

Crossing Borders, Carving Selves: Multiculturalism and Women's Quest for Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction

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Abstract

Indian Writing in English, which emerged as a significant literary force in the pre-Independence era, has evolved to articulate the complex realities of diaspora, gender, and cultural negotiation. This paper examines the cognizance of multiculturalism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's acclaimed novels *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002).

The study focuses on how Divakaruni, herself a diasporic writer, portrays the experiences of Indian immigrant women caught between traditional Bengali values and modern American individualism. Through the intertwined lives of protagonists Anju and Sudha — cousins born on the same day and bound as 'sisters of the heart' — the novels explore themes of nostalgia, displacement, estrangement, double marginalization, and the quest for identity.

Using the theoretical frameworks of cultural studies, feminist diaspora theory, and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the paper argues that multiculturalism in Divakaruni's works is not merely a juxtaposition of two cultures but a dynamic, often painful, process of negotiation and reconciliation. The characters' recall of homeland memories as mental solace, their confrontation with patriarchal structures in both cultures, and their eventual assertion of agency demonstrate how women navigate and carve out autonomous identities within stifling environments. The paper concludes that Divakaruni presents sisterhood as a counter-narrative to cultural dislocation, offering resilience and empowerment.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Diaspora, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Identity, Nostalgia, Sisterhood, Feminism, Cultural Hybridity, Indian Writing in English

1. Introduction

Indian Writing in English (IWE) has traversed from its nascent stage in the 1920s and 1930s to a globally recognized canon, giving voice to writers such as R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri. Among contemporary diasporic voices, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies a distinctive position for her nuanced exploration of Bengali-American women's lives.

The global phenomenon of immigration has resulted in multicultural societies where individuals must constantly negotiate between inherited traditions and adopted modernities. Culture, as a complex system of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral assumptions learned from earlier generations and passed on, plays a crucial role in framing identities and perceptions of the world.

This paper analyzes Divakaruni's diptych — *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* — to understand how multicultural cognizance manifests in the lives of immigrant women, leading to conflicts, traumas, and ultimately, self-realization.

2. Theoretical Framework: Culture, Diaspora, and Feminism

Culture functions as both a binding and differentiating force. Traditional and modern cultures are both ways of thinking and relating to people and the universe, yet their intersection creates barriers when backgrounds, ideologies, and expectations differ. As Stuart Hall argues, cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'.

For diasporic writers, nostalgia — a longing for the homeland — becomes a dominant affective mode. In conditions of distress and displacement, characters recall memories of their native land as a form of mental solace. This is compounded by what Vijay Mishra terms the 'diasporic imaginary'.

Furthermore, immigrant women experience double marginalization: marginalized as women within patriarchal structures and as ethnic others in a foreign land. Feminist critics such as Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern and Avtar Brah's work on diaspora help frame how Divakaruni's protagonists struggle to maintain modern values while carving out an identity of their own.

3. Sisterhood as Cultural Anchor in *Sister of My Heart*

Sister of My Heart is an expanded narrative of rich and complex female bonding. The novel centers on Anju and Sudha, distant cousins born on the same day in Calcutta, who regard each other as sisters of the heart. Raised in the conservative, women-dominated Chatterjee household — comprising mothers, aunts, and a loyal maid after both fathers die under mysterious circumstances — they embody contrasting personalities.

Sudha is portrayed as traditionally beautiful, dreaming of a romantic marriage, while Anju is described as less conventionally attractive but intellectually ambitious, aspiring for higher education. Both, however, are steeped in Bengali folklore, myths, and traditional values entwined with emerging Western philosophies.

The novel traces their physical separation through arranged marriages — a quintessential marker of Indian traditional culture. One remains in India, the other migrates to America with her husband Sunil. When tragedy strikes — Sudha's oppressive marital home and Anju's miscarriage — they discover that despite distance and marriage, female friendship remains a sanctuary against

universal problems of discrimination, displacement, and disorder.

Divakaruni uses the joint family, arranged marriage, and mythic storytelling to establish the cultural rootedness that her characters must later negotiate in a transnational context.

