

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Apart yet a Part of India**Dr. Neelanjana Pathak***Head, Dept. of English St., Aloysius College, Jabalpur, (MP)***Dr. Soma Guha Das***Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, St. Aloysius College, Jabalpur, (MP)***Abstract**

Immigrants from all corners of the world can be transformed into Americans, assimilated into the American culture, and continue to be a part of a large section of the dominant white population. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a distinct voice among the immigrant voices. Divakaruni admits that her cross-cultural experiences have an enriching influence on her life and have contributed significantly to her writing. Divakaruni's encounters with life and culture, both in Calcutta and California, have a profound impact on her literary expression. This paper examines the seminal concerns- women empowerment, assimilation and cross-cultural encounters of her Indian characters in her three selected novels *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*.

Key Words: Immigrants, Assimilation, Cross-Culture, Women's Empowerment

"I figured I had to start writing about what was of importance in my life, and one of the big things was the act of immigration and the ways in which it had changed me...the ways in which it had made me appreciate my own culture as well as question my own culture, and question my life in India, and all that was very important to me."

--Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The melting pot of American society and its message retains a strong hold on the national imagination of its people. It happens that immigrants from all corners of the world can be transformed into Americans, assimilated into the American culture, and continues to be a part of a large section of the dominant white population. Being an Indian writer in such cultural environment, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a distinct voice among a rich

galaxy of immigrant voices that seeks the conception of the melting pot in her fiction. Her imagination is a reflection of the sensibilities that were shaped by the place of her origin while still allowing for influences of American culture to shape their creativity. Divakaruni is regarded as a "cultural traveler" (sic), a term Elleke Boehmer explains as "ex-colonial by birth, 'third-world' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she works within the precincts of the western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and /or political connection with a national background" (223).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. In 1976, she moved to the United States to receive a Master's degree

from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and later PhD from the University of California at Berkley, where she studied Renaissance literature. Settling down in Sunnydale, California, in 1979 she taught Creative Writing at Foothill College in California for almost twenty years. In 1997 Divakaruni moved to Texas with her husband Murthi Divakaruni and two sons, where she taught Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Divakaruni admits that her cross-cultural experiences have an enriching influence on her life and have pushed herself a long way in contributing to the fecundity of her writings. Immigrant writers have an enormous raw material at their portfolios, drawing as they do from their dual culture, with two sets of world views juxtaposing each other. Divakaruni's encounters with life and culture, both in Calcutta and California, have a profound impact on her literary expression. She belongs to the Indian state, Bengal, a region with a rich legacy of literature and art. Calcutta being the original base of the British in India, Bengal came in early and straight connected with colonial 'culture' as well as colonial 'anarchy'. As Ketaki Kushari Dyson points out in her Prologue to the play *Night's Sunlight*, for Bengalis, "human communities have always been at the crossroads of culture, always evolving with a dynamic interaction between what is 'foreign' and what is 'home-grown'..." (iii). This paper examines the concerns- women empowerment, assimilation and cross-cultural encounters of her Indian characters in her three selected novels *The Mistress of*

Spices, Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire.

Bengal also has a strong tradition of women's writing both in Bengali and English. Divakaruni inherited this old and rich legacy of Bengal. Before she began her career in fiction writing, she was an acclaimed poet. However, it is her short stories and novels that have catapulted her into the limelight as a much-acclaimed writer. Divakaruni's stories revolve around immigrants and how immigration turns their relationships with people close to them. Her fiction is to a large extent autobiographical as she draws upon her own experiences and those of other people around her and elegantly transforms into fiction all that she feels strongly about. The stories explore cross-cultural encounters from a feminist perspective for it is women "on whose body's cultures are mapped and re-mapped" (qtd. in Mandal 15). In her stories Indian women are placed in a new culture, freedom is a mixed blessing, liberating them from many patriarchal traditions but also exacting a price in terms of challenging the values they hold dear, on the one hand, and facing the prejudices of the host country on the other.

Divakaruni, in her first novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) uses fable to explore the problems encountered by immigrants who come to the land of 'silver pavements and golden roofs'. The story is told in the first person from the viewpoint of Tilottama, who runs a spice store in Oakland, California. She is endowed with supernatural powers, using spices to help her people, that is, the Indians in America, to overcome their problems and live better

lives. She can forecast disasters and read the hearts of people and solve their problems by using types of spices with super natural powers. The store seems to be a meeting point. The store attracts a number of Indians, for it serves not only as a reminder of their distant home but also as a place to share the tribulations of their diasporic lives. They relieve their pain and redefine their position living far away from their native land. In this magical novel, Divakaruni draws a gallery of Indian characters settling in America, each having gone through different kinds of cultural encounters. She provides the reader with glimpses into the range of difficulties faced by Indians placed in cross-cultural situations –of alienation, nostalgia, racism, domestic abuse and so on. Each chapter of the novel is named after an Indian spice like Turmeric, Cinnamon, Chili, Fennel, Peppercorn and so many more and discusses the trials of an individual as well as the special characteristics of the spices. In this novel Divakaruni deals with the theme of women's empowerment. Tilo, by being involved with Raven, a native American, becomes aware of her own desires and breaks the rules of the Order of Mistresses. Towards the end of the story she abandons her powers as a Mistress of Spices to become a woman with the power to be a mistress of her own life. Debjani Banerjee sums up the situation succinctly, "Divakaruni is writing the script of women's rebellion against the pressure to suppress their desires and their bodies" (qtd. in Mandal 26).

