



# Diasporic Concerns In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels *Sister Of My Heart* And *Queen Of Dreams*

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## Abstract:

Indian diaspora women writers have been performing a very important role in Indian English Literature. They have shown their solidarity across the borders and contributed in different forms of writings such as novels, autobiographies and short stories. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of them whose writing has explored various shades of immigrant experience. She belongs to a post-modern group of Indian writers in English. She concentrates more on her immigrant women protagonists, and attempts to exhibit their harsh and humiliating experiences. Her works reveal her special interest in the lives of displaced diasporic communities. From the perspective of diasporic concerns, Divakaruni delicately portrays how expatriate women, naturally, are endowed with the feminine abilities to relate simultaneously to two homes. The study is restricted only to explore and explicate the overall reflection of diasporic experience in the selected works by Divakaruni. The researcher selects some major works in order to make a profound and comprehensive critical study on her selected works with an emphasis on the diasporic concerns.

**Key words:** Diaspora, isolation, alienation, immigration, expatriation.

Indian-American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works which chiefly deal with the existential quandaries of expatriates tackle two problematic areas of contemporary post-colonial theory - 'diaspora' and 'feminism'. Drawing on her own rich experience as an immigrant, Divakaruni projects the struggle, rootlessness and anxiety as also the adaptation and assimilation of foreign cultures by the Indian diaspora. Divakaruni delicately portrays how expatriate women, naturally endowed with the feminine ability to relate simultaneously to two homes, employ wisdom and compassion to empathize with two different cultures Indian and American. The experience of migration and living in diaspora have produced a plethora of studies

on the recent post-colonial literature. The immigrant issues have been explored by many diasporic writers. In recent years much critical interest has grown in the writings of Indian immigrant writers settled in other countries.

Chitra Banerjee the Bengal born writer immigrated to the U.S. in one of the foremost writers of Diasporic literature. She often focuses on the character balancing two worlds, particularly Indian immigrants struggling for peaceful life in America. The ambitious individuals uproot themselves from their cultural moorings and migrate to countries which promise them better living conditions and comforts. The immigrant who carries dreams of aspiration also carries with him his natural identity. His reluctance to shed his identity makes it difficult for him to get assimilated in his home. The natives too are not ready to accept him without any reservation. This harsh reality, besides causing innumerable problems to the co-migrant, leads to various tensions in the society. Divakaruni's books are directed to women of all races. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their culture and religion.

'Diaspora' (meaning 'to disperse' in Greek) is a major area of current post-colonial discourse. A diaspora refers to a group of people who have migrated from their homeland and who maintain some connection to their culture of origin. Diasporas can be formed for a variety of reasons, including economic, political, or social factors. The term diaspora is often used to refer to the dispersal of a specific group of people, such as the Jewish diaspora, which refers to the dispersion of the Jewish people from their homeland in the Middle East. Other examples of diasporas include the African diaspora, which refers to the dispersal of people of African descent around the world, and the Irish diaspora, which refers to the dispersal of Irish people around the world. Diasporas often maintain strong connections to their culture of origin, including through language, religion, customs, and traditions. They may also play a role in shaping the culture and politics of their host countries, and they may act as a bridge between their homeland and the wider world.

The Indian diaspora is one of the largest and most well-established diaspora communities in the world, with a presence in virtually every corner of the globe. The Indian diaspora has a significant impact on the global economy and has played a key role in the economic development of many countries. Many members of the Indian diaspora have achieved success in various fields, including business, politics, science, and the arts. The Indian diaspora is also known for maintaining strong cultural ties to India and for actively participating in the cultural and social life of their host countries.

