

DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES : THE IMMIGRANT WOMAN IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S FICTION

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Abstract

An outstanding author of Indo-American ancestry, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni expertly weaves her stories around the issues of diaspora, identity crisis, culture, and the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. Because she is an Indian author who came to a foreign nation, she has a distinctive viewpoint on the daily struggle encountered by immigrants to fit into the new culture without abandoning their own traditions and cultures. It becomes increasingly difficult for her immigrant women characters to fight patriarchal beliefs at home and racial discrimination outside. Banerjee's heroines travel from ignorance to experience, realise who they truly are, and shed the outer layers of expected performance and identity to lead more independently and blissfully in a convoluted, drawn-out tale. Her best-known books, including “*The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, The Vine of Desire, and Queen of Dreams, The Palace of Illusions*”, focus on women who are continually negotiating for a new place in a foreign country while maintaining their traditional roots in their home country. This essay analyses how these women characters navigate the many obstacles they must overcome by carefully adapting into the new culture and building new identities for themselves.

Keywords: Immigration, Women, Culture, Identity, Tradition.

Introduction

The word "diaspora" has a unique meaning in postcolonial discourse since it refers to "scattering or dispersion." It describes a group of uprooted individuals who, for a variety of reasons, were compelled to leave their native country and relocate to another cultural area. These individuals were consequently caught intellectually, emotionally, and physically between their native and the adopted cultures. In a sense, the diasporic Indian society was created by colonialism. The Aryan, African, Jewish, and Palestinian diasporas, as well as other significant historical migrations, must never be forgotten. Diaspora, expatriate, and other terms have found a home in our living room chat in the current era of globalisation and migration, which has become a widespread phenomenon. Diaspora raises interesting questions about tradition, culture, assimilation and acculturation, identity death and rebirth, and more. Diasporic or expatriate literature is a subgenre of literature that was inspired by these issues. Meena Alexander describes it as "writing in search

of the homeland" since the primary theme of this literature is to cope with the contrast between "home and distant nation" and between the "familiar and strange." Themes of rootlessness, racial prejudice, identity crisis, dislocation, cross-cultural interactions, nostalgia, and marginalisation are all addressed. Famous diasporic authors from India include Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri. They experienced cultural shock while immigrating to the US, Canada, and other European countries but managed to adjust as well as they could. Numerous cultural conflicts must be overcome by them. Their artwork reflects a melting pot of cultures as well as their longing for a faraway motherland. Literature from the diaspora focuses on the laborious process of acculturation, assimilation, and cultural identity. Acculturation is a process in which immigrants who have been estranged from their native culture are forced to go back and forth between the two distinct or diversified cultures. They get themselves into a lot of difficulty as they struggle with a different society, different behavioural patterns, and different ideals. As a means of surviving, expatriates gradually make an effort to recognise and understand the new social, political, and economic structures of the other country in order to become accustomed to them. Acculturation is the term for the adjusting process. Acculturation, according to Marden and Meyer, is "the shift in persons who take on traits from another culture and whose primary learning has been in one culture" (36).

Cultural identity is the belief that one belongs to a certain group or culture. A culture's accepted customs, heritage, language, religion, lineage, aesthetics, thought processes, and social structures are all relevant. A group of people identify themselves as members of that culture and hold the beliefs, customs, and social practises to be true. The first-generation and second-generation immigrant protagonists in Divakaruni's works continually bargain with their pre-existing identities in order to forge a more harmonious sociocultural environment and a new identity all their own. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an accomplished Indian American author and poet who is known as a diasporic writer, draws on her experiences as a first-generation immigrant to the Western world. Her literary works, which are primarily set in India and America, are coloured by the experiences of expatriates in the new country, their emotional crises, and the racial discrimination that threatens their very survival there. Chitra won the *PEN Josephine Miles Award for fiction*, the *American Book Award*, and the *Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for her first collection of short stories Arranged Marriage (1994)*. *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Palace of Illusions*, etc. are some of her other notable works. Born in Kolkata, India, Divakaruni relocated there to pursue her higher studies. Her writing reflects her experiences, excellent observational skills, and capacity for empathy with foreigners, particularly immigrant women.

The novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offer a chance to critically examine issues such as identity, immigrant experiences, multicultural society and its myriad intricacies, vanishing frontiers, intergenerational and cross-cultural conflict, and transnationalism. The term and idea of "diaspora" are explicitly discussed by Divakaruni in her works. Her sculptures represent her experiences growing up in many cultures, feeling dislocated and alienated, as well as a strong desire to assimilate. Her characters are seen struggling with these concerns of displacement, cultural tensions, and marginalisation in a foreign country on the one hand, and on the other hand,

a strong desire to assimilate and acculturate to the new culture, thereby constructing a new paradigm. Divakaruni explores the subject of creating characters, particularly immigrant Indian women, who participate in the laborious process of integration in the new place, as her novels centre on the journey across the oceans. This invariably creates a point of conflict, a conundrum, and a chain of inquiries that give rise to numerous concepts of identities, origins, and existence. They are forced to create their own identities as a result of the ongoing conflict between the values of their original culture and those of the new one they have assimilated; sometimes this involves blending the traditional and the new, while other times it involves returning to their roots and adamantly upholding the traditions of their home country. However, identity changes occur in both situations.

As a result, Divakaruni's well-known books such as *Sister of My Heart*, *Mistress of Spices*, and *Queen of Dreams* as well as a collection of short tales titled *Arranged Marriage* depict the issues that Indian immigrants experience in terms of identity, racism, and acculturation. She focuses mostly on her opinions around female identity-searching. Divakaruni's characters portray the struggle of immigrants to assimilate and acculturate with their new identity and the new culture, coping with the new language, culture, and environment. These immigrants are caught between two conflicting cultures: Indian and American, two different approaches to life, the internal and the external. In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni explores the experiences of a second-generation immigrant who is Indian in America. She focuses on Rakhi's efforts to strike a balance between her original ties to her parents' home country and the social space in the new country. Rakhi was raised in an environment with a strong Indian cultural influence while being an American by birth. Rakhi is introduced to new realms of bewilderment because to her access to diverse worlds of culture and tradition, but because she is intelligent and focused, she masterfully trapezes between the two worlds to reduce the confusion she is experiencing. She is frequently tossed to and fro, and Rakhi questions her own identity before coming to the knowledge that she can balance it. Rakhi's status as a US citizen born into an immigrant family is only revealed after the unexpected death of her mother in a car accident and her father's attempts to convert the tea House into an Indian snack shop, or "chaerdokan," in true Bengali fashion.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Rakhi and her family are forced into a dark hole where they begin to question their own identity after being labelled as terrorists for keeping the shop open. They are thrust into a nightmare and begin to doubt their own identities. While comforting Rakhi, Belle, who is a close friend of hers, gives her the wise advice to fly a flag in their store that horrible night. But the utterly bewildered and exhausted Rakhi says, "Bella, I don't have to put up a flag to prove that I'm an American! Already an American, I am. This is the only country I know, and I love it. However, I won't be forced to put up a banner announcing that love to every passerby. But if I wasn't an American, then what was I? Rakhi muses as this horrific incident affects her, her family, and her other immigrant acquaintances. (271). They are gradually compelled to compromise on their national identities before realising that "And people like us seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of foreigner who lost a sense of belonging" (272). Like many of her other immigrant acquaintances, Rakhi experiences many anxieties and deftly

navigates challenging new challenges to avoid being perceived as an outsider. As a victim of diaspora, she is forced to live in a constant state of conflict and indecision because she is unable to cut her ties with her imagined country, even if she has assimilated into the host society. Rakhi is described by Muthyala in the following way: "Assimilation into the host culture does not fully restore a sense of equilibrium that balances or rather harmonises the experience of alienation and loss engendered by the experience of travel and relocation, nor is maintaining a pure unadulterated native culture and identity in foreign locations a fully realisable possibility" (98). But these kinds of encounters always drive a person to consciously construct a new identity in order to blend in with mainstream society.

