

A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Literary Works

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a talented woman writer of South Asian diaspora living in America. The diasporic issues of individual identity, homelessness, estrangement, struggle for adaptation, racial prejudice are focused in her fictional works. She is not only a novelist but also a poet. The main theme of her works is the predicament of the immigrants. She shares her own immigrant experience in her writings. Divakaruni's characters are caught between two cultures: India and America. She has made her women shatter their silence and fight for freedom which lead them to acquire their own identity. The paper intends to analyze Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a diasporic writer.

Keywords : *Identity Crisis, Women suppression, Self-Exploration, Search for Authentic self –hood.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the major writers of diasporic literature. She has written seven novels, various stories, anthologies and poems. Divakaruni shares her view about writing poetry and fiction in an interview with Erica Bauer in *A Discussion with Chitra Divakaruni*: "I really like using different forms of writing – each form has its own strength. To me poetry focuses on the moment and in images, it feels like an intuitive form of writing. Recently I've been writing more fiction because I'm interested in exploring relationships and showing the differences that develop into characters" (March 1993).

Divakaruni is an award-winning author, poet and teacher. Her books have been translated into twenty nine languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Russian and Japanese. Two novels, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of my Heart* have been made into films. To her credit, her short story collection *Arranged Marriage* has won American Book Award.

Many of Divakaruni's works deal with the immigrant experiences of women. She focuses on the diasporic women protagonists who are oscillating between two cultures. She convincingly portrays those women's sense of isolation, exile, mental trauma and dislocation in the new country. Divakaruni's has concern for the identity of South Asian women which is evident in her writings. While giving voice to her immigrant women's autonomy, Divakaruni also

helps the immigrant women to get assimilated with the new culture by founding a helpline for the South Asian women called "MAITRI". The association acts as a bridge for the South Asian women in social and cultural context. Dr. Madhuri Sood says,

In case of immigrants the first problem is to observe the cultural shock. The transplantation of human beings from one cultural world to a different cultural world is always full of pain. The material prosperity and liberty attracts from far but the problems associated with adjustment and assimilation outweighs the material prosperity. The resultant conflict creates pressure and controls the attitude of migrants. (72)

Divakaruni's preliminary literary ventures were in the field of poetry. She published three poetry collection *Dark like the River* (1987), *Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990) and *Black Candle* (1991). The poetry collections reflect the unhappy marital life, conjugal violence and troubled immigration. In an interview with Julie Mehta in *Arranging One's Life*, Divakaruni confesses, "I realized then that fiction is in a way more gratifying to write because it appeals to a wide range of people. Poetry often scares people, I think" (Jan. 2000).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has also in her credit two short story collections. Her first collection of short stories

was entitled as *Arranged Marriage* (1995). It has encompassed eleven short stories entitled "The Bats", "Clothes", "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs", "The Word Love", "A Perfect Life", "The Maid Servants' Story", "The Disappearance", "Doors", "The Ultra Sound", "Affair", and "Meeting Mrinal."

The impact of the changing times on the esteemed Indian institution of arranged marriage is the subject matter of all the eleven stories of *Arranged Marriage*. Most of the stories are about Indian immigrants who migrated to the United States from the Divakaruni's native place of Bengal. The stories are recounted by the woman characters in the first person narrative which presented a voice of reliability. There are a number of immigrant women who are both liberated as well as ensnared by cultural changes. Those caged women are fighting to find out an identity of their own. The sturdy ethical and moral values imposed by her own middle-class Bengali background habitually become a predicament against which she juxtaposes the conditions of the new world.

Divakaruni's second collection of short stories is entitled as *The Unknown Errors of Our lives* (2001). The collection has nine short stories. They are: "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter", "The Intelligence of Wild Things", "The Lives of Strangers", "The Love of a Good Man", "What the Body Knows", "The Forgotten Children", "The Blooming Season for Cacti", "The Unknown Errors of Our Lives" and "The Names of Stars in Bengali". *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* are a collection of stories "about family, culture, and the seduction of memory"(book jacket). The protagonists of this story collection are women who trapped between the values and customs of their Indian tradition and their new country, America. The diverserange of stories illustrates the life in the India and America. Divakaruni used to write the problems of life in her point of view.

I hope I have given you a little too. Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it to be Indian. To be American. But where I am going – life or death, I do not know which – I will carry its brief aching sweetness. Forever. (*The Mistress of Spices* 311)

Divakaruni's bestselling novel *Mistress of Spices* is written in a distinctive style that blends prose and poetry along with magic and reality together. The novel is regarded as one of the top hundred books of the twentieth Century by the San Francisco Chronicle. *The Mistress of Spices*, the first novel of Divakaruni is a combination of enchantment and realism. Divakaruni illustrates magic and mysticism as vital themes in her novels. In an interview with Shauna Farrell she says, "I think the world is magical in its essence - there are layers of existence beyond the one we commonly experience, based on the sense and logic. Magic is one way of entering that world, or entering your own depths. That is how magic works in my novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*".