Indian diaspora women have taken effort to understand their multiple identities in relation to different communities and their connectedness to various social movements including women's movements and their struggle against existing inequality in society. Indian diasporic feminism conceptualised their identities under the circumstances on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity, gender, nationality and even various forms of oppression in their lives. Indian immigrant women are always considered as secondary migrants. The study focuses on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as an Indian diaspora female writer who had written extensively on women issues particularly in diasporic situations and their haunted memories. She has explored various issues of Indian immigrant women in diasporic space and their resistance to rigid and uneven cultural

practices from the feminist perspective. Her writings dealt with critical studies from feminist standpoint and also various themes such as transnationalism and multiculturalism, colonialism, migration, exile, cultural conflicts contained at the very core of Divakaruni's abundant narratives that would not subsist devoid of these diasporic dimensions of immigration. Women writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukerjee, Jumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee.

Divakaruni has created a revolution in English fiction by introducing various themes. Her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, women, immigration, history, myth and challenges of living in a multicultural world. Her works portray the various complexities of women and depict their struggle that she goes through to find her own identity in the society. Her major works deal too with the issues and aspects of immigrants' experiences. She has an extraordinary ability to discuss the very sensitive aspects of the lives of women characters and their conditions. In this paper, Divakaruni concentrates on her female protagonists and attempts to exhibit their harsh and humiliating experiences. Banerjee's writing affirms that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience made up of collectivities and multiple journeys. It's an experience that is determined by who travels, where, how and under what circumstances. Almost all the expatriates who emigrated from India to America face the clash of opposing cultures, a feeling of alienation which is followed by the attempts to adjust, to adopt and to accept. Only the degree of this adaptation differs according to the generations. Banerjee had moved away from her location, through her works she recollects her homeland, and as an outsider observes details with objectivity. Chitra Banerjee analyses the relationship of women with universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance and disorder.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has occupied a significant position in female Indian diasporic writers. She emerged as a brilliant literary artist of the Indian continent who writes from America. Born in Kolkata, Divakaruni migrated to the United States and subsequently settled there as a teaching faculty. She serves as Geny and Betty McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston. Even after settling abroad, she has not forsaken her Indian identity, culture and of course Indianness. Divakaruni is a leading writer of diasporic literature. She was born in 1957 in Calcutta and migrated to the United States at the age of nineteen to earn a master's degree. She began her writing career as a poet. Her works are largely set in India and the United States. Her major novels include *The Mistress of Spices* (1995), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005). Her Short story collections include *Arranged Marriage* (1995), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) and *The Lives of Strangers* (2005).

As a result, the present paper's objectives are as follows:

As a consequence, the following are the goals of this paper:

- To study the notion of 'Diaspora' and 'Indian Diaspora Literature'.
- To explore Chitra Banerjee as a diasporic writer of the Indian continent.

- To explore diasporic concerns in the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *Queens of Dreams*
- To distinguish between the strategies used by the creator to represent the characters in the novels.
- Recognize the writer's particular complicated elements that reveal her style.

The present research paper is based on the following methodology.

- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's selected novels are selected as the primary tools
- The findings and observations in the present research paper is based on the primary and secondary data.
- The relevant diasporic concerns in her selected novels would be explored through extensive study and close reading.
- The nature of the paper would be descriptive and analytical.
- The paper will follow the prescribed current edition of MLA Handbook.

The reviews of the research articles and dissertations discuss various themes like alienation, feminism, patriarchy, cultural conflict, social realism and magical realism incorporated by Divakaruni as an eminent Indian diasporic writer. The research on the literary works of Divakaruni appeals to her social contribution and the expression of personal experience to the world as the writer herself is an Indian born and settled in America. T. Chandra, in his thesis "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Novels: A Thematic Study" depicts women's sufferings, man-woman relationships. Raminderpal's article entitled "Female Quest for Identity by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with special reference to *Oleander Girl*" voices the various conditions of women. Vasigaran's doctoral work "Cross-Cultural Experiences of the Indian Womanhood through a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective: A Study on the Select Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" presents the Cross-Cultural experiences of female characters. S.Sathia Sali and Dr. D.L.Jaisy in their collaborated article titled "Cultural Conflict and Issues in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*" has talked about how Indian immigrant families face such critical hardships in American culture due to outsiders. They encounter many difficulties in merging with new people and culture. Mrs. Gupta and her two daughters face complexities in developing their social set up in westernized society. Mrs. Gupta, a mother, carries her Indian culture in America and teaches Indian cultural values to her daughters as well. As an immigrant family, Gupta family bears the issues of assimilation and dislocation. Mrs. Gupta and her elder daughter Rakhi particularly feel social and physical discomfort.

