



Understanding Women In Indian Diaspora: A Study Of Migrant Women In Select Narratives

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Abstract: Diaspora in the modern era can be defined as a group of people who migrated from their land of origin to another. Even as the diaspora suffer marginalization, women and the Queer suffer double marginalization as ‘the other within the other.’ Most diasporic studies focus on the issues of the entire community, with barely any emphasis on women. This has caused the expurgation of the suffering endured by migrant women. From their insufficient pay to their poor working and staying conditions, the state of women immigrant workers is horrifying.

Indian women diasporic writers have tried to represent this invisibility through their works in recent times. This paper is an attempt to understand the erasure of the female diaspora in the Indian context, making an in-depth study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*, Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. This study aims to understand how migrant women workers experience exclusion from within their own community. The invisibility and erasure of the female diaspora within the economy and the reasons that are associated with it are some of the main points of focus of this research. The study also focuses on how this invisibility of the female diaspora affects the migrant queer female individuals. The paradigm of this study is Sociological, Psychological, and Cultural primarily.

Index Terms - Diaspora, Female Immigrant Workers, marginalization, Sociological, Psychological, Cultural, Economic

I. INTRODUCTION

“So, here you are
too foreign for home
too foreign for here.
Never enough for both.”

- Ijeoma Umebinyuo, “Diaspora Blues”

If we were to define the Indian diaspora in the context of research, it would refer to the global community of people who are of Indian descent and have left their country for education, a job, or other political or economic reasons. With 18 million emigrants spread across the world, India has the most extensive diaspora, followed by Mexico in second place. Among the Indian diaspora, women make up a significant percentage, and they contribute to the development and growth of their host country as well. But often, these contributions never get acknowledged. From being successful entrepreneurs and professionals in fields such as medicine and engineering to taking leadership roles in organisations that contribute to society itself, women have proven themselves. Yet there remains a dearth of statistical data about emigrant women in comparison to men.

Diasporas face hostility and isolation in general, quite often. From racism to colourism and divisions due to social hierarchies, all form the major concerns in this area. The Indian diaspora also falls prey to such obstacles. But women sometimes face more challenges than men due to the norms of Indian culture and traditions. Women, at times, have to find a balance between their traditional roles and modern professional lives in the Indian diaspora. In addition, they also face discrimination and bias in the workplace and are even denied equal opportunity

and access to resources such as healthcare. While it is common to feel isolated as an immigrant, women in diasporic communities might find it even more difficult as they may have lost specific support networks that they might have enjoyed in India.

II. THE INVISIBLE SIDES OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA

When we think of diaspora, we often think of it in the international sense—in the wider sense—as people who have moved away from their homeland to a place outside their country. But that is not always the case. Migration within the country is also a form of diaspora—a diaspora that remains invisible. As per Indian culture, marriage often becomes a diasporic experience for women. Women, in addition to being victims of patriarchal codes set by our culture, also fall victim to the isolation that follows the shift to a new house after marriage. Even if the marriage falls apart, in India, it is the woman who suffers. It has been pointed out that in diasporic Indian families, within India, it is the woman who falls apart after a divorce/separation from her husband. Since she might not have a job of her own and might be abandoned by her own family; after the divorce, she is left alone to survive.

Another invisible margin of the Indian female diaspora falls on those who identify as queer. Being queer in Indian culture is seen as taboo, even in the twenty-first century. Therefore, the main challenges faced by the queer female Indian diaspora begin with a lack of acceptance and support, along with discrimination and even rejection from their own families and communities. This can result in further feelings of isolation and loneliness. Moreover, the lack of support networks for the Indian queer female diaspora in a foreign land also proves a challenge.

