

**IMMIGRANT IDENTITY, NOSTALGIA FOR HOME AND HOME LAND:  
A PERCEPTION IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE VINE OF  
DESIRE***

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**ABSTRACT**

Nostalgia for home is the quintessence of Diaspora. Today, the multicultural societies are the result of global immigration. Diasporic literature captures the problematic issues and the concerns experienced by the immigrants. The spatial displacements crossing geographical boundaries thus occurring involves de-territorialization and re-territorialization. The writings deal with the two invariables of their experiences one is 'exile' and the other is 'home'. Whether voluntary or forcible, the memory of home, people and the surroundings attached with them is visible. The themes such as exile, home and homelessness discussed, occupies the central place in diasporic writing. The experiences displayed in the imaginary novels depict pain and agony exacerbating the exile experience. The paper portrays the trauma experienced by the immigrants due to dislocation, a sense of disquiet longing for, home and homeland; nostalgia and memory and thereby struggle for identity. It brings about the emotional predicament and turmoil caused due to displacement. The novel *The vine of desire* is a fictitious representation signifying the immigrants desperation for home and home land. The comparison and contradiction from the original home with the adopted land digs out memories and nostalgic experience. The noticeable magnetism and influence of the contradicting cultures on the immigrants becomes cause of concern, which leaves them in a flux. The characters in the novel express restrictions to accept the changes and dilemmas amidst entangled emotions.

**Key words:** Nostalgia, Home, Diaspora, Immigrants, Immigrants Identity

Diaspora is the displacement of community from one geographical region to another geographical region. The occurrence of spatial movements involves de-territorialization and re-territorialization. Such displacements or dislocations often lead to a sense of homelessness and identity crisis. Diaspora is as old as human history. Either voluntary or compulsory, Such moments were common during colonialism. The colonialisation has lead to diaspora as Nayar depicts, “Such movements were common during colonialism”.(187).The term ‘diaspora gained importance gradually with the result of globalization. Diaspora theorist, Robin Cohen defines diaspora as communities living together in one country who ‘acknowledge that “the old country”- a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions...a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background’ (2001: ix).

Thus the displacement from one country to another and acquiring the ethnic culture also holding the native culture brings gradual dilemma and a sense of rootlessness in the migrant community. Indians, who migrate to various countries specially, The United States of America, Canada, England, Australia, Africa and many others countries, form the diasporic community and the writings which reflect these themes are placed under one heading “writings of the Diaspora.” Expatriate or diaspora writings in literature emphasizes some of the significant themes like immigration, emigration, exile expatriate, assimilation transformation, multiculturalism, to talk about a few. With the upsurge in globalization, immigration has become ubiquitous and diaspora literature is in focus as a result gaining popularity in English literature. There are exquisite works by some of the popular diasporic writers, starting from V.S Naipaul, Kamala Markandaya, Salman Rushdie, Bharathi Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Meena Alexander, Sunitra Gupta, Manju Kapur and many more. Many of them have pioneered in the field are proclaimed as prominent Indian diasporic writers. The common concerns of all these authors is the influence of the host culture on the immigrants due to perpetual cultural and demographical changes and the inherent dilemmas to accept the changes. Such themes have been analyzed and studied by authors of Diaspora and have been rendering scholarly contribution to Indian English literature.

The term Diaspora has multiple layers of meaning in modern academic circle. It is now often used as a synonym for migration, immigration, emigration exile and “the Diaspora” is equated to expatriate. The question of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ is a constant concern of the immigrant of which ‘nostalgia’ is the inherent result. According to Jasbir Jain, ‘exile’ “indicates a compulsory isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past” (12). ‘Home’ as per the Oxford dictionary; means the family or social unit occupying a permanent residence and Homeland means a person’s or a people’s native land. ‘Nostalgia’ according to Merriam Webster’s dictionary, a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition. The paper presents the yearning for home, a home which is not just a private residence but where one belongs to, the nation, the culture, the language, also the childhood to which one is emotionally attached. A very good example of this is the is stated by Avatar Brah,

Where is home? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is

possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand home is also the vivid experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations(192).

