

Assimilation Anxiety and Resilience in Edwidge Danticat's *Behind the Mountains*

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Abstract

In this contemporary world, immigration is the consequence of the unequal distribution of opportunities across space. Although immigration may improve an individual's social life, the adaptation process has an impact on the development of children. The developmental process of children is influenced by the transient shocks they encounter when exposed to an unexpected environment. Through the sociological paradigm, the present study seeks to investigate the impacts of anxiety on the development of a child in a completely new environment. This paper highlights the challenges of immigrant children in the process of integration, through a close reading and detailed study of Edwidge Danticat's first-person fiction *Behind the Mountains* (2002). Children of immigrant families are exposed to life-changing circumstances in which they are expected to adapt into mainstream society. The paper's focus is on the anxieties and resilience that a Haitian girl child goes through under host conditions during the assimilation process, in light of Milton Gordon's Theory of Assimilation.

Keywords : Anxiety; Assimilation; Immigration; Resilience.

Caribbean Literature is also referred to as West Indian Literature. It includes the writings of various islands of the Caribbean region, irrespective of language and subject. Although some territories retain colonial ties to the United States, they have become independent nations. Caribbean novelists in their works incorporate the island landscape with the vibrant lives of the natives, migrant cultures, explore displacement trauma, thus providing a platform for the profound study of Immigrants. The majority of Haiti's early novels are political satires that depict the lives of Haitian exiles in host countries. Dimitry Elias Léger, Edwidge Danticat, Jean-Claude Charles, Dany Laferrière, and many others are notable contemporary Haitian novelists. These writers examined the freedom and

influences of being a Haitian writer in the United States, with a focus on the hybridized space of the Haitian immigrant community.

Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American author, describes in her works the experiences she had encountered as a Haitian immigrant. Danticat, among other Haitian writers, is “acutely aware of the social and political issues that affect Haitians, whether as islanders or exiles” (*Allegories of Desire* 88). Danticat, according to the preceding remark, in her novel *Behind the Mountains*, which was specifically written for children, addressed the socio-political challenges that Haitian immigrant children experience. Her aim for authoring this novel, *Behind the Mountains*, is to explore the experiences of a Haitian child immigrant in the United States, especially “a girl with more ‘ordinary’ obstacles, more everyday struggles” (*Journal of Haitian Studies* 10). Through the immigrant experiences of the child Celiane, Danticat demonstrates two phases of immigration. The first phase of immigration is seen when Celiane immigrates from the rural areas of Haiti to its capital, Port – au – Prince, and the second phase of immigration is from Port – au – Prince to the United States. Danticat, using the first-person narrative technique, has effectively depicted the child protagonist’s journey from anxiety to resilience.

Immigration has emerged as an unsettling issue in the present world. The assimilation process is considered one of the prevalent forms of adaptation to a new environment. Immigrants appropriately integrate into the host community and are resilient enough to accept the socio-cultural backgrounds of the groups in a foreign society. Resilience is referred to as, “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (*Development and Psychopathology* 426). In the contemporary world, the experiences of children whose parents are migrants may contribute to a better understanding of the immigration process, as well as to anxiety and resilience.

In the novel, *Behind the Mountains*, Edwidge Danticat focuses on the challenges of a Haitian girl named Celiane Esperance, who immigrated to the US for the sake of familial bonding. Her journey begins from Haiti to New York City and each stage in her journey is looked at with challenges. The novel is narrated from the perspective of a 13-year-old girl as she recounts her life events in a journal offered by her teacher, Madame Auguste. Celiane records events from Wednesday, October 18, 2000 to Sunday, January 01, 2001. During this period, she initially describes her life in Haiti and then moves on to narrate her family’s travel experience to New York. Her father, Victor, has immigrated to the U.S. in order to work.

The present paper aims to provide an in-depth study of the developmental challenges of the child, through the stages of assimilation into a dominant host community. The objective of this research article is to emphasize children's anxiety owing to the challenges experienced in assimilating to an entirely different setting and their resilience, through the child protagonist, Celiane Esperance. This study uses qualitative methodology to bring into light the anxiety and resilience that children endure when immigrating to an alien land. This study is based on Milton Gordon's Theory of Assimilation, which provides a descriptive study of a child's development amidst the integration process and their ability to confront which allows them to fit in and accept a host community.

