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THE PATH OF LIBERATION FROM TWOFOLD EXISTENCE: A CENTRIPETAL REFERENCE TO GLOBAL IMMIGRANTS' IN DIVAKARUNI'S 'THE VINE OF DESIRE'

P.PADMAVATHI



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Abstract

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THE PATH OF LIBERATION FROM TWOFOLD EXISTENCE: A CENTRIPETAL REFERENCE TO GLOBAL IMMIGRANTS' IN DIVAKARUNI'S 'THE VINE OF DESIRE'

P.PADMAVATHI

Labelled as 'transitional being(s)' by Victor Turner, immigrants' lives are the phenomenon of dual existence. Under one they carry the socio-cultural baggage of their native soil and under another they struggle to acclimatize the host culture. They befit the Du Bois's terminology of 'Double consciousness' which, while reflecting the pathetic situation of African Americans, asserts that, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn as under" (Du Bois 2-3).

The term, 'Double Consciousness' though in particular, has been used to define African Americans, it is widely associated to global migrants especially South Asians who are sandwiched between the edges of two trans-nationals. Being South Asians, they are subjected to centuries old stigma of ethnic, racial as well as cultural discrimination. Akin to African Americans, the "two-ness" of being in past as well as present leads these immigrants to psycho-social tensions of identifying themselves as both insider and outsider.

Crammed with the array of past, present and future, their castle of diasporic consciousness, thus, get renovated every now and then in the hands of diaspora writers to enable them to come out of their hyphenated existence. The castle, thus, stands as a symbolic representation of an immigrant's identity that constantly transforms its shape from one form to another. Keeping in view the multi-faceted concept of home and host, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the most distinguished South

Asian writers, lays her prime focus on carving a centripetal space for her immigrant characters in the present. She does this by questioning their identity which in turn helps them discover their self-consciousness. In this context, the present paper endeavors to study Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* in the light of discovering one's second self amidst transcultural aspects of the U.S in particular and the world in general.

The story revolves around two sisters Anju and Sudha who get parted from each other due to their marital life and again get reunited in this incandescent and powerful narrative of Divakaruni's *Vine of desire*- a sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. Set at the backdrop of two transnational cultures, the novel focuses on how despite the traumas of marriage and cultural shock the sisters of heart fight the turmoil of their lives. Tracing back and forth to native as well as adopted land, the novel is weaved around the lives of Anju and Sudha who by washing away all the reminiscences of past move further in their life. But as the saying goes "Your past is always your past. Even if you forget it, it remembers you" (Dessen 368), the sisters being caught between the web of past and present find it difficult to cross the labyrinth of past which haunts them in their present. Unable to bear the sting of past, the sisters again get parted and seek the antidote for their pain in American dream. Nevertheless, after stepping into American Dream that promises to provide a better life for future generations especially to immigrants who after facing difficult situation in their native countries flee to America with some hope, the two sisters realize that akin to other dreams, American dream also proves to be a stereotypical one. With this realization they come to conclusion that past is not avertable no wonder how far they flee from it by shedding their true identity. The only thing one has to remember that one should not become the prisoner of past. Instead one

has to use it as a weapon to derive strength from it. The very consciousness of this notion bestow the two sisters a gift of strength with which they fight the upheavals of their life and find the true significance of existentialism which says that an individual himself is responsible for giving meaning and shape to his life not the society or religion. Sisters', thus, start the journey of creating their second selves which while enabling them to carve their identities, binds them once again with their lost relations. The sayings of Lord Buddha are best explainable in this regard. "No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path" (Gabriel).

Filled with the philosophy of existentialism, American dream, and diasporic cult, the novel spins around the lives of three characters Anju, sudha and Sunil who come to the U.S. to make a better life but then Sunil- the husband of Anju gets dangerously infatuated to Sudha- a single mother and divorcee. Anju, despite knowing her husband's obsession for Sudha, invites her to the U.S to set her scattered life with a hope that with the passage of time everything will get settled. However, the pull of infatuation is so strong that their lives fall apart. To detach herself from this bewilderment, Anju tries to find solace in writing letters to her dead father but even in her letters to her father she could not part her from the thoughts of three lives that are tangled to the extreme of destruction. In one of her letters written to her father, she writes how she is afraid of love.

"...Love which gives you a taste of itself and makes you greedy for more.... You would kill anyone- including yourself- to keep it from breaking. Then it breaks anyway.

All the loves I've loved, I've lost them- except one. And this one too- I think I hear it cracking underfoot, like lake ice in a thin water (65).

