
CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AS CATALYST FOR DEVELOPMENT IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKURNI'S THE VINE OF DESIRE AND OLEANDER GIRL

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Abstract: As a South Asian diasporic writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has through her novel *The Vine of Desire* (2002) and *Oleander Girl* (2013) projected voluntary acceptance of cultural displacement as an unconscious defence mechanism wherein the protagonists Sudha, Anju and Korobi fathom the compelling circumstances. The reasons behind their movement to US are varied but it exposes them to a new land with different culture which in turn help them in asserting their own identity. The reverse journey carried out by Sudha and Korobi is not a failed decision but an affirmation of their faith in them. This paper tries to point the fact that interaction with different cultures though displaces individuals but also promotes a better understanding of humanity and oneself in particular. Indian culture, tradition and values have been contrasted in with the American dreams and culture. Though there are differences but there is exposure to new challenges which results in opening up vistas of better understanding. The journey to US becomes a journey of discovery, development and displays contrasting world views but ascertains the ultimate acceptance of imperfections. This paper brings to light the way everyday realities in different cultural contexts affects the opinions and ideas and the way generation gap also leads to differences.

Keywords: Culture, Displacement, discovery, survival, quest, self.

Introduction: The word 'Displacement' though connotes a point of departure but it is a site of inquiry which leads to a constant process of negotiation. According to Angelika Bammer "Displacement is one of the most formative experience of our century [1]." It has a 'multivalent complexity' and is a 'reflection of struggle and survival'. Various writers and critics like Paul Fussell, Edward Said, James Clifford, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty and Adrienne Rich have tried to explore the metaphor of travelling and has unraveled the key concepts related to class, caste, power and gender. Displacement entails positive connotation of movement, travel and also relocation. Moving away from one's cultural environment to another is also a path of rediscovering the untraveled paths though not necessarily meaning total acceptance of things. It results in fusion, synthesis and blend of new ideas, circumstances and challenges. Displacement also leads to many more choices and options and in other words it also becomes synonymous with freedom or emancipation.

Aim: The research paper aims to explore two literary works of a South Asian Diasporic writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni *The Vine of Desire* (2002) and *Oleander Girl* (2013) as manifestations of displacement leading to development. This paper shows how voluntary acceptance of movement to another nation with a different culture acts like an unconscious defence mechanism. The protagonists Sudha, Anju and Korobi fathom the compelling circumstances. The reasons behind their movement to US are varied but it exposes them to a new land with different culture which in turn helps them in

asserting their own identity. This paper tries to point the fact that interaction with different cultures though displaces individuals but also promotes a better understanding of humanity and oneself in particular. Indian culture, tradition and values have been contrasted in with the American dreams and culture. The journey to US becomes a journey of discovery, development and displays contrasting world views but ascertains the ultimate acceptance of imperfections. This paper brings to light the way everyday realities in different cultural contexts affects the opinions and ideas and the way generation gap also leads to differences. The paper projects the instances, people, experiences which shape their world view and also help them develop a faith on themselves. East-West encounter also enables them to critically review her views.

Plot: *The Vine of Desire* (2002) is about Anju and Sudha who have grown up as sisters in India but one is married to a person in US and another stays back in India. This novel starts at a point where Anu has lost her child and is suffering in US whereas Sudha has delivered a baby girl but has abandoned her in-laws to save her girl. She goes to US to help Anju but lands up in trouble because of Anju's husband Sunil who gets attracted to her. Sudha though falls weak but refuses to compromise and charts her own journey, becomes financially independent and then returns to India. On the other hand Anju though loves her husband Sunil, decides to take divorce and pursues her education abroad and forgives Sudha. In *Oleander Girl* (2013) Divakaruni has explored the personal turmoil paralleled against the political which Korobi the protagonist undergoes but does not

get shattered. In search of her father she travels to US, faces many setbacks, adjusts with the environment and finally after unfolding the secret decides to return back to India. In one of the interviews Chitra has mentioned

“Actually though I think of my female protagonists as having both strengths and weaknesses. They are complex characters...Perhaps, what distinguishes my characters is their courage and spirit and a certain stubbornness which enables them to keep going even when facing a setback world[3].”

