



NATION AND ‘IMAGINED HOMELANDS’: THE EXPLORATION OF WOMEN’S DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN SELECTED NOVELS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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CHAPTER V - FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Analysis

This chapter sums up the analysis of the research. It explains the major findings of the study which are based on the objectives of the research. Some of the findings are inferred from the comparative analysis of the selected narratives of Divakaruni and the diasporic narratives, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur.

Diasporic literature is gaining popularity in the recent times. Historically, the origin of Indian diaspora can be traced to colonial rule in India and employment of Indians as labourers by the British Empire. Many Indians travelled and settled in different parts of the world as skilled workers and as businessmen. Over a period of time, educated Indians started moving abroad in search of greener pastures. A large number of people went to foreign universities, in the pursuit of higher education. This migration or ‘cultural transplant’ caused a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. The diaspora makes an effort to keep themselves connected with their native land and culture by various ways and means. The diaspora writings are one among such endeavours. The immigrant writers have effectively used the medium of writing to bridge the gap between their ‘Nation’ and the ‘Imagined homeland’. Their writings address, multiple consciousness as an identity, the cultural clashes and the identity issues of the diasporic women.

The post 1965 generation of Indian women writers settled in America have been contributing significantly towards the development of Asian American identity in the contemporary literary scenario. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the eminent Asian American writers who has carved a niche for herself in the world of

postcolonial literature. Divakaruni, who has made a mark for herself on the global map as a brilliant story teller, eloquently narrates her immigrant experiences through her narratives. The multiple awards and accolades received by Divakaruni, who is based in America, and is prolifically writing about India, imply that she is a valuable addition to the contemporary literary canon. Writing in the diverse genres of literature, Divakaruni's writings are significant contributions to the body of diasporic literature. She debunks the stereotyped depictions of victimized Indian women propagated through popular myths and legends. Her contributions in terms of the treatment of woman characters who re-negotiate their identities, to adapt themselves to the foreign land, revisionist writings, sisterhood and ethno-regional traditions are of great importance. Divakaruni's uniqueness in the portrayal of women characters is that she individualizes her characters by emphasizing their Bengali-Indian identity in contrast to a Pan-Indian identity. She presents her women characters as individuals in search of their own strengths and weaknesses rather than representatives of a common Indian or South Asian identity.

Divakaruni's narratives, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Oleander Girl* and *Before We Visit Goddess*, set against the diasporic backdrop were selected for this study. These narratives are a fusion of Indianness and Americanness, which chronicle the journeys of young immigrant women under different circumstances. The study has highlighted that the selected novels are diasporic narratives, as they portray the diasporic consciousness of the protagonists Anju, Sudha, Mrs. Gupta, Rakhi, Karobi, Bela and Tara. Each narrative has been validated as both an individual story and explicitly a bi-cultural or multicultural novel, depicting the struggles of the protagonists with the identity issues and cultural clashes as immigrants, as they negotiate the challenges of racism, diasporic mimicry and the

menace of stereotypes. The study has examined intersection between the gender and identity in cultural constructions of women's diasporic identities. The thesis has appropriately interpreted the various feminine symbols used by Divakaruni, in the diasporic context. It has explored the diasporic identities of the female protagonists with respect to the contexts of 'Nation' and 'Imagined Homelands', based on the theoretical frameworks of eminent postcolonial theorists such as Jasbir Jain, Cahndra Talpade Mohanty, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Avtar Brah and Edward Said among others.

5.2 Findings

This research, through close analysis of the selected narratives of Divakaruni, has explored the diasporic identities of the women protagonists with respect to the contexts of 'Nation' and 'Imagined Homelands', based on the theoretical framework of diaspora and feminism. The research has asserted that Divakaruni's works are excellent examples of diasporic narratives, as each of them delves deep into the diasporic consciousness of Divakaruni's protagonists. The study, based on the comparative analysis of the selected narratives of Divakaruni with the diasporic narratives *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur, has led to important findings which are relevant in the present scenario as well. These findings have been arrived at, after in depth study of the narratives in the diasporic context. The findings of the study have been broadly based on the objectives stated in the research. The women characters of Divakaruni's narratives have been juxtaposed with the women characters of *The Namesake* and *The Immigrant* with respect to their identity quest and the feminine resistance. The intersection between the gender and identity of women characters in the diasporic context has been explored. The symbols used by the authors have been extensively studied and interpreted.

