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## **CULTURAL CONSTRUCT AND IDENTITY IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF THREE FEMALE DIASPORIC AUTHORS**

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### **Abstract**

*The primary concern of this paper is to engage in a critical inquiry on the issue of identity in the literature of the diaspora by three selected writers Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Bharati Mukherjee. An identity crisis is not a product of any singular circumstance or reason. There can be multiple factors contributing to the crisis of identity in an individual. It is important to note here that not only the source but also the manifestation of the crisis is varied, in the sense that individuals differ in their ways of internalizing, as also, externalizing, the emotions attached to his/her identity- as a man/woman; as a citizen; as a professional; as a part of the system of beings, etc. My concern, however, is with the loss of identity as a consequence of the loss of culture. I propose that settlements in foreign lands (away from one's birthplace/ native land) are bound to breed a sense of identity loss since there has been, willy-nilly, a loss of cultural identity while trying to fit in into a new land/social surrounding—and the culture thereof.*

### **Keywords**

Diaspora, Immigrant, Identity, Occidental, Culture

## 1. Introduction

Identity is of great importance in human life. Everybody struggles for establishing or find his identity. Identity also refers to our existence. First of all, it is a very difficult task to define and determine identity. Identity is a tangible concept. It is subject to change according to the situation, time, and society. When we specially talk about the identity of women, we have to go through the literature of champions of women in India abroad.

Bharati Mukherjee deals with the subject matter of identity for women in her most celebrated novels, *Wife* and *Jasmine*. She studies keenly the distorted psyche of the immigrant women who live in conflict with traditional Indian values and those of the western world. Mukherjee examines the complex nature of her characters and searches for their multiple identities in her writings. Her texts replace the politics of identity. Her novels *Wife* and *Jasmine*, in present-day Canada, India, and the U.S.A. and in the past literary texts, discover a diasporic women's shifting characteristics.

*Wife* is a good description of tangential perplexities considering American culture. The novel displays the powerful impact of cross-cultural dilemmas. It shows how the life of a human being is driven to the edge of tragedy due to cross-culturalism. Moreover, the novel also shows the effect of cross-culture on the identity of men and women. Dimple is an important character in this novel. She is a teenage girl and keenly interested in her dream marriage instead of studying. She wants to migrate to the United States of America just after her marriage. She does not want to spend even her few days in the traditional house of her in-laws. She considers that her migration and marriage are the same. Mukherjee declares that migration for a flight from reality. This nature of human beings always questions her identity. When we try to escape reality and start living in dreams, our identity becomes ambiguous and confused.

Dimple has a great fascination for Occidental life so she grabs the chance of migration with excitement. She shares her excitement about the west with her friend. Pixie "Dimple expresses that actual joy was only seen in cinemas are in the West" (Mukherjee, 1988). Lastly, Dimple migrates to America with her husband and they stay with another couple of some financial job problems. Here, the novelist points out that in America financial factor matters a lot in the life of a person. He or she cannot demonstrate his identity in a financial crisis. In fact, language also puts a question mark on their identity and existence in the society of novel culture. Language problem has also been another major factor in shaping identities in American culture.

The interior of the apartment had a batik, framed wall hanging, which displayed King Ram, a Ramayana character, and his court in an impressive manner. This is because culture is the causal factor in demonstrating and shaping our identity. If we get our culture lost, we will forget our identity. The lives of the characters clarify that in the new land assimilation of the foreign identity is personal. In fact, the identity of people is formulated with the cultural values of their own society in which they have been nurtured. They have come abroad for vocational purposes. The country of adoption is a temporary address for them. So, it is very difficult for them to shake off the cultural values of their identity and adopt new ones. So, they have no interest to compromise their own identity, culture, and religious values for a foreign culture. Indians have fractured their identity in America. They are in search of their identity in that very society. They make their best effort to establish their identity by assimilating with the Americans. Not only this, but the Indians also adopt some social and cultural values to assert their identity.

## **2. Literature Review**

Dr. Manoj Kumar in his book *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Critical Spectrum* writes on various themes such as food, alienation, searching for identity, mythology, the pain of immigrants, marriage, gender problems, etc. It will be experiencing the varied experiences of existential characters, gender problems, and food-related aspects.

Shweta Garg in her book *Culinary Images and Identity* asserts about the central characters who respond to immigration through cookery, resistance through food, and food consumption. This book even captures the identity through food.

Jagdish Batra in his book *Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake- A Critical Study* discusses the inter-generation relationship, identity crisis, and institution of family through the characters in the novel.

Dr. Swati Mittal in her book *Bharati Mukherjee-A Diasporic Odyssey* contends the voice of a woman in a new world searching for identity. This Diasporic experience in the book is a blend of several emotions from hope to despair and displacement to acculturation.

Anita Sharma in her paper "Identity Crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" asserts how Gogol adapts to the new identity. Different cultural practices have also been mentioned in it.

Nigar Alam in her paper "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart: Complexities of Survival for Women*" avers that Divakaruni's novels assert not only the possibility of building

and maintaining such bonding but also substantiate how important these relationships are to immigrant women in America. The author conveys the message that female bonding is a beautiful delicate thing as she will be there by your side at all critical times.

Shweta Garg in her paper “Interpreting a Culinary Montage: Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies” avers that food acts as an aid to compensate for the understated narrative style of the author. Further, this paper underpins the fact that food not only acts as an identity marker but also negotiates the personal, racial, sexual, and social identities of the immigrant subjects.

### **3. Research Issues**

The identity of Dimple is strongly influenced by the American lifestyle as Ina invites Dimple to a party where she offers wine and there is a hidden desire in Dimple to drink. Indian culture does not permit a woman to have drinks. It is considered a social taboo in this country. In fact, our identity is the byproduct of our culture. Culture nurtures and moulds our identity. Hence, Dimple's identity is also going to under a change in American culture. Dimple belongs to the cultured Hindu brahmin family of Bengal. So, her conscience does not allow her to drink wine. She strives immensely to adopt the lifestyle of occidental culture, but her identity is not liberated from the massive influence of oriental culture. In this way, Dimple's identity gets confused between two contrasting cultures. Asnani asserts "Dimple is ensnared in a quandary of strains between American culture and society and the conventional limitations encompassing an Indian spouse, between a women's activist longing to be emphatic and free and the Indian should be compliant and self-destroying" (Asnani, 2011).

It is obvious at the beginning of the novel; the protagonist tries to change her identity as a wife with one such example including a miscarriage by skipping herself free from her pregnancy. She thinks that Babu's property is in her womb and her self-identity is avoided by her miscarriage. This traces that constructing identity leads to psychological imbalance which causes neurosis.

*Jasmine* is another novel by Bharati Mukherjee where Jasmine, the protagonist requires to look for her real self & a little independence from the dominant patriarchal tradition's confines. The novel really presents the crisis of identity. It especially focuses on problems related to gender, women's position, self-determination right, and alienation from the structure of power due to patriarchy.

Cross-cultural reality is a major issue in *Jasmine*. The novelist shows the effect of the oriental and occidental cultural conflicts on the life of Jyoti. She is the protagonist of the novel. The story of *Jasmine* revolves around the experiences of Jyoti, her feudalistic village Hasnapur in America. Her husband is killed in a terrorist attack. Thereafter, Jyoti resolves to go to America by producing illegal documents. Her intention is to fulfill her husband's wishes to perform 'Sati' after the death of her husband as suggested by Hindu culture. Jyoti has to face several challenges in her life caused by differences in oriental and occidental cultures.

From the beginning of the novel, it is obvious that *Jasmine* is a freedom-loving woman. She wants to come beyond the paradigms of traditional Indian culture. *Jasmine* is a bold woman from the beginning of the novel. She does not believe in superstitious elements of the traditional culture. The novel opens with "Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasanpur, an astrologer cupped his ears – his satellite dish to the stars – and foretold my widowhood and exile" (Mukherjee, 1988). Jyoti even speaks against the prophecy about her being a widow and her banishment. As it is said that "you are a crazy old man you don't know what my future holds" (Mukherjee, 1988).

In this vein, Jyoti displays that she is in search of her personal identity. She is not ready to lose it at any cost. She never wants to confine herself to the norms of superstitious culture. There we trace that astrologer hits on her forehead so that she won't find any good husband for her so the question here arises that in the oriental tradition girl's beauty is more significant than her qualities at the time of marriage. Steinberg also asserts the same thing "for a Bengali girl to have a physical imperfection is to be unmarriageable" (Steinberg, 34).

Thus, we find that physical beauty is also a mark of identity for girls. Not only this, education matters a lot to establish the identity of girls. Jyoti is keenly interested in education since her childhood. However, Jyoti has less opportunity for education because she belongs to a male-dominated orthodox village. In the same vein, the character of 'Dida' displays that women have to struggle for their identity. They are always suppressed in the culture of the conventional village. Moreover, in the eastern culture, dowry is also related to the identity and existence of women. Without dowry girls are not married in oriental culture whether they have established their self-identity, does not matter to society. Consequently, society ignores the existence and identity of girls. They are treated as curses to the family. They are mainly prepared for kitchen work. In this culture, parents think that they are destined to remain confined in the kitchen. They have no free

access to education as boys have. In fact, education is the most relevant factor to shape the personality and identity of an individual. Girls in oriental society have no freedom to choose even husbands for them. They are married to the bridegroom chosen by their parents or elder members of their family. Society has a deeply rooted notion about village women “village girls are like cattle whoever you lead them, that is the way they will go” (Mukherjee, 1997).

During the journey, Jasmine gets brutally raped by a half-face man. It is obvious here that the incident of rape adds a new identity to their personality of Jasmine. First, she feels loser of everything and secondly becomes a murderer. Lastly, she makes up her mind to use every opportunity to assimilate occidental culture. Jasmine is a very complex character who changes her identity every now and then. She hints that after being a widow she is discarding the old identity and forming the new one that is American. We have traced that identity’s truth revealed by the shattered water pot. According to what is said in the context of India’s literature, a water pot is compared to a woman’s role in the social structure of patriarchy. The external identity of Jasmine is strengthened and defined again by the internal identity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most celebrated Bengali diasporic female writers in the United States. She likes that she did not think that she had a story to tell she has written on her blog "moving to a totally different culture and figuring out how to live on my own made me see the world considerably more plainly.... I pondered India more than I had ever previously. I understood what I appreciated with regards to it; the glow, the closeness of more distant family the way profoundly invades the way of life. Be that as it may, I likewise perceived issues how ladies are regularly treated".

Divakaruni thinks that a woman can change herself and establish a separate identity only through education. Education helps a woman to build up their mindset and come outside the arena of patriarchal society. She also believes that education can mould age-old customs of society and make them friendly for women. Further, she speaks that marriage is an important tool for determining the identity of women. Women get married and they come in relation with in-laws and husbands. They have to perform the role of wife and mother. Thus, it also brings about changes in the identity of women. “*Sister of My Heart*” as claimed by San Diego Union-Tribune “magically affecting her intricate tapestry of old and new worlds shines with a rare luminosity”.

Women, as depicted by Divakaruni, in various roles or incarnations; someone’s mother, someone’s daughter, someone’s wife, and then a human being as well who has her own mind and

individuality aspiring for modernity while still being connected to the roots. The modern woman protagonists are expected to struggle along with the difficulties of political, social, and cultural alterations because of the consequences of the colonial period and globalization. In such a complex situation woman has to create a peaceful and progressive identity.

Divakaruni has also reflected feminism of different levels to assert the rights and interests of women so that they can create their identity. Some of her novels depict unexpected power for women in society. However, the novelist knows that the world does not belong to women. Women are always considered second-class citizens dependent on men. Women of all races classes religions and castes are controlled by men. Men have the decision-making power. Women have a minimal role in decision-making. That is a great hurdle for women in shaping their identity for them. But the determination of individuality of her heroines makes them stronger.

The novelist depicts a marriage in the novels written by her, frequently. It is a non-optional inevitable situation that all the girls have to go through compulsorily. Marriage is an important event in the life of girls in India and abroad that changes their identity. It is the elders who fix the marriage without the consent of the girl. Love after marriage is solemnized with no escape route for the couple. Not only this but things like separation from spouse, getting divorced, deciding to remain, spinster, are also prohibited in the typically traditional society. If a woman falls under these categories she is debarred from several social and religious celebrations. However, it is not the truth of society in the case of men. Thus, the novels of Divakaruni present gender prejudice and bias in a very strong manner.

The institution of Divorce is always pitied and looked at differently. Girls are expected to spend their whole life in the traditional families of their husbands that are generally dominated and ruled over by elderly women. In this way, the traditional setup of this society does not allow young women to come out with separate identities. Anju and Sudha in *Sister of My Heart*, have to join their husband's family. They are educated and want to create their individual identity for themselves. However, their husband's families obstruct them from doing so. These women are even portrayed as challenging widows after the death of their husbands.

The writings of, "*The Princess in the Palace of Snakes*" delineate the living style of these little ones, the girls, who are protected by all the three mothers right from their birth to marriage. The second book *The Queen of Sword* describes the girls as very strong and confident. It also depicts all the highs and lows that came in their married life. Divakaruni also focuses on the

established identity of Anju and Sudha through their bonding and friendship. The knot between these two sisters is shaping their identity. It also shows that the human relationship moulds the identity. The names of chapters in this novel are respectively named after the two characters played by these two women namely, Anju & Sudha, unfolding the perspectives in addition to interpretations of the feelings that they developed internally towards life's realities. It helps readers understand even the interest of the characters like Anju was ambitious towards literature and Sudha was a keen learner of stitching and designing clothes.

Anju is not interested in getting married which shows how she feels about the way of subjugation of women to men that do not allow women to think of their self-identity. She quotes "With a more grounded. That I should have a place with some man I haven't met when he puts a festoon around my neck. Gracious, for what reason would I be able to stay simply single? for what reason must I be burdened to a man like a truck to a bison?" (Divakaruni, 2004). The role of Sudha shows her identity and it demonstrates that Sudha has made her identity as a good homemaker and an Indian wife. Sudha seems satisfied at this juncture of life. Where we can trace that Sudha's identity depends on some other while Anju tried to come out with an independent identity for herself.

Fortunately, both the sister got pregnant at the same time and Sudha conceived a baby girl after her in-laws asked her to get aborted and she opposed that and left her husband. This decision seems stronger and she wants to carve her own identity with her daughter. Such incidents put light on the identity of women, which completely depends upon their marriage and husband in society. *Sister of My Heart* clears the identity of women as mothers through the character of Anju and Sudha.

*Queen of Dreams* is another novel of Divakaruni where the protagonist Rakhi wants to create her identity as a dream interpretation. She has a very high interest to be familiarized with India. She is torn between India and America as her adapting to the culture of America starts with her very birth but it was difficult for her to assimilate to the culture of America. Now as she was living as an immigrant, it became an opportunity for her to be creative. She also starts creating new narrations of identity & belonging. As per Nair: "Through absorbing and assimilation, and Indian foreigner lady in America can make a character for herself. However, this is a character that is continually developing being available to change and never-ending movement" (Kezia, 2009).

Rakhi endeavours to justify herself throughout the novel and faces criticism and cruelty. She now questions the most basic aims & assumptions, the actual nature of love and the tendency to forgive, to revive the love for her husband & her family, and then her own community. The changing aspects of Rakhi are crucial relationships that are changed in the period between her acculturation and identity crisis. The novel's characters are searching for their actual image. Most of them are torn between the traditional and the new values. The destructive power of hatred is demonstrated by the terrorist attack on 9/11. It ignites a new faith and respect in the Indian immigrants for their Indian values. It also motivates them to search for their past and root. Rocky becomes enslaved by the secrets and sacrifices of her mother through her dream journals. Rocky emerges as a stronger person in the end and she loves India but at last, she has adapted to American life. In this way, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has depicted the identity crisis of the Indian immigrants in her novel. Ultimately most of the characters come out of this crisis and created an independent identity for themselves.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the youngest among the two other authors shows a strange inquisition about the behaviour of humans & respect for the mystery it has. She makes the readers share the character's tragedies & their nostalgic experiences. She points out the damage to the identity created by their culture too. The characters look relieved when adjusting to the world that is new but regretful, at the separation from their original culture at the same time. Jhumpa Lahiri is renowned as an acclaimed recorder of the Bengali foreigner's experience. Most of her abstract yield is about to oust, about individuals venturing out from home and moving to another world. Both *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* investigate the thoughts of separation and character, individual as well as social. At the point when social and ethnic characters are obscured in an unfamiliar land, the individual personality additionally stands defenceless against change. The characters often experience an emergency of personality, attempting to accommodate the American personality with their Indian personality. The immigrants search for their roots in the culture to which they really belong. Being an immigrant, Jhumpa Lahiri also finds herself caught in these currents of life. The themes of her novels beautifully explore the lives of immigrants. The cross-cultural conflicts, man-woman relationships, east-west encounters, etc. are expressed explicitly in her novels. They further identify with touchy problems in the existence of Indian outsiders with subjects like material troubles, unnatural birth cycles, and separation between the first and second ages. Lahiri's composing is described by her basic language and her characters,

regularly Indian outsiders to America, who explore the social upsides of their origination and that of their embraced home. Lahiri's fiction is self-portraying and often records her own encounters just as of her folks, companions, colleagues, and others in the Bengali people group. Lahiri analyzes her characters' battles, tensions, and subtleties of outsider brain research and conduct. Her characters long for meaningful connections, but what they get is rarely what they expect. Those trying to adapt to an unfamiliar world do not always succeed. Regarding this fractured identity Jhumpa Lahiri comments:

The topic of character is consistently a troublesome one, however particularly so for the individuals who are socially dislodged, as foreigners are, or the people who experience childhood in two universes at the same time, just like the case for their youngsters. The more seasoned I get, the more mindful I am that I have some way or another acquired a feeling of an outcast from my folks, despite the fact that, in numerous ways, shallow ones, to a great extent I am a lot more American than they are. Indeed, it is still exceptionally difficult to consider myself an American. For workers, the difficulties of an outcast, the dejection, the consistent feeling of estrangement, the information on and aching for a lost world, are more expressed and upsetting than for their kids. Then again, the issue for the offspring of outsiders, those with solid connections to their nation of beginning, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The inclination that there was no single spot in which I completely had a place troubled me growing up. It disturbs me less at this point. (Web)

In the novel, *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri chooses to challenge the traditional construct of identity creation for one of her central characters, Ashima. Lahiri wrote the novel *The Namesake*, some four years after she had brought out the initial collections of stories of *Interpreter of Maldives*. It is quite common for a writer to depend upon his actual experiences of life when he starts writing a work of fiction. But whereas her first work suggests inspiration from the Indian diasporic community of America, the novel bears a clear stamp of autobiography. Starting from the details of life in Calcutta to the problem of identity of the second-generation immigrants in America, there are several aspects that are based on Lahiri's own life experiences. She clearly states that when she started writing fiction, her stories had Calcutta as their locale. Although she was born in England and brought up in America, she had been going to Calcutta in the company of her family that made frequent visits to the city. So, even while living in America, India has always formed a part of her fictional landscape and her characters have an Indian background.

India keeps cropping up as a setting in the background of the story of the novel. *The Namesake* is essentially a story of the life of Indian immigrants in the United States. Because of the dislodging, the diaspora's journey for personality and a feeling of powerlessness to have a place turned into even more troublesome and frantic. The rootlessness, combined with the detached disposition of the host culture, adds to the feeling of otherness. Diaspora's feeling of misfortune becomes disastrous when they consider getting back to their country. The homes to which they need to return go through a complete change and end up being a heartfelt hallucination. Whenever seen magically people end up being everlasting outcasts. One doesn't have an extremely durable home anyplace. It is this dislodging which gives diasporic composing it's impossible to miss characteristics of misfortune and sentimentality. As Salman Rushdie says in *Imaginary Homelands*:

They are obliged to bargain in broken mirrors, some of the pieces have been lost. A settler, despite the fact that westernized, has an excruciating encounter. He is vexed with personality emergencies; his local culture unknowingly meddles with the legitimate handle of outsider culture. They feel suspended in limbo. The devotion to the set customs and feeling of having a place with their country comes in resistance with the new climate coming about in forlornness and sensation of uncertainty. The outsider faces two inquiries "who am I?" and "where-is here?" (Rushdie, 1999)

#### **4. Research Methodology**

Socio-cultural, spiritual, ethical, and mythological sub-texts will be analyzed to effectively contextualise the selected works of the three authors. The history of food narratives, gender roles, and identifying trends and their gradual evolution will also be taken up for reaching the conclusion.

#### **5. Results**

Every name has a meaning which is exactly what makes it symbolic and meaningful in literature as well as in life. Names are identity symbols. The significance of names comes across while identity becomes the core issue. In Literature, names emerge as identity representatives while dealing with clash-counters of countries, races, and cultures. The writeup *Namesake* specifies the experience of a particularly specific community that has no name. They are South-Asian Americans of first and second generations. Lahiri has also focused on the immigrant's cultural dislocation from Calcutta settling in Boston to study and work so that a family could be

raised. The novel thus travelled from the birth of the son to the father's death. This is a tale of liberation and guilt as it talks about the struggle to run from the past and from the family too. The main concern is that the representative of the community, Gogol, which is without a name is himself misnamed. He is not confident of his heritage and is also embarrassed by the name he has so he struggles with both of them. Gogol wishes to redefine himself on the line that he feels is his own instead of what comes from his parent's Bengali immigrant culture. And in the greatness of a self-defining act, Gogol abandons the name and decides to become someone else.

## **6. Conclusion**

The novel's title works on the interrogation of the name's concept. We fix the identity of a child by naming him/her. The immigrants continued to observe the rituals that their grandparents used to observe back there in India. This relationship is also imaginative. Diaspora is a cultural dichotomy site where the parents do their best to create an ambience that is Bengali for Gogol & Sonia but the two as they grow in a hybrid atmosphere hardly respond to any of them to create a homeland in America. His way of life as Gogol, namesake of Nikolai Gogol, the Russian narrator, looms over a more drawn-out time of his life, making an isolated self that can't accommodate his past, present, or future, continually floating like a rudderless boat starting with one store then onto the next while never understanding its actual self. The primary issue with Gogol is that he is a joined person living in two very surprising universes. He is lost and floats away from his folks and culture. He needs to be an American living in America, as opposed to an Indian living in America. He has a place with the second era of diaspora which is brought up in America and whose qualities have been characterized by American culture. For them, India is an outsider nation to be visited once per year to spend occasions and meet family members with whom you don't have any nearby contact. Jhumpa Lahiri underscores not just the settlers who pass on their genealogical home to make another home in the United States yet, in addition, the interminable course of digestion that makes familial, social, phonetic, and monetary ties across public boundaries. Her characters live in the middle attempting to have a place with both simultaneously.

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