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Cultural Clash and Separation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Stories

Aju Mukhopadhya

Arranged Marriage

In her book of short stories titled *Arranged Marriage*, based on Indian system of marriage as a result of negotiations between the guardians of the brides and bridegrooms, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has cited many types of marriages, mostly arranged ones, where the interests of the couples often crash after some years of marriage due mainly to cultural heterogeneity and clash of personality. Though arranged marriage was widely in practice in India there has recently been observed an air of change; more an effect of cultural mix due to globalization and exchange of ideas than for the unfortunate results like bride's sufferings in later life or a breakup of the marriage for that unfortunate results have perhaps increased in numbers recently in love-marriages opted by the bride and bridegroom, following Western system of marriage.

Out of many interesting; bitter and pleasant experiences in the lives of the characters in her short stories in different juxtaposing situations, I have selected three stories; two of arranged marriage and one as fixed by the bride and the bridegroom even against the good counselling by their relatives and friends. The three stories chosen are about the Indian couples living in America

where the divorce or separation are influenced under the ambience of foreign culture which clashes with age old Indian culture. The results of the clash of culture and habits as the outgrowth of such culture are divorce in two stories, "Doors" and "Meeting Mrinal." And the third story "The Disappearance" is about the voluntary separation by the wife. In "The Disappearance" and "Meeting Mrinal", we find Bengali couples and in "Door" we find the man from Bombay and the woman, an Indian origin American, belonged to any province or the same province of India.

"The Disappearance", is due to exploiting the opportunity of arranged marriage taken by a husband to subdue and dominate his wife, considered as a precious possession, as was the wont of the male members of the society in the past, in India particularly. It has been in practice for many years in India making the weak position of Indian woman prominent in such marriages. Whereas such marriages were successful on many earlier occasions, of late failure has been prominent due to education and resultant growth of personality of Indian woman added with comparative freedom and establishment of woman's right in the society.

The Disappearance

After her sudden disappearance the husband asks the policeman, "How could a young Indian woman wearing a yellow-flowered kurta and Nike walking shoes just disappear?" (Chitra 169).

There are some mysterious clues given by the writer in the otherwise peaceful day-to-day life of the couple such as:

1. "She'd been out for her evening walk, she took one every day after he got back from the office. Yes, yes, always alone, she said that was her time for herself", husband tells the police (Chitra 169-70), till her return for dinner he would play with his little son.
2. When the would-be husband had flown to Calcutta to choose his bride; this bride, his disappearing wife, appeared before the persons gone for choosing her and seemed shy and nervous as usual on such occasions "But when she'd glanced up there had been a cool, considering look in her eyes. Almost disinterested, almost as though she were wondering if he would make a

suitable spouse" (Chitra 171). He had wanted then to marry her very hurriedly in spite of the warning of his mother that she didn't feel something about the girl right.

3. There has been mention of a spare room in the house with pile of books "Where she used to spend inordinate amounts of time reading" (Chitra 177), though she wasn't any scholar or anything else attracting her to books; just an ordinary college girl who wasn't even a graduate.
4. "He'd always thought her to be like the delicate purple passion-flower vines that they had put up on trellises on their back fence, and once, early in the marriage, had presented her with a poem he'd written about this. He remembered how, when he held out the sheet to her, she'd stared at his for a long moment and a look he couldn't quite read had flickered in her eyes. Then she had taken the poem with a small smile. He went over and over all the men she might have known, but they (mostly his Indian friends) were safely married and still at home, every one." (Chitra 178)

   "The unknown areas of his wife's existence yawning blackly around him like chasms." (Chitra 179)

Their day-to-day life was very peaceful: the wife wasn't allowed to get entrance in any institution for studies or for doing a job. She wasn't allowed to wear any American dress as the husband thought that she looked better in Indian dresses. There was only one car which the husband used to and from his office. Though he could afford to buy another for his wife he didn't as she hadn't known driving (as if it was an impossible job to get a driving license). The wife was allowed all the freedom in the house except the above and except in another important area, Sex. "She was always saying, 'please, not tonight, I don't feel up to it'." The husband thought this to be immodesty which he couldn't permit. His wife was, after all, "A well-bred Indian girl. He didn't expect her to behave like those American women he sometimes watched in X-rated videos, screaming and biting and doing other things he grew hot just thinking about" (Chitra 172). After dinner he pulled her to the bed-room by the elbow in spite of all her objections and pleadings; leaving all other works she had planned to do.

After her disappearance the husband announced a reward of very lavish $100000 and made contacts with the police. After a year passed, by a chance-checking of their kitchen self, he found that the tin box where he had advised her to keep her valuables weren't there. A further search to their bank proved that she had taken all the valuable jewelry, gold studded with stones but no other valuable papers were touched. It was proved beyond doubt that she had taken out all her assets in a planned way in complicity with someone who could not be guessed. After a year passed, he removed her photos from the frames and when her actions towards planned disappearance was noticed then he got furious and burnt the remaining photos of her which were kept in an envelope as a memory to the boy. He became so furious that he thought sort of waking his son and forcing him to confess as to who she used to meet and plan her future actions. At that moment, "as though he had an inbuilt antenna that picked up his father's agitation, in the next room the boy started crying (which he had not done for months), shrill screams that left him breathless. And when his father and grandmother rushed to see what the problem was, he pushed them from him with all the strength in his small arms, saying go away, don't want you, want Mama, want Mama" (Chitra 178-79).

Though this seems to be too much stretching of imagination, to the point of improbability, it fits well with the writer's scheme when she imagines that the boy would not be in speaking terms with his father at his old age, living in a home for seniors, when his two daughters would live at distant places, given birth to by his second wife who would be dead by that time; the cautious husband agreeing to marry for the second time chose to marry a girl like the one who might be far from beautiful, "Even good looks weren't that important. A simple girl, may be from their ancestral village. Someone whose family wasn't well off, who would be suitably appreciative of the comforts he could provide. Someone who would be a real mother to his boy" (Chitra 180).

Stretching the pinch of his first wife's deserting him the writer imagines that he would still be dazzled in his old age by the unguarded joy he had observed in her face when lulling her boy to sleep in her lap singing a lullaby in Bengali which she gave up with the force of hate for her ideal husband.

Unlike the other two stories, there is no clash between communities and alien cultures here. Here is a clash of personalities and revolt of the woman against age old repression and subtle torture of woman by a man taking advantage of her situation in a foreign country. Certainly her ideal and destined culture is opposed to the repressive culture of her husband, hence the cultural clash and resultant separation.

"Doors"

Preeti and Deepak live in America. Preeti is a confirmed Indian American, living there from the age of 12 whereas Deepak is a newcomer. They attended educational classes together for some time. They have intimate love and confidence on each other. They decide to marry. It cannot be considered a traditional Indian arranged marriage; a deviation from the theme of the book. Preeti's mother vehemently oppose this marriage proposal from the beginning till almost the moment of wedding on the ground that this is going to be a heterogeneous alliance between an American and an Indian with old world belief system and culture.

"It'll never work, I tell you", her mother said to Preeti, "Just because you took a few classes together at the university, and you liked how he talks, doesn't mean that you can live with him.... What do you really know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?" (Chitra 183-184).

The two women, mother and daughter, having real affection for each other argued constantly sticking to their own points. The daughter said, "'Is this the same mother who was always at me to marry a nice Indian boy! The one who introduced to all her friends' sons whenever I came home from college!

"'They were all brought up here, like you', her mother continued, 'Not with a set of prehistoric values.' And finally, 'I want you to know you always have a home with us.' Preeti's mother lowered the lid of the suitcase with a sigh, as though she were closing up a coffin" (Chitra 184).

Deepak's friends too took the same stand, "She's been so long it's almost like she has been born in this country. And you know how these 'American' women are, always bossing you, always thinking about themselves.... It's no wonder we call them ABCDs, American-Born-Confused-Desis" (Chitra 185).

Deepak continued to argue that Preeti was different and that they would have a very nice life together. Someone argued that he would go for an arranged marriage, a pretty young bride from his father's village, not too educated to obey and treat a man right, etc.

Finally, Deepak gave up abruptly saying that he didn't believe that his friends could put forward such ill conceived counsels, telling them that, "Women aren't dolls or slaves. I want Preeti to make her own decisions. I'm proud that she's able to" (Chitra 185).

They lived married life for three years in a tiny student's apartment in Berkeley and then shifted to a spacious condominium in Milpitas. After settling comfortably they gave a housewarming party. Friends from both sides attended the party and agreed in unison that defying their previous doubts the couple led a nice life. Even Cathy, a personal American friend of Preeti, admitted that they were really an ideal couple.

After the party was over they remained really happy couple, satisfied at their individual choices over their well wishers. But we pause here to hear the writer issuing a caveat; none knows so far about the Door which Preeti always wants shut and Deepak mocks at it though he poses no serious problem at the beginning. Ultimately this became a bone of contention between them at the intervention of a newcomer called Raju; an old friend of Deepak. The story goes to its conclusion around the door with Raju behind it.

Preeti shuts the study door before settling with her Ph.D. dissertation, bedroom door before retiring for the night, locks the garden door before beginning to weed. She would close the kitchen door had there been any. Once when she came out of the bathroom for changing to her nightie which she always did Deepak questioned her about closing the doors. Though she hadn't a ready answer, she took time to reply thus,

"'I don't know' she said, her brow wrinkled, folding and unfolding her jeans. 'I guess I'm just a private person. It's not like I'm shutting you out. I've just always done it this way. Maybe it has something to do with being an only child.' Her eyes searched his face unhappily. 'I know it's not what you're used to. Does it bother you?'

"'No, no, I don't care, not at all'", said Deepak. (Chitra 189)

Their life went on as usual until Raj descended on them.

Raj suddenly came from Bombay at night as he had informed by telegram to study his Master's degree. Though younger by five years to Deepak, he nevertheless was his close neighbour and friend; so close that he chose to kiss on two cheeks of Deepak loudly at the airport, oblivious of other onlookers. Let us here remember what the westerners do to their ladies before the others. He started calling Preeti bhaviji or sister-in-law. Appreciating her cooking acumen on the first taste he said, "What a marvelous meal bhaviji! I can see why Deepak is getting a pot-belly!" (Chitra 190).

It was quite late in the night and he was sleepy. He wanted to sleep in the kitchen itself then and there and was contemplating spreading a bedspread for the purpose. But when said by Preeti that she had prepared the guestroom for him he was upset, unused to such things in his life, "Are bhai, you know how I hate all this formal-tormal business. I won't be able to sleep up there. Don't you remember what fun it was to spread a big sheet on the floor of the living room and spend the night, all us boys together, telling stories? Have you become an American or what? Come along and help me carry the bedclothes down..." (Chitra 191).

At this first encounter with the guest Preeti stood frozen hearing his sing-song voice fade at the turn of the stairs. She waited eagerly in her bedroom for her husband's return but he came in after long hours to tell her that he was contemplating of taking two week's leave to take his friend around which she could not appreciate. She felt a surge of jealousy in herself at this unheard of intimacy between the two friends and when Deepak said that the guest would remain with them close to one and half years till he completed the Masters, she was beyond herself.

Hearing the tell end of his assurance to his friend, "And I told him that was fine with us....

"You, what? Isn't this my house too? Don't I get a say in who lives in it?

"Fine then. Go ahead and tell him that you don't want him here. Go ahead, wake him up and Tell him tonight." (Chitra 192)

His lips were closed and temper high. Preeti tried to reconcile for the time being. Next day when she told this to her friend, "Cathy, Raj is driving me up the wall" (Chitra 193), she was advised to say that to her husband but she replied, "I can't! Deepak would be terribly upset. It has to do with hospitality and losing face—I guess it's a cultural thing" (Chitra 194).

While Raj was always trying to befriend her she felt feverish and tense with his presence in the house. Yet she was aware of Deepak's feeling and position in her as well as in Raj's life. She was told how Raj had none in this foreign land than themselves. She felt disgusted at every gesture of Raj and Raj without realizing the cultural hiatus between them always advanced to please her. She prepared good dishes in the morning and planned to have a cordial night with Deepak, hoping to do what is called love making in this land but back home in the evening she found, "Deepak and Raj sat side by side in the family-room couch, watching an Indian movie where a plump man was wearing a hat and a bemused expression was serenading a haughty young woman. Both men yelled with laugher as the woman swung around, snatched the hat off her admirer's head, and stomped on it" (Chitra 195).

After showering his admiration for Nutan the actress and seeing Preeti at the door he exclaimed, "Oh, bhavi, there you are! Come, join us. Deepak bhaiya and I rented a couple of our favourite movies from the Indian video store..." (Chitra 195).

Deepak admitted that it was Raj's grand idea. Raj explained how in his Bombay days Deepak played a hero with the local damsels and how he sang pieces of Hindi favourite songs to please them, how he teased them, etc., but he was immediately restrained by Deepak. Preeti silently moved away from the scene not being able to share any of the jokes of Raj telling that she had to warm up dinner to which the reply was that they had good feast of Indian samosa from an Indian restaurant some of which was waiting for her in the kitchen. Both the men expected her presence with them to view the film.

When Deepak after long stay with his friend entered the bedroom Preeti quickly said, before losing her nerve, "I can't live with Raj in the house anymore. He's driving me crazy. He's..." (Chitra 197).

Deepak argued and said, "He's driving you crazy?" His voice was testy, "He's only trying to be friendly, poor chap. I should think you'd be able to open up a bit more to him....

"I just don't understand you nowadays. . . . Why must you lock the bedroom when reading? Isn't that being a bit paranoid? Maybe you should see someone about it" (Chitra 197-98).

Preeti turned away with a forced hope that things would turn better when Raj's term for stay is finished. After the end of a semester she was lying on her bed with eyes closed when her advisor called her to his office to tell that her dissertation was gradually going from bad to worst unlike her earlier achievements and that she should take some break in it, etc.

Back home she was lying with a dull headache when Raj came announcing his achievement in the class to which she said that she's very tired. At this he ran to his room to bring a remedy for her headache. Accidentally she forgot to lock the bedroom and Raj with eagerness unbound entered the room. Preeti was very weak by then but in rage she was seeing the mirage. She took the green Tiger Balm bottle from the extended hand of Raju and threw it on the distant wall against which the bottle was broken to pieces. She somehow shouted the intruder to get out immediately and like one in delirium came back to her bed where she threw herself up almost unconscious.

When Deepak came back he enquired about her health as Raju had intimated him. But soon he discovered that Preeti was standing by the side of her packed suitcase. On asking she said that she was ready to leave to Cathy's place to which Deepak objected saying that she belonged to his house and that it would look very awkward to people, that must not happen. He would rather ask Raj, a thorn in her life, to leave instantly. After some arguments in the living room Raj left wishing well of Preeti, taking leave of her in a very hushed voice as if to one seriously ill. Deepak came back to tell of Raj's leaving the house and to tell that she was surely happy to have the whole house for herself now with acid in his tone, telling further that he would sleep in the guestroom.

For the first time she lay down in the big bed alone after marriage which they had bought together a week before their marriage. While recalling the happiness of their occupying the

bed together she felt that the negative of the film in her memory was erased. She waited for the sounds of all efforts of making a bed subside in the guestroom. "And when the door finally clicked shut, she did not know whether it was in the guestroom or deep inside her own being" (Chitra 202).

Though not the same, this closing of the door has some resemblance with the closing of the door by Nora in Henrick Ibsen's sensational drama, *A Doll's House*. After Nora good-byes to her husband, Helmer, he sinks in his chair with his face in his hands, "From below is heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing" (Gallienne 82).

"That slammed door reverberated across the roof of the world", commented Hunekar, as quoted by Eva Le Gallienne in her introduction to *Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen* (Gallienne Introduction).

"Meeting Mrinal"

The cultural clash plays its role here in a different way. Both husband and wife are Bengalis, as in "The Disappearance", married through family negotiations, entering into an arranged marriage. They were happy until the husband suddenly declared his decision of leaving his family as he was allured by an American woman in the middle of their married life; imbued with American culture deep into their Indian marriage as he was, even after long years of marriage.

When their son, born there, is preparing for graduation, he simply decides to live with an American woman, his ex-secretary, under the illusion of living a better love-life when there was no breach of love between the original husband and wife.

The son gets frustrated after 11 months of divorce; being fatherless, without proper guidance or beyond guidance from the beginning, leading to a lopsided growth in such a society. He appears before his mother like,

> "The last of the sun glinted on his stud earring, making me blink. He was wearing his favorite T-shirt, black, with MEGADETH slashed across it in bloodred letters. I tried not to sigh. At least he wasn't wearing his other favorite, in purple and neon pink, bearing the legend suicidal tendencies." (Chitra 273)

He is Dinesh, nicknamed Dinoo but wishes to be called Dean. "I realize that Dinesh is drifting from me, swept along on the current of his new life which is limpid on the surface but with a dark undertow that I, standing helplessly on some left-behind shore can only guess at" (Chitra 276).

She's afraid that he might be failing grades, addicted to drugs, join street gangs or afflicted with AID. He has left college, it seems, and joined the Burger King where he eats. The mother tries to feed all his favourite dishes and salalds aplenty to appease his anger and turn him to a better person.

The mother, Asha, is in a precarious position in life as her husband, a highly paid executive, decides to marry his ex-secretary to enjoy life more pleasantly. On a summer day when she was sifting through clothes to wear for joining a friend's anniversary party, seeking her husband, Mahesh, to choose the dress for her as he had always done on such occasions, she found him inattentive and uninterested, as he had been for some time in the recent past. On her insistence he suddenly said, "'I don't care', "in a voice that didn't sound like his, "'I don't take this anymore, Asha.' All his life, he told me then, he he'd been doing what other people wanted, being a dutiful Son, then a responsible husband and father. Now he'd finally found someone who made him feel alive, happy. He wanted the chance to really live his life before it was too late" (Chitra 286-87).

It doesn't make much difference with Talaq; almost unheard of in our or even in other societies. It was done through all legal procedures and divorce papers duly reached her. But the story does not refer to any contest or opposition by the wife in the divorce suit. She has been satisfied with a good alimony, it seems as the story refers to a good alimony. She joined library science classes and began doing a part time job in a local library where she would work full time later, we are told. She had other income and it was possible to keep the house but even before the divorce papers reached brokers called on her asking if she would sell the house. She being a divorcee felt ostracized as she would be discussed in a gathering and other women would feel pity for her, as in every such situation. She didn't have a good relationship with her arrogant son, as it often happens, particularly after his father most unceremoniously left them. Dinesh occupied his

parent's room with double bed and used to listen his chosen music, keeping his musical instruments somewhere. He gets annoyed if someone disturbs when he listens music.

On a day a phone call came from London but she couldn't guess the caller at first as she had none there to contact but she learnt that it was from Mrinalini Ghose, once her most intimate class friend and a rival; she always had an intimacy mixed with jealousy with her. She felt more jealous as Mrinal was a bit superior to her in some respects. Now she was placed in a very high position in life. The son felt disturbed at this intrusion during his musical session but Asha began talking.

They did not meet after her marriage and shifting to San Francisco with her husband since long. Though they exchanged photos and letters at intervals, it is strange that Asha did not know Mrinal's marital status. Of the two friends Asha was married first with Mahesh, a handsome man with very lucrative job in America, which was objected to by Mrinal as they had agreed and promised after free talks to choose women's freedom over early arranged marriage, whereas she was getting married in the second year of her studies in college.

However, on asking she was informed that Mrinal had gone to London as representative of a company she was engaged in for attending a conference and she said that she would be attending another conference at San Francisco. The difference in their respective positions in life maddened Asha; she, a divorcee and having strained relationship with her only son and Mrinal, holding a very high position in office, highly qualified, must be moving in a very high society.

At this seeming defeat in life to her rival Asha began bluffing randomly, switching to English after a few words in Mother tongue ("English, which seemed a more appropriate language for lying", the writer says—Chitra 281) telling that all of them, including her husband and son were utterly busy during the time of her proposed visit to San Francisco. Lying about the busy schedule of her family members she said, "Mahesh's going to be out of town till Friday. They're sending him to Philadelphia to straighten out some R & D Projects. Dinesh is busy Mondays and Wednesdays with his karate, Tuesday he's his Toastmasters, (I

was improvising wildly by now) he is the youngest member, you know, Thursday..." (Chitra 282).

She even didn't invite her bosom friend to stay with them, only asking at the end where she would put up and was mentioned about one of the topmost hotels where the conference would be held. She was invited to join Mrinal in a top hotel in an evening.

The son was in the kitchen when he overheard her mother's conversation. After she shifted the receiver he reacted most bitterly in a language which does not suit any cultured family:

"'What's all this sheet about me and karate? ... And Toastmaster—Toasmasters, give me a break! ... I'm not good enough for your friend just the way I am, is that it? And why d'you have to lie about him'—he wouldn't use his father's name—'being out of town or business'. He imitated my Indian accent, thickening it in exaggeration. 'Why couldn't you just tell her the fucking truth-that he got tired of you and left you for another woman.'

"That's when I slapped him. It shocked us both.... I had rarely hit Dinesh when he was growing up.... I wanted to cry...but all I could say... 'never use that word in front of me again.'

"Dinesh's hands curled into fists like he wanted to hit me back...all he said in a cool voice, 'You make me sick.'" Just as he was slamming his door she said, "I didn't hear him asking you along, Mr. Smart ass!'" (Chitra 282-83).

After this although she wished much to reconcile with him, dreaming him as an infant sucking milk, she could not but one day prepared his favourite Indian dish, kachuris and called him to partake with her as he began eating out, he refused, telling, spare me.

Now the date of reckoning with her bosom friend, with heartfelt sense of defeat and heart-full jealousy, arrived. While preparing her dress she remembered many happy days with her husband who always had selected her dresses on such occasions and remembered her questioning him on his day of parting with her, "Haven't you been happy with us, ever?" To which his naïve answer was, "I thought I had. I hadn't known what real happiness was" (Chitra 287).

As she was preparing to meet her, her self-imposed conflict was tearing her apart. While she was feeling that she was utterly defeated in life compared to Mrinal's success and that she should confess everything as simply as their friendship once was, the self imposed deceit could not make her fit for that true confession. More she advanced more she felt ashamed but could not come out of the self-imposed snare. While she had invited her friend to come and see their happy family while sending her their gayest photos, when she offered to come she did not invite her.

In the crowded restaurant, "As I awkwardly followed the Maitred I knew I wouldn't belong here, and that every person in the room, without needing to look at me, knew it too" (Chitra 290).

Nearing her friend, Asha paused and saw her from all sides with intense desire to find her morose, "I wanted—I admit it—to discover a secret sorrow, perhaps a weariness with life. But all I could see was the easy grace with which she held her body, like always.

"She must have sensed my presence, because she turned. When she saw me, a smile of such pleasure crossed her face that I felt ashamed of having spied on her" (Chitra 291).

While Mrinal laughed very cordially Asha couldn't be so free though she too exchanged all good will, showering all praise on her for her position and look with the most exquisite outfit and make up as her wont was. Seeing the exquisite ring on her finger Asha took another chance, "'There's tons of news but...tell me about that divine ring! Could it be an engagement? Is there a lucky man waiting somewhere?' My own voice sounded coy and false even to my ears.

"'No', said Mrinal. A shadow seemed to flit across her face" (Chitra 292).

Mrinal explained that she bought that expensive diamond ring from London and presented herself to herself. In the course of their talks Asha deliberately introduced the subject of her husband and son and at one point Mrinal became very curious to know of the once seen very romantic Mahesh and his son, "I can't tell you how sorry I am at not meeting him. And your charming son, too" (Chitra 293).

Asha coughed taking the very costly drink offered by Mrinal and shamefully clearing her throat began her story full of falsehood to draw out the jealousy of her friend. Spell bound, she heard her and exclaimed, "You're so lucky.... You don't know how lucky you are, Ashoo, to have such a loving, considerate husband, such a good, responsible son" (Chitra 293-94).

Now Ashoo tried to flirt with her, praising her in all ways and Mrinal was confident enough to tell how she charmed each man, sitting in their company, leading them and making her terms victoriously in each meeting. "It's what I always wanted. I would never give it up to dwindle into a wife, like the woman—what was her name...."

Mrinal remembered the woman, from the book they read in their joint session during their teens but didn't disclose. And with little more provocation Asha brought her friend out when she admitted her boredom in spite of all her wealth and comfort, observing things in each morning remaining the same, etc. To her utter satisfaction, Asha found that "She ground her knuckles into her eyes and when she brought them away her mascara was smudged. I stared at her. It was the first time I'd seen Mrinal cry.

"'I was going to pretend everything was fine', she said, 'I wanted you to admire me, envy me. That old competition thing. But when I heard you talking about your husband and your son'—her voice faltered on the word—'when I saw the love shining in your face. I couldn't keep it up'" (Chitra 295).

The cheater cheating her friend feels the honesty of her friend's confession in trying to cheat and feels inspired to "go around to her side of the table and hold her. I wanted to weep like that too, to confess. But it was as though I were trapped inside something, a tunnel perhaps, or a well. With all that dark, cold water passing down on me". Torn inside, she still felt her role played perfect, when Mrinal said after recovering from the shock, "take good care of those two wonderful guys that God has given you" (Chitra 295).

Repenting for what she's done, a prick of conscience, and with hard labour of unpracticed driving she reaches her garage and closing it with the remote device keeps the car on deliberately, so the carbon monoxide constantly covers the garage feeling her

lungs while she self-punishes herself, "I'm crying for Mrinal in her spacious bed.... I feel like a child who picks up a fairy doll she's always admired from afar and discovers that all its magic glitter is really pained clay" (Chitra 296).

In the face of imminent death, she suddenly stops the engine and somehow opens the garage door to face her worried son. Almost swooning, she somehow reaches the bathroom with the help from her son and vomits profusely. Then going to toilet perhaps relieves herself to some extent, confessing, "I've lost my husband, betrayed my friend, and now to top it all I've vomited all over the sink in my son's presence" (Chitra 298).

She realizes that her efforts for perfection throughout her life and even her efforts to push herself as the most lucky woman proved illusory. She dreams that Mahesh too one day would realize that life is altogether illusory. The only solace she might feel was that her son out of sympathy for her came closer to her, for a temporary period though, in her drinking pista milk with her son in two Rosenthal crystal glasses Mahesh had presented her on their tenth anniversary. The idea of imperfection continues in her thought. She drinks the delicious milk with her son fulfilling her temporay truce with her son and decides that the next day she would write a letter to her bosom friend Mrinalini: What after all could she write when even confessions are full of miraze!

Of all the stories in the book, "Meeting Mrinal" seems to be the best with the perfect picture of an imposter at the acme of jealousy who hates the most beloved friend; never losing ground to her honesty for the sake of one's own victory in deception.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the Storyteller

Being an Indian–American, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni contrasts the two cultures juxtaposing them, bringing out the idiosyncrasies of each. Though she does not show the glaring differences and the results by examples like Jhumpa Lahiri, her characters speak about the differences and proceeds to show the results. Both of them write the stories of Indians, mostly living in America and sometimes or partly in India too. Bharati Mukherjee writes of Indians mostly living in America with a new orientation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the very apt storytellers who pushes her ideas through the characters, making them vivid and attractive with their own logic and personality. She makes the drawing-room tales lively with a touch of style that suits the *adda* among the friends, touching the fringe of gossip.

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Use of Fantasy against the Realistic Themes: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fictional Writings

Santwana Haldar

'Fantasy', which had been discarded from the realistic convention of fiction for its close affinity with 'once upon a time ambience', was embraced once again by the post-colonial and postmodern writers who made serious experiments with the use of dreams, myths, fables and such other elements of fantasy in their fictional writings dealing with socio-political themes. Broadly speaking, this new convention was popularized by Jorge Luis Borges[1], Argentine by birth but nurtured on universal literature. He created, outside time and space, imaginary and symbolic worlds in his brief sketches and short narratives, exploring thereby the paradoxical and intellectual possibilities. Thanks to his admirers and followers in Latin America like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the mode of fantasy began to be used in serious fictional writings all over the world. Even those writers who more or less followed the realistic mode of narration, made experiments with the blending of realistic and fantastic elements. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an award-winning writer of fiction who was born in India in 1956 and settled in San Francisco, is one such author who deals with several realistic issues and often gives a twist to her narratives with the use of elements taken from fables, myths, dreams, and also from parallel movements of past, present and future. She writes about the problems of Indian

women living new lives in America, comparing their stance with that of their compatriots in India, their identity crisis in the new land, the conflicts between their old treasured beliefs and surprising newfound desires and also about the transformation of the outer world into reflections of the soul. The present article intends to show how Divakaruni introduces fantasy in her fiction dealing with serious matters with the artistic use of the elements from myths, fables and dreams and also through creation of suspense and a twilight atmosphere that evoke a magical effect.

To start with Divakaruni's feminist concerns in her novels and short stories, she investigates the plight of Indian women married off at an early age: the sad stories of their getting adjusted to the house of the in-laws, their conflicts and occasional rise to revolt for some humanist issue, if not for the torture inflicted on them, their shattered dreams of a relationship based on mutual love, their hard struggle for financial independence and finally, their assertion of individuality through a complicated process of self-analysis. The short story "The Bats" (*Arranged Marriage*) reveals physical torture inflicted on a young wife by her husband and the poor woman's attempts to get adjusted with the life of humiliation. "The Disappearance" (*Arranged Marriage*) exposes the cruelty of an insensitive husband who never allowed his wife to satisfy her small desires and who, after the disappearance of the wife married again, this time "a plump, cheerful girl, good-hearted, if slightly unimaginative". "The Maid Servant's Story" (*Arranged Marriage*) is initially the retelling of the well known story of a wretched girl who had been forced to be a prostitute by her mother and who could never come out of the hell she had been thrown into. But the story also exposes the façade of so-called gentlemen and reveals how the good wives of the middle class families are deceived by their sexually perverted husbands. "The Ultrasound" (*Arranged Marriage*) introduces the issue of killing girl child in her mother's womb along the torture inflicted on the barren women. "Women chastised, even beaten, because they could not have children. Women whose husbands stopped loving them because they had reneged on the unspoken wedding contact. Women from whose faces people averted their eyes because they were bad luck" (217). Runu in "The Ultrasound" tolerates all the whims of her in-laws until she is asked to abort the foetus of the girl child she has been bearing. Everybody in her

new family including her husband and her own mother accepts the proposal of abortion leaving Runu alone to take a decision. A similar incident is elaborated in the novel *Sister of My Heart.* In this novel, Anju, the affluent between the two friends (they had the illusory idea that they were cousins), developed a feeling of protest akin to feminist ideology as she often advocated a single life, opposing the condition of being "yoked to a man like a cart to a buffalo" (130) while the other friend Sudha, aware of her financial limitations, never displayed a sign of protest. She protested only to save her girl, still in her womb, and it was an act of existentialist choice,[2] no fashionable feminist slogan like her friend's. Anju's reaction after reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* may also be quoted in this context: "I spent many afternoons reading and rereading the book, which was a long essay rather than the stories I usually preferred. I understood only a little of what the author was saying. But I felt her sadness and her fire. I could see her standing in front of a hall filled with women…demanding that they cast off their blinkers and stand up for their rights. She would not have raised her voice, but the passion in it would have pierced each woman's breast like a shaft, as it did mine" (134).

The backdrop of Divakaruni's fiction swings between India and America as do most of her characters, often in search of career and wealth in the Utopia of their dream. But when they confront the hard reality in America—besides the problem of adjustment with a new culture, the newcomers are harassed for securing green card, even manhandled as foreign usurpers, while the second generation faces identity crisis—their illusion is gone and the writer reveals the disappointment and the pangs attached to it. In *Before We Visit the Goddess,* the political activists Sanjay and Bishu fled to America in fear of life and hoped for a bright future there, and Bela, too, went there in secret to marry Sanjay, but they were disappointed soon. As Bela watched them, "it struck her that America might have saved their lives, but it had also diminished them" (102). Ahuja's wife Lolita in *The Mistress of Spices* is another victim of domestic atrocities in America. In the story "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" (*Arranged Marriages*) the protagonist Jayanti, a girl student from India, is shocked to find that the life of her married aunt with whom she is to stay in

America, is not much different from that of a housewife in India. In fact, she finds no magic in the land though her young mind had moved on the wings of imagination and longed for unimaginable exciting matters.

> As a child in India, sometimes I used to sing a song. *Will I marry a person from a far-off magic land*, *where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?* My girlfriends and I would play skipping games to its rhythm, laughing carelessly, thoughtlessly. And now here I am. *America*, I think, and the word opens inside me like a folded paper flower placed in water, filling me until there is no room to breathe. (46)

She faces the worst ever humiliation in her life when one evening while taking a walk outside along with her reluctant aunt they are approached by a group of boys who called them "Nigger", chanting the word in high singsong voices. The attack with racial slur shook the very root of Jayanti's existence, compelling her to face a crisis of identity. In the novel *Queen of Dreams,* Rakhi, who was born and brought up in America and was sure of her identity as an American, receives a rude shock when her family is accused of planning the attack of 9/11. The attackers tell them, "You ain't no American"; Rakhi utters in much confusion, "If I wasn't an American, then what was I"? (267-71). She is so disturbed with the identity crisis that she examines in the reflection of the mirror her dark eyes, the brown skin, the black crinkles of her hair; all these are appreciated as Indian features, she has known, but never in her life did she have any occasion to think that these features would speak against her American identity. But now these features, though familiar, appear alien and she feels that she is misfit to both the identities, Indian and American.

Divakaruni's fictional writings are interesting not as much for revealing the torture inflicted on women, identity crisis of the immigrants and their disappointment, as for the subtle references to fantasy in the realistic narrative. Take, for example, the short story "The Bats". Rendered from the perspective of a little girl who would regularly hear her mother cry at night, but would hardly found any word of complaint, the story exposes the little girl's attainment of maturity and her understanding of the hard reality in an artistic way. The story gives details of the girl's pure

joy when she was taken to the remote village of her mother's uncle—it is implied that her mother, unable to tolerate the torture of her husband, left his home along with her daughter and as she was orphan she could take refuge only in her uncle's hut—and how she kept the secret gift of her grandpa-uncle, a silver made ring that was found inside a big fish. The girl might have known the legendary story of Shakuntala's losing the ring given to her by Dushyanta and her sufferings that followed—in many folk tales of the regional languages a lost ring is recovered after a fish is cut to pieces and it is supposed to bring luck—and she took special care to keep the ring safe and secret after she along with her mother came back to her father's home. The little girl began to believe in the magical power of the ring, though all her attempts failed to find any magical effect. Still she carried the ring when she moved anywhere, as her father would often throw their things outside or even burn them during their short absence. But once they had to leave in the middle of the night, too suddenly to take anything with them.

> Mother stumbled behind me down the lightless passage—we hadn't dared to switch on the light—holding the wadded end of her sari to her face, the blood seeping through its white like a dark, crumpled flower. I pulled her hand to hurry her along, my own shoulder still throbbing from when Father had flung me against the wall as I tried to stop him. When we came back a few weeks later (this time before our bruises had faded all the way) I looked for the ring everywhere. But it was gone. (*Arranged Marriage* 15-16)

The atrocities of the father are now hard facts for the girl who need not question her mother anymore regarding where they are going and why. When she was a little girl, she would be angry with her mother and ask her questions. But now she has attained maturity, likely to be untimed, as is reflected in her attempts to protect her mother from her father's rage. The humiliation of their survival snatched all the joys and the magic attached to the joys from her life and the loss of the ring is suggestive of the loss of joy, hope and magic. The metaphorical use of the bats in the story is also suggestive of the wretched condition of the mother and the daughter. The bats in the mango orchard of which the Grandpa was in charge were poisoned lest they destroyed the ripe mangos.

It was thought that after the first week of massacre at least, the bats would stop coming to that orchard. But the bats continued to come much to the little girl's surprise who wondered if the bats had no idea that they would be safe elsewhere. The little girl did not understand then that the bats had no safe place to go as she and her mother were destined to go back repeatedly to the same place from where they fled to save their lives. An artistic use of the ring that obviously refers to the magical world of myths and legends and the metaphorical use of bats add a magical touch to the narrative.

In many of her writings, Divakaruni creates a sort of suspense by keeping some episodes in the dark. In "The Maid Servant's Story" (*Arranged Marriage*), for example, the protagonist gets no answer from her aunt when she asks her if it was her mother who kept the unknown girl as her maid and was utterly disappointed when that girl was recognized by her in the red light area of the city. The housewife in her aunt's story lost her husband and her baby son as did the protagonist's mother herself. But the aunt would not say anything more and the protagonist interprets this reluctance to face the truth as a characteristic trait of Indian women "whose lives are half light and half darkness, stopping short of revelations that would otherwise crisp away our skins"(167). She also wonders if the story revealing the husband's unfaithful and corrupt nature is a warning to her, a preview of her own life that is only a repetition of her mother's tragic song. "Perhaps it is like this for all daughters, doomed to choose for ourselves, over and over, the men who had destroyed our mothers…. We sit like this, two women caught in the repeating circular world of shadow and memory, watching when the last light, silky and fragile, has spilled itself just above the horizon like the *palloo* of a saffron sari" (167-68). In "The Disappearance" (*Arranged Marriage*) also nothing is learnt about the lady who left her husband's home. From the incidents rendered from the husband's perspective the cause of her leaving home is clear. The insensitive and dominating husband had a very clear conscience regarding his behavior and even credited himself for being a good husband, though sometimes "he had to put his foot down, like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes". "Surely he could not be blamed for raising his

voice at those times (though not so much as to wake her son), or for grabbing her by the elbow or pulling her to the bed, like he did that last night" (172). Surprisingly, after removing all signs of her from his life and having started a new life with his second wife, and even after the death of his second wife, he continued to wonder if his first wife was alive and if at all she was surviving, whether she was happy with the "unguarded joy in her face" that had been given up during her stay with him. Such process of keeping a twilight area in the narrative adds a mysterious effect to her writings. In her latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess,* a similar suspense is created in little Bela's encounter with the magician.[3] Bela remembers her conversation with the magician who was a real one for her till her old age, and was even vocal about his influence on her life—she was given a small globule that she consumed and after that she was lifted to a world of dream—, though her father brought the charge of a foul play against the leaders of union in his company, and the maidservant talked about catchers of children. Bela's belief in the existence of the magician is suggestive of her longing for something that would set everything right in her life. Until she is able to have faith on her abilities to mend her life herself, she continues to believe in the existence of external magic. She has to undergo a rigorous life on her own for supporting herself and this self support drives away her fear as well as her faith in magic which is an external support to remove blotches from life and make life smooth. When one gains one's own power, one needs no magic but unless and until this power is not attained, magic is very much a reality, a part of life, that cannot be ignored. Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* makes her stand clear in regard to her faith in the fulfilment of one's wishes in case these are uttered at night, looking at the falling stars. "Not that Anju believes in falling stars. They are nothing more, she says, than burning meteors, and have no power to help anyone, not even themselves. I know and I know also that there may be many sides to something all at once, many realities. A ball of flaming gas hurtling to its doom can, if you believe strongly enough, give your heart's desire. The death of a star, the birth of a new joy in your life. Isn't that how the universe balances things?" (128). The idea expressed by Sudha comes very close to that of the practitioners of magic realism in Latin America who profusely used dreams, superstitious

beliefs of the rural characters and elements from folk tales and myths in their writings side by side the presentation of stark socio-political realities, because they believed that reality may be attained both from rational scientific ideas and from the irrational dreams and traditional beliefs.[4]

It may be discussed in this context Divakaruni's use of the elements of folk tales and of dreams in her narratives. *Sister of My Heart* contains two parts entitled "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" and "The Queen of Swords" which are in fact decoding of the ancient folk tales in terms of modern realistic stories. In their childhood days Sudha and Anju lived in a palatial building owned by Anju's father, having been nurtured with the illusion that they were distant cousins. They often acted the roles of the characters in fairy tales during their play time and Sudha would act as the passive princess to be rescued by Anju acting as the prince. Anju recalls this role playing when both of them grew up and Sudha appears to be in love with Ashok but knows that she would not be allowed to have any relationship with him. Anju offers to find a way out but Sudha refuses any such proposal. Anju recalls how "during those fairy tales" Sudha would have the "same tranced look on her face", sitting passively on the bed with her folded hands, while she, Anju, would run into trouble in the course of rescuing Sudha, fighting the imaginary sea-serpent grabbing the rescuer in its coils. Once exasperated by the trouble attached to her role, Anju asked Sudha why she was sitting passively without helping Anju, Sudha expressed with surprise that it was the job of the prince to rescue the princess and prove his worth. Anju wonders if Sudha is caught in the enchanted web of the stories she loved so much, and "in some place deep inside her impervious to logic, she turned Ashok into the prince who has to save her from the clutches of the wicked king" (115). In the second part, "Queen of Swords", when Anju is much depressed in America and Sudha fights alone in India to save her girl, Sudha tells Anju on phone the story of the Queen of Swords who spent her girlhood in a crumbling marble palace set around with guards, and who happily adjusted her as a queen, rose to revolt when after a soothsayer's proclamation that she was going to give birth to a daughter, there were attempts to kill her still unborn daughter. "She felt something being passed

into her hands through the wall of the womb. Looking down, she saw it was a sword, a flaning sword made of light, and then another, one for each hand. Whirling the swords around her head like the Goddess Durga, like the Rani of Jhansi, the queen left the palace, and none dared prevent her" (309). The Queen of Swords in the tale is easily decoded as Sudha, who having been praised since her childhood as meek, mild and abiding, now takes the crucial decision of protest for saving the girl in her womb, embracing unknown sufferings fearlessly. An intelligent use of folk tales enhances the sharpness of Divakaruni's fiction dealing with realistic issues. She makes successful use of dreams in her narratives and the importance given to dreams makes it clear that happening in dreams and happening when one is awake run parallel in her writings. Take, for example, the dream of Raven described to Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices.* Before expressing his love to Tilo Raven tells her the sad experiences of his life and his attempt to commit suicide and also of his dream when he was lying in hospital bed. In his dream he stood on a hill of ashes amid a lake of fire while a searing wind blew over him. He was so thirsty that it seemed like burning. Unable to tolerate the pain any more, he threw himself off the hilltop to be drowned in the burning lake. Suddenly a beautiful raven swooped to catch him on its wings. As it soared, he felt better and his thirst was gone. There was a song in his ear—the bird's voice, harsh but not bitter—that gave him its name. He closed his eyes and when opened them, the raven was gone. He was in the place full of Eucalyptus and pine, a place of wilderness with no people to spoil it. Then he woke up. He told Tilo that the bird came to tell him that that place was the earthly paradise and he should search for that place, going back to the old ways, the ways of the earth before it was spoilt. He also said that he had recently started dreaming the same dream, each time the dream filling his mind with the hope that he would find that earthly paradise and live in it. He added that in the last few dreams Tilo was with him and then he proposed Tilo to help him search the paradise. The symbolic use of dream as prologue to an affair between two experienced sufferers deserves praise.