The deception from her closed ones blinds Anju to everything else instigating her to create her own new self. "...I can be someone else-anyone I want. If only I could decide who" (169). She wishes to be a snake shedding her old life but again gets confused and contemplates: "...But what if, shrugging of my old life, I find I am not a snake but an onion instead? Peel after peel after peel, and then: nothing." (169). Lately she even joins writers group. But none of these satisfy her. Most of the time she feels lonely among them and time and again she

gets trapped in her household tensions. The following lines are worth noteworthy in this regard:

Large chunks of herself will always be unintelligible to them: the joint family she grew up in, her arranged marriage, the way she fell in love with her husband, the tension in her household, that ménage a trios, Indian style. Only Sudha, she thinks unhappily, can ever understand these (124).

This states that earlier the concept of western ideology which used to form the basis for Anju's dream world has now become a mere product of observance from where she could not trace any pleasure for her life. Isolation and fear looms her as the contemplative thoughts of her lost son and the fright of losing her husband haunts her time and again. The very thought of parting from her husband pulls her to the extreme of solitary world. Shocked and devastated she even tries to commit suicide but very soon comes to her senses and finally leaves the house.

On the other hand, Sudha on her sister's invitation comes to America mostly to shape her own future and to set Anju's life, who loses her baby due to miscarriage. But her desire to be independent and live the life to its fullest makes mess of everything. Knowing full well about Sunil's infatuation towards her, she steps into her cousin's marital life and does what is forbidden to her. In her own words:

How long after he leaves, when I grope around for my underwear? My hands shake, buttoning my bra. My fingers snag on the folds of my skin. My sari is a mess of wrinkles that refuse to be smoothed out. The clock on the oven points to just afternoon. Can that be right? In the space of three hours, a life, four lives- what's the verb I'm looking for-tangled, unraveled, turned upside down? There's no word that fits this disjointed feeling, this sense of everything out of place (200).

Coming to Sunil, Anju's husband, a software programmer from an American based company, he has always desired to settle abroad and make a good life. It is mostly because during his childhood he is not at all in good terms with his father. He could never understand what crime he and his mother have done for which they deserve such a hatred from his father. Consequently, once he gets a job in America, he decides to never pay a visit to his hometown so that he can escape his father's

taunts. To get back his freedom, he also sends a stack of money to his father to repay him for his brought up. Later when he ties a knot with Anju, he starts working much harder to secure better future for them and for their baby who is about to enter this world. But his baby also fails him. With the loss of their son the relationship between Anju and him gets loosen. He strives hard to make it survive but of no use. Later with the arrival of Sudha, he loses all his sanities and starts pursuing happiness in a wrong way which has nothing to do with honour. He wonders thinking about the concept called honour: "How many unhappinesses they led us into. Who can even say what honor is? Isn't it right for us to pursue happiness? Isn't that our first right?" (50). Later he asks Dayita, Sudha's daughter, about his reflection and says: "I like that idea, don't you? Scary and magical, all at once. A mirror-self to show me who I really am?" (50). The notion which he has developed lately is also seem to be an influence of American Maxim 'live for yourself' which akin to others seem to have imprinted so deep in his heart that he sheds morality and starts committing mistakes one after another not realizing that cutting of the ties are not as simple as he thinks. Swaying in pursuit of happiness he tries to cut himself from his closed ones especially from Anju by confessing his obsession for Sudha. To quote him: "We aren't any good for each other anymore- you see that, don't you?" (238). He continues by adding "For a long time now, we've just made each other unhappy. I can't afford to do it anymore....Half my life is gone. I don't want to waste the rest.... The company is transferring me to Houston very soon. I want to start the divorce proceedings as quickly as possible" (241).

His search for pleasure blinds him to everything else. He doesn't even cares for Anju's feelings and moves along in his own path. With a new assignment at Houston based company, he aspires to start a new life with sudha. Nevertheless, all his hopes get shattered with Sudha's departure and with the letter which she leaves behind for Sunil to read which states: "I can't give you what you want. For me, you'll always be my sister's husband. And I'll always be your wife's sister. We can't forget it, no matter what we conceive ourselves of right now.... Whatever mistakes we've made, let's put them behind us. Let's not encourage them to grow until they crush our lives.... I'm starting over. I hope you will,

too, with Anju. It's best for us not to be in touch again" (202).

To some extent the main reason for the things to be fallen apart is too much liberty and independence of America which the three characters handle in a wrong way. The American maxim 'Getting Out' and 'live for yourself' Pg 84 echoes so deep in their mind that they choose to escape from their homeland, the part of their past selves and live in the present by not taking care about future. The American life moulds their character to such an extent that they no longer want to share their opinions, remain dependent or taken care by anyone. They develop this wrong notion that America is the best place to acquire ones' independence.

