



## DIASPORA: AN OVERVIEW OF *QUEEN OF DREAMS*, *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS: A NOVEL*, *ONE AMAZING THING*

Dr. PARMENDRA KUMAR MISHRA

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR (GUEST), DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION  
L. N. MITHILA UNIVERSITY, DARBHANGA, BIHAR- 846004



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### Abstract

The present research work recapitulates the fact that a Diasporic subject traverses through the conduits of autobiographical or biographical details, moves from one country to another, experiences love affairs, receives education etcetera. The circumscribed fulcrum of the study includes three novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni namely *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010). An attempt has been made to analyse these novels thematically, theoretically, textually, and philosophically. The study has also contextualized the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of Empiricism, Cognitivism, Pragmatism, Structuralism, Formalism, Psychoanalysis, Postcolonialism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Marxism, Cultural Materialism, Historicism, Feminism, Neo-Platonism, Aestheticism etc.

Key words: Empiricism, Cognitivism, Pragmatism, Structuralism, Formalism, Psychoanalysis, Diaspora, isolation, alienation,

The study, in the context, explores the phenomenological and existential reality of Diasporic self, which has its genesis in mass migration of Jews. It has been examined through its allomorphic variants, which focus on the process of subjectivization or epistemological construction that transforms the self into a subject. The process of subject formation and the reality of subjectivity are profoundly embedded into the social, political, economic, cultural, psychological, linguistic, and physical realities of the contemporary world.

A diachronic history of human beings and their civilization and culture may reflect the fact that they are never static, monological, uniformed and teleological. A close observation of the complete texture of history, sociology, psychology and economics of the human beings may divulge the fact that they are always in the perpetual

process of change, transformation, development and metamorphosis. There have been several events in the history of human development which have shaped the present predicament of human beings. The advent of structuralism, emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis, the birth of Darwin's theory of evolution, the arrival of Marxist theory of economic determinism, the presence of Einsteinian theory of relativity, the unprecedented growth of technology after apocalyptic wars, the experience of economic crisis, the growth of postmodernism, the imposition of globalization, liberalization and privatization along with transnationalism and finally the generalization of poststructuralism with its basic tenets of decentred reality of the world, hybridity, multiplicity, dialogism etc. the aforesaid events, movements and phenomena have constituted and constructed the reality of the

world. The condition of human beings has always been dynamic as they have experienced several incommensurable changes which have also guided their movements in the spatio-temporal, psychological, social, cultural and economic conditions. The phenomenon of movement is inextricably intertwined into the complex cusp of the existence of human beings. They have always been moving in aforesaid domains either syntagmatic or paradigmatic way which is often termed as Diaspora.

Diaspora is generally perceived as a global phenomenon which connotes the group of displaced or relocating people who have moved from their homelands to new hostland for the purpose of their social, political, economic and psychological reasons. The sign "Diaspora" is generally associated with the realities of expatriation, immigration, exile, longing-ness, crisis, assimilation, hybridity, syncretism et cetera and it has gone under some remarkable changes as far as its form, nature and function is concerned. The realities of Diaspora have gone under some major metamorphosis and what it used to connote during colonial period and even after that, it does not imply the same in the synchronic realities of postmodernism, poststructuralism and transnationalism. Though the word "Diaspora" has been derived from the Greek verb *Diasperio* which was used somewhere in fifth century B.C by Sophocles, Herodotus and Thucydides yet it has some direct relationship with some Hebrew terms like *Galut*, *Galah* and *Golah*. Stephane Dufoix in his *Diasporas* (2003) writes that the word Diaspora has been used in Septuagint Bible where several Greek words: "*apoikia* (emigration), *paroikia* (settlement abroad), *metoikia* (emigration) or *metoikesia* (transportation), *aikhmalosia* (wartime captivity), *apokalupsis* (revelation)" <sup>1</sup>. Further he notes that "Diaspora" is just a word. Like all words, it serves only to denote part of reality, one that is not always the same each time it is used. It is never that which it denotes. To the point where the word is alone enough to describe what it expresses. There is no phenomenon called "Diaspora" that is independent of each individual case an independent of the use of the word "Diaspora" and its corresponding terms

