

THE IN BETWEENNESS OF THE SELF OR TORN BETWEEN TWO IDENTITIES

Delia-Maria Radu

Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Oradea

Abstract: Characters in novels and films can sometimes, just like real people, get caught in between two cultures, two identities, two aspirations a.s.o. Usually this state of in betweenness leads to their unhappiness, until they find a solution to deal with it, either by becoming accepted by the others, or by changing something, moving on in their lives.

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As a remnant of the patriarchal society, women are supposed to get married and have children, especially at a certain age (less than in the past, it is true, but there is still a pressure, especially from parents and close relatives), to “follow the tradition” and failure to do so may lead to feelings of entrapment and insecurity.

Identity, the representation a person holds of himself/herself, is associated with the notion of well-being, of happiness or satisfaction with one’s life. Sometimes, women may feel dissatisfaction with their own lives apparently for no reason at all. They seem to have everything they could wish for, yet there’s something missing. This is the case of Elizabeth Gilbert’s main character of the novel *Eat, Pray, Love*, whose journey across the world in search of herself is triggered by such a personal crisis. Material status, all the things that surround her

“the prestigious home in the Hudson Valley, the apartment in Manhattan, the eight phone lines, the friends and the picnics and the parties, the weekends spent roaming the aisles of some box-shaped superstore of our choice, buying ever more appliances on credit? I had actively participated in every moment of the creation of this life – so why did I feel like none of it resembled me?” (Gilbert, 2006:14)

Can’t fulfill the inner void that makes her cry to sleep on her bathroom floor every night and seek a way out of her marriage.

In spite of her feelings of entrapment, Liz is a fortunate woman. She gets out of her marriage just because she is unhappy and longs for more, for something else. But countless women, throughout time and even nowadays, are stuck in abusive relationships, not daring to contemplate leaving, not seeing where they could go. Both Joanne Harris and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deal with this issue in their novels.

Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* is the story of Vianne Rocher, a single mother with a young daughter, who arrives in the village of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes and opens a chocolate shop, *La Céleste Praline*, in a disused bakery facing the church, thus disturbing Francis Reynaud, the parish priest. It takes her a while to be accepted, but during the process she gets to know various inhabitants

Joséphine Muscat explains Vianne what is considered in their village (or in any village, in fact, one could add) to be a decent, good wife and community member, thus betraying her feelings of maladjustment: 'There's a line across Lansquenet' - demonstrating on the counter with a callused finger - 'and if you cross it, if you don't go to confession, if you don't respect your husband, if you don't cook three meals a day and sit by the fire thinking decent thoughts and waiting for him to come home, if you don't have children - and you don't bring flowers to your friends' funerals or vacuum the parlour or - dig - the - flowerbeds!' She was red-faced with the effort of speaking. Her rage was intense, enormous. 'Then you're crazy!' she spat. 'You're crazy, you're abnormal and people - talk - about - you behind your back and - and - and -' She broke off, the agonized expression slipping from her face.' (Harris, 2007:72)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's main character in *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, who narrates the story, has moved to another country than her own to manage a spice shop and provide spices to other immigrants belonging to the Indian community. She is "in between": in a new country, but forbidden to leave the shop, she is young, but, like in a fairy-tale, in order to accomplish her mission and avoid any temptations, she has been transformed into an old lady who wears traditional clothes and thus continues to live and behave like in the "old country". Tilo falls in love with a Native Indian and in the end chooses to adapt herself to her new situation and move on, taking a new name, Maya, which suggests her permanent dual nature (any migrant's dual nature, in fact): "in the old language it can mean many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day." (Divakaruni, 1997:317)

Among her customers, she meets Lalita, a dress-maker from Kanpur. The elder of her sisters, in danger of remaining a spinster and staying with her parents all her life (which was a shame, according to tradition), Lalita accepted an arranged marriage with an Indian living in America. The marriage is not a happy one. Ahuja, her husband, is a watchman at the docks and has taken to drinking. Besides, he is abusive and refuses to let her work, for fear that by doing so he would prove to be “not man enough”. He is jealous, over-controlling and beats her. Following Tilo's advice, she finally gathers the strength to leave him and goes to a battered women's shelter, looking for a new start.

