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Between Two Worlds: Diasporic Wakefulness in the Works of Divakaruni and Lahiri

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Abstract: Since the beginning, humans have sought a better life; from the Stone Age to the modern technological era, this pursuit has driven people to move, often abandoning their homelands. Such migrations frequently produced a painful sense of exile. Language, identity, place, and home are interconnected aspects of belonging and alienation, as Jhumpa Lahiri observes. Fueled by widespread migration, diasporic literature emerged alongside postcolonial writing, developing within the same historical framework. Transplantation often renders immigrants rootless. Today much of the most significant Indian writing comes from the diaspora—authors such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri. In particular, Indian women writers in the diaspora have made powerful contributions, gaining international recognition and achieving excellence across literary forms. Their works frequently portray physical and emotional struggles, focusing on themes like discrimination, culture shock, identity crises, alienation, displacement, dilemma, depression, hybridity, and nostalgia.

This study examines the tensions of cross-cultural identity and cultural transplantation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. It offers a comparative analysis that foregrounds cultural and feminist perspectives to investigate the challenges faced by female protagonists navigating immigration in the selected novels.

Index Terms - Diaspora, diasporic literature, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni cultural displacement, identity crisis, exile, nostalgia, alienation.

Diasporic literature is a broad field encompassing works written by authors living outside their native countries that remain connected to their homeland's culture and background. Writers who produce work abroad yet keep ties with their place of origin are generally classified as diasporic. Central to diaspora literature is the idea of a homeland—the place of displacement—and narratives of often arduous journeys driven by economic, social, or political pressures. Such writing springs from experiences of loss and alienation caused by migration and expatriation, and typically explores themes of displacement, rootlessness, nostalgia, and the search for identity. It also considers cultural blending and fragmentation and mirrors the immigrant experience that emerges after settlement.

A recurrent motif in diasporic writing is occupancy of liminal space. Diasporic authors inhabit a double marginality: they are outsiders in the host culture, looking in, while also feeling estranged from a homeland transformed during their absence. The term “exile” often carries negative connotations, but when exile is self-imposed its meaning becomes ambiguous. Exile takes many forms: immigrants, émigrés, refugees, and expatriates occupy different social and legal positions. An immigrant typically leaves their country voluntarily to settle permanently elsewhere; an émigré often departs for political

reasons; a refugee flees danger or persecution; an expatriate relocates but resists full integration into the host society.

Regardless of motive—economic, religious, political, or forced—migrants share common experiences shaped by the circumstances of migration and the duration of stay in the adopted land. Most migrants endure the pain of separation from home: memories of the motherland and the loss of familiar surroundings frequently cause deep emotional distress.

Diasporic Indians generally maintain strong ties to their ancestral homeland, driven by a search for continuity and an “ancestral impulse” that seeks connection with their roots. Settling in a foreign country often produces dislocation—a rupture from former identities—and feelings of loneliness that arise from non-acceptance and ethnic discrimination by the host society. Immigrants strive to assimilate, adapt, and integrate into their new communities, yet they also work to preserve their original cultural identity. Marginalized groups commonly protect themselves from the dominant culture by continuing cultural practices and social traditions. First-generation immigrants, in particular, prioritize retaining their cultural repertoire—religion, language, music, art, dress, and cuisine—and consciously transmit these traditions to succeeding generations.

Expatriate writers, who undergo cultural, geographic, and emotional dislocation, often develop a diasporic sensibility that reflects a plural or hybrid identity. Their work typically embraces a pluralistic vision, shifting constantly between two worlds and moving back and forth between different locales. At times they portray their homeland as violent, impoverished, or corrupt; at other times they romanticize it. Caught between competing forces—pressures to preserve tradition and the pull of the new society—these writers inhabit an uncertain in-between, neither fully the place they left nor completely the one they now occupy. This pendulum movement between past and present recurs across expatriate writing.

More broadly, “diaspora” denotes a minority community dispersed from a common homeland. It describes populations that share a collective heritage yet live scattered across the globe. By contrast, “migration” refers to the act of moving to a new area to settle—motivations range from work, study, or family reunification to compelled departures caused by poverty, political unrest, violence, or natural disasters. Diasporas influence their countries of origin in many ways beyond remittances: they can foster trade and foreign direct investment, establish businesses, spur entrepreneurship, and transfer knowledge and skills.