in different languages"<sup>2</sup>. A general observation on Diaspora establishes the fact that it refers to a phenomenon of dispersion from a place; the organisation of an ethnic, national, or religious community in one or more countries; a population spread over more than one tertiary; the place of dispersion; any nonterritorial space where exchanges take place. Thus dispersion implies distance, so maintaining or creating connections has become a major goal in reducing or at least dealing with that distance. Now it is amply clear that Diaspora which knows its origin in religious, ethnoreligious or eschatological ideas gradually has acquired colonial, imperial and oppressive colours and then finally attains transnational identities. While referring to Diaspora as ethnoreligious or eschatological ideas it is often associated with Zionism. Similarly *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary of English Language* in 1913 reads: "Applied collectively:

- a. To those Jews who, after the Exile, were scattered through the Old World, and afterwards to Jewish Christians living among heathen. Cf. James i.i.
- b. By extension to Christians isolated from their own communion, as among the Moravians, to those living, usually as missionaries, outside of the parent congregation." By contrast, in the 1929 *Larousse du XXe siècle*, the meaning of the word is limited to the Jewish example: "Relig.hist. The dispersion of the Jews driven from their country by the vicissitudes of their history through the ancient world."<sup>3</sup>

Keeping these shifts and dialectics within Diaspora in mind; it may be approached, discussed and defined through three major ways; open, categorical and oxymoronic.

The Open definition of Diaspora tells us that any ethnic collectively which lacks a territorial base within a given quality which may include groups of nomadic hunters or herdsmen, "Gypsies". Further it also explains that modern Diasporas are ethnic minority rules of migrant origins residing and acting in post country but maintaining strong sentiment

and material links with their countries of origin—their home lands. Thus a Diaspora involves a number of factors like migration, settlement of one or several countries, maintenance of identity and community solidarity and finally the relationship between the living state and the host state is revisited.

The Categorical definition of Diaspora initially differentiate between true and falls Diaspora and then it offers two major definitions, depending upon whether Diaspora must satisfy one or more than one criteria. To define categorical Diaspora a French geographer, Yves Lacoste in *Herodote* (1989) defines it through geo-politics and says that a true Diaspora can be recognized by “the dispersion of the major part of the people”. Diaspora can be understood through six major features:

1. Ancestors must have dispersed from a center to two different foreign counties.
2. Persistence of a collective memory concerning the home land.
3. Certainty that their acceptance by the host society is impossible.
4. Maintenance of an often idealised homeland as a goal of return.
5. Belief in a collective duty to engage in the perpetuation, restoration, or security of the country of origin.
6. Maintenance of individual or collective relations with the country of origin.

The Oxymoronic definition of Diaspora has been found to be rooted in postmodern thoughts of 1980s and is the heirs of various forms of critical modernity which is dominated by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari. Modern societies, which are characterized by a belief in reason, progress, universality, and stability, are confronted by emerging postmodern societies dominated by doubt, fragmentation, the end of great narratives of truth and science, racial mixing, and fluid identities. Postmodernism spread through most of the social sciences, in particular sociology and

anthropology. In the 1980s it encountered the English “cultural studies” movement, which studied subaltern or postcolonial subcultures (workers, minorities, immigrants, and so on). In that setting, a vision of “Diaspora” developed that was radically different from both the open and the categorical definitions. Where those definitions stress reference to a point of departure and maintenance of an identity in spite of dispersion, postmodern thought instead gives pride of place to paradoxical identity, the non-center, and hybridity.

