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CULTURAL COMBAT AMID DIASPORA: REPRESENTATIONS IN
BORN CONFUSED AND QUEEN OF DREAMS

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ABSTRACT

Culture in broader terms is viewed as a symbolic construction of the vast array of a social group's experiences, the embodiment, and the chronicle of a group's history. Since the group histories of different sections of society differ in important ways, their cultures are correspondingly different. Group histories are inextricably linked with the material conditions of society, so that cultures are marked by the social and the economic conditions of the group at the various stages of its history. That is why the process of cultural production is, in part a process of cultural transformation. At any given time a group will inherit certain cultural institutions and traditions, but its acts of reiteration or repudiation, its everyday interactions and its ritual practices will serve to select, modify or transform these institutions. The above mentioned novels realistically depict the problems of Indian immigrants who endeavored to assimilate into American lifestyles and foreground the issue of cultural conflict within the domestic spaces of the two families after migration. These novels vanguard the problems and differences between first generation and second generation immigrants and lucratively shows how the second generation immigrant's are always ambivalent whether to take on their conventional culture of their parents or to sink into the existing one. Ultimately the cultural disorientation comes into play in the lives of the second generation immigrants and finally starts questioning themselves within which culture to assimilate into.

Keywords: Culture, Diaspora, Immigration, Ambivalence, Assimilation.

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INTRODUCTION

Every individual is a part of a particular society and society is composed of different races, religions, social and ethnic groups. To be a part of society socialization is important because, socialization is the process by which an individual acquire knowledge, language, social skills and values to be conventional to the norms and roles required for integration into a society. Within the process of socialization the symbolic construction of the vast array of social and ethnic group's experiences, the embodiment, and the chronicle of a group's history is termed as culture. Culture refers to the languages, beliefs, values, norms, customs, knowledge and skills that people learnt, and that make up the way of life of any society. Culture is passed on from one

generation to the next through the process of socialization. Culture bestows recognition to the particular society and differentiates it from the rest. Culture confers a group an authentic heritage to which to ascribe with and also provides the significance of cultural values, goals and career aspirations relatively uncomplicated. The human being gets socialized within the society he is part of and the culture he is accustomed with gives him the identification as an authentic member of that particular society.

With the passage of time certain traumatic or cataclysmic changes take place and the established society gets dispersed and falls into the domain of unfeasibility where conditions for living becomes inappropriate. For further continuation of the journey of life the human being becomes compelled to leave his homeland and migrate in an unfamiliar land where culture, language, norms and values are totally different from the institution he was part off. This dispersion of an established institution often traumatically is termed as Diaspora and the concept of dispersing involves the idea of separation or distancing from literal homeland or a cultural and ethnic origin. The dispersion of society carries within it the ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refuge; one anticipates the projection of one's culture and the other seeks refuge and protection and relates more positively to the host culture.

With the dispersion cultural in-between-ness takes place in the life of the immigrants. The immigrants are caught between two cultures; one their homeland and other the host land. The immigrant's condition gets bewildered and a kind of ambivalence arouse in their life and are finally caught in a dilemma which culture to continue with. It has been examined that living as a diasporic subject there are maximum possibilities and chances of transformation in the subjectivities and modes of thinking of diaspora, because, they have the advantage of living on the border zone of two cultures and having relationship with two geographical spaces which overlap each other in their internal space. The Diasporic subjects always remain in quandary whether to get transformed in host country culture or to continue with their own culture. This space formed in diaspora consciousness is called "Diasporic space" because there is always a double mindedness that comes into prominence and the problem of assimilating into "what" is always thought of. Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* referred to Diasporic Space as:

...a conceptual category is "inhabited" not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words the concepts of Diasporic space include the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'. (Brah 2005)

So, living in the Diasporic space where chances of transformation are at brisk there are certain immigrants who are staunch followers of their conventional culture, religion and their identities, don't give up easily their orthodoxy and continue their journey of life with their own conventional norms and principles. One most important thing should be noted that whatever the reason for migration is, the immigrants experience a sense of un-belonging and up-rootedness in the new lands. Sometimes certain immigrants try hard to get assimilate in the new cultures but always remain hesitant and bemused and are treated as other. So, living in the peripheries of the host cultures the immigrants undergo complex experiences of anxieties, confusions, yearnings and aspiration, because, the nature of the Diaspora, and its cultural location, politics and its behaviour not only depends on Diaspora but also depends on the nature and the behaviour of the host countries because there are limits of assimilation in the life of the immigrants as it is a proportional process and doesn't depend only on the assimilation of immigrants but depends on the people of the host country how much they will let the immigrants get assimilate into their own culture.

