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Teaching Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Feminist Dimensions In Indian Classrooms: A Critical Pedagogy

1. MOPIDEVI SRI LAKSHMI

LECTURER IN ENGLISH

GOVT. COLLEGE (A), RAJAHMUNDRY &

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

AUTDR-HUB

ANDHRA UNIVERSITY

VISAKHAPATNAM(AP)

2. Dr. VULLAMPARTHI SUDHEER

LECTURER IN ENGLISH

GDC-S.KOTA &

RESEARCH GUIDE

AUTDR-HUB

ANDHRA UNIVERSITY

VISAKHAPATNAM(AP)

Abstract: This research article explores effective strategies for teaching the profound feministic aspects embedded in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works within Indian classrooms. Drawing extensively on critical analysis of her novels, particularly *The Palace of Illusions*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, and *The Mistress of Spices*, this paper highlights key feminist concepts such as *écriture feminine*, female bonding, challenges to patriarchal norms, and the envisioning of separatist communities. It proposes a pedagogical framework that encourages students to critically engage with themes of female subjectivity, agency, resistance, and identity formation as portrayed in Divakaruni's narratives. By focusing on her unique articulation of women's experiences, the article aims to provide educators with insights to foster a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and empowerment in the Indian literary and social context.

Keywords: *écriture feminine*, patriarchal norms, female subjectivity, resistance gender dynamics

1. Introduction:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a contemporary writer whose works offer a rich canvas for exploring diverse facets of women's lives, challenges, and triumphs. Notably, Divakaruni herself states a focus in her writing on "friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers". Her work with MAITRI, a helpline for abused South Asian women immigrants in the US, has further provided "the necessary impetus for her inevitable choice of the theme of sisterhood". This suggests a personal and professional commitment to portraying the complexities of female relationships and experiences. Divakaruni's narratives are particularly relevant for

Indian classrooms as they often engage with Indian cultural contexts, traditions, and mythological frameworks, making them accessible yet thought-provoking for students to analyze through a feminist lens.

Feminist criticism posits that women's engagement with writing is an act of rebellion against male-dominated literary traditions. This "bold assertion" by French psychoanalyst feminist Helene Cixous serves as a "clarion call to all women to revolutionise the art of writing through the assertion of the feminine self". Women's writing is seen as a means to "become aware of their potentia, thereby contributing to their own empowerment and that of their own community". Divakaruni's works resonate deeply with these principles, offering narratives that "exhibit female subjectivity and agency" and challenge phallogocentric discourse by "render[ing] noisy and audible all that had been silenced". This article speaks about how Divakaruni's literature can be utilized in Indian classrooms to illuminate these critical feministic aspects, focusing on her representation of *écriture feminine*, the dynamics of female bonding, the challenge to patriarchal norms, and the concept of separatist feminist communities.

2. Understanding "*Ecriture Feminine*" through Divakaruni's "*The Palace of Illusions*:"

One of the most profound feminist aspects in Divakaruni's work, particularly evident in *The Palace of Illusions*, is her embodiment of "écriture feminine" (feminine writing). Introduced by Helene Cixous, this concept advocates for a new feminine language that resists "patriarchal binary thought" and "phallogocentric thinking and writing". Cixous argues that traditional Western discourse is male-dominated and oppresses women by connecting them to the body and nature, thus denying them the faculty of writing, which is considered "male territory" and an "act of intellection". *Ecriture feminine* aims to "challenge and move beyond the constraints of phallogocentric thought" by focusing on the "female body and sexuality in writing". It emphasizes a writing that is "unstable, non-linear and free-flowing".

