



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter": Understanding the Indian Diaspora Women in America.

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Abstract

This paper is a study of a first generation diaspora woman character named Mrs. Prameela Dutta, who leaves her native land Calcutta, India and immigrates to USA, to be with her son Sagar and his family. Though the diaspora subject Mrs. Dutta looks forward to a life with her son and his family in the US, once in the United States of America, she finds that she is ill-prepared for life there and consequently undergoes many trials and tribulations. The immigrant character displays the diaspora sensibilities of feeling alienated, of experiencing a sense of loss, of possessing a feeling of being displaced apart from being overcome by a sense of nostalgia. However, though she yearns for her lost home in India, yet we find that she evolves and changes and learns to accept life in the foreign land, America.

Keywords: alien, home, diaspora, uprooted, sense of loss, memory, acculturate and displaced.

1. Introduction

"Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" is a story by the Indian American author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This paper seeks to focus on Divakaruni's story, "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" which is in fact, the first in her collection of stories, titled *The Unknown Errors of our Lives*. The story revolves around a sixty six year old first generation immigrant Mrs. Prameela Dutta, who immigrates to America to live with her son, Sagar and his family. Through this story, the diaspora fiction writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, highlights the many issues that confront the immigrant character, Mrs. Dutta, as she goes and lives in an alien place, America. Beena Agarwal talks about Divakaruni's representation of the diaspora experience through the following words: "In dealing with the experiences of immigration, she ... constructs the experiences that brings isolation and terrible mental agony in the life of those who have taken shelter in the land of adoption" (Agarwal 2016). Hence, in the backdrop of the delineation of the woman

diaspora experience as exemplified through the character of Mrs. Dutta in this story, our paper focuses on this immigrant experience of the first generation female diaspora subject.

2. Methodology

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section of the paper is a study of how the first generation immigrant women are generally portrayed in diaspora literature. The second section focuses on how the author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays the first generation immigrant character, Mrs. Dutta and dwells on the numerous issues that Mrs. Dutta as a first generation diaspora faces in America. The third and concluding section of the paper seeks to unravel as to whether the first generation immigrant character Mrs. Dutta evolves and accepts life in America or whether she continues to exhibit diaspora sensibilities and remains attached to her home country, India.

3.1 Analysis and discussion

In the first section, at the very outset, it is important to understand the meaning of the term first generation immigrant. In immigrant or diaspora literature, the word first generation immigrant means the people who immigrate to a new land i.e., the hostland from their country of birth i.e., their homeland. The women in diaspora literature, are generally depicted as characters who go to the United States of America to be with their husbands, to live with their children, to live with their relatives, to pursue their studies, to work, to earn higher wages, to seek better opportunities and to seek a better life for themselves.

In immigrant literature, we often notice that the diaspora women tend to carry with themselves the baggage of their life led in India. Suresh Chandra Dubey captures this idea of the immigrant women when he avers: "Migration does not mean the mere physical movement of people. Migrants carry with them a socio cultural baggage, which among other things consists of predefined social identity, a set of religious beliefs and practices, a frame work of norms and values governing family and kinship organization, and food habits and language" (Upadhyay 2014). The above comment makes it amply clear that the first generation immigrant women carry with themselves the beliefs, the ideals, the lifestyle, the religion, the dress, the food and the language of the original land or the country of birth to the adopted land i.e., America.

It is important to bear in mind that food forms an important element in the life of the diaspora women as depicted in the diaspora literature. Such an importance on food bestowed by the immigrant women is best surmised by Khondker who mentions that: "For the diasporic community, food assumes a new meaning, a symbol, a vehicle for reproducing culture" (Rai and Reeves 2009). The diaspora women through the elaborate method of preparing and cooking Indian food sustains their memories of and links with the home country. It is through the food and the food habits which they preserve and follow so dearly and wholeheartedly, that the immigrants try to create a familiar picture of their original land, India, in the alien surroundings of America.

