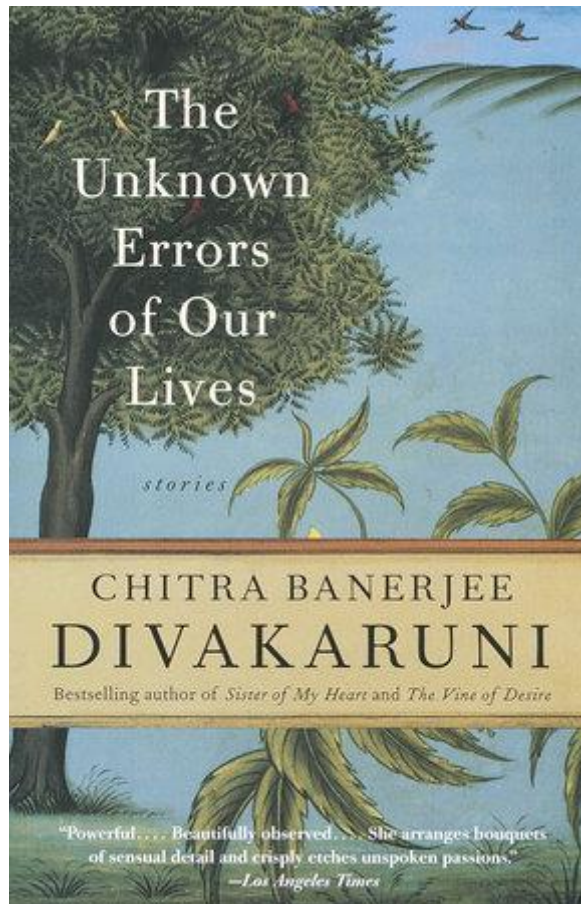


**Problem of Acculturation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
*Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter***

Mrs. G. Rajeswari

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to the young Indian group of writers that appeared on the literary panorama of Indian diasporic writing. She is a distinct and well established South Asian writer with a post-colonial diasporic identity after Salman Rushdie. She has been accepted as an Asian American writer as she has spent more time outside India than in it. Living with a hybrid identity and writing partially autobiographical works, she has focused on the issues of immigrants especially Indian immigrants to America which the other diasporic writers have not dealt with in detail in their works. Her venture into serious poetry writing began after her grandfather's death in her ancestral village in

India. She told Roxanne Farmanfarmaian in *Publishers Weekly*, “Poetry was closest to my psyche. Poetry focuses on the moment, on the image, and relies on image to express meaning. That was very important to me, that kind of crystallization, that kind of intensity in a small space”. She is an insatiable writer and her works have been published in leading literary magazines the Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker. Her works have been translated into many European languages like Dutch, Hebrew, Portuguese, Danish and German. And her literary works include novels, short story collections and poems.

Focus of This Paper

The paper titled “Cross-cultural Conflicts in Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to explore cross-cultural conflicts of the Indian immigrants’ dependents especially their parents in America. Many articles are available on the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and most of them probe into Diasporic issues like alienation, identity crisis, rootlessness, and so on. But very little is said about the clash between Indian and American cultures that the Indian immigrants face in America. It is one of the prominent motifs of Divakaruni’s writings. The purpose of this paper is to study the short story *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter* to establish the fact that cultural conflict is one of the most pre dominant themes of Diasporic literature and that it has yet not been fully explored with regard to Divakaruni’s works. By culture we mean the patterns of thought and behaviour of people. Culture includes values, beliefs, rules of conduct, and patterns of social, political and economic organization. These are passed on from one generation to the next by formal as well as informal processes. Culture consists of the ways in which we think and act as members of a society.

