

Cultural Dislocation and Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Lives of Strangers*



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Abstract

This research paper delineates cultural dislocation, changing identity and displacement in the life of characters presented in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Lives of Strangers*. The diaspora writers feel dilemma in foreign land and their works incorporate all experiences of diasporic aspects which exist in several socio-cultural societies. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has philosophical approach in context of human condition; she shows dislocation as a permanent human condition in our life. Human life is dislocated in this world. The diaspora writers delineate isolation, alienation, identity crisis and cultural conflict in their works. When people migrate from one place to another place, they face many obstacles related to cultural or geographical prerequisites which are usually asunder from their own country. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the epochal Indian-American diaspora writers in her time and all her works delineate the problems of immigrants. She expostulates dislocation of human condition in her works. Divakaruni has interconnected all events like cultural conflict, loneliness and cultural dilemma between native and foreign land. The migrated people have to face a serious dilemma in their newly identity in adopted land. Actually, the problems of the migrants are not only the problems of geographical migration, but also a serious challenge of cultural conflict. In adopted land, they have to face many obstacles between two cultures, native culture and adopted culture where they live.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Conflict, Alienation and Identity Crisis.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the significant Indian diaspora writers in her time. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is not only a short-story writer but a famous novelist and all her works show identity crisis, sense of loss and dislocation of human condition. She delineates all her characters and episodes for examining the cultural dilemma between Indian and American. Her thematic concerns highlight emotional and physical loneliness, displacement, isolation due to cultural diversities. She has written several novels and short-stories in which she delineates the cultural dislocation in the life of immigrants. Chitra Divakaruni wrote famous short-story collection as *The Lives of Strangers* (2005) and wrote several novels as *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *Queen of Dreams* (2004).

Aim of the Study

The aim of this research paper is to evaluate how cultural diversity works in the life of human being in alien land; they have to face many problems related to geographical in their foreign land. The present research aims to identify the obstacles and its causes created due to cross-cultural immigration. This paper shows the cultural diversities in Chitra Divakaruni's *The Lives of Strangers*. This research paper delineates the struggle which is faced in adopted land and this struggle is not only the struggle of writer but it also represents to every person who migrates from one place to another. Being migrated to the foreign land, Indian people show their identities but share common dilemma and suffering in American arena. They see American culture from Indian outlook and it is the perspective which creates dilemma in their life. They have to face many obstacles to compromise between the two cultures: native land and foreign land. The diasporic women writers delineate sense of loss, identity crisis and cultural conflicts in their works.

Review of Literature

Related works of this research paper have been reviewed for the purpose of completing this paper as Jumpha Lahiri, Bhartee Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bhaba etc. The research works of Bijalwan, Prajapati, Tylor have been reviewed for this paper. In *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Jumpha Lahiri delineates cultural dilemmas, sense of loss, alienation in the life of characters and her characters always find themselves caught in two different cultures, one that they have left behind and other in which they try to adjust and face a cultural dilemma in their life. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhaba shows the issues of cultural diversities, hybridity, and production etc. Bhaba says that cultures are distinct phenomena, but always being in context with each other and it is seen mixedness in culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (2005) also highlights cultural dislocation, identity crisis etc. Divakaruni allows her readers to see into the multicultural world through her characters. Prajapati says in his research paper that culture is generally the outcome of philosophical sources and geographical issue and culture incorporates different aspects of society as knowledge, art, customs etc. According to E. B Tylor, 'Culture' is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom and any acquired by a man as a member of society"(Tylor.E.B). Each culture has its own rules or norms which affect verbal and non-verbal communication and cultural dilemmas occur when various groups of people interact with each other. Dilemmas occur across cultural boundaries and it also occurs across perceptual and misunderstanding.

Bicultural Ambivalence and Cultural Barriers

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Lives of Strangers* is eminent short-story collection. Divakaruni delineates the cultural diversities, displacement, dispassion and sense of loss in her works. Diasporic writers explicate the cultural conflicts, the generational differences and identity crisis. Diasporic writers perceive the skirmish between two worlds' native land and adopted land. The Indian women writers such as Jumpha Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bhartee Mukherjee, Kiran Desai effect not only society, but also the lives of the several ethnic groups and the immigrants. In diasporic literature, these writers highlight cultural barriers, homelessness, and identity crisis of immigrants' group. The cultural barriers, loneliness, sense of loss and alienation are proliferated by displacement and dislocation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a first generation woman writer who explicates the cultural dilemmas, transposition and nostalgia for the homeland and alienation in adopted land. Divakaruni's short-stories and novels depict sociological and geographical barriers between native and adopted land.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also contemplates identity crisis concerning language, religion, generation differences. In her short-story "The Names of Stars in Bengali", it has been shown that a girl, who goes to America, follows all facets of

