

Cruel Optimism Leading To Translocation

Sanjaleen Prasad

The University of Fiji, Lautoka, Fiji

Abstract: *Indian migration is estimated at 20 – 25 million worldwide. This includes inexperienced, semi-skilled and able workers moving from India over the past two centennials (Khadria, 2006)[1]. People have desires for recognition, achievement and fulfillment of dreams. In order to reach their desires, they migrate to places which they think are better, create societal and cultural norms and try and come up with strategies which would guarantee a positive result. Berlant terms this as Cruel Optimism, which determines the relationship between desires and hindrances. She illustrates that cruel optimism can occur “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing... It might rest on something like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being” (Berlant, 2006: 21)[2].*

In the course of achieving their desires, many people get disappointed. They can lose their identity, their family, their homeland, and many more. Many a times, it is imagined that life can be better if one moves to another country, after marriage or when the societal norms are refused. This imagined world is different from the real world as desires and longings do not bring satisfaction to everyone.

The aim of this paper is to observe the distinction between the world-as-it-is-imagined and the world as it is constructed in our day-to-day lives. With reference to two fictions of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, this paper will determine that people many times get cruelly optimistic and choose to move to another place. Divakaruni's novels are about Indians moving from India to America, however, the idea is universal and very much relevant to the Pacific, and to transnational identity and diaspora.

Keywords: *Cruel Optimism, desire, diaspora, hindrance, transnational identity*

I. Introduction

Cruel optimism is faced by many individuals, however, many are not able to see their desires and longings as cruel optimism. There is so much emphasis on the term optimism that people fail to realise that being highly optimistic about their desires can at times bring greater problems. This paper seeks to discuss this issue and add to the existing literature on diaspora and transnational identity.

Prior to this, I have written and published papers mostly on women's issues such as women's oppression, gender being a social construct, communal practises regarding gender, to name a few.

II. Cruel Optimism Leading To Translocation

Movement from one place to another has been taking place from generations. People move for many reasons, some of which include: better education, better lifestyle, improved health facilities, freedom from societal and cultural norms and others. It is a desire to have more than what one actually has. However, it is important to note that many times this fascination can be a cause for disappointment and stress, especially when the immigrant realizes that movement to another country does not always fulfill dreams. This is termed as cruel optimism.

Berlant (2006: 20)[2] describes it as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss.” This suggests that people tend to be cruelly optimistic to have a good life, good financial status and better education to list a few. This leads to the greed to achieve these dreams, which later seems unattainable. Despite the fact that some desires cannot be fulfilled, people still stay attached to it and suffer a lot psychologically. Berlant states that in order to lead a better life, people are dying a slow death without realizing this. Nathan (2013)[3] also states that ‘one will not find relatively in any other city than Washington more persons of broken fortune, dead hopes, and bankrupt nervous systems’.

Many other writers have responded to Berlant's cruel optimism. Clough (2011)[4] for example, points out that the ‘object of desire’ Berlant refers to does not only refer to an object but a cluster of promises as well. In order to reach to what they are attached to people displace themselves and do everything to turn fantasy into reality. There comes a time when this desire is not considered to be a matter of choice, but a compulsion. These cruelly optimistic people stay attached to the desire that contributes to the “attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment” (Clough, 2011)[4]. Just like Clough, Will (2013)[5] states that ‘many workers are cruelly optimistic for upward mobility, and this desire is an obstacle to their flourishing’.

Berlant's Cruel Optimism (2006)[2] determines the relationship between desires and hindrances. She illustrates that cruel optimism can occur “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing... It might

rest on something like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being”. People have desires for recognition, achievement and fulfillment of dreams. In order to reach their desires, they often migrate to places which they think are better, create societal and cultural norms and try and come up with strategies and means which would guarantee a positive result.

Problematically, in the course of achieving their wishes, many people get disappointed. They lose their identity, their family, their homeland, and many more. Many a times, it is imagined that life will be better if one moves to another country, after marriage or when the societal norms are refused. This imagined world is different from the real world. Desires and longings do not bring satisfaction to everyone, as argued by Berlant.

