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Carving New 'Route' and Finding Home in the 'World': A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

Sunal Sharma
Research Scholar
Dept. of English
University of Jammu

Abstract:

Expatriate women writers from South Asian Diaspora reconstruct Sub Continental history in their writing. Women move from village to town, from one country to another for a variety reasons. Sometimes they join a husband who has gone ahead to look for prospects; sometime they go on their own to earn more; sometime they are forced to move because of war, famine, poverty, political or social persecution. Their move may be forceful or voluntary; it is not an easy one. The situation which they have to face after migration is beyond their control. When women whatever class, are forced by circumstances to migrate, they expose themselves to new forms of violence and exploitation. Though the reality is harsh, the protagonists of Divakaruni fight against all odds and tell their successful stories of assimilation.

In *The Vine of Desire*, a sequel to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's earlier novel, *Sister of My Heart*, she explores the emotional bond between two cousins, Anju and Sudha, whose lives have been entwined since birth in their native city of Calcutta, and now they are leading separate lives in America and India respectively. In *The Vine of Desire*, distressing events in the lives of both the cousins bring them together. The present paper shows how beneath the sensitive story about two sisters, Divakaruni's shows the exploration of immigrants' loneliness; cultural dislocation; the process of forging new selves and the complex ways in which immigrants negotiate their past.

Keywords: Desire, immigrants, location of culture, binary fixities, assimilation, tradition, modernity.

In the beginning was pain.

Or perhaps it was end that was suffused with pain, its distinctive indigo tint. Color of old bruises, color of broken pottery, of crumpled maps in evening light. But, no, not like them, ultimately. For although men have tried for thousands of years to find the right simile- and women too- ultimately pain is only like itself. (VD 3)

So begins Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Vine of Desire*. Divakaruni textures the experiences of Calcutta born and raised sisters, Sudha and Anju, living as adult women in 1990s San Francisco, as they journey through the hues of pain that are necessary for their discovery of self-worth in an oppressive society. In the novel, Divakaruni portrays the rewards and perils of breaking free from the past, often contradictory emotions that shape the passage to independence.

First published on January 1, 2002, *The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to Divakaruni's earlier novel *Sister of My Heart*. In *The Vine of Desire*, Divakaruni takes up the story of Anju

and Sudha from where she left them at the end of her novel *Sister of My Heart*. She continues the saga of Anju and Sudha, the now grown cousins and best friends from Calcutta, India. In *The Vine of Desire*, devastating events in the lives of both the cousins bring them together. After escaping the tyrannical grip of her mother-in-law in India, Sudha and her infant daughter, Dayita, journey to America to find freedom and to help her emotionally comatose sister, Anju, who is recovering from a miscarriage. Sudha also tries to escape from the suffocating embrace of her first love with her former boyfriend, Ashok who insists on taking care of her and her daughter.

The title of the novel is a paraphrase of the twelfth verse of Shankracharya's *Bhaja Govindam*:

Again the day, again the night
Dawn and dusk, winter spring.
In the play of time, life ebbs away-
Only desire remains.
Again birth, again death
Again the dark journey through the womb
In the world of changes, nothing holds fast
Except the coiled vine of desire.

The above verse states that in spite of knowing that everything changes and dies ultimately, man is enshrouded in the gusts of desire. Most Indian scriptures talk of the sublimation of desire as a goal but when Divakaruni encountered a new meaning in the western world where desire is positive, charged with passion and ambition and often associated with goal-getters it fired her to explore it in *The Vine of Desire*, the sequel to *Sister of My Heart* where the protagonist Sudha falls in love with sister Anju's husband and fights the feeling with every ounce of her strength. In an interview with Ismat Sarah Mangla, Divakaruni tells about desires:

I think desires are natural but we must examine them, see where they're leading us and manage them accordingly. It is when they control us that they lead to problems. Ultimately, as our scriptures indicate, one needs to rise above desire. For me this means we do the things we do out of love, and not out of need. (n. pag.)

