

Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Short Story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter"

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Abstract

Diaspora refers to the dispersion or the spread of people from their homeland to other places. They migrate from their native country to various parts of the world. This term originates from the Greek word *diasperein* which originally means the forced dispersion of the Jews to various places, as time passes, it refers to the migration of people of all origins. The immigrants face the mixed feelings when they settle in the alien land. Importantly, they experience the alienation, cultural conflict, identity crisis, rootlessness, longing for roots and so on. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the prominent writers in the field of Indian Diaspora Literature. She delineates skillfully the salient features of the life of Indian diaspora in her writings. She dwells deep on the themes like immigration, alienation, identity crisis, quest for belongingness and so on. She is a prolific writer and her short story collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is widely acclaimed one. In her stories, she highlights the longing for the roots of the expatriates especially about their cultural and traditional practices. This study aims at an analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" so as to bring out her treatment of the difficulties faced by the immigrant Indian traditional woman in a foreign land. Mrs. Prameela Dutta, the protagonist feels alienated in her son's home in America and she struggles to settle in the alien soil. Her cultural past could not allow her that much easily to assimilate to the features of host country. She undergoes the emotional set back and cultural conflict while attempting to accommodate herself into the new circumstances. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has brought out adeptly Mrs. Dutta's quest for identity and her struggle to assimilate into the new cultural background.

Key Words: Alienation, Diaspora, Entanglement, Identity Crisis, Immigration, and Longing for Roots.

The phrase identity crisis is defined as the confusion of a person to face a new environment and culture. When a person undergoes changes physically and psychologically in a new country to live, he or she can experience this. He/she may struggle to retain the identity of his/her past. People who migrate from one place to another have undergone alienation and cultural conflict. Identity crisis can offer chances for self-discovery through which an individual can develop the future course of action. It becomes the permanent component in the writings of the Diaspora authors. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the prominent Indian diaspora writers. She is an award-winning prolific writer and her notable works are *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Sister of My Heart*, *One Amazing Thing*, and the short story collections *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her short story collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* captures the lives of the immigrants realistically who are caught between the past and present, and, the homeland and the alien land. This study aims at an analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" so as to bring out her treatment of the identity crisis faced by an immigrant elderly woman in an alien land. Mrs. Prameela Dutta experiences the difficulties in accommodating herself in the home of her son in America. She struggles to cope up with the new environment in her son Sagar's home in California. Her displacement from her homeland to alien land makes her alienated and nostalgic. After the death of her husband, leading her life lonely for three years in Calcutta, she has moved to her son Sagar's home in California, USA. Her journey begins with a hope of better life with her son Sagar, and daughter-in-law Shyamoli and grandchildren Pradeep and Mrinalini. Unfortunately, the reality hits her and she could not lead her life happily in the new environment and cultural background. Her friend Mrs. Roma Basu sends her aerogram asking her whether she is happy or not in her son's home in Sunnyvale. Being a typical Indian woman of sixty years old, she keeps her perseverance and composure in facing the indifference of her daughter-in-law. The story begins with an alarm at 5.00 a.m. in Mrs. Dutta's room and it is her usual time of wake up. In USA, there is no need for her to wake up early as she does not have any work to do at that time. When she wakes up, she unknowingly wakes others too by making sound by cleaning work. Mrs. Dutta practices it from the early days of her marriage. Her mother-in-law orders her to wake up early: "*A good wife wakes before rest of the household*" (2). She has to get up from the bed and relieves herself from the clasp of her husband whom she has just started to love after her marriage. There is no exclusive place for an individual's need in Indian family set up and everyone has to sacrifice something for others. Only the welfare of the family is the top priority in Indian set up. In India, Mrs. Dutta has been taught by her mother-in-law that her needs should be placed after the family's requirements. Hence, she has to sacrifice her time of being with her husband and she wakes up early to prepare breakfast and to do other household chores. In America, there is no need for her to get up early and do the house hold activities. American lifestyle does not require her to do the chores hence her daughter-in-law asks her to take rest: "That's why you should sleep in now, Mother (3). Both Sagar and Shyamoli want

her to take rest and be comfortable but she is not accustomed to it. Since she has been used to take up the responsibilities of the family in India, she could not resist herself to do the same in America. At least in jobs like knitting, dishing, washing and cooking.

