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Coming of Age in a Cross-Cultural World: Analyzing Gender in Diaspora Writing

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Abstract:

This paper examines gender representation in diaspora writing, with a focus on Pratima Mitchell's Indian Summer. The study explores patriarchal oppression and gender dynamics within Indian society through a diasporic lens. Key themes include gender discrimination, child marriage, domestic violence, and the societal restrictions on women's education and independence. The paper analyzes how diasporic narratives address the intersection of "old" and "new" Indian diasporas, particularly the portrayal of womanhood and girlhood, while reflecting on the multiple patriarchies shaped by class, caste, community, religion, and race. It also investigates the psychological impact of cultural displacement, isolation, and alienation, alongside contrasting masculinities tied to socio-economic contexts.

Through its dual perspective on gender and identity, Indian Summer juxtaposes diasporic experiences with local realities. This research argues that Mitchell's work enriches the discourse on gender by bridging traditional and modern perceptions of women's roles, shedding light on the complexities of cultural belonging and displacement.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Young Adult Literature, Gender, Masculinities, Culture*

Introduction:

Diasporic writing, created by native authors living abroad, vividly brings local culture and society to life. This genre reflects the deep connection to one's roots and the quest for identity amid displacement from the homeland. It explores themes like rootlessness, alienation, nostalgia, identity crises, and cultural displacement, often portraying the East through the lens of the West. These narratives highlight the contrasts and similarities between cultures while offering fresh perspectives on the native land.

Diaspora writers strive to reconnect with their heritage, reliving memories and cultural understanding through their stories. Writing becomes a bridge between the old and new worlds, expressing their adjustment challenges and eventual reconciliation with a dual identity. This creative

process often blends two cultural experiences, revealing diversity and a nuanced understanding of tradition and modernity. At times, these works merge the two worlds, while at others, they emphasize stark contrasts.

Pratima Mitchell exemplifies this genre. Born in India, she published her first book at 11, earning international recognition. With her base in Oxford, she has traveled extensively across India, the U.S., and Europe. Her novel *Indian Summer*, chosen for this research, reflects her unique perspective on Indian society, shaped by her diasporic experiences.

Overview of *Indian Summer:*

Indian Summer by diaspora writer Pratima Mitchell is a layered tale set in India, exploring the challenges women face in a patriarchal society. The story unfolds through two adolescent female protagonists, Sarla and Bina. Sarla, a London-raised teenager, returns to her maternal grandparents' home in India, while Bina, an academically gifted but disadvantaged orphan, dreams of becoming a doctor despite societal and familial constraints. Bina's conservative grandparents, Hiralal and Lila, aim to marry her off as soon as she reaches puberty, dismissing her aspirations for education. With Sarla's grandparents' support, Hiralal is convinced to let Bina continue her studies. However, new challenges arise when Jeevan, a driver, blackmails Bina by threatening to expose her jailed mother, Shobharani—a former victim of domestic abuse turned outlaw.As Jeevan's threats escalate, Bina confides in Sarla, who, along with their friend Siddhartha, confronts him. Jeevan's attempt to assault Bina is thwarted, and he is removed from her life. Sarla also discovers surprising truths about her family but embraces her newfound relationships.

Bina's courage, Shobharani's defiance of societal norms, and Siddhartha's rejection of class barriers highlight themes of resilience and liberation. The narrative concludes with triumph over patriarchal constraints, celebrating empowerment and lasting friendships.

Gender in Diaspora Writing:

EvolvingWomanhood in the Old and the New Indian Diasporas

As Sreenivasan notes, "The literary talents of the diaspora found expression first in adversity and flourished with advent of prosperity. The writers later began mixing nostalgia with criticism of evils in the Indian society in contrast with their host countries." (2017). Thisnostalgic streak is seen in the writings of Mitchell where, with the characters both young and old, she portrays the Indian scenario with all its flaws and the shades of new emerging India trying to adopt a liberal outlook.