The consciousness of uprooting from the native environment creates emotional setbacks and raises the question of belonging and not belonging. This is a revelation that 'home' connotes not only physical distances but harbours passions attached with people and surroundings, and ambience shared characteristics of a native land. The yearning for home and nostalgia for homeland becomes a constant presence as it always seems to ponder the psyche of the expatriates. The Indians living in the alien countries continue to live in a double life refusing to give up their cultural roots. They are sandwiched between the deep rooted native culture and assimilated host culture. There is a flux of hope for assimilation in the new land, at the same time there is invariable magnetic pull towards home land. The present paper portrays such nostalgia and yearning for home and cultural conflicts in the intricately woven fiction, "*The Vine of Desire*" by the Indian born American, diasporic women writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who artistically blends the traumatic challenges with optimistic attributes sprouting out of disheveled tensions experienced in multicultural societies.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an immigrant, herself from a middle class educated family from Kolkata, India. She portrays immigrant experiences in her writings. She delineates the expatriate young women living in the U.S, who struggles hard to sustain self identity in fluctuating alien culture. She writes of as an Indian in America and about people migrating to the west and are caught multiple cultures. She depicts the women in special caught in multicultural challenges, sometimes and also affected by such multiple levels by both cultures she brings out the state of flux and reflects the mirror image of the particular environment and the world around her, the relations are torn between belonging and not belonging. Fractured; yet not fragments, the immigrants will power alone can sooth the wounds of longing. Divakaruni exemplifies her own experience. "*As a woman and an immigrant myself, I have obviously experienced or at least observed many of the challenges, problems and the gains of immigration that I write about,*" says Divakaruni (2009).

The picture of expatriate writings mainly signifies the struggles for identity and construction of new identities. The location drift causes individuals to get dislocated, migration to different countries governed by different reasons at different times of history. The main reasons for immigration are the pursuit of high standard of living opportunities for work, research and freedom to discuss a few. Divakaruni has expressed the themes of immigration, dislocation, home and exile in her novels; she explicitly portrays nostalgia faced by contemporary women. Divakaruni's view on diaspora differs from that of Rushdie and many other authors. It contains a sense of condemnation connected with immigrants and their viewpoint. Whereas Divakaruni's depiction of diaspora shows deliberate immigration and thus occurrence of whole hearted adaptable attribute towards change. America for the characters in the fiction means dream of freedom of traditional restrictions and intellectual freedom where she gets opportunity for financially, she achieves liberation from Indian expectations.

Chitra Banerjee's Divakaruni is considered as a deliberate diaspora who, for many years wanted to experience life in another country. She states in an interview that, "living in America has

given a whole different angle of vision on my original culture as well as that I now live in” (interview by TBR Senior Writwer Judith Handschuh 1996-2006). Chitralekha Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Kolkatta (Calcutta), India and brought up in the middle-class family and later at nineteen she migrates to the U.S. for further study. She gets a masters degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and a Ph. D from the University of California at Berkeley, both in English. She did intensive study on immigrants and her experiences reflect in her writings. The story plot and the characters seem very real which merge in them explicitly. Her middleclass upbringing caters the in-depth understanding of the middleclass characters she portrays; in general women, who are caught in entangled emotions. Some of her books are, *Sister of My Heart*, *The vine of desire*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams*, *The Palace of Illusions*, The story collections, *The Unknown Errors of Lives* and *Arranged Marriages*. Her characters in all these writings are a blend of artistically painted hues of emotions. They exemplify love, longing, yearning, friendship, desperation, marriages, dilemmas, knotted relations, and memories; experiencing bitter divorces, responsible parenting, child birth, miscarriage separations and rejoining. This novel explores the process of displacement and thereby a state of homelessness, exile lack of belongingness and unending search for roots and home.

