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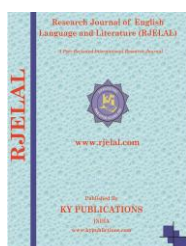
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DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN CHITHRA BANERJEE'S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the study of the novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) by Chithra Banerjee Divakaruni, in the context of diasporic consciousness. This paper looks into the experience of the diasporas. In particular it is necessary to understand the term "diaspora" and the received notions of diasporic characteristics and their modes of existence. It mainly focuses on themes like discrimination, cultural shock, problems in adjustment and assimilation, identity crisis, disintegration, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural dialogue. *Sister of My Heart* traces the many years and zigzags between India and America as the protagonist cousins, Anju and Sudha first grow apart and the eventually reunite. This paper also shows how Divakaruni invests this domestic drama with poetry as she traces her heroine's lives from infancy to motherhood. This novel shows that the immigrant experience encompasses a wide variety of challenges, some of which are handled more successfully than others by the female diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

Realism meets fantasy and social commentary meets idealistic dreaming in the wide net of Chithra Divakaruni's novels and poems. Divakaruni is a teacher, poet and social activist her works of magical forces and everyday lives translate into eleven languages and have won accolades all over the world. Chithra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1957 in Calcutta, India. Her books, which are set in both India and America, feature Indian-born women torn between old and new world values. With her laser-like insight and a skilled use of story, plot and lyrical description, she gives readers a many-layered look at her characters and their respective worlds, which are filled with fear, hope, and discovery. Chithra Banerjee is the one who makes repeated references to the cultural tradition of Calcutta. Her cherished moments of nostalgia or moments of bewilderment in encounters with real Calcutta are portrayed in her novels. Divakaruni also tries to

relocate her cultural space and identity mediated by significant cross-cultural influences.

Representing second generation of Indian American writers, Chithra Banerjee Divakaruni chooses to examine the world of middle class women. Most of the stories are about Indian immigrants to the United States from the author's native land of Bengal and are told by female narrators in the first person singular point of view, often in the present tense imparting a voice of intimacy and cinematic credibility. There are several immigrants who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own. A diasporic community is varied and complex and hence all attempts at homogenization are likely to lead to oversimplifications. Bhiku Parekh has observed that the Indian diaspora is one of the most varied, representing "half a dozen religions....seven different regions of India...nearly a dozen castes" (105). The chief characteristic features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity, uprooting and re-

rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The diasporic writings also known as the *theory of migrancy* helps to generate aesthetic evaluation, negotiate with cultural constructs and aid the emergence of a new hybridity.

The word “diaspora” takes from the Greek, meaning “to disperse” Ashcroft define “diaspora” as “the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homeland into new regions”(68). Diasporas thus live in one country as community but look across time and space to another. The migrant diasporas and their descendents experience displacement, fragmentation, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural ‘discourse’ of the subject countries. Diasporic writing unfolds the experiences of unsettlement and dislocation, at some or the other level, yet this multiplicity of homes does not bridge the gap between “home”_ _the culture of origin; and “world” the culture of adoption. The boundaries get an uncanny habit of persisting in a thousand different ways, and are often conflictual. Homi Bhabha shifts this conflicts to a theoretical gain; Gatherings of exiles and emigrant and refugees, gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures, gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafes of city centers”(139-40). Thus he shifts the focus from historicity to temporality, a hybridity ,which cannot be contained either in hierarchial or binary structures.

CHARACTERSTICS OF DIASPORIC LITERATURE

Diasporic literature is not based on any theory or philosophy but on the life experiences of the immigrants. It creates an emotional haven to its diaspora by discussing their own physical and emotional conflicts. The diasporic writer turn to their homeland for various reasons. For eg. Naipaul one who is in a perpetual quest for his roots turns to India for the same. Mistry visits and re-visits India for a kind of re-vitalization and to re-energize his aching soul. Diasporic literature also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. Diasporic writers live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories.

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVEL SISTER OF MY HEART

Unlike the magic realism of her first novel, *Sister of My Heart* is written in the realist mode and describes the complicated relationships of a family in Bengal. The book explores the tension between the desires of mothers who embrace traditional Indian culture, and the daughter-cousins, who embrace the new Western philosophies. *Sister of my Heart* centers on the lives of two girls, Anju and Sudha who were brought up together, closer ever than sisters. They share clothes, worries, dreams. The Anju and Sudha Chatterjee family fortunes are at low ebb, as there are only widows at home—the girl’s mothers, and their aunt.

The novel’s forty-two chapters are set as a sort of extended dialogue that is multi-tiered and over-layered. The chapters themselves are alternatively titled. The first half is titled *The Princess in the Palace of Snakes* and the second half titled *The Queen of Swords*. The techniques are epistolary and explanative, topography that is trans-cultural, tone that is adjectival and highly lyrical, and a style that is italicized and romantic. The epigram to *Sister of My Heart*, invokes African author Chinua Achbe writing in *Anthills of the Savannah*: “It is only the story.....that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spokes of the cactus fence”(SMH 9).

