

# A Study of Cultural Dichotomies due to Social Displacement in Select South Asian Migrant Narratives

**BIBHUDATTA DASH**

Assistant Professor

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences

Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, Nagpur

South Ambazari Road, Nagpur, Maharashtra – 440010, India

Email: dr.bibhudattadash@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-3880-4739

## Abstract

In this research, cultural dichotomy is understood to be a key psychosocial outcome post migration. Hence this paper discusses the cultural aspects like language, food, dressing, as well as race, economy, and gender which essentially contribute to the social and psychological differences among migrants. This paper shows how the dissimilar nature of cultures and lifestyles between the homeland and the host land cause cultural dichotomies among migrants. Its works towards understanding the roots of cultural dichotomies to help the migrants improve the quality of their lives thereby making them evolve from being cultural to transcultural beings. Further this research contributes towards breaking the existing stereotype - of migration being a male centric activity - by studying migration of women in different contexts in literature written by female migrant writers of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Migration, Culture, Society, Dichotomy, South Asian

## Introduction:

Human migration can be viewed as a part of the general evolutionary process (Pryor, 1975). The evolution of each new culture roots back to the assimilation of socially displaced individuals (migrants) who shared a particular space at a particular juncture of time. Thus, every new culture is a constructive by-product of the process of migration. Hence, culture as a “strategy of survival” is transnational by nature (Tiwari, 2013). The contemporary cultural discourses, thus, are rooted in the spatiotemporal histories of cultural displacements.

Every culture, though different it might be from the others, possess some similarities with the others. Similarities might exist between cultures in certain food habits, rituals, etc; however, the differences that exist in the ‘ways of their life’ are many. These differences are either ‘real’ or ‘imagined’. The ‘real’ ones are the “differences that can be found in the reality of languages, histories, and social and political institutions” (Longxi, 1998) whereas the ‘imagined’ ones are the differences that are constructed “by pushing difference of degree to the absurd extreme, by imagining cultural values as uniquely one’s own and the essence of an alien culture as whatever stands at the opposite from one’s self” (Longxi, 1998). Hence, “owing to the deeply conservative and ethnocentric nature of cultural systems in isolation as well as to the attractiveness of exoticism, all cultures tend to engage in the construction of such myths of cultural difference...” (Longxi, 1998). The construction of cultural difference works on the principle of binary opposition. “The contrastive principle imposes a logically necessary exclusion on both sides of the dichotomy” (Longxi, 1998). In the words of John M. Steadman (1969), Professor Emeritus of English, University of California: “To define the Orient, they contrast it with the West. To elucidate European civilization, they emphasize its opposition to Asia. In their hands, the terms become mutually exclusive--what is true of the one cannot be true of the other” (p. 15).

Different cultures are often set up in a mutually exclusive dichotomy to facilitate conceptualization of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ that promotes the cultural differences (Longxi, 1998). These differences are experienced in most aspects of life starting from language, food habits, and sense of dressing to fierce situations like poverty, racism, and gender issues. These differences collectively give rise to cultural dichotomies. This research paper aims to discuss these differences in the above mentioned aspects between Eastern Cultures (Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi) and the Western Cultures (British and American) one after another by drawing references from

select migrant narratives of Bangladeshi British writer Monica Ali, Pakistani American writer Bapsi Sidhwa, and Indian American writers Jhumpa Lahiri & Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

### **Dichotomous Language and Migration:**

Sharing of thoughts is one of the more important ways that brings people closer. Language being the carrier of thoughts plays a great role in connecting people across cultures. According to Sociologist Ruben G. Rumbaut (1994): “Language is also closely, and affectively, connected to the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity - both within and without the family” (p. 779). ‘Common language’ as a code helps people of varying cultures to communicate with each other; but beyond the basic purpose of being the vehicle of thoughts, language also reflects the impact of one culture over the other.