The present fiction, *The Vine of Desire* is the sequel to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of my Heart*. The protagonists in the story are the two sisters Anju and Sudha born on the same day opening their eyes to the ill-fated death of their fathers’ also brothers’ of the same family Gopal and Bijoy respectively, on a ruby exploration journey. The story narrates around the two women caught between hard core family traditions and modern thoughts of 1980’s the young women and their sisterly love for each other. They separate only on their marriages; Anju migrates to America with her husband Sunil and Sudha stays in India with Ramesh. The distance does not separate them emotionally but only physically as the communication goes on through letters. The present novel is the reunion of the two sisters in America. The sequel begins with a tragedy of miscarriage, emotion and trauma of the separation of son ‘Prem’ from her womb which end in an abortion leaving Anju unraveled in bouts of depression. Sudha experiences traditional Indian daughter-in-law but has to flee from her husband on the threat of her daughter’s birth. Anju feels the need for her sisterly support and also give a change to Sudha’s tormenting divorce. She decides “I want to bring Sudha to America” (18). Sudha visits America with a hope to make a life for herself and her daughter Dayita. Divakaruni follows the trend, shows America as the land of opportunities and a life saver from difficulties.

Divakaruni brings about the contrasting cultures of India’s and the US. The novel constantly focuses on the transculture; the characters seem to shuttling between two worlds. Loss alienation rootlessness and dislocation is experienced by every immigrant. The expatriates, initially try to adjust with the new culture and society into which they moved But at the same time they are not willing to follow the new land’s culture completely. For some diaspora as Parekh describes as “banyan tree making a new home in the host nation but the roots not always permanently secure its roots in the alien soil .some roots detach due to yearning and become desperate for home and to breathe their last in the native land”(13). In the present fiction the aged man who is affected psychologically finds himself in a state of despair and feels nostalgic for homeland. Jasbir Jain expresses “Yet this multiplicity of ‘homes’ does not bridge the gap between ‘home of origin’: and ‘world’” (12). Apparently the immigrants are caught in the

clutches of dilemma, where do they belong? The home of origin or the present dislocated land in the alien nation or world.

The sense of nostalgia is often seen among the dislocated and displaced people in most of the diaspora writings. In *Brick Lane*, *An American Brat*, *The Namesake*, *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Vine of Desire* one can find women characters leave their home to foreign countries after their marriage in order to settle in a new land with their unknown husbands. Anju in *The Vine of Desire* migrated to America as Ashima in *The Namesake*. Both share a lonely life though the situations and problems differ. In India, their life was filled with a number of relatives but in the US, when the husbands' leaves for job, there is no one to communicate and later during their pregnancy not a soul to give suggestions. Anju, during her miscarriage yearns for someone to console her feeling of loneliness. Anju's isolation reveals nostalgia caused due to immigration. The immigrants find themselves put out of place from the home society, they are upset emotionally and strive to remember and place themselves in a nostalgic past. There is frequent musings of the past memories of the childhood days, people and surroundings. All through, the story there is sentimental attachments seen displayed by different characters. Anju in this novel often finds talking to her unborn son she names him, "Prem" conveys reminiscence of her childhood.

She tells 'Prem' who is attached breathes in the warmth of her womb, at some instances of homesickness she goes back to her about the old house, the white elephant of a mansion that had been in the Chatterjee family for generations: its crumbling marble facade, its peeling walls, the dark knots of its corridors, the brick terrace where she and Sudha went secretly at night to watch for falling stars to wish on.(13) She senses pain for the change of things. She remembers even smallest of the incidents in the past which she used to loath and hate as a child, but as an immigrant the longing to retrieve the past.

"It's gone now. Demolished to make space for a high-rise apartment building. And I'm the one who kept at your grandmothers—do you know you have three grandmothers: my mom, Sudha's mom, and Pishi, who's my dad's sister? — to sell it. I used to hate that house, how ancient it was, how it stood for everything ancient. I hated being cooped up in it and not allowed to go anywhere except school. But now I miss it! I think of my room with its cool, high ceilings, and my bed sheets which always smelled clean, like neem leaves—and which I never had to wash myself!— and the hundred year old peepal trees that grew outside my windows. Sometimes I wish I hadn't been in such a hurry to come to America. (13)