adopted land and she gets off with an American man and after some time she visits to India with her children. In her family, the adults are her mother, grandmother, great-uncle and servant etc. All the members of her family perceive strange to see these children. The children don't comprehend the Bengali language and make laugh at Bengali words due to cultural diversities. They don't like Indian Bengali raiments and ways of living and they prefer to commute American or western clothes which are not liked by their grandmother because her grandmother does not wear jeans and T-shirt and commute Bengali sari. When the children play with their grandmother, they cannot communicate with their grandmother because she is unable to answer back the interpellation of children. Actually, they play with their grandmother till late night, children flout at Bengali words and their grandmother endeavors to stop them and says "Hush, children listen to foxes , and they would all listen-first the raucous sewing of crickets," (The Names of Stars in Bengali, TLOS240). But they don't comprehend the instruction of their grandmother.

When her husband visits to India and all family relatives ask about her husband whether he is a Hindu or not, he answer in negative and they ask about his other relatives, he replies with his native liberal tone that "his father, though born a Hindu, had stopped practicing the religion long before he married white, Episcopalian wife."(The Names of Stars in Bengali, TLOS243). The narrators' relatives say to her that her father feels shocked if her father is alive today.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represents identity crisis, sense of loss, homelessness through cultural diversities as language, religion by representing the life of the narrator and her husband. She concedes the American ways of lifestyle in every zone and after the demise of her father, she marries to American man. When her child falls sick, he feels pain in stomach, her mother tries several efforts to heal her baby and brings limca but his stomachache is worse. Actually, he hates limca and postulates 7-up, American pizza. His mother does not take rest and check his temperature again and again. In the morning, when a village doctor comes, he gives Indian medicine instead of American anti-biotic which child's mother gives. The village doctor says that Indian pills are better than American tablets, but child disgusts and pushes these medicines away. His mother and maidservant forcefully open the mouth of the child for giving medicine because he does not like this Indian medicine. After that the women of the village incite to her to take herbal medicines and tell her the ponder ability of goddess durga and she consents and goes to durga temple but she does not believe in these superstitions. Though child's mother consider these aspects the illusion of superstitions and she does not believe in herbal products which she knows from childhood as "She is not convinced that Indian antibiotics are better than American ones" (The Names of Stars in Bengali, TLOS 257).

In *The Lives of Strangers*, Chitra Divakaruni depicts the life of immigrants in adopted land and their

relationship with American people in cultural diversities. Her first story "Mrs. Dutta Writes to a Letter" puts to us the relationship of Mr. Dutta and her son and daughter-in-law. Her son and daughter-in-law are living in America and they invite Mrs. Dutta for living with them in America. In America, Mrs. Dutta wants to settle down in Indian lifestyle and in America, she gets up early in the morning ,but her son Sager does not like this, but Mrs.Dutta tells her that when she is a newly bride of seventeen, her mother-in-law forces her that "a good wife wakes before the rest of the household."(Mrs.Dutta Writes to a Letter, TLOS2). She tells about Indian customs that women get up early in the morning before their husband get up. Mrs. Dutta tells her daughter-in law that she was not good in her household activities. She had to repose late night because of her household plummet. So when Mrs. Dutta stays in America, her son Sagar and daughter-in-law Shyamoli tell that they want her to be comfortable, she should take rest in America and don't get up early in the morning. But Mrs. Dutta gets up early in the morning because of her Indian habit.

Chitra Divakaruni delineates inter-generational conflicts by representing different characters in her short-stories. As we see that Indian women don't call their husband by their names but in America, Shyamoli calls her husband Sagar by his real name. When Shyamoli gives clothes to Sagar for washing, Mrs. Dutta does not like this way of lifestyle and states that she never calls her husband by his name, but Mrs. Dutta wants to transact the works of Sagar because she realizes that these works are against Indian culture and Shyamoli tells her mother-in-law that in America, we don't vacillate to do men and women's work. So we see that cultural dislocation creates cultural dilemmas in the life of Shyamoli and her mother-in-law.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delineates the experiences of Indian- American people that how they face obstacles in their adopted land. As we see in this short-story, Indian people try to establish their

identities in alien land but they cannot correlate themselves with American culture due to cultural diversities. They find the dilemmas between two cultures; one that they have left behind and another one in which they are living as in adopted culture. Actually, it can be seen that culture travels within and outside countries and take root in adopted land too. All the diaspora writers want to associate themselves to alien land but their attachment to native language, food, religion cause emotional and psychological bondage in dilemmas of identity crisis and cultural conflict. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the marital or conjugal life and family relationship. All the diasporic writers incorporate the theme of displacement, dislocation, identity crisis. The diaspora writers delineate all the experiences of diaspora communities which exist in several socio-cultural societies.

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