

Cultural Tensions and the Diasporic Experience in *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* delves into the complex interplay of cultural expectations and diasporic identity through the intertwined lives of two cousins, Anju and Sudha. The novel explores the deep-rooted traditions of Indian society, including gender roles, family obligations, and arranged marriages, while simultaneously presenting the challenges of adapting to new cultural landscapes, particularly in the United States. As the protagonists navigate between the worlds of tradition and modernity, homeland and diaspora, they encounter a range of emotional and psychological tensions. These tensions are portrayed through their shifting roles as daughters, wives, and independent women striving for self-definition. The novel highlights how the diasporic experience acts both as a space of alienation and empowerment, where cultural identity is constantly negotiated. Divakaruni skillfully portrays the inner conflict between preserving one's heritage and embracing personal freedom, making *Sister of My Heart* a poignant narrative of transformation, resistance, and resilience. Through the dual perspectives of the protagonists, the novel presents a richly textured portrayal of immigrant life, familial bonds, and the struggle for autonomy within and beyond cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Cultural conflict, Diaspora, Feminism, Gender roles, Identity, Immigration, Transformation etc

1. Introduction

Culture is an unavoidable determinant in the identity formation of a person, be a native or an immigrant/migrant. Beliefs, values, norms, and ways of life- individual, social, religious, political- are ingrained in the concept of culture everywhere. Interestingly, the notion of conflict is invariably interlinked with the concept of culture. To cope with the change in a given socio-cultural context, one

often envisages a conflict that restricts their complete assimilation and negotiation with the new cultural norms and beliefs. This paper is written with its focus on the issues of cultural conflict as represented in selected works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who mostly deals with the lives of immigrants in her fictional works. Culture is seen as the vehicle of civilization. At various levels, culture and the cultural ways determine the changes that take place in society. Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) argues that culture is “the play of signifying practices; the idiom in which social meaning is constituted, appropriated, contested and transformed” (234). So the practices that define a particular culture can go through changes and transformations. There can be different ways of defining a culture, as Stuart Hall maintains in the *Introduction of Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. The anthropological definition considers culture as “whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people, community, nation or social group” (2). “Way of life” refers to the activities and performances one observes under the purview of a given structure of values and norms. Hall has also emphasized the sociological aspect where culture is looked upon as “‘shared values’ of a group or of society” (2). A person hardly thinks of going against the social norms she is a part of and whenever she attempts to transgress the imposed norms, clash and conflict have to be faced and taken care of. Interestingly, when one crosses the cultural boundary of her nation (for example, the diasporic community), the “set of practices” once practised in the nation of origin stands in conflict with another “set of practices” which are integral to the host nation. In view of Hall’s argument, two persons belonging to the same cultural root can interpret the world around them in almost the same manner as they share the same “cultural codes” (5). However, even in the same culture, “the diversity of meanings about any topic, and more than one way of interpreting or representing it” (2) cannot be overlooked. Culture, therefore, can be interpreted as a set of practices that may differ from person to person or a nation to nation. Literary representations of cultural conflict open up new avenues for the discussion to study various traits of the critical perspective associated with it. The characters become the writers’ mouthpiece to react and represent the various strands of culture and the associated notion of clash and conflict. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s fictional characters are interesting to study from the perspective of cultural conflict.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer and Professor of creative writing at the University of Houston, Texas. Since the publication of her collected poems and short stories, Divakaruni has received many awards and recognitions that have helped her establish her reputation as a writer. Moving to the USA at a very early age with a teenager’s expectation and urge to fulfill dreams and utilize the best opportunities, offered Divakaruni an opportunity to understand the multilayered view associated with the lived experience of acculturation and assimilation – the experience being pleasant and bitter at the same time. Like many other contemporary writers of the Indian diaspora, Divakaruni had to face bitter responses from the natives of the hostland: “I felt a real sense of being ‘other’. People were so startled to see an Indian person in Indian clothes-people actually stopped their cars to look when I walked down the street” (Hong). She inculcated the new cultural norms and values and tried to negotiate the in-betweenness of her position at the interstice of the two worlds – one which she inhabits physically and the other psychologically. It is interesting to study the writer’s women characters who mostly offer a great evolution of their personality – from being timid to bold, dependent to independent, all abiding subservient to determined decision-maker for the self and a creator of self-identity as a whole. It can be argued that in Divakaruni’s fictional world, the literary characters are in a constant flux of changing cultural behavior. The requirement to fit into the complex world of cultural norms that are something here in the native land

