

A Perspective into the Paradoxical Existence of Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Immigrant Women Characters populate the American mainstream literature, steeped in the archetypal images of Asians Americans. Women are portrayed as the most visible symbols of the perilous incongruity arising out of the cohabitation between cultures. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has proved her mettle as one of the most prolific and vociferous voices of Asian American Immigrant women. Her stories, despite all their mystery and magic, create a veritable smorgasbord of characters, barely untrue to their human failings and travails of a life. She has captured the bare rumblings of disquiet and often sheer cacophony through the varied immigrant experiences of women. This paper seeks to delve into the incongruity involved in the lives of women characters and forces and factors that bring about cataclysmic changes in their lives. *The mistress of spices* and *sister of my heart* offer ample scope to bring out the paradoxical elements involved in the convoluted and often paradoxical existence of women characters.

Key words: Diaspora, Multiculturalism, Existentialism, Immigrant experiences, Feminism, Cultural Displacement, Identity crisis, problems of assimilation

Rummaging through the rich harvest of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works one can easily conjure a virtual picture of the South Asian diasporic experience across the Atlantic. Her view of these experiences have been conditioned by, as is common to all diasporic communities, the unremitting cycle of contradictory posturing in notions of race and culture, time and geography. In most of her works The South Asian women divided between loyalties develop easily manoeuvrable thought processes as well as customs and habits to achieve a harmonious duality of existence. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the typical immigrant experience showing the mirror to Indian women wriggling out of stereotypes in American urban landscapes through her novels. Set in spaces-Physical as well as mindscape- divided by continents and cultures, Divakaruni's plots feature women of Indian roots torn between old and new values. Her writings centre on the lives of immigrant women - women in love, women in difficulties, and women in relationships. Her interest in delving deeper into the amorphous and often paradoxical existence of women began soon after she left Indian shores and her subsequent documentation of cross-country immigrant experience. She always maintained that the stories for her novels are inspired by her imagination and the experiences of others which the Indian Diaspora abundantly offers. Divakaruni combines a natural felicity of treating the narrative texture with the artistry of a painter. She strove to capture the

complex and baffling psyche of the south Asian women in America in a manner akin to Du Bois's "double consciousness".(P.5) Divakaruni's women are caught between the decadent, sullen customs of South Asia, their place of origin and their present skirmishes with a forward looking, liberated culture of an adopted place. As opposed to Du Bois's model of double consciousness, the women of her oeuvre get their place under the sun in the categorical constructions of racial and sexual identities. Divakaruni's characters take their journey beyond threads of duality, more towards conditions inherently complex and multifarious. In a clear departure from double consciousness, her women characters exhibit multiple consciousnesses ending up in creating a self that is fragmented. As the women perceive both their race and sexuality through new and varied prisms the notion of a singular identity comes out as a misnomer. A contradiction of sorts characterise the lives of women which is born out of varying levels of consciousness. The women characters display a raw streak of uncertainty in understanding the nature of their identities, and are also hazy about their adaptability to the social-cultural milieu of an American society. In fact, most diasporic writing is suffused with identification consciousness and problem of living in an alien society (P.42 Diasporic Indian writing in English by Somadatta Mandal). However in a strange paradoxical move this condition of multiplicity paves the way for emergence of a state of freedom from conflicts for the characters. Adaptation to a cross cultural setting actually enables this multiple consciousness to ultimately engender a positive psychological element. The women of Divakaruni's 'imagined world' display a flair for adjusting to a world which is linear and individualistic with equal élan as a collective mass of consciousness that is borderless and infinite in inventing identities.

