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Diasporic Consciousness in Divakaruni's novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*

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Abstract

Aims: This study aims to explore the shaping of diasporic consciousness in select Indian diasporic novels, focusing on themes of dislocation, rootlessness, alienation, suppression, hybridity, and assimilation. It investigates how the tension between preserving one's cultural identity and adapting to the host society influences the mental and emotional landscape of diasporic individuals.

Methodology and Approaches: The research employs a qualitative, literary-analytical approach, examining novels produced during colonial and postcolonial periods. Close reading and thematic analysis are applied to uncover recurring motifs of loneliness, nostalgia, alienation, and identity negotiation.

Outcome: The analysis reveals that diasporic individuals experience a dual sense of belonging and estrangement, as they are simultaneously treated as 'others' in the host country and yet nostalgically attached to their homeland. Over time, these experiences catalyze cultural hybridity and identity transformation.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The findings underscore the significance of diasporic consciousness in understanding the nuances of migration, cultural negotiation, and identity formation. By foregrounding the perspectives of the marginalized, the research advocates for greater literary and sociocultural engagement with diasporic narratives.

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in India and settled in America, is one of the greatest writers of Modern Times. She spent her childhood in India and learnt closely about the Indian culture, myth and scriptures. All these elements played a greater force in her life and provided her the opportunity to create her characters full of such traits and cultural values of life. She writes chiefly about the Indian immigrants and the hardships they face in their life in another country. She expresses herself in the women characters of her novels. Her protagonists are basically Indian immigrant women caught up between the two cultural worlds. They try to adjust themselves in new circumstances and face hardships and difficulties created on the basis of their being others there. Characters in her novels do not forget their food habits, way of talking and cultural behaviour of their past time in their homeland and that is the reason they hardly relate themselves to the foreign cultural dynamics. The sense of yearning for their homeland, an intense attachment to its religions, languages and traditions give birth to the diasporic Literature. This is a literature that relates itself primarily to the individuals' or communities' attachment to the homeland. This sense of belonging to their homeland is clearly reflected in the diasporic literature. Divakaruni has beautifully portrayed in most of her novels these problematic conditions of their characters and shows their dilemma in situating themselves to either of side clearly. With Divakaruni it becomes more intense as she depicts the women immigrants character for her novels and short stories for this problematic situation. She becomes more powerful in highlighting the sharp and intense sensibilities of her characters while facing the difficult circumstances in a foreign land.

Diaspora, as M. Tariq notes, is “not merely a geographical displacement but a psychological and cultural rupture that redefines the self in relation to the homeland and hostland” (Tariq 5). The diasporic individual oscillates between “the nostalgia of return and the necessity of adaptation,” producing a consciousness that is both “fragmented and fertile” (Tariq 6). This consciousness becomes a “site of catharsis where memory and identity negotiate their survival amid alien terrains” (Tariq 7). In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, the diasporic experience functions as a transformative metaphor, echoing what Tariq calls “a hermeneutic of suffering and renewal”

(Tariq 8). Through characters torn between the cultural intimacy of India and the liberating anonymity of America, Divakaruni dramatizes “the emotional dialectics of belonging and estrangement” (Tariq 9). Her fiction, thus, embodies what Tariq defines as “a cathartic journey from dislocation to rediscovery,” a narrative trajectory that mirrors the spiritual and cultural evolution central to diasporic identity (Tariq 10).

Diasporic literature is full of the sensibilities and experiences of diasporas at different levels and it also provides them the new opportunities, new directions and new potentials. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V. S. Naipaul, Bharti Mukherjee, Anita Desai and many other novelists secured an important place in the field of Diasporic literature. Their literary works are full of the diasporic consciousness which clearly reflect the social realities, longings and hopes of the writers. Divakaruni has experienced all these diasporic problems abroad and minutely portrayed her characters' consciousness in the novels. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin opine that “In recent times, the notion of a ‘diasporic identity’ has been adopted by many writers as a positive affirmation of their hybridity.” (p.62)

In the beginning, the term 'diaspora' was basically used for the dispersal and scattering of the Jews from their original home land. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word diaspora as 'the dispersal of the Jews beyond Israel. Broadly speaking, the term implies the dispersion of any people from their traditional homeland to another land.'(OED). So diaspora is related to dispersal or scattering of the people outside of their original homeland. The word diaspora is everywhere. Paul Gilroy defines the term in his book, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness*- "Diaspora is an ancient word. It derives etymologically from the Greek term 'dia-sperian' from 'dia' means 'across' and 'sperian' means 'to sow or scatter seeds', to spread, to disperse in different land." Thus from the above definition it is clear that diaspora is a community of people who belong to the same homeland but due to some reasons they have migrated to other land. Thus migration is closely related to diaspora.

