

Construction of Diasporic Identity in the Select Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract:

The intellectual tradition of the West and of the East has examined the primordial question of what constitutes the identity of a person. There are two broad paradigms; the essentialist and the socio-pragmatic. The essentialist paradigm explicates that the underlying and pre-given ontological realities determine the identity of a person whereas the socio-pragmatic models expounds that the social, economic, political, cultural, and linguistic realities structure the identity of a person. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novels has represented the condition of migrated human beings who migrate from one country to another, from one culture to another and what happens to the identity of a person in the entire process of migration. The paper intends to examine the process of the formation of diasporic identity in the selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Keywords: Identity, Migration, Diaspora, Essential, Cultural

What one is or in other words, the identity of the person has always been one of the most compelling and complex questions. The intellectual tradition of the West and the East has interrogated the question of being or identity through the presence of three forms of discourses; realist, aesthetic and metaphysical. The realist discourse responds to the realities of ideology and consciousness which constitute the fulcrum of one's identity. The phenomenon of crisis, conflict and catastrophe constitute the complex texture and rubrics of different realities and these realities are social, economic, political, cultural and linguistic in nature. Further, the philosophical, theoretical and intellectual complexes of the contemporary literary theories examine the process and the reality of the formation of one's identity. The philosophical ideas of Marxism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Postcolonialism, Historicism, Neo-historicism et cetera have explained the processes of identity formation and the constitution of one's ideology and consciousness. Furthermore, there are two different paradigms which respond to the phenomenon of identity and the process of the formation of identity; Structuralism and Poststructuralism. The philosophical plenitudes of Structuralism explain that identity is always absolute, fixed, determined, final and ultimate. It does not allow any change or contingency. It also explains identity through the philosophy of binary opposition where the one does not meet with another. However, the intellectual ideas of Poststructuralism explain the fact that identity is hybrid, unfixed, multiple and fractured, as has been explained by Parmendra Kumar Mishra and Veerendra Kumar Mishra's *Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Diasporic Consciousness* (2021).

The uncanny textures of self, subject and the phenomenon of identity formation have been accounted by theorists and philosophers from as early as pre-Socratic and they have continued to be addressed even by

the contemporary theorists and philosophers. It is indeed, very difficult to elaborate upon all possible schools of thoughts as far as the *terra firma* of self, subject, and subjectivity is concerned. It has incisively been articulated by Regenia Gagnier in her *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (1991).

First, the subject is a subject of itself, an “I,” however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this “I” from its own viewpoint, within its own experience. Simultaneously, the subject is a subject to, and of, others; it is often an “Other” to others, which also affects its sense its own subjectivity... Third, the subject is also a subject of knowledge, most familiarly perhaps of the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being. Fourth, the subject is a body that is separate (except in the case of pregnant women) from other human bodies; and the body, and therefore the subject, is closely dependent upon its physical environment. (08)

Modern age is the era of subject in which the self has become the locus of some serious and esoteric theories, ideas, and philosophies. These theories, ideas, and philosophies have recapitulated that self, subject, and subjectivity are the repercussions of the observable changes in the rubric of relationships particularly in social, economic, political, cultural, and economic. They defy the totalitarian, absolute, and harmonious model of the Enlightenment to recount for the phenomenological and existential reality about the self and subject rather they espouse the fact the subjectivity can be viewed through the unfathomable and inscrutable process of subjectivization which is cardinally guided by the poststructuralists’ and postmodernists’ realities of contingency, mutability, and the fleeting nature of the cosmos.

The historical, economic, psychological, cultural realities along with scientific discoveries and technological innovations, and the linguistic turn of the century have not only reshaped the content of the reality but they have also transformed the entire form of the novel. The modern novel abandons some metaphors like rise of the novel and birth of the novel rather it believes in the making of the novel as it refers to an incessant process of becoming and change. It goes beyond the tradition and conventionality of novel in which it is defined as a full and authentic report of human life as Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* (1830) describes novel as mirror; “a novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects the blue skies, at another the mud of the puddles at your feet” (84). The philosophical and scientific apotheoses of scepticism, relativism, and irony have displaced the monological, absolute, and teleological form and nature of reality by the dialogic, polysymous, and highly perspectival and subjective form of reality. Now, all possible binaries and polemics have been interrogated. Further, it has already been instated that reality itself is seen between the perpetual process of becoming and therefore almost all modern novels make an attempt of explicating the uncanny nature of truth or reality. Novels by all Diasporic novelists like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi, Ramabai Espinet, Jhumpa Lahiri, K. S. Manian, Sudesh Mishra, Shani Mootoo, Bharati Mukherjee, Mira Nair, Shyam Selvadurai, Sam Selvon, Subramani, and M.G. Vassanji. are fundamentally about the epistemology and ontology of reality and how it is constructed.

Postcolonialism and Cultural Studies gradually gave birth to a distinct phenomenon called ‘Diaspora’ that explores the process of migration, expatriation, alienation, appropriation, assimilation, nostalgia, hybridization, rootlessness, et cetera which entail profound upon the constitution of one’s identity. Diaspora can be located within the movement of Jew community into different parts of the world which also exemplifies ‘diaspeirein’ i. e. dispersion or scattering of seeds. Diaspora fundamentally deals with the phenomenon of migration of a person from one geographical and cultural realities to another and in the reality of migration has a great impact upon his/her identity. Thus, diaspora constitutes the

epistemological becoming of the character. There are some underlying characteristics which define the phenomenon of diaspora. They are:

1. Dispersal from a host country to foreign countries.
2. Faith in the collective consciousness related to home land.
3. Sceptic about his/her acceptance by the host culture
4. Constitution of a utopian location.

