

## **Evolution of a New Woman in the Sociological Milieu of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Journey to the Inner Self**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The idea of men's and women's relationships is one that literature today is highly concerned with redefining. The numerous social roles associated with males and females have been primarily influenced by biological sex. It needs to be clarified how or when the complementary position of women was replaced by a secondary one, which, over time, ossified that many women are still fighting for their civil rights today. In the diasporic consciousness, women also experience discrimination over their right to self-recognition. The longing for one's roots or homeland is intense among females. They become nostalgic and feel homesick. They battle with their inner selves to adjust to the unfamiliar conditions and surroundings and work to overcome relocation difficulties. As a result, they gain self-awareness and confidence, allowing them to reassess and rethink women's lives as mothers, spouses, daughters, sisters, and professionals. By moving through the different stages of experiences, there is now a new representation of women in life and literature who are independent, free, unreserved, and mature. The paper focuses on the struggles and experiences of such female characters in the selected novels of Indian American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In her novels, she gracefully tackles the diasporic pain experienced by the female protagonists, who are stuck in a society where they cannot forge their own identities.

### **KEYWORDS**

Diasporic consciousness; discrimination; self-recognition; longingness; homeland; nostalgic; self-awareness.

In recent years, the adoption of the term diaspora and its original meaning has come to encompass a far broader range of ideas. The term 'diaspora' denotes a movement in viewpoint as well as a transformation in the social landscape. According to several works of literature, Diaspora is a vast community of individuals who share a common culture, country, world view and ancestry. It is a

term used to describe a group of people who have been physically and culturally moving from where they originally came from. Diaspora is a necessary term for alienation, rootlessness, dislocation, nostalgia, and cultural and identity crises. Diaspora refers to rootlessness or a loss of homeland in the study of cultural movements. "The whole nation of crossing over or migrating from one identity to

another is enormously essential," writes Edward Said in *The Politics of Possession*. (122). Despite settling outside of India, writers from the Indian Diaspora, including V. S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have a strong affinity to and affection for their own country. "The global Indian diaspora is emerging as a critical phenomenon for twenty-first-century researchers to explore," claims Gauri Bhattacharya. (65). According to this point of view, Shukla acknowledges that the diasporic nature of Indian novelists in English is distinctive. In the 1990s, this pattern became more pronounced and verified. Numerous writers, including Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Gita Mehta, and Amit Chaudhari, are investigating life in this nation from a distance. (8).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known prolific writer of diaspora. Her works focus on the women characters in the diaspora awareness. She has authored many publications regarding the lives of South Asian women in the US. She collaborated with the California non-profit group "Maitri" to support women who had experienced domestic abuse. Her books, including *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), and *The Vine of Desire* (2002), portray the struggles and experiences of migrant women. They also show how she thinks about the diaspora and the difficulties that Indian women who immigrate to other countries encounter. Restrictions imposed by culture were exploited to create a distinct identity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni contributed to the development of Indian literature. Her works depict the women's diasporic issues and how they have dealt with the obstacles of living in different countries and with a wide range of diverse identities. Her novels present a

contrasting position of an Indian woman while living and working in the United States. The women characters of her novels struggle to reconcile Indian identity with the American one, she has developed while living and working in the United States. A sequel to her novel, *The Sister of My Heart*, in which two Indian-American women served as the protagonists and portrayed American life, is continued in *The Vine of Desire*. Sudha and Anju, the characters of the narrative, grew up believing that living in the United States was like reading about it in children's books. The cultural prejudices and discrimination against Indian women in the United States, on the other hand, remained a mystery to them. One of the most tragic aspects of Divakaruni's portrayals of women's characters is that they were unable to lead fulfilling lives in their new countries due to their lack of agency.

Cultures are formed by the values embodied by women in every aspect of our lives in the form of daughters, mothers, sisters, wives, or any other form of relationship. Women can influence our lives at every level. They have the power to shape our lives. They were given the power to dictate what the culture should be. Women are given the power to create life, and as we are very aware it is not an easy task. However, in India, women are subject to a completely contradictory situation. On the one hand, they are worshipped as goddesses, but on the other, they are shamed in numerous ways that are beyond comprehension to a sensible person.