The first part of the novel, *Subterranean Truths*, deals with the exploration of hidden secrets of the characters' life and how these create major rifts in the relationships. The novel begins with the happy reunion of the cousins, which is again marred by Sunil's passionate feelings for Sudha and by Sudha succumbing to his desires. Their lives totally change, challenging the reunion of the 'Sisters of Hearts'.

The day Sudha stepped off the plane from India into Anju's arms, leaving a ruined marriage behind, their lives changed for-ever. And not just Sudha's and Anju's. Sunil's life changed, too. And baby Dayita's. Like invisible sound waves that ripple out and out, the changes reached all the way to India, to Ashok waiting on his balcony for the wind to turn. To their mothers in the neat squareness of their flat, upsetting the balance of their household, causing the mango pickles to turn too sour and the guava tree in the backyard to grow extra-large pink guavas. The changes multiplied the way vines might in a magical tale, their tendrils reaching for people whose names Sudha and Anju did not even know yet. (VD 9)

Divakaruni muses, "Were the changes good or bad?" (VD 9). Divakaruni gives this expression to bring about curiosity in the plot with the three characters questioning themselves whether the decision of bringing Sudha to America was a right one. Sunil, Anju's husband, harbours passionate feelings for Sudha from the day he came for bride-viewing Anju in the Chatterjee house and the two cousins are well aware of it. Sudha is aware of the long stares from Sunil and knows that she is blessed with beauty. Sudha deliberately avoids being alone with Sunil, she neither trusts him, nor herself. On the other hand Anju's marriage with Sunil is at the verge of breaking down. Anju's loneliness intensifies emotional rupture, she finds herself brooding, at times adjusting and adjusting her own routine of college assignments, "All the love I've loved, I've lost them- except me. And this one too- I think I hear it cracking underfoot, like lake of ice in a thin winter" (VD 65).

The distance between the sisters has increased and they are no more the 'Sisters of Heart', they used to be in their childhood. Anju, Sudha and Sunil show external friendly disposition but there is a huge gap in the internal psyche: "A tableau of silence: three people, inside their chest black boxes. Secrets packed in secrets: velvet scraps, foam pellets, wood shavings, baby-black hair. ... The secret of their own self, already pollinated by time's spores, waiting to burst open when they are least prepared for it" (VD 70). Sudha can feel the marital discord between Anju and Sunil. There is nothing left between them to talk about except Dayita. "When he's with Dayita, all the bitterness falls away from him" (VD 30). Anju also seeks comfort in playing with Dayita. The only communication between Sunil and Anju is passing "formal sentences, mostly about Dayita" (VD 37).

On the other hand, Sudha, having fled an unhappy marriage in Bengal, yearns for Anju's husband, Sunil, although her mind cautions her by uttering the words, "the husband of my sister" (VD 80) whereas her flesh pronounces "I don't care" (VD 80). She wishes for things she doesn't have. The deep seated love of both the cousins develops a rift now, perhaps because of one year separation in separate lands or because of one man between them. Anju feels insecure with Sudha's presence in her house and Sudha hides dislike for the purposeless hours she spends working in Anju's house. She feels the necessity in understanding more about the American culture and life style. She says in the novel:

I should be more like Anju, I know that. I need to learn about this country. The TV, in spite of all its faults, can offer me images. Names. The clues of accents. But I get confused ... Is everything equally important in America? Or nothing important enough?... But why am I thinking of her in a wishful past tense, as though I won't see her again? (VD 111)

Through Sudha's understanding of the new land (America), Divakaruni clearly portrays the cultural problems and possibilities. Sudha finds consolation from her loneliness in the folk songs of Bengal countryside. This shows the influence of the Indian culture on her. Homeland is the final solace for the immigrant's loneliness in spite of the comfort offered in the new found land.