The Mistress of Spices is a unique example of blending the magic of myths with hard facts. Initially, it tells the story of Tilo,

an Indian woman who having suffered a lot has come to America in the guise of an old woman, opening a shop of Indian spices. With her intention to offer her customers a human dealing through providing useful spices to relieve their sufferings as well, she has been treated in a different way. Some of her customers, mostly Indians facing different problems in America, began to have faith in her 'magical' power to remove problems. Though she had vowed not to be in personal touch with her customers and not to fall in love with anybody, she breaks her promise and when she actually falls in love, her 'magical' power to remove sufferings diminishes. But this fact has been rendered with numerous myths associated with the spices as well as putting on facades. Moreover, the past life of Tilo has not been described realistically. Tactfully, the author makes Tilo reflect on the illusive nature of reality before she starts the story of her past, "Sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all that we encounter has already been changed by what we had imagined it to be. If we had dreamed it into being" (16). Tilo speaks of her 'magical' power as a sorceress in her girlhood days when her parents would utilize her power for earning money. Then came the pirates who carried her to their ship. Earlier she was called Nayantara and now her new name was Bhagyavati. After a while she became the queen of the pirates but could not be happy. One night she climbed to the prow of the ship and noted a typhoon in the horizon. She called the typhoon up from its sleep and the ship vibrated with it. All the pirates were drowned but she was saved by the sea serpents who had befriended her. The serpents asked her to accompany them, but she chose to stay in the island of spices. She learnt the secret magical power of the spices under the patronage of the First Mother in that island and her training being over she became the mistress of spices and settled in a shop of America in the guise of an old woman. Myths and fairy tales are also used while rendering the process of putting on a mask and travelling to America. "In the last hour of the night we piled wood in the centre of the volcano, in readiness. We danced around it singing of Shampati, bird of myth and memory who dived into conflagration and rose new from ash, as we were to do" (56). She chose her name this time, urging the First Mother to name her Tilottama. In a well decorated spice shop in Oakland,

California where she finds herself in the guise of an old woman, Tilo catches glimpses of the life of the local Indian expatriate community. To each of them she gives the spices he or she wants and also offers what they have desired in their hearts, a medicinal cure for the pangs of rejection, of family disturbances or external troubles. A common spice like ginger is described as "a root of gnarled wisdom"; peppercorn is rendered as something that can sweat one's secret out of oneself; 'amla' helps bear the pain that cannot be changed; asafoetida (hing) is the antidote to love; king spice 'makaradwaj' is able to bring back one's youth; so on and so forth. Divakaruni's magic lies in blending so many myths and elements from fairy tales in a compact story of the struggle of the expatriates as well as their thirst for love to remove loneliness.

The author of several award-winning books, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most promising writers of contemporary fiction who experimented with the technique of blending fantasy and stark reality. In most of her fictional writings there are flashes of fantasy suggested through symbols, metaphors, well known myths and fairy tales while a novel like *The Mistress of the Spices* is a complex texture, woven from beginning to end out of mythical fantasy, elements of fairy tales, dreams and burning social issues.

Notes

1. Borges did not discard dreams as unreal. Nor did he interpret dreams in terms of Freudian Sub consciousness. Rather he accepted dreams as extensions of reality. He was much inspired by the English writer John William Dunne, author of curious books about time in which he claims that the past, present and future exist simultaneously, as is proved by our dreams. Borges remarked that Sophenhauer had already written that life and dreams are leaves of the same book. Reading them in order is living and slimming through them is dreaming, he said. In his short narratives Borges liked to play with mind, dreams, space and time.

   Though Borges accepted no metaphysical system as true, he makes out of all of them a game for the mind. As Andre Maurois wrote in his Introduction to the English translation of Borges's *Labyrinth* (ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, 1964i), Borges discovered two tendencies in himself: one is to esteem religious and philosophical ideas for their aesthetic

value, even for what is magical or marvelous in their content; and the other is to suppose in advance that the quantity of fables or metaphors, though limited, can be "everything to everyone" (7-8).

2. The existentialists put emphasis on free choice as being the most ethical performance of an individual. According to Jean Paul Sartre, to deny one's freedom of will is to remain in 'bad faith'. To quote Soren Kierkegaard, "The goal of movement for an existing individual is to arrive at a decision, and to renew it. The thinker gives himself subtle ethical reality by forming and renewing himself in critical decisions which are a total inward commitment" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 284).
3. As Bela was sitting in the garden under a mango tree doing her homework, the magician appeared suddenly. She was startled and her fountain pen dropped from her hand, making black splotch in the middle of her mathematic assignment and leaving a dark trail on her uniform. He begged pardon and started his magic. "He removes his hands from the folds of his shawl and a glowing falls from them onto the notebook, on the smudge, which disappears. Lightly, lightly, he runs his fingertips over the stains on Bela's uniform, and that, too, is clean again. Then she seats himself, cross-legged, at her feet. Bela looks around wildly for someone who can confirm that this is really happening, but they are alone in the garden. Under her uniform, her knee tingles where the magician had placed his fingers" (41). After taking the globule offered by the magician she gradually lost her senses.
4. To quote from the Introduction to *Latin American Short Stories,* edited by Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria: "Magic realism results from the meeting of the two tendencies…. One is the formal experiments of the avant-garde, partly inspired by new conceptions of temporality and perception derived from the sciences. The other is the realism popularized in the nineteenth century and taken up as a program by politically motivated artistic trends such as socialist realism. On the whole, magical realism was an effort to express counter intuitively the world as if the presuppositions of Western bourgeois society could be erased and a fresh look made possible" (19).

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3

The Palace of Illusions: An Alternative Narrative

Anantha Vijay

Introduction

Gender plays an important role in perception. What a woman sees, a man does not see, to be more precise, cannot see, taking this cue from Native Canadian author Jeannette Armstrong where she dares the dominating culture to imagine the plight of the indigenous communities, it could be aptly said, the dominating patriarchal discourse cannot imagine the plight of women. In a predominant patriarchal society, even the myths are woven and maintained by the patriarchal structures of the society propagating patriarchy and its assumptions. Even the mythological characters were constructed from time immemorial by men were transmitted over ages reinforcing the patriarchal narratives seldom exposing the narratives from a woman's perspective.

In the Indian context, *Mahabhrata*, the world's oldest epic, was produced by men and handed over generations unquestioned, and it has now been passed into the present generation and with the same narrative. However, Chita Banerjee Divakaruni in her text *The Palace of Illusions* engages the epic from a different discourse that is distinctly feminine to produce a narrative from the perspective of Draupadi—the central character.

In her interview to Guernica, Divakaruni acknowledges that she writes both from the perspective of men and women, and the

basic contention being power struggle. But on the hind side, Divakaruni's portrayal of women characters who are powerful and suppress other women reflects otherwise. She portrays from a woman's perspective at least, with regard to the text *The Palace of Illusions.* Divakaruni delves into the mindscape of Draupadi and creates a discourse on the scheme of events and incidents from a woman's perspective.

Attracted to the form of bildungsroman, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, creates female characters who are closely related to her own experience. Acknowledging that there is power play otherwise termed as conflicts between characters, the conflict between men and women predominate in her texts. Her own experience as an immigrant and empathising with the recent immigrants who have migrated to the west, Divakaruni encounters on the social front women, who survived domestic violence, trafficking and other abuse.

Attempting to get the best of both the East and West, Divakaruni opines that strong women, when respected, make the whole society stronger. And at the same time, she is cautious about rapid changes. Her angst to preserve the positive traditions of Indian culture is equally dominant.

According to Goncalves, 'adjectifying' is the process of elaborating on the remembered event by giving it colour, shape, scent, taste, texture, emotion, thought and meaning. It enlivens an experience through a process of narrative symbolization. Draupadi was made to witness and adjectify events in her narratives.

This paper attempts to observe Draupadi into the innards of many characters and her own personal relations and reactions to events and judgments form a core of the text.

Myth

Myths are stories from the past—either real or imaginary leading a society to a certain understanding of a reality. Human beings need myths to comprehend a reality in accordance with their own cultural, spiritual, and religious ethos as transferred to them over ages notwithstanding whichever cultural, social, political denomination they belong to. It provides the paradigm of culture foregrounding what was deemed to be important at that point of time. Myths are codified information serving as tools

of education and providing moral frameworks for instilling proper behaviour along with the cultural norms. Myths also help in reinforcing the cultural and moral norms of the society. Myths borders on creating stereotypes. Campbell in his book *The Power of Myth* states,

> "Myth basically serves four functions. The first is the mystical function,... realizing what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder you are, and experiencing awe before this mystery....The second is a cosmological dimension, the dimension with which science is concerned—showing you what shape the universe is, but showing it in such a way that the mystery again comes through.... The third function is the sociological one—supporting and validating a certain social order.... It is the sociological function of myth that has taken over in our world—and it is out of date.... But there is a fourth function of myth, and this is the one that I think everyone must try today to relate to—and that is the pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances."

Divakaruni has effectively focused on what Campbell has codified as the third and the fourth function of the myth. *The Palace of Illusions* is neither decrying the social order nor turning into the text into a pedagogical text, but restrains itself to an alternative discourse where the episodes are narrated from a different perspective from the point of view of Draupadi.

Importance of Stories

For ages, the human kind has depended on stories for transmission of information, attitude, values events, ethos, worldviews, culture, etc. Thus, stories become culturally codified and are used to reinforce the cultural markers over generations. In the context of India, there are the two great epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which were handed over generations and it is widely acknowledged that *Ramayana* portrays about how 'to be', *Mahabharata* depicts how 'not to be'. *Mahabharata* which is more complex than *Ramayana* constitutes intricate and interconnected stories with subplots within it. The characters thus created in *Mahabharata* have become larger than life and are deemed to be demi-god like figures who were almost deified. The repetitive rendering of the epics retaining the basic structures over

generations have instilled in the collective unconscious a narrative that projects an image that is unassailable in the mindscape of millions of Indians over generations constructing a framework with a specified outlook. While stories are conceived as narrative fallacy "it is these stories that influence and formats our outlook" (Kahneman 199). Thus, *Mahabharata* has instilled in the Indian psyche an image of each and every character over generations. These are not just stories, but intergenerational transmission of ethos, values and worldviews. Driven by the passion of storytelling inspired by her grandfather, Divakaruni attempts at storytelling to reinforce avoiding the male narrative has taken up a distinct narrative that is unique.

In the text *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni subtly reinforces the power of storytelling in a discussion between Dhir and Draupadi where Draupadi says, "story gains power with retelling…deepens the belief (20). Acknowledging the fact that stories have a power, it is inevitable that stories construct characters from a certain perception, not necessarily an objective position. It is pertinent to note that these narratives in *Mahabharata* are primarily from a male perspective and were formatted from a male perspective through the consistent rendering of these myths over generations.

But, it is these stereotyped characters that are depicted in the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* that Divakaruni attempts to retell from a different perspective. Maintaining the basic story structure of *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni re-structures the narrative from the perspective of Draupadi maintaining the cultural, mythical and supernatural elements which is singularly feminine by way of positioning Draupadi as the prime mover of the entire epic *Mahabharata*.

Choice of Narrator

Though Kunti and Draupadi are major women characters, the choice of Draupadi is significant because the position of Kunti with regard to the Pandavas would be the character of a mother, and hence a hyper critical intrusion and critiquing them would not be possible. Moreover, from the position of wife of all the five Pandavas, Draupadi is in a better position to arraign her in events and incidents where her discourse dominates. The choice of Draupadi is unique as she forms the link between all

the Pandavas, the jewel in the Palace, linked with Karna, envy of the Kauravas, and connected to Krishna in a peculiar way. Thus, Draupadi becomes a natural choice for Divakaruni to provide an alternate discourse of the text *Mahabharata*.

The centrality of Draupadi is not only demonstrated but authenticated through the divine intervention of Vyasa placed early in the text in his advance warning that it is Draupadi's pride, temper and vengefulness that will be driving the events forward thereby Draupadi becoming the prime mover unaware of her inner predilections. Vyasa also says that he is writing the story of Draupadi's life (41). Draupadi who is privy to the information of what is to come was more living to the coded message than acting on her own. But she knew that she is going to be the deciding factor to the twists and turns of the story based on her decisions (43). The cast is set and the thin line of difference in the *déjà vu* is demonstrated. At one point Draupadi was not sure whether she is living her life or just executing the story of Vyasa.

Was she a marionette in the whole episode according to the Karma belief of the Hindu religion or was she the marionettist who had the power to take decisions and thereby change the course of the unfolding events as warned by Vyasa in her early days? Facing critical situations and forced to take decisions, Draupadi becomes the pivot whose decisions direct the further course of action to it ends. Thus, Divakaruni shifts the flow of events to its logical ends, where the decision of Draupadi forms the prime role in the shift of events.

Having placed Draupadi at the centre of the events, Divakaruni sets on to narrate the story then after ensuring the credibility of narration by first person narrative of events and articulating the inner working of the psyche of Draupadi who was simultaneously a witness and the prime mover of events that were sequenced without dislodging the framed narrative of the epic.

Demythicizing

Myths provide us space to imagine. Mythical characters were constructed in larger than life moulds that ordinary human traits are either pushed to the background or totally eliminated. These mythical characters when cemented to the myths are brought

down to the ground when seen from an alternate perspective. The space for imagination about the mythical characters is reduced while they take the place of ordinary humans. The lived truth seen from a different perspective is provided by alternative narratives. It is precisely this that Divakaruni brings forward by providing the narrative space for Draupadi. Draupadi having lived the myth sees it from a different perspective. "But truth, when it's being lived, is less glamorous than our imaginings" (139).

While Jonathan Culler articulates a 'Catch 22' situation where the argument is raised as to "whether the character emerges because of the actions or the cause of the action is due to the character" (111), Divakaruni not delving into the argument has gone in for providing an alternative perspective to the reason behind the actions. For instance, Yudhisthir is supposed to be of impeccable character in the mythical story, with the narrative of Draupadi, Divakaruni portrays a different Yudhisthir as a person who is not in a position to see the reality. Draupadi sees the faults of Yudhisthir as it is affecting her and her decisions. Draupadi comments on his being honest and straightforward as one who is deluded by his understanding of the world—that the entire world loves him (130).

This internal monologue of Draupadi provides space to critique the characters as Draupadi is made an integral part of the action doubling up as witness and knowing pretty well that she is the prime mover in the episodes. It is the intentions, inconsistencies, inner conflicts and cross-currents of characters that are being foregrounded by Draupadi and in the process demythicizing the identity and the characters. For the sake of analysis and space, this paper attempts to focus on the character of Yudhisthir alone for micro-level focusing on alterative narratives who was stereotyped in myths. Divakaruni in the process of re-narration, also focuses at the macro-level on the image of men as seen by Draupadi and therefore by the text.

Alternative Narratives

By the term alternative narratives the paper implies that the mainstream holds the 'main' narrative, the term alternative narrative is used by anyone who creates a narrative that has either been silent or subjugated by the main narrative.

Alternative narratives enable to dislodge existing opinions and ideologies. These narratives provide moral alternatives on values by articulating what was hitherto unsaid or suppressed simultaneously engaging in counter imaging by providing insights into events from a different perspective. Moreover, it subverts the dominant paradigm by taking a peep into the established narratives and providing an alternative discourse.

Divakaruni chooses Draupadi for providing an alternative discourse that would counter the dominant paradigm of patriarchal discourse. The imposition of patriarchal discourse even at a tender age is revealed in the schooling undergone by Dhir where the teacher has instigated Dhir to generalize women as "the root of all the world's troubles" (24). By way of placing at the beginning of the text the contrasting views of Draupadi and Dhristadyumna while narrating the story of their father and his ascendance to throne (16), Divakaruni effectively anchors and prepares her readers for a series of alternative narratives.

Divakaruni wishes to bring out also the fault lines in the masculine characters tearing aside the pretentions of perfectness in their characters as portrayed in the dominant paradigm. Draupadi identifies self-narratives from her life and operates differently from the main narrative or events that are potentially significant which stands as a dominant discourse embodying an apparently universal stands influencing language and cognition of events differently from those that were in circulation from time immemorial.

Macro-level Focus

While the mainstream narrative articulates the predominant patriarchal social structure, Divakaruni provides social alternative narratives by way of critiquing from the point of view of Draupadi.

Starting with the name given to her, Draupadi feels that the *raison d'etre* of her name provides prominence to her father Drupad and that her individual identity is subordinated. She was only a vestige added on to his son from the yagna makes it doubly disparaging for Draupadi. Her naming is attributed as egoistic and she longs for a heroic name of her own (5) paving way for the beginning of counter narrative against the social norm of patriarchy.

The two factors that are predominant in men as seen from the text are love and honour. These are not only intertwined but also play a vital role in a man's life. The characteristics of men are presented axiomatically throughout the text. The fact that King Drupad called for the swayamvar of Draupadi made her feel that she is a pawn to be sacrificed to the king's advantage "to execute his revenge" (58) and not having an identity of her own.

Objectifying Draupadi by her five husbands, her father and Kunti is all because these characters are more preoccupied with their honour and Draupadi becomes a pawn in their hands. Draupadi acts independently only after she moves into her own palace of illusions. Dhir opines that the honour of family is more important than other kinds of honour (85). The understanding of the idea of honour, acts as a driving force that propels the actions in the text. The Pandavas were not used to contradict their mother, while it is a virtue, for Draupadi, Arjun's failure to stand up to his mother is a callous great disparage towards Draupadi. The basic tenet of marriage between a man and a woman was shattered. The inability of the brothers to counter Kunti's declaration is unethical.

With regard to the male ego, Divakaruni explicates the anecdote of the virginity boon given to Draupadi an unilateral decision of Vyasa who wanted to hold the Pandavas together, but Draupadi was deprived of the choice of the boon (120). Was that to satisfy the male ego? Given a chance, Draupadi would have asked for a boon to forget about other husbands while she is with any one of them (120).

Dhai Ma warns Draupadi that a well-meaning man… is more dangerous because he believes in the rightness of what he does (135). Draupadi concludes that predominate reason for actions of men is honour as men take it more seriously than women. Beeshma unfolds the psychology of men thus:

> "Your childhood hunger is the one that never leaves you. No matter how powerful they became, … they would always yearn to feel worthy. If a person could make them feel that way, they'd bind themselves to him—or her—forever." (134)

After the attempted disrobing of Draupadi in the court of the Kauravas, Draupadi understands men better.

> All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. I'd believed that because they loved me they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me—as much as any man can love—there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. … For men, the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride. (195)

The general understanding of men is provided by Dhir who says that "men find it hard to turn down challenges" (68) thus stereotyping them for the better understanding of Draupadi. But this stereotyping of men as a people who do not shy away from challenges is portrayed as people who were unable to react when Draupadi was assaulted in the court of Duryodhan. This counterpoises the dominant discourse about men.

With regard to love, Divakaruni, moves across various characters to foreground the dominant discourse, for instance, by stating that Bheeshma's father fell in love again, "as men tend to do" (132) in one go, Draupadi had clubbed all men into one frame. Draupadi admits that she wasn't nearly as upset as she made out to be when her husbands took other wives and she knew that her husbands cannot be celibate for four years waiting their turn (151) she also acknowledges her strength and her importance of being a 'gold wire' that strings the Pandavas together.

On the physical distance between a man and a woman, Draupadi comments that "Distance is a great promoter of harmony: a fact that women who find themselves in situations similar to mine should keep in mind" (153). As a woman Draupadi wishes that 'a loka' for good women would be where men were not allowed and where they could be finally free of male demands (155).

Micro-level Focusing

Constructing a character is constructing a thought about that individual character. It is not just the event that is portrayed; the

event becomes a metaphor for the exposition of that character. By engaging in *micro-level focusing* on characteristics of an individual character Divakaruni counters the mainstream narrative on these characters and thereby providing rewriting them. For analysis this paper focuses only on Yudhisthir.

Though it is well known that Yudhisthir has a weakness for dice (144), when it is stated by Draupadi, it gains importance as she is the terrible victim due to his vice. Draupadi defiantly doubts Yudhisthir's composure, "Was that calmness a façade, or was he truly unshakable in the face of threats" (118).

While Yudhisthir is projected as a person with noble intentions for his impeccable honesty and goodness, Draupadi sees these characters as one of being stubborn, obsessed with truth and insisting on moralising (122). She comments further that he was shy in bed, and had a head compendium of ideas about what constituted a lady like sexual behaviour which is stereotyping of women. The fact that Draupadi talks about his expectation on sexual behaviour from a woman is undermining and demanding a reversal of attitude towards Yudhisthir.

When the blind king Dhritirashtra blesses Pandavas, the faith of Yudhisthir on the blind king forces Draupadi to ruminate on his decision—"was he lacking common sense or was he a saint?" (129). Living up to his ideals, Yudhisthir knows for sure that his uncle is not for his well-being, but still driven by his faith in his ideals, he moves forward with him.

When Yudhisthir was given the choice to choose the guest of honour when he was declared the king of kings, he philandered away the chance to Bheeshma, and the people were aghast at the decision of Yudhisthir. No one liked it. It was through Draupathi it is made known that Yudhisthir was blind to notice the dissatisfaction among his brothers. He almost took them for granted and believed blindly that his brothers would approve. This fault in the character of impeccable Yudhisthir could be brought out only by Draupathi.

The character of Yudhisthir, as a drunk who gambled and reeled under the influence of alcohol (170) and her doubt in Duryodhan's stay in the palace of illusions is made evident by Draupathi (171). A distinct narrative by Draupadhi fixes Yudhistir:

> But Yudhisthir loved the games. He threw himself into them with childlike glee and made no secret of his pleasure when he won. … He would stumble into the bed chamber … reeking of wine.... When he did sleep, he tossed and turned and cried out from nightmares. (170)

Given the situation and the context, no one other than Draupadhi would be able to tell about the exploits of Yudhisthir. Neither his brothers, nor his mother would be able to view Yudhisthir objectively. The analysis of Yudhisthir by Draupadi was reinforced by Kunti when she articulates the weakness of Yudhisthir "You are too trusting. Just like your father—that's always been your—" (177).

When Yudhisthir was happy to enjoy his stay in the forest, Draupadi was infuriated. She responds to the statement of Yudhisthir who said living in the forest is : "… almost as good as living in a palace!" to which an infuriated Draupadi accuses Yudhisthir of his wrong decisions thus: "Nothing can make up for the palace that I lost because of your folly" (205) fixing the blame fully on Yudhisthir. Thus a character that is portrayed as impeccable is shredded by Divakaruni through her alternative discourse.

Conclusion

The warning given by Sikhandi to Draupadi that "a man to avenge your honour, and you'll wait forever" (49) proved to be the driving force behind Draupadi's decision making at critical junctures. Was this the Vyasa's premonition or advance warning given to her? Draupadi decided her course of action at times of crisis, thus becoming the prime mover in the entire text. By instilling Draupadi as the prime mover in *The Palace of Illusions,* Divakaruni provides an alternative narrative to that of *Mahabharata*. She has not only presented the perspective of Draupadi but has also portrayed her and all other characters as humans as fallible. The myth of an impeccable character is torn asunder. Divakaruni also brings out the inner pangs of Draupadi it is more silent on the thinking of Karna as portrayed in the text. Divakaruni by simultaneously focusing on the characters and the patriarchal discourse on the individual and the society respectively, Divakaruni has weaved a different yarn foregrounding the text from a woman's perspective. She has made sure that the text did

not deviate from the original narration but by way of providing an insight into the characters, she has effectively dented the images yet holding on to the values.

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4

Identity in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

Dwijen Sharma

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni weaves a story of South-Asian immigrants' experiences in America in the convention of magic realism in her intriguing novel, *The Mistress of Spices*. The novel is imbricated with the motif of a journey that reveals the authorial design to conform to the magic realism in transporting her heroine through space, time and identities. The story is told by the protagonist, Tilo from the perspective of the identity that she embraces on reaching America. Though she still remembers her past lives, she attempts to identify herself as South Asian and American. The novel is crowded with peoples who are shown to negotiate the immigrant experience while struggling internally and externally. Most of the characters, including Tilo, in the words of Rajan, are "not fully fleshed out; it is their hopes, desires, and pain that makes them recognizable as typical diasporic, exilic, marginalized, damaged figures" (Rajan 219). In this context, Merlin states: "Divakaruni builds an enchanted story upon the faultline in American identity that lies between the self and the community" (Merlin 1).

In this paper, an attempt would be made to study the different dimensions of identity as presented in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams define identity as

"people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams 2). In the beginning of the novel, we find that Tilo is incapable of pure self-perception. While perceiving herself through other's perspectives, she marginalizes her own perception of herself. As a result, there is ambivalence and often confusing images of her identity. In this context, one can recall what Stuart Hall states, "Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself" (Hall 9-20). Ironically, she, who has the power to peep into others, is unable to perceive herself. Interestingly, the First Mother forbids Tilo to look in a mirror, for "Once a Mistress has taken on her magic Mistress-body, she is never to look on her reflection again" (59). This suggests that Tilo should not perceive herself through her own eyes. She should take the identity that others decide for her. She confronts multiple but contradictory perceptions of herself through her diasporic experiences. As Tilo observes how South Asian community is treated in America, she understands the working of the race relations. She comprehends the brutality of racism when Mohan is assaulted by two young white men one evening. As they beat Mohan, they spit, "Sonofabitch Indian, shoulda stayed in your own goddam country" (170). So, he is one among many immigrants for the white Americans. But, he and his wife, Veena, consider themselves different from other minority communities. Regardless of how the South Asian community perceives itself, they are subject to discrimination.

Moreover, we find in the text that on assuming a different identity, her name and even, at times, her physical appearances change. In an essay, "Issues of Identity in the Indian Diaspora: A Transnational Perspective" Ajaya Kumar Sahoo defines individual identity as emphasizing "how one sees the world from a particular position and relative to what aspects or how one experiences self-hood" (89). Thus, individual identity is based on certain elements—geography, language, religion, cuisine, arts, etc. In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist-narrator tells us: "They named me [her] Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye, but my [her] parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl-child, and this one coloured like mud" (7). It is an ironic name to be bestowed to an unwanted and unattractive girl-child.

This irony presupposes the Indian background where a girl-child is, more or less, considered as a burden. But it is her 'Shaman' like ability to foretell the future and "change their [people's] luck with a touch of my [her] hand" (8) that makes her a powerful and proud woman. Even her parents dare not say anything against her for they live a luxurious life at her expense. Furthermore, her desire / yearning has no end. Thus, her "calling thought had set in motion a juggernaut wheel" (18); consequently, she was carried off by the pirates after having burnt the village and killed her family and relatives. They named her "Bhagyavati, Bringer of Luck" (19), for they want to exploit her power in their evil activities. Nevertheless, out of anger and hatred, she uses her power to overthrow the chief of the pirates and becomes "the queen of the pirates" (19). In spite of all loots and riches, she is not happy with that life and "what I [she] longed for I [she] didn't know, except that it wasn't this (21). So, she "sent another calling thought over the water" (21). However, she is saved, this time, from her lacklustre life by the sea serpents who tell her about a magic island of spice, the embodiment of her unspecified longing.

On finding herself in the island, she forgets who she is. However, the Old One takes her under her tutelage and teaches her and other young women how to handle magical spices and prepare for "unending service" (40) in different parts of the world. After the period of apprenticeship with the Old One is over, the protagonist, who remains nameless in the Island, is assigned to be the Mistress of Spices in a tiny store in Oakland, California. However, each young trained mistress of spices is given a name by the Old One before each of them embarks on a magical journey through the Shampati fire to their destinations: "Daughters it is time for me to give you your new names. For when you came to this island you left your old names behind, and have remained nameless since" (40). Interestingly, the protagonist insists on selecting her own name, and calls herself Tilo, shortened version of Tilottama which indicate that her role would be "life-giver, restorer of health and hope" (42). Divakaruni, here, prefigures the process of Tilo's identity formation. The use of the Shampati fire as a metaphor for translating the mistress' identity indicates the phoenix like existence. The old body is burnt and one is reborn from ash. Therefore, Tilo's journey to America can be called a translation and translocation of the self.

It also means that her new life in America is imbricated with the past, and suffers from history. Perhaps, it is also the reason why she is transformed into an old woman as she reaches America. Moreover, Tilo is not only a derivative of the Indian word for the sesame seed, but, in Hindu mythology, it is also the name of the most elegant dancer at *Bhagwan* Indra's court who had to suffer damnation. It is perhaps an indication of what is going to happen to the protagonist in America. Therefore, having visualised what might befall her in America, the First Mother presents her a knife as a parting gift, which Tilo considers is "...to cut my moorings from the past, the future. To keep me always rocking at sea" (51).

In the novel, we find that Tilo, while living in Oakland, California, as a mistress of spice, gradually violates all the rules that the Mistresses are obliged to adhere to. She violates the code of conduct by fostering friendship with a number of Indians and also by establishing an intimate relationship with Raven, a Native American. She risks moving into the forbidden territory located outside the confines of her store, and also uses the spices for her own benefit. Referring to such transgression of rules, Olivia Espín states that immigrants have struggles including "feelings of rejection from the new society, which affect self-esteem and may lead to alienation; confusion in terms of role expectations, values, and identity" (19). When Tilo exits from the confines of her store for the first time, she longs for a place to call home: "I run my hand over the door, which looks so alien in outdoor light, and I am struck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness" (128). Tilo is also spatially dislocated, for America is only a temporal space, a point in between her geographical migrations. According to Minh-ha: "The search for an identity is... usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized" (Minh-ha 415). The Island, which she has left, is the only place where she feels the comfort of belonging, for it is idealised in her memory. However, as long as she is confined there, she is an insider and, in the words of Minh-ha, can speak with authority about her own culture, and she's referred to as the source of authority in this manner" (417). But,

this is not the case with Tilo for she also has the outsider's perspective.

But Tilo does not feel the loss of a home, rather she 'reterritorializes' other foreign lands, constructing, what we call, the 'diaspora'. The notion of home is complex and resists neat definitions. Divakaruni transforms it into an elusive form that is not based on a singular location but rather on displacement of several locations. In an article for the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Pablo Shiladitya Bose states that when people leave their home countries, the diasporas certainly "disrupt [a] tidy view of nation, narration, and belonging" (Bose 119). Though Tilo marginalizes her self-perception in the beginning, she reclaims her own self-perception as she assimilates to American culture. The moment of 'self-perception' occurs when she dares to question the First Mother regarding the bar of using mirrors for Mistresses: "Here is a question I never thought to ask on the island: First Mother, why is it not allowed, what can be wrong with seeing yourself?" (142). On gazing into the mirror, Tilo sees "a face that gives away nothing, ... Only the eyes are human, frail" (279). The frailty and humanity of Tilo's eyes form the basis of her identity. Thus, the notion of a singular 'true identity', or authentic self is debunked. This leads to Tilo's recognition of her multiple consciousnesses, and a possible solution for Tilo's dilemma of cross-cultural identity formation. The multiple consciousnesses, she develops, manifest themselves in both her experiences and her subsequent relationships with her racial and sexual identities. Having rescued by Raven from under the rubble, and having realized that she owns an ordinary body of a mortal woman, she realizes the need to go back to Oakland "to try and help" (314) for she thinks that her transgression has caused the deadly earthquake. At this moment, she is transformed back into the body of the old woman from the youthful and unblemished body of a lover. Divakaruni, here, tries to suggest that Tilo understands that the notion of a unified identity is illusive. Thus, she accepts her fragmented selves. Moreover, she also recognizes the need to adopt a new name as her "Tilo life is over" (316). Realizing the need to take a new name which would account for her cross-cultural identity, she describes to Raven that her new name must "spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now" (317).

However, in an essay, "The Migrant's Time", Ranajit Guha discusses the difficulty of the immigrants to feel at home anywhere as they lose their sense of past, present and future simultaneously. He argues that the immigrants essentially 'disown' their history on leaving their country and, as such, there is "a loss of the world in which the migrant has had his own identity forged" (Guha 156). But Divakaruni presents Tilo as chameleon like who keeps changing throughout the narrative space for she has diverse experience and transnational existence. Therefore, her assimilation is completed on her adopting a new name, Maya, which "can mean many things. The Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day" (317). It also helps in accommodating her multiple identities—South Asian, American and other possible identities—in her present consciousness. She, thus, governs her own identity by taking control of the renaming process.

Thus, Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* can be read as a novel of multiple consciousnesses that debunks the notion of a unified id.

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5

The Mistress of Spices: The Magical and the Real

Mukta Sharma

Magic and imaginary worlds are very important in Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni's fiction. Magic, myth and fantasy form an integral part of some of her works where she spins a web of magic with her words and imagination which lulls the readers into a realm of fantasy. It is a world of enchantment of which she convinces her readers as a real one. Her writing collapses "the division between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic" in her "attempt to create a modern fable".

Devakaruni's magical-realist novel *The Mistress of Spices* combines ancient Hindu mythology, religious superstitions and traditional Ayurvedic medical wisdom with American socio-cultural concerns of the 1990s. As she explained in an interview, the novel deals with a past that is set in a mythical India, but the present is very much set in Oakland, California. The allegorical fable and fantasy depicts the magical powers of a clairvoyant woman of Indian ancestry. Tilotttama named after sesame seeds, the 'spice of nourishment' runs an Indian grocery store, "Spice Bazaar." She has psychic abilities, which help her treat her multigenerational shoppers' physical, emotional, and even spiritual illnesses. Tilo is conscious of her own influence and

even claims near-divine powers: "I who can make it all happen, green cards and promotions and girls with lotus eyes." She is the architect of Indian immigrant dream.

Divakaruni's originality and talent lie in her technique of narration. She has used various techniques in writing, such as alternative narrative, first person narrative, stream of consciousness, letter and diary writing, myth and magic realism particularly to express discarded and tragic condition of Indian immigrants while establishing themselves in the new civilization. Her stories take both the young as well as the adult to a world of enchantment and innocence. The magic world that she manages to weave with her vivid imagination and lyrical prose is something that one has to experience first-hand. In her enchanted world, nature and its forces were rightly understood and used for immense power. Her literature represents a daring yet also smooth and spontaneous interaction between various worlds and ways of existence, those considered as 'real' and those considered as 'supernatural' or 'imaginary'. In this intersection of possible existences, of ways of being—that do not contradict one another but appear to be particularly complementary, her vivid, engaging style strongly supports the literary personae that fully lead their complex novelistic life.

The co-existence of 'magical fantasy' and the characteristics of hybrid, post-colonial or postmodernism, novelistic devices in this prose have often lead the author to define her writing approach as magical realism. Gita Rajan says "Divakaruni uses mysticism to achieve her goal of making the commonplace wondrous and real extraordinary." Magic has always been an integral part of different genres like epics, fairytales, adventure stories handed over orally from generation to generation, in drama and poetry. While myths may contain magical happenings and events, they are regarded to be authentic and true by the recipients of that culture while literary texts which contain magic are categorized under fantasy genre of literature.

Magic realism unearths the magic present in reality. Magic is given a vestige of normality, while the real world is de-familiarized, expanded, and transformed to bring together elements which are mutually contradictory like life and death, waking and dreaming, civilized and wild, male and female, and mind and body. The

boundaries of realism are extended in order to accommodate a fuller vision of reality. Magic realism is however set in the real world unlike the genre of fantasy which is set in an unreal, imaginary, or magical world brought to life by the creative genius of the writer.

The Mistress of Spices belongs to a genre portraying the eternal struggle of a human mind to balance between individual desires and common good. It reminds us that magical powers come with regulations as to their usage and the violation of these rules might result in disasters. The penalty of breaking these rules is only one: the Mistress has to enter the fire to annihilate herself. The Sea Serpents that had saved her from the storm had anticipated what form her life would take after becoming Mistress of Spices. They foretell the following about her future life when they discover that she was determined to become a Mistress," She will lose everything, foolish one. Sight, voice, name. Perhaps self."

Shortly after her birth, it becomes apparent that Tilo is special as she can see into the distant future with uncanny clarity—a skill of seeing distant future that brings her fame, fortune, and vulnerability. She is unloved by her parents but duly appreciated as they revel in their daughter's superfluous income. This attention only breeds contempt in the girl who longs to free herself from the family who only takes, never gives. Her internal wish is swiftly granted as pirates storm the village, taking the special girl with them to aid them in their plundering and killing her parents. Thus Nayan Tara(Tilo) finds herself swept up in a life of roguish wandering—she had no real home in India, nor does she have one at sea. This searching despondency is ultimately satisfied in the sea. Nayan Tara throws herself in the sea after hearing of a magical island of spices from two amicable eels, an act of desperation fuelled by the will to find her place in the world.

On the island Nayan Tara is found by the Old One, surrounded by her novices, spice smell rising like mystery from her shawl with which she covers Nayan Tara. Her hands, soft but with the skin burned pink-white and puckered to the elbow as though she had plunged them into a long-ago blaze." Each year a thousand girls are sent back from the island because they don't have the right hands. It does not count if they have the

second sight, or if they can leave their bodies to travel the sky. The Old One is adamant." The Old One lets Nayan Tara stay on the island as she is the, "only one in whose hands the spices sang back".

Nayan Tara is one of lucky few who is accepted by the Old One, a grand, ancient figure who rules over the island, commands its victuals, instructs her maidens, and regulates the influx of new apprentices. She also has mandate over the departure of these apprentices, who after fielding a vision, select a destination. They can pass through a cleansing, transmogrifying flame Shampati's fire, to the location where they will set up a heaven, a store, from which they will bestow their learned yet magical gift of physical and spiritual healing both through the sale and complimentary distribution of spices. However, before they depart, each apprentice must choose a name, one rich in meaning and apt in its appropriateness. This is not only symbolic of their new identity as mistresses, but in case of the protagonist, a new identity in the new world. In choosing her new name Tilottama, Nayan Tara incites both upbraiding and gentle laughter in the Old One, "It is certainly not confidence you lack, girl. To take on the name of most beautiful apsara of Rain God Indra's court." Tilo herself is quite homely. The Old One is not without misgivings, even though she permits the name for her most prized pupil. The serpents, the island, the Old One, the Fire of Shampati create a surreal world , in which is born Tilottama, the Mistress of Spices who is able to solve the problems of her customers miraculously with the help of the spices which they come to buy from her shop. The entire novel is based on the premise that the spices we use every day possess magical powers which yield themselves in the hands of a trained mistress of spices.

In order to portray magic realism, Devakaruni created a character like Tilo who is born in India. She defeats the pirate captain to become a pirate queen and after that she lives on the spice island where she is educated in the art of controlling and listening to the spices. This remote island is a place of protection for these women, who call themselves the "Mistresses of Spices" and are beneath the concern of the First Mother, the wisest and the eldest teacher. After receiving the skills of the art, she is sent to Oakland, California, to a small Indian spice shop "Spice

Bazaar" where she must begin her tasks of curing the masses. The first rule is to survive a life of a bachelor and never to yield to carnal desires; secondly, not to leave her place, thirdly, if she doesn't pursue these rules there is no effect of spices on people. So, she is warned by the Old One not to fall in love with anyone. She should be virtuous, sincere, and pure while applying the magic of the spices or she will lose her power over all her spices. The Old One says:

> But let me ask you certain you wish to become mistress? It is not to let to choose an easier life. Are you ready to give up your young body, to take and age and ugliness and unending service? Ready never to step out of the places where you are set down, store or school or healing house? Are you ready never to love any but the spices again?(40)

Tilo believes that spices hold the secret power to grant us whatever we desire most in life. This is how she talks about her unique ability to interact with spices: "I am a Mistress of Spices. I know their origins and what their colours signify, and their smells.... At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magical powers." Tilo says that most of us are unaware of the other side of these common spices used in cooking and other household activities. She claims that they have the power to revolutionize the life we live, but this can be accomplished only by a person who has the ability to tap their potential to the fullest. Tilo identifies herself as the Mistress of this secret power. She is a person with a number of identities.

Tilo reminiscences her past life and ponders over whether the existence we lead is at all objective and real. She finds her past confusing and conflicting. Nayan Tara and Bhagyavati, an integral part of her own past, seem to be of some other life time. Speaking about this quest for identity, she says, "sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as reality, an objective and untouched nature of being. Or if all we encounter has already been changed by what we imagined it to be. If we have dreamed it into being."

Devakaruni's magic realism is to bridge the gap between present and past state of affairs. Tilo with her magical powers becomes the owner of the spice shop where she is a master of all spices and speaks to them as characters to resolve the troubles of

the people of the real world with the assistance of magic:

> I am turmeric who rose out of ocean of milk when devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between. Yes, I whisper, swaying to its rhythm. Yes. You are turmeric, shield for heart's sorrow, an ointment for death, hope for rebirth. Together we sing this song, as we have many times. (13)

She has creatively applied magic on Indian immigrants, particularly to impart them their heart's desires and to help them to overcome their sufferings. Spices, legends and myth are beautifully put together by her for relaxation of people and their psychological, mental, physical problems.

Imagination plays a very important role in the novel in creating parallel worlds, like the magic island of the Mistress of Spices, or the order of the Conch Bearers. Devakaruni has attributed magical powers to natural objects such as spices, conches and mirrors. Ths spices are portrayed as spirits speaking to Tilo about how to treat her customers, punishing her when she goes against their wishes.