Back in India, the sisters used to read the mind of others at the instinct which is nowhere to be seen now in America. The cultural differences play a vital role in this regard. Back to their parental home in the past, the sisters used to share everything- their thoughts, their belongings, even the minute details of their life with each other. But in the course of time, they grew so distant from each other that they don't tend to discuss anything with other. In the beginning, when Sudha pays a visit to Anju, she observes that Anju, being obsessed with her classes in school, her assignments, especially with her writers group never notices the loneliness and fear that looms around her. Anju also gets accustomed to American jargon which is beyond the periphery of Sudha's knowledge. Her attitude, her apparel everything gets transformed and Sudha fits nowhere into it. Of late, impressed by one of the visiting professor's comments, Anju develops a notion of becoming a writer. As if she really owes it to herself, she feels a need to develop it and ask for Sudha's suggestion by gripping her wrist. Sudha, however entrapped in her own world of perplexity, realizes that no matter how best she tries she has nothing in common with this new existence of Anju and hence is no more able to read and feel her friend's thoughts. She reminds of their childhood days which were quite opposite of the present day situation. To quote her:

When we were girls, she'd grab me just like this, and I'd feel her excitement speeding up my heartbeat. Even when we became wives, she in San Jose and I bricked up in Bardhaman, we'd sense each other's needs with-

out having to talk. If one of us had a secret, the other would taste it, grainy and bitter like pomegranate seeds bitten into by accident (108).

But today Anju's touch has made her realized "nothing but heaviness" Pg 108.

Sudha also comprehends that American lifestyle has made such a huge impact on the character of Anju that she no longer seems to remember or care for her own parental culture- a culture where unlike American ideologies, People remain indebted to their parents, their ancestors, in-laws, children, teachers, society and God for the care and services that have been poured on them by their dear ones. It's a culture where there is no time to remain indebted to oneself but to their dear ones. Here, one point is worth remark able that Sudha, who is new to the mosaic culture of American life never gives a thought that very soon even she is going to soak herself in American mantra of 'live for yourself'. Slowly, alike Anju, even Sudha gets detached from her ancestral legacy and considers doing something for her own. However, to explore their inner realm, both the sisters choose two different paths which slowly increase the gap between them.

Anju being a part of this world of fantasy for quite a long time now fathoms this alien world much better than Sudha, who on the other side has this misconception that in America she can make over for all the lost she had in the past. For her America is a place where battered and suppressed women and other immigrant women suffering a domestic violence like her could really find some solace. According to her it's a dream world where they could search for their new identity; shape their life by shedding their past and create a space for them amidst the host society. Anju, however, tries to detach her friend from the world of fantasy by making her come to terms with the circumstances in America and tells her that:

You're too romantic about what goes on in America. There are a lot of silenced women here. The no-money, no-rights rule works here, too. And bribery. It's just not as blatant....It's got very little to do with love of justice (156).

Despite Anju's warnings, Sudha turns a deaf ear to all her attempts and commits one mistake after another.

The most significant point here is to see that both the sisters leave their parental culture to have some transformation in their lives and for the makeover of all the things which they lost earlier. But after visiting America they realize that shedding one's true identity is not that simple. One's shed, your entire being is lost. Sudha's life is best example in this regard. In the beginning, she takes a judicious step of coming out of her marriage and despite the taunts from the neighbours and from her own mother, she survives it too. Nevertheless, after visiting America, she still longs and cares for all that she was forced to leave behind. This could be better comprehensible in the words of Sudha which she tries to communicate to Anju:

She doesn't know the one hundred and one faces of my cowardice. My resentment. Someday I will tell her. I did care. All the things I had to leave behind, not only clothes and jewellery but my good name. The legitimacy of wifehood that I had worked so hard to earn (43). Here, she represents a stereotypical Indian woman who severs all ties from her marital life but still remains attached to it. That is to say, more than everything else, Sudha is especially concerned about the identity of wifehood on which she has worked so hard to secure a place in the heart of Sanyal's (in-laws); and the meaning of her name- Basudha, which she has always tried to live through her character. But now to her dismay she could not relate herself to any of these identities. Lately, swayed by the American maxim of 'Live for yourself', she could not maintain that serenity and prudence for a long time and tries to free herself from the shackles of old life where she has always lived for others as a duty bound daughter, a loving and selfless sister by sacrificing her love for Anju, a submissive wife for family pride, a passion fulfiller, and so on but never did anything useful to her. She, thus, sever her ties from her past which holds her broken marriage, her lost father and her forbidden love Ashok. At times she even feels entrapped because of her daughter Dayita, as she states: I can't stop myself from thinking, If I were alone, I could ... And so I grow angry with you. I imagine that you blame me for Sunil's kiss. For tearing up Ashok's letter. For dancing with Lalit. For leaving you behind to go out with him. All my own guilts I've projected onto you, all the regrets and rages of my snatched-away youth. I can die for you, no problem there, but can I live for you (189).