Three authors writing in English played an important role in establishing this vision: Stuart Hall, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy. Hall in “Diaspora” (1990) “I use this term metaphorically not literally: Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, imperializing, hegemonizing from of ‘ethnicity’. ... The Diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity”<sup>4</sup>. The postmodern vision introduced a break between modern forms of Diaspora, whose archetype is the Jewish model, and its new forms, whose archetype is the “black Diaspora.” Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) introduces the concept of “black Diaspora”. He insists on the “plural status” that can be seen in the word’s history, where “Diaspora-dispersion” and “Diaspora-identification” have coexisted in opposition, with the first tending to the end of dispersion, unlike the second, which is written in living memory. Taken in this second sense, the “Diasporic idea” allows one to go beyond the simplistic view of certain oppositions (continuity/rupture, center/periphery) to grasp the complex, that is the joint presence of the Same and the Other, the local and global —everything that Gilroy calls “the changing same.” Similarly, James Clifford foregrounds the concept of “traveling cultures”, also opposes two visions of “Diaspora” while rejecting the “postmodern” label: an “ideal-type” vision founded on the accumulation of

criteria and the built-in relationship to a center, and a decentralized vision more focused on the frontiers of the Diaspora than its core, in order to understand what Diaspora is opposed to. In 1999 the sociologist Dominique Schnapper weighed the value of the world with respect to the socio-political environment and made the connection between the shift in the meaning of "Diaspora" from pejorative to positive, and the development of transnational phenomena that relativize the significance of a national model. The confluence of cultural and economic realities within the framework of the national-state has become less pertinent, favouring a disassociation between the territories of residence, belonging, and subsistence. This context favours Diasporic thought, but it is necessary to specify the limits of a term whose contemporary use is so sloppy that it is becoming simply a synonym for "ethnic group," "Diaspora" will remain scientifically useful only on two conditions, writes Schnapper : first, its use must be neutral, neither pejorative nor eulogistic; second, it must concern, independently of the circumstances of the dispersion, "all dispersed populations, whatever their prestige, that maintain ties among themselves, and not only to the Jews, Armenians, Greeks, or Chinese." These ties must be "institutionalized... whether objective or symbolic." Schnapper is here touching on the differences between a word in its ordinary meaning and a category of scientific thinking. The distinctive criteria of Diasporas are a community of history, belief, reference territory, and the language between the dispersed cores. Further, "Diaspora" is synonymous with the persistence of awareness and the community link in spite of dispersion- a concept that contradicts the notion of the fragmentation, not to say absence, of a West Indian identity shaped by the slave trade, slavery, and assimilation. By contrast, British postmodern theorizing about Diaspora (Hall and Gilroy) puts the nomad and the hybrid first, as we have seen. The West Indian world (Hall) or the black Atlantic (Gilroy) became the prototypes of the Diaspora seen as "fluid and mobile". Diasporas primarily born of the loss of a national territory create a sense of identity in their exile situation, a national imagination that supports

the maintenance of solidarity in dispersion. So, the maintenance of myths- of origin or return-is therefore the foundation of a *modus vivendi* among states. We use Diaspora provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrants, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community. Thus, Diaspora was characterized by dispersion and fed by successive exoduses, forced or voluntary, and by ethno-cultural segregation and conservation of cultural practices despite contacts with the surrounding population.

