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## Depiction of Women in the Writings of Select Indian Women Diaspora Novelists

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### Abstract

*Indian Diaspora writings portray women in a complex and multifaceted manner. One common theme in Indian Diaspora writings is the experience of displacement and migration. Women who migrate to new countries often face challenges such as adapting to a new culture. They may also experience racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Despite these challenges, Indian Diaspora women are often portrayed as resilient. Another common theme in Indian Diaspora writings is the exploration of identity. Women who live in multiple cultures often negotiate their identities in complex ways. They may feel torn between their traditional Indian heritage and the values of their new home. They may also have to grapple with the different expectations that are placed on them by their families, communities, and workplaces. This paper makes an attempt to multifaceted narratives in the select novels of some prominent Indian Diaspora women novelists. The salient themes and the singular perceptive of each writer are highlighted in this paper. In Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, struggles to reconcile his Indian heritage with his American upbringing. His mother, Ashoke, a strong character, experiences the challenges of displacement and migration. In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, the protagonist, Jasmine, escapes from an abusive marriage in India and immigrates to the United States. She experiences the challenges of racism and sexism in her new home. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist, Tilo, is a young woman who has the power to control the emotions of others through spices. But she faces the challenges of being a woman of colour in the United States.*

**Keywords:** culture, Diaspora, discrimination, displacement, migration, resilient.

**Statement of the Research:**

The purpose this paper is to examine the portrayal of the intricacies of cultural identity, the sense of belongingness and the all-pervading conflict between tradition and modernity among the Indian immigrants in the United States. The issue of how the women characters discharge their roles in the context of discrimination on the basis of gender, and how they struggle to make their voices are heard and accentuate their identity in the alien cultural context. This includes how women find their agency, their journey towards empowerment and their strong resistance at humiliation. This paper addresses the issues concerned with the social mobility, racial discrimination, agony of displacement and their attempts for adaptability by the female characters in the select novels of Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

**Introduction:**

Human migration is an age-old phenomenon that traces back to the earliest chapters of our history. The term 'Diaspora' now denotes communities displaced from their homelands due to the intricate processes of migration, immigration. Within Diaspora literature, a prevailing theme is the sense of alienation, posing a substantial threat to the individual's freedom and peace of mind. The contributions of the Indian Diaspora to world literature are noteworthy. They tackle major issues such as cultural shifts, immigrant experiences, psychological alienation, and the evolving landscape of social values. This paper tries to examine the portrayal women characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* are considered.

**The Namesake**

Jhumpa Lahiri is indeed a prominent author known for her exploration of the immigrant experience, particularly focusing on the Indian Diaspora in the United States. Through her dispassionate yet empathetic chronicling, she captures the struggles, triumphs, and conflicts faced by her characters as they grapple with issues such as cultural identity, generational gaps. The term "double vision" aptly describes Lahiri's portrayal of her immigrant characters, highlighting their negotiation of identity within a bicultural framework. This duality is often a central theme in her works, illustrating the tension between the cultural heritage of the characters and their attempts to integrate into the broader American society.

Her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003), won her widespread acclaim, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway Foundation/ PEN Award for its author. Ashima Ganguli is a central character in the novel and her portrayal provides a rich exploration of immigrant experiences, identity problems, the tension between family tradition and individual freedom, and the generation gap. Ashima experiences a profound

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sense of cultural dislocation upon moving from India to the United States after her arranged marriage. Her struggle is seen in various aspects, from adapting to American customs to dealing with the loneliness and isolation that can come with being an immigrant. Ashima Bhaduri, a degree student becomes Ashima Ganguli after her betrothal to Ashoke Ganguli. After their marriage, they move to Boston. Her experiences in America bring her face to face with a more individualistic culture, where the concept of love and marriage differs significantly from her cultural upbringing.

The novel revolves around the experiences of two generations within the Ganguli family—Ashoke and Ashima representing the older generation resisting Americanization, while their children, Gogol and Sonia, grapple with the need to belong in a new cultural context in Boston. The narrative unfolds the struggles, psychological disturbances, and the impact of uprooting on the family. The mention of Calcutta suggests a connection to India, and the narrative appears to highlight the experiences and perceptions of the characters as they endure the clash of cultures and the trauma associated with migration. Additionally, it acknowledges the sacrifices made by Indian women who leave their homeland to create a new life for their families, emphasizing the challenges and aspirations tied to this decision.

