

Identity Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract:

Indian Diaspora covers a large part of the world. Several Indians migrated to different countries all over the world and the diasporic literature is the result of this migration. Diasporic or migrant writers have a noticeable impact on the contemporary literary works which are largely set in India. This article mainly focuses on the Indian women diaspora writers. The women diasporic writers have attracted the readers through their uniqueness in themes, and the most important characteristics are the blending of various cultures. Their novels trace the challenges of living in a multicultural world, and also the issues faced by the Indian communities there. The present paper aims to discuss the problem of immigrant Indian women by the prolific immigrant writers, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This paper focuses on the contemporary experiences of identity crisis in the immigrants in America, especially of women's journey from troubled and oppressed conditions to freedom and women's self-transformation. Women under diasporic conditions face a difficult life after migration as they are separated from their homes and homelands.

Keywords: Immigrant, Diaspora, Tradition, Culture, Identity Crisis and Homeland.

Introduction

The diasporic Indian novelists try to explore and interpret India significantly in its countless aspects of social, political, economic and cultural. The early Indian novels written in English or other regional languages depicted women as secondary or subordinated to their male counter parts. Under the influence of patriarchal Indian social structure, the status of woman has constantly been changing, often to suit the changing needs of man. Images of woman has been reshaped and reoriented by man and for man. It is this awareness of their condition, the women writers took up the question of female identity in a male-dominated society and questioned about her identity. The women writers focused on the crucial problem as how society looks at women, how women can empower their lives and thoughts. Indian Diasporic writers connect their feeling of nostalgia through their writings and have also made their position among the male writers. Their creative writing made them eminent at the level of India and worldwide. Today every diasporic women and women writer is equally commendable to man. Women

writers express the discrimination, dissatisfaction and agony through their works. Each writings of these women writers go beyond all those gender theories and react against it. Their writings urge for freedom and depict the life of woman who is trapped between their own aspirations and the constricting forces of patriarchy.

The writings produced by authors living outside their homeland are called Diasporic or Expatriate literature. Generally, the diasporic literature deals with themes of rootlessness, racial discrimination, identity crisis, dislocation, cross-cultural encounters, nostalgia and marginalization. Majority of Indian diasporic women writers depicts the sufferings of the frustrated homemakers and present their heroines resisting patriarchal notions. The women characters question their own individuality and identity who want to lead an independent life. They explore female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. They also show the women sufferings more because of the incompatibility between her individuality and the traditional views of her husband and her in-laws. Witnessed and depicted the woman as an individual; not merely a member of the family and tried to bring out the conflicts in her mind. These writers try to bring out the predicament of the Indian women. The women writers have moved away from traditional enduring, self-sacrificing women towards that of women in conflict who is in search of identity.

Identity Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Indo-American diaspora is one among the important Diasporas which has exerted a huge impact on the literary world and have fashioned literary geniuses of our time. Bharati Mukherjee, an Indo-American writer born in Kolkata, West Bengal on July 27, 1940. She was awarded by the National Book Critics Circle in 1988 for her collection of the short stories '*The middleman and Other Stories*'. Her admitted works are novels, a short story collection, memoir and nonfiction. She regards herself an American writer and not an Indian expatriate writer. She died in the age of 76 on January 2017. Bharati Mukherjee, in her writings, explores Issues related to women and deals with the problems of the Indian women immigrants. She writes about the struggles and problems faced by Indian women, problem of cross-cultural crisis and about identity crisis. Her novels reflect the temperament and mood of the present American Society as experienced by the Indian immigrants in America. As an immigrant, she experiences cross-cultural issues and identity crises in her novels. *Jasmine*, one of the famous novels by Mukherjee, explores the cultural transformation that the protagonist undergoes. The protagonist Jasmine, a young Indian woman, tries to adapt to the American way of life to survive. The protagonist of the novel undergoes several transformations during her journey from New York City to Canada as changes from Jyoti to Jasmine and then to Jane. Through this novel, Mukherjee portrays the

multicultural crisis encountered by an Indian immigrant woman.

Bharati Mukherjee explores the issue of identity in her novel *Jasmine*. She describes how the female heroine attempts to overcome the problem of cultural loss by changing to different identities. Jasmine flees her homeland in order to satisfy her desires, continues her hunt for self-sufficiency after she arrives to the United States. She works hard to achieve it, and in the end, she realizes that self-sufficiency isn't about being an Indian or an American, but about being at peace with oneself.

The protagonist starts her life as Jyoti in India, who is against the patriarchal system. Jasmine's childhood memories were always fresh in her mind which became a weapon in her fight against fate and search for self-identity. When she was just seven years old, an astrologer predicted her widowhood and exile. She didn't let fate get the best of her. She has always attempted to rise above irrational beliefs and superstitions.