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni skillfully deconstructs the traditional, male-centric narrative of the *Mahabharata* by retelling the epic from Draupadi's perspective. This act itself is a powerful assertion of "female subjectivity and agency". For centuries, women in literature have been "shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately submissive". Divakaruni's intention is to "place the women in the forefront of action", making Draupadi the "sutradhari" (narrator and enacter) of her own story. This narrative agency allows Draupadi to "construct her identity by enabling her to control and manipulate the narration," thus "deconstructing the earlier interpretations of her character".

a. Assertion of Female Subjectivity and Agency: Draupadi in Divakaruni's novel is not a passive victim but a "strong-willed, empowered, independent and rebellious person". From her childhood, she displays an "obsessive interest in the story of her birth" with the prophecy that "she will change the course of history". Her desire for a "heroic name" and an identity beyond "Daughter of Drupad" reflects a modern quest for selfhood. She openly challenges the notion that "a woman's highest purpose was to support men", declaring, "Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life". Her refusal to commit "honourable self-immolation" and her focus on her "own plans for [her] life" after her polygamous marriage underscore her indomitable spirit. Even after public humiliation, she asserts her independence from her husbands, realizing, "I no longer depended on them so completely in the future". This constant subversion of gender dichotomy invalidates the negative label of "kriya" often associated with her.

b. "Writing the Body": Cixous's concept of "writing the body" implies both writing "about" the body and "through" the body. Divakaruni demonstrates this through Draupadi's unabashed confessions of her secret desires and pleasures. Notably, Draupadi harbors a "secret desire for Karna", longing to see him again despite knowing he is her husbands' enemy. Her confession, "I didn't love any of my husbands in that way... Because none of them had the power to agitate me the way the mere memory of Karna did", explicitly portrays her inner sensual and emotional landscape, defying traditional expectations of a wife. Furthermore, Draupadi's awakening to her "own beauty and sensuality" during a royal procession, a moment of "eroticization" of her body, also exemplifies "writing the body".

c. **Non-Linear Narrative Structure:** *Ecriture feminine* privileges "non-linearity, incoherence and cyclical plots". Divakaruni employs a complex narrative pattern in *The Palace of Illusions* that challenges the "logic, coherence and linearity" of male literary traditions. The narrative, though autobiographical from Draupadi's perspective, is interspersed with "multiple narrative voices, digressions and stories". The story moves "back and forth in time, the present overlapping with the past", as seen through flashbacks narrated by Dhai Ma, Dhri, Sikhandi, Bhim, Bheeshma, and various sages. The cyclical plot is powerfully established by the novel beginning and ending with the theme of "fire" and Draupadi's birth. Her philosophical realization at her death, linking her birth and end through Krishna's presence, reinforces this circularity, suggesting the immortality of the soul. This narrative fluidity mirrors the characteristics of feminine language.

3. *Female Bonding and Sisterhood as Resistance in Divakaruni's Works:*

Divakaruni's fiction consistently explores female bonding and sisterhood as a crucial feminist strategy for survival and empowerment. She consciously aligns herself with the Western tradition in this regard, noting that "Indian writers from Anita Desai to Arundhati Roy have ignored sisterhood in their focus on feminine issues". For Divakaruni, female friendships possess a "closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need any explanation", enabling women to be "understood" with "all their imperfections".

a. ***Sister of My Heart:*** *The Power of Sorority:* This novel foregrounds the profound intimacy between two distant cousins, Anju and Sudha, who are born on the same day and provide "support and healing to each other in times of crisis". Their bond, characterized by "understanding, care and nurturing that is reciprocal", is described by Anju as: "Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart... I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it... and I'll know she understands me perfectly". This deep emotional fulfillment, akin to the relationship between Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, offers "healing and security". Despite their temperamental differences, a strong "complementary sorority" exists, exemplified by their intertwined arms and balancing a baby, symbolizing their "shared identity".

The novel also showcases the "dynamics of women's relationship with each other" through the three widowed Chatterjee women—Bijoy's wife, Gopal's wife, and Bijoy's sister. Their shared predicament enables them to defy societal norms of widowhood and actively run the household and family business, providing "social security and an urge for dignified survival". This "mentoring relationship" allows them to "live independently and happily", embodying a "co-mothering" tradition where they nurture Anju and Sudha without male support. The "unflinching love and affection that binds the Chatterjee women actually enable them to confront the toughest of challenges and come out of extremely trying situations", demonstrating how "Patriarchy cannot get the better of them".

