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**A Critical Study of Two Generation of Indian Diasporic Women
Writers from Bharati Mukherjee to JhumpaLahiri**

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Abstract:

After independence, many Indian settled in western countries like England, USA, Canada, France, and Germany as immigrants. The expectations to get better jobs, more money and higher education have made these people to leave their homeland and live as immigrants in these countries. The cultural shocks that they experienced have made them vulnerable in these alien lands. They had to adjust between the two completely different cultures, one which they had brought from India and the other that they have to face in these western countries. Many of these immigrants have tried their hand in writing to share their feelings and experiences as Indian diaspora. These diasporic writers especially the women writers are divided into two generations. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni fall in the first generation as they are the first generation immigrants while writers like JhumpaLahiri, MeeraSanyal, Kiran Desai are described as second generation writers who have somewhat narrated different experiences compared to the first generation writers as they are not born and brought up in India like their predecessors

did. The present article thus, is an effort to understand the characteristics of these two generations of diasporic women writers.

Keyword: Alien, diaspora, identity, immigration, multiculturalism

Introduction:

The term *diaspora* was first used to refer to the dispersed Jews after the Babylonian captivity. Interestingly the term again gets momentum in the later part of 19th century when the dispersed Jews from Europe starts returning to their homeland. This plight of Jews thus makes Dominique Strauss-Kahn to say:

“I consider all the Jews in the *diaspora*, and thus it is true in France, should everywhere they can lend their support to Israel. This is why it is also important that Jews take political responsibilities. . . .In sum, in my functions and in my everyday life, through the whole of my actions, I try to make so

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that my modest stone is brought to the construction of the land of Israel.” (www.idlehearts.com/1341235/i-consider-that-all-jews-in-the-diaspora-and-thus-it-is)

In the post-world war scenario, the term Diaspora gets varied interpretations. Like in the 1960s and 70s it is believed that the term is used for dispersed American, African and Irish communities. But the term begins to reshape gradually and in 1980s it symbolises immigrants, political refugees, racial minorities etc. Critics like Robin Cohen on the other hand believe that *diaspora* stands for the “people who live outside their national territories.” (Cohen 9)

Two Generation of Diasporic Writers:

The diasporic writings of Indian women writers grow along with the movement of Indian community throughout the continents. It has been said that Indians living outside of India continues to live in a ‘sandwich world’. In one hand it refuses to give up their cultural roots while on the other hand the challenges to mix and adjust with the alien culture. Thus most of the Indian diasporic writers live in a state of flux.

These diasporic writers are generally divided into two groups or rather generations. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represent the first generation while,

Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai represent second generation of diasporic writers. In the first generation we witness the alienation, the pain of migration, and nostalgia and above all the rootlessness from the homeland as the prominent subject matter. While in the second generation diaspora, we find a different scenario where the main characters are the children of the first generation and interestingly the country of their birth is different to the country of their origin. As a result, the children become confused between the cultures of their surroundings as well as their parents’ home cultures. This sense of ‘in-betweens’ causes the loss of identity and alienation. Critics like Steven Vertovec in his “Three Meaning of Diaspora: Between Third World and First.” is of the opinion that second generation diaspora tends to be more exposed to “the cross-current culture of different fields” (Vertovec 290). These differences are clearly visible as there is an urge for assimilation among the second generation diasporic people while first generation diasporic communities lacks it in the true

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sense of the term. In the following, let us analyse the prominent diasporic women writers of

both the generation of India. Calcutta born Bharati Mukherjee is famous for his novels,

short-stories and non-fictional works who is regarded as the first generation diasporic

writer. She became Canadian citizen in 1960s after marrying Clark Blaise, a fellow Canadian

student at the University of Iowa. Later in late eighties she along with her family migrated to

US and became citizen there. Her long time settlement in American continent thus gradually

changes her inner spirits of being Indian.

Thus she says:

“I came to a profound conclusion. I was no longer Indian in mind or spirit. The weight of tradition, even the multifarious tyrannies of a loving family, was no longer tolerable to me. In endless conversations with my old school friends, my parents and sisters, I realized that I had slipped a cog or two. It became clear to me -- another door opening -- that I was an immigrant writer in the tradition of other, older (European) immigrant groups.”

(<https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/writers/mukherjee.htm>)

Most of her writings narrates her experiences as an immigrant like anti-

Indian sentiments and racial discrimination in Canada. She is of the opinion that the due recognition and respect that she deserves, could not be attributed towards her while her husband Clark Blaise being a Canadian gets it quite easily. This experience is being portrayed in the character portrayal of ‘Tara’ in her novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971) and of ‘Dimple’ in *Wife* (1975). In this juncture of life she gets the required inspiration from V.S Naipaul and identified herself as an expatriate writer like him. Thus, in her work *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) she observes:

In myself I detect a pale and immature reflection of Naipaul; it is he who has written most movingly about the pain and absurdity of art and exile, of ‘third’ world art’ and exile among the former colonizers; the tolerant incomprehensible of hosts, the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, a *desh*. (287)