However, both are not the same. The concept of diaspora has come from the Jewish dispersal and exile and its meaning has changed with the due course of time. Previously diaspora referred to the powerful people of the dominant

countries who voluntarily emigrated from their own country to colonise other countries. Nowadays, the word is used in two ways. Scholars recognize generally two kinds of diasporas: forced and voluntary. Forced diaspora is traumatic in its nature and it often arises from the traumatic situations like wars, holocaust and natural disasters. People have to leave their country and settle into another country. They are forced to do so. As a result, the people of such diaspora share common feelings of nostalgia, loss and strong yearning to return to their original homeland. On the other hand, in the voluntary diaspora, people leave their own country on the basis of many reasons. They find better opportunities to make their career, to earn their livelihood in a better way. They migrate to those countries that provide them all such better opportunities in their life. People of voluntary diaspora too share common cultural and spiritual links to their countries of origin among themselves. They also take pride in their shared emotions, experience and memories related to their original homelands. To be in diaspora means to be in a new and unbelonging space.

Diasporic communities do not forget their association with their original homelands, but maintains different relationships through various cultural modes of the previous cultural roots of the country. It is the different modes of culture and traditions which make them tied and create the real sense and meaning of diaspora. Since 1980s, the term has covered the migration of all kinds due to its extent in both academic and popular usage. In the words of P.K. Nayar - "Diasporic writing captures the two invariables of their experience: exile and homeland. All diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities." (*Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has presented in her novels the strong and powerful women characters who struggle for their identity and emerge as individuals free from any bondage of relationships. During the course of their Journeys they face hurdles and hardships and feel the pangs of diasporic consciousness which clearly and transparently reflect the pages of the novelist. *Sister of My Heart* is a beautiful novel that tells the story of two cousins Anju and Sudha Chatterjee and their life struggles in tough and complex situations on the foreign land. They are born on the same day and closely connected to each other that nobody can measure the depthness and purity of their true intimacy. They are

brought up in a traditional family setup and are given opportunities to know the Indian familial values through family care. Though Anju and Sudha are very intimate to each other, their ways are not the same. Sudha is a beautiful girl who dreams of getting romantic marriage and Motherhood based on Hindu tradition. On the other hand, Anju is not so physically attractive as Sudha but she dreams of getting Higher Education and accepting challenges in her life and has something in her character that makes her a rebel. Both the girls have lost their father and their family consisted of only women-mothers, aunts and maids. Sudha considers that her father is responsible for the death of Anju's father that is why she accepts the theory of giving up things in her life from the beginnings of her childhood. Sudha loves a young boy named Ashok to whom she met in a theatre. In the beginning she wants to elope with him but later on she drops this idea as it might create more tensions in their family.

She surrenders herself to the will of the family and for the respect of the family members. Both the girls get married on the same day. Sudha has to marry Ramesh who is a weak willed person and always surrenders to her mother. Anju gets married to Sunil who is a computer scientist in America. Sunil falls in love with Sudha at the very first sight which makes Anju restless at the time. The changing of the mind setup of Sunil is clearly portrayed by the novelist when before his marriage to Anju he comes to see her at her book store. His behaviour is totally different and it shows the American influence on him in some of his activities done there by him. He appears non-Indian at Chatterjee's house when he shakes hands with Sudha and clearly refuses his father for dowry. After marriage Anju goes to America to enjoy the free atmosphere but always finds her husband's activity as suspicious. She considers him as a mysterious person as he doesn't allow even his own wife Anju to interrupt his freedom at any cost. Anju is also surprised to see his attraction towards the beauty of Sudha. There is not all good in the relationship between Anju and Sunil. On the other hand, Sudha tries always to become a good wife but in spite of that she suffers too much. She is humiliated by her financial mother-in-laws and Ramesh takes no action against all these odds of her life. Both the girls are far distance from each other and both feel loneliness in their life. Anju also becomes unhappy in California when she doesn't find any consolation from the side of her own husband Sunil. She thinks that life in

America is not so colourful as she imagined it to be. She expresses that, “It is not what I imagined my American life would be like.” (*Sister of My Heart*, 186)

Another problem comes to the life of both the women when they become pregnant. Anju suffers from a miscarriage and this makes her life full of troubles and depression. She gets exhausted and feels the mental stress. On the other hand, Sudha's mother-in-law wants to abort the child of Sudha as it is clear that the child is a female. Sudha is not ready to do so. Her husband Ramesh does not take any action against this immoral act of his mother. Sudha is shattered by the passive silence of Ramesh. She becomes rebellious against such inhuman decisions. Here the novelist realistically portrays the patriarchal mind set of Indian society. Sudha is changing now. She takes strong and bold decision in order to save her child Dayita. Here we can see a great change in the character of Sudha which makes her free to take decision for her life. She does not want to live with Ramesh anymore. She divorces him. After getting divorce from Ramesh she decides to leave India and go to California. In the meantime, Sudha's adolescent lover Ashok comes back in her life and offers a marriage proposal once again, but Sudha rejects this marriage proposal. It is the point when we see the freedom and empowerment in Sudha's life. She becomes a strong woman in the world of man and patriarchal structure. She finally likes to have “a future built by women out of their own wits, their own hands” (*Sister of My Heart*, 294). At the time Anju, her intimate friend invites her to America. Sudha accepts this offer and joins hands with Anju in her loss and depression. She thinks that it would be better for her and Anju both in this difficult situation. Now Sudha reaches America with her own female child Dayita. They, Anju and Sudha begin to live with each other. Here in America the life starts changing for both the cousins.

