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An Analysis of Immigrant Characters in Indira Ganesan's Novels

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Abstract

This paper aims at studying the immigrant characters in the works of the non-resident Indian writer Indira Ganesan. Does her immigrant status affect her writings? If so in what way does it get reflected? Do the female characters articulate the author's voice? These are some of the seminal questions raised in this paper. Ganesan makes an excellent attempt at depicting different types of characters who behave differently in a given situation. She tries to establish that it is not possible to create a uniform pattern of behaviour among immigrant characters. She examines cross cultural lives and portrays them as they are in her fictions. Her novels are so close to life and they offer a convincing materials to the readers.

Keywords

Immigrants; Cultural Clashes; Identity Crisis; Assimilation; Indira Ganesan; *Inheritance*; *The Journey*; *As Sweet as Honey*.



Indira Ganesan is an Indian writer, who primarily writes about middle class Indian families who move to the west in search of jobs or better educational opportunities. Her preoccupation is with the new life the west offers, the nostalgic feeling for the past, her characters as immigrants and their struggle to adopt, adapt and adept themselves in the new land. She explores the influences of culture and tradition on immigrant population.

Ganesan has had an interesting life, “There were too many things happening in my life,” says Ganesan. She was among 40 women scholars, scientists and writers who were selected to live and work at Radcliffe College, Harvard University for a year. *Is that Blood on your Forehead?* is her collection of short stories about immigrants. The subject chosen is apt as Ganesan herself is an immigrant. She is a Srirangam-born Tamil who migrated to the US at the age of six. Most of her schooling was done in America. She came back to India to do her Bachelor’s degree in Stella Maris, Chennai. She has experience both as an insider as well as an outsider to write about the Indian Diaspora and their problems. In an interview to Arthur J Pais, the writer talks about a grudge she holds over the years, “I honed my writing but lost my Indian connections”. Ganesan's own mother has helped her find peace and rediscover the roots of Indian tradition and religion. And Ganesan says, “Today I am more Hindu than I was 10 years ago”.

Ganesan’s first novel *Inheritance* revolves around Sonil who is sent to her Grandmother’s home off the Indian mainland. The novel is about the emotional and physical healing of a thirteen year old girl desperately longing for parental love. The story is set in an imaginary island called Pi which stands for Prospero’s island. Ganesan describes Pi as a multicultural place, having had invasions from the Dutch, the French and the British.

Sonil’s father is an American. Her parents decide to stay apart from each other for reasons better known to them. Being distanced from her father at a very early age Sonil develops a deep desire to identify herself with her rejected half. The desire for the other makes Sonil crazy about foreign places, people,

ideas and things. Sonil does not stop there but her first love is an American called Richard. She always has in her the yearning to be white, she tries to take after her father and says, "I read white books, tried to dress more white than brown and in being with Richard, I felt I was choosing white over brown. Yet I liked his whiteness, the sense of the other in him, the foreign, the mysterious." (*Inheritance* 77). Though the possibility of marrying Richard is less, she is eager, but also knows for sure that it is highly difficult to get along with his family, because they were different with their "thanks giving dinners, backyard base ball, first dates and first cars, roots that I didn't have". She also broods that "being half American wasn't enough" (*Inheritance* 115).

Sonil in *Inheritance* suffers hybridity, the neither here nor there feeling. The notion of 'in-betweenness' makes Sonil search her identity in two different and contradictory cultures. She realises a little later "No matter what my affectations. I could only wish to be someone else...with Richard she "saw not only the man, but more: I saw ease, something that had to do with eating hot dogs, sports, strength to lift a hammer as well as throw a Frisbee, animal casualness, American confidence. He was everything that no one in my family was, it was everything I wanted to be" (*Inheritance* 114). When Sonil wears the Ray Bans from abroad which her grandmother gives her telling, "They are to chase foolish thoughts away from your head," she says, "I tried them... I saw things differently through them." Through Sonil's words Ganesan suggests to the readers that the Indian way of looking at life is totally different from that of the west.

Ganesan's second novel *The Journey* is about journeys different characters in the novel undergo and the subsequent changes that happen in them and their lives. In a metaphorical way it talks about life as a journey and how it changes its course based on the decisions people take. The protagonist is Renu Krishnan who lives with her family in Long island in the United States of America. Renu's parents settle down abroad seeking better life and better prospects for them and their children. The mother is confused over how to bring up her children, pan

Indian or pan American. As in many Indian homes, being the head, the father takes the decision; he wants his children to have a scientific bend of mind and they dispose of whatever Indian sentiments they carry with them.

The house changed...with their father's death. The Americanization and Westernization with which he'd tried so hard to shape their lives began to fall away. Aerogrammes from Pi reintroduced myth into their lives, stories he'd banished. From the aunts came good-day charts and advice...The cabinets were filled with strange herbs and roots, medicinal cures and home remedies. Rukmani put away her coordinated pantsuits and wore saris from Lexington Avenue under her lab coats. She curtailed the girls' activities, refusing to allow them dances and late nights (*Journey*, 21).

Only after the sudden death of the father does the mother starts oscillating. Unable to take a decision on her own, she starts relying on advices from her people in her ancestral home in Pi. The girls are restricted to wear clothes approved by the mother. They are denied late night dances, staying over at friend's places and they find it extremely odd when they are strictly monitored. More than Renu it is her little sister Meenakshi who is affected by the recent changes at home. Though her roots lie in the remote island of the Indian sub continent she is an American in heart and soul. She calls herself Manx, discreetly she smokes at school with her friends, cuts her hair short, listens to loud music which relates to her restless spirit.

