



RE-INVENTING SELFHOOD AND RE-FASHIONING CULTURE IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *THE VINE OF DESIRE*

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ABSTRACT

In emerging Diaspora, the mixed cultural dominant environment poses a challenge to immigrants, where they strive to reinvent, a 'self Identity'. It aims to capture the striving role of women in men's society to build selfhood, an individuality in immigration context. From centuries woman is seen struggling under the shadow of patriarchal family structure. Her image is subservient and in general protected by a father or a husband or a son where her self-image is vanished off target without a self identity. Divakaruni focuses the notion of women struggling to make a footing in alien country out of the patriarchal zone. The paper foregrounds the struggle of the women characters in the novel *The Vine of Desire* who undergo emotional grinding in process of attaining re-inventing selfhood and re-fashioning culture. It focuses the notion of women struggling to make a footing in alien country miles away from their home. The struggle underlines, the impact of cultural difference. The native root culture is in contest with the 'other' culture, where the characters are in a state of vacillation. The cultures reflect the difference of the world around them, building a fissure amid belonging and not belonging. The women characters display fractured identity but gather the wrecked pieces to build their self image. They are inclined to transform and face the litmus test challenges to gather the shattered fragments in their lives.

Key words: immigrants, re-invent, selfhood, culture, identity.

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Diaspora writings significantly paint the picture of struggle for identity construction in such displacements in alien countries. The location drift causes individuals to get dislocated to different countries, caused by diverse reasons at different times of history. The immigrants are bewildered between two identities resulting in perpetual change of identity, either adapting to new identities or partially changed identities. In emerging Diaspora, the mixed cultural dominant environment poses a challenge to immigrants, where they strive to reinvent a self Identity. The paper foregrounds

the essential upheavals in the novel *The Vine of Desire* wherein the women characters re-invent themselves to attain a 'selfhood'- an individuality, in alien land.

Divakaruni focuses the notion of women struggling to make a footing in alien country miles away from their home. She captures the striving role of women in men's society to build selfhood individuality in immigration context. From centuries woman is seen struggling under the shadow of patriarchal family structure. Her image is subservient and in general protected by a father or a

husband or a son where her self-image is vanished off target without a self identity.

The women characters, undergo several levels of deadlocks on immigration. Anju and Sudha face patriarchal and cultural challenges. Immigration transforms them and they attain a propensity for psychological re-definition of self, which otherwise was not possible in their traditionally bound family. The women characters, reshape and reinvent themselves, like Nayan Tara in *The Mistress of Spices* and Anju and Sudha in *The Vine of Desire*. Women in her writings strive to restore and identity of her own.

Selfhood is an individuality, it can be deduced as self identity which gives a person one's purpose and value of existence the *astitva* (in Hindi). N.D.R.Chandra defines it as,

"Identity is concerned with self esteem and self-image of an individual, a gender, a community, class, race or a sex or a nation-real or imaginary dealing with existence and role: who are we? What position do we have in society vis-à-vis at international arena? (180).

He opines that these are the concerns and quests for equality and dignity for the progress and development. Also the Indian woman's identity is one that is usually connected to and defined by communal and cultural norm of a patriarchal structure. The question of identity flux is commonly found within the diasporic and transnational population. Various cultures, family background, education are few qualities out of myriad attributes associated with an identity. The struggle in such countries have with increasing desires, competencies and muddled situations, acquiring a self stable identity, becomes a consistent task. Anju and Sudha being cousins and from the same patriarchal joint family background mould their own identity. Anju belonging to an affluent family carries a self-assured disposition. Sudha is a distant cousin and financially dependent on Anju's family. The different status may not reflect the endearing relations between the sisters but absorb different identities. Therefore Anju apparently attains a confident dynamic behavior which structures her childhood identity, whereas Sudha attains a very