The research has brought the following findings to foreground.

5.2.1 Cultural Clashes and Identity Issues

The study has explored the selected narratives of Divakaruni and has brought to foreground, the cultural clashes and identity issues experienced by the immigrants in these diasporic narratives. The study has inferred that, each of the woman character has experienced the dichotomy between the culture of the home land and the culture of the host land. Their identity has gone through a transformation, due to assimilation of the foreign culture. This finding has been stated based on the concept of hybridity, expounded by Homi Bhabha in his book, *Location of Culture* (2004), in which he has said that in the case of immigrants of all the societies, their identity is threatened by the culture of the host country. He has asserted that the process of acculturation is a slow and one-sided one and is accompanied by a sense of loss and exile; it gives rise to hybridity marking different stages of acculturation (4). The study has led to the fact that the women immigrants have exhibited autonomy and hybrid identity, which is a blend of ethnic identity and the new identity of the alien land. The study has traced the cultural clashes and identity issues faced by the protagonists of the selected narratives of Divakaruni and has compared and contrasted the similar experiences of Ashima, in the narrative *The Namesake* and Nina in *The Immigrant*. The research has found out that the cultural clashes and the identity issues are inevitable for immigrants. Though, the first generation immigrants found it difficult to adjust in the beginning, over a period of time they have got acculturated. Through the study, it has been established that, like Anju, Mrs. Gupta, Bela and Ashima, the diasporic women have imbibed the foreign culture and found their ‘imagined homeland’ in the alien land. It has led to the understanding that the women diaspora re-negotiate their

identities when they come across challenging circumstances in their lives to ascertain their individualities.

The study has also inferred that, the responses of women immigrants differ from one another. Therefore, the contemporary women diaspora needs to be recognized as individuals away from homogenous identity makers. The observations about the behavioral responses of women immigrants cannot be generalized. This inference can be related to the significant observation made by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1986). She has asserted that the Third World women should not be treated as a singular and monolithic subject. Instead, the lived experiences of specific women should be taken as a basis for understanding and theorizing.

The research has inferred that, for an immigrant to lead a balanced and comfortable life in the foreign land, acculturation and adoption of the alien culture is important, while they remain connected to the culture of their 'nation'.

5.2.2 Intersection Between Gender and Identity

The study has examined the intersection between the gender and identity, in the cultural constructions of the women's diasporic identities and has revealed that the immigrant women have developed a new diasporic identity in the foreign country.

Speaking about the intersection between gender and identity, Jasbir Jain, in her book, *Beyond Postcolonialism: Dreams and Realities of a Nation*, has commented that the gender category needs to be problematized and theorized on account of two different reasons. Firstly, the positioning of women within very complex cultural situations, subordinated within most relationships, merged into other overpowering

identities. Secondly, their constant engagement in making choices as to how much of the culture of origin they wish to retain. She has also asserted that the space of the immigrant women is defined by the men in their lives, and that they are governed by conventional cultural role models even in a foreign land (175).

This observation is partially applicable in the current scenario. Since the immigrant women were away from the patriarchal influence in the cultural constructions of the new land, there has been a change in the perceptions about the gender and identity. The study has led to the fact, that the ancient patriarchal mindset that, the women are the care takers of home front, while the men go out to work and support the family financially has undergone a significant change. The women protagonists, Mrs. Gupta, Rakhi and Bela worked and supported their families. They extended their financial support in running the family, while the immigrant men did not mind sharing the domestic work at their home front. The immigrant women took their career seriously and the immigrant men willingly took care of their children, when required, as in the case of Rakhi and Sonny.