> Diaspora has undergone many classifications, with different thinkers and theorists assuming a diverse plethora of opinions, often focusing on what has been seen as "old" and "new" diaspora. The "old" and the "new" Indian diasporas reflect the very different historical conditions

> that produced them. The first one was born out of colonialism and the latter formed due to changes that have taken place in the modern age. Both share different perceptions—the "old" diaspora often created a break from the homeland while the new migrations have given a degree of connectedness between the diaspora and the "homeland" which was unthinkable in earlier times. The changing political and social set up forces people to select between the "routes" and the "roots", leading to the creation of their own space and voice their in-betweenness.(Kaur 70)

The narrative reflects on the old diaspora through the backdrop story of India's freedom struggle as narrated by Sarla's grandmother and the new diaspora, the modern India through the life of Bina. Nandi Bhatia notes that "despite the expanding corpus of critical writing on the relationship between diasporas and homelands, the role of imaginary homelands in defining and controlling women continues to remain overlooked" (Bhatia 1998:511). SandhyaRao also admits that the issue of "intersection of gender and diaspora and the way these have impacted each other has been less explored" (Mehta 1). So, it is necessary to examine the relation between diaspora and gender and especially the image of womanhood and girlhood as portrayed by the diaspora writers.

Pratima Mitchell in the narrative *Indian Summer* explores the traditional Indian society where women are not valued and have no identity of their own. They are only identified in relation to men in their family - the father or the husband, who are considered their custodians. Women are subjected to discriminations through the imposition of baseless traditions and cultural conventions which are governed by patriarchy. In these complex circumstances which they are subjected to, the women have to rise and find their path to freedom and dignity. As Kaur notes,

> In recent writings, diasporic women writers show how changes in terms of location or national identity are generally depicted as providing significant opportunities for women to challenge and revise culturally inscribed gender roles. These writers try to show how culturally displaced women appropriate the uncanny so as to engender new identities and assert the value of individual female experience. Women writers situate their female characters in resistance against culturally constructed norms that aim to control their bodies and sexually objectify them as symbols of male honour. (75)

Indian Summer too presents Sarla's mother Rita as a modern woman residing in England who is a dynamic and an independent working single parent raising her daughter Sarla all by herself. This role fulfilled by Rita adheres to the percept that diasporic works "reflect the struggle of

womenin claiming their space within the restrictive enclosures imposed on theirlives" (Kaur 75). In the words of Sarla, her mother "can do anything: dissect plugs and make them work, change a tyre, run for cover under gunfire, parachute jump, water-ski, drive a lorry, type news reports as fast as she thinks. Multiplying double numbers in her head is as easy as turning perfect cartwheels… honestly, I'm not exaggerating; the list is endless" (*Indian Summer* 9). Rita however finds that the traditional feminine works done by women, make them a sort of a lesser being. Sarla remarks that "the basic problem with superwoman is that in her view housekeeping is for an inferior species" (*Indian Summer* 10).

The thoughts of Rita about homely work being worthless reflect the memories from homeland, where housework is considered a duty of a woman and so holds no importance. Kaur points out that "the migrant women's experience depicts the process of assimilation and alienation, not only from the transnational perspective, but also from the perspective of gender. The protagonists set out on a journey of self-discovery and their struggle is no longer against a patriarchal male figure but against the societal norms and patriarchal structures that hinder their progress"(85). Rita sees herself as powerful as she satisfies the ambitious woman in her, bringing down the norms of patriarchy -"but Ma desperately wanted to follow her ambition and my dad went into politics in Mauritius, so they parted when I was three" (*Indian Summer* 20).

