



## Crossing and Constructing Boundaries: Ethnic Identity in the Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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### Abstract

This study explores the construction and negotiation of ethnic identity in the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through the theoretical framework of Fredrik Barth. Barth's seminal argument that ethnicity is not a fixed cultural essence but a product of boundary-making processes offers a critical lens to examine diasporic subjectivities in Divakaruni fictional work. Through close readings of *The Mistress of Spices*, and *Oleander Girl*, this paper argues that Divakaruni's characters actively participate in crossing, negotiating, and reconstructing ethnic boundaries and these boundaries are shaped by migration, gender, memory, and cultural interaction. The paper demonstrates that ethnic identity in Divakaruni's fiction is fluid, relational, and continuously redefined through social engagement rather than inherited tradition.

**Keywords:** Crossing boundaries, constructing boundaries, ethnic identity, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Oleander Girl*

### Introduction

Since ages, to tread the unknown path for the purpose of exploring beyond boundaries has been inherited in the basic human nature. As the human mind evolves with time, new aspirations grow and for the fulfilment of the same human moves to other land for the sake of stability and better opportunities in life. Migration is not new to humankind as geographic boundaries never put restriction on anyone who wants to achieve more in life. Moreover, due to the emergence of globalization, it is a usual thing known in today's world. Diasporic Literature is one such genre which presents the saga of an unending search of immigrants and their experiences which they have while surviving in an alien land. Within these genre diasporic women writers add a unique dimension to the concept of identity by showing their characters endeavour to redefining their new ethnic identity. The issue of ethnic identity has emerged as a central concern in contemporary literary and cultural studies, particularly in the context of diaspora and globalization. Writers of the Indian diaspora have significantly contributed to this discourse by portraying the complexities of belonging, displacement, and cultural negotiation. Among them, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands out for her sensitive and layered depiction of immigrant experiences, especially women negotiating multiple cultural frameworks and reconstructing their identities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, being an exceptionally creative writer, excels from her contemporaries because of her different dealing in presenting the situations of life abroad and how the characters rebuild their identities in the new land. Her characters are not presented in grey shades only, but in a jubilant one with every possible hope to endure and integrate with different societies, communities, and cultures. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings cover the culture of both; India and America showing bicultural experiences and ethnic conflicts. Being a native of Indian soil, she is well acquainted with the rites and rituals, customs and traditions and myths and legends of India. This Indian flavour is

distinguishable in her works. She create stories where characters negotiate their identities in search of self and acclimate in a new culture.

### Theoretical Framework: Fredrik Barth and Ethnic Boundaries

Barth, editor of the book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) marks a distinctive shift in the studies of ethnicity with this work which have 'stood the test of time'. This book highlights the interrelation of ethnic identities and negotiation of boundaries of ethnic groups. Roger Brubaker and Frederik in '*Beyond Identity*' (2000) remarked about 'Identities' as "something all people have, seek, construct, and negotiate". They mean to emphasize that 'identity' is everywhere and it is for everyone. It is a fluid and an ever-changing phenomenon. Therefore, it is worth pondering that how it is possible for us to recognize identity through its changing form, how it gets shaped, how it gets changed, how it is constructed; reconstructed and asserted; negotiated during a person's life.

Fredrik Barth, in his influential work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), redefined ethnicity as a process of social organization rather than a fixed set of cultural characteristics. In his book Barth has described ethnic group as follows:

- Ethnic groups are largely biologically self-perpetuated.
- They share fundamental cultural values and unite over similar cultural forms
- They make up their own field of communication and interaction.
- Their members identify themselves as part of the group and others also identify them as part of that group. However, each member is part of a category distinguishable from other categories of the same type.

Thus, ethnic group is defined as a people of a particular race who have a common culture, language and other rituals like food, customs, values etc. Barth has quoted three fundamental assumptions about ethnicity:

- Ethnicity is not defined by culture but by social organisation.
- Ethnic identifications are based on ascription and self-identification. They depend on situations and can change if the situation changes.
- The roots of these social organisations are not their cultural content but their difference from others. Hence, the boundary that guards an ethnic group is a social boundary formed through interaction with 'Others'.
- Identity is situational and flexible.

