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**IDENTITY CRISIS IN SECOND GENERATION INDIAN IMMIGRANTS:  
A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S FICTION**

**Abstract**

The role of these second generation Indians is central to the discussion of continually changing sensibilities of diasporic community. These generations suffer from double marginalization - first because of their ethnicity, and secondly due to generational differences. The complexities of their distinctive identity require particular note as they indicate both the challenges posed by the fragile cultural roots and possibilities for successful integration in the host community. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction offers the resolution of this dilemma in the form of the amalgamation of oriental ethics with the occidental ethos. This paper is an attempt to study the evolving life of the various Indo-American characters, their identity crisis and their final transmutation towards a remixed synthesis of its own as explored in her novels.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, identity crisis, Immigrants

The second generation is a term applied to the children of expatriates who are born in America but their parents are attached to the homelands. The frequent visits to the native country, continuous interaction with people of native culture and the pull of host culture complicates the identity issues of this generation. The ABCDs i.e. *American Born Confused Desis* referring to persons of South Asian origin born in the United States form a distinctive group as compared with the natives on one hand and the first generation of immigrants on the other. The role of these subsequent generations is central to the discussion of continually changing sensibilities of diasporic community. These generations suffer from double marginalization - first because of their ethnicity, and secondly due to generational differences. They become a sub-minority within a minority in the multiethnic, multicultural world of the West. The complexities of their distinctive identity require particular note as they indicate both the challenges posed by the fragile cultural roots and possibilities for successful integration in the host community.

The term 'diaspora' connotes the projection of one's culture and a positive relation with the host culture. The Indian diaspora is providing an empowered space that produces noteworthy narratives which discuss the question of American and South Asian identity. Several anthologies representing new and familiar voices are trying to define the contours of the South Asian communities settled in America. This almost invisible minority is making its presence felt in the literary circles. The forced invisibility is now being questioned and contested by contemporary South Asian writers. Although on the edges of the mainstream culture, the Diaspora is an eloquent entity that produces ground-breaking narratives, which deliberate upon hyphenated identity issues, and they are striving to move from periphery to the centre. As a result, this body of writing is more discernible and vocal. It is this literature, which eventually defines, redefines, changes, gives new shapes, and introduces new dimensions to American Literature. It is a margin that cannot be ignored because it is where the voices are neither silent nor weak. Writing was used as a tool to give expression to this perennial struggle on the part of third world immigrants in their attempt to assimilate into the host culture's life style.

The diasporic writers have created a unique literary space for themselves i.e. being the writers of Indian origin, located overseas writing mostly as a voice for India-born Americans and their children. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has become known as an outstanding Indo-American writer. She has explored in her writings globalization, transnationalism, cultural hybridity, alienation, identity crisis and feminism. Her experiences as an immigrant writer have given her a flexible identity and the ability to define the past and the present through continuous communication with both the cultures. Her characters continuously resist dislocation. They reconnect, re-affiliate and renegotiate their identities in the face of hardships. Hers is a poetic voice, even when couched in prose. Chitra has accentuated the opaque nature of national boundaries. This element of boundaries marks the margins of one's experience as well. It is a platform for resisting co-option by the hegemonic discourse. The culture represented in her writings is Janus-faced. It is not so much about returning to the roots as coming to grips with them as well as with the new culture. The evolving life of the various Indo-American characters and their final transmutation towards a remixed ingenuity of its own is discussed in her novels. This is where Indian and American cultures meet halfway and integrate.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni fully utilizes her position as an Amerindian to portray the cultural multiplicity of South-Asian Americans. Her novels highlight the evolving nature of both immigrant and mainstream American cultural establishment, by depicting with empathetic sensitivity, the lives of the Indo- Americans. The first generation's refusal to accept the identity forced upon them by the host country and living in a cocoon as a refuge from cultural dilemmas has created the feeling of being culturally inadequate in the subsequent generations. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction explores displacement, rootlessness, fragmentation and marginalization of the expatriates and particularly their descendents. She offers the resolution of this dilemma in the form of the amalgamation of oriental ethics with the occidental ethos. This

paper is an attempt to study the evolving life of the various Indo-American characters, their identity crisis and their final transmutation towards a remixed synthesis of its own as explored in her novels.

