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The Problematics of Loss and Longing in Divakaruni's *Growing up in Darjeeling*

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The concept of diaspora embodies a subtext of "home". The exile or displacement from it is mainly based on three types of phenomena, namely forced, half forced or half willed and willed consequences. To be in diaspora means to be in a space charged with the possibility of multiple challenges. Avtar Brah argues that "The diaspora communities are forged out of multiple imaginative journeys between the old country and the new. These spaces are both physical and emotional, yet at the heart of the diasporic experience there is always the image of journey." (3) Diaspora fiction lingers over alienation, loneliness, homelessness, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, protest, quest and identity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was an acclaimed poet before she began her career in fiction-writing. She has written poems encompassing a wide variety of themes, and directs much attention to the immigrant experience and to South Asian women. The wealth of her poetic work includes four poetry collections " *Dark Like a River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1991/2000), and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997). Divakaruni's collection, *Leaving Yuba City*, is a deeply affecting collection that explores images about India and the Indian experience in America - from the adventures of going to a convent school in India run by Irish nuns to the history of the earliest Indian immigrants in the United States. As with all of her writing, these poems deal with the experiences of women and their struggle to find identities for themselves. The changing designation of home and accompanying nervousness about homelessness and unfeasibility of going back are recurrent themes in Divakaruni's poems.

This paper shall deal with the section *Growing up in Darjeeling* from Divakaruni's collection of interlinked poems *Leaving Yuba City*. The trials and tribulations of young girls away from their homes poignantly underline their fractured identity and foreground the experiences of this 'Trishanku'[1] community belonging to nowhere. The poem, "The Walk", highlights the irony of Sunday evening walks of the convent students in "patent-leather shoes" (Divakaruni 9) through the hillsides of Darjeeling town. The girls are forbidden to talk to the local people or even to wave back at the "runny-nosed kids" for they were considered dirty and carriers of "who-

knew-what diseases" (Divakaruni 9). Instead, the girls were taught to "cut buttered bread into polite squares", to eat "bland stews and pudding" (Divakaruni 9) and to sing songs about the Emerald Isle in Ireland. In reality, they are suspended between the culture and traditions of their Indian heritage and those of the Irish nuns. The poem deals with the inner conflict of these adolescent girls in the context of cultural displacement as they are made to feel like strangers in their own land. This, however does, not mean that these individuals do not belong anywhere or they do not feel anchored in the new space, for those who experience homelessness cherish a sense of location through memory and nostalgia. Nostalgia, loss, betrayal are their companions as they painstakingly adjust to new situations and negotiate the misbalance of their hyphenated identities. Memory and nostalgia are used as the tools by which these displaced individuals conquer their alienation as well as keep the contours of the original home alive. The memories evoked are of the past, places and people as they were when the individual had experienced them. These memories are colored by imagination and nostalgia in the new land. The separating lines are thin and faint; the two worlds merge and fuse as the perspectives keep shifting. The wish to return 'home' remains a haunting presence in the background. The longing for home is suggested in "The Walk" by the admiration of cottages with honeysuckles over the gates and lanterns. There is the obvious longing for their mother and easy domesticity when they gaze at "a woman in a blue sari" who "holds a baby, his fuzzy backlit head against the curve of her shoulder" (Divakaruni 10). That they suffer from the pain of being far off from their home and the anguish of leaving everything familiar behind is easy to see. William Safran asserts that "they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another." (Safran 23) For instance, they miss the taste of their familiar food items; hence, they hunger for "real food, onion pakoras, like our mothers once made" (Divakaruni 10) as opposed to "bland stews and puddings" (Divakaruni 9). The shock of other religious and cultural affiliations is suggested by the "sharp metallic thrust" of the church spire and the "painting of Jesus that hung above our heads/ with his chest open." (Divakaruni 9).

The immigrants, whether their reason for migration is financial, social or political, forced or willing, have some shared experiences. They carry on the search for continuity and the search for roots, as settlement in an alien atmosphere initiates a dislocation. This dislocation is but a break with the old identity. They attempt to assimilate, adapt and acclimatize themselves with the norms of the new situation. Yet, these attempts are not without the anxiousness to maintain the unique cultural identity which

reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes and provides one with "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (Hall 435).