Applying Barth's theoretical framework to Divakaruni's fiction allows for a deeper understanding of how her characters construct and negotiate their identities in diasporic contexts. This paper examines how ethnic boundaries are crossed, reinforced, and transformed in Divakaruni's novels. It argues that how her narratives move beyond essentialist notions of identity and show its flexibility instead of presenting ethnicity as dynamic, performative, and context-dependent. In diasporic contexts, these boundaries become particularly fluid. Migration disrupts established cultural frameworks, compelling individuals to renegotiate their identities in unfamiliar environments. Divakaruni's fiction vividly illustrates these processes, making it an ideal site for applying Barth's theory.

### Crossing Boundaries & Constructing Identities

Migration serves as the main catalyst for the reconfiguration of ethnic identity in Divakaruni's novels. Characters who move from India to the United States encounter new cultural norms that challenge their sense of self. In Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, mythological and surreal story woven in real time and place, the characters are driven by their group and ethnic values. They are migrants in the US from South Asia and carry with them the burden of their ethnic beliefs. The characters' social behaviour is influenced by the pressure of their connections in foreign land, but more often they are behaving according to their own deep-rooted beliefs entrenched in their psyche in long and deep association with their ethnic and social groups. It's difficult for them to extract and detach themselves from the mores and values of their original groups, irrespective of whether or not they are valid in their new socio-economic environment. The characters, however, are more open and ready to accept new methods to mix with society, when given ample time in the new place, especially in formative years. The foundation of human behaviour in Divakaruni's characters emanates from the expectations of their groups from them and when the characters cross the boundaries and identify themselves with other groups, they face the wrath of their families and original groups. The behaviour of characters in the context of the influence of their ethnic groups aligns with Barth's theory of social groups and boundaries. For instance, Lalita, Ahuja's wife, was not ready for marriage. She was forced by the Indian beliefs and the intangible pressure of family "...in our community it is a shame if a grown girl sits in the house, not married and I did not want to shame them.....everyone would say, O those headstrong Chowdhary girls, better not to arrange a match with that family.... (100). Even when she is in America for a long time she is not able to muster the courage to break away from the ethnic Indian belief system, in which the wife bears all the harassments from the husband without any

complaints. Barth suggests that people draw boundaries based on commonality, and Lalita's behaviour is aligned with the theory. She does not also mingle with people from another ethnic background, which might have helped her. The open environment of America, her interaction with other people give her confidence and gradually she broke those taboos which were restricting her and started a fresh life.

Geeta was born in the US and had a chance to interact with other groups were beginning to transcend into a new group identity of Desi Americans. This severely affected her relationships at home, where she was judged on Indian values. Geeta's grandfather's wanted her to marry a "suitable Bengali boy", while she loves a Chicano boy, Juan. She identified herself with the new group of the cosmopolitan culture, but for her family, the group boundaries are too strong, which did not even allow them to mix with other groups. She left her home and started to live on rent but continues to date with her boyfriend. Her grandfather got ill. She returned to take care of him but not bend against their conventional ideas. Her grandfather accepted her decision ultimately. Geeta represents second generation immigrants. Divakaruni shows that cultural identity isn't inherited –it's negotiated.

One other character Jagjit, a Sikh immigrant, newly arrived from India was not accepted by the group of American boys at school, and was teased for his ethnic markers, but eventually Jagjit mingled with them and over the time boundaries began to diminish, and it reflected in his raucous behavior, dressing style, and language – "... Jagjit sullen in T-shirt and baggy Girbaud jeans and untied laces, the uniform of young America, speaking its staccato rhythms already..." (119). Similarly, Barth's stipulates that people can form new identities, and the boundaries of groups get morphed over time in new time and place. The features that define the boundary may differ and change based on circumstances. The behaviour of immigrant characters in *The Mistress of Spices* demonstrates that the Indian diaspora maintains a closely guarded boundary, and as Barth suggests, to be accepted as a member, the group considers only relevant factors which pertain to basic values and are important for the group. The point in case is Geeta's family's non-acceptance of her boyfriend though he had all the qualities of a good Indian groom, but that was not socially relatable to Geeta's grandfather. The relevant factors were his origins, caste, acceptance in the social circle, religion. Since these did not align with the traits of the group, Geeta's boyfriend was accepted as a member of that group

Similarly, in *Oleander Girl*, Korobi's journey to the United States represents both a physical and symbolic crossing of boundaries. Her quest to uncover her father's identity becomes a process of negotiating her own ethnic selfhood. The novel highlights how identity is shaped through movement and encounter, aligning with Barth's emphasis on interaction.