But after arriving in the United States, her thought process takes another turn. She now starts to believe herself not as an expatriate, rather as an immigrant. This view also touches her writings. As a result, she starts to shift from V.S. Naipaul to Bernard Malamud as her role model. Thus she says in an interview to Alison B. Carb that “[I]k Malamud, I write about a minority community which escapes the ghetto and adapts itself to the patterns of

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the dominant American culture.” (650) Thus in *Darkness* (1985) she says: “[i]f you have to wonder, if you keep looking for signs, if you wait-surrendering little bits of a reluctant self ever retreating past-you’ll never belong, anywhere” (2)

This transformation gets profoundness after the publication of *Jasmine* (1989) where we witness the compilation of subject matter of immigrant literature like transnational, transcultural identity. The story narrates the journey of the protagonist who emigrates to US from Punjab and tries to establish herself as an independent American citizen similar to her creator. Thus, after the publication of *Jasmine*, she tells Ameen Meer in an interview that “[i]t was writing in that book I transformed myself from being an expatriate to realizing I’m an immigrant...my roots are here. There is no going back.”(26) Mukherjee further says that

“I totally considered myself an American writer...I am the first among Asian immigrants writing to be making this distinction between expatriate and immigrant writing...I am writing about an American group who are undergoing many transformations within themselves. (26-27)

However, it can’t be said that as she declares herself a true American writer and tells her reader as “I am one of you”, but

her deep rooted Indianness comes out in various forms through her writings. In *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Wife*, both the protagonist Tara and Dimple come from Bengali Brahmin roots. In *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), the protagonist for the short story *The Tenant*, Maya Sanyal also represent the Bengali Hindu community which Mukherjee herself belongs. Her work *Days and Nights in Calcutta* which she composes along with her husband Clark Blaise, portrays the various fascinating parts of Bengali culture and ethos. In a nutshell, it can be said that though she has tried to portray herself as a native American, but she could not eliminate her ethnic, cultural, biological roots in India, more precisely the Hindu Bengali identity which somehow manages to wake up. Thus, she becomes one of the prominent flag bearers of Indian diasporic writing who gives many second generation immigrant writers a ray of hope in their path of journey.

Another first generation diasporic writer who gets acclamation from the literary fraternity is none other than Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her literary career spreads across genres including fiction, poetry, children books, book reviews, magic realism and others. Her books have become so much popular amongst the readers that in more than 25 languages her works have been translated. Her stories revolves around the South Asian diasporic

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experiences especially from those women who settled in US as immigrants. The experiences faced these immigrant women touches her heart. Thus, in an interview to *diverseeducation.com* she says:

“Women in particular respond to my work because I’m writing about them- women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships,” [...] “I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life.” (<http://diverseeducation.com/article/8312/>)

Apart from writing about them she also helps many women through a N.G.O. called ‘Mairti’, which helps women facing various social problems including domestic violence, racial and cultural abuses, human trafficking. These experiences help her to write *Arranged Marriage* (1995) where immigrant brides face social and cultural hardships and finally come out liberated. Her characters like Geeta, Hameeda and Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Jayanthi in *Silver Pavements and Golden Roof*, Uma, Anju and Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and Malati in *One Amazing Thing* (2010) shows the struggle and determination to tackle such challenges in alien country with great vigour. Thus, K.S Dhanman in the book ‘*Negotiating with the New Culture...*’ says:

Divakaruni’s books are directed mainly to women of all races and faiths who share a common female experience. All her

heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their cultures and religion... she also contrasts the lives and perceptions of the first generation immigrants with of their children born and raised in foreign land. And inevitably, it includes the Indian American experience of grappling with two identities. She has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos. Her writing course with her identification is with a brave new world forging to life. Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today’s issues are threaded through with an ongoing search for identity beyond anthropology, beyond sociology and beyond academia. (62)

Being a first generation diasporic writer, Divakaruni also portrays the problem of second generation immigrant in her novel *Queens of Dreams* (2004), where the protagonist along with her mother tries to establish a new identity in a foreign land. The difference between other novels and the *Queens of Dreams* is while the other novels deal with the aspirations and experiences of the Indian origin diasporic community, the *Queens of Dreams* showcases the impact of magic realism along with Indo-American diaspora. The story blends two different worlds where the reminiscence of ancient Indian and contemporary American culture collides and creates a new form of cultural identity.

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Thus, it can be said that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most prolific first generation diasporic writer who through her writings portray various forms and shades of identity, nostalgia, struggle, magic realism, customs and alienation. Her characters though struggle to cope with new identity in a pluralistic country like US, but still they never surrenders before the task of adapting this new life rather their zeal to fight against all the odds give rise a subtle message of positivism amongst the readers.

