

**A STUDY OF DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY AND  
ACCULTURATION IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF  
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI**

**A Thesis Submitted to**

**SWAMI RAMANAND TEERTH MARATHWADA UNIVERSITY,  
NANDED**



**For the award of  
The Degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Ph.D.) IN ENGLISH**

**By**

**Research Scholar**  
**Ms. Bilaye Nomita Suresh**  
**M.Phil. (English), B.Ed.**

**Research Supervisor**  
**Dr. Mrs. Padmabandhavi P.Mantha**  
**Head, Dept of English, Swami Vivekananda Mahavidyalaya,**  
**Shirur (Taj) Dist: Latur**

**Research Centre**  
**P.G. Department & Research Centre in English**  
**M. G. College,**  
**Ahmedpur, Dist: Latur**

**May 2019**

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction:**

India and Indian homes – homes of duty and desire, love and hate, closeness and farness, bonding and repulsion, safety and insecurity – remain as signs for both the first or second generation homes. Diasporic Indians connect themselves to Indianness in terms of cultural connections. For these Indians, the ‘hyphenated status’ makes them feel rootlessness as they are neither assumed to be a part of traditional Indian societies nor of adopted ones.

New homes are constructed on emotional mindscapes and mapped onto the sites of these original homes. Diaspora Indians cannot be at home unless they acknowledge the Indianness of past homes, whether in terms of origins, cultural affiliations or even duty. The acknowledgement can manifest as rejection or acceptance, but the conversation between homes remains a necessary pre-requisite of settling. The Indian community plays a crucial role in this home-formation either as hard-hearted guardians of the old culture, who punish any transgression or as a comfort base and support network that nurtures and teaches by example. The hyphenated status of Indians, who live abroad, often causes them to feel homeless; because they are not fully accepted – neither by their ethnic communities, nor by their adopted communities. The hybridity of the diaspora has a brooding underside of dis-contented disconnect. In all these novels, the significance of the past in terms of home patterns, Indian values, family and community are echoed.

Migration has become a part of Indian homes. Any migration results in displacement. Diaspora literature incorporates cultural dilemmas and dislocations of an immigrant to the host land. Immigrants are emotionally attached to their past. They

are caught between the two worlds, two cultures. They try to reconcile with the new land. They become nostalgic whenever they feel lonely. They feel homeless and rootless. They are emotionally attached to their motherland.

A modern immigrant has shown a serious concern for search for identity. In the rat-race, this man is a stranger not only to the outside world but also to his own self. The recreation of identity therefore is of serious concern today. This man keeps on re-thinking about creating something of his self. Similar is a condition of an immigrant writer. In the words of critic Veena Noble Dass, she interprets:

“When an Indian English writer comes in contact with an alien culture, he becomes aware of his rootlessness, and thereby the inadequacy of his mission. He feels that he is a stranger, a foreigner and an expatriate. Confrontation with the west leads him to a discovery of his own country, of his own self. The concept of Indianness forms an identity for these Indian expatriate writers.... He feels himself alienated when he is exposed to a new world, which is replete with new cultures and traditions.” (Veena 2006: 39)

In this globalisation age, immigration becomes an inevitable stage in human evolution. As immigrants are able to absorb both the native and the alien cultures, they grow into international citizens. Immigration takes place due to various reasons and in Indian context the migratory movements are governed by historical, political, economic reasons including higher education, better prospects and marriage. Though the Indian immigrants have shown greater sense of adjustments and adaptability and accessibility, they also suffer a sense of homelessness and it is genuine and intense as a refuge. The immigrant seeks security and protection and as ambassadors project

theirs own culture and help to enhance its comprehensibility. This research, with the help of interpretation of select five novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, mainly gives a telescopic insight into the life of Indian immigrants in America and the harsh reality of their lives there. It tries to expose the struggles and conflicts both at physical and psychological level of the immigrant life apart from their joys and happiness.

In Chitra Banerjee's novels, her women strive hard to achieve their positions as an individual and as a woman. She deals with the psychological conflicts of the Indian immigrant women. Divakaruni portrays the cultural diversity without bias and stereotypes. Several subaltern voices emerge in the course of the narrative which is legitimized by the novelist. Indians residing in the bay area of America exhibit their Indianness unconsciously in their dress food habits, values and ideology. To the immigrants in *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*, their 'Spice Bazaar' and 'Kurma House' is the reminiscent of their motherland.

### **Summation of Previous Chapters:**

A study of the research done on the five novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni indicates her treatment of immigrant experiences in the United States of America. Her works embody betrayal of the type-casts and showing light to the diasporic women. Divakaruni's characters lie on the bridge of assimilation and acculturation. They prove their cultural identity. The research tries to prove that the new generation immigrants represented in the works of the author merge with this new space. The aim of the thesis is to analyse the diasporic experience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's select novels focusing on the theme of diasporic sensibility and acculturation. The thesis has four chapters.

The first chapter '**Introduction**' presents an introduction to the rise and development of Indian English novel. It speaks about the importance of Indian English

novels in the global world of Literature. It further explores Indian English writers of the pre and post-independence era. It discovers the contribution of women's writing, highlighting the role and contribution of major feminist writers.

Furthermore, the chapter defines the title in brief explaining the key concepts 'diaspora' and 'acculturation', briefly enlightening its characteristics. The role of various South Asian American Diasporic women writers and their works are introduced. The chapter further emphasizes the need and importance of this research topic, review of literature in the related area, its scope and limitations.

The second chapter titled '**Diasporic Sensibility: A Sense of Alienation**' highlights various aspects of diaspora like alienation, rootlessness, despair, nostalgia and marginalisation, keeping in view the selected five novels of the novelist. It traces how her autobiographical works try to bring out the relocating of the self from the home land and of settling down to an alien land. The characters portrayed by Divakaruni undergo the expatriate experience. The gap between *home* (the culture of origin) and *world* (the culture of adoption) remains un-bridged and the boundaries are often in conflict.

