



CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI AS A NOVELIST OF DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

Indian born novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni currently resides in Houston, Texas. Her novels provide new perspectives to contemporary women's literature. In them we have women who either live abroad or happen to be visiting India. These women are no doubt conditioned by the Indian upbringing but have risen above the traditional constraints. They are torn between old and new values. They question the nature of their lives, and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals. This awareness leads them to rethink about their own lives as women and instils in them the confidence and strength to go ahead. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the diasporic consciousness of Indian women caught between two opposing worlds. They find themselves in an in-between states, struggling to carve out identities of their own.

Keywords: Consciousness, diasporic, ethnic, fiancé, gender, homeland, migration, narrative, nightmare and reconciliation.

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INTRODUCTION

Fiction by Women Writers centres around problems faced by women, their position in the society and their attempts to overcome the shackles imposed upon them by the society. It also endeavours to establish their identity and assert their individuality. This is a common theme popularized by all Indian Women Writers and those who belong to the Indian Diaspora. Some diasporic Women fiction writers are Kamala Markandeya, Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Meera Sayal and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who secured a credible place in this area of fiction. Their works are replete with the diasporic consciousness, which strongly witness social realities, longings and feeling in addition to the creativity of the writers. They experience diasporic problems. They portray different aspects of sensibilities and concerns, though they vary as per

their generations, perceptions, attitudes and specific identities. The distance from the homeland often encourages these writers to tread new ground, experimenting and exploring with new themes and forms, breaking taboos prevailing in their countries and developing new ideas. The consciousness of uprooting from the native environment creates emotional setbacks and raises the questions of belonging and notbelonging. This is a revelation that 'home' can notes not only physical distances but also harbours passions attached with people and surroundings and ambience shared characteristics of a native land. The yearning for home and nostalgia for homeland becomes a constant presence. The Indians living in the alien countries continue to live in a double life refusing to give up their cultural roots. They are sandwiched between deep rooted native culture and assimilated host culture. There is a flux of hope for assimilation in the new land, at the

same time there is invariable magnetic pull towards homeland. The diasporic women writings represent the women who are forms of cultural hybridization that reflect the experience and social positioning of the authors themselves. These women in diasporic literature show an inexorable awakening of identity in relation to western values of individuality and independence. The women go on to asserting and exploring their own identity, even when it reverts back to traditional concept. The present paper portrays Chitra Banerjee as a Novelist of Diasporic Consciousness with reference to some of her novels.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American Writer who emerged as on the world literary scene in 1990 and has prolifically published since then, writing poetry, short stories and novels. She was born in a middle class educated family on July 29, 1956 in Kolkata, India. She received a B.A., in English in 1976 from Calcutta University, an M.A., in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and Ph.D., in Renaissance English Literature in 1985 from University of California, Berkeley. She has taught creative writing and English Literature in the University of Houston. She also cofounded 'Maitri', an organization that works with South Asian Women dealing with situations of domestic violence. She volunteers her time to 'Maitri' and to Chinmaya Mission, a spiritual and cultural organization. She portrays immigrant experiences in her writings. She delineates the expatriate young women living in the U.S. who struggles hard to sustain self-identity in fluctuating alien culture. She writes of as an Indian in America and about people migrating to the West and are caught multiple cultures. She depicts the women in special caught in multicultural challenges of both cultures in her novels. The story, plot and characters seem very real which emerge in them explicitly. Her middle class upbringing caters the in-depth understanding of the middleclass characters; in general women, who are caught in entangled emotions. Some of her novels are—*"The Mistress of Spices"*(1997), *"Sister of My Heart"*(1999), *"The Vine of Desire"*(2002), *"Queen of Dreams"*(2002), *"The Palace of Illusions"*(2008), *"One Amazing Thing"*(2010) and *"Oleander*

Girl"(2014). They are largely set in India and the U.S. and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. The gender-specific representations of character development are explored in her novels. Magic and imaginary worlds are very important in her novels. Let us examine each of the novels for the theme of diasporic consciousness.

'The Mistress of Spices', Divakaruni's first novel, juxtaposes magic and realism, fuses an enchanted past into a contemporary ethnic shop in Oakland, and brings together the lives of the magical Tilo and many other immigrant whom she is destined to help through powers of spices. But when Tilo falls in love with Raven, a Native American, she is confronted with her own desires and a need to help herself. Thus, she has to choose between a life governed by a distant mystical power and the reality of her current life. Tilo's dilemma is an allegory for the dilemma of the immigrant who is pulled between the charm of the past and the call of the present.