b. ***The Vine of Desire:*** *Challenges to Female Bonds:* As a sequel, *The Vine of Desire* "problematize[s] female homosocial bonds". It depicts how "patriarchal influences" and "male intrusions" can disrupt the strong female solidarity. Sunil's (Anju's husband) "secret desire to possess Sudha" and subsequent adultery create a profound "emotional hiatus" and jeopardize the bond between the cousins. Despite the initial reunion and mutual support, the inability to communicate openly due to hidden fears and conflicting passions leads to their estrangement. The "distance of space and time" also weakens the mother-daughter ties, as daughters hesitate to burden their mothers with problems, leading to a "lack of communication" and disruption. However, the novel ends on a positive note, signaling the "possibility of a renewal of their friendship," where they bridge their differences and find comfort in their shared female identity.

c. ***Before We Visit the Goddess:*** *Intergenerational Bonds:* This novel highlights "multigenerational and transcontinental bonds" between three women—Sabitri (grandmother), Bela (mother), and Tara (daughter)—who are "strangely bonded in love" despite being separated by space and time. Their "greatest source of strength lies in one another," as heterosexual relationships prove "futile" for them. Though their relationships are often "strained" and marked by "misgivings, misunderstandings and stubbornness", an "eternal bond of female solidarity is not easily snapped". They repeatedly "fall back on their mothers in times of crisis". The

"invisible support system" of sisterhood, though not always direct, provides sustenance and guides them through difficult terrains. The physical distance is bridged by a powerful letter Sabitri writes to Tara, which, despite reaching years later, has a "cathartic effect" and helps resolve "all differences and misunderstandings". This illustrates how "mothers and daughters and grandmother and granddaughter" are connected by a "secret and unifying force".

4. Challenging Patriarchal Norms and Identity Formation:

A central theme across Divakaruni's works is the resistance to patriarchy and the relentless pursuit of female selfhood. Patriarchy is defined as "a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women", often reducing women to the "Other". Women's empowerment, in this context, implies "a belief in one's self-efficacy and the ability to make choices". Divakaruni's characters consistently defy these restrictive norms.

a. Draupadi's Self-Definition: As discussed, Draupadi's quest for an identity distinct from her patriarchal labels is profound. Her desire for her "own palace" that would "mirror my deepest being" is a powerful metaphor for her yearning for "space and freedom that was denied to most women". Her proactive instigation of her husbands to avenge her humiliation, asserting her role as the "driving force behind the success of her husbands", directly challenges the submissive portrayal of women. She "never accepts defeat" and continually "prepares herself for further unforeseen challenges and combats", thus "constantly subvert[ing] the gender dichotomy of the phallogocentric discourse". Even her empathy for Karna and admission of guilt for the war at the end, which shows her multi-faceted personality, are traits not typically highlighted in earlier versions of her character.

b. Matriarchal Strength in *Sister of My Heart*: The older Chatterjee women explicitly reject the "stereotyped image of a widow". Instead of leading marginalized lives, they team up to run the family business and household, providing "support and sustenance from each other". Gouri runs the bookstore, Nalini and Aunt Pishi manage the home and mother the girls. Their decision to sell the ancestral home and embrace a more liberal worldview, joining book societies and volunteering, symbolizes their liberation from "a great burden of tradition". Their ability to lead "meaningful lives" independently is a direct challenge to the patriarchal order that dictates "Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family".

c. Redefining Womanhood and Self-Actualization: In *The Vine of Desire*, Sudha's realization of the "essence of being a free woman" leads her to choose "to live life on her own terms". Her decision to become a "single mother and an independent woman", despite societal stigma and without initial support from the mothers, signifies her liberation from "patriarchal parameters". Similarly, Anju finds "fulfillment and independence in joining a writers' group and in learning para gliding," metaphorically learning "to fly".

In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, the women achieve "self-actualisation" through their inherent talents. Sabitri, as the daughter of a poor sweet meat seller, defies expectations with her "high ambitions" to become a teacher. She establishes her own successful enterprise, "Durga Sweets," which is a testament to her "immense strength of mind, confidence in her abilities and strong determination". Her culinary skills, genetically transmitted, enable her daughter Bela to also achieve "self-actualisation". After being deserted by her husband, Bela utilizes her cooking talent to become an author of cookbooks and run a popular food blog. This demonstrates how even a "traditional feminine activity like cooking, paradoxically, becomes a source of empowerment for women". The women in this novel, despite facing "desertion and deception by husbands and boyfriends", are "not easily shattered or subdued" but "defy all patriarchal assumptions" by carving out independent lives.

