



CULTURAL CONFLICT AND NOSTALGIA IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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ABSTRACT

The term 'culture' is a 'loaded' and complex term. It has a polyvocal sense as it contains the multiple artifacts of a particular community. Diaspora literature significantly focusses on 'cultural dislocations' and its consequences on the immigrants' lives. Diasporic studies become a platform for debating the issues of representation, identity and socio-cultural politics. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an immigrant herself, is one of the significant voices in American mainstream writing. She represents the South Asian Diaspora. Her writings vehemently assert the immigrants' abilities to assimilate in America. Though she intends to portray a positive, willing picture of immigrants, yet she does not brush under the carpet the cultural conflict, racial clash, humiliation, language barriers and other issues the immigrants have to face, the outside but also the failure of immigrants to adopt the new land as they carry the 'cultural baggage'. The researcher makes an attempt to focus how the 'cultural baggage' and the nostalgia for the 'old world' make the assimilation process difficult for the immigrants.

Key words: *Diaspora, Culture, cultural baggage, assimilation and nostalgia.*

INTRODUCTION

The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined.

James Gleick, Chaos (qtd. in Jasmine 1)

Initially almost all immigrants, whether willing or unwilling, go through the pain and pangs of adopting the new land and its culture because their new 'universe' seems to be (as James

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Gleick suggests) 'rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth'. People immigrate from their own native land to some other foreign land in search of opportunities and prosperity. But once they land in foreign soil they encounter the cultural clash. The cultural conflict poses a threat to the immigrants' old cultural and ethnic identity. Immigrants, when they travel, carry a psychological 'cultural baggage' with them. Their journey from one land to another is a far more complex phenomenon than it appears on the surface. It is the women who are the most affected by it. Manju Kapur, very aptly sums this up in her *Desirable Daughters*-

As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their old clothing, because clothes maketh the man, and new ones help ease the transition. Men's clothing has less international variation; the change is not so drastic. But those women who are not used to wearing western clothes find themselves in a dilemma. If they focus on integration, conversion, and conformity they have to sacrifice habit, style and self-perception. The choice is hard. (Kapur 152)

Culture is an amalgamation of many socio-cultural artifacts such as – shared rituals, festivals, culinary types, and ethnicity-a kind of heritage, clothes, language, a class, race, and a feeling of being together by a particular community. As a consequence of this, the term has become a multilayered and fluid. Clothes being the significant component of any culture matter a lot. Apparently, it seems men suffer less as their clothes representing culture remain more or less same at the national / international level, but for women the conflict is more severe. But both face the problems. It is difficult for the first generation immigrants to shed off their native culture, to 'uncondition themselves' from their motherland's culture and 'condition' themselves according to the cultural requirements of the 'new land'. The voyage between 'unconditioning' from one culture to 'conditioning' themselves in accordance with the culture of the adopted land is difficult. The problem gets aggravated more for those who hang on to the 'cultural baggage'. This creates a big barrier for such people and they find it difficult to mingle with the local populace. They seek to live in their deliberately created cultural ghettos; through myths, memories, dreams and nostalgia. Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths Gareth and Tiffin Helen in their *Key Concepts in Postcolonial 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 re-location or shift brings about a cultural confrontation for the immigrants. Immigrants feel that their culture is under threat from the dominant culture of the 'adopted land'. The globalization of cultural identities has given rise to the feelings of rootlessness, isolation, displacement, dislocation etc. The immigrants face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and it poses a threat to their ethnic and cultural identity. According to



Homi Bhabha, culture is always already, in a sense, diasporized. It is in itself a very vague, broad and an ambiguous term. He writes in *The Location of Culture*:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the 'middle passage' of slavery and indenture, the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World...The translational dimension of cultural transformation - migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation ... makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. (172)

Raymond Williams also accepts its ambiguity as he writes, "Culture is one of those two or three most complicated words in the English language... because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct systems of thought" (87). We could say culture is a way of life to live. It follows certain code of conduct agreed by the specific group of people and limited to that community only. Culture is always 'specific' - to groups, ethnicities, race, gender, communities and nations etc. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's phenomenal work *The Mistress of Spices* represents both willing / unwilling immigrants' experiences of cultural conflict in case of America, multicultural, always bring shock to them. Their pain and anguish gets aggravated due to the hostile nature of the foreign society towards immigrants. The unwilling immigrant have to deal with 'double trauma'-first one of being away from the native land and second is to cope up with the foreign culture. The cultural swapping becomes difficult to adjust for immigrants. They continuously remain in nostalgia. Their past never leaves them. For, as said by Avtar Brah the old world, "...cannot be expunged so easily, for we carry traces in our psyche."(5) The tools of memories and nostalgia help these immigrants to create an 'imaginary homelands' and survive invisibly in the foreign land. As a result of the continuous presence of the past, the present gets disturbed. And their nostalgia for their 'lost world' annihilates the possibilities of assimilation for immigrants. Almost all the immigrants in the text undergo the cross- cultural trauma in America.