While freeing herself from old relationships Sudha, however, finds that each one is connected to other. If she cuts herself from the one, all the others will get disconnected because they are attached to it and hence towards the end she will be holding nothing in her hands. Sandwiched between the parental and host culture, the sisters, thus, acquire the role of dual identity by leaving behind some customs and traditions of their parental culture and adopting the cultural elements of host society with a view to get assimilated to it. Despite their efforts to adjust themselves to American culture, the nostalgia of their imaginary homelands still haunts them. Back in India, the old mansion of Chatterjee's which is already sold still disturbs the sisters. They long to have that house again. To quote Anju:

But now I miss it! I think of my room with its cool, high ceilings, and my bedsheets, which always smelled clean, like neem leaves—and which I never had to wash myself!—and the hundred-year-old peepal trees that grew outside my windows. Sometimes I wish I hadn't been in such a hurry to come to America... (13).

Anju's favourite place of all was the family bookstore where at the special corner an armchair was placed for her to read all what she wanted. It was exactly there she came across all the western writers and their writings such as Anna Karenina, Sons and Lovers, The Great Gatsby and so on. These writings casted a spell on her to such an extent that after reading them she used to take a flight of fantasy to almost every place which she came across in her readings. But now after so many years she wonders thinking whether those books really did anything good to her and reconsiders how in the past Sudha's mother used to warn her by saying that:

...They were no good for me. They filled me with a dissatisfaction with my own life, and a longing for distant places. I believed that, if I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn't so easy, is it? (14).

There are times, however, when sisters love to be the part of their culture and heritage in spite of its drawbacks. In case of Anju, sometimes she comes across the people whom she was not aware of and who made her give elaborate explanations of her culture's negative aspects in which she had to agree: "yes, we do have street children. Yes, they really live hard lives. Yes, the police

are brutal. Yes, famine happens, and then people starve. Yes, widows are often repressed. Wives also...." But, then she wants to tell them that "...there's a lot more to India than what you're seeing here." (214). Here, she is desperate to inform them that to peep into her ancient heritage one need to have an optimistic outlook that is to say if one stops looking at its shortcomings, one can have the access to its heart. The above lines depict the common nature among immigrants who despite having accustomed to the host culture cannot sever their ties from their parental home and thus cannot tolerate if anyone dares to mock their culture. There are other portals such as aphorisms and cultural cuisine which drives them with homesickness every now and then. Bengaly recipes with its delicious flavours make them nostalgic towards their home town. To add to their dismay, here in this distant land they could not get the exact flavour because of the differences in ingredients. So they have to manage with the substitutes. In one such instance, when Sudha, finding it difficult to deal with old Mr. Sen, decides to leave Myra's house, she prepares Bhaté Bhat- a steamed dish especially eaten when people are starting on a journey. She remembers how during their childhood though they never got the chance to visit anywhere, Pishi used to prepare it for them because they loved it so much. Now in a far distant land she wishes to prepare that dish but has to search for the substitutes. To quote sudha:

For the coarse-skinned jhingay with its large seeds, I use zucchini. For sweet kumro, I use a slab of banana squash. With some misgiving, I replace the pungent mustard oil so popular in Bengal with extra-virgin olive. For some things there is no making do: bitter melon, the small brown taro roots. Regretfully, I let them go (246).

She continues by adding:

In India we would have tied each ingredient into a piece of old cloth and steamed it with the rice, letting the flavours soak in. Here I boil them in a pan, then mash them into balls flavoured with salt and olive oil, a little pepper (246).

While, she prepares the dish, she suddenly realizes that "Isn't that the traveller's life, substitution and experimentation?" (246). The above statement is a strong point to mark a patch on an immigrant's life for compromising so many things in his life to cope up with the new environment. The culinary art of Bhaté Bhat

with its substitute of ingredients, thus, becomes an eye opener for Sudha. It makes her realize that with the change of place and time, an individual may acquire a certain transformation in his/her identity but whether this transformation is for good or bad is solely depends on that individual who undergoes a transformation.

