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# Identity Politics and Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

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### Abstract

This paper tries to examine the identity politics and diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* against the backdrop of cross-cultural, inter-racial, multi-ethnic and transnational communication and interaction. Her concern with identity construction and identity crisis of both her male and female characters call for critical study. The communication and interactions are mainly the outcomes of an individual or community's journey, movement and migration from one locale to another. While the traditional notion of identity relies on the concept of sameness and oneness in the context of diasporic identity, this notion of sameness has come under severe strain. That the changes and transformations taking place in individual and social lives are important constituents of one's identity is a well-accepted argument in contemporary critical parlance. Moreover, the cultural difference and conflict formulate an important ground for critical overview.

*Keywords: Identity, Culture, Immigrant, Family.*

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## 1. Identity Politics and Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has established herself as a prominent figure in diaspora writing and criticism. The immigrant characters, she suggests, demonstrate a proclivity for being trapped between two worlds, exacerbating their inner conflict of being here and there. She is mostly renowned for her innovative storytelling style, lyrical sensibility, representation of female characters in a variety of sociocultural contexts, and uncanny ability to remove all types of barriers that block the ideals of assimilation and integration. Her novels features characters who, while living "beyond," are confronted by the cultural contrasts of two lands and for whom involvement in homeland memory is practically a natural activity. In "Traumatic Pasts, Literary Afterlives and Transcultural Memory: New Direction of literary and Media Memory Studies" Astrid Erll makes the point that memory studies in its recent course exhibits interest in "forms of remembering across nations and cultures" (1). Diasporic persons engage in mnemonic practises regardless of their nation or culture of origin, and their literary representation draws scholarly scrutiny.

The novel, *The Vine of Desire*, was published in 2002, shortly after Divakaruni relocated to Houston, Texas, where she began teaching in the University of Houston's creative writing programme.

It is a follow-up to her previous novel, *Sister of My Heart*. In *The Vine of Desire*, two cousins, Anju and Sudha, are reunited in America's free culture, which is diametrically opposed to traditional Indian culture, in which women are perpetually constrained, neglected, and denied. The tale depicts several threads of traditional Indian life as well as modern, self-sufficient American life. Sudha's journey begins with a life of compromise and sacrifice and ends with a life of freedom, while Anju's path begins with the suppression of dream and achievement and ends with its apparent fulfilment. Along the way, both of them, along with their male equivalents, discover that the old norms do not apply in the new realm. Cultural friction results in individual identity crises. The altered cultural landscape encourages the immigrant characters to forge their own identities free of masculine dominance.

Sudha, in Divakaruni's narration, adopts the role of a representative of those Indian women who bear their terrible lot in order to satisfy their own wishes but who receive no sympathy from society and are crushed under severe criticism as soon as they deviate from their so-called duty. By the novel's conclusion, both adored sisters have become estranged not only physically but also culturally, as the vivacious and independent Anju pursues her ambition of sailing to the faraway continent of America after marrying Sunil, who harbours an unspoken passion for Sudha. Whereas Anju demonstrates a rebellious attitude and a strong desire to be self-sufficient, Sudha remains devoted to the service of others, and self-sacrifice appears to be an innate characteristic in her.

Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* is preoccupied with identity, its genesis and crisis. Her contemporary protagonists, such as Sudha and Anju, are preoccupied with their uniqueness and self-established identities. They believe in the concept of a fixed identity but eventually discover that identity is a fluid concept. Numerous female characters retain their uniqueness in the face of change. In today's globalised world, passive responsiveness to social reality is unwanted. As a result, they shape their lives to comply to that order.

In Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*, the immigrant characters live in both India and America. In a globalised world, the concept of an individual being given a single nation is superfluous, at least for diasporic people. National identity has been supplanted by diasporic identification for the diasporic community. Globalization has resulted in multiculturalism, international ties, mass mobility and migration in order to promote national solidarity. In the current global context, the diasporic subject's seeming loss of one area for the apparent acquisition of another has the potential to pave the way for global identity.

*The Vine of Desire* is concerned with physical desire as well as the desire of immigrants to fulfil their ambitions in a new nation and to create a sense of self-sufficiency. Thus, desire develops a rhizomatic quality in the narrative. Sudha travels to California to assist her heartbroken sister, Anju, in fulfilling her yearning for parenthood by laying her infant daughter Dayita in her lap, and in fulfilling her own desire for independence. Anju has suffered a miscarriage, while Sudha has experienced a shattered marriage. Sudha travels to America in search of a fresh life, leaving her family and sweetheart behind. Sudha, like Anju, undergoes identity shifts when she travels beyond the boundaries of her land and culture. Sudha has been materially and emotionally dependent on others up to the point of her journey to America, yet she travels "independently or quasi-independently of men" (James Clifford's "Diaspora," 314). By granting Ramesh divorce, she subverts the conventional view of marriage as an institution. By defying all odds and giving birth to her daughter, she confronts the rigidity of her in-laws in India: "I cannot go back to India, to the way I was. Helpless, dependent - I can't love like that. I can't bring up my daughter to think that is how a woman needs to live" (104). Her resignation to Sunil's physical drive, or, more precisely, her hesitation to dispute his advancement, reveals another aspect of her identity. She, too, has sexual desire and succumbs to it when the vine of want encircles her. Sudha may succumb to her desire for sensual pleasure with Sunil because to the American attitude in "live for yourself" (177). However, the conflict arises when her Indian self makes her feel terrible, and she is forced to leave her sister of the heart's household of five on her alone. As she states in the novel, she enters an in-between space of identity: "I want to bite into the apple of America. I want to swim to India, to the parrot-green smells of childhood. I want a mother's arms to weep in" (87).

