

Immigrant experience and self-discovery of women in the select novels of Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni: A study

A Usha

M. Phil-Research Scholar, Department of English, PRIST University, Vallam, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

This research paper has expressed the brief account of the feminist fictional works of Indo-American writers. It also gives a bird's eye view of the characteristic features of the major novels of Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni, which analyses the art of characterization in the novel "Sister of My Heart" by Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni. It also discusses what feminist notions are dealt with in the novel, and how the novelist unduly praises the American culture and the freedom it affords to women, and how she underestimates the value of India traditions and Indian familiar relationship.

Keywords: feminism, post colonialism, self-identity, immigrant experience

Introduction

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni is a well-known novelist. She is also a famous poet. Many of her through-provoking articles have been published in more than fifty magazines and are widely read. Her writings have been included in more than thirty anthologies. She was born in Calcutta, India and spend her childhood days there. One of her childhood memories is that of her grandfather who used to tell her many enchanting stories which occur in the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha the two great epics of ancient India.

While listening to those stories, she curiously noticed the fact that "interestingly, unlike the male heroes, the main relationship (the) women had were with the opposite sex with their husbands, sons, lovers or opponents. They never had any important women friends". (Asian American Fiction, P.08) this fact had a profound influence on her writings Divakaruni was bought up as and still is a devout Hindu. She attended a convent school in India run by Irish nuns during her childhood. After her schooling, she went to the University of Calcutta and received her bachelor's degree from there. In 1976, at the age of nineteen, Divakaruni immigrated to the United States. She continued her higher education in that country. She received her master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and her doctoral degree from the University of California at Berkley. To meet her educational expenditure, she did odd jobs such as baby sitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread at a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab. Divakaruni did not begin to write fiction until after she graduated from Berkely, when she came to the realization that "I loved teaching but did not want to do academic writing. I did not have enough heart. I wanted to write something more immediate" (Asian American Fiction, P.10). Divakaruni moved around the country, living in Chicago and Ohio before moving to California, in 1979.

The stories of Divakaruni's novels, which are set both in India and the USA, feature Indian-born women torn between new and old world values. Her stories give a laser-like insight into

the feminine nature. Her skilled use of story, plot and lyrical description gives the readers a many layered look at her characters and their respective worlds which are filled with fear, hope, and discovery. Most of her works are autobiographical and are based on the lives of Indian immigrants. She has dealt with their lives and its many nuances in detail. She says that she writes to unite people by breaking down old stereotypes.

Her earlier works were books of poetry. She published *Dark like the River* (1987). *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), and *Black Candle* (1991). Even after these poetical works, she was not very well known. She then stopped writing poetry and began to write novel and showed it to an agent, who, in turn, secured a contract for Divakaruni with Doubleday.

In 1995, she published *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of short stories. In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni beautifully pictures the lives of the immigrant brides who have lost their identity. The stories in the book address issues such as racism, interracial relationship, economic disparity, abortion and divorce. The book was awarded the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for fiction, the Bay Area Book Reviews Award for fiction, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation.

In 1997, Divakaruni wrote her first novel *The Mistress of Spices*. It is a dazzling tale of misbegotten dreams and desires, hopes and expectations, woven with poetry and story teller magic. Divakaruni says about her first novel the following: "I wrote in a spirit of play, Collapsing the division between the realistic world of the twentieth century America and the timeless on of the myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable". (Introduction to the *Mistress of Spices*, P. ii). The main character of the book Tilo owns a spice shop in an Indian community in Oakland, California. She becomes involved in the lives of the customers and helps them by guarding them from abusive husbands, racism, generational conflicts, and drug abuse. The book was short-listed for the Orange Prize from England and was named one of the best books of 1997 by the Los Angeles Times.

Sister of My Heart, published in 1998, is Divakaruni's most recent novel. The book explores the tension between the desires of mothers, who embrace traditional Indian culture and the cousins, who embrace the new western ways of life. She published another collection of poetry, Leaving Yuba City, in 1997. This collection also deals with immigrant women and their struggles to find themselves in a new world. This story collection was awarded the Pushcart Prize and Allen Ginsberg Prize.

Divakaruni once explained the reason for writing: "There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious – the essence of spirituality – that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds the divine in everything. It was important for me to start writing about my own reality and that of my community." (Double Day)

Anju is the daughter of an upper-caste Calcutta family of distinction. Sudha is the daughter of the black sheep of that same family. Sudha is startlingly beautiful; Anju is not. Despite these differences, since the day the two girls were born—the same day their fathers died. Mysteriously and violently, Sudha and Anju have been sisters of the Heart. Bonded in ways even their mothers cannot comprehend, the two girls grow into womanhood as if their fates, as well as their hearts, are merged.

