Abstract:
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the famous contemporary Indian diasporic writers, moved to Sunnyvale, California, in 1989. She has insisted on being read not as an Indian or expatriate writer but as an immigrant writer, whose literary agenda is to claim that America is being improvised by newcomers from the Third World. The conflict between the first generation and the second-generation expatriates clearly reveals the difficulties of the process of acculturation. The distance, both geographically and emotionally between Geeta of The Mistress of Spices and her parents continues to increase. She wants to be an American not Bengali. Although parents want their children to take advantage of the educational and employment opportunities in America, they also want them to maintain their ethnic heritage in other spheres of their lives. The parents remain foreign, the children become American. Unbridgeable gulf is created between the two. The difference in taste, customs and language bring about domestic conflict. Thus, it can be concluded that mutual understanding is most requisite in human-life. As misunderstanding, sometimes, due to generation gap is natural and cannot be prevented.

Key Words: Affirmation, Immigrant, Mainstream, expatriate.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the famous contemporary Indian diasporic writers, moved to Sunnyvale, California, in 1989. In 1991 she became founder-member and president of MAITRI, an organization in the San Francisco area that works for South Asian women in abusive situations. In her essay “My Work with MAITRI” she says, “My work with MAITRI has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I have heard of acts of cruelty beyond imagining. The lives of many of the women I have met through this organization have touched me deeply.”

Chitra Banerjee also associated herself with Asians against Domestic Abuse, an organization in Houston. Her interest in these women grew when she realized that there was no mainstream shelter for immigrant women in distress, a place where people would understand their cultural needs and problems in the United States. The experience she gathered from counseling sessions, the lives of Asian women opened up to her revealing unimaginable crises. Chitra Banerjee has insisted on being read not as an Indian or expatriate writer but as an immigrant writer, whose literary agenda is to claim that America is being improvised by newcomers from the Third World. She is evidently accepted in her adopted country as an Asian American or a ‘woman of colour,’ but not as part of the ‘mainstream’ of American writing, or even of the ‘mainstream’ of American women’s writing. To her credit she won many prestigious awards instituted by Americans. As an award winning author and poet, she writes for both adults and children.

The Indian experience in America and the conflict between the traditions of the novelist’s homeland and the culture of her adopted country is the focus of much of her fiction and poetic work. As she proclaims: “As immigrants we have this enormous raw material, which is often very painful and puts us in a position of conflict, which is very good for a writer” and further elaborates, “We draw from a dual culture, with two sets of worldviews and paradigms juxtaposing each other” (Paravathi). And this precisely makes her an emerging literary celebrity of the present times. Chitra Banerjee focuses upon sensitive protagonists
who lack a stable sense of personal and cultural identity and are victimized by racism, sexism and other forms of social oppression. Her main focus is on her women characters, their struggle for identity, their bitter experience and their final emergence as self-assertive individuals, free from the bondages imposed by the relationship. For the courageous and sensitive treatment of large and significant themes, her works are regarded as outstanding contributions to Indian Writing in English. As Uma Parameswaran writes in “Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!”

Chitra Divakaruni, the most recent star in the Diaspora sky, delves into the darker dreams and nightmares of womanscape and has an appreciative readership among feminists, but since her women characters are mainly Indo-American, there is a tendency to see them not as individuals so much as representative of the Diaspora, and we are back on square one perpetuation of negative stereotypes that the average North American reader has of Indian life and culture (34).

Chitra Banerjee’s first novel, “The Mistress of Spices” (1997), is distinct in that it blends prose and poetry, successfully employing magic realism techniques. It is being optioned for a film by British film maker Gurinder Chadha. It is also clearly inspired by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s “Kapalkundala” and “Devi Choudhurani” and by old grandmother’s tales of pirates and strange islands and magical transformations which reverberated through the pages of children’s magazines like “Shishusathi” and “Shuktara” of forty and fifty years ago.

The old man who visits Tilo’s shop is Geeta’s grandfather. Though he is old, his walking and dressing style shows that he was a military major. He lives with his son in America, which he dislikes the most: “But mental peace I am not having, not even one iota, since I crossed kalapani and came to this America” (MS 85). His son Ramu forcefully brought him to America since he grows old and no one is in India to take care of him. Instead of loving his granddaughter he curses her that: “better to have no granddaughter than one like this Geeta” (MS 85). Geeta is a nice girl, so pretty and sweet-speaking too. As an intelligent and smart, she passed out of college with all A marks. And now she is a big engineer in a company. Inspite of all these, the grandfather dislikes her because she comes late at night to home with other men in their car: “Cheechee, back in Jamshedpur they would have smeared dung on our faces for that” (MS 85). He worries that no good Indian man would come forward to marry her. When he shares his opinion regarding this to Ramu, he says that: “don’t worry they’re only friends” (MS 85).