When a migrant speaker acquires and speaks the native language – the diction, speech pattern, grammatical connotations and syntax of his/her first language influence the acquiring of the second. They are caught up in the dilemma of ‘sticking to the pattern of expression with which they have grown up’ and ‘following the new pattern of expression in front of them’. This is where the dichotomy begins in the personalities of the migrants that gradually create in them a different facet to their existing self. In *An American Brat* when Feroza replaces ‘yes’ with ‘yup’ her uncle feels disgusted and hurt, and tells her: “What’s this new ‘yup-yup’ business you’ve learned? You’re not a puppy!” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 76).

Language is the carrier of cultural codes and values. In Indian culture, people never say ‘goodbye’; Indian languages do not represent a culture of parting it’s always a culture of meeting; so also is the case in most Eastern cultures. Hence, instead of goodbye they say “I’m coming” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 37). On the contrary, the Western culture as seen in the select novels has a different approach towards parting, as the way of speaking is often determined by the cultural use of language. In the East, business is not just transaction of money, but transaction of emotions as well; hence, people seldom use words like ‘buy’ while conversing with shopkeepers, whereas in Western culture they do. Thus, when people from different cultures communicate, it is found as often creating misunderstandings between them. Feroza’s conversation with a storekeeper serves as a befitting example to this situation. In America after selecting a product when Feroza asks the shopkeeper: “May I have these, please?” The shopkeeper replies: “You may not. You’ll have to pay for it. This isn’t the Salvation Army, y’know; it’s a drugstore” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 150).

Every language comes with its specific range of paralinguistic features. So when a non-native speaker of another language communicates in the native language, variations come into play. While describing a migrant character, Ali emphasises on the pronunciation of consonants by writing: “He had a cauliflower ear, sharp Slavic cheekbones and an even sharper accent, the consonants jangling together like loose change” (Ali, 2009, p. 14). As the migrants are from a different language speaking background, at times it becomes difficult for them to understand the pronunciation of the native speakers. In *The Lowland*, Gauri is seen as facing the dilemma of being unable to understand the local news on radio. Even though “she’d studied at Presidency, and yet she could barely understand the broadcast” (Lahiri, 2013, p. 125).

At times, foreign language itself confuses the migrants in understanding and using it. Not just in terms of pronunciation, but also in terms of grammatical rules, their native tongue always plays as a strong intervening factor in acquiring and using the second language. In *The Namesake*, on being asked, “Hoping for a boy or a girl?” by the nurse, Ashima replies: “As long as there are ten finger and ten toe” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 7). When the nurse smiles, “suddenly Ashima realizes her error, knows she should have said “fingers” and “toes.” This error pains her almost as much as her first contraction . . . But in Bengali, a finger can also mean fingers, a toe toes” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 7). Hence, Lahiri’s character Ashima gets caught in the dichotomous aspects of language – a common dilemma for all second language speaking migrants.

### **Food Cultures and Migration:**

Apart from language, food is essential for life and every culture has its own eating habits. According to food critic Pamela Goyan Kittler et al. (2012):

“The development perspective of food culture suggests how social dynamics are paralleled by trends in food, eating, and nutrition. It is useful in conceptualizing broad trends in cultural food habits that emerge during structural changes in a society” (p. 11).

Eating habits depend on a variety of factors including religion, climatic conditions, and geographical location. The food habits of people are hence seen as different across cultures. When people migrate, they discover an array of food which they could never think of eating on regular basis in the past, which makes them surprised yet curious. When Feroza reached America, she could not believe her good luck with regard to food. "It was an extravagant bonus – like so many of the unexpected delights her visit to America was to provide. She had presumed that canned foods like olives, mushrooms, condensed milk, asparagus, clams, were as precious and rare in America as they were in Pakistan, to be served up only on special show-off occasions" (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 113); whereas in America those were the principal food that she had to survive on.

