



Displacement Crisis in the fictional world of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract: Migration of people from one nation to another for higher education and better economic prospective has become a reality in post modern world. Geographical displacement gives rise to cultural and psychological displacement as well. Diaspora community is always confronted with a complex problem of negotiating boundaries in order to resolve crises arising out of displacement.

Displacement has emerged as a multidimensional metaphor in the fictions of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She deals with the issue of displacement at various levels including magic and reality, memory and experience, suppression and rebellion and so on. It is one of the recurrent themes of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The present paper is devoted to critically look at the displacement crisis as revealed in her fictional world.

Keywords: displacement, negotiating boundaries, diaspora, crisis and migration.

Introduction

Explaining the process of displacement and migration, Oliver Blackwell has stated — Both migration and displacement can be understood as processes which bring about changes in people's physical locations as a result transform economic, social and political relationships. (Koser 19). Divakaruni's works depict the tendency of contemporary people to move from developing world to the developed one with the hope of transforming their life qualitatively.

Divakaruni's characters lend themselves to the definitions of Safran —maintain a memory, vision or myth about their original homeland (...) the group's consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland. (Safran 83-84)

Resettlement of individuals in the new land is accompanied by fresh challenges to existence. The fictional characters of Divakaruni are confronted with the question of negotiating emotional and cultural boundaries. Emotionally they still feel connected to the culture that they have left behind and practically they find themselves confronted with the challenge of adopting the patterns of host culture. The happiness in the new land is directly connected to the ability of the character to successfully negotiate the question of multiple boundaries. These boundaries are of past and present, expectations and aspirations, tradition and modernity and so on.

It is very often said, that Divakaruni deals with the experiences of the characters who migrated from India to United States in search of greener pastures. Geographical migration gives rise to other questions as well. Very often her characters find themselves struggling between values of homeland and hostland. They in their own ways make attempts to negotiate cultural boundaries. In fact, the issue of negotiating boundaries is complex and intricate one. There is no single unalterable reality. It is made up of varied and complex and very often conflicting components. Reality is multi dimensional and pluralistic in nature. Geographical, cultural and social boundaries are disappearing fast. People from different backgrounds interact and intermingle for social, economic, political and cultural reasons. Migration from one nation to another essentially gives rise to the issue of negotiating various boundaries. Various individuals have different capacities to successfully deal with this issue. Moreover there are other types of boundaries which though invisible play important role in one's life. For instance, boundary between inner and outer reality, between life and death, between material and non material, between cultural and civilisation aspects, between personal and professional life, between tradition and modernity and so on.

Aim:

Thus, this paper makes an attempt to understand crisis of displacement from emotional, social, political and cultural point of views. This paper also focuses to understand how the fictional characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni make efforts to negotiate boundaries to discover their identity in changed circumstances.

Crisis of Displacement:

Question of boundaries is not as simple as it appears. Very often boundaries are neither clear nor they do run in a straight line. They are very often overlapping, zigzag and entangled. Entire life is a struggle to achieve and maintain a kind of equilibrium between and amongst various boundaries. Maintaining this kind of equilibrium in itself is a very difficult and complex task. Psychological, social, economic, cultural, intellectual, physical, spiritual needs of an individual on the one hand and the outside reality which in its own queer manner allows the satisfaction and attainment of these needs renders the question of negotiating boundaries a complex one. Inconsistencies of life are the cause and effect of failure on the part of individuals to resolve the issue of resolving the negotiating of boundaries in a satisfactory way.

Therefore, when we look at the fictional world of Divakaruni, it simply does not depict the issue of displacement in relation to geographical migration only but it emerges before us as a multi dimensional metaphor. Therefore it is imperative to critically look at how the fictional characters of Divakaruni negotiate boundaries to resolve the crisis of displacement.

Past and present:

The dilemma of Divakaruni's characters makes them constantly negotiate the boundaries between the past and the present. Their present experiences over and over bring home the point that nothing is forgotten nothing is erased. The Queen of Dreams is the story of a young woman Rakhi living in California who tries to rediscover her Indian roots through her mother's Dream Journal entries which opens for her the doors to her past. Dream Journals are a record of her mother's life experiences which she has never shared with anyone and which are discovered after her death. It is through her father with whom she has a cold relationship that she is able to interpret, infer and construct

the hidden meanings and is able to put to rest the noise of misinterpretations and give a voice to the artist within her. Instead of blaming others she is able to forgive and accept. The past makes her look towards the future with a better understanding and enhanced acceptability. Stock has mentioned that, —The act of remembering is always contextual, a continuous process of recalling, interpreting and reconstructing the past in terms of the present and in the light of an anticipated future.

