

Chapter VI

Summation

Commenting her novels Divakaruni says,

I have attempted to analyse the characteristic features of the principle protagonists on their journey towards self-asserted and liberated existence, indeed a perpetual negation of their identities.

Her humble hope about the outcome of her writings is that it will change some of the traditional ideas about the Indian women. She examines the complexities of female psyche and their search for self-identity. As said earlier she never calls herself a feminist. She always writes with female consciousness and always speaks in a female voice. She does not advocate rebellion but advocates the need and necessity for achieving equality between women and men. It is a wakeup call to all suffering women.

Many modern literary writers can be called 'Activists' they propound activism as a part of their writing. According to them, a literary work should have a social purpose, besides its entertainment value. It is only through art and activism that a radical change can take place for the good of the society. Activists advocate protest or dissent against the outmoded codes that are against the fundamental and basic rights of an individual. Divakaruni can be called as an activist in the sense that she writes with a social purpose and wants a radical change in the outlook towards women prevailing in the society.

She is not only for a radical change in the society but a radical change among the women themselves. She envisages women forever growing and changing with every new environment and each passing moment. The author dramatizes the emergence and transformation of her female characters as empowered women in her short stories and novels very effectively and successfully.

Divakaruni endorses the view of Betty Ford who observes,

‘A liberated woman is one who feels confident in herself, and is happy in what she is doing. She is a person who has a sense of self....It all comes down to freedom of choice (360) She pictures how subjugation of women by the prevailing social codes leads to their downtrodden and fallen state and how suffering and suppression eventually give way to their new awakened consciousness, which enables them to confront the patriarchal society and refuse to be mere followers of the role assigned to them by it, and strive to discover their own identities, to assert their rights, decide and recreate their roles in all aspects of their lives.

Situations a woman face is not due to her character but her character is shaped by the situations. Confronting with their situations made by the institutional structures, lead them to discover their inner strength and freedom. Situations of which the women have no control make them as victims. When calamity strikes, they transform themselves into brave and bold women and battle against the conventional society to preserve their conviction to be free and liberated.

Divakaruni firmly believes that radical change can be achieved not by blaming the male cantered society, but by changing oneself. But the change should take place in every individual woman. Her novels give a chance to delve into the minds of women, who doesn't

want to be treated like men. They actually want to be in charge of their own life and to create their own identity. According to the author, the future of women depends on how they continue to redefine their life goals, unless they believe in themselves and reject the unjust rules of the society; they will neither be independent nor gain their identity.

Assertiveness is a vital quality to fight against oppression. It gives strength to women shed their dependence and gives the desired courage and confidence to be self-reliant. The author wants women to be empowered because only empowered women will be self-reliant and only the self-reliant women will have the courage to be assertive and avert their dependence on men.

Divakaruni is not anti-family but opposes patriarchal tyranny hidden in the family structure. Instead of overthrowing the system from outside, she wants it to be reformed from inside. Her women don't want to be different from men but want to be equal to men. She is not for abandoning of values and systems but for reforming them.

Her characters try to adjust and compromise to preserve the family system. When adjustment and compromise do not give them the necessary peace and happiness and the conventional pattern of life becomes morbid and starts tormenting them, they never hesitate to break free of the traditional bonds and they tear apart all the manmade boundaries. They are forced to struggle and rebel though it is considered as insurgency. Though they are conditioned by the traditional Indian upbringing, they rise above the traditional constraints when the necessity arises because they think rationally.

America, distinctive, extraordinary, magical country offers safe haven for her women characters to rejuvenate themselves. The journey her women take to America is a journey to a new world of freedom and opportunities.

Recently arrived from Calcutta, unsettled in Chicago and San Francisco, Ms, Divakaruni's heroines are still half- submerged in the dream world of Indian femininity as innocence as still and dark as lake water. As America revives them, they rise to its challenges; the new freedoms of their chosen country act on them like extra oxygen. (*Kuortti & Tajeshwar*)

The author has successfully deconstructed the very idea of Indian women as submissive and subservient. Her characters always want to move forward, never to look back and are ready to accommodate and play multiple roles.

Tilo in *The Mistress of spices* is trapped within the body of an aged woman and never allowed to expose her freedom and individuality. But she resists and rebel, against the harsh and selfless life imposed on her by the old mother.