On analysis, it is clear that there is a constant search for values and traditions, a struggle against cultural clash and a search for identity. There is a deliberate search of a 'lost home'. There is a feeling of rootlessness, alienation, nostalgia and marginalisation on the part of the characters like Tilo, Lalita, Jagjit, Haroun, Geeta, Raven, Anju, Sudha, Sunil, Lalit, Mrs. Gupta, Rakhi, Belle, Rakhi's father, Korobi etc.

The third chapter '**Acculturation: A Cross-Cultural Adaptation**' discusses how culture has changed the lives of the people. Divakaruni presents an excellent perspective on culture-clash. Her novels present the bicultural identity. Her characters give a panoramic understanding of the socio-cultural experiences in India and in U.S.

As a cross-cultural perspective, acculturation implies that both the migrants and the host majority members try to balance the two worlds, the two cultures. The characters get influenced and transformed by the inter-cultural contact and are expected to modify some aspects of their respective cultures.

The fourth and the last chapter **Conclusion** sums up the earlier thematic chapters and gives way to the findings of the research topic. In all the selected five novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, it is observed that she emphasises on the impact of diasporic sensibility and acculturation on the Indian immigrants. She skilfully paints the ramifications of the Indian Diasporic society. Her heroines crave to prove their identity into the foreign land. They try to be freer in the host land. They try to adapt to the cultural environment, wherein they find themselves struggling to the native customs, traditions and values. A number of her characters acculturate and appear to accept the American ways. She superbly renders the contradiction of both the home and the host land. Chitra Banerjee has been successful in describing - being both 'here' and 'there'. She has skilfully devised the struggles of diasporic women and their perpetual quest of establishing self by redefining their Indian roots in the alien land.

After the analysis of select novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the light of diaspora and acculturation, certain conclusions are drawn. Chitra Divakaruni is a representative of contemporary Indian Diasporic Writers, who represent conflicting cultures. She writes about India and particularly about Bengal from a foreign land – The United States of America. She explores the impact of culture-clash in her works of fiction. A close reading and analysis of the primary sources, interviews, essays, articles, reviews, blog and website makes it clear that she deals with the identity crisis, acculturation and assimilation of the home land and host land in her select works of fiction. Recreating identity in the host land has become a living reality in today's era

of globalisation. The present thesis has examined that the clash of culture mainly arises because of migration; further leading to homelessness, rootlessness and nostalgia; finally resulting into recreation of a new identity. Diaspora and Acculturation are integral to each other. When Immigrants migrate to the 'other' country, he meets new people having novel thoughts; leads a new lifestyle with different societal norms and oscillates between different cultures.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a migrant from India, especially Calcutta has first-hand experience as an immigrant. She migrated for better prospects of education. She faced variety of problems as a migrant teenager. She did many odd jobs like – she has been a babysitter, worked in a bakery, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, washing instruments in a laboratory, removing dishes from the dishwasher etc. In an interview with *Hindustan Times* by Soma Das, she shares:

“All these jobs made me respect labour and also made me aware of the hardship of living such a life. Many of my characters go through hard times and are involved in odd jobs as they struggle through situations of financial and emotional difficulty. My own hardships have made me more sympathetic to writing about such times.” (Das 2016 Web)

Chitra Banerjee is being influenced by contemporary circumstances which shape their characters in their novels. She represents culture-clash through her works. Her selected novels represent clash between tradition and modernity. She presents homeland with all its problems, social evils, struggles and chaos. Her characters undertake migration for a better future. She also draws problems of the second generation immigrants. Rakhi, the protagonist of the novel *Queen of Dreams* is the only heroine, belonging to second generation born as an American (?).

Divakaruni's characters do shuttle between two cultures. They are products of the East-West encounter. They are caught in a dilemma in the multi-cultural world. The complexity of man-woman relationship with the clashes of culture weaves the pattern of her stories in her novels like in *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Vine of Desire* and *Queen of Dreams*. Her female protagonists migrate to America with their traditional vision of womanhood and personal relationships.

In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni compares the worst practices of Indian society with the freedom of the Americans. She depicts the protagonist like Sudha who is sandwiched between Indian traditions and bitter American reality after immigration. Her dilemma reflects the dilemma of immigration that faces culture-clash in which a woman suffers more. In the absence of cultural background, she feels lonely, isolated, and sometimes betrayed. Some protagonists like Anju have an illusionary American dream of a better future that shatters when they confront with the alien culture. The binary of glamour and reality is the gist that also points out the East and the West encounter and symbolizes the anarchy of the protagonists.

Divakaruni uses her pen to expose the issues of dowry and female infanticide prevailing in India (*Sister of My Heart*) and also speaks about disputes like live-in relationships, unwed motherhood prevailing in America (*The Mistress of Spices* and *Oleander Girl*). Thus, she strikes at the inner psyche of the women torn between the two worlds – traditional v/s. modern or India v/s. America. The East and West encounter provides them a new vision of personal identity which clashes with the traditional Indian framework.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni constructs the experiences of an Indian woman in the growing phase of geographical dislocation. While constructing the experiences, she takes care to establish the roots of national consciousness and national identity



against the challenges of the host culture of American society. Divakaruni's art lies in which her portrayal of women, who undergo the culture-clash with a positive approach. Her novels are a moving account of dreams and despair of those who settle in America (Mrs. Gupta in *Queen of Dreams*). While reviewing her novel *Queen of Dreams*, Joni Rendon opines:

“Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the psychic connections and hidden truths dreams can reveal about our inner and outer worlds.... [She] infuses this absorbing modern-day tale of family, identity and personal transformation with a mystical, otherworldly quality.” (Rendon 2004 Web)

Chitra's woman protagonists face disillusionment and become completely alone in the adopted land and torn between the values of Indian and American culture immediately after immigration. Keeping the old world traditions alive after immigration versus becoming Americanized is the tussle of cultures for the Indian immigrant woman, who undergoes the horrible experience of homesickness and permanent loss of native cultures. Sudha in *The Vine of Desire* is a perfect example of this. Sudha longs for her homeland; however, is happy to find her 'new self' and 'new life' to live all alone in the alien land. The pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the differences between one self and new unfriendly surroundings is the gist of her character.