Chitra Banerjee's novel *Queen of Dreams* examines the question of displacement from emotional and psychological point of view. It depicts quest of Rakhi for discovering her true identity. It is interesting to understand that Rakhi is not born in India and then migrated to US but she is born and brought up in USA. Moreover, her mother takes care not to mention much of India in her childhood. 'What cruel karma had placed me in the care of the only two Indians who never mentioned their homeland if they could help it?' (QOD 82). Despite all this, it is not that the influence of past has no impact on Rakhi's psyche. More than anyone else, she yearns to know of India where her parents were born, though she doesnot travel to that country in her life. She is caught between the immediate present of American society and the past that has shaped her roots indirectly.

In this novel Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes up the question of identity from the perspective of those individuals who despite being born in the hostland somehow feel affected by the past. The words of Sudhir Kakar find a resonance here as he has observed, —At some places identity is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at others, to an unconscious, striving for continuity of experience and yet another places as a sense of solidarity with a groups ideal.

Memories and Experiences:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels negotiate the boundaries between past and present convention and modernity, memory and experience. Despite geographical location, her characters continue to dwell in their original culture by the way of their memories. Transition from past to present in other words, from memory to experience is not smooth. They have to struggle hard to assimilate present experiences of host culture. Persistent adjustments with the present life without entirely erasing the past is difficult but necessary process of the formation of diasporic identity. In one of the interviews to Uma Ganesan Hong, Divakaruni (2007) has mentioned, "India is a country that straddles several centuries at the same time. It is this belief of hers which gets translated into the transformative process of the characters.

One amazing thing is another novel that brings forth the theme of displacement in a different way. The characters hail from different places and come from different backgrounds. They are thrown together by chance. Each one of them is negotiating with the boundaries of memories that they have left behind and the present experiences. Life is an unabetted process of negotiating past and present to create space for the future.

Noted writer Toni Morrison has compared memory to water. She has written, All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through (...) the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory what the nerves and skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'.

Her novel delves into personal stories but these stories point a universal truth. Each character seems to be running away to a new place to rediscover oneself and the echo of it is summed up in a statement by a nurse to Mrs Pritchett, —Moving to live where no one knew you, shucking off your worn out life like old snake skin!!(OAT 176) This

novel is not a movement towards a new settlement but rather takes a step towards the old settlement driven by the vehicle of recall, remembrance, recollection and with memory as an engine to it. The stories of the characters show that they are disoriented, dejected, displaced and are in search of some kind of reconciliation with them.

Geographical displacement which leads to cultural and emotional displacement has different effect on various characters. Uma is so accustomed to American way of life that her journey to India doesn't make her feel that she is coming back to her native land but it seems as if she is paying a visit to foreign land. Everything in India is quite unfamiliar to her. Her example clearly shows that moving away from one's land though is a traumatic experience in the beginning in the long run, one gets so accustomed to new surroundings that coming back to one's land of origin makes the person uncomfortable.

Tradition and Modernity:

Another important boundary that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's characters negotiate is the boundary between the tradition and modernity. It is not always right to presume that older generation is traditional and younger generation is modern in its outlook. Depending upon one's own perception of reality one may accept or reject traditional and modern ways of life.

Anu and Korobi move to US in quest of identity. For former it is her desire to discover herself while for the latter it is her wish to assert her authentic self. Displacement from India to US is not a smooth passage. For Anu, it takes her lots of efforts to overcome her fears and cultural conditioning to resettle her in new land. Korobi finds the new world full of opportunities to assert herself. For Anu migration emerges entrapment while for Korobi it is liberty.

Anu had travelled back to India but she always remained displaced and alienated whereas for Korobi it is not so: —She has travelled the world and chosen to come back home.¶ (OG 284) For Korobi home is where the heart is whereas Anu could never really find a home for her.

Anu though had changed her place of living but her thoughts and mind still could not accept the new freedom whereas Korobi though lives in US for a short while, she is able to mould herself as per the requirement. She transforms, accepts and even dares the route to discover her roots. In other words adjustment after displacement has a lot to do with one's own attitude coupled with mindset which is reflected in the words: Displacement, then, is not simply an external, geo-political phenomenon. It is also an internal process, in which the subject is cast out from its own history and culture (...) yet oddly it continues to be the carrier and medium through which that culture comes to know itself. (Smith 10) Korobi's decision to travel back shows her toughness. She though physically leaves a land of possibilities but carries with her the independent streak and comes back much more confident, determined to fight back the challenges. She learns, —To get to the other side, you must travel through grief.¶ (OG 276)

This novel is about the journey which metaphorically conveys the distances between lands as the distances between hearts.