The anchor to *Sister of My Heart* is the belief that storytelling not only lights the path for succeeding generations, but also possesses shamanistic power. Both teller and listener may be healed or transformed, cursed or freed. For the Chatterjees, an upper-caste Calcutta family, falls on hard times but tenaciously remaining in their decaying mansion of mystery and fades glory. Storytelling is a life line cast from aunt to niece, mother to daughter, cousin to cousin, past to present, and, in the book’s climax, continent to continent .Stories are not merely a way to pass the time or to put dreams into words. In Divakaruni’s magician hands these stories-within-stories, with their sights and smells and enchanted imagery, transport the reader to an Indian that is at once timeless and evocative of the present day. For her passionate characters, they shape lives for good or for sorrow with the razor edge of experience. Perhaps no character is as susceptible to a story’s

spell as Sudha Chatterjee, an uncommonly beautiful girl with a dreaming, ancient-seeming soul.

Sister of My Heart is the story of Anju and Sudha, two young women from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, who after a year of living separate lives are rekindling their friendship in America. Together they experience the joys, pains, mystical tales and tiresome tasks that accompany growing up in a traditional Indian house in Calcutta. Their exceptional bond remains the core of the novel as their affection for each other increasingly shapes the course of their lives. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support they need. It gives Anju the strength to pick up the pieces after a personal tragedy, and Sudha the confidence to make life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita-without her husband.

The unlikely relationships they form with men and women in the world outside the immigrant Indian Community as well as their families in India profoundly transform them. The story ends with Anju's metaphorical declaration, "I've learned to fly"(SMH 318). Divakaruni deals with a new facet of immigrant experience in the sense that the movement is not necessarily a physical one or from east to west. Sudha decides that she is not interested in America any-more and likes to go back to her home in Bengal. Thus the author wants to tread new ground.

Readers like the novel's simplicity as it does not try to do too many things at once. The plot focuses on the relationship between the two young girls, from the shared experiences of their youth to the varied experiences of their married lives. The scenes of forbidden love, demanding parental expectations and difficult-in-laws are, predictable. Her poetic language, elaborate descriptions, and symbolism are really at a higher level. Divakaruni does a good job of creating suspense and can draw the reader through the novel simply by its suspense. We find at the end of the novel, from his letter, that he is the father of Sudha and he is not the murderer of Anju's father and what Pishi says is not true. Some critics are also disappointed that Divakaruni stretches things a bit when she created the basis of the story, concerning the death of Anju and Sudha's fathers.

In the second half of the novel titled *The Queen of Swords* Sudha quickly learns the ways of her demanding and controlling mother-in-law. Meanwhile Anju's life in the United States has not entirely turned out as she expected. Anju and Sudha exchange letters and short phone calls, but their old intimacy is missing. The friends discover they are pregnant at the same time and both seem finally happy. Sudha's mother-in-law insists to abort her baby because she comes to know that it is a girl baby. She believes that the first child must be a son. Sudha is not able to turn, leaving her husband must be grounds to talk to each other again as true sisters. Refusing to tie her life to another man and realizing Anju needs her, Sudha and her daughter decide to go to the United States. After many years, the sisters are reunited, but future obstacles still loom.

Whether set in America, or India, the plot features Indian-born women torn between old and new values. They provide the readers a many layered look at the characters and their respective world. The characters in the novel are filled with dreams, desires, pain, struggle to lead with hope and discovery. Whether in California or Calcutta, women learn to adapt to their new and changing culture and as a result, discover their own sense of self amidst joy and heartbreak. Ironically, in her attempts to make the novel unique Divakaruni seems to have made it melodramatic and hence, stereotypic of South Asian movies. She simply develops the story between the two sisters without trying to create grandeur where it was not needed. Regardless, this is a highly emotional and beautiful written novel.

Through the eyes of people caught in the clash of cultures, and by constantly juxtaposing Calcutta with a California city, Divakaruni reveals the rewards and the perils of breaking free from the past and the complicated, often contradictory emotions that shape the passage to independence. Divakaruni's journey from a young graduate student in Calcutta to a mature writer of repute in the United States seems to have come a full circle. Whatever may be the reason for migration diaspora community faces the problems of dislocation, rootlessness, discrimination in the foreign

countries. Clifford says that, "life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful—struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the claims of old and new patriarchies"(Clifford 314). The degree of this adaption differs according to the generations. Divakaruni adds that women writers of the diaspora "tell stories from a perspective that is fully explored" (Website).

As female writers who are more conscious of the meaning of home as an exclusive space the detailed descriptions of Calcutta houses in their writings give them a cultural identity apart from their material reality. Thus each house is encased in different sets of vividly evoked specification—the verandahs, the terraces, the courtyards—all essentially female spaces in the Indian culture that contribute to the upbringing of the characters inhabiting them.

Most of her stories are about Indian immigrants to the United States from her native region of Bengal and are told by female narrators in the first person singular point of view, often in the present tense, imparting a voice of intimacy and cinematic credibility. There are several immigrant brides who are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own. Divakaruni says the stories themselves which deal with issues including domestic violence, crime, racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion and divorce are inspired by her imagination and the experiences of others.

CONCLUSION

Frustrated and distressed women are two sides of the same coin, but when we spin the coin on its edge, one side blurs into the other. Divakaruni in *Sister of My Heart* portray women of all ages, clothed in many different personalities but always as a person coming to terms with some aspect of her life. The styles vary as much as the points of view. Sometimes elegant, sometime obscene, always illuminating. Blends of realism and the grotesque of tragedy and compassion surprise the reader into glimpses of the self with the looking glass of the text. Sometimes make the ugliness that is there

unbearable to behold, only because it can become a powerful incentive for change.

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