Cross-cultural Conflict

Cross-cultural conflict is defined as the clash between two cultures. Culture is the main identity of human life. With the advent of science and technology the world has shrunk to become a global village resulting in a lot of migration. Though there are many reasons for people to migrate from their homeland, material prosperity is considered to be the foremost. To attain this one has to make a lot of compromises nay sacrifices. Yet material comfort alone does not decide a person’s happiness. As long as one is gifted to live in their home land one may not value or follow his culture. But the moment he keeps his feet on a foreign soil he wakes up to the greatness of his culture and he deems himself to be the ambassador of his country and culture and does every possible thing to protect and preserve his culture in the alien land and this results in a clash- clash between home culture and host culture. These immigrants are neither able to follow their home culture in the host land nor the host culture and as a

result their identity is shattered. Those who are able to make up and compromise with this get on well with the Western ways. This happens in rare cases. Hence this is a common phenomenon found in the lives of all immigrants. The nostalgia one feels for his country's culture and tradition does not allow him to accept the culture of the host land. This conflict is the main thing in the first generation immigrants. This is brilliantly portrayed in the works of the Diaspora writers. The same issue forms the core of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter* and this paper tries to trace this aspect of the diasporic issue in this short story.

Diasporic Issues

The diasporic issues presented in the works of Indian Diaspora writers are the outcome of either their own personal experiences or that of their friends' or acquaintances'. These stories are the tales of their own lives. Hence they have a lot of autobiographical bearings. The narrative of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is no exception to it. As an Indian migrant she has experienced all that that an immigrant from the east has to face with in the west. All these personal experiences of the author are transformed into artistic presentations in her mind which like a catalyst moulds them into excellent literary productions.

Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter

The first story taken for discussion is *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter* taken from the collection of short stories titled *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* deftly deals with the problem of acculturation in which a widow discovers that her old-fashioned ways are an embarrassment to her daughter -in -law. About this collection of short stories Somdatta Mandal says:

The female protagonists of eight of the nine stories in Divakaruni's sensuously evocative collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (22001) are caught between the beliefs and traditions of their Indian heritage and those of their, or their children's, new homeland, the United States. ..The diverse range of the stories of this volume is noteworthy. Most of them depict life in East and West perceptively.

Mrs. Gupta

The protagonist of the story is old Mrs. Gupta. She lives in one of the posh areas of Calcutta's suburban. Her son Sagar lives in America with his wife Shyamoli and children. Mrs. Gupta carefully resists her son's entreaties to come to America and live them. But a sudden illness makes her decide to go to America to live with her son's family. Her relatives appreciated her saying "Everyone knows

a wife's place is with her husband, and a widow's with her son." Before she leaves, she decides to sell her house. She disposes of all house hold things to relatives and friends. But when it comes to selling her flat, she is advised against it by her close friend Roma because Mrs. Dutta might need it in case she wants to come back to India. At this Mrs. Dutta is hurt and tells her friend, ". . . you think I'm such an old witch that my Sagar and myShyamoli will be unable to live with me?" (UEL-20).

Mrs. Dutta managed to sell her house and goes to America. This is the main background against which the issue of cultural conflict is raised. Mrs. Dutta is an early riser. The habit of getting up early in the morning was taught by her mother- in – law when Mrs Dutta was a bride of just seventeen. She finds it difficult to break her mother- in-law's words that good wife wakes before the rest of the household. She fondly remembers the days when she came as a young bridegroom to Sagar's father's family:

How hard it was then to pull her unwilling body away from her husband's sleep-warm clasp, Sagar's father whom she had just learned to love. To stumble to the kitchen that smelled of stale garam masala and light the coal unoon so she could make morning tea for them all- her parents-in-law, her husband, his two younger brothers, the widow aunt who lived with them. (UEL-2)

Habits Die Hardly!

