

Rootlessness and Search for Self-identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

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The theme of rootlessness and the search for self-identity have occupied the imagination of many writers in the course of literary history, either because they are forced to leave their native country for political reasons and persecution or because they feel estrangement with their societies and choose to live elsewhere. Likewise, the emigration culture has mushroomed in the Caribbean territories and the Caribbean peoples have opted for the United States, United Kingdom or Canada. Some of the Caribbean immigrants, who have settled in the US, have become eminent and illustrious with their memorable contributions to the American society through arts, politics, education, sports and other professions. Journey remarks that in Caribbean Literature, migration, displacement and rootlessness are constant themes. He further adds,

Whether a voluntary or forced geographical exile, a threatening political or economic situation, or an internalized exile stemming from cultural and linguistic upheavals creating a situation of uprooting, exile must be understood as a primary motivating factor in the development of both the character and the narrative in Caribbean literature.(1)

Immigration from the Caribbean islands takes innumerable forms - people fleeing political mayhem in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic; the economic immigrants from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Puerto Rico; or

people leaving for family reunification reasons. Caribbean immigration to the United States, which hosts a wide diaspora of cultural diversities, has significantly increased after World War II due to the revocation of Jim Crow laws and the dismantling of racial bigotry. However, owing to their nonwhite ethnicity, when the Caribbean immigrants are incorporated into the US social system, they are naturally endorsed with the minority status.

When Edwidge Danticat, who is a naturalized American citizen of Haitian descent, moved to the United States, she experienced many struggles common to the immigrants. She has to learn a new language, exist in a new physical environment and comprehend the new place, which has a diverse social structure. It is a great cultural shock and it is as if she were taken from one planet and put in another one. Like many writers of the different diasporas of the world, Danticat writes about her place of origin through the lenses of nostalgia and longing, as if writing about the paradise being lost. Munro points out that:

The alienations, dislocations, and split sense of belonging that exile inevitably brings seem in turn to have heightened her sensitivity to repression and exclusion, be it of the young Haitian schoolgirls in New York, of the Haitian “boat people,” of children whose childhoods are marked by poverty, of Haitian prostitutes on the streets of New York, of first-generation Haitian exiles, of the victims of Duvalierist violence, or of the migrant Haitian cane workers of the 1930s. (216)

Breath, Eyes, Memory chronicles the Haitian-American experience of a Haitian girl, Sophie, being uprooted to America. It portrays how Sophie copes up with the shocks and thrills of being in a new place. Being severed from one’s roots is a very thorny issue and it was an experience which Danticat shares with Sophie. In an interview to Garry Pierre-Pierre, Danticat recalls,

The first time was when my mother left, when I was 4. . . . I remember vividly being yanked from her as she was getting on the plane. The second time was coming here. My uncle had a laryngectomy. At that time I was the only person who could read his lips and understand what he was saying. Without me he would have had no voice. (91)

The immigration from her homeland to America causes psychological and physical injuries to Sophie and she has a nostalgic link to her land of origins. In an interview with Alexandre and Howard, Danticat tells, “One of the most visible effects of migration is how it changes family dynamics, how we lose familial connections - sometimes with extended family members, sometimes with immediate family members when we migrate” (166).

The departure from Haiti is perceived by Sophie as a punishment, a twist of fate that tears her apart from the only place she knows. She feels that she is separated from the warm familiarity of her aunt, Tante Atie’s in Haiti and sent to New York to live with her biological mother. When she is told that she will have to leave Haiti for New York, she wishes that everything disappears and she is unable to eat the bowl of food provided by Tante Atie. Sophie “reacts to her dislocation by withdrawing from the world which until this time had seemed so familiar, so unchangeable [O]nce she is in the United States – a place her mother describes to her as a sort of paradise – Sophie becomes bulimic” (Chancy 93). The United States is not a Garden of Eden to Sophie; there she hungers for the love of her true mother, Atie. In the essay, “Haitian Dream, Brooklyn Memory”, Paul Moses observes that, “Sophie loves the yellow daffodils, the smell of cinnamon rice pudding, the plantains, the yams, the magical stories and games of childhood in Haiti. And she loves her Tante Atie, who raised her” (94). Mackay makes a similar observation. To Sophie “. . . the island seems a paradise of boungainvillea, poincianas, and the unconditional love of Tante Atie” (90). On the

other hand, New York City seems a mean place that has worn out her mother and Sophie is distressed by the traumas and nightmares of immigrant life.