Kiran Desai is one of the most popular second generation Indian diasporic writer. She was born in Chandigarh, India and immigrated to England and with her mother to US. Her personal experiences as an immigrant help her to write about the experiences faced by this section of people. She becomes famous for her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) for which she gets the prestigious Man Booker Award in 2006 and becomes the youngest female to receive the award. The gripping subject matter of the novel thus draws a huge chunk of attention from the literary fraternity. Pankaj Mishra in his article *Wounded by the West* published in *The New York Times* says:

“ALTHOUGH it focuses on the fate of a few powerless individuals, Kiran Desai’s extraordinary new novel manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international

issues: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence. Despite being set in the mid-1980, it seems the best kind of post-9/11 novel.” (Mishra 2006:11)

Thus, as a second generation diasporic writer she has quite successfully describes the aspirations, struggles faced by immigrant communities in western countries.

Another famous second generation Indian diasporic writer is JhumpaLahiri. London born Lahiri’s parents migrated from West Bengal, India and thus she becomes the second generation immigrant. Her works thus, fruitfully portrays these generation gap aspect between the two immigrant communities. Along with various other issues related to immigrant communities, issues like identity crisis, cross cultural believes, emotional and psychological break down, nostalgia for native places find important place in her novels and short stories.

If we follow the diasporic literary tradition, JhumpaLahiri does not project herself as a typical second generation diasporic writer, rather she tries to project herself more of a first generation writer where we generally find nostalgia for native home, loss of identity and the pain of displacement. In an interview with Brati Biswas she thus says:

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In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. For migrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of their origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that these were no single palace to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now.” (Biswas 2002:187-188)

Though Lahiri was born in England and lived in Rhode Island, USA; but her connection with India, especially with Bengal never ceased off. Her works thus creates a bridge between the contemporary Bengali cultures, customs with American ethos. She always feels her bonding for Bengal, especially for Calcutta. Thus, in the same interview she says:

“I began writing fiction seriously; my first attempt [...] was always set in Calcutta [...] I learnt to observe things as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belong there in some fundamental way. (Biswas 2002:187)

This may be the reason why SumanBala regards her as “an expatriate Indian writer [...] (who) stands in the same categories as that of V.S Naipaul, whom

Bharati Mukherjee calls an Indian expatriate writer.” (Bala, 2002:11) Supporting her points, Sireesha Telugu in her critical book on *The Namesake* says:

The book opens with Ashima Ganguly, as she attempts to recreate the taste of her favourite Indian snack as an imagery of the sensual familiarities of Bengali to Cambridge. This is also a restoration and combination of both the cultures with a mixture of Rice Kris pies, Planters Peanuts, and chopped red onions with a mixture of salt, lemon juice and pepper. This signifies Ashima as an expatriate more than an immigrant trying to reconstruct the ex-status of her past. (Telugu, 2010:30)

Ashima Ganguly is presented in the novel as the alter ego of Jhumpa Lahiri, who like Lahiri tries to adjust herself with new foreign culture being a native Bengali Hindu from India. Her another famous novel ‘*The Lowland*’ (2003) is been written on the backdrop of Naxalite Movement in Calcutta. The way she gives the subtle details of 1960’s Calcutta, it shows how Calcutta plays an important role in Lahiri’s life and works. In an interview with Vibhuti Patel, Lahiri explains the significance of Calcutta in her life:

“[...] A significant yet marginal role. I spent much time in Calcutta as a child-idle but rich time-often at home with my

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grandmother. I read books; I began to write and record things. It enabled me to experience solitude-ironically, because there were so many people, I could seal myself off psychologically. It was a place where I began to think imaginatively. Calcutta nourished my mind, my eye as a writer, my interest in seeing things from different points of view. There's a legacy and tradition there that we just don't have here. The ink hasn't dried yet on our lives here.

While in her *Interpreter of Maladies*, there are two stories out of nine where the Indian characters are presented in an Indian locale, the characters' struggle to cope with Indian cultures, values, customs, taboos in Boston, USA.

Lahiri's life deals with the experiences of three countries as having roots in India and born in London, England and later grew in Rhode Island, USA. As a result, she has to live with a peculiar diasporic trauma where she fails to connect herself to a particular country and always feels the sense of hopelessness and dilemma of having the experiences of all these three countries.

Jhumpa Lahiri's extensive diasporic experiences are reflected in her style, technique and plot having characters of multi-cultural societies. It is said that Indian diaspora is regarded as a choice of a person for economic gains or academic

excellences. As a result, the native population react differently when they face these immigrants. As a result these people has to suffer the anxiety of alienation and to overcome this, they start adjust or adopt the alien culture. Thus, they gradually form a separate identity or assimilate as 'acculturated'. JhumpaLahiri is thus referred as an expatriate writer, to be more precise a second generation expatriate writer whose writing mainly focuses on the topic of migration.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it can be said that two generations of diasporic women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri have portrayed various shades in the lives of people including the issue of gender discourse, alienation in the alien land. Their personal experiences help them to understand and portray the happiness, sorrows and other struggles faced by women folk. In general, most of the stories narrated by them based on the issue of searching for individual identity and of Indian women in a complete new and diasporic situation and their journey to attain that identity. They get absolute success in narrating this theme and become the ultimate flag bearers of Indian women diasporic writing.

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