What are abusive relationships (which involve either emotional or physical abuse) and why do women not dare to get out of them ? Beverly Engel defines emotional abuse as nonphysical behavior designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish, or isolate another person through the use of degradation, humiliation, or fear. It ranges from verbal abuse (belittling, berating, constant criticism) to more subtle tactics like intimidation, manipulation, and refusal to be pleased. (Engel, 2002:10) [...] Once locked inside such a relationship, women change. Emotional abuse is like brainwashing in that it systematically wears away at the victim's self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in his or her perceptions and self-concept. (Engel, 2002:13)

Emotional abuse turns Joséphine Muscat into a kleptomaniac: “Can't you see?”, she tells Vianne. “I'm no good. I steal. I lied to you before. I steal things. I do it all the time!” (Harris, 2007:110) Both her husband and the village priest know that she steals, and her husband speaks about his own cross to carry by having to bear with her, to wake up to “her stupid face every morning”, to catch her time and again with her pockets full of stolen stuff from the market, lipsticks and bottles of perfume and jewellery, exposed to public gossiping and mockery in church. It is only his ego that matters, the public image, and convinced he is the victim in the relationship (his wife supposedly costs him money and held him back from who knows what glorious things).

After having been left by his wife, he claims to want her back for the sake of their marriage, but even Reynaud, the priest, can see through this pretext. He knows Muscat wants his wife back only “to cook his meals. To iron his clothes. To run his cafe. And to prove to his friends that no-one makes a fool of Paul-Marie Muscat, no-one. I despise this hypocrisy.” (Harris, 2007:206)

Ahuja's wife is more submissive. She "is young and seems even younger. Not a brash, buoyant young but raw and flinching, like someone who's lately been told and told she's not good enough." (Divakaruni, 1997:14) She goes to the shop every week, after payday, and only buys the essentials, sometimes holding things she longs for, but putting them back, not daring to disobey her husband. She is so much under the influence of her husband that she has lost her old personality and dreams, even her old identity, and she only thinks of herself as a wife.

As for physical abuse, historically, intimate partner violence (IPV) had been afforded privacy, being a subject that was not spoken about nor brought into the public domain. IPV remained 'behind doors', being spoken of in whispers and 'gossiped' about by neighbours. Minimal support was offered to those who experienced abuse as the general public alienated them and their problems. IPV is insidious and may intensify over time, involving financial control, physical violence, sexual assault and psychological intimidation. Universally, the results of such abuse have a devastating impact on the lives of the survivors, and their families, the survivors often remaining in a violent relationship for years, living in fear and pain. [...] some experiences being too traumatic to recall, and some not perceived as being controlling or abusive. Many survivors minimize their injuries, either due to fear of persecution or accepting their treatment as a 'cultural norm'. (see Keeling & Mason, 2008:2)

Many times, abused women lie when having to explain the different bruises and marks on their bodies and faces. So does Joséphine Muscat, a large woman with a square, unhappy face, with "nimble large hands, rough and reddened with housework", with her mouth perpetually downturned. She steals things, as a consequence of being abused by her husband, who isolates her from any potential friend in order to control her better. As Vianne describes her, it is clear that she has been abused into submission and how this has affected her: "Joséphine's hands digging fiercely into her pockets and head lowered as if to headbutt some unknown aggressor. [...] ten years of Paul-Marie Muscat made her wan and ungainly. Half-mad with fear, but underneath the madness, a sanity which chills the heart." (Harris, 2007:185)

When she starts opening up to Vianne, she is getting ready to resort to the usual lies, before admitting the truth. "There was a fresh bruise just beneath her lower lip, bluish in the failing light. She opened her mouth for the automatic lie. I interrupted her. 'That's not true,' I said. [...] When she spoke at last her voice was thick with self-loathing. 'It's stupid, isn't it?' [...] 'I never blame him. Not really. Sometimes I even forget what really happened.' [...] 'Walking into doors. Falling downstairs. St-stepping on rakes.' She sounded close to laughter.

I could hear hysteria bubbling beneath the surface of her words. ‘Accident-prone, that’s what he says I am. Accident-prone.’” (Harris, 2007: 109)

Like Joséphine, Lalita blames herself for what she goes through: “Mataji, maybe some of it was my fault. [...] My fault my fault. A refrain so many women the world over have been taught to sing.” (Divakaruni, 1997: 99)

According to Michael S. Kimmel, (in Keeling & Mason, 2008:30) some violence by men against women is motivated not only by anger, frustration or other feeling, but by the desire to control, to dominate women’s lives. In a patriarchal society, women are dominated and oppressed emotionally, socially, financially and sexually. Women may be less likely to seek social support due to isolation, economic dependence or fear of retaliation. Domestic violence frequently includes attempts to isolate the victim from potential support systems.