Tilo's customers include people from all casts and creed; A man comes in her life, an American who always looks at her old frame and frail body, as if looking for someone he knows to be inside her but can't see. And Tilo falls in love with him, against reason and warnings of her mind. Raven is lonely and occasionally comes to the spice shop. Tilo is unable to read or solve his problem as he arouses in her the forbidden desire for love. He is the only person in America to whom she reveals her true name. As the novel progresses, Tilo starts falling in love with him. Raven is also drawn towards her for her oriental, antique and mysterious appearance. He figures out that neither the body, nor the person whom he sees are the real Tilo. He confides in her how his own grandfather wanted to give him a very powerful legacy of magic which took the form of a raven. He had ardently believed that it would lead him to the earthly paradise of which he had dreamt of, but his mother had prevented him from accepting the legacy. Tilo's proximity gives him the hope that one day he would finally discover the whereabouts of the earthly paradise of which he had always dreamt of. Tilo goes out on a pleasure trip

for one day with Raven though it would condemn her for a life time of suffering.

Tilo can't help breaking the rules. The Old One comes to warn her that she must return to the island now and take her penalty. But, Tilo breaks the final rule. She takes on a beautiful body like the 'Apsaras' or the celestial damsels with the help of the spices in order to make Raven fall in love with her body and soul at least once in her lifetime, "By tomorrow night Tilo, you will be at the beauty's summit. Enjoy well. For by next morning it will be gone" (263). She uses the spices to become a young and exotically beautiful woman to spend one night with Raven. When driven by the intense emotions of her heart she is not able to restrain herself within the bounds, so much so, that when she ultimately finds love, she is ready to walk through fire for it. She agrees that she is willing to take up any punishment after the following night when she gives herself up wholly to Raven's love.

A terrible earthquake strikes as she is waiting for the fire of Shampati to blaze and take her back to the island of spices. Amidst the huge destruction, Raven manages to trace her and take her with him. Tilo wonders why the spices had not punished her. They answer her, "Mistress who was, when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer. You need not to undergo that suffering in body also" (305). She dismisses Raven's offer that they find their earthly paradise by telling that it is impossible to find one. She argues that we as human beings have the power of recreating earthly paradise in our lives through our constructive actions. The novel ends with Tilo finding a new life and new name to give meaning to her existence. She gives herself the name Maya which has a number of connotations like illusion, spell and enchantment.

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6

Transforming Feminine Constrictions: A Study of *The Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni*

Devika Khanna Narula

The creative feminine principle is venerated for its god-like potential to create new life and its quality of nurturing but, paradoxically, its embodiment, the woman, is humiliated and oppressed in patriarchal societies through a morass of cultural and religious restrictions imposed on her to inhibit the growth and flowering of her personality. The myths of patriarchal societies limit and control women to create a stereotyped image of the culturally 'ideal woman'. These are "myths of protection, of punishment for transgression, of the power of women, their indispensability and the glory of motherhood" (Jain 13) that imprison the feminine within their parameters, debarring her from progressing and establishing her identity. The terminology of 'love' and 'duty' blackmails her into surrendering her freedom as an individual. This reductive imaging of woman exists in every culture, juxtaposing it with the glorifying image of motherhood. Patriarchy has never bothered to look into the heart of woman to see how she reacts to what is decreed for her, but has always assumed her unquestioning acceptance of it. However, despite such attempts to control their destiny, women have still emerged as significant figures of social transformation, unobtrusively and silently marking their protest while working towards change within the folds of patriarchal structures.

Women have brought about a transformation in society yet, during the course of it, they have also suffered immensely. They have always been the soft target of vengeance for conflicts, whether familial, communal, racial or national, because rape is perceived as the easiest way of punishing and bringing dishonour to a family or a community, thereby establishing male superiority. In the war between nations, women are treated as spoils of the war, to be looted and stamped upon with the mark of their ownership. Hence, in a war between men, it is the women who are the innocent victims. Nevertheless, no matter what she suffers, the resilience in women does not let them stay down for long. They pretend to forget their shame and pick up the pieces of life again, though in their memory they keep it alive, like the smouldering embers that can burst into flame. They are not deterred from fighting tradition-bound conservative practices, or crying out against social injustice. They have in fact come out of these traumatic experiences stronger and more aware of their rights. Jasbir Jain in her introduction to *Women in Patriarchy: Cross Cultural Readings* writes :

> Women as producers of goods, of knowledge, of posterity, as carriers of tradition and agents of change, refuse to be passive objects of desire or of subordination. In fact sex and sexuality both have come in for a complete reworking in the process, it is not only society but art as well which has had to accommodate the change in women's self-perception. (Jain 21)

Gender situating and patriarchal contextualizing has more often than not deprived women of their significant role in the transformation and crystallization of values and principles in social structures. The woman is the one most deeply affected by the values engrained in society as she is the carrier of traditions. In fact, many philosophers and historians believe that the patriarchal world view has over-shadowed an ancient matriarchal society. Thus, the position of women is ambivalent: given much regard at times and totally neglected at other instances, but as the nurturer, the mother-figure she has always been placed on a pedestal because the family grew around her.

The contemporary reworking of myths and legends often suggests a new viewpoint, giving a different slant to a well

known story, especially true of women writers looking at myths with a new feminist perspective. They appropriate the myth giving it new dynamic and radical interpretations and problematize issues raised in the narrative. It was with Irawati Karve's ground-breaking study *Yuganta—the End of an Epoch* (1991) that the accepted conventional readings of characters in the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana,* were set aside. The characters so far viewed as mythical, symbolic and larger than life were seen by Karve as human beings with normal human weaknesses, aspirations and motives, situated in a certain sociopolitical context. Irawati Karve was the first to give sufficient importance to the women characters in the *Mahabharata* to explore their thoughts and reactions as ordinary women, negotiating certain situations, questioning accepted norms of the Kshatriya dharma.

The feminism that reflects through the pages of the two novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*, gives a new twist to the 'values' propagated by patriarchal societies. Divakaruni and Ray reveal how these accepted 'norms' of patriarchy impact the women, and also explore the hidden possibilities of subtle and obvious bonding of hatred and attraction which were then overlooked. The nuances of social interaction in these two contemporary novels are not assumed to be fixed positions of good and evil, of right and wrong, but rather the dynamics of the tensions of relationships, as reflected in conflicting emotions of love, hatred, humiliation and self-esteem, whether in a male or female.

The novels, *Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni*, present the story of Draupadi as a first person narrative of memory. Both the novels reveal an aspect of Draupadi that does not come through in the original epic, where Draupadi is a projection of a male standpoint. Divakaruni and Ray delve into the psyche of Draupadi, using their own feminine sensibility to depict her as a woman who becomes an instrument of destiny and because of such an epoch-making role, she is deprived of much of the solace that ordinary women might have had. Though Draupadi becomes a mythical figure, shaping the course of history, yet on the individual human level, she comes through as a pensive lonely

woman whose thirst for love remains unquenched. On one hand, the relationship of Draupadi with Krishna is projected as a non-greed, non-appropriation, asexual relationship that lies beyond conventional definitions and negotiations of power struggle in the patriarchal structure, whereas on the other hand, her relationship with the Pandavas is explicitly an exploitative power struggle. Both the novelists convert the bhakti/devotion of Draupadi for Krishna into a platonic love between them as individuals, over and above their social context, where being *Sakha* and *Sakhi* to each other, their friendship becomes more of a bonding of like-minded souls.

The love-hate relationship between Draupadi and Karna, based on an aborted attempt of appropriation and a desire left in abeyance, takes a twisted negative turn, painful for both. In the original text, there is no emotional connection shown between them as it is in these reworked contemporary texts because it would have clashed with the ethical code of that period. In the present two novels, however, there is a definite attraction felt by Draupadi towards Karna when she first sees his portrait:

> His eyes were filled with an ancient sadness. They pulled me into them . My impatience evaporated. I no longer cared to see Arjun's portrait. Instead, I wanted to know how those eyes would look if the man smiled. Absurdly, I wanted to be the reason for his smile. (Divakaruni 69)

Divakaruni and Ray signify Draupadi's humiliating Karna by questioning his lineage at the time of the *Swayamvara* as a forced action demanded by the exigency of the moment. The purpose of the Panchalas, Yadus and Pandavas is to prevent Karna, an ally of Duryodhana, from winning Draupadi as his bride. In view of the greater plan for which Draupadi and her brother Dhrishtdumayana have emerged out of the sacrificial fire, it is imperative that Draupadi should marry Arjuna, the ace Pandava archer. The test devised to win the bride is so difficult that only Arjuna can qualify it, but so can Karna. However, in that instant of humiliating him in public, she loses her heart to the 'tragic' unfortunate but skilled warrior, for here she sees in person the visage that she had seen earlier in the portrait. Krishna had promised her then that he would ensure that she does not make the wrong choice, and now when she rejects Karna

she knows that she is destined to marry Arjuna. What she does not know is that she is destined to marry all the five brothers. Hence, under patriarchal duress and as a tool of destiny, she neither gets the love of the man she desired nor that of the man who won her in marriage. Draupadi's feelings are set aside twice in the course of her *Swayamvara*, and she is seen only as a medium of achieving the goal and not as an individual and a woman. Draupadi loves Karna but she is never for a moment disloyal to her husbands and though Karna desires and loves her, he never tries to take advantage of her, as depicted in Ray's novel. It is ironical that Kunti tempts Karna by offering him Draupadi as a wife, if he joins the Pandavas as her 'acknowledged' son, thereby reducing Draupadi to a commodity. This is the reduction of her status in the patriarchal society where through marriage she had brought the Pandavas a powerful alliance when they had been hiding as poor Brahmins in fear of their lives, an alliance which emboldened them to ask for their share of the kingdom. Karna, however, spurns Kunti's offer and maintains his loyalty to Duryodhana. Draupadi and Karna, both born in a miraculous manner, she from the fire and he from the ear of Kunti, become victims of the 'destiny' that has brought them into this world, bound to each other though in an abortive relationship. They, along with the others, are cogs in the wheel of fate, enacting an ordained drama of a greater reality than that which surrounds only the lives of mortals.

Nevertheless, the character of Draupadi as it emerges in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is cheeky and irrepressible, wilful and indomitable, cast in a modern mould rather than the ancient decorous stereotype. When she arrives in Hastinapur as a new bride, her eyes keep searching for Karna, disappointed at not finding him there. Even when she looks into Arjuna's eyes, she sees a similarity to Karna. After her marriage to the five brothers, when Vyasa grants her the boon of being a virgin every year as she goes to her next husband, she muses to herself:

> Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not. Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women—they were handed to us

> like presents we hadn't quite wanted. …If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother I'd be free of the memory of the previous one. And along with that, I'd have requested that Arjun be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with. If he had loved me back, I might have been able to push aside my regrets about Karna and find some semblance of happiness. (120)

The thoughts expressed here reflect the turmoil she suffers as she goes from one brother to the next. It exposes the hard selfishness of patriarchal ethics that has no thought for the feelings of the woman. Her love for Arjuna, like that for Karna, is never fully requited as Arjuna cannot forget that her love is shared and not his alone. Draupadi spends her one year period with each of her husbands as a 'duty' until she can be the wife of the man she desires most after Karna, that is Arjuna. This depiction of Draupadi raises the issue of the tyranny of patriarchy that treated women as commodities. Divakaruni's Draupadi is more of a questioning judgmental woman than a submissive picture of acquiescence, and problematizes the patriarchal concept of womanhood where behaviour may be dictated but thoughts cannot be controlled because they have a freedom of their own.

Draupadi, as depicted in the two novels by Divakaruni and Ray, is definitely not cast in the traditional mould. She is an extraordinary woman who has imbibed through her own efforts the political and philosophical education that was the domain of men. She embodies the highest qualities of womanhood as well as the keen intelligence and political acumen of men. Yet, in Divakaruni's novel, the poignancy of the unwanted female child, an antithesis to the patriarchal desire for a son, is brought out beautifully through Draupadi's secret memories that she can neither share with anyone nor forget:

> Most of all I thought of something…that ate at me like the rust corroding the bars on my window.... A gaunt glittering man walked towards my brother and me as we stood hand in hand. He held out his arms—but for my brother alone.... Only my brother that he wanted. …I didn't forget that hesitation, even though in the years that followed King

> Drupad was careful to fulfil his fatherly duty.... But I couldn't forgive him that initial rejection. (Divakaruni 5-6)

The image of the rusting bars is extremely evocative because it reveals not only the caging in by patriarchy but also the corrosion of the bonding of filial love.

Thus, Divakaruni and Ray present Draupadi as an emotional, vulnerable woman, unable to keep a check on her thoughts but one who has the moral strength to hold her own in a male-dominated society, to speak her mind and demand her rights. She is also critical about patriarchal conventions as she questions and protests against them. Draupadi, in fact, is depicted as the woman who steps outside the parameters of conventional decorum not only in her actions but even in her thoughts, whether for Arjuna or for Karna. In both these novels, Draupadi is attracted to Karna and, in moments of distress, she always compares 'what might have been' if she had accepted Karna in her *Swayamvara.* She is aware of the subtle ways in which Karna protects her, reflecting his innate concern for her. After the Ashwamedha Yajna, he protects her from the wrath of the kings as he holds them back from the dais where Draupadi is standing (Divakaruni) and when Draupadi is carried away by the strong current of the river, Karna rescues her (Ray). This emotional interaction of Karna and Draupadi problematizes issues of loyalty and fidelity as well as the patriarchal assumption of a woman accepting her father's choice in her husband and having no thoughts for any other man. The only place where Karna lets her down is at the crucial dicing event. At that moment of revenge for his insult in the *Swyamvara*, Karna forgets his own principles and dons a tortuous vengeful image of himself. Just as a reflection of the self in a convex/concave mirror distorts the true image, similarly Karna's personality is distorted by being impacted by the evil thinking of the Kauravas, the convoluted symbol of whose mentor is the deformed Shakuni. Except for this instance, and as party to Abhimanyu's death, nowhere else does Karna deviate from ethical behaviour.

In both the novels, Draupadi is shown to sense Kunti's secret regarding her illegitimate son Karna, but as one woman to another, both victims of a callous patriarchal socio-political structure, Draupadi never lets it become apparent to Kunti that

she knows her secret, nor does she disclose it to anyone else. Clearly, patriarchy controls the sexuality of women for its own purpose, and Kunti having been a victim of it in her own life, and later assuming the role of the patriarch vis-à-vis her sons, compels Draupadi also to accept five husbands in place of one to ensure the bonding amongst her sons. However, Draupadi adroitly takes away the hold that Kunti had over her sons and insinuates herself into that position. Both Draupadi and Kunti have had relationships with five different men/gods. When Kunti's illegitimate son Karna accuses Draupadi of being no less than a prostitute as she has five husbands, the abuse rebounds to his own mother Kunti also. Yudhishthir humiliates Kunti for her one innocent experiment of testing Durvasa's boon but she is applauded for the three sons, Yudhishthir, Bheem and Arjun, that she begets from the gods at the behest of her husband, exposing complete control that men exerted on women's sexuality. Nevertheless, in contrast to Kunti who is neither loved by her husband nor reigns as the Queen over Hastinapur, Draupadi is a wife and daughter-in-law, loved by her husbands, judiciously managing her relations with her five husbands and ruling over Indraprastha. In fact, she is described as a woman whose beauty and the scent of her body drive men crazy with desire, in this way accentuating her sexuality and desirability.

The turning point in Draupadi's life comes when, in a game of dice at Hastinapur, Yudhishthira loses everything to Duryodhana, including himself, his brothers and their wife Draupadi. As a consequence of this, Draupadi is dragged into the court by her hair and an attempt is made to disrobe her in full public view. This horrific moment in time becomes crucial and significant since it determines the future course of history and starts the wheels of destruction rolling for the evil, arrogant Kauravas. It is a shameful moment for a civilized society because it offers the worst humiliation and insult ever offered to a woman in full gaze of the Elders of the clan, the king, the advisors, the teachers and the warriors. Neither her husbands, who are now in bondage to the Kauravas, nor the eminent elders in the court make an effort to stop the ignominy, and finally she trusts only Krishna to rescue her. In that particular moment in time, Draupadi is a symbol of the feminine at the mercy of patriarchal oppression and degradation of social values. The moment also exposes the

futile valour of the patriarchs and warriors who do not rise to protect Draupadi. There are three significant aspects that emerge from this scene, one that reflects the indomitable character of Draupadi; second, her physical state and third, the ethical status of society.

Firstly, no matter what external forms of security a woman prides herself on, she is ultimately alone, and must fend for herself. Thus, inspite of having five husbands to protect her and belonging to an illustrious dynasty, she is assaulted and humiliated in the worst possible manner. Draupadi, however, shows her resilience and strength in the face of this challenge to her dignity. She considers the act not as her personal shame but as the collective shame of the society that has permitted the perpetration of such an act. Further, having suffered such humiliation, she has crossed the boundaries of shame that would have otherwise restrained her. She questions the King and the elders regarding their responsibility and accuses them of being indirectly involved in the ignominy of the act because their lack of control over the situation implies their impotence and the loss of the right to be King and Elders of their community. The answer to Draupadi's question may have pedagogical pros and cons but what is important here is the fact that she has made herself free from patriarchal impositions of normative behaviour to raise such questions, pitting herself against the emblems of patriarchy to fight her battle alone.

Secondly, there is the constant reiteration of the fact that when this incident happens, Draupadi is menstruating. There is the reference to her using only one garment to cover herself and there is also reference to the blood on her garment because of her menstruation. At such a time, a woman is at her lowest immunity and most vulnerable because of the weakness that the loss of blood causes. In addition to this, according to the conventions of those times, when a woman is menstruating she would ordinarily not come into the public gaze but stay secluded in the female section of the palace. So in every way, the dignity of her body and private space is violated. Further, symbolically Draupadi's menstruation reflects the potential of motherhood within her. Hence the crime is not just against the individual woman but against the embodiment of the feminine creative principle itself.

The third aspect of this scene is that the whole idea of creating a social structure governed by rule of law, symbolized in the person of the King, is to protect the rights of an individual, his/her space and dignity from those who would exploit or violate it. Hence, the scene that takes place in the court is an indication of the fact that in this social structure governed by the Kurus, so far revered for its balance and ethics, law and order have now taken a back seat. The King is not only physically but even metaphorically blind, and the consequence is the anarchy and lack of control that prevail. These are the ominous signs of the approaching end of an epoch.

This crucial scene of the disrobing of Draupadi paradoxically shows her donning the mantle of her role as the 'destroyer' of evil. The narrative reflects a recriminatory cycle, inviting upon the Kauravas the vengeance of the feminine principle for their arrogant callousness towards women. It is only when Draupadi curses the clan of the Kauravas, predicting its destruction and the widowhood of its women, that it has an effect on the blind king. Dhritarashtra is terrified into an awareness of the danger to his sons and tries to placate her by granting her three boons. Even in this, Draupadi shows herself as different from other women and uses her political acumen to restore the status of her husbands. In two boons she asks for her husbands to be set free from their slavery to Duryodhana and their kingdom and possessions to be restored to them. When she is reminded by Dhritrashtra to ask a third boon for herself, she refuses to do so, saying her husbands will take care of things. This clearly reveals the tragic ambivalence of the woman's position—though she can raise moral issues and question non-adherence to ethical norms, she finally has to take male support to win her battle. Hence, she is once again dependent on her husbands, who are the cause of her humiliation, to avenge her humiliation.

Draupadi refuses to be silenced as she raises her 'voice' against being a passive body on whom history is to be written. She keeps the memories of the past alive within herself, controlling the present with it, in an effort to shape a better future. She has the temerity to ridicule Duryodhana as well as the audacity to question the Elders of the Kuru clan about their ethical code of conduct. In fact, Draupadi becomes a symbolical mythical figure

because of the militant position she assumes till the time her enemies are destroyed, reminiscent of Goddess Durga and her annihilation of the demon, Mahishasura, the symbol of evil. As per the presentation in the two novels, she is aware that her mission in life is to bring about a change in the morally decadent world order. Her role as the wife of the five Pandavas is special. Though her husbands have other wives who lead a protected life, it is Draupadi who chooses to be their companion in all their travails and has to bear humiliation and insult, without any of her husbands being in a position to 'protect' her. She, however, never acknowledges defeat but rather each insult makes her more determined in her resolve to avenge herself on the Kauravas, not only for her own selfish satisfaction but also because their behaviour has lowered the moral standards of the times. She, with her unbound matted hair by which she had been dragged by Dushshasan, is a living symbol of the anarchy let loose by the Kauravas, and she stands before her husbands as a constant reminder of their failure to protect her.

The Pandavas, in their conflict with the Kauravas, always try to avoid war and are willing to take even five villages as their inheritance. Except for Bheema, whose objective is to redeem Draupadi's honour, the other Pandavas never talk of avenging Draupadi's humiliation. Draupadi is finally able to achieve the mission of her life through the great war but at a heavy cost to humanity in general as well as to her own self, leaving behind a sorrowful world of widows and mothers without sons. Irawati Karve explains the social and emotional status of women during the era of the *Mahabharata*:

> "Their happiness, their sorrows were decreed by men to whom they belonged. Men acted, men directed and the women suffered." (Karve 40)

Thus, in the Great War Draupadi loses all her relatives, father, brothers and sons. She is distraught at the death of her five sons whom she had to leave behind for thirteen years and in the fourteenth year, when they had grown up to be young men, she loses them all to death. Draupadi is the catalyst for the transformation of society, motivating her husbands and forcing them to declare war on the Kauravas, but at the heavy cost of devastating personal loss and sorrow :

> Draupadi's full-grown children were dead, her father's clan destroyed. As the dying Duryodhana had said, she and Dharma (Yudhishthir) would reign over a kingdom of widows....The widow Uttara and her son born after his father's death were the only young people left. ... The end of the *Mahabharata* is not merely the end of Draupadi or the end of the Pandavas or of their clan. It is the end of a yuga. Each agony of that dying yuga, Draupadi suffered in her own person. When her sons were treacherously killed, she wept and complained for the last time. From then on we hear her voice no more. (Karve 84)

The commentaries on the *Mahabharata* have generally focused on predestination and choices made by men, but never upon the emotional conflicts within women. Did that mean that women did not question these decisions but quietly acquiesced without any protest, whether voiced or silent? No, the truth is that feminine thought and response were a neglected area of study because women were never given importance in the public domain. Attention was always focused on the heroics and concerns of men as women remained silent and invisible in the patriarchal world, caged in the stereotyped images of the daughter, the mother, the wife or the sister. However, Irawati Karve treated Draupadi and Kunti as individual women with their own thinking processes, women who felt humiliated or elated and women who protested and spoke up. In spite of her own open-mindedness, however, even Karve feels that in the disrobing scene, it would have been better for Draupadi to have pleaded with Karna and the Elders and begged for their help rather than question them, and raise issues of what is ethically correct or wrong. Perhaps this would have been the pragmatic way out of a difficult situation, a compromise, a path guided by prudence while living in a patriarchal society. The uncomfortable questions raised by Draupadi, however, attack the very foundations of the patriarchal structures, the code of chivalry protecting the honour of women and children that was the basis of the Kshatriya code of conduct. It was the openness to new perspectives initiated by Irawati Karve and taken further by feminists that made it possible for Divakaruni and Ray to write their first person narratives on the life of Draupadi, exposing a very feminist rendering of her character. Though the material is familiar and well known, yet

the feminine introspection has created new constructs of conventional characters, presenting them in a totally new light. What is significant here is the contemporary treatment of Draupadi's persona that has illuminated the secret spaces of the feminine psyche and given a new twist to the accepted views on normative behaviour of women, leading to a new feminist interpretation of Hindu mythical women characters.

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7

The Dilemma of Be-Longing in the Fictions of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Sumana Gupta

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the foremost Indian American writers writing about the immigrants in America since 1987 when her first volume of poems *Dark Like the River* was published. Divakaruni engages herself with the theme of immigrant experience and the negotiations with identity that each immigrant generation has to go through. Divakaruni was born in Calcutta and migrated to the US in 1976 to pursue her higher studies; she soon began her literary career with poetry and then went on to write narratives of displacement. Her own American experience pushed her to explore the margins of immigrant living, the racial discriminations and physical abuses faced by the South Asian immigrants. In the introductory statement to her poetic narrative, "Yuba City Wedding" Divakaruni has said that writing in America is a challenge for her to bring alive, for readers from other ethnic backgrounds, the Indian—and the Indian American experiences, not as something exotic and alien, but as something human and shared. Writers belonging to the immigrant community share the anguish of dislocation, they carry with them the diasporic consciousness of the exile and being considered the 'other' in the country they have built their homes.

The diasporic condition pre-supposes a departure from the native home to an alien host country and settling down there

with altered subjectivities and translated identities. The migrant subject finds the cross-over difficult as he/she tries to preserve the ethnic culture of the homeland, while at the same time aspires to adapt to the culture of the host society because he feels the need to survive in the alien land. The conflict between the need to preserve and the aspiration to adapt often leaves the diasporic to a liminal state. Dislocation in a sense also means translation (*trans* and *fero*—meaning 'to carry across') that bring upon the traditions and cultures of the homeland to be viewed and appreciated by the adopted culture, continuing with the tradition yet respecting the differences and open to embrace a new culture. So, the process of settlement in a new land and its culture is a composite process of adopting and adapting to the needs of the individual as well as the community.

While the shock of arrival gives way to participating in the national life, the migrant moves on from being an exile or émigré to engage in a diasporic identity. The divide between the two nationals and cultures remain, but rather than engaging in the binary opposition of 'us/they' there is an engagement with broader perspectives and exploration of cosmopolitan cultural identities. The theorist Stuart Hall uses the term 'cultural identity' that works in two ways; one, as a shared culture held by people with a shared history and ancestry; and second, by recognizing the deep and significant differences that constitute 'what we are' or 'what we have become'. Cultural identity in this second sense is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identities are not fixed, they have a past, but they are subject to constant transformation, to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power, and "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (435). Hall recognizes the diasporic experience as defined by heterogeneity and diversity, and the concept of diasporic identity as a process of constantly producing and reproducing through transformation and difference. It gives a flexibility and fluidity to the diasporic character that defies any attempt at fixing a static identity. The simultaneity of 'being' and 'becoming' can only be explained as a translated identity in a multicultural society.

America in the 1960s was looked upon as a land of promises and opportunities and immigration to the US was shaped by the

lure of better wages and living conditions. The immigration from South Asia post the 1960s was described using the metaphor of the 'salad bowl' as opposed to the 'melting pot' theory popular during the beginning of the twentieth century. The proponents of multiculturalism upheld that instead of a heterogeneous society becoming homogeneous, the cultural differences of the various ethnic groups should be preserved, and hence the alternative metaphor of the 'salad bowl', the 'kaleidoscope' and the 'martini cocktail' became popular where different cultures meet but do not mix, they remain distinct. So cultural identities acquire a new meaning in the post-colonial era; moreover, the second generation immigrants are in continual transit between their homelands and adopted land due to increased global network and reduced costs of travelling. Suketu Mehta writes in his article, "The New Faces of America" published in *Forbes*:

> The metaphor of the melting pot is outmoded. People come to the US today, singly or in groups, and do not melt; they stay resolutely whole. Their flavors might mingle with each other, but they do not lose their general contours as separate ethnic enclaves….Today's immigrants—at least the legal ones—can go home a few weeks after they step off the plane at JFK, thanks to the cheap fares. What is exile when a round trip home is $500? (2)

In this sense, writers of the Third World today are best described as cultural travellers. A migrant writer explores his/her migrant experience from multiple subject positions. Elleke Boehmer writes in her book *Colonial and Post-colonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*:

> In the 2000s the generic post-colonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveller, or an 'extra-territorial', than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, 'Third World' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, she or he works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national, ethnic, or regional background. (227)

The question of a national identity versus a literary identity of the writer becomes significant in contemporary literary discourses. Writers of Indian, Pakistani, and Srilankan or Bangladeshi origin choose to write in English because of the

colonial hangover of being ruled by the English spoken continent for more than two centuries. But merely writing in English or writing from a specific location does not make the writer a British or an American writer. State, nation and nationality are nineteenth century constructs that manipulate the identity construction of the writer. Hence writers belonging to two nations, sharing their literature and culture do not have a fixed identity; they can no longer be defined by fixed and formulated concepts of identity. They have an identity that is multi-national or rather multi-local and should not be tagged under a specific fixed identity.

The transformation of the individual due to immigration is a central theme in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, though she approaches the subject differently in each work of fiction. In her own experience she found America very different from what she expected from her reading of books and watching the movies; and as she presents it America is very different for each individual. The way the American experience shaped her perspective is like a steady movement in a chart—from being looked upon as the 'other' to be accepted as one of the most prolific writers in America. Divakaruni thinks that integration is an essential requisite for an immigrant, because it allows an opportunity to partake the best of both the cultures. It does not mean giving up one's own cultural heritage, but she is against forming artificial cultural ghettos that limit an individual. Divakaruni considers that the immigrant's identity is linked to his / her sense of security, to feel at ease with the change that takes place in one's life due to immigration. In an interview given to Sarah Johnson in 2004, she says:

> The word 'American' can mean different things to different people. For many people it's a wonderful word; to others it's a bad word—"You've become American." It depends on how secure you are with your own identity. One always responds to change from that place in one's life. If you're secure in your identity, the change doesn't bother you. (62)

Divakaruni has depicted the Indian community in America with sincerity, remaining true to her cultural heritage. Her own experiences and the various counselling sessions she had with Afghani and South Asian women helped her trace the immigrant's concern with preserving identity. Though there is bound to be

several gaps in the immigrant experience, particularly the gap between the first and second generation immigrants, the immigrants in Divakaruni's stories believe in change, are hopeful of the change. Divakaruni sees these immigrants are still battling with primal elements and fighting for their right to choose, for their right not to be called names in the streets, or disgraced merely for the colour of their skin. It was such a catalytic moment in Divakaruni's life when she faced racism that shaped her career as a writer. As told to Patricia Holt in an interview given in 1999: "I think in people's lives, different moments act as catalysts, and for me the catalyst was facing this kind of racism. The first impulse is to bury it, but you always know it's there. It doesn't go away. So I thought, 'how can I make sense of this moment?' Writing became a way, though it took years." Divakaruni firmly believes that the world has changed and with it fixed notions of identities; the diaspora has expanded to include cultures from different parts of the world and individuals whose lives are poised between two cultures are constantly reinventing themselves. In an online interview given to *Atlantic Unbound* in 1998, Divakaruni says:

> The diaspora has changed the lives of Indians immensely. Now that we are in so many places, and are of so many cultures, who is to say what an Indian is or is not? The definition of 'Indian' has now expanded to include much more than the traditional woman in the sari with a dot on her forehead. The bougain villea girls who have lived all their lives here are poised between two cultures and are therefore Indian in a whole new way—but they are no less Indian. They are like many women I see around me all the time, the ones who are concerned about their identity and the question of being Indian. It's a space that they are negotiating and an identity they're reinventing constantly. I think it's very exciting how people change, how entire communities will take on new identities because of their history. That's what happening in India and among Indians abroad. (n. pag)

After the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001, she noticed how the negotiations with identity has changed in the country she and so many other immigrants have made their home. She observed that it was easy to blame anyone belonging to a visible minority

community and wondered how one can continue living in America as Americans being victims of fear and hatred. Divakaruni's sixth novel, *Queen of Dreams* (2004) deals with the aftermath of 9/11 and the resultant complexities of being an immigrant in America. She makes use of the magic-realism genre yet she is painfully aware how meanings of home and citizenship gets reconstructed in the wake of 9/11 terrorist attacks. In an online interview to the September 2004 issue of *Water Bridge,* Divakaruni admits that this is the most political of her novels:

> Yes, in some ways it's my most political novel, dealing most directly with an event of national importance and its aftermath. Yes, it helped me express the terrible pain I felt after 9/11 because, in addition to suffering the effects of this national tragedy, my community (and other communities like mine that looked 'like terrorists') had to suffer from hate crimes that erupted in so many parts of America. (n. pag)

The question of 'home' and 'homing' becomes problematic in the context of a single attack on America. The immigrants who have made America their homes suddenly find themselves in no man's land where their safety and security is threatened. Home is no longer a safe place for these immigrants; the feeling of rootlessness becomes evident during this crisis as the immigrant tries to reconcile with the loss of the homeland and the real home in the adopted country. The sense of belonging neither 'there' nor 'here' is the cruel truth that the immigrant has to come to terms with and accept it. Divakaruni also explores the experience of the second generation immigrant through the protagonist Rakhi, the American born daughter of Indian immigrants, a divorced mother and an independent business woman. Rakhi's parents had immigrated to America with a romanticized vision of the West and Rakhi had not known India, the land of her origin. She harbours a similar romanticized vision of the East and is drawn to India as a mystic place. The question of being the 'other' in a country not your own is revisited as the ghost of 9/11 seems to haunt the members of the coloured communities in the novel. As the notion of citizenship is questioned and loyalty is put under suspicion, Rakhi faces the issue of identity in a time of alarming transitions. Divakaruni wrote a number of articles during this time focusing on the racist attack that immigrants were subject to

after the 9/11 happened. In an interview given to Susan Comminos, Divakaruni says how she felt putting up an American flag for her own safety:

> Then I felt, *Why should I have to put up a flag for my own safety? Why should I have to prove I'm not a bad person, just because I look a certain way?* And so it became a very ambivalent gesture. I did put up a flag, but every time I looked at it, I was visited by these very different feelings. I know a lot of people in my community felt the same way.

So I did those immediate pieces of writing, which were much more autobiographical. But the question of what happened—and how, in difficult times, a visible minority becomes a target—continued to concern me. I felt very strongly about it. I had to find a more permanent literary space to put it in. So, when I started writing *Queen of Dreams*, I knew I wanted to bring 9/11 into it (n. pag).

Divakaruni realizes like other immigrants of the South Asian community that though the American society has come a long way since the 1960s, the sense of the 'other' is still there. In another interview given in October 1, 2004 titled, "Writing From Two Worlds" (*Nirali* Magazine). She says: "We have a much stronger community here, yet the sense of 'the other' is still there. We will always be a visible minority; in that concept of 'America', we will always be strangers. In *Queen of Dreams*, when a tragic event or catastrophe occurs, that fear [of 'the other'] comes up to the surface."

In her next novel *One Amazing Thing* (2011), she depicted the complexity of human experience when she brings a motley group under one roof in a visa office surviving an earthquake. These immigrant characters speak about the one amazing thing in their lives, and the stories relate to the complex social and cultural pressures they face as they try to come to terms with their identities. As they reconcile their inner tensions to survive the crisis they are faced with, they reveal their human sides and bridge the perceived gaps between different cultures. The common thread among this group is that they all live in America, all of them are immigrants representing a particular community and all destined to travel to India. As they engage in storytelling they reveal their purpose of visiting India. While India has been a

home for some like Jiang, the elderly Chinese woman acompanied by her gifted teenage granddaughter Lily, it is also the home to Uma's parents who decided to relocate to Kolkata after spending twenty years in America. It is the country from where Cameron, an African-American ex-soldier has adopted a child. It is the ultimate destination of Tariq, a Muslim immigrant in America who is torn between living in America and relocating to India under the present circumstances when FBI agents would be picking up people from the minority community as suspects of terrorist attacks. While his parents and folks would like him to relocate to India, he wonders why: "This was my country. I was an American. The thought of being driven from my home filled me with rage" (131). For the elderly couple Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett, India is a land of palaces and they had planned the visit to India because the image of India has stirred something in the ailing Mrs. Pritchett. The stories these characters tell are a journey within the self, within the inner 'I' and the retelling is an exercise of keeping the memory alive. While India is the common destination of this uncommon group, it entails different things for different people; to the first generation immigrants like the Chinese woman it is definitely a retour to her home she had left behind, but to Tariq and Uma, second generation immigrants raised in America, it is a departure from their current home, a route taken for the sake of their parents. Divakaruni poses the question that whether home is a relative concept, especially for the immigrants who feel differently about migration, or whether home is a subjective location in the mind, a space created within the self. In an online interview given to Susan Comminos for *Atlantic Online* in 2012 Divakaruni says:

> A lot of young people who have grown up here have seen India only as visitors. Or, in many cases, they have not seen India at all, if their parents didn't make a real effort, or perhaps couldn't afford a trip back home. So there's this connection and yet lack of connection to the homeland. (n. pag)

Divakaruni's perspectives have changed as a migrant writer as she tries to address the issue of home and the connection to the homeland among the second generation immigrants; it becomes complicated because these people born of immigrant

parents do not relate to India as their home because they know it only through their parents, while they take America for their home because they are born in this country and culture, yet still remain aliens or 'other' to this side of the world. The dilemma is dramatically brought out in *One Amazing Thing* (2010) through the nine immigrants from different backgrounds and age groups who are united by one common mission, survival against the odd. That is how Divakaruni sees the immigrants; they are homeless exiles who have made America their home and desperately trying to survive in the hostland braving the prejudices and racial intolerances post the 9/11. The changing face of identity in the time of crisis becomes evident as the walls that divide these cultural groups collapse and they come to be identified by the one amazing thing that they are survivors. The biases that had kept them apart, like Cameron's black skin and Tariq's beard are shed off when these characters tell their stories of struggle and survival. The tapestry of nine stories woven by the trapped immigrants focuses on issues of love and redemption, identities and alienation, longing and belonging and for the characters who tell these stories it becomes a cathartic exercise. Divakaruni seems to be moving towards universal issues like redemption and spirituality; the people in transit are pilgrims who seek 'one amazing thing' in their lives to illuminate the darkness of their existence. Their experience only affirms that life with all its pain and suffering is miraculous; it has to be lived in order to survive the trauma of change.

Divakaruni in her novel *Oleander Girl* (2013) moves at length between Kolkata and California. In this novel she subtly deals with the theme of immigration and identity and shows that the allurement of America is part an illusion because the situation has changed post the 9/11; the atmosphere of suspicion, disbelief, wrongful detention and humiliation can make an immigrant to stoop as low to steal and blackmail to make a survival in America. Korobi, the protagonist's journey to America reveals a kind of truth about the country which might deter migration, yet it provides Divakaruni a scope to explore the dangers of the hostland for the naïve new comers. Divakaruni approaches the theme of identity in this novel in the pattern of a quest; circumstances force the protagonist Korobi to emerge out of the cocoon of her protected life in Calcutta to seek the truth about her

self and embark on a voyage to America. The story remains just not the story of Korobi and her quest but a documentation of how class, caste, religion and race inform people's world views in the changing times and it is the self that has to choose where it belongs.

Though there is a great variety in the immigrant experience, the gap between time, between the first and second generation immigrants, the immigrants in Divakaruni's stories suffer from the dilemma of belonging, they question their positions in the American society. These narratives of post 9/11 survival reveal that even after half a century of living in the United States India immigrants cannot completely erase the feeling of remaining in the margins of the American society. The label of the 'other' that the society imposes on non-white Americans continue to discriminate natural citizens from the immigrants who acquire citizenship.

Divakaruni uses her unique position of being both the outsider and the insider to look at aspects of the American society, its culture and relationships that mainstream American writers often miss. The dual vision of 'ethnic' and 'American' allow Divakaruni to represent the exotic in the familiar and bring the mythical oriental world closer to the contemporary America. The issue of identity is dealt with keeping in tune with the times, believing in the fluidity of the concept. The sense of loss of the homeland and the ethnic identity is pervasive and it is negotiated through a process of alienation—assimilation—acculturation—redefinition. Stature, skin and hair colour, shape of eyes and nose which are significant markers of race have attracted unnecessary attention in the aftermath of the post 9/11 hate crimes and violence. Asian Americans find themselves at the receiving end of a hostile and prejudiced race in view of which identities are reinterpreted and redefined. Literatures do not belong to any geographical or cultural borders and writers enjoy the privilege of representing the complexities of identities as they travel through time infusing the local and the global. Divakaruni aptly puts to words the multiple identity of a South Asian American writer in an interview given to Dharini Rasiah:

> I'm a writer, I'm an American writer, and then, when I think of it in more special terms, I'm an Asian American writer,

> then I'm a South Asian American writer, and I'm also a Bengali writer writing in the United States, and each of these is true to my identity. It's wonderful that more people are recognizing that we, the Indian American writers, are part of the Asian experience. (146)

Divakaruni, like the immigrant characters in her works is hopeful of change. The American society witnessed this change when the nation got its first coloured president in 2008. The South Asian diaspora in America is asserting its presence in every aspect of social life and the writers of this diaspora community writing over a period of forty years have successfully changed the dominant discourse of power and hegemony in mainstream fiction.

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8

Exposing Subjugation of Women: A Critical Analysis of *The Palace of Illusions*

Aditi Paul,
Poonam Pahuja

From time immemorial, women in Indian society have been trapped in the patriarchal norms. The obnoxious nexus of rules and imposed orders indicate men as superior and women as inferior, men as farsighted and women as a cause of destruction or fall. The andocentric ideologies construct hegemonic structure and by unfurling the pages of history, one can easily locate how women have been subjugated as object. Their intelligence, and grandeur have never been given an importance until their deeds, actions and motives have not circumscribed the male heroes. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir aptly states:

> The great man springs from the masses and he is propelled onwards by circumstances, the masses of women are on the margin of history, and circumstances are an obstacle for each individual, not a springboard. In order to change the face of the world, it is first necessary to be firmly anchored in it; but the women who are rooted in the society are those who are in subjection to it; unless designated for action by divine authority—and then they have shown themselves to be capable as men—the ambitious woman and the heroin are strange monsters. (17)

Epics demonstrate women as ideal figures who, without any hue and cry, have laid their lives by following the patriarchal

order. But ironically, the nuances of lives of women have also been illustrated by classics where Sita, who is portrayed as quintessence for women, has left all worldly pleasures for sake of her husband. Gandhari, wife of sightless Kaurva king chooses to blindfold herself at her marriage. Kunti, mother of Pandavas, gave up all her desires, dedicating her life for sons. These all female characters have remained as shadowy figures—their emotions, desires and motives were invisible in front of men's honour, glory and exploitation. They were prisoned in the realms of men's exploitation and vengeance. This situation demarks placing women at forefront could never be accepted in the male centric society and further to it, the Indian taboos force women to think themselves as inferior and dependent beings.