When her son, Sagar has asked her to wake up belatedly, with tears in her eyes, she accepts to do so. Unfortunately, when she wakes up late the next day, she has a problem in sharing the bathroom with her grandchildren. They speak rudely to their grandmother. Mrs. Dutta hopes Shyamoli can reprimand them for speaking rudely to the elder but nothing like that happens. She does not chide them and not even instruct them to speak politely. This act surprises her and she thinks of the Indian context. If it happens in India, the elders should censure the children and even punish them by beating. In America, children have more rights to express themselves. Another act surprises her very much, when her son Sagar used to knock the door to get into the room of his children. She looks at this act with great awe and it seems to be peculiar to her. American culture has given the children the freedom to close their doors in private and even their parents are restricted to enter. When she thinks of her grandchildren, her heart feels the heaviness. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes: "THE CHILDREN. A heaviness pulls at Mrs. Dutta's entire body when she thinks of them. Like so much in this country they have turned out to be—yes, she might as well admit it—a disappointment" (9). The children in her family, both Pradeep and Mrinalini are not properly taught about how to behave with others especially to the elders as practiced in India. In Indian culture, it is the duty of parents to teach their children to respect the elders and speak politely. But both her son and daughter-in-law do not give much importance to this aspect. Certainly, the children love their grandmother but they are not instructed to follow the practices of people in India. The features like children are having their own privacy and even the parents are not allowed to enter their rooms without permission have caused a great surprise to her. In India, she has beaten her son Sagar many times when he was young for some minor mistakes. She understands that she cannot sway over the opinions of her grandchildren as she can do in India due to the cultural differences. Her being as an Indian grandmother makes her think of interfering the acts of the family members but she cannot do it in American environment. Starting with turning off the alarm clock, using the American made bed, taking bath in early morning, washing her own cloth, drying her cloth in balcony, cooking her Indian dish, speaking to the neighbors, seeing the cross-legged sitting posture of her daughter-in-law and her calling of Sagar by name all make her think of herself and the Indian way of doing all these. She undergoes the identity crisis and struggles to cope with the practices of American culture.

In her stay in California, the kitchen becomes Mrs. Dutta's favorite place. If she feels lonely, she starts to do her *poojas*. Cooking and worshipping give her immense pleasure in the alien land. She wants to keep her pooja room clean and always she prepares Indian food such as rutis, mustard sauce, real pulao with raisins, cashews and ghee, and alu dum. At first, Shyamoli is happy about the cooking of Mrs. Dutta. Afterwards, she feels not happy. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes: "Mrs. Dutta has caught wisps of words, intensely whispered: *cholesterol, all putting on weight, she's spoiling you*" (9). Mrs. Dutta starts to feel the indifference of her daughter-in-law who is not happy about the cooking of her. In fact, she has led three years lonely life in India after the death her husband. She has gone to America on the insistence of her son, Sagar. She faces the crisis of her being and it is reflected in the words of the writer: "Everyone knows a wife's place is with her husband, and a widow's with her son" (17). That is why, she has moved to America but her stay in the alien country makes her unhappy due to the indifference of her daughter-in-law who is very much influenced by the cultural aspects of the country of living.

Mrs. Dutta used to cook traditional Indian meal for her family. Cooking for her family gives her happiness and she spends much time in the kitchen. Her daughter-in-law worries much about the preparation of food by her. She contends that her food contains much cholesterol and it makes Sagar and others to gain weight. In the beginning, Shyamoli loves the cooking of Mrs. Dutta, and she feels happy for the fresh hot meal after her return from office. Later, she develops a grudge against the cooking of her mother-in-law. Mrs. Dutta wants to share the true experience of her to her friend Mrs. Basu in India. She finds happiness in doing religious practices by reading the holy book *Ramayana* and chanting mantras in 108 times. Cooking for her son and family also has given her joy. She has difficulty in understanding the manners of the alien culture especially those of the grandchildren who are more interested in Power Rangers, Spice Girls and Spirit Week than reading the stories from holy book.

Mrs. Dutta tries to use some of the electrical gadgets like refrigerator and washing machine but she is afraid of committing errors in operation. Mrs. Dutta does not want to serve the *jutha* food kept inside the refrigerator but Shyamoli insists her to store all the left overs in it. She always wants to prepare fresh meals for her family members but Shyamoli is not much interested in that. Mrs. Dutta wants her clothes to be washed and dried up every day separately in the outer space. Unfortunately, she has not been allowed to do so. Hence, she dries her clothes at the time when all others have left for work. She wants to dry them before the arrival of Shyamoli from office and she hangs her blouse and underwear in the fence separately from her son's clothes. While she does this, the neighbor notices everything. When Shyamoli returns from work, she has found Mrs. Dutta's act of drying clothes. This has made Shyamoli irritated and she could not resist her anger. She complains about Mrs. Dutta's act to her husband. In fact, she requests for a separate cloth line for her in the backyard but Shyamoli does not accept it. The daughter-in-law often expresses her displeasure with her sighs. Mrs. Dutta is traditional Indian woman and she feels unhappy to keep the unclean clothes in the same room where she keeps the pictures of her gods. She believes that it may bring bad luck to her and family. That is why, she washes the clothes every day and dries them up regularly in the open place.

