



CULTURE SPECIFIC CONFLICT IN ALIEN LAND PORTRAYED IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE UNKNOWN ERRORS OF OUR LIVES

Dr.S.Subbammal @ Kala

Mrs. Shanthi Kumari Pushpa

Head & Associate Professor of English

Assistant Professor of English

Annai Hajira Women's College Melapalayam

Annai Hajira Women's College Melapalayam

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundranar University

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundranar University

Abstract : Being an immigrant to the American Countries, the female protagonists of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, struggle to overlook the culture and habits they follow in native country. This paper aims to trace the displacement of Mrs. Dutta from "Mrs. Dutta writes a letter" , Mira from *The Intelligence of the Wild Things*, Radhika from *The Blooming Season for Cacti* and Ruchira from *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. It analyzes Diasporic consciousness like alienation, rootlessness, loneliness, and nostalgia. Divakaruni in the short stories clearly reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. All these characters tried to scrutinize and re-evaluate the tradition and culture of their homelands in an alien environment.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian born American author focuses on the experience of South Asian immigrants. Though she began her writing career as a poet, she wrote short stories and novels. *The Palace of Illusions*, a re-telling of the Indian epic- *The Mahabharata* from Draupathi's perspective made her a National Best-Seller in India. She was the recipient of American Book Award and Pushcart Prize for her short story collections.

The paper analyzes the female character of the four stories, "Mrs. Dutta writes a letter", "The Intelligence of the Wild Things", "The Blooming Season for Cacti" and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* and how they face the problems of cultural contradictions.

Key Words - Cultural Diaspora, Displacement, Cultural Identity, Alienation, Loneliness and Nostalgia.

"Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" is one of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's stories explores the culture shock encountered by Mrs. Dutta and her experience as an immigrant. Mrs. Dutta is raised and conditioned to be dependent on men by her surroundings since her childhood. But later in her life when her husband died and she had to fend for herself and her son in California discovers that her old Orthodox world ways causing embarrassment to her daughter- in- law Shyamoli.

Mrs. Dutta attempts to do everything by herself. She tries to wake up early in the morning that distracts others sleep. When she prepared Indian food Shyamoli initially enjoyed but later became worried about cholesterol in it. Mrs. Dutta is terrified of the washing machine than washing on her own. She is surprised when Shyamoli did not say or punish the children for being disrespectful to elders.

Throughout the story, she compares American behavior with Indian customs and beliefs. The cultural conflict that is created in their lives is beautifully portrayed. Mrs. Dutta has been raised to be a traditional Indian wife was taught to get up early in the morning. Mrs. Dutta has trouble in adjusting to American lifestyle. The narrator explains, washing clothes using electronic devices with their cryptic symbols and rows of gleaming knob terrified her. She is over whelmed by a highly technologically advanced machine.

Another trouble she gets into is the uncared nature of the neighbors.

When she first arrived in Sagar's home, Mrs. Dutta wanted to go over and meet her next-door neighbors, maybe take them some of her special rose-water rasogollahs, as she'd often done with Mrs. Basu. But Shayamoli said she shouldn't. Such things were not the custom in California... ("Mrs. Dutta Writes A Letter" 21).

Here everyone was busy, they didn't sit around chatting, drinking endless cups of sugar tea. Why, they might even say something unpleasant to her... "For what?" Mrs. Dutta had asked disbelievingly, and Shyamoli had said, "Because Americans don't like neighbors to – here she used an English phrase – "invade their privacy". Mrs. Dutta, who didn't fully understand the word privacy because there was no such term in Bengali, had gazed at her daughter-in-law in some bewilderment. But she understood enough to not ask again (*Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter* 21-22).

She always wonders at the behaviour of the people and at the end of her life. She could not accept the change easily. She comes to the conclusion that widow-hood in India to be a better state than living in America in an alien land.

In "Cultural, Identity and Diaspora" the theorist Stuart Hall argued that cultural identity is not only a matter, a being but of 'becoming', belonging as much to the future as it does to the past. From Hall's perspectives identities undergo constant transformation, transcending time and space. This is very much reflected in the characters of Mira and Tarun in "*The Blooming season for the Cacti*"

The Setting of "*The Blooming season for the Cacti*" played an unbelievably symbolic purpose with Mira's past in Bombay and the riots which took place while her and her mother were living there. This memory made Mira scared for life. She saw terrible things taking place as her mother hid her in their water tank and never returned. It can easily be assumed that Bombay, or at least the memory influenced heavily on Mira's every action and decision. This kind of attachment to setting creates a realistic type of appeal that keeps readers hooked from beginning to end; the back story of this character is tantalizing and continuously evolving.