Tilo keeps on changing her role since her childhood first as a foreteller (Nayanthara) then as a pirate queen (Bhakyawathi) the bringer of luck and death. Unsatisfied with life, she calls for death, death comes to her with the tossing of the ship. The snakes in the sea save, and she becomes Sarpakanya, a new name. Not heeding the advice of the snakes, she reaches the island naked and meets the Old Mistress, who is in charge of the island. Then she becomes (Tilothamma) and finally becomes Maya. She keeps on changing her names and her roles till she attains her individuality and freedom. The transformation is not very easy for her. She has been warned and threatened whenever she tried to exercise her will. She has to struggle and suffer to attain her freedom and individuality.

The journey from identity to identity until she falsities her own being till she finds a home ' It is indeed the creation of Maya which expresses the elusive character of

illusion and reality, the home and the foreign, Maya being then itself a hybrid, a foreign or simplified representation' (Volna 87)

Sister of my Heart and *The Vine of Desire* is about the journey of two young women brought up under strict patriarchal rules and regulations in a cloistered setup. They commit mistakes, take wrong decisions and become egoistic. Both women are betrayed by their husbands. Situations make them as victims. The patriarchal strictures ingrained in their mind did not help them to solve their problems or offer solutions. When calamity struck them they transform themselves into brave, bold and courageous women and took decisions which are not approved by the conventional society. But they stick to their conviction to be independent and free to make their own destinies.

They are not for abandoning the traditional values taught by their parents and preserved by the society, but they want to create new ones for their convenience and for their happiness. They come out of the cocoons of defence imposed by their mothers into the openness of assertion and freedom. Even at a very young age they are forced to divorce their husbands. Both the women are exploited by their husbands due to their innocence. When they realize their weakness and show their resistance, their husbands are not ready to accept them. Finally they realize their self and attain individuality after undergoing lot of sufferings and pain. The self-examination leads the two characters to self-introspection. Myles about this experience observes, 'Self –introspection and self-discovery help the women characters to realize their veiled inner strength'(10)

The story of Draupadi, is still relevant to the present society. She represents the contemporary women's struggle to define herself in a masculine society to attain her individuality. In a society where women are not given any identity or entity, she fights to redeem her identity with immense fortitude, courage and perseverance. Even though

she is a princess and a queen, she is not able to enjoy any privilege. On the other hand, she has to resist and rebel against the life of slavery imposed on her in the name of duties of a princess and a queen. She has to fight and struggle even to get her basic need fulfilled. There is nobody to show sympathy for her sufferings or show favour because she is a woman. She has to fight a lonely battle till the end of her life.

She is never ready to accept her life as something predetermined by fate, which can't be redeemed or restructured, even during the period of arduous trail. She firmly believed the prophecy of Vyasa that she is destined to change the course of history. Draupadi, strives to reinterpret her position and status not only as a queen and leave a mark in history but also as an independent woman and a good human being. Her innermost urge to lead a meaningful life prompts her to demand a rightful place for herself. She is not adamant or arrogant but assertive and very firm in her stand.

Assertiveness means that you express your rights but not at the expense, degradation, or humiliation of others. Assertiveness is the ability to say yes or no when one wants to; it is the freedom to be themselves in all circumstances. It is also the ability to get what one wants and when they want it. It is also to be in control of the world around. An assertive manner certainly means that we'll feel more empowered, and more in control of circumstances.... the ability to express yourself and your right without violating the rights of others. (Relationship and Assertiveness)

Most of the women fearing to break the established social norms remain passive and allow themselves to be dominated.

According to Ferguson,

‘Passivity has a lower value because assertiveness is needed for success, and it is men who succeed. Women do not succeed because they lack assertiveness. Why should men alone be allowed to monopolise assertiveness? Assertiveness is needed for success’(1)

Divakaruni advises women to unlearn the out dated virtues like timidity and submissiveness and be assertive because assertiveness is a weapon to defend oneself not only from patriarchy but against any authority.

According to Simon de Beavor, ‘...the more women assert themselves as human beings; the more marvellous quality of the 'other' will die in them’(74), Divakaruni wants women should possess the quality of assertiveness which gives them confidence, courage and introspection. If women are able to incur these qualities her search for freedom ends. To quote Betty Ford, ‘A liberated woman is one who feels confident in herself, and is happy in what is she doing. She is a person who has a sense of self ... It all comes down to freedom of choice’ (360)

In *Sister of my Heart* Sudha, through her assertiveness overstepped her family, her husband and the society to preserve her individuality and the life of her daughter. Her women characters, though after a lot of sufferings learn that, to be assertive they have to empower themselves. Empowered women become self-reliant which, in turn averts them from depending on men. Both Sudha and her sister Anju made up their mind to be free from the clutches of their husbands the first thing they did was to seek job for themselves which gives them courage and confidence to lead their life without the support of their husbands. Assertiveness not only helps women to get their

individuality but also their identity. It is not liberation from oppression but from care and concern of their husbands.

