

Quest for Women's Identity and Independence in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

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Abstract

In this paper I propose to study a very successful woman writer of Indian Fiction in English to see how as a woman she seeks to depict the life of women in her world and how such depiction fits in the general context of Indian women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction explores women searching for their identity as human beings. This paper focuses on the Quest for Women's Identity and Independence in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*. The women characters, Anju and Sudha caught in the web of family dispute and in the complexities of man and woman relationship react to the situations identified as instances burgeoning blissful thoughts or perpetrating painful reflections during their process of adaptation in America. This paper attempts to analyze immigrant women's quest for identity and independence in the novel *The Vine of Desire*.

Keywords: Experience, Immigrants, Identity, Independence, Women.

Great Literature tells us about social realities as class exploitation, injustice, insults and above all the abuse of subalterns. A woman succeeds in establishing her identity without disturbing its cultural roots. Identity development in subalterns needs to be seen in the context of their experience. It is necessarily bound to their sense of connection to others. Among the Indian women writers who fight bravely for women, carving their identity in the conservative, deserted and elite dominating society is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the contemporary writer.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indo- American and the focus of her writing is Indian's experience in America and the conflict between the traditions of her homeland and the culture of her adopted country. The immigrants in their deliberate search for a materially better life migrate to various lands and make every effort to identify themselves with the foreign land and consequently face the challenge to find their feet there. They undergo a harrowing experience, so

they find it extremely difficult to cope with the new modes of life in the new land. Indeed they are torn between the two worlds, familiar home and unfamiliar country.

Divakaruni portrays characters and their tormenting emotions when they choose to throw the baggage of culture and create new identity, which keeps transforming and reinventing. The choice they make and the interaction they have with the immigrant community push them in identity crisis and conflicts, and force them to question their existences. Her works nourish a serious concern for contemporary women. She particularly depicts women, caught in multicultural challenges and represent transformation from traditional wives to modern women to survive on their own to sustain their identity. Her novels deal with the immigrant women's quest for identity, freedom and independence. Fiction is one of the most characteristic and powerful forms of expressing the most intimate consciousness of life and society. This paper entitled "Quest for Women's Identity and Independence" in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* reflects on the recurrent theme of the search for self-definition and freedom. The characters portrayed by her strive very hard for their identity and independence.

The Vine of Desire (2002) is a sequel to her earlier novel *Sister of My Heart*. The story of *The Vine of Desire* continues from the same point where it is finished off in *Sister of My Heart*. *The Vine of Desire* begins with the much anticipated reunions of two cousins. Sudha arrives in California where Anju lives with her husband Sunil. They both have a very difficult time. Sudha is divorced from her husband because her mother-in-law wanted her to abort her baby girl Dayita: she is therefore a single mother, a stigma in the Indian society. Anju on the other hand went through a miscarriage of her baby boy, Prem. This really affects her psyche and her relationship with Sunil. In this novel, we see the difficulty for Sudha in getting adjusted with an alien land and culture. In India, her life was restricted and oppressing. Nobody would accept a woman like her, who dares to break the rules and who wanted to live alone with her daughter. The protagonists Anju and Sudha have a desire to be independent and work hard to carve out their own identity.

Sudha arrives in America to create her own identity and to achieve independence. She visits America with a hope to make a life for herself and her daughter Dayita. She starts a new life in America with her daughter Dayita. She gets acquainted with the American way of life. Sudha accepts the job as a nurse to look after an old man Mr.Sen. She starts earning an income and that gives her a feeling of being empowered. She also compares the social and cultural system in America and India when she arrives in the house of Mr.Sen. Sudha identifies that the old man is not happy because he suffers with a sense of displacement in an alien land. "In this bed, in this house, all of which is alien to him" (278). She senses that he may get peace in his homeland. The identity crisis is also experienced by the old man. The moment the old man feels insecure, there is change in his life and consequently a new hope begins to rise in him a hope is

the essence of life. Here, for the old man, the hope of going back to India and leading a joyous life is something new which he wants. The old man recaptures and talks to Sudha and Dayita about his memorable experiences in his native land. For such Indian immigrants, the past is associated with traditions and customs which have their own beauty and assurance, in spite of their limitations. This awareness gives the immigrants a sense of new judgment and understanding of their own culture and traditions. In the first generations of immigrants, migration creates alienation, nostalgia and cultural rootlessness at the place of migration as he/she is still sticking to the cultural beliefs, practices and norms of the homeland.

