CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT IN AMULYA MALLADI’S ‘THE MANGO SEASON’

Introduction to the Author:

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Abstract:

The paper makes an analytical study of cultural displacement in AmulyaMalladi’s The Mango Season. Malladi’s The Mango Season demonstrates all the common ideas of cultural displacement and dilemmas by exploring the struggle Priya faces when dealing with cultural shock in her own country. Cultural displacement and dilemma are basically the results of two living experiences, which develop conflicting ideologies in the mind of the protagonist. The cultural clash is also seen in the living styles in America and in India. It is important to study a psyche which is affected due to cultural displacement and a newly adapted culture. It is also essential to note that serious misunderstandings can and do occur not just in cross cultural interactions and encounters but also within one’s own culture, among its own people. The Mango Season is very realistic in its presentation of cultural displacement and dilemmas experienced by Priya, who studied in the west whereas her family is stuck in the Eastern culture. This relation between adaptation to the new and an adaptation to the old is undoubtedly related to individual differences.
Indian Diasporic writings are a powerful network connecting the entire globe. Diasporic literature helps in the circulation of information and in solving many problems too. Looking at it optimistically, diasporic literature creates good will, a cordial relationship and helps in spreading values, virtues and universality.

The modern diasporic Indian writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. The first class comprises of those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land to a foreign land. The other class comprises of those who have been bred up since childhood from outside India. They have a view of their country as an exotic place of their origin. The writers of the former group have a literal displacement whereas those belongings of the latter group find themselves rootless. Both the groups of writers have produced an enviable corpus of English Literature. These diasporic writers live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories.

The Indian Diasporic writers, particularly women writers, who stay abroad and write about Indian culture and ethos, have engraved for themselves a place in Indian English Literature. They have explored their intense feeling of immigrant sensibility through their fiction with the help of different aspects of life. In the past, Indians were intellectually fed on the thoughts of Dickens, Scott and the like. Today, people all over the world are being nourished by the writers of the Indian Diaspora namely Amulya Malladi, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anne Cherian, Meena Alexander, Chitra Banerjee and Githa Hariharan etc. Such writers have brought about Indian life and culture to the world outside. Among these writers, Malladi has focused on some of the major diasporic issues. She explores the experience of being caught between two cultures with cultural conflicts, displacement and dilemmas. As a women writer, she views gender from a woman’s point of view and thus extends the boundaries of human experience from different perspectives and dimensions.
Malladi’s novels mainly focus on the themes like family tension, the changing possibilities of memory and the elusive nature of mind, the misunderstandings between two generations, the conflict between modernity and traditional values and the changing status of women from traditional roles to conflicting women characters. The major issues reflected in her works are related to women, their self-actualization, psychological transformation, problem of identity, cultural displacement, issues of gender and culture.

Culture is the context in which a person lives, thinks and feels. It is the collective identity of which everyone is an integral part. Displacement is a key term in post colonial theory which applies to all migrant situations. It refers both to physical displacement and a sense of being socially or culturally “out of place”. Immigrant groups face a number of problems when they try to adjust to a new culture. The immigrants unknowingly imbibe the host culture when cultural displacements occur. Such cultural displacement can be traced in the novel *The Mango Season*. Cultural displacement is a shift or dislocation of a home culture when an immigrant faces an inevitable situation and gradually accepts the host culture. It also means the move of the home culture as a result of contact with a different culture. Cultural displacement can be experienced by an immigrant who is transferred from the native country to any foreign country.

*The Mango Season* is a narrative of how Priya is culturally displaced by the host culture. After seven years in the United States she returns to her home country of India. She feels like a semi foreigner when she enters into her native city Hyderabad. She goes to the Monda Market with her mother to get raw mangoes. After getting the mangoes, they wait for auto rickshaw for such a long time. Finally, an autorickshaw stops in front of them and Priya and her ma get into the autorickshaw. The road is bumpy and the auto rickshaw moves in mysterious ways. She realizes that she cannot drive in India as there are no rules and there never had been. Anybody could make a U-turn anywhere, anytime a person felt like it and crossing a red light was not a crime.
If a policeman caught a person without his driver’s license and registration papers, twenty to fifty rupees would solve his problem. Priya compares her life before leaving for the States and her life later and says “Everything that had seemed natural just seven years ago seemed unnatural and chaotic compared to what I had been living in and within the United States” *(The Mango Season)* 14.

On Priya’s return from the US to India, she finds it very difficult to readjust to the Indian culture. Her parents think she is still single and want her married soon. However she does not find it hard to think that she is unmarried. She is twenty seven and her fear is that sometime soon her mother would find out that she is living in sin with a foreigner whom she intended to marry him. She thinks that life would have been easier if she had fallen in love with a nice Indian Brahmin boy – even better if she had not fallen in love at all with Nick. She knows that her parents, especially her mother would never accept her marriage with a foreigner as it is away from the Indian traditional culture.

Priya thinks of how she had fallen in love. In fact, she had not planned to fall in love with Nick. They met at a friend’s house. Sean was a college friend and his sister was Nick’s ex girlfriend and now “Just a good friend” *(The Mango Season)* 17. As soon as Nick said, “Hello” to her, she had fallen in love with him. She had never before found an American so attractive in her life. She thinks most Indian women are trained to find only Indian men attractive. She even thinks that it may be something to do with centuries of brain washing from elders and well wishers in the Indian society: “I was of course flattered that Nick was attracted to me as well, but I didn’t expect him to pursue a relationship. And I really didn’t expect that I, even in my wildest flights of fantasy, would be amenable to dating him. But he was, and I was. Before I knew how it happened, and before I could think of all the reasons why it was a really bad idea we were dating, we were having dinner together. As if things were not bad enough, we started
to have sex and soon we moved in together and after that everything really went to the dogs because we decided to get married” (*The Mango Season* 17).

