

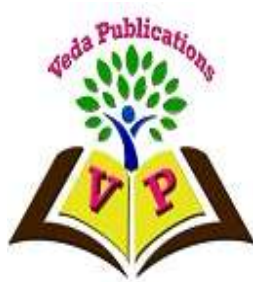


## INDIANISM AND NOSTALGIA FOR HOME AND HOME LAND IN CHITRA BENERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the study of emerging sense of longingness for the 'homeland' or 'root', a strange and unusual attachment to its traditions, religions, and languages. Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* beautifully presents Indianism, and diasporic consciousness like, alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, cultural conflict, racism, economic disparity, miscarriage, divorce, etc. This novel celebrates Indian women's immigration to the United States as a journey from oppressed or miserable conditions to freedom and discovery of self with the inspiration of western influences.

**Keywords:** *Alienation, Loneliness, Rootlessness, Nostalgia, Diaspora.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni acclaims the status as an authentic chronicler of Indian immigrant experience. She discusses the complications of the place, situation and time under which the immigrants' life hover round with characteristics details. She deals and depicts the ex- and now culture side by side keeping the dual identities and assimilated zones of responses and reactions. As an interpreter of diasporic life her foremost concern has been the life of South-Asian expatriates and the dilemma of 'acculturation' and 'assimilation'. Acculturation is the depressing upshot of post-modern scenario, which Divakaruni has discussed and debated in her novels. Her characters are autobiographical portraits of her interpretation and reaction of her own experience as an expatriate. The self as 'an immigrant nobody' – the replica of identity crisis - is truthfully reflected in her novels.

Divakaruni's works often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants largely set in India and the United States. Her works have been translated into 11 languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Japanese and this has settled her into a role as one of the premier Asian American writers of today. She writes for children as well as adults and has published novels in multiple genres, including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, and fantasy.

Divakaruni concentrates to carve out an identity of the lives of the Indian women struggling with cultural shackles. The conflict between traditional ethos and the so-called modern culture are portrayed, where they are torn between their historical past and the progressive present. In spite of being rational and modern they mentally retain some of the traditional beliefs which make them feel alienated and psychologically depressed.

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* deals with the issues of diasporic angst, psychological and physical displacement and hyphenated identity often experienced by the immigrants in an alien country. The novel depicts the Indian mysticism, fantasy and realism at the backdrop through which the novelist presents the inner struggles of the characters. The female characters in the novel are shown fighting with the inner self to get adjusted with the new outer

atmosphere and situations to overcome the problems of diaspora. This awareness strengthens the confidence to forge ahead and help them to rethink and question about their own lives as women and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals. The novelist focuses on the diasporic trauma felt by the Indian women who are caught between two opposing worlds. They find themselves in an in-between state, struggling to carve out identities of their own. They are all trying to discover their own selves amidst joy and heart-breaking pathos. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni like many other contemporary writers excels at depicting the cultural dialect of immigrant experience.

*Sister of My Heart* is an intensely rich and complex novel with its virtual tapestry of plots. The underlying tension between the desires of the Indian mothers for their culture and Indianness and the craving of their children for western philosophies are picturized in a typical Indian manner. Divakaruni through the lives of Anju and Sudha of Calcutta Chatterjee family tries to focus on sisterhood, womanhood and immigrant experiences. Sudha undergoes a great trauma thinking of the situations in which they were born which weaves a menacing thread through the friendship. And, the cousins face hardest test when they fall in love and are physically separated by arranged marriages.

The novelist uses so many descriptions and social elements recollecting the character's own tradition and society and thereby recreating a culture which has got separated physically but remains at the psychological level as a reminder of his/her identity. She writes mostly from sources related to the ancient epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, myths, folk tales and also shows relevant issues which are of Indian mindset in her novels. She gives references of myths in her novels like in, "*The princess in the palace of snakes*": "Once there was a princess, who lived in an underwater palace filled with snakes. The snakes were beautiful - green and yellow and gold and gentle. They fed her and played with her and sang her to sleep". The above resemblance of the myth is to show, how Anju loves Sudha very much, as Sudha is a princess and Anju herself a snake, to take care of Sudha. Here, Divakaruni wanted to exhibit the world



readers, about the richness of Indianness and how Indian myths are born.

