

The Leading Lady Stars of Indian Diaspora

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Abstract

“Language, identity, place, home: these are all of a piece – just different elements of belonging and not-belonging” - Jhumpa Lahiri

Inspired by the vast spread of migration, immigration or emigration, Diasporic literature gained prominence in the universal literature in the backdrop of post-colonial context, simultaneously developing with post-colonial literature. The process of transplantation makes the immigrant a victim of 'rootlessness'. Today, we can say that the most important Indian writing is produced in the Diaspora by writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. Especially, Indian women diasporic writers have made their voice heard around the world, managed to excel in all areas of literature and achieved global recognition. These female diasporic writers exhibit their own physical and emotional conflicts in their works. Diasporic literature focuses mainly on themes like discrimination, cultural shock, identity crisis, alienation, displacement, dilemma, depression, hybridity and nostalgia. This article explores the conflicts of cross-cultural identities and transplantation into a new culture in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. It undertakes a comparative analysis, from the cultural and feministic points of view of the predicament of women protagonists in immigration as presented in the selected novels.

Key Words: cultural displacement, identity crisis, exile, nostalgia, alienation.

Introduction

Dictionary.com verifies that Diaspora first entered English in the late 19th century to describe the scattering of Jews after their captivity in Babylonia in the 5th century B.C.E. The term originates from the Greek diasporá, meaning “a dispersion or scattering,” found in Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 25). While this specific historical sense is still used, especially in scholarly writing, modern-day definitions of the Jewish Diaspora can refer to the displacement of Jews at other times during their history, especially after the Holocaust in the 20th century. The term can also refer generally to Jews living today outside of Israel. Some of the most prominent Indian writers in English belonging to the diaspora are – V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry etc. The novel, by its very nature, is better equipped to deal with social reality, whatever, liberties it may take in projecting it. It is hardly surprising therefore that the most substantial contribution of the period comes from the Indian women writings of fiction. The writers like Anitha Desai, Kiran Desai, Uma Parameswaran, Bharati Mukherjee, and Jhumpha Lahiri are the fore- most diasporic women novelists who hold centrality in the contemporary literary scenario. They have made a distinct mark on the world literary scene with their rich cultural heritage and skilled language control.

Representation of Diasporic Themes in *The Namesake*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Inheritance of Loss* and *Jasmine*

Many Indians have been migrated from their homeland to various alien lands under forced exiles or self-imposed exiles and majority of these people experience inequality, discrimination biases, prejudices and alienation in their foster land. Nostalgia for their home land, feeling of rootlessness, cultural displacements, quest for identity and alienation are the common themes of Diasporic literature.

We see a depressed Ashima, in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, who is emotionally detached from her parents and other family members. She is trying to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack, thereby trying to recreate the past. Pregnancy period was hard for Ashima as she was alone and no one was there to soothe her in the alien land. She always felt lonely and the surroundings were unfamiliar which nearly killed her feelings. Ashima was the only Indian in the hospital which made her more uncomfortable. She was afraid to raise a child in a country where she herself was an alien. She is nostalgic about her family in India. Once she says to Ashoke "I am saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (p.33). She becomes depressed again when she was unable to hold fast to the practices of her culture i.e. assigning the name to the new born by her grandmother.

Gogol marries a Bengali girl, Moushmi which was Ashima's choice. The marriage becomes a failure as Moushmi was in relation with another guy. Both Ashima and Moushmi belong to the same culture. Moushmi represents the global identity of the multi-cultural, second generation Indian Immigrants. This incident also points to the concept about marriage of first and second-generation migrants. Ashima always remembers to follow the words of her elders "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family" (p.37). The second generation never tried to follow the culture of their parents. They live a life of their own. Moushmi is a new generation Bengali, born and brought up in America. She is more exposed to America's multicultural society. She is more westernized in her attitude and she has "privately vowed that she had never grown fully dependent on her husband" (p.247). This can be considered as a reason for the end of her marriage with Gogol. Sonia, Ashima's daughter is the other second generation immigrant. She is more familiar with the American culture than Bengali culture. She visited Calcutta once but never felt it as her home. But she is familiar with the Indian culture through her father and mother. Her parents never forced her to follow their culture. Displacement and marginality in Sonia's case triggered a sense of alienation and nostalgia in her. The choice to end the novel with a Christmas party hosted by Ashima is significant. Gogol and Sonia had instigated the Gangulis' Christmas traditions when they were kids by begging to celebrate the holiday like their other American friends. At first, Ashima and Ashoke felt like Christmas was a concession to the American culture, a betrayal of their Bengali roots. But over a period of time, for Gangulis, Christmas became an occasion to bring together other Bengalis living in America and make great quantities of Indian food. Not only did the parties represent something uniquely American, but they represented something uniquely Bengali as well. In this way, the Christmas tradition becomes a symbol of the Gangulis' Bengali-American identity.