In India, women have to fight for their human rights. The orthodox society of India does not accept to provide them their basic human and civil rights. It is considered that men are physically strong and women are emotionally strong. As the Indian women are emotionally strong and throughout their lives, they face the problems and fight back. The people of

India do not allow women to receive education as they believe that if women were educated then they would be not eligible for marriage. Women are considered the most important part of society as they perform the roles of mother, spouse, daughter, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, grandmother, etc. and take care of the whole family. During the early period of India, women suffered a lot and faced many problems like child marriage, parda pratha, sati pratha, restrictions to widow marriage, devdasi pratha etc. However, now such old practices have almost been abolished from our society. But still, women face many other problems and challenges in India.

Today we are on the 21<sup>st</sup> century and consider our society to be modern. But still, in modern society, women face many challenges that make their lives uneasy. In India when a girl child born, society lays certain patterns to be followed by her as she is a female. The society marks a demarcation between a male and a female. The women are restricted for many things. They have been assigned some attributes by society such as emotionalism, infantilism, passivity, and irrationality as opposed to men. The patriarchal society of India confines her role as mother, daughter, sister, and wife.

The current article focuses on the development of a new woman and her quest to discover her inner self, with specific attention paid to *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The paper also examines the experiences of two-generation immigrant women in the novels. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novels examines how the women in the society are economically, politically, and socially exploited and how they break the restrictions of the society and evolve as a 'New Woman'. Divakaruni portrays the enigma of a woman and also the fears of

modern women in society. In her works, she focuses on the identity crisis of the women characters and their struggle with the inner self. She admits in an interview that:

Women in particular respond to my writing because I write about them—women in relationships, in love, and difficult situations. I want readers to identify with my characters and feel their joy and suffering because that will make it harder for them to be prejudiced when they interact with each other in real life. (The Border Book Festival)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni excels in her narrative style and understands the emotions of women. She portrays the tragic and agonizing paradox of a woman who strives for her independence in her novel *Sister of My Heart*. Sudha, the female protagonist of the novel thinks

Desperately I try to remember that there is a saner world where women study and work and go shopping and visit this cinema with their girlfriends, where it is permissible for them to live normal lives even if they cannot be mothers. I repeat to myself the names of classmates who I've heard have become doctors and teachers and famous dancers, but they are too far away. (SMH 215).

The intricate familial ties of two female characters are depicted in the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. The novels focus on the existence and evolution of a female protagonist into a 'New Woman'. Two cousins named Anju and Sudha are the subjects of the novel, *The Sister of My Heart*. They grew up in a typical Bengali family in Calcutta. Both the cousins live with their mothers and aunt Pishi who is a widow and lives with her brother's family. After the death of

Sudha's father both the mother and daughter live in Chatterjee's mansion. The family is deprived of men as both the fathers are lost in the ruby hunt. There are three widows in the family, Sudha's mother Nalini, Anju's mother Gauri Ma and Aunt Pishi. Although the lives of the two cousins are shaped by the three widows in the family still, they have a strong emotional bond. They were not allowed to be acquainted with any young man as their mothers kept an eye on them. Sudha says:

We moved in a world of women, my cousin and I, at home and outside. It was a world of filtered, submarine light, languid movements, eyes looking out from behind a frieze. Small muted sounds: the tinkling of bangles, female laughter. (SMH 66)

Anju and Sudha are emotionally and psychologically connected. They love and support each other and share their views and ideas. Anju says:

I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart... Like no one else in the entire world does. Like no one else in the entire world will. Early in my life, I realize something people were jealous of Sudha and me (SMH 24)

After the marriage, Sudha and Anju are separated. Anju went to America and Sudha remains in India. After marriage Sudha's life became worse and in America Anju's husband Sunil wanted to maintain distance from Anju. When Sudha came to know about her pregnancy and when it was identified that in her womb is a female baby, her mother-in-law forced her to go for abortion. Sudha says:

My mother -in- law is gracious, with the graciousness of someone who knows she cannot be persuaded. If I return at once and

go through with the schedule abortion, she will consider my foolish act of rebellion forgotten. If not, she is afraid, she will have to set the divorce proceedings in motion. (SMH 267).

