

Unveiling Cultural Conflict Through Diasporic Displacement: An Analysis of the Unknown Errors of Our Lives by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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ABSTRACT

In the writings of the second generation of immigrant writers of American Indians, there is an effort to synthesise the dilemma of dislocation and relocation. Instead of surviving with the anguish of displacement and exile, the Indian immigrants look forward to assimilate with renewed consciousness to redefine human sensibility and the dynamics of personal relationship. The psychological alienation and emotional bonding with cultural roots give a distinctive richness to the sensibility of Indian immigrants. America is the crowning glory of our time and so it has become a sole dream of people around the world. Young ambitious people especially from the 3rd world countries are making an unabated flow to America. This flow of divergent races, classes and cultures has totally changed America with regards to its culture. These aspirants to the new competitive world blindly imitate American culture and habits. They feel more American than their native counterparts. During this process some people are lucky enough to get their dreams fulfilled while others become victims of the various forces they encounter and are doomed to lead a life of a pathetic immigrant. Those who experience acculturation sing with America and are never tired of showering praise on the country of their adoption for its abundance but others can never forget that their plunge into a culturally different ethos has been a big mistake for them.

Keywords: Dislocation, Relocation, Exile, Alienation, Acculturation, Assimilation

In spite of the open bosom of western countries, the nostalgia for the homeland and inability to cope with the complexity of high technology created A sense of alienation, loneliness and an Inferiority complex. Due to this east West encounter the immigrants found themselves caught up in the web of old world values and the new world promises. This alienated feeling of 'identity atrophy' arises out of the fact that the West is considered superior when compared to the submissive ideology of the east. This cultural transaction gives rise to the emergence of new hybrid culture which gives space to escape from the shadows of homelessness and the feeling of being alienated is eliminated.

All the above circumstances paved the way for a new class of writers who mainly focus their feelings of fragile identities homelessness , cultural displacement, cultural experiences, and self-emancipation humiliations. There is a distinctive contradiction in the ideologies of eastern feminism and western feminism. It is strongly accepted that female identity has an innate kingship with national boundaries

and native religion and cultural ideology and in the process of migration this innate sensibility tries to make continuous struggle against relentless cultural hostility existing in the land of immigration.

Feminine ideology in India offers a vital and lively portrait of Indian women, the idealised image of Indian womanhood. A woman survives in 2 spaces simultaneously, one as a woman sharing her private world of feminine experiences, a notion of 'universal womanhood' and in the second place she defines her status and identity in various contexts of social commitments and cultural practices.

The process of migration to America has revealed a new high in terms of immigrant population within a span of 100 years. People from all over the world are drawn towards their country for a variety of reasons. Those who choose to stay on and finally settle down experience qualitative cultural transformation which with men of letters get appropriated in their works

In the works of the second generation of immigrant writers there is an effort to synthesise the dilemma of dislocation and relocation. Instead of surviving with the anguish of displacement and exile they look forward to assimilation with the renewed consciousness to redefine human sensibility and the dynamics of personal relationship. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with the strength of her creative imagination in her short stories captures the intense and crucial movements of the life of immigrants who seem to be caught between the past and the present allurements and modernity of the West and the longing for the spiritualism of the east. The Traumatic effect, the contradictions of traditions and modernity constitute the essence of immigrants' psyche in her novels.

The short stories in Divakaruni's work *In the unknown errors of our life* is a wonderful collection that deals poignantly, patiently remarkably with the tensions between old world and new. There is an exceptional awareness of the conflict of human emotions related with the phenomenon of geographical location. The bonds of emotional affinity essentially affect the patterns of familial and personal relationships along with the awareness of morality and human values that impart a distinctive emotional authenticity to the experiences of Indian immigrants. All the stories are more poignant than the conflict born out of cultural and geographical displacement. The stories illustrate the pain, loss and alienation of immigrant experience and transfer them into the drama of the common human existence. The crisis springs out of the compulsive bonding with the new hybrid culture.

