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## REINVENTION OF THE “SELF” AND “IDENTITY”- A STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURE IN SELCTED NOVELS OF CHITRA BENARJEE DIVAKARUNI

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“The audiences have been very multicultural when I do a reading, and people of all ages come,” Divakaruni says. “A lot of people are connecting to Tilo’s story because most of us can relate to the immigrant experience – we know how it is to leave familiar things, even if it’s just moving to a new neighborhood.”

### **Abstract:**

According to the effect of the “globalization” Indian people are changed. Changing in sense of socially and economically people are forced to move away from their roots of their motherland. Imperialism has paid great impact on almost all the Asian countries and created their cultural changes on all human beings. Globalization marked with great cultural changes in all kinds of class, caste, religion and take away to culture is as artificial construct only. Literature is a mirror of society has succeeded to bring out the dilemmatic diasporic sensibility of global citizen. There are number of writers belongs to diasopric literature, who represent their own people and culture being on the foreign land like U.S.A. Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni is also one of the writer.

This paper undertakes on various aspects of the cross-cultural intersections and study emerging, potent identity of the self. A woman wants liberalism in both socio and economical conditions. It represents the positions of woman in India and foreign land, who has been longing for self identity. Indian society is not considered equal in comparison to the perceptions of women with experiences of their male counterparts. Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni presents Indian women’s immigration to the United States as a journey from oppressed state and miserable conditions to freedom and discovery of the self with the influence and inspiration of the western culture. As a promised land America seems to be unfold abundant possibilities to help and realize the dreams of all estranged women characters, who achieves their lost wish and status of freedom in society in male dominant society.

**Key words:** Immigration, Identity and independence, Tradition and modernity, Women's voice, Cultural intersections, Diasporic Identity.

In an interview *"Thoughtful India"* Divakaruni affirms that her success lies only in touching the hearts of the readers as she states that, "on some level to say as long as the books are reaching readers and touching their hearts that's the real success, everything else is finance" ("Divakaruni"). In the connection special, she further reveals that, "immigration, in my case, made me into a writer, it gave me a subject to write about it gave me a whole different focus for looking back at my home culture but also for looking at this new world in which I found myself, everything was so different". She declares about all her writings.

I live in America; America is a part of my life; should I not write for white people also? It's a defeatists and hypocritical attitude to say that I will live in America and write only for other Indians, I don't think writers anywhere think, "I will write only for this community, and nobody else should have access to my work." That goes against the whole impulse of what makes us to write, which is to reach out and communicate across the barriers and to create and improve understanding between people. Why else are we writing?(cheug)

As a social phenomenon multiculturalism seeks to preserve cultural differences and erase the dichotomy of high/low culture which leads cross-culture. Distinguishing boutique multiculturalism and strong multiculturalism Stanley fish says, "The politics of difference is what I mean by strong multiculturalism. It is strong because its values difference in and for itself rather than as a manifestation of something more basically constitutive.....". The discourse of multiculturalism emerged as a subversive exercise to colonial literature which misrepresenting the cultures of the Africans, Native Americans, Latinos and Asians. Multicultural literature refers to mass of literary works that embraces many cultures and where culture is an integral part of the story. Cross-culture elements find in the works of the Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipul, Amitha Gosh, Toni Morrison, Bharati Mukarjee, Monica Alli, Bapsi Sidhewa and Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni among others. All these writers sharing post colonial diasporic identity and they depict the cultural diversity in cosmopolitan view in all its rich setting.

Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni is one the creative writer of realm from Indo-American literature, who produced number of books which are set in both India and America, featured Indian born women woven between traditional Indian and western cultural values to presents cross-cultural in her novels. Post- colonial era has its impact of fast changes on socio and economic scenario across the globe. Globalisization has paved the way for greater cross-culture symbiosis. This has resulted in revolution of literature with new concepts of 'cultural diversity', 'self identity', 'idependence'. Multiculturalism is a concept of new literature and it informs post-colonial literature, especially diasproic writings. Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni is literary voice presents Indian immigrants who longed for self identity especially in reference to the women characters of Americans of South Asian descents. Influence of her Indian culture and literature made her to grow up as a writer of cross-cultural writings to present both Indian traditional culture and western culture in her most of the novels. Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni's materials stride multiple cultures and nations as Bharati Mukarjee's and Meena Alexander's narrative do. But, unlike the works of Mukarjee and Alexander, the problems, pains, and erasures brought about immigration are emphasized to the point where some aspects of her works strongly promote orientalist and neo imperialist projects" (kuortti & Rajeshwar 79).

All her writings probe more deeply into related issues of women's survivals, relationship between sister and sister, mother-daughter, role in a family and society consequences which leads to self identity of woman. Increased writings feminism made most of the woman writers to write the image of women in fiction has undergone rapid changes. Which leads from traditional self sacrificing women in family system to character for searching for self indentify. Most of the women characters of Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni's wanted to lead a happy independent life with self identity not like a woman in traditional Indian family

system to scarifies everything. This can be seen in the works of most promienent Indian women writers like Anitha Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur, and Arundathi Roy.

