

# Displacement and Self- transformation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*

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## ABSTRACT

“And that is how, poised in the sky between our new life and our old one, the life we cannot yet imagine and the one we’ve already begun to forget, I tell her a tale to make her heart strong, to graft her life onto. For of all things in this world it seems to me that that is what women most need.”

-Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*

Literature is one of the expressions to epitomize human thoughts and experiences and a writer’s nativity plays an extensive role in its prognosis. It is predictably evaluated by smearing theories consequential to the literary styles and themes entrenched in the literary canon.

Diasporic Literature is such a genre which offers the saga of an interminable exploration of immigrants and their search for identities. Within this genre, are Indian women writers who enhance an exclusive height to the perception of identity, as one carries one’s own native culture within mind because one is never detached from one’s native land.

The celebrated Indian English Diasporic women writers - Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, Shani Muthoo, to name a few have made a fruitful attempt to present their writings through the prism of Identity-an otherwise non-literary lens. They express their views, thoughts, feeling, emotions and experiences as well, through the power of their pen.

The present paper aims to highlight Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings which raises the themes of alienation and self-transformation at various levels and try answer questions pertaining to Diaspora and its influence, identity, displacement, disillusionment with special reference to *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *The Vine of Desire* (2002). The paper will also throw light on the aspects of identity connecting literature and life with the two novels under study.

**Key Words:** Diaspora, Identity, displacement, disillusionment, self-transformation.

The present-day literature is assumed to have been transmuted by the mounting surge of globalization; writings are now crossing the boundaries of countries and cultures and the newly emerging authors are articulating numberless voices of the subaltern. Diasporic Literature presents one such saga of an unending search of immigrants and their experiences while socializing in an alien land.

At the apex of this innovative literary upsurge, is a new generation of South Asian female writers emerging to make their unique mark upon the world of the fiction. Women novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Meera Sayal, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are treading new ground, experimenting and exploring new themes and forms, breaking the taboos prevailing in their native countries and developing new ideas, distant from the homeland. These diasporic writings represent the women of the cultural hybridization, reflects the experiences and social ranks of the writers themselves. In literature, these women demonstrate an inevitable emerging of distinctiveness in western values of individuality and independence. They assert and explore their own identity, even when it relapses to traditional perception.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a winner of many reputed awards and one of the premier Asian American writers of today, is a renowned poet, short story writer and novelist who secures a high position in the world literature. Her works are primarily based on her experience as an immigrant, exhibiting the struggle, rootlessness and anxiety as the adaptation and assimilation of foreign cultures by the Indian diaspora.

Divakaruni presents the vibrant flashes collected from the nostalgic experiences of immigrants' life in her writings along with the conflict of mingling of tradition and modernity; blending of eastern mysticism with contemporary American culture. Her protagonists, generally face discrete clashes that coerces them to migrate, mostly to the United States.

She surpasses her contemporaries at depicting the gradations of immigrant experience, shattering the stereotypes and focuses on the bicultural lives of Indian women struggling with cultural shackles to carve out an identity of their own. She draws the contrast between the selflessness in women of India and the freedom they get in their adopted land through her own experiences as a first-generation immigrant and a woman between cultures and traditions.

Bharati Mukherjee, in one of her interviews expresses her views on immigrants:

“We immigrants have fascinating tales to retell. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries, which are placed by civil and religious conflict... when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must know about 200 years of American society. I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to explore Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country.”

- Times of India, October 01, 1989. 1

The similar note and experience are dealt with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her literary works. These migrated people are caught between two cultures while they travel from one country to the other. They long for their home country and its culture as live within the culture of other nation. When Divakaruni was asked to express her feelings about the label Asian American, she firmly showed the integrity of her personality by saying that as a writer, she may have many identities, though she is relatively comfortable with all of them. She feels herself as a writer, beyond all other categories.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a remarkable inventive writer, uses her ingenious abilities with incomparable insight to exhibit a notable range of experience and imagination in remarking the genuineness of her environs. She is the author of a number of books set in both India and America that features Indian women splitting between two diverse cultural values. She comprehends to the problems of immigrants and attempts to provide a solution through her writings as she considers herself a listener, a facilitator and a connector to people- trying to portray the experiences of the migrants:

To me the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about. ...Women in particular respond to my work because I am writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet in real life. (Dissolving Boundaries, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/10/divakaruni-chitra-banerjee/>)

She excels many of her contemporaries in her writing skills, presenting the oppressed women in her novels, but not only depicting a gloomy side of characters, but also a jubilant one with every possible hope to endure and integrate them with different societies, communities and cultures. Though immigrants are nostalgic despite treasuring their new place/situations enthralling and sufficing their desires. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, thus presents a sort of encounter between Indian cultural activities with the American society, depicting these diasporic Indians in the transnational era.