On the other hand, to avoid restlessness, Anju goes back to college, pursues a creative writing program, and realizes that she can write. This gives her an escape from her growing dissatisfaction with her marriage. The isolation of both the cousins reveals nostalgia caused by immigration, as Swamy observes:

The immigrants find themselves, put out of place from their home society, they are upset emotionally and strive to remember and place themselves in a nostalgic past. There is frequent musing of the past memories, the childhood days, people and surroundings. (5)

All through the story, sentimental attachment is displayed by different characters. Anju recollects her past life in India and also thinks of her present life in America. In an assignment submitted to the college, she eulogises her Gouri Ma, for all that she has extended to her and regrets her own miserable life in America. Anju is not able to accept the loss of her son. She often finds that talking to her unborn son "Prem," conveys reminiscences of her childhood. She tells 'Prem' who is attached and breathes in the warmth of her womb, about the old Chatterjee house, its peeling walls, the white elephant of the mansion and the big terrace where she and Sudha used to go at night to watch for falling stars to wish on. She senses the pain for the change of things. She remembers even the smallest of the incidents in the past which she used to loathe and hate as a child.

Sudha, too, is in the habit of concocting stories from the Indian epics, she narrates to Dayita, the tales from *Ramayana*. Sudha is unaware whether Dayita understands these stories, yet she reveals them because it makes her feel motherly and good, which is rare for her. Once she narrates the story of how the demon Ravana stole Sita from her home. The story is symbolic of Sudha's life also. She reflects:

Each of our lives has a magic circle drawn around it, one we must not cross. Chaos waits on the other side of the drawn line. Perhaps in leaving Ramesh I had already stepped outside my circle. With the kiss, Sunil trampled the circle his marriage had etched around him. What is there now to keep us safe from our demons? (VD 80)

All these tales from the native country provide the immigrants like Anju and Sudha, who are floundering between the two worlds, the much needed anchorage that is required to sustain in an alien country.

Despite the nostalgia felt by the two cousins, the most interesting aspect of the novel is how Anju and Sudha deal with their increasing westernization. Sudha receives an important letter from India and yet spends hours cleaning and tidying the apartment before sitting down to read the missive. This emotional coldness is in direct contrast to the lives of Anju's and Sudha's mothers in India who lead an open lifestyle, discussing their daughters lives, offering advice and speculating on how the situation can be improved. Few years in America have transformed Anju in her usage of peculiar words and interests. Her shrinking memory of India makes Sudha realize that even their memories are marooned on separate islands.

Meanwhile, Sudha also undergoes great transformation in America. With the fire of independence inside her, she asks a girl, Sara, whom she meets in a garden, to find a job for her. Sara is an Indian exchange student and believes in highly self-centred thoughts which inspire Sudha. Sudha is startled with her decision of cancelling of her marriage only because it would lead her to the loss of her privacy. She frankly accepts in front of Sudha, that "In-laws, kids, servants, you know how it is India ... So I bought myself a bus ticket to California" (VD 83).

Sara is a modern woman with American outlook. She becomes a source of inspiration to survive and amalgamate in the alien culture for Sudha. As she says, "You got to get out of

this valley, girl. See the other Americas. There's too many men chasing after sex and money here, who think the word *no* doesn't apply to them" (VD 84, original emphasis). So, Sudha sheds her traditional conservative role of a pathetic female and evolves into a liberal and self-dependent woman.

Through Sara, Sudha acquires information about Lupe, a woman of connections. Sudha communicates Anju's number and heaves a sigh of relief as she is confident of acquiring a job, if any crisis arises. She becomes nervous and reflects thus:

East and west, east and west ... I want Lupe to find me job so I can escape this apartment. The river of my life is speeding towards an abyss. What shall I do? ... I want to bite into the apple of America. I want to swim to India, to the parrot-green smells of childhood. I want a mother's arms to weep in. I want my weather-vane mind to stop its manic spinning. I want Sunil. (VD 87)

Staying at Anju's place, Sudha develops an attraction to Sunil. "I've done that which I shouldn't have" (VD 108), she reveals to Anju in her mind, "I've kissed your husband and liked it" (VD 108). On the other hand, Anju confides in Sudha, "You're closest to me, the one who understands me best. The one I trust most of all" (VD 108).

