

**DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY, AN UNCOMPROMISING HUMAN
SYMPATHY PORTRAYED IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S,
THE UNKNOWN ERRORS OF OUR LIVES**

Ms.P.Savithri

Assistant Professor of English, Sri Meenakshi Government
Arts College for Women (Autonomous), Madurai



Abstract

South Asian writers derive a special attention among the diasporic community. Almost the writers made their homes or shifted to North America in the post 1965- which has been called as 'Immigrant Era'. These writers do not dissolve the mainstream narratives or literature whereas they offered a distinct in a way unique voice. Particularly Divakaruni- represents the shift from one culture to the other without compromising themselves or in a way they remained themselves.

Divakaruni's texts focus the female subjectivity and national identities. Their writing captures different aspects of the cultural encounter. Meena Alexander, in New York and Divakaruni from San Francisco reconstruct personal and national histories as a historical intervention and master narratives imposed upon them by the dominant/ popular culture. One could witness the conflict between the old and new country. The Diasporas projects the discontinuous / unavoidable bondage between India and America- the Indian national identity and Western Nation space- described in the diasporic writings.

The stories collected in the volume *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, are moving account of the dreams and despair of those who are settled in the corner of American subcontinent. The aforementioned work projects the inner conflict of characters, challenges in multiculturalism, dilemma of personal relationship, clash between native western values and challenges of acculturation.

South Asian writers derive a special attention among the diasporic community. Almost the writers made their homes or shifted to North America in the post 1965- which has been called as 'Immigrant Era'. These writers do not dissolve the mainstream narratives or literature whereas they offered a distinct in a way unique voice. Particularly Divakaruni- represents the shift from one culture to the other without compromising themselves or in a way they remained themselves.

Divakaruni's texts focus the female subjectivity and national identities. Their writing captures different aspects of the cultural encounter. Meena Alexander, in New York and Divakaruni from San Francisco reconstruct personal and national histories as a historical intervention and master narratives imposed upon them by the dominant/ popular culture. One could witness the conflict between the old and new country. The Diasporas projects the discontinuous / unavoidable bondage between India and America- the Indian national identity and Western Nation space- described in the diasporic writings.

The stories collected in the volume *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, are moving account of the dreams and despair of those who are settled in the corner of American subcontinent. Divakarui presents the three generations of Indian Bengali expatriates to America who came to America to escape political or economical difficulties of their native land, or to study or as Professionals "as part of the brain drain". The aforementioned work projects the inner conflict of characters, challenges in multiculturalism, dilemma of personal relationship, clash between native western values and challenges of acculturation.

The intensity of passions revealed in these stories exposes her concern for the drama of one's common human existence. In dealing with the experiences of immigration, she avoids the romantic

nostalgia of homeland but constructs the experiences that brings isolation and terrible mental agony in the life of those who have taken shelter in the land of adoption. The nine stories collected in this volume provide a fine synthesis of innovative narrative art and uncompromising human sympathy.

It critically analyses how the multi-cultural society influences the one's family, culture, and seduction of memory also represents the tales of journeys and returns, of error, of loss and recovery, all resound with the writer's unique understanding of the human spirit. And the women are striving to create new identities while gracefully incorporating the old.

Divakaruni admits that in unfamiliar cultural surroundings, women immigrants are the worst sufferer because they have to resist the gender bias and also the apathy of culture. Mrs. Dutta, an elderly widow from an Indian Bengali family visits America to seek comfort and consolation in the family of her son, settled in America. When she migrated to her son's house, even her habitual practices like her early morning rise she uses her old alarm clock which was condemned as old and obscure in America. As a young bride she was taught that "a good wife wakes before the rest of the household" (2). Soon she finds herself trapped by the restrictions. Sagar directs her,

Mother please don't get up so early in the morning. All that noise in the bathroom, it wakes us and Moli has such a long day at work...(4)

Though her son has been given an image of an obedient Indian boy is conscious of his mother's physical comfort, he simply ignores his mother's mental crisis. He tries to comfort his mother saying,

We want you to be comfortable, Ma. To rest That's why we brought you to America.(3).

A letter from Mrs. Basu kindled her lost homeland memories. Her concluding interrogation in the letter makes her feel dejected. She reflects how American life is intolerable and the custom like children's closing of doors against their parents, hurts her moral consciousness. Even Mrs. Dutta and her daughter in law stands like polaric oppositions. This gap can be defined in terms of "rejection" and "acceptance". Shyamli modifies her habits because in her immigration she seeks the possibilities of assimilation. On the whole this story focuses on the emotional crisis of Mrs. Dutta and the fragmented consciousness of the immigrants.

The second story "*The Intelligence of Wild Things*", Divakaruni retains the emotional intensity born out of the quest for personal relationship along with the desperate realization that the geographical distance creates unsurpassable barriers which alienates himself from native cultural heritage. Divakaruni makes efforts to establish balance past and present, native and alien, pragmatism and human values and the temporal and the timeless. The narrator of the story is a young married lady who tries to recall her past through the story of her brother Tarun who was migrated from India and is now seeking roots in Vermont in U.S. The geographical distance alienates him from cultural heritage. The sympathy for his native soil, realization of commitment to ailing mother, longing for adventurous childhood, the sensibility for Indian moral values has become one of the dead past. This indifference to the root culture and the adaptation in the new one creates a sense of agony and disappointment in the life of the narrator.

