

Diasporic Consciousness and Cultural Adaptability as a Destructive Force in America with Reference to the Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

The motif of Indian diasporic writing is the search for self-recognition and self-identity. Through various techniques, the chief and most popular of which is the probe into the emotional and psychic consequences of immigrant experience. A microscopic analysis of diasporic literature brings to limelight the invisible but the inseparable 'commonalities' that unite such literature. In the study of the identity of diaspora, the concept of 'cultural capital' and 'sites of memory become inevitable and indispensable as they act as the bridge between the culture and memories of the past with the present precarious position of the immigrants. Tropes of food, customs and rituals associated with religion, caste frequently recur and force the writers into a nostalgic mode which makes them have a sigh of relief and refuge.

[Keywords: immigrant, diasporas, identity, inevitability]

Full Paper

Divakaruni as an Indian English writer is unique in the sense that though she is a migrant and writer of the issues related to immigrant women, unlike most of the diaspora writers, is not willing to serve the umbilical cord relations with her motherland and she remains as an Indian within and without. The Cross-cultural experiences take the center stage in their writings, particularly Indian immigrant women writers. Cross-culturalism is a comprehensive term, which as ideology accommodates most of the values and characteristics associated with concepts such as knowledge, environment, tradition, modernity and the like. But most of the diasporic writers present this aspect as metaphoric designation to all people in forcible or voluntary exile such as expatriates, immigrants, refugees and even racial minorities. With a reference to situations leading to cultural divergence it projects a kind of sensibility, a sense of shared dislocation which offers the diasporic writers a sense of novelty with a new space for imagination which, in turn, enables them, to examine and elaborate issues affecting them positively and adversely as well. Commenting on this, Parameswari remarks that these diasporic would normally move in a particular direction to disclose the "problems that arise from transactional space created by a fluid community that neither at home nor outside, that neither gets amalgamated with the new culture nor decides to move back to the origin"

The Diasporas are the best living examples of not one but two axioms: “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” and “Familiarity breeds indifference, if not contempt”. Their long stay in their mother-land does not kindle any emotional concern; nor do they develop any rosy picture about their ancestral homeland. Salman Rushdie terms his irretrievable loss of the past and homeland of the immigrant as “the loss of our common humanity” [Rushdie, 12]. The likes of Nazi persecution of Jews and the Taliban in Afghanistan are not traceable in the pages of history of India which clearly makes a vast difference between the Indian migration and the other diasporic communities.

The Indian diasporic made an impressive and distinctive stamp of Indo-Anglian literary tradition. Most of the themes of diasporic writings are, like a game of see-saw, rotate on the anvil of ‘yearning backward’ and ‘looking forward’. The changes in the inner psyche and inner life of the Indian immigrant women which they cannot verbally express are more powerfully and forcefully recalled in their writings. The eternal confrontation of the oriental and occidental values dons the dual role of offender and benefactor to Indian immigrant women. As the offender it imbalances their mind and spirit while as a benefactor it influences their creativity to give vent to their thoughts in print. As such, their writings become the inner and outer voice of their consciousness of cross culturalism, the inevitable by-product of orient-occident encounter involved in cultural divergence which projects a kind of sensibility, a sense of shared location through which a diasporic writer comes to terms with a new space for imagination to elaborate issues related to diaspora. Commenting on this aspect of diasporic writers Parameswari, observes that such diasporic writers would normally move in a particular direction of disclosing “the problems that arise from transnational space created by a fluid community that is neither at home nor outside, that neither got amalgamated with the new culture nor decides to move back to the origin” [Parameswari 13].

The writers who are in exile, forcible or voluntary, fall under the category of diasporic and their writings are, based on the bitter experiences of their own or their acquaintances.

The experience is bitter because of the futile search for identity. The displacement from the native place and the replacement or shelter in an alien land gives exiled painful sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Moreover though physically far away from the birthplace his/her mind and soul are tied tight to the roots. This makes the problem all the more complex because the diaspora are trapped into the web of cross-cultural confrontation. Inability to discard the age-old traditional cultural running into their veins and the growing desire to absorb the alluring host culture pose the greatest challenge. Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homeland* and Naipaul’s *House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Bend in the River*, for example, are built upon the sense of homelessness. Addressing the profound uncertainties of immigrants Salman Rushdie states in *Imaginary Homeland*:

It may be that writers of my position, exiles or immigrants or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fiction not actual cities or villages; but invisible ones, imaginary homeland, India’s of the mind: [10].

The diasporic literature began to grow in volume and global recognition particularly after 1980 with the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. The favorable as well as the hostile criticism equally helped in popularizing the work and the author as well. Anthologies of short stories, poems, memoirs and novels began to make frequent appearance. The fact that the growth was not just quantitative but also qualitative is proved beyond doubt by the award of the coveted Booker Prize for the very first novel of Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* in 1997. The feather thus added to the cap of Indian diasporic writing took it to further heights. The first generation of women writers of Indian diaspora who are still remembered for having successfully broken the conventional stereotypes and for having eloquently articulated their experiences through their works. If Hossain's *Sunlight in a Broken Column* (1961) is a classic account of woman's perception of partition and its aftermath, Markendeya's *Nowhere Man* (1972) is one of the earliest and best fictional representations of the unforgettable experiences of immigrant women. Taking the cue from such trend setting pioneers the second generation of women writers such as Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Meena Alexander, JhumphaLahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and others make beautiful pen pictures of multiple patterns of diasporic experiences born of or leading to factors such as inter-racial matrimonial alliances, higher education abroad, changed life styles and so on. The striking feature of their writings is that they concentrate on those problems which are directly and specifically related to the female migrants and they are adept in the use of gender for the purpose of diasporic negotiation. The triple freedom of body, mind and spirit enjoyed by American women widened her vision of women's liberation as she was accustomed to see the patriarchal society in Calcutta to keep the womenfolk in eternal bondage.

Based on the women immigrants' experience, joyful as well as painful, Divakaruni's fictional writing, like other diasporic writers, is strong by built on the triple pillars of Location, Dislocation and Relocation. Yet she differs from others as her women protagonists are portrayed as colossal characters who defy tradition and March towards modernity. As such there is no wonder that they consider America as the Utopia where they can translate their dreams of a bright future into reality. More importantly they are sure to enjoy the freedom which was hitherto denied to them in their motherland. Taking the cue from such trend setting pioneers the second generation of women writers such as Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Meena Alexander, JhumphaLahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and others make beautiful pen pictures of multiple patterns of diasporic experiences born of or leading to factors such as inter-racial matrimonial alliances, higher education abroad, changed life styles and so on. The striking feature of their writings is that they concentrate on those problems which are directly and specifically related to the female migrants and they are adept in the use of gender for the purpose of diasporic negotiation.

She found to her surprise and even shock that the occidental culture is not just different but alien to oriental culture. The triple freedom of body, mind and spirit enjoyed by American women widened her vision of women's liberation as she was accustomed to see the patriarchal society in Calcutta to keep the womenfolk in eternal bondage. The complexities arising out of perennial and common problems such as rootlessness, identity crisis and the like Divakaruni lays emphasis on women's emancipation and empowerment by juxtaposing the two contrasting societies, namely, the old, traditional patriarchal society and the new, emerging modern society. She brings under the scanner

the changed life style of Indian women, the inevitable outcome of their dislocation for whom self-recognition is the major concern. Thus we could get the in detail the problems the people face in life when living far from native.

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