The term diaspora (Greek, “dispersion”; Hebrew, “galut,” exile) has long historical usage, notably describing the Jewish communities dispersed after the Babylonian Exile. Today there are many diaspora populations—the African diaspora across the Americas, Europe, and the Caribbean; the Chinese diaspora spanning Southeast Asia to the Americas; and the Jewish diaspora across Europe and beyond. Diasporas often include people who left their homelands involuntarily, as in the transatlantic slave trade, forcible removals, or more recent waves of refugees and exiles such as Syrians fleeing conflict.

Contemporary Indian Writing in English frequently examines problems arising from migration and diaspora—displacement, alienation, rootlessness, fragmentation, racial discrimination, marginalization, identity crises, and cultural conflict, among others. The late twentieth century saw the rise of transnational communities commonly referred to as diasporas. The term “diaspora” derives from the Greek roots *dia* and *sporio*, meaning “to disperse.” Historically, it described Jewish populations scattered after forcible displacement and mass violence; more recently the label has been extended to other dispersed peoples and communities.

Diasporic writers such as Anita Desai, Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shani Mootoo, Kiran Desai, and others have examined immigrant concerns across their works. In recent years, critical interest has especially focused on Indian writers who have settled in the United States. These authors give voice to the psychological trauma, cultural alienation, and identity crises experienced by people uprooted from India.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s writing engages deeply with the cultural disjunctures experienced by Indian immigrant women in the United States. Living in America heightens her awareness of cultural differences and prompts a sustained exploration of diasporic identity. Divakaruni argues that immigrant Indian women feel the effects of dislocation more acutely than men; consequently, her protagonists frequently oscillate between remembering their pasts and adapting to new social realities. In her American Book Award-winning debut collection, *Arranged Marriage*, she delineates key dimensions of diasporic consciousness—alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, and existential questioning—while concentrating on characters who negotiate the demands of two worlds.

Although the United States offers economic opportunity and cultural pluralism, it also presents obstacles to assimilation. Many migrants uproot themselves seeking better material conditions, yet they retain a strong attachment to their cultural identities. This reluctance to relinquish inherited identities complicates integration, and native populations often respond with ambivalence or resistance, producing social tensions and hardships for newcomers.

Divakaruni's oeuvre is centrally concerned with women across racial and religious boundaries who share common gendered experiences. Her heroines must reconcile competing cultural and religious expectations. As she observes, her characters struggle to balance family responsibilities with individual fulfillment, a tension that reflects the conflict between traditional Hindu ideals of maternal self-sacrifice and Western notions of personal happiness.

Having emigrated to the United States at nineteen in 1976, Divakaruni became acutely aware of racial and cultural hierarchies and the vulnerabilities of South Asian women in exile. Her activism—most notably the founding of Maitri, a hotline for South Asian women experiencing abuse and discrimination—informs her fiction, which often foregrounds the abuses and resilience of immigrant women. Divakaruni is regarded as a prominent voice within the Indian diaspora for her sensitive portrayals of Indian, particularly Bengali, women's lives in America. Across her fiction and poetry she repeatedly examines identity crises, emotional isolation, communicative breakdown, and migratory experience. Her work has been widely translated and anthologized; several stories and novels have been adapted for stage and screen. Before turning to fiction, she established herself as a poet, and her literary practice continues to foreground the immigrant experience.

"Expatriates have powerful and poignant experiences when they live away from their original culture – and this becomes home, and never quite, and then you can't really go back and be quite at home there either." (Divakaruni Profile by Arthur J. Pais)

Chitra Banerjee, the author of several award-winning volumes of poetry and novels, in her debut collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) which has also won a PEN Josephine Miles Award and a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, deals with the immigrant experiences, especially of women in general. Divakaruni, with her remarkable workmanships portrays diasporic women protagonists, living in two cultures, struggling the insecurities of exile, and questioning their identities. In this brilliant collection, which contains eleven short stories.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represents the first generation of Indian immigrants to the United States who spent formative years in India and carried aspects of their native culture into exile. Her dual exposure to India's postcolonial society and the diasporic context abroad informs her nuanced portrayals of adjustment, struggle, and suffering among characters both at home and in the diaspora. A central concern throughout *Arranged Marriage* is the problem of cultural adjustment experienced by Indian women who relocate to the West, a recurring theme within the broader study of Indo-American cultural dynamics.

The collection's opening story, "Bats," depicts the physical and emotional injuries endured by a woman who flees an abusive husband and returns to India with her child, while "Clothes" examines the unfulfilled promises of marriage and the anxieties of migration as Sumita accompanies her husband to California. Across these narratives Divakaruni registers the hardships faced by women in foreign environments and advances a conception of diaspora as more than dispersion: a complex matrix of consciousness. Writing as an immigrant woman, she captures the multiplicity of Indian diasporic experience in vivid detail.