In the unknown errors of our life Divakaruni proceeds with the vision that rootlessness in life of immigrants is not an external phenomenon but it essentially operates upon the consciousness of the expatriates. The process of assimilation requires the total elimination of native cultural roots but it is difficult to achieve the mental negation of the past and its lingering shadows that hinders the process of cultural transformation. For her, expatriate sensibility includes social assimilation and the reconstruction of the psychic self. The collection opens with "Mrs Dutta writes a letter" about an Indian woman who has come to the US to live with her son and daughter in law and who is trying to figure out how to tell our best friend at home about her new life without letting her know how out of place and lonely she feels. In the title story the unknown errors of our lives a young woman struggles to come to terms with her fiancé past indiscretions which literally lands on her front door just before her wedding. In her short stories she reveals that the pain of her exile has been exposed through the immigrants who have nostalgia for the past and in absence of an amicable solution they are forced to compromise with forced harmony. Their struggles for the values of homeland and host land between the glamour of the west and the spirituality of the east.

Chitra Divakaruni Mrs Dutta writes a letter that was first published in the Atlantic monthly in 1998 and was included in Divakaruni second short story collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Life* 2001. "Mrs

Dutta writes a letter” is one of her many stories that explores the cultural shock faced by Indian women who have made such immigrants. In this particular case Mrs Dutta, an Indian widow, bows to her sense of duty and pressure from her Calcutta relatives. She decides to come and live with her son and his family in the San Francisco bay area, a setting that Divakaruni uses repeatedly in her fiction. Throughout the story Mrs Dutta tries to answer her Calcutta friend's question about whether or not she is happy in America but she keeps putting her response letter aside. She is afraid to explore how she really feels since this may conflict with her loyalty to her family. However, through a series of cultural conflicts she finally gains the strength to be honest with herself about her unhappiness. The story is a narrative reconstruction of the experiences of an immigrant woman who witnesses the trauma of immigration along with the prejudices against the life of women. The story tells about the emotional crisis of the divided self of immigrants through the web of familial relationships.

In the story Mrs Dutta, an elderly widow from a traditionally Bengali family migrates to America to stay with the family of her Americanised Indian son Sagar and his wife Shyamali. Mrs Dutta's habits are deeply rooted in traditional Indian pattern and therefore she finds herself baffled, isolated and confused in the family of her son. Her simple habits are looked down upon by her daughter in law. Her habit of fixing the alarm in the clock to wake up early is criticised by her son and daughter in law.

In America Mrs Dutta finds no freedom to survive. Her daily activities like early rising and chanting of mantras are condemned as an absurdity and a hurdle in their sophisticated living. She speculates over her past to know and to define the nature of real happiness. She makes comparative assessment of her dreams in America and the life in Kolkata. Mrs Dutta suffers emotional anguish at Shamli's casual attitude about the management of food habits. She realises that in India food habits are closely related with traditions, sentiments and the warmth of personal relations. However American grandchildren failed to respond to her sentiments. Shamli and Mrs Dutta represent the differences of two generations.

Mrs Dutta's consciousness is rooted in Indian soil and like a desperate home seeker she suffers a sense of loss whereas Shamli retains her individuality to redefine her image of life to cope up with the American lifestyle. Shamli in spite of being a Hindu wife appreciates American's hybrid and liberal culture and condemns the conventional attitude of her mother in law. Mrs Dutta in her letter to her friend in India makes an honest confession of her situation that the real problem lies in her own will that does not let her adjust to American living standards. Her letter reveals that expatriate sensibility where every individual survives as half and half. Mrs Dutta's anguish is a justification of Divakaruni's vision that Indian immigrants suffer the loss of emotional bonding in personal relationships.

In the story lives of strangers Divakaruni constructs the mosaic of homeland and host land Pilgrim party from Kolkata to the holy shrine of amaranth. Leela an elderly woman immigrant is also in the company. Being disgusted with the materialistic nature of America she comes back to India in search of peace and spirituality and retrospectively starts recollecting her childhood experiences of playing chess on computer long drives on the bike reading books etc. she had left India long back for a research abroad where she developed her relationship with another programmer Mrs Dester. However this interracial personal relationship proved a failure and she was frustrated and discontented. An uncompromising sense of loss of national identity followed by acute depression forced her to swallow sleeping pills. The subsequent trauma of alienation in American society made her impatient to return to India in search of stable human relationships. Divakaruni in this story admits that emotional bonding with the past fascinates immigrants towards homeland.

