

SELF-RELIANCE AND HOPE OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECT NOVEL OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKAURIN

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Abstract

An attempt has been made in this research paper to substantiate that the women characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni 's face a sense of insecurity and alienation in host countries but they themselves overcome through their self-reliance and hope. The novels highlight the fortunes and adversities encountered by women and also underline the emotions of women whose lives are affected by the Indian Tradition and Culture. The novel *The Mistress of Spices* a saga in prose and poetry. Bonding between women is realistically portrayed in *Sister of My Heart*. Bonding sisterly friendship and love wins against all odds in *The Vine of Desire*. Indian American experience and dreams of Women in *Queen of Dreams*.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Diaspora, Myth, Indian tradition and Culture, Women sufferings.

William Golding British Novelist, Playwright and Poet in his novel *Lord of the Flies* rightly says about Women:

I think women are foolish to pretend they are equal to men. They are far superior and always have been. Whatever you give a woman, she will make greater. If you give her sperm, she will give you a baby. If you give her a house, she will give you a home. If you give her groceries, she will give you a meal. If you give her a smile, she will give her heart. She multiplies and enlarges what is given to her (179).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author and poet. She is an award winning author. She has to her credit two collection of short stories namely *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001); children's books namely *Neela: Victory Song* (2002) and *The Conch Bearer* (2003) and novels like *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) *Shadowland* (2009), *One Amazing Thing* and *Oleander Girl*. She transcended boundaries, negotiating two different worlds from various perspectives.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revives the long forgotten Indian myth, belief, tradition, culture and dreams. There are many women diasporic writers from India who have excelled in their own way and have enriched the field of Diaspora Literary Studies immensely. They are members of their traditional group, as well as new members of the predominant culture of a host country, while simultaneously transferring gender positions within each; the expectations of behavior (from self and other) vary

greatly. Divakaruni who focus on the issues of diaspora find themselves in a distinctive spot, both personally and within their text, which Lau asserts reasons unique struggles (243). As a result of (or within) those struggles, identity is a theme that becomes quickly recognizable in the literature diaspora women produce as they "write and discuss at length the confusion of identity they are experiencing" (Lau 241). Lau deal with that certain repeated elements or themes are often seen in diasporic South Asian women's writing. Women characters in the novel turns into one of just a few classes, including "women who were born and bred in South Asia and subsequently have either been sent or have chosen to live in the West" (244).

Lisa Lau Comments about identity in South Asian Literature:

Identity is one of the most common themes in South Asian literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful, and only occasionally rewarding... Women writing in South Asia write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations, diasporic women's writing has different characteristics ...Women of diaspora, instead almost always, without exception; testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities(252).

The conflict between the traditionalists and the assimilationists in migrant communities is a frequent theme in the fictional works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Almost all the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are credentials

of the life of the Indian community in America. Her novels capture the sufferings of Indian community in America and their efforts to retain their identity in a foreign space. The trauma of being a female confined within the Indian tradition drives Divakaruni's female characters to the conflicts in the diasporic experience.

On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad, Phillipa Kafka credits Divakaruni as one of the diasporic authors who "write eloquently on the issues that arise either for them or for their characters in the West" (26). In her novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) Divakaruni knits a saga that integrates magic and mysticism side by side with the persistent reality of life for a multiplicity of poignant characters. Divakaruni's writing holds the complex and multi-layered identity disputes faced by settlers, with an emphasis on those experienced by women.

The Mistress of Spices is full of people negotiating the immigrant experience. The characteristics issues in *The Mistress Of Spices* are many and varied, and Divakaruni affords a gorgeous background for exploration of them. This probe takes place on numerous levels and is proven through multiple literary elements including structure, exposition, character development, images, and figurative language. Divakaruni skillfully "builds an enchanted story upon the fault line in American identity that lies between the self and the community" (Merlin). The main character and narrator of the novel, Tilotama (Tilo) is originally born in India, then trained to be a "mistress of spices" by a mystical teacher who resides on a magical island, and eventually sent to look over a spice shop in Oakland, California. She not only sells Indian species but helps her customers in solving their problems through her magical power of reading their mind and heart. Throughout the novel, She keeps changing her names too, Making clear how complex is the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land. (Nayan Tara, Bhagyavati, Tilotamma and lastly Maya)

According to Rajan, "the characters themselves are not fully fleshed out; it is their hopes, desires, and pain that makes them recognizable as typical diasporic, exilic, marginalized, damaged figures" (219). Within that chaotic existence, Rajan remarks how Divakaruni focuses on the main character, even going so far as to "sequentially alter Tilo's name/identity to match the shifting contours of the plot" further improving the emphasis on the individual and identity issues (218).

Throughout the novel *The Mistress of Species* the lives of immigrants are illustrated as painful and rending.

The immigrants are torn apart on numerous levels. Physically, the characters' bodies are affected in ways that break them into pieces, both literally and figuratively. Emotionally and mentally, immigration and consequent transferring processes encounter a feeling of completeness and functioning as healthy, fully- self realized characters. Divakaruni repeatedly uses transcendent elements in her novel to not just integrate the 'unreal' but to further exemplify a simultaneous disconnect and conjunction of reality and fantasy. As Divakaruni's immigrant characters struggle, they try to communicate experiences, feelings, concerns, needs, etc. In that process, language becomes yet another site for fracturization.

Kafka states that Divakaruni portrays such issues powerfully and effectively on an individual level: "In highly poetic language within the context of a feminist myth based of Tilotama, Divakaruni conveys the feelings of all the characters, their problems in their everyday existence" (Kafka 163).

