



# Indian Diaspora Women Preserving Culture and Identity in their Host Countries as revealed from Celebrating Literature

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## ABSTRACT

The word '**Diaspora**' has its roots in the Greek word 'Diaspeirein' which means 'to scatter about, to disperse'. In Greek language, 'dia' means 'about' or 'across' and 'speirein' means 'to scatter'. The Indian Diaspora is a generic term which is used to describe the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India. It also refers to the subsequent generations of such people.

Certain features of **the Indian Diaspora** are as under:

- Many Indians, in ancient times, migrated to Far East and South East India to spread Buddhism
- The migration of the Indians during the Colonial period was characterized by helplessness, misery and deprivation. Many of them migrated as part of indentured labour system to countries like Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, Maldives, etc.
- In the post colonial period, the Indians migrated as skilled labourers and successful professionals to the industrialized, developed countries like U.K., Netherlands, Middle East, USA and Canada.
- As a result of the globalization of national economies and mixing of cultures, the Indians have emerged as representatives in all walks of life like academic, I. T. or medicine too.
- Apart from playing an important role in the economic development of their home countries by sending remittances, the Indian people abroad have even dominated the political sphere in the countries of their migration, like Mauritius, U.K., Trinidad and US.
- At present the Indian Diaspora is estimated to number over twenty million. The Diaspora covers practically every part of the world. It numbers more than a million each in eleven countries, while as many as twenty-two countries have concentrations of at least a hundred thousand ethnic Indians.
- The Diaspora is very valuable to India. Though they reside in distant lands, they have retained their emotional, cultural and spiritual bonds with the country of their origin.
- Social and cultural experiences of the Indian Diaspora have been voiced successfully by creative writers like Salman Rushdie, Raja Rao, Amitav Ghosh, Anurag Mathur etc. All of them deal with the theme of identity of Diaspora in their novels.
- Through their creative writings, female writers of the Indian Diaspora have delineated their striving for preserving culture and identity in their host countries. The novelists like Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya, Bharti Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa

Laheri, Kiran Desai have portrayed the issue of identity of men and women of Indian diaspora in their literary works.

## II.

Out of many novels of the Indian Diaspora, **Bharti Mukherjee's** *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and **Jhumpa Lahiri's** *The Namesake* (2003) are chosen for this study as they reflect the portrait of traditional Indian families and contemporary American sagas of women who are compelled in many ways to break with their own tradition in the world of multiculturalism and yet have remained tied to their native country.

**Bharati Mukherjee** was born in Calcutta in 1940, the second of three daughters born to Bengali-speaking, Hindu Brahmin parents living in a joint family. She was eight, when she moved to live in London for three years.

Her stay in London enabled her to experience the cross cultural milieu at an early phase of her life. After returning to India in 1951, she obtained her B.A. (Honours) in English from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and her M.A. in English from the University of Baroda in 1961. Then she went to the U.S. and received a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature in 1969 from the University of Iowa. There she met Clark Blaise, Canadian novelist, professor and journalist and married him in 1963. She went to Canada in 1966 with her husband and spent there almost fourteen years of her life. Along with her husband, she returned to the United States in 1980. Afterwards she taught at Mc Gill University, Skidmore College, Queens College, and City University of New York. Currently she is working as a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley.

Bharti Mukherjee's well known novels are:

- *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971);
- *Wife* (1975);
- *Jasmine* (1989);
- *The Holder of the World* (1993);
- *Leave It to Me* (1997);
- *Desirable Daughters* (2002);

- *The Tree Bride* (2004);
- *Miss New India* (2011).

Her short story collections and memoirs include:

- *Darkness* (1985);
- *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988);
- *A Father*.

Her nonfiction works are:

- *Days and Nights in Calcutta*;
- *The Sorrow and the Terror*.

The 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award was conferred upon Bharti Mukherjee for her *The Middleman and Other Stories*.

*Desirable Daughters* is written in an autobiographical mode in which an immigrant woman from India is trying to discover herself in the United States of America. Elements of myth and suspense are mingled in this novel with artistic craftsmanship. The plot swings back and forth from the small village in East Bengal where her ancestors live and San Francisco.