The novel *Sister of My Heart* portrays the strong women relationship which empowers each other to overcome the obstacles they face in their life. The female bonding is analyzed on the basis of Anju's diasporic life and Sudha's domestic life. At the beginning of the novel, the story shows Anju and Sudha's closeness despite their opposite characteristics. In the novel, both are treated as cousins. Anju is a young brave girl, very spontaneous and straight-forward, while Sudha Chatterjee is a calm, feminine and very delicate young girl. Both are caring for each other. They grow up together and are very accustomed to each other's presence. They grow up in a very conservative upper-middle class home consisting solely of women-mothers, aunts and the maid. Sudha dreams of a romantic marriage and motherhood based on Hindu fables and legends. Both of them lost their fathers on a ruby-hunting expedition which was planned by Sudha's father. Sudha

feels guilty for her father's actions. In turn she compromises her love for Ashoke. She drops the idea of her elopement with Ashoke because it might break Anju's marriage. Sudha renounces herself to an arranged marriage with a weak willed man, who is dominated by his widow mother. Anju gets married to a computer scientist Sunil who is working in America. The string of the bond of both the sisters is somewhat stretched when Anju finds that Sunil feels attracted towards the beautiful Sudha.

Though miles apart, both the girls face the same loneliness in their marriages. Sudha is desperate for a child, just to call someone as her love. In America, Anju feels Sunil as a mysterious person. He seeks for his privacy and does not tell her about his whereabouts. There is a sharp contrast between the lives of both the cousins. On the one hand Sudha spends her whole day performing household duties while Anju drives freely; performing outdoor works on her own, studies her favourite subject in college. But still the dissatisfaction in Anju's life makes her think and she declares that "It's not what I imagined my American life would be like".

Life brings them to the same stage when both become pregnant. Sudha's mother-in-law forces her to abort the fetus but she ignores and desires to keep the child and moves to America. On the other hand, Anju starts collecting money through a job for air tickets for Sudha. This job makes her feel the power of economic independence. Unfortunately due to mental stress Anju suffers a miscarriage. Sudha and her daughter Dayita are the only hope that would give her energy to forget the loss of her baby. On the way to liberty, Sudha once again refuses Ashoke and his love because now she is not sure if she would be happy in trying herself to a man's whims again. She becomes a rebel in the world of man. She finally prefers "A future built by women out of their own wits, their own hands"

While Anju and Sudha begin to seek ways of fulfilling their dreams of self-reliance in America, the new setting creates major rifts in relationships. Sudha could feel the silence between Sunil and Anju. There is an exchange of only a few sentences between them and that too about Dayita. Sudha's daughter Dayita's presence somewhat helps Anju to diminish the memories of Prem (her unborn child). Sunil avoids confronting Sudha to control his desperate passion for her since his marriage. Sudha with the fire of independence inside her asks a girl Sara, whom she meets in a garden, to find a job for her. Sara was an Indian and believed in highly self centered thoughts which inspire Sudha. Sudha startles with her decision to cancel her marriage only because she could not lose her privacy. She frankly accepts in front of Sudha that, "In-laws, kids, servants, you know how it is in India .... So I bought myself a bus ticket to California". Sara promises Sudha her entry into real American life which would be a great help none-the-less attempt to escape from herself.