On a visit to the Chopra family along with Sunil and Anju, Sudha is overwhelmed at her first exposure to the wealth in America - a dazzling assemblage of glittering surfaces, marble floors, mirrored walls, crystals chandeliers, glasswork on cushions, paintings studded with rubies and emeralds. It is there that, she meets Lalit.

Divakaruni's multicultural perspectives are vividly shaped in the characters of the immigrants. Lalit, a second generation immigrant, a doctor by profession, represents the modern youth assimilated to host country. He tells Sudha about the immigrants' experiences, "all immigrants are dreamers, you're saying? Yeah, but they're practical about it. They know what's okay to dream about and what isn't" (VD 181). His sense of humour catches up with people and attracts them with a friendly charm. Sudha confides in him and shares the secrets which she couldn't share with her sister. His depiction in the novel is a blend of assimilated immigrant connected with Indian roots attracted towards Indian people and Indian society.

On the other side of her life, Sudha comes across Lupe who informs her about a caretaker's job. She informs Sudha that the family into which she has to work as the caretaker, is an Indian family and hence she can have the advantage of speaking one of the Indian languages. Ngugi-Wa-Thiang'o in *Decolonising the Mind*, observes that "... language, any language has a dual character, it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (13). Sudha can have privilege of speaking her mother tongue to effectively communicate her struggle for retaining her new identity in the alien diasporic location.

Divakaruni's expertly juxtaposes the challenges, freedom and crassness of modern day America with the issues both personal and cultural which each woman faces. Sudha realizes that even though she can choose to wear either a sari or blue jeans and a t-shirt in her new world, she will always feel a sense of belonging to India. Divakaruni's women characters emerge as people of substance. They learn to make peace with the events life seems to thrust on them, and they try to correct their mistakes, and grow as they hope for progress and peace. MS Antony Ophelia observes:

The tormenting emotions that result when the characters choose to throw the baggage of their culture and create a new identity ... the choices they make

and the interaction they have with the immigrant community in America and through contact with their family ... forces them to question their existence and mortality and find answers. (106)

Sudha is amazed to notice the friendly ways of the people of America. People who are unknown to her offer her a friendly smile and converse with her. The entire atmosphere is strange to her as contrary to India, her land of birth, where, strangers remain strangers. She changes her attitude and attempts to be friendly with strangers. But, Lalit pronounces a word of caution wherein he cautions her, "There a lot about America that's unexpected. Don't be in too much of a hurry to make up your mind about things. Or people" (VD 178).

Sudha discovers herself in a pool of uncertainties. When she considers the affection she has for Dayita, she realizes that because of the love for Dayita, she has left behind everything she is familiar with and has plunged into uncertainty. Sometimes she feels trapped by her own daughter. She cannot stop herself from musing; "If I were alone, I could ..." (VD 189). She becomes angry with Dayita when she feels that Dayita, accuses her for Sunil's kiss, for tearing up Ashok's letter, for dancing with Lalit and for leaving Dayita behind in order to accompany Lalit. She focuses all her feelings of guilt, all the regrets and rages of her snatched-away youth on the Dayita, "My daughter, my enemy, my own wounded self" (VD 189)

Despite the guilt and shame, she feels, she decides to move on and live her life by her own. "... I whispered. I won't need anyone's charity" (VD 244). This shows her attempt to assert herself and act independently. She exhibits her own strength of mind, which is extra ordinary for a woman of Indian origin. And there ends the first part *Subterranean Truths* with passions running high and the characters entangled in a vine of desire, unable to separate the wishful from the reality.

