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## **Negotiating Identities: The Cultural Psychology of Indian Immigrants in USA**

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### **Abstract**

Narratives are a powerful force of sharing individual stories in endeavoring a clear understanding of the human existence and experience. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, “It is with narratives that a literary critic negotiates” (1998). The contribution of diaspora literature depicting identity and representation is quite significant in this regard. The identity of an individual is vulnerable to the various elements of any diaspora like religion, language, culture, cuisine and the arts. An explorative study on the psychological issues of Indian diaspora gives the evidence of the challenges at a deeper sense of identity and self-awareness experienced by the expatriates. In the course of history immigrants have absorbed themselves with different cultures, languages, social and economic spheres equipped by the multi ethnicities abroad. But they cannot be away from their original cultural

heritage and a deep sense of attachment with the home land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the prominent Indian American expatriate writers in the canon of Indian writing in English. Being a postcolonial writer, Divakaruni has fetched different shades of identity intricacies challenged by the immigrant women in an ostentatious way through her literary creative. Going through a period of metamorphosis the immigrant women's experiences of being 'in between' and the 'makeover' with courage; the relationship in the family and community, the bond of sisterhood is vividly represented in the writings of Divakaruni. The author's protagonists not only undergo an internal vigorous conflict within themselves but externally with the existing social norms and myths of imaginary homeland. They witness their identities being re-critiqued, re-defined and re-deemed with a wide experience of turmoil arisen from emotional and physical dislocation. This paper intends to make a careful analysis on specific ethnicity and gender in terms of author and her primary characters in diaspora literature by envisaging on the concept of immigrant psychology and identity formation.

### **Keywords**

Identity Crisis; Diaspora; Fragmented Self; and Immigrant Psychology.

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Literature has always been one of the best lenses in picturing life and world at large. With its multifaceted genres of prose, poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction, biography, autobiography, essays, travelogues it brings out various reflections of the different trends of social realities prevailing in the society. In other words, weaving fictional element on the realistic platform, literature transcends cultural boundaries and the stereotypes, portraying the true image of the human existence in terms of civilization, socio-cultural ethos, tradition, myth, relationship both interpersonal and intrapersonal with the touch of human sensibility and emotion. In the words of Grace Daphne in

*Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* (2007), “Literature is part of the self-referral quest of the human being to express consciousness”(8). The exigencies, struggles and changes manifested within the characters in the stories go parallel with the readers who see the paradigm of their self-identity in a large scale and try to draw remedies to their wounded lives. Rushdie, while analyzing this consciousness, has remarked:

Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist  
... Literature is made at the frontier between the self and the world,  
and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable,  
and allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow  
into the world. (Daphne 427)

Identity is a term with multidimensional nature. The psychological and Sociological concept of identity reveals a person’s conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations (e.g. cultural or national identity). A profound definition of identity would be the distinctive characteristics belonging to any particular individual or the attributes shared by the members of a particular group or society. This term has been derived from the French word ‘Identite’ having its linguistic roots in the Latin term ‘Identitas’. It is derived from the Latin adjective, *idem* meaning ‘the same’. In the words of Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney in *Handbook of Self and Identity* (2012):

Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past-what used to be true of one, the present what is true of now, or the future the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become. Self and identity are predicted to influence what people are motivated to do, how they think and make sense of themselves and others, the actions

they take, and their feelings and ability to control or regulate themselves. (69-104)

Identity crisis is an important and indispensable aspect of human predicament which women writers have tried to analyze, explore and resolve in their writings. Though they have always questioned the traditional values and patriarchal taboos, it is observed that this cultural system has gone much deep into the lives and minds of individual lives and has become an inseparable web to part with. They make every effort in asserting an identity for themselves which was denied to them in a culture that marginalized them. Loss of identity not only degrades individual freedom of choice but it hampers the dignity of human life. It restricts her independence for the 'space' and the 'voice' she wills to move in and speak for herself. The turmoil becomes intensified in women's lives first being a woman and next the unsettled being lacks much in being the insider in the host land.

The contribution of Diaspora literature is quite significant in this context. Having acquired the experience on an alien land of the trials and tribulations expatriate writers explore in their writings a double identification with the original homeland and the adopted land. Homi Bhabha expresses in *The Location of Culture* (1994) "...a range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history - subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement - that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking"(172).