The challenges faced by the first generation, particularly Ashima, in acclimating to an unfamiliar culture are pronounced. Her pregnancy, a usually joyous phase for married women, became a formidable trial in this alien land where solace was scarce. The loneliness stemming from the unfamiliar surroundings extinguished the typical sentiments of joy associated with pregnancy. For Ashima, it was overshadowed by the isolation and the peculiarity of her new environment. In the hospital, Ashima found herself as the sole representative of her Indian heritage, surrounded by three American women in the adjoining room. The usual camaraderie and support that often characterize the experience of pregnancy were conspicuously absent for Ashima. Ashima is just scared “to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one” (6). She turns nostalgic about her kin and kith in India. After giving birth to Gogol, she expresses her apprehension to Ashoke, “I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back” (33). She sincerely longs that her grandmother in India should give a name to her new born baby boy in America. But she extremely disappointed when she fails to do so.

After her husband’s death, Ashima initially experienced a profound dissonance; she felt, “suddenly, horribly, and permanently alone” (278). However, determined to find a new equilibrium, she chose a unique coping strategy—dividing her time between six months in the States and six months in India. In the aftermath of her husband’s death, Ashima’s concerns shifted towards her son’s marriage. Gogol eventually married Moushmi, a girl from the same cultural background. Nonetheless their union faced challenges due to Moushmi’s clandestine involvement with Dimitri, leading to marital strife that eventually

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culminated in divorce. The multicultural context in which their relationship flourished in America ultimately could not withstand the strains, resulting in the dissolution of their marriage.

After her divorce, Moushmi moves in with Dimitri, intending to relocate to Paris. Though Ashima and Moushmi share the same cultural background but lead distinctly different lives. While Ashima cherishes everything associated with her husband, Moushmi views most things related to her Gogol as mere commodities lacking significance. Ashima stands out among the characters due to her unwavering commitment to marriage, guided by the wisdom of her elders. She follows the advice of her elders, “not to eat beef, or wear skirts or cut off her hair” (37) rather earnestly. Born and raised in India, Ashima upholds Indian values, traditions, and culture even as she resides in America. As a representative of the first generation of immigrants, she takes pride in her cultural heritage and is determined not to compromise it. However, the second generation defies conventional norms, forging their own paths in life. Moushmi, a modern Bengali of the new generation, is born and raised in America’s multicultural society, embodying a unique blend of Indian American and French identities. Unlike migrants who hold a deep regard for India and its people, Moushmi adopts a more Westernized attitude.

Similarly, Sonia, the daughter of the Gangulis, never feels at home in Calcutta during her visit to her ancestral home. But, unlike Moushmi, she marries her boyfriend Ben, a half-Chinese boy and remains loyal to him. Through the existential struggle, as portrayed through Ashima, Jhumpa Lahiri captures the emotional turmoil of a woman grappling with the challenges of living in a foreign land, plagued by a profound sense of isolation. In both appearance and ideology, Ashima embodies the essence of a traditional Indian wife. Her life orbits around her husband and children, and she willingly sacrifices personal comforts for the sake of her family. Devoted to the roles assigned to her as a daughter, granddaughter, wife, and mother, Ashima emerges as a true victor in going through the complexities of her existence.

### **Jasmine**

Bharathi Mukherjee, an acclaimed and daring immigrant, dwells on the intricate intersection of two cultures—Indian and Canadian. Her journey involves grappling with culture shock and the conflicts of adjustment. Bharathi Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* (1989) narrates the tale of a young village girl uprooted from rural India, journeying to Tampa, Florida, marking the novel as a fable depicting the immigrant experience. The narrative explores the psychological struggles and self-invention integral to success in America for newcomers. Jasmine's odyssey commences in the makeshift environment of Hanspur, Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, her birthplace, and the setting where the threads of fate are woven based on gender, determining the future lives of women like her. The narrative

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unfolds with the reflections of Jane Ripplemeyer (known as Jasmine), a twenty-four-year-old, residing as the common-law spouse of Bud Ripplemeyer, a fifty-four-year-old banker in Baden. Through retrospection, she recounts her life's journey, commencing from her childhood in Hanspur.