In book two, *Remembrance and Forgetting*, Divakaruni projects the characters of Sunil, Anju and Sudha on a different plane. Both Anju and Sudha transpire as women of strength. Instead of going back to the old restricted ways of Indian life, they feel secure for the impersonal customs of America to start a new life as Sudha muses:

Every time a vehicle swerves around the corner, I cringe, willing myself to grow small and invisible. I must be emanating some type of distress signal, because passersby stare at me strangely. If this were India, at least half of them would know me. They'd ask me a thousand questions, offer to help, give advice, may be even escort me back home. Thank god for the impersonal customs of America. (VD 204)

Divakaruni follows the trend, shows America as the land of opportunities where exists always a chance of fresh start. Sudha, greatly mesmerized by the American proverb "Live for Yourself" (VD 177), states that she will not think about others as she used to in the past. She fully agrees with the American philosophy and says:

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. (VD 177)

In America Sudha feels lost in a society where it seems that there are no rigid rules to follow at least. She goes through a lot of transformation as she gets freedom that she could never get in home culture. As far as Sunil is concerned, he is totally a changed man now. Sunil wants to start the divorce proceedings with Anju as quickly as possible. Their relations are emotionally dry and silent. There is no smile and laughter, no free exchange of thoughts and ideas, any questions or queries between them. The bond of love between them is lost. As he says to Anju, "For a long time now, we've just made each other unhappy" (VD 241). Anju also accuses Sunil of his negligence with regard to her welfare and finally agrees to sign the divorce papers.

By bidding adieu to the conventional concept of marriage, Divakaruni fashions two alternative destinies for the cousins who have been brought up to believe in the primacy of marriage in their lives as women. The novel chronicles Anju's discovery of her own literary voice, through the shapes she seeks to give to the chaotic incidents in her life which drive her to the edge of suicide, in the writing assignments for her creative writing classes in college. In Anju's assignment, "Draupadi's Garden", Divakaruni blends myths and lyricisms, all derived from Indian cultural tradition, in order to re-imagine the transformation of women's identities in South Asian diaspora.

Anju begins her self-searching journey keeping distance from all those once closed to her. She even refuses any help from Sunil after they get separated. She shares a room with one of her friends from the writer's club but their belonging to different lands does not make a comfortable companionship between them. She still wants Sudha close to her to share and understand her fully. Anju feels like tingles in fingertips like pins and needles when any of her American friends criticize about the heritage that is so dear to her. Even their everyday talks are so different that she feels lonely among them. She understands that:

... large chunks of herself will always be unintelligible to them: the joint family she grew up in, her arranged marriage, the way she fell in love with her husband, the tension in her household, that ménage a trois, Indian style. (VD 124)

Through the life of Anju, Divakaruni explores the real sense of Indianness, though the Indian immigrants are in America, Indian lives never forget their mother-land and love and affection towards it. Anju clears the doubts of her friends about India. She always gets bad news about India in America which forces her to give elaborate explanations, and sometimes she feels infuriated. On such occasions Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes a fine portrayal of Indian diaspora, and Anju's character endorses it. When one of the women writers in the group asks Anju to watch the movie because "it's about India" (VD 213), Anju stiffens slightly and gives the answer:

No, we don't eat monkey brains. Or bugs each either. Yes, we do worship Goddess Kali, but, no, not usually by sacrificing beautiful virgins ... Yes, we do have street children. Yes, they really live hard lives. Yes, the police are brutal. Yes, famine happens and then people starve. Yes, widows are often repressed. Wives also. But there's a lot more to India than what you are seeing here. There's ... (VD 214)

Meanwhile, Sudha receives a letter from Ashok in which the information of Ashok's visit to America is stated. Their meeting turns out to be quite different from their earlier ones. Although Ashok still loves Sudha and wants her back, Sudha has moved on.

Ashok does not persuade her any further to come back to him and simply leaves handing over his drawing note-pad to her. The relationship is over as Sudha muses, “*We did love each other. It’s gone now, but it was good and true. I thank you for it*” (VD 338, original emphasis).

Sudha’s clear refusal to Ashok, friendship with Lalit, leaving Sunil and decision of returning India with the Old man and with a deal of serving him in turn for a good school for her daughter are surely the characteristics of a changed ‘self’ in America, a place where “in a minute you might be pulled up into it, released of gravity. One can take a new body here, shrug off old identities” (VD 293).