Diaspora is such a powerful expression that drives within a variety of competitive ideas and images. It sometimes proves to be an affirmative assertion of an identity or sometimes on the contrary a pessimistic situation of qualms of losing an identity. With the change of time and roles the diaspora identities undergo being created and recreated themselves with change, difference and transformation. From this ambiguous situation, arise both the strengths and weaknesses of the theory and everyday practice of diaspora.

With the transnational movements of bodies, objects, and capital, Sara Ahmed in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000) says “the stranger is always in proximity,” that is, the stranger has come closer to home (13). She again reflects:

Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognized as not belonging, as being out of place. Such recognition of those who are out of place allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of ‘this place’, as where ‘we’ dwell. (Ahmed 21-22)

In the course of history immigrants have absorbed themselves with different cultures, languages, social and economic spheres equipped by the multi ethnicities abroad. This inheritance of adaptability is successfully carried on by the Indians to different countries which is an important factor in the evolution of Indian Diaspora across the globe. But they cannot be away from their original cultural heritage and a deep sense of attachment with the home land. With this regard William Safran states in his article, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”:

They continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (85)

Two directions are apparently embedded in the subject of diaspora marching towards a cultural identity which is historical at one place and also a society of relocation which is geographical in other hand. This notion has paved the way for Salman Rushdie for the emergence of ‘Imaginary Homelands’ which has an ever influence on the intricate global character. The genre of diasporic writing has become strategic because it has the direct association with the identity of the diasporic subject. Now this term ‘diaspora’ has spread its metaphor in the domain of immigrants, refugees, exiles and expatriates who find

self-revelation in the writings of experienced expatriates. This is quite obvious for these expatriate writers to have focused in their writings the culture, tradition, customs, cuisine specific to the region they belong to and thus bringing the enriched existent diversities of their experience into the literature they create. One important feature emerged within these writers is their way of adopting and assimilating into the life and values of the alien country. This mode of adjustment differs on the basis of kind of generation whether first or second generation of immigrants.

In case of first generation of immigrants it is observed that they suffer from a feeling of rootlessness and long for the land of their birth that they have left which hampers their sense of adjustment as they are quite conscious of the cultural differences they face. There takes place a conflict both on the physical as well as psychological level between tradition and modernity, Indian and Western culture, theory and practice. They have to maintain two different cultures at the same time without any choice of discarding the either. Inside home they attempt to preserve their rich Indian cultural values and heritage and at the same time try to cope with the present trends prevailing outside the American culture. For example women stick to the chores at home like cleaning, cooking and childbearing besides working outside.

The second generations Indian Americans like their parents compartmentalize their lives. They compromise with both the communities. One observed and maintained by their parents, the lifestyle at home and the other is the modern American community, culture being born and brought in that atmosphere. Conflicts do appear coming to the career decisions and marriage decisions. They experience a strong sense of alienation and rejection and are constantly reminded of their difference by not only the peer groups but also at home. As they are supposed to adjust and adopt two different cultures, they grow up with two different personalities. In the words of Homi Bhaba, “the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a

space of splitting”(TLC 44). The colour of the skin plays a dominant role in this conception. How much they try also they can never assimilate and integrate being a part of the white society.

Therefore, they continuously suffer being exiles in a foreign land with the feeling of alienation and the very concept of their belongingness. They struggle with the cultural fetters of not belonging to any land completely, neither the home land nor the adopted land. This leads to a loss of identity and a feeling of homelessness.

In the words of Gauri Bhattacharya: “The global Indian diaspora is emerging as a critical phenomenon for twenty-first-century researchers to explore” (65). Since the time of India’s independence the number of Indian immigrants in the United States has crossed 2.5 million. With the increase in the number of expatriates the amount of narratives have grown significantly handing over the understanding of the Indian diaspora in America.

The post-colonial literary production stands not just telling about stories but highlighting and defining the true, exact experience. The diasporic experience of the immigrants in the United States is filled with both challenges and struggles from the point of view of individual as well as community stand. Bhattacharya opines, “immigrants do not simply accept the ‘melting pot’ roles expected of assimilated American”- instead they continually redefine their sense of identity (66). Women in the diaspora periphery are frequently found to be a part of multi-cultural community.

At one hand they are a part of their own cultural group and simultaneously integrating with the culture of a host country. The behavior prospects of self and other in tune with the point of gender vary to great amount. In the opinion of Abraham diasporic women have to go through a difficult act of sense of balance in this regard:

As an ethnic minority, South Asian immigrant women ... have to cope with semi permeable boundaries that allow them ... to

partially internalize the norms and values of the dominant culture while being simultaneously excluded by the dominant group from total membership in that culture. (198)

Hence, the very experience of an individual is greatly manifested by the condition of gender, social, economic and educational factors.