The study has inferred that there is a gradual change happening in the society regarding the perception of gender roles. The preconceived and ancient notions about the gender roles are becoming slowly obsolete now, giving way for the new ‘equality of gender’ ideology which has influenced the Eastern world as well.

5.2.3 Interpretation of Feminine Symbols

This research has interpreted the feminine symbols employed by Divakaruni in the selected narratives. The symbols have played an important role in the narratives.

John McLeod in his book, *Beginning Postcolonialism* has pointed out that in the diasporic context, a sense of mutual and national belonging is created by the performance of various narratives such as, rituals and symbols which stimulate the sense of belongingness of an individual, as a member of a select group (69). This observation has been justified in the research. The study has established the significant fact that the women immigrants have resorted to multiple feminine symbols to establish their identity in the diasporic set up. They have predominantly used the culinary skills as the feminine symbol in the kitchen space. The delicacies churned out in the kitchen, reflected the mood and mind set of these women. The study also has brought to foreground, the significance of some actions and use of some objects such as hair, letters, paintings, dreams, etc. as feminine symbols. It has located similar instances in the other diasporic narratives, *The Namesake* and *The Immigrant* to justify the inferences made about the feminine symbols. The research has validated that the gastronomic identity is strongly influenced by the culture and emotional belongingness in the homeland and alien land. The research has also brought to foreground, the connection between the apparel and diasporic sensibility. It has revealed that, the choice of clothes and accessories used by the immigrant women were forms of their self-expression. The protagonists changed their dressing styles and the accessories to suit the requirements of the foreign land and its culture. These inferences have been made after a thorough study of the portrayal of the characters, Anju, Sudha, Mrs. Gupta, Bela, Rakhi, Tara and Karobi. The secondary characters such as Belle and Seema also have validated these inferences.

The study has brought to foreground that the understanding of the feminine symbols used by the diasporic writers will create an awareness among the people to interpret the feminine symbols in the diasporic context, in an appropriate manner.

5.2.4 Analysis of Diasporic Identities

The study has analyzed the diasporic identities of the women immigrants portrayed in the selected narratives of Divakaruni, and arrived at the finding that, the identities of the women have gone through a transformation when they have migrated to a foreign country. They have got influenced by the culture of the new country and have assimilated it over the years. These findings have been brought to foreground, after analyzing the texts based on the theories of the diaspora theorists. Avtar Brah, a diaspora theorist discusses about the process of changing of the identities of immigrants in the book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Brah says,

“A diaspora space is an intersection of borders where all subjects and identities become ‘juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; Where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate, and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition”” (208).

This research has inferred that women diaspora, has developed diasporic identity, based on their multiple experiences in the diaspora space. Their ethnic identity has got influenced by their diasporic identity. They have exhibited hybrid identity, which is a combination of their ethnic identity and their diasporic identity.

The women characters of each of the narratives, have emblemized diasporic identity. Anjali, Mrs. Gupta and Bela have exhibited their diasporic identity as they oscillate between their home country and the new country. Though Sudha and Karobi stay in America for some time and return to India, the influence of their immigrant experiences and their diasporic identity have strongly impacted them. Rakhi and Tara,

being the second generation immigrants, have displayed diasporic sensibility of a different dimension, like Sonia and Moushumi.

The study has inferred that the immigrant women need to be understood from a different perspective. Due to their cross cultural exchanges and their diasporic identity, their outlook towards life also differs.