American Sociologist Milton Myron Gordon's model of Assimilation Theory details seven stages of assimilation. Gordon's Seven Stages of Assimilation include Acculturation; Structural Assimilation; Marital Assimilation; Identification Assimilation; Attitude Reception Assimilation; Behaviour reception Assimilation and Civic Assimilation. The focus is mainly on two stages of Gordon's theory as the rest of the stages can be applied to the other characters in the novel. The two phases chosen for the present study are Acculturation and Structural Assimilation. These two stages of integration represent protagonist Celiane's different stages of development during her assimilation process in New York as depicted in the novel *Behind the Mountains*.

Gordon defines Acculturation as a "change of cultural patterns to those of the host society" ("The Nature of Assimilation" 71). The cultural pattern here refers to the established behavioral patterns in certain social situations. This stage highlights adaption patterns of immigrants such as language acquisition, appearance, and norms of the host community. In this select novel *Behind the Mountains*, the protagonist Celiane, her mother, and her brother live in a rural place named Beau-Jour on the crest of the mountains in Haiti. Celiane's acculturation is seen when she moves to Port - au - Prince and New York. Her anxieties during the process of acculturation are discussed using instances from the select novel. Before Celiane immigrates to New York, she and her mother Manman pay a visit to her father's sister, Tante Rose, in the city of Port-au-Prince.

Celiane narrates her experience as she enters a new environment as follows, "I always feel like I am being pushed and shoved by crowds of people. Even when we are in a taxi with Tante Rose, there are always people surrounding the taxi" (Danticat 25). Furthermore, she encounters violence in the city, which implies shifts in her psychological perceptions about

the host culture. She declares, "I wanted to be outside, to look up at the sky, and see the mountains in the distance. Despite the shootings and the pipe bombs, people are still going about their lives, walking to and from church, visiting with friends and family" (Danticat 45). These incidents highlight Celiane's reluctance to adapt to a new setting at the beginning, but as the novel progresses, she accepts the realities of Port - au - Prince. Her acceptability towards a different location is demonstrated in the novel, as she states, "I am beginning to enjoy Port - au - Prince" (Danticat 30). Celiane, in the light of Gordon's acculturation phase, accepts the beliefs of the city which is considered a dominant group. For instance, when she sees Tante Rose kneeling to honor the dead, she too does the same. This signifies a transition in the cultural practices of Celiane. Similar acculturation happens when Celiane joins her father in New York as a voluntary immigrant for the sake of familial unity.

The acculturation process is considered to be initiated only when the child is able to understand ethnic differences between people of their host land. In this select novel, Celiane narrates her experiences in the host culture once she arrives in the United States. She observes people who walked past them keeping their heads low, closing their chests, and covering their entire body with thick material because of the cold climate, she says, "It suddenly occurred to me that we looked like those people" (Danticat 89). This depicts the first step of protagonist Celiane in the acculturation process as she dresses like the people who belong to the host community, appropriate to the environment. Celiane notices the imbalance in the world as she compares people in her village who illuminate the nights with lamps and people who live in the city with giant lamps on street corners but later accepts these host differences. This demonstrates a healthy way of negotiating between native and host variances.

The acquisition of a second language is regarded as essential in the process of Acculturation. Celiane, in her process of language acquisition at an initial stage, encounters much pressure, as communicating with people of a foreign land is still a barrier for her. She enrolls in a separate class which is for pupils who do not speak English since she is unfamiliar with the language. She is forced to acquire a new language, which she believes might modify her personality. This adds up to her anxiety in her course of acculturation. Later in the novel, this anxiety is resolved at a basic level as Celiane mentions that speaking in English does not make her a different person. She states:

In Beau Jour, when I used to think about coming to New York, I

had imagined that speaking in another language would make me a different person. But here Moy and I were, saying a few words to each other in English, and we were still the same people we have always been, the same people living in a different language (Danticat 126).

