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MIGRANTS IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *QUEEN OF DREAMS* AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Who am I? Why am I here? And what is my purpose of life? These fundamental questions have been contemplated through the centuries by the immigrant's minds in search of identities and finally to sense the true meaning of existence. Your identity is your sense of self. One should not lose one's sense of identity especially if you are an immigrant since it is unattainable belonging. Erikson has suitably quoted, "In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity." (Erikson, 1968, p.38).

Indian-American authors Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri have been persistently adhered to the shared theme i.e. Sense of belongingness, rootlessness, multiculturalism and displacement. Both the writer's work is frequently ruminates onto be supposedly-autobiographical as most of their stories are located in the regions where they live, tackle the immigrant experience- especially of Indians who settle in the US.- and analyses the investigation of Indian-American women both in India and America.

This paper is an endeavor to scrutinize the plight of 'name' and 'sense' of identity and belongingness of the immigrant characters in the works of Divakaruni and Lahiri. The certainty that both of them are born of the Indian parents and cross borders overseas make them both migrant and diaspora writers in chorus. They write on Indian diaspora and relate stories that circulate the imbalance of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of diaspora in their works.

Key Words: Identity, diaspora, Indian immigrants, cultural dislocations, rootlessness, diaspora writings.

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INTRODUCTION

The 'model minority' in America is the Indian diaspora community, working in different fields like IT, teaching, medicine and many others. This migration began in the last decade of 20th c., esp. to Canada. Sikh-Canadian community of Indian descent migrated over 100 years earlier. Sikhs from Punjab migrated in America in the late 19th c. and early 20th c. The immigration policy was modified by

America at the end of World War II. Hence the bulky rush of Indian immigrants started in 1960s and lasted in 70s, 80s, 90s, and 21st c. The latest and the huge flow of migration till date happened in late 1990s and early 2000. The contribution of Indian immigrants to the different fields of their adopted country and homeland stands lofty in every sphere of human life such as- commerce, science,

technology, fine arts, agriculture, politics and literature.

There is noteworthy and substantial Indian diaspora literature in English. There are many fiction writers of Indian diaspora who are awarded different literary prizes. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri are eminent expatriate writers among them. Fiction by them comprises a crucial part of contemporary Indian diaspora literature. These writers have made their native land indelible and widespread by writing about it and turned diasporic through the movements of migration. It relies on personal rejoinder to the adopted country and the acknowledgement by the host.

At the predominant stage of their writing Divakaruni and Lahiri appear 'aliens' and confront the usual question – who am I? Their works as diaspora writers are autobiographical and pinpoint to the issues like rootlessness, homelessness, nostalgia, dislocation and displacement. So diaspora fiction concerns with space, move between 'home' and 'foreign' country, between 'known' and 'strange', 'the old' and 'the new'. The contrasts and the comparisons between these two spaces are typical in the works of Divakaruni and Lahiri, which are different from regular Indian English fiction. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their book *Key concepts in Postcolonial studies* define 'diaspora' as

"The voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions". (p.68).

Identity crises is the central theme of this comparative study between Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* and Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Both the authors share the identical lineage i.e. Indian Bengali origin.

Identity Crises in *Queen of Dreams*

In *Queen of Dreams* Divakaruni revolves a captivating tale of a second generation immigrant struggling to search her identity with her dream-interpreter mother, Mrs. Gupta offers magical and mysterious tinge to the story. The visuals of primitive India and contemporary America is concurrently projected through the mother, who migrated from India with her husband and daughter Rakhi. Rakhi, a young artist and divorced

mother living in Berkeley, California, striving to realize her status in a world which is signaling in the exercise of transition, torn by brutality and terror. Her mother's distance from Rakhi and her father generates the misadjusting family in which the daughter fruitlessly attempts for her mother's attention and the father repeatedly engulfs into the route of drinking. Rakhi's relationship with her father is mostly displeasing throughout her childhood. Furthermore, she undergoes herself as an abandoned child when she cannot track her mother to the province of dreams. She is unable to trust her and is shattered by the feeling that her mother's prime concerns rest in the world of mystery instead of her own people.