Divakaruni's writing interrogates, invites and suggests a journey into this multicultural world where 'dissolving of boundaries' is must for reshaping the notions and ideals.

Experiences resulting due to Movement to a foreign land: The reasons for travelling and moving to US for the three characters are different. If Anju travels to US because of her marriage, Sudha travels to help her friend and Korobi's journey is meant to search her roots. Their experiences with a new culture are at times confusing but at other times it leads to adjustment. Both Anju and Sudha see US as a land of opportunities but Korobi is more practical as she understands the modern world and is not in awe of US. Korobi comes across as more practical and strong-headed. The delineation of the protagonists Anju and Sudha represent the woman of India in the 20th century whereas Korobi belongs to this age of technology and Divakaruni as a writer has marked this sea change through her characters.

Korobi in *Oleander Girl* arrives in US and remarks, *“No one knows me. I know no one. This is my life now[3].”* (92) US throws open various challenges to her and she starts feeling that she is 'losing her Indian courtesies' but she also thinks in terms of being a 'survivor'. It is only after landing in an alien environment that she becomes more conscious of her heritage and her inheritance. *“I find myself missing our temple back home, though I rarely visited it on my own [3].”* (94) It is Seema's life and her small little sharings that provide her a little comfort in an otherwise hostile environment. The distance between two nations also takes a little toll on her personal relations with Rajat. *“she in a land of night while he is in day time, each unable to truly gauge the other's suffering heart [3].”*(121)

Similarly Anju in *The Vine of Desire* recollects that in her growing up years she always thought of going to distant places, *“I believed that, if I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn't so easy, is it [2]?”* (14) For her foreign land offers her a chance to fulfill her dreams and finally she starts her education again, learns to fly and even gets moulded into the life of America-cooking, driving,

working on her own.

Sudha on the other hand feels, *“I can't go back to India, to the way I was. Helpless, dependent-I can't love like that. I can't bring up my daughter to think that is how a woman needs to live [2].”* (104) She has more of romantic notions about America but both Lalit and Anju try to tell her the reality. *“You're too romantic about what goes on in America. There are a lot of silenced women here. The no-money, no-rights works here, too [2]”* (156) Even Lalit warns Sudha, *“There's a lot about America that's unexpected. Don't be in too much of a hurry to make up your mind about things. Or people [2].”* (178)

Sudha's final decision to go back to India affirms her own faith but only after realizing that there are differences between India and America but that she would be more happy in accepting it. Sudha finally is able to accept that she belongs to India and says, *“America isn't the same country for everyone, you know...Going back with you would be to start over in a culture I understand the way I'll never understand America [2].”* (320-321) She snaps at Lalit, *“America did help you to make yourself into what you wanted. But I don't have any professional skills— [2]”* (330) The experience in US leads Sudha to believe that though she thought of US as an exotic country, her own country has so much to offer her. Had she not moved to a foreign land, the illusion would have continued. In this sense cultural displacement also leads to the breaking of illusions and accepting reality.

Similarly Korobi faces another set of problems. The assistance provided by Desai and Vic make her ponder, *“How strange the world; you never know who will extend you friendship, and who will hate you [3].”*(129) Mitra from whom she had expected support seems to ignore her and a stranger offers help to her. She realizes her obligations and promises for her family and though she goes through a series of inner conflicts but her strength never diminishes.