In diaspora literature, another important feature in the lives of the diaspora women is their religion. The women often appear to be strongly attached to the religious traditions, religious beliefs and practices of their homeland. The women are very particular about preserving the religious beliefs and practices of their homeland in their adopted land and strive hard to

continue their practices in the alien surroundings. Such beliefs and practices, it is observed, helps them to remain connected with their homeland and not feel uprooted even though they live away from their country of birth. Religion acts as a refuge, providing succour to the unsettled and displaced lives of the first generation women immigrants.

It is imperative to note that in diaspora literature, language is an issue which many first generation immigrants have to confront with, as a diaspora subject. The first generation diaspora women tend to continue to speak and use their own native language even after they immigrate to USA. Often, the first generation immigrant women find speaking and communicating in English very difficult. In diaspora literature, the first generation diaspora women also suffer difficulties because they are not familiar with the American accent and the American way of pronouncing words. Under such circumstances, the first generation diaspora subjects feel inhibited in communicating freely which accentuates their feeling of being displaced. As such, they feel out of place and experience a sense of being uprooted from their original homeland.

Another cultural marker through which diaspora literature represents the immigrant women is through their dress. In diaspora literature, the first generation immigrant women are depicted as being very conservative when it comes to matters of wearing clothes in America. In such works, the women characters are seen as wearing sarees and other traditional Indian clothes to uphold the traditions and culture of their country of birth.

The idea of home it is seen, remains paramount in the minds of the diaspora women in immigrant literature. For the first generation diaspora women, we note that home signifies the culture, the way of life, their practices, their values and customs which they are so accustomed to in their country of birth before coming to their land of adoption, America. Gloria Anzaldua tells us that: "... in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (Rivkin and Ryan 2008). The above mentioned few words drive home the point that the first generation women immigrants carry the idea of the home along with them wherever they go as it becomes an integral part of their lives.

In diaspora literature, the first generation immigrant women, it is observed, become nostalgic about the life in India, their native land. In the words of P. Susheela Sriram, "Nostalgia is often the

preoccupation ... as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures” (Dhawan 2013). The nostalgia, we note, binds them to their life in their homeland. Diaspora literature points to the fact that the first generation female diaspora subject often remembers the familiar sights and sounds of the country of their birth and yearns for their homeland. What is to be noted is that in such a situation, the first generation immigrant women experience a sense of loss.

In diaspora literature, it is clearly seen that the first generation diaspora women often transport themselves to their past lives in India. According to Pramod K. Nayar, “Postcolonial diasporic literature can be read ... as presenting an analepsis-looking backward at the past-and prolepsis, facing forward to/at the future” (Nayar 2008). The first generation diaspora women, it is seen often recall the past and compare the present with it. It is to be noted that the women find it difficult to accept the ways and norms they encounter in the US and often feel trapped in America, their adopted land. In such situations, these first generation diaspora women recollect their past lives in their country of origin to seek comfort and solace from such recollections.

Diaspora literature depicts that once in America, the Indian diaspora women often confront a clash of Indian and western values. This, we note, causes a bicultural crisis in their lives. They are caught between two cultures, i.e., the culture of the native country India and the culture of the host country America. The first generation immigrant women, it appears find it difficult to adjust to the western values that they encounter in America. These values and ideals, we can say, appear to be in sharp contrast to the values and ideals that they grew up with in their home country.

Diaspora literature shows that the Indian diaspora woman face many challenges as far as the process of acculturation is concerned in America. They like to continue to follow their old traditions and customs which are considered outdated and are not considered appropriate with what is generally followed in America. Thus owing to such a strict adherence to the traditional Indian values, ideas and practices, these immigrant women find it difficult to acculturate and adopt the American way of life.

3.2 Analysis and discussion

The second section of this paper makes an endeavour to explore the way that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represents her first generation diaspora subject Mrs. Dutta in her story, “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter”. Mrs. Dutta, the immigrant, is primarily

represented as a first generation diaspora subject within the precincts of the four walls of her son Sagar’s house in Sunnyvale, California, USA.

