



## **DIASPORIC CRISIS AND FEMALE IDENTITY: AN OVERVIEW OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND JUMPHA LAHIRI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The diasporic and the female studies form an important and interesting area of research in the contemporary literary studies. Diasporic literature traces its roots in the migration of less privileged people to the promising new lands like America, British, Canada, Trinidad, etc. Migration is usually a phenomenon of the nation's having a colonial history. The newly independent people migrated to the foreign lands in order to overcome the pricks of poverty and for a better promising future. The new lands proved a fecund plane for the material prosperity, it also proved an equally opposite to the psyche of these immigrants. The new lands had a readymade culture, customs, and norms for these immigrants. The newly migrated people thus found themselves caught between their native past, the alien present and the unknown future. Their psyches got everlastingly trapped in the intricate web of history and geography.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Diasporic writings occupy a significant position around cultures and countries. Cultures travel and take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia. Though the immigrant writers share common features, yet the differences based on the condition of their migration and settlement cannot be overlooked. The diasporic writings are the records of the experiences of the diasporic communities living in varied socio-cultural settings. The diasporic Indian writing covers every continent and part of the world. It is an interesting paradox that a great deal of Indian writing covers every continent and part of the world. Study of the diasporic writings reveals that the common features noticed in the writings of the old diaspora and the new diaspora are nostalgia, homesickness, and the sufferings due to being far off from their homeland. The basic problem of diasporic writings is the feeling of dislocation without roots. The diasporic immigrants feel homeless and alienated in the foreign land. Dispersal of roots involves pain, alienation, identity crisis and

**SHOWKAT HUSSAIN DAR**

1Page



other feelings to the acculturated ones. The Indo-American diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri document the trauma of their protagonists in different contexts. The former in *Wife* describes the alienated feeling and loneliness of a young bride and the later in *The Namesake* describes the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrates to USA. In these two novels one can vividly see how the first generation immigrant suffers in an alien atmosphere. With the entry of women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri etc., the English language has widened its umbrella in Diasporic writing. Diasporic people migrate to an alien land to live happily, severing their roots of native country. The diasporans feelings are truly documented by the Indo-American diasporic authors like Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri in their novels and short-stories by placing their central character in different contexts. Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* deals with the status of the immigrant women experience, social oppression, east-west encounter and culture conflict. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* located in America, brings her characters struggle in assimilation. Like Bharathi Mukherjee, her novel too has autobiographical elements. Mukherjee's novel, *Wife* deals with Dimple, a young Indian woman. Dimple is married to a young engineer named Amit Basu. She was suppressed by the alien culture. She cannot adjust her life in the USA out of fear and personal instability. She lacks her inner strength and she cannot cope with the culture of New York. At the end of the novel Dimple murders her husband due to acculturative stress.

The writings of Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Kavita Dasvani, M. G. Vassanji, V. S. Naipaul to name a few, provide an inside view of the difficulties faced by the displaced people in their adopted homes in a way that questions the traditional understanding of the ideas like home, nation, native and alien. These writers challenge essentialist nature of the difference between cultures premised on double division informing the east and the west. Whereas the earlier writers depicting cross cultural encounter often created conventional forms of life and characters to mark the essential difference between the cultures, diaspora writers often contest fixed notions of identity and stable norms that govern life at home and abroad. Diaspora fiction highlights an altogether different attitude of the people from the erstwhile colonies in the postcolonial times.

Women studies, which has been an important field of research, deriving from such texts as Marry Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of Rights of Women*, and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, to the contemporary text like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. The study of female psyche and the place of women in the so called postmodern world give an additional scope to this area of study. The writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri interpret the situations faced by migrant women live outside India. The cross cultural dilemma, alienation and ethnic struggle of diasporic women are revealed in their writings. Their writings concentrating on the problems of women and



explore with a view to discover how far they support women's struggle for liberation from patriarchy. In her book *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee illustrates the situations confronted by diasporic women. The main protagonist Tara after her divorce stays in San Francisco with her teenage son. Her journey as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother and moreover as a woman is well represented by Mukherjee. Jhumpha Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* concentrates on the life and problems of the women kept at the margins due to the compulsions of gender, caste and ethnicity.

The works of Jhumpha Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee deal with the above mentioned themes of diaspora and female identity. Both these writers innovatively exploit these themes to present before their readers the life of their characters, caught between the Indian past and the alien present. While dealing with the lives of the immigrants in their fictional canvas, they often raise the question about identity, history, culture, modernity and westernization. The Indian past remains as an ever-following shadow of their characters which result in the continuous oscillation of their respective identities between the two extreme poles of reality and appearance. In the midst of all these complications, both give a glimpse to the female psyche; the split caused in their soul by the migration, the communication gap it resulted in their respective lives. Tara in (*Wife*), Mrs. Sen, and Boori Ma in (*Interpreter of Maladies*) are the products of such circumstances.