Habits die hardly. Whether it is Calcutta's suburban or America's Sunnyvale Mrs Dutta is not able to rest in her bed beyond 5:00 A.M... But here in her son's Sunnyvale apartment, it is considered to be a big disturbance. Her daughter-in law is working woman. After a day of hard work she comes home only in the night and she needs to sleep sufficiently to take up the next day's assignment. Mrs. Dutta's waking up in the morning and bathing and washing- this hullabaloo will disturb the sleeping Shyamoli. So her son tells her not to get up get up early, "Mother, please, doesn't get up so early in the morning. All that noise in the bathroom, it wakes up, and Molli has such a long day at work..." (UEL-3) Unable to perform her morning routine Mrs. Dutta lies in her bed chanting the 108 holy names of Lord Narayana until the sound of the stirring household reaches her ears.

The East and the West

The East and the West are in clash here. If we substitute the term east with expressions like old, traditional or culture and West with modern, young, then the clash here is between tradition and modernity, old and new, home land and host land. Both the East and the West have different attitudes

towards even simple things like this. Washing clothes has been a problem for Mrs. Dutta ever since she arrived in California. When she asked her son Sagar to put up a clothesline for her in the backyard, she was told that such things could not be done in a nice neighborhood like theirs and she was asked to put her dirty clothes in the hamper which Shyamoli had put in her room. Shyamoli even told that she would wash her clothes along with everyone else's. But Mrs. Dutta knew that she should not store unclean clothes in the same room where she kept the pictures of her gods. She believed that it brought bad luck.

What embarrassed Mrs. Dutta more was when Shyamoli brought the laundry into the family room to fold. She could not bear the sight of her daughter-in-law taking out her panties and lay them next to a stack of Sagar's briefs. When Shyamoli pulled out Mrs. Dutta's own crumpled, baggy bras from the clothes heap, she felt so ashamed that she wished the ground would open up and swallow her like the Sita of Mythology. On another occasion when her daughter-in-law asked her son to dry the clothes, Mrs. Dutta could not keep quite. She rushed forward and said, "No no no, clothes and all is no work for the man of the house. I'll do it." The thought of her son's hands searching through the basket and lifting up his wife's and her own- underclothes filled her with horror. But her Americanized daughter-in-law protested saying:

"Mother! This is why Indian men are so useless around the house. Here in America we don't believe in men's work and women's work. Don't I work outside all day, just like Sagar? How'll I manage if he doesn't help me at home?"

"I'll help you instead," Mrs. Dutta ventured.

"You don't understand, do you, Mother?" Shyamoli said with a shaky smile. Then she went into the study. (UEL- 15)

Mrs. Dutta received her first shock as soon as she arrived in Sagar's home. She wanted to go over and meet her next-door neighbor and take them some of her special rose-water rasogollahs as she had often done with Mrs. Basu, in Calcutta. But Shyamoli said that she shouldn't. Such things were not the custom in California, she explained earnestly. One shouldn't drop in on people without calling ahead. There everyone was busy; they didn't sit around chatting, drinking endless cups of sugar tea. Why, they might even say something unpleasant to her. Because Americans don't like neighbours to invade their privacy. This shocked her to a great extent. But still she thought that people are people, whether in India or America which Shyamoli would know when she was as old as Mrs. Dutta.

Annoying American Life Style!

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American life style is quite annoying to Mrs. Dutta. One day she goes to the backyard to collect her saree which she has dried up over the fence. It was a sunny day. But she could not see any one outside. She says that one might stare out the window for hours and not see one living soul. Her mind immediately starts comparing the place with her Calcutta:

No vegetable vendors with wicker baskets balanced on their heads, no knife-sharpeners calling *scissors-knives-choppers, scissors-knives-choppers* to bring the children running. No *dehati* women with tattoos on their arms to sell you cookware in exchange for your old silk saris. Why, even the animals that frequented Ghoshpara Lane had personality. Stray dogs that knew to line up outside the kitchen door just when leftovers were likely to be thrown out, the goat who maneuvered its head through the garden grille hoping to get at her dahlias, cows who planted themselves majestically in the center of the road ignoring honking drivers. And right across the street was Mrs. Basu's two-story house, which Mrs. Dutta knew as well as her own. How many times had she walked up the stairs to that airy room painted sea-green and filled with plants where her friend would be waiting for her.