When Sudha learns a dark family secret, that connection is threatened. For the first time in their lives, the girls know what it is to feel suspicion and distrust—Sudha because she feels a new shame that she cannot share with Anju; and Anju, because she discovers the seductive power of her sister's beauty, a power Sudha herself is incapable of controlling. When, due to a change in family fortune, the girls are urged into arranged marriages, their lives take opposite turns. One travels to America, and one remains in India. When tragedy strikes both of them, however, they discover that, despite distance and marriage, they must turn to each other once again.

"Like the old tales of India that are filled with emotional filigree and flowery prose, Divakaruni's (The Mistress of Spices) latest work is masterful allegory of unfulfilled desire and sacrificial love. It is also an intricate modern drama in which generations and castes struggle over old and new mores. Anju and Sudha are cousins, born in the same household in Calcutta on the same Day? Which is also the day on which their mothers learn that both their husbands have been killed in a reckless quest for a cave full of rubies.

Sudha grows up believing her father was a no-good schemer who brought ruin on his cousin, Anju's upper-class father. As they mature, Anju dreams of college, Sudha of children, but arranged marriages divide and thwart them. Anju adjusts to life in California with a man who lusts after Sudha; Sudha grapples with a mother-in-law who turns to the goddess Shasti to fill Sudha's barren womb rather than to a doctor for her sterile son. Ultimately, the tie between Anju and Sudha supersedes all other love, as each sustains painful loss to save the other. When Sudha learns the truth about her father and no longer needs to right his wrongs, she sees that all along her affection for Anju has not been dictated by necessity. An inspired and imaginative raconteur, Divakaruni is sure to engender comparison with Arundhati Roy (The God of Small Things), but Divakaruni's novel stands in its own right as a

compelling read..... (A) mesmerizing narrative."

"like Rebecca Wells's Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood, Divakaruni's debut novel, The Mistress of Spices was a word-of-mouth hit; its blend of magical realism and culinary sensuality also appealed to fans of Laura Esquivel's Like Water for Chocolate (LJ9/1/92). This second novel is a bit more earth-bound. Born on the same day their

Divakaruni was inspired by many writers. Dabydeen and Asoka Weerasinghe are two of them. In the evolving history of South Asian Canadian literature Dabydeen occupies a special place. He is not only a prolific writer—he has published over a dozen volumes of fiction and poetry— but also a writer who has conscientiously worked to gain recognition for minority writers in Canada. Dabydeen's Stoning the Wind is a collection of fifty-eight poems. He is at most poetic when he uses images from his native landscape. Many of his poems are dedicated to individuals, and several of them directly pay tribute to a friend by remembering small, specific incidents.

Tears for My Roots are a slender volume of twenty-five poems by Ashoka Weerasinghe. He published several such volumes since 1968, when he immigrated to Canada from his native Sri Lanka via England. Its main interest lies in the use of newspaper clippings and photographs, ink-sketches of temple sculptures; and a refrain of silhouetted figures of elephant and dancers at border of each page add a dimension to the reading experience.

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni is a new name, which is likely to become more familiar. There is no doubt about the presence of poetic talent in Black Candle. The volume looks, feels and reads the way poetry should. The font used is aesthetic. The cover picture in purple, blue, and orange showing a cobra with raised hood is evocative of the power of fear of female sexuality. The book is dedicated to her mother and "for my sisters of the South Asian Diaspora" the subtitle is "Poems about Women from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh".

"Writing the body" is a term used in feminist discourse for bringing to the surface woman's experiences, physical and emotional, that have long been left undivulged. Every one who has been spared personal experiences of victimization cannot but know the incidents of violence against women now and through ages.

The earlier generation of expatriate writers is Raja Rao, Santha Rama Rao, Anita Desai, and even Bharathi Mukarjee. Contemporary writing from the South Asian diaspora bears the marks of a cultural encounter that combines re-writing the history with advanced responses to dislocation and marginalization by hegemonic structures. The raw energy of first generation politics is substituted by a more complex response to issues of race and belonging. The new writers return to this marginalization, not by dissolving into the mainstream but by rendering their distinctive values.

In Sister of My Heart, once again the protagonist, Sudha and Anju live in a female universe. In this novel the male and the female worlds are more symbolic than real.