During her childhood in Hanspur, an astrologer prophesied Jasmine's fate, predicting that she would become a widow and face exile. Born as Jyoti, the fifth unwanted daughter in a destitute, displaced Hindu family, she represents the plight of Indian girls. She follows her destiny amidst a society marked by nepotism and pressing women's issues, especially in the context of immigration. At the tender age of seven, an astrologer predicts Jyoti's fate, foretelling widowhood, and exile. The initial transformation in Jyoti's life evolves through her determined marriage to Prakash, a modern, city-dwelling man who challenges Hindu traditions. Prakash ushers in a different marital reality, eschewing traditional roles for a more progressive, urban perspective. Prakash's thoughtfulness extends to his belief that "the husband must protect the wife whenever he can" (90), a sentiment tragically cut short when he falls victim to a bombing by Sukki terrorists.

Following Prakash's demise, Jasmine resolves not to return to her former identity as Jyothi in Hanspur. Embracing her new persona as Jasmine, she determines to fulfil Prakash's mission and vision of owning an electrical store. This endeavour becomes her primary goal, symbolizing a fresh start in life. To pursue this ambition, Jasmine embarks on an exile to America, clandestinely crossing borders with forged, costly documents. The anticipated fate of exile becomes a reality. Upon arriving in America, the initial act involves burning both her sari and Prakash's suit in a motel simultaneously. This act serves as a cathartic release, marking the definitive separation from her former life. Jasmine's actions symbolize her rejection of traditional constraints and her eagerness to embrace a new life.

Jasmine, in her resistance to Indian restrictions, emerges as a symbol of resilience, embodying the desire for a transformative journey toward a new and liberated existence. Her foray into American life commences in the new household of Lillian Gordon, a white American woman. Lillian. The initial phase of Jasmine's transformation involves adopting an American appearance, mirroring the ethos of the melting pot symbolizing the diverse amalgamation of people from around the world in the United States. Jasmine aspires to assimilate into this new land, seeking the security and freedom that a green card, a resident alien card, can provide. The green card becomes a symbol of permission to live without the spectre of refugee status, granting Jasmine the freedom she craves.

During her two-year tenure as a caregiver for the adopted daughter, Duff, Jasmine becomes more entrenched in American culture. Living with this American family and experiencing their affluence becomes synonymous with embracing Americanness. However, when confronted with her husband's murderer, Jasmine senses the need to flee from the

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comfort of Taylor's home, indicating a complex and challenging journey through the contrasting facets of her American experience. Her journey to Iowa signifies another chapter in her exiled life. In the Ripplemeyer land, under the name Jane, given by her prospective husband Bud Ripplemeyer, she grapples with the challenge of being an Asian woman in a predominantly American setting. Jane, as she is now called, stands out as a foreign stranger, even as she carries Bud's child. Her loss of a husband reinforces her decision to distance herself from India and seeking escape from the unbearable fates. Both Jane and Du, another figure in the story adopted by the Ripplemeyers, serve as parallel narratives, pointing to the diverse paths, the immigrants take in their American journey.

The narrative introduces us to a very different phase in Jasmine's life. Her situation in Baden, Iowa is complex, marked by her pregnancy and relationship with Bud Ripplemeyer. The description of their life together highlights the contrast between Jasmine's past and her current circumstances. The choice to live in rural Iowa with an older lover, Bud, and their adopted son Du adds layers to the narrative, underscoring the unconventional aspects of Jasmine's journey. The changing names that Jasmine assumes at different points in her journey are symbolic of the multifaceted nature of her identity. These names not only represent her assimilation into new cultures but also reflect the societal expectations and constraints imposed upon her. Some names may empower her, giving her agency and freedom, while others might be oppressive, indicative of the challenges and restrictions she faces. The contrast in Jasmine's love for two different men underscores the internal conflicts that often arise when individuals grapple with competing responsibilities and their own aspirations.