Diaspora is an amalgamation of ambivalences, conflicts, questions of belongings, placements and displacements, old values and new desires, identity crisis, changing global conditions and psychological generation and degeneration. The domestic space in Diaspora becomes the scenario of chaos when especially the later generation comes to age and starts understanding the notions related to the cultures, traditions and about identity. The problem arises mainly because there are differences between first generation and second generation immigrants. As in the case of first generation immigrants, they can relate their Diasporic experiences to their own memories of a time before migration, and later generations for whom the new land

has never been new and whose memories of the home land are more fragmented as they have nothing to relate with. John McLeod claims that:

Though the children born to migrants or the next generation occupy different spaces in the representative culture because of their better assimilation and better settlements, and their confusions, feelings of rootlessness and displacements are also less intense and are not of similar nature but their sense of identity borne from living in Diaspora community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grandparents. (McLeod 33)

The later generation immigrants think themselves completely as part of the host countries because they adapt and adopt everything related to it and this assimilation gives different dynamics to later generations, because they quiet literally do not have the same starting point as those who originally migrated. The later generations have not experienced migration and have no memories of the time before it. They are the heirs of the Diasporic memories that are told and retold, re-appropriated and reinterpreted in light of here and now. The later generation immigrants entirely incorporates themselves with the culture of the host country and reject their parental culture because they do not find any other people relating to it except their parents. The identity with which the later generation immigrants live with is snatched from them in a very skimpy time at times of national crisis by the people of the host country with whom they have been living with close terms and finally are left bewildered about their existence.

In this paper my focus is on how the descendants of the first generation immigrants assimilates completely within the cultures of host countries but unfortunately are not accepted by them and are pushed back to ponder over where do they really belong to. For this I choose Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* as postcolonial fictions to explicitly show the cultural conflicts where the second generation immigrants first segregates from their parental culture and finally their integrates with their own parental culture to enforce an existent identity.

Born Confused

Born Confused Tanuja Desai Hidier's debut novel written in 2002 offer readers an engrossing account of the Indian-American experience through the eyes of an insightful narrator Dimple Lala, a teenager growing up in America with Indian parents who have Indian ways of living. This teenager explores issues that surpass adolescent crisis and delve into far more dire dilemmas. Dimple thinks that she was born confused creating her mother twelve treacherous hours of painful labor and that confusion is her ultimate destiny. Living in America as a second generation immigrant Dimple wants to fit into the American culture. Dimple's parents seem like dinosaurs to her, conspicuous by their accents and quirks in her world because her parents want her to be more Indian than American and are pushing things on her. So she starts hating her parent's culture in the beginning because she cannot relate to anyone else but her parents about it which she doesn't want to do.

She tries her level best to assimilate herself into American culture and almost adapts and adopts everything required to label her as an American. Her American friend Gwyn is an inspiration to her because she is beautiful, blonde, slim and the centre of attention, but comes from a home where she was abandoned by her father and ignored by her mother, and she craves the stability of Dimple's family unit, which, of course, Dimple does not understand, since she longs to be beautiful and blonde and free of parental restrictions. Dimple's parents want to control her behaviour because she infuriates them by her gloomy behaviour, gives some guilt gifts and then absconds herself in the dark room which she considers her space of comfort, where she holds supreme authority.

Dimple's parents want her to marry an Indian boy so that she can retain what is lacking in her life. But she abruptly rejects it and tells her best friend that you are welcome to him. After some time she suddenly meets Karsh and starts thinking that they had lot in common but the time was gone because her friend is already passionately in love with Karsh and is ready to learn things about Indian culture to which Karsh belongs. Gwyn borrows Indian culture when convenient and scoffing at it when not. As the times passes Gwyn and Karsh starts dating and Dimple is left to dust.

Dimple's best friend betrays her and uses her words against her. She says she wants to be a part of your family, and even tries to become more Indian than you are, but deceives her at the end and after that

deception Dimple starts to dig out her identity. She starts understanding herself and her parent's culture. She thinks she may have been born confused, but she's determined that she's not going to stay that way.

As time goes on Dimple wishes to understand her parental culture and to be aware with it she sticks to her father and during that course of understanding the relationship between them starts getting better. It is Dimple's father who makes her understand the true and authentic value of remaining attached with the traditional ways and finally makes her understand that it is all absurd and meaningless to try to be what you are not. The father provides every kind of information to his daughter about their religious conviction and evokes a standard religious fervour in her by endowing her with the religious books, the stories related to their great Indian epics –the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and about the whole Indian culture. He creates a passionate religious curiosity in his daughter and made her believe that every problem's solace lies in devoting yourself to the deities and religious places. He takes her to the Shree Ganesh's Temple where she learned about the appropriate behaviour of entering into the sacred places and the people to whom she sees there almost looked like her under the silks and salwars. She holds an intuition there as if she is losing herself in order to gain something more valuable. She realises as if she is incarnated by devoting herself to her parental culture.