In the "*Blooming season for the Cacti*", Mira faces persistent challenges in America. The protagonist moves from India to America in an expectation that her life would get better with good career opportunities. However, she cannot secure an appropriate job. In this condition, she starts to work at an Indian restaurant. There she makes a boy friend. Her relationship with her friend leads her to a physical relationship which is against the Indian culture. But eventually, she starts to feel mortified of what she has done. With the guilt and hindrance of losing her job in America she reminisces her mother. She apprehends that nothing to compare between the homeland and the foreign land. The author portrays through this story that immigrants would never feel connected to the foreign except their expectation of pursuing their happiness there.

This story slices through an immigrant's life, the sentiments, that unites and also divides the Indians living abroad.

"*The Intelligence of Wild Things*" explains the phenomenon of how the shift of geography creates some irresolvable barriers. The story centers on a sister and a brother, born and brought up in Calcutta living in America. The author shares through the story about the changes brought by immigrant life in familial ties. The sister is on a short visit to persuade her brother to talk to their dying mother in India. But Tarun had not spoken to their mother after he came to USA. The sister enquires with her brother about the photograph of a girl near his bed. Tarun replies that she is his girlfriend and it shocks her. Her stay in America after her marriage had taught her that she cannot interfere in his life even though he is her brother.

"Tarun, whose photo is this?"

"My girlfriend's"

"Your girlfriend!...you never told me you had a girlfriend, especially a white one! What is ma going to say when she finds out!" (*The intelligence of Wild Things* 37)

Mira thinks about a letter received from her mother, before Tarun's arrival to Vermont. The letter described the fight between the mother and the son. The mother insisted him to go to USA fearing Naxal movements in Kolkatta. The son did not want to leave his mother as he was very much attached to her. She succeeded in the attempt but Tarun is gone forever. He did not communicate with his mother and once he arrived in USA. Mira says,

Everyone called Tarun a good boy..... He preferred being with mother and me. Even when he was a teenager, he'd come into the kitchen where we were fixing dinner and knead the dough for her, or help me slice the bitter gourd. If asked, he would give us an obedient description of his day (theorems in maths class, essay test in English, atoms and molecules in science) (*The intelligence of Wild Things* 39)

Divakaruni vividly explained how the geographical space influenced the individuals. Mira recollects when she was eight and her brother three, they were sent to their uncle's house after their father's death. They both became homesick, miserable and were, afraid of the spiders in that home. They did not fit in with their cousins. The story moves forward and backward throughout the narration she reminds nostalgic in her attitude to life.

In the title story, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* Ruchira is the female protagonist born and brought-up in America. She has a strong feeling towards her forefather's land and traditions. She was greatly inspired by her grandmother's stories.

Ruchira has the habit of writing all the errorful events happened in her life similarly she has also written all that has been bluntly explained by Biren, whom she is betrothed to.

The hard reality struck in her life when a woman named Arlene came at the doorstep claiming that she is carrying the baby boy of Biren in her womb. It was the same time Ruchira has fallen in love with Biren and ready to shift their things to the newly wed Condo.

JUST THREE DAYS left before her wedding, and Ruchira thinks..... It's her best one so far, and it's ready now, at least this phase of it. Just in time, because it's to be her surprise wedding gift to Biren..... she'll hang it opposite to the bed, so they can look at it after lovemaking or in the morning, waking each other up..... Then Biren's knocking, and she lifts the easel into the closet and rushed to the door and opens it. But it's not him..... It's a young woman- well, maybe not so young, once you take in the cracked lines at the corners of her eyes- very thin and very pregnant, with spiky blond hair and a pierced eyebrow, wearing a shapeless pink smock that looks borrowed and a studded black leather jacket that she can no longer button over her belly.....

She had realized, right away, that she shouldn't let her in. But she couldn't just shut the door in the face of a pregnant woman who looked like she was starving could she?..... Then she speaks, an unexpected dimple appears in her cheek, and Ruchira is shocked to discover she's beautiful. "My name's Arlene," She says. And after a while Arlene says, "It'll be born in a month of February". She narrows her eyes and stares as though Ruchira were a minor fact she's memorizing for a future test, one she'd rather not take. (*The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* 225-228)

In this situation she gets prompted of her grandmother, who used to pray to the Lord Shiva to forgive both the known and unknown errors of their lives.

Forgive us, O lord Shiva, all our errors, both the known and unknown'.... Errors that look your life between their thumb and forefinger, Thakuma, and crumbled it like a muffin until you were alone, separated by oceans and deserts and a million Skyscrapes from the people you loved, and then you were dead. (The Unknown Errors of Our Lives 231-232)

These lines make it clear that Ruchira who was born in America, visited her grandmother for only a dozen times but has a heart which is associated with her own culture and homeland. Her heart cannot accept the culture and habit that affects her own moralities.

Thus this paper examines the displacement of the female protagonists of the four short stories and their sense of the past for their homeland and their struggle to locate themselves in an alien land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focused on how the geographic space caused conflict between generations and cultural identity.

Works Cited

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