gentle and obedient disposition being brought up by a typical Indian middleclass and builds up a submissive identity. Her dependency on Anju's family and the guilt conscious that her father is the reason for their father's death makes her embarrassed and small in front of the big heart of her dear sister. Marriage in postcolonial women's writing is considered as an index of oppression and violence. Striving the oddity, women build and rebuild their identity. Sudha's marriage makes her learn to adjust to new surroundings. She faces the wrath of her mother-in-law and her unsupportive husband transforms her to a strong person. She gains the confidence to give birth to her daughter against her in-laws-wishes. She takes a stand to bring her daughter on her own in an orthodox family where young women with a child are seen as a burden. Divakaruni exposes the *female infanticide* which is rampant in some parts of the country. Pramod Nayar observes, "the emphasis of male heirs to the family in India produces a level of stress that is unimaginable(138). He continues that though the theme was a restricted areas in English literature since 1795, but is still observed in many novels. The gender inequality prevails where a boy's birth is considered fortunate and vice versa, as he is the descendent of the family's name and inheritor of the property. Consequently the dowry system distressingly becomes the major drawback to have *selected sex*, which determines the selection of gender preference. Sudha's issue is not different. Her typical mother-in-law and her husband enforce Sudha to terminate her girl child. Sudha takes a strong stand on keeping her daughter even if she has to forgo her marriage. Sudha's identity is boosted on ethical ground and to save her motherhood. Sudha also shows that motherhood makes her determined to any possible extent to save her daughter's life. It also shows that she plunges herself for an opportunity for independence. She converts her adversity into opportunity. Sudha sheds her nativity and inhibitions and acquires a new identity, the modern immigrant modern identity. She transforms herself like a new bird with new wings. Sudha who is totally dependent and meek, changes with the changing

situation. She learns smart Western culture to think and live for herself.

“Live for yourself”...“I’m not sure what it means. I’m not sure I know how to do it and still be a good person. And I want to, you know. I still want to be a good person, even if I’ve failed at being a good wife. I feel like a flyaway helium balloon—all the people I know are on the ground somewhere, but so far away and small, they hardly matter. Yet I know I can’t go back to the old way, living for others.” (177).

Sudha represents transformation in motion, from a traditional wife to a 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 handedly, she risks about bringing up her daughter. With all these burdens she adventures to America to give emotional support to her sister and a new direction to her life well aware of the fact that her dear sister’s husband has a passion for her. Sudha adapts to American culture and takes up a challenging job all alone. Sudha shows immense determination when she decides to relieve the octogenarian of his homesickness and search for a life for her daughter and herself. American immigration conjures up a confidence of adaptation and survival in host country. She feels relieved to take decisions, have liberty, which she could not get earlier.

Anju similarly is crestfallen following the loss of her unborn son. Anju’s immigration to America and her association with a foreign country makes her less confident and with child bearing and the consequent abortion makes her lose identity. Anju suffers low self esteem craving to be loved and identified. Pramod Nayar while expressing about women’s recognition in the society being identified by lack of education and more of her marital other roles says, “The women’s education, ambitions, and desires are far less important than her role as mother, daughter-in-law, and wife”(132). Writers have emphasized such roles as wife and mother in their writings like, *Jasmine, Wife, The Namesake, The Sister My Heart and The Vine of Desire* where women’s education takes a back seat. Contradictorily Manju Kapur has given a different

perception of women’s emancipation and independence in *Difficult Daughters* (1998). She shows how the protagonist Viramati struggles and breaks all traditional man-made boundaries to achieve her desire. This is considerably a bold step, going for higher education and having illicit love affair with a married professor. Sudha unconsciously becomes a cause for Anju’s breakup with her husband Sunil. Anju and Sudha realize, that they lack security in their lives, so strive for emancipation, after their shattered marriages. Anju regains her lost identity. Her education gives her financial stability helping, her to reshape her life. “Access to higher education makes them realize the need to live in the family; but rejects the roles prescribed to them by society” (Mathiapparanam & Prasanna 8). Anju comes out of her depression, attains an identity of her own mastering of her writing skills and learning to fly on her own. Sudha suffers guilt conscious of becoming a cause of Anju’s break up with Sunil even though Sunil assures her, that the separation was a mutual reaction. Sudha is ripped by economical instability and suffers cracking identity. Financially broken, away from her family in an alien country, Sudha finds a job to look after her daughter and herself. Sudha transforms and rebuilds her identity strengthening herself taking her own decision in stabilizing her identity. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* reiterates that identities in displacement are discursive, “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”(2). Anju displays courage, separates from her husband and also withstands his infidelity.

Assimilation is undoubtedly an extension, a more bewildering one in multiculturalism. The characters Lalit, Trideep and Myra are different assimilated characters who struggle for their identity as immigrants. Sunil attains his selfhood only after separating from Anju. Lalit, the second generation immigrant, a doctor by profession, displays modern youth assimilated to host country. His depiction in the fiction is a blend of assimilated immigrant connected with Indian roots and gets attracted towards Indian people and Indian society. Sara

immigrates as an exchange student for a year and was about to get married to her fiancé, but just about a month she realizes that she cannot get the freedom that she desires after her marriage “it hit me that for rest of my life I’d never have a chance to be alone, In-laws, kids, servants, you know how it is in India”(83). So she ventures to have a life of liberty, before getting into marriage bonds. She represents a woman of modern outlook unmindful of the future. Though she does not hold responsibility for deeds, she obviously crosses the ethical code of conduct which she supposes as freedom and self identity. To a riddle asked by Lalit to Sudha, “What’s the difference between a soldier and a lady?”(152) the octogenarian, “There’s no difference at all my dear. You of all people should know that.”(349). This indicates that Sudha endures like a soldier, solely taking the responsibility of her daughter, and also relieving the old man from his homesickness by promising him to take him to his homeland. She is not less than any soldier, framing an identity for herself in an alien land.