The sublime manifestation of her character's inner and outer worlds add a rich emotional texture to an emancipating story in *The mistress of spices* about women who are quick to make peace with the difficult choices that the circumstances have forced upon them. The plot goes for a roller coaster ride as the characters get in enmeshed with one another. Divakaruni's vaunted style is palpable in display and the emotional surcharged insights into the bare bone realities of women's lives- in all its lively detail- whether in material comfort, or bodily pleasure or the baffling bursts of superior levels of consciousness. The protagonist Tilo led a life underplayed often in being controlled by others. The discovery of her innate powers turns the dice in her favour and her new found mystical aura elevates her standing in the family scheme of things and she becomes a giver and facilitator for her family's magniloquent lifestyle. She had to constantly juggle to realize her identity, losing sight and feel of it more often than not- finding and losing in the secluded company of snakes under water while searching for treasures or later in the Island of spices. Success serenades her life in a strange way; most eloquently she became the Mistress of spices. But her search resumes its trail again from the time she met the lonely American when as a Mistress she "was being treated as the other". Her adopted place Oakland failed to snap her ties of nostalgia about India, which is more pronounced in her flashes of unmistakable empathy for fellow Indians. Her intermittent search for her true identity was laced with clashes and flouting of norms with the solitary exception of the moment of visceral and carnal gratification with Raven in a night of gay abandon and wilful surrender after she attains beauty with the help of spices. The feeling of being an alien is very much represented by Tilo in this fatalistic tone as "nothing except my eyes is my own". Instead, as a girl she gained recognition only as a girl of supernatural powers and even at the spice shop she was treated as a witch woman by most of the persons. Life turns a full circle for Tilo, the protagonist, who started out as one causing another dowry debt in her family

Even the minor characters of the novel represent the theme of alienation to a large extent. Geeta and her family members too suffer the alienation. Geeta suffers the most when

her family turns against her desire to marry Juan, an American notwithstanding their seeming acceptance of the language and culture to some extent. However, she being more coming of age and sure footed hated women making kitchen their fate, decides to marry Juan. Strangely, she could solemnise the matrimony with the consent of her parents and not against their will. Chitra Banarjee's women are liberated as Geeta but her use of mysticism unlocked from Hindu mythologies adds to the infusion of paradoxical elements into her characters. The alternating strand of meaning underneath the metaphor of the spice Turmeric which she borrows from the mythological story of '*Devas and Asuras*', considered as a shield for heart's sorrow, an ointment of death and hope of rebirth. The mistress tries to cure Lalitha Ahuja's wife with this turmeric when she feels deserted by her husband leaving her long to have a child of her own, to fill the emptiness in her life. Even in while self anointing herself, the mistress enjoys the liberty of alluding to the story of Tilottama, the beautiful dancer, and Apsara at Indra's court and how she was banished to live a mortal life for seven ages. Her characters like Lalitha find solace only when they dared to step away from the pre ordained life of passivity and helplessness. Hameeda too suffers a lot in the hands of her husband but starts life afresh, ironically with help from his brother which is stark reminder about the inherent paradoxes involved in the lives of women in this novel. She even attends classes to learn English to make her own living in America and to bring up her daughter. The contradictions are just not limited to the physical or social space alone. While flight to advanced societies are reasoned by prospects of economic betterment, in this novel disparities in economic values and opportunities come to the fore. Women find a mini replica of their substandard stature in the patriarchal society in their homeland here too, mainly because of the economic disparities. However, Chitra Banerjee not only poses the questions but also offers solution to her women characters by suggesting practical ways of finding emancipation and financial assurance, often through vocational work. Divakaruni represents the women of her novels as a class just as Marxian epistology. As a fight against the atrocities, women were shown different areas to work and stand on their own with their creativity and hard work and thus breaking the male geocentricism.

Divakaruni's "*Sister of My Heart*", is a poignant tale of two young women whose lives are torn asunder by marriage, as one reaches the foreign shores leaving the other behind in India. The upheavals in their lives are simple aftershocks of their cultural displacement and ambivalence, quite typical of post colonial cultural studies (1.). Sharing the same genealogy an upper caste family of distinction, Anju and Sudha offer pictures of contrast. While one is fortunate to have credible parent, the other is the daughter of the black sheep of that same family. Even physical attractiveness is a divisive element. Yet despite these obvious incongruities, they share a bonding of compatibility and pure understanding due to strange coincidences in their dates of birth and the deaths of their fathers in similar mysterious fashions. They carry this bonding well into their womanhood in spite of their mothers failing to comprehend it.