The need to connect and yet to be part of the new land is important to all the immigrants. They have to confront social habits which are alien to them. The novel delves the psyche of dilemma and uncertainty. The two novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The vine of Desire* are set in India and America and features Indian-born women sandwiched between old and new world ethics. She writes with insight and consideration, in a language that is expressive as well as uncomplicated. In all her stories, she takes the readers deep into the many-layered worlds of her characters, the world that is crammed with terror, optimism, and discovery. In an interview in "*The telegraph*", (March 13<sup>th</sup> 2005).She says that women in particular responds to her work because she writes about them; women in love, women in difficulty, women in relationship. She wants people to relate to her characters so that they can feel their joy and pain, since it will be

harder to be prejudiced when they meet them in real life. Though Anju dreams of American from the time she reads books, the America which becomes the promised land of her “as amazing as the fairy kingdom of Pishi’s tales”(179).

‘So in my teenage years, I read things like *Anna Karenina* and *Sons and Lovers* and *The Great Gatsby* and *A Room of One’s Own*. I’m glad I did, but maybe Aunt Nalini—that’s Sudha’s mom—was right. They were no good for me. They filled me with a dissatisfaction with my own life, and a longing for distant places. I believed that, if I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn’t so easy, is it?”(14).

The dislocation whether voluntary or forced displacement the initial euphoria subsides and the life in the alien land becomes monotonous, causes severe problems. The schism caused by the course of actions leave them in dilemma and generates an identity crisis. Anju poses herself the questions her decision being immigrant. Divakaruni artistically blends the optimistic attributes sprouts out of disheveled tensions and challenges and complications experienced in the society. The sisters Anju and Sudha both emerge as best sisters friends most endearing and best supporting system during need. They learn to make peace with the difficult choices, circumstances that force upon them. Anju and Sudha grew up and moved on; they got separated on their marriages on the same day. The physical displacements does not bring change in the relationship the sisters share from the childhood. They shared everything but one hard truth that threatens them is Sunil’s attraction towards Sudha, disclosed only at her marriage. They distance themselves without tampering the sensitive issues which makes them coil into a shell. The women’s bond is shaken to the core when they confront the deeply passionate feelings that Anju’s husband has for Sudha. *Sisters of My Hearts*.... As rootless weed detach only to crumble into pieces with shattering of dream of their happiness. The emotional trauma is sensed the strain the moment her so called sister of my heart cross the threshold of home and her life. The sisters are no more the sisters they used to boast of. Anju, Sudha and Sunil show external friendly disposition but there is huge gap in internal psyche. The lives in the tale unfold the sensitivity, adaptability in the midst of deteriorating relations.

“A tableau of silence: three people, inside their chests small black boxes, holding inside them smaller, blacker boxes: secrets packed in secrets.....The secrets of their own self, already pollinated by time’s spores, waiting to burst open when they are least prepared for it”(70)

Anju’s loneliness intensifies emotional rupture, she finds herself brooding, at times adjusting and advises her own routine of college assignments “All the loves I’ve loved I’ve lost them-except me. And this one too-I think I hear it cracking underfoot, like lake of ice in a thin winter.”(65) On the other hand Sudha’s deep rooted Indian tradition is at stake, when she goes off guard in passion with her sister’s husband Sunil, leaving her torn and burdened with guilt. Sudha’s entrance in Anju’s life observes changes in all their lives, Anju, Sudha and Sunil “Were the changes good or bad?”(9)The author gives this expression to bring about the curiosity in the plot and the three characters questioning themselves whether the decision of bringing Sudha to America was a right one. Sudha undergoes cultural changes on immigration. Sara is an assimilated modern women with American outlook. She becomes a source of inspiration to survive and amalgamate in the alien culture. “You got to get out of this valley, girl. See the other Americas” (84). Sudha sheds her traditional conservative role of a pathetic female and evolves

into liberal and self dependent women. She represents transformation in motion, from a traditional wife to modern women to withstand on her own to reject a home to save her pregnancy. She breaks all restraints bound with Indian marriages and security. Single handed she risks about bringing up her a daughter. With all these burdens she adventures to America to give emotional support to her sister and a new direction to her life well aware of the fact that her dear sister's husband has a passion for her. The predicament proliferates on her immigration; she becomes the cause of her sister's home breaking. She encounters all these challenges yet to take up a job in America as a profession of home nurse to an octogenarian, who suffers extreme depression for home and India. Sudha also decides to relieve the octogenarian of his homesickness and secure a life for her daughter and herself. Sudha undergoes metamorphosis similar to the character 'Jasmine' in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Sudha transforms from a naïve traditional well matriarchal protected woman to modern and independent.