The open world of US makes her conscious of the differences and she also learns to eventually accept it. Her simple act of getting her hair cut to raise money to travel in US evokes different responses from people but for her it is a way towards realizing her goal. *“If I hadn't sold my hair, I wouldn't have the money to go to California. I would have to go back to India without ---without doing what I had come all the way to do [3].”* (178) Along her journey she has a bad experience also wherein one person tries to play with her dignity. She feels dejected and hopeless at the coldness of the people's responses. At times the environment seems stifling and she gets exhausted, *“Why was everyone in America convinced that I was out to deceive him [3]?”* (233) For Korobi it is her goal which is most important and once she achieves it, it becomes easy

for her to return back to her loved ones.

Korobi wishes to find about her father but at times when she is unable to find a clue, she lands herself into moments of desperation and frustration. "all the troubles I went through, searching the dangers I faced---no one even wants to know about it. All they want---even grandmother---is for me to go back, pull the blanket of status quo over myself, and dwindle into a wife [3]" The brave, loyal, headstrong woman goes through her hiccups and odds. It is Vic who makes her realize the truth of her self-discovery. "You think that if you learn who your father and mother were, it'll teach you who you are? But you are someone already. You'd see it if you weren't busy focusing elsewhere [3]." Her journey to US brings her face to face with a bitter truth. She discovers that her father was an Afro-American and that her mother never married her father. Her illegitimate status breaks her for a while. Torn between east and west, India and America, Rajat and Vic, Korobi finds herself at a crossroad but she finally decides to go back to her people, her country and firmly steps out to once again live a life of protection but this time with more self-control. However her decision is not welcomed by Rajat or by her in-laws. Rajat's demanding of evidence to show that she is not guilty and her mother-in-law doubting her legitimacy puts her in a state of shock but she refuses to fall. "I'm Korobi, Oleander, capable of surviving drought and frost and the loss of love [3]."

Transformation: Korobi, Sudha and Anju all evolve into a much stronger persons. Their physical journey though moves outward, physically spanning the different time zones and spaces but it also makes them travel inwards wherein self-questioning and interrogating enables them to chalk out their own strategies for survival and pursue their goal. Anju adopts the strategy of adopting and mingling, Sudha overcomes fear and evolves but Korobi learns to detach and isolate. From feeling fragmented to experiencing wholeness in their imperfections they travel alone and discover their strength. Chitra Banerjee in a unique way has used culinary skills to bring out a poignant message. A.A. Gill has

mentioned, "Food is not immune to nostalgia... taste is something that happens in your head and not, as you imagine, on your tongue [4]" Korobi gets on as usual with her life after returning back trying to learn cooking. She struggles to learn to cook and the words of cook speak volumes of the way of life. "You'll get used to it...Look how many burns I have on my arms. That's the only way to become a good cook [3]." (275) The cooking lessons serve as 'a self-improvement regimen'. All three protagonists learn to make their choices and decisions with a foresightedness and at the same time learn to accept differences. The key factor in the novels is there is no hatred or remorse. Each one of them forgets and forgives. The Grandmother's words in *Oleander Girl* "She has traveled the world and chosen to come back home...He, too, has traveled, gone astray, swung back...Do you agree that we have made an atonement [3]." (284) hints at the significance of forgiveness as a key to life which is even reflected in *The vine of Desire* wherein the two girls open their arms for each other. If travelling signified an outer journey of physical and spatial mobility, herein Divakaruni has made diaspora a 'metaphor for the interior journey of the soul, the mind and consciousness'. Departure is not forced but voluntary and the journey to US is taken as a transit where the protagonist tries to reach a point of arrival and lives in the present by rediscovering the past.

Conclusion: The disparity between cultures when experienced only can lead to a better understanding. For korobi the return to India seems like, "it's as though a cover has been whisked away...I'm not sure the city will love me back...But I know there's no going back to some things [3]." (269-270) For a better understanding it is essential to recognize and accept the multiplicity and variety, people's many identities and its numerous social, political, religious marks to value one's own identity. Sigmund Freud words almost in a nutshell presents this journey into words, "A man should not strive to eliminate his complexes but to get into accord with them, for they are legitimately what directs his conduct in the world [5]."

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