Chitra Benarjee Divakaruni now settled in the United States of America, who is an Indian resident from Calcutta. She is an award winning novelist, poet and short story writer, her works widely published in over 50 magazines including Atlantic Monthly and New Yorker and her works translated into 11 languages including Dutch, Hebrew and Japanese. Divakaruni is a Co-Founder and former president of *Maitri*, a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. An English and creative writing instructor at Foothill College near San Jose, Calif,. She is better known in academic circles as editor of the popular Multitudes anthology. With the reference to her works it is noted that, she is carrying the message of Cross-Culture understanding to show women's self identity.

Divakaruni works are largely set in India and the United States of America, and often focuses on the South Asian experience of immigrants. Her novels include multiple genres as Realistic Fiction, Historical Fiction, Magic Realism and Fantasy. Much of her novels state that they are partially autobiographical. Her most of the fictions are set in Bay Area of California, and includes nuances of immigrant experience. She focuses mostly on the differences between society of India and abroad communities. It leads her to show Cross-cultural lives of the Indian women struggling with cultural shackle to carve out for self identity of their own. In her novels she shows the contrast between selfishness of women in India and the freedom they got in their adopted land. The question "why we have migrated ? and what, if any , are the peculiar pleasures of exile? Is their part of a hunger for recognition?" according to these questions Divakaruni's writings raises the themes of alienation and self-transformation and voice such questions by exploring the roots of the allegiance, family, origin, community and identity through her works.

Divakaruni is a writer of certain cultural traits, which results the fact that living abroad widens the mental horizons of Indian women. In her fiction it is clear that the women who either live abroad or happen to be visiting India and in other way who live in India happens to visit United States of America. No doubt at all these women characters born in Indian conditions of the patriarchal society and grown up in a traditional culture conditions. These characters are unable to break their traditional bonds during the moments of choice and crisis but wanted to live in independent conditions for self identity. The female characters in Divakaruni are tattered in between old and new world cultures. They question the nature of their lives, and roles of mothers, sisters, wives, daughters and their profession. This awareness to rethink about their reinvention of the self as a women and instills in them the confidence and strength to go ahead. In this way Divakaruni focuses on the diasporic Indian women caught between two opposing worlds. They find themselves in between state, struggling to carve out identities (self) of their own.

As a foreigner Divakaruni leaved India and caused to reevaluate her homeland's culture, specifically in the treatment of women characters in her works. Most of the Indian women living in rural areas and some of them receiving formal education, some of them self identified professionals and most of the women are not receiving education but gaining status only through marriage and bearing sons. "At Berkely, I volunteered at the women's centre", she says. "As I got more involved, in became interested in helping battered women-violence against women cross-cultural borders and educational levels. Then, slowly, I focused on women in my community". These resulted in Divakaruni and her friends found a helpline *Maitri* in 1991 to provide services to Indian American women. This leads her to write some of the short stories with help of help-line volunteers because they have observed some of the phone calls and receives their struggles of the Indian American women.

*The mistress of spices* begins with the initial adventures of the protagonist Tilotamma, in search of an independent identity. After her training as a spice mistress she enters into her new role of administrating spices to the expatriate Indians in Oakalnd. In this novel Divakaruni adopts a complex strategy for unfolding the diasporic dilemma of the immigrants. Divakaruni portrays the cultural diversity without bias and stereotypes. This is story set in an Indian grocery in Oakaland, where Tilo, the proprietress, dispenses spices like magical charms to heal the sundry problems of her customers. At home in Sunnyvale in the Bay Area, Divakaruni employs spices in a broad range of Indian dishes. Some reflects her Bengali background; others, her husband's origins in south India.

The spices are important characters, "metaphor of how we take things that are common to us for granted and don't know their magic power," she says. "One of the connected thoughts of the novel is that there is magic in our everyday life and we have to know how it finds." The phrase of this novel deliberately gendered to undercut the power associated with mastering supernatural powers. Generally as per Indian Myth the supernatural power is closer to the hearts of the women than men. Apart from the immigrant Indians another community that draws our attention in the narrative is the Native American community. The complexity of their cross cultural relationship is portrayed through Evvie and her folks.

*Sister of My Heart* centers around two Indian girls, Anju and Sudha who are brought up by three widowed women: Aunt Pishi, Gouri and Nalini and the way their life changes with marriage and a secret of the past. The novel is set in Calcutta (urban India) in the 1980s in the last quarter of the twentieth century which still defines specific and strong cultural heritage. The Chatterjee family stays in the 'old crumbling marble mansion' and that is the heritage property which they possess. Most important fact regarding this novel is the fact that the novelist has chosen ordinary characters which generally live inside and outside the purview of our social set up and through them the writer has given a glimpse into the socio-cultural condition prevalent in India. The story moves with the narration of the birth of Anju and Sudha , their childhood stories, their escapades and their life after marriage.

