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Demarcating the Concerns of the Indian Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Poem *Indian Movie: New Jersey*

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Abstract: The present paper is aimed at studying the representation of different concerns of the Indian diaspora as revealed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's poem 'Indian Movie: New Jersey'. It discovers the themes of cultural displacement, identity, and the emotional turbulence experienced by the Indian immigrants. The poem captures the real picture of the struggles and ambitions of the Indian diaspora in America. Divakaruni uses the experience of watching an Indian movie in a foreign setting as a metaphor to highlight the struggles of the Indian diaspora in preserving their own cultural heritage and adapting to a new milieu. Through close textual analysis of the poem, this paper explores some of the prevalent characteristics of the diasporic experience. Specifically, it highlights the emotional alienation, nostalgia, and complex negotiations of identity. This paper aims to shed light on the broader socio-cultural dynamics that influence the diaspora's sense of belonging. It also examines how the poem reflects the typical concern of the Indian diaspora, namely, the simultaneous longing for home and the desire for integration in a new land.

Keywords: Indian diaspora; cultural displacement; Identity; emotional turbulence; assimilation; emotional alienation; nostalgia

Introduction

The term "Indian diaspora" refers to the international community of people of Indian origin who live outside India. This group particularly incorporates Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and People of Indian Origin (PIOs). Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) hold Indian citizenship but reside abroad, while People of Indian Origin (PIOs) have acquired citizenship of another country but retain family roots in India. The Indian diaspora is the largest in the world. It is the result of the migration of skilled Indian professionals, particularly in engineering, medicine, and IT, to developed nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

The global movement of immigration has developed into the formation of diasporic communities. The people living in these communities face various challenges due to their distance from their homeland. These concerns are aptly discussed by William Safran, who writes, "Diasporas are characterized by their efforts to maintain a connection to their homeland, often through nostalgia and memory, while simultaneously adapting to the host country's culture." This dual existence complicates identity and belonging, leading to a perpetual negotiation between home and abroad. (Safran 83) A prolific writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's poem, *Indian Movie: New Jersey*, highlights and vividly portrays the immigrant experiences of the Indian diaspora. The poem captures the cultural, emotional, and psychological struggles of Indian immigrants when they try to reconcile their previous identities in a new place and culture. With the help of the metaphor of watching an Indian movie in New Jersey, she addresses key concerns of the Indian diaspora, such as identity crisis, cultural displacement, and emotional turbulence.

Concerns of the Indian Diaspora in the Poem:

Many critics and thinkers have described the life of the Indian diaspora as a hybrid existence, particularly in the United States. Their living is nothing but a complex web of social and cultural connections. Vijay Mishra's observation enhances our understanding of the hybrid existence of the Indian Diaspora when he describes it as follows: "The Indian diaspora is a product of multiple dislocations — colonialism, migration, globalization — that generate complex identities and affiliations, often producing a 'diasporic imaginary' that blends both memory and aspiration." (Mishra 2) *Indian Movie, New Jersey*, is a poem that highlights the Indian diaspora's experience of hybrid existence. It is done by describing the poet's experience of watching an Indian film. The Indian film is a nostalgic and symbolic representation of home in a foreign country. The poem illustrates how the Indian diaspora is caught between two worlds — its cultural heritage from India and the societal tensions of the host country. This "in-betweenness" results in a hybrid existence and continuous efforts on their part at negotiating identities. The poem voices this hybrid identity when the poet-speaker reflects on the resulting feelings of being an Indian in America: "There, on the screen, / I see familiar faces, and for a while, I am / back in the land of mangoes, monsoons, and / ancient temples." (Divakaruni 40) This instance of momentary connection with the land of origin is contrasted with the stark realities of living in a foreign land, where the idea of belonging remains elusive.

In his renowned book, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha discusses cultural displacement, which occurs when migrants are unable to fully integrate into the host culture while simultaneously feeling estranged from their homeland. This creates a sense of perpetual exile, where individuals belong to neither place entirely. (Bhabha 18) Cultural displacement is one of the recurring themes in Divakaruni's work. *Indian Movie, New Jersey*, is a poem that highlights the Indian diaspora's sense of displacement. The speakers' experience of watching an Indian movie in a cinema hall in New Jersey arouses a deep sense of displacement. The movie represents India in America, serving as a reminder to the Indian diaspora who struggle to maintain their cultural roots in a foreign land. This dislocation is emotionally unbearable, creating the sense of what Homi K. Bhabha refers to as "unhomeliness" – the emotion of being socially and culturally displaced. They get the feeling of neither belonging to this nor to that culture.