Tilo is a magical woman who runs a grocery store and uses spices to keep her customers overcome difficulties. But when she falls in love with Raven, a Native American, she is perplexed whether to serve her people or to go after the way leading to her own contentment. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays the immigrant women's struggle for identity through the protagonist Tilo's search for her own identity. The novel was selected for the Orange Prize and made into a film by Gurinder Chadha and Paul Berges.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is a complex and intricate novel of diverse plots. The novel focuses on the innate tension between the wishes of the mothers, who firmly follow time-honored Indian culture and tradition, and those of the cousins, who are allured by Western philosophies. The troubling truth about the situation under which Sudha and Anju were born, secretly torments Sudha and intertwines a cord of friendship. And, when the cousins fall in love and are parted by arranged marriages, their exceptional bond faces its tough time. As the novel progresses the author makes the readers follow the track of the women through their lives, understanding their jealousy, failure, misery, surprise and separation. In the end, the dynamism of their friendship is obvious and the novel concludes with a moving reunion.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni expresses what she is familiar with and is aware of in her novels. Divakaruni is a very good story teller of immigrant women for whom it is difficult to quit the values of their native country and adopt the culture of the new land. *The Vine of Desire* is a sequel

to her previous novel *Sister of My Heart*, in which she illuminates the emotional bond between two cousins, Anju and Sudha, whose lives have been intertwined by birth in their native city of Calcutta. The distressing events in both of their lives bring them together: Anju in America has had a miscarriage, and Sudha has parted with her husband; she has denied yielding to their domination of having an abortion when the fetus was confirmed to be a girl. It delineates their journey of self discovery as they experience dark conditions. Anju moves to US with Sunil and Sudha moves to US to re-establish her relationship with Anju who lost her unborn child and she wishes to give her girl an elevated life. For their situation reminiscences fortify their ties and on account of Sudha it gives her the confidence to retaliate and oppose the resistances. A moving and touching sequel to *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire* has its credit as a novel of profound intensity and sensitivity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Queen of Dreams* depicts a peculiar relationship between the Indian-born mother, a dream teller, and her American-born daughter, Rakhi, a single mother, painter and a coffee shop owner. As a child Rakhi frantically desires to become a dream teller like her mother, but she is not as talented as her mother. So she cannot grasp the mystical rituals like her mother. Her mother's power captivates Rakhi but also detaches her from her mother. She craves to be closer to her mother.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni relates the ethical, moral and emotional intricacies of Rakhi's life, and on the other side, she unfolds the world of dreams experienced by Mrs. Gupta who leaves her account of covert life in the form of "The Dream Journals". For Rakhi, the memories of her mom and her journals provide to recover the lost self-interest and it brings the family move closer.

With her grandmother died and her mother overwhelmed, the painting must have given her stability. A way to express her emotions. I observe the care with which she delineates details. The windows of the tall building gleam in the light from the flame. --- The sky, too, is full of fire. It's hard to wrench my eyes from the strangely magnetic quality of the painting. (212)

After her mother's demise, she reads her dream diary that unlocks the long closed door to the past. Rakhirealizes herself after going through the Dream Journals, it is comprehensible that Mrs. Gupta was not contented with the preferences she had made in life. She says that she could not do justice to both her relationships in life and her dream world. Divakaruni admirably presents a woman's point of view in the delineation of Indian immigrant lives. The tradition of her motherland and the experiences of the land of immigration both fuse together and locate a fair and unprejudiced expression in her fiction.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion* is the retelling voice of Sage Vyasa's Mahabharata in Draupadi's stance. The central character Draupadi, born as princess undergoes pain in her life by marrying five men. Draupadi's destiny divulges that she is the foremost reason at the back the blood-spattered battle of Kurusathra between Pandavas and Kauravas. The epic *The Palace of Illusions* however restates myths in a different perspective; it brings into light the scene of exile of Pandavas and their circumstances. The novel exposes Draupadi's mission of representing vengeance and projecting her suffocated wishes to encounter her enemies. The novel evaluates how women are subjugated and lose their identity in those days. Women have to chase conventions and traditions blindly without knowing any reason behind it.

As a woman writer, Divakaruni accentuates the fact that women should face their troubles daringly to attain self-identity in their lives. Abha Pandey opines: "The feeling of rootlessness, alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation and sufferings due to discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language culminates into conflicts, fight for identity and on the other hand lead to birth of feeling of marginality in the minority group". (120) her novels encompass the power of women, not her weakness. The immigrant women are standing apart from their native soil for a number of reasons. Though they have to be assimilated with the new culture, they psychologically and emotionally embrace their memories of native country. Her women try to accept their new life for which they try to reconstruct and restructure their minds. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni engraves herself amid the outstanding writers

who believe in the dynamism of literature to bring about transformations in human perception.

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