. (247)

Culture has the capability of transcending itself, by exceeding its own boundaries and becoming transcultural with the openness of extending through all human cultures. Apart from the above elements, migration involves four 'strategies' of acculturation – assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. These strategies established by Psychologists John W. Berry and D.

Sam are noteworthy in the understanding of transcultural displacement. 'Assimilation' takes place efficiently when an individual is open to the differences in the present culture. When an individual holds on to the original culture and becomes close to the new culture, 'separation' is observed. When an individual accepts both the ethnic as well as the dominant culture, in everyday life, 'integration' takes place. When an individual loses 'cultural and psychological contact with the traditional culture and well-built society', 'marginalization' occurs.

The clash between tradition and modernity and the east-west confrontation is the impulse behind Chitra Banerjee's works. Divakaruni's cognizance in the differences arising in-between culture urges her to explore the arising conflicts. She delves into the vitality of her native country's tradition as well as the burden encountered by the immigrants in their adopted nation. She has made an endeavour to explicate the day-to-day experiences of the immigrants.

The concept of female identity demonstrates how female experience is transformed into female consciousness, characteristically in reaction to male paradigms of female experience. It is a skill and approach of writing. As the female self-image attempts to identify itself in the experience of creating art, women involve themselves in the process (Kelly, 2000). In such a patriarchal society, under the austere male domination; women are raised and groomed from their childhood hardly acquiring encouragement to burgeon their individual self. The resolution regarding their profession or even nuptials is ordained by their father, mother or brother. Divakaruni, beget of the postcolonial feminism, compasses her women characters, with good educational background though they hail from an iniquitous traditional family set-up. Due to relentless hardships imposed on them in the name of Indian tradition and customs they detach themselves free from the past conventional emotions and resolve to progress into the new world- America.

Divakaruni scorns at the patriarchal system because Indian men perceive women as nothing more than a baby giving machine. The protagonist Sudha experiences traditional Indian daughter-in-law harassment and takes a resolution to flee from her in-laws' house and homeland on the jeopardy of her daughter's birth. Women are merely not only victims; they are also agents within the patriarchal protrude. Sudha's mother-in-law is the one who forces Sudha to abort her girl child and implores her son to go in for a second marriage. Again, the inexorable tradition meddles in the survival of a naive woman with its redundant and impractical moral standards. Sudha finds American culture a liberating negotiator as there are no resolutions for her social tribulation in her homeland. In spite of India being liberated from the imperialistic clutches numerous decades ago, it is apparent from the women characters of Divakaruni that womanhood is yet dominated and agonized by the patriarchal tyrannical familial system. For Sudha the expedition to America is an ilk of liberation as she is augmented to make her daughter Dayita grow up daring and audacious. Transformation in characterization becomes very lucid for her as she ignores her past and dynamically plays a part in the new culture where in still her old tradition in the form of attire, food habits and home decor peep in.

Indian women born and brought up in a conventional Indian family and wedded with an immigrant man have to survive in two distinct socio-cultural environments one at the same time; Indian inside her house and American outside. Similarly born and brought up in a traditional Indian family women find it intricate to cope with the free American culture, as she is thrown straight into the alien land after her marriage. Margaret Abraham aptly writes that diasporic women often find themselves:

As an ethnic minority, South Asian immigrant women...have to cope with semi permeable boundaries that allow them...to partially internalize the norms and values of the dominant culture while being simultaneously excluded by the dominant group from total membership in that culture. (198)

Divakaruni voices the notion and expectation of not only Anju but of all immigrants who move to America. Sunil says to Anju, "You can be what you want" (SH 179) in America. But marriage changes Anju in unanticipated ways, as she perceives everyone as an intruder. Life in America is not as she anticipates. She leads a solitary life. She believes that her personal sovereignty must be respected.

In America people follow a closed door system, as they give more significance to privacy. Anju becomes vulnerable as her husband works on a computer when she pines to talk with him. The hectic American life does not allow Sunil to squander much time with her. She contemplates her past life's cheerful and wistful moments along with her family. The state of Indian women married to their immigrant husbands is obnoxious than Indian women living in India. Identity is the collective component of the collection of qualities by which something is certainly known or recognizable; a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which a person is identifiable as a group member (American Heritage Dictionary, 1993).

Indian women born and brought up in a conventional Indian family and wedded with an immigrant man have to survive in two distinct socio-cultural environments one at the same time; Indian inside her house and American outside. Similarly born and brought up in a traditional Anju's life is chaotic in America as she must deal with her quandaries on her own. She says, "Sometimes I think of leaving Sunil and returning to Calcutta, but I know I never will. It's not what I imagined my American life would be like" (SH 207-209). The psychology of a newly married bride, who is inundated with an ambitious immigrant dream in her psyche, is precisely exhibited by the novelist. Divakaruni anticipates the consequence of the immigrants' expectations in the new land. People from the East often have biased notions about the life in the West. They believe that the white working-class represents a liberal culture of clubs, recreation and leisure activities. When they voyage to a 'new' land, they familiarize the 'newness' of the culture in the 'new' topography. The novelties can be surprising as well as intimidating giving rise to the clash between the 'new' and the migrant's own values. The conflict basically is from both sides – the residents and the migrants – the sufferers being predominantly the migrants.