Their happiness is destroyed by the turn of situation when Sunil is hypnotised with the beauty of Sudha there. Sudha also finds some vacuum between relationship of Anju and Sunil. She surrenders herself to the romantic desires of Sunil and has sexual relationship with him. This revelation of the union completely changes the mind setup of Anju. Now she is full of pain and disturbances. In America, the land of hopes and dreams, she finds herself in complete alienation. At this juncture, Sunil is ready to leave Anju and wants to marry Sudha. He tells all these to Sudha, but she is not ready to do such immoral

act as she has already committed adultery with Sunil. Sudha leaves the house of Anju and Sunil separates himself from Anju. Really this is very disastrous for both the sisters. After leaving the house, Sudha begins to seek for the work for her livelihood. She starts working as a nurse in the house of Myra and Deep to collect money for her life. This makes her self-dependent on the foreign land. It refers to the changing attitudes of the females that are the result of the diasporic consciousness they feel and change themselves according to the required situations and conditions.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has portrayed her character as diaspora subjects who are filled with enthusiasm with life in America. Anju and Sudha are first generation immigrants and they enjoy their life in California. Anju tells Sudha in *The Vine of Desire*- “listen, how about we go camping when summer comes around.” (*The Vine of Desire*, 37) This is the positive outlook of her in America though she suffers miscarriage there. She is completely busy there and takes part in outdoor activities like a true American. The women characters, Anju and Sara are depicted as diaspora subjects. They are depicted as lonely and forlorn immigrant characters who settle in the foreign land and try to make themselves comfortable there. Anju works lasagna for Sudha having it in mind that, “Sudha has never tasted any in India.” (*The Vine of Desire*, 11). Here we witness the love of Anju for American food which indicates that she anxiously wants to be the part of American life. Cultural assimilation is depicted here by the novelist. For Sudha America is the land of hopes, economic stability, freedom and Independence. Sara, another immigrant character says about herself, “I came here as an exchange student it was going to be a year. I was all set to go back and get married to buy I'd met in college in Bombay in-laws, kids, servants. You know how it is in India.” (*The Vine of Desire*, 83).

It is clear from the statement given by Sara that when she compares her life in America with that of India, she finds better freedom and enjoyment in America. Diasporic consciousness is clearly discernible in the example of Anju when after a long time of pain and suffering with her life, she starts herself busy in creative writing and assignments. The situations create the need for assimilation and transformation for the immigrants. It also changes their identity. The novel clearly depicts the condition of hybrid nature of the immigrants. As

Sunil is totally changed as an American but in spite of this he is not able to tolerate the intimacy of Lalit either with Sudha or with Anju. He begins to fight with Valet when he comments over the Indians in the party, “fucking Indians, showing off” (*Sister of My Heart*, 130). Sudha is also in the condition of dilemma over the question of whether to go to India or not. Actually she wants to enjoy the freedom of America but her heart longs for her original homeland India that is why she considers herself as homeless.

Once in the company of Lalit she shares her innermost feelings. She says- "have not you realised yet that I am homeless." Feeling of loneliness and rootlessness is seen when Anju lost her child and felt completely alone in that alien land. She is a mute sufferer. Sudha after reaching the land of freedom finds herself alone. Displacement and the feeling of otherness is portrayed in a manner that the immigrant characters of the novel are conscious about all such fillings. After the miscarriage, Anju is very sad and upset and feels rootless on the foreign land. Then Sunil says to her- “I don't know how to help you when you are like this.” (*The Vine of Desire*, 11) Nostalgia and love for Homeland are the features which articulate the consciousness of immigrant characters. The novel is full of all such events which evoke the sense of love for the homeland. This is beautifully exemplified in the case of Sudha in *The Vine of Desire*. Her mother gifted her a calendar at the time when she was leaving India for America. She looks at that calendar and says – “The Indian months and days are marked in red Bengali lettering.... it indicates all our festivals, even our minor one like Jamai Shastri, when son-in-laws are invited and served their favourite dishes. Little diagrams mark full moons and no moons.....which is a time for women without husbands to fast.” (*The Vine of Desire*, 149)

So with the story of two sisters in both the novels, *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, the novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has created the diasporic consciousness throughout the novels. The immigrant characters feel the displacement, dislocation, loneliness, rootlessness, hybridity, assimilation and longing for homeland. Almost all the characters who immigrated from India to America face cultural clash and identity crisis. Divakaruni has herself been in the condition of immigration that is why she has depicted the depth of the diasporic consciousness in both the novels.

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