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## MIGRATION, CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT NOSTALGIA AND MEMORY: INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE SELECT POEMS OF IMTIAZ DHARKER AND CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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**Abstract:** The past has always displayed its pages to reveal to readers the complex process of migration. Migrants, initially, face problems with language, social norms, values, customs, rituals, and culinary habits in alien countries; eventually, they shape their own linguistic and social identities by adapting to the new social context, which is perforated by cultural diversity. They are undoubtedly puzzled by the encounter of multiple identities and the nostalgia for their homelands. Sometimes, personal and professional needs force people to move from their own lands to foreign lands. The plight of these immigrants, in unfamiliar social conditions, cannot be ignored. Many writers have meticulously depicted the lives of expatriates in their literary pieces. The diasporic poems of Imtiaz Dharker and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni display the concepts of uprooting, socio-cultural loss, and the resulting nostalgia and passion. The study argues that the poems of the two writers express striking similarities in dealing with major diasporic themes such as immigration, cultural displacement and nostalgia, and that their poems serve as an agency to voice the predicament of immigrants.

**Index Terms - Migration, diaspora, cultural displacement and nostalgia.**

“Migration—the movement of people from one country to another—occurs all the time and has done so throughout human history. Anyone who moves is a migrant. Immigration is a term used to describe the movement of people from their own country to settle permanently in another. They are immigrants to their new country, but have emigrated from their native country” (Senker 6).

Indians started migrating to foreign countries about 150 years ago. After the colonial period, Indians began migrating to the US and other European countries. The economic gain was initially the sole goal of people, and later the younger generation started settling in foreign countries to gain new knowledge in different areas. The growth of the IT industry also wholeheartedly welcomed the Indian youth. Their concerns and worries provide ways for the formation of new social, cultural, political and economic identities. New immigrants regard cultural integration as one of the biggest challenges. They become more sentimental when they talk about customs, rituals, culinary habits and religious practices in their own country. They talk constantly about their cultural heritage and its greatness. Immigrant experiences make them aware of their nationality. Eventually, the appreciation of cultural diversity helps them assimilate into the culture of the host country.

“[Culture is] . . . the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs and in their religion” (Eliot, 1948). Cultural displacement causes severe internal conflicts among the diaspora. The term *diaspora* initially used to talk about Jewish descendants, has undergone a major change in its meaning. For years, we have been talking about the confusion, plight, problems, opportunities and mental well-being of the Indian diaspora. The comfort and economic security of the host country attract people to settle in a foreign country. However, the years that pass will make them more meditative about their homeland and the warmth of their relationships. At times they lack confidence because multicultural occasions give them mental pain and distress. “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (Mishra, 2008).

The poems of Imtiaz Dharker and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depict the nostalgia, separation, cultural bereavement and identity crisis experienced by Indian immigrants as they root out from their homeland. “[Dharker] grew up in two continents and has lived in three cities-Lahore, Glasgow and Mumbai” (Choudhury, 2006). Divakaruni also talks about how immigration and the subsequent multicultural environment have torn apart the identities of these immigrants. Her poems show how immigrants develop an unequivocal attitude towards the cultural aspects of the host country, how it makes their lives difficult, and how they consciously make efforts to adapt to a hostile culture. The immigrant experiences of both poets make their poems extraordinary and reveal the pain of Indian immigrants who accuse them of sanctity for their culture and customs.

Imtiaz Dharkar's poem "At the Lahore Karhai" reveals the experiences of Indian immigrants in England. The poet grew up in a foreign land, though she had roots in India. The poem "At Lahore Karhai" depicts the craving for homely food and psychological relief while travelling to Lahore Karhai, an Indian restaurant located in Wembley. Moreover, the poet regards the trip as a "pilgrimage," a divine and exciting experience as she enjoys her traditional meal with a group of migrants in London. She is sure of the greatness of togetherness that spiritual travel brings to her and her friends while dining in Lahore Karhai. The Hindi word *karhai* refers to the kitchen, a sacred place according to Indian culture.