Rakhi ties her nuptial knot with an American guy Sonny, a DJ in a famous night club. One evening Sonny invited Rakhi to join him in club and hear him play. But poor Rakhi finds in the clutches of drug and rape. The deafening music and uproar forbid Sonny catching his wife's cries for help. When a week later she relates Sonny about her molestation he denies to trust her. His dismissal enrages her that turns into antipathy and finally into divorce. Mrs. Gupta nonetheless is distinguished by secrecy and isolation from society, she cannot serve as a productive example for her daughter. Consequently, when Sonny tried to approach Rakhi to prevent their divorce, she does not answer his phone calls and unending messages until one day he just stops calling. Rakhi consciously creates a gap of silence between herself and Sonny equivalent to her detachment from her mother that Rakhi has encountered throughout her life. This dysfunctional form of relation facsimiles itself with Rakhi's daughter, Jonaki.

Having imbibed an Indian heritage through blood and an American culture by birth Rakhi oscillates between two aloof origins. She does not know who she actually is and where she actually belongs to. Born and educated in America Rakhi deemed America as her home and she wants to be accepted on her own terms. She faces a sense of 'insider', 'outsider'.

Although unacquainted she persistently squabbles after her broken past, and ponders a visit to the mysterious land India which she would never

succeed. Bereft of any knowledge about her forebear's home, she endows only an enclosed sense of what is Indian. After the death of her mother in the inexplicable car accident, her father ventures to lend a hand to overhaul the Chai House into an Indian Snack Shop. The blending of two cultures is assertively endured in the new emergence materialization of the resplendent coffee shop under the banner Kurma Shop. By participating the culinary secrets with his daughter, the father not only reinforces their relation but also circulates heritage, custom and knowledge.

Rakhi anxiously yearns to succeed as a painter or as a remunerative shop owner. Rakhi as a diaspora subject is forced to live in an eternal state of uncertainty and indecision because she is incapable to balance the ties with illusory homeland though she has lodged into the host culture. After the fiasco of fire in the Kurma Shop she perceives her mother's words that

"calamity happens so we can understand caring" (Divakaruni QD237).

The bond of harmony broadens after the calamity. Catastrophe makes the customers more casual in their correlation with Rakhi. The fact that they all belong to the same homeland makes them associate and they frame a distinct ethnic group and community. The customers begin to throng around the Kurma Shop to hear Gupta who sing their fostered old, loved Hindi songs. The father's positive response also brings a crowd of ethnic musicians to the store. Rakhi observes that,

"while some wear western cloths and some are in kurta-pajamas". (Divakaruni QD 217).

Despite the fact that these people are her countrymen and they

"share the same skin color, the word foreign comes to her again, though she knows it's ironic". (Divakaruni QD 194).

They once more figure out the bliss like an "unexpected oasis tucked into an arid stretch of dunes" (Divakaruni QD 196). An ecstasy they would never expected in America. In America the devastation triggered by the terrorists on September 11, 2001 traumatized all complacency and Chitra Banerjee considered it right to chronicle about it. The barbarity unleashed in the American Society on

account of the bombing off the World Trade Centre takes a great toll on the lives of the immigrant. In *Queen of Dreams* Rakhi and her customers are attacked by the native people called 'patriots' in the Kurma Shop. Stigmatized as terrorists for keeping the shop open they are hurled into a nightmare where they start to question their identity. Filthy words are flung at them.

"looked in the mirror lately? One of them spits. You ain't no Americans! Its fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson". (Divakaruni QD 267).

Brooding over these words Rakhi agonizes "But if I wasn't American then what was I?" (Divakaruni QD 271). All the developed sense of being American is vanished on that day of devastation to immigrant mass as they realize that,

"and people like us seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of stranger who lost a sense of belonging". (Divakaruni QD 272).