The above need to be addressed as it is an ongoing issue in many Indian societies. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has produced novels that are about Indians moving from India to America, however, the idea is universal and very much relevant to the Fijian society.

The aim of this paper is to observe the distinction between the world-as-it-is-imagined and the world as it is constructed in our day-to-day lives. It will precisely focus on ways in which people identify objects of longing and why their relationship to these objects can be characterized as cruelly optimistic. In determining that people can be cruelly optimistic, the paper will draw on examples from two of Divakaruni’s fictions along with diaspora and cruel optimism in the Pacific. Divakaruni employs female characters to show their longing for things beyond their reach. If the women in her novels are optimistic about marriage, independence through migration, and eventually independence through divorce, the emotional and thinking processes that direct them along such experiential journeys need to be untangled and explored. Thus, this paper will endeavour to determine the reasons for which they become cruelly optimistic.

Divakaruni is a creative and celebrated writer who has written some popular novels (Sailaja, 2014)[6]. She is one of the stupendous voices of the immigrant writers. She throws light on the multicultural nature of her characters and amuses a passionate desire to tell a conscientious and inspirational story by highlighting the splendor and charm of Indianness and immigrant life in a foreign land, fighting for their identification (Sundari, 2011)[7].

Sister of my Heart (2000)[8] portrays the story of two friends, Anjali and Basudha. They share secrets, protect each other in times of need and are ready to give up almost anything for each other. Both have lost their fathers in a tragic accident at sea and the mothers are left to take care of them. Finally, marriage is arranged for both and they are wed together on the same day. From then on, they are to live in a new environment with new people and different ways. Basudha remains in India, but Anjali travels to America, where her husband has a job. The fiction suggests that people tend to fantasize as they have this American Dream.

Anjali is the one who has to accept and adapt many different things, such as, new food, new culture, new dressing style and others. In fact, she takes on an entirely new lifestyle. Basudha also finds life difficult at her in-laws because they have many expectations of her. However, she is close to home. Divakaruni is an Indian American, who moved to reside in America when she was still young. She uses the character of Anjali to portray the struggles/adjustments associated with movement to a new land.

Pacific Islander movement has always been a diasporic migration. Voyages have been made around the Pacific for thousands of years, and movement continued long after the first settlement. There is every evidence that migration was multidirectional. Due to this, by late twentieth century, most of the Pacific Islanders lived in a place different from where their ancestors lived. Migration also takes place within island nations, such as ‘from Penrhyn to Raratonga, from village to town in Papua New Guinea, from island to island within Kiribati or the Federated States of Micronesia. Other migrations take Samoans and I-Banaba to Fiji, Niueans to Samoa and Tongans to Hawai’i and there are large movements out of the Pacific Islands to countries on the edges of the ocean’ (Spickard & Rondilla, 2002: 16)[9].

Not only this, Indians started moving to the United States from early 1820. Migration at this time was not high but eventually increased from 1990s. “As of 2013, more than 2 million Indian-born immigrants resided in the United States, accounting for 4.7 percent of the 41.3 million foreign-born population” (Zong & Batalova, 2015)[10].

The United States was known as ‘the Promised Land’ by numerous people over the past four hundred years (Cullen, 2003)[11]. The American Dream as Hochschild (1995: xi)[12] puts it, “is not merely the right to get rich, but rather the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it – material or otherwise – through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success”. The thought of the American dream is connected to everything, that is, from the right to religious freedom to owning a house in the periphery. This inspires feelings ranging from fulfillment to disappointment.

On the one hand, dreaming of an improved life is good, but on the other, it has implications. These implications embrace costs that are usually overlooked. The American Dream takes many forms. It is defined as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man” (Cullen, 2003: 7)[11]. However, what exactly is meant by better, richer and fuller? It can mean more money, better education, sexual expression and no cultural and societal constraints.

Most people are also overly dependent on material possessions. They feel that they can be rich if they have physical objects to show off to others.

