

Diaspora and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Dr. Parmendra Kumar Mishra

Assistant Professor (guest)

Department of Commerce and Business Administration,

L. N. Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar- 846004.

Abstract

Born in Calcutta and mostly educated at Calcutta University and Wright State University in Dayton, Berkley, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to the group of of Diasporic writers who explore the conditions of Diasporic realities; the phenomenon of isolation, alienation, cultural heterogeneity, expatriation, syncretism, dialogisms and hybridity in identity and their relationship with phenomenon of the world. She has been a sensitive woman, a consummate artist, a visionary endowed with exceptional human sensibility and innovative vision. The paper in context seeks to explore the dimensions of diasporic sensibility in some of Divakaruni's seminal books which further gives rise to intellectual curiosity.

Key words: Diaspora, isolation, alienation, cultural heterogeneity, expatriation, syncretism, dialogisms and hybridity

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni enriches the complex firmament of Diasporic writers who explore the uncanny conditions of Diasporic realities; the phenomenon of isolation, alienation, cultural heterogeneity, expatriation, syncretism, dialogisms and hybridity in identity and their relationship with phenomenon of the world. She has been a sensitive woman, a consummate artist, a visionary endowed with exceptional human sensibility and innovative vision. She has been conscious for the problems and issues related to the life of women. Since 19991, she has been the founder president of MAITRI, a help line for South Asian Women that works to redeem the sufferings of the victims of domestic violence and other traumatic situations. As a president of MAITRI, she made rigorous efforts to study and to investigate the root cause of the problems of women across the globe. The literary career of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni begins with the publication of her debut short collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995). The realist discourse of cultural conflict in the multilingual society forms a central motive in her writing. Even in "Arranged Marriage", most of the stories are the narrative account of the experiences of women immigrants and their resistance against cultural and gender ideologies in the diverse cultural surroundings. The novel, designed on the lines of Magic Realism, is the imaginative account of the experiences of a woman who being well equipped in the secret properties of spices is universally known as '*Mistress of Spices*'. The novel encapsulates three major events which revolve

around the narrative and life of Tilo; Tilo as a migrated women who experiences Diasporic realities in the uncanny world of America, Tilo as a Mistress of Spice who explores the mythical realities of Indian cultural which allows her to cure the illness of others through the mystical properties of spices, and Tilo as a beloved who gratifies her physical need and her life is completely changed after she marries Raven.

The novel *Sister of My Hearts* (1999), explores the texture of marriage, friendship between two women of Indian culture and mythical realities, Tradition and Modernity and some features of Fairy Tales. Two Indian girls; Sudha and Anju narrate the texture of their narrative in which she covers the journey of their life through childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. The novel recounts the process of epistemological construction of Sudha and Anju. It also expounds how they experience social, cultural and linguistic realities which shape the process of their becoming or the reality of their *Bildung* formation. The novel has been divided into two books; “The Princess in the Palace of Snakes” and “The Queen of Sword” in which the process of becoming and unbecoming of both Sudha and Anju have been explored. The novel reinstates some underlying features of female *Bildungsroman* as has been expounded by Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974) defines it the “[N]ovel of all-around development or self-culture with a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience”¹. The *Bildung* vacillates in the space between the child to the youth and the youth to the age of adulthood, the protagonist experiences several stumbling stones which propel her journey further, however the narrative pattern of the novel charts the growth and development of the character but it does not allow the protagonists to attain their inner culture, in fact they attain a failed *Bildung* which is amply clear through the failed narrative of Sudha and Anju. The first book of the novel recounts the relationship between Sudha and Anju, how they become almost inseparable friends, sisters and a constant companion for each other. “The Prince in the Palace of Snakes” states that both Sudha and Anju grow in a family which is controlled and run by three mothers; Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini. Pishi is the aunt of Sudha and Anju and the youngest brother of Pishi, Bijoy Chatterjee marries Gouri and thus Anju is the daughter of Bijoy and Gouri. Nalini is the mother of Sudha. Hence, the protagonists grow in a joint family, though they are sisters yet different. Sudha is a storyteller and dreams to maintain a family whereas Anju is very enthusiastic to study literature in a collage. When they are caught skipping their schools, the plan of their life is changed and the family prepares them to get married and finally they marry on the same

day. Sudha moves along with their husband whereas Anju plans to move to United States of America where her husband lives. Though they are separated yet they are in constant touch with each other through letters. Finally, Sudha along with her daughter goes to Anju where two sisters are united but it offers some other kind of challenges in their life.

