

.Portrait of Multi Culturalism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Vine of Desire

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian, American, award winning author and poet who writes out of her own personal experience about the immigrant women. She is mainly focus on South Asian women struggle amidst patriarchal society in search of their own identity. Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* deals with the multiplicity of vision evolved in the multicultural pulls of ideologies. The novel has been integrated to constitute a comprehensive vision of the dilemma of existence in the life of immigrant women. *The Vine of Desire* explores cultural transactions and the shift of geography redefines the very texture of human existence involving the predicament of women, national consciousness, challenges of hybridity, burden of the commitment of femininity and obstacles of the adversity of cultural paradigms. *The Vine of Desire* highlights the cultural changes of the characters. A few years of staying in America transforms Anju in her usage of peculiar words and interests. Anju's shrinking memories of India make Sudha realize that even their memories are marooned on separate Islands. Divakaruni believes that cross-cultural understanding should go beyond the towers of academia and thus she deals with the crisis of consciousness successfully through exquisitely wrought prose, philosophy and psychology. The immigrant's relationship with the old home and the new home is neither static nor monolithic, and her novels and short stories, emphasise on the immigrant experience.

KEYWORDS :constitute, geography, predicament, obstacles, shrinking.

Divakaruni's female immigrant character in almost all the novels either assert their presence through their culinary skills or complicate their association between home and food. Her writings are scattered with details of traditional Indian food and flavours and wardrobe giving shape to her stories. She has pictured the characters as they prepare some American food items at their home, it may be surprising for the other Indians whose food habit is entirely different, but in fact, it is true that many immigrants have given up their customary food habits.

In *The Vine of Desire*, Anju cooks for her sister, Sudha, who is going to visit America "Anju who is a terrible cook, has spent the day making lasagna because, she says Sudha has never tasted any in India" (VD 14). Anju's craving for fresh fish is an important cultural measure in a land where chopped and canned fish items are mostly preferred. Both Anju and Sunil are assimilated into the American culture, keeping their Bengali cultures aside. Throughout their relationship they manage to maintain a fairly average American life style with a Bengali subculture. They live in a tiny flat in New

York. Though Anju is not an expert in cooking she prepares Indian dishes to welcome her sister friend.

The refrigerator is stuffed with dishes, spaghetti and meat balls, potato salad, tuna casserole, banana bread, Vanilla pudding, apple pie... It is the most Indian of ways, what the women of her family had done to show love through the years of her childhood". (VD 20)

Sudha arrives in California where Anjulives with her husband Sunil. Sudha divorced from her husband because her mother-in-law wanted her to abort her baby girl Dayita, she is therefore a single mother, a stigma in the Indian society. Anju on the other hand went through a miscarriage of her baby boy, Prem. This really affects her psyche and the relationship with Sunil. Sunil is very much impressed by Sudha's nature, he could not resist her incredible beauty. In the novel, we see the difficulty for Sudha in getting adjusted with an alien land and culture. She misses small things in everyday life in India, her life was restricted and oppressing. Nobody would accept a woman like her, who dares to break the rules and who wanted to live alone with her daughter. She too wants to live her quality and free life but is confused to do so. She asserts that she will not live for others as she had done earlier. She gets lured by the American way of living and makes friendship with Lalit at a party. When Sudha thinks of her life, she feels her life is flexible according to the will and wish of others, her mother, mother-in-law, husband and Sunil. She feels she is flexible to every person and every circumstance she is trapped into. Sunil reveals his love for Sudha by saying that even though he does not like his wife Anju, he tried to convince himself after marriage that he could love her and did not want to disappoint Anju. She decides to leave Sunil's house immediately. Sudha's confused mind sometimes thinks about Ashok and sometimes about Sunil. She turns away the proposal of Ashok even though he shows eagerness to look after Sudha and her daughter. Sudha does not want to go back to India or stay in Sunil's house. She wants to stand firmly on her own feet.

Divakaruni is an Asian American with her ancestral roots in West Bengal, India. She has crossed boundaries negotiating two different worlds from various perspectives. She usually explores issues that are central to the experience of immigration. Her rich collection of characters includes Americans and Indians; who are exiles caught between two opposite cultures, Indian and American. It is found that there is a continuous oscillation between Western and Eastern cultures, but the immigrants have always been trying to reconcile with the new homeland, Divakaruni's fiction portrays the quest for identity, cultural dilemmas and displacements in the new spatial configurations. The *Vine of Desire* effectively maps out the curves and lines of the new South Asian community in the United States and its struggle for identity. Her writing is also complete with vivid and lively images of Calcutta dwellings and surroundings, which we can come across through the longings of the nostalgic minds of the protagonists. Her characters seem emotionally attached to their past, that they cannot rejoice at their newly achieved freedom without an inquiry and a sense of skepticism. This dilemma is the result of these two existing experiences, which develop conflicting ideologies in the minds of protagonists.

