



Exploring the Diasporic World of Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through their Select Short Fictions

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Abstract

The study of Indo-American Diaspora literature provides an opportunity to see how immigrant groups see themselves and their relationships with different countries. In particular, it allows us to observe how these immigrant Indians deal with their awareness of identity as a minority community and the means they use to recognise the "home" they have left behind and its persistent influence on their minds and psyche. The present research paper titled "**Exploring the Diasporic World of Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through their Select Short Fictions**" is a study of similarities and dissimilarities between Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as Indian diaspora writers. This paper also discusses the findings discovered during the in-depth analysis of *The Middleman and Other Stories* by Bharati Mukherjee and *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. My choice of these two writers has been motivated by personal and professional reasons. They are the writers who have blended their personal vision, experiences, and their social, political, cultural and world view into the texture of their works. Their works can be read as independent, open-ended texts with infinite possibilities and probabilities to explore. As coloured expatriates, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni likely have faced their share of racial discrimination, which is clearly evident in their works. Mukherjee and Divakaruni, in their collection of short stories, have strongly presented the cultural confusion and confrontation of immigrants in a multi-racial society, their clash with the native culture and their need for adaptation as a part of expatriate experience.

Keywords: Migration, Exile, Immigrants, Expatriate, Rootlessness, Reconciliation, Displacement, Dislocation and Disorientation

This paper aims to study the similarities and dissimilarities between Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as Indian diaspora writers. 'Diaspora' is a place of

temporary inhabitation and uncomfortable occupation. Being diasporic requires a transference process from an identity that is partially recognised and accepted to one



that only exists in the future. Diaspora as a conceptual tool highlights the multiple standpoints borne of migration and exile. It forges a politics antithetical to cultural and ethnic essentialisms and is open to future possibilities.

Indian English-language writers encounter alien cultures and are made aware of their lack of roots and the futility of their goals. They experience feelings of alienation, foreignness, and exile. They learn about their own country, its longing, and their divided selves due to their confrontation with the west. For these Indian expatriate writers, the idea of Indianness shapes their identities. Along with the individual identity, a writer also requires the nation's identity.

The Indian English writers find themselves alienated when exposed to a new world, which is replete with new cultures and traditions and sometimes feels like an outcast in the new culture. The list of Indian expatriate writers is quite vast. Many writers from India are settled all around the world. There are two categories of Indian expatriate writers. Some of them were born in India, made their homes abroad, and chose subjects based on the Indian setting, as opposed to the second group, who were born abroad and made their homes in India. They also select topics related to Indian tradition, culture, or ideals. The former are first-generation diaspora writers, while the latter are second-generation.

Immigrant sensibility has traditionally revolved around nostalgia,

rootlessness, lament, and the struggle to accept and get accepted. The nostalgia is amplified if the author is a coloured immigrant living in a primarily white society. Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Uma Parameswaran, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, Anjana Appachana and a host of other Indian diaspora authors frequently explore the crucial issues of racism, alienation, and the accompanying social tensions that clog the world of an immigrant. Being caught between opposing cultural traditions, immigrant writers frequently explore themes of displacement, dislocation and disorientation.

American novelist Bharati Mukherjee, born in India, has garnered praise from practically every corner of the world. She is well known for being the "voice" for immigrant-expat sensibilities. Family ties have connected her to her birth nation even though she moved to the American continent more than three decades ago. In her works, she exposes the extremes of Indian behaviour and culture.

Indian-born Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni now resides in California. Despite having Bengali roots, she has uniquely experienced American society. She deals with the complexity of interpersonal interactions. Divakaruni has consistently addressed the unexplained and unavoidable loneliness of the solitary woman, whether it be due to widowhood or her husband's abandonment in India. Her fictional



protagonists frequently find themselves in unwarranted situations where they must deal with the effects of being an outsider in their own country.

It is possible to learn how this group views itself and its connections to America by reading the literature on the Indo-American Diaspora. We can observe how these postcolonial Indians deal with their awareness of identity as a minority group, the means they use to recognise the "home" left behind and its pervasive presence in their minds, the rupturing repercussions of migration, and how a new, integrated cultural identity develops.

As coloured expatriates, both Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni likely have faced their share of racial discrimination, which is evident in their works. Mukherjee and Divakaruni, in their collection of short stories, have strongly presented the cultural confusion and confrontation of immigrants in a multi-racial society, their clash with the native culture and their need for adaptation as a part of all expatriate experiences.