This wretched condition of women is aptly demonstrated by Chitra Devakarni in *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* through *Mahabharata* that weaves, myth, religion, history, superstition, science and statecraft in innumerable stories-within-stories, attaching numerous beads in one garland called hegemony / dominance / patriarchy. The epic *Mahabharata*, as interpreted and explained by Helene Cixous, leaves no space for a female who "has never her turn to speak" (879).

Female voices in male chauvinist society have always been suppressed and the females who express themselves, against the codes of the society, are considered as rebels. This suppression of voices is equivalent to killing of one's individuality which led to the emergence of Feminism with main constrain to bring equality, to break these constructs and to help the marginalized females to resurrect. Many feminists such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kamla Markandya, Anita Nair, Kamla Das have tried to make people aware by illustrating women's ordeals. Like these feminists, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also raises voice for women. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakarni gives the plot a fictional space portraying age old traditions confining women in patriarchal construct, reciting epic from the protagonist Draupadi's point of view. She expresses womens' thoughts, actions, and their efforts to sustain their voice which have totally ripped their stature in the world which is accustomed to look at the things from male-centric prospective.

The paper unfurls the illusory existence of Draupadi and Dhristadyumna from fire. Draupadi's "initial rejection" (15) by

king and his subjects clearly lay a predicament how life of a girl could not escape from the dichotomy of gender:

> Only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at my birth required me to get an education beyond what women were usually given...Dhiri too sometimes wondered if I wasn't learning the wrong things, ideas that would confuse me as I took up women's life with the prescribed, restrictive laws. (23)

The above statement clearly depicts that educating Draupadi was a matter of great dislike by her father and tutor, as "lack of reason" or "absence of logos" from ages has been accepted in woman's inherent nature. Women are considered as the 'other' and to 'reason' or 'question' was against the male centric regime. Text clearly asserts how every phase of Draupadi's life was woven by the male characters, even while taking a crucial decision of marriage, she relied on her father:

> I'd hoped to find Krishna here. I was depending on him to tell me the secrets that potential wife needs to know, information the artist was sure to skip either from ignorance or fear. (68)

Draupadi's this dependency over Krishna clearly shows that she believed Krishna to be farsighted and herself as inferior in taking decision. She considered his suggestions would be most valuable in terms of her marriage prospect. On the other hand, Krishna's words, "on the crucial day, I'll be there...to keep you from choosing wrongly" (71) clearly suggest that Krishna's words and actions went in unison for the manifestation of prophecy into reality; suggesting an epic to be a divine association. This timely intervention of males with a woman's selfhood distorts her reasoning power using her as an instrument for paving a path for destruction without her conscious knowledge and efforts.

The work in hand unfurls how Draupadi's honour was defamed right from the time when her *swayamvar* was cautiously crafted, where only Kshatriyas could participate and she was sacrificed merely for the sake of politics and her father's vengeance. She was made to marry Arjun instead of Karna for whom she always held a secret admiration:

> His eyes were filled with ancient sadness. They pulled me into them. I no longer cared to see Arjun's portrait. Instead,

> I wanted to know how these eyes would look if the man smiled. Absurdly, I wanted to be the reason for his smile. (69)

Draupadi held a great liking for Karna, felt a strong connection with him. Despite knowing what her heart wanted, she insulted Karna at the *swayamvar* to protect her family honour and save her brother. "But I did it only because I couldn't bear to see my brother die" (96).

Her marriage was just a profitable alliance and her sufferings reminded her of the happy life she would have spent with Karna, if she would have followed her own desires:

> I bit at my lips to keep in tears of pain, of anger at my husband's indifference. An insidious voice inside me said, karna would never have let you suffer like this. (99)

This clearly suggests that she was married to Arjun for the sake of her family and in order to accomplish the prophecy taking it as a course of destiny. This shows that she was a mere puppet and prophecy made by the male centric regime reduced her status to a commodity—cherished gem handed to the suitor as a trophy who would win the competition. It can be clearly implied how power politics comes into play. Drupad insistently accepted Pandavas as relatives for gaining power to seek his revenge where as for Pandavas; married Draupadi to regain power in order to demand their right from Hastinapur. This stature of woman clearly depicts that in patriarchal domain, women have no right to take decisions regarding their lives, even regarding their marriages.

The work in hand also exposes the objectification of women in the novel as Draupadi becomes the victim of polygamous marriage. Kunti mistakenly asks her sons to share the gift (Draupadi) among the five of them treating her as a commodity. Kunti makes Draupadi a verdict by sustaining that Pandavas should not digress from their vows and their unity should not be effected with Draupadi's presence:

> I told myself I'd bring you up as princes in the halls of your forefather's, and no matter how much harassment I faced.....sons, if you value what I did for you, you must now honour my word. All of you must marry this woman. (108)

Kunti's acknowledging Draupadi as 'this woman' implicit her fear for the change that Draupadi might bring in Arjun and

thought this change might disdain Arjun from obeying Kunti's orders. This hidden fear evidently showcases the contempt that she holds for her daughter-in-law whom she saw as "her adversary" (13). This situation clearly portrays the patriarchal construct where a woman sees other woman as an 'enemy', in lieu of which women is never able to untangle herself from the grasp of andocentric chains and woman's psyche is always clustered with fear caused by the presence of other women and how the other women would control her life and mere existence.

Draupadi's family's consistent persuasions could not let the Pandavas decipher from their firm decision conceding their mother's wish for the *swayamvar* with the five Pandavas. Yudhisthir who was considered as man of his words laid arguments against the persuasions:

> Draupadi would most likely have to take her own life, and then we'd have to hunt you down and kill you in revenge... the choice is yours.... An honourable life for the princess as daughter-in-law of Hastinapur—or a death you force upon her. (118)

These words tormented Draupadi's father who admits the fact that his daughter's marriage to the five brothers would be a matter of great delight at Hastinapur but in Kampilya people would "call Draupadi a whore" (118). To all this Draupadi stood by herself bewildered and flabbergasted at the hands of the men who were deciding her marriage and materializing her future. It clearly manifests that to preserve the honour of a man the integrity of female is put into question turning a woman into an object to quench man's desolation and desire.

The text also unfolds the judgements and decisions that are imposed on the females without their acquiescence. The sage Vyasa announces an ordinance of Draupadi's polygamous marriage and as a sympathetic inspection endows her with Virginity as a boon:

> Vyasa designed special code of marital conduct for us. I would be wife to each brother for a year at a time.... In a postscript he added that he would give me a boon to balance the one that had landed me with five spouses. Each time I went to a new brother, I would be a virgin again. (120)

This was never regarded as a boon by Drupadi, in fact the law was implicated for her husband's benefit. The notion of chastity and virginity does not hold any ground reverence in a polygamous marriage but the boon helped in sustaining the sanctity of marriage each year without damaging the bond that the five brothers shared with each other.

Draupadi turned into be a virgin before entering into a forced bliss or bane in another words. On the other hand, Pandavas took other wives with the pretext to be politically more stable which can just be regarded as a ploy for the desires that male holds. The concept of virginity in a polygamous marriage is absolutely ridiculous and shows the miserable stature of a woman where she needs to prove her chastity, each time when she is being shared by her husbands as decreed by the sage. This clearly indicates she has been a mere puppet and was used as per the defined ulterior motives that the males held with a relevant reason supporting her destruction. Draupadi's own existence and desires had no importance. She was not able to express her affinity for Arjuna; as it would have been an unpardonable offence if she did not consider her five husbands equal. She was helpless to vent out her heart and pain when her husbands were getting married to other females. Draupadi's entire status has been reduced to a pitiable figure, whose motif was to be a chaste wife and sacrificing herself as per the need of the family.

The Text emphasizes the norms which were dictated by holy ascetic and respects the desolations that the queen has been through. Draupadi has been marginalized throughout the text; one or the other character has dominated her and has imposed their desires and notions on her. Krishna whom Draupadi considered as her benefactor was the one asked her to comply with the fate and not to foster hatred towards her husbands and their wives as everything was the part of destiny woven to build a great history. She was commoditized at the name of marriage and her body was put on stake whenever a misfortune arose. She has always been a helpless woman despite being married to five bold figures. The curse uttered by Draupadi announces the agony that she has undergone while being dragged to the King's court where her robe was ripped apart. She cursed them that history will retain the incident as disgraced memory to what was done to a "Defenceless woman" (194).

The "Defenceless" term clearly signify the indifferent and callous attitude shown by Pandavas who were regarded as the best warrior but were still helpless to protect their wife from being publically humiliated. The same incident was repeated in the court of King Virat where Draupadi was chased by Keechak and men maintained 'signified silence'; the difference being that in previous incident she was a queen and in the latter case she was a servant. These incidents bring to insight that however powerful a man has been but he has always been ignorant to the miserable plight of women. Their power is only extended to get amass wealth, win battles and force woman to mould herself as per their discourse.

Throughout the text, constant allegations were raised considering Draupadi to be the reason behind the death and suffering of the innocent people. The legends and epics have been reduced to see that "women were the root cause of all the world's troubles" (11). This situation asserts a question that how Draupadi alone could be considered as a signifier of war? There has been a staunch belief that the temporal changes in the history were manipulations to advert that disastrous outcomes are the result of females' arrogance and misconduct. The text clearly implicates that women were caged in the patriarchal structure to an extent that even being aware of the catastrophic path it was next to impossible for her to go against her conscience.

One can trace in the text that Panchaali (Draupadi) emerges as an iconoclast, characterized opposite to other female characters that are unable to untangle the social codes of conduct and disciplines set by male dominating society. The text highlights that hegemony of patriarchy and conscious discrimination of women on the grounds of gender and power that dictated Panchali to live life as per the terms and conditions of her husbands, following the moral codes that were on the other hand also imposed on her by the patriarchal society, giving up her desires and wishes right from the time of her elementary education till her death bed. Thus it can be aptly stated by Pramod K. Nayar, "Feminism's key assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined and women is trained to fit into those roles. This means the role like 'daughter' or 'mother' are not natural but social because woman has to be trained to think, talk act in a particular ways that suit the role" (83).

Throughout her life Draupadi was entangled with the associations lead by the society norms; being a daughter, mother, sister, wife, with a constant reminder that she would be the reason, changing the course of history but leading to death of her own children and one of the most destructive wars, which again belittles and demeans her constructive role, placing her as a culprit where as the truth unfolds that the battle was fought with the aspect of righteousness, for the honour of the Pandava clan and power. She realizes with passage of time, if she was the honour of the house then Pandavas at very first instance would not have let her honour be disrespected in the court and would have gathered themselves for avenging Draupadi's disrespect without waiting for the right circumstances, whereas on contrary to this Draupadi was ready to do anything to save her husbands:

> But now I saw that thought...they loved other things more. Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. (323)

Thus, it can be deduced that *The Palace of Illusion* represents a thought provoking image of woman living a pitiable life. Text highlights how Females are cultured to model themselves according to the discourse of man. As per the text the ideal stature of women laments the idea that women cannot have pleasures that her husband has been outlawed. For instance, Gandhari blindfolded herself, Draupadi left everything and stood firm with her husbands in every situation. This portrays that ideal woman is the one who gives up all her desires, foregoes every single possession and comfort for the welfare and happiness of her family. Epics and legends exhort the ideal women to be chaste and provider to her husband, irrespective of the husband's behaviour towards her. This typecasting of women is under the patriarchal construct where her voice is subdued and her own decisions and thoughts are completely neglected. Further, motif of ideal woman is set as an exemplar for others reiterating the same contagious practice of being suppressed throughout the generations. Thus, the text clearly laments the suppression and subjugation of women who are consistently trying to unfurl their way out of male dichotomy.

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9

Cinematic Adaptation vs Tradaptation: Case of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* in Indian Cinema

Joya Chakravarty,
Preeti Sharma

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a diasporic writer narrates the diverse experiences of the Indian migrants in America in her second novel, "The Mistress of Spices" (1997). In this remarkable piece of art, she works upon the themes of cultural conflict, disintegration of identity, a sense of alienation and a struggle of the individuals to keep track of their roots while trying to adapt the new culture. It is basically a novel constructed on the lines of the technique of Magic Realism. In the background of myth, magic and romance, she presents a wide spectrum of the life and longing existing in the experiences of immigrants. The narrator in the novel is Tilo, a young woman born in another time in a faraway place. She is an expert in the ancient art of spices and is therefore respected as 'Mistress' charged with the special power of magic related with spices. The novel can be very much read and analyzed with the concept of Diaspora since it represents the struggles and inner turmoil faced by a population which has moved geographically, politically, socially and culturally from its homeland India, and is trying to come to terms with a new existence in a foreign land. In "The Mistress of Spices", Tilo and the customers whom she tries to help are all trying to re-establish their ties with India with the help of an ancient heritage which they share in common. The spices and their mystery is a unique

link which makes them reminisce about their common past with nostalgia.

Gurinder Chadha, another artist of great repute hails from the same community of the diasporic Indian society and thus voices similar concerns. Though an origin of India, she now is a British National. Her trials and tribulations of being Non Resident Indian are visible in her interesting composition of films dealing with diasporic Indian experience. Nevertheless, her portrayal of India and the Indians in *The Mistress of Spices* is strategically essentialist. As a whole she follows to the stereotype of the East produced in and perceived by the West, rarely challenging these stereotypes. In the film under discussion, Chadha has created a beautiful, inter-racial love story set against the multicultural, cosmopolitan backdrop of America. But, on the other hand, in doing so the director Mayeda and the scriptwriter Chadha overlooked the spiritual and political angles of the source novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. There are many major and significant issues, particularly racial discrimination and related problems faced by the Indian immigrant community in the US, which are boldly and firmly narrated in the novel, are hardly talked about in the film.

The realistic presentation of the cultural conflict in the novel has been unsuccessfully conveyed in the movie by Gurinder Chaddha. The movie is beautiful but unmoving, poetic but unrythmic.

The movie *Mistress of Spices* represents a brave but flawed attempt at that most unforgiving of contemporary genres, magical realism. A tale of an exquisite young Indian woman, who surpasses the boundaries of her powers as a spice dispenser in San Francisco's Bay area, focuses too much on the porcelain beauty of the lead actress, Ms. Aishwarya Rai, and too little on the story's social and emotional traces to bring off the whole construction.

This paper sets out to analyze and thereby conclude that while the adaptation is the filmmakers' fairly good attempt but in the course of that adaptation, the film at times appeared to be completely divorced from its original text.

There is a lack of magical realist elements in the film, whereas the novel is supplied and loaded with them, and this is perhaps

another reason which disconnects the novel with the movie. The filmmakers preferred to highlight the love story, which brought together and merged the East West cultural dichotomy, while completely minimizing the ignoble reality of immigrant life that was depicted in the novel.

This novel made into a movie starring famed Indian actress Aishwarya Rai and Dylan McDermott, when watched gives a sense of lacking something, and if one has read the novel then it is more prevalent. The movie had to strip away the layers of complexity, the details of Tilo's past and her old woman appearance among others, in order to create a marketable film.

The book, *The Mistress of Spices* , however, is beautiful and wise; and an incredibly strange book, in the most wonderful of ways. Through her main character of Tilo, Divakaruni is able to explore stereotypes, cultural relations, immigrant clashes, and more. Though Tilo's story takes center stage, there are many secondary players that Tilo tries to help over the course of the story. The plot line that strikes the most is Geeta's clashes with her parents and grandfather. Geeta's grandfather dislikes the fact that she works in a professional setting with men, staying late and putting herself in situations that no good Indian girl should be in. However, Geeta's parents insist that she understands their values, and that they will not put artificial constraints on her based on Indian standards because she is trustworthy. But when Geeta's grandfather tries to arrange her marriage, the whole family is in for a shock. Tilo steps into this situation, trying to mediate between grandfather and granddaughter, bringing them to a place of mutual understanding and trust.

There is also a supernatural element to *The Mistress of Spices*, and it shouldn't work, but it does so beautifully. Tilo is from old world, superstitious, inflexible India. She has accepted that she cannot have a life of her own because she is devoted to the spices. But when she counsels her patrons to have flexibility and understanding, trying to help them with their difficult situations, it reminds the reader that Tilo has none of these benefits. When she meets Raven, and he sees through her old shell to the young, vibrant woman she is underneath, she can't help but realize all that she has agreed to forsake.

The film under discussion does perform this important function, as it analyzes the cultural politics influencing the Indian immigrant community,though not as profoundly as the novel. Desai discusses that South Asian diasporic films can be situated within the broader canon of "national cinemas that are nation-building projects" (36). This can be said to be true of the British filmmakers' *The Mistress of Spices*. The film has the aesthetics of the Bollywood genre, the most distinguishable being the music track, whereas politically, the film aims at the amalgamation of the migrant subject into the American mainstream—creating an individual consent towards the nationalistic collective, which is Hollywood's favourite genre. This film, like several 'ethnic films' in America, confronts easy classification—it is neither Hollywood nor Bollywood. *The New York Times* reviewed it as "a one-dimensional, sometimes illogical film, but it's certainly good-looking. The rich visuals of the movie are appreciated by almost all the movie reviewers. The Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai, a former Miss World, looks exquisitely beautiful and the photography often stands out and looks alluring. The superb scene of colourful heaps of spices, garlanded red peppers, bottled potions, and jarred condiments captivates the audience's fancy. Apparently, Spices never looked so attractive. The mundane spices attain some sort of unfamiliar aura due to their extraordinary depiction. The camera work focuses the mystical powers. These spices show later in the movie. The spice shop looks like a cultural boutique with shiny interiors and fashionable ethnic wares. But this aesthetic display of the spice shop in the film is a far cry from the cobwebbed, dark dingy store of Divakaruni's novel, which she describes thus:

> "Grease-smudged window. Looped letters that say SPICE BAZAAR faded into a dried-mud brown. Inside, walls veined with cobwebs where hang discoloured pictures of the gods, their sad shadow eyes. Metal bins with the shine long gone from them. And in the corners accumulated amongdustballs, exhaled by those who have entered here, the desires." (4)

The glittering picture of the shop in the film gives a contrast depiction of the shop portrayed in the novel.

Another significant feature to be noticed is the marked difference in the age of the protagonist as depicted in the adapted

work. Tilo, the mistress of spices, is shown in the film as an attractive lady without wrinkles, sans grey hair, as an unblemished beauty. In the novel, Tilo's ancient body is constantly at disagreement with her inner youthful heart. After walking through the magical fire, the youthful Tilo is transported to her spice store in San Francisco with an old body. She is "a bent woman with skin the colour of old sand" with *"creases and gnarls"* (4-5) on her body. Her conflict in the novel is not only cultural but also metaphysical. It is this clash between Tilo's inner and outer selves that adds depth.

The film divests the character of the male protagonist of the deep internal conflicts and through the casting of the handsome Dylan McDermott, Doug is presented as a white American who is drawn to Tilo merely because of her Indian beauty and charms. Another contrastive feature is the presentation of the intensity of the relationship between Tilo and Raven wherein Gurinder Chadha and Paul Mayeda Berges fail miserably to appropriately adapt the characters of the novels in cinema.

The relationship as depicted in the novel is reduced to a mere love relationship between an Indian and an American, who after resolving the basic East-West differences decide to satiate their passion for each other in a vivid erotic scene of making love on a bed of red chillies. The scene is definitely rich in cinematography and use of bright, vibrant hues but is devoid of the intense psychological depth that Divakaruni weaves into the relationship of Tilo and Raven.

The Spice Bazaar in the novel can be seen as the multicultural market providing an opportunity to the culturally marginalized group to spread their culture and tradition. As the Mistress of Spices, Tilo bridges the gap between the tradition culinary skills of India and the fast food cosmopolitan culture of America. The spice shop can be seen as a miniature of India and the spices are the spiritual ingredients that commence the healing process of the Western world. Spices oppose the Western consumerism and emerge as the Indian way of constructing the multicultural world in the post-colonial era.

There is a complete absentia of magic realism in the film and spices are presented as exotic and mystical but definitely not powerful. The film presents the spices with vibrant hues and

glitter but devoid of all the connotations and the subversive power given to them by the author. Tilo's spice shop as depicted by Divakaruni is always buzzing with people whereas an "architect of the American dream" (Divakaruni 28), Tilo uses the magical properties of the spices to bring relief to her customers. The innumerable faces belonging to different sections of the American and the immigrant society visit the shop—the bougainvillea girls, Mohan, Haroun, Geetha's grandfather, Kwesi, Lalita, Jagjit and so on.

The novel passionately explains the story of each individual visiting the shop. This personal attention and interaction of Tilo with them brings out different shades in her character and enriches the plot of the novel:

> "So many people on Saturday, it seems the walls must take a deep breath just to hold them in." (Divakaruni, 78)

Whereas, the film pathetically misses the demonstration of colours added by the visitors of the spice shop. The film thus emerges as a superficial inter-racial love story and any other attribute that might shift the attention of the audience from the glamour of the heroine or the passion of the love story is carefully eluded from the film.

Finally, ending of the novel too differs from the way the film ends. In the novel after giving way to her physical and mental desires in her relationship with Raven, Tilo decides to be ready for the chastisement that might be perpetrated by the spices through Shampati's fire for leaving the spices and the spice shop and thus disobeying the dictates of the Old One : "Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it is to be Indian. To be American. But where I am going—life or death, I do not know which—I will carry its brief aching sweetness" (Divakaruni 292). The earthquake then follows, destroying everything and thus symbolic of the destruction of the established world order where the supremacy of the West prevails. Destruction becomes imperative in order to create a new world order which is in keeping with the Indian cycle of life—creation, preservation and destruction. Thus spices pave way for the creation of a new world before forsaking Tilo by creating the devastating earthquake. Together Tilo and Raven look for the earthly paradise, a dream world symbolizing a utopian existence.

However, they realize that a new world can be created from the ruins of the devastated world: "Because there is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug-dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and waking in cells. Yes, in the hate in the fear" (Divakaruni 315). Thus in this new world order Tilo, now bereft of the power of spices takes on a new name Maya : "Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day. I need a name like that, I who now have only myself to hold me up" (Divakaruni 317). Thus the ending of the novel is optimistic, upholds multiculturalism and envisions a world where the marginalized communities co-exist with the powerful people with their shared knowledge of ancient wisdom.

As compared to the figurative significance of the ending of Divakaruni's text, the ending of the film is extremely simplistic and flat. In the film after the disaster of the earthquake, Tilo is shown to continue as the mistress of spices in her shop on one hand and on the other pursue her personal life with Doug. The melody of the background score taken from an old Hindi film adds to the romantic appeal of the passionate scene once again reinforcing the film as a peaceful love story. Nevertheless, the film recommends 'brand India' in Hollywood, flaunts Indian culture and ethnicity and displays the various facets of the diasporic community. Although Berges and Chadha's film is devoid of the psychological and cultural conflict that is predominant in Divakaruni's novel, yet the film upholds the effortless amalgamation of and coalition with the East and the West.

The novel does not see the possibility of an easy amalgamation of cultures, while the movie is far more optimistic that the ancient value-system can have a peaceful coexistence with the Western capitalist cult. The novel does not advocate forsaking traditions but it supports a progressive ideology of accommodating the old with the new, the East with the West, nevertheless privileging the Eastern worldview over the established norms of the rationalistic Western worldview. In the film, the Indian ethos seems to extend its limits and incorporate the worldview of the West in its heterogeneous, pluralistic fold,

which can be perceived as Chadha's hopeful intervention. The film promotes a healthy mixture of cultures in the peaceful multiracial world, while the novel poses serious questions to this paradise. Further, the film refuses to engage with larger societal problems, and posits the uncomplicated treatment of across-cultural love story as a political device to undermine the racial issue, with Tilo and Doug uniting without any immense conflicts. Although Chadha and Berges' film dilutes the cultural conflict raging in Divakaruni's novel and also indulges in shallow exoticism, it upholds its own ideology, that of the effortless amalgamation of the East and the West which makes it to some extent disconnected with the novel.

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10

Confronting Stereotypes: Struggle for Identity in *Oleander Girl*

Nivedita V. Bedadur

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has written many novels and short stories and poems largely featuring women as central protagonists. In every work of hers, the protagonist's struggle is mirrored in the struggle of other women. These women live fractured lives, torn between the stratified, hierarchical existence which they once believed to be the ultimate reality and their struggle for identity. The truths that they once held sacred come crashing down as they are left adrift in the stormy skies of love and loss. What is remarkable is the courage with which they face this fracture, living many realities and truths while carrying in their wombs the genesis of change; the burning ashes from which a phoenix is born.

Oleander Girl focuses on the larger question of negotiating identities in the intersectionality of religion, caste, class and gender. The seed of the story of Karobi was already sown in the stories that have come before it and continues with the story that comes after it: Tilo of *The Mistress of Spices*, Sudha and Anju of *Sister of My Heart* and Sabitri, Bela and Tara of *Before We Visit the Goddess*. *Oleander Girl* is framed in the context of this recurring struggle to confront the stranglehold of the hierarchy of power. It comes through as the journey of a writer who sowed the seeds of

Karobi's struggles in Tilo, Sudha, Anju, and developed them in Sabitri, Bela, Tara and many other women. It examines the forces that stratify society by creating stereotypes which break down only when man and woman wake up to their own identity and listen to the voices inside them, tearing out the being that other people expect them to be. Ultimately, this leads to the reconstruction of identity in the changing landscape of the mind; which is possible, only through pain, destruction and sacrifice. The confrontation takes place at two levels, in the minds of the protagonists and in their decisions, which destroy as well as create. *Oleander Girl* depicts this struggle through the female characters of novel: Jayashree, Pia, Sarojini, Sonia, Anu, at various stages of surrender and negotiation, and destruction. The struggles of these women are part of the journey of the protagonist, Karobi, the Oleander girl. The struggle is framed in the intersectionality of caste, class, religion and gender, on whose fulcrum of social structures the identity of the protagonist and her family operates. Love tears this identity apart to question the verity of these structures. *Oleander Girl* delves into these questions lightly but firmly, affirming that change comes through confrontation of the shadows that both bind and tear apart the mosaic of humanity. Yet this emerging of new identities and thereby new social orders does not come without its price, the breaking down of and sacrifice of the familiar, the known and cherished: the death of Anju, Karobi's mother; the death of her grandfather; the cutting of Karobi's hair and her discovery of being black and bastard. In the fire of this questioning, pretense of purity, heritage and lineage and the love that binds them together burns and breaks down. When does one begin to know oneself, asks our protagonist, only when the social construction of identities is torn apart and burns the life as we have known it. This is when one is forced to define oneself in bare terms as just 'oneself' recreated through the fire of love, losing and pain.

The lyrical poetry of Divakaruni's prose and her bold strokes of mythical realism, create the symbols which are the crucible of her stories. She places the supernatural, spirits, chants and gods squarely within the truths of human experience, a balm to our tired souls in our effort to understand the larger designs of human existence. This, she achieves through the lyrical quality of

her language, a masterly stroke of a feather touch to understand the truths that control our lives. For Indian or American, Black or White, Brahmin or bastard; all understand the ultimate truth and pain of love.

Oleander Girl chronicles the journey of a young girl's search for her father, which becomes a search for her identity, a struggle to confront the stereotypes which strangle her: the silken threads of race, class, caste and gender. As she questions these empty pretenses, she suffers pain and loss and reconstructs herself in making her choices.

The Oleander Girl, Karobi loves her grandfather to distraction, she worships him and obeys his traditional bindings over her youthful urges. Her rigid, patriarchal and proud grandfather sets impossible standards, dampening Karobi's desires. She does not understand his fear, and why her mother, who is long gone, is not mentioned in their house. However, what seems like an unjustified restriction to Karobi, is the result of guilt and fear of a broken man who lies to his beloved granddaughter about her father's death, only to save her from shame. This sets Karobi on a journey to find her wronged father and to find her real identity. In this, she neglects the love of her life, leaving him to destroy his parents' life work through his foolish decisions and settle his own scores with a troubled past.

The first reality that breaks down for Karobi is the solid love and worship of her grandfather and his rules, for he was neither true nor upright. His actions lead not only to the death of her mother but also the estrangement of her father who is forced to believe the death of his wife and daughter in an elaborate subterfuge. All this to keep Karobi to himself and uphold the family name. Worse still, he led Karobi to believe that her father was dead.

In America where Karobi is forced to cut her hair and assume a new identity, she discovers that she is a bastard and a black man's daughter. Struggling in a new world, where trouble lurks at every turn, Karobi faces the breakdown of every structure her grandfather had carefully woven around her—caste, class, race and gender. And then the Oleander girl realizes that her mother never married her father, to honour the promise she had made to Karobi's grandfather—that she would not marry without his

permission. The journey her mother took to India was to repair the rift between herself and her father, and bring her daughter into this world honourably. Karobi rues that her mother died without being able to do so and thus the final thread which binds her to her grandfather breaks, leaving Karobi adrift in an empty ocean, to find her true identity.

Here Karobi becomes one with the many women that Divakaruni has sketched before her: Anju who loses both her husband and baby to the love of the 'Sister of her Heart' and Sudha who loses her husband and lover, only to carve a new self with her binding shame; Tilo, the Mistress of Spices who loses her secret powers and her position as Mother to become human and to love and suffer, for the sorrow of a broken city; Sabitri, Bela and Tara who lose each other and their loved ones in the search for the self. All of them show exceptional courage in carving new identities. Divakaruni has in her books sketched a long line of struggling women whose beliefs in the old order lay broken: Lalita whose husband rapes her (Divakaruni *The Mistress of Spices*), Sabitri who betrays and is punished by her husband who takes to drink and Bela whose husband turns her daughter, Tara against her (Divakaruni *Before We Visit the Goddess*). Yet both Sabitri and Bela rise above their daughters' hatred; Bela who loses husband, daughter and mother and yet conquers her guilt to write books and do cookery shows, Tara who conquers her kleptomaniacal tendencies and the loss of her child (Divakaruni, *Before We Visit the Goddess*). All these struggles to understand their lives and their own selves form a kaleidoscopic mirror of the many selves that lay the seed of Karobi, who ultimately transcends the breaking of the earth underneath her feet, the earth made up of the sands of race, class, caste and gender of being legitimate or illegitimate, honoured or condemned. The spirits of these individual stories have not only converged in the creation of Karobi but also allowed her to transcend their identities.

In *Oleander Girl*, other women connected to Karobi, frame her struggles: Sarojini struggles against her husbands' cruelty, rising above his repression and false brahminical pride and emerges strong and stable after her husband's death; Pia who has already broken the boundaries of race and class defies her brother in order to talk to her old friend Asif, causing him to save them

almost at the cost of his life; Jayashree whose father-in-law spit at her, causing her to vow in anger to rise above her class, to become rich and famous; Seema who escapes the strangle hold of her husband's grip, and sells her hair and jewelry to return to India. These women through their own struggles mirror and frame Karobi's questioning of the bindings of race, caste, gender and class which are built on hypocrisy so as to affirm the power in the hands of the few. When the women in Divakaruni's books break through their stranglehold, they suffer loss and pain but emerge victorious.

In Indian culture race, caste, class and gender have their own symbols that proclaim their identity: clothes, jewelry, cars, houses, beauty, temples and servants. In the confrontation of stereotypes these symbols are destroyed, ravaged and vandalized. In *Oleander Girl* Rajat's Art Gallery in America and in his warehouse are vandalized, Karobi has to cut off her hair, Sarojini and Seema sell off their jewelry, Asif sacrifices his employer's Rolls Royce. With this destruction comes the release from bonds and Asif becomes a part of the Bose household, Karobi accepts herself as bastard, black and penniless like a kite set free from the strings of her brahminical origins: the Roy heritage and its definitions of her duty as a granddaughter. Later when cast out of the Bose household she sheds her ideas of what a betrothed should do, to affirm her identity and becomes the real oleander girl. This journey is true of the male characters as well: Rajat in finding his car destroyed and his life in danger, undergoes a transformation, Mr. Bose sees the danger of holding on to the vandalized Art Gallery in America and sells it. In her earlier works, Divakaruni does not explore the development of male characters as fully as she does in *Oleander Girl*. In *Oleander Girl*, Mr. Bose cooks gourmet meals and gives the credit entirely to his wife; it is a secret between his wife and him. He is the alter ego of the stereotypical caste, class and gender conscious male who follow all the rules: Mr. Bimal Roy, Karobi's grandfather. Asif, who is insulted by Rajat and Jayashree loves Pia as his own sister and struggles to please and protect her. The bond between Asif and Pia is examined in the development of both characters; Asif emerges stronger as Pia affirms their bond and because of Pia; he grows and confronts both Sheikh and Mrs Bose to transcend race and class. Mr.

Bhattarjee finds a new self, very different from his class and heritage conscious pride, when he prays at the Roy's temple where Netaji once prayed. He confronts the hypocrisy of those who upheld Netaji's lineage and his own desire to build a stronghold of that lineage. He becomes human again in the company of Sarojini and heals his own wounds by repairing her home.

Yet, this is not true of all the males as it is not true of all the females. In America, Karobi experiences class, race hatred, gender stereotypes in the men who accuse her of being a fraud and try to take advantage of her; beginning with Mitra and the other people whom she approaches in search of her father. Even her father first reacts in the same manner. Yet Rajat chastised by Pia changes and sheds both his class pride and his arrogance after a disastrous mishandling of an explosive situation at the warehouse which escalates into a racial riot. Framed in the backdrop of 27/11 which stoked hatred for other races in America, our local race hatred gains perspective. It is the pain and sacrifice that keeps these fires from exploding into cataclysmic blasts.

The lyrical-mythical realism of Divakaruni's prose conjures up new symbols, visitations from the dead which warn us of impending dangers, the temple goddess in the Roy home transforming Bhattacharjee into a better man. The lyricism of the prose as when Rajat experiences a strange calm after his near brush with death and Pia's voice sounds like 'a tree full of birds' and he feels like the song, 'Anandodharabohichebhubonay' take the symbolism to a new level (260).

In every book Divakaruni brings in the spiritual, through both her lyrical prose and her symbolic encounters with the supernatural. *The Mistress of Spices* is firmly rooted in this mystical realism. Realism because the power of spices is true while the mystical elements are the magic of the island, the vow of the mistress, the visitations from mother, of changing from old to young and beautiful. In *Sister of My Heart,* it is the cave of rubies which casts a spell on the brothers and extracts a sacrifice. This leads to the death of one brother and to anonymity and helpless service to another. In *Before We Visit Goddess,* it is the chapter on Medical History which accounts for the mental and spiritual where Sanjay fields questions like: name one human mystery,

what is the nature of life, questions which seem ordinary but hold the essence of human existence.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an activist, professor and writer. Her novels are placed squarely on the shoulders of her experience of helping immigrant women. She is a real time avatar of Tilo from *The Mistress of Spices*. She weaves through the magical idiom of a master story teller these struggles of shifting identities transformed by the winds of change. *Oleander Girl*, a major milestone in this journey is also remarkable for its visual quality, the story unfolds before us like a movie. The words woven into a fabric of magic, come alive and enact, and cast the spell of reality so true that you want to touch the people it weaves you and itself around. This is why her stories are so popular, not because they are crafted from and through experience but because they like the clouds purge themselves in rain and transform the lives they touch by transcending the boundaries of class, caste, religion and gender to give new meanings to life.

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11

East-West Encounter in *The Mistress of Spices*

S. Somasundari Latha

People leaving their home country to a new place with the hope of seeking green pasture face lot of challenges. They experience physical and emotional alienation because of dislocation. Accommodating one's self into a new environment is not easy. Food habits, unknown place, strange people and different culture create a sense of fear in their mind. The cultural shock will keep them in bewilderment. After initial inhibition and hesitation, they gradually adapt themselves to new culture and that results in assimilation of new culture. They cannot severe their link with their home culture but at the same time the inevitability of embracing new culture will pave the way for encounter of two different cultures. Childs and Williams observe, "Post-colonial cultures are characterized by a decentering movement, a subversion of universals and unities, in a diversity and hybridity that permeate their past and condition their present." This paper aims at dealing with East-West Encounter in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a versatile writer born in Calcutta and living in San Francisco with her husband and two children. Her immigrant experience has begun in 1976. She teaches creative writing at the University of Houston and is the coordinator for a helpline for South Asian Women. She has

several award winning collection of poetry, best seller short stories and a good number of novels to her credit. She has won American Book Award and a Light of Indian Award. Her books have been translated into twenty nine languages. She has won the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction. Her themes include immigration, myth, exile, loneliness, dislocation, loss of identity and challenges faced by immigrants in an alien country. In 2015, she was chosen by the Economic Times for their list Twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women. When she talks about the success of her first novel *The Mistress of Spices*, she says, "I am a listener, a facilitator, a connector to people. To me, the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about."

The protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices* is Tilottama, known as Tilo is named after sesame seeds, the spice of nourishment (5). She runs an Indian grocery store Spice Bazaar in Oakland, California. She uses her knowledge of spices to help her customers to overcome their difficulties. She is the architect of the immigrant dream (28). She can make it all happen green cards and promotions and girls with lotus eyes (28). This novel is "a mixture of Hindu mythology, religious superstitions and traditional Ayurvedic medical wisdom with American socio-cultural concerns of the 1990" (www.essayempire.com).

Tilo is born in a village of India as an unwanted girl child for her parents. Her parents have named her Nayan Tara, star of the Eye which means Stat-seer. She has mysterious power to foretell certain things and people believe she could change their luck with a touch of her hand (8). She is kidnapped by the pirates and lived like a queen to pirates, she is a Bhagyavati, "Bringer of Luck." Her voluntary entry into the island of spice provides an opportunity for her to get trained by an Old one about spices. She enters into Shampati's fire and comes out with a new body. She has taken the form of old woman with wrinkles and sagging flesh.

Tilo is a self-indulgent woman and chooses to come to America against the wishes of Old Mother. She is given a knife by the Old one to keep her chase and to keep her from dreaming (51). She is forbidden to love anyone. She is not supposed to give importance to her heart's desire. Tilo, the medicine woman or

sorceress' presence in America and her efforts to cast spell into spices to cure the diseases of people signifies the encounter of two different cultures. Rasiah opines, "The novel deals with a past that is set in a mythical India but the present is very much set in Oakland, California." Tilo tries to bridge the gap between two different cultures and she is the only one help the immigrant to come in terms with their lives (Nongmaithem 147-150).

Life is not a bed of roses for immigrants. To find a career, to settle in life and to live a peaceful life is not easy. Bhattacharya says, "Transnational movement presents itself as an important influence upon psychological, physical and public health" (66). Lau feels, "It is a move from the known to the unknown.... It may be a traumatic journey" (Lau 247). The story of Mohan and Veena is pathetic. They come to America with a dream. Mohan runs an eatery known as Mohan Indian Food and everything they cook, gets sold. But their dream is shattered when few men have come to the stall and beat Mohan badly, saying, "Sonofabitch Indian, shoulda stayed in your goddam country" (170). Finally, Veena has taken her one-eye blind, crippled scarred husband to her home country. Haroun, a Kashmiri has come to America with a dream of working as a driver is also beaten by strangers without reason. But because of the care and love of Hameeda and her brother, Haroun gains confidence and decides to continue his life in America. In the same way, Jaggit is made fun of by his classmates. He is discriminated for his colour and accent; his turban is pulled out from his head and laughed at for his unhurt hair. The big boys who have come to his rescue engage him in illegal activities. Tilo has given him manjistha to cool his blood and make it pure. Sailaja and Co observes:

> *The Mistress of Spices* depicts the paradox and incongruity of life. Divakaruni's characters reflect the predicament of being caught between two conflicting cultures, the Indian and the American, two different approaches to life, the internal and the external. (Sailaja & Co 3)

The immigrants from India contain a heterogeneous group speaking different languages Hindi, Oriya, Assamese, Urdu Tamil and English. Tilo's grocery shop is the centre place where all these people will come. Tilo and the grocery shop with all spices represent Indian culture. The first generation immigrants struggle

hard to give up their culture and imbibe American culture. But their children, the second generation immigrants easily adapt themselves to American culture since their home country and its culture become alien to them. Espin observes, "[a]s migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioural boundaries… one's life and roles change. With them, identities change as well." Geeta's grandfather could not digest his granddaughter's American way of life, since because he is pressurized by his son Ramu, the old man has come to America to stay with them. He is very much upset by his granddaughter Geeta's life style. He says,

> That Geeta, how much make-up she is using all the time. Uff, in my days only the English women and prostitutes are doing that. Good Indian girls are not ashamed of the face God is giving them. You cannot think what all she is taking with her even to work. (86)

He is disgusted with her short hair, Mascara, blusher, foundation, eye shadow and lipstick. Tilo burns the incense of the champak flower for the harmony in Geeta's home. "Geeta who is India and America all mixed together into a new melody, be forgiving of an old man who holds on to his past with all the strength in his failing hands" (87). Geeta embraces American culture casually without any hesitation. When her grandfather tries to fix a boy for her from India, she reveals her love with Juan Cordere, Chicano. Her parents' displeasure over this love affair forces her to say that she is going to live with Juan without formal marriage. This shocks not only grandfather but also her parents very much.

If Geeta and her parents alone had discussed her love affair, it would have taken different turn. But the interruption of grandfather and his conservative ideas about love marriage has made everyone act quickly with anger and without thought. As a result, Geeta leaves home letting her parents curse her. Grandfather who is the cause for all the happenings couldn't bear unusual calmness at home. He realizes his responsibility to restore peace in the family. He seeks Tilo's help. The news that Geeta is staying with her friend not with her lover, Jaun gives a sigh of relief to the family. Geeta cannot easily give up her cultural root for her love. Like American girls, she cannot enter

into live-in-relationship with Jaun without her parents' blessings. She doesn't want to shame her family. Grandfather who is the cause for all the mess understands the ground reality and seeks the help of Tilo to bring back his daughter to the family again and thereby restores peace and happiness of the family. This shows even the traditional man like Geeta's grandfather undergoes transformation and accepts American culture.