Gogol's identity is a mixture of all the names and experiences he has ever had. Thus he is "Gogol" as well as "Nikhil"; he is, for better or worse, the former lover of Ruth and Maxine and Bridget and Moushmi. Rediscovering his father's gift of *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* is like re-discovering a part of him that has been lost. His choice to read the short-story collection is a choice to be at peace with the name "Gogol."

Tilo, in **Chitra Divakaruni's, *The Mistress of Spices***, is the "mistress of spices, a woman born in India, empowered with magical prowess. She comes to Oakland in disguise as an old woman and sets up a shop of spices for curries and kormas, highlighting the magical wonders that Indian cuisine can work. The Mistress of Spices has a mystical quality to it, and, as Divakaruni puts it in "Dissolving Boundaries," (an essay for the on-line journal), "I wrote it in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable". The major diasporic element in the novel is multiple identities and resultant identity crisis and cracked images. Many characters in the novel have multiple names which exemplify multiple identities. For instance, the protagonist has five names. When she was talking to Raven she said, "I too have had more than one. But only one of them is my true name" (*The Mistress of Spices* 152). She was named as Nayan Tara by her parents; Bhagyavati by the pirates group which kidnapped her; Tilo or Tilottama by the First Mother who had trained her in mastering the power of spices; Maya by Raven, an American, who loved her; and the Mistress of Spices by the

general public. This signifies that Diasporas acquire multiple identities for various reasons. Consequently, they experience identity crisis and their image become cracked or fractured one.

Another diasporic characteristic in the novel is migration or exile. In the broad sense the terms 'migration' and 'exile' are used as synonyms, though 'exile' has negative shade to it. Migration may be voluntary or involuntary. Most of the characters in the novel migrate; their migration is voluntary as well as involuntary. For instance, the exile of Nayan Tara from her birth place to the place of pirates is involuntary, whereas her migration from the pirates' place to the island of spices and from there to Oakland is voluntary. The migration of Lalita from Kanpur to Oakland is involuntary. She was not ready to marry Ahuja and lead married life with him. Considering the family's reputation and her younger sisters' future she went with Ahuja to Oakland. In Oakland also she did not have any freedom and experienced torture by her husband. In order to get rid of it she went with members of an organization which came to the help of such women. Here, her migration is voluntary. The migrations of Haroun, Geeta's parents and grandfather, Hameeda, Shamsur, and Rehamansab are voluntary because all these people had come to the USA in search of job. The migration of these people – belonging to different regions, communities, and castes and who speak different languages – to metropolitan centre in search of job exemplifies postcolonial migration.

Another important diasporic feature is racial discrimination. Several characters in the novel experience the racial discrimination. For instance, Jagjit experienced brutal racial experience. His parents admitted him to a school. He was frightened to go to school because he knew only Punjabi. His teacher put him in the last row. The first English word he learnt is, 'idiot, idiot, idiot' and the second word is 'as****e' (38). Even at night “he lies with his eyes open” seeing “the jeering voices, the spitting mouths, the hands that pull pants down in the playground and the girls looking” (39). But with the help of Tilo who had offered him cinnamon 'which is the destroyer of enemies' provider of strength to legs, arms and mouth he could resist it. Migrated people are often attacked and cheated by natives. This is well expressed by Haroun. When he saw Tilo who kept her store open late in the evening and permitted Raven to search something in the store. He says, “Lady jaan, you must be more careful... All kinds of bad people roaming around this neighbourhood. Did you read or not in India Post just last week some man broke into one ...shot the owner. His name was Reddy I think. Just because he's dressed all fancy- fancy does not mean you can trust him. I've heard of men like that, dress up and pretend they're rich, out to cheat you” (111).