"The Geography Lesson" presents Ratna as a rebellious spirit resisting the onslaught of the new codes of conduct. She does not cry even after getting "weal-streaked palms" (Divakaruni 12) as a result of being punished for having damaged school property by unmindfully knocking off the globe in the classroom. She is further persecuted by having a placard with the word 'Wicked' written in large black letters, pinned to her chest. In addition, she is ostracized till she repented for her act. This alienation and the reciprocal protest to resist entrapment and the subsequent mutilation arising from the hegemonic and oppressive forces of patriarchy are at the very core of diaspora literature. Later, in the night, Ratna cries in her sleep for her pet dog. It is but a desperate cry for the love and comfort of a familiar homestead, not to be compensated by the kindness of the night nun offering water to the distraught child. In fact, it is rejected by being knocked away, and the diasporic individual tries to find shelter and solace by internalizing nostalgia. However, according to Uma Parameswaran, nostalgia "as the only sustenance can become quite toxic, vitiating the living stream into a stagnant cesspool" (32). As such, Ratna is rejected as being incapable of adaptation to the changed mores of the new situation.

The students of the convent seem to remain in what may be called a state of animated suspension, anxious about their new surroundings, unsure of their affiliations and roots. Away from their respective families, they fluctuate between crisis and development. For instance, a passive resistance is shown by them in "The Walk" when they refuse to drink their tea after being exposed to the poverty and the miserable life of the inhabitants of the Darjeeling hills during their Sunday walk. The local children with "tattered pants and swollen chiblained fingers" (Divakaruni 9) and the women having "branch-scarred arms" (Divakaruni 9) bent under the weight of huge baskets, tear at their heart strings. The cruel blows of the refectory ruler on their knuckles fail to subjugate them. The poem foregrounds a powerful force of resistance by virtue of which the girls attempt to resolve their trauma of displacement and alienation, and consolidate their power in a new space.

The immigrants' sense of emptiness and loneliness is a feeling born out of being detached or disconnected from the known land. They remain on the edge of the adopted culture and are treated as the 'other'.

While remaining on the margin, they undergo complex experiences of anxiety, confusion and yearnings. This is wonderfully depicted in the poem, "The Infirmary". The infirmary is described as a "low brown building crouched among *jhau* trees" (Divakaruni 15), as if it is a predatory animal waiting to pounce on its victims. In fact, the girls at the convent were taken to the Infirmary for medication once every month. However, the rigours and regimentation of school life is compensated by the kindness of sisters during sickness. The poet persona describes nights of feverish sleep when she recalls "cool fingers like rain" (Divakaruni 16) on her fevered forehead and fingers stroking her back until she slept. Sometimes, she remembers the sisters lovingly lying down with her like her mother long ago. Every kindness reminds her of home and her mother who is again the embodiment of every memory associated with 'home'. The dedication and loving care of the sisters is counterbalanced by the reference to Father Malhern who came to exorcise ghosts from the school after a spate of sickness. Perhaps it is also the "ghost" of the "lost home" with its indigenous traditions, religion and language, that came to haunt the young girls and filled them with nostalgia. The foolhardiness of going sweaterless in the Darjeeling damp to make her sick again is but a desperate attempt to recapture the remembered warmth of the desired home. It highlights the notion that "home" is both a geographical place as well as an emotional centre. It is constructed within a matrix of psychic and geographic spaces. It might be asserted here that "the sense of being located is the sense of being home and at home" (Raina 16).

Displacement is thus, at the heart of all complex tensions regarding cultural oppression, hybridism and quest for identity. In spite of being situated in a cozy corner of India, the convent students go through the whole gamut of emotions emerging from migration to an unfamiliar space, alienation and rootlessness. The subjects feel confused as they belong neither to their motherland nor to the adopted community. Their feeling of rootlessness, alienation, confusion and nostalgia gets multiplied due to the differences based on culture, religion and language. *Growing up in Darjeeling* deftly captures this trauma of dislocation, separation and homelessness. "In such discourses," says Swaraj Raj, "the desire for the Real, the realm of the impossible- there is no place like home- the mother, the originary home, the homeland haunts the diasporic consciousness" (55). This desire for home is indeed the defining feature of diaspora. However, this "home" may be multi-placed; as Avtar Brah opines, the concept of diaspora "signals the processes of multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries" (Brah 194). Thus, Brah believes in the fluidity of the homescape.

Home is seen both as a place and as an emotional centre to their "racial" or "national" identity. They are lived through diverse locations. As Gilroy suggests, it is simultaneously about roots and routes. This observation leads us to the problematic of homelessness and belongingness. According to Martin Heidegger, "Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world." (qtd. in Sharma 61) He may perhaps be called the first philosopher of the diasporic condition because it was he who first understood and addressed the modern man's "homelessness" in the world we live in today.

Notes

1. Trishanku is a character in Hindu mythology. He was compelled to remain suspended in his own heaven as a compromise between the earth that he belonged to and the heaven that he sought. Thus, the term suggests a state of suspension. It describes a middle ground or a compromise between an individual's aims and desires and one's current state and possessions.

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