In *The Vine of Desire*, Divakaruni dexterously mingles the dilemma of cultural apathies with the sensitivity and obscurities of the inner world of feminine consciousness. At this crucial juncture of life, Anju suffers the bouts of depression for the loss of her unborn child along with the unexpressed hysteria of lost land. Her nervousness increases so fast that even she fails to make a response to the phone calls. Her restlessness is evident in her reaction how she rocks her body, spreading hair on sofa, fingers digging rigidly into her arms until they left bruises shaped like tiny petals. With the news of Sudha's arrival, she fills with unexpressed dread involving the feeling of 'ecstasy' and anguish'. She recalls her childhood and all the associated evidences and objects. She cries out,

I miss it! I think of my room with its cool, high ceiling and my bed sheets, which always smelled clean, like neem leaves and which I never had to wash myself and the hundred years old peepal tree that grew outside my windows. Sometimes a sense of loss grips her consciousness. I wish, I hadn't been in such a hurry to come to America. (VD 13)

Divakaruni's in her novel *The Vine of Desire* succeeds in portraying how the life varies for an Indian and Indian American, what sort of difficulties, attitudes, and beliefs they have towards their lives. Myra and her husband Trideep are an excellent example of this. Myra is sick and felling tired of life, taking care of Trideep's father who irritates her a lot. Immigrants, when they enter United States initially, wish to live like white Americans by absorbing the native habits and culture, but later they tend to lose interest and their attention goes towards their native countries. Similarly, Trideep's father enjoys his life in the United States initially, but later he asks his son to send him back home. He suffers with a sense of displacement, which 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 goes down into psychotic-violence.

For the two protagonists of the novel, the two sisters, their lives as part of the diaspora in the United States of America is a mixed experience. American society offers opportunities as well as pain to both and this shakes the foundation on which their extraordinary love and friendship stands for Sudha, there is repeated dislocation and the pain multiplies manifold, every time she seeks to relocate and renegotiate with oddities in life. Anju changes and grows by taking up the opportunities America offers to her. Although the opportunities in United States of America are not as easily available to Sudha as they are for Anju, her experiences are not wholly negative. Sudha too is able to take up a job, to earn her own money and to be independent, things that may not have been possible in India. In the United States of America, she visits different places, meets different people and learns to survive independently, yet she chooses her homeland as the better option to get settled. As Sudha tells the old man, Mr.Sen, "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. In a new part of India, where no one understands me without the weight of old memories"(321). Finally she makes her mind to go back to India. Her mental crisis comes close to the vision of M. G. Vassanji who accepts that the dilemma of duality constitutes the sensibility of immigrants. She says,

We are but the creatures of our origins and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghost from our past stand not far behind and we are not easy shaken off.(9)

The dilemmas and displacements presented by Divakaruni are relevant to the sensibilities of human beings in the age of globalization. The displacements are associated with innumerable options of lifestyles in different geographical settings and the shock of footlessness in the process of hybridization is explored in *The Vine of Desire*. We see the struggle of the immigrants to assimilate in an alien land and their unfulfilled longings, with finding themselves trapped in the middle of nowhere, desperately try for a way out and suffer in the process of cultural dilemmas and displacements in the newly adopted land.

The Vine of Desire stands on its own as a novel of extraordinary depth and sensitivity. The title expresses the story of two immigrant women, Sudha and Anju enmeshed in the making of American lives and in the work of living with passion and commitment with parents, children and men, with one another and most importantly of all in their own skins. It speaks of desires and dreams that all human beings keep closer to their hearts like Anju and Sudha and how sometimes life disappoints by but we keep striving to find that deep joy we once knew as children. The very story of desires and dreams of the two heroines Anju and Sudha teaches a lesson that life is a journey full of changes and transitions and that nothing is permanent. The book is not just about transformation and growth but also about expectations versus reality. It depicts a lot about the Indian culture and what it is like to be immersed into a completely foreign culture. Sudha experiences a lot of changes as she realizes the freedom that come with a culture so different from her own.

The complex plot of *The Vine of Desire* reveals Divakaruni's art of mingling contradictory issues with the life and sensibility of immigrants. Along with the crisis of exile and displacement, she presents a complex pattern of personal relationship, nostalgia of homeland, innate longing for native cultural heritage, religious fidelity for Indian culture and Indian sensibility.

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