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Rerouting the roots the hyphenated existence of the second generation expatriates

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Abstract

The present article portrays the cultural paradigm of Indian- American with that of an Indian. The article revolves around the women expatriates who have to adjust themselves with the inevitable change in the culture when they move away from their native. The ethnic identity with the younger generation from the perspective of parents is brought in under the discussion.

Keywords: Rerouting, roots the hyphenated, generation expatriates

Introduction

What does “being Indian” mean in the United States? No matter whether expatriation is forced or self-imposed, an expatriate feels an acute need to culturally identify herself as she is exposed to a different cultural paradigm. Even after crossing the borders of one’s nation and culture, the borders have an uncanny existence in the mind of an individual. Caught in between the two worlds an expatriate constantly moves from one existence to another.

Expatriates and their roots

Trying to access and be accessible to both the worlds, an expatriate might lose her identity or redeem it in a different form. Existing on the borders definitely gives rise to a sort of identity crisis which is exclusive to the expatriates. More so to the women expatriates who are considered as the flag bearers of tradition and culture. Women are constantly haunted by their roots and the process of uprooting is never complete. Ferosa Jussawala compares this to the recurring sarees of Draupadi. To quote her words

We become ‘chiffon sarees’ we are unable to cast off the sarees that we wear. Like Draupadi in the Mahabharatha, as each saree is shed, a new sari generates itself to cover us and our multitude of faults. To attempt to shed our Indianness is perhaps altogether too artificial. (1989: 15)

In addition to this the tensions between the old home and the new home is experienced differently by the first generation and the second generation expatriates. The first generation expatriates carry with them the memory of their homeland where they have lived in for quite some years, and try to sustain or re-live their native lives in an alien land through innumerable cultural practices. Since, ethnicity or culture is not something static or unchanging definitely the culture that is transferred to the second generation expatriates is different as well as distant from that in the homeland.

In other words being Indian-American is completely different from being Indian. It is under the guidance of this hyphenated existence i.e. American-Indian that the younger generations grow up in the alien land which may not be as alien to them as it is to their parents. They learn about the original culture through the older generation. For them the culture of their homeland (if they accept India as their homeland) is a reflection of someone else's memory, something with which they do not have direct contact. Given this complexity of transferred ethnic identity - how do the children, grown up or young, belonging to second generation understand India and its value system? How do they relate to the ethnic identity given by their parents? Does this identity hamper the process of assimilation? Or are they strong

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enough to sever themselves from the unknown identity and develop a sense of belonging to the country that they are born into and are living in?

It would therefore be necessary to examine what Indian values mean to the younger generation. Time and again these children are forcibly introduced to India through classical music and dance classes, festivals, Indian temples which are mushrooming in America. How do the children react to these artificially created links? First of all, they are perplexed when their parents mention India as their home and not the country where they are living. They are bound to live confused lives. This is evident in the words of Jhumpa Lahiri who herself belongs to second generation immigrants:

I've inherited my parents' preoccupations. It's hard to have parents who consider another place "home" - even after living abroad for thirty years, (2002: 24)

Therefore this constant looking back, a result of nostalgia, is sure to affect the assimilating process of younger generation. This paper intends to examine the logistics employed by the second generation expatriates to live the life of a complex combination- a combination of ephemeral Indianness and their perpetual present.

A couple of Chitra Divakaruni's stories are an attempt in exploring the lives of second generation expatriate women. In a story titled "The Lives of Strangers" the protagonist Leela, a second generation expatriate physically visits the real India in order to re-discover her 'self. And Ruchira in the story "Unknown errors of our lives" remains psychologically dependent on all that is Indian to pull through her life. The story "The Lives of Strangers" confronts the question of 'identity'. Leela is frustrated by a bitter episode in her life and takes a drastic decision to visit India the land of her origin which she has never seen.

