

**EXPLORATION OF IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE AND SELF
TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *THE VINE OF DESIRE***

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Writers of Indian origin worldwide are immensely contributing towards the immigrant experiences of Indian diaspora. They are creative and have successfully made their impact globally by producing praiseworthy writings that have gained an international acknowledgment. Indian diasporic writers, particularly women, who stay abroad and write about Indian culture, have successfully engraved their special place in Indian English Literature. They explore their deep feelings of immigrant sensibility with the help of portrayal of various aspects of immigrant's life in their writings. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the outstanding voices of the immigrant writers. She is an Indian American writer who began her career during 1990 and established herself as a diasporic and highly sensitive writer.

Chitra Divakaruni started composing poetry first and then turned to the writings of short stories and fiction. Her major **fiction includes:** *The Mistress of Spices*. (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002). *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008). She has successfully portrayed diverse lives of the marginalized immigrants in the American society. Most of her work is partially autobiographical and based on the lives of Indian immigrants. She writes to bring people together by breaking down old stereotypical rules. Divakaruni's writings raise themes of alienation and self-transformation at various levels and try to voice such issues by exploring their roots, loyalty, family, community and identity through her works. The present paper is an attempt to explore the contemporary immigrant experience of expatriates in America, a journey from oppressed and depressed conditions to freedom and discovery in the form of self transformation of women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*.

In *The Vine of desire*, Divakaruni portrays immigrant experiences of expatriate men and women living in America, who struggle hard to maintain their self identity in variable alien culture. She particularly depicts the women, caught in multicultural challenges in alien culture. Who represent transformation in motion, from traditional wives to modern women to survive on their own to reject a home to sustain their identity. Sudha saves her daughter by breaking all restraints bound with Indian marriages and security. With all these burdens she visits to America to give emotional support to her sister and a new direction to her life, even though she is well aware of the fact that her sister Anju's husband, Sunil has a secret passion for her. Meanwhile, 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 old man, who suffers extreme depression for his homeland, India.

Sudha takes divorce from her husband, as her mother-in-law wants her to abort her baby girl Dayita; she is, therefore, a single mother, a stigma in the Indian society. Anju, on the other hand, has a miscarriage of her baby boy, Prem; this really affects her psyche and the relationship with Sunil. They hope that being close can help each other to recover soon but life together becomes more difficult to both of them.

Sudha walks out of the security of her husband and starts a fresh new life in America with her daughter. In America Sudha does not face the restrictions, which are in India. Even though Ashok proposes her, she refuses him because she wants to lead her life independently. Although, in India, Sudha gets the unending, unselfish support of Ashok who is her first love, and stands by her throughout her troubles, she rejects Ashok's proposal because she does not want to depend on Ashok's assistance for her daughter's future. She comes to America to achieve freedom and independence. She begins to build a new community around her and to fit happily into her new life. She gets acquainted with the American way of life. America becomes her land, the land of prosperity and opportunity. She 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. However, it is significant that Anju refuses to come back India though her mother and others insist her to come. When she gets separated from Sunil, she refuses any help from Sunil. In this way Divakaruni shows the liberal American notion of feminism encourages Indian women to struggle for the freedom and independence. Anju and Sudha are well educated and economically independent women in search for their identity. This is like Shashi Deshpande's Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* or with Manju Kapur's Nisha in *Difficult Daughters*.

Sudha is greatly mesmerized by the American proverb that is "*Live for yourself.*"ⁱ She states that now she will not think about others as she used to be in the past. Initially, she falls in love with American life style and makes friendship with American guy Lalit in the party. In *The Vine of Desire*, Divakaruni explores how the American cultural set up greatly makes the impact on Sudha's life style. She is fully agree to the American philosophy. She says in the novel: "Live for yourself"... "I'm not sure what it means. I'm not sure I know how to do it and still be a good person. And I want to, you know. I still want to be a good person, even if I've failed at being a good wife... Yet I know I can't go back to the old way, living for others."ⁱⁱ In California, Sudha feels lost in a society where it seems that there are no rigid rules to follow at least. Sudha goes through a lot of transformation as she gets freedom that she could never get in her home culture. Thus, Divakaruni portrays how the gender politics is deeply rooted in Indian culture in contrast with the equal freedom offered to women in the United States. She contrasts the two cultures clearly in poetical terms by reconstructing personal and national histories simultaneously in a powerful and persuasive narrative. In this novel, the American culture is more dominant and at the same time, there are various instances in which the reader can find the echoes of Indian culture also.

Sudha is aware of the long stares from Anju's husband Sunil and knows that she is blessed with beauty. Sudha deliberately avoids being alone with Sunil, she neither trusts him, nor herself. The sin that Sudha does not want to commit is committed. But later she feels guilty for her behavior. So, she decides to leave the Sunil's house immediately. We can witness the predicament of women in a male dominated society where woman is victimized either as wife or as the other woman. Sudha realizes that she is also a part of that tradition, which she so much wants to get rid of. In America Sudha becomes the victim of Sunil's lust, so she flees from her cousin's home, to work as a nursemaid to an old man to earn a livelihood. Meanwhile Sunil and Anju also get separated.