The diasporic protagonists in Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* frequently overcome their sense of alienation and isolation through alternate ways such as storytelling, taking an interest in culinary skills, and artistic forms such as painting, music, and film that are rooted in their birthplace. The indulgence of immigrant characters in such pastimes serves to jog their remembrance of their birthplace. Memory and nostalgia are inextricably linked to the conceptualization and creation of diasporic identity. Numerous fictional characters rely on memory to fill the emptiness left by the loss of their motherland. Thus, memory is central to her fictional portrayals of diasporic identity.

Sudha learns from her life experiences that she must be self-sufficient in her own right, much like Anju, who has begun seeking a college degree that she was unable to obtain in India, when marriage proved to be more essential than study. Sudha feels compelled to learn more about and adapt to American culture and way of life while physically residing there. She affirms: "I should be more like Anju; I know that I need to learn about this country. The TV, in spite of all its faults, can offer me images. Names. The clues of accents. But I get confused" (58). The chance encounter with Sara, the self-sufficient Indian immigrant, instils in her the desire for economic independence. Even Lupe, the Mexican American character, inspires her to live an independent life.

The intersection of the two cultural ways elicits an awareness about self-perception in the immigrant women characters, as well as the necessity of interrogating the rigid cultural norms that affect them not only physically, but also psychologically. The narration of the stories fragments an individual's cohesive sense of being, and the fractured sense is portrayed to come into conflict with a progressive world that demands change in the self and surrounds.

*The Vine of Desire* depicts other threads of immigrant life, as Divakaruni presents additional immigrant characters in addition to Anju, Sudha, and Sunil. They have come to pursue and realise their own ambitions in a foreign culture. Each immigrant's experience is unique. Additionally, the class distinctions among the immigrants have been demonstrated. Sunil's client, the Chopras, has achieved success and lives a luxury lifestyle, whilst Sunil has yet to accomplish more of what he desires. Lalit is living his dream by being a successful doctor but not without initial turmoil encountered by his father and he himself as he tells Sudha, "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" (181). Not only do dreams suggest achievement, but failure is a continual threat as well. The writer introduces Sudha's boss Trideep, an Indian immigrant, his American wife, and his octogenarian father, who yearns only for his motherland, especially after growing ill.

The portrayal of Myra and Trideep provides another layer to the novel's essentially linear narrative. Cultural differences bring these two people closer together, but Myra's failure to comprehend the elderly man's altered behaviour is a symbol of cultural struggle. She is enchanted by eastern mysticism but is perplexed by the old man's yearning to return to his original place. The old man's yearning for home justifies Salman Rushdie's comment about the diasporic writers for whom, the "present is foreign" and the "past is home" ("Imaginary Homelands," 9). Sudha attempts to reconcile the contrasts between the two cultures while living with Trideep's family. She earns the elderly man's affection by introducing him to his culture through cuisine, music, care, and love, as well as by teaching Dayita to address him as Dada. At the novel's conclusion, she decides to return Trideep's father to his hometown in North Bengal, as the elderly man does not believe America to be his home. Sudha ultimately fulfils the old man's desire to return home, which conforms to Saffan's concept of a diasporic individual's desire to return to his hometown whenever the circumstances permit. In the old man's perception, "young people when come to this country never want to leave" (320). However, Sudha's case is unique in that she did not travel to America with the intention of settling permanently. Her voyage is more akin to a self-discovery journey that aids her in developing her own identity.

It encapsulates the unusual kinship between two cousins, Anju and Runu, as well as the disparity between Indian and American life styles, faiths, and beliefs. Divakaruni demonstrates in this narrative, as well as in its novelistic adaptation, how the fixation for a male child pushes certain Indian families to abort the girl child only for the sake of perpetuating the family lineage.

As members of the diasporic community, immigrants in Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* seek their ancestral roots with the purpose of establishing and cementing a local or national identity, while also making intentional efforts to adhere to the host nation's cultural rules. However, in the era of transnationalism and globalisation, the restricted notion of identity conceived in terms of home or host states is being questioned. By overcoming the trauma, loss, and sorrow, diasporic subjects progress toward negotiation, reconciliation, and acceptance. The negotiation results in naturalisation for the immigrants in the host country, despite the rhetoric of being rootless and establishing roots elsewhere troubling them for generations. As a result, identification, particularly national and cultural identity, cannot be singular at any point for diasporic communities. It is fascinating to contrast the postmodern concept of rhizome with the classical understanding of roots at this point. Perhaps it is not so much about developing roots elsewhere as it is about paving the way for rhizomatic existence notwithstanding the roots.

## 2. Conclusion

Divakaruni has attempted to represent the distinctions across cultures through Anju and Sudha. While these differences can be a source of contention at times, as long as individuals demonstrate a willingness to accept and adjust to new conditions in a new location, things appear to be less complicated. Sudha considers her daughter's obstinacy in the face of cultural differences: "In India this stubbornness would have been a disadvantage, something to be scolded - even beaten - out of a girl. But here (in America) she's not sure. All rules are different in America, and she knows none of them yet" (7). Not bargaining, but return to the source becomes the defining factor of her identity for her. She is portrayed as more than an immigrant; she is portrayed as a cultural explorer. On the other hand, Anju and Sunil depict the immigrant's desire to live in the host country while adopting its social and cultural characteristics.

Divakaruni's immigrant characters exhibit a range of responses to their immigrant circumstances, and are frequently more self-sufficient than their non-immigrant counterparts. Exposure to a more free and advanced society - whether in India or America - expands an individual's reach beyond their usual limitations. An examination of her fiction reveals that her portrayal of the Indian or diasporic community is critical in terms of social constraints, the quest for belonging, the interaction of memory nostalgia and double consciousness in immigrant lives, and racism, all of which may go unnoticed in the dazzling light of globalisation and multiculturalism.

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