Negotiating the Complexities of Bi-cultural Existence

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Abstract
Multiculturalism fundamentally necessitates the recognition and accommodation of heterogeneity, diversity, difference, and plurality, within which immigrant populations endeavour to retain their native cultural specificities, frequently resulting in the formation of fractured identities. Consequently, the immigrant subject confronts a multiplicity of selves, leading to a vacillation between multiple cultural affiliations, often culminating in an overarching sense of non-belonging. Contemporary diasporic discourse meticulously chronicles the doubly liminal, fluid, and evolving terrains of diasporic existence. Migrant authors, in particular, have extensively explored the potentialities inherent in the "border zone", a conceptual space where the migrant identity intersects with that of the host culture. This exploration necessitates a critical process of discernment, involving decisions regarding the preservation or discarding of elements from the indigenous culture, alongside an analysis of migrants' responses to their adopted homelands. The aesthetic of dislocation, as articulated by writers of South Asian origin, powerfully evokes the anxiety, anguish, and epistemic violence that frequently characterise cross-cultural mobility and its resulting displacement. This multicultural trajectory of thought ultimately posits the possibility of simultaneously inhabiting two or more distinct cultural worlds, a condition often accompanied by the emergence of a hybrid sensibility equally conversant in both native and foreign contexts. Indeed, significant variations are observable within immigrant cohorts concerning the degree of ethnic cultural value retention, behavioural adaptations, and the extent of accommodation achieved with the demands of the host culture. These diverse facets of the immigrant experience, brought into sharp focus by cross-cultural encounters, underscore the shared lived realities of diasporic communities, collectively constituting the diaspora ethos. Consequently, "diaspora" emerges as a crucial conceptual tool, effectively highlighting the manifold standpoints generated by migration and displacement. Furthermore, it illuminates an inherently ambivalent politics of both self-positioning and external positioning, as well as processes of self-identification and external identification.

Keywords: Diaspora, Displacement, Identity, Third-Space, Assimilation, Nostalgia

In the contemporary epoch, the term "diaspora" has evolved to encompass the dispersion of any populace affiliated with a recognised nation-state or that shares a common cultural heritage. In the words of Himadri Lahiri, "diaspora is a social formation outside the nation of origin" (4). It is a phenomenon that involves the "uprooting, forced or voluntary, of a mass of people from the homeland and their re-rooting in the hostland" (Lahiri 4). Within these diasporic communities, paramount concerns revolve around the profound states of homelessness and alienation experienced in the new geopolitical landscape. This dislocation transcends mere physical relocation, manifesting predominantly as a complex psychological process. The inherent sorrows and occasional solace of migration have catalysed a quest for non-territorial principles of solidarity among these dispersed groups. This trajectory has, in turn, established a conceptual framework for defining diasporic subjectivity grounded in contemporary theoretical conceptualisations of identity politics.

Such conceptualizations include notions of hybrid effects, the occupation of liminal or border zones, the emergence of a "third time space" (Lavie 56), or the inherently complex genre of the "hyphenated subject" (Mishra 433). As Stuart Hall posits, the multiple cultural configurations characteristic of diaspora:

bear upon them the traces of particular traditions, languages and history by which they are shaped. The difference is that they are not and never be unified in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures: belong at one and the same time to several homes. (310)

The diasporic consciousness, as articulated by authors within the Indian diaspora, frequently manifests as an oscillation between multiple cultural affiliations, often culminating in an overarching sense of non-belonging. Indeed, their authorial impulses are significantly catalysed by the precarious liminality of their lived experiences. This inherent condition renders their literary output, to appropriate Uma Parameswaran's formulation, "doubly liminal" (98). Migrant writers have extensively explored the interstitial possibilities of the border zone, a conceptual space where the migrant identity intersects with that of the host culture. This exploration necessitates a complex negotiation: a critical assessment of which elements of the indigenous culture to discard and which to preserve, alongside an examination of their affective and adaptive responses to the adopted homeland. As diasporic writers, they function as external observers of the new culture, yet simultaneously, they are rendered outsiders in their homeland, scrutinising their past, at times with profound nostalgia, at others with disquieting surprise, given the transformative alterations their original spatial contexts have undergone during their absence.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed poet and writer, and co-founder and former president of MAITRI—a pivotal helpline for South Asian women—has served as a significant voice for Indian women in the United States through her literary works, which meticulously explore the innermost recesses of her protagonists' psyches. Her story-anthology, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), features nine short stories, three of which are set in India. This paper undertakes an analysis of the challenges inherent in navigating bicultural existence, the fluid and evolving landscapes of diasporic realities, with reference to Bengali-American experience, and the persistent affective ties to the country of origin, as depicted in the six stories featuring Indian immigrants from the author's native region of Bengal within the U.S. context.