The basic problem of diasporic writings is the feeling of dislocation without roots. Jhumpha Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee document the pain and sufferings of their characters in various ways. Their fiction shows us how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system and they also depict that the immigrants stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs but gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Lahiri and Mukherjee do not remain confined to the dislocations of migrants in foreign lands alone. Rather, they are philosophical in their approach; they present dislocation as a permanent human condition. Man is dislocated in this world. By analyzing their fiction, one can understand how the first generation immigrant suffered in an alien country. Mukherjee's and Lahiri's works deal with the events like marriage, female psyche, love for Calcutta, Orient-Occident conflict and trauma on pregnancy.

*The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* by Vijay Mishra constitutes a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian diaspora. It is also an important contribution to diaspora theory in general. Examining both the old Indian diaspora of early capitalism, following the abolition of slavery, and the new diaspora linked to movements of late capital, Mishra argues that a full understanding of the Indian diaspora can only be achieved if attention is paid to the particular locations of both the old and the new in nation states. Applying a theoretical framework based on trauma, mourning/impossible



mourning, specters, identity, travel, translation, and recognition, Mishra uses the term imaginary to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously or unconsciously, as a group in displacement. He examines the works of key writers, many now based across the globe in Canada, Australia, America and the UK, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, M.G. Vassanji, Shani Mootoo, Bharati Mukherjee, David Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry and Hanif Kureishi, among them to show how they exemplify both the diasporic imaginary and the respective traumas of the old and new Indian diasporas.

*Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora (Gender Studies)* by Aparna Rayaprol and Apama Rayaprol give a gendered perspective on how immigrant communities conceptualize and indeed actualize the process of reconstruction in a foreign land. Faced with a disjunctive crisis, religion becomes a major symbolic resource in the rebuilding of a community. The community in question is South Asian, and the material representation of their coming together is the Sri Venkateswara temple in Pittsburgh. Clearly positioning herself in the field of women's studies, the author feels that the "immigrant" has generally been treated as a monolithic construct and that the dimension of gender has been ignored. Through this study, she asserts that immigrant women's experiences cannot be treated as though they were identical to those of men.

*Women Writers of Indian Diaspora* by S K Anand, comprises thirteen critical essays which explore the complexity, richness and paradoxes that inform the works of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherji, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni, Meera Syal, Abha Dawesar, Anita Rau Badami, Kiran Desai, Kavita Daswani, Monica Pradhan, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Rishma Dunlop. The articles focusing on poetry, fiction and short fiction by women writers of Indian diaspora offer multidimensional perspectives into the diaspora life by encompassing themes as diverse as exile, nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation, racial and gender discrimination, marginalization, assimilation, identity and cultural hybridization. Some of the contemporary women writers make use of literary space to highlight women's issues and their existential dilemmas through gendered lenses. The book will prove to be of immense help for those working on writers of Indian diaspora.

*Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* is a collection of essays edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung. This text provides novel insights into Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction. This critical writing on Lahiri's fiction addresses accepted, conflicting, and evolving definitions about family, nationality, home, ethnic-global movement, and canonicity that her work and literary popularity raise. Therefore, this volume forms an important document in understanding the issues of subjectivity in her works and the discourses that create it. *Bharati Mukherjee: A Biography* by Fakrul Alam is an important book written on Bharati Mukherjee's literary skills. In this thorough, penetrating study of Bharati Mukherjee's





published work, Fakrul Alam argues that although the author may see herself as an American writer, the circumstances of her birth, upbringing, and education in India, as much as her marriage to a North American and her education and career on the American continent, are the contexts indispensable to an understanding of her fiction. At her best, Alam concludes, Mukherjee has been able to bring to her firsthand experience of exile, expatriation, and immigration her considerable narrative skills and a lively imagination to produce memorable and colorful tales of the excitement as well as the traumas of adjusting to a new world.

The concept of Diaspora is very valuable to India. Though the diasporans live in distant lands/countries, they have retained their emotional, cultural and spiritual bonds with the country of their origin, i.e. India. Social and cultural experiences of the Indian Diaspora have been expressed successfully by novelists like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anurag Mathur etc. All of them deal with the theme of identity of Diaspora in their writings. Through their creative writings, female novelists and short-story writers of the Indian Diaspora have portrayed their striving for preserving culture and identity in their host countries. The Indian writers like Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya, Bharti Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai have portrayed the issue of identity of men and women of Indian diaspora in their fictional and non-fictional works. The theme of feminism is very dear to these female writers. Their works reveal how women from the beginning suffer lonely in a phallogocentric (male dominated) world. These writers poignantly reflect the women's pain, suffering, torture and psychic trauma. They assert that the world will flourish and peace will prevail once women are given their due respect in every nook and corner of the world.

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