Yet another feature of diasporic writing is conflict or 'in-betweenness'. Most of the characters are caught between two ways of thinking; western and eastern. Emigrant parents strongly desire to give their children modern English education based on the western model but expect them to follow Indian traditions. Consequently such children face the problem of 'in-betweenness'. For instance, Geeta's parents bring her up in Oakland, offer her good education, and she gets A grades at all levels. Till the completion of education she followed her parents' advice. But after getting a job in a company her attitude has changed. Her grandfather does not like her coming home late. Geeta loves Juan and wishes to marry him. When her parents oppose it she leaves home. As everyone expects she does not go and live with Juan but stays with her friend hoping to convince and get the consent of her parents. Lalita faces the conflict – if she should continue to tolerate the torture given by her husband or she should resist and give up her husband.

Kiran Desai's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* chronicles the journey of immigrants from South Asia and other parts of the world to England and the USA. The subject of this novel is the experience of being displaced, of being in exile. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai portrays such characters that are dislocated in one way or another. Some characters are experiencing the pain of exile in America when a few persons are enjoying the pleasure of being immigrants in the subcontinent. Their achievements and frustrations reside side by side. In both the cases they face identity crisis after a certain period of time in their life in exile. Desai competently explores these crises and the disorientation in the formation of cultural, national and linguistic identity.

In America, Biju works in a restaurant called the Stars and Stripes Diner: "All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived" (42). Biju's daily life in America reflects his insight of being an exile. A sense of alienation starts to haunt him continuously just after arriving in America. He changes the restaurants one after another to adapt himself with the cultural and linguistic differences. Inside him he nurtures the Indian culture fondly. He possesses "an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India"(77). Being in exile, the crisis of national identity always haunts him.

In New York, Biju dreams of his country and of the peace and comfort of his native village. Surprisingly his diasporic experience assists him to ignite the Indian culture in his mind. Throughout the novel, it is conveyed that the experiences in exile always welcome multi-levelled losses in life. To this thread, Desai adds the story of Judge Jemubhai Patel, who travels to England as a youth in colonial times and returns home as an Anglicized Indian. The Judge's and Biju's diasporic travels underscore the historical continuities between colonial and neoliberal times as well as the ways in which the post-colonial subjects and the economic migrants feel marginalized in the Global North. Yet, their experiences and opportunities in their host countries are very different as the Judge and Biju are separated by class and legal status. Though the title of the novel connotes a feeling of vacuum with the use of the word "loss", the novel ends with a glimpse of hope.

Jasmine is a 1989 novel by Bharati Mukherjee. Mukherjee is an immigrant from Kolkata, India, who has written extensively on the Indian culture and history as well as the immigrant experience in America in both fiction and non-fiction works. Although the events of Jasmine are fictional, the author has stated that she was heavily influenced by her own experiences. In Jasmine, Mukherjee explores the themes of identity and assimilation, as the lead character frequently reinvents herself in order to try to fit into the American society. In the book, this is explored explicitly with Jasmine literally changing her name based on different situations. Jasmine is shuttled between her identities. "I shuttled between identities" (p.77). Similarly, this identity reflects her two worlds both India and America. Bharati Mukherjee symbolizes the virtue of representing immigrant issues as she was born in a period of transition where she was a sensitive observant of the subsequent socio-political conditions.

In a broad sense, Diaspora suggests a displacement from one's own homeland, location of origin to different regions or foreign states. Jasmine's effort to reshape her own destiny and make it the foundation of the development of her inner potential is sheer naivety. For Jasmine, America is a fantasy country which assures a wonderful future. This has been excellently depicted by Mukherjee in this novel.

The future transformation in Jasmine's life begins with the association of Lillian Gordon. This association makes a remarkable positive move and bright vision for her future. The multiple names for Jasmine initially Jyoti, Jasmine for Prakash, Jase for Taylor, Jane for Bud shows her transformation. In this magic land of America with his help she learns to talk and walk American and turn into a new confident woman, to return to the normal real world, with normal man-woman relationship with Taylor.

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Conclusion

The diasporic people have the influence of their native cultures even in their adopted lands. They cannot completely assimilate themselves into the culture of their adopted homeland, nor can they embrace all aspects of their native culture. As a result, they are always in search of a new identity that will define them, yet make them distinctive. They forget their colonial past and reshape their mind with the values of their native cultures. The diasporic writers reflect on the values of their native cultures and bring the artefacts produced at the location of their origin.

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