There is a need to recognize the evolution of the diasporic sensibility in terms of its continually changing consciousness. The role of second-generation and third-generation youth is central to this discussion. The complexities of distinctive identity of this generation require particular note as they indicate both the challenges to and possibilities for successful integration in the host community. The native substratal roots and their generational differences with their elders in their families on the other hand marginalise and isolate them. They refuse to anchor at the cultural island created by their parents and the sea of the host culture refuses to immerse them.

“Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces.”

(Aschcroft, 2002: 217-218).

The response of the first generation of immigrants to the immigration was individualistic especially about bringing up their offspring in a controverting host culture. The Queen of Dreams, Mrs. Gupta, Rakhi's mother never came to accept her migration to California. She is just caught up in America. She nurtures in her heart “her longing for community forever” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 211). But when it comes to bringing up Rakhi, she gives her “a warped Western sense of what's Indian?” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 89) because she believed that not talking about the past will protect her daughter. That way she “wouldn't be constantly looking back, hankering, like so many immigrants do.....,splitting between here and there, between life right now and that which can never be” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 89). On the contrary Belle and Jespal's parents try their level best to bring them up according to Indian mores and codes.

The second generation of Asian-Americans, a relatively new cross-cultural breed of Indians living in America, has emerged as a section of society that is neither exclusively American nor Indian, but has the traits of both. The pull of both the cultures that is diagonally opposite creates a cultural confusion. They suffer from a conflict between two selves- their native and acquired self. While cutting themselves from the biological homeland they have evolved a new and meaningful version of consolidated values.

Rakhi, the second generation Asian-American, longs for the mysterious magic of India. The rhythm of her life is attuned to this longing and effectively brings out her perennial dilemma. Her inimical reminiscence of Sonny's fusion music session also suggests her inability to come to terms with her hybrid existence. She has an aggressive desire to learn to be the interpreter of dreams like her mother because she feels “to be an interpreter of the inner realm seemed so *Indian*” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 35). She hungers for “all things Indian.” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 35) and discards Freud's *Interpreter of Dreams* because it “focused too much on Western methodology” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 49). Rakhi exoticizes the Orient like an Occidental. In her student days, she in an attempt to be acquainted with her origin borrows cassettes with songs about Bengali

monsoons and listens to them time and again. But it is only when “ancient Indian wisdom and New Age Californian” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 48) one converge that Rakhi is complete.

The charisma of the man in white and Elaina, the girl in flowery dress, weaves fantasy and reality so beautifully that magic seamlessly flows into the waves of the reality. Apart from imparting the magical ambiance to the plot, they explore the themes very effectively. Man in white, messenger from the dream world for Rakhi’s mother and later guardian angel of Rakhi is basically Orient in origin. He seems to symbolize all that is lost by leaving the motherland. Whereas he connotes a sense of loss for Rakhi’s mother and gives her final salvation by taking her down the pathway back to dreamland, a land she had lost when she left her motherland, he metaphorically proves claustrophobic for child Rakhi who desperately seeks to know her mother’s land and feels lost. He is the dream power that is not hers but he plays a pivotal role in Rakhi’s life. He reignites the blocked genius of Rakhi by appearing to her time and again in the eucalyptus grove. He helps Rakhi to come to terms and accept her position as Indian-American by delivering the photographs that contribute towards unclouding her mind. The photographs that are “Indian- but in such different ways!”(Divakaruni, *Queen* 245) teach her to shed the boundaries around the word- Indian. With these typified icons crashing down, “she waits to see if she can build new satisfying shapes from them”(Divakaruni, *Queen* 245).She often wonders if the man in white appears to her, “to bring her something old, something new, a crumb of memory, a silver of understanding?”(Divakaruni, *Queen* 144) to give her a glimpse of dream world to help her to symphonize her synthesized cultural identity. Her attempts to paint the tree in the eucalyptus grove are spoilt time and again till the time she does not come to terms with her hybrid existence. Her identity is complete only when India and America come equidistant to meet in her life.

For the third generation of immigrants, Jonaki, the amalgamation comes quite naturally. Her metaphorically inheriting her grandmother’s gift of dream-telling and her mother expressing herself through painting stands for her being perfectly at peace with her Indian origin and American bringing up. She is the true blue transnational human being whose her guardian angel is not some elusive oriental man in white but a Czechoslovakia girl in floral dress with flowers in her hair, Eliana, a friendly dream spirit, who sings to her, gives her gifts and guides her in every possible way. Her acceptance of her dichotomized cultural identity makes her magical gifts also inclusive.