Suppression and rebellion:

Many of Divakaruni's female characters are the embodiments of this negotiation between suppression and rebellion. Her main characters are middle class Indian women, but this implication is left unspoken and creates the assumption that every woman is granted the same possibility of upward mobility because, "the image of womanhood [is] an image based on purity and fidelity, on a morality highly regulated by patriarchal power" (Jain 1654).

Rebellion is more visible in her novels with reference to education, rights of women, methods of seeking pleasure, choice of clothes and career. Rebellion becomes meaningful when Chitra Banerjee's female characters carve out a space for themselves by asserting their wishes, opinions and beliefs authentically.

This space is necessarily located outside of competing paradigms of traditional identity and modern identity. The protagonists Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams*, Anju and Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* respectively rebel against functioning as the repository of national/cultural identity.

Characters in her novel do not belong to static communities. They are those people who migrate from one nation to another and pass through cross – cultural experiences. This outward movement is reinforced by their inner transformation that empowers them especially women to shake off suppressive forces and create a space in the world both inner and outer where their identity can flourish not according to the expectations of their male counterparts but as they want themselves to be.

In traditional Indian family women are forced to live a subservient existence. The heroines of the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, Anju and Sudha are brought up in the traditional joint family system in Calcutta. In the absence of males in the family, there is no one to take care of the Chatterjee family. So, Gouri Ma “shouldered the burden of keeping the family safe”(SMH 17). The three adult women Gouri Ma, Nalini and Pishi bring up the two girls Anju and Sudha. Everything about their lives and situations is traditional and conventional. As Simone De Beauvoir opines, they take by becoming a prey, find freedom by giving it up and aim to conquer the world by renouncing it (SS 437). Gouri remains unusually brave at the death of her husband and later at her acceptance of every tragedy that has come her way and in the way of the Chatterjee family. Her potential as the head of a joint family, her resolve to run the bookshop without forgoing traditional values, the pain she has suffered due to heart attack, her resolution to marry off the girls –Anju and Sudha are all indicative of her motherly protectiveness with traditional values and modern ideas.

The traditional Indian attire for a woman is a sari and each one has its own purpose. Her clothes also indicate her progression from daughter, to wife, to woman. Despite the traditional ambience of the household, there is a speck of revolution in the young women, conflicts in their thoughts and deeds. Sudha says, “I’m tired of these old-women saris you make us wear. You would think we were living in the Dark Ages instead of in the Eighties. I bet there isn’t another girl my age in all of Calcutta – except poor Sudha, of course – who is forced to dress like this. Why can’t I wear trousers, or a maxi, or at least some kurtas once in a while?” (SMH 67)

Chitra Banerjee talks about the concerns and perceptions of the new women and shows how they are not satisfied with the status of housewives bestowed on them by the male-dominated society. Sudha and Anju, through various interactions with their lovers, husbands, and in-laws, often bring out the negative aspects of the Indian male. Lalita has a rare gift of doing needle works; but she is not allowed to do her stitching because of her husband’s dominance. In this context Simone De Beauvoir’s opinion is worth considering: “In masculine hands logic is often a form of violence, a sly kind of tyranny: the husband, if older and better educated than his wife, assumes on the basis of this superiority to give no weight at all to her opinions when he does not share them” (SS 449).

The new education has gradually made Anju conscious of the futility or the emptiness of the various long-preserved notions and taboos about the woman she has started opposing and breaking down. Anju writes to Sunil: “I’ve moved my stuff out. Inform the manager if you want to continue to keep the apartment. Or else, for a fee, she’s willing to

pack your things and put them in storage. Have removed my name from the joint bank account. No point making deposits there for me. Did you really think I was going to continue taking your money?" (VD 267)

Anju is bewildered when she is exposed to two opposing ideologies. She travels through the poignant impasse of whether to carry on with the old tradition which she has observed while growing up or to embrace the liberated life infused into her by the modernized American society which is free from traditional morality.

A deviance in the set trend is considered to be an act of rebellion and disobedience. It is an irrevocable misconduct on the part of the women to think for themselves, assert their individuality and become economically independent. An act of defiance on the part of women leads them to be ostracized by the family and eventually by the community. This is proved by a woman Sudha meets at the Kali temple who says, "They want to get my husband married again. He would be happy enough. He never did care for me – thought I was too dark from the start" (SMH 236). Later Sudha decides to return to Chatterjee-home for protection. A girl brought up under the strict discipline of a traditional family, takes a decision single handedly to return home in order to save the unborn child. She thus breaks all fetters considered sacred by society. In this single act she metamorphoses from the timid Calcutta home maker to a rebellious woman.

The question for quest for identity is one the recurrent themes in her fiction. Even in the novel *Mistress of Spices* her characters continue to negotiate the boundaries of suppression and rebellion. Like other women characters, Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* also takes a bold step of becoming modern from the patriarchal structure for mistresses. In the course of the novel, there is a reference to women's liberation ideology.

