

**EXPLORATION OF THEMES & TECHNIQUES IN THE SELECT
SHORT STORIES OF DIASPORIC WOMEN WRITERS: CHITRA
BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI, SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN AND
ANJANA APPACHANA – A STUDY**

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Conclusion

The research study includes an introduction which contains several themes on the Diasporic movement, recurrent themes and unique themes in the anthology of stories by three women writers Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anjana Appachana and Shauna Singh Baldwin. Narrative techniques followed by them in their stories and the feminine concerns they showed towards women migrants are also included in the thesis. The post-colonial period witnessed large scale migration from South Asian countries to the Western countries like America, Canada and others in search of better opportunities. All of them are well educated technically qualified and professionals unlike the migrants during the previous period. This causes several problems in their encounter with multiculturalism in the alien lands. Though the migrants, as a whole, experienced different cultural economic and social challenges it is women in particular, who are considered weaker, submissive, traditional and conservative, and whose adaptability becomes more difficult than that of the migration of men.

The short story and its evolution is not a new concept in the Indian languages. *Katha Sarita Sagar*, *Panchatantra* and various episodes in the *Mahabharata* are remarkable models of the perfect and evolved genre. The English short story can be looked at from the background of colonialism, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism. The spread of the English language and its literature during the colonial period and its expansion in the post-colonial period helped the emergence of many Indian writings in English. There has been much give and take between the Indian writings in English and the regional languages which had a wealth of literature by then. The Indian writers contributed a lot to the development and perfection of story as a genre.

The scope of the conclusion limits itself to the problems such as immigration, causative factors, and the post-colonial period in South Asia in general and India in particular. The English language, which has been, the legacy of the British rule in India, has been the medium, which can be better understood by the readers world over. Though there are several genres in literature, as the medium of communication, story has been the most popular and convenient genre, which becomes a tool and instrument in the hands of the Diasporic writers. There is a big list of Diasporic writers who have contributed to the

genres of novel and story. The scope of research is confined to the woman writers who have had experiences as migrants in America Canada and other countries. Story has been a popular genre in several regional languages of India and there have been several story writers like Premchand, Sarat Babu, Tagore, and Mahasweta Devi. The Diasporic literature as an independent and separate genre, has crossed the periphery of national borders as it assumed dimensions attracting the readership from all corners of the world, thus placing itself on the world map of literature. It assumes a remarkable significance particularly at a time when people have begun to migrate from one country to another and the world has become a global village. The theme of the story in the Diasporic literature is not confined to the problems connected with social evils and narrow regional problems. It depicts multicultural pluralistic traditions and focuses on problems, which encompass international political and social problems.

In the study of diasporic literature displacement and dislocation is a value-oriented term which does not confine to convey the concept of physical movement of migrants from one place to another; but the baggage consists of their feelings, emotions and their attachment to their native culture. Hence in the migrant life, cultural displacement or dislocation assumes tremendous significance. The socio-psychological issues involved in the migration and pain and pressure experienced by them is explored in the narratives by the three women writers. The migrants' relationship with the homeland and their pleasant and unpleasant experiences and the hangovers of the past unsettle their behaviour and thinking. They can't assimilate into the alien culture without remembering their experiences at home. Their traumatic experiences, feelings and emotions, their bonding with the home environment can best be portrayed by women writers. They, from their perspective, as preservers of cultural heritage, can present an accurate picture of migrant women.

The diasporic sensibility conveys the meaning that the sensibility of the migrant writers exposed to alien culture and with the background of native cultural nuances, will be able to explore the inner layers of the migrant psyche. A detailed analysis of different problems confronted by the migrants, finds place in the narratives of the migrant women writers. Employment opportunities, better living conditions, the western open society and

modern civilization and culture lured many migrants. They had to face problems like cultural apathy and unfamiliar geographical conditions. The consciousness of home culture and the challenges posed by the host culture have become subjects of serious reflection of the writers of diaspora across the globe. The women writers like Divakaruni, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Anja Appachana and Baldwin, with the feminine sensibility born out of their immigrant experiences, responded to the phenomenon of migration and explicated sometimes the rootlessness and other times, strenuous efforts of assimilation, in spite of their nostalgic memories unsettling their thinking. The culture based poetics of dislocation and relocation or suffused with religious consciousness, feminine consciousness, nationality, and personal relationships. This thesis has opened the window to allow the sources of light reflecting the feminist concerns and cross-cultural conflicts in the women diasporic writings.