2.1 The Modern-day Women in the Indian Diaspora

Today, in the twenty-first century, we have established many organisations and initiatives to support and empower the Indian women's diaspora. Several non-profit organisations, cultural and community groups, and even government initiatives have realised the necessity of supporting immigrant women in the fields of education, career development, and personal and professional growth. But even with all these, not all women might be able to reach out to receive the support of these establishments. The lack of representation and inclusion of women in the diaspora in economic decision-making and leadership positions contributes to the exclusion of the female diaspora from the economy. Ineffective policies and attempts to promote and empower women in the diaspora may stem, in these cases, from a lack of understanding of the unique economic obstacles and requirements these women confront.

Women who have migrated with their families stay bound to their families often. Their dependence might become a reason for their inability to escape abuse or any other unfair treatment within the family while they are in a foreign land. Even if women are active breadwinners in the family, they are not often seen as equal to men. In fact, in most diasporic Indian households, women would have to balance their lives between their careers and familial duties within their house.

Migrants earn nearly 13 per cent less on average than national workers in high-income countries, according to a new International Labour Organisation (ILO) report (Migrant Pay Gap Widens in Many High-income Countries, 2020). Furthermore, we must take into consideration the fact that migrant women workers have to deal with double wage penalties, both as migrants in a foreign land and as women. So far, there is a lack of statistical data on the overall pay gap faced by migrated Indian women. In addition to this, the COVID-19 crisis, which began in 2019, has deeply affected the lives of many migrant workers. This crisis, according to reports, would only widen the labour market differences between migrant workers and nationals.

2.2 The Representations and Reality of the Female Diaspora

Literature often mirrors life. The lives of diasporic Indian women have often been presented throughout the literary works of several Indian authors. These fall under the category of diasporic literature. Diasporic literature in itself is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that can include the texts of all those authors who write from outside their native country. But all diasporic literature has a shared root in certain themes, like alienation or identity. Those works representing women and their lives in diasporic literature point out how, under a patriarchal society, the female community lives a humiliated, silenced, and tortured life.

In Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, we see the roles played by women in society through the protagonist, Bimla Das. Desai's take on the novel presents us with aspects of the man-woman relationship and brings to light the character's feelings of alienation, loneliness, isolation, and lack of communication that emigrant women experience in an alien land. The difference between the treatment one receives as a man and as a woman is highlighted through Bimla and her brother Raja. Desai makes us aware of how diasporic Indian women are not presented with the same opportunities as men in Indian culture.

Not all immigrant women end up being part of the working class. Some migrate to be with their families. Chitra Divakaruni's *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* highlights the lives of these women through several short stories. Set in India and America, Chitra Divakaruni's stories explore themes of solitude, alienation, expectations, love, and betrayal. In her work, we see the different essences of migrant Indian women through vivid characters like Mrs Dutta, Aparna, and Meera, all present throughout different stories. The author here speaks for the collective diaspora, who reminisce about their lives before migration and the simpler times.

Not always do we see Indian women as the main characters in diasporic writings. At times, they are not the main characters, and at times they are even antagonists for reasons like abandoning their responsibilities as mothers or wives. One such character is Gauri, Udayan's widow, the antagonist of the novel *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Lowland* explores the experiences of the Indian diaspora, with a specific focus on the lives of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, and their families. Gauri as a character is created to be a smart and selfish woman whose unresolved grief over her husband's death and feelings of inadequacy as a mother ultimately results in her detaching herself from the life she had and severing all contact with her second husband and daughter. Gauri, after the death of her husband, was forced to leave her homeland and follow Subash, the brother of her husband, who offered to marry her in a so-called selfless act. As a woman, other than agreeing to the choices of the men around her, she has no option in the beginning. The act of Gauri running away from her reality has been true for many women in foreign lands. The struggles that migrant women face as they navigate their new lives in foreign countries, and the impact this has on their relationships, cultural identity, and mental well-being, are revealed throughout the novel subtly.

III. THE LIFE OF THE DIASPORA WITHIN INDIAN SOCIETY

Migration is often more than just a physical shift. It is also a mental shift, as aspects of culture and tradition often have to change or adjust to the new place. For women, this applies especially as women are made to indulge or indulge themselves in traditions and traditional roles.