Ahuja's wife Lalita comes to America with lot of expectations that her husband is earning in dollars. Ahuja is a watchman at the docks. Lalita lives a happy life in India. She is a tailor and earns good money from sewing, goes to movies with her women friends and has her own bank account. Ahuja looks older than the photograph which he has sent to her. It is too late to stop the marriage and so Lalita has married him out of compulsion. He doesn't permit her to do her tailoring. Moreover, she is sexually harassed. Both think that a baby would make everything alright between them. When everything is fine with Lalita, doctor asks her to send her husband for sperm count. The man in Ahuja could not tolerate this and tortured his wife. Lalita doesn't want to go back to her parents like a coward. No doubt, America has instilled in her lot of confidence. In American culture, individuals are significant and their desires, feelings and emotions are important. American culture allows woman to live her life in her own terms. Lalita's decision to leave her husband to an organization which helps women like her shows her thirst for freedom and empowerment. If Lalita had been in India, she would have been advised to put up with her husband whatever might be her sufferings.

As a mistress of spices, Tilo feels other's pains and sufferings and comes to their rescue. She has given up her ordinary life for the spices. A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves (69). Tilo cannot use the spices to fulfil her own desire. But she is emotionally disturbed by the frequent visit of Raven, an American. Raven's father is an American but his mother is an Indian-American. His mother behaves and lives like an American woman without revealing her identity to Raven's father. His mother prevents Raven from learning the magic from his great grandfather. Raven couldn't forgive his mother for this. Raven is

lured by Tilo's mysterious appearance. Tilo who has crossed boundaries to help others with spices seeks the help of spices to take a beautiful form in order to surrender herself to Raven. She keeps on changing her identity to cope with her environment. Mitra says, "Chameleon like [and] she keeps changing throughout the novel, making clear how complex is the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land."

As a Mistress she has power over spices. By falling in love with Raven she fears that she may gradually lose her power. Her determination to close the grocery shop shows her determination to fulfil her lover even at the cost of the anger of spices. Tilo along with the spices represents Orient and Raven symbolizes Occident. Edward Said is of the opinion that the idea of Orient and Occident are manmade.

> … Men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities to say nothing of historical entities, such locals, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are manmade. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (Said 5)

Spices play a vital role in enticing the West to the East. For the inhabitants of the East, the West is a dreamland, a land of fairy tales where all aspirations can be fulfilled (Shankar Jha 82). Unlike Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* who fails to cope with the American culture, Tilo willingly assimilates American milieu. Cultural values are negotiated, domains of the differences are erased and the result is the overlapping of cultures. Bhabha opines:

> The negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual recognition (or representation) of cultural difference. The social articulation of difference from the minority perspective is a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybrities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha 52)

Tilo has to choose between Raven and spices. Tilo's choice of Raven over spices shows her firmness to give up power and live an ordinary life with Raven. Tilo's love, Lalita's individuality, acceptance of Geeta's love and her lover, Jiggit's maturity to manage things at school and Haruon's plan of marrying Hameeda depicts how the immigrants hold certain practices of their home culture strictly and at the same time adapt themselves to new culture. In an interview (Video: PSB) Divakaruni says, "I wrote the book in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth in my attempt to create a modern fable". Tilo's recent name 'Maya' means 'illusion' which symbolically represents that the thin line between East and West is just an illusion.

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12

Mythologization of Reality in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*: Some Observations

Maciej Karasinski

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a world-acclaimed author, born in Calcutta, who published literary works of various genres with poems, novels and short stories paving new ways for understanding of humanistic issues of the world. Divakaruni has attracted readers' attention with her poetry and fiction dealing with problems of Indian emigrants. Her works take us into the tormented psyche of Indian women and give alternative understanding of South Asian diaspora (Abcarian 1544). The article is a study on *The Mistress of Spices*, an oneiric fantasy novel short-listed for the Orange Prize. This charming and compelling read won readership with its magical realism and omnipresent sensuality. Perhaps easy to disregard on a first reading is the author's attempts of mythologization of reality. In fact, the present paper tries to show how the novel's realism is morphed into magical realism. The characters of Divakaruni's work cross the boundaries between dream and reality and question their own understanding of life and reason. Not only the titular character is a magician bound by the ancient vows of chastity but her dreams and memoirs bind present life of Asian diaspora in California with mythical past of India.

The aim of present paper is to remark on various aspects of mythologization and magical realism of *The Mistress of Spices* and compare the novel with Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Gaiman is a British writer most famous for his disturbing fantasy novels, comics and short stories. The majority of his works share similar atmosphere of ambiguous multidimensional reality shattered by spiritual disturbances. Gaiman's magical reality is full of literary allusions to myths and legends of West and East. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was named Book of the Year in the British National Book Awards (Byatt 2013). This outstanding work can also be called an oneiric novel with fantasy elements and magical realism at its core. Therefore, an attempt is made to present a short comparison of both novels and to point out how myths and reality are redefined and recreated by the writers.

Mythologization and Magical Realism

Mythic thinking can be understood as the belief that myths—conceived as explanatory narratives dealing with crucial questions of humankind—should serve as frameworks for interpreting life (Sterenberg 1). Magical realism, on the other hand, is a unique literary genre anchored in mundane reality but having fantastic overtones. Authors like Cortazar, Mario Vargas Llosa or Gabriel Garcia Marquez introduced conflicting perspectives to blend natural and supernatural phenomena in unnerving dramas (Flores 113-116). As observed by Rudge, the term magical realism was first employed by the German art critic Roh, to describe paintings produced in the 1920s. Roh praised artists' attempts to move beyond expressionism and concentrate on mystery of life, the hidden wonders behind the ordinariness (Rudge 127-140). Roh used a term *fantastic dreamscape* to name the sphere of reality reflected in the paintings and that very term was later employed by literary critics when describing works of Marquez or Allende. Another point of reference can be a term coined by Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky's, i.e., 'defamiliarization'. Shklovsky insisted on art presenting an object in an unfamiliar way so the reader could stop "experiencing the artfulness of an object" (Reeds 175-196). The same idea was further adapted by writers of mystery novels. Magical realism soon became a new trend in world literature questioning realistic descriptions of life and

boundaries between dream, hallucination and authenticity of experience. The writers keep ironic distance from the supernatural, preventing magical realism from moving into realm of fantasy. The narrators seem to claim that to describe the world one need to go beyond, climb into suprarational or surreal dimensions (Zamora 15-32). Literary works play on the idea that there are points of contact and interdependencies between what is commonly understood as reality and dream.

In world literature there are more than few examples where mythologization is introduced within the prosaic frame of magical realism (e.g., Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*). In more than one novel, surrealism and realism are merged to revitalize national myths or cultural identities (e.g., Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*). In fact, magical realism avoids triviality of fantastic stories. In many cases, the stories pertaining to the genre are anchored in contemporariness and deal with problems relevant to seemingly ordinary life. Thus, within the trends of postmodern literature many texts dwell on border of their genre deconstructing styles and canons (Slemon 13). Hence, we can even pose a question if the oneiric visions of Bruno Schulz or Kafka's works can be considered examples of magical realism or whether or not they represent unique genres penetrating various layers of reality.

The article here attempts to prove that even the structure of those texts (i.e*., The Mistress of Spices* and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane)* determines the coexistence or even merging of realism and supernatural elements. The analysis of Divakaruni's novel sheds some light on narrative devices and the way in which the reader is textually implied and constructed.

Magical Realism of Memories

The Mistress of Spices starts like a classic fairy tale revealing the story of titular character Tilo, an Indian sorceress trained in ancient lore of spices. She uses her occult powers, fine-tuned during training in secret hermitage, to help Indian expats living in contemporary California. Spices have magical properties seemingly activated by Tilo's touch and words. They are the tools in her altruistic efforts to comfort the poor. Nevertheless, none of her ruses is able to mask her loneliness. The story morphs into a fairy tale when Tilo's true love knocks on her door. The infatuation leads to frustration as for Tilo to love means to

disobey her vows and offend ancient forces. Following her feelings, sorceress ultimately causes disturbance in the very fabric of magical reality. In her pursuit of romance, Tilo misuses the power of spices. It is interesting to note that the spices are used like mantras: a mistress of spices is like a master of incantations who practiced recitation of sacred formulas for years and is bound by laws and vows related to the spiritual discipline. Like Hindu mantras, the potencies hidden in the spices inflict punishment on those who disrespect them (Vajpeyi 38).

The curse, as perceived by Tilos, is also an epiphany that allows the sorceress to step beyond the ancient laws and start a new life. Her new life starts (quite literary) with an earthquake and is affirmed by Tilo's decision to take a new name. Therefore, the whole story provokes questions about human nature and quest for identity. The same elements (i.e., magical reality and problem of identity) lie in the heart of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. The structure of Gaiman's work is different from Divakaruni's as the storyline starts with a search for identity and the very quest leads readers into to realm of magical realism. While *The Mistress of Spices* is the moniker of titular sorceress, *The Ocean at the End of Lane* designates the very centre of magical location that serves as a gateway to other dimensions. The magical realism of Tilo's story flows through the axis of time—the mythical past influences semi-magical present. On the contrary, the axis of time in Gaiman's work is not linear. The story revolves around a middle-aged man returning to his childhood. The return brings memories and his reminiscences form a bizarre tale with supernatural overtones. Gaiman's novel discusses remembering or memories. Can we remember our life? Can a child see things beyond ordinariness?—asks the novelists. In some ways, it is a novel of retrospection. Thus, Gaiman's book offers a narration that gives a voice to a child and an adult. We have a middle-aged man recalling his worst fears of his early days in rural England. Time flows in more than one direction and in the magical land of the Ocean's centred village various times and spaces intermingle. Therefore, the magic world can be explored with a child as a guide. While Tilo has her intuition and magic spices to heal the wounds of society, unnamed hero of Gaiman's story meets sorceresses that use ordinary objects to create their own realities. If Tilo appears to be young at heart and inexperience even with her long training and proficiency in

magic arts, Gaiman's magicians are archetypal witches. Gaiman introduces three women—a playful girl, a mother and a grandma (The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone of the Wiccan beliefs) (Mcdaniel 295). The book leaves it up to the reader to decide if they are one or many characters. Perhaps, as the ending suggest, they may be indeed manifestations of one eternal feminine. To paraphrase MacBride's opinion of Kafka's storytelling, we may say that Gaiman's novel deploys a sophisticated tie to reality to construe a putatively self-relying fictional world that is shattering the genre's formal closure in its search for openness (McBride 50).

Divakaruni's work offers a dreamlike opening throwing a reader into the ancient world of magic and Indian beliefs. Magic seems to be hidden in words (Indian names, flowing syllables of people's names, names of spices, places, etc.). Divakaruni's minimalistic prose adds a dramatic tincture to already spiced story. Tilo frequently muses about past and rarely discloses anything but what she had planned to say. Short statements of stripped-down matter of fact prose indicate Tilo's hesitations, doubts or even the fear of revealing too much. While Tilo is a sorceress Gaiman's protagonist is a sensitive boy whose world is the realm of books and stories. The stories that give him courage and help him deal with surrealistic threat. Gaiman's tale is rich in literary and cultural references. One may admire bookishness of his prose where drama is hidden behind ordinary life. The normality is un-familiarized and enlivened by terrifying fairy tales. For the boy, reading is indeed an act of creating reality. In similar manner, Tilo plays with spices and their powers to shape her life.

Mythologization of Magical Reality

> *"Maybe you need loving to cure your heart", I say, smiling also. It amazes me how easily I am learning the rules of this flirting game. "Maybe that's why the ache."*
>
> *O shameless Tilo now what.*
>
> *"You really believe that?" he asks, serious now. "You believe love can cure the aching heart?"*
>
> –Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni *Mistress of Spices*

Adults follow paths. Children explore—says Gaiman's narrator leading his young protagonist into the remarkable land of monsters

and ancient spirits. He is finding his way with books and fairies by his side. The realities are composed out of emotions, flavours and shades of darkness. Tilo, on the other hand has her shop lightened with colours. As the Mistress of Spices says—*each day has a colour, a smell. And if you know to listen, a melody.* Apart from shades and flavours, the two novels are teeming with references to myths and legends of various cultures. Tilo is led to a secret land by snakes that take the shape of Hindu Nagas but her story revolves around Indian and American myths. The spice market and the Ocean (in fact a small pool that children named Ocean) are gates to other dimension. Unlike fantasy stories, the gates are not opened with magic spells but characters and ideas travel through them when the doors are ajar. While Gaiman provokes questions about remembering and identity, he also deals with the myth of childhood—the time of playfulness and innocence. In his book the very myth is deconstructed: children are seers who can understand complexities of life while adults are the ignorant drones undisturbed by the omnipresent magic. The big myth which Divakaruni attempts to confront is the myth of romantic love. The love in the story has various shades and layers. It is a forbidden fruit and an elixir of freedom that removes the shackles of loneliness. It takes away innocence and replaces it with the beauty of mature confidence. It revolutionizes one's life but awakens demons of pride and fear. Can romantic love and love for humanity be waves of the same sea? The classic legends of India are scattered in *The Mistress of Spices* and like a pinch of cardamom seeds they add oriental flavour to the story. There are omnipotent goddesses, the Mothers, who served as Tilo's tutors of magic, and their island that reminds us of one of the mythical Dvipas of Hindu mythology. In fact, the readers may find in Divakaruni's work an alternative topography connecting American cities with Indian towns and dreamy lands. Divakaruni seems also to play with the myth of eternal return. The concept developed by Eliade refers to a belief that people (or individuals) are able to become contemporary with or return to the 'mythical age'—the time when the events described in one's myths occurred for the first time. Since the return to the archaic age is not possible, people in every culture struggle to recreate the experience of coming back to the ideal world (Wendy XIII). The world of myths is therefore full of allusions to the idea of the Golden Age.

The spices of Tilo's shop can be considered the links with the past, the linkage between lost magical India dreamed anew by the expats. We may say that love is another linkage in the story. Perhaps the Tilo's love unites West and East in spiritual communion of intercultural dialogue.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of the present paper was to shed some light on mythologization of the reality and creation of magical realism in *The Mistress of Spices*. An attempt was made to compare the Divakaruni's work with Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane.* The comparison pinpoints the difference in narrations that lead readers into the magical reality. The protagonists of both novels dwell in magical time, which flows in circles. Not historical time, which runs in a line. Therefore, the process of mythologization of reality in both texts has many layers. Indian legends function in Divakaruni's novel it two ways—as direct references to tradition and as implicit markers rather than overt ones. Their relatively low-key presence is a distinguishing feature of the story. Let it suffice to mention the Indian holy places and deities mentioned by the Tilo's clientele.

The ancient myths are re-invoked in modern context to suit the requirements of magical realism. The so-called 'ontological' strand, as defined by Carpentier. This type of magical realism relies on over-familiarization of the supernatural elements and often introduces oneiric topography peopled by both ghosts and humans. This variant realistically portrays strange and implausible phenomena (e.g., hauntings or resurrections of the dead), combining them with mimetic images of mundane reality. Thus, both novels imply that the paranormal is a part of human life. Hence, Gaiman's juvenile hero banishes evil spirits from his family plot and Tilo marks sacred space of her shop with magical spices. Magical realm of Divakaruni's and Gaiman's protagonists is swarming with myths and ideas of paranormal provenience. Therefore, one may be tempted to say that *The Mistress of Spices* is an interesting example of a novel belonging to ontological strand of magical realism. Its dramatic style is enriched with series of myths that are adapted to suit new reality crafted from emotions and hopes of the main character. The narration leads from a reality of Indian diaspora to surreal and paranormal, finally uniting all the realms with a classic love story.

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13

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri: Genuinely Similar, Genuinely Different

Prachi Sathe,
Mamata Paithankar

Comparative Literature involves comparison of two or more than two literatures and its multi-dimensional aspects. Etymologically, the term 'comparison' is a faculty of reflective group which is supposed to distinguish resemblance or contrasts. Hence, comparative literature is the study of inter-relationship between any two or more than two significant literary works. Additionally, it is concerned with other spheres of human activities including myth, history, politics, philosophy, and psychology, etc. In this increasingly globalized age, comparative approach of literature plays a significant role. Previously, there was a nation based approach among comparative literature but now it has been associated to a cross-cultural approach.

Major concern of this research paper is to give a comparative and comprehensive overview of two continents and cultures through these Indian American writers and their female protagonists. The fictional works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni advocate females' vision for understanding human relationship. Even after the seventy five years of independence, how and why post-colonial wind hurts these alluring Indian American females is portrayed in their works.

Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni both are Indian-American Bengali women writers settled in America. Both

the women writers concentrate mainly on the diasporic writings. It can be said that both are representing India and Indian culture in the United States. Both have done their doctorate in English Literature and teach Creative Writing in USA. The words of Chitra Banerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are full of the sugary fragrance of Bengali dishes and the vibrant beauty of their culture, impulsiveness and candour that reflects the expatriate sensibility. Both the writers are of same age, same continent, same culture and religion; even the topics they deal with are also somewhat similar.

Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India. After receiving her B.A. from the University of Calcutta in 1976, she received a Master's degree and received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley in 1985. She writes in several narrative styles such as realistic, historical, fantasy, existentialism and magical realism. Divakaruni has more than ten novels, two short story collections and some children literature to her credit. Having corresponding motifs, she has tried her hand in poetry also. Divakaruni bagged several awards for her poetry and fiction, such as Barbara Deming Memorial Award, Gerbode Award and Allen Ginsburg Award.

Correspondingly, Lahiri has been the Vice President of the PEN American Center, an organization designed to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers since 2005. London-born, American-raised author Jhumpa Lahiri is also of Indian descent. Lahiri completed her graduation in English literature and then received multiple degrees from Boston University: an M.A. in English, M.F.A. in Creative Writing, M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. For *The Lowland,* her name was nominated for The Man Booker Prize. She received PEN / Hemingway Award (Best Fiction Debut of the Year), the Pulitzer Prize and O. Henry Award for *Interpreter of Maladies*.

As far as literary career is concerned, both the women writers strived to get their work published. Works of both the authors have been characterized by their unadorned and simple language and characters who navigate between their adopted home and the cultural ethics of their native land. Their stories address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants,

with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages, and the disconnection between first and second generation United States immigrants.

Eastern sensuality, ethnic dress, Indian cuisine, arranged marriage, interracial romance and second-generation cultural confusion are some of the anatomical structures of their write ups that easily pigeonholed their literature in diasporic society. Diaspora is a renowned and distinguished genre that is depicted here through females in the works of both the writers. Most of the female protagonists of Lahiri and Banerjee are sailing in the same boat and afraid of hindrances they face during this voyage. A critic and research scholar D. Dhanalakshami observes in her research paper titled "Fusion of Oriental Values with Occidental Ethos in *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*" that all journeys away from home are the only journeys towards home (1).

Heroines of Chitra Banerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri speak language of diaspora. *Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) by Jhumpa Lahiri are their second short stories collections that are concerned with the post-colonial diasporic situations in the lives of Indian American women. Despite one, all nine heroines of *Unknown Errors of Our Lives* are set in America, deal with dislodgement of one sort or another. Most of their heroines are Indian immigrants to America who speak the language of disarticulation. For them, life becomes a foreign language, each female protagonist mispronounce it. Stories of these two collections encompass inwardness of the female protagonists due to disruption.

Another genuinely similar aspect in both the writers is the autobiographical touch. Most of their stories are set in the Bay Area of California and deal with the immigrant experiences. Their four short stories collections are all about Indian women caught between two worlds. At many places, it is felt that Divakaruni shares her expatriate understanding through her works. Some of Divakaruni's stories are the outburst of frustration by the tendency to classify whole segments of the diasporic community, especially in "Silver Pavements Golden Roofs." How people tend to prejudice these groups and it is very tough to live

with this distinction. It annoys Divakaruni a lot. On the other hand, description of second generation immigrants in Lahiri's writing is heavy with pro-American attitude where age bracket and sandwich culture are very prominent. Thus they are genuinely different as well.

Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee's fictional characters involve in the process of acceptance and resistance. Since generations, Indian girls find marriage the only way out from parental control but now women of this era are highly qualified, working ladies and living alone in the cities. In spite of the enormous social pressure to get married, Indian women feel culture as a baggage that has been imposed on them. They prefer hanging out with women friends, drinking, dating and having fun. They want to have fun like everybody else. The heroines of chick-lit skilfully balance cultural traditions with twenty first century lifestyles. As a consequence, their aspirations are depicted as American Dream through their work. Lahiri's and Divakaruni's stories may fall in the category of chick-lit fiction also.

Jhumpa Lahiri's interest in female topics binds her to Chitra Banerjee. Be it Leela, Ruma, Hema, Usha or Apana in Lahiri's fiction, all have encountered the emotional dislocation caused by stepping into a time machine called 'immigration' that subjects them to the foreign habits of a world they had imagined imperfectly. In "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" and "The Intelligence of Wild Things", Divakaruni writes intensely touching saga of lapsed communication, inarticulate love and redemptive memories of women.

The plights of the heroines in different strata of society, their traumatic psyche in this marginalized age, material disintegration of upper middle class as well as identity crisis in female protagonists have been portrayed similarly in "Mrs. Sen's", "The Real Durwan", "Boori Ma" and in other stories. Lahiri's first generation female immigrants balance themselves hazardously. They find life very flimsy and messed up on foreign boundary, whereas second generation female protagonists are either very focused or confused. Lahiri portrays child psychology beautifully through young protagonist Lilia in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and Usha, the narrator of "Hell-Heaven."

In the recent years, mythological fiction has received great

acclaim. Amongst these novels, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deserves kudos. Chitra's *Palace of Illusions* tells us the story of *Mahabarata* through the eyes of one of the most enigmatic princesses in our epics, Draupadi. Chitra Banerjee incorporates several mishaps and national calamities in her works for showing the after effects of the disasters on the lives of female protagonists. Chitra Banerjee's Draupadi witnesses Mahabharta, Neela amongst Indian freedom fighters and some heroines lock in Gujarat riots, Bengal communist riots and World Trade Centre accident and earthquake, etc., whereas Lahiri's females haven't faced such riots and wars. Lahiri's heroines have war with themselves only. Thus, they are deeply similar and deeply different at the same time.

Divakaruni's female protagonists are of all time and periods, at the same time Lahiri's females are of all age groups; young girl, teen aged, youth, middle aged and old aged. Her females have been suffering from all distress and miseries but not of conjugal brutality. No heroine of Lahiri is as submissive as of Chitra's in "The Bat." Females of Lahiri are far from domestic violence and corporal torture. Most of them are educated but surrounded by all diasporic issues; economic and psychological torments. Lahiri's heroines have no connection with myth or any fantasy, or any historical or mysterious background as of Divakruni's Neela (of pre-independence), Draupadi (of mythology) or magical and mysterious girl Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices*.

Tolerance wise most of the females of both the writers resemble but their acceptance, forbearance and revolt make them different. It is nature-nurture conflict. The leniency of their nature in which they are nurtured causes gigantic diversity and sometimes conflict. Education wise their females are affluent enough. It is said that education grooms the personality and helps to grow high but at the same time it is seen that sagacity and rationality wins, it needs no education. Thus, their work is different from each other. Their protagonists are earning and leading a resourceful life, especially of Lahiri's females. They carry themselves elegantly and competently. But, it makes us feel that modern education helps in material growth only; abandoning spirituality whereas Divakaruni's heroines of *Palace of Illusion* and *Queen of Dreams* have some knock of spirituality.

Most of the females of Lahiri and Banerjee have been conceived

within past three-four decades while globalization has shaped and twisted the lives of women in developing nations and traced a tremendous impact on them. The economic impact on women has not only widened from its domestic arena to global economic scene but in their literature also. There is no doubt that the economic empowerment of women has a direct relationship to the employment opportunities offered to women.

These two authors formulate feminism in different socio-cultural, historical locations and to postmodern diasporic ground. Talking of the western feminist movements that started in 1960s and went a long way, there were abundant feminist writings which played their role in obtaining a respectable place for women in patriarchal society. Feminism has gained ground over last few decades because of the impetus given to it by Indian and American theorists such as Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpandey and Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Kate Millet and Betty Friedan respectively. With reference to these two authors it seems that feminism finds post-colonialism at the crossroad that portrays women like colonized subjects by various forms of patriarchal domination.

A recurrent autobiographical touch has been found in the female portrayals of both the authors. Jhumpa and Chitra execute the lives of females around them. The eminent French feminist Helen Cixous writes in her text *The Laugh of Medusa* that woman must write of herself, about women and bring women to writing (6). Helen Cixous inflames woman to register her presence into world text by her own movement and provokes to write of herself. Her body must be heard. It is time for women to start scoring their accomplishment in any form or genre. The same is observed with the concerned authors too.

Both have portrayed women in different locations and in striving and winning position but no female portrayal of theirs' is financially independent at all. Though their Indian American female protagonists are educated and working but tucked with kitchen sink most of the time. Perhaps this is the reason that no female of their writings is blessed with financial freedom. Women work two-third of the world's working hours, produces half of the world's food but earns only ten percent of the world's income and own less than one percent of the world's property. Female

portrayals of these writers are religious but lack spirituality, seem happy but not contented. Readers miss portrayal of any strong and famous lady like Kalpana Chwala and Sunita Williams who are also Indian immigrants and have proved their calibre.

Lahiri's women are mostly career oriented but still unable to completely break off from their moorings. Few are of pro-American attitude and defy the world with a revolt against traditional beliefs and practices. Another notable absence in their literature is sexuality, perhaps because it is a traditionally taboo topic of discussion in India. It classifies them from Shobha Day and Bharti Mukhajeean literature who describe sex with extreme details.

The catchy and touchy issues of their female protagonists pave further impetus to the modern wave of literature. Their works are largely set in India and the United States and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. All the heroines have encountered the emotional dislocation caused by stepping into a time machine called 'immigration' that subjects them to the foreign habits of a world which was imagined imperfectly. Their females are exciting like magical realism and enchantment; multi-coloured like Indian festivals but at the same time they are exotic, facing high dearth or some stereotypical images too that are again associated with India.

The study points out the effects of environment on the thinking faculty and responses of these female immigrants towards life. With the diasporic identity, these females juggle dexterously with the conflicting ideas and inhabit the attitude of compromise that is a phrase of their self-rule. It is the representation of East in West culture: their adaptability to the needs of swiftly changing global circumstances, both in literature and in everyday life.

Jhumpa Lahiri's and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literature critically help in evaluating Indian women's position in the present worldwide panorama. Their works bridge the gap of two continents and revise the inner poise of Indian American females with a new vision. Both the authors are Indian American immigrants and focus the endeavours of diasporic community and its contemporary conditions on individual isolation. Their work is a voice to their ideology of diasporic community that was confined and imprisoned earlier. Their work is the *status quo* of

Indian women in America. In this regard, Chitra Banerjee Divakruni and Jhumpa Lahiri both are doing great job and lay out the innermost feelings of women to the new paradigms. At the same time, their short stories, novels and other genres may also be considered as workshop where new ways of human coexistence are being tested. We hope for a few more novels from their side to enrich Indian writing in English.

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14

Re-visiting the Myth of Draupadi: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

Papiya Lahiri

Mythology has its own charm and provides inspiration to authors. By having the amplified effect of suggestiveness, it helps in dealing with complex socio-political aspects of any community, region or country. The influence of myths has been evident ever since the ancient Greeks and Romans began telling stories about the gods. Westerners still imbibe the Greek myths in their day to day life. Myths have existed in every society and it seems to be a basic constituent of human culture. Despite Indian culture being full of mythological characters, rarity of female heroes is lamentable. It is therefore noteworthy that some contemporary writers like Pratibha Ray, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Uma Parmeshawaran *et al.* have found strong women heroes and re-visited their myths from new perspectives.

The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos', which has a range of meanings such as 'word', 'saying', 'story', 'fiction' and a traditional tale common to the member of a tribe, race or nation. It usually involves the supernatural elements to explain some natural phenomenon in boldly imaginative terms. It is a sacred narrative usually explaining how the world or humankind came to be in its present form, although, in a very broad sense, the word can refer to any traditional story.

Myth is deeply rooted in our culture, tradition and religion. They may be legendary or traditional stories of ancient times that usually persist through oral transmissions and are believed to be true. They are said to be the by-product of men's emotions and imagination and are related to the extraordinary events, conditions and deeds of gods or superhuman beings set in a time often at the beginning of creation or an early stage of prehistory. Myths are not just old stories but hold a purpose and are lessons in themselves, hence, considered imperative to pass on from generation to generation. As they are told and re-told, they lose their authenticity with time.

Myth also has a strong hold on human psychology. It lacks proof and forms a collective story that is often used to justify a social institution. It is an aspect of the natural created world of customs or ideals of society. It is so embedded in our psyche that many a times it forms the basis of cultural consciousness.

> Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances and codifies beliefs; safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic chapter of faith and moral wisdom. (Gupta 101)

The Indian mythic tradition spans over a period of over thirty-five hundred years. Amidst the ceaseless changes that have taken place during the vast stretch of time, while other older systems have perished, the mythology of India has not only remained relatively stable but has also proved its potency for fresh growth and development. In the study of folklore, a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and human kind came to achieve their present form. Every culture has its own mythology that includes the legends of its history, religion, heroes and notions on the creation of the world. These stories have immense symbolic power which has made them stand the test of time since the beginning of the universe.

Myth has vitalized literature and has great affinity with it. Both myth and literature are the products of human intellects and are the aesthetic expression of man. They have great similarities

that represent social problems through deeper unconscious repertoire of archetypal images. Indian mythology is vast and scattered among many literary works like the Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana,* Buddhist writings, etc. They show a culture evolving from primitive worship of nature and realization of saintly principles.

Mahabharata is a unique epic which reflects the ancient culture of India. It has been the richest storehouse of myths, legends and tales. The epic dexterously weaves myth, history, religion, science, philosophy and superstition into its innumerable stories within stories, thereby, creating a rich world with psychological complexity. It is said to be an intricately woven saga of love and hatred, bloodshed and noble thoughts, courage and cowardice, beauty and poise, victory and defeat. It deals with all the four main aims of human life—*Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (economy), *Kama* (pleasure) and *Moksha* (salvation).

Mahabharata also depicts the life of women in all its colour and variety, dealing with their status, education, aims, field of activity, marriage, family life, social codes, economic condition, political life, style of living, etc. They are women of integrity and have the essential quality of living a life of simplicity. Each one of them in her own way is a teacher to mankind with their goodness and many dimensions. The women of *Mahabharata* are incarnate in the women of today as modern women too are struggling between social norms and individual freedom. The characters like Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi reflect the vision of the society about women and reveal a most serene profile of Indian woman in the epic.

In the *Mahabharata,* Draupadi (daughter of Drupad, the king of Panchala) is a heroic princess and is known by several other names such as Yajnaseni (owing to emerging from a yajna or ceremonial fire, Krishna (as she was of darker complexion), also known as Krishna Draupadi, Panchaali (princess of Panchala), Sairandhri (he assumed name during exile), Prasati (grand-daughter of Prushata), Mahabharti (being married to five descendants of Bharata), Yojanagandha (whose fragrance can be felt for miles). She is considered as one of the panch-kanya (the five virgins) of ancient Hindu epic along with her mother-in-law Kunti.

Draupadi with her extreme beauty, intelligence and virtue is also one of the most complex and female character in Hindu literature. On the one hand, she is womanly, compassionate and generous and on the other, she wrecks vengeance on those who did her wrong. She was born to uproot Kauravas and mark a change in history by establishing the rule of religion. She never compromised on either her rights as a daughter-in-law or even on the rights of the Pandavas and remained ever ready to fight back. At the very moment of her disrobement, she vowed and promised herself that one day she would definitely seek revenge on the injustice meted out to her.

There are few women in Hindu mythology who were aggressive and could speak their mind in a world dominated by men. Draupadi was one of them. She is the only one in the epic who enjoys a unique relationship with Krishna, addressing each other as Sakha and Sakhi. The possession of strong qualities such as strength of character, determination and fearlessness makes Draupadi a natural ideal for young women. She has remained at the same time the most enigmatic personality, who did what she felt was right and just. It was her strength of will and unshakable faith in God that gave her the power to overcome the innumerable and unimaginable sufferings she had to face throughout her life.

Draupadi is a symbol of Indian woman representing chastity. A role model created by the males to showcase how they want their woman to be—pure, law-abiding, beholder of their honour, personification of beauty and sacrifice. In the words of Sutherland, "Draupadi is the central female character in the epic and embodies a very dynamic role model for woman. Her role symbolizes the concerns for the treatment of woman in a society dominated by patriarchal ideals" (63). In the *Mahabharata* the honesty about human situations is mostly manifested in its narration of the story of Draupadi.

> The men play dice and wage wars in *Mahabharata*, as anywhere else; but it is the women who wield power and influence. It is the women who take decisions, direct the course of events and decide the fate of man and their generations to follow. The Epic is interwoven with their remarkable sagacity in exercise of their power and leadership. (Rajagopalachari 32)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-) is an Indo-American author having published her novels in multiple genres, including realistic and historical fiction, magical realism and fantasy. Her major themes include immigration, struggles of women, South Asian experience, history, myth and diversity. Divakaruni aims to dissolve boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities and ages, thereby destroying the myths and stereotypes through her writing.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) tells the story of *Mahabharata* from Panchaali's (Draupadi) perspective. She believed that the epic had powerful and complex women characters that affected the action in major ways but were always treated as 'shadowy figures'. She mentions it in the author's note:

> I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women. They remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motifs mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. (Divakauni xiv)

Divakaruni wanted to place the strong woman character in the forefont of the action and uncover the story that lay in between the lines of the epic with a socio-political background. *The Palace of Illusions* takes us back to the ancient times of myths where Panchaali, daughter of Drupad, the fire-born princess narrates her deeply humane story and the adjustments she made in a man's world; her view about crime, punishment, loyalty, promises, love and vengeance. Visi Tilak rightly comments "though she was destined to change the course of history… Draupadi is traditionally left playing a supporting character" (Bhawalkar 39).

The novel moves back and forth between flashbacks and present time frames. At the beginning, we find Panchaali remembering her obsession of listening to her own story from *Dhai Ma*. This provided Panchaali a critical insight into her life giving her a feeling of empowerment. She even critically examined her name 'Draupadi', as she wanted a name that could bring out the mission of her life. She wanted a heroic name:

> "The story inspired me to make up fancy names for myself: Off-spring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One. But *Dhai Ma*

puffed out her cheeks at my tendency to drama, calling me the Girl Who Wasn't Invited." (Divakaruni 1)

She was an unwanted child for her father who only desired a son to take revenge from Drona. Drupad was forced to accept Panchaali because her brother, Dhrishtadyumna was not ready to leave her hand when they emerged out of fire. Panchaali could never forgive her father for that initial rejection:

He held out his arms—but for only my brother alone. It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted.... (Divakaruni 6)

Panchaali unconsciously had an urge to shine through history by changing its course but at the same time was always doubtful if she had the capacity to bring changes in others lives: "I thought of the prophecy then, with yearning and fear. I wanted it to be true. But did I have the makings of a heroine—courage, perseverance, an unbending will?" (Divakaruni 5).

Divakaruni has beautifully portrayed the relationship between Panchaali and Krishna. He guided her throughout her life increasing her self confidence whenever she self-doubted and stopped her from feeling inferior because of her dark complexion, that she considered a drawback. Apart from giving her lessons on the political situations of Bharat, Krishna convinced Drupad to impart the same learning to Draupadi that her brother was receiving. The comfort and solace that Draupadi found in Krishna was incomparable to any in her life:

I felt a piercing sorrow as though the blade had gone through my own body, then emptiness like I'd never felt before. It struck me like an iron fist, the realization that if Krishna wasn't in my life, nothing mattered. Not my husbands, not my brother, not this place I was so proud of, not the look I longed to see in Karna's eyes. (Divakaruni 165)

Krishna considered her as his *sakhi* (friend) and sister. She was usually left alone to look after herself and she always called God for help.

Draupadi wanted to be an agent of action who wished to redefine the roles of women in the society. She was never interested in learning drawing, painting, sewing and decorating rather felt attracted to solving riddles, responding to witty remarks and

writing poetry. She always raised questions to her elders on her expected roles as a princess and as a woman:

> And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men? I burst out… A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things in my life…. Each day I thought less like the women around me. Each day I moved further from them into a dusky solitude. (Divakaruni 26)

Panchaali, despite always being surrounded by people, longed for love and companionship. She by heart was just a normal girl who wanted to have a happy married life with a husband who would love her dearly. As Bhawalker aptly says:

> Draupadi, unlik the mythological goddess or the ideal heroines of our ancient literature, was quite human with human emotions and feelings like anger, love, hate, happiness and grief. Her life was full of ups and downs and she maintained her dignity in both the situations. (141)

But she became a pawn in the hands of time. Her emotions during her marriage with five men, forces the reader to reanalyze the character of this epic heroine. This also brings in the novel Panchaali's relationship with Kunti, who asked her sons to share Panchaali between them as if she was a commodity. She was caught between family, responsibilities and social ethos. Panchaali always thought Kunti saw her as an enemy who would take her sons away from her:

> I wasn't going to give my mother-in-law the satisfaction of thinking that she'd reduced me to tears, though in fact I was on the verge of weeping with frustration….But one thing I knew already: from the moment she saw me… my mother-in-law regarded me as her adversary. (Divakaruni 105)

Although Panchaali felt attracted towards Karna throughout, yet she disregarded the voice of her heart and chose to be a devoting wife. Panchaali bemoans her fate of being granted five husbands and follow the arrangements where rules were made by men. She also felt strongly that the boon of turning into a virgin every year was also not for her but for her husbands:

> Now was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine.... If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the

> gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother I'd be free of the memory of the previous one. (Divakaaruni 120)

Divakaruni's Panchaali was always aware of the future as Vyasa had predicted but was unable to alter it in anyway. This again shows her vulnerability before fate. Vyasa advised her to refrain from doing three things as illustrated below:

> You will marry five greatest heroes of your time…. You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time. You will bring about the death of evil kings—your children and your brothers. A million women will become widows because of you…. But I'll give you some advice. Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be just before your wedding: at that time, hold back your question. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be when you're shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. Maybe it will mitigate the catastrophes to come. (Divakaruni 39-40)

Since, Panchaali couldn't hold back from doing the three things Vyasa warned her about, she had to endure the sufferings and humiliation so mortifying to her throughout her life. Panchaali could never find peace at her father's palace. She always dreamt of a palace that would be entirely different from any ever built. Her palace of illusion or maya was the only place where she could find a home. This was a palace full of imaginations and illusions where Duryodhana falls into an illusory pool and Draupadi with her maids laughed at him commenting, "blind king's son is also blind!" (Divakaruni 172). Duryodhana felt gravely humiliated and sore to take revenge for it. It was one of the reasons that led that ultimately led to the Mahabharata war. As part of his revenge, he plotted for a dice game with Yudhishthira as he knew this was one of his weaknesses. Everything went as per their plan and Yudhishthira lost all his wealth and kingdom, but still he did not stop and finally put Draupadi on stake. He elaborately made proclamations of her physical beauty before staking her, as if it was natural for a husband to stake his wife. Sutherland illustrates it thus:

> She is not too short, nor is she too large; nor is she too dark nor is her complexion red. She has eyes reddened from

> passion. I will stake her—whose eyes and fragrance are like autumnal lotuses. Attached to modesty, she is, in beauty equal to Sri, the goddess of beauty…. She has red eyes, long hair, a waist as slender as the sacrificial altar, and a body with no excessive hair. (Sutherland 65)

Yudhishthira not even once thought that if he lost Draupadi then what can be the consequences. In front of the *darbar* (court), full of men, Dushasana dragged her by her hair and disrobed her but no one came for her rescue except her *sakha* Krishna who did save her from falling into the nadir of humiliation.

It is a repeated pattern of episodes in *Mahabharata,* in which she has been projected as a beautiful lifeless object, that can be owned, enjoyed and exchanged as per others wishes. This also happened when Jayadartha abducts her in the absence of her husbands and when Keechak tries to seduce her in King Virata's palace where she was living in disguise of a maid of his queen, Sudeshna. Both the times, she was at the mercy of God.

Draupadi's embarrassment at the court soon turned to rage and she vowed that she would not comb her hair till she washed them with Dushasana's blood and this anticipated war. Her actions like this were questionable with regards to the traditional patriarchal standards. She was outraged that her husbands did not come to her aid and her anger became observable to the entire assembly; she embodies an aggressive attitude in response to her husbands' passive behaviour. The situation justifies Draupadi's response to defend her. She challenged the dharma about the status, identity and respectability.

> Was I won [in the game of dice] in accordance with dharma? The elders of the Kuru-family present here have sons and daughter-in-law. Let them reflect on their question and answer it justly…. Therefore her question unsettles and deconstructs the issues of morality and provokes an examination of what is the highest dharma. (Uniyal 33)

Although Krishna saved her from this humiliating act, Dhritarashtra being afraid of receiving any curse from Draupadi, granted her the boons in which she asked for freedom of all her husbands, Here once again she gave example of a dutiful wife, who thinks of her husbands even before herself. It is Draupadi's

reactions to such situations which sets her as a sharp individual, well versed in the codes of the shastras:

> She could argue forcibly to win her point with apt quotations and illustrations from her fund of knowledge on various subjects like righteousness, duties and codes of conduct for the four Varnas (castes), moral, legal and ethical codes and was called Dharmajna, Dharamadarshini. (Bhawalkar 141)

Divakaruni shows Panchaali's strength and boldness that sets her apart from other women in the epic. We observe her intelligence when she considered Gandhari's sacrifice (decision of tying a thick blindfold over her eyes) a foolish act. According to her, Gandhari could have helped Dhritarashtra by being his guide and advisor. Draupadi comments, "If my husband couldn't see, I'd make doubly sure to keep my own eyes open" (Divakaruni 76). The Pandavas also never questioned her decision, possibly due to their guilt towards her and also because she was a learned woman and gave commendable advices. The enemies of the Pandavas also knew Draupadi's influence on them. With her sharp intellect, she raised such moral questions that nobody could answer:

> I am a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. I tried to remember other words from the *Natya Shastra*. If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife. (Divakaruni 190)

Draupadi is sometimes criticized for being self-centred in terms of her desire for revenge and is called *kritya,* the one who brings doom to her clan. She never let the Pandavas forget the insult through thirteen years of banishment while living in the forest; was aware of their strength and always exhorted for war. Here, we must also understand that the war was inevitable and was important too, so that Kauravas could be defeated and dharma could be restored. Vyasa predicted already, "the seeds of this war were sown long before you were born, though perhaps you [Panchaali] did nudge it along a bit" (Divakaruni 254).