Chitra Banerjee's novels explore the culture-clash through various features like East-West encounter, the clash between modern and traditional values, the conflict between American individualism and Indian collectivism, alienation, in-betweenness, homesickness, racial discrimination, and rootlessness. She records the predicament of the Diasporic characters that undergo the horrible experience of conflicting cultures in

the transnational world authentically. Her delineation of the characters is credible. She depicts the shuttling of the characters in two cultures in a very considerable way. Her characters straddle in the alien land due to the conflict between the culture of homeland and the culture of the host land. They acculturate according to their cultural norms and values. The differences in values and norms of behaviour of people from two different cultures strengthen conflict like Geeta's encounter with her parents and grandfather in *The Mistress of Spices*. They create misunderstanding between themselves. She realistically focuses the failure of her characters in the host land. It is noticed though her stories depict the bleak side of the immigrant life, she tries her level best to put her characters on the positive path at the end of the stories when they realize the futility of immigration.

Divakaruni's characters prefer to stay at host land and choose the liberal American attitude towards life. In the host land, they feel nostalgic, alienated, rootless and marginalized. They also undergo a crisis of identity. This shuttling of cultures makes their life chaotic. Their encounter with different cultures creates their hybrid identities.

Chitra's strong protagonists preserve Indian values with them and choose the path of self-discovery. Women like Tilo and Mrs. Gupta from *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams* act as healers to the immigrants living around them and rebuild their identity by breaking down cultural differences and giving preference to humanitarian bonds. They do undergo hyphenated position, while leading a diasporic life. They exhibit tolerant cultural traits and nostalgia for their cultural roots as they incidentally encounter the western life. Sandhya Rao Mehta has observed the duality of an immigrant in her research article titled "*Tilottama and the Bougainvillea girls*": *Creating identities in The Mistress of Spices* through the following lines:

“More importantly,... if grappling with one’s sense of the self and the repercussions of what it means to be off-centred and create meanings in those margins defines the role of the expatriate Indian writer, *The Mistress of Spices* fulfills the purpose which it gives itself, creating a narrative capable of responding to the predicament of the postcolonial diaspora. Its heady mix of exotica and urbanity, myth and reality, fact and fantasy along with its unabashed intermingling of native and English phrases makes for a challenging experience of migrancy.” (Mehta 47)

Through her characters Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tries to balance the bridge between two cultures. The first generation Indian-American try to pass down the traditions they have inherited. However in *Queen of Dreams*, Mrs. Gupta keeps her daughter Rakhi away from their Indian past, so that, like other immigrant children, Rakhi does not get sandwiched between the two cultures. However, Rakhi keeps thinking of her own ethnicity.

Divakaruni’s female characters struggle in their balance between family responsibilities and individual happiness. Like Sudha, in *Sister of My Heart* lives for family. She does everything to make all of them happy. She doesn’t find it wrong to help them. In fact, she is delighted to see them satisfied. For her, family comes first. Even though her husband stays away from her due to his job, she feels it is her duty to take care of her in-laws. In this way, Divakaruni’s characters are at the center of the conflict between the Hindu culture which always shows the mother or wife as the giver, as the nurturer, and as sacrificing herself for the good of the family against the western concept of self-happiness. Sudha, however, when understands that her in-laws

are wanting her to abort her girl-child, becomes like the Queen of Swords and fights for her unborn daughter's life. She runs away from her husband's family to save her unborn daughter from forced female foeticide, faces one predicament after another in India and abroad because of her reliance on others. All that she had ever been coached to become was to be a good house wife. Her spirit of service unto others is exploited by in-laws and she is condensed to being a glorified servant without any life or choices of her own. Sudha, the pregnant lady, comes back to her mother's place and decides to give birth to her daughter and take care of her on her own. Moreover, when she gets a divorce notice, she easily accepts it. Regarding her daughter's bright future, she decides to fly off to America to her soul-sister - Anju's home and start a new living in the foreign world. But in America caught up in circumstances she uses her house-maker's skills to her advantage and proves her worth in the field of eldercare. Trideep's father is a very quick-tempered bed-ridden old man. But with her serenity and care she wins him over. In this way, Sudha learns to think about 'her' happiness.

Another occasion, when she gets her beloved Ashok's proposal for marriage, she is extremely happy; but fails to accept it only because she is concerned about her 'yet-to-be-married' sister's future. Sudha is basically shown to be living life thinking only about others. But America changes her approach. She thinks about her real happiness and decides to land in India with the old man, of whom she takes utmost care.

Divakaruni's talent lies in highlighting how the pulls and pressures of the past lives of her women continue to influence their future. Her characters therefore grow out of maturity. They become conscious of recreating their identities and wipe out their dark past.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni constructs a specific world in the background of culture displacement. Her novels and short story collections are all female-centric. The

roles of female characters are significant and dominant than those of the male characters. Her characters survive alone without any help and support of their male partners. Banerjee portrays highly individualistic women characters who voice their concerns against a variety of issues concerning women. Conversely, her characters seem to be caught between the internal and the external world. She takes up issues like quest for identity, crisis of existence in immigration, awareness for national identity, resistance against the oppressive mechanism of patriarchy, acculturation v/s. assimilation and candid confession of female sexual derives. Priya R. in her article *The Spicy Life of Indian Immigrants in Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices* detects:

“Divakaruni adopts a complex strategy for unfolding the diasporic dilemma of the Indian immigrants. It is through the eyes of Tilo that Divakaruni takes the readers to the private realms of her customs to encounter their hardships and frustrations. All the Indian immigrants suffer from diasporic nostalgia. The wending of characters with the suitable spice is excellently done by Divakaruni.” (Priya 158)

More than socio-religious concern, Divakaruni focuses on the psychic stress of the female protagonists. In *The Mistress of Spices*, through the consciousness of Tilo, who sells and supplies spices to immigrants, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni constructs the whole poetics of ‘exile’ coupled with the idea of national consciousness. Tilo supplies different spices for different remedies. Her sympathy remains not only with female immigrants but with male immigrants too. She retains her feminine sensibility and human sensibility simultaneously. Tilo’s identity as a Mistress is her desperate attempt to escape from her real self as a woman. In her relationship with Haroun, she determines to construct her disillusioned womanhood. She makes affirmation of her

desires and longings. Her feminine delicacy comes on the surface and she makes a declaration, “Ah my American, perhaps at last I have found someone with whom I can share, how it is to live the Mistress life, that beautiful, terrible burden.” (MS. 203) Involvement in personal relations and the affirmation of feminine self becomes a mechanism of assimilation in American life.