Chitra Divakaruni makes a fine portrayal of an Indian immigrant Sudha, who decides to accept the job as a nurse to look after an old man. Now, She starts earning by herself that gives her feeling of empowerment. She starts evaluating the American culture in her lonely fight to carry on her life in the immigrant land. She also compares the social and cultural system in America and India when she arrives in the house of Mr.Sen. She now concludes that there can be a prosperous life in her homeland, if she returns there to get settle down in the different part of her homeland. Her immigrant experience in America gives her new insights in her life that can take her back to India as an enriched person.

During immigrants stay in the new country and in interaction with the representative culture the subjectivities and modes of thinking of the diasporas get changed and they too intervene in the cultural discourse of the dominant culture. Thus, so much change is seen in the identities of diasporas with the changed global economic, political and cultural scenario. In Sunil's case, it is his passion for Sudha and change brought in him by American society. As he says to his wife Anju, "For a long time now, we've just made each other unhappy."ⁱⁱⁱ Sunil wants to start the divorce proceedings as quickly as possible. Sunil and Anju's relations are emotionally dry and silence. There is no smile and laughter, no free exchange of thoughts and ideas, any queries and questions between them. The bond of love between the wife and the husband is lost. Divakaruni projects male passions which make them not care for morals and values. They keep them aside only to seek personal fulfillment. This kind of infidelities of husband, seem to occur in a woman's life but she has to bear in silence. In *The Mistress of Spices*, one of the characters, Lalchandani's wife, also has to face the same kind of humiliation. Divakaruni shows the typical male attitude. Men do not think of morals and values and do not care much about the suffering in women.

Divakaruni seems to suggest that when the problems of women are unheard and the anguish is pent up in their minds. They look for various means to get relieved from them. The same sort of situation is experienced by the women in Indian patriarchal society, who are not given a voice and hence turn panic in their lives. But, here we have the bold Anju, who comes out of this complicated phase and stands on her own feet.

Anju is not like Sudha, she doesn't like certain aspects of her home culture but her view is quite balanced about both Indian and American culture. She is realistic in her judgments and knows the fact very well that she idealizes India after Sunil's adultery when she longs to be back in the place where she grew up. She deliberately decides to stay in America appreciating the changes that have occurred in her life in that place, some of them having thrown her into deep grief, but others have given her hope to relocate herself. Her stay in America makes her more alert that helps her to adopt a more westernized way of thinking in that she starts believing that she owes something to herself.

The technique of the novel reflects the transformations in both the author and the characters. Divakaruni incorporates a whole range of issues related to the lives of the women. These include arranged marriage, unhappy relationships, divorce, female foeticide, the conflict between old values, self-transformation and new female experiences that are both repressive and expressive; the two sisters undergo a catharsis of a range of emotions, individually work out strategies of survival and finally emerge as stronger women. Unlike other immigrant narratives, Chitra conceives the Indian women's immigration to the US as a journey from oppressed and depressed conditions to freedom and discovery of the self with the inspiration of western influence.

Nostalgia or homesickness is a phenomenon most of the immigrants face in their stay in foreign land. As they live in a new land, it is inevitable that they think about their culture, the

familiar environment in their homelands. They find themselves unable to adjust in a new culture. Because of this alienation from the mainstream American society, most of them become lose their hope. Sudha feels that the old man is not leading his life happily because he stays in an alien land; “In this bed, in this house, in this country, all of which is alien to him”^{iv} She senses that he may get peace in his homeland. So, she assumes that he would get recovered, if he is taken to his native land. In the first generation of immigrants, migration creates alienation, nostalgia of the past and rootlessness due to firmly clinging to the cultural beliefs, practices, norms of the homeland, of which Makarand Paranjape makes observation. As he says, “there is a clinging to the old identity and a resistance to making a transition”^v

The writer succeeds in portraying how the life varies for an Indian and Indian American. Myra and her husband Trideep are an excellent example of this. Myra is tired of taking care of Triddep’s father who irritates her a lot. Immigrants usually when enter US initially, love to live like Americans by absorbing the native culture, but later they lose their interest and attention. Similarly, Triddep’s father enjoyed his life in the US initially, but later he insists his son to send him back home. A sense of alienation and displacement is seen in the old man that leads to his mental ill-health. He lacks the inner resources to cope with the displacement and alienation that he experiences in America and he gradually falls down into psychotic-violence. The silence and hollowness London disturb old man and makes him uneasy and alienated. He finds himself insulated and isolated. When old man says, “Young people who come to this country never want to leave” 320 Sudha responds him “America isn’t the same country for everyone, you know. Things here didn’t work out the way I’d hoped. Going back with you would be a way for me to start over in a culture I understand the way I’ll never understand America.”^{vi} Sudha also dislikes some of the cultural patterns of American culture. So, she likes to look back to her home culture in recalling her memories to compares and contrast the cultures of two different lands. The different cultural problems of diaspora are well formed in the concerned novel.