The assertiveness of Korobi in *Oleander Girl* gives her the courage and confidence to take out a lonely and dangerous journey to an alien country to search for identity. Her self-reliance helps her to avert dependence on males and overrule the objections raised by others in her family not to undertake the journey to America. Her fiancé, his mother, and even her own grandmother are against her idea of her going to America all alone. Her strong conviction and courage gives her the necessary strength to do what she wants to do. Though she faces life threatening experiences in America, she finds her identity at the end by meeting her father.

Korobi is rightly named after the Oleander flower by her mother. The flower appears delicate but, it is intrinsically very tough and strong. Though Korobi is young and beautiful, she proves her toughness through her action. Korobi's upbringing parallels the sheltered life of all the women characters of Divakaruni. The author wants every woman to have such a strong conviction and assertive behaviour in their life to achieve what they want.

Constant suppression leads women towards self-realization. This awakens their consciousness. Self-examination of their past life makes them to redefine themselves and take a new journey to achieve a greater fulfilment of their own identity as a woman in a men's world. Her characters think more rationally but mentally retain some of the traditional beliefs, which help them to maintain successfully a delicate balance between the pressures of the ancient tradition and the pull of the modern life both in India and America.

In her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage* the author makes most of her women characters to live a life of their own choice in the foreign land. Marriage is considered as a holy institution in the Hindu society but in marriage husband and wife should complement each other. Inadequacy of the spouse leads to so many problems in the married life. There should be unconditional love and mutual sharing of emotions and feelings between the partners for their happy co-existence. If the expectation of the husband become unjust and the wife fails to satisfy his expectations their relationship becomes strained and problems arise in the family. Their married life becomes suffocating and meaningless. They begin to exist as husband and wife for name sake, leading an unhappy life full of sufferings and sorrow.

Divakaruni is not for such a marriage. She wants to create an awakening among the middle class Indian housewives. She advises women to shed all the illusions related to arranged marriages. She makes her women to forgo all their inhibitions as women and not to hesitate to break all the social conventions related to marriage if the need arises.

In the short story *Affair* both Abba and Meena decide to terminate their marriages after the awakening and realization that their marriage is a mirage. They realize that their marriage life is spiralling towards hate and hopelessness. They don't want it to continue for the rest of their life. So, they decide that it is better freeing themselves from the meaningless bond before it is too late.

Women after being exposed to the egalitarian society, are obsessed with the urge for self-fulfilment. They grope for identities and their status both in the family set-up and the large social structure' (Amin 150).

In the short story *Ultrasound* Arundhathi, who becomes pregnant after five years of marriage, is shattered when she learns that her expected duty as a wife and daughter in law is to give birth to a male child or else she has to abort it. Learning about this, Anju her cousin sister fumes and advises Runu to leave her house. Her husband Sunil, as a typical Indian husband, says,

That's easy for you to say from here. Runu's the one who'll have to face every day. Even if money isn't a problem, what kind of life it is for her? He certainly won't have the chance to remarry. She'll be alone with her daughter the rest of her life, a social pariah, someone the neighbours point a finger at every time she walks down the street. (U 227)

But Runu takes the bold decision of quitting her husband's household to save her daughter and start a new life breaking the patriarchal tradition.

An unnamed woman protagonist in the story *The Disappearance* suddenly disappears from her house leaving her husband and her child, to preserve her dignity and integrity from a tyrannical, ill-suited and indifferent husband, who subjects her to marital rape. Divakaruni encourages the cultural transgression from the norms of accepted Indian wifely behaviour instead of living a suffocating and meaningless life.

In the short story *Cloths* the author makes her protagonist Sumita to shed the stigmas related to a widow. Not willing to get stuck in the iron web of prejudices and social stigmas, Sumita resurrect herself victorious, forgetting the tormenting past and shedding age old cultural bondages.

Forgetting her personal tragedy she strengthens herself to realize her dream. She gets ready to step into the shoes of her husband by taking in charge of the cloth store

I strengthen my shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath. Air fills me – the same air that traveled through Somesh’s lungs a little while ago. The thought is like an unexpected, intimate gift. I tilt my chin, readying myself for the arguments of the coming weeks, the remonstrations. In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the colour of almonds. (C 33).