Divakaruni has looked back in all its neutrality the goodness as well as the negative aspects of the society in which she was brought up through her characters. Avtar Brah has mentioned: On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination; on the other hand; home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations. In other words, the varying experiences of pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture. Divakaruni has exemplified this idea of 'home' and penning experiences which reflect not just the locale but also the inherent tradition and culture.

*The Vine of Desire* continues the story of Anju and Sudha, the two young women at the center of Divakaruni's bestselling novel *The Sister of My Heart*. Far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, and after years of living separate lives, Anju and Sudha rekindle their friendship in America. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support each of them needs. Anju gets strength this way to pick up the pieces of her life after a miscarriage and Sudha gets confidence to make a life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita without her husband. Their bond is shaken to the core when they confront the deeply passionate feelings that Anju's husband has for Sudha.

We find here the dilemma of the young girl who wishes to behave in the progressive manner of her western counterparts but whose Indian background makes her conscience prick. Here we find the difference of cultural upbringing. If she had come from a different society, more progressive and forward thinking she would not have gone through the emotions and the reactions that she experiences. The East-West Cultural Studies of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* confrontation is appears limited in scope and depth mainly because she is too idealized to bring out the clash between his inherited and adopted cultures. She would not accept the responsibility for her actions nor for the consequences that resulted; choosing

instead to blame others. Apart from Anju's interest in India and the little facts that she has discovered, her life is also shaken by new shocks given by her husband.

Traditionally in India, the burden of the family is borne by the woman she is also expected to preserve the traditions of her ancestors and culture, even at the cost of her personal interest. Her individuality is ever endangered because of her efforts to strike a compromise between the burden of legacy, and the need to preserve roots to establish a position for her. Sudha who is married in India and living in a joint family selflessly accepts her husband's dominating mother and two young brothers. She occupies herself with the daily responsibilities of life. She forgets her passion for stitching and designing clothes. She also tries to divest herself, of the memories of her past love, Ashok of whom she is always reminded because she is dissatisfied with her married life. But she continues to live in her husband's house with forbearance till she is made to undergo an ultrasound test during pregnancy to find out the sex of her child. The insistence by her mother-in-law to abort the female fetus is the last straw and she decides to depart from her husband's home. Sudha flees away from her husband's house because she is being urged to abort her unborn daughter and returns to her paternal home. When Anju learns of this development in Sudha's life therefore she invites her to America where she feels it will be easier for Sudha to live as a single parent and look after her child. Sudha takes the rebellious step of running away to her mother's house and then to her cousin Anju in the U.S., mainly because she is opposed to the idea of female feticide and hates the thought of enduring life-long submission to the old fashioned views of her mother-in-law and an ineffective husband.

Indian culture demands specific duties of woman and strict conceptions of morality are held in high-esteem. While outside home, in the public realm in America, she has begun to experience a sense of freedom and self-expression at many levels which is conflicting with her domestic role and duty. The development of a divided role is largely due to circumstances, created to cope up and respond to the cultural dissonance that surrounds her. This happens with Sudha also. She comes to America and begun to experience a sense of freedom which changes her attitude towards Indian woman who is weighed down by social relationships and communal identities that prevail both in her pre and post marital life.

*Queen of Dreams* is a modern American immigrant saga with a large dollop of that south Asian writer fetish-magic realism. There are portents and omens, mysterious men in white, women in crowns of flowers and dreams becoming reality. The roomful of mourners at her mother's funeral may or may not have been imagined. When little Jona makes drawings of her disturbing dreams of people trapped in burning buildings, two planes crash into the Twin Towers in New York, and a circle is complete. But there are also coke-fests in seedy clubs, handsome strangers doing Tai Chi in eucalyptus groves and cookie-dough ice cream and peanut butter jelly sandwiches for lunch.

*Queen of Dreams* is distinctly women's writing as opposed to chick lit and is more than your average mother-daughter tearjerker. Two things really stand out in this novel. Attack on huge impersonal business chains that swallow whole the little Guy. Rakhi's Chai House is in danger when Java (think Starbucks), a huge chain of cafes infamous for cropping up around popular local joints and squeezing them out of business, opens a store down the street. And the other, how life changed overnight for the brown-skinned citizen in America immediately after 9/11. Though there is no happy ending, there is some degree of hope that it could easily come, and with it some deeper understanding too. When the *Chai* House finds a new partner in Mr Gupta, the chef extraordinaire of Bengali snacks, exit the cookies and enter the *pakoras*. In striving to become "authentic", the tea house survives the competition, and the lesson is learned- "To thy own self be true." Later when the tea house is vandalised for being "foreign" and for being open the day after 9/11- though more people are outraged by the act than are in agreement with it- for Rakhi the refrain remains a comment made by one of the attackers: "You ain't American." Even though occasionally two-dimensional, the novel is more than occasionally profound.

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