

Indian Knowledge Systems and Indigenous Epistemologies in The Diasporic Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract:

This research article investigates the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and indigenous epistemologies within the language, narrative structures, and thematic frameworks of the celebrated Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. While contemporary scholarship predominantly examines her work through the lenses of gender, migration, and postcolonial identity, this study argues that her narratives are fundamentally anchored in traditional Indian epistemologies, including Dharma, Samskara, oral traditions, and mythic consciousness. By analyzing major works such as *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Palace of Illusions*, and *Arranged Marriage*, the article demonstrates how Divakaruni employs these ancient frameworks to articulate a unique diasporic subjectivity. The research concludes that IKS provides a resilient, adaptive, and alternative model to Western narrative paradigms, allowing characters to sustain cultural continuity across geographical boundaries.

Keywords: indigenous epistemologies, postcolonial identity, Dharma, Samskara, diasporic subjectivity, narrative paradigms.

1. Introduction:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni born in 1956 occupies a pivotal position in contemporary South Asian diasporic literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an Indian-American author and poet, has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary diasporic literature. Her narratives often explore the complexities of migration, gendered identities, and cultural hybridity with narratives that navigate the intricate intersections of cultural hybridity and gendered identities. However, beneath the surface of these common diasporic themes lies a profound engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)—a comprehensive term encompassing the traditional philosophies, aesthetic principles, and cultural practices of the Indian subcontinent. These systems include philosophical traditions such as Vedanta and Yoga, aesthetic theories like *rasa*, and the narrative structures of *itihasa* and *purana*.

This article proposes that Divakaruni's literature functions as a dialogic space where Western literary forms interact with indigenous Indian epistemologies. Rather than viewing migration as a total

rupture from the past, her work presents it as a site where ancestral knowledge is re-articulated and transformed. Through her use of symbolic language, sensory memory, and mythic reinterpretation, Divakaruni asserts the validity of non-Western ways of knowing, positioning them as essential resources for navigating global modernity.

2. Philosophical Frameworks: Samskara and the Poetics of Memory:

A foundational element of IKS in Divakaruni's fiction is the conceptualization of memory as *samskara*—the impressions left on the mind by past experiences that shape present sensibilities. Unlike Western models that often view memory as a linear or purely representational retrieval of discrete events, Indian epistemologies suggest that memory is cyclical, layered, and deeply embedded in sensory experience.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, memory serves as a living, dynamic force mediated through the protagonist, Tilo. Tilo acts as a practitioner of ancient knowledge, where spices function as conduits for *smriti* (remembered knowledge). For instance, turmeric is not merely a spice but a symbol of healing and protection, while cardamom carries the "taste of memory" and traces of home. This sensory knowledge allows the diaspora to be reframed as a transformation of lived wisdom rather than a loss of identity. By embedding memory in everyday practices and objects, Divakaruni aligns her narrative strategy with an IKS-informed understanding of relational selfhood, where the past continuously informs the present.

3. Oral Traditions, Mythic Consciousness, and Rasa:

Divakaruni's narrative architecture is deeply influenced by Indian oral storytelling traditions, such as *katha* and *purana*, which emphasize multiplicity, moral reflection, and the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the mundane. This oral dimension is particularly evident in *The Palace of Illusions*, where she retells the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. This act of re-voicing is a hallmark of indigenous interpretive traditions, where epics are not static relics but are continually reimagined to address contemporary concerns. Mythic consciousness thus enables characters to situate their personal struggles within a larger cosmic and ethical framework.

Furthermore, in her short story collection *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni utilizes frame narratives and stories-within-stories, a technique reminiscent of ancient Indian texts. These narratives often evoke the *Natyasastra*'s concept of *rasas*—emotional "flavors" or moods that arise during aesthetic engagement. In the story "The Bet," the layering of voices functions as a mode of ethical exploration rather than mere ornamentation. Through these techniques, Divakaruni shifts the narrative focus from Western mimesis to cognition through affect and metaphor, preserving the aesthetic principles of IKS within a transnational context.

4. Embodied Knowledge and the Sanctity of Feminine Wisdom:

Central to many Indian Knowledge Systems is the principle that knowledge is inseparable from the body and lived action. Philosophical systems like Yoga and Ayurveda recognize the body as a primary site of cognition and spirituality. Divakaruni's female protagonists often embody this principle, realizing wisdom through domestic and ritual practices that Western epistemologies might dismiss as merely "intuitive".

In *Sister of My Heart*, the bond between the cousins Anju and Sudha is sustained through storytelling, rituals, and the invocation of female ancestors. Their agency is not derived from Western

feminist frameworks alone but emerges from indigenous models of relational interdependence and embodied memory. Similarly, Tilo's healing powers in *The Mistress of Spices* are the result of disciplined spiritual training and bodily practice. By foregrounding the kitchen and the domestic sphere as repositories of wisdom—where cooking and caregiving become acts of cultural preservation—Divakaruni validates feminine spaces as crucial sites of knowledge production.

5. Epistemic Resilience and the Negotiation of Dharma:

The concept of Dharma—understood as duty, ethics, and lived action—serves as a guiding principle for characters navigating the tensions between inherited traditions and the host culture. Divakaruni's narratives suggest that indigenous epistemologies are not rigid or obsolete but possess an inherent flexibility that allows them to adapt to new environments.

In her stories set in the diaspora, characters often reinterpret traditional values to face contemporary challenges. The principle of Dharma evolves from a rigid communal duty to a form of ethical self-realization, where characters negotiate between personal aspirations and familial expectations. This "epistemic resilience" prevents cultural erasure, as characters use their ancestral knowledge to foster hybrid identities rooted in continuity rather than rupture. Divakaruni's work thus challenges the notion that modernity necessitates the abandonment of tradition, proving that Indian Knowledge Systems can coexist with and enrich global modern contexts.

6. Conclusion:

The literature of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offers a profound testament to the persistence and adaptability of Indian Knowledge Systems in the diaspora. By integrating cosmological memory, oral narrative techniques, embodied feminine wisdom, and the ethical framework of Dharma, Divakaruni extends the boundaries of diasporic writing beyond Western epistemic frames. Her fiction demonstrates that ancestral knowledge—sensory, relational, and philosophical—remains a vital source of meaning and resilience for those living between cultures. Ultimately, this study suggests that recognizing these non-Western epistemologies is essential for a comprehensive understanding of global literature and the enduring power of cultural memory.

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