In *The Vine of Desire*, Chitra Banerjee reflects on the issue of complex web of sisterly relationship between Sudha and Anju in the multi-cultural societies. In spite of innate bonding with cultural roots, Sudha and Anju find assimilation as a better option to save their ego from being lost in the obscurity of traditions. She recommends the aesthetics of assimilation than that of withdrawal.

In *Queen of Dreams*, Rakhi, the protagonist emerges as a self-aware human being who retains her autonomy to make choices and observations on two cultures. Rakhi’s effort to open a Chai House to provide comfort to Indian immigrants is her mechanism to seek a satisfaction of her lost maternal instinct.

Korobi in *Oleander Girl* goes to America with a specific purpose of searching her unknown father, thereby identifying her ‘self’. So, she goes to U.S. for a temporary period. At certain moments, she is lured by American modernity but doesn’t fall off. She returns to India after meeting her father by embracing Indian thoughts. She is given two choices to decide for her future – Rajat or Vic, India or America. Korobi decides for it by choosing the former.

In the diaspora, the nation of origin incarnates itself as a traditional identity and associates the individual in a superficial relationship with the cultures. The customs and the code of conduct imposed on them by these proxy patriarchal cultures are far more stringent than they are for the male counterparts. Cultural otherness and estrangement from their ethnic community leaves these women entrapped in a space

between the culture of homeland and that of the host country. Complex ground realities including low levels of literacy, discriminatory social customs and traditions, limited exposure and unfamiliarity with alien culture further tries to subaltern these women.

In a research study titled “Cultural Conflict and Issues in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams*” S.L. Sathia Sali observes:

“Divakaruni infuses a woman’s point of view in the depiction of Indian immigrant lives. These pictures are authentic due to the first hand experience of the writer who herself is a part of Indian diaspora. The cultural bearing of her motherland and the experiences of the land of migration both mingle and find a fine and balanced expression in her fiction.” (Sali 194 Web)

In the patriarchal setup of Indian society, women do not get much revelation and thus are incapable to achieve financial independence. Nevertheless, men like Sunil in *The Vine of Desire* keep on evolving with the changing global scenario because of their interaction with the outside world. Women stay cloistered at home as they are believed to be the guardians of the domestic cultures. The customs and the codes, made obligatory for them by the patriarchal culture, are far more harsh and rigid than they are for their male counterparts. They are financially reliant on male members of the family for their requirements and as a result they are subservient to them. Sunil’s mother is a meek and mild woman getting abused by her husband. She is shown to be oppressed under his pressures. Anju narrates Sunil’s mother’s behaviour as: “... when Sunil’s father is around, Sunil’s mother turns into a different woman. She bends her head and speaks in a watery whisper, or hunches her shoulders apologetically as she rushes to fetch what he’s shouting for.” (SH. 180)

In India, the task of carrying out all domestic chores falls exclusively on women. “Cultural taboos about female employment makes the problem more pronounced in cities... Even if women are highly educated, they aren’t allowed by in-laws and husbands to do any job outside the home.... Women are graduating to get a good groom not a good job,” said Ranjana Kumari, author of *Gender, Work, and Power Relations*, and director of New Delhi-based think tank the Centre for Social Research. (qtd. in Sugden 2014) Over all these social restrictions lead to a huge opportunity cost for women and society both. These overworked, upraised women, doing domestic duties, voluntarily run willingly, find themselves marginalised in the Indian economy. The economic bias epitomizes the discrimination they face in the society, at large. This gap has implications not only in terms of inferior quality of life for financially reliant overburdened, domesticated women, but also in loss of direct female contribution in work force.

According to the Indian traditional gender norms, women have to take up the strenuous job of the unpaid household work mandatory for sustaining the households. Being unpaid, this work is considered as less important than remunerated vocations. It is taken for granted and not considered to be ‘occupation’ by men, who in fact, profit directly from it. This load holds back women from seeking employment and therefore, hinders their monetary empowerment. The circumstances of women of richer families are not improved, as they confine women members to the house and restrict them from entering into the salaried job market in the name of their traditions. Refusal to take up any domestic chores responsibility is an affirmation of male-chauvinism. This leads to domestic chores abuse which is worse off than domestic violence since it goes untapped and hence no counteractive action is possible. According to World Economic Forum “ India ranks top, or bottom (depending how you look at it), in terms of the



number of minutes women spend on housework each day versus the amount of time men dedicate to daily household tasks.” (qtd. in Sugden 2014 Web)