Joséphine Muscat knows it all: “Her face as she turned back was a blur of misery. I could see that she was close to tears. ‘This always happens,’ she said in a harsh, unhappy voice. ‘Whenever I find a friend he manages to ruin it for me. It’ll happen the way it always does. You’ll be well out of it by then, but me—’ (Harris, 2007:148)

As does Lalita, in *The Mistress of Spices*, whose husband refuses to let her work (which would be an insult to his manhood) and who wants to control every aspect of her life, every contact she has with her family or other people: “Recently, the rules. No going out. No talking on the phone. Every penny I spend to be accounted for. He should read my letters before he mails them. And the calls. All day. Sometimes every twenty minutes. To check on what I’m doing. To make sure I’m there. I pick up the phone and say hello and there is his breathing on the end of the line.” (Divakaruni, 1997:103)

Jay Peters discusses domestic violence myths, which, he claims, serve a larger social function of supporting patriarchy by trivializing the abuse and marginalizing victims and with them the whole social problem of domestic violence. In addition to blaming the abuse on the victim’s character, the myths also promote the view that the victim causes the abuse by her (bad) behaviour through nagging, making the batterer jealous, through acting provocatively with other men, or arguing with her partner when she should ‘know better’. (in Keeling & Mason, 2008:139-40)

There are women in the village, who consider themselves superior and blame Joséphine for her problems and sympathize with her husband: ‘Braze, that’s what she is,’ hissed Joline

Drou to Caro Clairmont as they passed the door in haste. ‘Quite brazen. When I think of what the poor man had to bear with –’ (Harris, 2007:201)

Domestic violence myths appear to serve the social function of keeping women ‘in their place’ through reinforcing patriarchal attitudes towards the use of force and coercion towards women. (in Keeling & Mason, 2008:145)

But abusive behaviours and relationships also lead to the destruction of the couple, of the marriage, to the disappearance of any feelings of love or tenderness. If Lalita never loved her husband, being trapped into an arranged marriage, Joséphine’s feelings have faded in time.

“I try to remember what it must have been like loving him,” confesses Joséphine, “but there is nothing there. It’s all a blank. Nothing there at all. I remember everything else – the first time he hit me, oh I remember that – but you’d think that even with Paul-Marie there’d be something to remember. Something to excuse it all. All that wasted time.” (Harris, 2007:190)

After breaking free from her husband’s domination and finding shelter and support in Vianne’s house, soon Joséphine seems a different woman: “In only a few days she has changed the look of vapid hostility has gone, as have the defensive mannerisms. She seems taller, sleeker, abandoning her permanently hunched posture and the multiple layers of clothing which gave her such a dumpy look.” (Harris, 2007:210)

As for Lalita, we do not find out what the future has in hold for her. She writes Tilo from a shelter, where she is still in between, torn between the desire of leaving the shelter which is far from the conditions she had at home, of returning to her husband, longing for the brief, happy moments with her husband, and the desire of dignity and happiness every woman deserves, as Tilo has told her (Divakaruni, 1997:272)

As we have seen from the examples above, characters in novels (which are, sometimes, turned into movies) can sometimes get caught in between two cultures, two identities, two aspirations a.s.o., just like real people. Usually this state of in-betweenness leads to their unhappiness, until they find a solution to deal with it, either by becoming accepted by the others, or by changing something, moving on in their lives.

Elizabeth Gilbert’s protagonist (who is the fictionalized version of herself) is not happy in spite of a good marriage, good social and economic status, without having a real reason for that. She simply does not fit the pattern of “traditional” women who are supposed to wish for nothing else than what she has got and settle into a calm routine after marriage. She is in

between her “duty” to comply with this image/tradition and her own feelings and inner void. Failure to fit in makes her leave and travel the world in order to find herself and her inner peace.

The situation is different in the case of the other two characters, Joanne Harris’ Joséphine Muscat and Chitra Baneerjee Divakaruni’s Lalita, women whose husbands abuse them, both emotionally and physically, and whose identities have, therefore, been lost during the process. The abuse leaves marks on their behavior and posture, and it is only because of new found friends and mental support that they even contemplate leaving their husbands. In their case, we have considered that the in-betweenness refers to carrying on bearing their husbands’ abuses or daring to leave them and regaining their own identities and lives.

In order to understand what they have been subjected to, we have resorted to field literature explaining abuse and its consequences on its victims. Then we have applied the theory to the chosen texts, showing how the characters are described and behave like real, typical victims of abuse. Their unhappiness stems from forgetting how to assert themselves, and being caught between their spousal “duty” and their right to dignity and happiness. Their only chance is to gather the courage of leaving their abusive husbands and start living on their own.

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