The contentment achieved and lived in a dream is unfathomably more scenic and pleasing than the tangible realization of the dreamt moments. Similar is the life of a Diaspora. The term Diaspora has a yawning intensity of congregating a large number of people who are travelling or are on some or the other journey. They can be called out as expatriates, immigrants, migrants, refugees, settlers, etc. These people may or may not have completed their journey yet the travel refuse to fade. The journey here refers to two different stations. One may come to a halt when one has reached a geographical destination but the very same person may not have reached at the end of his/her epistemological destination. The journey of self-knowledge reaches no station. And Diaspora of the self from home to the strange foreign land is at constant negotiations.

Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, (2006) explains that the phenomenon of Diaspora is related to the intellectual and philosophical ideas of postcolonialism and it has some inseparable connection with Jewish movements. He also expounds certain critical and conceptual terms like travel, trauma, mourning, et cetera. Further, Mishra writes:

Diaspora, of course, refuse to die... can Diasporas be anything else but travellers, happy in their travel/treavail; the nation state simply an anchoring point for material advancement, and the homeland always something other than the land of our birth? If transience is our condition, if Diasporas can reconstitute themselves wherever they are- in Suva or Sacramento, in Trinidad or Toronto, Mauritius or Melbourn-can Diaspora dia for a cause?" (37)

Sudesh Mishra in his *Diaspora Criticism* (2006) explains the phenomenon of Diaspora through the theoretical and critical paradigms of Structuralism and Poststructuralism. On the one hand, he represents the diasporic identity through the metaphors of absolute, certain, final and finitude but on the other he explains the identity in the diasporic reality though the signs of hybrid, contingent, multiple, fractured et cetera. Makarand Paranjape's *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts* (2003) explains diaspora through its historical and contemporary developments. Similarly, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy and many other critical and literary theorists have explained the phenomenon of Diaspora and they define it through the appropriate use of words like immigrants, expatriate, refugee, exile, travel, trauma community, ethnicity, melting pot, salad bowl, hybridity, in-betweenness, liminal space, third space et cetera.

The literary history of diaspora is related to the history of migration or immigration of the people of one geographical region to another. The movement of the people indeed brings contact or the state of pidginization and creolization where the people of different cultures come in contact and share cultural realities among themselves which further brings the condition of diglossia. Hence, diaspora traditionally refers to the movement of the people from one country for the purpose of exile and empowerment. Diaspora refers to exile, expatriates and immigrants who live in other countries away from home. They face two or more cultures, languages, countries and remain suspended between them what Homi Bhabha calls the condition of 'hybridity'. On the one hand the phenomenological condition of diaspora represents a different kind of order, away from the replication of the grand narrative of the enlightenment but on the other hand it is also emancipatory and liberating in its nature and function. Thus, the literature of Diaspora

across the world is inextricably intertwined with postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Like the theory of deconstruction, the theory of diaspora is open ended. Theoreticians and cultural materialists and philosophers particularly Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, William Safran, James Clifford, Makarand Paranjape, Vijay Mishra, Raymond William etc have explained Diaspora through the metaphors of exile, hybridity, and journey from home to the host for the purpose of discovering and to be discovered which remains an aporia or chimera.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in Calcutta on 29th of July 1956 and educated in Calcutta and the USA, an established contemporary diaspora writer in America, makes an attempt to negotiate with the aforementioned problematics. Divakaruni tries to delve deeply on the above mentioned aporias in her some remarkable literary creation. Her literary corpus includes *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010). Divakaruni also realistically portrays the varied lives of Indian immigrants. She is distinguished from her contemporary immigrant writers in the sense that she not only projects the characters caught between two cultures or two worlds but also the characters which are liberated in the host country by cultural changes. Her *The Mistress of Spices* is an experiment in magic realism and combines Hindu myths, fables, and superstitions with contemporary American social problems. It also explores some elements of diaspora. The allegorical novel tries to solve the boundaries of prose and poetry while dealing with the magical power of an ageless mystical Indian woman- Tilotamma, known as Tilo. Tilo originates from a spice island in the Indian Ocean, and runs a store in Oakland, California, selling Indian spices. She is both healer and spice seller. With her telepathic powers, Tilo, diagnoses her multiethnic and multigenerational customers' physical and psychic illness. *Sister of My Heart* narrates the story of Sudha and Anju who have always been together since the very beginning of their birth. They experience the condition of migration, acculturation, cultural appropriation and hybridity. *Vine of Desire* reinstates the relationship of Sudha and Anju and it also records how they experience the transformation in their relationship. Finally, *One Amazing Thing* also explores the thematic concerns of diaspora as has been explained by Parmendra Kumar Mishra and Veerendra Kumar Mishra (2021), Beena Agarwal (2012), Malti Agarwal (2014) et cetera. Beena Agarwal's *Women Writers and Indian Diaspora* (2012) explains that Various aspects of the phenomena of migration, cultural alienation, cultural hegemony, cultural co-existence have been represented in the novels of the women writers of Indian diaspora. The text records the psychological condition of expatriation. It also underlines some of the essential elements of the diasporic consciousness as they have represented and recorded by several writers of Indian Diaspora. The text also reinterprets the cross-cultural dilemma as has been experienced by several characters. Similarly, Malti Agarwal's *English Literature: Voices of Indian Diaspora* (2014) explores the condition of alienation and rootlessness which are experienced by the major characters of the novels selected for the study. Further, she has also explained some other aspects of diasporic consciousness as they have been represented by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her major novels.

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