



## Representation of Women in Diasporic Novels: A Study with Reference to the Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri

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Date of Submission: 14-07-2024

Date of Acceptance: 30-07-2024

### Abstract

This study examines how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri, have written about two generations of diasporic women in their novels. It looks at how these writers show the experience of immigrant women, with a focus on South Asian women living in the US. Some of the books for study are “The Mistress of Spices” and “Queen of Dreams” by Divakaruni and “The Namesake” and “The Lowland” by Lahiri. Some of the postcolonial and feminist theories used in this study to make sense of how diasporic women's identities are shown are hybridity, liminality, and intersectionality. The writers showed connections between different generations, especially between moms and children. It also looks at cultural issues, identity development, changing gender roles, and other things. The results show that both Divakaruni and Lahiri write about women who go against gender norms and deal with the problems of becoming an adult in a new country. The study contrasts and compares Divakaruni's and Lahiri's writing styles, showing how the two authors write about similar themes differently. When writing about the daily lives of refugees, Lahiri uses careful realism. On the other hand, Divakaruni often uses magical realism and Indian myths. The study also says that Lahiri writes a lot about different generations, while Divakaruni writes mainly about the stories of first-generation immigrants. Comparative studies like this show how different experiences of foreign women are shown in modern diasporic literature. It shows how vital these writers are for busting myths and showing South Asian women who have moved away in a complicated way. As stated in the study's conclusion, it might be helpful to compare

diasporic literature writing to works from other countries and look at how gender, class, and age interact in future research.

**Keywords:- Diaspora, Diasporic Novels, Women, Immigrant , Literature**

Diasporic literature gives us significant new perspectives into the challenges foreign women face as they deal with cultural differences and figure out who they are in places they do not know. The writers of Diaspora express their expatriate, immigrant, migratory, dislocated, disoriented, displaced subjectivities and experiences through a continuous flow of ideas, feelings, and thoughts in a stream of consciousness. In these stories, immigrants talk about how hard it is to move to a new place, figure out their culture, and find a place to call home. In this literary setting, how women are portrayed is especially important because female characters often show how old and new family norms and personal goals can clash. Well-known writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have done much work to improve diasporic literature. Both writers use their own experiences as Indian-American women to write stories about immigrant life, with a focus on female characters. Divakaruni, who was born in India but moved to the US, writes from the point of view of a first-generation immigrant in books like *Queen of Dreams* and *The Mistress of Spices*. Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the lives of the second generation in books like *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*. As diasporic women deal with cultural issues and gender norms and find out who they are in immigrant communities, Divakaruni and Lahiri's portrayals of female characters show the many challenges and opportunities they face. Their



books are about Indian women who have moved to new places and are trying to figure out how to balance their national identity, family duties, and personal goals.

Diaspora studies draw on key concepts such as hybridity and liminality to understand the identities formed in immigrant settings. Theories from the postcolonial and feminist traditions may provide an understanding of how diasporic women's experiences are portrayed. Postcolonial theory took up the theory of hybridity at the suggestion of Homi Bhabha (who was influenced by authors like Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison) to describe the transcultural forms that emerged from linguistic, political, or ethnic mixing and to question the preexisting symmetries, hierarchies, polarities, and finalisms (Guignery et al. 3). This concept is particularly relevant to second-generation immigrants who navigate between their parents' culture and that of their adopted homeland. The terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' gained popularity through the writings of Victor Turner in the second half of the twentieth century (Chakraborty 145). Liminality, as developed by Victor Turner, refers to the transitional state experienced by immigrants, existing between cultures and social structures.

The concept of Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is particularly relevant to understanding diasporic women's experiences. Intersectionality is the recognition that marginalization may occur on several levels, including gender, colour, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability, and that each person has their own unique experience of oppression and discrimination (Taylor2). In diasporic literature, this theory helps show how gender, ethnic background, foreign status, and generational differences affect how people live and who they are. These theoretical models help me better comprehend Divakaruni's and Lahiri's literature. The themes of hybridity, liminality, and diversity may help people better understand how their female characters deal with gender norms, adapt to new cultures, and grow as people in diasporic settings. This theory may help you understand how the writers wrote about the experiences of immigrant women, showing the struggles and successes these women face as they try to fit in with their new culture and find out who they are.

In her novels like *Queen of Dreams* and *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni gives her female characters many layers, making them battle with

national identity and find themselves. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes about a strong female lead who has many problems coping with cultural differences and finding her own identity. The main character in the book, Tilo, shows the problems and chances that come with being a migrant. Tilo, an Indian immigrant who runs a spice shop in Oakland, California, feels torn as she uses her magical skills to help other immigrants while also struggling with her own goals and limitations.