The present study focuses especially on the Indian women in diaspora. Their case is atypical as they are twice marginalised. In the diaspora, the native nation embodies itself as a traditional identity and character and involves the individual in an apparently inherent correlation with ‘Indianness’. A solid national identity becomes an alternate for existence. Cultural distinctiveness and drifting apart from their ethnic community leaves these women fascinated in a space between the ethnicity of homeland and the culture of the host country. With cross-regional marriages becoming more universal, the Indian girls are married to far-flung countries away from their land of their birth. Dispatched to a new place, the women are compelled to fashion a new life in a strange place, only rarely of their own choosing, whether they so wish or not. Dealing with both pleasures and pains of new state of affairs, they invariably build up their potential of creating as well as upholding new social relationships. They are away from their native values and they are given lesser chance to intermingle with the host civilization. Many of the stressed out, overworked, disenchanted men take out their frustrations on women at home. Cultural rupture and otherness from their native, ethnic community leaves these women entrapped on an bridge between the culture of homeland and that of the host country.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni herself combating with the hyphenated identities gives voice to these muted ones. The effort of the community of progressing from margin to the centre is aided by their literature as their writings illustrate their predicament, desires and struggles. She is producing cutting edge narratives, which examine the issue of American and South Asian identity. Her fiction outlines the journey of the women stuck on these segregated cultural islands. Her writings

delineate and give new forms and new facets to the literature in general. Her experiences as an immigrant writer have given her an eclectic identity and the capability to outline the past and the present through incessant communication with both the cultures. Resisting displacement, her characters reconnect, re-affiliate and re-negotiate their identities in the face of adversity. Representing the cultural diversity of the South-Asian Americans, her novels emphasize the evolving nature of both immigrant and conventional American cultural organization, by portraying with empathetic understanding, the lives of the Indo-American women/organisations like *Maitri* and *Daya*.

Divakaruni has shown solidarity towards the muffled victims of domestic abuse not just by exposing their predicaments in her writings but also founding help lines. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction revolves around the diasporic women's journey towards self-actualization. She focuses particularly on the lives of Indian women struggling with cultural constraints to construct an identity of their own. Her fiction embodies the problems of these women and makes an effort to inspire them to become independent as a solution for the ills ailing the trans-migrant women. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, an "architect of the immigrant dream" (MS. 28) meets Lalita, referred as Mr. Ahuja's wife, leading an abusive marriage. Her happiest memories are of her sewing: "Every cloth she touches with her needle blooms." (MS.14) She dreams to have her own shop, Lalita Tailor Works. Lalita, Ahuja's wife touches longingly at the embroidered clothes inside the spices store as she memorises the fondness with which she could stitch and embroider for a baby she longs to have and for a life gone waste in the shade of an abusive husband. Her wish to develop her potential and indulge in her hobby of stitching professionally is refused with the resounding male chauvinist logic *Aren't I man enough man enough man enough.*" (MS. 15) As a result, her

identity as Lalita gradually submerges and she is only 'Ahuja's wife'. After being sexually assaulted by her husband in India, she had anticipated a better future and new life in America, but joy and dignity that she seeks for so eagerly keeps on fleeing from her. Eventually, at Tilo's provocation she takes the decision to leave her husband and become self-reliant by taking up her hobby of stitching professionally. To quote James Clifford from *Cultural Anthropology* on 'Diasporas':

“Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful – struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies.... Women in diaspora remain attached to and empowered by, a “home” culture and a tradition” (Clifford 314)

Women have been considered as the pillar of a nation and the architect and sculptor of its destiny. Fostered appropriately, women can prove to be invaluable human resources and can contribute towards overall development but for that there is requirement of equal rights and opportunities. Being solely accountable for domestic chores they are stressed psychologically and physically and it leads to lower self-esteem as well. The social and cultural revamping of family value systems is the only solution to this perplexing social phenomenon. Socially sentient writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni play a very imperative social responsibility by creating characters to motivate women in various situations to struggle for their rights and affirm their individualism in miscellaneous social situations.

Divakaruni in her novel *Queen of Dreams* has shown the individual struggle of two women – Rakhi and Belle – who have set all their hopes for individuation on the sustainment of their chai house. When Belle and Rakhi have been planning to start

Chai House they put all their savings in it. Belle has cajoled her parents letting her have the money reserved for her dowry in order to be self-employed. In a way, Chai House has been her last chance to escape from traditional backward marriage planned by her parents since she cannot grasp the idea of wearing *salwar kameez*, cooking Indian food and pleasing a never-satisfied mother-in-law. This is why when Chai House is not working well she tries every way to sustain it, because in sustaining Chai House, she is sustaining her freedom and proving her own parents wrong, who are always apprehensive about the non-existence of Chai House whenever they call and ask her how are they.

Like Belle, the Chai has become more of an identity issue for Rakhi because in getting the thing fine in Chai House she is providing herself with the right to babysit Jona, her daughter.

Another example of seeking individual identity can be perceived in *The Mistress of Spices*. Tilo's real name, age and beauty is all hidden. She fakes an identity which is not her original. Her customers are not aware of her birth name. She has given herself 'Tilottama' name as a Mistress. Her clients do not know her age and beauty because Tilo looks like an old woman, least considering her beauty. As a Mistress, she is asked never to look into a mirror and caress her beauty. She says,

“They do not know, of course. That I am old, that this seeming-body I took on in Shampati's fire when I vowed to become a Mistress is not mine. I claim its creases and gnarls no more than water claims the ripples that wrinkle it. They do not see, under the hooded lids, the eyes which shine for a moment – I need no forbidden mirror (for mirrors are forbidden to Mistresses) to tell me this – like dark fire. The eyes which alone are my own.

No. One more thing is mine. My name which is Tilo, short for Tilottama, for I am named after the sun-burnished sesame seed, spice of nourishment. They do not know this, my customers, not that earlier I had other names.” (MS. 5)

Anju and Sudha of *Sister of My Heart* are brought up listening to the sayings of Aunt Nalini like “Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother’s name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family’s fame.” (SH. 23) Anju, who does not believe in following the social restriction, scolds Sudha for letting her arrange a marriage for her though she wants to study further. Anju who has a wish to make something out of her life feels unhappy about Sudha’s inability to grab her freedom. “You can’t just let your mother have her way, not in *this*.... Without a college education, what kind of life are you going to have? You might as well tie a bucket around your neck and jump into a well right now. You might as well put blinkers over your eyes and join the bullocks that go round and round the mustard mill. That’s all you’re going to be, a beast of burden for some man.” (SH. 87) When Sudha’s perspective groom’s family comes a whole hour late, it hurts her egotism. “If something like that happened to me, I’d be so mad I would break the match off myself. Why should the boy’s side always be in control?” (SH. 121)