Here, it is essential to recognize that since few months have passed after her arrival in America, sudha still have the relish for Bengali cuisine and its culinary art. That is why wherever she stays in America she shows her pleasure in preparing Indian cuisine. Whereas on the other side, Anju, having spent more than two years in America, gets habituated to spirit of American Cuisine and hence desires to welcome Sudha with its culinary art. As such, in the beginning when Sudha is about to visit her in America, Anju works diligently on western cuisine to impress her long lasting friend with the flavours of Devil's food cake, spaghetti and meatballs, potato salad, tuna casserole, banana bread, vanilla pudding, apple pie and so on- a point to prove that spirit of place has far deeper impact on our mindscape than we expect it to be.

However, after much hullabaloo in their lives, the three characters rediscover that despite the differences that have begun to surface recently, they still have the concern for each other but each of them is tangled with their own follies. The characters, thus, realize that though they feel the responsibility to look after the welfare of others but their first and foremost duty is to set the things right for them and create a new self of their own. As stated by Anju: "She needs to sit down with Sudha soon, talk to her about her future....But not today. She can only fix one life at a time.... And she must start with her own" (216).

Alike Anju, even Sudha, who is lately oscillated by the American Maxim of "Live for yourself", desires to remain good to others but don't know how. Nevertheless, her decision to leave the house in order to erase the tensions between Anju and Sunil acts as a proof that she is still true to her friend and her intentions were never wrong. Besides, her job at Myra's house as a caretaker for Mr. Sen. finally pays the way for her life of independence. In this way she will not remain indebted to any one and at the same time will experience the life in this host country on her own terms.

The same kind of transformation has been observed in Sunil. He realizes very late that with his one wrong step he has brought unhappiness to everyone around him and asks forgiveness for the mistakes he has committed. To quote him: "If I have no forgiveness in me, can I ask to be forgiven? Dayita, are you there, can you hear me? Dayita, I'm waiting." (311). Later when he visits India to attend the ceremony to propitiate his dead father by mixing his ashes with the holy river Ganga, he grasps the fact that there is no use in grieving for what has already been wronged but one should try to overcome the faults within him/her. With this realization he writes to Anju asking her if it is possible to meet her when he visit San Francisco next time with the only hope of asking for forgiveness. (365)

The turn of events underscores the fact that though influenced by the western maxim of 'Live for yourself', the moral ethics and values that have been instilled in Divakaruni's immigrant characters by their native culture, guide them through correct path. The characters comprehend the point that the cure for their sore selves doesn't lie in satisfying one's self-esteem but in the pleasure and happiness of others who believe in us. The domain of self-awareness, thus, transforms Divakaruni's characters from a mere individual to a unique being.

The series of events that took place in Sunil's, Anju's and Sudha's life one after another throws a reflection on immigrant's life in overseas. Besides, through these characters, the novel also provides an evidence for the influential approach of American mantra on immigrants and how it moulds their lives through its culture and tradition.

The novel 'Vine of Desire', thus, with its enigmatic characters gives an insight into vicissitudes of lives in a distant landscape of America- a land of dreams that offers to fulfil all the desires of the people especially immigrants who comes to its mainstream with some hope. The novel also reflects how in the swing of American Maxim 'Live for Yourself', these immigrants find it difficult to resist themselves from the culture shock. As such some gets enticed by its mantra and some gets entrapped in its labyrinth. There are very few who could extract the real meaning of life from it by knowing the truth that though the mantra suggests to 'live for

oneself', it doesn't ask to leave the dear ones behind. Those who fathom themselves to this principle survive and others get caught in its web. This is especially true regarding the main characters such as Anju, Sudha and Sunil who realizes the real worth of existentialism and finally succeed in carving a centripetal space for their dual identity amidst the periphery of two cross-cultures.

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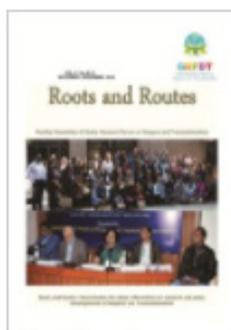
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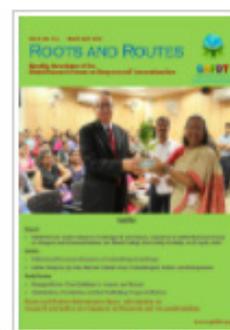
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Roots and Routes is a monthly newsletter of the Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT). It is inclusive of articles, book reviews and news analysis, which help in disseminating latest information on research and policy development in Diaspora and Transnationalism. The newsletter enjoys readership of academicians, policy experts, diaspora think tanks etc.

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Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT) is a consortium of researchers and policy makers drawn from national and international universities, institutes and organizations. GRFDT is presently based in India and is shaping as the largest such group focusing specifically on the issues related to diaspora and transnationalism.

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