Few years in America transformed Anju in her usage of peculiar words and interests. Her shrinking memories of India make Sudha realize that even their memories are marooned on separate islands. The alien land seems to create the need of assimilation and transformation for the immigrants. But behavioural changes are hardly acceptable in accordance with the new culture. As Sunil, though outwardly assimilated, could not tolerate Lalit's intimacy either with Sudha or with Anju. The deep seated love of both the cousins develops

a rift now, perhaps because of the one year of separation in separate lands or because of one man between them. Anju feels insecure with Sudha's presence in her house and Sudha hides dislike for the purposeless hours she spends working in Anju's house. The trio suffers a disastrous situation when Sudha abandons Anju's house after hours of physical intimacy with Sunil. Her guilt compels her to move out of her friend's married life.

Sudha now realizes that she cannot go back to the old restricted ways of Indian life. She somehow feels secure for the impersonal customs of America to start a new life. She thinks standing at the corner of a road, "I must be emitting some type of distress signal, because a passerby stares at me strangely. If this were India, at least half of them would know me. They'd ask me a thousand questions, offer to help, give advice, and maybe even escort me back home". Not only Sudha but Anju and Sunil also trace new paths for them after deciding for a divorce. Anju begins her self-searching journey keeping distance with all closed ones. She shares a room with one of her friends from writer's club but their belonging to different lands could not make a comfortable companionship between them. She always wants Sudha close to her to share and understand her fully. Anju feels like tingles in fingertips like pins and needles when any of her American friends criticizes the heritage which she loves a lot. Even their everyday talks are so different that she feels lonely among them. She understands that, "...large chunks of herself will always be unintelligible to them: the joint family she grew up in, her arranged marriage, the way she fell in love with her husband, the tension in her household, that ménage a trois Indian style".

Sudha becomes a caretaker of an old Indian man who is living with his son and his American wife. He suffers more from mental sickness than physical. He wants to return to his own land (India). The foreign land has badly affected his health. Sudha understands his pain and promises to take him to India. She cooks Indian dishes for him, calls him Baba and leaves Dayita to play with him. Subsequently this improves the old man's health. She is excited with her own bank account but leaving the old relationship is the only regret.

Sudha's clear refusal to Ashoke, friendship with Lalit, leaving Sunil and decision of returning India with the old and with a deal of serving him in turn for a good school for her daughter are surely the characteristics of the changed 'self' in America, a place where "in a minute you might be pulled up into it, released of gravity. One can take a new body here, shrug off old identities".

*Queen of Dreams* follows the lives of members of a Bengali family who have settled in America. The Bengali family finds it difficult to adjust in a new land and see its challenge, be it social or financial daunting. Central to the story are the female characters, who are Indian immigrants in pursuit of reconstructing their identity in the context of the multi-cultural experiences. The main protagonist is Mrs Gupta, a first-generation immigrant, a mother and an interpreter of dreams. Other protagonists are Rakhi and Jona, born in America and daughters and granddaughters to Mrs Gupta.

Divakaruni in *Queen of Dreams* presents the experiences of the Indian female diaspora, mainly the complex situation of reconciling with the foreign lands and the critical consequences which are usually estranged relationships. Merging with the society of the foreign land is a double-edged sword for them as

they are not just forging a cultural identity amidst significant religious, political and social differences but also trying to get over the depression, anxiety, misunderstanding and guilt of losing their native identities in the process.

Identity conflict is such a thing that it easily seeps into the diaspora inevitably, be it the first-generation immigrants or their descendants. While Mrs Gupta neither rejects the culture of the host-land altogether nor does she accept it fully by transforming herself or forging for herself a new identity. She would wear Indian clothes and cook Indian food. Her identity was built around her profession as a dream interpreter and not Indian or American culture. It can be said that Mrs Gupta merely adapted to her surroundings. Due to these cultural clashes, it becomes difficult for diasporic individuals to relate to one culture or the other. The culture of their host country is markedly different from the native culture in which they were born and brought up. Reconciling the two cultures becomes the crux of their identity crisis. This is because man is a social animal and it needs to belong somewhere. Not being able to see either culture as their own, is the beginning of the loss of the sense of belonging. What adds to their dilemma of identity is the rejection of both the societies not seeing them as their own as well.