The Vine Desire (2002) with its extraordinary depth and sensibility, probes the trauma of immigration in the background of the complexity of personal relationship where the two lifelong friends get reunited and how the reunited relationship goes under a dangerous metamorphosis when the husband of one is attracted towards another. The book one “Subterranean Truth” records “The day Sudha stepped off the plane from India into Anju’s arms, leaving a ruined marriage behind, their lives changed forever. And not just Sudha’s and Anju’s, Sunil’s life changed, too. And baby Dayita’s, like invisible sound weaves that ripple out and out, the changes reached all the way to India, to Ashok waiting on his balcony for the wind to turn...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”². Hence, in *Vine of Desire* there is a fine balance of internal and external conflict.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004) marks a growth of Divakaruni’s vision of immigration. The narrative is focused on the conflict and crises of survival of a Bengali immigrant family living in California at the beginning of new millennium. The mother, who comes from the native slum area of Calcutta, is endowed with the exceptional power of interpreting the hidden messages of the dreams of her customers. Like that of the mistress of spices, her identity has been acknowledged as the ‘Queen of Dreams’. She wants to spare her daughter Rakhi, from the tales of her strange and painful past. Rakhi, in spite of her birth and nurturing in American life, unconsciously retains her innate bonding with Indian life, Indian scenery and Indian culture. She is married to Sonny, another Indianized American but fails to get desired contentment in her married life. However her six year old daughter Johna remains a link between them. Besides of her fascination for painting, Rakhi in association with her father runs a *Chai Shop* and this chai shop becomes the meeting point for all distinguished immigrants. It provides a natural feeling of fraternity for the immigrants. After the death of her mother in a car accident, her father tries to make financial support to save ‘chai shop’ from being closed. Father also supports Rakhi in translating her mother’s dream journals from

Bengali to English to reconstruct the mystery of the life of her mother. The novel is structured as the postmodern metanarrative and the narrative moves between past and present. In *Queen of Dreams*, in the background of magic and fancy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deals with the postmodern issues like racism, terrorism, painting, dreams and the conflict of dislocation and relocation affecting the life and sensibility of immigrants. Here Divakaruni presents a composite spectrum of enigmatic situation. In this novel, Johna's anxiety to discover India through her own imagination suggests that the shadows of homeland are integrated in the inner consciousness and they are beyond the constraints of time and space.

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reinvents Indian myth in the light of western ideologies. It is an attempt of Divakaruni to give a voice to Panchaali, the fire born heroine of *Mahabharata*. The novelist here has tried to weave a vibrant interpretation of the ancient tale of Panchaali's being married to five royal husbands. Panchaali did her best to support her husbands to regain their status and kingdom. However, she could not deny her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husband's more dangerous enemy.

In *One Amazing Thing* (2010), Divakaruni makes experiment in the mode of travel narrative with the ample scope for the self-revelation of the characters. The structure of the novel is the collection of the experience of nine travellers trapped in the visa office at an Indian consulate after a massive earthquake in an American city. The group consists of two visa officers, an Indian woman in her last years. Her granddaughter, Lily, is an ex-soldier haunted by her own guilt. Uma is an Indian American girl bewildered by her parent's decision to shift to Kolkata. Tariq is a young Muslim from Kolkata. As rescue operation was going on, to come out of the trauma of earthquake, they begin to tell each other stories related with their own life, narrating one amazing thing from each one's life. These tales are the tales related to the harsh realization of life with the immense possibilities of affirmation of human conditions.

Apart from some notable novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also has penned some beautiful collection of short stories. The first collection of short stories entitled *Arranged Marriage* (1995) contains eleven stories; "The Bats", "Cloths", "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs", "The World Love", "A Perfect Life, The Maid Servant's Story", "The Disappearance", "Doors", "The Ultra Sound", "Affair", and "Meeting Mrinal".

Divakaruni with these short stories explores the realities of Diaspora where she delineates the condition of cultural alienation, expatriation, assimilation, disassociation, hyphenated identity, in-betweenness, syncretism and hybridity as has been explicated by HomiBhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) ³. The narrative of the story explores the phenomenal realities of cultural dissociation and differences as has been observed by Rey Chow *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (1993) ⁴. Similarly, Divakaruni expounds some major components of culture which constitute the fulcrum of her Diasporic realities. She writes about on clothes, human relationship and all temporal realities which form the culture of her epistemic construction. Raymond Williams in his *Culture and Society* (2001) elucidates the fact that all small components of a culture constitute the structure of feeling or the arena of one's epistemic structure. The novelist, short story writer and also a poet, Divakaruni exemplifies the philosophical position of Raymond Williams as far as the matter of the construction of one's structure of feeling is concerned.