Queen of Dreams

Queen of Dreams written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in 2004 is embedded with themes like nostalgia, alienation, marginalisation, despair, readjustment, assimilation, adaptation and adoption. Most important she portrays cultural in-between-ness in this novel and represents characters in a very productive manner within which cross-fertilization of cultures takes place. She contrasts lives and perceptions of first generation immigrants with that of their children born and raised in a foreign land.

The narrative of *Queen of Dreams* explores the connection between wakefulness and subconscious. The author spins an enchanting story of a second generation immigrant trying to divine her identity, with her dream interpreting mother contributing to the mystery and magic. The picture of ancient India and contemporary America is simultaneously projected through the mother, who migrated from India with her husband and her daughter Rakhi. Rakhi a young artist and divorced mother live in Berkeley California tries to find her footing in a world which is alarmingly in the process of transition torn by violence and horror. The first generation immigrants try to keep their own traditional culture. Mrs. Gupta maintains her culture by mostly cooking Indian foods. Rakhi Says,

At home we rarely ate anything but Indian, that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture (Divakaruni, QOD 7).

Mrs. Gupta clad herself as Indians do either a Saree or Salwar kameez. She usually restricts herself within the confinement of her house and only ventures out to pass the message of her dreams to her clients. Mrs. Gupta follows both the strategy of segregating and integrating in order to enforce an existentialist sense of identity. To her, her identity is no great an issue as she maintains most of her Indian culture and tradition. She adjusts and accommodates expediently though her sense of up rootedness disturbs her peripherally. Mrs. Gupta remains tender accepting most of the changes revolutionizing America and adapting to it, not so much affected by it. She creates an identity for herself which revolves around her dream world which none dares enter, not even her husband or daughter. While on the other hand Rakhi a second generation immigrant thinks herself as an American and marries with an American man. Mrs Gupta hides her past in an attempt to prevent her daughter from experiencing an inevitable split between her Indian and American identities.

Trapeze between Two Cultures

Having imbibed the American culture by birth and Indian culture through blood Rakhi trapezes between the two cultures. Rakhi does not know who she actually is or where she actually belongs to. Born and educated in America Rakhi perceives America as her home, and she wants to be accepted on her own terms. She "faces a sense of alienation in the sense of 'insider', 'outsider' (Divakaruni, QOD32). Though ignorant she constantly bickers after her nonexistent past, and contemplates a visit to the mysterious land India which she would never make. Devoid of any knowledge about her ancestral home, she possesses only a warped sense of what is Indian. After the death of her mother in the mysterious car accident, her father volunteers to help

resuscitate the Chai House into “an Indian Snack Shop, a ‘chaer dokan’, as it would be called in Calcutta” (Divakarui, QOD185). The intermingling of two cultures is strongly felt in the new emergence of the resplendent coffee shop under the banner ‘Kurma Shop’. By sharing the culinary secrets with his daughter, the father not only strengthens their connection, but also transmits cultural knowledge and customs. Hence, the task of cultural transmission is finally redirected to the father. Explaining Indian culture to his daughter through the stories of his own life, the father answers Rakhi’s basic need for ethnic belonging, mutuality, and continuity, thus, helping her reconstructing her identity.

The Aftermath of 9/11

In the US, the devastation caused by the terrorists on September 11, 2001 shattered all complacency and Chitra Banerjee had felt a need to narrate about it. The violence unleashed in the American Society on account of the bombing of the World Trade Center takes a great toll on the lives of the immigrant. In *Queen of Dreams* Rakhi and her customers were attacked by the native people called ‘patriots’ in the Kurma shop.

Branded as terrorists for keeping the shop open they are thrown into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. Obscene words are hurled at them,

Looked in the mirror lately? One of them spits. You ain’t no American! Its fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson (Divakarui, QOD 267).

Ruminating over these words Rakhi reflects “But if I wasn’t American then what was I?” (271). All the built in feeling of being American is lost on that day of great loss to many people as they realize that,

And people like us seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of stranger who lost a sense of belonging (Divakaruni, QOD 272).

Despite the fact that the second generation Indian immigrants spend their whole life in America they aren’t accepted as Americans because of their brown skin, the Indian features, the dark eyes with the darker circles under them, the black crinkles of the hair looks suddenly alien, their dream gets shattered and the question again arises in the mind of the immigrants who they are and where do they belong to?

Conclusion

This paper presents the study of *Born Confused* and *Queen of Dreams* and delineates the problems of second generation immigrants in host countries. This paper shows how these immigrants even after completely assimilating themselves into the host country culture are not accepted, are forced by them to face cultural dilemma and ultimately left confused and bewildered. The novelists explores the characters who feel isolated, clustered, disoriented when they are pushed back by the host country people and are not allowed to get space in their culture. Both novels portray characters that first reject their parental culture and segregates from it adapts host culture, unfortunately not accepted by them, retains back their parental cultural knowledge and ultimately integrates into it.

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