In the novel, Rakhi's response is very different. As an American born, she inherited a mixed cultural heritage. She, too, like her mother, experienced identity conflict. While her mother could resolve her identity conflicts through her profession, Rakhi's profession as an owner of a tea shop only aggravates her quest for identity. There is a constant arrival of Indian customers in her tea shop, whom Rakhi observes intently. Mrs Gupta hiding Indian culture from Rakhi only makes Rakhi crave more for it. She is obsessed with the idea of discovering her Indian roots, which she says are shrouded in "unending mystery."

Cultural clash is the core problems of a diaspora. Cultural clash is the primary reason why diasporic community members have to renegotiate or reconstruct their identities. A cultural clash can be observed in the text in straightforward terms of dream interpretation. We can see through Mrs Gupta that she believes that dream interpretation is a gift which cannot be cultivated or learnt. It is simply possessed and can just easily be lost as well. Mrs Gupta's beliefs about dream interpretation stem from Indian culture. But Rakhi, who wants to be a dream interpreter herself, finds out that dream interpretation in the Western world is regarded as a science that trained psychologists are licensed to practice. Therefore, cultural clashes lead to a sense of alienation. Experiencing existential rootlessness begins with cultural alienation, in fact, the entire diasporic journey is from alienation to assimilation.

There are stark differences between Indian and American culture when it comes to beliefs, customs, attitudes, and other social behaviours and endeavours. As it can be observed in the text, diaspora finds themselves between the two cultures, often reconciling one with the other. Cultural dilemmas lead to the dilemmas of identity, which in the novel came to the forefront with the 9/11 incident. Soon after the attacks, the immigrants faced large-scale rejection by the American society, for they were all branded as terrorists. It forced Rakhi out of her American identity and made her consider her Indian identity more seriously. She

questions her identity and cannot locate herself in one place, and she feels pulled by both the places. It is nothing short of trauma as cultural alienation instigates a sense of loss.

While the challenges of having bi-cultural identities or hybrid cultural identities are stressful, we see in *Queen of Dreams* that Rakhi is able to find stability and achieve a sense of belonging after all. She addresses the identity crisis and mental trauma of dislocated migrants head-on. She adapts to a new way of life that embraces the American lifestyle while still being rooted in Indian culture instead of shunning one or the other altogether.

The perfect example of the successful creation of this sense of belonging is Rakhi's daughter, Jona. Jona is the ideal blend of American and Indian identities. We can see her not just as a painter, hinting at her individuality, but also as a dream interpreter like her grandmother. She has a self-identity created in American society and a connection to the traditions of her ancestors' homeland. She accepts her hybridity and the circumstances that she is living in, and identifies with both her heritages. While Mrs Gupta and Rakhi's sense of belonging was shaped by the experience of migration and its consequences, Jona feels more at home in America and is comfortable with her blend of American and Indian identity as she has not experienced migration or any of its negativity was not passed down to her.

## Conclusion

By discussing features of Emigrant or Diasporic literature, the present paper has attempted to investigate the reflection of the Diaspora Concept and its different aspects in Indian English literature. Many Indian Diaspora writers, both in English and other languages, have depicted distinct community, area, and culture specific issues in the new lands of relocation in their literary works, illuminating the diversity of Indian culture. It also looked at Indian contributions to English-language diasporic literature. At last, it can be observed that the text of *Sister of my Heart* and *Queen of Dreams* through its female characters, manages to depict the trauma of living in a foreign land and the diasporic challenges of adapting to the host land. The novel also presents the acceptance of hybrid identities, which creates a sense of belonging, as a solution to the problems faced by the diasporic communities in their host land.

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