One most unsuccessful reverie of living in America is that of equality. People tend to think that America would offer them equal opportunities irrespective of age, race, colour and gender. Conversely, this is not always the case. Cullen (2003)[11] gives examples of African Americans who do not enjoy the benefits of equality in their dream country.

Pacific Islanders also have this dream. If not America, then they long to move to other countries in search of better education for their children, improved lifestyle, freedom, better medical facilities, et cetera. But, according to a research published in 2009, many Pacific Islander households live close to the poverty line in the US (Francis & Lee, 2009[13]). Little do they realize that achievement usually comes at a cost. In trying to reach their fantasies, many people often lose a lot and realization of this comes very late.

Living in a new land away from one's own people can be difficult and frustrating. This is usually the case when the host country is not as one expected it to be and there is some sort of discrimination from the host country.

On most occasions, the migrants are referred to as the 'other' and not given all the rights which the citizens of the host nation get.

Gautam (2013)[14] suggests that discrimination can occur due to language difference and also because the immigrants keep to themselves and do not merge with the host people. In cases where speech and religion are the same, the "difference is in endogamous marriage patterns, practices and ritual performances" (Gautam, 2013)[14].

Despite all these cruelties, people intend to move to a new country where they think life would be better and merrier. The Indians usually encourage their children to move abroad for education and employment. They even tend to look for marriage partners from countries abroad, with the intention of getting a residence visa in another country which would enable them to live in better conditions. The novels of Divakaruni suggest that Indians mostly move to the United States for a better life.

Marriage is another practice which compels women to move to a new home and many times newly married couples decide to migrate to foreign countries in search of new hopes. Most Indians feel that marrying a foreigner of the same religion can prove to be fruitful. They would examine the partner's wealth, education, employment, status and family background before arranging the marriage. According to Jain (online)[15] "many women, Indian or not, whose parents have had a long, healthy marriage hope [their children] will too". It is just that the husbands must be rich, socially cognizant and practical.

Marriage for a woman means moving to her in-laws. As soon as a girl reaches her marriageable age, the elders in the family start searching for suitors. Once a suitable one is found, the girl is married off with the hope that she'll be happy with her husband. This doesn't mean that marriage never works out. There are times when the woman is ill-treated, seen as an outsider, thus the family secrets are not for her and she feels neglected and alone in a new place.

These marriage practices are still seen in the Pacific especially among Indian communities. In this arranged marriage, women are oppressed in physical, social, personal, psychological and universal aspects. They are usually caught between two worlds; one which they cannot totally reject and the other which they cannot easily accept. Most of the time, a woman gets married due to society, family and religion.

In *Sister of my Heart*, it is not very late that we read about the disappointments these two sisters encounter. Anjali sees America through Sunil's eyes. The place seems as amazing as the fairy kingdoms we read about in children's tales. She is told that America will fulfill all her dreams and desires and that she can be anything in America. At first she loves this place as she is allowed to continue her education, has material possessions such as a house and a car and has a husband whom she loves.

However, despite being happy with her marriage, her husband, her college, Anjali feels lonely and misses her home. Her life seems dry, unpeopled and stagnant. She longs for her own house and the noise back in India she once disapproved. She soon realizes that 'marriage is transformation into wondrous and terrifying selves we could never have dreamed.' (Desai, 2000: 163)[8].

Sudha, her childhood friend who gets married to Ramesh in India is also faced with disappointments and is heartbroken on many occasions. She has a mother-in-law who makes life difficult for her, a mother-in-law who demands respect. She is expected to do all the household chores and she does everything diligently as she feels it is her responsibility. When she is unable to conceive for three years, she is forced to see a doctor, a leading gynaecologist and is finally sent to Goddess Shashti's shrine to pray for a child.