and something else there in the host land poses the characters at the receiving end of clash and conflict. The crossroad between the two cultural ways evokes in the women characters a realisation about self-perception and the necessity to interrogate the rigid cultural norms that tend to suffocate them not only physically but psychologically. The unified sense of being is fragmented and dragged into the confrontation of a progressive world which demands change in the self and the surroundings. The writer portrays in her works both native and immigrant characters with equal ease and critical attention. The immigrant characters Divakaruni projects show the tendency of being caught between two worlds that intensify the inner dilemma of being here and there at the same time.

Through Anju and Sudha Divakaruni has tried to portray the differences in cultures, which at times come under the scanner of conflict, but as long as the individuals show the tendency of freely accepting and adapting themselves to the changed circumstances in the new land, things appear to be less complicated. Sudha thinks of the stubbornness of her daughter regarding the disparities between the two cultures: “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). For her, not negotiation, but a return to the root becomes the determinant of her identity. More than an immigrant, she is portrayed as a cultural traveler. Anju and Sunil, on the other hand, portray the immigrant’s desire to live life in the hostland, accepting its social and cultural aspects. To precisely summarise the discussion on cultural conflict with reference to the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, it can be stated that the thematic undertone of Divakaruni’s novels offers an interaction between two cultures’ nuances and the inevitable conflict out of this interaction opens up self-realization for each standing at the interstice of two cultures.

Indian-American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s works, which chiefly deal with the existential quandaries of expatriates, tackle two problematic areas of contemporary post-colonial theory - 'diaspora' and 'feminism'. Drawing on her own rich experience as an immigrant, Divakaruni projects the struggle, rootlessness, and anxiety as well as the adaptation and assimilation of foreign cultures by the Indian diaspora. Divakaruni delicately portrays how expatriate women, naturally endowed with the feminine ability to relate simultaneously to two homes, employ wisdom and compassion to empathize with two different cultures, Indian and American. The experience of migration and living in diaspora has produced a plethora of studies on the recent post-colonial literature. The immigrant issues have been explored by many diasporic writers. In recent years, much critical interest has grown in the writings of Indian immigrant writers settled in other countries. Chitra Banerjee, the Bengal-born writer, immigrated to the U.S. in one of the foremost writers of Diasporic literature. She often focuses on the character balancing two worlds, particularly Indian immigrants struggling for a peaceful life in America. The ambitious individuals uproot themselves from their cultural moorings and migrate to countries that promise them better living conditions and comforts. The immigrant who carries dreams of aspiration also carries with him his natural identity. His reluctance to shed his identity makes it difficult for him to assimilate into his home. The natives, too, are not ready to accept him without any reservations. This harsh reality, besides causing innumerable problems to the co-migrant, leads to various tensions in society. Divakaruni’s books are directed to women of all races. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their culture and religion. ‘Diaspora’ (meaning ‘to disperse’ in Greek) is a major area of current post-colonial discourse. A diaspora refers to a group of people who have migrated from

their homeland and who maintain some connection to their culture of origin. Diasporas can be formed for a variety of reasons, including economic, political, or social factors. The term diaspora is often used to refer to the dispersal of a specific group of people, such as the Jewish diaspora, which refers to the dispersion of the Jewish people from their homeland in the Middle East. Other examples of diasporas include the African diaspora, which refers to the dispersal of people of African descent around the world, and the Irish diaspora, which refers to the dispersal of Irish people around the world. Diasporas often maintain strong connections to their culture of origin, including through language, religion, customs, and traditions. They may also play a role in shaping the culture and politics of their host countries, and they may act as a bridge between their homeland and the wider world. The Indian diaspora is one of the largest and most well-established diaspora communities in the world, with a presence in virtually every corner of the globe. The Indian diaspora has a significant impact on the global economy and has played a key role in the economic development of many countries. Many members of the Indian diaspora have achieved success in various fields, including business, politics, science, and the arts. The Indian diaspora is also known for maintaining strong cultural ties to India and for actively participating in the cultural and social life of their host countries.