At the very outset what strikes us is that, before she moves to the US, Mrs. Dutta as a first generation immigrant, looks forward to her life in America. Though the speaker informs us that “... the night before she had awakened weeping”, yet she prepares herself by giving away all her belongings (Divakaruni 2001). For Mrs. Dutta says: “Here, Didi, you take this cutwork bedspread. Mashima, for a long time I meant for you to have these Corning Ware dishes ... And Boudi, this tape recorder that Sagar sent a year back is for you ... I can always tell Sagar to buy me another one when I get there” (Divakaruni 2001). In fact, Mrs. Dutta, also sold off her house of forty-five years in Calcutta and moved to California to her son’s home.

Once in America, we find that Mrs. Dutta, tries to create a home for herself. She sets up the home according to her own wishes. Divakaruni paints Mrs. Dutta as she goes about arranging the things in the kitchen: “She pours the half-drunk glasses of milk down the sink, though Shyamoli has told her to save them in the refrigerator... She washes the breakfast dishes by hand instead of letting them wait inside the dishwasher till night, breeding germs” (Divakaruni 2001). Through such a behaviour it becomes amply clear that Mrs. Dutta is “never able to give up her Indianness” (Sharma 2016). Even in America, she sticks to the customs and the way of life of her home in India.

Mrs. Dutta, we observe, takes care of the food of the family in America. Food is an important way through which she connects with her homeland. For Divakaruni comments on what the protagonist Mrs. Dutta thinks about the food that she cooks in the following way: “*At least the family’s eating well since I arrived, she writes in her mind, proper Indian food, rutis that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee- ...*” (Divakaruni 2001). It is interesting to note that she uses the traditional ingredients and cooks it in a traditional way which gives her a sense of belonging and helps her to recreate the past life in her adopted land.

As far as religion is concerned, Divakaruni portrays her first generation immigrant Mrs. Prameela Dutta, as a devout woman who says her prayers regularly. Divakaruni portrays her as a diaspora subject who remains deeply attached to the religious customs and practices of the land of her birth. Divakaruni

announces that: “Mrs. Dutta repeats the 108 holy names of God. “*Om Keshavaya Namah, Om Narayanaya Namah, Om Madhavaya Namah*” (Divakaruni 2001). Clearly, Mrs. Dutta is depicted as a first generation immigrant woman who assiduously adheres to the religious norms and customs of the country of origin.

Divakaruni portrays her first generation immigrant character through another cultural marker and that is her dress. In the story we read about her clothes through these words: “So she keeps an eye on the menacing advance of the clouds as she hangs up her blouse ... As she drapes her sari along the redwood fence that separates her son’s property from the neighbor’s ...” (Divakaruni 2001). Through such details of her clothes it appears that she is particular about wearing the traditional Indian saree, though wearing such traditional clothes in an alien country like America is likely to seem quite odd to the people of the host country.

Language, is another significant marker through which the first generation diaspora character Mrs. Dutta, is represented in the story, “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter”. Mrs. Dutta does not understand English and finds it difficult to speak in English. The speaker highlights this fact through these words: “Mrinalini ... turns back to a show filled with jokes that Mrs. Dutta does not understand” (Divakaruni 2001). Such an inability, we note, heightens her sense of displacement and her feeling of being uprooted from her homeland.

In the story, “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” we find that Mrs. Dutta gets nostalgic about her life in Calcutta. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives us an account of Mrs. Dutta’s nostalgic feelings through the following words: “As the potatoes turn golden-brown, she permits herself a moment of nostalgia for her Calcutta kitchen- the new gas stove bought with the birthday money Sagar sent, the scoured brass pots stacked by the meat safe, the window with the lotus-pattern grille through which she could look down on children playing cricket ...” (Divakaruni 2001). This sense of nostalgia transports her to a past and helps her find happiness in an alien surrounding and allows her to connect with her native country, India.

As a diaspora subject, she feels a sense of loss in America. The sense of loss can be related to the fact that she leaves her homeland and comes and lives with her son in America. She misses the familiar sights and sounds of her land, Calcutta. Divakaruni brings to light Mrs. Dutta’s sense of loss through the following words: “Calcutta pushes itself into her mind again, Calcutta

with its narrow, blackened flats where families of six and eight and ten squeeze themselves into two tiny rooms, and her heart fills with a sense of loss ...” (Divakaruni 2001).