'Sister of My Heart' is the second novel by Divakaruni. It is an absorbing tale of the bond between two distant cousins, Anju and Sudha who consider each other as the sister of their hearts. Set in the 1980's Calcutta, the novel delineates the middle-class Bengali culture steeped in superstitions and myths. The book is divided into two parts—Books are entitled *"The Princess in the Palace of Snakes"* and Book two entitled *"The Queen of Swords"*. These titles refer to the stories that the two sisters, Anju and Sudha tell each other. The former is a fairy tale and the latter is the legend of the Queen of Jhansi, Rani Laxmi Bai. This unique narrative strategy enables the novelist to interrogate the validity of myths and fairy tales in real life situation where a timid princess is transformed into a valiant queen. The story is told in the alternate voices of Sudha and Anju, each one being the narrator of each alternate chapter. The beautiful Sudha is gentle and quiet. She reveres old myths and weaves them into her narration to interpret life's realities, while Anju is rebellious, always questioning the old tales that Sudha reverse. Yet, when Sudha is put to the test, she makes the biggest sacrifices and walks the boldest path. This novel portrays two beautiful and passionate protagonists, taking readers into the core

of their voices fiery criticisms of society's injustices against women. Its language is metaphoric and sensuous.

"The Vine of Desire" is a continuation of the saga of Sudha and Anju, the two cousins, from *"Sister of My Heart"*. Far from the comforts and troubles of Calcutta, the women are now caught up in the anticipations and disenchantments of immigrant life in California. In the first book, many forces test their devotion to each other. Now they face new challenges: a baby born and a baby lost, Anju's husband's treacherous attractions to Sudha's beauty and Sudha's difficulty in finding a true home for herself. The sisters are no more the sisters they used to boast of. Anju, Sudha and Sunil (Anju's husband) show external friendly disposition but there is huge gap in internal psyche. The lives in the tale unfold the sensitivity, adaptability in the midst of deteriorating relations. Anju's loneliness and emotional rupture, she finds herself brooding, at times adjusting. On the other hand Sudha's deep rooted Indian tradition is at stake, when she goes off guard in passion with her sister's husband, Sunil, leaving her torn and burdened with guilt. Sudha's entrance in Anju's life observes changes in all their lives, Anju, Sudha and Sunil "were the changes good or bad?"(p.9) The novelist gives this expression to bring out the curiosity in the plot and the three characters questioning themselves whether the decision of bringing Sudha to America has a right one. Sudha undergoes cultural changes on immigration. Sudha sheds her traditional conservative role of a pathetic female and evolves into liberal and self-dependent woman. She represents transformation in motion, from a traditional wife to modern woman to withstand on her own to reject a home to save her pregnancy. She breaks all restraints bound with Indian marriages and security. Single handed she risks about bringing up her a daughter. Sudha transforms from a native traditional well matriarchal protected woman to modern and independent. Language rich in imagery and lyricism and characters created with convincing emotional reality enrich this book.

"Queen of Dreams" is a spell binding tale of mothers and daughters, love and cultural identity. Rakhi, a young painter and single mother, is

struggling to come to terms with her relationship with ex-husband Sunny, a hip Bay Area D.J, and with her dream-teller mother, who has rarely spoken about her past or her native India. Rakhi has her hands full, juggling a creative dry spell, raising her daughter, and trying to save the Berkeley tea house of her best friend Belle Own. But greater challenges are to come. When a national tragedy turns her world upside down and Rakhi needs her mother's strength and wisdom more than ever, she loses her in a freak car accident. But uncovering her mother's dream journals allows Rakhi to discover her mother's long-kept secrets and sacrifices-and ultimately to confront her fears, forge a new relationship with her father, and revisit Sunny's place in her heart. Thus, Haunted by nightmares beyond her imagination, Rakhi nevertheless finds unexpected blessings-the possibility of new love and understanding for her family. In lush and elegant prose, Divakaruni has crafted a vivid and enduring dream, one that reveals hidden truths about the world we live in, and from which readers will be reluctant to wake. In *"Queens of Dreams"*, she takes a somewhat different track in order to explore the gulf between a mother's ability to interpret dreams and a daughter's attempt to understand her.

Circumstances are never very easy in any of Divakaruni's novels. By showing the inner strength and resourcefulness of her characters, the writer is providing options and models for her readers. This is particularly obvious in her retelling of the most sacred Indian epic, "Mahabharata", with the significant title *"The Palace of Illusions"*. The title itself serves as a general metaphor for life as "Maya". This novel positions its readers completely in a world that is old and new, magical and real at the same time. The major novelty brought by Divakaruni lies in the fact that the story is focussed on the legendary woman named Draupadi or Panchaali who right from the beginning received the prophecy that her life was to change the course of history. The novel traces the princess Panchaali's life, beginning with her birth in the fire and following her spirited balancing act as a woman with five husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom. Panchaali is swept into their quest to reclaim their birth right, remaining at their side