In the pursuit of her husband's American Dream, Jasmine endures a harrowing journey, braving the perilous seas and the brutality of a human trafficker. But her unwavering spirit and determination guide her towards a glimmer of hope, embodied by Lillian Gordon, a compassionate woman who extends a helping hand to undocumented female immigrants. With Lillian's support, Jasmine secures a job as a nanny for Taylor and Wylie Hayes' daughter Duff. For the first time, Jasmine experienced independence and freedom. She was treated as a professional, not a servant. Jasmine's happiness living with the Hayeses ended when Wylie left Taylor for another man. Jasmine remained as Duff's nanny during the divorce, and Taylor made his interest in her clear. However, one day in the park, Jasmine recognized Sukhwinder, the radical terrorist who had killed Prakash, working as a hot dog vendor. Panicked and fearing for her own safety, as well as Taylor and Duff's, she fled to Iowa. In present-day Iowa, Jasmine recalls the day that Bud was shot and paralyzed by a disgruntled bank customer. It is one more burden of guilt that she takes upon her shoulders, along with Prakash's death.

Jasmine's life in Iowa revolves around her frustrations with fitting in, her love-hate relationship with Karen, and her deepening awareness of the strength and aptitude of humanity as evinced in Du. Du, having found his one remaining sister in California, leaves Iowa to reunite with her in a Vietnamese community. Before departing, he encourages Jasmine to follow her heart. Meanwhile, Jasmine has been receiving postcards from Taylor, who expresses his desire to see her again. He eventually travels to Iowa with Duff, hoping to rekindle their romance. Taylor and Duff's arrival at Jasmine's doorstep crystallizes her decision. Though fond of Bud, she does not love him. Rejecting the astrologer's prophecy, Jasmine takes charge of her destiny and walks out with Taylor, never glancing back. Jasmine transforms her immigration experience as an act of transformation and opportunity towards progress in an alien land. The bodily and the emotional ventures are interwoven, when she declares, "Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through the un-caulked windows" (240). Thus the novel is woven with the theme of acquiescence with the alien cultural milieu but not of moral defeat. The novel is about how one should escape guilt and become one with the American cultural acclimatization. To put it in the words of Muktha Manoj Jacob "The center of morality and focus is disputed, just as Thomas Hardy declared his Tess a 'pure woman', Mukherjee declares her jasmine as a true woman and a heroic woman." (792)

### **The Mistress of Spices**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is a novel that invites a critical examination from a gender perspective, exploring the intersections of femininity, agency, and societal expectations. The narrative revolves around Tilo, the titular Mistress of Spices, who possesses magical powers linked to the spices she uses in her spice shop. As the Mistress of Spices, her abilities transcend the conventional boundaries of power associated with women in traditional societies.

Tilo, the central character in the novel, entered the world as the third daughter of a modest family. Born at a time when the family's resources were strained, she was nourished with donkey's milk, an unconventional sustenance that surprisingly accelerated her development, granting her the gift of sight and speech earlier than her peers. Initially named Nayan Tara, Tilo's life took a remarkable turn. Discovering her latent abilities, she assisted villagers in resolving their issues and begins to earn lavish gifts as expressions of gratitude. Her household gained renown, transforming the once-neglected girl into a celebrated figure. Tilo's renowned transcended local boundaries, and her powers, unchecked and misused, could attract both admirers and adversaries. She becomes a symbol of empowerment, challenging stereotypical notions of female roles. Tilo's journey can be seen as a rebellion against societal expectations imposed on women.

As a Mistress of Spices, she withstands the limitations set by a patriarchal society, using her magical abilities to assert her agency and challenge gender norms. The spice shop becomes a metaphorical space where Tilo negotiates her identity, resisting societal constraints on women. The novel explores the complexities of romantic and familial relationships, emphasizing the struggle for autonomy within these relationships. Tilo's relationships with men, including her love interest Raven, showcase her desire for love and connection while maintaining her independence. The male characters in the novel are not mere stereotypes but are presented as individuals who grapple with their own understanding of gender roles. Tilo's character embodies a synthesis of tradition and modernity. She, with her mystical powers, becomes a bridge between these worlds. The spices themselves serve as symbolic representations of various aspects of femininity. Each spice embodies a different characteristic, reflection of the multifaceted nature of women. The magical powers of Tilo are tied to these spices, and she could communicate with them. She uses the spices to heal people, both physically and emotionally.