The settlers develop ambivalent attitudes and multiple identities. "When an original culture is superimposed with a colonial or dominant culture through education, it produces a nervous condition of ambivalence, uncertainty, a blurring of cultural boundaries, inside and outside, an otherness within" (Young, Robert J C 23). When the whole family expected Rukmani's return to her ancestral home in Pi after her husband's death, this uncertainty is what makes Rukmani continue to live as a chemist in Long Island. "...the women are often called upon to preserve their national identity through the restoration of their tradition in their new home" (Eswari C N 72). So when Renu's father dies,

Rukmani falls back into her past, gets instructions from her people back at home of how to run her household here in America. In the words of the sociologist N. Jeyaram, women are the ones preordained to carry the 'socio-cultural baggage to their settler nation. Women wherever they go whatever they become are strictly expected to follow and adhere to the rules laid by the patriarchal society. Thus diasporic women face double marginalisation due to race and gender.

"The multicultural societies of the west have a tendency to stick ethnicity on people, thereby fixing them in their nations of origin and hindering the process of assimilation" (Eswari C N 72). This may be the reason why Rukmani tends to bring up her girls according to the codes and conducts of her home country. So they may be protected from problems regarding marginalisation based on gender and race.

The family is forced to come to their ancestral home in Pi following the death of Rajesh, cousin to Renu and Meenakshi. Manx feels that life in Pi is boring, dull and hopeless. She desperately waits for their return to Long island. The unfriendliness between genders, the conscious efforts people take to avoid befriending someone who is of the opposite gender is strange to Manx. She does a lot of complaining to the family about her displeasure at the Indian way of life. Ironies of cross cultural life, same situation approached differently by different types of people are explored in this novel. To a given situation Renu and Manx react in totally different ways, though they are brought by the same parents.

To assimilate herself into the mainstream culture she calls herself Manx, a new, unique name which wards off her roots and heritage. She even develops a friendship with a much elderly American called Freddie and she shocks and embarrasses her sister by sleeping with him. She does this unheard of act in her family not in America but in Madhupur while going on an inland tour with a small group of friends. Yet again this proves that Meenakshi is not able to disassociate herself from the impact of American casualness.

Contrarily Renu is so self-absorbed, obeys all her mother's rules and is unable to participate in the American social life hence withdraws from it. She

invents excuses to keep herself away from boys and dates. Clinging on to the past hinders the process of assimilation and it is proved in the case of Renu and Rukmani. The west and the east are “...conflicting, competing cultures” and the immigrants end up “...identifying with one emotionally, curious about the other intellectually” (Young, Robert J C 22). The emotional and psychological leaning towards one’s home country is evident in Renu’s and Rukmani’s behaviour.

In *As Sweet as Honey*, Ganesan’s third novel, the central character Meterling moves to London, but leads an unhappy life, feeling neither here nor there. Meterling marries an Englishman by the name Archer who owns a gin factory in Pi. He is an elderly man who dies immediately after their marriage. The poor Meterling carries his child and she is later married to Archer’s cousin with whom she goes and starts her life in London. There in London she is sometimes mistaken as the caretaker of her Anglo- Indian child. She often finds herself lonely, misses her cousins, her family and the traditions left behind.

When talking about immigrant writers Fewzia Bedjaoui says, “...despite achieving literary success in the west, they are compelled to play an ambivalent role of preservers of their culture and at the same time being agents of change” (29). The west also expects the writers to portray India in the shades of sati, dowry, child marriages only to realise and be happy about their cultural superiority. Fewzia continues to say that “...with the increased migration of Indian people to Britain and the USA, as part of the cultural diaspora, there has been a further strengthening of stereotypes of women, which had been inscribed in colonial thought. Those contemporary representations keep on depicting Indian women as being highly traditional, submissive and victims of patriarchal structures, notably arranged marriages as well as of cultural clashes” (29).

There is a common accusation that many Indian immigrant women writers write for western readers. To some extent Indira Ganesan fits the frame because many of her portrayals of characters and descriptions about the country are very often shallow, stereotypical and tailored for the western audience. Ganesan has her limitations, since she was not brought up in India in her formative years and

since she resides outside India now, she has her difficulties in depicting contemporary India. In her novels she talks about an India as reported by her long distance relatives and friends and her earlier little association with the country. Antonia Navarro-Tejero opines that “Distancing lends objectivity, but it can also lead to the ossification of cultural constructs, and even if memory is sharp and clear, the expatriate is not directly in contact with the reality of India.”

When characters from these novels are studied closely, it is found that these diasporic women associate themselves with their settler nations in different ways, some like Manx embrace a transcultural identity by reconciling one culture to another, some like Rukmani subordinate one to another and some like Renu recognize the validity of both, some like Sonil hold on to their hybridity and some women’s search for their identities never come to a close.

The notion of home according to Avtar Brah is “...intrinsically linked with the way in which the processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It relates to the complex political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’ (Brah 194). Likewise Indira Ganesan’s works prove the fact that in spite of having various ethnic origins; all men and women are individuals. The way human nature works is very different and the immigrant characters cannot be typecast as stereotypes. Behavioural patterns of each individual vary based on their mind and not on the borders they live. This is why within the same household the three people of the Krishnan family approach their immigrant status in different ways. It is not possible for the author to establish a similar behavioural pattern. Thus Ganesan relates the complex stories of several striking characters and examines many of the ironies of cross-cultural life in the United States and in Pi through her novels *The Journey*, *Inheritance* and *As Sweet as Honey*.

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