Anju is not like Sudha, she doesn’t like certain aspects of her home culture but her view is quite balanced about both Indian and American culture. She is realistic in her judgement and deliberately decides to stay in America appreciating the changes that have occurred in her life in that place, some of them having thrown her into deep grief, but others have given her hope to relocate herself. Her stay in America makes her more alert that helps her to adopt a more westernized way of thinking in that she starts believing that she owes something to herself.

Anju and Sudha came together after a period of long separation. Sudha apologizes to Anju for whatever had happened. “No”, Anju says, her voice firm: “it took me a long time to close that door. Don’t start opening it again” (VD 362). Renunciation and forgiveness is an Indian way of life. Sunil, too, in a letter dispatched to Anju, has expressed her desire to meet her in San Fransisco. He does not expect anything except forgiveness, “But, then, forgiveness itself is a large thing to hope for” (VD 365), Anju muses.

However, Anju and Sudha barter their expertise. Sudha discloses to Anju all Dayita’s childish mischief, about the Old man’s stories where she works as a care taker and about the Bhutan ranges which the Old man wants to visit. Anju responds with tales about her Professors; how she has done well in her classes and how she has mastered the art of flying in the hand-Gliders. Beneath the spoken words, a whole different conversation develops. Emotions dash against the windows of the car like birds that try to escape:

What shall we do about the love that’s lost, the love that can never be recovered all the way? I’m so tired of being angry, of being lonely. This good-bye is so unlike the previous one, so sadly tinged with relief. What shall we do with our thwarted desires, which is also our grief? I don’t know, I don’t know. (VD 366-367, original emphasis)

In the end of the novel, Anju changes and grows by taking up the opportunities, she grabs in America. In America, she finally finds her ‘voice’. As she tells Sudha about her assignment, “this new woman thinks it’s one of the best in the class! She writes on the paper that I have Originality and Voice” (VD106). She further says, “You won’t believe it, Sudha. I’ve learned to fly” (VD 368). Anju has learnt that she can do anything and finally, we see Anju is flying free of the burdens of the past. She allows the photograph of the still born baby Prem to fly away. “She does not want that anymore, not now. Her life is just beginning” (VD 370). Thus, Anju masters the art of living, showing resilience in her attitude and finds home in the ‘world’, the home of solitude in an alien land.

By presenting Anju, growing with the passage of time during tragedy done to her in America; assimilating the American culture for her personal growth and ultimately deciding

to stay in America which made her confident, Divakaruni shows that all migrants carve their own routes in the course of time and it is not necessary that they want to settle in the countries of their origin. Thus new subjectivities are born, the migrants go 'beyond' the binary fixities of natives/ migrants and carve new 'route' instead of lamenting over the lost roots as Homi Bhabha theorizes in his *The Location of Culture*.

On the other hand, Sudha finally makes up her mind to return to her native land. Nevertheless she is not going back to the old home but to a new abode, to start a new life, "I never have to depend on any one again" (VD 321). This new life in India would be in some ways the results of her diasporic experience and transformation, as it is in the United States of America. She experiences independence for the first time. Her decision to return back home is a reflection of the changing scenario of the new world. Sudha redefines herself and her relocation is an assertion of her independence.

Thus, Divakaruni poignantly explores the struggle of Indian women as they seek new pastures in a world that would have them remain submissive. Her characters struggle with the traditional values that they have absorbed from childhood and the new values to which they have been introduced due to their immigration. This is a confrontation of oriental values with the occidental ethos in order to discover one's own.

Committed to making people more open to other communities, Divakaruni remarked in an interview with Mangla Sarah Ismat in *Nirali*, "My hope is that the books will bridge cultures." Her characters are inheritors of the Indian-American hyphenated community, a new identity to accommodate and assimilate. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is firmly rooted to her culture and by her continuing existence in the American soil; she assimilates the new cultural life style, that is, the fusion of both the cultures. The perfect cogent of this is the characters of Anju and Sudha.

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