

PROBLEMS OF EXPATRIATION FOR WOMEN: A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S SELECT NOVELS

R. RANIREVATHI

Research Scholar in English,
A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College (Autonomous)
Poondi. Thanjavur Dist 613 503

ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni one of the most exceptional writers of the Indian Diaspora, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has developed the 'immigrant sensibility' as the major theme in her fiction. As she has settled in The United States, she has experienced first hand the difference between Indian culture and life style in the U.S.A. Her subject is the stories of Indians who migrate from their motherland to The United States for varied reasons such as career, education, business and so on. Some of Banerjee major works like *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Mistress of Spices and Arranged Marriage* reflect the expectation, trust, ambition and Frustrations of the immigrants in the United States. While people migrate from one country to another, many changes occur in their life.

Sister of My Heart dealt with the difficulties faced by women and the manners in which they overcome from their Problems and difficulties. *The Vine of Desire* is a Sequel to *Sister of My Heart* Anju and Sudha reunite after a year of living separate lives. Afflicted respectively by guilt and bitter envy, Sudha and Anju individually grapple with both their inner pain and the outside pressures of furious, impersonal city life in America as they journey towards independence.

Mistress of Spices deals with an immigrant woman Tilo, with her extraordinary sense for spices bears an inherent power to work magic with spices. She attempts not only to assimilate the new culture of her settled nation America but also to retain her own cultural identity by recreating a strong self perception. In *Queen of Dreams* Mrs.Gupta like Tilo possess an inherent power to interpret dreams and also strives to define her self identity in culturally contrast world.

Key words: Migration, rootlessness, culture conflict, self identity.

In Diasporic writings of women writers the female characters offer a productive scope to explore the pain of immigration as they encounter the double jeopardy of self identity crisis in an individual level and in social level in an alien country. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels also deal with the state of migration and the female characters dilemma to assimilate the new socio-cultural life styles. The female characters in her stories constantly engage themselves in pursuing identity in the

conflict of old traditions and modernity. Most of Chitra Banejee Divakaruni's female characters are torn between the cultural imposition of India and modernity of the USA.

Sister of My Heart (1999) is the second novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni details the sorrow filled lives of two Indian cousins, Anju and Sudha, who were born on the same day and lived together as Sisters in a joint family consisting of the two girls and three mother figures. In a Unique structure that allows both girls to share alternating parts of their story, Sudha and Anju describe their struggles with outdated Indian customs, the memories of their fathers, arranged marriages, separation in-laws, pregnancy, miscarriage and abortion.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart* relates emotional story of two young Calcutta girls. Anju, who is from high caste in India and Sudha, who is more beautiful. The girls were born on the same night after their mothers learned that both the girls' fathers had died. The fathers had been cousins, so Anju's and Sudha's mothers remained living together, allowing the girls to grow up almost as sisters. When the book opens, the narrator, Sudha is listening while her aunt Pishi tells an old myth that says the Bidhata Purush (a god) comes to the birth of each child to foretell the baby's fate. Sudha and Anju are so much influenced by the stories narrated to them such as the "Princess in the Palace of Snakes", the tale of Bidhata Purush and stories from Hindu mythology.

The traditional Hindu religious system gives more importance to the Patriarchal Society, dominated by the male in every aspect of the society. Basically, Indian family system are based on Patriarchal norms, rarely one could find the matriarchal family system where the female would play a vital role in inheriting the property, than the male. After the father's death in the typical patriarchal family set up, the responsibility of running the family lies with the mother. The woman has to support the family **economically, emotionally, psychologically and physically**. The same situation prevailed in the two sisters' home. Gouramma takes in charge of the bookshop, after her husband's death. Though the bookshop is not run profitably it becomes the responsibility of Gouramma to run it efficiently to escape from the clutches of poverty. Anju says,

In spite of the long hours mother puts in at the store and her determination to get us whatever a most intelligent person I know and the most efficient. Still, the store never seems to make a profit, and each week she has to go over our household expenses in her careful, frowning way, trying to cut costs. (SMH P.25)