Tilo says, "When I came to America I was given no items for outdoor use, just the frayed saris, colour of stained ivory, in which I greet my customers" (MS 126). The voice inside her warns her but she has deftly refused to listen to the voice. In a public restroom she changes her clothes. She goes out and waits at a bus stop with others. It surprises that no one could recognize her.

Chitra Banerjee believes that rebellion doesnot mean simply opposing the old order. It is more concerned with hammering out new order which is based on equality of genders and justice. Economic independence of women is an integral part of this new world. Despite education and capacity to earn, many women donot take financial decisions themselves. They leave this matter to be decided by the men. Until and unless women are confident and competent to execute their financial decisions their independence will remain incomplete.

Tilo is not supposed to go out of the spice shop. Whenever she dislikes the job she should get back to the island that is back to the state of submission to the patriarchal condition. Even *The First Mother*, superior to the *Mistresses* does not have the power to come out of this subordinate life. The Shampati fire set by Tilo suggests that the „new woman“ has to fight for an identity. Identity is always in crisis but the search for it never fails, whatever the consequences may be.

In contrast to the Indian women or first generation immigrants in America, the second generation has changed and become modern totally. As to Geeta in *The Mistress of Spices*, it is left to her grandfather to understand and make her parents understand. This can only happen because of his great love for her and it is not without suffering either. Her grandfather condemns: "Chee, chee, no shame at all, making talk of love in front of her parents, in front of me, her grandfather" (MS 89).

As a Mistress, Tilo also wants to know what would happen if the mistress would violate the old rules: "Tilo ever too confident . . . what happens when a Mistress grows disobedient, when she seeks her own pleasure?" (MS 93).

In the joint family system, though the role of woman is considered to be important, a woman is not given a place due to her. In *The Mistress of Spices* Daksha's husband actually believes that a woman's place is in the kitchen. Her psychology is affected and she becomes unreachable even within the family, she is the one "to whom no one listens so she has forgotten how to say. And inside her, up against her palate enormous and silent, the horror of what she sees all day" (MS 80). The caged condition of Daksha and her disillusionment are presented thus, "When I put the wedding garland around his neck, was I ever knowing that this is what is being a wife and mother, walking the edge of a knife with fear like a wolf waiting on both sides" (MS 61). A self-respecting woman has no other options to advance on her way to self reliance but to quit her home. The new woman refuses to be stifled under oppressive restrictions. The new woman's demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect that is due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one. Lalita mourns: "There are voices in my head every day. They whisper, He's learned his lesson, things will be different now, would it be so bad to go back? . . . pray for me that I will remain strong enough to find it" (MS 272). The emotional satisfaction that she gets out of this ride is well described: "she comes out of a feminine world in which she has been taught feminine good deportment and a respect for feminine values" (SS 447).

Divakaruni believes that living life is synonymous with constantly negotiating boundaries of one sort or other. She is well acquainted with Indian social and cultural traditions that explicitly or implicitly conspire against woman to suppress their wishes desires and opinions. The forces of modernity including education, economic freedom, equality of genders empower woman to raise the flag of rebellion against old traditions and conventions. Many of her female characters are the embodiments of this negotiation between suppression and rebellion.

Conclusion:

It is clear that the novelist is keenly aware of the crisis of displacement. Fast means of transport and communication have broken the geographical and cultural isolation. Social, political cultural and geographical boundaries have loosened their grasp over actions and thoughts of individuals. Not only this, intellectual and psychological awareness has made it possible to negotiate the other types of boundaries such as the boundary of realism and fantasy; materialism and spiritualism; life and death etc. the disappearance of various boundaries has made it difficult for many to keep intact the sense of their unchanged identity.

Theme of displacement runs through almost all the fictional works of Divakaruni. Everyone in life has to grapple with displacement at many levels and in myriad forms. Geographical migration and cultural change are the visible aspects of displacement which has other dimensions as well. Creative genius of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is keenly aware of even invisible aspects of displacement. Individual on account of physical, social, psychological, intellectual needs or desires has to cross boundaries to maintain and carry on his or her life. Crossing the boundaries is not easy. It means putting into practice the necessary force and efforts to end the inertia that prevents the individual to move and cross over the boundary and go to the other side.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels negotiate the boundaries between past and present, convention and modernity, memory and experience. Despite geographical location, her characters continue to dwell in their original culture by the way of their memories. Transition from past to present in other words, from memory to experience is not smooth. They have to struggle hard to assimilate present experiences of host culture. Persistent adjustments with the present life without entirely erasing the past is difficult but necessary process of the formation of diasporic identity.

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