Korobi is the Oleander girl in Divakaruni's novel, and she, like an Oleander, is beautiful and attractive. Her grandfather, a staunch Bengali Brahmin, is so entrenched in his beliefs that he completely overlooks his daughter Anu's happiness. He is against sending her to the US for higher studies, and takes a promise from her in front of Goddess Kali that she will not marry without her father's consent. The values and traits of "Good Brahmins" are so deeply

rooted in Anu's psyche that even when she realizes the vanity and futility of such values in the new environment, she does not have the courage to extract herself out of it. At times, these strong ties to her values, inculcated from her childhood and her association with her ethnic group, did the right job of keeping her in good stead, as Mrs. Anand recounts about Anu - "...had strong values. If she thought something was wrong, she wouldn't take part in it. Sometimes we'd all get together and smoke pot...but she'd walk out of the room" (221). At other times, the same values intoxicate her life, and devoid her of any chance at happiness, as Rob Lacey remembers Anu's words - "...she'd already told me about her promise not to marry against her father's wishes..." (221) Despite falling deeply in love from which Anu could not escape, however hard she tried, she did not break her promise to her father.

In Barth's theory, people define the boundaries based on the basic traits they consider relevant and important. Anu was in the US, an open society, but the geographical distance from her ethnic group could not weaken her group boundaries. She herself felt that she was weak to be able to overcome those boundaries. As Barth theorizes, the people within the group tend to adhere to the core values and mores of the group, and these may change over time and in situations. And, it is the people within the group who decide the boundaries and who, outside the group, have common traits to be included in the group. In Anu's case, given the ethnicity of Rob, it was impossible for him to be accepted in Anu's group - Bengali Brahmins. As Mrs. Anand states "...don't have much hope. There's no one as stubborn as a traditional Hindu father... doesn't forgive easily, not when you choose the kind of man she'd chosen..." (221-222). Even Mrs. Anand, who was in the US for a long time, takes the interracial marriage as a pariah, and something naturally repugnant. She still associated herself with the original ethnic group. Barth states that ethnic boundary determines and drives social life and people's behaviour, and rejects the fact that culture is preserved through lack of knowledge and understanding of other groups. In this case, the ethnic boundary is driving the behaviour of Anu and her grandfather to the extent that there was no chance of redemption and reconciliation between what Anu wanted and what was expected by the group. Both Anu and Mrs. Anand interacted and communed in an open society, but they continued to persist with their own groups.

When Korobi finds out about her father's race, her grandmother is rightly concerned, she says "...no, Shona. But I'm afraid a lot of people will be shocked if they find out...Mrs. Bose. Maybe even Rajat..." (225). Korobi, though brought up in the same household and with same values as her mother, is tougher. She relentlessly pursues the truth, and does not let the group traits dictate her behaviour. A human being's identity is associated with his/her roots. Korobi feels lucky to have such a rich inheritance. Her impressive background makes her feel special. Especially Rajat's family is very impressed by her origin. But Korobi risks all these privileges by searching the core of her parentage. She, too, is as influenced by social and cultural values as the Bose family and others in Kolkotta, and this guides her initial reaction to the fact that her father is an Afro-American and she was born out of wedlock. However, she feels complete as an individual only after learning the truth about her father, and experiences a sense of satisfaction in understanding her identity.

The analysis of this amalgamation of characters from different age groups emphasises the fact that a sense of belonging is extremely essential for one's identity. It is the strong foundation of deeply embedded roots that allow and nurture an individual into a sprawling and blooming identity which has its own unique characteristics. These roots include everything from parentage to tradition to cultural leaning. While migration enables people to cross the boundaries, diasporic communities also play a crucial role in constructing and maintaining them. Indian immigrant communities in Divakaruni's novels often function as spaces of cultural preservation. These communities reinforce ethnic identity through shared practices such as festivals, food, language, and social norms.

### Conclusion

Divakaruni's characters continuously cross and construct boundaries, navigating the complexities of migration, gender, community, and memory. These processes reveal that ethnic identity is both constructed and contested, reflecting the fluid nature of belonging in a globalized world. One of the most significant insights from applying Barth's theory to Divakaruni's fiction is the recognition of identity as fluid and transformative. Through the lens of Fredrik Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries, this paper has demonstrated that identity in her fiction is not a fixed essence but a dynamic process shaped by interaction, negotiation, and transformation. Characters do not simply inherit their ethnic identity; they actively construct it through their interactions and experiences. Finally, Divakaruni's work underlines the idea that identity is not confined by rigid boundaries but enriched through their crossing. Her narratives offer a powerful commentary on the evolving nature of ethnicity, emphasising resilience, adaptability, and the possibility of multiple, coexisting identities.

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