During the progression of children in adapting to a different environment, they witness acculturative stress. In an article titled, "Language, Culture and Adaptation in Immigrant Children," Acculturative stress in immigrant children is described as "challenging and/or overwhelming demands" (Toppberg and Collins 9). Celiane finds difficulties in following the standard practices of a foreign land. She was instructed by her father to find her way home by herself, which resulted in acculturative stress. She found herself lost on her way home, "I felt as though I was looking both for my new home as well as for myself" (Danticat 108). This demonstrates her feeling of loneliness in the new environment and her quest for identity.

Celiane feels too shy to approach other students in the school, which results in anxiety. Later, she tries to change herself when she finds out that Immacula Cadet, a girl in her class, is also her neighbor. She, when decides to leave with her on the bus, feels happy. She is also warned of the situations in school as there are gangs differentiated by colors and it is best not to wear either red or blue colored dress and she follows the same. These incidents validate the first stage in Gordon's assimilation model relating it to the acculturation of a 13-year-old child, Celiane. She maintains her equilibrium throughout the acculturation process, she preserves the ties of her native land while still allowing for smooth coexistence in a host country.

Structural Assimilation is the second stage in the theory of assimilation and Gordon defines it as, "largescale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of the host society, on primary group level" ("The Nature of Assimilation" 71). According to Gordon, "As social contact initiates interaction, assimilation is its final perfect product" ("The Nature of Assimilation" 62). At this stage, attention is given to the organization, social relations, families, and so on, in which the immigrant group enters a dominant society. This structural assimilation focuses on the primary interaction of children with individuals not belonging to one's ethnic group. At the preliminary stages of Assimilation, immigrant children find it difficult to interact with people of the host community. This demonstrates an initial breakdown in their process of Structural Assimilation.

Concerning the preceding declarations, in the novel *Behind the Mountains*, when Celiane lost her way home from school in her new surroundings, primary communication occurs. She struggles to ask for help from the woman who walked past her. Celiane's unsuccessful attempts in socializing with other individuals in the host culture, during her initial stage of structural assimilation, are vividly depicted in the aforementioned occurrence. This also implies that the immigrant children struggle to engage with various social groups in their initial phases of assimilation.

According to Gordon, structural assimilation would also eventually enhance chances for interethnic relations. Celiane's difficulty to assimilate with pupils from the same educational institution in the host nation is depicted in the select novel. She states, "I had made no friends at school. I know this should not be a surprise on the first day, but I had hoped that someone would volunteer to look after me," (Danticat 109). Though Celiane has problems interacting with her classmates in the beginning, she hopes that she can have a good relationship with them in the near future. This reference shows Celiane, being a child, develops an optimism for better social relationships. She succeeded in her communication with other characters Immacula and Faidherbe who belong to the same ethnic groups. These instances in the novel signify the initial development of immigrant children in a host culture as they pass through the phases of anxieties, and their progressive absorption in societal groupings.

Children acquire a resilient spirit in their process of integration into a host society as a result of their encounters with immigrant anxieties and challenges. In *Behind the Mountains*, after a series of struggles in assimilation Celiane declares, "We had mountains of obstacles but with help from family and friends seemed to have conquered them, at least for now" (Danticat 159). There is a sense of relief in Celiane's tone after facing many struggles as a child immigrant. Reviewing the above quote, it is understood that Celiane is resilient enough to withstand anxieties of immigration that arise in her path eventually leading to the acceptance of the host society. This indicates the child's gradual acceptance of the host culture and people as well as her psychological stability, which was retained in the process of integration.

The narrative *Behind the Mountains* reveals the child protagonist's journey of assimilation with her stream of dreams in a host community. It is observed that the kind of reception that immigrant children receive from the host society plays a significant role in their adjustment. As witnessed in the novel, *Behind the Mountains*, American society has not just aided the

protagonist Celiane but also other immigrant children to enhance their adaptation to the host land. Although the plight of Haitian immigrant children is addressed, little is recorded about their political and economic adjustments. Thus, the present study primarily focused on the social and psychological aspects of Haitian immigrant children, specifically the anxieties experienced when they encounter different circumstances. The novel, *Behind the Mountains*, affirms that despite the challenges, immigrant children are resilient because they conform to the societal norms of their host country as well as retain their own ethnic identity.

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