It's also significant to note Rama Nair's comment about the assimilation and acculturation processes in relation to Rakhi's behavioural propensity in this case. According to Nair, "assimilation or the capacity to respond instinctively and emotionally to a culture is a significantly slower process. Acculturation and acceptance of changes in external behaviour begin early. The only means of surviving is to separate oneself from one's race and adopt a new culture (Nair 82). Rakhi is adopted into the United States from the moment of her birth, but she has a very tough time assimilating into the culture. She has plenty of room to forge her own identity, though, as Nair notes: "An Indian immigrant lady in America can establish one for herself through assimilation and acculturation. However, this is an identity that is in permanent motion and is open to change (83). No matter their generation, Divakaruni's protagonists struggle with an identity crisis and gradually adjust by assimilating into the host culture and norms. In contrast to Rakhi, Mrs. Gupta is Rakhi's mother and the first-generation immigrant in the book *Queen of Dreams* (2004). She interprets dreams for others, saying, "I dream the dreams of other people so that I may assist them live their lives" (7). Her daughter Rakhi does not live in the same circumstances as she does, and neither does she and her husband Mr. Gupta in their new home of California. Born in India with the remarkable ability to predict others' dreams and interpret them for the benefit of the populace, she sees her abilities waning after marrying Mr. Gupta and emigrating to America. In America, she begins to lose her identity as a dream interpreter as she loses the ability to do so. Finding her way back to the caves (India) to reclaim her identity as a dream-teller is the only other option she can see at that point. Her joy, however, is fleeting as she learns she is expecting Rakhi and decides to scrap the trip. "Next, I let go the prospect of returning," she says (295). After Rakhi was born, she gradually regained her lost abilities and returned to her dream work of dream interpretation. She modified her work to make room for this endeavour.

Mrs. Gupta insists on an existentialist sense of identity by emphasising the two competing traditions and cultures that she is exposed to through segregation and integration. She strikes a balance between her cultural roots and the new one to easily fit into a society that expressly and subtly acknowledges her wandering existence in foreign territory. In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes that "an exile is delicate in the beginning, develops stronger in the process, and finally becomes perfect. A person who feels at home in their own country is still a beginning and to whom the entire world is alien (407). Mrs. Gupta wonderfully embodies what Said has noticed. She still has a strong willingness to conform with the majority of the extreme

changes she encounters in the foreign country. She makes use of the new culture in a positive way rather than becoming overwhelmed by the changes. Through her dream journal, she creates a bizarre universe that she forbade anybody from entering—not even her own husband or kid. Even though Mrs. Gupta had reclaimed her ability to read dreams, she had lost the ability to speak the whole truth to her clients and provide solutions to their issues. So, in order to live in a foreign place (America), she chooses a different strategy in which she just learns about people's dreams and gives them advice by outlining safety measures. The novel *Sister of My Heart*, which is split into two parts with the titles "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" and "The Queen of Swords" respectively, encourages migrating to a distant country as a way to give distressed souls some anonymity. Anjali, also known as Anju, and Basudha, also known as Sudha, are the book's main characters. Although they are not related, they have a close sisterhood tie because they were both born on the same day. Mother Nalini, who is extremely traditional and devoted, has raised Sudha to be the ideal Indian woman. In a patriarchal environment, she teaches her daughter and Anju the proper manners and behaviour. She imparts to her daughter and Anju the ideal behaviour and manners required in a patriarchal society. Through nursery rhymes and lullabies, she instils in them these patriarchal beliefs and moral precepts, such as "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; bad daughters are fire brands, searing their family's fame" (23).

Their marriage, though, tells a different tale for them. After her marriage, Sudha stays in India, but Anju and her husband depart for the United States. She discovers a way of life that is utterly different from Indian civilization. She is ecstatic to discover that it is more liberated and full of possibilities. Anju's altered way of life, vocabulary, and attire reflect the influence of the new culture on her. However, Sudha, who resides in India, had a rocky marriage that ended in divorce. Her life with her little daughter after her divorce is filled with criticism, estrangement, and emotional pain. In contrast to the United States, Divakaruni portrays the rigid, judgmental Indian society, which, rather than empathising with Sudha, makes her life even more intolerable. The narrative comes to a close with Sudha moving to the US to live with Anju, proving that living abroad does give people like Sudha more anonymity and opportunities for a self-sufficient and independent existence. Divakaruni depicts the opportunities and dangers Sudha and Anju encounter in the unfamiliar land in *The Vine of Desire*. In this book, both sisters are torn between the pressures of home life and social conventions, Indian household culture and the conservative outlook of first-generation Indian immigrants. It vividly portrays the multicultural clash between the two Indian immigrant ladies, Sudha and Anju, who are driven to forge their own identities in the postcolonial world. Anju's idea of what it means to be married is tested when she ends up in her husband's family after being born and raised in a highly traditional family structure. Due to familial difficulties, emotional turmoil, and persistent sexual assault, Divakaruni's female characters, such as Sudha and Anju, choose to make sacrifices and work out a tranquil single life. Both of them fight to integrate in a foreign land of their unfulfilled longings; when they get imprisoned in the middle of nowhere, they frantically search for a way out while suffering from cultural difficulties and displacements in the newly adopted area.

