

Diasporic Concerns in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Oleander Girl*

Dr. Arushi Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, (M.S.) India

Akshaya Dhuri

M.A. Honours in English, Department of English, University of Mumbai, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The term 'diaspora' has been derived from the Greek language means 'to scatter about', so here the term means the 'scattering' of the population away from their home or birth land. When the same term 'diaspora' is used in relation with Judaism, it is capitalised 'The Diaspora' which is specifically related to the Jewish Diaspora, that is movement and the settling pattern of the indigenous population of the Jews, after the fall of Jerusalem. In recent times, due to various reasons migration has become a part of human life. Many Indian diasporic writers have drawn the picture of assimilation, acculturation and alienation of Indian people in foreign land. Diasporic literature refers to texts, which record the geographical and cultural displacement of individuals or communities to a new location. This genre of literature concerns itself with the notion of the homeland and the migration to new land, where the struggle to negotiate between the old and new culture is somehow quite prominent in diasporic writings. These issues are reflected in the diasporic writings of Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This research paper aims to analyse the diasporic concerns and identity crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, *The Oleander Girl* (2012). In the novel, Divakaruni deals with the identity crisis of the protagonists, issues of immigration, and cultural conflict they experience on their journeys from homeland to new land. The diaspora experiences of the characters arise a sense of displacement, which results in alienation. These alienated characters struggle to adopt themselves into new structure and dangling into two paradigms. The concerns of diaspora will be examined through the lens of Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity and Diaspora to highlight the issues of displaced characters.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity crisis, Assimilation, Acculturation

Introduction

The term 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek verb 'dia speiro' which means 'dia' as through and 'speiro' means 'to scatter about'. So, in Ancient Greece, the term diaspora means 'scattering', also used to refer to the citizens of the dominant state emigrating to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, and aim of assimilation of the territory into the empire.

Since the early sixth century, the term 'diaspora' has prominently referred to the Greeks in the Hellenic world and to the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem. Especially the movement and settling pattern of the dispersed indigenous population of Israel. Hence, when this term is in relation to Judaism, it is capitalised without any modifiers (The Diaspora) and specifically to the Jewish Diaspora. While in the

Hebrew Bible, 'diaspora' is synonymous to 'exile' that focuses on the fate of the Israelites, who were forcefully taken into exile from their kingdom. Eventually, the understanding of the term 'diaspora' has drastically not only changed but also has expanded. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, diaspora (noun) means – if it is capitalised – The Jews living outside Palestine or modern Israel. Otherwise, it means as people settled far from their ancestral homelands and the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland. K. Satchidanandan in one his essay about diaspora says, 'There has been a tremendous quantitative and qualitative change in the phenomenon of diaspora - owing to the great demographic upheavals of the last century, especially its last decades, and to the unprecedented growth of the technologies of communication including the maturing of the multimedia communication systems and cybertechnologies.'

From the Stone Age, human kind has been migrating from one place to another in search of food, water, security and better place to live; still humans continue to migrate from one place to another in search of better standard of living, better job opportunities, security or even for or due to martial reasons. Though it can be said that in this postmodern age, the term diaspora, as any other terms, lost its original meaning and gained different meanings in relation to various matters. In this postmodern era, its scope widened, it considers international migrants and transnational diaspora as the twin spaces of capitalism and global capitalism. Although, in general perspective the term diaspora captures the feeling of displacement, rootlessness with

lots of hope and desire of going back to their homeland. This sense of displacement is filled with feelings of nostalgia making an individual establish and to build new attachments with the new land, their struggle in creating their own space. Over the period of time, these migrant communities vary in many factors including culture, traditions, language, religious practices etc as compared to their home lands. Though the amount of nostalgia or identification towards the homeland varies according to the generation of migration. Scholars through their studies and experiment have classified or divided diasporas, may be on the basis of their experiences, namely, as victim (forced migration, convicts sent to Australia), imperial or colonial, trade (Middle East traders migrating to Western countries) or labour diasporas. Another dimension can be migration because of historical or political factors, for instance partition of British India into two young countries as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Diasporic Literature