I hated this change in myself, this shrinking of sensibility, this failure of intelligence. But I didn't know what to do about it. Did anyone else suffer from such a disease? (43)

Divakaruni focuses on the dilemmas of personal relationship in diverse cultural surroundings. When Tarun's sister visited him she understood her efforts to make him understand the deep agonies of

her dying mother in India has gone waste. And she found her brother's secret relationship with a white girl which she could accept as it is against her native Bengali culture.

The sanctity of personal relationship has become the central motif in the story "The Lives of Strangers". The story is about a pilgrim party in the from Kolkata to the Holy Cave of Amarnath which was organized by the chief narrator Leela. Through Leela's narration Divakaruni records the sensation and excitement of those pilgrims. Leela shares the agony of Mrs.Das whose husband died just two years after her marriage. In America after this tragedy, she was cursed as "an unlucky star" and was forced to take up a job. She left India in the hope of maintaining her position as a researcher in America. In America, she develops her relationship with Dexter another programmer which ended up with her suicide attempt. Dexter complains her saying "You're like one of those spring creatures that live at the bottom of the ocean"(60).With such experiences Divakaruni develops the aesthetics of loss and gain. It emancipated a kind of loneliness and insecurity which made her to return India where her aunt Seema preaches her of "Red India" and "Spiritual India". Leela's memory dwindles between past and present. The whole story portrays the emotional longing of Indian Immigrants.

The story "Love of a Good Man" specifically exposes how the geographical shift creates unsurpassable barriers in personal life. Dilip's mother asks why he had been fascinated to America by visions of gleaming glass and steel. However she looks at her father of the past and his present relationship with his son, she has a vague vision of confrontation, accusation and tears from her father. This story evidently constitutes the emotional crisis.

The fifth story "What A Body Knows" is a pathetic and psychological account of the sensation of a young married lady who desperately tries to come out of the trauma of immigration. The reconstruction of feminine psyche in context of the pregnancy and childbirth.

The story "Forgotten Children" where a young girl who faced trauma of negligence of parents. Her family was constructed with insecurity, uncertainty, lack of belongingness. She develops hostility for the father because he used to change jobs and places without caring the expectations of his children. Divakaruni justifies that relationship have no absolute significance but their commitments change according to the situation.

The story "*The Blooming of Cacti*" shares a sensitive Indian Mira who plans to visit California nurtures the dreams of fanciful scenery. She starts viewing her new geographical space will redefine her own life conditions. She pours out her immigrant dilemma.

I felt myself growing into all the words my sister- in -law had shouted as I packed my things in her Dallas name two days ago. Selfish yes. Ungrateful yes. Following only my own pleasure, I would be all that.(168).

In spite of emotional longing for homeland, Mira was fascinated by the lifestyle of U.S. and she was attracted by Ajith whose manners are typically American. Both of them share distinct sensibilities, Mira accepts sexual perversion as a method of compensation for the personal loss just as she adopted her immigration to California as a compensation of her loneliness. The complexity of emotions governing the immigrant's life and sensibility is the central motif of the story.

The agony of immigration in this short story collection depends on the level of education and the motifs behind immigration. Neither the dislocation nor can the assimilation be total. Most of the women protagonists of *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* are the victim of these kinds of cultural shocks. According to Christine Gomez,

Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past, often symbolized by ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the differences between oneself and new unfriendly surroundings as assumption of moral

and cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced one of the environment. The expatriate build a cocoon around himself/herself or refuse from cultural dilemma and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country.(242).

Divakaruni records that the landscape, geographical locations and cultural dynamics play a significant role in modifying the commitments of relationship.

Sometimes the immigrants are able to absorb the best of both native and the foreign culture. The diasporic people who originate from Asiabut live in Western countries provide an interesting example for the new hybrid culture. The central characters include Mrs.Dutta, Tarun, Leela, Monisha, Mira and Ruchira represents the duality of cultures, the East and West. The East- West conflict gives way to the conflict between the male rational approach in facing life's realities and the female view based on faith and sentiments. Against this backdrop the writer presents an unique love- hate relationship with America. The immigration implies not only a desire for social and cultural conglomeration but also a desire on the part of the immigrant for transformation into a new personae. The immigration and transformation becomes the key factors in constituting the American experience. One could witness from the characters that are caught between two worlds, two cultures, two identities, hoping that the hoping ends would meet. Homi Bhaba in *The Location of Culture* argues that that migrant subjects are constituted by cultural indeterminacy and hybridity which reject fixed identity. On the whole Divakaruni's stories lay bare a powerful collage of experiences of the "dislocated" and resettled intertwining the social and personal, and fashioning to show how he transplanted live in the new land. The dislocation is an inescapable physical and geographical reality. This leads to an envisioning of the diasporic culture in the light of new sensibilities.

References

1. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Unkown Errors of Our Lives*.New York: Double Day, 2001.Print.
2. Agarwal, Beena. "Bicultural Sensibility: A Motif in Divakaruni's *The Unkown Errors of Our Lives*".English Literature: Voices of Indian Diaspora. Delhi: Atlantic Publishers,2009.Print
3. Babha, Homi. Ed. *Nation and Narrative*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
4. Christine Gomez. "The On- Going Quest of Bharati Mukerjee from Expatriation toImmigration" in R.K.Dhawan,ed. *Indian Women Novelists*, Vol.3 (Delhi: Prestige, 1995), p.72.