*Desirable Daughters* is about marriage and family ties. It begins with a story which informs us that on a winter night in a village of East Bengal in 1879, Tara's ancestor, 5-year-old Tara Lata, has to marry a tree after her 13-year-old husband-to-be dies of snakebite on their wedding day. The novel ends almost after 120 years, when Tara, the 36-year-old narrator, returns to this same village in winter. Like her ancestor, Tara Bhattacharjee is the youngest of three sisters of a Brahmin family. Although they grew up in Calcutta, Tara and the oldest sister Padma now live in America while the middle sister lives in Bombay.

Tara's parents got her married to Bish Chatterjee, who represents the Indian immigrant's American Dream. He excelled at Stanford University, started up his own dot-com company, and became Silicon Valley multimillionaire at very young age. However, Tara is bored by her marriage. She represents another dream of Indian immigrant's who wants to live with a California-style. She seeks divorce from her husband and lives with

liberty of her own with her gay teenage son and her Hungarian Buddhist lover in San Francisco.

Every novel has a crisis at its centre. In this novel it appears in the form of a young man who introduces himself as Chris Dey and also as Padma's illegitimate son, conceived through an affair with a prominent businessman named Ronald Dey. In the due course of the novel, it is revealed that Chris Dey is not really who says he is. A murder occurs and almost a fatal bombing also takes place in the end.

The main focus is the pull of two cultures. Tara and her teenage son exemplify the Indian trying to mix with American culture. Her sister holds onto traditional culture in the face of pressures to assimilate.

Padma and Tara undergo absolutely opposite kinds of experiences of cultural confrontation. Padma resists to absorb in the alien culture, so Padma's approach is that of an expatriate. Tara's approach, like her creator, is that of an immigrant. Tara shows her willingness to merge with the adopted culture.

Padma clings "to a version of India and to Indian ways and Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a 'charming' accent" (Mukherjee 134), to prevent the American culture from penetrating it. According to Avtar Brah: "Not all diasporas inscribe homing desire through a wish to return to a place of 'origin'" (193).

Padma has become more Indian than when she left Calcutta before 25 years. As a 'multi-cultural performance artist' she goes to schools and community centres to stage "Indian mythological evenings, with readings, slide shows, recitations and musical accompaniments" (Mukherjee 94). She fits perfectly in the expatriate mould, who says, "Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way" (Mukherjee 134).

Tara, on the other hand, exhibits identity which can be called hybrid identity, who, adapts to the patterns of dominant culture. She recreates a self of her own through hybrid identity. Hybridity here

may refer to the fusion of two or more cultures giving rise to a hybrid identity occupying a 'third space'. The displaced voice of Tara indulges in a constant dialogue between 'self' and 'other'.

Once in America, Tara turns her back to the Indian patriarchal norms and traditions. Tara "as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his [her husband's] names to his face, . . . after crossing the dark waters to California I called him Bishu, then Bish, and he didn't flinch" (Mukherjee 23). She divorces her husband after a decade of their marriage "because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn't support his wife?" (Mukherjee 82). A suffocating life forces Tara to start living with Andy, her Hungarian Buddhist lover, who she thinks "has been a better father than Bish" (Mukherjee 162) for her son. She starts working as a kindergarten teacher.

Padma thinks that Tara has brought shame to the Bhattacharjee family. Whereas, Tara considers Padma's clinging to a version of India as a "cowardly way of coping with a new country" (Mukherjee 134). The cultural dislocation of Padma and Tara seems to have brought a shift in their identities. Padma, "whose every utterance was couched in hatred for those times and for the family and for the city, is trying to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey," and Tara says she loved her family and culture but had "walked away from the struggle to preserve it. In San Francisco, I (she) barely knew any Indians." (Mukherjee 181).

In the New World, Tara lives for herself. She resists the pull of the patriarchal oppressions. She overcomes the feeling of lack of belonging. She relocates herself in a new home. Having closely scrutinized the oppositional diasporic experiences of Padma and Tara, we can say that culturally displaced, Padma, considers it her duty to preserve and propagate her ethnic values even in an alien land. Whereas, Tara, the victim of gender-based marginalization, wants to break out of the

patriarchal bounds and step into a new identity free of the traditional limits.

Cultural conflict is the main focus of Mukherjee's fiction. Her works mostly represent the movement from expatriation to immigration, which coincides with her own movement from Canada to U.S.A. Tara in *Desirable Daughters* closely resembles Mukherjee as far as her adaptation or assimilation is concerned.

Several themes of class, history and changing consciousness are interwoven. Here we find Tara's quest for her identity. Bharti Mukherjee, beneath her family drama, narrates the story about Indians in India and also in the US. She delineates a picture of different cultures like Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, Shikh which are also divided by the classification of caste and creed and yet are kept together by strict traditions of family behaviour and spiritual rituals. The author shows the clash of tradition and myth with the free will and dimensions of the one world economy.