Shyamoli is reluctant to allow Mrs. Dutta to dry the clothes in open. She cares very much about the status of the family in the alien land. Shyamoli says: "It's just not done, not in a nice neighborhood like this one. And being the only Indian family on the street, we have to be extra careful" (14). She cares much about the opinion of American neighbors than the cleanliness of the family. She wants to wash the cloth on Sundays after gathering the week's clothes of all. Mrs. Dutta feels embarrassed when Shyamoli brings laundry to the family room and openly displays the inner wears of all the family. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes:

Mrs. Dutta would bend intensely over her knitting, face tingling with shame, as her daughter-in-law nonchalantly shook out the wisps of lace, magenta and sea-green and black, that were her panties, laying them next to a stack of Sagar's briefs. And when, right in front of everyone, Shyamoli pulled out Mrs. Dutta's own crumpled, baggy bras from the clothes heap, she wished the ground would open up and swallow her, like the Sita of mythology. (14)

Mrs. Dutta is not at happy to see the display of her inner wears to the family members. She does not like the showing of her inners to others. Being a traditional Indian woman, she wants to hide them from the view of others. It is not seriously viewed in American context. To her shock, Shyamoli calls her husband Sagar to the washing by his name: "Can you do them today, Sagar? (Mrs. Dutta, who had never, through the forty-two years of her marriage, addressed Sagar's father by name, tried not to wince)" (15). She experiences the cultural difference in the lifestyle of people in America and India. She gets the identity crisis especially in the act of showing her inner wears to others and the manner of calling husband's name by the wife. She wants to write all these differences in her letter to her friend Roma in India. Her daughter-in-law's anger towards her makes her think about herself and other Indian wives who are dutiful and uncomplaining. She wants to write the same to her friend Mrs. Roma Basu: "*Women need to be strong, not react to every little thing like this. You and I, Roma, we had far worse to cry about, but we shed our tears invisibly. We were good wives and daughters-in-law, good mothers. Dutiful, uncomplaining. Never putting ourselves first*" (27).

In those days, the young women who have gone to the homes of their husbands, always place the interest of other family members at first and they suppress all their feelings and ready to act according to the wishes of the elders and their husbands. They never speak against their mother-in-laws. She remembers an incident in which she scorched a special kheer dessert. Her mother-in-law has shouted at her: "Didn't your mother teach you anything, you useless girl?" (27) As a punishment, she has not allowed her to go cinema with Mrs. Basu. Mrs. Dutta accepts the words of her mother-in-law with heavy heart but she has not spoken anything against her. It reflects the dutiful and uncomplaining nature of Indian wives in those days. On the contrary, now in California, her daughter-in-law becomes angry and indifferent for minor issues like the preparation of food, making the cloth line and speaking to the neighbors. All these changes in the alien environment have made her to think about her own identity. She struggles to retain her identity as a devoted, dutiful, traditional Indian mother-in-law in America. Even she could not digest the highhandedness of her daughter-in-law in the minor issues who often has indulged in quarrel with her husband and behaved indifferently towards her with stares and sighs. She is not allowed to interact with the neighbors as she has done in India. Her grandchildren have their own personal space and they retain their privacy. She could not wash her clothes on her own and dry them in the courtyard as she has done in India. Her preparation of food is not appreciated by the members of the family. Her son has been asked by his wife to do the household chores like washing and dishing in her presence. All these changes in the alien soil have made her to undergo the identity crisis. She writes a letter to her friend who is curious to know about her stinct in America. She writes:

I cannot answer your question about whether I am happy, for I am no longer sure I know what happiness is. All I know is that it isn't what I thought it to be. It isn't about being needed. It isn't about being with family either. It has something to do with love, I still think that, but in a different way than I believed earlier, a way I don't have the words to explain. Perhaps we can figure it out together, two old women drinking cha in your downstairs flat (for I do hope you will rent it to me on my return), while around us gossip falls—but lightly, like summer rain, for that is all we will allow it to be. If I'm lucky—and perhaps, in spite of all that has happened, I am—the happiness will be in the figuring out. (33)

In this letter of her, she has made it clear that she is not afraid of returning to India, her homeland and leaving the sophisticated America all due to the variations in the cultural practices. Though she is happy to lead her life along with her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren, she feels the barrenness in her heart caused by the enforcement of the alien culture on her own. She obviously reveals her longing for roots when she is ready to return to India. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni adeptly brings out the inner conflict of herself and her struggle to cope up with the cultural practices of the alien soil. It reveals obviously the identity crisis of her.

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