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## **Conflict and Anguish in an Alien Land: How Feminine Writers Cope with Migration**

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### **Abstract**

Social scientists have since long been aware that migration is not just a transfer of place; rather it leads to a veritable metamorphosis of the life of migrants and generates several multi-layered influences on the migrants' psyche. In its implication, this has repercussions on both sides: genesis of chauvinistic feelings among the hosts and, more as a reaction to it, a kind of nostalgic self-identity crisis among the immigrants, the moment they seek to locate themselves within the host social corpora. Such experiences lead the social scientists working in the field to pay attention to the migrants' struggle to get their identity established in the world of the host community. The present paper uses a *Conflict Approach* to the phenomenon of migration. As a vital aspect of the Conflict Approach, the paper endeavours to underline quotidian agonies and struggles depicted in the writings of the female migrants across continents. Our main concerns are: How do these women authors provide deep insights into the migrants' expectations from the host land and the bereavements in the nations left behind? How do they provide glimpses of the conflicts gripping the migrants who find themselves divided between two worlds? How does a trans-national identity transcend its cultural differences with the receiving society? The paper also seeks to find out how migrants struggle to adapt themselves to an alien culture and how they endeavor to resolve the potential, latent and manifest, instances of conflict. Our investigation is based on a *content analysis* of selected pieces of female migrant literature.

**Keywords:** Affinity, Conflict, Cultural index, Food, Identity, Language, Literature, Migration.

### **Introduction**

Far from being a simple transfer of place, any instance of migration leads to a kind of metamorphosis: new experiences are evolved through migration, leading to multiple influences on the people's psyche. The migrant people's reluctance towards adopting a new culture with its behavioural patterns and traditions, and fear regarding the variant folks and the consequent racial encounters, in turn, disturb as much the mental as the physical state of the immigrants the moment they seek to locate themselves within the host social corpora. This has its repercussions on both sides: representations of chauvinistic feelings and experiences among the hosts, and, more as a reaction to it, a kind of nostalgic self-identity among the immigrants.

This, on occasion, results in an action-reaction chain in which the host side's racial chauvinism and the migrant side's assertion of identity feed upon and strengthen each other. Such experiences do lead the social scientists working in the field to pay attention to the

migrants' sense of identity, among other things, and inherent --- occasionally manifest but most of the time latent --- conflicts with the world of the host community to get their identity established. As said, "Such representations are manifesting in cultural artifacts of many kinds --- new forms of dress, food cultures and consumerism, new styles of music and poetry, new political ideologies, and a new form of literary production" (White, 1995, p. 1).

## 1. Migrants in Selected Italian Literary Creations

The present paper adopts a Conflict Approach to the phenomenon of migration. By the term migration, here, we mean permanent migration in which a group of migrants settles in the host country forever. As a vital aspect of a Conflict Approach, the paper endeavors to shed light on the uniqueness of the concerned migrant community in the host corpora through the cultural indices like special and specific culinary art, clothing, and linguistic usages. The investigation of the present study is based on a content analysis of selected pieces of writings by female migrants from across continents. These female authors portray the keenness to adapt themselves to an alien culture, while still holding to their identity. This eagerness for immediate assimilation into the new society is well demonstrated by the title of an exhilarating masterpiece *Come Diventare Italiani in 24 Ore: Diario di un'aspiranteitaliana* (How to become an Italian in 24 hours: Diary of a would-be Italian) by an Indo-Italian author, Laila Wadia. Other illustrations of migrant literature in Italy have been portrayed through some traditional schema-based short stories, like *Salsicce* by Igiaba Scego, *India* by Gabriella Kuruvilla, and *Curry di Pollo* by Laila Wadia; and through a novel *Amiche per la Pelle* by Laila Wadia. Of these three female authors, the first one is an Afro-Italian author and the other two are Indo-Italian ones. The stories mentioned earlier have been taken from *Pecore Nere (Black Sheep)*; an anthology of short stories by women writers. On the other hand, the Indian Diaspora's literature has been depicted through *Mistress of Spices*, a novel by Indo-American author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose short-story collection is titled *Arranged Marriage*.