The past life when her son was a young boy haunts her mind. The narrator mentions such a feeling through the following words: “... Sagar’s face seems to Mrs. Dutta still that of the boy she used to send off to primary school with his metal tiffin box. She remembers how he crawled into her bed on stormy monsoon nights, how when he was ill no one else could make him drink his barley water” (Divakaruni 2001). Such memories of her son’s childhood in the native country provide a powerful connection with the homeland. These images remain vividly etched in her heart and mind, providing her an escape from the disturbed and unhappy existence in America.

In the story, “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter”, it is to be noted that, Mrs. Dutta experiences a generational conflict. One such instance is when her grandchildren do not pay much heed to the anecdotes about her past life. Again, Divakaruni points out that: “When she first arrived in Sagar’s home, Mrs. Dutta wanted to go over and meet her next-door neighbors, maybe take them some of her special rose-water rasogollahs... But Shyamoli said she shouldn’t. Such things were not the custom in California ...” (Divakaruni 2001). To such sentiments expressed by Shyamoli, Divakaruni comments in the following way: “People were people, whether in India or America, and everyone appreciated a friendly face. When Shyamoli was as old as Mrs. Dutta, she would know that too” (Divakaruni 2001). It is apparent that Mrs. Dutta finds getting acclimatized to the mores of the American society perplexing and experiences a generational conflict with her daughter-in-law, Shyamoli and her grand children Pradip and Mrinalini.

Mrs. Dutta is painted as an immigrant character who is caught between two cultures. Mrs. Dutta, hears her daughter-in-law tell her son Sagar what their neighbour told her. Shyamoli says that: “I’d like to see how calm *you’d* be if she came up to you and said, ‘Kindly tell the old lady not to hang her clothes over the fence into my yard.’ She said it twice, like I didn’t understand English, like I was an idiot. All these years I’ve been so careful not to give these Americans a chance to say something like this, and now-” (Divakaruni 2001). To such harsh comments from her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Dutta could not respond. In fact, in the short story, the speaker mentions that: “In the passage Mrs. Dutta shrinks against the wall. She wants

to move away, to not hear anything else, but her feet are formed of cement, impossible to lift, and Shyamoli's words pour into her ears like smoking oil" (Divakaruni 2001). We understand that Mrs. Dutta's world is completely shattered and she gets shocked and overwhelmed by such a situation in her life. She is caught between the pulls of two cultures i.e., the native culture and the culture of the adopted land. Gloria Anzaldúa best captures this situation when she comments about the diaspora woman through the following words. She says: "Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (Rivkin and Ryan 2008).

In the story we find that, Mrs. Dutta is projected as a diaspora character who thinks of and longs to return to her homeland. In her letter to her friend Roma, Mrs. Dutta writes: "*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) ...*" (Divakaruni 2001).

3.3 Analysis and discussion

Against the backdrop of the discussions of the two foregoing sections, this third and concluding section seeks to understand as to whether the diaspora character, Mrs. Dutta still remains a part of her native homeland or whether she tries to evolve, transform and adapt to the American way of life.

As far as her habits or strict adherence to the values and customs of her original land are concerned, she realises that she is in America in her son's house and does not need to get up early in the morning unlike what she was used to doing in India her homeland before she immigrated to the US. Divakaruni brings to light this habit of hers for she comments: "Mrs. Dutta knows, of course, that this turmoil is her own fault. She should just not set the alarm. There is no need for her to get up early in Sunnyvale, in her son's house" (Divakaruni 2001). Thus, though Mrs. Dutta nurtures a thought of returning to her homeland, yet she yields and tries to adjust and adapt to an American way of life.

As far as dress is concerned, we note that the immigrant Mrs. Dutta, notices American clothes and thinks about the skirt that her daughter-in-law Shyamoli wears. The writer points out: "With her legs crossed so elegantly under the shimmery blue skirt she has changed into after work, and her unusually fair skin, she could pass for an American, thinks Mrs. Dutta

..." (Divakaruni 2001). While we notice a certain degree of ambivalence on this issue of dress on the part of Mrs. Dutta, we can nonetheless say that the story seems to indicate that Mrs. Dutta begins to tolerate and even appreciate and admire western outfits.