The real name of **Jhumpa Lahiri** is Nilanjana Sudeshna but her nick name - Jhumpa was preferred by her teachers at school, hence, she has kept herself introducing as Jhumpa. She is a post-colonial writer of Diaspora. Her parentage is Bengali, but she was born in London in 1967 and brought up in South Kingston, Rhode Island. Hence, her identity can be considered a product of three countries—India, England and America. After doing B.A. in English Literature from Bernard College in 1989, she received her post graduate degrees from Boston University in English, Creative Writing and Comparative Literature and Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. She married Alberto Vourvoulias Bush, an American Journalist in 2001, and now lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two children. She is the Vice-President of the PEN American Centre.

Jhumpa Lahiri is known for two of her short story collections, viz.,

- *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)
- *Unaccustomed Earth* (Part I and II) (2008)

Her novels:

- *The Namesake* (2003) and
- *The Lowland* (2013) have been received very well by the readers.

She has won almost 14 prestigious awards for her literary contribution, which include:

- 1993 – TransAtlantic Award from the Henfield Foundation,
- 1999– O. Henry Award for short story "Interpreter of Maladies",
- 1999– PEN/Hemingway Award (Best Fiction Debut of the Year) for "Interpreter of Maladies",
- 2000–Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her "Interpreter of Maladies" to name a few.

Her novel *The Namesake*, spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. It is the story of two generations of an Indian family and their struggle to assimilate themselves in the host country, USA. In this novel there is a treatment of the issue of the importance of one's association with one's own name. The novel is about Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who arrive in Massachusetts from Calcutta in the late 1960s.

The novel commences in 1968 with the birth of a son to Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. Retrospectively the readers are informed about the incident that happened in their life in 1961 when Ashoke almost lost his life in a train derailment. Only the book he was clutching - A Collection of Nikolai Gogol's Short Stories - revealed him to rescuers. With this incident in mind, Ashoke and Ashima confront the problem of what to do with their newborn son's name. As per their Bengali tradition, they have to give the child both a 'bhalonam' - a good name for the outside world, and a 'daknam' - a pet name. But they failed to get the good name for their son from Ashima's grandmother in Calcutta, so he has to start his life with only his nick name, Gogol. Gogol is admitted to the school under the name of Nikhil, but he prefers to be known as Gogol, so the same name remains in practice. The Gangulis are prepared

with the name, Sonia / Sonali, when their daughter is born.

On Gogol's 14th birthday his father presents him the book *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, but does not tell him about the train accident. Later on, his father tells him the truth of him being named so. It has a profound effect on Gogol. Gogol finds it difficult to assimilate himself with the American culture. He develops an affair with Ruth, a white American, which can not last for a long time. Then his affair with Maxine who is of white American ethnicity, also breaks because of Gogol's struggle regarding emotional complications of his father's death. On his mother's suggestion Gogol gets associated with Moushumi, daughter of their friend, due to their shared culture and background. But their marriage breaks as Moushumi loves Dimitri, a German man.

Ashima, after the death of her husband, lives for half an year in India and the rest of the year in the U.S.A. At a party on Christmas Eve, Gogol finds the unread book that his father had presented him on his 14th birthday. He turns to read the first story 'The Overcoat'. In the end Gogol feels "The givers and keepers of Gogol's name are far from him now ..... Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace" (Lahiri 289).

In *The Namesake* issues of racism, prejudice and marginalization by the unwelcoming society are at the centre and Gogol seems to be a victim of it. Gogol struggles to transform himself by escaping from the traditions of the community of Indian immigrants to which his family belongs. He is an ABCD - an American Born Confused Desi. The inner psyche of characters are highlighted here. The identity is formed by clash of cultures. Multiculturalism results in "the Melting Pot" and "Salad Bowl". The family is forced to make peace with their loyalties to Indian culture and to that of their host country.

Gogol in *The Namesake* feels that his name is absurd as well as obscure. His hatred for his name can be seen in these words: "There is no such thing as a perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen," he adds. "Until then, pronouns." (Lahiri 245)

The title *The Namesake* signifies the struggle Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual name. About the controversy of name of Gogol, Lahiri says in an interview, "But I think that for the child of immigrant, the existence of two names kind of speaks so strongly for the very predicament of many children of immigrants. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants - those with strong ties to their country of origin - is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. For example, I never know how to answer the question: "Where are you from?" If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged" (Book Browse 2007).