On the other hand, there are willing immigrants who wish to leave behind their native cultural baggage and its responsibilities when they travel to a new land, but they find themselves in the same situation, they wish to be free from. This torn between situation about their dream and the reality creates a dilemma in them. The main protagonist - Tilo short form for Tilotamma - is a willing immigrant as she herself chooses to be in America to 'heal the immigrants' by her magic herbs and spices. She tries to cure wounds of immigrants caused in

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American society and its culture. She prescribes the use of the special spices that come to her "SPICE BAZAAR" (*Mistress 4*). Though Tilo leaves in a free land, she is imprisoned by laws of the 'old world' left behind. As she is not supposed to fall in love with anyone. "...Mistress must leave her own passion behind" (*Mistress31*) All these are customary chains of the Indian patriarchal culture. Tilo falls in love with an American- Raven and finds herself into the tangling ties of two opposite cultures.

Nostalgia for the 'native world' is another significant psychological determinant in immigrants' lives to assimilate in the American culture. Nostalgia for the left behind world crippled and aggravates their trauma. The wives in the novel are dependent on their husbands and 'there is nothing much to do at home' situation increase their yearning for the 'old world' they left unwillingly. To bear the pain of being in the foreign land, they seek relief in nostalgia for left behind world and its memories become real for them. They always carry a 'home' in their mind. Here I would like to quote the poem by the poet Sujata Bhatt entitled "The One Who Goes Away". The poem depicts the significance of 'home' from immigrants' perception:

*But I am the one
who always goes away...
But I never left home.
I carried it away
with me – here in my darkness
In myself....*

*We weren't allowed
to take much
but I managed to hide
my home behind my heart...*

*I am the one,
who always goes
away with my home
which can only stay inside
in my blood –my home which does not fit
with any geography*

This 'never left home's confrontation with a new and opposite foreign culture, put them into cultural conflict. They in order to survive create an 'Indian ghettos' and take recluse in their cocoon. For example Daksha's Mother-in-law wishes Daksha to behave like a typical Indian daughter-in-law. She doesn't wish to eat morning food and yells at Daksha for fresh food.

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The mother-in-law says, "...old food from the fridge is good only for servants or dogs..." (*Mistress* 80).

The cultural clash brings with it the painful awareness of their failure of going back to their longed world increases the trauma. For instance, one such dependent wife - Mrs. Ahuja is a regular visitor to Tilo's Store. The Writer writes, "Ahuja's wife has of course a name. Lalita... I would like to call her by it, but how can I while she thinks of herself only as a wife" (*Mistress*14). Lalita is a "double marginalised". Her husband, Mr. Ahuja works as a watchman in America. He cheats on her by showing his young age photo and gets marry to her in India and brings her in America. He exploits her physically, sexually and psychologically. When Tilo comes to know Lalita's pain of being with such a cruel husband. Lalita relieves her pain by telling it to Tilo and informs her that she likes stitching clothes. Tilo asks her, "Why don't you work in this country?" (*Mistress*15). Lalita, being alone at home experiences the loneliness. The writer expresses her pain as, "...the silence like quick- sand sucking at her wrists and ankles. Tears she cannot stop" (*Mistress* 15). The pain forces her to tell the reason to Tilo, Lalita says, "He refuses that his woman should work...*Aren't I man enough, man enough, man enough*"(*Mistress* 15). He beats her regularly. He suffers humiliation and hostile nature of American. His low job profile weakens him. The job frustration he exerts on his wife. Lalita is confined in the patriarchal glass world, willing to be in the outside free and liberal world. The critic Avtar Brah rightly says, about the painful living of immigrants in the prevailing culture "...All diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces even as they are implicated in the construction of common 'we' " (*Cartographies*192). This living 'in-between' condition is very excruciating and marginalizing for them. Women experience more traumatic 'psychological transformation'. As a result of this, they find difficult to confront a new culture and yearn for the lost world and its culture.

The unwilling immigrants have to deal with 'double trauma'-first one of being away from the native land and second are to confront the cultural clash. Immigrant women have to bear pain of sacrificing their cultural, ethnic identities, habits etc. Their expulsion from their native land and confrontation with a new country and its culture, in case of America, multicultural, bring them a cultural shock. When women migrate, willingly or unwillingly to the foreign land, they inherently carry the traditional identity with them. The identity gets formed by the race, ethnicity, gender, traditions and above all by the culture. According to Hall:

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not a once-and-for all... It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. (230)

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Migration brings shock of confronting the new land and its culture. The dominant culture of the new land challenges the immigrants' identity as it happens to Jagjit- a Punjabi Child in the novel. He experiences a cultural clash and humiliation by his fellow schoolmates. They humiliate him for his turban being Punjabi. His mother is more concern for his radical behaviour at the home. She couldn't tolerate the trauma and narrates to Tilo- the healer. Tilo can foresee Jagjit's racial humiliation at the school. His parents' immigration has brought it the upheaval in their identities, culture, social values and the overall behaviour. Jagjit becomes the victim. The new land poses a threat to the immigrants' old identity. The risks posed by the new land and its culture put immigrants into the dilemma. The cultural conflict and its consequences depend on the immigrants' acceptance/ rejection of the changes which come with the change in geographical location.

To conclude, the research paper tries to focus on the impact of cultural conflict and nostalgia faced by the immigrants due to their geographical and socio-cultural dislocations. The researcher assumes that it's a hard process for immigrants to 'uncondition' from the former 'old world and its culture' and again 'condition' themselves in order to assimilate in the 'new culture'. Their willing / unwilling nature determines their success and failure in adoption of the new land and its culture.

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