Draupadi admits that it was for her sake that Bheema killed so many people at war. The incident at the court left her transformed because her respect and palace were attacked.

> She's dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear. The woman who has taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history. (Divakaruni 206)

In *Mahabharata,* Draupadi proves that no problem is so great that it may not be dealt with. After the incident of her insult, she never abandons her husbands, regardless of the condition they led her into. She remained concerned about the common good of her family working as a unit. Her devotion reached its heights when she followed them into exile and endured the hardships of the forest. She even looked after Gandhari, whose sons had wronged her in every possible way. She learnt to sublimate her ego to reach a higher spiritual self.

Panchaali all her life remained by the side of the Pandavas. In the end also it was Yudhishthira who decided it was time for their *Mahaprasthan* though Panchaali urged him to spend some more time on earth but then she readily agreed to go. She wanted the generations to know that she was the only consort who dared accompany the Pandavas on their final adventurous journey to heaven. She wanted to bid farewell to the world like a noble queen, who had the courage to admit her mistakes. She wanted people to remember her:

> I made sure to wear my finest clothes and all the gold I owned so that the eyes of onlookers would be dazzled. I wanted the people of the city to remember me as heroic, majestic. The woman around whom, history would gather itself. I wanted them to make up stories about the beautiful Panchaali, to weep because I was leaving them for something better. (Divakaruni 341)

Towards the end of the novel, Divakaruni presents the most heartrending scene where Panchaali falls on the way to *Mahaprasthan* at the foothills of Himalayas when her husbands once again left her all alone to die without turning even once. Moreover, Yudhishthira stops Bheema when he tries to help her. Panchaali remembers Karna, as she did in the past especially in times of woe:

> It was both infuriating and mortifying. Perhaps that was why the thought came, I did not try to push it away: Karna would

> never have abandoned me thus. He would have happily given up heaven for my sake. (Divakaruni 347)

Panchaali, the woman who never shirked from any responsibility, lived all her life for others, lost her dearest brother, her sons and her heartfelt love for Karna was destined to die alone. Her husbands could neither offer nor protect her respect and honour that a woman must have as a wife and a mother. In the epic also there is not much discussion about her motherhood. Though the Pandavas succeeded in making her into a queen, who was expected to follow rules and act according to dharma. Draupadi like a pawn was used by almost everyone associated with her. Stating from her father by wanting her to marry Arjuna for selfish motive of securing the alliance of Pandavas, to take revenge on Drona; then by Kunti where Draupadi was offered to be distributed among five men as alms, with the purpose of keeping discord at bay between her sons; then by the Pandavas unhesitatingly baiting her in the dice game; her *sakha* Krishna, using her as a temptation for Karna, to make him withdraw from the war, supporting the Pandavas; finally, on the last journey. But despite all the sufferings, Draupadi embodies a fiery spirit, never being submissive but choosing to stand against all injustice. Her uncompromising nature made her face terrible conditions with great fortitude, skill and presence of mind. These are some reasons she is considered as a goddess of war and people in India worship her as the personification of Shakti.

At the moment of her death, she realizes that she was set free of all bonds. It was a moment of self awakening:

> At his [Krishna] touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali. (Divakaruni 360)

Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* has very poignantly portrayed Panchaali in a daring light, revisiting and re-interpreting the myth and story of *Mahabharata* that runs in the psyche of every Indian through ages. Panchaali is shown attaining grace and honour through her strong will power and self-reliance. Panchaali with her audacious demeanour and integrity seems to

be every woman of every age. She stands out as an epic protagonist deserving deeper understanding, attention and awe than she in reality does.

I will end my paper with my poem, based on Draupadi.

Woman

Taking birth, living through the years and gradually nearing the threshold of death

Through the generations of male dominance stands unsolicited—a woman

Sometimes a mumble, at times a shout turning into a loud protest comes with a slow yet steady speed—the voice of woman

Impersonating with rhythms of torments,

Riding the currents of fear and perpetual clamour,

Raising from the abyss into a half-shadow half-light arena of self enlightenment

Forms the journey of a woman...

Standing between two worlds of responsibility and duty for her husband's progress and child's welfare with no room for her own expression of feelings, joys and sorrows

Who has the answer?

Who shares the phenomenon?

Who claims to suffer for the suffering?

What's the meaning, what's the interpretation...?

Never has come an answer nor shall ever ensue

The opinion right, the mighty decision

Only darkening the mire of reasoning

With a sense of futility, filling a void with a miasma of suspension under oddities

For yet to be achieved, yet to be aspired for truth in its innate form

Who will accomplish this, if not anyone with a sense of belonging to the 'woman',

Who ignores all her desires to belong to someone.

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15

Depiction of Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Selected Short Stories in *Arranged Marriage:* An Analysis

Yusuf Mehdi

Women count for half of humanity. They are undoubtedly as important as men to run the world. But the society has never been able to treat the two sexes alike. Nature may have made both the genders equally important but in due course of time men usurped the power and importance on the basis of physical strength and captured almost all the privileges. Women were confined into the realm of homes and given the tasks of child rearing and home keeping. Had it been just to divide the tasks, it would have been acceptable but the purpose was to relegate and exploit the so considered 'weaker sex'. Men became self-proclaimed protectors of women in the form of father, brother, husband and son. And then began the exploitation. Women have been exploited and ill-treated by their own protectors throughout the world. In every society of the world, women have been considered secondary in position. They have been made to live under severe restrictions. Their lives have never been theirs.

Women were not allowed to participate in creating literature. They were not allowed to study. They were not even allowed to express their distress through writing until very recently. But a few brave women confronted the male chauvinistic world and stood for their rights. In last few centuries, we have had women writers who created works which are intellectually as engrossing

as any other work. We have had women writers who have written clearly about the condition of women in different societies of the world. There are works which depict the atrocities born by women across the world. In the Indian context, also we have had many women writers who wrote about the predicament of Indian women.

In almost all societies across the world, a woman is culturally assigned certain norms of behaviour such as, standards of conduct, taste and decorum; and any deviation or violation to the ideal image of womanhood makes her an unruly, obstinate woman to be condemned by the society. Women in the Indian society are forced by men to accept the status of an inferior. Hence, women must struggle against male-controlled institutions, ideologies and must have solidarity among themselves, by biological instincts. In order to gain equality and to realize their human potential, women must become autonomous. They must make their position strong in the society by attaining education and at the same time they must raise their voice against any kind of exploitation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of those female writers who depict, through their works, the condition of women in the society. Divakaruni was born in Kolkata (Calcutta) in India in the year 1956. She put herself through graduate school by taking on odd jobs and currently lives in Texas, where she is the McDavid professor of Creative Writing at the nationally ranked University of Houston Creative Writing Programme. Divakaruni is a co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. She has written numerous short stories, novels, poetry, and one young adult fantasy series. Her first collection of short stories *Arranged mMarriage* won an American Book Award, a PEN Josephine Miles Award, and a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award. This book also increased her visibility.

The current essay would be focusing on Divakaruni's depiction of women characters in the selected short stories in the book *Arranged Marriage.* The stories taken into account are "The Bats", "Clothes", "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs", and "Doors." Divakaruni deals with a variety of themes related to women. These include arrange marriages, domestic violence, bride viewing, longing to become parents, responsibility of educated women,

burden of an extended family, life abroad and many more. The women characters of Divakaruni are very varied. The protagonists of Divakaruni are sometimes educated and sometimes illiterate; sometimes assertive and sometimes very submissive. Then, there are some women who are educated and consider it their duty to help the weaker women.

The first story in the book *Arranged Marriage* is "The Bats." The story is an account of a married woman who constantly suffers beating at the hands of her husband but never retaliates. The beating is disclosed to us by the narrator and the daughter of the woman. The daughter comes to know of the beating that her mother has suffered through the "yellow blotch with its edges turning purple" (Divakaruni 2) and through another mark on her face "even bigger and reddish-blue" (Divakaruni 3). The heart rending depiction of the predicament that is presented by Divakaruni in "The Bats" leaves the readers gasping for breath. The very first sentence of the story tells the whole story: "That year Mother cried a lot nights. Or may be she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice" (Divakaruni 1). Wife-beating has been a very rampant practice in the world and India is no exception. Many men show their valour through this practice as if beating a woman makes them more manly.

The mother does take a brave step and leaves, while the husband is asleep, along with the daughter to one of her uncle's house. The uncle's place is very tiny, "almost a play house, with mud walls and straw on the roof like in my storybook pictures" (Divakaruni 6). The life for the narrator there is very eventful and joyful. She doesn't have to see the mother crying night after night and no bruises anymore. But the compulsion of the societal norms are so strong that the mother is compelled to inform by herself their whereabouts to the husband. The husband commits not to repeat the torture and urges them to come back home. The joyful life of the narrator comes to an end abruptly and she is back to her father's home in no time. Does the situation really change for women? The answer is 'NO'. The mother meets the same fate. The mother and the daughter have to leave like this many times but always had to come back, sometimes "even before the bruises had faded all the way".

The comparison with the 'bats' is indeed very intriguing. The bats keep coming back to spoil the mangoes. Grandpa-Uncle tries

everything "sticks and drums and magic powder from the wise woman in the next village" (Divakaruni 8) but nothing seems to work. Finally, grandpa-uncle has to use poison. What are the compulsions that make bats keep coming back to the mango orchard? Even after being poisoned, some of them keep coming. The mother and the daughter are beaten day after day. They leave the house; but come back again. The compulsion in this case is the society that does not allow a woman to live away from her husband. The woman has to adjust. If she is thrashed, thats her bad luck. She should not protest or revolt against her husband—the protector. If she revolts, she is immoral. Who would give her place to live all through the life?

The second story, "Clothes", is basically about the unfilled promises of the nuptial bond. Sumita has a number of dreams, just like any other young girl would have. The dream that her handsome prince "would take her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas" (Divakaruni 18). Somesh Sen, her would be husband, lives in the US and she will have to go with her husband after marriage because "a married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws" (Divakaruni 19). Somesh is a kind husband and encourages Sumita to get a degree in teaching. Sumita is gratified with the fact that Somesh has such confidence in her. She dreams and pictures herself "in front of a classroom of girls with blond pigtails and blue uniforms, like a scene out of an English movie" (Divakaruni 27). But her dreams are shattered when Somesh is killed by a burglar in his store '7-Eleven'. So, the promises of the nuptial bond are not fulfilled or rather completely shattered by the turn of events.

Another very profound theme that has been highlighted in "Clothes" is of bride-viewing. Bride-viewing is a very common practice in India. Girls wear beautiful clothes, put on the make-up, and get ready to be viewed by the prospective groom. The boy comes, the girl comes with tea in the tray, the boy and the in-laws watch the girl—the way she walks, the way she has dressed up, her looks, her complexion, sometimes she is even asked to sing for the prospective groom and his family. People do not really realize the predicament of the girl while she is viewed and assessed for whether she is worthy of the boy or not.

Sumita is also viewed by Somesh and his parents. She is made to wear the most beautiful sari for the day. She is prepared for viewing by her friends.

> "I close my eyes and smell the sweet brown odour of the *ritha* pulp my friends Deepali and Radha are working into my hair so it will glisten with little lights this evening. The scrub with more vigour than usual and wash it out more carefully, because today is a special day. It is the day of my bride-viewing." (Divakaruni 17)

Sumita is lucky enough to be chosen in the very first go. Radha, on the other hand, is not that lucky. Her parents are also trying to arrange a marriage for her. "So far three families have come to see her, but no one has chosen her because her skin colour is considered too dark" (Divakaruni 19). This is a kind of materialization of women. They are seen as if they are some products the features of which are assessed and then decided whether to buy the product or not. This is the sad predicament of girls in the society depicted by Divakaruni in the story "Clothes."

Sumita is a brave woman who cannot be mowed down by even most adverse circumstances. Her dreams have been shattered. The promises that came along with the nuptial bonding have been left unfulfilled. She is in a "dangerous land" (Divakaruni 33), far away from her family. She has lost her very 'loving' and 'caring' husband and has been left all alone. But this does not make her, like many other widows, dead. She is not ready to be one of those widows "in white saris…bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cutt-off wings" (Divakaruni 33). She still has vigour for life left in her. She is not ready to yield to circumstances and is determined to start the life afresh though she is aware of the approaching remonstrations. "I straighten my shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath. Air fills me—the same air that traveled through Somesh's lungs a little while ago" (Divakaruni 33).

"Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" depicts the relationship between husband and wife in long standing marriage that too when both of them are living completely cut off from their families. It also depicts the dreams of a young girl about a dream country coming crashing down at her. The story also touches

upon the problem of racism in the Western countries. Uncle Bikram and Aunt Pratima have had a very long standing marriage and have been living in Chicago for many years cut off from their homeland. Perhaps, they have suffered severely at the hands of the locals there because they are not one of them and that may be a reason why uncle Bikram is so angry at the Americans. "The Americans hate us. they are always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, *kala aadmi.* Blaming us for the damn economy, for taking away their jobs" (Divakaruni 43). Aunt Pratima has been put under severe restrictions by uncle Bikram. Of course, this has been done in order to keep her safe.

Jayanti Ganguli is a young girl who comes to the US with many dreams in her eyes. Her dream of marrying "a prince from a far off magic land where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold" (Divakaruni 46) is badly shattered by looking at the predicament of her aunt and uncle. Through Jayanti's insights, we come to know about the major changes that have come in the aunt after marriage. Aunt Pratima was considered a very beautiful woman back home before marriage and that is why she was perhaps chosen for Uncle Bikram. She was "someone who deserved the good luck of having a marriage arranged with a man who lived in America" (Divakaruni 49). But now she's confined to home only. She used to roam around in the streets while she was back home in her village in India "always walking everywhere—it was so nice, the fresh air, the sky, the ponds with lotus flowers, the dogs and goats and chickens all around. Of course, here we cannot be expecting such country things..." (Divakaruni 47). Here in America, she is not allowed by the husband to roam around alone. She tells Jayanti, "Your uncle does not like me to go out. He is telling me it is dangerous" (Divakaruni 46). Uncle Bikram is the protector and aunt Pratima is a docile recipient of orders. She has to be careful lest uncle Bikram should get angry. The long standing marriage and living away from their families have made the bond between the two very so strong. Uncle Bikram hits aunt Pratima in rage "the swelling spreading its dark blotch across Aunt's jaw" (Divakaruni 55) but the aunt caresses him and understands why she was hit so hard. This is the strength of the bond of, perhaps, love between them.

"Doors", another story by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, deals with an unwelcome guest who is very close to the husband and thus, has to be born with. The marriage of Deepak and Preeti is a love marriage. They took some classes together in the University and Preeti started to like the way he spoke. Both Deepak and Preeti are warned against this marriage by their family members and friends. "It'll never work, I tell you" (Divakaruni 183), says Preeti's mother about the marriage. Mother believes Preeti and Deepak are not compatible for Preeti has been living in the US since she was twelve and Deepak—"he's straight out of India" (Divakaruni 183). Deepak's friends are also concerned about this marriage. "Yaar, are you sure you're doing the right thing?" (Divakaruni 185), one of the friends asks Deepak, staring down at the wedding card Deepak had handed him.

> "She's been here so long it's almost like she was born in this country. And you know how these American women are, always bossing you, always thinking about themselves...." (Divakaruni 185)

Deepak is a little different from his friends. Some men, even in the US, want to marry a girl from their village only. But yes, she should be a "pretty young girl…not too educated, brought up to treat a man right and not talk back…" (Divakaruni 185). A girl who talks back, who is too educate, and who speaks for her rights, is not a wife material. But Deepak is different. He respects the women who makes their own decisions. he says, "Women aren't dolls or slaves. I want Preeti to make her own decisions. I'm proud that she's able to" (Divakaruni 185).

The marriage happens and two start living happily with each other. In due course of time, friends and family realize that they were wrong, and Preeti and Deepak are indeed very compatible. They are a "perfectly matched couple!" Though they have many dissimilarities yet they are compatible. No two human beings are alike and its not mandatory that people with different perspectives can't be compatible. Deepak is an open person, he hates closing 'doors' all the time; he even bathes himself with the door open. On the other hand, Preeti is too particular about closing the 'doors'. She very meticulously shuts the doors behind her. Once Deepak asks her the reason for all that shutting but does not get very satisfactory answer. " I don't know…I guess I'm

just a private person. It's not like I'm shutting you out. I've just always done it this way. May be it has something to do with being an only child" (Divakaruni 189). She is undoubtedly a private person. But her privacy is encroached upon by Raj, Deepak's friend from India, inseparable back in India.

Raj is very 'Indian', kisses Deepak on both cheeks at the airport, oblivious to American stares, uses a very strong Bombay accent, belches in appreciation of food and insists on not sleeping in the guest room, since he is not a guest. He would sleep in the living, for around one and a half year. The advent of Raj creates tension and mild tussle between the husband and the wife. Preeti feels her space intruded relentlessly by someone who is very close to her husband. Sometimes she even feel jealous of the way Deepak gets so close to Raj—"He moved closer to Raj to make space for on the couch, and Preeti noted with a twist of the heart how he casually let an arm fall over Raj's shoulder" (Divakaruni 195). The doors which are so important for Preeti, do not exist in Raj's universe.

> "He would burst into her closed study to tell her of the latest events in his computer lab, leaving the door ajar when he left. He would throw open the door to the garage where she did the laundry to offer help, usually treated to her little garden in search of privacy, there was no escape. From the porch, he gave solicitous advice on the drooping fuchsias." (Divakaruni 193)

The world of Preeti is turned upside down. Privacy is violated. If she protests, the husband feels bad. The house that she considered hers also along with being Deepak's, was perhaps only Deepak's. The guest was invited and asked to stay for one and a half years without even consulting the wife, the half owner of the house. Everything is fine till she bears everything silently, but if she protests against the intruder, she is going to have her 'first serious quarrel'. The husband spends most of the time with his childhood buddy discussing about wonderful past times and listening to old Kishore Kumar songs on the stereo. The wife feels lonely. She has started getting unwell and looking sallow. She has got craters, literally, under her eyes. She looks depressed and has lost weight also. Preeti has to do something to get rid of Raj otherwise her life would be completely devastated in this one and

a half years. Her work in the school has also deteriorated and has become 'second-rated'. Preeti takes the final chance and tells Deepak that she is leaving the house. The trick works, Deepak talks to Raj and finally Raj is out of the house. But the whole episode has created a wide gap in the relationship that was going fine until Raj entered. Deepak tells Preeti, "Hope you're happy, now that you have the house all to yourself, I'm going to sleep in the guest room" (Divakaruni 201). The wife lays alone in the bed in the bedroom.

The female characters of Divakaruni are very varied. The imperfect lives of these characters are depicted in the book *Arranged Marriage*. The women of Divakaruni are both liberated and trapped in their struggle to create their own identity as they are under the influence of cultural changes. The women are, many a times, Indian-born US-settled, who try to strike a balance between their hereditary cultural values and modern liberal thoughts. The challenges faced by these women are no different from what is talked about by other female writers—domestic violence, wife-beating, bride-viewing, exploitation, etc. Some women are educated and some are not so educated. But the predicament of all the women, irrespective of their educational qualifications, is the same. They are supposed to rear children and take care of the household chores. Though not every husband is bad and not all in-laws are cruel but yet women have to go through a lot of adjustments in order to make the husband and the in-laws happy. The wives might not be consulted for the decisions taken by their male counterparts but of course the decisions taken by the women must be in consultation with the husbands. Divakaruni's female characters are rebellious and bold. They are in a pursuit of self-realization though they are absolutely aware of the potential remonstrations. They, many a times, go against the conventions of the society to register their protest. The conventions formed by the male-chauvinistic society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also, very vividly, puts forth the fact that whether women are educated or not; whether they belong to rich families or not; whether they go for arranged marriage or not, their fate is almost the same in the patriarchal world. They will have to fight their battles themselves and will have to get through their trials and tribulations on their own.

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16

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*: A Narrative Study

Swati Kumari

In general terms, Narrative is a mode of telling some imaginative, invented and a series of true events either by single narrator or multiple narrators. It is structured either chronologically or shifts in narratives to reveal about myriads of events in character's lives. Many a times, narrators are either 'distanced ones' in third person narration or narrator is one of the characters as well in first person narration. Traditionally, narrative used to reflect a set of actions in organized pattern and in particular order as a plot.

As Abbott defined it, "Narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented" (Abbott 12).

Author's craftsmanship relies on his representation of events, so as to portray plot of the novel. Usually, these techniques are explained by the points of view in the novel. It can be the point of view of the narrator, who gives his or her own versions of the story and hence there cannot be a real story. The quest for truth is an incessant process which entails reconstruction and retelling of stories. The duty of the main narrator is to deduce truth from the multiple voices. Bakhtin identifies polyphony as a special

feature of the novel; and he traces it back to its carnivalistic sources in classical, medieval and Renaissance cultures. Guerin observes:

> Bakhtin's constant focus is on the many voices in the novel, especially in the way that some authors in particular such as Dostoevsky allow the character's voices a free play by actually placing them on the same plane as the voice of the author. (Guerin *et al.* 1992: 350)

He has rejected the monologic form of the traditional novel in which the character's voices, viewpoints, philosophies and the diversity of their social worlds are all objects of an encompassing authorial knowledge, and thus subordinated to that unified monologic artistic design, where authorial voice is always the final word.

> A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of its characteristics, nor does it serve as the mouthpiece of the author. (Bakhtin 1984: 7)

Ghosh's novels are polyphonic where he allows his characters absolute independence and refrains from imposing his own moral or ideological control over their destinies. "Instead of being illuminated by a single authorial consciousness, a plurality of consciousness with equal rights and each with its own world" (Bakhtin 1984: 6) populates his novels. Different characters cum-narrators take up their roles in the novel in their own unique linguistic registers leading to the entry of heteroglossia into the novel.

In the mode of Heteroglossia, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* is an ode to the emotional resonance of four Bengali women: Durga, Sabitri, Bela and Tara. It is an appealing tale describing the emergence of their dreams, conflict with their mothers and at the end realization of their mistakes. The author has beautifully narrated different events in their lives but the effect of those events on their lives is actually the state of 'Identity Flux.' Apparently, this cross-cultural and inter-generational saga recapitulates their life and journey, their ambitions, desires and at the end the true meaning of 'success' in their lives. The strength of the novel is in Divakaruni's powerful

portrayal of the women's shifting thoughts and emotions. Their expression of desires and memories, cultural clash, identity crisis and the like are the nuances of the writer. It's a bittersweet tale on the memory lane of these women and woven on a tapestry of different perspectives including the people they encountered with in multi-layered narrations.

As the title suggests, these women cleanse themselves of all that has been bothering them before they meet their maker. It is a beautiful tale of three generations of women who have loved, lost, and misunderstood each other over a span of a lifetime. *Before We Visit the Goddess* is a story of immense alienation felt in myriad ways and the deep need to connect to the ones you love. It is like circular way of narrating events as every woman is shown as a mother; full of apprehensions and ambitions for her child, rejected by the child and again the redemption dawned upon the characters.

Story: Series of Little Narratives

With the episodic mode of narration and the little narratives, the novel celebrates plurality of women's voices. Lyotard also opines that, if we cannot invest belief in the big ideas of modernism, the meta or grand narratives, what remains, in contrast to the large, is the small: the 'little narrative' is now the primary form of 'imaginative invention'. The focus is now shifted from the large to the small, and in making this move there is also a resulting shift from the singular (there cannot be that many potential meta-narratives) to the plural. There is no single vision in the novel; rather the narration defies any single perspective towards 'success' and 'life' in multi-cultural mosaic.

These multiple stories, and voices, now suggest a culture made up of many different things: a plural and fragmented cultural, social and political landscape, with each fragmentary 'little narrative' potentially claiming its own identity and value without at any point coalescing into a larger totality. Therefore, the novel is divided into nine chapters describing the events in character's lives metaphorically and with didactic tone. The first chapter 'fortunate lamps' symbolizes the lamp enlightening other's lives independently as Sabitri confesses to her granddaughter Tara:

> … satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself without having to depend on anyone. No one could take it away. That's what I want for you my Tara. That's what it really means to be a fortunate lamp. (Divakaruni 32)

Chitra Banerjee has used 'refrain' in narration to expose the ideas about cultural uniqueness of India.

> Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name
>
> Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame. (Divakaruni 20)

Next chapter entitled 'The Assam Incident: 1963' strikes back to the days spent by Bela, Sabitri and Bijan and it has imprinted in her consciousness about Magicians and myths. Banerjee has recapitulated the cultural consciousness of the Indians by revealing the personal space of Bela and she got trapped in her fantasy world as a child. It also reveals a lot about child psychology as well when the child is devoid of any support of family the 'unbelievable fancies' attract them like the stories of Bela's Ayah.

> … Sorrow rakes her as she watches him become tiny, then tinier until he spins away like spore on the wind. (Divakaruni 41)

She found solace in the presence of magician. With the use of **Magic Realism,** Banerjee has peeped into the child's psyche. She is performing better in school now and that's how she revealed her ideas about magic:

> I was terrified that I'd forget my lines and everyone would laugh. But it was perfect—like magic. (Divakaruni 43)

With the **use of Magic Realism** in her narration, Chitra Banerjee has portrayed the mindscape of Bela and how her childhood is fascinated with the memory and desire of an innocent child yearning for the love of her mother. According to Gita Rajan,

> …the inclusion of magic realism aestheticizes and braids together matter-of-fact daily events with fantastic elements, the real with the unreal, and myth with human experience.

Bela has memories shaped up by something mysterious and full of magic. She remembers about the magician and her conversation with him and suddenly the disappearance of him, leaving her awestruck.

> Bela looks around wildly for someone who can confirm that this is really happening, but they are alone in the garden. (Divakaruni 41)
>
> Sorrow rake her as she watches him become tiny, then tinier, until he spins away like a spore on the wind. (Divakaruni 41)

Through the coalescing of fantastic and real memories of Bela and magician, the author has given an alternate narrative of myth around which our life revolves around.

In the third chapter American Life: 1998, she has shifted the place and the time once again in order to juxtapose East and West encounter and the generation gap. As this family saga unfolds collage perspectives but also from a few of the men who intersect their lives. The relationship between Tara and Robert on one hand based on 'enlisting' (about Robert's good and bad points) to remind her of their relationship and also the relationship between Tara's mother and father. She loved Robert but she was suspicious of his relationship with other woman.

> …was it the scent of another woman? I couldn't stop myself from imagining Robert at work, his hands caressing female curves. (Divakaruni 56)
>
> ...in her twenty nine years of marriage, my mother had never suspected my father. When one morning at breakfast, as she was serving him crisp dosa, he told her that he loved someone else, she smiled, thinking it was one of his jokes. (Divakaruni, 56)

The chapter Durga Sweets is again compilation of incessant events of the making and unmaking of Sabitri's dream of her own sweet shop. It is again divided into four subsections, namely, 1995: Ash, 1991: Aerogram, 1980: Ice, 1970: Saffron, 1965: Umberalla. The narration is beautifully knitted with the thread of significant moments in Sabitri's life. How the relationship though entangled yet signifies an everlasting bond between mother and daughter.

The metaphorical title *Beggars Can't be Choosers* is actually Bela's story and her estrangement with sanjay. The paradox is, in spite of so many hardships in her marriage she had undergone, she couldn't come out of the maze of emotional fulfilment.

> Would she really give up, for his sake, everything she was familiar with? Drop out of college? cut herself off from her mother—a wound never to be totally healed, because that's the kind of woman her mother was?

Her craftsmanship lies in jigsaw pattern of narrating the events. The opening lines are epitome of the fact that characters have gone to visit Meenakshi temple and their the encounter with death is described in the beginning of the novel:

> She lifts her eyes and there is Death in the corner, but not like king with iron crown, as the epics claimed. Why, it is a giant brush loaded with white paint. It descends upon her with gentle suddenness, obliterating the shape of the world. (Divakaruni 34)

This gives an insight into the Sabitri's pain for her daughter Bela. With the captivating prose, the author is revealing lack of words to express Sabitri's pain like Death to her. Her condition can be compared with the same emotions in Tennyson's poem "Break, Break, Break", where the poet is unable his emotions and pain vividly.

Narrative Devices: Stream of Consciousness Technique

The term 'Stream of Consciousness' was coined by philosopher and psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890):

> …consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits...it is nothing joined; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life.

Stream of consciousness as a narrative device helps in delving deep into the character's mind and the flow of thoughts wither with the use of interior monologue or in connection of his or her actions. It is characterized by leaps in non-linear thoughts and therefore frequent shifts in time and place are seen. Stream of consciousness and interior monologue are distinguished

from dramatic monologue and soliloquy. In them, either the speaker is addressing an audience or a third person and is used in poetry and drama. The novel may seem linear in format but through the narrations we flicker back in time to go more in depth with the characters' thoughts and reasons. It's a story of how small incidents can alter relationships and how time can manipulate your ego to hold on to grudges long after the memory has faded.

The last chapter is like closure to the fluttering thoughts and emotions of the characters. It is Tara who will give final resolution to the accomplishments of the previous generations.

> …I confess. I am a disgrace to the family. My mother has several successful cookbooks and a popular food blog, *Bela's kitchen*, now well into its second decade. My grandmother Sabitri's desserts were legendary in Kolkata—so I've been told. (Divakaruni 186)

Free Indirect Speech

As cited in Wikipedia, it is a style of third-person narration which uses some of the characteristics of third-person along with the essence of first-person direct speech. It is also referred to as free indirect discourse, free indirect style, or *discours indirect libre* in French. Randall Stevenson suggests, however, that the term free indirect discourse:

> …is perhaps best reserved for instances where words have actually been spoken aloud and that caseswhere a character's voice is probably the silent inward one of thought should be described as free indirect style. (Wikipedia)

In the text, we find various instances of free indirect speech but the best one is Bela and Sanjay decides to buy a house and the interior monologue within Bela is an allude to free indirect speech.

> The words swooshed around in Bela's head like wild birds. That was her secret dream: a house of her own. She had lived in a house only once in her childhood, a magical sprawling place in Assam with giant hydrangea buses that leaned up against the walls. Her father was still alive then, she remembered walking with him in the mango grove, gathering golden fruit from the ground. Was that why she wanted a

> house so badly? She hadn't told Sanjay because it was an unreasonable longing, with her earning only minimum wage and loans, so many of them still: his student loan, their ticket money, payments to various who had arranged their visas. (Divakaruni 100-101)

The thoughts inside Bela's mind and the narration by the author keeping in mind the exact words of her mind are significant to enmesh the memory and longings of Bela. This desire can be contrasted to her present situation where she is overloaded with loans, no one to take care of her like Sabitri and she is 'stuck in a groove'. The chapter shuffles between past and present and most importantly with various questions inside her mind—Can Beggars be Choosers?

> … She was still sitting on the bed, motionless because there was an anchor inside her belly, heavier than anything she had known. She had known. It held her down. (Divakaruni 118)

The child inside her belly is compared as an anchor holding her steadfastly. Now she knows what mistake she did in her past. The reason behind choosing back shuffling of time and place is to portray the agony, feelings, regret and the mixed perception of the characters for each other.

> She'd learned it just now—as Sabitri, too must have during those long widow years, bringing Bela up on her own. It was a lesson all mothers had to memorize. (Divakaruni 118)

Though the characters are the voiced here but it's the voice of every woman from different spaces and times. In a collage form, she has given voice to their flickering whims and wishes and at the end the realization that every mother has to undergo with the same issues no matter they belong to different continents.

Shift of Narrative

The text seems to be fragmented and uneven due to sentence construction, and frequent shifts in narrative. It is a deliberate attempt to break the chapters into multiple scenes—either physically or conceptually so as to provide a backdrop for images of growth, development of the characters in novice way.

The structure of her prose is like a fluid stream of consciousness, evident in the manner in which she plays with

the epistolary form and breaks it up in the first chapter when Sabitri is writing a letter to her granddaughter, Tara. Divakaruni believes that with women, 'our thought-connections are often emotional ones'.

It is exactly this emotional resonance she wishes to explore and exploit in *Before We Meet the Goddess,* deeming it a 'novel-in-stories'. It is "a form that allows me to go through three generations of lives, their ups and downs, in an agile and swift manner, a non-chronological manner". This is important for me, because in some ways this is a novel about memory and how it colours and shapes our understanding of our life. Each chapter in the novel is a stand-alone story, focusing on a moment in the lives of these women, an emotionally significant moment, perhaps a moment of transformation—either good or bad. These stories have many narrators—not just the three women, but the man important in their lives— even if just for one day. Such a structure allows me to organize the novel according to emotional resonance. In order to express experiences as well as internal struggles, immigrant authors often turn to narratives as a format in which such issues can be explored.

In *Before We Visit the Goddess,* the author takes the different phases of life in her stride without making any of the experiences sentimental, such as young Bela's pain, or the loneliness, and whimsical and wretched behaviour of Leelamoyi, Bela's wealthy benefactress. Her trademark fiction of the world of Bengali women remains steadfast but she also develops the inter-generational differences magnificently. Writing that shares individual stories and creates conversation is a powerful force in the endeavour to understand the immigrant experience. According to Gayatri Spivak, "it is with narratives that a literary critic negotiates" (Lodge 430). Narratives are like pictures of everyday life, even fictitiously. Therefore, it becomes essential to explore the existing narratives of the Indian English writing community in order to make observations about experiences, challenges, and perspectives of Indian-American immigrants. In addition, this reminds us that if we are able, as literary critics, to focus on the text and not indulge immediately in sociological applications, it becomes possible to examine narratives more effectively based on individual experiences within them.

Avant-garde Technique: Epistolary Form and Poetic-Prose Pattern

The novel is like a window to look into the relationships between mothers and daughters, man-woman relationship, and a memoir depicting inter-generational problems. From letters to a medical history, Divakaruni uses a wide range of tools to construct the multifaceted story of this family and it is an effective tool to capture exact words of the characters and the author as a medium to express their views about each other from a distance.

Her narration is full of maxims and in poetical manner, she transgresses from personal to universal statements. Homi Bhabha asserts that "the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting" (Lodge 44). The characters are very clearly torn apart, often into multiple pieces both physically and emotionally.

> "What is the nature of life?
>
> Life is lines of dominoes falling.
>
> One thing leads to another, and then another, just like you'd planned. But suddenly a Domino gets skewed, events change direction, people dig in their heels, and you're faced with a situation that you didn't see coming, you who thought you were so clever." (Divakaruni 146)

Divakaruni's versatility can be seen in making the language shift between prose and poetry and also the fluidity in narrating the events smoothly like the thoughts coming and going. With these devices, she can be regarded as a postmodern novelist too. Like her contemporary writers like Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, etc., she has used new forms in her narration. She is influenced by the postmodern devices like Magic realism by Rushdie, Memory Lane pattern by Amitav Ghosh, poetic form of narration by Vikram Seth. She has transgressed all of them by taking up 'local issues' of the women by employing multiple narratives and delving deep into the inner recesses of the character's minds. She says in her author's note:

> I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women; they remain shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious. Their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husband, brothers and sons.... (www.genderforum.org)

The stylistic techniques, the enmeshing of past and present with flashback device and the gift of dreaming are some of the devices used by the author to expose the feelings and the dark caverns of these three women who belong to same family but stay in different locales and generations yet experience the same pangs of motherhood.

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17

Indianism and Feminism in the Canons of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Shashi Deshpande: A Comparative Study

Kakarla Ujjwala

Introduction to Biographical Sketch and Works

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in India in 1956, basically from the very cultured city, Kolkata in a traditionally middle-class family is a popular award winning novelist, poet and short-story writer. She immigrated to the United States in 1976 who emerged on the world literary scene during 1990 as an Indian American writer and established herself as a prolific and extremely discerning writer. She currently lives in Houston, Texas, where she teaches in the Creative Writing Programme at the University of Houston and moreover, co-founded Maitri, an organization that works with South Asian women dealing with situation and condition of domestic violence. She has also worked with Afghani Women refugees and women from dysfunctional families, as well as in shelters for battered women. Divakaruni's writing is fuelled by her own experiences as a first-generation immigrant and a woman between cultures and traditions. She draws on her own experiences and those of other immigrant Indian women to write novels and verse, including the award-winning *Leaving Yuba City*, *New and Selected Poems*, *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of short stories, and *The Mistress of Spices*, a novel. Divakaruni has also published two works for middle-grade readers: *Neela*, *Victory Song* and *The Conch Bearer*.

Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and the United States. Her work deals with the immigrant experiences and important matter in the medley of American society. The author has published novels in multiple genres, including historical fiction, fantasy, magical realism, realistic fiction, feminine sensibility, and myths or stereotypes. According to Divakaruni, she is very much influenced by Mahasweta Devi—an Indian feminist writer. But more than this, a lot of women from different traditions have influenced her as well. At the starting point of Chitra's writing career, she didn't have the confidence that her subject would be of interest to anyone. So, after reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Women Warrior*, she found a new stream. The poet Adrienne Rich, V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, and Erdrich are also a part of her inspiration. She has also been persuaded by many of the feminist ideas of Virginia Wolf. She likes to pick up women of different backgrounds.

She started her writing with the different issues of women. She has studied both Eastern and Western literatures; she also likes to bring the two together in her writing. She feels it is a way to enrich both traditions. Divakaruni occupies an important place in the recent Indian Literature. Her novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) was released as a film of the same name in 2005. The film starred by Aishwariya Rai and Dylan McDermott. The film was directed by Paul Mayeda Berges, with a script by Gurinder Chadha and her husband Beges. In addition, her novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) was made into a television series in Tamil.

When she was a child in India, her grandfather would tell her stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the ancient Indian epics. Being a child she loved to hear about the amazing and incredible exploits of heavenly warrior heroes such as Rama and Krishna. More than these princes, she was attracted towards the women of the epics. There were so many examples of women power and sacrifices, like Sita, Draupadi, and Kunti. She knows India very well through her heart and mind. Her writing is more complicated by the fact that she is exploring the experience of being Indian. She accepted in one of her articles that:

> "When I was twelve, I spent a summer with an aunt in Rourkela, a small town very different in flavour from Kolkata, where I lived. My aunt taught me to pickle mangoes and to

make quilts out of old cotton saris—skills that my mother, a busy school teacher, either didn't possess or didn't care to teach me. For this reason, I was fascinated by them. My aunt also taught me a prayer ritual, or vrata, popular among unmarried girls."

Her writing gives a new light to theme of feminine sensibility, immigrant experiences, fight of identity, homelessness, and the gap between the East and West.

Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad in Karnataka as the second daughter of the well-known Kannada dramatist as well as a great Sanskrit scholar Sriranga. She pursued her education in Dharwad, Bombay and Bangalore. She has completed her degrees in Economics and Law with a gold medal. After her marriage, she was moved to Bombay where she undertook a course on journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine, *Onlooker.* In 1970, she published her first short story; "Legacy" was the first collection of her short stories, which came out in 1978. Two years later, she published her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors.* The subsequent year saw her next brainchild *A Matter of Time***,** which was published in the United States of America. The Feminist Press of New York brought out that novel for the first time.

Shashi Deshpande is a leading women novelist in the Indian English Literature with seven novels to her credit. She is a receiver of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi and the Nanjangud Thirumalamba Awards for the novel, *That Long Silence* and moreover Thirumaathi Rangammal Price for *Roots and Shadows*. She has achieved the status of distinction in the mainstream Indian English Literature.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most significant female writers of the 21st century in India. Owing to her Maharashtra and Karnataka connection, her female characters are more reflective to the culture and society of these regions. As a novelist, she tries to explore the meaningful search for the uprooted existence of her female characters within the socio-cultural context of time and place. It is clear when she shares these following lines in (*The Sunday Times* 2012) "My writing comes out myself, my ancestry, the place I was born in, the place lived in, the cultural I am steeped in, the fact that the writing is in English, changes

none of these things."

Shashi Deshpande does not believe in destructing ideologies in the mask of modernism and feminism. On the contrary, through her character she declares that salvation is hidden in tradition. Her feminism is particularly Indian in the sense that it is borne out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities. The women characters are with traditional approaches trying to tie family and profession to maintain the virtues of Indian culture. Deshpande's simple yet powerful prose reads like a grandmother's tale that pierces the deep into heart and settles. At one point, the use of omniscient narration teases the reader as the speaker forces events but is not to share until time and plot unfolds it.

The underlying theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels is human relationships especially the ones that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife, between mother and daughter. In all relationships, the women occupy the central stage and significantly, the narration shifts through her feminine consciousness. Being a woman herself, she sympathizes with women. As Shashi Deshpande clarifies in one of the interviews about feminist approach in her writing, "If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world" (Deshpande, Shashi Interview with M. Rati).

Critical Analysis of Indianism and Feminism

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a brilliant story teller; she eliminates the world with her artistry and shakes the reader with her love. Divakaruni profoundly exhibits the themes, such as Indianness, immigrant experiences, Sisterhood, Mysticism, Fantasy in her novels. She is a woman with immense care on Indianness in her novels, depicts the Indian mysticism and fantasy and realism in her bestselling novel, *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, where she visualizes on sisterhood, womanhood and immigrant experiences through the lives of Anju and Sudha of Calcutta Chaterjee family. *Sister of My Heart* merely portrays the traditional Indian Hindu life, through the lives of Anju and Sudha, living in India and America—the cultural intermingling of their lives extracts foreign as well as Indian feelings and emotions. The Indian society or the social life of Indians are class

of patriarchal and matriarchal grounds, but always male dominated society is revealed in Indian context, Sunil and Ramesh, who are dominated over their wives [Anju and Sudha], are of Indian male egoism, on the other hand, Divakaruni speaks of Dayita, daughter of Sudha, who is orphanage with losing her father shows the new will of womanhood, fighting for the right cause to hold on matriarchal grounds, Sudha is praised for breaking traditional bonds, by taking care of her own child on her shoulders.