In cultures, specific to certain religions like Islam, drinking of alcohol is considered a profane affair. But, when people migrate to a country where drinking is ingrained in the fabric of society, they end up drinking. In the words of Chanu: "It's part of the culture here. It's so ingrained in the fabric of society. Back home, if you drink you risk being an outcast. In London, if you don't drink you risk the same thing" (Ali, 2003, p. 110). In *An American Brat*, after coming to America even a traditional Pakistani like Zareen defends Bhutto's drinking habits by saying, "You know what he said when they accused him of drinking: 'Yes! I drink! Yes, I drink whiskey: not the blood of poor people!'" (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 12).

Eating mannerisms also vary from culture to culture. Some cultures like their food bland whereas others like their food hot and spicy. Subhash in the dinner cooked by his American companion Holly "ate pieces of chicken cooked in mushrooms and wine, served with bread warmed in the oven instead of with rice. The taste was complex, flavourful but without heat of any kind (Lahiri, 2013, p. 71). Being an Indian, Subhash is more acquainted with heat in the food, hence, he feels unsatisfied after the meal with Holly. Eating mannerisms are not just reflected in the use of condiments but also in the style of eating. Americans are more familiar to eating with fork, knife, and spoon whereas people in India grow up eating with fingers. These differences create cultural dichotomies among the migrants and the natives. When after a long time Subhash returns home, "the freedom to eat with his fingers" (Lahiri, 2013, p. 92) and drinking water with a heavy cup whose rim is slightly too wide for his mouth poured from a black clay urn in the corner of his room, gives him the satisfaction that the sophisticated dinners in America could not (Lahiri, 2013, p. 92).

People across cultures have several preconceived notions regarding the food practices of other cultures. Such as, the people in the West think that Indian's are vegetarians. In *The Namesake*, at Ashima's buffet when Judy "bites into something that turns out to be a shrimp cutlet" she whispers to her husband: "I thought Indians were supposed to be vegetarian" (Lahiri 2003, p. 39). Food habit also serves as the parameter for people of one culture to determine the identity of another culture. *In the Kitchen* has a reference to one such notion:

"Let's see, you could say, for instance, that the French are more decidedly . . . French in their identity. But why should that be a good thing? It depends what you prefer. We got the Beatles. They got Johnny Hallyday'. 'And we've got chicken tikka masala', said Gabriel, 'and they've got decent food'" (Ali, 2009, p. 364).

Food, as a way of life, often faces sarcasm. People who do not identify with a particular food habit of another culture at times look down upon it and pass sarcastic comments. Ice-candy man, a Muslim, says to his Hindu friends: "You Hindus eat so much beans and cauliflower I'm not surprised your yogis levitate. They probably fart their way right up to the heaven!" (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 97). These kinds of cultural differences and comments not only create dichotomy but also brings disharmony among people of different cultures.

### **Dressing Mannerisms across Cultures:**

Dressing essentially is influenced by cultural practice and traditions of a society. From the observations of Professor of Library Services at Hofstra University, Elena Cevallos et al (2007):

"Dress is an important component [*sic*] of our daily lives. Through clothing, individuals establish their sense of self as well as their place in society."

Every culture has its own unique dressing mannerisms. The style of dressing varies from culture to culture. In America, as depicted in *The Mistress of Spices*, one can see "the professor types in tweed with patches on jacket elbows or in long skirts in earnest earth colours"; one can see the American Krishna devotees "in wrinkled white kurtas with shaved heads", and one can see "backpack-toting students in seldom-laundered jeans" (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 67-68). The three categories of people described by the author not only represent the cultural diversity of America but also presents differences amidst similarities and similarities amidst differences in terms of dressing

across cultures; as one can see the dressing traits of all three mentioned category of people in East as well, but with little variations.

At times, social events and practices also determine dressing mannerisms. As per cultural practice in the 1960s, women were not allowed to wear frocks in Pakistan. Women had to wear burqas that hid their legs and faces:

“When I was her age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinnaird College. And that was in '59 and '60 – fifteen years after Partition! Can she wear frocks? No. Women mustn't show their legs, women shouldn't dress like this, and women shouldn't act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the *mullahs* should wear *burqas* and stay within the four walls of their houses!” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 10).