Divakaruni's longer works—*Mistress of Spices*, *The Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, and *Queen of Dreams*—consistently foreground the female immigrant experience, addressing cultural conflict, racism, identity, alienation, and processes of integration. Her fiction traces how immigrant women negotiate belonging: many initially struggle with dislocation and cultural clash, then gradually gain purchase in the United States through selective adaptation. They frequently adopt positive elements of American life while preserving valued aspects of their native culture and discarding more orthodox practices. Second-generation characters frequently occupy an in-between position, negotiating parental cultural inheritance alongside American social norms. This study examines the lived experience of Indian women migrants in the United States as represented across Divakaruni's fiction.

She seems to follow two divergent tracks personal and impersonal, but it moves in the direction of uniformity. In the novel *Queen of Dreams* which came out in the year 2004 marks a growth in Divakaruni vision of immigration. In this novel the mother, who comes from the native slum area of Calcutta is endowed with the exceptional power of interpreting the hidden messages of the dreams of her customers like that of mistress of spices, she wants to spare Rakhi from the tales of her strange and painful

past. Rakhi in spite of her birth and nurturing in American life unconsciously retains her innate bonding with Indian life, Indian scenery and Indian Culture.

Divakaruni focuses primarily on women who live between two cultures, showing their sadness, disappointment, and how they adapt to these conditions. She examines how they respond to life in the diaspora, whether by abandoning or preserving their cultural values. Each story offers a distinct perspective on diasporic consciousness. In most stories, Divakaruni clearly depicts Indian women immigrants who face ongoing social and psychological conflict. Through careful storytelling, she presents female protagonists who live in two cultural worlds, cope with the insecurities of exile, and question their identities. This notable collection contains eleven short stories.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a significant writer of Indian diaspora who has enriched the corpus of international writing in English. Nilanjana Sudeshna, better known as Jhumpa Lahiri, is known for her short stories, novels and essays in English and Italian. Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Indian immigrant parents from West Bengal. She was born in London in 1967 and raised in Rhode Island. Her Bengali parents, a teacher and a librarian, took their family on regular trips to Calcutta, India to visit extended family. Lahiri completed her B.A. at Barnard College, and from Boston University she earned M.A. She is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University in the United States. Her debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) was adapted into the popular film of the same name. In these works, Lahiri explored the Indian-immigrant experience in America. In 2011, Lahiri moved to Rome, Italy and has since then published two books of essays. In 2019, published her first novel in Italian called *Dove mi trovo* and also compiled, edited and translated the Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories which consists of 40 Italian short stories written by 40 different Italian writers.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an award-winning author known for her sensitive portrayal of immigrant experiences and Indian American life. Her stories also explore universal themes such as loneliness, longing, identity, and difficulties in communication. Some of her well-known works include *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and *The Lowland*. Her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. Lahiri's writing style, especially in *The Namesake*, is simple and clear. She uses straightforward language, uncomplicated sentence structures, and minimal figurative expressions, making her work accessible to a wide range of readers.

A significant aspect of Lahiri's writing is her representation of Indian diasporic women. Her works examine the experiences of immigrant Indian women through themes related to feminism, womanhood, and motherhood. She highlights issues such as double marginalization, patriarchal control, cultural and ideological pressures, gender inequality, discrimination, power dynamics, sexism, stereotyping, personal freedom, and female sexuality. Through these themes, Lahiri presents the challenges and struggles faced by women living between different cultures.

The Namesake explores the struggles faced by immigrants living in a foreign country. The novel focuses on feelings of displacement, homesickness, cultural conflict, and the search for identity. Through the experiences of the Ganguli family, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays their thirty-year journey of adapting to life in America while trying to preserve their Indian cultural roots. Lahiri's characters often experience an internal conflict between their native culture and the culture of their adopted country. They struggle to balance these two identities and search for a sense of belonging. Their experiences reflect issues such as alienation, cultural differences, and the development of a hybrid identity. By presenting the emotional and psychological struggles of her characters, Lahiri gives her work a universal appeal that connects with readers from different backgrounds.

The Namesake is considered a diasporic novel because it follows the life of an Indian immigrant family living in the United States. Lahiri has received critical recognition for her detailed and realistic portrayal of family relationships and the challenges faced by immigrants who try to maintain their Indian heritage while pursuing the American dream. Drawing from her own experiences as the child of immigrants, Lahiri understands the difficulties of living between two cultures. In *The Namesake*, she explores important themes such as diaspora, cultural alienation, identity crisis, and the challenges of building a new life in a foreign land.