twelve years of exile and a terrible civil war involving all the important kings of India. Meanwhile, we never lose sight of her strategic dwells with her mother-in-law, her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna, or her secret attraction towards Karna, the mysterious man who is her husbands' most dangerous enemy. Panchaali is a fiery female redefining for us a world of warriors, gods, and the ever-manipulating hands of fate. In the end, Panchaali as seen by Divakaruni manages to understand that proved her loyalty to her husbands and to the system that decided the course of her life. On the battle field of Kurukshetra, she sees what she needs to learn, a true ethical notion that "the desire for Vengeance" should not be stronger than the longing to be loved". Fate decided that Panchaali would become a wife of five brothers, five paradigms of male supremacy. In a way, Panchaali's task is to develop multiple qualities that will allow her to live as harmoniously as possible not just with the five men in a cyclical arrangement that brings each of them to her bed once in five years, but also with the rest of the society she is exposed to. Born out of fire, she lives at the peak of her glory in a palace made of water, in the midst of a desert. For such unusual heroine, the ancients have not given a major role in the epic because the system has already relegated women to a secondary position. In Divakaruni's novel, Panchaali is continuously forced to recreate her own universe and to learn meaning of life from her mistakes. Panchaali's quest for the meaning of life that addresses our own doubts, fears and hopes of renewal and love in a world at the end of an old cycle and at the beginning of a new era. Relevant to today's war-torn world, "*The Palace of Illusions*" takes us back to a time that is half-history, half-myth and wholly magical.

Divakaruni's next novel, "*One Amazing Thing*" deals with lives of nine people trapped in the visa office at an Indian Consulate after a massive earthquake which hits a certain America city. Among the nine people, there are Indian visa officials- Mangalam and Malathi, Chinese Indian Americans like Jiang and Lily, Indian American Muslim youth angry with the New America, Tariq, American daughter of Indian parents and a university student, Uma, African American ex-

soldier, Cameron and an elderly white American couple Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett. So there are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Chinese Christians among them. There are whites, blacks, brown and yellow. They lend the novel an air of multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi lingual look and feel. All these people respond to the disaster in their own ways. The novel shows how disaster- affected people under a stress and tension react to their situation. On the suggestion of a young graduate student, each tell a personal tale, "*One Amazing Thing*" from their lives, which they have never told anyone before. As their surprising stories of romance, marriage, family, political upheaval, and self-discovery unfold against the urgency of their life-or-death circumstances, the novel proves the transcendent power of stories and the meaningful of human expression itself. It is a passionate creation of the novelist about survival-and about the reasons to survive.

In her latest novel, "*Oleander Girl*", Divakaruni brings about understanding and reconciliation among people of all cultures. The novel deals with the only child of an old and distinguished Hindu household in Kolkata, Korobi Roy who grew up with the best of everything expect parents. All she knows about them is that her father died a few months before her birth, and her mother died when she was born. Korobi has lived her entire life with her grandparents: her beloved, cantankerous grandfather who made sure she received a top-notch boarding school and upbringing, and her grandmother who encircled her in the comfort of family traditions. But despite her happy childhood, Korobi yearns to know more about her parents, and cherishes an unfinished love not from her mother to her father that she discovered as a child, tucked away in a book of poetry. At seventeen, Korobi has found her match in the handsome and charming Rajat, the only son of one of the city's high-profile business families. On the night of their engagement party, Korobi's grandfather dies of a sudden heart attack. His death reveals the family's unexpected financial problems as well as dark secret. Her grandfather confesses that her father is alive. His name is Rob, and she lied with the American grandparents all these years. The

discovery of this secret shatters Korobi's sense of self, and sends her –against the wishes of her fiancé and his family—to post 9/11 America on a life-changing search. 9/11 might not be the safest thing for a sheltered seventeen years old girl from India. The second half of the novel deals with Korobi's experiences in America, with the note of suspense provided by the search for her father-and the repercussions of the latter upon her lover once (Rajat) in India.

As a coming of age novel, "Oleander Girl" is up there with the best of its kind Korobi's evolution, from a thoughtless pampered blossom to a human being who understands risks and consequences and willingly shoulders responsibilities, is believable and organic. This novel is elegant classic, but also vivid and immediate. Love and loss and secrets collide in this powerful story of the way we live now. Here the novelist explores issues of class and politics in modern India and immigrant America, but the family issues at the heart of the novel give it a cross-cultural appeal.

Critique: Beloved by critics and readers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been hailed by Junot of Diaz as a 'brilliant story teller'. She uses her considerable story telling skills to full advantage in her novels. In the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the gender-specific representations of character development are explored. The gender plays a crucial role in the way in which immigrants experience diaspora. In the migration process, women and men encounter different experiences. Divakaruni goes one step further by challenging expected gender-based responses, reactions and resolutions in regards to fractured identity issues. In doing so, she is able to provide commentary on identity formation and the fracturing process that is involved in settlement into a new culture that is unique in each gender, with this, Divakaruni wants to provide a reaffirming message of hope and strength within especially female negation of fracturization. Divakaruni has defended all her portrayals as being guided by truth and honesty, and compassion for her character. In conclusion, we see that Divakaruni's literature often insists on our capability to uncover what is best in our hearts. In response to the general philosophical stance,

Divakaruni also suggests that no solutions in today's world are possible without ethics. This certainly means the concern for the good of all, of the world as whole and not just a portion of humanity.

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