### 1.1 Why Female Writers: Need for a Discussion

Here our preference for female migrant writers contrasts with the fact that during the 1960s and early 1970s, the phrase "migrants and their families" was a fixed code for "male migrants and their wives and children" (Boyd and Grieco, 2003). The women's movement as migrants, however, remained almost invisible and they were assigned the space inside the four walls of the household. However, "research in the 1970s and 1980s began to include women" (Boyd and Grieco, 2003). Given the worldwide clamor for gender equality, the United Nations Organization declared 1975 as the international women's year and from then onward supposedly feminine voices began to reverberate, providing multi-layered vignettes of contemporary society that started reshaping the contemporary literature of migration. For women authors, the act of writing and their protagonist characters have been the tools to provide deep insights into the expressions of the migrants' affinities, bereavement inside the nations, from which they or their parents came, and their aspirations and expectations from the host society. The anecdotes narrated in the said short-story collection provide a glimpse of the conflicts that are in here in the migrants' identity because they are divided between two worlds. It is a kind of transnational identity that endeavors to get assimilated and goes beyond their cultural differences with the receiving society.

In the case of *Pecore Nere (Black Sheep)*, the very title is a metaphor used to suggest the association of the colour 'black' with the dark and dusky skin complexion of the female authors and their characters. But if their characters have been assumed to be domestic, naïve, and as frightened and coward as a sheep, it is primarily due to the stereotyped image of women. What we may well regard as another important aspect of the Conflict Approach, these female authors also tend to portray the keenness of the migrants to adapt themselves to an alien culture, while still holding to their identity, and how they endeavor to resolve the potential or latent and

manifest instances of conflict.

### 2. Analysis and Outcome

Food, dressing, and language are the cultural indices that have the power to heal or reconstruct the 'fractured' identity. These recurrent themes prevail in almost every piece of migrant literature. "Even psychologists and sociologists have tried to define the effects of food on the human psyche" (Gabaccia, 2003). Massimo Montanari, an Italian food historian affirms that "food is the first way to come in contact with different cultures" (Stano, 2015). It is a key to one's culture and reflects its identity. However, with time one's food choices are shaped by various and varying cultural, historical, social, and economic factors. At the same time, these changes may also reflect the distances moved away from original ethnic perceptions and practices.

#### 2.1 Cultural Indices and Identity Reconstruction in the Italian Framework

In the book with an emblematic title, *Mondopentola* (World Pot) of Wadia, the food and its implications highlight this fact, depicting the significant roles of the protagonists in twelve culinary art stories. This salient gastronomic feature is also at the nucleus of the short story *Salsicce* (Sausages) by Igiaba Scego, one of the four female authors of *Pecore Nere*. What is important here is to note the reciprocal flow and the conflict described in the said story. The protagonist of the story is well aware that eating pork is no less than a sin for a Muslim, but the zeal to gain the recognition of being an Italian lead her to push down her throat --- unwillingly --- what is *haraam* (impure and forbidden) in Islam. Eating a product derived from a pig would mean renouncing her very heritage as a Muslim, a fundamental part of herself, to achieve a new identity. Yet a feeling of guilt always remains there in her subconscious. Her encounter with her religious affiliation --- which gives rise to a kind of 'Islamophobia' --- is not simple by any means. There is a sense of severe disgust towards the pork, felt by the Muslim protagonist when she cooks it and when she somehow swallows it rather than eating it. "I have to eat the sausages while vomiting to prove that I don't have a guilty conscience? To prove that I am a sister of Italy with all the chrism? To get the imprint of *Made in Italy*?" (Scego, 2006). This consumption of sausages --- more precisely say, pork sausages --- for the first time in their life is like furnishing the proof that she is not an alien to the Italian soil. She thus feels having been split between her Italian identity and her Islamic identity, while her Somalian identity gets relegated to the background. But Scego knows that in these very *salssice* lies the solution to the fractioned identity of her protagonist, who is nurturing that very identity. Though Scego is a Somalian by origin, she grew up and studied in Italy and therefore she seems to have an eye to perceive the 'pluridentity' as an asset --- an asset that opens the horizon to see the world from multiple angles, in its multiple facets.

On the other hand, another story from the same collection, viz. "*Curry di Pollo*" (Chicken Curry) by Laila Wadia, portrays the conflict between Anandita, a Milanese adolescent girl of Indian origin, and her own parents' strong attachment to their homeland. For her, they are an obstacle in the way of her complete assimilation into Italian culture. To Anandita, her parents are an encumbrance as they are quite scrupulous about their habits, schemas, and Indian traditions. Not only that, they even seek to anchor Anandita to their origin(-ality), reminding her always where she came from. "My parents are Indian Flintstones who think they still live in a mud hut in the obscure village of Mirapur, in central India, with their two cows and three goats..." (Wadia, 2007). *Curry di Pollo* is the depiction of a drama just opposite to that in the story *Salsicce*. In the latter story, the repulsion and disgust felt by the Muslim protagonist can be visualized through the sausages that she has to consume perforce. Whereas the culinary habits of Anandita's parents are an instrument for their strong bonding with their roots. The episode in which her father exclaims with pride: "We don't like this stuff, we like curry. And we eat with our hands," affirms the common aphorism that "What we eat and wear is what we

are” (Wadia, 2007).