To protect her kid, Sudha travels to her mother's residence. Anju, who is also expecting, wants to bring Sudha to the United States. Therefore, she works to earn money which leads to miscarriage. Sudha visits America with her daughter Dayita, to look after her beloved sister Anju. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents the problems and sufferings faced by Indian women in society. She beautifully explores the bonding of women who support each other to overcome difficulties. If the women are united and co-ordinate to each other then no external force can attack and separate them. Overwhelmed by life's trials and tribulations, these ladies take solace in one another's presence, making up for their lack of resources. Jyoti Singh says:

Overpowered by the torrents and tribulation of life, these women seek refuge in each other's company, compensating for their deprivation. An empathy bond, in which acts as a mentor, guiding their destiny to a safer shore, knits their relationship together. (Singh 154-155)

The sequel to *Sister of My Heart* is the novel *The Vine of Desire*. Beginning with the reunion of both cousins, Anju and Sudha, in America, *The Vine of Desire* takes place. In this novel, Divakaruni examines the immigration experiences of an American lady who fights for her identity while living in a foreign country. The novel starts with the miscarriage of Anju, which leads an abortion. She misses her unborn son Prem. The deceased are not irreversibly dead as long as one refuses to

let them go, according to Divakaruni, who writes:

with the lost of her (Anju) strength, she holds on to something she heard a long time ago in another country, when she was not much more than a child herself: the dead are not an irrevocably dead as long as one refuses to let them go. (VOD 7).

Anju's miscarriage makes her feel lonely. She becomes nostalgic and lost in the memories of India. Beena Agarwal says: "Her nostalgia and isolation become small intense after her abortion. She unconsciously associates her personal tragedy with the shift of location" (57). Anju feels lonely and becomes homesick after her miscarriage. She thinks about her home in India:

It's gone now. Demolished... I used to hate that house, how ancient it was, how it stood for everything ancient. I hated being cooped up in it and not allowed to go anywhere except school. But now I miss it! I think of my room with its cool, high ceiling, and my bed sheets, which always smell neem leaves- and which I never had to watch myself: - and the hundred -year old peepal trees that grew outside my windows. (VOD 13).

In America, Sudha gets a job as a nurse to an old man. She finds that the old man is not happy with his life in an alien land. He is nostalgic for his homeland. In an alien land, most of immigrants face the issues of nostalgia or homesickness and thus it becomes difficult to adjust in a new culture. Sudha realises why the old man is not happy, "In this bed, in this house, in this country, all of which is alien to him". (VOD 278).

Sudha has finally been released from any limitations placed on her in India and has begun a brand-new life in America. She becomes familiar with

American culture. She visits America to become free and also to make her life and her daughter's life comfortable. Chitra Banerjee encourages Indian women to fight for individual identity and struggle for freedom and independence.

Sudha is aware that Sunil is secretly infatuated with her, and she ends up being the object of his lust. She thus departed from Anju's home and went to work as a nurse at an elderly man's residence. When Sudha leaves Anju's residence, she says to Dayita, "Dayita none of the choices ahead of me are good ones. This one just seems a little less bad than the others." (VOD 202).

The old man Mr. Sen wishes to go back to India but his son cannot send his father back to India because of his age of dependence and also there is no one in India to look after him. Therefore, the old man becomes angry and refuses to eat. He becomes mentally and physically sick. Sudha therefore decides to return to India with the old man Mr. Sen, who is homesick and longs to return to his homeland. Anju, however, chooses to stay in America and embrace the changes that have taken place in her life. Her decision to stay in America helps her to adopt a more Westernized way of thinking and she starts believing that she owes something to herself. Both Sudha and Anju succeed in breaking the traditional notions of society and finally, begin to talk in different voices. They become the symbol of the 'New Woman' who finds her own identity in a patriarchal society.

## CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the true epitome of diaspora. She is the perfect voice of immigrant writers. Her novels deal with the issues of nostalgia, alienation, displacement, dislocation, identity crisis, cultural crisis and homesickness. She speaks and writes the language of women. She is an authentic

female author. In an interview with Neila C. Seshachari, Divakaruni says:

I am because it is a physical fact that I have left my homeland, whatever my motives were. Moreover, I have decided to settle in a very different land and a very different culture. So whatever the original motive or intent was, I do find myself torn between two cultures specially now that I'm bringing up children here, and I'm torn by the desire to go back to India for long or short periods of time. I'm conflicted by the fact that my mother is alone in India. All her

children are here (in the United States). I think the idea of the diaspora is very important to me and in my writing, it comes up many times because I'm aware of other people whose entry into America was even more diasporic than mine. And I write about them too; their stories and important to me. (Seshachari)

Divakaruni incorporates the issues of arranged marriage, female foeticide, divorce, and unhappy relationships. Her writings reflect experiences from feminine perspectives as she gives more importance to women characters.

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