Leela - A character of conflicting existence

Through Leela's visit to India, the writer hints at reverse migration which is very much a possibility and which is also happening right now for whatever reasons it may be. There is nothing strange in the migrants intending to 'go native', as most of the critics term it, after living the diasporic life for some years. As R Radhakrishnan points out:

It is quite customary for citizens who have migrated to experience distance as a form of critical enlightenment or a healthy estrangement from their birth land, and to experience another culture or location as a reprieve from the orthodoxies of their own "given" cultures: It is also quite normal for the same people, who now have lived a number of years in their adopted country, to return through critical negotiation to aspects of their cultures that they had not really studied before and to develop criticisms of their chosen world. Each place or culture gains when we open it to new standards. (2003: 126)

She, belonging to second generation evinces interest in the unknown, exotic, mysterious country of her origin. Interestingly in a subtle manner, the story also tries to examine the difference between the national identity and the ethnic identity. Is national identity more powerful and stronger when compared to ethnic identity? Or do both

ethnic identity and national identity combine to create a hyphenated identity Indian-American which once again defers the nationalized American status. Therefore, the expatriate status is a disheveled status touselled by the choice between the Indian identity and the ethnic identity. This story dramatizes the emotional debate of such a conflicting existence oscillating between rootlessness and rootedness.

It is when Leela is rejected by the white American who represented all that was American be it the individualistic attitude, the freedom, the aloneness, - that she feels like visiting India. Leela's affair with Dexter was a short lived one. Dexter accuses her of not responding to his sexual demands and calls her cold. He wasn't right about Leela. How could Leela, whose origin is India where there is community living, where strangers become uncles, aunts, bhaiyya and didi, be so cold? Is it the American birth and the environment which is camouflaging her dormant genetic self?

She begins to test the truth of Dexter's accusation. It is this self-introspection which makes her go in search of her roots - the urge to know 'who she is'. Her going back to India may not be an answer in itself. But it becomes a solace to a confused tormented mind. Leela decides to come out of that "watertight shell" which she had woven around herself. It could also be the cold, indifferent individualistic American society which had made her cover herself with rather too hard a shell. The call of her roots pierces through the shell and beckons her to the country of her origin. So, the reverse migration begins. When Leela goes on the pilgrimage with her aunt to feel the spiritual India, she is encountered with the complex Indian concepts of sin and expiation, lucky and unlucky stars, birth-rebirth and destiny. Obviously, Leela is on a journey of 'self' She is constantly juxtaposing the American way of life with the Indian beliefs:

Leela is surprised and pleased to discover her hidden self which has the potential to love - to love even strangers. The new knowledge about India, the awareness of her genetic roots brings about a major transformation in Leela. The whole pilgrimage, according to the Pilgrims is undertaken to expiate one's sins. Did Leela also have something to expiate? - Perhaps her Americanness. What happens to her American identity which she has been so familiar with since her birth? Does it get tinged with the unforgettable Indianness?

Does this mixed identity add to her confusion or resolve her confusion? The author hints that her life in America after her visit to India is not going to be the same. The change may be a positive one or a negative one but one thing is for sure and that is the inevitability of the mixed existence or mixed identities of Indian - Americans. The expatriates belonging to second generation will continue to experiment and explore before accepting or taking on the given identity. Radhakrishnan rightly points out.

"When my son wonders who he is, he is also asking a question about the future. For my part, I hope that his future and that of his generation will have many roots and many pasts. I hope, especially, that it will be a future where his identity will be a matter of rich and complex negotiation and not the result of some blind and official decree." (2003: 129)

In another story written by Chitra Divakaruni called "The unknown errors of our lives" which is also the title of a

collection of her short stories, she places her character – Ruchira, the protagonist of the story a second generation immigrant, at the volatile confluence of two conflicting pressures. Loyalty to one's traditional heritage and the desire to live a modern, independent life.

Ruchira and her preoccupations with India

Ruchira is an American born twenty six year old girl who deliberately blends her Indian heritage with her American self. Ruchira has grown up with the memories of her grandmother who was in touch with her through her letters until she died. She has seen India through the eyes of her grandmother and has quite unconsciously imbibed Indian values. "Grandmother" keeps peeping into her conscience now and then to remind her of her lineage and caution her.