At the same time, the gesture of her mother who prepares pasta to make her daughter happy is an effort on the part of the parents to make the two poles meet; this happens when Anandita invites her boyfriend to her house for lunch along with another Italian girl. (Quite tell-tale here is the fact that Anandita keeps her relationship with the boy a secret from her parents). Eating pasta is the manifestation of integration with the wider recipient society, which Anandita feels necessary to display before her Italian friends, and which is somehow felt needed even by the mother.

## 2.2 Edibles and Attire: Modus Operandi of Cultural Amalgamation

The jingoistic feelings of Anandita’s parents assume deep connotations not only through the culinary art of preparing Indian chicken curry, but also by drinking Indian tea with milk, applying coconut oil on the head, and by Anandita’s mother flaunting gaudy *saris*. “Despite all the time she has spent in Italy, mom still dresses Indian-style --- parading around in one showy *sari* after another. She always does her hair in the Indian way, she always cooks Indian, and she always speaks Indian. I bet that if there were some Indian way to snore, she’d do it” (Wadia, 2007).

From the same collection, even Kuruvilla’s story “India” hints at the affinity of her protagonist to her Indian roots which is manifested in the character of her father who is struggling to preserve the tradition by offering his daughter away to a young Indian through an arranged marriage. “This was father’s outlook who was seeking to re-establish a strange union between the West and the East --- by wearing a shirt and a gold watch above his *lungi*” (Bhardwaj, 2016). Edibles are a part of the stronger imprinting that Wadia sees as a part of the solution, though there exists a dichotomy in the introspections of both of Wadia’s characters. The existential theme of integration into the recipient society assumes connotations of the generational and cultural clashes among parents on one hand, who are the first-generation immigrants, and a teenage daughter, born and raised in Italy. “As a matter of fact, Laila has through her literary-culinary creations put forth the flavor of difference: the difference between the rapport of daughter and parents, the difference between two separate worlds, one, where they are actually living and another where they actually belonged to, the two worlds which are reluctant to compromise” (Bhardwaj, 2016). However, to Wadia, it is no longer a deprivation but an addition. It helps Anandita’s parents to live the experience of difference in a better way. In the daughter’s perception, her mother and father are reluctant to adapt themselves to their new milieu, but in actuality, they have indeed understood that finding the key to multiculturalism is possible only by recognizing the differences as an asset and not by denying the inevitable contrasts.

## 2.3 Humour as a Tool

Wadia’s writings comfortably highlight, and with a touch of hilarity, the urgency the migrants feel to locate themselves in the new society along with a nostalgic sense of the food left behind and of a deeply rooted affinity with the clothes of the land of origin. Her creations gained an unexpected success and enormous popularity partly by injecting humour of farce into the usual themes of migrant literature like women, race, food, clothes, and language. In her writings, humour by no means comes as a piece of buffoonery but as a unique style of terminological exactitude with a tasteful blend of entertainment and morals that keeps the readers engaged and then leaves them wondering and pondering. The author creates such a climate of the tales for the recipient in order to create a predisposition that is favorable to bring out parallelly, the strengths and weaknesses of both, the foreign migrant community and the host.

### 2.3.1 Perplexity in Nomenclatures

Confusion around names and words is a recurring theme in Wadia’s texts; this creates a kind