Divakaruni purposefully inserts myths and mythological allusions to bring her standpoints on psycho-socio issues. Thornell is of the view:

*Mythology and literature can be a useful means of determining the paradigms of a culture...myths and literature can teach us how another culture views its life events... They provide insights about the religion, customs and rituals of a civilization. They also provide model of societal expectations and demonstrate human behavior. Myths also teach us about ourselves.*”(Thornell)

Divakaruni inserts the ritual of *Shasthi Puja* and the wait for the *Bidhata Purush*, a ritual which seems to have evolved from old Puranic myths:

“They say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born, the Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be. That is why they bathe babies in sandalwood water and wrap them in soft red malmal, colour of luck. That is why they leave sweetmeats by the cradle ... If the child is especially lucky, in the morning it will all be gone”. (3)

The highly traditional marriage rituals of India are presented with minute details:

It is the day before our weddings, and the house is filled with frenzied activity. Hordes of men are at work stringing up lights and setting up an enormous tent on the lawn. In the courtyard behind the kitchen, hired cooks bustle around huge clay ununs, constructed for the occasion, where curries and dhals are bubbling. The air is pungent with the aroma of mustard fish and tomato chutney, for many of our out-of-town relatives have arrived already and must be fed”. (146)

The way Divakaruni has reflected the process of wedding and the exotic Indian cuisine also focuses on the tradition of India which is rich and varied. Anju says,

“The ceremony is going to continue for a long time - the putting of sindur on the woman's forehead, the recital of more

mantras, the official giving away of the bride, the recital of even more mantras”. (158)

On the one hand she portrays the typical Indian concept - "The subtle dowry transactions, hectoring mothers - in - law, abusive fathers - in law, caring yet insensitive husbands"; the other side presents the coming of the “New Woman” (of Ibsenian sense) with her typical “free will” aspect. The novel focuses on female character elements of re-visit, re-frame and common theories of Indian American female identity, and bonding relationships. She portrays the cultural intermingling of both the foreign as well as the traditional Indian feelings and emotions through the lives, experiences and living patterns of the characters. Divakaruni portrays her heroine's lives in a wonderful domestic drama from infancy to motherhood, making Sudha and Anju as backbone of the story. Anju might spell for both when she says, "In spite of all my insecurities, in spite of the oceans that'll be between us soon and the men that are between us already, I can never stop loving Sudha. It's my habit, and it's my fate"(6).

Both Sudha and Anju grapple with their life after marriage and are caught in the frenzy of traditional values. However the novelist has not just commented on the social structure, traditions but even under the weight of cultural legacy has tried to portray the rise of the New Woman. Sudha though ponders on her sense of self but ultimately takes a step of moving to America, the land which could at least offer her an opportunity to be independent. On the other side is Anju who grapples and questions the orthodoxy at every stage and tries to assimilate and adjust in a new environment.

Divakaruni's skilful use of different techniques and styles allow the reader a unique access into the complex consciousness. She wants to expose to the Indians the Indianness and their style of living in abroad, with their own identification. In her attempt to analyse the relationship of women she has become a spokesperson of the universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance and disorder thereby creating a canvas filled with colours and shades of India which reflect the past as well as the contemporariness of India.



The end of the novel is open ended and it leaves an 'optimistic note of possibilities'.

### CONCLUSION

The novel bears a significant stamp of Divakarunian artistry and justifies the claim: "Divakaruni is gifted with dramatic inventiveness, lyrical, sensual language, where she depicts the beauty of India and Indianness and womanhood in her writings on immigrant experience on alien shores".

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