“That’s how it is sometimes when we plunge into the depths of our lives. No one can accompany us, not even those who would give up their hearts for our happiness.” (*Sister of My Heart*)

It is a novel seeped in emotion and weaved beautifully in the complex web of India’s superficial society, with its problems of patriarchy and hypocrisy, the novel that captures the growth of these two women Anju and Sudha in a very expressive and realistic manner.

The differences in culture and the problems faced by the immigrants like-when they prepare to leave their country, they are fascinated by the life outside but are deeply disillusioned as Anju is in *Sister of My Heart*. She learnt on thing from Sunil that: “You can be anything in America” (16). Fascinated by this statement, she surrounds herself in the fantasy, believing in monarchy of fairy tales. But divergently, things do not turn as expected, resulting in her disillusionment. The novels depict isolation, relegation, desolation, homesickness, reformation, integration, adaptation or espousal of women living abroad with a sense of acquaintance and sentiments of sisterhood.

*Sister of My Heart* scrutinizes the emotive bond and the tautness between the desires of the two women- Anju and Sudha. Despite their closeness, they have different perspectives and approaches to life. Sudha learns a murky secret about her father’s treachery from her aunt Pishi and agonizes from a guilt which continuously examines her relationship with Anju. She even sacrifices her love for Ashok in order to prevent her cousin’s match in a traditional family from breaking up and renounces herself to an arranged marriage. Marriage entails not only their first separation but also their first rivalry with each other, a rivalry not of material possessions but of heart. Though Anju always said “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 else in the entire world will. Early in my life I realize something. People were Jealous of Sudha and me” (24).

Cracks appear in their relationship as Anju goes to America and Sudha enters a loveless partnership in India. The pregnancies of both women bring increased pain and a new relationship between them. Anju calls Sudha to her place to fulfil Sudha’s dream of America.

Divakaruni’s novel *The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart* which focuses on Sudha living with Anju after leaving her abusive husband. Both reunite after a year of living separate lives. At first, the women are overjoyed to see one another and their bond seems stronger but after Anju’s startling realization of her husband Sunil’s passionate obsession with Sudha, irreparable rift between them is created, shattering the illusion and causing a

seemingly disillusioned life. Tormented respectively by guilt and bitter jealousy, Sudha and Anju individually grapple with both their inner pain and the outside pressures of frenetic, impersonal city life in America as they journey towards independence.

Sudha proposes to leave Anju's home and talks to her daughter, "Dayita none of the choices ahead of me are good ones. This one just seems a little less bad than the others" (202). Her return to India, her native land, is a symbolic triumph for all the women persecuted by the dogmas of the patriarchal system. Her life seeks new connotation as her diasporic experience becomes beneficial in empowering her to be self-sufficient to lead an independent life, becoming the symbols of hope – about the changing world where women generate their own new world.

Divakaruni integrates an unabridged array of issues interrelated with women and their life. These include arranged marriage, unhappy relationships, divorce, female foeticide, the skirmish between old values and new, self-transformation and new female experiences of repressiveness and expressiveness. Both the sisters endure a catharsis of emotions, individually work out strategies of survival and finally emerge as stronger women. Unlike other immigrant narratives, the writer apprehends the Indian women's immigration to the States as an expedition from oppressed and depressed condition to freedom and discovery of the self with the inspiration of western influence.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *The Vine of Desire* (2002) portrays the themes of alienation and self-transformation and at the same time answer questions pertaining to Diaspora and its influence on identity, displacement and disillusionment. Thus, the creator and her creations face up to standards laid down boldly and create new spaces and voices for themselves.

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