Indian sari symbolic of entrapment whereas, western attire of skirt and blouse are symbolic of Sumita’s liberation. Sumita seems to be poised to liberate herself only by giving up such Indian customs of wearing sari and caring for elderly-in-laws. (Kuortti & Tajeshwar 85).

In the short story *Doors* Divakaruni makes her protagonist Preethi to disown her mother's attempt to force her to adjust and accept the patriarch norms and conditions. The patriarchal norms resist to give space to women because that is one way of ensuring a women's conformity and obedience. She makes Preethi as an assertive woman, who resists her husband Deepak's attempt to curb her privacy and individual space. She repeatedly resists her husband's dominance and asserts her right to privacy and independence.

There is no surprise that Preethi's husband is not ready to offer a private space to his wife. In the Indian society women's role and their life space are circumscribed from their birth. The sense of transience and non- belonging torments every woman; they don't have the sense of belonging in the house they are born and in the house they are married in to, Belonging nowhere is a typical immigrant phenomenon.

Preethi Mandal in his “*The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction*” explains that clash of culture “Through the eyes people caught in the clash of

cultures, and by constantly juxtaposing Calcutta with a Californian city. Chitra Banerjee reveals the rewards and the perils of breaking free from the past and the complicated, often contradictory emotions that shape the passage of independence” (15).

The patriarchal conditioning threatens the dignity and the individuality of her protagonists who go through a lot of conflicts and crises. But by identifying their inner strength and courage they assert themselves. Divakaruni has used her stories to create an awakening among the eternally suffering Indian women and encourage them to live for themselves.

In an interview Divakaruni says My beliefs about women's roles are very simple: that women should be respected, that they should be given choices, and allowed the means so that they should be given choices, and allowed the means so that they can follow their choices and dreams.

Divakaruni is ‘concerned with the marginalization of all women being relegated to a secondary position’ (qtd in Radhai: web). Hence she captures them with a motive to redeem them.

Her major concern is about the plight of the suffering women trying to understand herself and struggling to preserve her identity as a daughter, wife, mother, and above all, as a human being with a self and individuality. The suffering females searching for their independence and liberation replace the long-established depiction of suffering and altruistic women. None of the protagonists in her novel runs away from the hard realities of life by choosing death as the final solution. Her characters strongly detest their marginal position assigned by the society. Initially they lose their identity in a crisis. But the consequent self-search, helps them to discover their identity which enables them to be assertive to get their independence and individuality.

She advocates women being strong, because only a strong woman can make strong society. Even in the ever changing society they have to preserve the positive aspects of the old traditional believes peculiar to the Indian society. At some point or the other, they question the old set of rules. They often fumble and fall but they gain the strength to fight against all the odds.

Divakaruni is not a writer of the elite like Shoba De her characters are poor, working class and underprivileged women. She gives the mirror image of the society. 'Divakaruni's humans but flawed characters constantly err; they manage to find tiny pin prickles of resurrections in situations that seem otherwise' (*Sandhya K 206*)

Commenting on the characters of Anju and Sudha Aldama says,

Divakaruni textures the experience of Calcutta born and raised sisters Anju and Sudha living as adult women in the 1990's San Francisco, as they journey through the many contours of pain that are necessary for their discovery of self-worth in an oppressive society' (Aldama 78).

Divakaruni's protagonists life is filled with pain and despair but, it is also filled with hope and optimism.

Divakaruni has presented Gowri in *Sister of my Heart* as a model woman of strength and boldness. Though she has lost her husband at a very young age, she faces the calamities very bravely. She takes over her husband's bookshop which is not running profitably. She did not turn her face, from Pishi and Nalini, relatives of her husband, and maintains the family very ably within a stringent budget. She is concerned mostly with family matters. She treats her daughter Anju and her cousin without any difference. To carry out the responsibility of marrying off Anju and Sudha, she postpones

her heart operation. She suffers silently hiding her problems; she successfully consummates two marriages without damaging respect of the Chatterjees family.

Divakaruni is not for portraying women who always satisfies the demands of the masculine society but what woman demands of life in a very restrictive role in a restrictive boundary which is very much dictated by the terms and conditions of males. Her protagonists do not remain fixed to one phase of self-discovery. Instead, they transcend from feminist towards the female that is from the stage of protest against the patriarchal modes towards the process of self-discovery.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's women according to Bennett are, 'constructive marginal " who " get beyond this confusing point through a recognition of the inevitability of ambiguity and of their own responsibility to think autonomous based on the assessment of the context' (*Bennett 115*)

Though she never claims herself as a feminist, her inner feelings and spirit are for the empowerment and emancipation and welfare of the women. She is not in favour of outright rebellion against men or society she wants her women protagonists to undergo a process of self-revolution of developing the quality of assertiveness.