Divakaruni uses magical realism to explore Tilo's unique role as a "Mistress of Spices." Using this plot device lets the truth of life as an immigrant in the US and Indian religion combine in a complex way. Like Tilo's ability to understand and change people through spices, immigrants bring a lot of cultural knowledge and impact to the places they live. Titiksha Mittal states, "The novel shows the geographical, political, social and cultural struggle undergone by the population and the consequent customers with the help of an ancient heritage want to re-invent their ties with India (Mittal 4). The spices act as a stimulant, which makes them nostalgic about their past. As the book goes on, Tilo learns more about herself and feels better about herself. At first, Tilo feels limited by the strict rules of her magical training. For example, she has to control her urges and keep an emotional distance from her clients (Mittal 5). However, over time, she begins to question these limits. As her feelings for an American guy named Raven grow, she has to face the limits of her job and think about what life might be like outside of it (Mittal 5). The struggle Tilo is having with herself is a metaphor for the problems diasporic women face when they try to meet both their traditional responsibilities and their own goals. In the end, Tilo goes against gender norms by leaving her business to date Raven. She does this to accept a mixed identity that includes parts of her Indian past and her American present. This choice shows that she has the freedom to make her own choices.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explains the challenges of diasporic female experiences through the lens of mother-daughter relationships and intergenerational tensions. The novel centres on Rakhi, a second-generation Indian-American, and her mother, a dream interpreter who struggles to reconcile her mystical gifts with her role as an immigrant mother. The mother-daughter relationship in *Queen of Dreams* serves as a powerful metaphor for the cultural divide between first and second-generation immigrants. Rakhi's mother, with her connection to



Indian mysticism, represents a tie to the homeland that Rakhi struggles to understand. As Shaw and Banunote, “Divakaruni skillfully addresses the difficulties and misconceptions associated with cultural divides” (162). This difficulty is demonstrated in Rakhi's frustration with her mother's secretiveness about her past and her abilities, which originates from the mother's desire to protect her daughter from the burden of her gift.

Divakaruni skillfully explores the theme of cultural identity and belonging through Rakhi's character. As a divorced single mother running a failing chai shop, Rakhi struggles with her Indian heritage while trying to forge her path in America. Her search for identity is complicated by her limited knowledge of her mother's past and her disconnection from Indian culture. This struggle is particularly poignant in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks when Rakhi faces discrimination and must confront her status as a perceived outsider in her own country (Shaw and Banu 163). The novel also highlights the female characters' search for independence and fulfilment. Rakhi's journey towards self-realization parallels her mother's earlier struggles to balance her mystical calling with her family responsibilities. Phillipa Through these narratives, Divakaruni presents diasporic women's experiences, exploring how they navigate cultural boundaries, family obligations, and personal ambitions in their quest for identity and belonging.

Lahiri's novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* depict first- and second-generation immigrant women navigating cultural expectations and personal desires. In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri depicts first-generation immigrant women through the character of Ashima Ganguli. Ashima's journey from a young bride in Calcutta to a mother and grandmother in America spans several decades, illuminating the challenges and transformations experienced by immigrant women. Lahiri's portrayal of Ashima brings out ideas of ethnic adaptation and longing. Ashima has a hard time getting used to her new life in the United States at first because she is lonely and everything seems strange. “In fact, the beginning of the story summarizes and predicts the trauma and displacement of the rest of the story” (Assadnassab9). Ashima tries to preserve her Bengali heritage in a faraway country by making traditional Bengali food with American ingredients. Along with keeping true to her Bengali background, the story follows Ashima as she gets used to life in the United States. Lahiri does a great

job of showing this change by showing how Ashima combines parts of both cultures. Ashima is getting used to being of mixed race by spending more time with Bengali-American family and friends at Christmas.

Another theme that the book addresses is how gender roles change over time. At first, Ashima is a traditional Bengali woman committed to her family and home. However, as time passes, she learns to stand alone. After her husband dies, Ashima picks to split her time between India and the US. This shows how mature and independent she has become. According to Assadnassab, “As time goes by, Ashima indulges herself more in the American way of life which gradually provides her with the sort of confidence and independence that a typical American woman is supposed to have” (Assadnassab 11). While writing *Ashima*, Lahiri shows us a picture of the immigrant woman's life. She does this by focusing on both the challenges of cultural displacement and the chances for self-actualization and strength that are present in the diasporic setting.

*The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri juxtaposes and contrasts the experiences of two female protagonists, Gauri and Bela, from different eras. Bela, an American-born daughter of adult immigrant Gauri, and Gauri, an adult immigrant, symbolize different sides of the diasporic female experience. Lahiri examines Gauri's experiences with trauma, guilt, and rebirth. The assassination of her first husband and her involvement in his revolutionary activities in India continue to haunt Gauri, making it difficult for her to adapt to life in the US. However, according to Hossain, “Gauri starts to discover her new, different (possibly present or future) personalities after relocating to America” (Hossain para 1). Gauri's transformation is symbolic of her journey of self-discovery.