The immigrant women experiences cultural resonance amid the questions of loss of identity and redefining identity. When compared to men in general women, face contrasting cultures questing ethnicity. Immigration brings them close to Western culture and poses a threat to root culture. The Indian appearance and attire suggests alien and is considered a mere costume in foreign culture. However, going beyond the tradition is rootless and unethical. “All cultures and religions limit the boundaries of women’s lives and segregate them from the rest of the society. Education and training of women limit their physical mobility and sexuality”(Nimavat 281). Anju and Sudha adapt to these limitations to define themselves. Divakaruni brings about the contrasting cultures of India and the US. The characters apparently shuttle between two worlds. Loss, alienation rootlessness and dislocation is experienced by every immigrant. The expatriates initially try to adjust with the new culture and society into which they move. But at the same time they are not willing to follow the new land’s culture completely. The study of Indian culture by K.M. Munshi in *Foundations of Indian Culture 1962* emphasizes, ‘culture’ which is

deduced as the distinctive means of life, encouraged by original values in which people live in. The culture encompasses the values expressed through art, religion, literature, social institutions and behavior, conveys a typical pattern of life of a society of people. Divakaruni explores culture and heritage weaving them into her novels. In *The Vine of Desire* the traces of cultural roots illustrate contesting host cultures in immigration and global context where fusion of culture is inevitable. Anju and Sudha assume a cultural transformation on immigration. Sara, an example of cultural assimilation adopts liberal and adventurous life. Sara is a flamboyant girl assimilated into American culture. “Don’t look so scandalized! It isn’t hard. I love the freedom, the risk. It’s being in a play.”(83). Sudha is shocked to see an Indian girl displaying, such incautious disposition. She becomes a source of inspiration for Sudha, to survive and make a fusion of cross culture in the alien land, who proclaims, “I love the freedom.”(83). “You got to get out of this valley girl,”...see the other Americans....” (84). For such people the home or the country doesn’t exist, what matters is the present; reclusive of limitations or cultural boundaries. Sudha sheds her traditional conservative role of a pathetic female and evolves into liberal and self dependent women. Sudha, renovates, like a butterfly released out of a cocooned life. She breaks all restraints bound with Indian marriages and security. Single handed she risks about bringing up her daughter. Divakaruni exposes the concerns of present day women affiliating to success by reinventing self. She opines that transformation is inevitable on crossing borders where they encounter multiple predicaments and cultures.

Sudha, crosses the ethical boundary which, is symbolic to crossing the *Lakshman Rekha*, after which, she undergoes crisis. Sudha realizes her folly who ultimately believes, that life will be simpler, if everyone knows their limitations, and that, trouble enters only when they cross the limits. Sudha, unclasps herself from the chains bound by matriarchal protected family and transforms into modern and independent woman.

She gets freedom that she could never get in her home culture, she goes out on a date with

Lalit. A divorcee dating a gentleman would raise many eyes, “ Folly and frivolity, my mother would have said. My mother-in-law would have called it sin....I turn my back on them all (160). Sudha’s acquiring, financial stability to look after herself and her daughter, is significantly a bold step. This gives her emancipation from her duty bound puppet life; from her nagging-mother, overpowering-mother-in-law, feeble-husband and seducing-Sunil.

The women in the fiction emerge as resilient at the time of trouble. From national to transnational, Divakaruni’s artistically narrates the same tensions of assimilations and complexities of creating own identity in the host country. This is possibly creating a support system for survival in the host country, but at times the roots weaken and deracinate when nostalgia overrides them, as in case of the octogenarian in the fiction.

Sudha redefines and re-fashions herself and also reorganizes herself back in her own country as a nurse to the nostalgic ridden octogenarian, to give all three of them a fresh beginning. She proves herself not only capable of taking care of herself but also her daughter Dayita and the old man. Anju is confused over her life, her cousin, her husband and her lost son. Finally, Anju comes out of emotional and financial upheavals to form ground to her identity. She attains her physical strength and learns to accomplish her dream of flying a glider. The women apparently, emerge with immense resilience, at times of trouble. The trauma of desertion from her husband awakens her self-respect and invigorates herself to re-invent her selfhood, to keep her rooted in a foreign country.

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