If we were to look at Indian society at a single glance, we could see how deeply we are marked by culture and traditions. We are united and divided in this nation by culture and religion. Therefore, the Indian diaspora also shows traces of culture rooted within it. It is undeniable that Indian culture is built on patriarchal notions. Women from many states and cultures are restricted from having a life of their own. In fact, they are taught from a young age to prioritise those around them (beginning with men, obviously) and finally themselves. *Clear Light of Day* was published to represent the time when the change was slowly reaching India. India stood between tradition and hope for future generations. Through the different female characters in the novel, Desai has managed to show the different solutions Indian women, of both the nation and the diaspora, have chosen in order to deal with a society that is in many ways run by men, for men.

The partition created a major trial of diaspora with it. The novel *Clear Light of Day* gives us glimpses of India from the 1940s up to the 1970s. Even though the events of the novel do not directly collide with the events and protests of the partition, the characters in the novel are indirectly affected by it. The period of partition was a time of transformation and change. British India had now become two different countries. This led to the creation of a huge diaspora in itself, which created a new social order. We were aliens in our own country in one sense, or from another point of view, we were refugees in our own country. Whether to adapt to the modern world or to stick to age-old traditions was a question that troubled many Indians at the time. This

was also the time when women were beginning to stand up for themselves and pursue their identities under the guise of modernity.

We can point to two main instances of diaspora and alienation in the novel: one through Tara, who had to migrate to America, and one through Bimla, who was living in India. Tara's decision to marry Bakul made Tara a part of the Diaspora that came as a result of the partition. Bimla, on the other hand, felt a sense of alienation from the Westernised society around her and her strained relationships with her family. Desai here used the family as a microcosm for larger national concerns.

Tara and Bimla are contrasting representations of traditional and modern Indian women. Tara filled the traditional role of a woman with her feminine nature and her dreams of marriage and children, rather than an identity or a career for herself. Bim, in contrast, is ironically a modern girl who dreams of standing up for herself and creating a life for herself rather than being someone's wife or mother. These two women and their thoughts represented the ideologies held by many women at the time.

Coming back to the present, Indian society still hasn't changed its perspectives much.

"About nine-in-ten Indians agree with the notion that a wife must always obey her husband, including nearly two-thirds who completely agree with this sentiment. Indian women are only slightly less likely than Indian men to say they completely agree that wives should always obey their husbands (61% vs. 67%), according to the survey, which was conducted between late 2019 and early 2020." (Evans et al., 2023)

These statistics stand true for the diaspora too, as in most Indian diasporic households, women are urged to put their household and family duties first and their own personal careers after. The status of women in Indian society has changed over different time periods. During ancient times, characters like Sita and Draupadi of Indian mythology (Ramayana and Mahabharata) were worshipped and seen as mother goddesses. Pre-colonial and colonial times brought change. British notions of 'how a woman should be' began to spread in India too. Therefore, patriarchal rule began to strengthen in India. The ritual of Sati was one of the terrible crimes that existed during the ancient period, which involved killing a woman along with her deceased husband during his funeral rites in the fire. Many other superstitions from ancient times still prevail in modern society. Calling women witches or 'Dayan' for achieving beyond what is considered capable for a "woman" is still a practise in many Indian diasporas due to superstitious faith.

IV. THE DAUGHTER, THE SISTER, THE WIFE, THE MOTHER

Identity defines a person and establishes a sense of who they are as individuals and members of certain social groups. Therefore, in that aspect, the term 'identity' is:

"To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable or what ought to be done or what I endorse or oppose. It is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (Taylor, 1992).

The formation of identity for a woman is critical for herself as it establishes the way she defines herself and what 'self' she bases her identity on. Therefore, it serves as a foundation for her life. In Indian society, we often see women praised as devoted wives, selfless mothers, and obedient daughters. Our respect extends so far that we are taught that, "all Indians are my brothers and sisters" in our school. While this serves as a method to enforce unity between genders, it also enforces the idea that respect is based on family-like relations.