When a letter arrived from India, she slept with it for nights, a faint crackling under her pillow. When she had trouble making up her mind about something, she asked herself, what would Thakuma do? (ibid: 221)

Ruchira like the other American girls had never dated any boy. She is engaged to Biren and it is an arranged match. But she does not hesitate unlike a typical Indian girl to have sex with Biren before marriage. Ruchira is constantly negotiating the culture she is born into and the culture of her lineage. She had found an outlet to her dual personality through her paintings which she intends to keep a secret. Even her paintings drawn largely from Indian mythology reflect her preoccupations with India.

Hanuman with the face of her father, Kamadhenu the sacred cow, with the face of her grandmother, Jatayu, with the face of her grandfather and the colours of the feathers are the colours of the Indian flag - all this not only speaks for the mind of Ruchira but also for all those expatriates who are straddling two cultures and imagine that they are leading undisturbed comfortable lives in America.

This particular story dramatizes the discontinuous links between India and America which is the typical experience of the second generation immigrants who have indirect contact with the country of their ancestors. It is the grandmother's letters, which Ruchira receives now and then, that act as a link between the lost country and the country where one struggles to feel at home. She is not able to completely suppress the faint crackling under her pillow - "a reminder of her roots." She relies on her roots to take major decisions of her life.

Ruchira as a teenager had the habit of recording her errors in a notebook. But, now that she is a grown up woman, she thinks that she does not attach much importance to that note book. She. In order to evade her 'errors' she depends upon the ideals fed by her grandmother. Every time she faces crisis or is placed at the fork roads, she has to rummage her store house of memories to make a choice. And she is all the time anxious about committing errors. As Salman Rushdie writes, the Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles. And "What would Thakuma do?" Constant falling back on the grandmother and her letters prove the fact that, somewhere even a second generation immigrant needs the strength from the country left behind in order to gain a firm foothold on the new land. Ruchira had started painting soon after her grandmother's death. So, even after her grandmother's death she intends to keep her alive in her paintings. The fragmented ideals of her

grandmother do not prevent her from indulging herself. She needs the painting of "Kalpataru" to give her the much needed re-assurance. The multicolored jewelled tree with birds from Calcutta not from America, grandmother used to call them 'birds of memory! She wants the winged memories to assure her of her future with Biren, especially when her 'hard constructed world' is shaken by Arlene, Biren's American girl friend. When Arlene discloses the fact that she is pregnant by Biren, Ruchira's tower of future cautiously built with dreams, hopes and faith begins to tremble:

In spite of being under terrible shock Ruchira is still contemplating about accommodating the new knowledge about Biren and trying to live with it. In the process of struggling to understand herself, Biren, Arlene, grandmother, India and America, somewhere Ruchira loses the physical anchor but she has found a suitable anchorage in her mind - that of her grandmother's memories. When she is confronted with the moment of crisis whether to marry Biren or not, It is not her parents who are living in America who come to her rescue but it is her late grandmother from India. "What would you do, Thakuma?" is her repeated question to solve her problems.

Ruchira inherits two worlds, the world where she is born and the world cherished by her parents. She is utterly confused as to which should be her world ultimately. Strangely, it is her grandmother who talks to her and strengthens her and not her parents who have chosen the new land for their livelihood. Her grandmother's morning prayers and Chantings haunt her:

It is the painting of 'Kalpataru', and the fragmented memories which fill Ruchira with the required inner strength to propel her to "add in a bird with the face of the son of Arlene and Biren in her painting. She includes that boy into her future. It is 'Kalpataru' which renders that inclusive outlook to human life in general and gives her the courage to answer Biren's question about that boy in the painting".

Conclusion

The expatriates are perennially nostalgic about their nation and it is nostalgia which makes them waddle between their fading, breaking and re-forming identities? More so with the second generation immigrants who anchor on to their roots partially familiarized to them by their parents. With this balancing act of assimilating into the American society while still holding on to their roots and drawing support and succour whenever needed living becomes a struggle to come to terms with their fragmented Indian American Identities.

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