Women in those days dressed under prescribed parameters of the then Pakistani society. American culture is diametrically opposite to this, which makes the American aspirant Feroza retaliate to the ways of life her mother used to live.

Dressing as a part of culture keeps changing with time. Ali's character Chanu “no longer wore pyjamas”-- that he used to wear after returning home. With time, he preferred wearing lungi and vest (2003, p. 184). The manner in which people make their cloths is also a part of cultural practice. In America people barely tailor their cloths; dresses are available readymade for all sizes as seen in Lahiri's novel. When Subhash tells this to his parents, “the news that there was nowhere to have clothes tailored in Rhode Island, that American clothing was all ready-made” comes to his parents as a surprise (Lahiri, 2013, p. 112). Apart from wearing cloths, nudity in personal spaces is also blended with cultural practice and varies across cultures. In the West, as depicted in the novel *An American Brat*, people do not shy away from walking nude in front of their lovers; whereas in Pakistan people are born and brought up in a conservative approach, where nudity is considered to be too private to be displayed in front of anyone other than the self. The nudity between partners lasts just for the duration of sex, after that people choose to remain clad with their attires. This could be seen in *An American Brat* where Feroza's boyfriend David:

“Who might have wandered naked in his room before an American girl, didn't. Feroza dressed and undressed behind doors and beneath bed sheets. David never saw her, except for brief moments, naked, and then her voluptuous warm nakedness, her swelling breasts, were imprinted in his mind as the essence of desirability. Both were intrigued by the otherness of the other – the trepidation, the reticence imposed on them by their differing cultures” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 256).

Clothes hence, have larger connotations across cultures. Clothes do not just reflect style, religious and cultural practices; it is also a way of covering one's nudity.

### **Socioeconomic Factors across Cultures:**

Like dressing, economic condition as a social factor, varies across cultures. Economic condition determines the lifestyle of people; and lifestyle being an ingredient of enculturation makes economics a distant yet important part of cultural industry and cultural transactions. Poverty is seen as one of the major push factors for migration. Poverty has different definitions in different countries. Depending on the overall economic condition of a country, people get stratified as rich and poor. When migrants settle in a country of better economy, they sense the extent to which poverty stricken their homeland is. Feroza in America feels the poverty of Pakistan to be “a galloping, disfiguring disease” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 238-239). To her, the poverty stricken people in America seem to be richer than the Pakistani regular mass. In Sidhwa's words:

“Every kind of poverty in the United States paled in comparison. Yet it did not mean that the condition of the poor in America was trifling, or the injustice there less rampant. Feroza tried to clarify her thoughts. Poverty, she realised, groping for expression, was relative” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 238-239).

Her friend who was at Kinnard College describes a house she had visited in one of the poorest ghettos in Harlem; the family had electricity, running water, a fridge, and a car. The concept of refrigerators and cars stood at the very limit of extravagance in comparison to the people who dwelt in the rag-and-tin lean-tos and in infested, stinking *jhuggees* without bathrooms or electricity, undeserving of sympathy in Pakistan (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 238-239).

Citizens of the third world grow up with fanciful notions about the economic condition of developed countries. But at times, the reality surprises them when they migrate to live in one of those countries. In *An American Brat*, “Feroza was used to the odor of filth, the reek of poverty; sweat, urine, open drains, rotting carrion, vegetables,

and the other debris that the poor people in Pakistan had become inured to” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 81). But those were smells and sights she was accustomed to and had developed a tolerance for. But, the pavement of America where she found her surrounded with “alien filth, a compost reeking of vomit and alcoholic belches, of neglected old age and sickness, of drugged exhalations and the malodorous ferment of other substances she could not decipher” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 81); it disturbed her psyche; it seemed to her they personified the callous heart of the rich country that allowed such savage neglect to occur. “The fetid smell made her want to throw up. She ran out of the building, and leaning against the wall of the terminal, began to retch. . .” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 81). After she turned right on the Forty-second street, Manek said, “So, you’ve seen now, America is not all Saks and skyscrapers” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 81).