Whether it be the Indian diaspora or national Indians, we see a certain pattern in the worship of certain female goddesses in the Hindu religion. Sita, Sati, Lakshmi, and Radha are some of these goddesses idolised, and through them, we can track a pattern here on the fact that these goddesses incorporate the traditional values that Indian society expects women to uphold as mothers, daughters, sisters, or wives.

Now, we can wonder what is wrong with epitomising women in these gendered roles. The answer lies in the truth that a woman's core identity as an individual has been stripped away due to it. A mother is expected to care for her children, the father of the children, and sometimes even other family members. Under the vulturous gaze of society, married women, especially mothers, are questioned and disapproved of for seeking careers for themselves. They are asked to balance their traditional roles and responsibilities as wives, mothers,

and daughters with the demands of their careers and professional lives, unlike their male counterparts. This applies even in diasporic Indian households.

The character of Gauri in *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri is seen as the antagonist by many of us. While she is at fault for abandoning the responsibilities of her daughter and running away, we as readers often fail to empathise with or even sympathise with her situation. Gauri was not given a choice to reject the selfless act of Subhash and was therefore forced to move to America with him. Her only escape and method of coping in the foreign land was education, which led her to see the world beyond the limits of what she had known until then. While her choice went against the idea of motherhood, as a diasporic woman who was in an unfavourable situation with no source to seek help from, we cannot exactly blame her. Today, similar to Gauri, many women are indeed moving beyond the enforced title of 'mother' and are establishing their own careers. But it does not change the fact that this change is still frowned upon by many diasporic Indian families.

Ashima Kumari, a journalist, questioned in her social media post, "Why should a mother be 'highly respected' only because of her 'sacrifices'?" She asks, "if a mother doesn't kill her choices then does she become any less a mother?" (Chauhan, 2018)

We have often seen society ask women, and successful ones at that, about motherhood. Husbands in many Indian diasporas often give their wives ultimatums to choose between their career and their family. Considering how the society we live in is crude to single or divorced women, often these women end up choosing to save their marriage.

4.1 Cultural Bindings for Women in Diaspora

A majority of Indian women do maintain their cultural and ethnic identity in their host countries. Their relationship with their culture ranges from something as basic as their sense of dressing to the ways in which they maintain their relationships with their families and surrounding communities. Often, women are seen as the ones passing down cultural values and heritage to their children as mothers. In the collection of short stories, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, we see how Indians who had now become new settlers in America adjust to their surroundings that had now shifted.

One of the numerous tales in the collection, "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," examines the cultural shock experienced by an old Indian woman who has immigrated to her son's home in California, only to learn that her traditional values embarrass her daughter-in-law. The old woman, Mrs. Dutta, finds a way to cope with the said situation by writing a letter to her friend back in India, Mrs. Basu, which is also the entire premise of the short story.

The story brings to us two kinds of women in the diaspora and their responses to the changes in their surroundings. Since she was a little child, Mrs. Dutta had been moulded and groomed to be dependent on the men around her, like many Indian women. But later in life, after her husband's death, she was left to care for herself all alone. At the time, she made the decision to live alone despite being invited to her relatives' homes. This was a surprise to her as well as to others because she never expected herself to make this particular decision to be independent or to create the life she did. But Shyamoli, Mrs. Dutta's daughter-in-law, had become a stylized and modern American in a short span of time after shifting. The major theme of the story, therefore, is the many differences between traditional Indians and modern Indians living in America and the conflict that this cultural divide can create. Therefore, the short story's main focus lies on the discord that this cultural gap can cause among modern Indians residing in America and their various distinctions from traditional Indians.