Cultural identity is one’s sense of belonging to a given society or to the global cultural supermarket. Identity is complex and multifaceted especially in relation to Diaspora identities, therefore conceiving national or ethnic identities as fixed, closed, and unchanging, has negative consequences. Since society plays an integral role in the development of a firm sense of identity, the treatment of specific individuals can accomplish only so much. Racial prejudice of American society contributes to identity confusion, negative identities of immigrants. In the economy of identity, immigrants

are led to imitate but mimicry. The immigrants are made to lead, in the words of Du Boise “a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes.” (qtd. in Hall 1960: 38)

All cultural identities differ from one another in one way or the other. Every perceptive consciousness is rooted in its own socio-cultural, racial, class and gender identity.

Since Chitra Banerjee has been exposed to some or other kind of racial discrimination which makes her aware of her cultural identity, she too has felt the same and attempted hard to come out of her crises. Thus, the Indian immigrants’ search for identity in America provides a common thread in the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She has exhibited a sense of identity with a different point of view. Divakaruni as first generation Indian American has to put more of her efforts to carve proper niche for herself. Second generation Indian Americans – who fail to identify themselves with either of the country – India or America – are considered to be at more loss facing a double identity crisis. One can witness the cultural identity crisis experienced by second generation in Divakaruni’s novel *Queen of Dreams* in the character of Rakhi.

In this novel, Rakhi’s dilemma is the dilemma of America-born Asians, whose divided identities make it difficult for them to locate and place themselves. They do not know when, where and how to relate and belong. Rakhi who has always considered America as her home is made to recognize her real identity that is Indian not American. She does not find it appropriate to put a flag outside her Chai House just to tell that she is an American, which of course, she is, as she is born here. Her family is accused of planning the attack of 9/11. When Jespal tries to assure them that they are also Americans just the way they are, one of the attackers screams “You aint

no American.” which makes Rakhi question that “... if I wasn’t American, then what was I?” (QD. 271) She tries to locate the difference in her “reflection in the glass – the brown skin, the Indian features, the dark eyes with darker circles under them, the black crinkles of my hair. It’s familiar and yet, suddenly, alien.” (QD. 271) She feels as a misfit into both the identities – Indian and American.

Rakhi is a victim of hyphenated and hybrid identities which Homi Bhabha defines “as a state of in-betweenness as in a person who stands between two cultures.” (qtd. in Habib, 166)

As a second generation Indian American, her identity can be established both in asserting her difference from and similarity to her peer group.

Like Rakhi, Jagjit of Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* also suffers because of his racial identity. He is assaulted at school, taunted by white classmates who scream, “Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole.” (MS. 45). Tilo’s client Jagjit sobs and tries to understand why the jeering must occur, wondering what it means to be called “nigger,” when he is not black but rather South Asian.

The thesis traces the immigrant woman, Tilo’s journey from established principles to unknown values as narrated in her first novel *The Mistress of Spices*. It is a journey to an unexplored country moving from tradition to modernity. *Sister of My Heart* takes Anju and Sudha to America in search of a new life, free from all Indian traditional social evils. N. Padmanabha Rao in her article *Multiplicity of Identity: Reading Chitra Divakaruni’s Sister of my Heart* evaluates:

“... if Anju on one side is hell-bound to fight all ups and downs to shield ‘the sister of her heart’ from the nagging society; on the other side, Sudha also struggles to overcome all the obstructions in her path to arrive at the final decision of parting from her in-

laws, giving birth to her daughter, turning Ashok's proposal down because he is not ready to welcome Dayita into his life and, finally moving to US to get reunited with her other half Anju, so that they could start together a new life with new future.... Consequently, through both the sisters Banerjee tries to underscore the utopian approach of the 21<sup>st</sup> century postmodern women who are no more the doormats of the house where men can dispose of their patriarchal dust. Instead these women have now got off the floor and started creating their own identity.”

(Padmanabha 190)

However, the sequel, *The Vine of Desire* makes the two sisters independently re-search their true self. Their dreams get shattered once they understand the true essence of American life. *Sister of My Heart* deals with homeland realities whereas; *The Vine of Desire* explores the realities of the host land. In *Queen of Dreams* too, Mrs. Gupta travels to U.S. in search of comfort life and continues with her dream-telling technique. Korobi, in *Oleander Girl*, belongs to the Chatterjee household, where women are always given the secondary position. It is a novel of Korobi's grandfather, who defines the Indian male, the caretaker of his family. Anne Morris, in her book review of *Oleander Girl* reports:

“Divakaruni, who teaches creative writing at the University of Houston, says in the dedication to this new book that it is “for my grandfather, whose life inspired this story.” Though Korobi's adored grandfather dies early on, his strong personality controls the remaining pages. He is the one who made all the decisions — right and wrong — for the household. He is the one they all



trusted more than themselves.” (Morris 2013 Web)

She moves to U.S. to search her father but apart from meeting her father, she meets her true identity. Thus to say, this study highlights how Chitra exposes the real identities of her immigrant characters.

Chitra Banerjee presents the experiences of immigrants. She displays the homeland with all its problems, struggles, and chaos. Her novels focus on the challenges her female protagonists encounter in both India and U.S. They show conflicting situations between tradition and modernity. Her protagonists face the dilemma of opting either to remain traditional or become untraditional. But they find the mid-way. They resolve themselves by preserving the traditional values and carve their own identity in the new world. They become healers to the society and follow humanity. In this way, they re-discover their hyphenated identity.

P. V. L. Sailaja, Prof. N. Ramakrishna and Prof. C. R. S. Sarma in their article *Quest for Self: An Analysis of the Female Protagonists in Select Novels of Divakaruni* perceives the following commonalities in Chitra’s protagonists. They record:

“An identity crisis is a period of serious personal questioning where the individual makes an effort to determine one’s own values and sense of direction. Tilo, Rakhi and Korobi go through a period of identity crisis in their lives. But they redeem themselves and their values towards the end with their immense fortitude, courage and perseverance. All these novels depict how these characters come to terms with their past and present. Their quest for their true self forms the crux of these three novels.”