Of all the living spaces, the kitchen represents best people's attitudes and their culture. In the comparatively more traditional rural houses, the kitchen and household activities acquire sanctity. A corner of the Indian kitchen is always kept for God, and cooking and eating are done as holy acts. The ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas, consider food being life-giver as God by mentioning *Annom para -Brahmam* (food as a form of God, because it gives life). Even cleaning and decorating the house and the household products are done religiously as acts of invitation to the Gods. (Baram, 2011) It's the place where family members sit and enjoy homely meals made with care and love. Indian diaspora in foreign countries does not get these enjoyments that have the power to strengthen family bonds. Irrespective of caste and religion, all Indians celebrate festivals serving delicious food items. Like family ties, these social unions foster solidarity among Indians, where food acts as a medium. Here, the poet and her acquaintances try to recreate the same atmosphere of unity and togetherness by eating at Lahore Karhai, the Desi kitchen. They feel nostalgic when they spend a great Sunday together and enjoy the traditional taste of their own land. The poet says:

It's a great day, Sunday,  
when we pile into the car  
and set off with a purpose –  
a pilgrimage across the city,  
to Wembley, the Lahore Karhai. (Dharker, 2003)

The poet draws a strange comparison between her and the truck drivers of India who are struggling really hard to drive trucks on Grand Trunk road. They arrive at a *dhaba* to eat traditional food. She is one of those immigrants looking for traditional pleasure amid their chaotic lifestyles. They are away from their native Sialkot and Chandigarh. Her expatriate experiences reveal the love for her homeland. She says:

Hauling our overloaded lives  
the extra mile,  
we're truckers of another kind,  
looking hopefully (years away  
from Sialkot and Chandigarh)  
for the taste of our mothers'  
hand in the cooking. (Dharker, 2003)

Dharkar is nostalgic when talking about Lahore Karhai's doors and steps into the restaurant located in the host country to enjoy the food served there. She enjoys the remains of food sitting with acquaintances at the restaurant. The sanctity associated with the kitchen is manifested in the following lines:

[T]he Sindhi refugee  
with his beautiful wife  
who prays each day to Krishna,  
keeper of her kitchen and her life (Dharker, 2003)

These gatherings bring back memories of the warm relationships she holds close to her heart on weekends, while living in a foreign country. Food, here, reflects the warmth of relationships and the poet clearly reveals the quality of these intimate associations. The enjoyment of traditional cuisine brings back memories associated with her hometown. When she worships traditional food items, she experiences nostalgia and divinity.

Yes, a great day.  
A feast! We swoop  
on a whole family of dishes.  
The tarka dal is Auntie Hameeda  
the karhai ghosht is Khala Ameena  
the gajjar halva is Appa Rasheeda.

The warm naan is you.

My hand stops half-way to my mouth.  
The Sunday light has locked  
on all of us:  
the owner's smiling son,  
the cook at the hot kebabs,  
Kartar, Rohini, Robert,  
Ayesha, Sangam, I,  
bound together by the bread we break,  
sharing out our continent.

These are ways of remembering. (Dharker, 2003)

The poet expresses her nostalgia when she remembers relatives and acquaintances in her homeland. The enjoyment of these food items reminds her of the fascinating childhood days when she spent her time in her homeland. Now Indian diaspora in an alien world is exposed to severe mental pain. The prejudice of the natives makes the diaspora a less privileged group. But her artistic mind helps her forget the negative aspects of immigration and conscious assimilation. The experiences shared by expatriates are not really smooth:

Diasporic members frequently feel a sense of alienation in the host country because of systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and socio-economic exclusion. To resist assimilation into the host country, and to avoid social amnesia about their collective histories, diasporic people attempt to revive, recreate, and invent their artistic, linguistic, economic, religious, cultural, and political practices and productions.