Her powers extend beyond the ordinary, allowing her to touch the lives of those who seek solace and transformation. However, she faces a profound inner conflict as she grapples with her emotions and desires. Her magical duties clash with her personal longings, especially when she becomes romantically involved with Raven. This conflict adds a human dimension to her character. Tilo exists in a dual state, tethered to both the mystical realm of the spices and the tangible world of human emotions. This duality becomes a source of tension as she struggles between her responsibilities as the Mistress of Spices and her desire for a personal life. Tilo's romantic relationship with Raven, a man she meets in her spice shop, becomes a central element of her character arc. This relationship is not only a source of joy but also a source of conflict as she copes with the consequences of breaking the rules that govern her mystical existence.

Initiated into the ranks of young mistresses of spices as a girl, Tilo received guidance from the First Mother. She was cautioned about crucial rules that carried significant consequences if broken. These rules included a mandate never to abandon their designated stores scattered across the globe. Additionally, the young mistresses were strictly instructed not to make physical contact with the skin of the individuals they encountered. Equally important was the prohibition against harnessing the formidable and enigmatic strength of the spices for personal gain. Disregarding these rules meant grappling with the repercussions of their misuse; she runs a store named Spice Bazar in Oakland. Her life takes an unexpected turn when a dashing man on a motorcycle crashed outside her shop. Tilo, attempts to mend his injuries. However, everything changes when their physical contact sparks a profound and genuine love. With this, the spices, which were once a source of positivity, begin to exhibit negative effects, marking a tumultuous shift in Tilo's world.

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Recognizing that the root of her misfortunes has stemmed from breaking the sacred rules, the First Mother appears in a vision of Tilo. She expresses anger at Tilo's choice of the American over her commitment to the Spices. Overwhelmed with sorrow, Tilo pledges to return to India and close her store.

Before bidding farewell, Tilo informs the Spices that she would spend just one more night with the American. Closing the store, she ventures into a romantic and passionate night with Doug. The next morning, she leaves him a heartfelt note, explaining that she must depart and could not return. In a symbolic act of eternal servitude and submission to the mystical Spices, she sets the Spices ablaze, with her at the centre of the flames. In the end, Raven embarks on a quest to find Tilo and discovers the store in ruins. To his surprise, Tilo has not been succumbed to the flames. She remains alive and unharmed. There is no evidence of a fire, but the aftermath of an earthquake is evident. In a mystical vision, the First Mother appears, , and conveys that Tilo's demonstration of loyalty to the Spices has earned her the right to everything she deserves, assuring her that the Spices would never abandon her again.

Raven embraces Tilo's journey and agrees to assist her in rebuilding the store and christens her as Maya—Illusion, Spell, Enchantment—the invisible power which keeps the universe move ahead perpetually. The trials and tribulations have cemented their bond, and Tilo's newfound connection with the Spices promise a future filled with harmony and fulfilment. Her character explores the human longings for love, and companionship. Her willingness to sacrifice personal happiness for the greater good is evident in her choices and actions. In this novel Divakaruni blends parable with witchcraft and achieves stupefying success in her attempt. To put it in her own words, "I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable." (qtd. in Ch. Aruna, 97)

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, after a thorough examination of the portrayal of women in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, it becomes evident that each author employs a unique lens to explore the complexities of womanhood within the context of Diaspora and cultural identity. Despite the distinctiveness of each portrayal, common threads of cultural tension, identity negotiation, and the empowerment of women emerge. These literary works underscore the resilience and agency of women in the face of cultural shifts, emphasizing the importance of embracing complexity and diversity in narratives about women and ultimately enrich our understanding of the intricate tapestry of womanhood.

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