5. Exploring Separatist Feminist Communities in “The Mistress of Spices:”

Divakaruni ventures into the realm of separatist feminist communities in her debut novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, offering an explicit alternative to traditional androcentric paradigms. Separatist feminism advocates for women's separation from male-dominated institutions and relationships to “see themselves in a different context” and challenge patriarchy.

a. The Spice Island as a Female Universe: Divakaruni creates a “similar female universe” to utopian feminist fiction like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. The spice island, inhabited solely by women, is a “near utopian world” where “men are conspicuously absent”. It is described as “the island of women” and a “blissful and sheltered life in the company of women where men are redundant”. The island's unconventionality, with “green slumbering volcano, red sand beaches, granite outcrops like grey teeth”, symbolically inverts “all values and paradigms of the androcentric society”. The “Old One,” the matriarch and trainer, is deemed “not beautiful in the way men use the word”, signifying a deliberate shift from the male aesthetic.

b. Empowerment and Vows of Resistance: The training received on the spice island, overseen by the First Mother, functions as a “women empowerment programme”. Here, girls learn the “secret power of the spices” and “the ancient science of the herbs and spices” (Ayurveda). This knowledge empowers them, transforming them into “Mistresses of Spices” who can help others in distress. The ritualistic vows taken by the mistresses—“never use the power of the spices for their personal use, never step out of the store, abstain from heterosexual love and never use a mirror”—reinforce their radical outlook and commitment to a life outside patriarchal norms. The spice store itself, where Tilo (the protagonist) works, acts as an “isolated female world by itself”.

c. Female Endearment and Healing: On the island, the trainees “learn to bond with each other and feel for others,” developing an “endearment that is best described as sisterhood”. Tilo acknowledges that learning to “feel without words the sorrows of our sisters, and without words to console them” is “the most worthwhile of the skills I learned”. Tilo, as a spice mistress, demonstrates profound empathy for women customers, feeling their pain as her own, highlighting women's “natural tendency to bond with each other”. As “life giver, the restorer of health and hope”, she acts as a healer, “transform[ing] the prodigious cosmic energy into a form that can be used by the client’s body-mind-spirit system”. This portrayal of women successfully operating “without men” underscores their “corporate completeness” and ability to be “vibrant, self-preserving and self-sustaining”.

6. Conclusion:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s literary contributions offer invaluable resources for Indian classrooms seeking to explore feminist perspectives. Her works consistently highlight the critical need for women to assert their voices and narratives, challenging the historical silencing imposed by patriarchal discourse. Through characters like Draupadi, Divakaruni demonstrates how women can actively subvert male-dominated traditions by embracing their subjective experiences, desires, and even their bodies in their narratives. The portrayal of female bonding and sisterhood, whether between cousins (Anju and Sudha), generations of women (Chatterjee mothers, Sabitri, Bela, Tara), or within separatist communities (spice mistresses), underscores its immense power as a support system for survival, healing, and emancipation in a “man's world”.

For Indian classrooms, teaching Divakaruni's works can serve multiple pedagogical objectives:

- Encouraging critical thinking about traditional narratives and gender roles in Indian society.
- Fostering discussions on female agency and self-definition, moving beyond stereotypical portrayals of women.
- Highlighting the strength and significance of female relationships (sisterhood, mother-daughter bonds) as forms of resistance and empowerment.
- Introducing the concept of "écriture feminine" and discussing how language and narrative structure can be used to challenge patriarchal norms.
- Exploring alternative social structures and the potential for women to thrive independently, as seen in the separatist communities.

By engaging with Divakaruni's nuanced explorations of identity, relationships, and resistance, Indian students can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of womanhood in a culturally relevant context, promoting critical awareness and empathy towards gender issues. Her consistent effort at "subverting male assumptions through the secret power of female bonding" makes her a undeniable author for contemporary feminist studies in India.

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