4. Negotiating Multiculturalism in The Vine of Desire

The Vine of Desire, which reunites the beloved characters, explores how emotional ties transform when confronted with American individualism and complex desires.

Far from Calcutta, after years of separate lives, Anju and Sudha rekindle their friendship in California. Anju, shattered after a miscarriage and the disintegration of her marriage, and Sudha, a single mother to daughter Dayita who has left her husband to build an independent life, must confront new realities.

Divakaruni, herself an immigrant to the United States, scrutinizes the essence of being a woman caught between the dictates of two cultures. All facets of life that make Anju and Sudha Indian — the joint family, arranged marriages, deference to elders — become unintelligible to the Americans they meet, highlighting cultural incommensurability.

Key multicultural conflicts in the sequel include:

1. **Identity and Hybridity:** Anju pens essays on Bengali fairy tales for her American university classes, which metaphorically articulate the pressures of her fading marriage and her dual feelings about India as 'a society where property and destiny were controlled by men'. This is classic Bhabhaian hybridity — living in the third space.
2. **Gendered Expectations:** Sudha receives letters from home reminding her of limitations as a woman saddled with motherhood but without a husband. Her decision to work as a caregiver for a depressed, elderly Bengali man yearning to return to India is portrayed with realism, showing alternative kinship beyond blood.
3. **Male Characters as Cultural Tropes:** The male characters — Sunil, torn between duty to Anju and passion for Sudha; Ashok, Sudha's former lover who appears out of touch asking her to return to Calcutta; and Lalit, the charming Americanized suitor who harbors a 'purer-than-pure-Indian-woman' fantasy about Sudha — represent different patriarchal negotiations of multiculturalism. They are neither as powerful nor as impressionable as the female protagonists, emphasizing Divakaruni's feminist focus.
4. **Nostalgia and Estrangement:** The narrative abounds with vibrant imagery, such as Sudha 'who threw herself against the fence of marriage hard enough to knock it down', illustrating resistance against cultural shackles.

5. Analysis: Themes of Multicultural Cognizance

5.1. Nostalgia, Displacement, and Oppression

Nostalgia functions not as mere sentimentality but as a survival strategy. For Anju and Sudha, memories of the Chatterjee home, their mothers' stories, and Calcutta's lanes provide solace in alienating America. This displacement leads to estrangement — from self, family, and nation — yet also prompts critical reflection on both cultures.

5.2. Tradition vs. Modernity and Education as Agency

The novels demonstrate female independence achieved through, and often despite, trauma and pain. Divakaruni suggests that women can assert themselves as individuals who set their own boundaries only through access to higher education. Anju's university education enables her to critically analyze her condition, while Sudha's experiential learning in America gives her confidence to raise her child independently. Education becomes the tool to reconcile traditional bonds and modern values.

5.3. Sisterhood as Feminist Resistance

Divakaruni began the narrative by contemplating the nature of women's friendship and how it substitutes for extended family and community among immigrants. In a world laden with hypocrisy and societal compulsions, the bond between Anju and Sudha offers an alternative model of family — chosen, supportive, and empowering. Their relationship endures jealousy, love, betrayal, and geographical distance, ultimately demonstrating that female solidarity is central to navigating multicultural dilemmas.

6. Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* collectively offer a profound cognizance of multiculturalism as lived experience. They move beyond simplistic binaries of East versus West to present a complex tapestry of emotions where identity is constantly negotiated, fractured, and rebuilt.

The characters' journey from the centre of a protected Calcutta household to the margins of immigrant life in America, and back to a self-defined centre, illustrates the complexities of cultural clashes rooted in differences in beliefs, values, and ideologies. The features of nostalgia, separateness, dispossession, and reconciliation dominate the narrative arc.

Ultimately, Divakaruni presents two intelligent and courageous women striving to reconcile tradition and change. Through Anju and Sudha, she affirms that while multiculturalism may cause trauma, alienation, and fear, it also opens possibilities for transformation, self-discovery, and feminist empowerment. The author's sensitive and passionate storytelling endorses sisterhood as the vine that sustains desire for belonging and identity in a bicultural world.

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