Gogol cannot detach himself completely from his roots and identity. He tries to reject his past but it makes him stranger to himself which is the greatest enigma of his life.

### III

After going through these two novels, Bharti Mukharjee's *Desirable Daughters* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* one is likely to notice certain **similarities** between these two authors. Both of them are from Bengal, they have migrated to the US. Both of them have married to the persons of foreign origin, Bharti Mukharjee to a Canadian and Jhumpa Lahiri, to an American. Like Bharati Mukherjee, Lahiri's cross-cultural marriage is an evidence of traditional subversion and an attempt to assimilate with the host culture. Both of these writers are academicians and both of

them have expressed their experiences in the forms of short story and novel. Moreover, both of them write with the sensibility of a woman.

A *difference* that one can notice between the two is that unlike Bharati Mukherjee, Lahiri has a second hand experience of Indian traditions and culture. It is Jhumpa's own cross-cultural experience spread over three continents that drew her to write about the first as well as the second generation immigrants.

#### IV

The study of these novels lead us to *derive* that the works of such women writers reveal a feminine voice trying to subvert the repressions of gender, history, race and culture. These female writers endeavour to re-invent a new identity free from their marginal status. Hence, their treatment of the issue of identity of an immigrant living in a condition of Diaspora remains different from that of male writers of Diaspora. The main reason behind this difference of perspective is that patriarchal form of the Indian family exists for women even when they are settled abroad. Women find themselves dependant on others for their identity. They do not find it easy to consider themselves as autonomous as men. So, the impact of cultural displacement is greater on women than on men. Women require more time and courage to reinvent them in a new environment.

Lata Rengachari writes:

“In their aim at self-definition and the expression of their expatriate experiences, women from 1970s onwards chose to use literature. Literature became a means of establishing autonomous selfhood. Third world women sought to find words and forms to fit their experiences and have chosen narrative strategies like the auto-biography and the quest novel to do so. They use the auto-biography to give shape to an identity grounded in these diverse experiences of expatriation and self-definition” (Rengachari 35-36).

The social upheavals and the terrible delusions of modern times have been presented in these novels.

#### V

Among the Indian Diaspora, the concept of home, nation and cultural identity of belongingness to the place of origin/ ancestry keep on changing from one person to another. In the first generation of immigrants, it is found that the migration results into the feeling of alienation, nostalgia of the past and root-less-ness at the place of migration because he or she is still clinging to the cultural beliefs, practices and social norms of the homeland.

But, the children born of the immigrants are tossed between two different nations, and cultures because they are born and brought up in the host cultures, but their parents hold steadfastly their home culture. Hence, they are torn between two polarities. Such children develop a sense of in-between-ness which results in the loss of identity which means adoption of both elements of home and host culture as per their convenience, which has been described as plural identity.

It can be derived that the identity of an immigrant living in the condition of Diaspora can be named as plural identity and it almost always is in constant change.

These **novels** discussed here have a universal appeal cutting across barriers of culture and time. We are all socialized differently because we come from different cultural backgrounds and we grow up in different communities. But at the core of every culture remains the uploading of basic human values. A globalised culture has now evolved and it must combat with the world of heterogeneous societies who do not wish to leave aside their historical particulars which give them uniqueness. Diaspora is all about the bringing out of new identities, spaces for growth, resolution of conflicts and revealing of a new culture, either composite or plural.

Government of India has implemented the recommendations of Singhvi committee since 2002. It grants dual-citizenship and confers Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award. Government of Gujarat inspires them to invest in different industries of

India by celebrating kite festival, holding Vibrant Gujrat Industrial summit with the NRIs. The government also attempts to bring awareness about Indian cultural heritage into the successive generations of the Diaspora.

The concept of 'Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam' forms the basis of our Indian Philosophy. The Sanskrit Shloka is :

Ayam Nijah Paro Veti Ganana laghuchetasam |  
Udarcharitanam tu Vasudhev  
Kutumbakam || (*Hitopadesh* 48)

It means:

For the narrow minded people 'this is mine,  
this is of others',  
But for generous people the whole world is  
like one family.

As such, we do not consider multiculturalism as a threat but a part and parcel of the life of all human beings inhabiting on the earth, achieving the great ideals of universal peace, harmony, and fraternity.

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