This paper discusses the findings discovered during the analysis of *The Middleman and Other Stories* by Bharati Mukherjee and *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. My purpose behind selecting these two writers as the subject of my paper is very much because of my liking for their works, as they are writers with a worldview. My choice of these two writers has been motivated by both personal and professional reasons. They are the writers

who have blended their personal vision, experiences, and social, political, cultural and world view into the texture of their works. Their works can be read as independent, open-ended texts with infinite possibilities and probabilities to unfold.

Gender, identity, class, domestic abuse, crime, racism, interracial relationships, economic inequality, abortion, divorce, female foeticide, girl child trafficking, live-in relationships, and extramarital affairs are all important themes in their narratives. However, the central theme that runs through these two writers' works is the struggle the unfortunate immigrants must face and the agony they must endure in adjusting to their new lives.

The line of differences between Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* and Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is that Mukherjee, in her collection, deals with protagonists who deliberately choose America as their abode not because of some political unrest disturbing their country but out of lure for a better and brighter life, whereas, the protagonists of Divakaruni are Indian women who come to America, not due to the lure for any better and brighter life but as young brides accompanying their 'NRI' husbands.

Mukherjee, in her stories, enlarges her canvas globally rather than exclusively focusing on the Indian immigrants, but She portrays the lives of immigrants like Hispanics, Italians, Sri Lankan, Iraqis, etc.,



whereas; Divakaruni only portrays the experiences of Indian immigrant women. Divakaruni's concern behind writing this collection is humanitarian and social. She finally wrote *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of stories about the nerve, courage and abuse of immigrant Indian women due to her affiliation with Maitri, where she works as an advisory board member.

In Mukherjee's short fiction, the protagonists are both men and women, whereas in Divakaruni's, the protagonists are only women. Mukherjee does not give her female protagonists a feminist colouring but focuses on their experience as immigrants, whereas, in Divakaruni's stories, a strong force of feminism drives the narrative.

The protagonists from various backgrounds in Mukherjee's collection are compelled to put their culture on the back burner; on the contrary, the characters of Divakaruni's collection are not compelled to leave their culture, but they negotiate with the American milieu and absorb only those traits to American culture which they think is essential for their grooming as independent individuals.

The difficulty, struggle and suffering these unfortunate immigrants experience as they attempt to settle themselves and make a living in an alien country—America—is a common theme that runs through all the stories of *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Bharati Mukherjee wrote these stories after she immigrated to the

United States and published them shortly after her U.S. citizenship.

All the stories in this collection have a strong, upbeat tone and feature a wide variety of locales and characters. Alfie Judah, an Iraqi gunman, tells his first-person account in the title story, "The Middleman." The approaching insurrection of an Indian woman in America is the subject of the story "A Wife's Story." In "Loose Ends," Vietnam Battle veteran Jeb Marshall explores the psychological effects of war. The main character in "Orbiting" is a woman of Italian and Spanish ancestry who has a relationship with an Afghan named "Ro." In "Fighting for the Rebound," Griff, the main character, is under pressure to commit to his Filipino lover. In "Fathering," the viewpoint of a Vietnam soldier divided between the competing demands of his half-Vietnamese daughter and his American fiancée is presented. In "Jasmine," an adolescent Trinidadian Indian character observes American culture. In "Danny's Girls," a teenage Indian boy falls in love with a Nepalese mail-order bride. A man from Sri Lanka who is determined to immigrate to Canada is the subject of the film "Buried Lives." The Indo-Canadian main character in "The Management of Grief," Mrs Bhave, finds it difficult to accept the death of her family in an aircraft tragedy.

In Mukherjee's fiction, violence takes a firm grip over the lives of the immigrants, like wars, plane crashes, etc., but in Divakaruni's fiction, violence does not play any role. In her case, it is a matter



of self-esteem and autonomy denied to women within India's insular and bigoted community. Women in these stories struggle to carve out an identity of their own. Women's struggle in *Arranged Marriage* is dual; firstly, they struggle for their own identity as individuals free from any patriarchal identity. Secondly, they struggle for an identity that is neither Indian nor American. The protagonists in Mukherjee's fiction are searching for only American identity.