In a sudden twist in plot Sudha's discovery of a dark family secret threatens their bonding tempting them to taste the bitter feel of suspicion and distrust. Family fortunes do take likely turns so as their lives take opposite turns. They lead lives of secrets till tragedy strikes both of them and realize an imperative urge to unite blurring distance and marriage. At this point it is apt to run through Rosellen Brown views: "What an irresistibly absorbing immersion into the pleasure and anguish of growing up passionately in a world of duty, where each comfort is hedged with a constraint and love unsettles every plan. *Sister of my heart* may be alive with exotic detail but its emotions are very recognizable". This forms the central message of the '*Sister of My Heart*'. It can be studied from various angles and points of view, and its varied nauseas and poignant realities include traces of feminism.

Sudha, one of the protagonists of the novel, suffered a lot, being a fatherless child, and out of guilt of her father's act, could not insist on her choice of marrying Ashok. She could never reconcile to the dark family secret. Tradition claims its easy prey in women which is clearly represented by the character Pishima, the sister of Anju's father, widowed at an early age and even denied opportunity to continue studies, condemned to the kitchen for always. She shorn of everything she could have got lives a life of utter dependence. And quite paradoxically, Gourima, the mother of Anju, is shown in contrast to the character of Pishi assuming dominance in running the household after the death of her husband. She handles the book shop and even takes care of the two daughters, Sudha and Anju, their studies, and even the widows, Nalini and Pishi. She even neglects her health, while struggling hard to take over the family without hurting the traditions of the Chatterjees. Again quite interestingly Nalini, the mother of Sudha represents the dominant forces of society, conservative and bossy who revelled in denying others their rightful privileges be it education or otherwise. Her dark prophesies are summed by the author as:

For girl-babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born (P.3.)

What follows in Sudha's life is nothing short of catastrophe as in all her choices she bows before the family's will. Ironically, Nalini more than caring for her daughter's wellbeing feared the society after she goes through terrible plight. Divakaruni brings out the paradoxes involved in how as daughters Sudha and Anju were restricted not to be fashionable, not to watch movies, not allowed to use lip stick and salwar kameez in a bid to make them the acid test of finding a good suitor. Even other women characters like Mrs. Sanyal betray their own perceptions of womanhood and impose flawed notions and expectations on other women like Sudha in detecting pregnancy. When Sudha comes out of Bardhaman, out of fear of abortion, Mrs. Sanyal quite nonchalantly declares that to be a fault and even decides for a second marriage to Ramesh without the least hesitation.

Divakaruni represents the women of her novels as a class who constantly struggle to achieve financial self sufficiency. When Sudha was divorced Anju invites her to come to America and to have her own boutique which she dreamed off in her childhood. She even says that the Americans give much value to those which represents the Indian tradition. Anju too does a part time job of assisting her lecturer in proof reading so as to provide economical support to Sudha and help her to make a good starting in America. In this novel, Divakaruni represents the psychological struggle often bordering on duality in women. Sudha, despite being so close to Anju could not resist her feelings after knowing the dark family secret unable to fathom the difference between them. Anju's struggles too looked endless from being aghast being considered baby-machines to inability to fulfil personal aspirations. Even though she went through a lot of stress when she realizes that her husband is very much disturbed by the beauty of Sudha, she stands in her support and strives a lot to present her a good life in America which results in the loss of health as well as a miss-carriage too. However, Sudha, till the end of the novel, feels the displacement because of the guilt that she was feeling because she was not the real cousin of Anju. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes use of mythological metaphors to accentuate the liveliness of experiences her characters undergo. She reveals the glorious stories of Rani of Jhansi through the voice of Sudha to Anju at the time when she was depressed because of her misscarriage and helps her to regain her strength. She narrates it also to her daughter Dayita, on their way to America, in a different way. She even reveals the story of Lord Krishna who helped his sister Draupadi in times of need and compares the lost child of Anju to be Lord Krishna in the symbol of a star in the sky - thus leading Dayita to a bright future.

In fact, much of Divakaruni's work deals with the immigrant experiences which is an important theme in the mosaic of the post colonial literary landscape. Works starting from "Arranged Marriage", a collection of short stories about women from India caught between two worlds to the analyzed texts "*Mistress of Spices*" and "*Sister of My Heart*" are microcosmic representations of lives lived by women who are caught in the cross roads of a cultural shift. She in her beautifully lyrical style fills the canvass of her work by caricatures of women in all perceivable dimensions of womanhood. In fact, in one of her interviews, she observes that, 'women in particular, respond to my works because I'm writing about them, women in love, women in difficulties, and women in relationships'.

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