(Sailaja, Ramakrishna and Sarma 25)

Chitra Banerjee’s description of Indian society projects the evils of Indian caste

and class system, male dominance, dowry system, female foeticide, ill-effects of arrange marriages etc.; whereas the American society is projected as a mirage – that offers freedom, liberty and independence. But the traditional outlook of U.S. doesn't allow the women to enjoy. Both the societies commonly display double standards prevailing in it. Thus to conclude, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni becomes an acculturating bridge between both the countries.

In Divakaruni's work, India and America are twinned. Her fiction is located in India, usually Calcutta and /or U.S. Her protagonists in America get attracted to MTV, fast food, jeans, multicultural world, meeting multicultural people, falling in love and living with an American. She even exposes the superstitious Bengali culture, which has got influenced by colonialism in India. Therefore, she shows the Chatterjee girls of *Sister of My Heart* going to English medium convent schools learning English literature.

In terms of acculturation, Tilo, the protagonist of the novel *The Mistress of Spices* is an example of the amalgamation of traditional culture as the mistress and the modern culture when she emerges to break the mistress' laws.

*Sister of My Heart* merely portrays the traditional Indian Hindu life, through the lives of Anju and Sudha, living in India and America – the cultural inter-mingling of their lives extract foreign as well as Indian feelings and emotions. Instead of writing from the perspective of a minority influenced by an invading culture in her homeland, Divakaruni elucidates the struggle of the minority in the homeland of the dominant majority. The strength of Divakaruni lies in uncovering the struggle that female immigrants face when dealing with the cultural mosaic of a twentieth century United States of America.

*The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. Through Anju and Sudha,

Divakaruni has drawn a compelling contrast between the selflessness required of women in India and the sometimes bewildering freedom offered in their adopted land. Tormenting emotions is the result, when the characters choose to throw the baggage of their culture and create a new identity. It discusses both innovation and conservation. In it, the most interesting aspect is how Anju and Sudha deal with the increasing westernization.

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* are two novels, which merely depict both Indian and western cultures and philosophies. *Sister of My Heart* stands for Indian Hindu life and traditional, religious perceptive, whereas *The Vine of Desire* is a novel of the immigrants on alien shores.

The novel *Queen of Dreams* depicts the Indian-American's experience of grappling with two identities or cultures. The novel is also divided between India and the United States, although set entirely in America. It deals with the difficulties that come with cross-cultural experiences. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Rakhi, the protagonist, and her friends deal with the densities about their acculturation.

The protagonist, Korobi in *Oleander Girl* is definitely torn between two worlds — the values of India and America, how women are expected to behave in each culture, the importance America places on the individual versus the privilege given to family by Indian culture.

The research studies how acculturation changes individuals as immigrants – both for the first generation and for the second generation immigrants too.

### **Key Findings of the Research:**

Following are some of the major findings of the current study:

- 1) In all of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, 'women' have been the hub, around

whom the stories are woven and extended with the help of their trials and tribulations. Her depiction of women's world is real, convincing, and authentic. In her novels, she has explored the physical, social and psychological problems and the tortures to which the immigrant women are subjected. She deals with the inner world of the immigrant women in her novels.

- 2) Divakaruni's female protagonists either migrate after marriage with husband from parents' home or cross the border for professional pursuits. Divakaruni's novels draw around the lives of women engaged in a quest for self. Her female protagonists long for the identity in the postcolonial world. The search for self-identity involves various factors such as alienation, relationships, society, etc. Divakaruni has created budding new women in her novels who are not puppets in the hands of others, but someone who try to assert and carve their own identity in this 'all man's world'.
- 3) The female protagonists such as Rakhi, Korobi, and Sudha face the darker side of American society. Though the open-minded American society permits certain liberties to these women, but their traditional mind-set doesn't allow them to enjoy. These women are no doubt conditioned by the Indian upbringing, but have risen above the traditional constraints.
- 4) Divakaruni's characters are very close to reality with which she weaves her plots. Her novels continue to explore such contentious social issues as abortion, female foeticide, dowry system, the failure of family life, separation, childlessness, loneliness, gender discrimination, class-discrimination, racial discrimination etc.
- 5) The female protagonists of novels are immature at the beginning of the novel. After the interface with the stern realities of society, they come to terms with their self or persona in their own specific ways.

- 6) Divakaruni's women protagonists suffer from a sense of alienation in both India and abroad. Tilo, Anju, Sudha, Lalita, Rakhi and Korobi are the characters, who often suffer from the sense of alienation at one point or the other. In most of Divakaruni's novels, a woman migrates either after marriage or chooses America as her workplace. Some of her characters are second generation immigrants, who face cultural conflicts and feel alienated. Her protagonists are alienated from the world, from the society, from families, from parents and even from their own selves. When these characters have to face alienation, they become rebels and turn reactionaries.
- 7) Divakaruni also gives importance to the Indian culture in her novels since she is an immigrant, writing about India and particularly about Bengal, writing from a foreign land i.e., America. Chitra Banerjee presents homeland with all its problems, struggles, and chaos. She outlines her characters shuttling between two cultures, thus making their life chaotic. Some of her characters prefer to stay at the host land and choose the liberal American attitude towards life.

After this research, it is evident that there still exists much potential for future research on the topic as it relates to acculturation in diasporic literature.

#### **Future Scope and Limitations of the Study:**

The proposed study aims to highlight the select novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and hence, it has a substantial corpus of primary source. However, since the study is delimited to focus on diasporic sensibility and acculturation in the select novels of Divakaruni, there is a wide **scope** to other critical traits and discover different issues such as:

- i. The postcolonial, feminists, and ecological perspectives of the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni can be explored.
- ii. The narrative technique and linguistic experimentation can be studied.