As the perception and preconceived notions of the migrants make them see a flowery image of the host nation, similarly the preconceived perceptions of the people in the host nation makes them discriminate the migrants on the basis of their race. Migrants face ethnic and racial discrimination on a daily basis. In the words of Ali Soyly, Professor of Management, School of Business, Cameron University, and Tom A. Buchanan, Manager, School of Business, Cameron University:

“Ethnic discrimination starts with the national identification of individuals on the workplace during the application process, during interviews, or even during the course of the individual’s employment. It is also very common to identify persons based on their appearance, beliefs, religions, native languages, and accents. However, subjectively placing national labels on persons and stereotyping them accordingly is wrong and is often the foundation for discrimination” (2013, p. 851).

Racial discrimination often creeps into the lives of dark skinned migrants in countries with fair skinned natives. Due to the colour of their skin they have to go through suspicion, hatred, and ill treatment in their host nation so much so that at times to escape the humiliation they wish to become light skinned: “*I must be proud like Mother says to be Indian, I wish for that American skin that American hair those blue American eyes so that no one will stare at me except to say WOW*” [Italics in the original text] (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 63).

Migrants, in spite of their service, are withheld from the opportunities they deserve. Like Ali’s character Chanu, they remain helpless. In the words of Ali’s character Nazneen:

“My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man. He says that if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem” (Ali, 2003, p. 72).

It is seen from the novels that, not just in work life, but also in social sphere, in market place, or on the streets they face attacks and slangs like “*Bloody bugger Hindoostani. Fucking Dothead. Paki go home*” [Italics in the original text] (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 54). The conditions of racial discrimination have become worse after the 9/11 attacks: “All Eastern things are associated in people’s mind with 9/11” (Divakaruni, 1023, p. 185). Anyone with brown skin is checked with extreme caution in the American airports. In *Oleander Girl: A Novel*, Korobi and Vic going through the process of security check at Airport, clearly shows the condition of eastern migrants in the post 9/11 America:

“Welcome to flying while brown in post 9/11 America!” “Doesn’t it bother you, being treated like this? You’re a US citizen. You shouldn’t have to –” Vic shrugs. “I choose my battles. Things could be worse” (Divakaruni, 2013, p. 183).

### **Gender and Cultural Dichotomies:**

Apart from class and race, every society is divided by gender. In most societies women are given secondary status; they are dominated by men. But, according to the degree of freedom enjoyed by the individuals of a society, the ratio of dominance keeps varying. In the words of Political Philosopher, Susan Moller Okin: “Virtually all of the world’s cultures have distinctly patriarchal pasts,” she asserts that some cultures – mostly, she says, Western liberal cultures “have departed far further from [these pasts] than others” (Volpp, 2001). In some societies women enjoy a better state of life, where they live their rights and are free, where as in others, they remain emancipated. Male chauvinism becomes a significant part of such societies. In *An American Brat*, it is seen how, in the East, it is believed that the Western culture pollutes the minds of young girls and makes them wayward: “What with the onslaught of television and the American and British videos, it was hard to keep young girls as innocent as one might wish” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 17).

In Pakistan, every Parsee girl grows up warned of the catastrophe that could take the shape of a good-looking non-Parsee man (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 17). From their childhood, girls are threatened and trained not to marry outside the community. This condition applies to girls in India as well. In the name of ritual, women are not allowed to get inside temples during the period of menstruation: "Zareen could not accompany her because she was having her period; her presence would pollute the temple" (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 40). These prohibitions and secondary treatments torture women making them seek for a better life, but most times they end up by being subjugated by their societies. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Ahuja's wife thinks of restarting her life again in America, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling what a woman's duty is and how a woman should act. But as voices, she had carried them all the way inside her head to America. They never seem to leave her even in the distant land (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 102-103).