If one has to put in simple words, what diasporic literature, then it would be the work of literature created by any author who lives far away from their homeland, usually deals with or narrates the journey may it be happy or harsh taken on by the characters in the novel because of their migration or in simple terms displacement. The major theme or recurring characteristics that is observed in the diasporic literature is a sense of alienation in the new land, followed by the hope of returning to the homeland. The authors through their characters to preserve and recognise the traditions, culture, language,

conflict between alienation and assimilation. In his essay Salman Rushdie states that with the emergence of technology the world has come closer than it was before. This has resulted in the sense of yearning, the curiosity of the homeland and the host country, religion, language has been healthier, rather the essence of 'diaspora' has lost its original connotation. Nowadays, the migrated or uprooted population do not experience nostalgia as telecommunication means of communication. Diasporic literature helps in strengthening the bonds between the home land and the host country, helps in breaking the shackles of alienation, nostalgia, rootlessness, quest of identity or the after effects of migration. The notion of home differs from generation to generation of the migrating population. The first generation who migrate experience the most identify with their home land. While, the second generation have only an idea of their origin but not direct relation to their homeland and hence they create their 'home' in the host country. The notion of home further extends into the nostalgia of their homeland. Most of the women diasporic authors write about their nostalgia of their homeland, especially those who have migrated after their marriage. The diasporic authors try to showcase the diasporic life in as much realistic manner as possible, but fictionalising their first-hand experience helps them to escape the disillusionment, the rootlessness, the alienation etc. The continuous struggle of identifying with the new culture, tradition, language, religion etc of the host country and also preserving and respecting culture, tradition, language etc of the homeland. A study shows that it is the second generation that has the most conflict of identity, rootlessness as they have to maintain their

dual identity. It is difficult to conclude that all the diasporic authors showcase all the themes and the characteristics in all of their works. Some authors focus on the idea of the homeland, while some focus on their life in the new host land or some deal with the harsh reality and conflicts that the migrated population face. Some new experiences and perspectives try to compare, contrast and criticise their homeland and the host land. These diasporic authors exhibit their own style and techniques of portraying their experiences, some use realistic examples, magical realism, metaphors or symbolism. Meena Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Chitra Divakaruni are some of Indian diasporic authors. Aforementioned, the concept of diasporic literature deals with the idea of homeland and its difference with the newly migrated land, the narratives of harsh reality and everything that follows. The newly migrated community becomes the minor community not only in the new land but also in their homeland.

Divakaruni through her works has focused on the dynamics of the complex nostalgic emotions, the conflict between desire and passion towards their homeland and making their own place, adapting to the new land and their workings. The diasporic literature includes writings in the form of novels, short stories, travel stories, poems and prose. Indian diasporic writers can be classified into two different categories; first category is made up by those who spent some part of their life in India and another in the foreign land, where they have brought their own heritage and identity to be preserved in the new land. Another category includes the group where they have been born and brought up in the

foreign land, with their roots in India. Both of them dream of their homeland with different perspectives, both experience displacement, alienation and assimilation, struggles of adapting to the new culture but the second category is the one that faces identity crisis, marginalization and rootlessness then the first category. Diasporic writers are the connecting wire between the home land and the foreign land. For years they have been building networks so strong that they have brought the world together. Divakaruni in her works have touched upon most of the major themes, themes such as nostalgia towards homeland, search of identity, familial and multicultural environment and lifestyle etc. According to the United Nations report of the year 2019, it is observed that the Indian diaspora is the world's largest diaspora, followed by the Mexican diaspora and Chinese diaspora with a population of 17.5 million, 11.8 million and 10.7 million respectively. In the year 2020, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs reported that India still remains the largest diaspora in the world with eighteen million of the population residing outside India. This diasporic population hails from different economic class, religion, region, language, culture and time of their migration or displacement.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta; she received her Bachelor's degree from University of Calcutta. She completed her Masters and PhD in English from the University of California, Berkeley. She now is the McDavid Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. She is also the ex-president and the cofounder of the Maitri, a helpline for South Asian women living in San Francisco and are

victims of domestic abuse. She has authored nearly twenty-one novels such as *The Oleander Girl*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Palace of Illusion*, *Before We Visit the Goddess* etc. Her *Palace of Illusion*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, and *The Last Queen* are the narratives with feminist perspectives of Indian epics such as Mahabharata, Ramayana and about Maharani Jindan, the regent of Punjab, who single handedly fought against Britishers after her husband's death, respectively. She has published in more than hundred magazines and anthologies such as Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker, Vogue and others. Her works are also translated in about national and international languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Dutch, Hebrew etc. She has been awarded with an American Book Award, a PEN Josephine Miles award and many others. *The Last Queen* was awarded with the Times of India Best Fiction and the Best Book Award from the International Association of Working Women. Another feather in her overflowing is that she is one of the twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women of the Economic Times'. The themes of her works are generally immigration, identity crisis, myths, cultural conflicts, magic realism, and cultural adaptation.