- iii. Apart from Chitra Banerjee being a novelist, she has been well acclaimed for her short stories, poems and essays. Thus, her immigrant issues can be well studied through the in-depth reading of various genres other than novels.
- iv. Apart from diasporic identity, other themes like mythic interpretation, human relationships (family relationships), magic realism, multiculturalism, contemporary Indian and American experience etc. can be examined further.
- v. Comparative studies of Divakaruni's novels with her contemporaries (other Diasporic writers of Indian origin) will give a deeper and extensive understanding.
- vi. Since Divakaruni's books are published in 29 languages and published in many countries, there can be vernacular researches on the same topics in future for the global readers.
- vii. Acculturation as a thematic study can be undertaken keeping in view various other diasporic writers.

This study will help the future research scholars, student immigrants and literary critics to understand acculturation in the multicultural society. It will help them assimilate in the host land. It will enable them to respect other cultures.

However, the **limitations** of the study could be as follows:

- i. The present research focuses on a single writer and concludes to certain generalisations.
- ii. The select novels of Divakaruni do not represent the entire range of writings of South Asian American Diasporic Indian writers.
- i. The study concentrates only on select five novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, leaving aside all her other genres – poetry, short stories, essays etc.
- ii. The said research does not aim to do a comparative study between the diasporic works of other South Asian American Diasporic Women Novelists.

iii. The study thematically analyses only diasporic sensibility and acculturation, entailing gaps and limiting its scope.

As a woman writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni infuses a woman's point of view in the depiction of Indian immigrant lives. Her depiction is authentic due to the first-hand experience of the writer who herself is a part of Indian diaspora. Her characters' search for identity is not in vain. They are able to re-affirm their identity with sheer will, purpose, courage and determination. Chitra keeps the Indian mothers, daughters, sisters, cousins, wives, friends, Godmothers dynamic representatives of the diasporic world.

To quote Mrinal Miri,

“So, there is no real surprise in the view that there are cultures other than our own, that we can individuate them, that we can understand them – never fully perhaps, but to a large extent. But it is important that the question of knowledge and understanding arises at all, and that there can be a serious answer to it. It shows that the cultural other is a *genuine other* and not the same in a different guise.” (Miri 1999)

## WORKS CITED

### CHAPTER IV

#### Primary Sources:

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Mistress of Spices*. Black Swan, 2005.
- ---. *Sister of My Heart*. Black Swan, 1999.
- ---. *Queen of Dreams*. Abacus, 2004.

#### Secondary Sources:

- Habib, M. A. R. *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History*. Blackwell Publisher, 2008.
- Hall, Donald. E. *Subjectivity*. Routledge, 2004.

#### Journals / Periodicals:

- Clifford, James. "Diasporas". *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3 (1994): 302-38.
- Dass, Veena Noble. "The Expatriate Indian Writing in English." Vinoda, T. and P. Shailaja. *The Expatriate Indian Writing in English*, Vol. II. Prestige Books, 2006.
- Mehta, Sandhya Rao. "Tilottama and the Bougainvillea girls: creating identities in *The Mistress of Spices*." *The Commonwealth Review*, 17.2: 46-54. Special Issue on Feminism and Literature.
- Priya, R. "The Spicy Life of Indian Immigrants in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*." *American College Journal of English Language and Literature*, 4 (2015): 157 – 161.
- Rao, N. Padmanabha. "Multiplicity of Identity: Reading Chitra Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*." *The Commonwealth Review*, 23. 1 (): 182 – 190. Note: Special Issue on South Asian Diaspora Literature.



- Sailaja, P. V. L., N. Ramakrishna and C. R. S. Sarma. “Quest for Self: An Analysis of the Female Protagonists in Select Novels of Divakaruni.” *Contemporary Vibes* 8.32 (July – Sept 2013): 23 – 25.

### **Webliography:**

- Das, Soma. ““My hardships made me more sympathetic to writing about such times’: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.” *Hindustan Times*. 28 April 2016. 25 March 2019. [www.hindustantimes.com/books/author-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni-on-her-new-book-and-women-s-empowerment/story-zq6WLbp2F78Os9xYe7wAOK.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/author-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni-on-her-new-book-and-women-s-empowerment/story-zq6WLbp2F78Os9xYe7wAOK.html)
- Miri, Mrinal. “Understanding Other Cultures.” *Symposium on Multiculturalism*. December 1999. [www.india-seminar.com/1999/484/484%20miri.htm#top](http://www.india-seminar.com/1999/484/484%20miri.htm#top)
- Morris, Anne. “Book Review: *Oleander Girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.” *Dallas News, Arts, Books*, April 2013. [www.dallasnews.com/arts/books/2013/04/27/book-review-oleander-girl-by-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni](http://www.dallasnews.com/arts/books/2013/04/27/book-review-oleander-girl-by-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni)
- Rendon, Joni. “*Queen of Dreams*: Book Reviews” *Book Page*, October 2004, 8 Jan. 2018. [bookpage.com/reviews/3734-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni-queen-dreams-fiction#.XLcIAzAzblU](http://bookpage.com/reviews/3734-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni-queen-dreams-fiction#.XLcIAzAzblU)
- Sali, Sathia S. L. “Cultural Conflict and Issues in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams*.” *Research Journal of English language and Literature*, Vol. 6, Issue 3 2018 (July - Sept) 22 Dec. 2018 [www.rjelal.com/6.3.18/191-194%20S.L.%20SATHIA%20SALI.pdf](http://www.rjelal.com/6.3.18/191-194%20S.L.%20SATHIA%20SALI.pdf)
- Sugden, Joanna. *Gender Chore Gap: Where Housework Is Most Unfair*. The Wall Street Journal, Oct 29, 2014. [blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2014/10/29/gender-chore-gap-where-housework-is-most-unfair/](http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2014/10/29/gender-chore-gap-where-housework-is-most-unfair/)