Divakaruni has created a revolution in English fiction by introducing various themes. Her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, women, immigration, history, myth, and challenges of living in a multicultural world. Her works portray the various complexities of women and depict their struggles as she goes through to find her own identity in society. Her major works deal with the issues and aspects of immigrants' experiences. She has an extraordinary ability to discuss the very sensitive aspects of the lives of women characters and their conditions. In this paper, Divakaruni concentrates on her female protagonists and attempts to exhibit their harsh and humiliating experiences. Banerjee's writing affirms that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience made up of collectivities and multiple journeys. It's an experience that is determined by who travels, where, how, and under what circumstances. Almost all the expatriates who emigrated from India to America face the clash of opposing cultures, a feeling of alienation, which is followed by attempts to adjust, to adopt, and to accept. Only the degree of this adaptation differs according to the generations. Banerjee had moved away from her location, through her works, she recollects her homeland, and as an outsider, observes details with objectivity. Chitra Banerjee analyses the relationship of women with universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance, and disorder.

The novel *Sister of My Heart* portrays a strong woman relationship that empowers each other to overcome the obstacles they face in their life. The female bonding is analyzed based on Anju's diasporic life and Sudha's domestic life. At the beginning of the novel, the story shows Anju and Sudha's closeness despite their opposite characteristics. In the novel, both are treated as cousins. Anju is a young, brave girl, very spontaneous and straightforward, while Sudha Chatterjee is a calm, feminine, and very delicate young girl. Both are caring for each other. They grow up together and are very accustomed to each other's presence. They grow up in a very conservative upper-middle-class home consisting solely of women-mothers, aunts, and the maid. Sudha dreams of a romantic marriage and motherhood based on Hindu fables and legends. Both of them lost their fathers on a ruby-hunting expedition that was planned by Sudha's father. Sudha Cultural clash is the core problem of a diaspora. Cultural clash is the primary reason why diasporic community members have to renegotiate or reconstruct their identities. A cultural clash can be observed

in the text in straightforward terms of dream interpretation. We can see through Mrs Gupta that she believes that dream interpretation is a gift which cannot be cultivated or learnt. It is simply possessed and can just as easily be lost as well. Mrs Gupta's beliefs about dream interpretation stem from Indian culture. But Rakhi, who wants to be a dream interpreter herself, finds out that dream interpretation in the Western world is regarded as a science that trained psychologists are licensed to practice. Therefore, cultural clashes lead to a sense of alienation. Experiencing existential rootlessness begins with cultural alienation; in fact, the entire diasporic journey is from alienation to assimilation. There are stark differences between Indian and American culture when it comes to beliefs, customs, attitudes, and other social behaviours and endeavours. As it can be observed in the text, diaspora find themselves between the two cultures, often reconciling one with the other. Cultural dilemmas lead to the dilemmas of identity, which in the novel came to the forefront with the 9/11 incident. Soon after the attacks, the immigrants faced large-scale rejection by American society, for they were all branded as terrorists. It forced Rakhi out of her American identity and made her consider her Indian identity more seriously. While the challenges of having bi-cultural identities or hybrid cultural identities are stressful, we see in *Queen of Dreams* that Rakhi can find stability and achieve a sense of belonging after all. She addresses the identity crisis and mental trauma of dislocated migrants head-on. She adapts to a new way of life that embraces the American lifestyle while still being rooted in Indian culture, instead of shunning one or the other altogether. The perfect example of the successful creation of this sense of belonging is Rakhi's daughter, Jona. Jona is the ideal blend of American and Indian identities. We can see her not just as a painter, hinting at her individuality, but also as a dream interpreter like her grandmother. She has a self-identity created in American society and a connection to the traditions of her ancestors' homeland. She accepts her hybridity and the circumstances that she is living in, and identifies with both her heritages. While Mrs Gupta and Rakhi's sense of belonging was shaped by the experience of migration and its consequences, Jona feels more at home in America and is comfortable with her blend of American and Indian identity, as she has not experienced migration or any of its negativity that was not passed down to her.

Conclusion

In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offers a rich narrative that weaves together the complexities of cultural heritage and diasporic displacement. The protagonists' struggles highlight the constant negotiation between preserving tradition and embracing modernity, a challenge faced by many in the diaspora. The novel does not present a definitive resolution to these tensions but rather portrays the evolving process of self-discovery and resilience. Ultimately, Divakaruni underscores the transformative power of female bonds in navigating the cultural dissonance of immigrant life, illustrating that identity is not fixed but fluid, shaped by memory, relationships, and the ongoing journey across borders.

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