Fate is Fate, When Beulah's bridegroom was fated to die to snakebite on their wedding night; did building as still fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary (Jasmine 2)

Even in childhood, she knew that she had the potential to fight, win all battles and establish a strong identity. Her fight with the dog using a staff giving her a buzz of

power, her rejection of a marriage which was almost finalized by her father and grandmother, her affection of the electric switch in Vimla's house which made her feel totally in control all showed her confidence to go towards the realization of her potential.

Jyoti's journey for identity was affected by risks and hardships. She is cultured by the society in which she is born, despite her ability to grasp the concepts of power and control and it was for this reason that she chose to hide her true identity majority of the times and lived according to the images created by others.

By falling in love and marrying Prakash, a young and ambitious engineer, she realised a little part of her goal. He wanted Jyoti to let go of her old self and become a new woman. After her marriage, she changes to Jasmine. Her husband, Prakash encourages Jyoti to study English, and symbolically gives Jyoti a new name Jasmine, and a new life.

He wanted to break down the Jyoti as I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, "You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume". Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities (77).

She was renamed Jasmine and was excited to travel to America with her husband to complete his education. She was enjoying sharing her husband's ambition. However, on the eve of their departure, her husband Prakash was killed by fundamentalists – Khalsa terrorists. Jasmine was heartbroken and irritated as a result of this. Rather than spending the rest of her life as a helpless widow in Hasnapur, she chose to travel to America and arrived on the campus of the university where her husband was supposed to be studying. It was her method of expressing her displeasure at having shattered her husband's hopes. In such a situation, her inner strength allowed her complete her mission successfully.

The second part of the book deals with Jasmine's life in America and problems she faces there. After her husband's death, she migrated to America to fulfil her husband's mission. She reached America through illegal ways and doesn't know anything about the American way of life. Loneliness and disillusionment are common problems faced by the expatriate community.

Then Jasmine met Lilian Gordon, one who educated her, set her free from her old memories, and encouraged her to live. She went to meet Professor Vadhera with her support, and he assisted Prakash in gaining admission to an engineering programme. She initially resided at Professor Vadhera's residence and decided to leave the residence of Vadhera. This action suggested that she was moving closer

to self-actualization in her life, which could be attributed to her acculturation to the American way of thinking and wearing.

After a short while, Jasmine went to work as a babysitter for Tylor and Wylie Hayes' daughter Duff in their Manhattan home. Her name was changed from Jasmine to Jase while she was there. While working as a caregiver, she also employed part-time jobs such as answering phones and tutoring Punjabi graduate students at the university. Jasmine had developed a personality at this point in her childhood and was extremely self-assured about it.

The tug of war between these two opposing powers, the Indian and the American, did not alarm her; instead, it fascinated her. Even if the other immigrants were caught in the middle of these two pressures, Jasmine was relieved that she had been able to adapt to the new culture. Despite her insecure identity, the alien country taught her to live with ease and confidence. Then she decides to move to New York in order to pursue her goals. In the last part of the novel, Jasmine moves to Canada where she married another man named Bud Ripple Meyer and settles in Iowa, and changes her name to Jane Ripple Meyer. Another period in Jasmine's life was when she abandoned Taylor and Duff because of the presence of Sukhawinder, the Khalsa terrorist who murdered Prakash in India. Then she went to Iowa and met another benefactor, this time in the guise of a mother, Mrs. Ripplemeyer. She acquired a job in Iowa's bank while she was there. She

also found a place in the banker Bud Ripplemayer's heart.

Jasmine had a peaceful life in Bud's house. She was overjoyed at her new career and her new role as stepmother to Du, a sixteen-year-old. She had been thinking about her responsibilities to others, but now she was thinking about her love and herself. Her two remarks, "The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives" and "I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness," A care-givers life is a good life a worthy life." It was a clear response to her courage. She did not feel any guilt. She only did what she thought was right for her. Jasmine's desire – "I want to do the right thing. I don't want to be a terrible person" proved that she did not feel guilty and no longer was thinking of herself as Jane. She had survived the worst part of her life in America and now was free to make her place in Taylor's life.

Mukherjee through her character Jasmine shows the potential of a woman to remake herself in a New World. Uprooted from her native land India, Jasmine does her best to create a new world of new ideas and values and establish a new cultural identity and adapts according to her situations. Through this novel, we can see her as a survivor, a fighter and an adapter. Jasmine's is the total transformation of an Indian body into an American soul.

Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning Indo-American author and poet,

who belong to the category of expatriate literature. Her works are largely set in India and America and portrays the experiences of the South-Asian immigrants particularly that of South Asian women. Her first collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1994) won her an American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, and the PEN Josephine Miles Award for fiction. Her other major works include *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Palace of Illusions*, etc and her works have been translated into 18 languages.

Divakaruni was born in Kolkata, India. After completing her graduation, she moved to the USA to continue her higher studies. She earned a Ph.D. from the University of California. She moved to Texas after her marriage and now she is a professor of creative writing at the University of Houston. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the outstanding voices of the immigrant writers. Her writings are set both in India and America focusing on the lives of immigrants especially women in America caught between two cultures. Divakaruni's focuses on the lives of Indian women grappling with cultural restraints. *Sister of My Heart* was first published in 1999 followed by sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002). The story centres on the lives of two Indian girls, Anju and Sudha who use their own voices to narrate the story of their lives.

Sister of My Heart is about how marriage transforms the lives of two women, one of whom moves to California

and the other remains in India. *Sister of My Heart* is about a Bengali family's tangled relationships. Sudha and Anju are distant cousins who grew up together in a large, old Calcutta mansion on the same night when both their fathers unexpectedly disappeared and are very attached to each other. Anju and Sudha commit to an arranged marriage out of familial obligation. Instead of marrying her first love, Ashok, Sudha submits to an arranged marriage with the son of Mrs. Sanyal. Sudha believes that by refusing to elope, she has rescued her family from shame, and as a result, Anju and Sunil have a lovely marriage. Therefore, Anju married Sunil, a computer scientist, and Sudha marries Ramesh, an Indian Railways officer.

At their joint wedding, Anju perceives her husband Sunil's infatuation for Sudha's beauty. She marries and joins her husband Ramesh's rigid household, and Anju eventually travels to California to join Sunil. When Anju visits Sudha's house before leaving for America, she comprehends that marriage has complicated their lives, divided their loyalties and has set them on their different wifely orbits.

Sudha's life becomes complicated as she fails to conceive a baby and experiences the displeasure with her in-law's. Sudha's mother in law, Mrs. Sanyal is a controlling and nasty woman. She controls her son and does everything with her approval. Once he decides to stay at his in laws in Calcutta and Mrs. Sanyal is not happy for his decision. She says- "Am I dead that you think you can arrange whatever you want, do

whatever people insist on without even asking permission?" (Divakaruni, 196) Mrs. Sanyal prefers to accomplish affairs as she desires.

Both Anju and Sudha expect babies at the same time. Mrs. Sanyal's family is overjoyed to know about Sudha's pregnancy. Sudha's mother-in-law relieves her of home duties after the pregnancy. Sudha now has more freedom and find time to sleep late and doze in the afternoons. Sudha's favourite dishes are served to her. The whole family is overjoyed by the news. But Mrs. Sanyal's family gets upsets to know that they are going to have a baby girl through the gender reveal test and things take on a new turn. Mrs. Sanyal states that the Sanyal family's eldest child must be male, and as a result, Mrs. Sanyal pushes Sudha to get an abortion. Sudha is taken aback. Ramesh, her husband, is unable to save her though being a good husband and a respectable man. Sudha is determined about not aborting the fetus and is compelled to leave her in-laws and moves to her mother's house in Calcutta. Under such a situation, Sudha's mother, Nalini, advises her to submit to Mrs. Sanyal in Calcutta. She doesn't have many options as a Chatterjee lady. The family's reputation becomes extremely important.

Now, Mrs. Sanyal has planned for a divorce for her son Ramesh from Sudha and has plans to get Ramesh married again. The final divorce papers are delivered to Sudha. Sudha is practical, as she does not break down and thinks about her past, as how hard she has worked at loving her in-laws

and at being a good wife. She experiences an emotion as though she has spent years of her life pushing a rock uphill and the moment she stops pushing, it has rolled right down to the bottom. Sudha relishes a tremendous ease. She signs the divorce papers with a flourish. Sudha observes: "We were starting anew, my daughter and I, and because there were no roles charted out for us by society, we could become anything we wanted". (Divakaruni, 257)

Sudha leaves the Sanyals and travels to Calcutta. She confronts Ashok, her first love, who has expressed an interest in marrying her. Ashok accepts Sudha but not her daughter. She holds a viewpoint that she has no intention of separating herself from Dayita, her daughter. Sudha left the Sanyals because they intended to abort the unborn baby.

On the other hand, Anju, Sudha's counterpart, is concerned about Sudha's future chances. Anju wanted to reserve a ticket for Sudha and Sudha's daughter Dayita for the journey. Anju keeps a sum of money hidden for Sudha and her daughter and expressed her desire for Sudha and Dayita to visit America in a letter.