Another aspect of ABCDs (American- Born Confused Desis) is portrayed through Balwant aka Belle, who is very keen “to shed the last vestiges of her desi-ness” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 15). Quite like Rakhi she is culturally confused but she rejects every attempt made by her parents to “let them pull her back into their safe Sikh net” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 16). She hates the idea of having been sent to take up Punjabi classes in gurdwara in her childhood. This peppy, semi-Bimbo girl makes every effort to break away from her FOB (fresh off boat) rules of her Sikh parents that they “pushed down (her) throat everyday of (her) life until she

escaped to the college” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 219). On the other hand her boyfriend Jespal is a very balanced character who has accepted his ethnic identity amidst the western civilization and chosen the religion and lifestyle of his parents after due deliberations. “He didn’t accept them because he grew up with them. He thought about them and struggled against them, but finally he was convinced they fitted better than Western ways.” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 219)

The aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attack raises the question regarding the hyphenated existence of Asian-Americans. Rakhi and her family are attacked by the native people who call themselves ‘patriots’ in the Kurma shop. Apart from the physical injuries, it causes serious doubts in the American acceptance of the migrants. The words of the rioters, “You ain’t no American” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 267), keep on haunting Rakhi, who wonders “if I wasn’t American, then what was I?” (Divakaruni, *Queen* 267).

Tariq of *One Amazing Thing* finds himself in almost similar dilemma. Everyone advises that his parents should move back to India after his father’s illegal detention by the Govt. authorities and his subsequent stroke of nervous breakdown and paralysis, but Tariq is stuck between both the worlds. The parents since they were born and brought up in India can afford to go back to their roots, but Tariq “wouldn’t fit in India” (Divakaruni, *One Amazing Thing*, 131) and his assertion “I am an American. The thought of being driven from my home filled me with rage” (Divakaruni, *One Amazing Thing*, 131) depicts the mindset of many Americans of Asian descent. India becomes little more than folklore in the traumatized world. It becomes a lived reality, the pivot to their past and present lives.

Preeti of *Doors* (Divakaruni, *Arranged Marriage*, 183) even referred to directly as an ABCD has a particular independent mentality. She guards her privacy ferociously. But Deepak is too eager to make his guests comfortable even at the cost of discomforting his wife. Preeti is also caught in two worlds She loves the very Indian Deepak but she is scandalized when “His accent (becomes) ... a lot more Indian.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged Marriage*, 194) In the end the doubts of Preeti’s family and Deepak’s friend come true when they lock the doors of their rooms to each other.

Tilottama, *The Mistress of Spices*, “Tilo, the architect of immigrant dream.” (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 29) evokes the magical powers of the spices of her native soil to assist her customers. These customers, mostly first or second-generation immigrants, are toiling to fuse their native ideas with the foreign new world ideas. The anxiety of the first and second generation of immigrants is quite different. Whereas the first generation worries about the preservation of the native cultural values, the second generation staggers and tries to be a part of the mainstream American culture. For Lalit and Geeta, in *The Mistress of Spices*, the family becomes a battlefield, where modernity clashes with tradition where the Indian culture of Geeta’s grandfather clashes with the American culture of Geeta and where theory clashes with practice. Frayed between two cultures the second generation is both unshackled and shackled by cultural changes on both

sides of the ocean. In a deliberate attempt to forge an identity they cling on to the centre and identify themselves with both host and native nation.

The identity of immigrants could be plural or partial. When it is plural it symbolizes cultural multiplicity whereas partial stands for frail cultural roots. But the diasporic writers advocate plural, hybrid identity as panacea for all the ills. Fusion music and amalgamated cultural clothing of the second generation club goes opens new vistas of life for Rakhi (*Queen of Dreams*). It broadens her spectrum and expands her horizons but for some second-generation Indian Americans like Geeta, (*Mistress of Spices*) the awareness of hyphenation identity is particularly underlined. They try to compartmentalize their family lives and their social lives. At home and within the local community they are try leading compromised Indian life following Indian mores and codes whereas they are constantly under an immense peer pressure to become more and more westernized. American individualistic ideologies and Indian communitarianism creates the conflict.

Divakaruni's fiction thinks through the intrinsic complexities of the cultural identity of the second-generation immigrants, the so called ABCDs. She accentuates their unique situation i.e. being at home as well as homeless. They must assay both the cultures and deliberate upon their cultural inheritance. She prognosticates a global identity as a resolution of their dilemma.

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