Bela, on the other hand, shows what it is like to be a second-generation foreigner. Because of what her mother did and her search for self-discovery, Bela, born in the United States, has difficulty understanding her Indian past. Lahiri skillfully shows Bela's growth from a confused and rebellious child to a socially aware adult, illustrating the unique problems immigrant children face. The story also looks at the idea that women may be happy with their lives if they reach their school and career goals. Getting a degree in philosophy gives Gauri comfort and freedom, and she is determined to keep going until she gets it. “Ordering foreign volumes from publishers. She remembered the incremental path of her education hours sifting through and catalogues, at Presidency,



then in Rhode Island, even early on in California” (Dhar 83). Lahiri shows how complicated it is for diasporic women by telling the stories of Gauri and Bela. They are from different groups but have the same problems as immigrants: figuring out their ethnic identity, their personal goals, and their family ties.

Both Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri use female characters to write about general problems in the lives of diasporic women. However, they tell their stories in very different ways. Their works detail cultural clashes, identity development, and how women's roles change in immigrant communities. The central theme of both books is cultural conflict, with women who are pulled between the norms of American culture and their native Indian beliefs. Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* shows the conflict through Tilo's conflicting needs for freedom and her magical duties. Similarly, Lahiri's *The Namesake* shows how difficult it is to balance different national values by following the main character, Ashima, as she slowly becomes part of American culture while still keeping her Bengali identity. “Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri have reliably adhered to the shared theme, i.e. Sense of belongingness, rootlessness, multiculturalism as well as displacement from their origin or homeland” (Pandya and Bhatt 368).

The search for self-discovery is another theme that runs through both artists' works. In *Queen of Dreams*, Rakhi's path to learn about her Indian ancestry is a good example of how Divakaruni often shows people who are struggling with identity and connection. *The Namesake* is about second-generation refugees like Gogol who have a hard time fitting in with American culture and their parents' culture. *The Lowland* takes a detailed look at this problem by weaving together Bela's tangled family history with her journey of self-discovery.

There are some themes that both Divakaruni and Lahiri write about, but their ways of telling stories and how their characters grow are very different. In Divakaruni's stories, the miraculous and the everyday are often mixed. She does this by using magical realism and Indian folklore. This is well shown in *The Mistress of Spices* by how Tilo's special abilities represent the problems refugees face. Lahiri's style is controlled reality and careful attention to everyday details, as shown by how accurately she writes about family life in *The Namesake*.

The writers also have different points of view when it comes to how they show foreign women from different groups. Divakaruni writes a lot about the lives of first-generation refugees who still hold on to their Indian roots. Mrs. Gupta from *Queen of Dreams* is one of these characters. However, Lahiri often writes about the lives of newcomers from different generations, which shows how people from different generations adapt to new countries and find their own identities. *The Lowland* is an excellent example of this because it shows how diasporic identity changes over time through the different paths that Gauri and her daughter Bela take.

Both writers use the relationship between a mother and daughter as a key theme in their work. They use it to explore issues of cultural transfer and conflict between generations. *Queen of Dreams* looks at how hard it is to keep up a culture when living in a different country through the relationship between Rakhi and her mother. The relationship between Ashima and her daughter Sonia in *The Namesake* shows how gender roles and traditional standards have changed over time.

Either author paints a picture of marriage, families, and gender roles. In Divakaruni, gender roles are often questioned. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo chooses to date Raven. Lahiri's other works, like *The Lowland*, look at how immigration can change gender roles and traditional family systems in two ways. “Both the authors share the identical lineage, i.e. Indian Bengali origin that is left behind” (Pandya and Bhatt 386). These writers have made significant additions to the canon of South Asian American literature by showing women in complex ways that show what it's like to be a woman who has lived in more than one place.

The literature of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri also looks into how gender, cultural identity, and connection change in diasporic societies. Through their careful writing, both authors show different immigrant experiences in a way that questions stereotypes and brings out the challenges of South Asian women living in the United States. Divakaruni and Lahiri both keep putting down the idea that South Asian women can only play traditional parts or are meek. Gauri in *The Lowland* and Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* are two characters who go against the norm by following their hearts and making it in their jobs. According to Jayshree Singh, “In all these configurations, women's position determined a paradigm shift in envisioning Third World Feminist Struggles, suggesting political rather than



biological or cultural basis for diasporic alliances” (54). By looking at immigration from a woman's point of view, both authors draw attention to the unique problems and opportunities that women face in emigration.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri both contribute to diasporic writing with their female leads, which helps readers understand the challenges immigrant women face. Their books give a deep understanding of the struggles and successes South Asian women face in the United States by looking at how cultures meet, how identities form, and how gender roles change in diasporic settings. A study found that both authors write about complicated women who fight gender stereotypes by figuring out their ethnic identities and pursuing their own life goals. With the works of Divakaruni and Lahiri, diasporic literature would be more substantial. The different points of view of immigrant women whose stories put the reader at the center help us understand migration and cultural identity better in a world where everything is linked. It might be interesting to look into how gender, class, and age combine in diasporic literature or the works of new South Asian American writers in the future. It would be helpful to compare diasporic writing from different cultural backgrounds in order to learn more about how immigrants and cultural change affect each other.

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