In the United States of America, Sudha visits different places, meets different people and learns to survive independently, yet she chooses her homeland as the better option to get settled. Finally Sudha decides to go back to India along with her daughter Dayita and the old man Mr.Sen and live in the native village of the old man and serve him as a maid. When the old man asks her why she wants to go back to India and look after him, she says: “Going back with you would be a way to start over in a culture I understand the way I’ll never understand America. In a new part of India, where no one knows me. Without the weight of old memories, the whispers that say, we knew she’d fail, or serves her right” (320-321)

Sudha writes to Anju stating:

I am writing one final time to let you know that I am leaving for India. I’m going to take care of Mr.Sen, the old man I was looking after here. He lives in Jalpaiguri, up in the north of Bengal. I think we’ll be happy there-or at least peaceful, which is perhaps better. He is very fond of Dayita and has offered to pay me a generous salary. (347)

Sudha also writes to Pishi:

I’m coming back to India, Pishi, but not to Calcutta. I must start over- without the memories, the whispers .And this job I have, taking care of old Mr.Sen who is recovering from a stroke, will allow me to do so.....

Do you think I’m making a mistake by coming back?

But think of this: for the first time in my life, I’ll have my own bank account. It makes me feel – finally –like a grown up! (349-350)

Finally Sudha makes up her mind to go back to India. Thus it could be seen that Sudha is firm in her decision and justifies it. The struggle to find identity and freedom has become a very theme in women’s writings. It studies the various problems faced by women and creates awareness among them. Women are struggling to achieve social liberty and civil rights in all

dimensions. Many of their rights have been curbed, which makes them more rebellious. Sudha cousin Anju protests against the injustice of all sorts even during her childhood. Later after her marriage when Anju is forced to deal with her restlessness, she goes back to college and realizes that she can write. She is sad because she feels lost in the new country. Anju is completely shattered after her miscarriage. However it is significant that Anju refuses to come back to India though her mother insists her to come. She also refuses any possible help from Sunil after her separation. He wants to start the divorce proceedings as quickly as possible. In Sunil's case the American society had brought sea changes in him. Anju cannot control herself as she had loved him the most in her life. When Anju feels cheated by her husband and leaves him to lead an independent life, he regrets for his infidelity and makes efforts to patch up with her. However, Anju remains unrelenting. Anju does not wish to surrender herself to patriarchy and helplessness. She does not return to seek refuge in her .She decides to seek out some independent paths of survival and not to break down. Anju changes and grows up by taking up the opportunities America offers to her.

Anju and Sudha meet each other before Sudha leaves for India. During that time Sudha tries to tell Anju why she has left her house. But Anju says, "No It took me a long time to close that door. Don't start opening it again ... Whatever happened I tell myself that it's like the dream I had last night. What does it matter if it was a good dream or a bad one? Neither kind is going to help me live my life today, is it? (362) Anju has learnt to fly in the glider. She tells Sudha that she has learnt to fly. This shows that Anju has freedom from all her problems and that she learnt to be independent. After a period of struggle, by involving in creating writing, assignments and extracurricular activities, she sheds off her old value system and takes steps towards a new leaf in her life. She is able to reconcile with her situation of being cheated by her husband with the act of writing. It also helps her in making links with people in America.

Lalit is shocked by Sudha's idea of leaving to India and getting settled there. He advises her to change her decision since there are many opportunities in America, but frustrated Sudha replies him: What life Lalit? What kind of life do I have here? I'm tired of this mantra that everyone chants, this cure for all ills. America America America for you, yes. America did help you make yourself into what you wanted. But, I don't have any professional skills" (330). She does not want anyone to take care of her but wants to stand on her own without depending on anyone. Sudha wishes to go back to India. She thinks India would be a perfect solution to her life. She changes her earlier opinion that America would show her new way for living, but the things have worsened after reaching America. Now, the same Sudha does not care about society and its treatment and decides to live independently for taking care of her daughter. Sudha turns

down two suitors, Lalit a surgeon, and Ashok. Both Anju and Sudha decide to live independently.

Divakaruni's fiction explores women searching for their identity as human beings, independent of their traditional roles as a daughter, wife or a mother. Anju and Sudha demonstrate the female independence that Divakaruni celebrates, although such independence is achieved not without trauma and pain. Anju and Sudha find courage, not just to face the situation but also to understand their real needs and aspirations. Anju finds solace among her fellow students at Berkley, while Sudha learns, for the first time, what it is to pave her own way.

The very thought of having something of their own and financially free and independent gives satisfaction to Anju and Sudha. For the two protagonists of the novel, the two sisters, their lives as a part of the diaspora in the United States of America is a mixed experience. American society offers opportunities as well as pain to both and this shakes the foundation on which their extraordinary love and friendship stands for Sudha. There is repeated dislocation and the pain multiplies manifold, every time she seeks to relocate and renegotiate with oddities in life.

Sudha and Anju individually grapple with both their inner pain and the outside pressures as they journey toward independence. Divakaruni suggests that women can assert themselves as individuals. Divakaruni exhorts women to strike their course with courage. The female protagonists stand by themselves and learn to demand their place in society. They discover their own selves amidst joy and heart break.

Works Cited

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