In contrast to this western concept of being a strong, independent female, is the Indian woman, who is equally strong and determined, but has to fight for her basic rights. The narrative offers a character sketch of Bina's mother Shobharani, a rebel, who is traumatized to the extent of becoming an outlaw, due to the patriarchal conventions of the society. As the newspaper article about the 'Bandit Queen of the Hills' rightly notes, "Shobharani is a victim of male oppression and systemic gender imbalance" (*Indian Summer* 136). The works of diaspora writers show "Their female characters battle through difficult times to emerge as confident women"(Kaur 75). Both the mothers in the narrative undergo hardships and overcome them. While Rita gains her identity by following her ambitions and dreams as Sarla says: "My mum was a star television reporter, a single parent and her career was very important to her. She'd slogged out her guts to get where she was. After all, she'd left my dad because she was so single-minded about work" (*Indian Summer* 16); Bina's mother Shobharani symbolizes Kali - "the fierce and angry goddess" (*Indian Summer* 26), as she fights her battle against the highly female-oppressive social system. Shobharani breaks all social boundaries to become a bandit and a leader of rebel men like her. This renders her a tone of authority when she says: "What did life ever offer me? I was married when I was a child, beaten black and blue by my husband and mother-in-law; and for what? Because I didn't bring a big dowry - no fridge, scooter, Benares saris - so I was worthless as the dirt under their shoes! The day I tried to defend myself I became a criminal in their eyes and the eyes of the law" (*Indian Summer* 137).

Kaur notes, "Characters in recent fiction by women writers often question their position within society, challenging the traditional roles assigned to them and (re)constructing their identities" (85). Bina too, like her mother tries to cope up with the everyday challenges to explore her self-identity in a realistic manner. She says: "I started to feel that my life did matter and I would become independent and strong one day. Of course I didn't rush around babbling out my thoughts to the world, but I could feel myself changing inside" (*Indian Summer* 24). The oppression of women intensifies in lower socio-economic societies. Here, Bina tries to rise above the constraints of the traditional Indian lower socio-economic class society which does not allow her to pursue her education and aspirations. Her grandfather is a male chauvinist who exercises his control over the females of his houses. As soon as Bina turns fifteen, her grandfather Hiraarranges a meeting with a prospective groom's family and Bina is ordered to dress herself in a sari. The prospective in-laws question the young adolescent girl elaborately on her cooking, knitting, embroidery, singing and such other stereotypical feminine skills and agree for an engagement. However just like her mother, Bina too has the fire within. When she sees her dreams getting shattered she protests. But her grandfather with a conservative mindset clearly declares, "You know my views and they will never be any different. Girls need to settle early and start a family. They should never have to work outside the home. Luckily, this boy can look after you and you will fit in well with the joint family" (*Indian Summer* 33). She uses not her physical strength like her mother but instead makes use of her intellectual capacity to convince Koshi aunty and Uncleji to persuade her grandfather and stop him from ruining her life. She takes charge of her life and decides, "I don't want someone else to work out my future, and I don't believe in any kismet-shismet. I have to find my own destiny, or else there is no future for me. If I don't, then it will end up being the future that's been planned by my grandfather, and I would rather die than go along with that!"(*Indian Summer*40).

Multiple Patriarchies and Gendered Power Structures:

Kaur reflects how women are oppressed by,"Multiple patriarchies which exist today due to class, caste, community, religion and racial interconnections. In a hierarchical society, women are oppressed, not only by men, but by these multiple patriarchies which force them to question their relation to power. In order to cope with these challenges, women unconsciously grow multiple identities, even confused personalities". (76)

Bina is subjugated not only by her typically male grandfather, but also because of her low socio-economic class. She understands that she is "different from the other girls at school" and that she is "servant class" (*Indian Summer* 40). She does not have a friends' group like others and is discriminated by the upper class girls - "I'm the servant's child and almost invisible. Sometimes I catch Madhu and Sumita deliberately wrinkling their nose when I come near. I don't smell, so it could only mean that they want me to know they know I come from what in their eyes is gutter"

(*Indian Summer* 41). Due to this hierarchical oppression, Bina, too experiences identity crisis as she struggles in everyday life with oppressive societal forces. She articulates her feelings, "I get dizzy when I try to see myself for who I really am: my mother's daughter; Koshy Aunt's "adopted" grandchild; the only granddaughter of Hira and Lila, the cook and maid; or a "grown woman" being presented for marriage. There are so may Bina's in one person" (*Indian Summer* 39). She decides to let go her submissive self and gain agency to attain better life and freedom.