What took you so long today, Pramela? Your tea is cold already.

Wait till you hear what happened, Roma. Then you won't scold me for being late...
(UEL-20)

No Nostalgia Anymore!

Yet she thinks that she should not indulge in nostalgia any more but accept her American life as it is. Because she knows that 'every single relative would give an arm and a leg to be in your place'. As she gathers up the petticoats and blouses, she looked in the next yard. There are two wooden chairs under a tree. She wonders, "What is the point of having such a big yard if no one is going to sit in it?" Immediately Calcutta pushes itself into her mind, 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 which she knows to be illogical. She feels that in America all the rules are upside down. Her mind feels muddy, like a pond in which too many water buffaloes have been wading.

One day when she was about to turn away, out of the corner of her eye Mrs. Dutta notices a movement. At one of the windows a woman is standing. She is smoking a cigarette elegantly from her fingers. Mrs Dutta is so happy to see another human being in the middle of her solitary day that she forgets how much she disapproves of smoking, especially in women. She lifts her hand in the

gesture she has seen her grandchildren use to wave an eager hello. But the woman stared back at Mrs. Dutta. She does not wave back or smile. Perhaps she is not well? Mrs Dutta feels sorry for her, alone in her illness in a silent house with only cigarettes for solace, and she wishes the etiquette of America had not prevented her from walking over with a word of cheer and a bowl of her fresh-cooked alu dum.

Showing Affection in the Public

Displaying marital affection in front of others is very much unknown in Indian soil. But that is something quite common with the Americans and also the American Indians. Once when Shyamoli returns home restless and makes fuss, Sagar kisses her and asks her whether she had a bad day at work. This embarrasses Mrs. Gupta and when Shyamoli breaks, Mrs. Dutta writes in her imaginary letter which is addressed to her friend Roma:

Women need to be strong, not react to every little thing like this. You and I, Roma, we had far worse too cry about, but we shed our tears invisibly. We were good wives and daughters-in-law, good mothers. Dutiful, uncomplaining. Never putting ourselves first. (UEL-27)

Remembering Mother-in-law

She also recollects how she had been scolded by her mother-in-law for scorching a special kheer dessert and how her mother-in-law made her cry by not sending her to the cinema with Mrs. Basu. But she did not show all these things to her husband. She wept the entire afternoon but before her husband came home she washed her face carefully with cold water and applied kajal to her eyes so he wouldn't know.

There are many more things that make her feel her culture to be much superior to that of the American's - like children sleeping in a separate room, children referring to elders in disrespectful ways, the amount of TV they watch, their talking back and also saving half-drunk milk glasses in the refrigerator with the rest of the food, using stale bottled curry powder for cooking etc. Though for a modern Indian this may seem absurd

To Conclude

To conclude it can be said that the old woman who is immersed in the hoary Indian culture, American life to be intolerable, contradictory, and unacceptable and totally in conflict with her own Indian culture. Finally she learns that she could even bear the separation of her son and his family but not survive without her culture which is the very backbone of her being. This cultural clash could be seen in three different levels. The first generation immigrants who willingly opted for migration for

their material prosperity try to accept it as the bitter part of the fruit of their ambition. The children of the first generation immigrants are forced to follow their home culture by their parents but they want to follow the culture in which they are born and brought up. As a result there is disillusionment in them. The dependents' case is totally different. It is the same as that of Mrs. Dutta. Generation to pass before one accepts the host culture as theirs. If we follow the words of Kavian Poongundranaar, an ancient Tamil poet, "Every *town our* home town, every man a kinsman" there would be no trouble

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Mrs. G. Rajeswari
Assistant Professor of English
Government College for Women (Autonomous)
Kumbakonam
Tamilnadu
India
rajig1968@gmail.com