Like Dharker, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works are also notable for aspects related to relocation and existence in a multicultural context. Her poems uncover the anguish and frustrations of Indian immigrants in alien countries. "Indian Movie, New Jersey" is one of her famous poems depicting the complexities of the immigrant experience. As an immigrant women's writer, Divakaruni clearly understands the cultural, social and economic problems faced by Indians in a foreign country. Many Indians leave their homeland due to personal and professional needs. Highly educated immigrants can adapt to the new social context; however, new immigrants face problems with language and prejudice. The poet tells us about a group of Indians stationed in New Jersey. She highlights the unity and intimacy they feel when they gathered at the theatre to watch a Bollywood film. They admire the beauty and charm of the heroine who dances with music. The poet's efforts are remarkable for comparing the Bollywood actress to a "sex goddess". The depiction of a woman as a sexual goddess is an example of the essential differences between Indian and American aesthetic and emotional reactions. The beautiful Indian landscape shown in the movie takes them back to their homeland. The heroine in the film speaks English with an accent that falls on the Americans' ears like pellets. The poet, who reveals the language of the heroine, reminds readers of the linguistic disadvantages that people of Indian origin often face while living in a multilingual environment. The English used by the heroine creates a hilarious atmosphere. The poet indirectly remembers the insignificance of a foreign language and its eccentricities within a perfect Indian gathering. She says:

The sex-goddess switches  
To thickened English to emphasis  
A joke. We laugh and clap. Here  
We need not be embarrassed  
By mispronounced phrases  
Dropping like hot lead to foreign ears. (Divakaruni, 1997)

Initially, the poet talks about the harmony experienced by the Indian diaspora community, however, at the end of the poem, she unravels the disenchantment and uprootedness of Indian settlers. Although racial and linguistic differences confuse them, the togetherness they experience at social meetings relieves them of the emotional toughness they usually experience. Divakaruni also emphasizes the importance of social unions in her poem. Indian immigrants try to escape the socio-cultural crisis they face in the process of assimilation. They want a world where there is no inequality when it comes to money, language, racism and religion. They even try to ease the emotional conflicts that hinder socio-cultural integration.

"[I]t is generally assumed that only second-generation immigrants suffer from culture conflict, because they live in the midst of two cultures and are not firmly rooted in either. First generation immigrants are said to be free of this malady, as they are well anchored in their own culture" (Johnston 5). Some of them try to adapt to foreign culture, while some try to maintain their own cultural values. The concept of cross-cultural experience can be seen in Divakaruni's poem. She says:

The flickering movie-light  
wipes from our faces years of America, sons  
who want mohawks and refuse to run  
the family store, daughters who date  
on the sly. (Divakaruni, 1997)

The lifestyle of the second generation is clearly manifested in Dharker's poem, "Minority". It talks about the post-immigrant experiences of Indians. The opening lines demonstrate the plight of the children of immigrants to live the lives of foreigners. The poem clearly reveals the pain of a young immigrant who appears to be alien in many places. Life has become so miserable for the second generation of alien countries that they bear the humiliation of belonging to no place. The first line of the poem, "I was born a foreigner," (Dharker, 1997) tells her readers of the poet's anguish. She says, "I carried on from there/ to become a foreigner everywhere" (Dharker 1997). Why does she consider herself a foreigner? For people suffering from the impact of dislocation, the answer to the question will be intolerable. She is disappointed by the weight of adapting to a foreign culture. She says,

I went, even in the place  
planted with my relatives,  
six-foot tubers sprouting roots,  
their fingers and faces pushing up  
new shoots of maize and sugar cane.

All kinds of places and groups  
of people who have an admirable  
history would, almost certainly,  
distance themselves from me. (Dharker, 1997)

The poet compares herself to a carelessly translated poem and says, "I don't fit, /like a clumsily translated poem;" (Dharker 1997). It is true that a well-translated poem will certainly inspire readers. If there are no definite words in translation, it will appear clumsy. Her life in a foreign city like Glasgow is empty and invalid due to a lack of emotional satisfaction. The poet uses touching expressions to highlight the feeling of separation and otherness that a person feels after settling in a foreign country that pays no attention to the emotional well-being of immigrants. She says:

until, one day, you meet  
the stranger sliding down your street,  
realise you know the face  
simplified to bone,  
look into its outcast eyes  
and recognise it as your own. (Dharker, 1997)