5.2.5 Inter-generational Conflicts

The research has brought to foreground that the ‘inter-generational conflicts’ are a common feature in the diasporic families. The first generation of immigrants have tried to remain rooted to the culture of their homeland, while they have assimilated the culture of the host land. Due to their expectations, that their children should also follow the culture and the traditions of their ‘nation’ they have attempted to impose the same on their children. Invariably, the children have responded by resisting against it. The children of the immigrants were unable to connect with their native culture as they are not a product of that culture. Their upbringing in the foreign land has kept them closer to the culture of the alien land. They have been influenced by their peers in the society and the culture of the nation in which they are living. Some of the immigrants’ children, such as Gogol and Sonia, in the narrative *The Namesake*, would have visited their homeland occasionally and will have some idea about their nation and some memories of their motherland. But some second generation immigrants such as Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams* and Tara in *Before We Visit the Goddess*, who never got an opportunity to travel to their motherland, will have no way to connect with the motherland or the people living there. They have grown up with hybrid identity. They have had more affinity towards foreign culture. They not only have faced the identity issues but also the clash of ideas with their

parents. While some children have craved for some information about the homeland and exchange of conversation with the people of their nation, like Rakhi, some second generation children have developed an aversion towards their nation. For Belle, going back to Punjab and leading life the way people do there, was unimaginable. Tara refused to identify herself as an Indian. Tara turned out to be a rebel like Sonia of '*The Namesake*.' Some children became extremely rebellious, when the parents tried to impose their ideologies regarding the traditions of their country, as in the case of Moushumi of '*The Namesake*'.

It is important for the immigrant parents to understand the hybrid identity of their children and deal with them appropriately. This study will create an awareness amongst the immigrants and will enable them to bring up the second generation of immigrants in an empathetic way, amidst the challenges.

5.2.6 Racial Discrimination

An important revelation of the study has been, the after effects of racial discrimination, on the immigrants. This finding is significant, as it highlights the emotional vulnerability of the immigrants.

The immigrants who have experienced racial discrimination, have gone through psychological trauma. Their treatment as second citizens has caused depression and has made them feel agitated. The research has studied the portrayal of immigrants' plight in Divakaruni's narratives, *Queen of Dreams* and *Oleander Girl*, which are set against the backdrop of the blast of twin towers. The immigrants had faced racial discrimination and also racial attacks by the native people. The description of the attack on the 'Kurma House' by native Americans in the narrative *Queen of Dreams* and its consequences, has portrayed the trauma of the immigrants. In the narrative

Oleander Girl, Divakaruni has delineated how after effects of the racial attacks had soured the American dream of Indian immigrants and had changed their lives overnight. The lives of immigrants had become a nightmare due to the racial attacks. Manju Kapur, has described the humiliation experienced by Nina in the Toronto airport, which was a public display of racial discrimination, in the narrative *The Immigrant*. In the real life scenario, the racial attacks have been happening across the globe. The instances of international students' murders and shooting of immigrant professionals which have been reported by the media, are increasing in number. This has created disharmony in the world.

The research has highlighted that in this globalized world, acceptance of multiculturalism and multiple ethnicities of different nationalities, is the need of the hour. The people need to be educated about the concept of co-existence.

5.3 Special Findings

The study has also brought to foreground the following findings which are significant to the society.

- Relevance of the diasporic literature in the contemporary society; diasporic literature is important in understanding and appreciating the socio-cultural aspects and ethnic identities of different nations.
- Understanding of the psycho-dynamics and diasporic sensibilities of Indian immigrants and the significance of cultural connect of Indian diaspora with their native country.

- The women immigrants negotiate their identity, in the context of diaspora and create their own identity which is ‘hybrid identity’. They embrace feminine bonding to sail through the problematic situations in the alien country.
- The experiences of different women immigrants differ in many ways. Accordingly, their responses also differ. Their responses also depend on the factors such as, education, family brought up, cultural background, the proficiency in spoken English, etc.
- The status of the immigrant such as, marital status, financial status, the professional status, etc. influences their experiences and the process of acculturation.
- The country specific social, political and cultural conditions, also have an impact on the diaspora. This finding has been justified based on the projection of the after effects of the twin tower blasts on the immigrants in America.
- Creating awareness about hybrid identity in the diasporic context, minimizes inter-generational conflicts. It enables the parents to create an atmosphere with less conflicts at their homes.
- The emotional connect with the homeland is drastically different for the second generation of immigrants. They are not as much attached to their native land and culture, as their parents are.
- The projection of the immigrant issues in the diasporic narratives, provide an insight to the readers about the culture of the alien land.