Consequently Rakhi afflicted by numerous difficulties and is compelled to formulate a gender identity where she has to sniff out herself.

America does not proffer Rakhi the warrant of being an American although she is born in America, despite that by embracing American path she evolves towards success and solidity in life. Though momentarily she endures a complication on account of distrust about her sense of belonging and identity. Her mother's dream journals and her father's stories over and above the band's multicultural music and the Indian-American paintings nurture Rakhi with different ways of self-definition. Hence through these significant interchanges with others that she realizes that there is more than one justifiable way to be ethnic or Indian American. Thus, *Queen of Dreams* illustrates an amiable archetypal tale of self-discovery which is accredited with aspects of mystery, suspense and supernatural elements.

Identity Crises in *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* analyses the themes of cultural dilemmas and heartbreaking experience of the first and second generation Indian immigrants. Isolation is

one of the vital issues of the expatriate community in their chosen land. *The Namesake* deals predominantly with the central character of this novel Gogol and the entire predicament happens owing to his 'namesake'. Like a typical second-generation Indian-American, Gogol makes a willful attempt to be incompatible from his parents. He constantly longs for a world rid of Bengali culture, from the traditions that tie him down to a country and culture he does not know. He confronts a cultural dilemma on frequent junctures during his life. He experiences the feeling of distraction between the two nations which culminates in withdrawal from both the lands. As Gogol grows up, his identity crises lead off soon when the school principal finds his name difficult and peculiar to vocalize. Scrutinizing what persists in his mind Lahiri says,

"He hates that his name is obscured that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second". (Lahiri TN 176).

Gogol intensely required to merge with America to be a part of them. He does not want to be acknowledged as an immigrant, accordingly he starts to stay away from everything which is Indian or Bengali. He has witnessed how the natives treat his parents with mistrust and contempt. He wants to evade such circumstances in his personal life and to achieve a sense of belongingness. Therefore he willingly disowns his ancestry and assimilate into American culture. He tries to become Nikhil once he is going to join the University to solve his identity crises. The new identity gives him a sense of freedom and he is able to shed his earlier inhibitions. Changing his name is like a custom of transition to adulthood for Gogol. Gogol like a routine American dates girls one after another. He enjoys premarital sex with Ruth and Maxine. The liberty of premarital sex seems granted from American parents, who would come as heresy to his own parents. His sister Sonia dates with an American boy. Gogol and Sonia are capable to abide each other's relationships but cannot share it with their parents. This is not due to a generational gap alone but partly due to cultural

gap as well. Their mother Ashima is dreadfully agitated at seeing her children becoming cultural orphans in America. She had never assumed this about her children.

In India, parents, particularly the fathers share some important secrets of their life with their children especially the first born male children just before their forthcoming death. This mainly happens whenever parents receive alarm of their imminent end. It happens in the life of Ashoke and Gogol too. The heart-to-heart conversation that develops, manifests the reason behind Gogol's name. Ashoke narrates Gogol about the night that nearly taken his life, and the book that had saved him. Gogol listens and is dumbfounded by his father's profile. Lahiri describes Gogol's frame of mind,

"Though there are only inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy; a man whose past he does not fully know. A man who is vulnerable, who has suffered in an inconceivable way. He imagines his father, in his twenties as Gogol is now, sitting on a train as Gogol had just been a story, and then suddenly nearly killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead one, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments. Against instinct he tries to imagine life without his father, a world his father does not exist." (Lahiri TN 123).