The dual novels deal, compare and contrast the Indian mindset, where Indianness is a fragrance in Indo-American Literature. Divakaruni picturizes the Indian concept and its context to a great extent; the feel of motherland, i.e., India and Indianness poses a great deal in Divakaruni's writings, where she visualizes the Indian customs, traditions and even food and nature (atmosphere) of her birth place; she gives the description of Indian food, Dal, Parotta and more on pickles. Indian costumes like Sari, Kurta, Paijama, Indian flowers Jasmine and the traditional and religious symbols, i.e., wearing Bangles, Bindi and Sindhur at the levels of immigrant experience, where all these are not found in American culture. As critics view on Divakaruni's writings: "Divakaruni is gifted with dramatic inventiveness, lyrical, sensual language, where she depicts the beauty of India and Indianness and womanhood in her writings and writing on immigrant experience on alien shores."

Shashi Deshpande's novels, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* dwells with the theme of quest for self and a new identity. Centre of both the novels are female and feminine consciousness. These novels document protagonists' genuine search for love and identity as well as their need for creative expression and freedom to assert their femininity in and outside marriage. Her approach to the women's question and her treatment of the condition of woman character is strongly feminist. R. Mala holds: "Her feminism is not western oriented because it is born out of typically Indian solutions. For her fiction represents the predicament of the Indian women placed between family and profession; between culture and nature" (Mala 56). In her novels, women appear in a focal position her presentation of the women's predicament takes on two dimensions: a woman's place within

the circle of man-woman relationship in marriage and the woman concern in the social order. She is deeply concerned with the quest; with the search to define 'a meaningful identity' in a hostile, social and domestic climate. This theme has a special significance in these novels as she wishes to depict women's internal struggle to unravel the immense complexities of her identity and gender definitions.

There is constant interplay of nostalgia and reality in Deshpande's and Divakaruni's novels. Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* and Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* are similar in their characters. Both of them abandon everything and realize their life and survive alone. In Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*, Sudha was struggling with her husband and mother-in-law to save her unborn baby. Even though her mother-in-law is a female she cannot understand the feelings and love of a mother.

In Desphande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, same kind of treatment was imposed on the protagonist Saru in her parental house. It brings out the struggle of a woman in a family where a male child is preferred to a female child and the novel reveals how the insensitive attitude of the family towards a female can drive her into a schizophrenic state of mind. It portrays the secondary position of the woman in her parental house as well as her husband's home where the male ego overpowers all other considerations in the relationship of marriage. At last she leaves her husband and lives her life. The sequel of *Sister of My Heart* is *The Vine of Desire* which also depicts similar circumstances when Sudha leaves her husband and joins with her cousin sister Anju in America. In America, she lives for a short span of time because Anju's husband spoils her. Without informing Anju, she leaves her house and goes somewhere. In both the novels, the voices of women could not be heard by the men.

In Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors,* Saru finds comfort in her love marriage with Manu. To get rid of her insecurities, fears and loneliness she started earning. As a typical status conscious husband, Manu felt uneasy and unhappy as his wife is more respected and more successful. He even raped her and she again left alone as she separated from him. However, the feeling of being alone does not despair her for long.

She exhibits a real courage as she tells herself, "All right, so

I'm alone. But so's everyone else. Human beings ... they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors, 220*). Saru frees herself from the shackles of tradition in quest of her self-identity which she ultimately realized in course of her life. As she struggles with her emotions and anxieties, Sarita gradually realizes that there is more to life than dependency on marriage and family—she resolves to use her new found truths to make a better life for herself.

The characters Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Shashi Deshpande help rescue women from marginalized status in the academy as well as the world on the whole. Their novels outline the lives of women engaged in a quest for values.

Both the writers make use of myths to enhance the artistic effect of the novel. Divakaruni's past influence of ancient epic stories and her attraction towards the women of the epics also gets reflected in her novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). This novel takes us back to the time of the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*—a time that is half-history, half-myth, and fully magical. The whole story is re-written through new eyes or we can say by a new narrator Draupadi, who was also fondly known as Krishna or Paanchali (wife of five husbands—Pandavas). Author gives us a rare feminist interpretation of an epic story or considers it a feminist *Mahabharata*. The novel traces Panchaali's life, beginning with her magical birth from fire. It was prophesied before her birth that princess Draupadi would be the reason for the bloodiest wars in history.

Draupadi had a fiery female voice in a world of warriors, gods, and ever-manipulating hands of fate. The *Mahabharata* tells us about the war that was caused by an insult to a woman and her thirsting need for revenge. The whole epic took place in a world and society which was dominated by men, in a world where the role of the wife was just about taking care of her husband and family or their needs. Divakaruni's book gives us a chance to take a look into the mind of the women who changed it all and in the process set the ball rolling for generations to follow. The book worked because every character seemed to be reflected in today's society.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Saru's father tells her how on her death-bed her mother had made him repeat the episode of Duryodhana's hiding in the lake at the end of the battle, waiting for the Pandavas to come and kill him. Saru thinks of herself and her mother as Duryodhana figures—lonely, unloved, defeated and filled with a sense of rejection. In her novel *That Long Silence*, Jaya also recalls the pativratas—Sita, Savitri and Draupadi—mythical symbols of ideal wifehood, ironically comparing herself to them. "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to declaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails." Interestingly, in spite of education and the influence of the feminist movement, many biases against women still persist. For the modern human being, the past becomes defunct or if it exists, it no longer manifests itself as it was. Hence, the past must be defined anew according to the perception of each individual. Divakaruni and Deshpande attempt to come to terms with the past the Ecoian way:

In a broader perspective, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Shashi Deshpande are humanists preoccupied with a process through which human potential especially that of a woman, gets actualized. Both deal with contemporary problems in terms of their own ancestral roots of religion and culture. In their novels the battle of sexes is presented in vivid images of women as powerful and equally vivid images of men as powerful and powerless. They acknowledge the fecundation of the divine like spirit or psyche within the individual, a fecundation that is synonymous with self-realization. Their novels record and reflect a very broad spectrum of the experiences of life.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Shashi Deshpande nourish a serious concern for contemporary women. Living in the modern times, the two have the same roots and share a common feeling that the women be free of the patriarchal strains. The obvious differences in their manner and attitude to life or writing, however, noticeable they may not separate them in their aims. There is a particular point of convergence where the two writers meet and run parallel to each other. Their point of meeting is their homeland. Though Divakaruni is settled in the US, it is the feeling of belonging and rootedness to India and her interest in women which binds her with Deshpande.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction, the women characters are distanced from their homeland; they think more rationally, but they mentally retain some of the traditional beliefs. Shashi Deshpande's women on the other hand, defy all traditions, but subconsciously they too, remain tradition-bound. Leaving India and its orthodoxy behind seems to be a solution to some of these problems in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction.

In the case of Shashi Deshpande's works, perhaps the only way possible for the temporarily wandering wife is a return to her domestic fold. Shashi Deshpande presents her women longing to become economically and ideologically independent. She finds her women caught up in a conflict between their family and professional roles, between individual aspiration and social demands. Her women protagonists are caught in the conflict between responsibilities to oneself and conformity to the traditional role of a wife. They do not accept to be considered as the objects of gratification. They challenge their victimization and find a new balance of power between the sexes. But their idea of freedom is not purchased from the West, they strongly believe in conformity and compromise for the sake of the retention of domestic harmony rather than revolt, which might result in the disruption of family relationships.

Although the works of both these writers portray how modern Indian women are torn between their historical past and progressive present, between traditional ethos and modern culture, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni demonstrates a bolder attitude while Shashi Deshpande does not allow her liberal thinking to overpower her traditional outlook. The female characters in the fiction of both Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are torn between old and new world values. They question the nature of their lives, and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals. This awareness leads them to rethink about their own lives as women, and instils in them the confidence and strength to forge ahead.

In their works, insights take precedence over compulsion of technique. They acknowledge the paradoxes in a given epoch, and wage an artistic, cultural, ideological and philosophical struggle. In this sense, both posit ego, sex, love, freedom, the signs of modernism, as problematic through their modern sensibilities.

For these two writers, the main arena has been the study of the self. They try to locate meaning in the life around, and then try to respond to the modern conditions of individual isolation and cultural fracture. They aspire to modernity; attempt to be universal; feel bound to the roots and as a result, find themselves in an anomalous and jarring position. Striving for identity in the post-colonial world, the protagonists of these writers present the dilemma of the modern day woman covering each and every aspect of her life.

Conclusion

There is constant interplay of nostalgia and reality in Deshpande's and Divakaruni's novels. At a deeper level, they show a conflict between tradition and modernity. The trials and tribulations and the struggle to maintain the modern values and to carve out an identity of their own in the new and ostensibly both the writers have grappled with contemporary issues and a variety of themes on motherhood, mothering, marriage, individuation, class, conflicts, marginalization, woman as wife, mother, sister and lastly, yet significantly, woman as human, not just a sex object. They seem skeptical about tradition and, yet they discover in their heritage the solutions for the needs and longings of women in contemporary times. Both are 'modernist' writers since their writings highlight the notion of the marginal woman in an androcentric set up, prevalent in the 'First World' and the 'non First World'. In fact, their works have mapped the social, political and cultural changes brought about by colonization, post-colonial consciousness and globalization.

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18

Magic Realism in *The Conch Bearer*

Parul Mishra

The use of Magical Realism is worldwide. It started in 1928 with the translation of Roh's book into Spanish by Fernando Vela. In Germany, it appeared as escapist and reactionary in the 1940s and its use diminished during World War II, apparently because of its containment by the Nazis. It is now even being practical to a genre of contemporary literature and art criticism. This term appeared in Belgium in 1943 in the writings of Johan Daisne, a Belgium writer (1912-1978) and the concept was rapidly spreading not only through Europe but also in Latin America due to the arrival of many European immigrants during the 30s and 40s. As Argentina was one of the first Latin American countries to welcome these Europeans, the existing intellectual group of the country was greatly enriched (Rave 19). Magic realism often gives voice in the thematic domain to indigenous or ancient myth, legends and cultural practice and the domain of narrative technique to the literary traditions that express them with the use of non-realistic events and images; it can be seen as a kind of narrative primitivism (Faris 103).

Magic realism as Franz Roz opines, describes tendencies of new objectivities characterized by clear, static, thinly painted, sharp focus, images frequently portraying the imaginary, the

improbable in a fantastic realistic rational manner. The term was adapted in the United States with 1943 exhibition at the New York museum of modern art, entitled American Realistic and magic realist. The term has been further used by Latin American authors such as Borges, Garcia Marquez, Alenjo Carpenter (Roz). Magic realist stories and novels have, characteristically a strong narrative drive in which elements like dream, fairy story and mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic pattern of refraction and recurrence, English magic realism also has some affinity with the neo-Goethic (Drabbles 56). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines 'Magic Realism' is a "kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the 'reliable' tone of objective realistic report designating a tendency of modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folk tale and myth while maintaining a strong contemporary social relevance. The fantastic attributes given to the characters in such novels-levitation, flight, telepathy, and telekinesis—are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century" (19). M.H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* describe magical realism to be violating standard novelistic expectations by having highly effective changes in the subject matter, style, presentation of characters and so on. The writers (magical realists) interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales (261).

The theme allows the fiction writer to explore the imagination of true fiction, exercising the what if fiction tool to encourage the reader to imagine the existence of the character or place and, in the readers' imagination, if it existed, imagine what it would be like to know the character or live in the place. The idea allows the reader to imagine an escape from the burdens of the world and to live in and explore a place that gives health and long life *(The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 101). Magical realism is not a realism to be transfigured by the complement of a magical viewpoint, but authenticity which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic. P. Gabrielle quotes "Magical realism unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires

a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community that has historically constructed and connected" (286). Chitra Banerjee has repeatedly used pragmatic aspect in her fictional world of writing. She has provided a medium through the representation of supernatural power, the way to reach and read the mind of the characters; how they relate it to their everyday life, what in fact is the real prospect of the presence and affect of the magical squeeze in the novel. Magic realism as a technique of transforming the fantastic into reality is represented by Chitra Banerjee. She has the knack to twist the unbelievable into the believable, as verified in *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams* and *The Conch Bearer*. Through magical realism she endeavors to portray a reality, magic, superstition, religion and history which are categorically infused into the world. Hence magic realism is an artistic style or genus of fiction in which magical elements blends with real world. Myth and magic has also become a perennial source of themes for mythical writers like Chitra Banerjee. Paranormal occurrences become part of everyday life, "the supernatural…is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism (Zamora 3). In her novels, Chitra depicts the mystifying globe of fantasy in (magic) realistic ways to show the psychosomatic veracity of modern man of today. In *The Conch Bearer,* we meet Anand who is twelve year old boy living in modern India and a believer in fairy tales and magic; his mother is a widow and sister Meera is in a mentally deranged condition. Anand's mother has spent all her savings on doctors to help Meera. She was suffering because she has witnessed a hit and run, which had left a bad impact on her senses; as a consequence she was not able to speak normally. His father left the family two years before the start of the story. Anand and his mother had to work for the livelihood of the family. Anand gets a job of servant in a tea shop. Owner of the shop Haru is not happy with the services of Anand and pays him a nominal salary. Two things help Anand make happy, first his mothers' smiling face on receiving meager salary each week, and second was his secret belief in magic. He wished that someone would give him a magic apple like the one he had read about. Once, he had confided in his mother about his covert wish. He said, I could make Meera better, and we could see where father was, and

if he was all right (CB 4). His desire came true when he met Abayadatta, one of the Brotherhoods who entrusted him with a conch shell that possessed magical powers. That was a turning point in his life. Earlier Anand's mother had doubted that those things would happen only in storybooks; Anand nodded, and said that he didn't tell her what he believed that magic could happen. That it was happening all the time, all around them, except that most people didn't know about it. Sometimes he could almost sense it whizzing by him, rapid as an invisible hummingbird. If only he could figure out how to grab it and make it carry him along, too, his entire life would change. He was sure of it (CB 5).

An old man visits the shop where Anand is employed. Haru the shopowner thinks him to be a beggar and orders Anand to drive him away from the shop. Anand being gentle towards the old man asks him to go from the shop and gave him his stale pooris to eat. The same night that beggar is found by Anand at his door:

> Anand bought the mango which fell from his hand and rolled into the darkness. He worried that he had spent two whole hard-earned rupees on. He scrabbled desperately for it, but felt nothing but asphalt and dirt. He wanted to search more, but something told him it wasn't safe to delay any longer. At that time he felt a kind of mysterious fog and he wondered from where the fog had come: How could it be windy and foggy at the same time? He looked around wildly, not recognizing anything. (CB 18)

Anand thought that it would be nice if he could get help from somebody. Then he started going to his home. At that time he saw an old man following. He asked him why he followed him home. The old man replied that he was called by him. But Anand refused that he never called anyone. Then he added suspiciously what he wanted from him. The old man asked whether he had not called for help a little while before. Anand said that the thought was in his mind only and astonished how he could read out his thought (CB 20). Abhaydatta comes to know about the problem of Meera and cures her through the help of his magic. Coming to this point of the story it is visible that Ms. Banerjee has managed to mould the readers' mind for the acceptance of the

magical aspect in the novel. The condition of the 12 year old child bounds us to believe that Anand is going to be influenced by his surroundings, some magical occurrence in his life were sure to happen which could turn his life to as he wished for. Unaware of the healthy consequences awaiting for him he starts his journey with a girl named Nisha. Nisha is a character in the novel that has forgotten her own name, she has lost her parents. Nisha tells Anand where Abhaydatta must be waiting for him. On their way to journey they meet Surabhanu, who is the culprit for stealing the magical conch. He meets the children in a disguised wealthy passenger. He did his utmost to influence the struggling Anand and Nisha, unfortunately being disturbed by a candy vendor. Finally they meet Abhaydatta with the help of old woman blessings. Now the real story where real magic is seen begins. Anand meets Abhaydatta who tells about the journey and what they have to do if by chance they miss at any point. He makes them aware of the three trials which they have to face on their way for Silver Valley. Silver Valley is a place where magical actions are performed. Abhaydattta trusts Anand and gives the magical conch to him. This was unexpected for Surabhanu, the evil in the novel who stole the conch for himself. He is capable of changing shape; Anand and Nisha met him in the form of a wealthy passenger for giving the conch to a common child like Anand. The preface to the magical interference is smelled from here only. *The Conch Bearer* (2003), the first in *The Brotherhood* account (where Anand is a tea boy and Nisha a street-sweeper), Chitra Banerjee imagines for her young heroes all the challenges that will make them understand better who they are and what their chore is, allowing them to grow conscientiously, honouring life's mysteries. She draws the readers' attention at the separation between power-seeking science that wants to have power over everything and everyone, privileging the intellect and smothering the heart, and the spiritual quest, the magic, the tradition that has been breathing for millennia and may be eradicated in the very country in which it originated. In this world of fear-driven separation, Anand as a healer and a savior will not succeed in his heroic feats if he is lost in his own apprehensions, doubts and his aspiration to become recognized in his ego dimension. He needs the loving support of the girl Nisha. He even believes that no human courage and resourcefulness can be protected without

the help of the Conch. The novelist entrusts the magical element and keeps the story in motion by giving the glimpse of magical realism in bits.

The characters in the novel are placed in social settings where the supernatural is an ordinary and a customary companion to the everyday actions, although the humans who hold power continue in their endeavors to curve these powers so as to use them for their personal gain. Positioned at the boundary of an assortment of cultures, Divakaruni tries to take the reader into her Bengali world of myth and magic. Abhaydatta vanishes when he is attacked by Surabhanu. Anand and Nisha manage to escape the attack and start their way to journey for the Silver Valley.

In magical realism, we find non living objects to behave like living things. It is observed that the common and the everyday going through transformation; they turn to awesome and unreal. It is predominantly the art of surprises. The inanimate things are seen speaking, walking, etc. As we see in *The Conch Bearer* that the Conch starts speaking to Anand, responding to his thoughts. The conch reveals to Anand that the power of the conch can be only used when all possible solutions are performed by the human beings. It can only work when all human actions will be exhausted. It is evident here that the conch is behaving like a powerful human being by saving the lives of the travellers. Further, in the novel, we see animals behaving like human being; a mongoose joins them saving them many times out of danger.

The conch voice said, "Chessmen may move only one at a time, sounding as though it came from far away. It is someone else's turn now" (CB 181). In this way, it frequently spoke to Anand and advised him. And the snake called Nisha to pick up the boulder near her foot and hit the boy on the head with it and knock him out. Beside him, she had bent over and, with one hand, picked up a huge boulder twice the size of her head. Her other hand still gripped Anand's arm. She lifted the boulder effortlessly, fueled by Surabhanu's power and she brought it down on Anand's skull.

The novelist here is presenting the attitude of reality that is expressed informs popular or cultural forms, in elaborate or rustic styles in closed or opens structures. In magical realism, the

writer confronts reality and endeavors to untangle it to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts. The chief thing to be observed is not the creator of imaginary things or world but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between the life of man and his circumstances. We can again refer to *The Conch Bearer,* where we see Anand in such a plight that we ourselves imagine that some miracle should occur in his life to make it smooth. The circumstances where he is less paid and heavily burdened of work, where he is not able to fulfil his little desires. The feel of sympathy rises among the readers and the heart suggests that there should be some magical occurrence in the life of the child.

It is observed that Magical Realisms there are no explanations required for psychologicalor logical effects. For instance, members of the brotherhood have the power to look into the future. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it bit to stop the mystery that exists behind things. There is nothing logical seen in this part of the novel: Many ages ago, a group of men with special powers came together with the dream of perfecting those powers and using them to spread goodness in the world. They called themselves the Brotherhood of Healers, and over the centuries they taught their powers to other young men who came to them, called or chosen from among many.

The old man had already known his desire. He got wondered when the old man told about Anand‘s desire. Anand asked incredulously. The old man explained, I was called to you because of your belief in magic and your desire to enter its secret domain (CB 32). When the old man showed his lost mango, he got amazed and insisted him an explanation the old man smiled at Anand‘s amazement but offered no explanation. Meera is cured through the powers applied by Abhaydatta :

> His sleep was disturbed when Meera woke him and he astonished as she recovered to speak normally. He felt much happy as she was cured. Then his mother realized that the old man was a real healer and she said: He spoke the truth. He was a Healer. Anand could understand that the old man kept up his promise and decided to go with the old man. So he started searching for him to Sialdah station and tried to

enter into the train. But he was caught by the station master who doubted him as a pick packet. At that time a strange old man saved Anand by calling him as his own nephew. In the train, he was given the favorite food of him. When he was about to taste it, Nisha who was standing at the platform gave her signal not to eat. He felt it was more as though there was an invisible rope tied around her waist, and it was dragging her forward while she tried to resist.

There is no explanation given to such instances. Meera could not speak. Abhaydatta through his powers makes her speak. No explanation for such instances has been given by the novelist. The other chief point to be noticed regarding magic realism is that the conch is personified by the novelist. It communicates to Anand like human beings. The conch has got powers super than human beings. Further the story discloses the fact of Abhaydatta and we see how he turns himself into the form of a mongoose and faces off with Surabhanu, who has turned himself into a snake.

Shurabanu came in the form of snake as Satan came in the form of serpent to tempt Eve. Like Satan, he also charmed Nisha's mind to obey to his order and to disobey to Anand. When the giant snake fixed Anand with its cold, glittering eyes and said: "Ah yes, we meet again, Anand" (CB 180). The snake laughed and said that Nisha was his servant and it told that it was his power that filled her. He flicked his tongue at Nisha and she stood with a jerk, pulling Anand up with her. It also tried to tempt Anand:

> "...You see, Anand", the snake taunted. "I take care of my servants, not like that old idiot who abandoned you to your own devices. You, too, should have chosen to serve me! You would be better off today if you had!"
>
> "... Nisha didn't choose to serve you. You forced her." Anand managed to choke out the words. (CB 180)

The conch voice said, Chessmen may move only one at a time, "sounding as though it came from far away. It is someone else's turn now" (CB 181). In this way, it frequently spoke to Anand and advised him. And the snake called Nisha to pick up the boulder near her foot and hit the boy on the head with it and knock him out. Beside him, she had bent over and, with one hand, picked up a huge boulder twice the size of her head. Her

other hand still gripped Anand‘s arm. She lifted the boulder effortlessly, fueled by Surabhanu‘s power and she brought it down on Anand‘s skull.

Anand stared at the mongoose in horror and love. He guessed that it might be Abhaydatta. In the mean time the old man must have taken on an animal form to battle the evil sorcerer, Surabhanu. And Nisha was stretched out on the snow. And the snake which mesmerized her was not a snake anymore. Instead, it was a gaseous cloud grew more solid, taking human shape. The face was still indistinct, but he could see the glitter of Surabhanu‘s diadem already, atop the head (CB 185).

Abhaydatta destroys Surabhanu and saves Anand , but has used excess of his powers and is unable to turn himself back to real form.

The magical realist narrative provides a perfect way to present to the reader the contrast between the psychopath’s and the average reader’s view of what is ordinary behaviour. Geof Hancock describes magic realism as constituting the ‘conjunction of two worlds’—the magical and the realist (7). Likewise, Amaryll Chanady states that magical realism is an “amalgamation of a rational and irrational world view” (21). Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris observe that the conjunction or amalgamation of these two worlds creates a mixture of these opposing cultures (6). Morrison claims that magical realism provides “another way of knowing things” (342). When Ms. Divakaruni was asked about magic, she quoted “I think the world is magical in its essence—there are layers of existence beyond the one we commonly experience, based on sense and logic. Magic is one way of entering that world, or entering your own depths. That is how magic works in my novels.” According to the narrative, magical fiction particularly helps in challenging our underlying beliefs about the nature if the world. It makes us imagine grandeur and heroism in a special way. When speaking of magical or mystical realism, Divakaruni‘s three volumes written for children, *The Brotherhood of the Conch* (2003, 2005 and 2009), are certainly to be considered, together with her two influential novels, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). Nonetheless, one can easily conceive that in her stories and novels, everything (the magical included) is real, convincing and natural. There is a unvarying

communication of worlds and interpenetration of different levels of human existence, so that Divakaruni's other texts, although apparently set closer to everyday reality, also suggest a profound expressive and devout relationship that each character nourishes with other magnitudes. Without such a connection, life might become pretty excruciating for characters in the novels such as *Sister of My Heart* and its sequel *The Vine of Desire*.

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19

Narrative Techniques in *Oleander Girl*

Madhavi Lata Agrawal

The paper intends to explore the various techniques of writing employed in the *Oleander Girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She writes in a mystical mantle and carries you into a different world. Her story starts with Korobi falling in love with Rajat Bose a business man of a prosperous Bengali family but on the date of the engagement her loving grandfather dies and Korobi is heart broken and after the death of her grandfather she realizes that her life is not what she has lived but there is a truth that she does not know and this she tries to find out. The novel deals with the urge of Korobi to discover her true identity—and it is full of clashes between the tradition, heritage and the modern times. The heroine is the catalyst in the novel and on her decisions does the entire story revolve.

Oleander Girl is a full fledged narrative with everything in it, a villain, a vamp, concealment and dark secrets, love and retaliation, an art gallery and an old conventional house with an ancestral temple, food and foliage, helpless and resilience and numerous other episodes which are realized in the book and make a fascinating interpretation. Her creative writing makes you peruse through the book nonstop. Expatriate writing is well-built where the writer remembers the beauty of Kolkatta before she has immigrated to America. She is a brilliant story teller, chronicler,

and expatriate, with diasporic elements very perceptible in her writings. Her narrative dexterity remains unparalleled.

Her writing is full of the cultures, tradition and a sense of pride in a family which are the basic characteristics of an Indian. The novel has mystery, romance, family history, heritage, emotions and business. Politics and scandal also play a very important role in the life of the Indians which is very clearly depicted in Chitra's *Oleander Girl*.

The novel depicts a young courageous heroine who wants to comprehend her true self for she realizes after the death of her grandfather that she had been living a great lie and to find out the truth of her life she decides to fly to America and pick out the little strands of her mother's life and braid them together to build up her own background and the story of her parents past. A truly feministic blend is obvious when she defies all to go and search for her past and be accepted for what she is and not for her grandfather's traditional background.

It is a gentle but compelling novel with its fascinating story of ancient India which fuses with the modern in the character of Korobi—the name itself reveals the character of the female protagonist by which she proves to be strong as well as stubborn the same as the oleander leaves and flowers which are said to be poisonous as well as strong with the beauty and courage all rolled into one. The novel is a peek in to the cultures and the family life with its sense of explorations and the binding family ties.

The style of Chitra is simple with the usage of straightforward, uncomplicated and effective language, rich imagery and excellent characterization. Her characters do need a little bit of more development so that the characters stand and the strength of them be revealed. Her novel deals with multiple roles and the characters are clearly identified with the traditional Indian women characters. It can be said to be a feministic approach for Mrs. Bose also takes interest in the business and silently rules the Boses' nest and with Korobi we have a young but headstrong person searching for self. Rajat does not come out as a leader and strength is shown in the ladies of the novel. The male characters should have been developed to better levels and balance the book.

After Korobi leaves for America, there is a shift in every chapter and because of this a concentrated reading of the book is essential. Even today the class system is entrenched in our modern life though it may not be as deeply rooted as it was in the traditional times but still the differences are very obvious. The tension between the Muslims and the Hindus is also very perceptible in the reading of her novel. Korobi goes in search of her roots which she feels is enrooted in America and she is dissuaded by one and all but she fights through proving that she is a true feminist who knows what she wants and flies to America.

Korobi's expedition to America leads her to new experiences that also make her question some of the basic traditions, truths and expectations that she has grown up with. The novel provides a view into the lives, culture and tradition of the present day citizens of India. The novel proves that investigation into the past without a scare of the future gives you enhanced prospects in life. The interplay between tradition and modernity is an important point of conflict skilfully explored by the writer. The technique of telling anecdotes as a series of events in a special way is the term utilized for narration that Chitra Banerjee has proved herself past master in her narrative style. Her style is superb and the story telling technique is captivating. Her art of painting the picture is impressively extraordinary. The story unravels mysteries and brings to the fore conflicts. It also speaks about the temporality of existence and at times is problem solving. Her narrative is all about human life and its innumerous experiences. Her stories relates to numerous interpersonal relations.

Unity of time is also visibly apparent in her novels. Her novel gives you a three dimensional effect of seeing, understanding and narrating. Her art of relating the story makes one understand the sequences, the search for self identity and the understanding of personality. Her novel is a narrative covering a wide assortment of characters and experiences. Her story deals with everyday people with their tribulations and joys in society which they find themselves.

Her art of joining together Indian cultures with the American seems a specialty in her writings. It is a special blend of American and Indian tradition and culture. A story arises from the

experiences of life and being a woman her art of inter-relating life's experiences which are very dissimilar from those of men are exposed and this she displays in all her writings. Through her narrative skills she discloses her liking for the rich traditional culture of India.

Chitra has mastered the art of modern story telling interlinking it with the traditional culture. It gives to the novel character like a parable and a legend, with myth, fantasy and romance rooted in the culture of Kolkatta. She is a talented writer who uses language to make the novel exciting and she is a dramatic and lyrically an imaginative writer. Her stories revolve round the stories of woman, her independent views and she is central in the novel. Around her story loom unravels and the story is recited.

This paper tends to explore the various narrative techniques employed and the art of storytelling as employed by Divakaruni in *Oleander Girl*.

The starting lines of the book itself grips you when it starts with—," I'm swimming through a long, underwater cavern flecked with blue light, the cavern of love, with Rajat close behind me. We are in a race, and so far I am winning because this is my dream. Sometimes when I am dreaming, I don't know it, but tonight I do" (1). These lines prove the gripping mystery in the novel and hold you dumbstruck wondering what to expect in the coming chapters. The construction of the sentences jerks you awake and makes you wonder at the work incorporated for just such a sentence just at the right moment.

The innocence of the little girl and her faith in her grandfather revealed in these simple lines "I slip my hands into his as I've done ever since I was old enough to walk. I don't expect a response; he's never been demonstrative. But he surprises me today by squeezing my fingers"—(15) denoting the family feeling and ties that run in the Indian families proving that blood is thicker than water a typical Indian feeling of belonging.

As the story progresses, we come across various incidences and the lines carry an emotive underlining packed with attachment. "Rajat clenches his teeth as the Mercedes hurtles down the night street towards the hospital, bucking and rattling across the potholes because he has impressed upon Asif that speed is more important—-" (36) the language utilized put the

reader into tension and the belittling of the streets of Kolkatta is very obvious in her use of 'potholes'. The hurry to reach Korobi's grandfather in hospital after the heart attack during the engagement ceremony is clearly denoted and the futility can also be understood.

After the death of Bimal Roy, the ancient house undergoes much heartbreak. While cleaning the home, Sarojini the grandmother, absent-mindedly stands in front of the mirror and realizes that she is now a widow. "It startles her; a woman so colourless that she is almost transparent"—(43) a beautiful depiction of widowhood with nothing to look forward too, only emptiness and the void that is ever present in the life of Sarojini very clearly depicted by the author.

"All the feeling damned up for so long burst over me; joy at the news, anxiety for Anu's health, sorrow that she had to beg to visit her own home…" (56). After Anu had gone against her father's wish and gone to study abroad, had fallen in love and married and now pregnant wanted to visit her roots once again and reminiscences on her happy old days. She just wanted to visit her mother so that she could tell her about her happiness and the life abroad. The underlying note in the sentence proving the iron hand of Bimal Roy and the despot he was.

"What hurts even more is knowing that my grandparents—whom I loved more than anybody—would deceive me like this! It hurts so much!"—(65) when she relates to Rajat the story of her mother and weeps and the hurt felt by her is very visible in the flow of Korobi's tears. A girl who was never scared of facing neither the world nor the truths that would be revealed if she went in search for her history. The love she had for her grandparents and the way they had lied to her made her feel wronged.

"—Then the people started jumping. Aghast, I try to turn away, but I can't climb out of my dream. Around me, white ash drifts like bitter snow. It coats my mouth, it makes me blind" (101). In her dream, Korobi dreams of the burning of the twin towers in America after listening to the stories of Mrs. Mitra in America where she had lodged up as they were the employees of Mrs. Bose. So intense is the story related that Korobi almost sees everything as related in her dreams. She is in search of her past

and the stories told makes her realize that maybe her world would also go up in flames as the twin towers of America.

"I wasn't sure. I only knew that it wasn't the impulse to gawk at disaster. Perhaps it was a mosaic of desires. To acknowledge tragedy. To pay respect. To understand Mitra's melt down…" (150). Looking at the negative attitude of the Mitra's Korobi feels the negativity of life and realizes that life is no bed of roses.

"Today the river fails to soothe him. Like a seal he can't stop picking at, he keeps returning to the warehouse" (173). The strike at the warehouse when a fight breaks out between the Muslim and Hindu workers aggravates Rajat, who tries to find solace in the smooth flowing river but realizes that he is so perturbed that the river also cannot offer him the solace it always used to give him. The flowing river makes him coming back to his response to the people at strike in the factory and this shows his agitated mind which is unsettled at the havoc created by him in trying to take strict measures with the workers in the factory.

"Some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this profound shame. I'm furious with everyone—my mother, my father, my grandfather—" (246) words that carry the millions of thoughts which run in the heart of Korobi when she realize that her parents had not been married and she was an illegal child. This hurt her inner being and her anger is realized in her feeling for all her elders.

"—Because the oleander is beautiful—but also tough. It knew how to protect itself from predators. Anu wanted that toughness for you because she didn't have enough of it herself" (253). Korobi asks her father Rob the meaning of her name when he comes to see her off at the airport and when told the meaning she feels her mother must have realized the future for her even before she was born and she finally proves her mother right in every by standing alert and fighting and being open with no secrets between her future and her past. She has faith in her beliefs and is unwilling to hide secrets and is ready to bear the brunt of everyone but the truth of her has to be no secret and this is what she realizes that truth is the only thing which breaks down barriers for all.

"a river of joy flows through the worlds" (260) when Pia and Rajat are returning after a dinner celebrating the birthday of Pia. While returning back from the treat their car was crushed on purpose so that the lives would end but because of the quick thinking of Asif their ex driver they were saved and this thought arose in Rajat as he was lying in hospital. He feels that though he had left the job with the Boses he was still very much attached and without thinking of any consequences he goes to save Rajat and Pia.

The last lines of the novel too is also very captivating and in a poetic way she ends the novel proving the sublimity of life and writing:

"He who binds himself a Joy

Doth the winged life destroy

But he who kisses the Joy as it flies

Lives in eternity's sunrise." (288)

She uses a framing device from the beginning by using a single action, scene, event, setting, and an element of significance at the beginning and end of *Oleander Girl*. She also uses the narrative hook at the very beginning of the novel in the dream sequence of Korobi. Chitra has also used the time travel paradox wherein the protagonist travels back in search of her true identity. The novel has a unique ability to connect to the common man and the universal experiences such as shame, guilt, regret, friendship, love, forgiveness and atonement are all fulfilled.

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20

Beyond Silence: A Textual Analysis of *The Palace of Illusion* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the Light of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

Priti Bala Sharma

"Too many women in too many countries
Speak the same language of silence.
My grandmother was always silent
Always aggrieved.
Only her husband had the cosmic right
(or so it was said) to speak and to be heard.
.....
We speak only to give words
To those who cannot speak
(too many women in too many countries)
I seek only to forget the sorrows
Of my grandmother." (Clinton 278)

India has a tradition of silent culture and women in India have always been presumed 'speaking silences'. Women's role in the Indian society has always been based on the ancient religious texts like the Vedas, the Puranas, and social texts like *Manusmriti* and *Grihsutras* etc. Before the arrival of the Aryans, the society was matriarchal but after their invasion and settlement in India, women's space became secondary and marginalized. The

establishment of sexual differences imposed restrictions on women. Men were presumed to be physically strong and were active in public sphere whereas women were passive and were free in private sphere (home) only. Their roles as mothers and objects of male desires were fixed. They were romanticized only as a submissive Sita or Savitri or Draupadi by giving them a fitting image of 'Pativrata Nari' in society.

Later on, many women empowerment movements in India took place and started spreading in the fields of education, economic self-sufficiency, preservation of human rights and liberation. The new women may seem to be too slender and physically weak but they know that they are not an object of possession and are able to define their secular identity and realize their claims and rights in the twenty-first century.

Gender inequality is not an episodic, ephemeral or situational phenomenon. Its ramifications correspond with social and cultural differences in Indian society. Due to its historical, social and cultural specifications, the representation of 'new women' is much desired.

To accomplish this, many writers have been giving vent to the concept of modern girl or new woman and other feministic aspects minutely and appropriately. Writers like Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Das, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandeya, Mahashweta Devi, Manju Kapur, etc., try to represent the contemporary modern women's struggle to define and reach to an autonomous self.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among those Diaspora writers who in her works like *The Sister of My Heart*, and *Oleander Girl*, etc., deal with the contemporary issues of women. Her work *The Palace of Illusion* is rather different from her these other books as it is an attempt of translating the voice of modern woman through Draupadi, the timeless character of the great epic of India *Mahabharata* and portraying her as the first feminist of India. Julia Hydis says,

> "Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of those imposed by history and gender." (Hydis 1)

About the motif of telling *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's point of view, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in one of her talks at Google Office, admits,

> "There is an action. There are plotting and planning. There is fortunes made and fortunes lost...most epics are a very action-oriented tales, but we do not really get the story of the women. Our epics are generally male-centred. But there are some amazing women like Draupadi and Kunti who really amazed me. But I never really knew what they were feeling, thinking or motives of their actions."

Therefore, she decides to retell the great epic *Mahabharata* from a woman's point of view. In the preface of The *Palace of Illusion,* she says,

> "If I ever wrote a book, I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the mines of the men's exploits." (Chira xiv)

In defining the role of women in society and gender identities, Chitra Banerjee resonates Virginia Woolf in some ways.

Virginia Woolf, who is considered to be the first modern feminist, advocated women's emancipation for education and space and formulated her feminist views in her works. Her *A Room of One's Own* is considered to be an elusive feminist treatise. In this work, she portrays the role of women in her times where women were given an idle place in literature but in reality, they were treated merely as an object in the hands of men. In her times, a girl used to be treated as the property of her father who chose a husband for her and after marriage her husband used to become her new lord (Pati) or master (Swami). So a woman had to depend on her father and her husband for everything she needed. Therefore, she says,

> "Imaginatively, she is completely insignificant; she pervades poetry from cover to cover. She is all but absent from history."[5] (Woolf 83)

Chitra begins *The Palace of Illusion* with the question of the origin of Draupadi who was a "gift beyond what was asked for...for she will change the course of history" (Chitra 5). Even listening to this prophecy, she was treated as a girl who was

never desired at first place. "It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted" (Chitra 7). Therefore her years in her father's house were unbearable and Dhai Ma's stories and Dhari were her only escape.

Education for Women

About education, Hindu scriptures state that 'Sa Vidhya Ya Vimuktye', i.e., That is Education which liberates us. Opens us, and shows new paths to explore. Therefore, when it liberates us, then why women are being sequestered from education. This question of the modern woman is the central argument of both Virginia Woolf and Chitra.

Instead of portraying Draupadi as an exploited woman, Chitra reverberates Virginia Woolf in terms of education for a woman. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf points out that woman must have money and a room of her own. Besides the economic power, she clearly argues for the education of women which if given would result in "... rational discourse. No need to hurry. No need of sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself" (Woolf 14). Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusion* too supports the need of education for women. So even many failed attempts of Dhari's tutor to dissuade her from lessons as "the lesson were making her too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech", she refuses to give up on studies. Instead of indulging into feminine interests she was determined to learn new war skills and political lessons. She further says,

> "I was given lessons in singing, dancing, and playing music. (the lessons were painful, both for my teachers and me, for I was not musically inclined, nor deft on my feet). I was taught to draw, paint, sew and decorate the ground age-old-auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival. (My paintings were blotchy, and my designs full of improvisations that my teachers frowned at.) I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson, I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me." (Chitra 29)

In Virginia Woolf's times, the women were not given freedom of intellectual equality, education and liberty because they were

considered subservient. Woolf argues the same point in *A Room of One's Own* that,

> "My difference with Affable Hawk is not that he denies the present intellectual equality of men and women. It is that he, with Mr. Bennett, assets that the mind of a woman is not sensibly affected by education and liberty, that it is incapable of the highest achievements; and it must remain forever in the condition in which it is now". (Woolf 9)

In the same way, Chitra's Draupadi does not accept the argument that boys are different from girls and argues on the purpose of a woman and questions the patriarchal rules "and who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (Chitra 26). Draupadi like Virginia Woolf recognizes that women are curious, clever and creative as men and they are not a path to ruin and have 'short memory' or 'impulsive nature' (Chitra 24). Therefore, when Yudhisthir loses her in the game of dice, she is thankful that she is not 'an unlettered girl; ignorant of the law. The elders would know the rule I referred to…" (Chitra 191) and quotes from *Nyaya Shastra*, "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife" and argues that she is a queen. She is the Daughter of Drupad, Sister of Dhristadyumna and besides this, she is the mistress of the greatest palace on earth. Therefore, she cannot be "gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to the court like a dancing girl" (Chitra 190).

Chitra and Woolf promote the freedom of mind of women who are capable of working on equal terms. Women are not merely an object for pleasure or a decorative piece, but have their own identity and play multiple roles and are able to en-shoulder various responsibilities at one time.

Marriage

Patriarchy is the provenance of civilizations which uses marriage as a scourge to coerce and silence women giving them secondary or subordinate status and repress their individual desires and identity.

In her other work *Women and Fiction*, Woolf illustrates the oppressive nature of marriage and familial obligation by saying, "...a woman was liable, as she was in the fifteenth century, to be

beaten and flung about the room if she did not marry the man of her parents' choice" (Woolf 45).