With the dawn of western education and beliefs in the 20th century, the Indian woman's perspective has extended beyond the confines of her household. The asserted capacity of existence has made the learned Indian woman conscious of the overpowering and uneven nature of the social norms and parameters that administrate her life as a woman. She feels trapped in her familial role and doubts her socially assigned submissive status. Awakened by her potential, she abhors returning to her previous situation (Fox et al., 2018).

The narrative comes to a close with Sudha moving to the US to live with Anju, proving that living abroad does give people like Sudha more anonymity and opportunities for a self-sufficient and independent existence. Divakaruni depicts the opportunities and dangers Sudha and Anju encounter in the unfamiliar land in *The Vine of Desire*. In this book, both sisters are torn between the pressures of home life and social conventions, Indian household culture and the conservative outlook of first-generation Indian immigrants. This novel vividly portrays the multicultural clash between the two Indian immigrant ladies, Sudha and Anju, who are driven to forge their own identities in the postcolonial world.

Divakaruni portrays the pretension of the immigrants. They pretend to be blissful in the far away land like Anju though they pine for their homeland which is heart-touching. Anju in America nearly loses her independence and psychological strength. After her tragedy of miscarriage, she yearns for someone to soothe her. Anju's seclusion reveals nostalgia due to her immigration. The immigrants locate themselves out of place from their home society. They are offended emotionally and strive to place themselves in the past. There are recurrent musings of the past memories of their early years, ambience and people. Critic Stuart Hall opines that people who have been disseminated for ever from their homeland fit in at one and the same time to several 'homes' and to no one particular 'home'. Though they develop different forms of belonging, they cannot preclude themselves from the preconceived and well established notion of homelessness. Acculturation is the term for the adjusting process. Acculturation, according to Marden and Meyer, is "the shift in persons who take on traits from another culture and whose primary learning has been in one culture" (36).

The psychological processes such as behavioural shifts, culture shedding, culture shock, and trauma are consummated by the immigrants who undergo acculturation in altering degrees. The

process of deserting old values and inculcating new ones, put up to the experience of disorientations in migrants. The paramount feature of exile is that it sometimes casts off and sometimes welcomes the ubiquitous culture. Culture plays a vital role in human evolution, allowing human beings to acclimatize the milieu for their personal purposes comparatively than relying exclusively on the natural medley to accomplish adaptive success.

Culture is an adaptive process. Bhabha explains the thought of ambivalence in the form of culture or culture itself from its deconstructive standpoints. He states that culture is not singular but is inclusive of multifarious impressions in the immigrants' behaviour and practices. Hybridization of any culture generates an ambivalent situation—a stipulation in which people believe their culture and convention belong to 'no one's land.' Liminality (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning a threshold) is another input to Bhabha's postulations. Liminality, for Bhabha is one of the elements in amoebic reproductivity of culture itself. According to cultural critic Jeff Lewis, culture is "transitional, transformative, open, and unstable" (23). He characterizes Transculturalism as the following.- Transculturalism seeks to enlighten the various gradients of culture; is engrossed in the disintegration of groups, cultures, and clout; it does not seek to privilege the semiotic over the material state of affairs of life; locates relationships of supremacy in terms of language and history; can never disdain the force of its own precepts and the vibrant that is culture; accepts that particular language and materiality; persistently interacts within an unstable locus of explicit historical condition and never sides with one moral perspective over another but endeavours to scrutinize them without ruling out moral relativism or meta-ethical convergence. Culture has the competence of transcending itself, which exceeds its own boundaries by becoming transcultural with the openness of extending throughout all human cultures. Theorist Mikhail Epstein briefs his view on culture:

The essential element and merit of culture is its capacity to free humans from the dictates of nature, its physical restrictions and necessities; but it is the capacity of transculture to free humans from the determinations of culture itself. Culture, by releasing us from physical limitations, imposes new limitations, of symbolic order, and transculture is the next step in the ongoing human quest for freedom.... (25)

Fernando Oritz a Cuban Sociologist coined the term 'trans-culturation' in the 1940s which connotes to the conquered people's acquisition in transculturing. Trans-culturalism is a substitute to globalism which presents the unified growth within one's culture. It is ingrained in the pursuit to define shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders. Trans-cultural displacement is the geographical and cultural relocation of people across national borders involving and combining elements of more than one culture. An entity becomes a trans-cultural cosmopolitan citizen when one's identity is defined and more decisively recognized in affinity with the other. According to the critic Slimbach "Transculturalism is rooted in the quest to define shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders"(204). Trans-culture is thus, a way for each individual to overcome the determinations of his or her own culture while living on the borders of one's own cultural identity and promoting openness of cultures (ibid) across nations.

Divakaruni triumphs in presenting an assessed picture of Diasporic Dislocation and Cultural Conflict of immigrants in a foreign terrain. It is to be perceived that any migration, whether, made of individual choice or out of obligation, result in dislocation, which is forever painful. The true triumph of immigrants involves not in the running away from the hurdles of life but in confronting them fearlessly and courageously. A sense of displacement has become a vital part of the modern psyche. Displacement not only results in alienation but also gives a chance to incorporate into a new culture. Though they feel marginalised, they seek to empower themselves and battle the menacing challenges, thus causing in new paradigms.

Chitra Banerjee's novels portray the scope for establishing a bicultural identity. Divakaruni's portrayal to ethnic identity is dependent on the view of South Asian Diaspora that believes in the necessity of integrating the Indian heritage with its American experience. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

revives the long forgotten Indian myth, belief, tradition, culture and even dreams which are vital for existence, which in reality is only a mixture of all in fantasy or magic realism.

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