"... The sun hangs low on the horizon half hidden by the papal trees which line our compound walls all the way down the long drive away to other bolted wrought-iron gates. Our great grand father had them planted hundred years ago to keep the women of his house safe from the

gaze of strangers. Abha Pishi, one of our three mothers has told us this. Yes, we have three mothers perhaps to make up for fact that we have no fathers". (Sister of My Heart – P.16)

The girls live in a matriarchal home in which there is absolutely no male control. The only male 'alive in the family' is disguised as Singhji, the driver, who exerts no authority over the household. What was originally conceived of as a respective boundary for the women is recreated into a female universe just like Tilo's store. But the difference is that the rules that are upheld in this world are those laid down by the patriarchal society. It is only later that the world of the Chatterjee women is completely transformed into a feminine one.

The male world only creates trouble for the protagonists Marriage tears them apart and Anju moves to America while Sudha to rural Bengal. Men separate them effectively in terms of geography. Their lives are shattered when they attempt to conform to the rules of the masculine society. Anju almost loses her mental stability and Sudha her freedom. It is only when they decide to migrate to a female universe quite remove from male geographic definition, albeit symbolic, that they begin to find the solution to their problems. When Anju is upset by her miscarriage, Sudha calls her over the telephone and tells her a story.

"Once there was a princess who spent her girlhood in a crumbling marble place sat around with guards. They told her what was proper and what was not, and held up their poison spears before her face if she attempted to stay outside the boundaries they had drawn for her. (Sister of My Heart, P.308, 9)

The crumbling marble palace is symbolic of the confined space which men have allocated to women in their universe. The princess (mythic representation of Sudha, the narrator of the story) tries to live by the rules of the male world. She marries the king chosen for her and conceives. But when it is known that the foetus is female the men decide to destroy the baby. It is then that the queen rebels to protect her baby. She leaves the kingdom and reaches the ocean's edge.

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni believes that the major theme in all her writing is sisterhood, that mysterious female bonding which goes far deeper than conventional familial ties and which insistently surfaces in women's relationships despite all patriarchal conditioning. In "What Women Share", an essay in *Bold Type* of February 19, 1990, she describes how often her grandfather had told her stories from the Indian epics and how she had always searched in them for that sense of sisterhood she knew most have existed among those great women, for "The aloneness of the epic heroines seemed strange to me even as a child. I could see that this was not how women around me lived" whether in the villages or in middle-class Calcutta. But where male friendship in the great stories - "unselfish, devoted, noble - were meant to inspire us to similar emotions", the women of the epics, she saw, related only to the men around them even when they did have women friends these friendships inevitable broke up when a man entered the scene. "It was as though the tellers of these tales (who were,

coincidentally, males) felt that women's relationship with each other were only of significance until they found a man to claim their attention and devotion". (Asian American women, P.115).

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni, who was born in a traditional Hindu family in Calcutta, India, later settled in the USA. So she had the advantage of looking face to face both the Indian and American ways of life. She was well versed in Indian mythology and the feminist writings of modern India, She also took interest in the emancipation of women from the innumerable problems that they have to encounter in their day-to-life.

In her major fictional works, Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni deals with the problems of women, and offers solutions to the problems. She deals with the theme of female bonding and stresses the fact that female bonding is definitely different from male bonding.

In the novel *The Mistress of My Heart*, Divakaruni represents all the major problems of women who belong to the Diaspora. She describes realistically how women are ill-treated by their abusive husbands, how they are bullied by their fathers-in-law and mother-in-law, and how they lose their female identity and individuality. The novel also offers solutions to the problems of women who are enslaved by mythological beliefs and abusive restrictions and conventions of Indian family system. Moreover, the novel *The Mistress of My Heart* tries to evolve a female identity in the novel, which can emancipate women from their traditional bonding and abusive relationships.

Her novel "Sister of My Heart" also deals with the problems of women and stresses their emancipation. This novel deals with the theme of female bonding and many types of feminist notions in detail. The two major women characters in the novel and their lives are contrasted with each other. It discusses how the relationship between the two women is split by the traditional family system.

Both of these novels represent women's lives and their various problems. They do this by contrasting the western culture and the Indian culture. They tend to praise excessively the American traditions and ways of life and the freedom they are thought to afford to women, and to underestimate the Indian traditional values and ways of life. The reason for the partial treatment of the Indian traditional values might be the fact that these novels were written mainly for the western readers.

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