Divakaruni's "The Founding of Yuba City" describes the experiences and bewilderment of Indians in the United States of America. The experiences of early immigrants in California are depicted with extreme sincerity and authenticity:

Let us suppose it a California day  
 bright as the blinding sea that brought them  
 across a month of nights  
 branded with strange stars  
 and endless coal shoveled  
 into a ship's red jaws.  
 The sudden edge of an eucalyptus grove,  
 the land fallow and gold to the eye, a wind  
 carrying the forgotten green smell  
 of the Punjab plains. (Divakaruni, 2011)

The farmers from Punjab arrived in California in 1910. Many of the early migrants continued to live there, and because of immigration laws, they could not see their relatives. Unlike native whites, they were denied many rights. The poet talks about the predicament of those settlers like this:

The men closed their eyes, turned their faces  
 to the earth's damp harvest-odor.  
 In their dreams their wives' red skirts flamed  
 in the Punjab noon. Slender necked women  
 who carried on their heads  
*rotis* and *alu*,  
 jars of buttermilk for the farmer's lunch.  
 When they bent to whisper love  
 (or was it farewell)  
 their hibiscus-scented hair fell like tears  
 on the faces of the husbands  
 they would not see again. (Divakaruni, 2011)

It is the fate of the second generation that they are marginalized because of differences in colour, ethnicity, language and culture. Sikh immigrants living in California are seen as inferior by whites. The poet describes how a boy is treated by other students at the school. They mock him for his appearance. She says in the poem "Yuba City School":

In the playground, Neeraj says,  
 invisible hands snatch at his uncut hair,  
 unseen feet trip him from behind,  
 and when he turns, ghost laughter  
 all around his bleeding knees.  
 He bites down on his lip  
 to keep in the crying. (Divakaruni, 2011)

The poet describes the plight of the family trying to adapt to the new cultural background, where language acts as one of the obstacles. Newly arrived immigrants in the English-speaking community often face bitter experiences because they lack knowledge of refined English. A mother's stress to rescue her son from her own schoolteacher is depicted in plain language; but the lines are profound. The mother's pain is visible in the following lines:

Tomorrow in my blue skirt I will go  
 to see the teacher, my tongue  
 stiff and swollen  
 in my unwilling mouth, my few  
 English phrases. She will pluck them  
 from me, nail shut my lips. My son  
 will keep sitting in the last row  
 among the red words that drink his voice. (Divakaruni, 2011)

It is clear that both poets have had personal experiences of displacement. They are also part of a group of expatriates who migrated to foreign countries for personal and professional growth. They talk about the uncertainty that immigrants experience in the process of cultural integration. They try to appreciate cultural diversity while living in host countries. But we see them suffering great grief. Cultural and social differences have deepened the mental anguish they experience. The poetic outpourings of these poets depict the anxiety, misery, passion, depression, loneliness and plight of the Indian diaspora in unfamiliar social contexts. Hence, their poems bring homesickness and socio-cultural alienation experienced by Indian diaspora as time progresses. The solidarity they build after migrating to alien soil is remarkable. Neither poet overtalks the psychological challenges faced by the Indian diaspora living in host countries; but the nostalgic attitudes of poets speak openly to readers about it. The aspirations of the members who gathered in the drama hall and restaurant in the poems "Indian Movie, New Jersey" and "At Lahore Kharhai" make us think about their emotional attachment to their homeland. Although their poems reveal much about diasporic experiences in its true sense, they do not overexaggerate the condition. The post-colonial aspects associated with the concept of immigration and trauma are presented with utmost authenticity in their poems.

Integration into a new culture is a conscious process, as it takes a lot of mental efforts from the first-generation immigrants to know and learn the subtleties of culture and its products. The dilemma encountered by them will be severe that it creates culture shock and accentuates psychological stress. Whereas the second-generation immigrants find it easier to overcome these psychological anguish and agony due to the process of socialisation and assistance of peer groups. But the ethnocentric outlook of the host country will definitely harm the psychological well-being of the diaspora and cultural homogeneity will remain an unrealistic vision for many.

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