As a sincere Bengali, the old man hates the girl’s freedom in America. He even hates Ramu and his wife Sheela because they are the one who “brought up her girl too lax, never a slap even, and see what has happened” (MS 85). Geeta’s grandfather complaints even her hair style, which he considers as the essence of womanhood. According to him even much make-up is not necessary for Indian girls: “With my own two eyes I have looked into her purse. Mascara blusher foundation eye shadow and more whose names I am not remembering, and the lipstick so shameless bright making all the men stare at her mouth” (MS 86). According to Tilo, Geeta herself, nevertheless, cannot be identified as just Indian anymore. “Geeta whose name means sweet song...Geeta who is India and America all mixed together into a new melody...” (MS 87).

The conflict between the first generation and the second-generation expatriates clearly reveals the difficulties of the process of acculturation. The distance, both geographically and emotionally between Geeta of “The Mistress of Spices” and her parents continues to increase. She wants to be an American not Bengali. Shamita Das Dasgupta in her article “Gender Roles and Cultural Continuity in the Asian Indian Immigrant Community in America” comments: “This trend towards conservatism with age may suggest that parents have been somewhat successful in inculcating their children with Indian cultural values, and that this process becomes more rigorous as their adolescents approach marriageable age” (80). Similarly Geeta is reproached by her grandfather, “Well, Madam comes in late as usual, nine p.m., saying I ate already” (MS 88).

As a typical old Indian the old man expects the woman should not be a little spendthrift and would

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save their income for future. He worries that they are wasting money by purchasing a new car instead of saving that for dowry. He could not accept his son’s explanation for that: “It’s her money from her job and besides, for my Geeta we’ll find a nice Indian boy from here who doesn’t believe in dowry” (MS87). The grandfather is totally disappointed when Geeta refuses to marry a match from Jadu Bhatchaj. He even shocked when Ramu and Sheela worried: “she is brought up here, can she live in a big joint family in India. And Sheela of course saying O I don’t want to send my only daughter so far away” (MS88). And he tried his best to convince both of them. But could not tolerate Geeta’s refusal and explanation regarding this: “I am wanting to say, since when are you some of the guys, but I practise self-control . . . tell me you’re joking. She laughs and laughs. Can you see me with a veil over my head sitting in a sweaty kitchen all day, a bunch of house key tied to the end of my sari” (MS88).

The situation comes to a head when Geeta, believing in her parents’ tolerance, announces that she wants to marry not only out of love, but that her boyfriend is a Chicano. The attitude of Geeta’s grandfather and her parents’ clearly shows that they may approve foreign manners, foreign etiquette, foreign fashion but not marriage with a foreigner. The parents remain foreign, the children become American. Unbridgeable gulf is created between the two. The difference in taste, customs and language bring about domestic conflict. As a second generation South Asian Geeta of The Mistress of Spices is shocked by the elements of racism that she perceives in her parents’ reaction to Juan. Her parents have “given” plenty of independence to her but they cannot accept her boyfriend. Her Indian parents are rigid in their own old Indian ways and would not grant her the American style of living as much as they feel the pull of their native civilisation.

Although parents want their children to take advantage of the educational and employment opportunities in America, they also want them to maintain their ethnic heritage in other spheres of their lives. In the traditionally tyrannical household a woman is not permitted to leave the husband’s house without permission. Geeta of “The Mistress of Spices” is forced to leave her home. Leaving home, for a bright lad, is an essential part of the process of self-assertion, a necessary step on the way of self-reliance. To escape from home is to win release from the place that stunts one’s growth, stifles one’s breath, distorts one’s values and ruins one’s opportunities. She says, “I’m leaving. And never coming back . . . I’m going to move in with Juan then. He’s been asking me for a long time. I said no, thinking of you guys all this time, but now I will” (MS90).

The old man in “The Mistress of Spices” confronts a complex socio-cultural matrix where he tussles to find his space by balancing the Indian life and the pristine self in the American culture. The sudden metamorphosis which the migrant women are subjected to is excruciating for him. Besides, he is encumbered with the onus of imparting the cultural norms to his son. The loneliness of being in an alien land is revealed by the author through the eyes of the first generation diaspora. He tries to share his frustration to Tito: “When she [Geeta] explains I tell to her, You are losing your caste and putting blackest kali on our ancestors’ faces to marry a man who is not even a sahib, whose people are slum criminals and illegals . . . O Ramu send me back better I die alone in India” (MS89-135). Geeta is able to express herself to her father and mother but could not face her grandpa’s curses: “don’t say O grandpa you just don’t understand, you think I don’t see TV news” (MS89). Geeta’s allegedly free behaviour and disinterested in the match suggested by her grandfather upsets him. She is not. She works towards an affirmation of relationships which would involve the various people she loved and tie them into a common bond of family.

Thus, it can be concluded that mutual understanding is most requisite in human life. As misunderstanding, sometimes, due to generation gap is natural and cannot be prevented. Due to generation gap youngsters cannot understand and when and where their parents need them and same happens in younger generation’s cases. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “The Mistress of Spices”it is expressed clearly.
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