of laughing zone. To maintain a direct relationship with the reader, there is the adoption of dialogical parts which results in hilarity. For example, Anandita's mother calls her daughter's (boy-)friend 'Makku' or 'Makko' and not 'Marco' which is his Christian name and a very common masculine Italian name. The choice of juvenile-adolescent language implies a willingness to penetrate the new society. In the Wadia stories, the presence of words borrowed from a foreign language enhances the beauty of the language and also enriches it by giving it varicolored cultural connotations. While the word "curry" is Indian in origin, which depicts the blend of Indian gusto of herbs and spices, it has been blended with *pollo*, an Italian term meaning 'chicken'. Wadia's novel *Amiche per la Pelle* also critiques the racial conflict with a lovely sense of farce. In the case of Shanti, who is one of the four protagonists, "the humour in her naïve misunderstanding suggests that the new immigrants need not necessarily understand themselves as the 'other,' as a foreign object. Shanti's failure to "correctly" understand Signor Rosso's racism is a rectification of that racism itself, reversing the direction of the hateful speech" (Anatrone, 2015). By misunderstanding the name of Mr. Rosso as "Signor Cazzo-altrineri," she pronounces it in a way that turns to be humorous, though of course unknowingly. She says: "'My na-me is Shan-ti Ku-mar,' I answered, carefully articulating my words and extending my hand. 'My husband is Ash-ok Kumar. Living on the third floor. Nice to meet you, Mister Shit More-negreos'" (Wadia, 2007). In yet another example, Shanti's Chinese female neighbour calls Signor Rosso "Lo So" (meaning "I know"). It may be noted here that the Chinese people pronounce "R" as "L" due to their specific linguistic structure. Playing upon these very letters, however, Wadia devises a pun for poking fun at the man's unreasonable sense of superiority; showing the migrants a possible way to diffuse a situation of conflict with others.

*Amiche per la Pelle*, as the title suggests, is a contemplation of female friendship ("amiche") and racial difference ("pelle"), and it presents disputable presumptions of provenance and self-fusion in a progressively Italian cultural terrain. It depicts four 'extra-comunitari' women from four corners of the world --- an Indian, a Chinese, an Albanian, and a Bosnian --- interacting with their Italian language teacher. These women are all noticeable by their cultural, racial, and linguistic features in the Italian framework. They are neighbours, living with their husbands and children in the sordid apartments of the same building. The kitchen table provides the ladies the space for learning the themes of teaching and language. Thus, the kitchen table, on which these outsiders are being taught language lessons, becomes a sort of Wi-Fi zone where they come closer to all their cultural and linguistic differences. The text thus strengthens the idea of language acquisition by bridging over and reconciling the differences. "Shanti's only mode of interaction with an 'authentic' Italian is that with her language teacher Laura who not only teaches a language but encourages a particular kind of cultural assimilation" (Anatrone, 2015): one involving traits of independence. "For instance, Shanti feels proud with a new sense of independence when she finally convinces her husband to let her work and earn her own money" (Anatrone, 2015), as Italian women do. Learning the language is, according to her teacher Laura, also learning the "Italian" values of feminism and so forth. In other words, Laura is for immigrant women a means of expression, through which they anticipate the synchronization of their aspirations and ethics with the western ideology of modern women.

### **2.4 Outlining Psychological Therapy in the Indo-American Framework: Cultural Indices**

When it is a question of the role and significance of the element of food, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Mistress of Spices* cannot be overlooked in the context of female migrant literature. "According to ayurvedic concepts, food is responsible for different aspects of an individual including physical, temperamental, and mental states" (Sarkar, 2015). Food is equally responsible for the healing of the human mind. Divakaruni has named the chapters after the names of spices, indicating their origins and special qualities, e.g., *Gingerchai*, *The Island of Spices*, *The Red Spice of Anger*, *The Punishment of the Spices*, etc. Divakaruni through her

novel introduces food as a psychological therapist both literally and metaphorically, synthesizing the elements of magic, superstitious rituals, herbs, and spices.

#### 2.4.1 Spices for Nostalgia Healing

The novelist succeeds in ingraining a dream-like technique in her works, creating an aura of what has been called ‘magical realism’. Through spices, Divakaruni also seeks to preserve her Indian sensibilities in the host country. In the film *The Mistress of Spices*, the character Tilo provides spices not only for cooking but also as a panacea for the feelings of homesickness and alienation which the Indian immigrants narrate to her in her shop of spices and herbs. Food suggests “the sojourners’ ineradicable connection with their homeland and also symbolizes the blending of cultures and the immigrants’ progress towards advancement and assimilation” (Nongmaithem, 2014). Thus, one can feel the importance of preserving one’s foremother’s recipes to connect oneself with one’s immediate past, just the way the character of Anandita’s parents does in Wadia’s masterpiece.

As a matter of historical fact, the entire colonial expedition in South and Southeast Asia began with a quest for spices. “In ancient times it was the spices that lured the West to the East. Thus, the spices symbolize Orientalism and exoticism... The spices, which are like a denomination of the South Asian food, are an important signpost of Indian culture and its heritage” (Nongmaithem, 2014).

