
Breaking Shells and Seeking Lives: A Study of Female Protagonists in the Select Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

¹Ms. S. Vigneshwari., ²Dr. M. Muruganantham

¹Part-Time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai and Assistant Professor of English, A.K.D. Dharma Raja Women's College, Rajapalayam.

²Associate Professor of English, Rajapalayam Rajus' College, Rajapalayam

Abstract

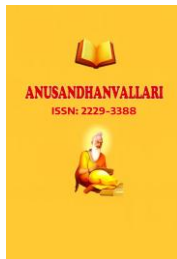
Our society is full of paradoxes and contradictions. This society considers female as a peripheral member, both in her parent's house as well as in her husband's. Throughout her lifetime she is searching for her own identity and this leads to her insecurity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a world-acclaimed author, born in Calcutta. She has published literary works of various genres like poems, novels and short stories paving new ways for understanding of human issues in the world. Divakaruni has attracted readers' attention with her poetry and fiction dealing with problems of Indian emigrants. Her *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* discuss the tormented psyche of Indian women and give alternative understanding of South Asian diaspora. Divakaruni's major themes are centred around her desire, to investigate the identity of Indian American women and the multiplicity of experiences gained through like geographical, cultural, psychological, and emotional spaces that continue to shape and reshape it.

Keywords: paradoxes, contradictions, peripheral, tormented psyche

Women count for half of humanity. They are undoubtedly as important as men to run the world. But the society has never been able to treat the two sexes alike. Nature may have made both the genders equally important on the basis of physical strength and bestowed almost all the privileges. Women are confined into the realm of homes and given the tasks of child rearing and home keeping. Women have been exploited and ill-treated by their own protectors throughout the world. In every society of the world, women have been considered secondary in position. They have been made to live under severe restrictions. Their lives have never been theirs.

In the past, women were not allowed to participate in creating literature. They were not permitted to study. They were even prevented to express their distress through writing until very recently. But a few brave women confronted the male chauvinistic world and voiced for their rights. In the last few centuries, the works of the women writers are intellectually as engrossing as any other work. The immigrant women writers display the condition of the women in different societies of the world. There are works which depict the atrocities experimented by women across the world. In the Indian context, also many women writers write about the predicament of Indian women. They share a common theme and pattern in their fiction.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. She has a unique place in the Indo-American group of novelists. She moved to the United States to continue her studies, and she has received a Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. For several years she has been interested in issues involving women and has worked with Afghani women refugees and women from dysfunctional families, as well as in shelters for battered women. At Berkeley, she volunteered at a center for battered women, and with a group of friends, she started MAITRI in 1991, a helpline for South Asian Women that helps the victims of domestic violence and other abusive



situations. In MAITRI they provide legal and medical help and family counseling. They provide educational workshops, where they teach women legal and financial independence and survival skills, and also offer awareness workshops.

Divakaruni's writing comprises of poetry, short stories and fiction. Her poetry collections are *Dark Like the River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle* (1991), and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997). Her literary career includes the following novels *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Mirror of fire and Dreaming* (2005), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *Shadowland* (2009), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2012), *Grandma and the Great Gourd* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), and *Last Queen* (2021). *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) are her short stories. Her themes include myth, exile, loneliness, dislocation, loss of identity and challenges faced by immigrants in an alien country. In 2015, she was chosen by the *Economic Times* for their list of Twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women. *Sister of My Heart* was made into a television series in Tamil.

In *Sister of My Heart* the protagonist are Anju and Sudha. Divakaruni describes the life of two Calcutta women, Anju and Sudha, who born only twelve hours apart in the same house, consider themselves twins and remain inseparable during their lives. They overcome all the critical and difficult situations by their mutual understanding. Sudha's father Gopal and Anju's father Bijoy have undergone a fearful experiment of finding out the 'ruby cave'. They have lost their lives in the adventure. A woman has to depend upon man at every stage of her life. As a girl, she has to depend upon her father, and in the middle stage, she accepts the domination of her husband, and in the last phase of her life, she has to adjust herself and live with her son. In the absence of a male in the family Anju's mother Gourimma takes in charge of the bookshop after her husband's death. Sudha's mother Nalini offers physical support to the family. Aunt Pishi plays an important role in the lives of two young girls by showing them, her love and affection. She used to narrate her experiences to them thereby she indirectly inculcates in them the values and the virtues of women besides the reputation traditionally uphold by their family. Anju and Sudha are bound closely with each other emotionally and psychologically, they cannot imagine their life without the other. Anju says, "I could never hate Sudha. (SMH, 24)

Nalini and Gouri Ma accept the challenge fully. But Pishi is forced to sit in the back of the hall on feast days because widows must not take part in the auspicious occasion, according to the orthodox and traditional system. Both Sudha and Anju, being educated, oppose these things. Being a childless widow, Pishi endures stoically the lack of status that ancient Hindu tradition prescribes for widows. Like Pishi even adolescent women are mutilated or marred by shaving off their heads and wearing of 'austere white.' She says, "I hate Pishi when she puts on her patient smile and sits in the back of the hall on feast days, not participating, because widows mustn't" (SMH 23).