In *Brick Lane*, Hashina gets insulted in Bangladesh for working with men. In her words:

"They say it sinful for men and women working together. But they the only ones sinning take Gods name give insult to us and tell lie" (Ali, 2003, p.152).

Even in America, where women enjoy their equal rights with men, the migrant Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi women get to face their fate of being subjugated by the male members of their families. They are not allowed to look good, marry with their choice, or even work with men. In *The Mistress of Spices*, during a conversation with Tilo, Geeta's grandfather says:

"Maybe OK for all these *firingi* women in this country, but you tell me yourself *didi*, if a young girl should work late-late in the office with other men and come home only after dark and sometimes in their car too? *Chee chee*, back in Jamshedpur they would have smeared dung on your faces for that" (Divakaruni 1997, p. 85).

These words reflect the mindset of certain Eastern communities who still believe in clipping the wings of women rather than making society a better place for them.

Migrant women, who have travelled all the way from Bangladesh to London, as seen in Ali's novel, remain exiled inside the four walls of their homes. They are questioned by their husbands: "Why should you go out? If you go out, ten people will say 'I saw her walking on the street'" (Ali, 2003, p. 45). To justify his statements, in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's husband Chanu adds:

Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do? Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops. Anything you want, you only have to ask. I don't stop you from doing anything. I am Westernized now. It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck. And anyway, if you were in Bangladesh you would not go out. Coming here you are not missing anything, only broadening your horizons (Ali, 2003, p. 45).

In the name of freedom and with the promise of a better lifestyle, all they give their wives is a lifelong imprisonment in a far distant land.

According to the report of European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2010):

Available data indicates that migrant and minority women occupy the least-paid and least-skilled jobs in the most marginalised segments of the labour market. Often, their employment opportunities are restricted to work in the domestic sphere, with a high risk of insecurity and, often, irregular working conditions. In addition, discrimination experiences of migrant and minority women are different according to the various social and legal positions they occupy and to the attitudes of the majority population they are confronted with (p. 8).

Women in most Eastern countries are not given freedom. They are kept covered with purdahs and burkas in the four walls of their homes; and are outcasted and treated cruelly if they move out, as is evident from the migrant narratives. In Pakistan "the victim of rape ran the risk of being punished for adultery, while the rapist was often set free" (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 237). Sidhwa gives an example of how women are treated in Pakistan:

". . . Our elders used to say, keep the girls buried at home. Do you know your grandfather would not allow even our pigeons to stray? If one of the birds from our loft spent the night on another's roof, we'd have pigeon soup the next day. He'd have its throat slit!" (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 121).

Mere arrival at America, at times gives the feeling of freedom to women migrants who live exiled in their countries as the novels depict. The thoughts that they will no more be judged by people around them; they can walk with their faces uncovered; and they can make their own choices on the basics of their lives, makes them elated. In *An American Brat*, Feroza's arrival in America makes us understand this situation in the words of Sidhwa:

“The liberating anonymity she had discovered within moments of her arrival at Kennedy airport, when no one had bothered to stare at her and the smoky-eyed American she was talking to, still exhilarated her. In Lahore these contacts would have been noticed and would have drawn censorious comment. Within the heady climate of her freedom in America, she felt able to do anything” (Sidhwa, 1993, p. 216).

On the contrary, at other instances as discussed above, it can be seen how in spite of the available freedom in the new land, women still suffer; this brings in the dichotomy in their minds.

## Conclusion

Thus, when migrants arrive in the host countries, they come across new geographies and cultures. With time, they gradually discover the differences between their own cultures and the host culture. The socio-cultural parameters as seen from the migrant narratives together bring about the contexts for the construction of cultural dichotomies that redefine the life of migrants in the far away land.

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