Through acculturation or enculturation, the migrants follow the cultural mores of their group and try to adapt themselves to the host culture but the challenges to be confronted with, are crucial. Acculturation helps the peaceful co-existence with other cultures which deprives them of their ecstatic feeling of home culture and makes them converted persons. The integrated patterns of human knowledge consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, superstitions, institutions, works of art, ceremonies and other components which are difficult to repudiate. Migrations and cross-cultural encounters have affected the lives of migrants so much, that there is a possibility of rejection, confusion, and tension.

Migration is an effective way which strengthens the relationship between two cultures. Of course, there can be challenges in the cultural fraternity of nations. Sometimes there is anger, bitterness and remorse among the immigrants and the relatives and friends back home experience the negative reactions faced by the immigrants abroad. There is a conflict when the dominant host culture attempts to subjugate the social and cultural practices of the migrants: even governments of the alien nations remain callous and apathetic to the suffering and traumatic experiences of the migrants. During the cross-cultural migration many problems arise and the Diasporic writers have paid their attention to these problems in their writings and try to acquaint the new generation with

those problems. The three women writers selected for research have focused on several problems resulting from migration. The themes exploring those problems have been classified as "themes recurrent and themes non-recurrent or unique themes". There are many common themes in the anthologies of stories written by them. Though the contexts and situations in which the women are placed are different. The presentation of these problems and the narrative techniques applied by the storytellers are different from one another. In most of the stories, multi-Culturalism or cultural plurality has been identified as one of the themes.

The collection of stories by these writers is replete with the experiences of the women migrants. There are instances of acculturation in some stories like "The Intelligence of Wild Things" in which the protagonist Tarun, though he migrates to America later than his sister, assimilates into the alien culture, and falls in love with an American woman. Janet in the story, "Nothing Must Spoil this Visit", with the multicultural background during her visit to India with Aravind, has been firm against spoiling the visit, despite initial hiccups. But Devika in spite of her readiness for adaptability fails to meet the demands of her husband. There are several instances of migrants', ability or inability of cultural assimilation. With the large scale migrations from the third world countries, America has been a heterogeneous culture converting itself into a homogeneous culture. Hence there has been a lot of pressure and discomfort on the part of migrants in general and the migrant women in particular.

Joel Kurrotti in his *Preface to Indian Women's Short fiction* writes that, "Divakaruni Banerjee's stories are stories of displacement. Her contention is that South Asian Diasporic experience has been dominated by the male experiences. The emergence of women writer has enabled a more vivid expression, of which Divakaruni's is a good example", Banerjee as a writer explores the binaries of east and west. The issue of Nostalgia assumes significance in her short stories, depicting literature as a global meeting of various cultures. The Diasporic literature represents within the national literature the multi-cultural and trans-cultural perspectives. At the one end of the scale we find a parochial attachment to tradition, culture, and race and at the other end transformation, assimilation impurity and hybridity.