The setting of all the stories in *Arranged Marriage* is on the domestic front, like relationships between husband and wife, wife and her friend, mother and son, mother and daughter, girlfriend and boyfriend, etc. In contrast, the stories written by Bharati Mukherjee have both domestic and commercial settings.

Bengali women writers of the Indian diaspora like Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have inexplicable and often inextricable links with Bengali culture, specifically with the urban middle-class culture of Kolkata. But the Kolkata syndrome dominates Divakaruni more than Mukherjee's collection. Divakaruni, in the references to the cultural tradition of Kolkata, cherishes moments of nostalgia or moments of bewilderment in encounters with the real Kolkata, especially in the stories "Silver Pavements", "Golden Roofs", and "Ultrasound." It appears to be more a case for dual identity, addressing cultural negotiation.

In Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*, the characters are submissively educated Indian women playing the role of intelligent caregivers, nurturing not only their children but also their husbands and parents-in-law, and sometimes the husband's family brothers, sisters and cousins. The reservoir of desi culture, the preserver or curator of tradition learned from mothers and grandmothers back home, was thought to be middle-class, educated Indian women overseas, who were typically married to upwardly mobile men. Women are preserving the imported Indian value system while the men and kids in the household have been associated with advancement. As a result, women's roles are static while men's and children's roles are far more dynamic, especially in the story "Meeting Mrinal." As stress relievers, women adapted themselves to the broader society almost imperceptibly: they cooked, cleaned, mopped, and shopped, but also learnt to drive and wear western clothes.

The standard line of thought that runs through both collections is that every now and then, the native flavour peeps through the lives of immigrants, leaving them with sudden pangs of nostalgia.

The pull of mothers and the motherland keep these unfortunate immigrants divided between the two worlds and cultures. As portrayed in Divakaruni's, Mukherjee's fiction lacks the stronghold of native culture. Particularly in the case of the narrative "The Word Love," in which the protagonist is torn between her American



partner's love and her widowed mother's love back in Calcutta.

Mukherjee and Divakaruni are members of the urban-class Bengali intelligentsia; they have an undisputed position of privilege and what, in the conservative analysis, would be identified as being 'Americanized.' They have more than genetic links with Bengali and Indian culture as they spent their formative years in India and took up residence in the U.S. as young adults. It is virtually impossible to break entirely free from the cultural upbringing of one's childhood and adolescence and the influences of one's family culture. These often exert a stranglehold, valorised as a disciplining of the individual, and generally characterise the middle classes. These two women seem to agree about the sense of claustrophobia in middle-class Bengali social culture and its debilitating insularity.

Mukherjee and Divakaruni explore possibilities of cultural negotiations that establish a dynamic relationship between descendants and migrants and their mutual appreciation. This can be stated as their first step towards transnational harmony rather than the hegemony of cultural globalisation.

A noticeable feature of Mukherjee and Divakaruni's representation of dysfunctional families is the deliberate mythification of American freedom and demonisation of traditional Indian cultural norms. Also noticeable is that Mukherjee and Divakaruni, as first-generation

immigrants, do not suffer from the nagging sense of guilt.

The collection of short stories by these two writers narrates the internal gendering and cultural differentiation of Third World women. Simultaneously, they seem to agree that the gendered sense of self can be interrogated and relocated in the comparatively more liberated socio-cultural environment of the United States. In Bharati Mukherjee's collection, the front cover is a raised arm with a lamp-the unmistakable American icon, the Statue of Liberty, but the arm is not a solitary one holding up the lamp. A brown arm, slightly smaller, holds onto the light too, but the two arms are not intertwined.

The cover of Divakaruni's collection is more culture-specific, but the American sojourn and experience are also included as insets. So, along with a veiled profile of an Indian bride with a *tikli* on her forehead - demure, pensive, eyes downcast – the two insets are of an illuminated section of the Golden Gate, San Francisco and a postage stamp of Gandhi on a torn envelope with a traditional brass artifact next to it. It makes an impressionistic collage.

On the whole, both collections have an affirmative function. The stories examine and explore the existing culture of immigrants, their fight with it, and their final reconciliation with the American culture. The question of identity and self, which is lost when people leave their native country to forge a new identity in a foreign society, becomes one of the things that



haunt the lives of these immigrants. But still, this chance can be danced if one dares to adopt, adapt, and become adept.

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