In the words of Edward Said in his article, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals”, the author leads a vital role in ‘testifying to a country’s or a region’s experience, thereby giving that experience a public identity forever inscribed in the global discursive agenda’(27).

Literary narratives by women writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have witnessed a smooth swift since the independence crossing the transcending boundaries of culture. Most of the immigrants being women as well as writers writing in English could pen down their narratives with the unique experiences of their kind thus adding to the healthy growth of women’s diaspora literature. Identity which may be seen as broken, fractured or confused, is a commonly explored theme that is clearly dealt in the diasporic women literature. The characters weaved by the writers especially the women in an alien geographic location fit exactly with “women who were born and bred in South Asia and subsequently have either been sent or have chosen to live in the west” (Lau 244). Travel has always been the core concept of diaspora but in addition to it Lau has highlighted the issue of identity exploration in South Asian women’s writing making its existence worthwhile:

Identity is one of the most common themes in their literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful, and only occasionally rewarding. (252)

Divakaruni obtained her Master Degree at Wright State University in Ohio. To continue her education in the United States, a foreign land having come from a middle class family in India was not an easy task for her. She had



to earn money for her living and education. She took initiative of getting engaged in several odd jobs including selling merchandise in an Indian Boutique, babysitting, slicing bread in a bakery and cleaning the equipment in a science lab. During her doctorate studies at the University of California, Berkeley, she stayed in the International House and worked in the dining hall, replacing the dishes from the dishwasher, slicing Jell-O etc. She never felt ashamed or hesitated to do all these strange jobs to meet her expenses as she always believed in economic independence.

After completion of her graduation from Berkeley she got the realization of her passion for teaching. Her love for teaching was in her blood since her mother was also a teacher. She gradually took interest in writing fiction. In the field of teaching profession instead of going for academic writing she opted for something spontaneous and immediate and took for creative writing. Soon she got married to Murthy Divakaruni in the year 1979 and became the mother of two sons named Anand and Abhay. At present she is working as a creative writer at the University of Houston. Having got the wide experience of cultural heritage in India and living in the United States; being aware of the cultural differences made her to write all these experiences in her writings as a medium of identity and cultural exploration.

In 'Arranging One's Life', an interview with Julie Mehta Divakaruni says:

Immigrating was the most transformative experience of My life-it exposed to me a life beyond my existence in Calcutta. Immigrating to America made me see my own Indian culture in a different way, it made me both appreciate my culture and question some aspects of my culture. (Jan. 2000)

Divakaruni plays a multifaceted role in her existing life as a writer, teacher, mother and a social worker. In the year 1991 Divakaruni initiated a voluntary organization called Maitri (the literary meaning of which is friend) for South Asian Women. Maitri was the first organization of its kind in the west to

help South Asian women come out of their troubles related to domestic violence, subjugation, depression, harassment, cultural alienation, identity crisis and other issues. In an interview to Neila C. Seshachari (2001) Divakaruni stated that she began to write:

About what was of importance in my life, and one of the big things was the act of immigration and the ways in which it had changed me, the ways in which it had really made me see the world differently and see my place as a woman in the world differently, the ways in which it had made me appreciate my own culture as well as question my own culture, and question my life in India, and all that was very important to me. (Divakaruni)

In Divakaruni's works one finds a spectrum of themes and techniques ranging from the victimization to protest self-assertion. Her well known short-story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995) was the precursor of many novels together with *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), *Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Unknown Error of Our Lives* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013) and *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016). A strand running in the course of all these novels is immigrant women, especially their sensibility, their relationships, subjugation under patriarchy and quest for self. Divakaruni has also highlighted on the issues such as loss of identity and the path of struggle that women undertake in order to re-assert their individuality and need for independence. The significance of financial independence has also been echoed in most of her writings. Being involved with the organization 'Maitri and 'Daya' offers Divakaruni a wide platform to comprehend at close quarter the suffering of the victimized women and get it reflected in her narration. Divakaruni has juxtaposed the experience of how she was forced by her own community upbringing with the circumstances of the new world. In a magazine piece titled "Born in the USA; Yet the question 'Where are you From?'" in this article