Mrs. Dutta is depicted as an immigrant character who starts compromising with the cultural habits she carries from her original land, India. The pain of leaving her own home and having to adjust in an alien land among alien surroundings is clearly visible as when her son Sagar, tells her not to wake up early in the morning and disturb the other members of the household. The narrator opines: "And she, turning a little so he shouldn't see her foolish eyes filling with tears as though she were a teenage bride again and not a woman well over sixty, nods her head, *yes, yes*" (Divakaruni 2001). Here, we notice that though she feels hurt that she is criticised for the cultural custom that she carries from her homeland she begins to accept the fact that she is now in America and has to follow American norms, American customs and practices. She, we note, acquiesces and makes an effort to adapt to the American way of life.

Mrs. Dutta, the immigrant character appears to try to adopt the western practice of washing clothes in the washing machine. The author declares about her intentions through these words: "... after a while she ... whispered to Sagar that she wanted him to teach her how to run the washer and dryer" (Divakaruni 2001). Such an inclination points to the fact that Mrs. Dutta attempts to adapt to a western pattern of life.

In a mind-letter to her friend in Calcutta, Mrs. Roma Basu, Mrs. Dutta shares her experiences of learning to adapt to the American lifestyle. This proves that she gains a positive attitude towards adapting to the American way of life. In fact, Mrs. Dutta feels exalted about adapting to the American way of life. Divakaruni informs us that: "In her mind she writes to Mrs. Basu, *I'm fitting in so well here, you'd never guess I came only two months back. I've found new ways of doing things, of solving problems creatively. You would be most proud if you saw me* (Divakaruni 2001).

Mrs. Dutta is a diaspora woman who however writes to her friend about the sense of hope that she sustains in her heart for she writes: "If I'm lucky- and perhaps, in spite of all that has happened, I am- the happiness will be in the figuring out" (Divakaruni 2001). Such feelings depict that the diaspora character has not lost her desire nor her hope of finding happiness in

the midst of alien surroundings in a strange land.

In a letter to her friend Mrs. Basu, the immigrant character Mrs. Dutta, talks about adjusting to life in America. “*Today I’m cooking one of Sagar’s favorite dishes, alu-dum... It gives me such pleasure to see my family gathered around the table, eating my food. The children are still a little shy of me, but I am hopeful that we’ll soon be friends*” (Divakaruni 2001).

Mrs. Dutta appears to come to terms with life in America. She seems to be happy and announces to her friend that she is adjusting to life in America. In her mind-letter to her friend, Mrs. Basu, the first generation immigrant character proclaims that: “*... I know you will be pleased to hear how happy I am in America. There is much here that needs getting used to, but we are no strangers to adjusting, we old women*” (Divakaruni 2001).

However, it is imperative to note that, despite trying hard to adjust and adapt to an American way of life, she finds it hard to live in America. In her letter to Mrs. Basu the immigrant character Mrs. Dutta, confides: “*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 words to explain” (Divakaruni 2001).

4. Conclusion

Nonetheless, despite such an ambivalent feeling, we should bear in mind what Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni avers so strongly about the diaspora subject, Mrs. Dutta. Divakaruni says: “Pausing to read over what she has written, Mrs. Dutta is surprised to discover this: Now that she no longer cares whether tears blotch her letter, she feels no need to weep” (Divakaruni 2001). These words highlight the fact that the first generation immigrant character Mrs. Dutta, accepts her life in America. She, we can say, comes to terms with her life in America. In fact, we can say that, she takes a less sentimental view of things, does not expect anything from her son or his family and becomes more realistic in her approach to life. Despite her hardships and her poignant sufferings, she emerges as a character, who illustrates a gradual transformation of a woman who leads a marginalised existence in the hostland, America, to a diaspora character who learns to accept life in the hostland and move on.

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