The Indian heat is dreadful to Priya and now she sweats in her parents’ home even more, dreading having to tell them about Nick. Her present visit to the Monda Market years ago had never made her sweat profusely like this. She feels as if she has never been through an Indian summer before. To remove her sweat and the two layers of dust that have been deposited on her skin after her trip to Monda Market, she takes a quick bath, puts on a yellow cotton *salwarkameez* to appease Ma and looks up at herself in the mirror: “I winced; I was doing that complaining about India thing that all of us America returned Indians did. I had lived here for twenty years; the place was a hell hole. Guilt had an ugly taste in my mouth. This is my country, I told myself firmly, and I love my country.” (*The Mango Season* 18)

Priya’s family believes that just as they mistrust foreigners, foreigners mistrust Indians. Any negative trait in an Indian immigrant is regarded as due to American influence. Malladi portrays how the American influence culturally displaces the Indians. Though they love each other for years and get married when they go to foreign countries, the immigrants imbibe the host culture and gradually displace their home culture: “Manju and Nilesh were classmates from engineering college in India. They started their romance in the first year of college and survived as a couple through four years of engineering college, two years of graduate school in the United States and a year or so of working in *Silicon Valley* before getting married. But happily ever after had evaded them. They had recently divorced and Priya thinks that she made the big mistake of telling Ma about it. Ma immediately says that it is because of the evil American influence.” (*The Mango Season* 80)

Priya is culturally displaced. The inner conflict within her and the pull of her native land results in more variance and inconsistency. Finally her love for the American boy makes her decide her going back to the host country and she informs this to her family. Though she
has been Americanized she shows her respect and love towards her family like a typical Indian: “I didn’t want to go. I had to go. I didn’t want to go. I had to go. The twin realities were tearing me apart. I didn’t want to go because as soon as I got there, my family would descend on me like vultures on a fresh carcass, demanding explanations, reasons, and trying to force me in to marital harmony with some nice Indian boy. I had to go because I had to tell them that I was marrying a nice American man.” (*The Mango Season* 3)

Priya thinks about the last time she had slept on their house terrace, when she had been twenty years old, ready to face the world with the strength of the innocent. She was gearing up to go the United States; she had gotten her F1 student visa and her bags were packed. She was spending a last weekend at Ammamma’s house before heading over across seven seas to the land of opportunities. She had been so eager to leave, so excited that she had never thought that when she came back everything would be different to her. Priya experiences the feel of a ‘semi foreigner’ in her own country because of the cultural changes and this makes her uncomfortable: As she thinks “This was not home anymore, Home was in San Francisco with Nick. Home was whole Foods grocery store and fast food at KFC. Home was Pier her and Wall mart. Home was 7-Eleven and star bucks. Home was familiar, Hyderabad was a stranger; India was as alien, exasperating and sometimes exotic to me as it would be to a foreigner.” (*The Mango Season* 134)

When she was a child, Priya used to visit her grandparents. Her hands would smell of turmeric and stay yellow for days. She had not done this for so long and she was stung by the loss. She feels she has lost so much since she has left India and she has not even thought about it. She has become so much a part of America that the small joys of dunking pieces of mango inside gooey paste are forgotten and not even missed. She assumes “It was as if there were two people inside me: India Priya and American Priya, Ma’s priya and Nick’s Priya. I wondered who the real Priya was” (*The Mango Season* 69).
The effects of cultural displacement can be indicated while Priya probes into her family with an American view. Like all expatriates, it sounds as if the western culture forms a part of her intellectual make up whereas the Indian culture is a part of her emotional make up. Nostalgia for a mango and the happiness are associated with her longing for India but living in India on a day to day basis has become almost impossible to Priya.

Priya asserts that she has to start living her own life on her own terms and knows for certain that she can achieve her goal easier in the United States than in India for being in her home town stifles her sense of self and independence. The intelligence of Americans ideas makes her think that America is a better choice for her future.

Priya finds it impossible to taste a slice of mango in the Monda Market, though she used to steal mangoes in her childhood days and eat raw mangoes with salt and chilli powder. When her mother picks up a mango and asked the mango seller to cut a slice, Priya looks horrified, at the slimy piece of raw fruit thrust under her nose: “Was she out of her mind? Did she expect me to eat that? My Indian friends who visited India after living in the United States said: “Everything will look dirtier than it did before”. I never thought myself to be so Americanized that I would cringe from eating a piece of mango that had languished in that man’s basket where he had touched if with his hands and I shook my head when the man scratched his hair and used the same hand to find a piece of food between yellow teeth, while he waited for judgment to be passed on his mangoes.” (*The Mango Season* 6)

An identification of Priya with either the Indian or the American life is a frustrating experience. Though she regrets at the separation from the culture of home, she likes to adopt the host culture due to her love for Nick.

Conclusion:

*The Mango Season* explores the subject of the gap between cultures and between generations. The gap has been filled with cultural displacement. Malladi shows how India
slowly moves into modernity, and the cultural displacement and problems are rise between generations. Cultural displacement is the reason for Priya’s social changes and her intellectual changes which make her to argue with her family. As Priya is Americanized in her view her father’s compassion and her grandfather’s manipulation are the sights, sounds and smell of India, the India that is foreign, yet familiar to Priya.

References:

