



## UNITY OF PLACE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY AS PROJECTED BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI IN MISTRESS OF SPICES AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE IN JASMINE:A NOTE IN COMPARISON

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### **Abstract**

*This paper lays focus on place, culture and identity as travelled by two different authors, Chitra Banerjee and Bharati Mukherjee, on the same lines by revealing how both the writers have dealt with such perennial contemporary issues as immigrant issues, fight for identity, feeling of rootlessness, alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation and sufferings due to discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language concludes into conflicts. It beautifully picturizes how as women writers, they view gender from a feministic point of view, thereby extend the boundaries of human experience from different perspectives and dimensions.*

**Keywords:** *Rootlessness, Displacement, Magic Realism, Epistolary Method, Hybridity of Language, Intersexuality, Dislocation, Up Rootedness.*

It is generally agreed that the immigrants attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. Their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity. The most important means used for insulation is the continuation of the cultural practices and social traditions. The modern diasporic Indian writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. One class comprises those who have spent a part of their life in India and have migrated to an alien land, while the other class comprises those who have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin. Both the groups of writers have produced an enviable amount of English literature. Gauri Bhattacharya aptly holds: "The global Indian diaspora is emerging as a critical phenomenon for twenty-first century researchers to explore" (65). These writers, while depicting migrant characters in their fictional world, do obviously explore the theme of displacement and dilemma of cultural identity. The diasporic Indian writers have generally dealt with characters from their own displaced community.

The first generation immigrants are always concerned with the social, and cultural aspirations which consists of among other things their religion, language, music, art, dress, cuisine, etc. The experiences of these cultural elements have been varied in different diasporic situations. Some of these elements have vanished, some have persisted or survived, others have experienced assimilation, change, and few elements ought to be rejuvenated. The immigrants in these situations are compelled to feel that they stand on the borderline belonging neither to their motherland nor their adopted country. Truly speaking, in the words of Dr. Atmaram Shamrao Gangane, "Indian fiction in English carries various facets of Socio-economic, political, cultural, psychological and linguistic changes. It also records the changing ethos of village life and culture" (170). In their attempt to integrate with the adopted culture while maintaining their inheritance, they develop a dual identity, and their culture becomes a sandwich culture. Their efforts for assimilation and failure to do so dishearten them. The feeling of rootlessness, alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation and sufferings due to discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language leads to conflicts, fight for identity on the one hand and leads to the birth of feeling of marginality in the minority group on the other hand, resulting in the creation of a fractured identity. As they are torn between the two places and two cultures and often languages, the expatriate writers navigate a new literary space. The diasporic literature arises under these circumstances. Therefore, the migrant writer feels a imperative need to write on cultural disparities and with their multicultural ethos and a profound understanding of socio-cultural and economic realities around them, are said to have successfully embarked on the forceful task in transforming their experiences into writings. The very act of creation is a purposeful effort to form a cultural identity.



Indian diasporic literature has raised different issues and aspects of immigrants' lives. The fictional narratives like Bharati Mukherjee's **Jasmine** (1990), Meera Syal's **Anita and Me** (1996), Jhumpa Lahiri's **The Namesake** (2003), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's **The Mistress of Spices** (1996) have picturized the Indians living in England, America and how they have immigrated either to advance their financial condition or to seek jobs due to unemployment at homelands or for better education of their children or better professional opportunities. Their life is full of hard work, tensions and anxieties because of various existential problems have also been portrayed in these texts and many immigrants are shown not feeling a sense of belonging and are longing silently for home. Some of these texts have also brought out the predicament of the illegal immigrants who have to do tedious jobs at lower wages quietly, constantly living under the fear of police and the immigration authorities. Lau pointed observes: "American-Indian women are the most prolific of the contemporary South Asian women writers" (238). Another aspect that surfaces from the novels like Bharati Mukherjee's **Jasmine** and Chitra Divakaruni's **The Mistress of Spices** is the violence and sexual exploitation suffered by Indian women both at home and at workplaces for various reasons such as mismatched marriages with NRI men the feudal approach of the Indian husbands towards their wives and the sexual abuse of Indian women by comparatively better placed men of their own communities and even by the priests of temples and gurudwaras.