Society keeps checks on a widow and snatches her right to wear new clothes once she has lost her husband. A widow is put to all sorts of criticism once the shadow of her husband is off her head. After the funeral Gouri would not allow herself to break down as Nalini did. When others try to get her weeping, to let her sorrow out of heart, she said, "I don't have the luxury. I made a promise and I must use all my energies to keep it" (SMH 48). Divakaruni's protagonists aspire to adapt to their newfound world easily. Unlike the female characters of the older generation the women of younger generation, are firmly rooted in tradition and are ready to break the bounds set by patriarchy to experience what has so far been restricted in their life. They try to resolve the psychological conflict that is accompanied with the new situation. Divakaruni vividly presents the dilemmas of Indian women in traditional society.

Sudha's love with Ashok Ghosh is an interesting part of the novel. Later Nalini rejects him as he is from the lower caste. When they have the plan to elope, Sudha is forced to drop the idea, because of Anju's father-in-law

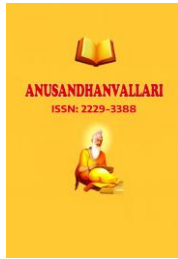
who upholds the respect and prestige of them are more important than individual's likes and dislikes in the family. He told Gourimma that he would not expect any wrong opinion about the Chatterjee family girls. If it would happen in the future, Anju would be sent back to her mother's home. So Sudha had left the plan of marrying Ashok.

The two sisters are separated after their wedding. Sudha's condition in Mrs.Sanyal's family is worse, she is forced to do all the domestic works. The groom Ramesh reacts, according to his mother's wish. Before Anju's trip to America, she visits Mrs.Sanyal's home. After seeing the poor condition and status of her sister Sudha, she gets shocked and half-heartedly goes to America. Anju's life in America starts in an unexpected way. Sunil wants to maintain a distance in the husband-wife relationship. When she comes to know about Sunil's personal character, she wishes to come back to India. He reaches home late and drinking. Mrs.Sanyal starts to ill-treat her daughter-in-law Sudha, for not giving birth to a baby. Mrs.Sanyal sends Sudha for the test. The test report explains Sudha is normal and she can give birth to any numbers of children and the problem lies only with their husband. Impotency and Sterility are the two main problems in society. The society is ready to treat the women as a Sterile Women. But it is shown partiality to treat man as an important person. It is the greatest biological discrimination faced by all women. Sudha's pregnancy creates a big storm in her life. When it is identified as the female baby, she is forced to go for abortion, Ramesh is passive and not prepared to support his wife. Sudha has to come to her mother's home to save her female child. Anju is deeply worried about Sudha who is also pregnant. The economic condition of the family becomes worse. Vijay Agnew in his work describes. "The individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between 'here' and remembering 'there' between memories of places of origins and entanglements with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home." (19)

Anju has to work for Sudha. She wishes to invite Sudha to America to fulfil Sudha's childhood dream. So, Anju earns money for Sudha. Without the knowledge of her husband Sunil, she goes to work. Hard work leads to miscarriage and the baby is identified in her womb as 'breathless'. Motherhood is the greatest pleasure and promotion to women in the world. Her health condition becomes worse, when she comes to know the death of her child, she becomes unconscious. James Clifford says that, "Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful-struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the claims of old and new patriarchies." (314).

The Vine of Desire is the sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. Sudha is ready to go to America to take care of her beloved sister Anju. Ashok Ghosh again approaches Gourimma for the remarriage with Sudha. Ashok demands only Sudha and her love, not her child. Sunil has sent the tickets and Visas for Sudha and her daughter Dayita. She goes to America and the two beloved sisters are reunited again. Sudha's entrance in Anju's life observes changes in all their lives, Anju, Sudha and Sunil "Were the changes good or bad?" (VOD 9) Both Sudha and Anju know that Sunil was really in love with Sudha and had never been able to forget her; indeed, their friendship had almost broken up when Anju had discovered her husband's feelings for her cousin. The characters Anju and Sudha are bound together. They easily overcome all the critical and difficult circumstances, because they are in co-ordination, co-operation, and mutual understanding. Through this novels Divakaruni brings out all the problems, faced by women generally in the society, women have to support, unite and coordinate each other to overcome these situations.

People leaving their home country to a new place with the hope of seeking green pasture face a lot of challenges. They experience physical and emotional alienation because of dislocation. Accommodating one's self into a new environment is not easy. Food habits, unknown place, strange people and different culture create a sense of fear in their mind. After initial inhibition and hesitation, they gradually adapt themselves to new culture and that results in assimilation of new culture will pave the way for encounter of two different cultures. Divakaruni through her works has not only presented a female point of view but has also subverted the



patriarchal authority over women in India and in America. She emphasises on the fabulist pattern of heroines who carefully identity the shifts in the development of identity as centred on a well-articulated notion of race, caste and class.

In almost all societies across the world, a woman is culturally assigned certain norms of behaviour such as, standards of conduct, taste and decorum, and any deviation or violation to the ideal image of womanhood makes her an unruly, obstinate woman to be condemned by the society. Women in the society are forced by men to accept the status of an inferior. In order to gain equality and to realize their human potential, women must become autonomous. The way Divakaruni has transformed marginal women into new icons of independence in her selected novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* prove that women are capable of restricting the community. She suggests two advantages of Women's Liberation. First she allows them to realise their potential as individuals in the wider society. Second, she insists that it is the only way by which they could achieve personal recognition and identity.

Works Cited

- [1] Agnew, Vijay. *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for an Identity*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.
- [2] Clifford, James. "Diasporas". *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (1994): 302-38.
- [3] Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Sister of My Heart*. London: Black Swan, 1999. Print.---*The Vine of Desire*. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.