Anju and Sudha had both through a unique immigration experience and absorption into American culture. Anju stands for independence, escape, exploration, discovery, revelation, and removal of the imagination, for balancing new heights, for thoughts and aspirations and achievement, and for meeting the test of the indefinite, while Sudha represents deeply ingrained viewpoints, family background, one's inborn personality, the pull of the native land and the buried past, remaining an outsider in the adopted country. Another charming book by Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, tells the tale of Tilo. It addresses the difficulties, cultural conflicts, and identity crises faced by racially and socially disenfranchised immigrant Indians in a foreign country while simultaneously imagining a homeland fraught with difficulty, suffering, and worry. In Rushdie's words (1991, p. 11), "when the Indian writer who works from outside India attempts to portray that world, he is obliged to deal with broken mirrors, some of whose parts have been irretrievably lost," Divakaruni's diasporic position that leads to such spaces is best summed up. Tilo, an Indian native, uses her exceptional abilities in a foreign country after receiving training in the ancient art of spice making and being ordained as a mistress. When she arrives in Oakland, she establishes a business selling antiquated spices and treats her clients with them. Tilo, who is oppressed and vested at the same time as she struggles in a region strongly delineated by the east-west dichotomy, is the subject of the narrative's major argument.

The story's female protagonist, Tilo, who struggles with the east-west divide, is both empowered and repressed, and she serves as the focal point of the main discussion. Notably, Tilo upholds the magical forces and traditions of India, which give her superhuman talents as a healer and a nurturer. Ironically, it is these abilities that entrap her under strict gender rules derived from traditional Indian value-systems. Similarly, even if America grants her the freedom and liberty to own a spice shop, it nonetheless exoticizes her. Because of this, Tilo, the magical healer, lives in a transitional place between the east and the west where she continuously bargains with cultural norms to achieve autonomy and identity.

Intriguingly, Tilo maintains the magical traditions and powers of India, which enable her to use her superhuman skills as a healer and caregiver. Ironically, though, it is these same abilities that force her to adhere to the country's strict gender-biased cultural norms. The novel's charm is in showing how Tilo carves out a niche for herself as a renowned "mistress of spices," mending and curing the whites with the use of the medicinal spices from her native nation and their curative qualities. Tilo, a mystic spice vendor in Oakland, California, has a remarkable command over spices and makes use of their enchanted ability to ease the suffering of others. She provides healing to Indian immigrants who are subjected to racial violence, discrimination, and isolation in an unfamiliar environment. Although America gives her the liberty and autonomy to own a spice business, it exoticizes her, limiting her existence to a liminal region between the east and the west where she has the chance to experiment with cultural norms in order to achieve an autonomous existence. A detailed study of Divakaruni's novels reveals that they are full of immigrant characters who, although remaining immigrants in America, deeply identify with their Indian background. Their lives are defined by a perpetual struggle between two diametrically opposed cultures and ways of existence. However, it is their vivid recollection of their home country, alive with its

traditions and rituals, which allays their tension as immigrants and calms their feelings of isolation. The situation with second generation immigrants is more problematic since they end up having a more compromised hybrid identity, in contrast to the first-generation immigrants who are able to juggle the two different cultures with ease. By valuing cultural legacy and elevating the past, the majority of the characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels try to find their roots. The most astounding aspect of how she creates her characters is how eagerly she encourages them to fit into western society, despite the fact that racial discrimination continuously calls into question their identity. Her characters, like Rakhi, Anju, and Sudha, were able to successfully integrate into western culture and forge their own identities in the new country despite the numerous diasporic problems they encountered.

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