Divakaruni touches upon this concern of the Indian diaspora in the poem as "In this dark, cold theater, / I clutch at fragments of my motherland, / but they slip through my fingers, / blending with the cold, foreign air." Through these lines, the speaker's longing to regain her social identity is evident. However, the task of reclaiming that cultural identity is challenging. This particular concern of the Indian Diaspora is aptly described by Stuart Hall, who says, "*Diasporic identities are not static but fluid, shaped by the ongoing process of negotiation between the desire to retain the past and the pressure to embrace the present.*" This tension often leads to an internal emotional struggle. (Hall 222) The cinema becomes a space where the borders between the native and the host country blur, dropping the speaker in a state of cultural and social ambiguity. Emotional turmoil is yet another substantial concern for migrants navigating a new cultural land. According to R. Radhakrishnan, Immigrants often experience a sense of dislocation and emotional turbulence as they navigate the complexities of belonging to multiple cultures, frequently feeling torn between preserving their native culture and assimilating into a new one. (Radhakrishnan 35) The poem captures the poignant dissonance experienced by many members of the diaspora. It is a mix of frustration, longing, and confusion. It portrays the speaker as torn between her past and present. This ultimately leads to the speaker's sense of inner conflict.

The poet's use of images and symbols communicates this emotional turmoil. She says, "The images on screen swirl, / but the tears in my eyes make them / dissolve into formlessness." This flash captures the speaker's emotional suffering as she grapples with the multifaceted emotions of homesickness, loss, and the mix-up of identity. Thus, for immigrants, leaving behind a motherland often comprises both physical and emotional dislocations, resulting in a deep sense of loss which may never be completely reconciled. One of the fundamental challenges for the Indian diaspora, as exemplified by Divakaruni in her poem, is the delicate balance between retaining cultural heritage and assimilating into a new culture and society. In the poem, Divakaruni examines how immigrants often struggle to maintain their cultural practices while adapting to the social expectations of the host country. Paul Gilroy writes, For immigrants, preserving their cultural heritage becomes a symbolic form of resistance against the erasure of their identity within the host society. However, the negotiation between cultural

preservation and assimilation is fraught with complexities. (Gilroy 23) Divakaruni describes this pressure when she writes, "Here, in America, we speak / in another tongue, but our hearts / still whisper in Hindi." Here, she illustrates how the speaker attempts to assimilate herself into American culture with the help of language; however, her emotional connection to her innate culture remains strong. This challenge of conserving one's heritage and simultaneously trying to assimilate into a new culture is confronted by most immigrants. Because the pressure to adapt to the present culture occasionally threatens to destroy their original culture and identity.

Another very conspicuous concern of the diaspora is that they often suffer emotional alienation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak aptly observes that for many members of the diaspora, the experience of emotional alienation is a byproduct of their inability to fully assimilate into the dominant culture, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection from both the host country and their homeland. (Spivak 47) Emotional alienation is frequently referred to in the poem as the speaker fails to feel attached to her neighborhood in New Jersey. This dissonance, flanked by the pictures of India on the screen and the realism of life in America, intensifies the sense of loneliness. The theater becomes a place of alienation, where the speaker discovers herself equally alienated from the cinematic world of India and the real America.

The reference to the theme of nostalgia then deepens the speaker's emotional alienation. This is a recurring theme in diasporic literature. Nostalgia is a recurring theme in diasporic literature, where the memory of the homeland is idealized as a means of coping with the alienation and estrangement experienced in the host country. However, this nostalgic longing can also exacerbate the feeling of displacement. (Boym 45) Divakaruni rightly captures this nostalgia when she writes, "I see my childhood streets, / but they are not real. / They are shadows in the distance, / fading as the movie ends." This idea of fading, or the loss of cultural and emotive ties with the homeland, deepens the speaker's sense of alienation. The poem presents a miniature world of the larger diasporic experience by offering us an intricate portrayal of the conciliation between belonging and integration. For most diaspora families, attaining the ever-desired sense of belonging in the host nation is an ongoing struggle. Nirmal Puwar sheds light on this concern, Noting That Belonging is a complex and contested space for diasporic subjects. It is shaped by factors such as race, ethnicity, language, and the socio-cultural dynamics of the host country, where systemic inequalities and prejudice often hinder full integration. (Puwar 35) The speaker of the poem remains trapped between her thoughts and memories of India and the facts of her present-day life in America.

In the last lines of the poem, the poet suggests that the wish for belonging may never come true: "As the lights come on, / I step out into the cold New Jersey air, / still searching for a home / that no longer exists." This distressing reflection encapsulates the core of the diasporic experience. The quest for a home never comes to an end. The struggle of the Indian diaspora to integrate into the host culture is a process fraught with strain. Their desire for a homeland conflicts with the burdens of adapting and assimilating into the new culture. Robin Cohen discusses this as, The process of

integration into the host society does not imply a complete erasure of the diasporic identity. Instead, it involves a continuous reshaping of the self that incorporates elements from both the homeland and the new environment. (Cohen 124)

Conclusion:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents deep concerns of the Indian diaspora through her poem *Indian Movie, New Jersey*. She vividly depicts cultural displacement, emotional turbulence, identity crises, and the immigrant experience in the poem. Divakaruni summarizes the multifaceted realities of life between two different worlds. The poem explores nostalgia, emotional alienation, and struggles with assimilation, which are key aspects of the diasporic experience. Eventually, Divakaruni's poem illuminates the constant negotiation of cultural identity, belonging, and amalgamation that immigrants must navigate as they try to reconcile their past with their present.

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