The two sisters are separated after their wedding. Impotency and sterility are the two main problems in the society. The society is ready to treat the woman as a 'Sterile' woman. 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 by her mother-in-law. 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 family becomes worse. Anju has to work for Sudha. She wishes to invite Sudha to America to fulfil Sudha's childhood dream, i.e. to start the embroidered, design of sarees. So Anju earns money for Sudha. Hardworks leads to miscarriage and the baby is identified in her womb as 'breathless'. Motherhood is the greatest pleasure and promotion to a woman in the world. Her health condition becomes bad, when she comes to know the death of her child and she becomes unconscious. 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. Through this novel, Chitra Bnerjee brings out all the problems, faced by women in the society. Sudha has to face the problem with her husband, mother-in-law and lover Ashok. But finally, she takes the correct decision of joining with Anju in America. Every Woman must be bold and reactive to all men.

The Vine of Desire continues the story of Anju and Sudha, the two young women at the center of Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart*. Far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood and after years of living separate lives, Anju and Sudha rekindle their friendship in America. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support each of them needs. It gives Anju the strength to pick up the pieces of her life after a miscarriage, and Sudha the confidence to make a life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita without her husband. Meanwhile, the unlikely relationships they form with men and women in the world outside the immigrant Indian community as well as with their families in India profoundly transforms them, forcing them to question the central assumptions of their lives.

At first, the sisters are delighted to see one another. They focus on Sudha's toddler Dayita whom they worship, especially relationship with her. Anju tells Sudha:

“When he’s with Dayita, Anju tells me later, all the bitterness falls away from him. He used to be like that when I was pregnant. Boyish and excited and tender. He’d make a world of plans - all the’ things he wanted to do far – “she swallows – Prem (VD – 30)

Anju remembers Prem and tortures herself by thinking about the past. So Sudha scolds her.

“There’s no point in torturing yourself over what’s happened already” (VD 30). Anju embraces loneliness and seeks out a solitary space at the college where she can write. Anju’s loneliness intensifies emotional rapture. She finds herself brooding, at the same time she adjusts and diverts her mind into the college assignments.

At the end of the novel, before Sudha’s departure to India, Anju has news for her: “You won’t believe it Sudha, “Anju says, “I’ve learned to fly”.(368) Divakaruni portrays remarkable characters yarn a hope in an alien country, where the immigrants venture to set an identity amidst suffering and overcoming tormenting emotions discard the cultural differences exhibit resilience.

The first novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* successfully blends romance, mysticism and community consciousness. The novel is a love story on two levels. Interlace with events it is a traditional love story that touches on themes of fantasy and reality. But it is primarily the story of Tilo’s discovery of love for the people, felt by the readers through the author’s compassion for her characters and sense of heroic optimism.

Tilo is a young woman who is trained by the ancient women who imparts instruction about the power of spices, which hold the power to address a variety of human frailties and problems. She is sent to modern-day Oakland, California to help people with her powers. “I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this” (MS 3). Her store attracts a large group of people for whom the place is reminiscent of home, a little Oasis in their diasporic lives fraught with problems. Thus she is thrust into the chaos of American life and the newness of a culture to which she must adapt. The mistress feels that the Indians come to her store in quest of happiness:

All those voices Hindi, Oriya, Tamil and English, layered one on the other like notes from a tanpura, all those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where. (MS 78)

With Turmeric, Cinnamon, Fenugreek, or neem, Tilo attends to her customer patients; Geeta, whose traditional family cannot accept her wild ways or her Chicago boyfriend. Jagjit, who runs from playground bullies to join the gangster life. Tilo, the woman with power to use mysterious qualities of the spices is the protagonist of the novel who not only just tells story of her dilemma and desires but acts as narrator to tell stories of Asian lives in America. Tilo herself torn between her vows taken years ago on a mysterious island before her Guru, the great mistress of Spices, and her intense desire to beget an American man, uses her mystical power of spices (and sometimes also metals, earth and stones as she claims at the beginning of the book) to make other people's lives less miserable. She consoles them and solves their problems using various spices. The homely nostalgic and magic atmosphere of the spice bazaar makes the Indian immigrants confide in Tilo their problems and suffering. Tilo is the architect of the immigrants' dreams in this story.

