

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 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.

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 counterparts. Under the influence of the patriarchal Indian social structure, the status of the woman has constantly been changing, often to suit the changing needs of men. Images of women have been reshaped and reoriented by men and for men. It is through this awareness of their condition, that the women writers took up the question of female identity in a male-dominated society and questioned her identity. The women writers focused on the crucial problem of how society looks at women, and 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 woman and women writer is equally commendable to men. Women writers express discrimination, dissatisfaction and agony through their works. Each writing of these women writers goes beyond all those gender theories and reacts against them. Their writings urge for freedom and depict the life of woman who is trapped between their aspirations and the constricting forces of patriarchy.

The writings produced by authors living outside their homeland are called Diasporic or Expatriate literature. Generally, diasporic literature deals with themes of rootlessness, racial discrimination, identity crisis, dislocation, cross-cultural encounters, nostalgia and marginalization. The majority of Indian diasporic women writers depict the sufferings of the frustrated homemakers and present their heroines resisting patriarchal notions. The women characters question their individuality and identity. They want to lead an independent life. They explore female subjectivity to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. They also show the women suffer 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 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.

Indo-American diaspora is one of the important Diasporas which has exerted a huge impact on the literary world and has fashioned literary geniuses of our time. Bharati Mukherjee, is

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 as an American writer and not an Indian expatriate writer. She died at 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, the problem of cross-cultural crisis and about an 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 to satisfy her desires and continues her hunt for self-sufficiency after she arrives in 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 searches 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 a 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 gives her a buzz of power, her rejection of a marriage which was almost finalized by her father and grandmother, her affection for 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 the majority of the time 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 a 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 to complete her mission successfully.

The second part of the book deals with *Jasmine's* life in America and the problems she faces there. After her husband's death, she migrated to America to fulfil her husband's mission.

She reached America in 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 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 Ripplemayer. 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 caregiver's life is good 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 adapt 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.

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 portray the experiences of 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 PhD 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 is one of the outstanding voices of 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 focuses on the lives of Indian women grappling with cultural restraints. *Sister of My Heart* was first published in 1999 followed by the sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002). The story centres on the lives of two Indian girls, Anju and Sudha who use their 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. 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 set them on their different wifely orbits. Sudha's life becomes complicated as she fails to conceive a baby and experiences displeasure with her in-laws. 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 with his in-laws in Calcutta and Mrs Sanyal is not happy with 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 finds 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 upset 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 by being a good husband and a respectable man. Sudha is determined not to abort the fetus and is compelled to leave her in-laws and move 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, or 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 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 the view 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 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 remains which was difficult to preserve in Calcutta.

Marriage has been projected as something sure to happen in her novels. It is an inevitable entity that all the girls have to go through. Unlike in 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 to men. This entire gender stereotype thinking about women's fate right from 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, provide Dayita with whatever she needed in America and be less worried about her 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 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 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 comes motherhood and relation with in-laws and the change of identity of the 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 for 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 protagonist 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 become more independent, as do their three mothers. The opening lines, "The old tales say this also: in the wake of the Bidhata Purush come the demons, for that is the world's nature, good and evil mingled" (Divakaruni, 3) is a quite realistic statement. One can anticipate the writer's idea of difficulties going together in the character's 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, declaring 'Maybe there's no Bidhata Purush either' (Divakaruni, 6) Abha Pishi, sister of Anju's father widowed at the young age of 18 years lived with her brother's family and was like a mother to both the girls. Divakaruni has described the 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 a steady flow of money through the earnings she made in her bookshop. Sudha's mother Nalini endowed with beauty is not much involved in the running of the house except by complaining about 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) means offering and Basudha (Sudha) means 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 can explore expectations based on individuality as well as gender, and support the strength of women in the diaspora. 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 for her true self. Even when the protagonist goes through the worst experiences of her life, she can 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 identities and she has tried to identify her immigrant self through them. It is an experience of dislocation and relocation. We must keep both the directions of dislocation and relocation when we are discussing the Indian diasporic experience. This article throws light on how Bharathi Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have successfully incorporated the Indian diasporic experience in their novel taken up for study. There is no doubt the protagonist and the 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 have considered the renowned voices in the post-colonial era to 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