But some of the female characters in these novels are also shown adopting different resistance approaches to emphasize their identities and live a life of self-respect and dignity by revolting against the repressive relations and looking for the help of the police and NGO's, "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams" (J 25). In this respect, Indian novelist's interest moved from the public to the private sphere. They began to lineate in their works the individual's quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms along with their problems and crises. Most of them in their eagerness to find new themes, "renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man and engaged themselves in a search for the essence of human living" (Vergese 124).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a popular award winning novelist and poet. Though she writes on a wide variety of themes, she lays much focus on the immigrant experience of the South Asian women in the U.S. by delineating the experiences and struggles experienced by women trying to find their own identities. She is centrally concerned with giving shape to South Asian women's lives in the United States. Living in San Francisco, Divakaruni works as a writer to express a more complexly contoured politics of the oppressed and also, within her South Asian community, to improve the living- conditions of the women. 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 exemplifying multiple identities. For instance, the protagonist has five names. 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. Raven has many names, Raven's mother too has two names. Her first name was Evvie but her later name was Celestina. It seems that Raven too had multiple names and this fact angers him. This signifies that diaspora acquire multiple identities for various reasons. Consequently, they experience identity crisis and their image is cracked or fractured one.

Another important feature of diasporic literature is to reclaim native culture and rewriting it. It seems the main objective of the novel is to do so. The title of the novel itself underscores it. History is the witness that India has been known for its spices. "I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this" (MS 3), she says of her store. **The Mistress of Spices** diagnoses problems of emigrants and offers suitable spices to end their problems as physicians diagnose and prescribe medicine. Almost all who called on her got rid of their problems with the magical working of spices. Out of fifteen chapters, thirteen chapters are titled after Indian Spices. Through this, Divakaruni wishes to decentre the centre by providing central space to the marginalized knowledge system. It is like elevating the local to the global level and offering local solution to global problems. It also involves deconstruction and rejection of western canons. By underlining and bringing to light the native natural solutions to emigrants' problems, the author wishes to decolonize the minds of the colonized.



The novel has, besides the above explored diasporic elements, many more diasporic elements. The novel throws light on several feminist issues also, it is known for its employment of narrative devices like the first person narration, non-linear plot, shift in time and place, flash back, magic realism, story within story, epistolary method, hybridity of language, intertextuality etc.

Bharati Mukherjee deals with how migration and expatriation complicate the lives of Indian- American women in the USA. She also breaks with the conventional presentation of the stereotypical archetypes, and her characters are in contrast with the underbelly immigrants who exist in the liminal waiting room between East and West. Through inter-textual elements Mukherjee examines the tension immigrants feel in the liminal space between cultures as well as they agency this “between’s” affords them. In **Jasmine**, a widowed Punjabi peasant woman rediscovering herself in the U.S.A., was published in 1989. Jasmine, the title character and narrator of the novel, is a young woman whose life takes her from India to the United States, where she lives out many different destinies. She narrates her story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her long journeys encompass five different settings, two murders, one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes and changes again: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane, “wanted to break down the Jyoti 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” (J 70).

Jasmine’s rebirth as Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jazzy/Jase/Jane represent stages in Jasmine’s ever-changing self-identification process and the cultural influence she undertakes at each stage. When Jasmine visits a swami in an “ashram” after Prakash’s death, he tells her that a person’s highest mission is to create new life (J97). She later realizes that the identity of Jasmine and the dream of Vijn and Wife are her versions of this life. It is through this redefinition of “new life” that Jasmine gains enough courage to transform herself into a maximalist immigrant. The process of resignification in Jasmine’s name changes does not stick because the group categorical identification’s inner effects do not retain themselves in Jasmine’s view of her identity. Jasmine, like the Bengali interpretation of Kali, encompasses birth and destruction at the same time. Her journey also reads as a realization of Hindu theological beliefs about the soul. The text’s tangled structure allows Jasmine the freedom to float between classic to powerful Indian goddess Kali. This structure also prescribes the breakdown of cultural barriers literature. When Jasmine learns how to walk, dress and speak so that she will blend in more easily, for “...if you walk and talk American, they’ll think you were born here. Most Americans can’t imagine anything else” said Lillian (J 133). Here Mukherjee provides not only a space for the Indian immigrant in the American canon, but also subtly makes the argument that Indian women do not adhere to their passive Orientalized stereotype. She uses the pitcher as a visual representation of performative femininity within Hindu culture, namely due to its connection to water gathering and the force needed to break it. Mukherjee enables Jasmine’s maximalism to be seen as feminist in ways that defy both historical conceptions of women by breaking the “pitcher” that divides American and Indian feminine roles represented in these characters. Through interwoven identities of fictional women that gain agency through their ability to transform themselves, Mukherjee sets a literary precedent for Jasmine and therefore asserts her place as an American feminist character.