America has its own challenges of conflict of beliefs and a new way of life but it would provide Sudha with the benefit of anonymity. Sudha's identity will stay secret in America since no one will care whether she is a Chatterjees' daughter or that she is divorced. Therefore, her privacy retains which was difficult to preserve in Calcutta. Marriage has been projected as something which is sure to happen in her novels. It is

an inevitable entity which all the girls have to go through. Unlike Western countries in India marriages are fixed by the elders of the family and the prospective bride and groom are expected to live together as husband-wife. At the same time divorce, separation, widowhood or spinsterhood is not acceptable in Indian traditional custom. Women coming under these categories are barred from many social, religious and family customs. But the same doesn't apply for men. This entire gender stereotype thinking about women's fate right from their birth and the life she spends as a child and then growing up till she attains old age is presented by Divakaruni in her novel. Sudha could carve out a new life, support herself, and provide Dayita with whatever she needed in America and be less worried about the reputation and status. Best of all, no one could judge Sudha since she is one of many mothers in America who have decided that living alone is preferable rather to live with the wrong man and swears – "I will prove myself. I will be in charge of my fate. I will pattern a new life for myself. I swat away the superstitious unease that buzzes in my ear like gnats". (Divakaruni, 273)

Divakaruni frequently mentions about education, marriage and food. She knows that a change in the role of a woman is possible only through education. There are other issues like marriage and with it come motherhood and relation with in-laws and the change of identity of woman. Sudha separates herself from Ramesh since he is unhelpful to her and she does not agree with Ashok's marriage philosophy. Sudha and

Anju in America search freedom that binds them together. When the protagonists choose to throw away the baggage of their society and build a new identity as strong women with independent moral strength. Divakaruni portrays her protagonists as a modern day woman struggling with the complexities of social, political and cultural changes due to globalization and postcolonial consciousness.

Marriage is very important in *Sister of My Heart*. By the end of the novel, both Anju and Sudha becomes more independent, as do their three mothers. The opening lines, "The old tales say this also: in the wake of the BidhataPurush come the demons, for that is the world's nature, good and evil mingled" (Divakaruni, 3) is quite realistic statement. One can anticipate the writer's idea of difficulties going together in the characters life. Sudha and Anju the two cousins born on the same day were fatherless. The cruel hands of fate had snatched their fathers even before they were born. The societal norms and the traditional beliefs haunt the girls as "For girl-babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born" (Divakaruni, 6).

Anju is outspoken and disagrees with the biased notion, declared 'Maybe there's no BidhataPurush either' (Divakaruni, 6) AbhaPishi, sister of Anju's father widowed at young age of 18 years lived with her brother's family and was like mother to both the girls. Divakaruni has described life of a widow spent in strictness through Pishi and later through Gauri ma

and Nalini. Gauri Ma took the reins of running the family by supplying steady flow of money through the earnings she made in her book-shop. Sudha's mother Nalini endowed with beauty is not much involved in the running of the house except complaining for everything. Life had been hard both emotionally and financially after the mysterious death of their husbands on a journey they had taken together. Anjali (Anju) which means offering and Basudha (Sudha) meaning patient as the earth god.

Divakaruni herself is an immigrant and attempts to present different experiences combined with varying levels of negotiation of fractured identity issues, she paints a powerful portrait of a selection of South Asian immigrants. Within that portrayal, she is able to explore expectations based on individuality as well as gender, and support the strength of women in diaspora.

Conclusion:

Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is the movement of Jasmine's life towards achieving true identity. Her journey to America is a process of her quest of true self. Even when the protagonist goes through the worst experiences of her life, she is able to come through the obstacles and attains self-awareness and a new identity and overthrows her past life. Divakaruni's characters are mostly Indians with Bengali identity and she has tried to identify her immigrant-self through them. It is an experience of dislocation and re-location. We must keep both the directions of dislocation and relocation when we are

discussing Indian diasporic experience. This article throws light on how Bharathi Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have successfully incorporated the Indian diasporic experience in their novels taken up for study.

There is no doubt the protagonist and their creators of the novels *Jasmine* remain forever in the minds of every reader. We can trace the energetic and cheerful qualities of the first-generation Diasporic writers in the USA like Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. They are considered as the renowned voices in the post-colonial era express the dilemmas and problems of the expatriate community in the USA and the other world. Both the writers, through their simple narrative style, explored the identity crisis, loneliness and

disillusionment faced by the immigrants mainly the Indian women. Mukherjee captured the emotional and pivotal role of the immigrants in the world. Divakaruni examines the traditional institution of the arranged marriage and its relevance across the time. As immigrant writers, both of them successfully and authentically express multicultural conflicts drawn from their alien life.

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