Women in India are supposed to support the family, cast aside their own interests, and, most significantly, be obedient to their husbands and other males. At one point in the story, the narrator notes that Mrs. Dutta had never, through the forty-two years of her marriage, addressed Sagar's father by his name. Many women in Indian culture, like Mrs. Dutta, are expected to remain with a man as opposed to being on their own. This can be seen by how, after her husband's passing, Mrs. Dutta, who lived alone was suggested by her own close relatives that this was not suitable and was later informed that they were happy Sagar invited her to immigrate to America.

Another story within the collection, "The Names of Stars in Bengali," examines what a woman has gained and lost as she travels back to her home country (India) and re-evaluates her relationships. The woman, namely a young mother, visits India with her two boys to meet their grandmother. She discusses her childhood memories with her sons, who are astonished because they are used to a much busier, more Americanized parent. The story offers an in-depth examination of the immigrant experience. Her return to her homeland after a long absence brings the realisation of how isolated she has become from her tradition and her people. Her memories act as a link to bring nostalgia into her mind as she tries to recollect her own lost self, which she wants.

Returning to the homeland after a long absence intensifies the protagonist's awareness of how distant and different, she has become from her native people and her tradition. But the remembrance of old times brings nostalgia to her mind. When she tries to recall the Bengali names of stars during a night time scooter ride with her cousin, this nostalgia comes full circle. The young mother makes every effort to recall the lost version of herself that she desires to rebuild: "How does one remake oneself, she wants to know. It is a skill she is in need of. But she cannot think of an appropriate way of asking this in Bengali," (Divakaruni, 2001). By bringing her young sons to the village where she was raised, she not only intended to remember her youth but also teach her children about their cultural heritage. The main characters in Divakaruni's works blatantly demonstrate that they struggle to adapt to or follow the new cultural standards of their host society. Because of their rejection of the norms and cultures of the new community, they are unable to navigate their own feelings of security, distinction, or identity and often consider going back to their home country.

4.2 The General Experience

There is a particular term in the industry that refers to the metaphorical invisible barrier that prevents women from being promoted to higher-level positions within an organisation due to bias. This term is called the 'glass ceiling'. An example of this is when a woman puts in the same amount of work as a male co-worker and has the same qualifications but never gets promoted to a senior level. Often, women are told 'it's not a woman's job,' even if they are perfectly qualified for it. Diasporic women experience this to an even further extent due to racial factors. Being an Indian woman in a foreign land puts them under the scope to experience prejudice both as a woman as well as a person of colour.

The pay gap is another universal experience experienced by women universally. Studies have shown that immigrant women, including Indian women, tend to earn less than men with similar qualifications and experience. This pay gap arises mainly due to factors such as gender bias and discrimination in the workplace. The financial gap women face due to their pay gap often affects their access to credit and loans. It may also become a barrier to them accessing government benefits and social services. Often, the pay gap leads to financial insecurity for those women trying to fend for themselves. Therefore, financial struggles, pay gaps, and economic crises faced by immigrant Indian women are significant and multifaceted issues that require attention and action. These issues affect the independence of Indian women themselves.

Additionally, the COVID-19-related economic crisis currently affecting the world has made things worse for Indian immigrant women. Immigrant women, particularly those in low-paying positions, have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's large surge in unemployment and economic insecurity. The mental health of Indian migrant women has also been impacted by the pandemic. The pandemic has left many people with feelings of loneliness, worry, and depression. They have found it difficult to deal with the stress and anxiety brought on by the pandemic because they are unable to communicate with their families and communities.

Six themes were developed from the interview data about the impacts on and experiences of women migrant workers: loss of livelihood and resulting debt; compromises; captivity and the burden of responsibility; disrupted access; emotional geographies of COVID-19; and insufficient support. (Azeez et al., 2021)

Diasporic Indian women often face economic crises due to either their dependency on their family or husbands or due to the bias they face as women of colour. Some of the main economic challenges faced by Indian women in the diaspora are difficulty accessing education and lack of employment opportunities. It is critical to acknowledge the distinct needs and experiences of Indian women living abroad. This may entail offering assistance and materials catered to their particular requirements, such as language lessons, professional development opportunities, and mentorship relationships. Implementing programmes and policies that support inclusion and diversity in the workplace and tackling prejudice and discrimination can also be included.