Robin Cohen, in his enumeration of the defining characteristics of a diasporic formation, identifies "the memory of a single traumatic event" (22) as a sustaining force for the diaspora in their new spatial contexts. In Divakaruni's "The Blooming Season for Cacti", Mira's diasporic subjectivity is indeed sustained by the traumatic experiences and indelible memories of the Bombay riots, during which she suffers the profound loss of her mother. Her subsequent journey toward self-realisation begins with these harrowing events. Following this trauma, she accepts an invitation from her brother, relocating to America to reside with him and her sister-in-law, motivated by a visceral need for "something as different as possible from Bombay" (169). She harbours the expectation that America might serve as an anodyne for her past afflictions. Yet, memories persistently haunt her, particularly those of desperately searching for her mother "through streets filled with the stench of kerosene and burned flesh, calling her name" (176). This trauma continues to pervade her consciousness even in America, notably triggered by the olfactory memory of the water tank in her Bombay house, where she had sought refuge for nearly two days during the riots.

However, her new environment fails to provide an unmitigated sanctuary when her brother initiates plans for her arranged marriage. Consequently, she absconds to California from her brother's residence in Dallas, driven by an intense aversion to matrimony. She articulates her revulsion in the following words, "How could I tell them that when I thought of a man touching me, I smelled the water tank, smoke and corroding metal" (183). California, in turn, presents Mira with new challenges embodied by Radhika and Ajith. Radhika's presence evokes strong maternal associations for Mira, leading her to contemplate various descriptors for Radhika, including "friend,

sister, mother" (190), with the maternal archetype being predominant. A significant shock ensues when Radhika kisses her on the lips, prompting Mira to realize that Radhika's own bitter marital experiences have fostered an atypical, bordering on lesbian, relationship. Mira perceives herself as "being sucked into a vortex from which whispered words rise like ancestral ghosts, disgusting, perverted, unnatural" (201). While her indigenous values ultimately preclude her engagement in a lesbian relationship, she undergoes a phase that Kaur terms "cultural flowering while away" (56). During this period, she succumbs to the influence of liberal American norms, engaging in a sexual encounter with Ajith to explore "the possibilities of my new American life" (203). Nevertheless, her hope of achieving self-reconciliation through pre-marital sex proves abortive, as the sexual experience itself is marked by profound disappointment.

Mira's inability to reconcile with both the "absent topos" and the "present topos" (Mishra 16) positions her squarely within the theoretical paradigms of diasporic subjectivity, specifically aligning with what Vijay Mishra terms "the semantics of the hyphen" (16). The unresolved nature of her affiliations, in relation to both her homeland and hostland, renders her identity simultaneously severed and sutured. Consequently, she occupies a "third time space" (Lavie 16), a liminal interstitial zone that characterizes the complex, non-binary existence of the diasporic subject.

Similar to Mira's trajectory, Monisha, the protagonist in "The Love of a Good Man", seeks refuge in America via a student visa, driven by a profound desire for a new life and an escape from the shame and existential void engendered by her father's abandonment, her mother's agonising death from cancer, and the excruciating solitude she experienced in performing her mother's cremation rites. As Cohen articulates, the traumatic experiences endured in the homeland constitute a significant determinant shaping "the nature of the diasporic group in its countries of exile" (22-5).

Monisha's father emigrated to America, abandoning his wife and daughter for reasons that remain unclear. Years later, he visits his daughter in California, expressing profound remorse for his past dereliction. Monisha readily extends forgiveness, and in the course of her introspective journey, she apprehends that her initial error "lies in trying to find motive, in thinking of humans as rational beings whose actions spring from logical causes" (101). Monisha's response to her father's reappearance indicates a decisive repudiation of her past and a comprehensive assimilation into American culture.