The present research work recapitulates the fact that a Diasporic subject traverses through the conduits of autobiographical or biographical details, moves from one country to another, experiences love affairs, receives education etcetera. The circumscribed fulcrum of the study includes three novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni namely *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010). An attempt has been made to analyse these novels thematically, theoretically, textually, and philosophically. The study has also contextualized the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of Empiricism, Cognitivism, Pragmatism, Structuralism, Formalism, Psychoanalysis, Postcolonialism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Marxism, Cultural Materialism, Historicism, Feminism, Neo-Platonism, Aestheticism etc.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004) marks a growth of Divakaruni's vision of immigration. The narrative is focused on the conflict and crises of survival of a Bengali immigrant family living in California at the beginning of new millennium. 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 the mistress of spices, her identity has been acknowledged as the 'Queen of Dreams'. She wants to spare her daughter 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. She is married to Sonny, another Indianized American but fails to get desired contentment in her married life. However her six year old daughter Johna remains a link between them. Besides of her fascination for painting, Rakhi in association with her father runs a *Chai Shop* and this chai shop becomes the meeting point for all distinguished immigrants. It provides a natural feeling of fraternity for the immigrants. After the death of her mother in a car accident, her father tries to make financial support to save 'chai shop' from being closed. Father also supports Rakhi in translating her mother's dream journals from Bengali to English to reconstruct the mystery of the life of her mother. The novel is structured as the postmodern metanarrative and the narrative moves between past and present. In *Queen of Dreams*, in the background of magic and fancy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deals with the postmodern issues like racism, terrorism, painting, dreams and the conflict of dislocation and relocation affecting the life and sensibility of immigrants. The characters retain their right to self-growth and self-affirmation against the externally imposed limitations. It is remarked, "The characters are extremely well developed. You feel Rakhi's frustrated quest for roots, the anguish of mother who is condemned by "vivid imagination", the kindness of her father, the love of sonny and Johna and the hatred of racists and bigots." (Review: Goldman). Here Divakaruni presents a composite spectrum of enigmatic situation. In this novel, Johna's anxiety to discover India through her own imagination suggests that the shadows of homeland are integrated in the inner consciousness and they are beyond the constraints of time and space.

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reinvents Indian myth in the light of western ideologies. It is an attempt of Divakaruni to give a voice to Panchaali, the fire born heroine of *Mahabharata*. The novelist here has tried to weave a vibrant interpretation of the ancient tale of Panchaali's being married to five royal husbands. Panchaali did her best to support her husbands to regain their status and kingdom. However she

could not deny her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husband's more dangerous enemy. In context of the innovative perception of myth by Divakaruni, in one of the reviews, it is said "Divakaruni has taken a male-centred story and breathed new life into its female characters, giving us a rich tale of passion and love, power and weakness, honour and humiliation... entertaining, insightful and suspenseful" (The Unions). In *Palace of Illusion*, myth dominates, and the idea of immigration subsides in the background. However the aim of the novelist remains hazy and uncertain because myth dominates and the focal interest seems to have been subsided in the background. The Reviewer, Grace Andreacchi has failed to appreciate the ambiguity and vague idea expressed in this novel. It is said that it is impossible to take this book seriously. It professes to be a retelling of the great Indian Epic the *Mahabharata* from the point of view of a female protagonist, the Princess Panchaali. But the writing is so awkward and the sentiments so lackeyed and cloying, we know immediately, we have been relocated in the sprawling suburban sensibility of modern American.

In her latest novel *One Amazing Thing* (2010), Divakaruni makes experiment in the mode of travel narrative with the ample scope for the self-revelation of the characters. The structure of the novel is the collection of the experience of nine travellers trapped in the visa office at an Indian consulate after a massive earthquake in an American city. The group consists of two visa officers, an Indian woman in her last years. Her granddaughter, Lily, is an ex-soldier haunted by her own guilt. Uma is an Indian American girl bewildered by her parent's decision to shift to Kolkata. Tariq is a young Muslim from Kolkata. As rescue operation was going on, to come out of the trauma of earthquake, they begin to tell each other stories related with their own life, narrating one amazing thing from each one's life. These tales are the tales related to the harsh realization of life with the immense possibilities of affirmation of human conditions.

Countless dialogues and researches have been undertaken to unknot and unwind the



intricate nexus between Diaspora and the identity scooped and fashioned through it. The immense proliferation of Diasporic writers and literature has also led to the discrete study of the Diaspora theory itself. The apocalyptic wars, phenomenon of globalization, linguistic turns in theory of epistemological construction, and the unprecedented growth in technology have unsettled the structuralist model of telos, eidos, and truth. Now everything is seen through the phenomena of dialecticism, dialogism, aporia, and multiplicity. All these things have led to globalization and has destabilized entire philosophy of self, subject, and subjectivity. The phenomena of self and subjectivity are seen through the lenses of ideology and the consciousness which are deeply influenced by the temporality of history, economic diversifications and the dissolution of boundaries.

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