The Oleander Girl

The novel focuses on seventeen years old protagonist Korobi's quest for identity, search for a home, and alienation in her life because of dislocation. It also studies the conflict of culture, issues of assimilation, acculturation, and cultural identity through the character of Korobi. It focuses on the journey of Korobi from questioning her identity to decentralising it and then to fixing or finding her identity. In the novel *The Oleander Girl*, Korobi has to go to

America to find her father, who she thought was dead at the time of her birth. Even though her time in America is stipulated for a specific period of the time, it plays a pivotal role in the novel as well as in the identity building of Korobi.

When the novel begins she had a stable identity of being granddaughter of respected and honourable Bengali family of Bimal Roy but it changes when her grandmother, Sarojini reveals to her that her father is alive and he is an American. This revelation though makes her heartens; it triggers her identity crisis. Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, states regarding identity, 'If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or narrative of the self about ourselves' Here, Korobi's grandparents had constructed her identity based on their traditions and honour, which gets shattered when Korobi learns the truth about her parents. Korobi's quest for identity begins with her name itself, from childhood she wants to know the reason behind her name Korobi. Naming her daughter Korobi was her mother Anu's wish, hence her last wish was respected by her grandparents. Her name and the letter with a poem are the only things that she has inherited from her mother. She grows up in the traditional and patriarchal house of her grandparents and she is engaged to get married with Rajat whose family is modern yet strives to maintain their culture and familial heritage through their actions. At first, Bimal Roy, Korobi's patriarchal and traditional grandfather was against their marriage, for he believed that 'the daughters of Roy family do not have boyfriends.' She is sheltered and protected by the Indian culture and traditions but she urges to

follow modern and western culture. Her idea to associate herself with a new identity, which is not the one she is born with, makes her inner self fragmented and develops an identity crisis in her character. Korobi says to her fiancé Rajat once about her inner turmoil, "I'm so confused. All the things I was so proud of, my family, my heritage—they're only half-true. The other half of me don't know anything about it. Except that all this time my father was alive, and in America." (Divakaruni 66) Her journey of unfolding her true identity not only transforms her completely but also takes her journey to a new country. her journey is not an easy one, she had to convince Rajat, her fiancé. While convincing Rajat she says that, 'You want me to go through my whole life with my in-laws pretending that my father is dead? That he was Indian? Are you ashamed of who I am?' (Divakaruni 73), which shows her determination to uncover her identity and establish it. She is the daughter of the Roy family, here she does not have her own identity and she is owned by her grandfather. After her marriage she will be the daughter-in-law of the Bose family and wife of Rajat Bose. But everything changes when her grandfather dies. She is revealed that her father may be alive and he is an American. This revelation changes everything for Korobi, this incident changes how she perceives herself and people around her. These words by Divakaruni in Korobi's mind reveal that her grandfather Bimal Roy was proud of his Indian heritage and traditions and that is why he hides the truth of Korobi's father's origin. On knowing that Korobi is half American, Rajat's perception of Korobi changes slightly. Korobi decided that she will travel to America and find her father, till then she will not marry. But at the airport, Rajat asks for a promise from

Korobi to be faithful to him and to return back within a month. Her (Korobi's) journey from the sheltered and pampered home of her grandparents at 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road to dreamy and alluring America, makes her experience the harsh, brutal and oppressive reality. Once she lands in America, her first challenge is to keep the real reason of her visit secret from Mitra, that is her search for her father. Mr. Mitra is the manager of the Bose family's gallery in America, which due to the recent 9/11 attack is facing some problems and losses. The manager thinks that Korobi has been sent by the Bose family to keep an eye on him. This double-faced attitude of Mr. Mitra lowers the spirits of Korobi's and she has to become more observant. Another tool that hits her image in the beginning of her stay in America. While visiting the detective's office, a man approaches her and tries to attack her, but Mitra who is supposed to take care of her just stands there watches. Korobi takes the reins in her hands, and somehow frightens the man. Korobi saving herself disappoints Mitra but it shows how Korobi is taking charge of her life and trying to establish herself in the society. Subhra Roy in her critical essay states that this action of Korobi standing for herself gives her the power and encouragement to make Korobi courageous, fearless and confident (Roy 135).