Immigration breaks down families. Talking about her brother's and her separation from their parents, Danticat says to Margaria Fichtner that the separation was unpleasant as she did not conceptualize that they would ever be together. Though there were contacts through photos, tape messages and phone calls, it did not in any way assuage her agony and when the family was reunited, there were two US-born little brothers. In the same interview, she recalls,

I was very, very nervous. I didn't know these people. I felt like I was adopted. And when I got off the plane I remember going through the doors..., and then there was this sort of huddle of people surrounding us. And not really knowing what to do, you kiss them and say hello, but what then? Imagine thinking, 'Gosh, this is the rest of my life' and feeling unsure about the whole thing. (86)

Once in Brooklyn, Danticat feels lost; the same feeling, she depicts in her portrayal of Celianne in *Behind the Mountains*.

Breath, Eyes, Memory narrates the yearning of a child as being separated from its parents. Everyone knows, "A child belongs with her mother, and a mother with her child" (*Breath* 14). However, when parents migrate, circumstances compel them to leave their children behind. Martine leaves Sophie behind because she does not know about the place she is going. Atie explains to Sophie, "She left you because she was going to a place she knew nothing about. She did not want to take chances with you" (20). Sophie's apprehensions and fears about this new and foreign land are portrayed in the scene at the airport involving her first encounter with her mother's car. Martine's car is old and in a bad condition. Its faults include a broken windshield, peeling paint and torn cushions. Sophie is hesitant to enter the

car, just as she feels insecure to enter a new life and the new world seems to be full of shortcomings and faults. In the end, Sophie is forced to enter the car, just as she is forced to make the transition from her native island to the US.

Sophie “suffers the effects of geographical, cultural, linguistic and affective dislocation” (Marcos 130). She finds it difficult to adapt to a new language, a new city and bigotry. She struggles to find identity in the US, predominantly because she feels alienated from her mother and she hates her school because it is a French School. Sophie feels that the Haitians in America have a bad image as “boat people” and “stinking Haitians”. As New York is not as she has envisioned, she continues to look at Haiti with nostalgia. Life is very hard as she has to live with her biological mother, whom she has never truly known and in a large city with an American culture completely unfamiliar to her. She yearns for Haiti and Tante Atie and she wishes to run around or just play with kids from across the street under the hot sun. According to Martin Munro there is

a sharp contrast between the security and homeliness of Tante Atie’s place and the shabbiness of the mother’s apartment in New York. Far more important than mere physical discomfort is the emotional uneasiness that Sophie experiences in exile. Tante Atie’s homely space shielded her from some painful realities that in New York become unavoidable. (221)

Not only Sophie, Martine too senses that she has been left alone in an entirely alien environment. However, as Francis observes: “Martine flees to the US in an attempt to escape the trauma of bodily violation, leaving her island and her past behind. . . . Migration, in this instance, is not propelled by economic necessity but rather is crucial to saving Martine’s life” (80). Four years after Sophie is born, Martine leaves Haiti and moves to New York to forget

the past and to begin her life afresh. In New York, Martine goes back to school, becomes a nurse's aide, buys a house and supports her mother and sister financially in Haiti.

On her arrival in the US, Martine finds the place to be “overcast and cool” (*Breath* 41) and she misses her home. She keeps a doll as her company. She says to Sophie: “[The doll] is like a friend to me. She kept me company while we were apart” (45). However, Martine's trauma travels with her. In spite of relocating to New York, the rape remains a relentless body memory and she fails to stifle the memory of the rape and succumbs to it. Unable to be freed from the terror inscribed on her body, Martine stabs her stomach seventeen times and the “rupturing of her reproductive organs destroys the assumption that she could remake herself in diaspora” (Francis 86). Francis explains it further saying that: “If the United States symbolizes the place for the fulfillment of immigrant dreams, in writing about the pained black Haitian woman's body that can get no relief - even through migration, Danticat compels us to understand that sexual trauma travels as well”(86).