She envisions a 'New Woman' liberated and free from the bondage of ignorance and social restrictions. Not only women living in India, but the immigrated women attempt to maintain equilibrium between their Indian roots and the surrounding Western culture. They are not outright rebels but they are fighters who learn to adjust in the environment by adopting varied techniques. They endure and resist at the same time, she wants her characters to be strong and firm in becoming what they want to be and never suffer from any sense of guilt or remorse for not living up to the expectations of the masculine society.

In the socially structured relationships, the new woman stands at the cross roads of traditions and modernity, which pull her in opposite directions, whereby as Riso says, ‘very serious intra psychic conflicts occur, and the person attempts to remake reality rather than succumb to anxiety’ (467). By breaking the traditional, social and moral constrictions, she will be able to live with a heightened sense of dignity and individuality.

Her popularity is due to the fact that women who read her novel relate themselves with her characters. Incidents in her novels are culled from actual life experience. The author herself says,

Women in particular respond to my work because I am writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to be prejudice when they meet them in real life (*quoted in Chaturvedi 55*).

Divakaruni uses her stories to empower and encourage women to be themselves. Through her stories she shows that, for a woman, personal choice is more important, and it is the birth right of all human being, so every woman, should make the best of what they can do in their life. When they have a chance, they struggle and discover happiness. To attain happiness, they don’t step out of the sphere of conventional feminine territory. They attempt to recreate the female world out of the existing stereotypes. They don’t want to be different from the male counterpart but what they demand is equal opportunity and chance offered by the society to males.

According to Divakaruni 'The New Woman' is not necessarily a western model: she is rather authentically an Indian. As, Stevens points out that "As New Woman, woman stand for the nation and its quest for modernity – modernity as an admirable state of civilization, strength, and progress (83).

The author shows that a metamorphosis (a process of suffering in which, women discover their true personality and digs up their inner potential) takes place in each and every character of her story. The reader can clearly observe a radical transformation in the attitude of every woman during their life journey who resent the inferior treatment meted out to them which is required for her own liberation. For them the radical changes do not come from outside: it takes place within every woman which helps them to redefine themselves. Her women characters never look back and ruminate over their misfortunes. They are ready to foresee a future built, with their own hands and with their own wits, refusing to get stuck in the web of social stigma and prejudice.

According to Rotimi Johnson, the literary theoretician of womanism and feminism observes that womanism believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. Unlike feminism it wants meaningful union between women and men and will wait patiently for men to change from sexist stance.

Divakaruni doesn't advocate her women to wait patiently for men to change from the sexist stance but encourages them to snatch their independence from the state of othernesses accredited to them by male culture. When it happens a woman becomes an autonomous, independent being without any support from males. She endorses the view of Simon Beauvoir. According to Simon Beauvoir:

The emancipated woman wants to be active; a taker and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values; she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating on the same terms as men, instead of seeking to disparage the, she declares herself their equal (2).

Her women characters never suffer from a sense of doom or gloom. They never wallow in self-pity or with a sense of loss of hope when they face disillusionment and disappointment. With the spirit of freedom and liberation, they take a new lease of life. They never choose death as an escape, but they kick back whenever pushed to the wall. They have to be happy and confident that what they are doing is what they want to do. They should feel that they have full control over their life rather than resigning themselves to the predetermined destiny, the society has constructed for every women. The author, strongly advocates her women to unlearn the out-dated virtues like timidity and submissiveness.

Divakaruni encourages every woman to have a dream and work towards realizing it, not bothering about the contained and conditioned life the society has offered. According to her, a woman as an individual, as a separate entity has a right to seek fulfilment of her personality. She exhorts that women should shed their inhibitions and fear, to redefine their faith and fight against exploitations. Through her stories, she makes her women to find the joy of being their own. Her characters become mature enough to choose their own destinies on their own terms. In *The Vine of Desire* Anju, after the betrayal of her husband and her loving sister Sudha, undergoes a severe mental trauma, but she quickly revives forgetting her past failures and sorrows. She learns hang gliding and flies happily in the sky saying 'I have learnt to fly' Divakaruni wants every woman to be like Anju.