Psychological Complexities of Cultural Dislocation:

Compared to the struggles of Bina which have more to do with the oppressive patriarchal and socio-economic society, the complexities of the culturally displaced Sarla are quite different. Though she does not have to fight for her basic rights, she yearns for a stable family - "the feeling that I didn't belong, didn't fit in, didn't have a proper family life and everything around me was rackety and disorganized. Rita and I were like gypsies - chaotic and mad and unsettled, unconventional and arty-farty. I just hated it" (*Indian Summer* 17). According to Kaur, "Displacement creates alienation of vision and a crisis of self-image in the displaced" (70). Though Sarla is not much culturally connected to India, she still experiences fragmentation and rootlessness, a feeling which stems from being an Indian family in a foreign land. She is clearly caught "between two worlds" and "negotiate(s) for a new social space". Everything in her house, the things the furniture was as she says "mixed-up, English and Indian, a bit like me" (*Indian Summer* 15). She becomes thrilled at the idea of spending her summer vacation in India with her family. This excitement is reflected in the words: " "Family" had always been something other people did and which I wanted more than anything for myself" " I was on my way to be with my own family, to spend my holidays with "my own blood", which sounds so corny but was such a thrilling prospect for me" (*Indian Summer* 58). Though the complexities in Sarla's life do not stem from gendered structures, they are based on immigrant psychologies and the patriarchy of the dominant culture of the host country which result in the feelings of isolation and alienation.

> Important to diaspora is the way in which gender identities are formed, with women negotiating traditional expectations and contemporary realities of the adopted land by blurring external borders through a systematic blurring of physical bodies, to carve out a new identity of their own. Diaspora means a rendezvous with diversity which may be of cultures, languages, histories, people, places or times. (Kaur 68)

Sarla and her mother Rita have embraced the culture of the foreign country to become one with it. Rita's identity carries the shades of foreign culture of the adopted country where society has liberal attitude towards women. As Kaur notes, "the interaction of traditional culture with the culture of an adopted alien land brings about a transformation in the personality of a person" (82).

Accordingly, Rita freely indulges in smoking and has a boyfriend who is quite acceptable to her daughter Sarla. Thus, the mother-daughter completely adopt the London lifestyle and become confident, self-assertive females.

The diaspora writers have memories of homeland with its traditions and cultures, much of which change with the passage of time. Some traditions become obsolete, some ideologies change, places, lifestyle, mindsets and attitudes of people change. So, narratives by diaspora writers reflect on the memories associated with olden times and the fresh ideas and perspectives that come with the changing times.

Contrasting Masculinities:

It is interesting to note that while "fictional representation of masculinity and femininity reflects the actual situation, yet at the same time is affected by other power hierarchies" (Nikolajeva 105), such as socio-economic class, age etc. So,

> Men carry the burden of victimhood as well. The patriarchy that systematically subjugates women also subjugates men who do not conform to the class/caste and sexual subjectivity of the mainstream. Indeed despite the fragmentary efforts made during the last few years, there exists a vast difference that distinguishes the lives of men in different parts of India which is impacted by caste, class, religion and sexual orientation. (Dasgupta&Gokulsing 8).

Indian Summer shows contrasting masculinity which bears relation to the socio-economic class of the male character. Bina's father, her grandfather and Jeevan, the driver all belong to the lower strand of the society from economic point of view. These males are not educated and have a conservative, patriarchal mind-set who think women to be inferior beings. They try to exercise their dominance over women and control their lives. Bina's grandfather displays traditional patriarchal masculinity where "he just wants to remind the world that he is in charge of his family, he is Mr. Boss. Typical male!" (*Indian Summer*36). Bina describes him as "moody, narrow-minded, conservative, suspicious, sometimes even quite scary" (*Indian Summer* 34). This same hegemonic masculinity is exerted even by Bina's father who beats and abuses his mother. Also, the driver Jeevan tries to exploit Bina's fears by forcing her to marry him and even going to the extent of physically assaulting her against her wishes.