The novel centers on Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, an Indian couple who move to America in search of better educational and professional opportunities. Through their story and the experiences of their children, Lahiri examines the complexities of identity and cultural difference within the diasporic community. The novel demonstrates that identity is not fixed but is constantly shaped by cultural experiences, family influences, and social environments.

In an interview Lahiri has admitted: "I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds... I don't really know what a distinct south Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life". And that is exactly what she does through her characters. Names are symbols of identity in life. Names help people to communicate with each other, they play an important role for people to identify themselves. As identity becomes the core issue, the names become quite significant. Indian tradition follows various kinds of rituals and ceremonies of naming a born baby. Names play a very important role in life. In literature, dealing with the clash of cultures, countries, and races, names emerge as identity symbols. In Indian perception good names represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Pet names are sometimes meaningless and silly. The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggle Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual name. The novel represents the experience of a very specific community which has no name.

According to Michel Wieviorka, when a diaspora community is continuously excluded, discriminated against, or treated as culturally different despite its desire to be accepted, its members may develop a stronger attachment to their cultural identity. Such experiences often lead individuals to define themselves through their cultural background and distinct social position.

In *The Namesake*, the immigrant family tries to recreate a sense of home while living far away from their native country. This effort is especially important for their children, who grow up in a foreign environment. However, the children often experience feelings of rootlessness because they struggle to fully identify with either American culture or their parents' Bengali heritage. They are caught between the culture of the country in which they were born and the culture of their ancestors.

Ashima and Ashoke make great efforts to preserve Bengali traditions for their children, Gogol and Sonia. They organize Bengali social gatherings and introduce them to Bengali language, literature, and cultural practices. For example, Ashima teaches Gogol about Durga Puja and encourages him to memorize a children's poem by Rabindranath Tagore. At the same time, she recognizes the importance of adapting to American society. She allows her children to watch educational programs such as *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* so that they can improve their English and fit into their school environment.

As a result, Gogol grows up balancing two cultural worlds. At home, he speaks Bengali and follows Bengali customs, while outside he participates in American society. This dual cultural experience creates confusion about his identity and sense of belonging. Multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of different cultures within the same society. It promotes respect for cultural diversity rather than forcing people to abandon their cultural backgrounds. At the same time, it discourages cultural, religious, linguistic, or racial groups from isolating or discriminating against one another.

The Namesake effectively portrays the complex experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States. Through Gogol's character, Lahiri shows how the children of immigrants often feel that they belong neither completely to their parents' culture nor fully to the culture of the country in which they live. Although Gogol is American by birth, he is not always recognized as fully American by others. Because of this, he struggles with questions of identity and acceptance and strongly desires to fit into mainstream American society. He wants to live unnoticed. But he is not viewed as an American by other Americans, even though he is a native-born citizen. He tries to put a wall between his past and his present but it is not easy. The adoption of Nikhil is a part to live only in the present, but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil.

He tries to become an entirely different person from what really, he is. Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet Gogol and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. Jhumpa Lahiri tries to focus on the issue of identity what she had faced in her childhood. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He wants to be connected to the strange names in the graveyard when the students were taken to the graveyard for the project. He wants to relate himself with American locale, but his name hinders his way to be recognized as an American. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. No one knows him as Gogol but Nikhil. His life with new name also gets changed. Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianness. So, who he is becomes a great problem. It is the name which determines identity. Gogol is trying to get identity. Even after making all efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. Such efforts are made to escape his past identity and heritage. Gogol engages in a constant struggle to remain loyal to both worlds.

Hence, the major theme portrayed in the novel is one of identity. This theme is illustrated vividly by examining the importance of one's culture and background, gender, and name as the definition of patriarchal lineage and destiny in life. The Namesake convincingly illustrates the lives of both first generation and second generation Indian migrants in the USA. Alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian Diaspora and even if people are at home in any part of the world it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation. The novel also shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. She has tried to answer all these questions in her own poise through the quest of identity of her characters. The second-generation Diaspora finds their roots only after undergoing cultural imbalance. Diaspora is all about the creation of new identities, spaces for growth, resolution of conflicts and a new culture. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural belief and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groomed to be bilingual and bicultural face cultural dilemmas and displacement more. But at last Lahiri also shows that all immigrants carve their own routes in the course of time and it's not necessary that they should settle in the country of their own origin.

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