The concept of hybridity emerges as a salient model for understanding diasporic formations within the context of migration. Iain Chambers posits hybridity as a process of cultural intermingling wherein immigrants assimilate elements of the host culture, subsequently reworking and reconstituting these into the production of novel hybrid cultures or identities (50). Tarun, in Divakaruni's "The Intelligence of Wild Things", exemplifies this process by embracing American norms and reinterpreting his native cultural codes to forge a new hybrid identity. His forced relocation to America by his mother, driven by fears of his involvement in the Naxalite movement in Calcutta, and her wounding declaration that "he was ungrateful, a burden" (42), initiated his dislocative journey. In America, the perceived neglect from his sister and brother-in-law acts as a catalyst, compelling him to shed his past identity and assume an American one. His sister observes that "even the expression on his closed face is so totally American" (41). His romantic involvement with an American woman further symbolises this transformation. This initial and comprehensive assimilation into American culture creates a significant emotional chasm between Tarun and his sister, who desperately seeks to convey their mother's critical condition in India and the imperative for his return. However, towards the narrative's denouement, Tarun's transformed self undergoes a further metamorphosis. He is subtly re-influenced by his native cultural values through the sight of a bird, reminiscent of the marsh crane, or *sharash* as it is known in Calcutta. This avian encounter evokes cherished memories, prompting him to affectionately address his sister as "*Didi"*. In turn, his sister demonstrates a readiness to reconcile with Tarun's relationship with the foreign woman, perceiving the bird as a symbolic messenger from Bengal, a harbinger from ancestral tales, carrying a message of mutual salvation. Ultimately, both Tarun

and his sister achieve hybrid identities, successfully navigating and balancing their respective roots and routes.

The protagonist of the eponymous story, "The Unknown Errors of Our Lives", Ruchira, constructs meaning for her diasporic subjectivity through a steadfast retention of native ties, a phenomenon Safran defines as "ethno communal consciousness" (83). Despite her upbringing in America, she exhibits an unwavering conviction in Indian legends, manifesting this through the creation of a series of mythic paintings. Her consistent visits to India during vacations to see her grandmother, whom she cherishes above all others, underscore this profound connection. Furthermore, she undertook the study of Bengali specifically to facilitate epistolary communication with her grandmother. Following her grandmother's demise, Ruchira adopts painting as a medium to continue this profound correspondence.

Ruchira meticulously renders mythic images, including "Hanuman, the monkey god, Kamadhenu, the magic cow" (222), and "Jatayu, who died to save Sita" (223), superimposing the visages of her father, grandmother, and grandfather onto these respective figures. Notably, Jatayu's feathers are depicted in the colours of the Indian national flag: saffron, white, and green. Her culminating artistic endeavour is a portrayal of *Kalpataru*, the wish-fulfilling tree, which she intends as a surprise wedding gift for her fiancé, Biren, following their nuptials.

The critical juncture in Ruchira's life emerges with the revelation of Biren's past, specifically when Arlene discloses details of her affair with Biren, which resulted in a pregnancy. Initially, Ruchira contemplates cancelling their impending marriage. However, her affection for Biren acts as a transformative force when she encounters a voicemail on his mobile phone: "And in case this is Ruchira, I want you to know that I'm crazy about you" (233). She subsequently forgives Biren, particularly as he had previously disclosed aspects of the relationship. Nevertheless, she resolves to incorporate the infant's face into one of the birds depicted in her *Kalpataru* painting, contemplating, "And if Biren asks about him? This is what Ruchira wants from the Kalpataru, that when Biren asks, she'll know how to ask him back" (235). It is Ruchira's unwavering fidelity to her cultural heritage and its inherent values of tolerance and forgiveness that provide her with essential stability within the host topos.

Migrant literary productions consistently articulate thematic concerns such as uprootedness, nostalgia, alienation, and adaptation processes. Raminder Kaur observes that "In the relationship between home and away that marks out diasporic understandings, away signifies some sort of loss" (6). This profound sense of loss precisely defines the diasporic subjectivity of Mrs. Dutta in the story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter". As a first-generation immigrant in the United States, Mrs. Dutta demonstrates an inability to sever her ancestral roots and fully reconcile with her new cultural routes. Her son, Sagar, daughter-in-law, Shyamoli, and grandchildren, Mrinalini and Pradeep, who represent second and third-generation immigrants respectively, have readily assimilated into Western culture, often expressing disdain for Mrs. Dutta's adherence to Indian customs.

Following her husband's death, and with her only son residing in the United States, Mrs. Dutta had maintained an independent existence in Calcutta. A staunch traditionalist, her relocation to America to live with her son's family is primarily motivated by an intense longing for her grandchildren. The nascent stages of her diasporic experience are characterised by profound nostalgia, which, exacerbated by the perceived indifference from her family members, exerts a considerable psychological burden. In her internal monologue, she composes letters to Mrs. Basu, her intimate friend and sole remaining link to her hometown in Bengal: "Oh Roma, I miss it all so much, sometimes I feel that someone has reached in and torn a handful of my chest" (8). This expression vividly conveys the visceral anguish of her cultural and emotional disjunction.