While thinking about the concept of nation and identity, it becomes necessary to investigate the way of living life and human existence, in the past and present. Problems of the nation, identity, national identity, individual identity, etc. are the recent needs, which have surfaced, which were never experienced by mankind in the past. The life that people lived in the past was mainly introvert with themselves and their families. It was a life more given to the spiritual aspects and with less possible material needs. The question of the nation and national identity was neither experienced nor imagined by mankind in prehistoric ages. However, those primitive values, the way of life, the need for life and objectives of life have entirely undergone a change and notions like the nation, nation states, national identity have emerged. According to Sandra Ponzanesi,



As far as the condition of migration and diaspora is concerned, women are often called to preserve their nation through the restoration of a traditional home in the new country. The idea of home entails the preservation of traditions, heritage continuity; there is even an intense emotive politics of dress for some communities (245)

Diasporic identities are characterized by a continuing relationship to a homeland that may either be physical, when individuals or group members continue to visit the homeland, or based on an imaginary community with the knowledge that they cannot, or will not return. Immigrants live and share the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples as they realize that they may never be fully accepted by their new nation and maintain memories, myths, customs and traditions of their original homeland. They position themselves astride the boundaries of two different cultures. Unable and unwilling to assimilate, these immigrants exist as on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never get completely interpenetrated and fused. To account for this duality, immigrants assert their individuality by declaring their hyphenated identity. However such transformations come after great loss and compromise; most of the times not without violence, in which one self seems to annihilate another in the in between spaces. In the act of becoming, when the old subjectivity and the new subjectivity collide, psychological violence is inevitable. These ideas of violence take textual forms in many different ways.

Diaspora is an essential and inevitable phenomenon of this modern era. Migration occurs due to the lack of basic necessities like food, shelter and clothing, but often people undertakes mass migration for a better and fitter survival. In the world of immigrants, it is essential for an individual to preserve identity. Identity becomes the stamp or hallmark of such person. The painful and frustrating search for identity is consciously and unconsciously experienced by every immigrant is very progressive stage of life. Jameela Begum asserts that, “the quest for self is a metaphor for existential alienation. Immigration is also a metaphor for reintegration of the alienated sensibility” (65).

**The Mistress of Spices** is about magic, wielded by a woman masquerading as an old and bent creature, but in reality, vibrant, eager for life, hungry with desires. Tilo, the mistress of spices, has many disguises and names that reveal her multiple identities. The problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land is one of the themes. Accordingly, the narrator changes her name many times. Homi Bhaba states that “the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (MS 44). Like Bharati Mukherjee’s Jyoti Jasmine-Jane; from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati to Tilottama and finally to Maya, the most appropriate name, since it means spell or enchantment; she has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood. Mukherjee ends the novel with a sense of movement which reinforces the notion that Jasmine's identity is forever evolving in relation to her surroundings. But for Jasmine to exist in the centre of culture she must negate her own cultural characteristic to the demands of her new western home. The series of adventures which Tilo undertakes during her journey from her village in India to the exploits with the pirates, then to the island, to her enclosed life in California and finally to her emergence into the new world of America. As she keeps changing throughout the novel, it only clarifies the complexity of the crisis of the self that an immigrant has to struggle with in a foreign land. As Nayan Tara becomes Bhagyavati, Bhagyavati becomes Tilotamma and Tilo becomes Maya, she stands as a metaphor for movement, change and struggle for survival. “For when you came to this island you left your old names behind, and have remained nameless since” (MS 40).

Psychologically, every person wants to be acknowledged, in other words, the problem of nation and identity is associated with the human sense of belonging. One wants to accept and to be accepted. Whenever, any interruption takes place in this need, the problem of belonging emerges. It is not essential for one to take it for granted that the problem of nation and identity take place in the life of person only when he accepts migration and mobility. Since, it is a psychological feeling; there is a probability of its experience even within his native land. Identity becomes the core issue in any investigation of diaspora, a particularly diasporic identity that is made of various factors and sub-factors. This diasporic identity is multi-level. It is also based on the history or conditions leading to migration, as well as the individual responses to these circumstances. This experience of dislocation is dependent on factors such as the generation of diaspora that one belongs, impact of globalization, why the diasporic has shifted away



from his homeland and also the approach of the host country towards the diasporic community. There are some factors like language, dress, and socio-cultural environment that deepen the problem of nation and identity after migration takes place.

The works of expatriate writers depict the effect of cultural uprootedness and the never-ending experiences of which social rejection is central. Social rejection is when a group of people decides, to reject one or more persons from participation in their group. Social rejection can be of many different ways. Sometimes people out rightly reject someone by telling them they are not wanted. Sometimes, there is a potentially more cruel rejection that is not easy to accept in human beings, and there is always a natural sentiment of the need for acceptance in groups. To conclude, it may be stated that Bharati Mukherjee is one of the shining jewels of Indian women writers. Multiculturalism is a theme that echoes throughout her work and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award winning novelist whose main focus has been levelled in her writings on cultural uprootedness and immigrant experience and societal issues always rejected, in different contexts for various reasons known to those who reject the diasporic community so as to make them search for national / individual identity in all respects.

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