Dasgupta notes that "Patriarchy in India as in the rest of the world has seen a shift from its private nature, where women have been oppressed by their husbands, fathers and other male members of their family, to public patriarchy where they are collectively sub-ordinated by a society led by men" (7).This is responsible for the atrocities against females in the society. However, today the Indian society is changing for the better where men are unlearning the chauvinist masculinity.

The narrative *Indian Summer* shows the changing definitions of masculinity and the emergence of the "new male" who does not conform to the old patriarchal norms of masculinity as being aggressive, dominating and dispassionate. Sarla's maternal grandfather and Siddhartha, who are educated and belong to the upper socio-economic class, symbolize hybrid masculinity where the men are able to express their sensitivity, emotions and embrace the traits of liberal masculinity and femininity at the same time. When Sarla comes to know that her Nana is not the real father of her mother Rita she refuses to 'switch loyalties' saying, "I remembered his many kindness: his gentleness and patience with Bina, his generosity, his perfect manners and his affection to me. I decided I'd stay with Nana as my grandfather" (*Indian Summer*280). These tender traits make him the new age male that does not conform to the patriarchal stereotypes of masculinity.

> What makes the protagonist, usually a New Age Boy, preferable to his peers is that in the course of the narrative his masculinity is defined as the attainment or disclosure of an element of self-awareness which enables him both to take responsibility for his own life and to take on significant social commitments. Other components of a masculinity schema are oriented and subordinated to these key qualities of self-awareness and other-regardingness. Further, because the New Age Boy's self-awareness often leads him to an understanding of how discourse shapes the world and hence to a realization that creativity is a form of agency, text production, whether as writing, imagining, or some other form, figures agential self-constitution.(Stephens 38)

Siddhartha too represents the sensitive new age boy who rejects sexist attitude and also cultural hegemony. Though coming from a family of Maharaja, Siddhartha abhors the exploitative lifestyle of the rulers saying, "Well, my grandfather may have been a maharajah, but he was a selfish, mean person. He never did anything to help anyone. It runs in the family, so maybe I want to break the tradition" (*Indian Summer*174). Siddhartha is committed to serving society as he wishes to become a doctor to serve the needy and downtrodden. Thus, he symbolizes the new model of masculinity which is more inclusive and non-conforming to gendered as well as class-based patriarchy. The narrative aids to explore the "ways in which gender is expressed, explored, interpreted, written about, and performed in the literature of the Indian diaspora" (Mehta vii Preface).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the exploration of gender in the context of Indian diasporas, as illustrated in works like Pratima Mitchell's Indian Summer, underscores the nuanced interplay of tradition, modernity, and cultural displacement. By addressing the "old" and "new" diasporas, this study highlights how diaspora writers bridge the gap between ancestral roots and contemporary realities,

using their narratives to reflect on the evolving roles of women and girls. The portrayal of womanhood and girlhood reveals a dynamic resistance to multiple patriarchies shaped by intersecting factors such as class, caste, religion, and race.

The research also sheds light on the psychological complexities of cultural dislocation, where immigrant experiences are marked by isolation and alienation within both the native and host societies. Contrasting masculinities, defined by socio-economic status, further enrich this discourse by revealing how gender roles are constructed and perpetuated across cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the diasporic lens offers a platform to critique and reimagine gendered power structures, fostering a dialogue between traditional and progressive ideals. Through narratives like Indian Summer, diaspora writers contribute significantly to understanding the intersections of gender, identity, and displacement, emphasizing resilience and the transformative potential of transcending societal constraints. This reinforces the importance of diasporic literature in broadening perspectives on gender and cultural belonging.

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