Steeped in profound nostalgia, she endeavours to reconstruct her homeland within the American context through the rigorous adherence to traditional practices. This is manifested in her diurnal routine, commencing her day at 05:00 A.M. for devotional prayers and the meticulous preparation of indigenous Indian cuisine. However, all such attempts to cultivate a miniature India are systematically impeded by Shyamoli. During

this initial phase, Mrs. Dutta's diasporic identity remains largely immutable, sustained by what Weber defines as "persistent ties with the old cult" (390). Subsequently, Mrs. Dutta transcends this phase of acute nostalgia, reminiscences, and native country sentiments, actively striving for assimilation into American culture, primarily motivated by the perceived well-being of her son's family. As Driedger posits, "many immigrants would no longer wish to continue the traditions of the restricted old world, but would opt for the opportunities of the new. Openness to abandoning the restrictive past for future opportunities" (23) is a common adaptive pattern observed in ethnic identity transformation. This shift indicates a pragmatic reorientation of her priorities, prioritizing familial harmony and adaptive integration over an unyielding adherence to past cultural norms.

Mrs. Dutta actively endeavours to assimilate into American culture, occasionally articulating self-commendation for her adaptive efforts. In her internal correspondence with Mrs. Basu, she reflects, "I'm fitting in so well here, you'd never guess. I came only two months back. I've found new ways of doing things, of solving problems creatively" (17). Despite these concerted attempts, Mrs. Dutta ultimately fails to fully adapt to the norms of her adopted home. Her most significant deficit stems from the absence of the robust sense of kinship characteristic of Indian society, which stands in stark contrast to American etiquette, where "they don't like their neighbours to invade their privacy" (21-22).

Her disillusionment culminates upon overhearing Shyamoli's angry outburst to Sagar, expressing an inability to tolerate Mrs. Dutta's antiquated customs any longer. Wadhwa observes that in their day-to-day interactions with their children, "these first-generation mothers of second-generation Indian children are repeatedly reminded of the fact that they are Indian and their offspring, despite their Indian blood are American in their beliefs, outlook and style" (134). As a first-generation immigrant, Mrs. Dutta acutely perceives herself as an intruder within the harmonious domestic sphere of her Indo-American son's family, envisioning, "A silhouette-man, wife, children- joined on a wall, showing her how alone she is in this land of young people. And how unnecessary!" (33). Consequently, she resolves to repatriate to her homeland, seeking to reclaim her lost contentment in Mrs. Basu's companionship.

In certain diasporic subjects, the liminal state can prove excessively protracted or acutely distressing, potentially leading to a regression towards their ancestral identity. This phenomenon is exemplified by the character of Aparna in the story "What the Body Knows". Following her separation from her new-born infant, she develops a transient infatuation with Dr. Byron Michaels, the surgeon who performed her second operation. However, this liminal phase swiftly yields to a profound self-realization, compelling her to re-embrace her ancestral and native cultural norms. This re-affirmation brings her an enduring sense of contentment, stemming from the recognition that her true fulfillment resides with her husband, Umesh, whom she perceives as an exemplary spouse.

The six narratives in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* collectively delineate the multifaceted experiences of diasporic individuals. The protagonists, navigating the inherent challenges of bicultural tension, exemplify diverse transitional methodologies within, between, and across distinct cultural paradigms. Each character's trajectory chronicles the profound angst, sorrows, and occasional solaces associated with displacement and cross-cultural mobility. A recurring thematic concern among these immigrants is the imperative to establish a sense of belonging within their adopted environments. In certain instances, such as with Mrs. Dutta, nostalgia precipitates a return motif, while in others, like Monisha, complete assimilation into the host culture confers a novel identity. Further narratives within the collection explore the complexities of hybrid, liminal, and hyphenated subjectivities. The exploration of infinite routes, underpinned by a conscious awareness of their roots, imbues their diasporic sojourns with profound meaning. The stories also vividly portray intergenerational conflicts, particularly between the first generation, whose identities are firmly anchored in their heritage, and subsequent generations, whose identities are predominantly shaped by their adopted cultural routes. As a diasporic text, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* meticulously chronicles the often-arduous

process undertaken by immigrants in forging a new spatial and ontological existence in their adopted land, while simultaneously affirming the homeland as an indispensable component of their enduring identity. The aesthetic of dislocation, as articulated by writers of South Asian origin, powerfully evokes the anxiety, anguish, and epistemic violence that frequently characterize cross-cultural mobility and displacement. This multicultural trajectory of thought ultimately posits the possibility of simultaneously inhabiting two or more distinct cultural worlds, a condition often accompanied by the emergence of a hybrid sensibility equally conversant with both native and foreign contexts. This collection thus serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit in negotiating the complexities of transnational existence, highlighting the continuous interplay between cultural preservation and adaptive transformation. The narratives collectively argue that a complete severing of ties is rarely feasible, and that true integration often involves a dynamic synthesis rather than a complete erasure of the past.

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