In this process of finding her roots Korobi find herself too. She has become stubborn and headstrong just like her grandfather, when in need of money for sustenance and investigation of her father, she does not ask Rajat for money. Instead, she donates and sells her hair and uses that money for paying the fees of the hired detective. Her decision to donate her hair gives her not

only a new physical appearance but also a new confident identity. Korobi's long hair embody the weight of traditions, patriarchy and distrust, and when she cuts them or donates them Korobi feels free from the shackles of patriarchy and traditions 'I feel light headed and untethered' and she feels, 'A mass of curls, barely reaching my shoulders, have transformed me into a stranger, glamorous and a little dangerous.' (Divakaruni 177) Korobi, in the novel, has to go through two grave predicaments which worsens her identity dilemma. First predicament is when she meets her real father – who is an African American and that she was conceived out of marriage. Once again, the tradition interferes with Korobi's life as having a child without marriage is not accepted in marriage and that is what Korobi is, she is an illegitimate child where her identity is not accepted in the society. Korobi's second predicament is that her journey to America is time-bound where she decided to stay only with an aim of finding her father. She is in a dilemma whether to stay back in America and make up for the time lost between her and her father and create a new life with Vic or to go back to her lonely and widowed grandmother. This dilemma is from the onset of the journey when Korobi is thinking, 'Grandmother had once told me about the enchanted land. When people went there, they forgot the loved ones they had left behind. They forget themselves too. No one returned from the country, although they were not unhappy there in bewitchment. What if America turned out to be like that?' (Divakaruni 92). These lines reflect the pain which people feel once their loved ones migrate from their homeland to some other land.

From the beginning of her journey to America, Korobi fears of being allured by America's life, but eventually Korobi like Divakaruni's other characters feels homesick and nostalgic and returns to their homeland, India. Korobi that returns to her homeland is not the same Korobi that left India to search for her father in America. Now, Korobi is the best version of herself, she is confident, can stand up for herself and starts her life anew. Her recently discovered identity does not allow her to live after returning to India; since her engagement is broken, she restarts her studies, she lives happily with her grandfather. As Edward Said says, "the people in diaspora live in a complex space between two worlds and two cultures, a situation, which is reminiscent of 'Janus, the Greek god with two faces, one looking backward and the other forward.'" (as qtd by Bala 127) Similarly, Korobi in *The Oleander Girl*, is stuck between the space of being a granddaughter of an honoured and respected grandfather and being an illegitimate daughter of her Indian mother and African American father. At the end, she discovers the mystery behind her name Korobi, her father informs her that her mother 'Anu wanted that toughness for you because she didn't have enough for herself.' (Divakaruni 253) Korobi, by the end the novel becomes 'beautiful but tough ready to take challenges' (Bala 138). It was a new identity, which she achieves by associated herself to her roots. She experienced transformation in her identity, which was a result of going away and realising her roots

as a part of her life. She goes to through furnace of life changes like experiencing life outside her pampered, cocooned and strictly guided 26 Tarak Prasad Roy Road, finding her father, her illegitimacy, her dilemma between Rajat and Vic and also whether to stay back in America or go back to India and at last finding her own identity. These cathartic and transformative challenges do not hinder but she comes out of the furnace as strong, tough and balanced just like her name.

Conclusion

Chitra Divakaruni in her works, employs such events that makes the readers ruminate on the situation of the diasporic population in the foreign land. The author herself is an emigrant, so her first-hand experience of the plight of the diasporic population has doubled the impact of the characters in the novel.

In her novel, *The Oleander Girl*, through the character of Korobi, she has represented every Indian that travels to foreign land in search of one or the other thing, experiencing struggles but emerging as stronger and better versions of themselves. Korobi, by travelling to America not only finds her father but also finds worth in her life, love, respect and trust that she was yearning for since her childhood. Divakaruni urges every immigrant that is facing an identity crisis to take that one step that will benefit them and also their life, by enjoying both bitter and better experiences that life enables for them.

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