Healthcare is another critical aspect when it comes to promoting the living aspects and the general physical and mental well-being of people in general. Along with constantly recurring physical and mental health issues, migrants continue to be among the most vulnerable members of society, with inadequate access to health treatments. Immigrants are more than often denied access to the universal human right to healthcare. Women are subjected to this bias even more than men.

Female health care and reproductive health care are often inaccessible to women. Therefore, pregnancy-related and similar healthcare options become beyond the reach of migrant Indian women. Often, workplaces deny maternity leave for migrant women even after pregnancy. Certain research studies indicate that postpartum women also face psychological changes. Thus, in addition to physical changes in the body, the brain also experiences changes of its own. By denying maternity leaves, workplaces are denying healthcare for these women to adapt to the changes around them.

The care gap is another experience faced by diasporic Indian women. Lack of economic and secure childcare is a care gap encountered by immigrant Indian women. Many diasporic Indian women are employed in low-wage, unstable occupations without access to childcare.

V. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The Ignored Queer Female Diaspora: The female queer Indian diaspora refers to Indian women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or other non-heterosexual orientations and who have migrated to other countries. Often, this migration is in the hope of finding a better life for themselves and/or escaping from their own families and communities. But ending up being a diaspora in a foreign land also leaves them void of a support network. They might experience detachment and estrangement as a result of trying to balance their non-heterosexual identities with their Indian origins and culture. Accessing medical care as well as other support services that are considerate of and inclusive of their needs could also present them with additional difficulties.

Under the Indian sense of culture and tradition, being queer is frowned upon. Being a queer woman in an Indian community is even more of a struggle than being a queer man. While men do face their own share of troubles, they do not experience the same intensity due to their gender.

The queer diaspora can be considered "ignored" rather than "marginalised" in the community. This is due to the certain lack of enthusiasm we express for knowing about the community and collecting data and statistics, even in the twenty-first century. While statistics on female Indian diasporas are low, those on queer Indian diasporas are close to none.

VI. CONCLUSION

Women make up a majority of the Indian diaspora and have significantly contributed to the growth and development of their host nations. Despite their numerous accomplishments and services, the Indian women's diaspora frequently encounters difficulties and barriers. They often find themselves having to juggle the demands of their employment and professional lives with their conventional duties and responsibilities as daughters, mothers, and wives. Additionally, they might experience prejudice and discrimination at work and in their communities, and they might not be given the same chances or access to resources and support.

This paper is an attempt to understand the erasure of the female diaspora in the Indian context through select Indian diasporic writings. Literature often parallels real life and represents the real world. Immigrant women's frequent struggles with racism, sexism, and other types of oppression are often depicted in literature. This diasporic literature emphasises the strength and resiliency of Indian women despite the difficulties by emphasising their agency in the midst of difficulties. These tales also highlight the distinctive cultural distinctions between India and the host nation and how they influence the identities of Indian women. Diasporic literature aims to start a conversation about the complex and varied experiences of the Indian diaspora by examining the opinions and experiences of Indian women.

Giving necessary resources to Indian women in the diaspora and providing assistance to help them balance their caregiving duties with work and other obligations is crucial to addressing several of the problems. This can include making affordable and dependable childcare available, as well as making support services for caring for the elderly and other caregiving obligations available. In order to eliminate the gender gap, it is crucial to include and support Indian women in leadership roles within their communities and organisations. Although we have a tribal woman at the helm of our country (as the President of India) and the present Ministry

is supportive of women and we see women as the Finance Minister, Human Resource Minister, and the like, this support is yet to reach the grassroots level, and many households in the rural areas must understand the strength of their women and give them the necessary space and freedom to grow—to grow beyond the four walls of their houses—and reach the greater skies of professional excellence.

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