After her first landing at Kolkata Leela expresses her irresistible fascination for cotton sarees and groceries the morning prayers in the temple. The serenity of Indian lifestyle stirs a natural response for human sympathy. The emotional cries and physical sufferings of Mrs Das engage her. With this interaction she comes to the realisation that it is only the bonds of human sympathy that leads human souls towards sublimation.

With the love and sympathy of Leela, Mrs Das retains her physical strength to continue her journey. With her pathetic involvement in the life of Mrs Das, Leela develops a new vision of life and gets involved in the relationship of Leela and accepts that in the impending hurdles at least they are together. This idea of togetherness fills her with rare sympathy. This reawakening for human sentiments makes Leela obliterate her memories of the American dream. Her union with Mrs Das becomes a reincarnation of a dead self and she constructs the dreams of her life beyond the pragmatic ideology of American Society. By this story Divakaruni emphasises the uncompromising faith in human values that are rooted in Indians.

In the story the names of stars in Bengal Divakaruni tries to present the issues of assimilation in the life of the children of immigrants. The beautifully narrated story is about a San Francisco wife and mother who returns to her native village in India to visit her mother in which each understands afresh the emotional dislocation caused by stepping into a “time machine called immigration” that subjects them to “the alien habits of a world they had imagined imperfectly”. It is a narration of the experience of a lady who visits India as an American immigrant after a considerable pause of time. On her arrival at Kolkata for the first time she feels a sense of fulfilment to see that her American born sons are fascinated by bamboo forest jumping with wild flow of adrenaline and are moved with the chanting of old rhymes. In contrast to this happiness it becomes a painful realization to her that her children are not able to understand and pronounce their original mother tongue fluently. However the ultimate joy and happiness adds a new dimension to their consciousness. Their grandmother narrates tales and stories to the boys but they are helpless to grasp the hidden message or moral of those stories. The children have no affinity for their language or culture and at this juncture the narrator repents her marriage with a foreigner.

The narrator constructs her own past and recalls her childhood pleasures. She feels a sense of loss but she wilfully overcomes the fears of regression. Divakaruni asserts that retreat in the process of immigration distorts the self and the identity of immigrants because the retreat of space can ensure the retreat of time. For immigrants their homeland becomes stranger than the land of their adoption. However the negation of India can't be adopted as a defence mechanism to get rid of the guilt. The guilt of betrayal makes a greater damage to the butchered ego of the immigrants. With such confessions Divakaruni develops the concept that the process of assimilation cripples a person to interact with its own native cultural identity.

The story of the blooming season of cacti again represents Diwakaruni's obsession with the idea of east West encounter. It is the story of Mira, a sensitive Indian girl who migrates to California with innumerable dreams. There in spite of the neglect of her sister in law she starts seeking the possibilities of assimilation. Residing in California she recalls the pleasures of Bombay “torrential monsoon” greedy flooded streets and the sign of ocean at night necklaced with the light from marine drive. She also recalls the painful shadows of Hindu Muslim riots. For her even the life in California is not a consolation and in spite of her brother's warning she makes efforts to get a job at the restaurant of Mukherjee where she is finally placed as a cashier and is permitted to stay in an apartment building. One of the attendants at the

restaurant inspires her towards marriage. Mira comes in contact with Radhika Malik Mukherjee's second wife and develops sympathy for the misery of Radhika.

Simultaneously she develops a fascination for an amicable personality man - Ajit. She accepts the proposal of dating him and manages a private date with him. Mira in her intoxication of sensual pleasures and passion eliminates the concept of geographical and cultural disparities. The flow of passion is not the fulfilment of lust or love but only a mode to escape from the insecurity of being a woman and an immigrant. her feminine sensibility overpowers her insecurity as an Indian immigrant. Through the relationship of Mira - Ajit, Divakaruni emphasises that involvement in personal relationships is the only mechanism for cultural harmony.

Divakaruni within the compact structures of these stories creates strong situations to deconstruct the sensibility of immigrants. With her sensitive imagination innate sympathy for human relationship, keen consciousness for gender prejudices and man's innate bonding with national boundaries. In the background of the anguish for personal relationship she has constructed a unique pattern of east West encounter. The psychological alienation and emotional bonding with cultural roots give a distinctive richness to the sensibility of Indian immigrants. With this vision of universal brotherhood, Divakaruni explores new dimensions of conflicts affecting human consciousness in the era of globalization.

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