Finally, when she does conceive after having her husband checked by the doctor, it is a girl child and she is expected to get an abortion. She is threatened with divorce proceedings. Despite this, she decides to keep her unborn daughter safe and runs away to her mother's home in search for happiness and relief and to be away from 'her heartless mother-in-law and an unsupportive husband' (Desai, 2000: 241)[8]. She is optimistic that she'll be able to overcome the obstacles and be victorious finally.

This can be seen as another example of cruel optimism. This is evident in the sequel novel *The Vine of Desire* (2002)[16]. Sudha travels to America to Anjali hoping to lead an easy and independent life, but misses India and her people. She detests the American television shows, has disapproval for most American women and finds life difficult in order to earn a living for herself and her daughter. Movement for both has been difficult as it meant loss of culture and traditions, family and friends, a colourless life and hardships to survive in a land where the host citizens are unappreciative of the migrants.

Though divorce seemed to be the right thing to Sudha when she tried to save her child, she repents her decision quietly and realizes that she did care about all those things she left behind in India.

Not just women, men also get cruelly optimistic about many things. One example from the novel would be of Sunil, Anjali's husband, who wasn't happy with his marriage even before he got married, but he thought America would solve all his problems. He thought 'love will come after marriage' (Desai, 2002: 193)[14] and that everything will work out in this dream country. It is not long when he realizes that he cannot love Anjali and divorce is the answer for them as well.

The above are just illustrations from works of fiction, nonetheless, the same can be said to be true for the Pacific citizens. The Indian Indenture System started in 1879 which saw mass movement of people of Indian descent. The Indo-Fijians were transported to Fiji to labour on the sugarcane farms when the country was a colony of the British. The British government gave its word that the Indo-Fijians will be equal to the native Fijians, however, this did not happen. Many of the indentured labourers decided to stay back in Fiji, but they were not given any land rights and were excluded from the political and civil rights. Not only this, women were sexually harassed, working conditions were harsh, weather was unfavorable, and most of all, they were separated from families. In short, native interests were protected at the cost of the sacrifices of the Indian settlers. The question is did these travelers know that life would be such in the faraway land.

The reason for people's movement has always been 'expulsion' and/or 'attraction', where expulsion is due to shortage of food and other socio-economic factors (Gautam, 2013)[14]. 'Indian Diaspora today has reached the mark of more than 25 million, dispersed around the globe in more than 75 countries' and 'it is the third largest diaspora after the British and the Chinese (Gautam, 2013)[14]. Whatever the reason for movement, the diaspora Indians have to either assimilate or integrate. They always try to maintain their culture and connection with their home land through remittances, conversations, visits and transnational activities. Nevertheless, diaspora is not always gratifying. The migrants have to face some form of prejudice by the citizens and culture of the host country.

Pacific migration has also seen an expeditious inflation in the mobility of Fijians to Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand in the mid 1960s. This surge in migration was due to the increasing political and economic problems in Fiji. Migration increased rapidly as a consequence of the 1987, 2000 and 2006 coups. However, migration was not only motivated by the political crisis, but a downturn in the garment and sugar industries. It has also taken place within the Pacific where people move for better social and economic opportunities temporarily, meaning they intend to return to their homeland.

Identity becomes an essential issue for all those 'whose land of residence is not their land of reference' (Rynkiewich, 2012: 287)[17]. They face dissimilar problems than the people back at home and most commonly their identity takes a different form than in the homeland.

III. Conclusion

Conclusively, it can be stated that this paper serves as a wake-up call to all those people who think desires and longings can always be fulfilled. People all over the globe are cruelly optimistic at one time or the other. However, their expectations and dreams are not always fulfilled and this leads to disappointments, heart break and broken dreams. Being optimistic is a positive trait people possess, but being cruelly optimistic is what people need to be aware of. Having a desire for a better life in a new country is not bad. It should not be condemned, but whether a person is able to achieve his/her dream is yet another question. The truth remains that all immigrants are not able to flourish in the country they move to. The problem of pursuing a dream is that everyone does not see it in the same manner. *The Female Complaint* (Berlant, 2008)[18] argues that "tomorrow is another day" and there is nothing wrong if people live with desires of a good life.

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