The stories in the two collections *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of our Lives* deal with conflicts arising out of love, the double dislocation of the Indian migrant women, different conceptions of love and consequent hurdles in the union of lovers, cross-cultural marriages doomed to failure, the conflict between Indian patriarchy and American feminism, awakening for the quest for identity and gradual assimilation of modern culture, which unfetters the subordination of woman migrants. Vijaya Mishra writes that the modern writers inhabit the luminal or threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities that define the experiences of migrants. [15] San Francisco Chronicle reviews the stories in *Arranged Marriage* that the “beautifully told stories of transformed lives and trapped by cultural changes on both sides of the ocean. These women struggle to carve out an identity of their own” [143]

The Unknown Errors of our Lives records the crisis of the divided self of the immigrants through the web of familial relationships. Immigration affects the warmth of love. The immigrants are in a dilemma between the absence of sustained love relationship and the absence of humanism and fellow feeling in the native culture. Leela in the narrative “Lives of the strangers” undergoes the same experience when she gets back to India. Beena Agarwal in her book *Women writers and India Diaspora* writes that “The psychological alienation and emotional bonding with cultural roots give a distinctive richness to the sensibility of Indian immigrants. Many of the stories in the anthology deal with marriages, human relations and cultural details. Some of the migrants strive to survive in the alien culture and get assimilated into the new culture. The writer explores the relocation process in the migrant lives, which usually takes a long time. The strong-willed migrants, who left India to enjoy the free and liberated life in America, sometimes find themselves in a confused state on the borders of the cross cultural lines. They try to make choices.

The thesis consists of chapters on recurrent, non-recurrent themes and feminine concerns which have been explored in depth and in detail. The Diasporic writing seems to revolve around several themes which find recurrence, though it looks as if all the writers are concerned with the issues and problems their narratives have the stamp of uniqueness and style and presentation of circumstances and, situations, in which the story takes

place. The difference in perspectives engages the readers' and critics' attention. The narrative techniques, the scope of the narrative the layers which unfold in different stages are unique and peculiar to the different story tellers. Hence the readers don't develop the feeling of 'dejavu'. Stories in all collections make a good interesting reading. The problems confronted by the migrants in different milieu and the themes are adroitly woven into the fabric.

Themes like multiculturalism, Diasporic sensibility, hostile host culture, adaptability and assimilation, east west encounter, nostalgia, sex ethics are not common to all stories. But a few stories are replete with some of the above themes. Hybridity, melting pot theory, thrisanku, neither here nor there are a few theories evolved by theorists like Salman Rushdie and woven into their narrative by the story tellers. Solutions to the problems arising from migration are left to the discreet wisdom of the readers. Compromise, accommodative approach has been suggested by a few writers in the post colonial era and modern times.

The chapter on non-recurrent themes has to be viewed and understood from the perspective that they are unique and have not been woven into the fabric by many of them. Shauna Singh Baldwin's *English Lessons and other stories* and *We Are Not in Pakistan*, as the scope and depth of her writing and narrative techniques differ from those of others are unlike the stories in the Indian regional languages. She has selected a larger canvas, international themes addressing the problems and concerns of readers all over the world. She casts a stunning effect on the probing readership. Non-recurrent themes may have recurrence in some of the stories by the same writer. Though a particular writer weaves a few of the themes into some of her stories they are supposed to be non-recurrent and writer specific.

Sikh religion and anti-sikh riots, post 9/11 terrorist attack and its impact on migrants, undocumented migration problems of old age, parents treatment of their progeny, English as Lingua Franca of the world, as a consequence of migration to the west and to the English speaking world and themes of partition are unique in nature and certainly catch the attention of the readers cutting across national borders.

The chapter on feminine concerns gains prominence over others because the trajectory runs through every theme. Apart from the problems confronted by women migrants, marginalization of women has been specially focused. The immigrants to the west have ethnic differences. Women as protectors and guardians of native culture, have to assimilate ethnic differences of the migrants and strive for the amalgamation of diverse ethnic cultures.

The nucleus of home culture has been kept alive only because of women, who stand as a collective force against the onslaught of alien culture. This aspect witnesses generational gap, notwithstanding the preservation of the core values. In many of the stories a gradual change comes about in the behaviour and cultural attitude of women for a purposeful and peaceful co-existence abroad. The social and cultural transformation of the migrants can be experienced when readers traverse the landscape of storytelling by the pre-colonial, post colonial and neo-modern migrant writers.