After the death of Gogol's father, Gogol terminates the relationship between him and Maxine and obeys his mother to marry Moushumi, another Bengali immigrant girl. Gogol and Moushumi live for a year as a married couple but they lose interest in each other as they step into the second year of their married life. Their marriage does not succeed since their mutual expectations contradict each other. When Moushumi is back with her friend Astrid and Donald, Gogol discerns the change in her. She starts deviating from him using her studies as a justification. Their relationship transforms into separation, when she goes to Paris

for paper presentation and meets her former friend and bring into extramarital affair with him. Gogol senses the deception of his wife and a chill runs down in his spine. Lahiri explains it,

“like a poison spreading quickly through his veins. He cannot blame her much, for they had both acted on the same impulse”.
(Lahiri TN 284).

They both agree to divorce without much vindication. She moves to Paris after their formal divorce. Thus Gogol is categorized as a divorcee. Gogol, having experienced many emotive setbacks due to his ‘bicultural’ distinctiveness leads to the end displaced, dejected, isolated and distressed. After his father’s death he changes into inscrutable entity as his wife deserted him furthermore his mother departs to India. His identity as Indian is suspicious. His desire to settle down in America, having own house, family, kids and high-ranking position in his profession indicate his quest for the new ‘route’ which will register him after his reflections in the company of the stories by his ‘namesake’. For the time being there remains merely void in him and this nothingness disrupts him. Undoubtedly he is still another ABCD (American-Born-Confused-Deshis).

Conclusion

This paper highlights a study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* probed the theme of identity crises in both the novels. The cardinal problems of diaspora writing are the feeling of dislocations without roots. The diaspora undergoes homelessness and alienation in the foreign land. When a person visits the unknown land, he is a non-member in a no man’s land and there he has to strive a lot for his existence, overpowering these recent feelings of nostalgia. He yearns for a new region and navigates himself completely with the temptation of the west. He entertains himself into a new character and builds emotional bonding with the place he locates in. the living ‘in-between’ condition is very nasty and diminishing for the diaspora people. They torment cultural dilemma and rise perplexed and mystified. In the next generations these ignorance, drawbacks and cravings become mild as they get guided by the culture of their host

country. Additionally change themselves to it assertively.

This is true in the case of both Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. Both the novels research the thoughts of isolation and identity, not only personal but also cultural. The characters in both the stories repeatedly run into crises of identity, which is linked to inability to reconcile the American identity with their Indian identity. In the novel *Queen of Dreams*, Rakhi the heir of immigrants, is born to the hyphenated lifestyle – Asian-American. Before Rakhi locates the dream journals of her mother, she has been establishing a sense of ‘homeland’ through the pictures of India and other images accessible through globalized networks of communication. She has never been to India but is adamant to identify her ‘roots’ so that she comprehends her identity as an Asian-American. Rakhi counts herself as an American – an inexorable lot of the second generation diaspora, as she has failed to remember her hyphenated identity. She does not figure out why Java Café would display the American flag or she would be instructed to close the shop early. On the one side, the people who have established an assumed community in her Kurma House hunt for the sense of belongingness in her café but simultaneously, they come outfitted in western attire and feel hesitant. At the end of the novel Rakhi and her friends and her families be subjected to the agonizing experience with the racial riots in the aftermath of 9/11. Rakhi notices how she has abruptly become an outsider in a land that she was born and raised in.

Similar to Rakhi in Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams*, Gogol, the central character in Lahiri’s *The Namesake* fights hard to search his origin with his immigrant parents while imitating the American society in distinct frame of references. Gogol scorns his name and reared as an American within his capabilities while his parents adhere to their Bengali past, however living seems to be a regular American suburban life style. For Gogol accommodating his ethnic background with American culture confers a crises of identity. The issue of naming is an omnipresent argument throughout the novel. In the beginning he struggles with his odd name and

later with the imposed Indian traditions from his parents that embarrass Gogol in front of his American friends. Towards the end Gogol abides by his identity as it is two names, two cultures, half-Indian and half-American. He realizes that he cannot elude from his name and from his diversified identity. Eventually he accepts that being an immigrant his torn self is his only truth. He admits that he neither changes his fate nor his name.

Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* discloses the obstacles of Indian immigrants in America and their search for identity in their relocated province.

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