The second story entitled "The Intelligence of Wild Things" explains the phenomenon of how the shift of geography creates some irresolvable barriers, however Divakaruni endeavors to address the structural realities of all binaries and tries to establish balance between past and present, native and alien, pragmatism and human values and the temporal and timeless. Towards the end of the story, Divakaruni condemns the narrator and she records, "That is the trouble with our Indian families, always worrying too much. Is it good for your brother to be on his own for a while. He is probably having a great time at the university. For all you know, he has half a dozen girlfriends and would much rather you did not keep tabs on him."(46). Thus the story passes through the conduit of emotional tempest where pathos and empathy dominate. The story also suggests that it is possible to reconcile the hiatus between cultures but is extremely difficult to resist the burden of emotion that is integral to human existence as it has been theorized by Arthur Danto's *Narration and Knowledge* (1985) ⁵. Further the story "Love of a Good Man" also addresses the question of personal sensitivity and conflict. The plot of the story encapsulates the action and the narrative of the mother and the father in order to unfold the thematics of emotional crises and the texture of emotional crises has aptly been delineated by Jain, Jasbir Jain's *Writers of Indian Diaspora*(1998) ⁶.

When the volume comes to “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives” the writer turns towards the complex texture of human relationship. She does not provide the reader with psychological crisis in human relationship but she also underlines different lacunas and gaps which may fissure the human relationship in social and cultural hemisphere as has been adumbrated by John McLeod’s *Literature of Indian Diaspora* (2000)⁷. The ultimate story entitled “The Names of Stars in Bengali” involves the poetics of exile, obscurity between mother and daughter relationship, nostalgia for the childhood memories and the clash of values of East and West. In a nutshell the story sums up all major arguments that Divakaruni has attempted to establish. Beena Agrawal in her *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A New Voice in Indian English Fiction* (2016) reinstates:

The experiments with the dimension, variety and intensity within the limited canvas of short story impart a distinction and innovative direction to the sensibility of Divakaruni. Liveliness, twilight of gloom and joy, depth of sentiments and deconstruction of invisible spaces of human consciousness constitute the texture of her writings. The light of the prism of the short stories of Divakaruni collected in the volume *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* of her reflects and represent the domain of her Diasporic realities. Her over sensitivity for the emotional affinities in personal relationship at the diverse levels of human experiences make her stories a thing enduring popularity that is beyond the constraints of time, place and cultural constraints. The echoes of human sentiments give a window to the sublimity and the distinction to the art of Divakaruni⁸.

Apart from her fictional works, Divakaruni is also known for her poetic composition. The corpus of her poetic composition is a rich testimony of her profound thoughtfulness, richness of imagination, deep emotional appeal and seriousness of purpose. Her celebrated poetic collections are *Dark Live the River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtium* (1990), *Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh* (1991), and *The Leaving Yuba City* (1997). These collections echo the voices of Indian immigrants settled in America. Divakaruni has attempted to paint the curiosity and sensibility of children. She has written *Neela, Victory Songs* (2002) where the sketches have focused on the adventures of a twelve year old girl whose father was involved in the struggle of Indian war of Independence. Similarly, *The Couch Bearer* (2003) presents a fantasy in which twelve year old Anand returns a magical Couch shell to the distant

Himalayans from which it had come. In context of *The Couch Bearer*, the quest adventure has an exotic flavour, magical background from traditional Tales and deliciously detailed description of Indian food.

Like BharatiMukharjee, ChitraBanerjee through her novels constructs the world of immigrant's experiences and represents the plight of Indian immigrant women. The emotional identification and affirmation of self-anguish through their conflicts; provide a rare authenticity to her narrative presentations. In the galaxy of immigrants' literature, Divakaruni breaks the traditional matrix of 'home and homelessness' and constructs varied narrative patterns to provide ample spaces to her immigrant characters to reveal their suppressed sensibility for their homeland. Besides of the nostalgia of the characters, she encourages ethnic arts, performances, ethics and poetic realization of native sensibility. She has a realization of paradigms and commitments of her narrative art. Locating her position in the realm of Indian Diasporic writers, she admits:

Each one of us has our own concerns, style and subject matter. Some of mine are immigrant issues, women's roles and an interest in folk tales and magic. I have also become very interested in writing for children. (Interview: Deslit Daily)⁹

Her agenda is evident because in her writings, she presents the message of cross- cultural understanding beyond the ivory towers of academia. She defines her own positions, "I am a listener, a facilitator, connectors to people, to me, and the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about." (Interview: Softky Elizabeth). As a writer she fulfils a significant role, the role of the 'connector' of cultures. She writes with the assumption that women as immigrants, have a better sense of cultural identity and they can more successfully work for the assimilation of cultures. Deviating from depressing cultural bouts, she records the incidents and the consequences of the horrors of violence against women crossing cultural boundaries. The idea of national consciousness, realization of the warmth of the mechanism of personal relationship, innate bonding with geography and culture, inheriting the heritage of ethnic arts, have been the prime issues integrated in the Diasporic consciousness presented by Divakaruni in her writings.

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