Tilo as the owner of the Spice Bazaar encounters different people every day. People with different ethnic and religious backgrounds visit the Spice Bazaar to fulfil their individual needs. In the process of supplying groceries and other Indian commodities, Tilo gleans out their problems and tries to help them out by dispensing the appropriate Spice. The novel is about magic, wielded by a woman masquerading as an old and bent creature, but in reality, vibrant, eager for life, and hungry with desires. Tilo, the Mistress of Spices, has many disguises and names that reveal her multiple identities. Like chameleon, she keeps changing throughout the novel, making clear how complex the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land is. Each character portrayed in this novel tries to negotiate with the newly found American culture. Every character is caught up in a web and is helped by Tilo and her spices.

Queen of Dreams, following the success of *The Mistress of Spices*, also unfolds its plot through the unexplainable, the enigmatic and the magical. In *Queen of Dreams*, Divakaruni employs motifs of dreams, caves, snakes and spiders to construct a world that subverts the demarcation between human and animals, culture and nature, the human and the divine. One of the main characters in the novel, Mrs.Gupta is an interpreter of dreams who reveals to strangers what fortunes or misfortunes will befall them. Her work is different from American Psychics in that she does not charge a fee and she seeks out strangers whose dreams she has entered despite herself.

Queen of Dreams travels along two story lines; the one of Mrs.Gupta told through her dream journals, and the other of her daughter Rakhi. The first is more powerful story than the second. While the story of Mrs.Gupta centers on her relationship to herself, the story of Rakhi deals primarily with relationship with others ex-husband father and diseased mother. *Queen of Dreams*, beginning with the mother's point of view and ending with the daughter's seems to project a trajectory of merging, but unfortunately this goal is not fully achieved. The revelation of her mother's past fails to serve as the primary vehicle through which the daughter arrives at a new level of self-recognition.

Divakaruni's writing in this portion of the novel is not only superior but also richer and more enlightening than her writing of the other portion. *Queen of Dreams* is another tale of east meeting west. It talks about the trials tribulations and experiences of the Indian American community through the lives of a Bengali immigrant family. The novel is divided between India and the United States of America although the entire story takes place in America.

Rakhi is comfortable in her American life, she feels a strong connection towards her Indians. However, her mother wants to spare her tale of her strange and painful past in India and her ability to read dreams. Rakhi desires intensely for India, and also wishes for closeness with her own mother, a closeness that has always been denied to her because of her mother's profession of being a dream teller.

My mother always slept alone. Until I was eight years old, I didn't give it much thoughtMy discovery occurred on an afternoon when I'd gone to play at the home of my classmates.. Why don't you sleep with Dad? I kept asking... Don't you love us?.. I do love you.. I don't sleep with you or your father because my work is to dream. I can't do it if someone is in bed with me.
(QD 6-7)

Queen of Dreams explores the connection between wakefulness and the subconscious in the backdrop of diasporic life. One morning when Rakhi is about to step out to the car, she sees a bird in the maple tree, which she has not seen in that part of the state before. The bird is "large and gray with bright orange mihinda eyes" (QD 185).

Queen of Dreams is an exploration of the relationship between a mother and daughter. The novel explores the theme of what it means to be an American, particularly in the immigrant community. Divakaruni has been interested in the magical parts of Indian culture, in folk beliefs and age-old traditions and especially in how they are incorporated into modern times and settings.

After a careful study of the select novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni one can find a pattern in all her novels. Divakaruni has tried her level best to explore the psyche of the women in her novels. She has beautifully brought out the Problems of Women in an alien land. Her novels explore the theme of immigration and the problems arouse out of it, particularly in the US. She has vividly portrayed the experiences of migration in all her novels.

REFERENCE

- Divakaruni, chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. UK. Black Swan. 1997. Print
- Divakaruni chitra Banerjee. *Sister of my Heart*. UK. Black Swam 1999 print
- Divakaruni chitra Banerjee. *Vine of Desire*. London. Abacuss 2002 print
- Divakaruni chitra Banerjee. *Queen of Dreams*. London . Abacus 2005 print
- Mishra, vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the diasporic Imaginary*. Newyork. Routledge 2007 print