Sunil and Lalit are two different characters. Sunil the first generation immigrant mostly an introvert subdued finds difficult to express his desire to marry Sudha sympathetic for Anju. He proved himself a good husband taking care of her during her miscarriage "When he's with Dayita," Anju tells me later, "all the bitterness falls away from him. He used to be like that when I was pregnant. Boyish and excited and tender" (30). Sunil expresses his nostalgic moments describing how as a child mesmerized by the grandeur of the theatres and enchanting characters in films. "I went back to see the place, after I was grown and in college. But it was gone and some kind of air-conditioned market had taken place. I was relieved. For the rest of my life now, could continue thinking of it the way I remembered it, without my critical adult eye ruining the spell"(119.)These memories he wants to cherish in his life, some of the adventures and some lessons he learns from the play *Macbeth* (12). His young mind probes on the difference between good and bad. Sunil thinks that one should stop falling into bog or leave it like *Macbeth* "because there is no way back" (122).

Divakaruni's multicultural perspectives are vividly shaped in the fiction of the immigrants. Lalit, the second generation immigrant, a doctor by profession. Lalit displays modern youth assimilated to host country. He believes that "all immigrants are dreamers, you're saying? Yeah, but they are practical about it. They know what's okay to dream about and what isn't" His sense of humor catches up with people and attracts them with friendly charm. Sudha confides on him and shares the secrets which she couldn't share with her sister. His depiction in the fiction is a blend of assimilated immigrant connected with Indian roots and gets attracted towards Indian people and Indian society. From national to Transnational Divakaruni's artistically wrought narrative shares the same tensions of assimilations and complexities of creating own identity in the host country. The octogenarian who makes life very difficult for his modern assimilated son Trideep, and daughter-in-law Myra. The initial enjoyment is only momentary in America which gets converted to homesickness in no time. "All he'll say- in that painful stammer -is *send me home, Deepu*". (237) The life in an alien country becomes too agonizing and leaves him in depression nostalgia for home his own country where he wants to spend his rest of his life "he knew the song too. He thought of the rivers he would not see again. Green water, kalmi rushes Cranes setting stiffly on the silt. All excess fallen away. The evening has aged into ten-fifteen. Ten-thirty. Eleven. She touches the pillow cover, but it's dry. Some things are beyond tears (261). Bhiku Parekh has observed that the Indian diaspora is "like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the

only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world”(106) This is possibly creating a support system for survival in the host country, but at times the roots weaken and deracinate when nostalgia overrides them in case of the octogenarian in the fiction. Sudha redefines herself also redeploys herself back in her own country as a nurse to the nostalgic ridden octogenarian also to give all three of them a new beginning and independent. “ I always owed myself to be on someone else’s goodwill was the one always taking the one who was taken care of”(331)

The women in the fiction emerge as resilient at the time of trouble however at the end upsurge their flight. “You won’t believe it Sudha,” She says. “I’ve learned to fly.”Anju masters the art of living, shows resilience in her attitude and finds home in the ‘world’; the home of solitude in the alien land.

Divakaruni says “No journey is commonplace. Each person’s journey is unique and changes that person in a special way. I hope I am able to show that through my different characters.” Divakaruni portrays remarkable characters, every character yarn a hope in an alien country, where the immigrants venture to set an identity amidst suffering and overcoming tormenting emotions, discard the cultural differences exhibits resilience. Divakaruni’s narration in the novel *The vine of Desire* is an adroitly tailored from first person, second person and also third person narration. The emotional communication through letters also expresses the family bonds, responsibilities and yearning for home.

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