Divakaruni's migrant women are not the helpless Indian women, though they appear to be so in the beginning when compared to Appachana's and Baldwin's women characters. The migrant women depicted in Divakaruni's stories are educated women frequently, either studying or doing dissertations perfectly at ease with life in America, although still connected to Indian codes of conduct and belief systems. They are supposed to be the protectors and guardians of tradition and culture. Sometimes they are frozen in the ancient culture holding onto the traditional values prevalent at the time of their departure. They are ignorant of the fact that Indian society has moved on. Vijaya Mishra comments, "For an Indian in the diaspora, for instance, India is a very different kind of homeland than for the Indian National.

Unlike the gradual transformation in the behavior and attitude of the woman migrants in the narratives by Divakaruni, the female characters in the Anjana Appachana's *Incantations* and other stories revolt against, the established culture and tradition, in contravention of the societal norms. Men are either absent from the scene of activity or lethargic and oblivious to the problems. They are silent spectators without contributing to the solutions to the problems raised in the narrative. There are only women, no men, is the apt observation of the critics. In the stories "Her Mother" and "My

only Gods” filial love occupies the center stage in the narrative. Mothers are shown as guardians and protectors of their daughters. But daughters steeped in the alien culture revolt against the cultural fetters, which may be due to the different mindsets because of generational gap. The “Bahu” in the selection of the stories undergoes the painful experiences of the daughter in law, because of the matriarchal authority at home, husband's lack of individuality and his meek surrender to the insolent mother. It initiates radical thinking in Bahu's mind who walks out of the bonds of family life, liberating herself.

The collection of *English Lessons and other Stories* capture the attention of the readers through the details of tradition and culture. Baldwin explores the wounds endured by the immigrant Sikh women, who try to live in the alien culture. She portrays the Indian cultural values in contrast with the individualistic values of the west. Though a few of the stories insist on the women to adopt silence and comply with the traditional values, women liberate themselves from the constraints. Baldwin shows a good measure of compassion for the women characters in her complex and multi-layered narratives. Woman characters are portrayed with their rising awareness and strength to tap their innate abilities to cope with the changed cultural milieu.

The Indian women swim through the complexity of plurality and lose their Indian identity while gaining a new one in America. They have to struggle for identity within the family before their quest for identity in the cross-cultural society. They are doubly marginalized, as on the one hand, they are the victims of the familial, religious and social compulsions at home, on the other hand, they become the victims of divergent culture. They are frustrated as they are disillusioned with the alien culture which falls short of the expectations. Most of the immigrant women become victims of insider and outsider sensibility.

Marriage in her stories occupies the central theme as the protagonist women lean towards the liberty and choice. Pre-marital sex and woman's right over her body, regardless of the consequences gets repeated in her narratives. Baldwin's message about humanism, fellow feeling sympathy for the suffering of others, and cross-cultural humanitarian understanding is, clearly spelt out in “Jassie”. Problems affecting women's

psyche, who feel under pressure to adapt themselves to the alien cultural nuances, result in problems like hallucinations and schizophrenia. The psychological disorder in women, who cannot assimilate into an alien culture, is adroitly woven into the narrative “Devika”.

Baldwin’s anthology *We are not in Pakistan* is a blend of several unique themes which are non-recurrent. It is unique in the thematic selection and narrative style. She has selected a large canvas encompassing complex international problems and painted with kaleidoscopic colours. Surprisingly and appreciably, story has become a means and medium for multi-dimensional themes in the hands of the writer. Usually, the theme of stories in regional and national languages and literature is limited to the problems regional or national. With Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost the disintegration of the Soviet Union starts, but the after effects of Glasnost are not really felt. In the bipolar world; USSR and America are caught in a tangle blaming each other's political philosophy. The explosion of Nuclear Reactors in Chernobyl and the devastating effect is an international problem. It is deftly woven into the narrative intertwining with the loss of an embroidered button in the story “Only A Button”.