Haiti has long been plagued by political, economic and social hardships, autocratic rule, fraudulent elections and volatile situation. Further, natural and environmental disasters often wreck the island's frail economy and create calamities. During the centuries of violent politics and economic tragedy, Haitians in large numbers flee to Florida on makeshift boats, primarily to escape the choking grasp of abject poverty or a vengeful regime. Those intercepted on the way are put into refugee camps, where conditions were abysmal and appalling and many are unfortunate to die and their bodies wash up on the beaches in Florida. Some, who flee are accorded refugee status and are resettled in the United States, but others are repatriated. Unlike Cubans, who are welcomed, the Haitian immigrants are usually denied asylum in the United States and sent back to their homeland. In one of her interviews, Danticat says about the dilemma of the Haitian immigrants thus:

Travel often terrorizes them. A boat trip from Haiti to the US, for eg, is physically perilous, and, more often than not, Haitians who have made that journey are not greeted with open arms. They are imprisoned or turned back. Even if they are allowed to stay when they get here, they are infantilized by their lack of knowledge of the new language. They must survive economically, and their trial continues. (Alexandre, and Howard 161)

Danticat herself has been a victim of the US immigration policy; referring to the incident which happened to her uncle, who died because of the US Immigration policy, Danticat believes that the Haitians are singled out and set back to Haiti whereas the Cubans are allowed to stay in Miami. Still, the Haitians are ready to take any risk to go the United States. One such example is Louisa, of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. When dissuaded to take this extreme step, she responds: “I have heard everything. It has been a long time since our people walked to Africa, they say. The sea, it has no doors. They say the sharks from here to there, they can eat only Haitian flesh. That is all they know how to eat” (*Breath* 99). Even the threat, “Thousands of people wash up on the shores. They put it on television, in newspapers” (99) does not deter her from this perilous journey.

Set in Haiti and in Brooklyn, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is steeped in Haitian culture, language, folklore, cuisine, and customs. Haitians eat American food because Haitian food reminds them of the emotional pain they endured in Haiti, but at the same time they long for traditional dishes with ingredients like cassava, ginger, beans and rice and spices. In one of her interviews, Danticat says,

Nostalgia is part of the life of every immigrant, but so is ambivalence. Just the other day, I was with a Haitian friend. We were eating some eggs, and she said, “These are not eggs. The eggs in Haiti are so much better.” Her husband who is American said,

“You sound like the stereotype of every immigrant, always comparing everything to the old country. If the old country was so great, why did you leave?” And my friend said, because the eggs were good, but there were few of them. . . . There’s nostalgia, but there’s ambivalence too, always wishing that there had been more eggs, so to speak, so you wouldn’t have had to leave. (Alexandre, and Howard 164)

The fictional writings of Danticat traverse across geographical boundaries and her protagonists are individuals without an anchor, without horizon and thereby rootless. They try to create their own new identity in the alien country, but they have to face social, cultural and economic difficulties. Like all the new immigrants, Martine and Sophie, who are expatriates in the US, have no choice but to reinvent themselves in some way or other. Otherwise, they will not survive their new lives in America. They strive hard to forget what haunts them and begin a new life in the US, but ultimately, they find balancing between these two realities quite difficult. People normally migrate to reshape their economical and social identity, but at the same time they have to forget their individuality.

Danticat writes about the immigrant experiences first-hand because she has lived through it and the episodes depicted in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* mirror her own experiences. When people are displaced, they try to make their new home like the home they have left and at the same time they want to keep out the haunting past. In anguish and despondency, Sophie and Martine are compelled to leave and they envisage striking root in the alien soil. Cut off from their cultural roots, they try to get sustenance from their adopted country. However, setting down in an alien environment with a new and strange habitat is accompanied by an excruciating sense of lack of assimilation and identity crisis and as objectified beings, they are pushed into invisibility.

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