- An understanding of the cultural clashes analyzed in the study, enables the people who are about to take up transnational journey, to handle the cultural clashes and deal with the immigrant issues appropriately.
- The themes of the diasporic writings are different. They are the reflections of the experiences of the diasporic writers. Therefore, it depends on the country to which the writer has migrated and the social milieu of that country.
- The level of acceptance of the alien land as their ‘imaginary homeland’ differs from person to person of the diasporic community. While some immigrants are happy and reconcile to the reality of living in an alien land, quite a few get nostalgic about their nation and nurture the desire to return to their country.

5.4 Outcomes of the Research

This study has explored the topic of the research and has justified the objectives of the research. It has thrown light on the diasporic sensibilities of the immigrant writers and their distinctive characters which encapsulate the homogenous regional identities in the face of their transnational journey, hybrid identities in global societies and their cultural clashes as heterogeneous individuals.

The important outcomes of the research are —

- An understanding that this research is relevant in today’s highly globalized world. The Indian diaspora today forms not only the largest diaspora but a unique workforce in today’s world. Close to twenty million Indian immigrants have migrated to more than 110 countries across the globe. An understanding of the diasporic sensibilities leads to harmony in the multicultural societies existing across the globe.

- The immigrants negotiate the challenges of racism, diasporic mimicry, the menace of stereotypes and gender roles in diasporic set up.
- The solutions to counter the problems of diaspora are – cultural, religious and racial tolerance. Assimilation of different cultures and coherence amongst populace of diaspora belonging to different nations, ethnicities and races which coexist plays a pivotal role in the current scenario.
- Creating awareness among the women diaspora about their identity shift in the home country and the host country and acceptance of the same assists them in the process of acculturation.
- This study infers that sisterhood prevails predominantly in the foreign country among the women diaspora, who is geographically away from the family. They find strength from their immigrant peers to sustain themselves in the diasporic context.

The fact that this study contributes to the society by shedding light on the psycho-dynamics of diaspora is noteworthy. It also highlights the importance of diasporic literature.

5.5 Scope for Further Research

Despite its attempts at carving out new grounds for research, the research has left avenues of analysis open for further discussion. These tropes under-researched can reveal new insights into reading contemporary South Asian American narratives.

The research has scope for further research in the following arenas –

- Each of the chapters based on significant themes can be extended elaborately as individual research topics, dealing in depth, encompassing the other diasporic writings of Divakaruni. Divakaruni is an impressive diasporic writer of multiple genres and a gifted poet as well. Her other forms of fiction and poems can be studied and analyzed based on the themes of the chapters of this research.
- There is also a scope to explore the interrelatedness and relevance of the portrayal of Divakaruni's women characters by comparing them with contemporary Indian immigrant women who are educated, confident and financially empowered and have made their 'Imagined Homeland' as their true homes.
- The projection of Divakaruni's male characters in the diasporic context is an interesting aspect of Divakaruni's narratives. Some of them defy the stereotypical representation of patriarchal notions. There is scope for exploration of the portrayal of these male characters as represented in Divakaruni's narratives.
- There are multiple dimensions of diaspora, such as, spiritual diaspora, trade diaspora and cultural diaspora in diasporic narratives. There is scope for further research in each of these dimensions of diaspora.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are as given below.

- Divakaruni has written about the theme of diaspora in different genres. Out of them, five narratives have been selected for the research which are directly connected to the theme of diaspora. The study mainly deals with the portrayal of women characters in the selected narratives and ignores the other diasporic writings and also the experiences and the perceptions of the male characters.

- The other limitation is related to the fact that the social milieu portrayed in the narratives has changed significantly as compared to the contemporary scenario, is noteworthy. Owing to the progress in the technology, the communication between the homeland and host land has become much simpler and easier, unlike the projection in the selected novels. The women migrating today are better educated and confident individuals as compared to the undereducated and less exposed protagonists of the novels.