With the interaction of the migrants, with the changing global sex ethics, the transformation has come about in the man-woman relationship. The institution of marriage as a flawed culture has man at the centre and woman relegated to the subsidiary role. The traditional institution of marriage has yielded place to love marriage. Premarital sex and live-in relationship despite its tenuous bond and vulnerability, has come to stay. The right of a woman over her body and her decision to choose the partner prevail over other deciding factors. There is no scope for patriarchal authority and traditional dictates. A few instances of loveless relationship and heterosexual ethics have been blended into the narratives. Mother takes up the responsibility of childbearing, having attained the status of a single mother. It leaves no room for father to claim right over the child in the story “Naina”. At least in a couple of narratives, the sanctity of marriage has been tainted by the insiders. The sacred institution becomes a laughing stock, following the dissolution of insulated cultures into a liberal modern foreign culture in the “When Anklets Tinkle”. A sea change has come about in sex ethics. Relationship between the

members of the family which is also shown in a changed new light as a result of alien experiences, gains the status of a theme in the story “The Mother”.

The conclusion will be incomplete without making a reference to the narrative techniques followed by the migrant woman writers. With the evolution of the story as an important genre theorists and critics evolved certain techniques used by the novelists and storytellers but the writers need not, as a matter of rule, follow all the techniques, though there has been an application of various techniques in almost all stories. To illustrate the narrative technique in all details is an exhaustive study.

Magic realism as a narrative technique has been deftly intertwined in the stories of Divakaruni and Baldwin. Baldwin in the story “Naina” uses fantasy to drive home the truth or reality that there is gender discrimination in the traditional culture. Hence the hesitation of the girl child to come out into the hostile world, nor is the mother inclined to deliver it. In the story, “Night of the Leonids”, Tania's exhilarating experience of the beautiful visual scene of the arrival of the Leonids cutting the rock volcano of the cold night, the blazing sky and the smoke trains lingering in the sky, is a beautiful scenery which is fantastic and imaginary. The deft handling of the imaginative fantasy by the writer is appreciable. Magic realism as a narrative technique, is skillfully laced into the stories “Bats”, “Golden Roofs, Silver Pavements” in the anthology *Arranged Marriage*. When the grandpa uncle catches a rue fish and cuts its stomach open, he finds a ring. He says, “This must be the ring of the sorcerer of Kalodighi the one that grants all wishes.” [AM 11] The granddaughter preserves it secure; but her efforts to enliven its spirit fail. In “Golden Roofs, Silver Pavements” the protagonist moves on the wings of imagination and slips into a fantasy. She pictures herself, in love with her professor. Jayanti prefers the imaginary fantastic marriage with him. She dislikes arranged marriage unlike her aunt, who has submitted herself to tradition. In “Forgotten Children”, Swapan and Shanti enjoy the ecstatic moments of fantasy. It is a beautiful description of their escape into their imaginary experiences as the real-life situations are bitter and painful. This thesis serves as a launching pad to the research scholars who wish to delve deep into the thematic complexities and narrative technique.

The scope and Limitations of the Research

- The present research has its own limitations too. There are Caribbean, African, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and European Diasporic women writers. But the present research is based only on the selected works by the Diasporic Indian women writers.
- These women writers write poetry, essays, Letters, autobiographies, plays, travelogues and short stories in English. Of these categories, only short story collections of selected women writers are taken for study, though they belong to different generations of Diasporic Indian women writers.
- The selected texts may be studied for themes recurrent and non-recurrent. Of these approaches, only feminist concerns and narrative style are identified to study only the diasporic women and their adaptability to the culture of Host land.

Findings & Recommendations

It is observed that most of the Indian diasporic writers are from different states, different religions, and different background and have settled in countries like England, USA, Canada, Germany and other European countries. Though they are with different background but they have some common likes and dislikes. As seen, The Indian Diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population though not at a particular place and time but over a period of time starts from workmen to IT professionals.