Sudha undergoes in great transformation in America. Sara is completely assimilated in American culture as a modern woman with American view. She turns out to be a source of motivation for others to live in the alien culture. As she says, “You got to get out of this valley, girl, See the other Americas”^{vii} So, Sudha sheds her traditional conservative role of a weak female and changes herself. Divakaruni projects the condition of Indian women and their mundane roles in their lives devoid of new challenges and career through the character of Sara. Sara is a woman who is completely assimilated into the mainstream culture and cannot think of her native country as her own after a few years. She projects the reality and the feelings of NRIs who cannot go back to the past and who have inhabited America as their homes.

Divakaruni’s multicultural perspectives are vividly shaped in the fiction of the immigrants. Lalit, the second generation immigrant, a doctor by profession. He displays modern youth wholly assimilated to host country. Lalit tells Sudha about the immigrant experience, He believes that “All immigrants are dreamers, you’re saying? Yeah, but they’re practical about it. They know what’s okay to dream about and what isn’t”^{viii} indeed the novel present’s diverse immigrant experiences of different characters in the novel.

American society offers opportunities as well as pain to both sisters and this shakes the foundation on which their extraordinary love and friendship stands. Their experience is complex and affects both in different ways. Anju finds a space to live and grow in The United States of America, she starts going to college to join the writers club. She tries to assimilate cultural diversity to explore and discover her creative talent. This is certainly true of many immigrants to America but the same society and its opportunities seem far away from Sudha. Sudha tells

Dayita when she decides to leave Anju and Sunil's house, "Dayita none of the choices ahead of me are good ones. This one just seems a little less bad than the others"^{ix} Finally Sudha decides to return India with another immigrant Mr. Sen, an old man who is keenly waiting to return his homeland, India.

Anju changes and grows by taking up the opportunities she grabs in America. She tells her unborn son Prem about, "who I used to be before the accident of American happened to me"^x In America Anju finally finds her 'voice'. As she tells Sudha about her assignment, "This new woman thinks it's one of the best in the class! She writes on the paper that I have Originality and Voice!"^{xi} Also, when Anju and Sudha meet in San Francisco, before Sudha's departure to India, Anju has news for her, "You won't believe it, Sudha", she says, "I've learned to fly"^{xii} Anju has in this way grabbed the freedom and opportunity. She has learnt hang gliding but figuratively she has learnt that she can do anything and that is the image of Anju, finally we see Anju is flying free of the burdens of the past. She allows the photograph of the stillborn baby Prem to fly away. "She does not want that anyone, not now. Her life is just beginning"^{xiii}

Though the opportunities in The United States of America are not as easily received by Sudha as they got by Anju, still all experiences of her are not disappointing. She succeeds in receiving a job, she starts earning her own money and independent. The same things seem to her impossible in India. Book one of the novel ends when Sudha takes up decision to leave Anju's house, and start independent life in Trideep and Myra's house for taking care of Mr.Sen. In the United States of America, she goes to different places, meets different people and learns to survive entirely different way. She finally makes up her mind to return her native land. Nevertheless she is not going back to the old home but to a new abode, to start a new life, "I never have to depend on anyone again"^{xiv} This new life in India would be in some ways the results of her diasporic experience and transformation, as it is in The United States of America she experiences independence for the first time. Her decision to return back home is a reflection of the changing scenario of the new world. Sudha's relocation is an assertion of her independence. Her decision to return to a new place in the country of her origin indicates that she has successfully altered the terms of an unfair system partially if not wholly. There are doubts in her mind about her choices. However, she says, "*at least I know what I don't want*"^{xv}

Her return is symbolic victory for all the women victimized by the doctrines of the patriarchal system in her country. She denies the offers of the men in her life. Her life seeks new meaning; her diasporic experience becomes useful in empowering her to be self-sufficient, to live life independently just as Anju does. Both women succeed in breaking traditional notions, of womanhood defined by men. The two disappointed women finally begin to talk in 'different voices'. It makes them the symbols of hope, signs that the world is changing and that women are creating their own world.

The women characters like Sudha, Anju, Nalini and Gouri support each other, emphasize with each others' predicaments and stand as examples of empowered women. Divakaruni shifts the focus from traditional portrayal of women who submit to pressure from all sides. Her characters instead become bold, courageous and independent fighting all odds against them. Divakaruni probably wishes that women need to be bold and active even in difficult situations; and they can create a life of their own, a destiny of their own, if they find out solution by thinking practically. It is not an end to a woman's life if she is deprived of man's love. It is the acceptance of the situation that makes Anju bold and independent. She changes and grows, taking up the opportunities held out to her in America. Sudha too is able to change her life by taking up a job, and to be independent, things that may not have been possible in India.

Divakaruni writes to unite people and she does it by destroying myths and stereotypes. She identifies the strength of mind and potential of the twenty-first century women who desires to get freedom and autonomy in leading their lives.

Works Cited

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- ^{vii} Ibid., p.84
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- ^{ix} Ibid., p.202
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