Divakaruni presents her cultural dilemma born from her own experience. She describes about her five years old son, Abhay who while returning from school one day took a bath, trying to clean, to wash frantically ‘the dirt colour’ out of his skin. Divakaruni explains,

I began to realize, what a challenge it would be to bring up my children in a country where all their lives their appearance would proclaim them foreigners. Where, though they were born in America no less than Bruce Springsteen they would have to continually answer the question “Where are you from?”(Salon Aug. 1997)

In the same article Divakaruni throws light upon one of the past incidents in a flash back. After she came to the United States from Kolkata in the year 1976, she was nineteen years old. One day while she was walking down the streets of Chicago with some of her relatives, wearing a sari, then some teenagers who were white called the writer and her relatives as –‘nigger’ and also threw slush at them. “That was such a shock to me; I realized that people didn’t know who we were!” (Hindu 7 Mar. 2004). It disturbed her mind to a great extent questioning her identity. She did not discuss much about this incident to anyone, it triggered in her mind the need to write about such experiences. There has been a good number of critics dealing exclusively with not only the study of diaspora but also exploring the different issues of self-identity. *The Immigrant Experience* (1992) by Thomas Wheeler is such book that has researched this issue at length. Many writers, journalists, reviewers have contributed their books, articles, journals and have had discussions on this aspect. Jameela Begum’s *Locating the Exile’s Culture: Shyam Selvadurai’s Funny Boy* examines this issue in detail. The sense of dislocation experienced by the immigrants from their original roots creates an emotional space which can be neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’ but somewhere ‘in between’.

*The Mistress of Spices* (1997) was the debut novel of Divakaruni contributing to the literary world a unique piece of ineffaceable impression. It is a mixture of immigrant sensibility, dilemma between duty and desire, love, magical realism, conflict between tradition and modernity, women psyche, identity and herbs. This novel scrutinizes vividly the principle features of Tilo, the major protagonist's development and also the milestones of her expedition towards a liberated and self-asserted existence. Tilo, with the passage of time is transformed into several identities and existences such as 'Nayan Tara' who could foresee the future, 'Bhagyavati' who could bring fortune to the pirates, 'Tilotamma' who could heal the suffering world with the magical power of her spices and finally 'Maya' her truly liberated self. In this journey of transformation Tilo has experienced her identity to be splintered in a dilemma between duty and desire. The novel showcases the psychological predicament and struggles of the individuals, dealt with both the Indian ethnic roots and also with respect to the newly assimilated hybridized identity through the character Geeta who is a second generation immigrant. The writer has also highlighted the effects of the vicious web of conservative patriarchal attitude which ultimately leads to a splintered self in the character Lalita who is married to Ahuja a much older orthodox man working in America who confines Lalita within four walls and restricts her freedom. Woman's experience of alienation, isolation and identity crisis both on physical as well as psychological level compels her to ascertain her lost identity against the struggle of patriarchal hardships. As a consequence she estimates her own position in the society whether deliberately or unknowingly and endeavours to create an intellect of self-worth and self-confidence. As James Clifford writes,

Life for women in diasporic situation can be doubly painful—struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies. (314)

In *Queen of Dreams* (2004), Divakaruni has deciphered the terrain of self-identity emerged from the feeling of 'loneliness', 'alienation' and the search for her own 'roots' through the character 'Rakhi', an American born daughter of Mrs. Gupta, an Indian immigrant. The novel also showcases the identity crisis taken birth from the dilemma between duty and desire that Mrs. Gupta experiences being a dream teller by profession and having a family life with her husband, daughter and granddaughter. Mrs. Gupta has tried her best to bring a balance between her longings for individual existence and responsibilities towards family. The position of Mrs. Gupta seems to be in an in-between space as mentioned by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), remaining at the border, the edge necessitates 'a new art of the present' where the borders are captivated with divergences, uncertainty and fluctuation, beyond which one aspires to move. Bhabha discusses:

The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor leaving behind of the past... beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle year; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (TLC 2)

Divakaruni has tried to highlight on characters balancing two worlds, specifically South Asian immigrants' struggle, predicament and contour in America. Her prime intention has been to focus the oriental and occidental values at the backdrop of cultural assimilation in the foreign land. It is appropriate to quote Lois Tyson, who has analysed this issue in "Postcolonial Criticism":

Double consciousness and unhomeliness are the two features of postcolonial diasporas. 'Double consciousness' or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused. ( ... ) To be "unhomed" is not the same as being homeless.

To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak. (421)

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