One of the findings from the study is that although Diaspora writers have much dissimilarities, it is researched and concluded that the Women diasporic writers' short fiction contains certain common characteristics such as nostalgia, identity, Indianness, alienation, assimilation and focus on feminine concerns. It is researched that contemporary women diaspora writers have subtle difference in their perspective than those of earlier women diaspora. As modern women diaspora writers are no longer depicting the suffering and mere pain, they present women characters as stronger gender and struggling successfully against the all odds. The researcher has concluded that women diaspora writers after 1980 have been basically preoccupied with modern Indian women's search for self realization and self identity amidst male dominance.

The reading and interpreting of different characters in all these three writers' select short fiction led to understanding of the rise of various themes may be recurrent or non-recurrent. The setting of all the stories keeps on changing from foreign lands to India and again India to various host lands. In spite of different settings, the writers clearly stick on to common theme that is diasporic identity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to undertake the quest by creating characters that live in their own imaginary world. The writer makes use of Indian legends, fairy tales, myths, rituals etc..., which make her work more Indianized. Chitra Banerjee being an immigrant delineates the expatriate young women living in the U.S., who struggles hard to sustain self-identity. She portrays the women especially sandwiched in two different cultures.

In the current research of all three diasporic women writers, it is clearly found that they have successfully made use of fictitious characters and situations, linked to the issues of culture, race, and nostalgia. The writers have successfully portrayed the first and second generation community of diaspora, who encounter the identity crisis.

It is found that all the five story collections, *Diasporas* form hybridity and assimilation. Hence such hybridity of cultural identities is not only the product of assimilation of two different cultures, but it is something a new product, though such hybridity affects the identity.

In the select works of these diasporic women writers, sense of rootlessness and dislocation is clearly demarcated along with identity crisis. However, there is a degree of difference. For example, in Chitra Banerjee, it is quite dominant than Shauna Singh Baldwin and Anjana Appachana. Shauna Singh Baldwin gives more importance to global themes and Anjana Appachana's focus is on familial themes. However Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni feels happy abroad. She expresses both her positive and negative experiences abroad.

It is also found that there is also a sense of insecurity and alienation in the characters of diasporic writers which are overt as it is the destiny of all most migrants. Such sense of alienation and insecurity make them to undertake identity quest. Sumita, Radhika, Meera, Jayanti, Kelly and Karan Singh have undergone such experiences in different contexts. Multiculturalism, longing for homeland, family and traditions is a

recurrent theme in all writers and their characters. Jayanti recalls her house and mother and her family background in India. Mrs. Dutta recalls her friends, early marriage days, countless experiences of her son's childhood days. These feelings make her cry at one stage.

It is also found that in these story collections, women become agents of change and take control of their identities that supersede cultural and social stereotypes. The selected writers have maintained some sort of link with their mother land, in matters like food habits, culture and tradition, arranged marriage etc.. Even in exile the migrants haven't severed their cultural links with the home land in insignificant areas food and cooking and other celebrations. Several diasporic writers have been successful as professionals and there is a significant upsurge in the literary works. Of late, the concept east west encounter or cultural clash has changed as Indian diaspora in different parts of the world, differ from one another in their attitude towards Indian cultural practices and social system. A few of them are highly critical of Indian traditions.

Suggestions for further research

Findings of this thesis may guide future research scholars in identifying and exploring various unfathomed areas of cultural conflicts and issues with regard to Indian diasporic literature. There is much scope for further study of the first and second generation diasporic literature and the differences in their outlook about migration. This thesis may provide the launching pad for further intensive research in the areas of divergent ethnic cultures in the alien land. Detailed comparative and interdisciplinary studies in fiction involving other Indian regional languages may be pursued.

The chapter on Narrative techniques is inconclusive as several nuanced and the advanced techniques may be evolved by the writers of the regional and international languages. This evolution of literary techniques has a lot of scope. Shauna Singh Baldwin in the collection of stories *English Lessons and other Stories* has shown the way to short story writers that the genre has an unlimited canvas and can accommodate international problems and themes. Appachana's elevated style in her short fiction and novels inspires

the next generation writers to excel her. In the future research study there is much scope for comparison between men and women diasporic writers.