Departure from the homeland assimilates with the arrival in the host land but it also leaves a void and emptiness. Though the characters transfer from one nation to another, the landscape of memory lends colour to the canvas of life. Distanced physically, they are hit by the changes in everyday realities but the impeding experiences are transformed into reassuring certainties. Past becomes a positive stimulant and it serves to reformulate and transform the present. Push and pull between expectations and aspirations, tradition and modernity also can be seen.

The process of distinguishing, understanding, and determining fractures also frequently becomes the place upon which female diasporic characters from the story ultimately find strength and empowerment. Within positive turning of disintegration, the women in diaspora in *The Mistress of Spices* are able to redefine their sense of self within their new environment on their own terms.

The first-generation Indian-Americans are acutely aware of the apparent cultural differences. 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.

Divakaruni's second novel, *Sister of My Heart* is a realistic treatment of the relationship between two cousins, Sudha and Anju, who narrate alternating chapter of this modern drama that develops over decades. This novel is

written in the realist mode and describes the complicated relationships of a family in Bengal. Born in the big old Calcutta house on the same tragic night that both their fathers were mysteriously lost, Sudha and Anju are distant cousins, and are brought up together. Closer even than sisters, they share clothes, worries, dreams. The Chatterjee family fortunes are at low ebb, as there are only widows at home – the girls' mothers, and their aunt. The chapters themselves are alternately titled, Anju and Sudha, and contain within their folds, techniques that are epistolary and explanative, landscape that is transcultural, tone that is adjectival and highly lyrical, and style that is italicized and romantic.

The male world only creates trouble for the protagonists. Marriage tears them apart and Anju moves to America while Sudha to rural Bengal. Men separate them effectively in terms of geography. Their lives are shattered when they attempt to conform to the rules of the masculine society. It is only when they decide to migrate to a female universe quite removed from male geographic definitions, albeit symbolic, that they begin to find solutions to their problems. When Anju is upset by her miscarriage Sudha calls her over the telephone and consoles her.

The Vine of Desire continues the story of the friends the two young women at the centre of Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart*. They re-ignite their friendship in America and demonstrate the female independence that Divakaruni rejoices, although such independence is not achieved without trauma and pain.

Divakaruni suggests that women can assert themselves as individuals who set their own boundaries with their partners only through the importance given to education in their lives. Unlike other immigrant narratives, Divakaruni conceives the Indian women's immigration to the United States of America as a journey from oppressed conditions to freedom and discovery of the self with the inspiration of western influence.

In *The Vine of Desire*, the union of the friends is challenged when Sudha and Sunil become dangerously attracted to each other. Sudha experiences a nightmare of guilt and she exiles herself from America. In Anju's life the black comedy is her friend's deception, and her role as the devoted wife is fragmented, but Anju privileges their individualities and gets on with life. Their love for each other surpasses all obstacles; their silences, invisible vibrations and emotional bonding encircle them in critical moments. Sunil has no doubts of disintegrating his home and prioritizing his personal need for Sudha who in a way sacrifices security for herself and Dayita, because her

inherent conscience would not validate it. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* writes, "Once a woman is self-sufficient and ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator" (689).

Heartened by her own strength Sudha determines to lead a meaningful life of her own and for her daughter. It becomes necessary that women must achieve their own individuality for a focused existence. Sudha and Anju fight against these forces within society which do not allow them to be themselves. Realization advents on them that if they have to progress for the better and march towards freedom, they have to wrest from men what they do not want to give: control, power and privilege. They are no more passive agents; they have become activists who have taken steps to remove many of the misconceptions imposed on them in the family as well as in the society.

The family that Divakaruni portrays in *The Vine of Desire* constitutes both men and women who are both strong and weak. In the domestic province, the patriarchy has been encountered with strong intelligent and sensitive women, who have taken certain unprecedented decisions and emerged as women with well-defined self-hood. It makes difficult Sudha's position as a fatherless child, a divorced woman and as a mother in love with her cousin's husband. The complex intersections of identity marker govern the narrative of the novel.

Quest for self-definition and search for distinctiveness are the main features of the characters depicted by Divakaruni. They are caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Divakaruni things to see the fact that women meet with different problems which they cannot solve unless they have knowledge of their inner strengths. In *Queen of Dreams*, Mrs. Gupta is a first-generation Indian immigrant. She is the queen of dreams. Mrs. Gupta's daughter, Rakhi is a second-generation immigrant. Rakhi is born and brought up in the United States; yet she has a longing for India. Rakhi's fascination with India is only for its myths and mystery intertwined with her mother's unspoken past.

Mrs. Gupta dreams for herself and for others. She predicts the future of her customers. Mrs. Gupta is totally involved in her dream-telling technique. This dream technique is familiar to an Indian. It is exciting for the westerner. Contrary to the western concept of analysis the dream-telling of Mrs. Gupta is viewed with an eye of suspicion by Rakhi.

Expatriate writing occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. Cultures travel and take root or get dislocated. Individuals internalize nostalgia or experience forgetfulness. There is a need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes in diasporic writing, the bi-cultural pulls and the creation of a new culture which finally emerges. It is important to understand the dynamics of reception at both the ends for reception is also rooted in cultural contexts.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her attempt to analyze the relationship of women has become a spokesperson of the universal problems of discrimination, financial struggle, and displacement, disturbance faced by Indian women in India and in America. Her character struggle to release themselves from a tradition bound society in order to gain an independent identity. On the positive side, the freedom offered by the new land offers new opportunities but there is also a feeling of estrangement. To conclude, though the characters are expatriate but they also get relocated in a new context which offers them new challenges and they overcome with their inner strength and hope.

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