Divakaruni's another novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) relies less on the magic realism of *The Mistress of Spices* though it

does have an element of the fairy tale. It is the story of two women, Anju and her cousin Sudha, born on the same night when both their fathers were tragically lost. The girls grow up sharing a close bond and living each other's dreams, hopes and anxieties under the supervision of widowed mother and widowed pishi, without any male persona. As the story proceeds, they find themselves pushed apart by marriage as the beautiful, tender-hearted but passive Sudha moves to her new home while the simple, energetic and defiant Anju joins her charming husband in California. Both face tragic upheavals in their married lives. Anju, after her migration to California, finds herself confined to her cousin Sudha whom she used to call 'Sister of my heart'. In spite of the proper care of her husband Sunil, she feels lonely and isolated after her abortion. Despite the distance separating them, decide to turn to each other once again. Sudha, now divorced, moves to America with her baby-daughter to join Anju and her husband. In this novel 'sisterhood' is the major concern of Divakaruni. As Urvashi Barat comments, "that mysterious female bonding which goes far deeper than conventional familial ties and which insistently surfaces in women's relationships despite all patriarchal conditioning" (qtd. in Mandal 44).

The serial novel, *The Vine of Desire* (2002) continues the story of Anju and Sudha as they rekindle their friendship in America. The intense love that they share, gives them the courage to emerge from the ordeals that both have gone through. However their bond is shaken to the core when confronted with the passionate feelings that Anju's husband has for Sudha. Tormented respectively by

guilt and jealousy, Sudha and Anju individually have to battle with the agony in their hearts and also with the outside pressure of a frenetic, impersonal city life in America as they journey towards independence. The metaphorical proclamation that Anju makes at the end, "I've learned to fly", is Divakaruni's portrayal of a facet of the immigrant experience signifying that, for Anju, the movement has not been merely a physical one (368). Nor is the movement necessarily from East to West, as Sudha decides to move back to India. In the novel, the protagonists are caught in a clash of cultures and there is a constant juxtaposition of Calcutta with a Californian city.

Divakaruni has chosen to write freely of the trials, tribulations and the triumphs of the Indian immigrants in America, especially women, who strive to maintain a balance between their Indian sensibilities and the demands of life of a modern America. Having a first-hand experience of the antithetical worlds of India and America, Divakaruni can lay claim to a deep insight and understanding of her own community in America. Writing from a perspective which is generally not available to a writer who has lived mostly in India, she presents an authentic picture of a complex people with high aspirations, struggling not only to find a place in an often hostile cultural environment but also to keep alive their ethnic identity.

It is very interesting to compare the immigrant experiences in Divakaruni's stories with those of Bharati Mukherjee's. For Divakaruni's characters, happiness and fulfillment lie in attaining a mutually

beneficial blend of the best in both the cultures. They are constantly questioning as to which culture is better at a given point of time and what to accept and what to reject of the two cultures. Bharti Mukherjee, on the other hand, appears to celebrate the possibility of the melting-pot—for her a "successful immigrant is one who is ready to go the whole distance in assimilating and settling down" (Alam 79). Divakaruni confines herself to writing about Indian characters. Very few Indian diasporic writers have been confident enough to write from the point of view of characters from other cultures. Vikram Seth does it in *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music*. Divakaruni's portrayal of the immigrant experience is close to Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri also makes an attempt, albeit a slight one, to touch upon the views of American characters in her stories.

Authors like Divakaruni have been accused of attempting to portray India using the tropes of romance in their works. It can be said in their support that by writing things that may initially seem exotic, readers become familiar with the subject or place, just as Indian readers of English literature long back became familiar with Hardy's Wessex, which no longer appears exotic to them. Divakaruni admits that the expectations from an Asian American writer can be summed up thus, "You are expected to be a spokesperson for the community, and this is just an unfair kind of burden. I always try to make it clear that I am presenting one vision about what is true about the Indian American community. It is a very diverse community and mine is just one angle of looking at it" (qtd. in Mandal 136).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a skilful story-teller feeling into the hearts of her people, much like Tilottama, and interpreting their hidden aspirations, desires, longings, disappointments and heartbreaks. She has been the president of MAITRI, a helpline for South Asian women; is also associated with 'Daya' a centre similar to Maitri in Texas, and involved with Pratham, a non-profit organization that seeks to improve literacy among disadvantaged Indian children. She takes them before the

world in a captivating and graceful manner, using her incisive insight and lyrical language to weave stories that are exotic and familiar, at once unique and universal. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni feels that writing has a social purpose far more important than trying to alter the world. She states to Sheshachari in an online interview, "The whole idea of literature ... is about reaching across boundaries and barriers and making available to people lives they would never read otherwise".

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