#### 2.4.2 Apparel for Emotional Skirmishes

In the story “Clothes” from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage*, the protagonist Sumita’s changing attitudes are underlined by the various outfits that she dons at different stages of her life. This depiction of a constant tussle between her emotions and external pressures is what, in turn, sculpts her new and hybrid identity. Caught in the web of a conflict, she embraces the western culture with a sense of empowerment and her freedom of choice. She wears a *sari* at home which is a unique and important part of her Indian identity. To Sumita, the *sari* is the talismanic mirror of her hopes, her feelings, and her thoughts. The different colours of the *saris* manifest the various stages of her life. When she takes a bath and prepares for the bride-viewing day, she describes her wet and yellow *sari* as a sunflower after rain. It reflects her vision of a new, positive change that is about to come after her marriage and her immigration to America. The *sari* which her father brings for her to wear on the bride-viewing day is pale-pink: the colour of imagination, as she thinks of herself living in a new country with her life partner. While flying to the new land, she wears blue and red, the colours of possibilities, luck, and the sky. She continues to wear a *sari* at her in-laws’ home to demonstrate her attachment to her Indian identity, but gradually she embarks on a transition from an Indian woman to a western lady, as she tries western clothes in her bedroom and dreams of working in her husband’s store. She imagines herself wearing a skirt and blouse while working, thus fulfilling her dreams. “In the mirror, a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirts the colour of almonds” (Divakaruni, 1995). After her husband’s death, she emerges with a new identity --- that of an independent, capable, and strong woman who is ready to face the arguments (with their latent hostility) against her decision. She finally decides to stay and work in America --- just the way she and her husband had dreamt.

#### 2.5 Narrative Artistry Adopted by Migrant Writers

Divakaruni’s novel *Mistress of Spices* and her short-story collection *Arranged Marriages* gained popularity due to her ability to represent the skillful mix of all sorts of nostalgic elements and sufferings in the everyday lives of Indian migrants in America --- like tragic journeys, linguistic estrangement, dislocation, useless search for jobs and houses, racism, domestic violence, social abuse, and much more. Her dream-like technique projects magical elements in her work. The ability to speak with inanimate objects like spices and conch shells has provided

a novelty to her writings. The novelist imbues them with vivacity and brilliance, creating an aura of what has been called magical realism. Significantly, Divakaruni projects myths, traditions, conventions, beliefs, and even dreams as the essential tokens for existence. But the best part is that as the narrative progresses, realistic elements take precedence over the fantasy and escort the readers to the atmosphere where they can have a glimpse of the characters' lives with all their joys, despairs, disappointments, sorrows, and sisterhood.

Migrants are victims of a prejudice --- that the language of the host is available only to the writers of intellectual, affluent, educated classes and that their works belong to the high social strata of the host country to which they have migrated in search of wealth, fortune and prosperity only. That is the reason only migrant writers in the main prefer to communicate with their new folks in the language of the host. The thrust to convey their resentments, aspirations, and possibilities immediately carries more urgency for the readers in the new land, which is possible only through the language which is comprehensible to them at least. Additionally, without losing the heritage language, acquiring the host language leads to fidelity toward both cultures. Therefore, in the works of almost all the migrant writers, whether it is Laila Wadia or Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, there is certainly a significant share of the voices from the language of origin. Yet their preferred inclination is for writing in the language of the host nations.

In Wadia's writings, the presence of a high proportion of voices from the Hindi speaking milieu on the one side indicates a strong attachment to the homeland; on the other, it helps the author to satirize the social structure in a hilarious way, where she is currently living. Similarly, being a Bengali by origin, Divakaruni deliberately inserts Bengali words in between the English ones because she prefers a weaving of the languages.

### Conclusion

Determining and recognizing the pressures and implications result in magnifying the theoretical terrain for international migration in general along with the individual experiences of migrant women around the world. The creation of this new literature is an utter appeal to peep inside the world of a new league of biographers. It creates a special texture that the people of the author's linguistic background may hopefully appreciate. The writers have learned to accept the differences and contrast as a boon, and by retaining the diversity, they find the route to multiculturalism. This is probably the secret of their long survival on alien land while in search of La-La land --- if not with much wealth, then with utmost satisfaction at least. These are the aspects that have given rise to a plethora of literature in sociology too.

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