In *The Palace of Illusion,* Chitra reveals this fear hidden in the female psyche of Draupadi whose happiness for choosing her own husband in *Swayamwara* shatters when she comes to know that her marriage is pre-planned by her father. And when Karna comes forward to compete, she had to think about the safety of her father and brother in the first place and had to crush her own desires. To do this, she had to insult Karna in the worst possible way. Later on, when she was given the examples of Nal and Damayanti story to follow, she takes an unchanging position for the women throughout ages and speaks the modern women's mind for second marriage instead of labeling herself a Pativrata Naari,

> "Yudhisthir would have been happier with someone like Damayanti. She was a better woman than I. (but is the *better* word I was looking for? At what point does forbearance cease to be a virtue and become a weakness?) Once I returned to my father's home, I would not have kept searching for my husband. And had I called for a second *swayamvar*, I would have made sure it was a real one." (Chitra 210)

Draupadi like modern women aspires to find freedom, love, and sense of identity through her marriage and shuns this notion that an educated and strong woman cannot enjoy any position in society. Rather than accepting or surrendering to the man for his carnal pleasures, a woman must always speak her mind. In this way, Draupadi pronounces the independent identity and position of women in the heartless society.

Room (Space) for Women

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes the importance of having financial independence as indispensable for a woman to be free to become whatever she wants to become. As she writes, "A woman must have money and a room of her own" (Woolf 16) otherwise she will always be kept down by the conventions and patriarchal rules of the society she is living in. Therefore, she connects the sense of belongingness to the space and identity of women. This idea resonates in *The Palace of Illusion when* Chitra portrays the grand Palace of Khandava as

Draupadi's her 'own domain' (Chitra 148) and her desire, love, and attachment to it. She describes how during the making of the palace, Draupadi gives her opinion on the architecture and interior designing of the palace. Draupadi says,

> "I want a stream wending its way through the palace, with lotuses blooming all year, I added. I was being outrageous, but why not? Everyone else was asking for impossibilities—fires without fuel, towers that brushed the sun." (Chitra 145)

The status of women in Indian society has been deplorable throughout the history. There has never been a place for a married woman to belong to and attach her true feelings. She is only meant to do her duties for the family of her husband. The only real place she thinks she belongs to, where she can remain herself is her parents' home and when she finds the detachment from her parent's home after marriage, she has no place in this world to go. Keeping this scenario in mind, Chitra gave Draupadi a powerful voice to secure a substantial and significant space for her in her home and society.

From the very beginning of her childhood, Chitra's Draupadi has been an individual and rebellious by nature. She never liked her father's too much control and is found annoyed for having no privacy. Because of this disparity of gender, she always dreamt of her own palace one day. And when she got the palace as her own space "that is what I have been waiting for all my life" (Chitra 146), she was very happy as,

> "These were good years for me. I loved my palace, and in return, I felt its warmth embracing me as though it were alive. Some of its serenity seeped into me, some wisdom, so that I learned to be happy with my lot in the world. (And now that I had such a palace, how could I be otherwise?)" (Chitra 148)

This space gave her identity by rooting in a location where she could control over her life. This space of her own gave her the strength and was reflected through her actions "she was getting better queen day by day". She finds that "we were all surprised to discover that I had a good eye for matters of governance. More and more, Yudhisthir began to ask my advice when a tricky judgment had to be delivered" (Chitra 148).

Unlike Judith Shakespeare (female and uneducated) in *A Room of One's Own* who shared the genius of her brother William

Shakespeare had to commit suicide when she was sexually harassed, Draupadi like a new woman in *The Palace of Illusion* does not surrender to the odds of life when Keechak tries to humiliate, abuse, and harass her. She becomes more thoughtful on her femininity, rectitude and role as a strong woman in the patriarchal society,

> "…it seemed that everything I had lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart would not listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled in the most magical of palaces... none of them were the true Panchaali. If not, who was I?" (Chitra 229)

A Room of One's Own advocates the world where women have education and room of her own; similarly, Chitra in *The Palace of Illusion* gives the agenda of a Utopian city for women, a place of equality for women. During the Kurukshetra battle, Draupadi pronounces, "…. Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their lives without harassment" (Chitra 325).

Like Virginia Woolf, Chitra gives a new definition of a woman who has her own independent identity and has nothing to do with the gender assigned to her at the time of their birth. If a woman can make a mark in her profession or anything she can do like men, she should be acknowledged, recognized and treated as equal. In *Professions for Women*, Woolf defines woman differently,

> "What is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anyone can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skills." (Woolf 12)

In *A Room of One's Own,* she states that woman is a project, not a given. Femininity is a representation and cultural construction, not an eternal essence. The last part of *The Palace of Illusion* reinforces Draupadi as a new woman who rebels against the rules and boundaries set by patriarchal society, and unlike other wives of Pandavas, she decides to accompany her husbands on their final journey. She says,

> "Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what

> was the alternative? To sit among bent grandmothers, gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves with toothless gums as I waited for death? Intolerable! I would rather perish on the mountain. […], my last victory over the other wives […]. How could I resist it?" (Chitra 343-44)

Both Virginia Woolf and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *A Room of One's Own* and *The Palace of Illusion* respectively voices for the struggle for identity, education, free will and space for a woman. To portray it, they use a variety of foci to make their point and present their ideas. To present the ideas, they not only use the stream of consciousness technique to relate the ongoing narrative of a character's thoughts, they also use many other features of this narrative technique such as interior monologue, i.e., the character talking to herself and constantly does an analysis on their role in the family, society, identity, radical reformation to be done and the equality and the rights of women.

Like Virginia Woolf, Chitra attempts to show the way to see the world through the eyes of women because from many past years the world has been looked at through men's eyes only. In all civilizations and throughout the history, patriarchy has been defining religion, politics, economy, law, social norms, etc., only through men's perspective. And feminists like Virginia Woolf and Chitra decry against discrimination of women on the basis of sex *raison d'être* are prevented from education and space. Although having great influence on her family and being a strong, powerful, enigmatic and independent woman, Draupadi of *Mahabharata* was portrayed and narrated as subservient, oppressed woman throughout ages. But Chitra connected a contemporary sensibility of the twenty-first century women to her Draupadi turning her into a new woman and thus giving a platform of glocal feminism.

Therefore, it can be said that *The Palace of Illusion* is a rejoinder to *A Room of One's Own* as it deals with Draupadi, wife of Pandavas, as central to recent models of the twenty-first century new woman who has revolutionary and radical views on education, identity, silence of women throughout the ages and her space in her home and society. Like Virginia's Mary of *A Room of One's Own,* Draupadi of *The Palace of Illusion,* unlike the

other women of her times, rebels against the rules and customs of patriarchal society and raises her voice for her education, space and equality of women. In this way, she is portrayed as a significant forerunner of a modern woman who advocates the freedom of mind. There is literally 'no gate, no lock, no bolt' that can control (Draupadi's voice) 'her freedom of mind' (Woolf 74).

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Medusa Laughing: A Magical Feminist Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

Sneha Christall

There are few authorial voices that command attention among both literary critics and the mass reading public; fewer still manage to walk the thin line between writing for political and personal reasons. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works possess this rare literary merit; her novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) was adapted into a film by the same name in 2005. Her works, including popular novels such as *The Palace of Illusions, Oleander Girl, Queen of Dreams* and *Before We Visit the Goddess* interweave among many concerns, the varied strands of feminism, the Indian diaspora, historiography in the postmodern age and Indian mythology. While these aspects have been studied by various scholars, one compelling prospect is to compare her work with that of a contemporary author from a different cultural background.

The Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel proves to be most suitable in this regard. Like Divakaruni, she has written on concerns such as feminism, the feminist revisioning of history and significantly, uses magical realism. Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and Esquivel's *Malinche* (2006) are grounded in the principle of re-visioning conventionally patriarchal narratives of mythology and national history. Further parallels may be drawn between Esquivel's novel *Like Water for*

Chocolate (1989) that employs magical realism in its narrative framework, and Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). Indeed, it is apparent that both writers evoke a sensory experience, one that is grounded within the phenomenal plane, while challenging received notions of femininity and a woman's place in the turning, postmodern world.

The object of this study therefore, is to analyze their works *The Mistress of Spices* and *Like Water for Chocolate*, with due focus given to the means by which magical realism furthers the interconnectedness of gender, narrative and power. Furthermore, the intersections between magical realism and feminism will be studied. In 1987, Patricia Hart coined the term 'magical feminism' to describe the works of Chilean-American writer Isabel Allende, who in her novel *The House of the Spirits*, employed magical realism in a feminist narrative. This form therefore possesses the subversive quality of challenging monolithic structures such as patriarchy and colonialism. In both *The Mistress of Spices* and *Like Water for Chocolate*, the protagonists Tilo and Tita are endowed with supernatural capabilities; Tilo is mystically wedded to spices and can communicate with snakes, while Tita can transfer her emotions to the food she cooks. Consequently, this study also aims to reclaim the stereotypical representations of such women, who are deemed 'witches' in popular imagination and culture. Another point of interest is the setting of the novels; both plots progress in the essentially feminine space of the kitchen (or spice shop in *The Mistress of Spices*). The conventionally trivialised women's role of cooking and nurturing, here becomes a space for reclaiming feminine identity, where the women characters are eventually born into their agency. This study will use the theoretical arguments of Wendy B. Faris regarding magical realism and Hélène Cixous' critical essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" to delineate the role of the writer as evidenced in Divakaruni and Esquivel's works, and their particular consciousness of feminine experience. In both their works, the woman characters are not devoid of desire and longing; they assert the concept of 'writing the body' as postulated in *Écriture feminine*. By privileging experience before language, and employing a subjective discourse that is non-linear, while never consciously attempting to integrate two different worlds, the magical feminism employed by

Divakaruni and Esquivel reiterate the very ideals of *Écriture feminine*.

> When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Bronte who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to.
>
> –Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own*

The term 'magical realism' first gained currency in the domain of visual arts; it was used by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to refer to a new form of post-expressionist art. However, it gained significance during the spurt of Latin American literature in the 60s, which produced Gabriel García Márquez's magical realist novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

In her work *Ordinary Enchantments*, Wendy B. Faris noted key characteristics of the mode:

> First, the text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (7)

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo has magical powers that allow her to see into people and their suffering; she transmigrates to become an old woman and uses spices to allay their tensions. She is at once Nayan Tara, the star- seer, Tilottama, the name she gives herself and Maya, meaning 'illusion'. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Tita's tears inadvertently make their way into her sister's wedding cake. Consequently, the bitterness and despair she feels towards Rosaura for marrying her lover, Pedro is experienced by all the guests who eat the cake.

The novels abound in seemingly fantastical elements such that the reader is forced to confront their illusoriness. It elicits the question as to how these supernatural elements have been used

to convey feminine experience. Moreover, it draws together the modes of magical realism and feminist writing, as reflected in Hart's concept of 'magical feminism'. Just as magical realism is subversive and tends towards decentring established norms, feminism challenges patriarchal mores. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo is seen to use her knowledge of the spices' mystical powers; she offers Lalita a bag of fennel that would help her dream again and resist her abusive husband's advances. Esquivel uses this mode to subvert conventional representations of female sexuality. When Gertrudis eats Tita's dish made of rose petals, in which her blood had spilled, "she began to feel an intense heat pulsing through her limbs" (35). Overcome by an all-consuming passion, her body gives off flames and she runs naked towards Juan, a soldier who feels within him, a similar burning passion.

Thus, using fantastical language as a discursive means to express sexuality, desire and resistance, Divakaruni and Esquivel affirm the tradition of French feminism advocated by Hélène Cixous—*Écriture feminine*. This French feminist theory was seen in the works of Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig among others. Kristeva famously proposed that all women's writing is in the voice of the hysteric; the woman writer, she said, was fated to use phallogocentric language. By using a masculine code of signification, she had to speak of feminine experience, forever conscious that her experience could never be fully expressed. In her essay "Femininity, Narrative and Psychonalysis", Juliet Mitchell responded to Kristeva's statements by proposing that the woman writer's condition was *necessarily* one of hysteria, for it is within this very bind that she may best express herself. Though she accepts that the writer and her audience would be forever entangled in the process of telling and re- telling history(s), she anticipated it as a necessary process. "Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse" (290).

Cixous viewed male writing as monological, with a singular vision. There felt a need, among these French feminists to write of feminine experience, about women's bodies, their sexuality, even eroticism. *Écriture feminine* therefore concerned itself with

language and posited that the woman's status as 'other' in the masculine symbolic order may act as the very space within which she may reclaim herself. By engaging with her 'otherness', she may be enabled to transgress and subvert the monolithic claims of patriarchy.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo's 'othered' state is foregrounded at multiple levels—in her childhood, even her parents fear her supernatural powers. Soon, she becomes the pirate queen, far away from her homeland. Once again, she learns divine powers in the hands of the Old One:

> "I should have made you go", the Old One would tell me later, shaking her head ruefully. "They were volcano hands, simmering with risk, waiting to explode. But I couldn't."
>
> "Why not, First Mother?"
>
> "You were the only one in whose hands the spices sang back." (31)

In Oakland, she is a divine mistress of spices, forbidden from any physical contact with her customers. She is, at all times, once removed from the material world. Her customers are wary of her, yet find their way to her in times of need:

> Their glance skittery with fear with wanting.
>
> Witchwoman, say the eyes. Under their lowered lids they remember the stories whispered around night fires in their home villages.
>
> They keep their cautious faces turned away as they leave.
>
> But they will come back later. After darkness. They will knock on the shut door of the store that smells of their desires and ask.
>
> I will take them into the inner room, the one with no windows, where I keep the purest spices, the ones I gathered on the island for times of special need. I will light the candle I keep ready and search the soot-streaked dimness for lotus root and powdered methi, paste of fennel and sun-roasted asafetida. I will chant. I will administer. I will pray to remove sadness and suffering as the Old One taught. I will deliver warning. (11)

Tita too, suffers a sense of 'otherness' from the moment she is born. Her life and experiences are largely relegated to the

kitchen. She is forbidden by her mother, Mama Elena from marrying her lover Pedro, on account of a tradition that the youngest daughter must remain unmarried and serve on her mother, till the mother's death. Through the clever play of foreshadowing, Esquivel remarks, "Tita had no need for the usual slap on the bottom, because she was already crying as she emerged, maybe that was because she knew then that it would be her lot in life to be denied marriage" (5). The magical realist narrative then describes how she was "washed into this world on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor" (5). Quite matter-of-factly, Nacha, the family cook sweeps up the tears and collects the salt from it to be used for cooking. Esquivel cheekily adds that it lasted the family quite a long time. Yet, one must not mistakenly assume that Tita passively submitted to the patriarchal order: "Tita knew that discussion was not one of the forms of communication permitted in Mama Elena's household, but even so, for the first time in her life, she intended to protest her mother's ruling" (8).

Cixous, in her foundational essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" writes of a woman who described to her "a world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge,… prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rupture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful" (876). She called for women to write of desire, beauty and 'erotogeneity'. Quite clearly, she wished for women to speak freely of their sexuality, to 'write their body'. She describes a woman speaking in a public gathering, "Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body.... Her speech, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectified', generalized: she draws her story into history" (881). The popular conception of Medusa as a horrible woman, consumed by rage, inspiring terror and fear, is indicative of a culture that wishes to repress female power and agency. By appropriating this image to speak of women's sexual experience, Cixous liberates women to identify with a renewed conception of Medusa as an agent of free expression, desire and otherwise.

In the novels pertaining to this study, the women characters are in the process of identifying an appropriate means of

expression. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Geeta finds herself caught between the ways of her parents and the ways of America. She wishes to marry Juan, a Mexican project manager she loves, but is thwarted by her family's more traditional sensibilities. Even as she moves out of her home following a fight, she does not enter into a live-in relationship with Juan, respecting her father's wishes. She seeks reconciliation with her family through Tilo, even when her father remains silent. Similarly, Lalita, slowly reawakens into herself as the spices work their magic on her. "O almost Lalita whose mouth turmeric is beginning to open like a morning flower, how can I tell you there is no shame in speaking out. How can I say I admire" (78). Once she joins the battered women's collective, she takes up tailoring again, a pursuit she enjoys. In Esquivel's novel, Tita first begins to realize her own agency when she spends time away from Mama Elena, under the care of Dr John Brown. "Now, seeing her hands no longer at her mother's command, she didn't know what to ask them to do, she had never decided for herself before. They could do anything or become anything. They could turn into birds and fly into the air!" (69).

Indeed, the authors are unrestrained, even lyrical in their expression of female sexuality and desire. Tilo is depicted as a woman looking in on a man's private moments. Divakaruni here subverts stereotypical representations of the male voyeur. Tilo uses her supernatural powers to search within herself and watch Raven undress himself in the privacy of his bedroom. "In all my lives before, fortune-teller and pirate queen and apprentice of spices, I have never seen a naked man, never desired to see it. Then my hands shudder to a stop. Not now, hands, not now. Give me just a moment more" (58). In *Like Water for Chocolate*, every female character is described as sexually active, filled with longing; Gertrudis' surging passion is quenched only after she joins a brothel. Though Tita's actions seem limited to the kitchen, Pedro is drawn into this space by the aroma of her cooking:

> His scrutiny changed their relationship forever. After that penetrating look that saw through clothes, nothing would ever be the same. Tita knew through her own flesh how fire transforms the elements, how a lump of corn flour is changed into a tortilla, how a soul that hasn't been warmed by the fire

> of love is lifeless, like a useless ball of corn flour. In a few moments' time, Pedro had transformed Tita's breasts from chaste to experienced flesh, without even touching them. (44)

Another point of interest is the manner in which Divakaruni and Esquivel have reclaimed traditionally feminine spaces like the kitchen, and affairs such as cooking, feeding and sewing to mark the female characters' agency, identity and ultimate subversion of received notions of passive femininity. In doing so, they satirize, as Virgina Woolf did, the 'angel in the house', the Victorian feminine ideal, of the wife devoted entirely to the needs of her husband and children. This narrative strikes many resonant chords with the magical realist mode that also works on the principles of appropriation and subversion. Caroline Bynum suggests that food, and its manipulation was a means by which "women controlled their social and religious circumstances quite effectively" (220). In effect, they took to sewing and cooking, even modifying recipes as an end to exercise some control over the tasks assigned to them under traditional patriarchy.

As mentioned earlier, Lalita takes up tailoring, as a means of sustaining herself and giving herself value. Tilo searches deep within her consciousness and discovers that she dreams of setting up a tailoring shop—*Lalita Tailor Works*. Tilo herself is drawn to the allure of spices; the First One (her spiritual mother) denies her from leaving the sacred space of her spice shop. The apparent 'domesticity' of such a setting, that denied her from stepping into the streets of California and making friends of her customers, later ironically becomes the means by which she meets Raven, and finds within herself, the capacity to resist the laws laid down for her. Though wedded to the spices, she uses them to make herself young again, and shed the appearance of the old woman she was destined to be:

> Make me beautiful, makaradwaj, such beauty as on this earth never was. Beauty a hundred times more than he can imagine. For one night so that his skin will dazzle, his fingertips be branded with it for always. So that never again will he be with another woman without remembrance and regret. (195)

In Esquivel's work, cooking becomes a means by which Tita projects her unfulfilled desires and longings, the bitterness she

feels towards her mother and the despair that she would die unloved by Pedro.

> Just as women indulge themselves in romance novels, they too indulge in culinary creations. Numerous parallels exist here, since both activities are feminized and normalized. A more subversive reading shows how women use the time to read in ways that echo their time in the kitchen—as an escape from others, an excuse for–me-time that is granted since it fits with traditional gender role expectations. As a result, women who find food and food chores fun can use the kitchen in a selfishly indulgent way that allows the women relaxation, at the risk of reinforcing that they love to cook or feed others because of some innate qualities. (Mills 20-21)

These 'innate qualities' may refer to the essentializing notion of women as caretakers and nourishers. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Tita's breasts magically produce milk for her nephew Roberto. She is described as "Ceres herself, goddess of plenty" (52). Esquivel goes on to write, "If there was one thing that Tita couldn't resist, it was a hungry person asking for food" (52). However, her supernatural capabilities are not restricted to purely maternal instincts. The wedding cake she prepares for Rosaura has disastrous results, inducing pain and sickness among the wedding guests:

> But the weeping was just the first symptom of a strange intoxication—an acute attack of pain and frustration—that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio and the grounds and in the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love. Everyone there, every last person, fell under this spell, and not very many of them made it to the bathrooms in time. (28)

Furthermore, Pedro disguises his continued affection for Tita by praising the dishes she serves him. This irritates Rosaura and Mama Elena no end, while comforting Tita. The storyline is, many a time, interrupted by recipes for Tita's famed dishes. Thus, the characteristically feminine narrative of the cookbook here serves to redraw the limits of the novel genre, entering the new realm of 'culinary fiction'.

When Tita eventually finds her way out of Mama Elena's grip and goes away with Dr. Brown, Chencha runs alongside

their carriage and throws Tita the bedspread she had been sewing for months. "Tita used any yarn she happened to have in her bedspread, no matter what the colour, and it revealed a kaleidoscopic combination of colours, textures, and forms that appeared and disappeared as if by magic in the gigantic cloud of dust that rose up behind it" (68). In many cultures, sewing quilts from old clothes is recognized to be a symbolic act wherein something new and useful is created after destruction. "A common denominator found in many of these goods made of patchwork is economy, function, decoration and symbolism.... But aside from the aspects of utility and decoration, they are often laden with symbolic and magical contents" (Weagel 109). Thus, associations with shamanistic magic may be made even in this instance. Following her return to Mama Elena's house, Tita no longer fears her, and is more inclined to disregard her demands.

In battling the Angel in the House, Tita and Tilo among the other women characters, negate the notion of femininity handed down to them through socialization. They are represented as women who are powerful, magical even, who identify and assert their aspirations, as opposed to selflessly satisfying others' desires. Most strikingly, they do so, from within the very domain that is considered to be frivolous in dominant patriarchal thought.

At this stage, it would do to analyze in further detail, the 'magical' powers the women characters are endowed with, and their relation with the feminist discourse of *Écriture feminine*. Many critics consider the magical realist mode to be a form of identity and cultural politics; it represents the marginalized, those who are situated outside mainstream culture. Characteristic features of the mode include attention to detail and emotionally evocative content. By showing the ordinary in extraordinary ways, it serves to express alternate perspectives that may otherwise be neglected. As the magical coexists with the everyday, the characters are better capable of actively altering their circumstances and overcoming their oppression. While critics like Stephen Slemon have identified magical realism's many intersections with post-colonialism, which allows for creation of a 'dual spatiality', wherein gaps, silences and absences are foregrounded, and the dialectical interplay of binaries follows, the mode also has multiple parallels with other forms of identity politics that foreground plurality, such as feminism:

> All roads may lead to empire and nation, but not all forms of power politics chip at the grand narratives in the same way. For one thing, there is that mysterious discourse driving ideology that determines the direction of identity politics and the position from other discourses, and, for another, there are those numerous articulated categories of knowledge embedded in any grand narrative that require dismantling one by one. (Hart and Ouyang 153)

The magical realist mode is essentially a hybrid one; it combines the real and the supernatural. By disrupting realism and revisioning the past, it decentres fixed agents of power. In *Ordinary Enchantments*, Wendy B. Faris writes of this aspect:

> Although the narrative mode of magical realism belongs, in a sense, to both genders, it may be possible to locate a female spirit characterized by structures of diffusion, polyvocality, and attention to issues of embodiment, to an earth-centred spirit world, and to collectivity, among other things, that is active in magical realism generally, regardless of authorship. (170)

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo steps into Shampati's fire to be reborn as a mistress of spices in Oakland, California. Soon, she transgresses the laws laid down for her; she loves Raven, takes on the guise of a younger, attractive woman, and does not heed to the spices' warning by buying herself a mirror. She realises that retribution is imminent, yet she carries on. Later, in her acceptance of her 'wrongdoing', she readies herself for the ultimate penance, and decides to relinquish all ties with Raven and the material world:

> Spices I am singing the chant of propitiation. Can you not this once travel the path of forgiveness.
>
> The world does not work that way, foolish Mistress who thinks she can roll up the falling waterfall, can make the forest fire suck in its blaze-red tongue. Or as that man waiting in his car would say, hold again in your hands the bird already flown.
>
> Leave him out of this, spices, this is between you and me....
>
> Spices start with my life if you must. Take me first. Spend your hate on me.

> Tilo how little you have understood. From the deep the voice is a hiss, like water on hot iron. Or is it a sigh. Like the waterfall the avalanche the forest fire, we do not hate. We only do what we must. (212)

Just as Tilo's actions are shadowed by fear of retribution, Tita is haunted by Mama Elena's ghost who appears frequently to harangue her. This continues till the day Tita tells the ghost, "I know who I am! A person who has a perfect right to live her life as she pleases. Once and for all, leave me alone I won't put up with you! I hate you, I've always hated you!" (130). Following this incident, the ghost does not reappear.

In both the texts, the protagonists constantly interact with the real and magical worlds. At the moment they assert their will, they are redeemed. Tilo willingly accepts the suffering that she must endure, just as Tita throws all caution to the winds and reprimands the ghost. In Divakaruni's novel, the entire city is destroyed as a result of Tilo's transgression. The climax of *Like Water for Chocolate* rings familiar; Pedro and Tita's lovemaking causes the ranch to burn down in a shower of fireworks and brilliant sparks. Perhaps, these scenes, elevated to incorporate a magical, ethereal quality, allow the reader to come to terms with her own experience of lived feminine reality.

It becomes necessary therefore, to identify the figure of the witch, who armed with special powers, acts as an extended metaphor for the liberated woman who asserts herself personally and politically. Kimberly Wells, in her doctoral thesis *Screaming, Flying, and Laughing*, writes of the role popular literature, like the novels studied here, plays in this process:

> By portraying women with a kind of real power to change their worlds, they allow readers to explore various subject positions and imagine themselves with power. Readers who might not be receptive to feminist propaganda find themselves imagining a world where gender does not determine ability to influence the world, where the power they may exercise, domestic and political, is not devalued or trivialized or even made-over as 'cute' and weak but instead is shown as possible for radical social transformation. (24)

In conclusion, it becomes evident that Divakaruni and Esquivel employ magical elements that coexist with the ordinary,

to reimagine women's existence and experiences. Their works embody *Écriture feminine's* social and political commitment towards decentring the authority and autonomy of male forms of writing. Their magico realist works, situated firmly within a feminist discourse, are directed towards social change and revisioning. By calling out the phallogocentric narratives that predominate popular culture and imagination, their subjective, emotionally evocative and non-linear narratives promote new categories of thought and action.

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22

Where Dreams Come True: Studying *Oleander Girl* as a Fairy Tale

Aditi Deo Deol

Oleander Girl (2013) mirrors many concerns which find space otherwise in Chitra Divakruni Banerjee's realm of issues. The book has been variously studied as a novel portraying quest for identity, migration, displacement and women empowerment. With Chitra Banerjee's specialization in the field of mythical fiction and magical realism, it is quite natural that her seemingly realistic work *Oleander Girl*, is also not without fantastical leanings. Fairy tales first originated to provide mankind with hopefulness in the face of struggles. As Jack Zipes, an eminent critic in the field of fairy tale studies puts it, fairy tales aims "to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors that are accessible to readers and listeners and provide hope that social and political conditions can be changed" (Zipes 2). Zipes also contends that the fairy tale seems to have evolved from wonder folk tales—narratives that promised intervention of the marvelous and magical in the face of harsh reality. Such tales refer to no specific time or space. However, the tale has to make the real word as its basic setting so as to base its subversion of reality through other means. Earlier, a part of the folklore, as Tereza Havíøová asserts, it was in 18-19th century that the fairy tales were finally written with Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Anderson and Charles Perrault being the pioneer writers of fairy tales. Ruth Bottigheimer defines fairy tales,

> Fairy tales are commonly narratively and lexically simple, may or may not include fairies, unfold along predictable lines, with magically gifted characters attaining their goals with thrice-repeated magical motifs. (Bottigheimer 57)

Vladimir Propp delineated the fundamental characteristics of fairy tales. He emphasizes that fairy tales begin with a lack. *Oleander Girl* opens with Korobi, the protagonist yearning for parental love and affection. She as a young girl wants to understand her parents, their existence and their absence. She is told that her parents died when she was little and she has been trying to accept this fact, though unsuccessfully. No one speaks of her parents in the house of her maternal grandparents:

> I know so little about my mother, only that she died eighteen years ago, giving birth to me—a few months after my father, an ambitious law student, had passed away in a car accident… I never knew for sure because no one would speak to me of them. (OG 1)

This buried secret is an idea that provokes the reader's suspense. It is this lack which propels Korobi to tirelessly search for her mother and later, her father. For her various facts, the reasons of which are revealed later, such as her hair and the texture of her skin puzzle herself and the people who surround her. Her grandmother wonders, "Where she got those curls, Sarojini can't figure out. Everyone else in the family has stick-straight hair" (OG 12). Ostensibly Korobi has loving grandfather and grandmother who belong to the class of traditionally elite, a fiancé who is rich and handsome, good education and appreciating parents-in-law. However, the book from the beginning harps on the fact she felt the lack of her biological parents and her need to associate with them as parents and people.

If Korobi is the naïve and virgin heroine, we also have in the book a rich, handsome, much sought-after eligible bachelor as the hero to complement Korobi's presence through the love plot. The introduction of this glorious hero is quite in the opening of the novel, with Korobi telling this to the seeming apparition of her mother,

> He comes from such a different kind of family. They're so rich and modern and fashionable that it's a little scary. And you

> know Grandfather—proud to bursting of our heritage, of the old ways. But I was amazed at how well they got along from the first. Maybe it's because Grandfather saw that Rajat loves me just the way I am, that he never wants me to change. And I— I feel complete in his arms, Mother, just like you'd written in your letter. Why, I love him so much, I could die for him! (OG 2)

Not only he is rich but he is much coveted by Sonia, his ex-girlfriend whose presence, temper and tricks threaten Korobi time and again. He is a perfect wooer, an experienced lover and loves to teach Korobi many things she is unexposed to such as dancing skills, socializing in parties, etc. He is filled with love and great admiration for Korobi, stands up for her at all the right times, begs forgiveness when he is wrong, and is ready to accept up with her mixed race heritage. Hence, all these qualities make him the perfect lover in a fairy tale.

Lewis C. Seifert asserts that psychoanalytic studies indicate fairy tales to be concerned primarily with sexuality and concerns with the maintenance of the stability of a household.

> For the hero or heroine, this means progressing from an initial situation of disequilibrium within his or her family (resulting from the death of a parent, expulsion from the family, etc.) to a situation of restored equilibrium (in which the family is reunited or a new family is begun). (Seifert 2)

This is quite true of *Oleander Girl*, because as soon as Korobi comes to know of her father being alive and being an American, she launches on a journey to find her father. This journey also helps her to resist against the confines of patriarchy. She realizes later that the apparition of her mother wanted her to go out and find her real roots,

> Now I knew what my dream mother had wanted. She wanted me to understand that I had a future across the ocean, someone waiting there for me, although he didn t realize it yet. (OG 69)

As Raufman observes about female protagonists of fairy tales, "Many heroines begin their narrative journeys after losing their mothers" (Raufman 120). Korobi's grandfather dies of a heart attack and asks forgiveness from Korobi. Later, her grandmother

reveals that the grandfather hid a big secret about her father—that he is alive and he is an American. This puts the peacefully happy circumstances in a topsy-turvy situation. Burning with the need to connect with at least half of her self she courageously ventures for a journey to the United States of America. Hence, this feature, another chief characteristic of a fairy tale is what occupies a large part of the book. The young, innocent, and virgin girl in moving to the other part of world, threatens her virginity, her engagement with her fiancé and her future in every way. This also categorizes the novel as a *bildungsroman,* a books talking about the adventurous journey of the protagonist.

This journey also displays another idea endorsed in fairy tales—that of growing up and coming of age. It is noteworthy that Korobi lives in a relatively cocooned ambience in Kolkata. However, her journey to America is a tale of coming to terms with life full of harsh realities. Her myths regarding people, their genuineness and their goodness are busted as she meets various kinds of people. Especially in case of a person pretending to know something about her mother and later trying to rape her, she comes to realize the adversities of life. If Kolkata is the place which seems to give her a life full of dreams, America is the far-off land that busts those dream. One after the other she is shocked about her newly-found identity as a daughter of an American, a black and as a child born out of wedlock. All realities that her grandfather carefully protected her from, changes her idea of her very being. This quest for identity and subsequent revelations are classic features of a fairy tale. This journey also imparts her an understanding of her relationship with Rajat. The romantic encounter with Vic, makes of her conscious of the love she has for Rajat, the love which finally propels her to come back to him. This change in mental make-up of the protagonist after the journey is explained by J.R.R. Tolkien as "recovery".

> Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view.... We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness. (Tolkien 9)

It is only when Korobi is able to see the people and the faces around her with a new light, the old Korobi returns home with

a new experience. When she comes back from America she realizes that her secret has made her a different person in the same city.

> I'm amazed at how different the city appears. I've taken this road every year upon my return from boarding school, have looked at the same scenes. But today it's as though a cover has been whisked away. (OG 269)

This recovery arms her to see Rajat's love, her own parents and her grandparents in a new light. This is summed up best by Sarojini who contemplates at her granddaughter's wedding,

> Look now at our granddaughter, strong and beautiful. She has traveled the world and chosen to come back home. Perhaps her mother would have, too, if we had let her. See her hand in the hand of her husband. He, too, has travelled, gone astray, swung back. (OG 183)

"Fairy-stories, at any rate, have many more permanent and fundamental things to talk about" (Tolkien 11) and *Oleander Girl* is an apt example of that. The perpetual theme of a fairy- the struggle of good versus the evil also finds space in *Oleander Girl*. The hero and the heroine and their relationship is pitted against the villainous Mitra, the caretaker of Boses' art gallery in America. An embittered victim of the 9/11 tragedy, Mitra is bewildered by the financial troubles which entrap him in America following the big tragedy. He seeks succour in gambling, misusing the art pieces in the gallery. As Korobi goes to America, he thinks her to be Boses' spy and is negative towards her. Later, he is vengeful towards her as his wife leaves her thinking it to be Korobi's influence. Fuelled by revenge, he attacks the office of the detective hired to find Korobi's father, to publicly reveal or blackmail the Boses equipped with the secret of Korobi's father's identity as a black man and that her parents never married each other. Thus, here Mitra fulfils the function of the villain as indicated by Vladimir Propp in his famous *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, that of plundering something precious (Propp 18). Mitra is quite successful till Rajat's father intervenes and deals one-on-one with Mitra. Another villain in the book is Sonia—Rajat's ex-girlfriend who is not yet over Rajat. She hovers in the background for sometime before making her intentions clear to the reader—that she wants to marry Rajat. She is the example of the spoilt brat—

the girl who is not a virgin now and has chosen to give it up before marriage, something which Korobi was apprehensive of doing due to her traditional upbringing. The cunning, filthy rich, ill-tempered, seductive Sonia is pitted against the innocent, learning-the-ways-of-the-world, loving and beautiful-at-heart Korobi. Propp indicates that sometimes even after the protagonist returns home, it may not be the end of the story, as in case of Korobi.

> [A]n initial villainy is repeated, sometimes in the same forms as in the beginning, and sometimes in other forms which are new for a given tale. (Prop 37)

Once she returns to Kolkata, Rajat under influence of his mother, who in turn is under influence of the information she has received from America, refuses to marry Korobi. Only after finding sufficient evidence of her innocence, Rajat begs forgiveness from Korobi and marries her.

Fairy tale offers, "the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires" (Tolkien 13). Carrasi also asserts that,

> "to tell a fairy tale would mean to tell a story concerning figures, phenomena, situations, and beliefs included in that indefinite, mysterious, fascinating, dreadful subject called supernatural, which gathers all that lies beyond the natural, known, usual, realistic boundaries of the daily life: a sort of parallel and alternative world with its own rules and customs, more or less different from those being current in our world." (Carrassi 72)

To provide this succour, there are some supernatural or paranormal events in the novel. The book opens with Korobi witnessing the apparition of her dead mother when she least expected her visitation. She recounts many occasions when as a child she often hurt herself thinking the spirit of her parents would save her. However, nothing of the sort happens till the day of the engagement ceremony.

> But there it is, in the armchair in the corner of the bedroom: a still female form, black against the darkness of the room, looking toward me.... It makes a certain sense that she should visit me now.... A terrible thought strikes me: Has she come, like ghosts in tales, to warn me of an impending disaster? (OG 1-3)

The troubled look of this spirit serves the function of foreboding all the tribulations which follow in the course of events. Korobi again sees two golden orbs when she is departing from Kolkata to her journey understanding it to be her mother and grandfather. Also, after she looks at her wedding pictures she notices, "two small ovals of light above our heads. A reflection from the flash? I choose to believe otherwise" (OG 186). Not to miss the way in which Korobi's long lost father accepts her with an unexplained transformation of heart after initially blaming her for trying to exhort money from him. The miraculous is again seen when the big mansion of Korobi's grandfather is suddenly saved from being sold out by a pro-Hindutva politician. This transformation is almost sudden and miraculous bordering on the magical. Bernheimer is quite right to observe that

> The natural world in a fairy tale is a magical world. The day to day is collapsed with the wondrous. In a traditional fairy tale there is no need for a portal. Enchantment is not astounding. Magic is normal. (Berheimer 69)

As in fairy tales, the villains lose in the end and the good triumphs. Seifert rightly suggests that, "familial structures and the sexual dynamics they [fairy tales] entail are most obvious in the stereotypical marriage closure of so many fairy tales" (Seifert 2). In its happily-ever-after ending, the novel reinforces the victory of those who are innocent. Tolkien calls this phenomenon "Eucatastrophe"—the opposite of tragic endings. For him this function of the fairy tale is much more true than the satisfaction of ancient desire in imaginative ways.

> The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. (Tolkien 13)

Fairy tales are characterized by a circularity in narration. The endings hint back at the beginning. If the engangement ceremony mark the beginning of the book, Korobi's marriage with Rajat marks the ending. Korobi notices that "For the wedding photo we

stand once again on the veranda overlooking the garden. So much has changed since we gathered here less than three months ago" (OG 185). The picture perfect ending hints at the wishful peace and happiness that lies at the heart of all humans. Pia's antics as a photographer, capture this moment and make it seem perfect with Korobi's and Rajat's wedding. The villains are defeated or miraculously subside (as in case of Sonia). Rajat's business, suffering due to workers' issue, seems to pick up again. Domestic felicity predominates the scene and the idea of "universal final defeat" (Tolkien 14) is denied.

To conclude, it can be said that all the realistic events in the narrative supply the obstacles or the raw, realistic basis but do not relieve the book of the magical and fairy tale-like elements which dominate it. *Oleander Girl* is the site of coexistence of the magical and the real world. What Rajat exclaims about Korobi can well be seen defining the nature of the book,

> "Are you kidding!" Rajat says later when I ask him this. "The way you've grown up, orphaned at birth, hidden away in some mountain valley, and now guarded in that ancient, beautiful mansion by your ogre of a grandfather—why, just listening to you was like entering a fairy tale!" (OG 17)

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23

Depiction of Domestic Violence in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Bats"

Zeba Mehdi,
Smita Mishra

The present paper proposes to analyze the story "The Bats" in the light of 'Domestic Violence.' We all know the dictionary meaning of 'Domestic Violence', i.e., violent or aggressive behaviour within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner. Domestic violence is a blot on the society. The unheard cries are left with the sobbing. It remains a personal affair of the couples. Nobody dares to intervene in the matter. It strengthens the courage of the oppressor. Samantha Gluck believes, "Even though the causes of domestic abuse remain poorly understood, it is critical that society stands strong against the crime of domestic violence and support laws and social programmes put in place to stop the cycle" (on-line).

"The Bats" is a very simple story of a family of three (mother, father, and a daughter) and a maternal grandpa in a guest role. The family is an unfortunate one that has to forgo the burden of domestic abuse. It leaves the family members in utter depression. The least affected member is the man of the house. He who oppresses does not feel the pain. The oppressed ones live in the horror of contempt. The family is not rich. The father is a foreman at the Rashbihari Printing Press, and the mother, a housewife. The narrator is a small girl who introduces her parents in a

dramatic way. The beginning of the story leaves the readers stunned at the horror of the society being faced by the females.

> "THAT YEAR MOTHER CRIED A LOT, NIGHTS. OR MAYBE she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice." ("The Bats" 1)

In the story, the father beats his wife more often. The daughter notices marks, swellings on the mother's face and feels very hurt. She cleverly introduces her father. She does not see her father much. He sleeps late in the morning and she goes to bed before he comes back from his work. He is a bad and short tempered person. He does not have much role to play. He is a passive actor. He has been projected as the epitome of cruelty. He does not have love for his wife or daughter. His own life is his concern. He comes, does whatever he wants to, and leaves for job. It is his daily routine along with beating and thrashing of his wife. She describes her father's ill temperament.

> "I heard him, though, shouts that shook the walls of my bedroom like they were papers, the sounds of falling dishes. Things fell a lot when father was around, maybe because he was so large". ("The Bats" 2)

The girl knows about her father's behaviour with her mother. He never gives her money. She says, "I wondered how she would buy our tickets. She never had much money, and whenever she asked for any, Father flew into one of his rages" ("The Bats" 3). The father has been projected as the sheer chauvinist.

One day she notices another deep red mark on her mother's face that is worse than the previous ones. She asks but in vain. She portrays her mother as a weak and obedient wife. She always listens to him. She is compelled to work against her wishes. She is a simple person. She is herself responsible for her miseries. She is a victim of domestic violence. This kind of violence in the house results in the death of human relationships. One day after she was badly beaten by her husband, tells her daughter to visit her grandpa. She gets excited, and starts packing. They leave in a train, while father is sleeping. It is a great experience for the girl who has never experienced such a journey. They reach the grandpa's house. Seeing the house, she comments, "There it was, a tiny house, almost a play house, with mud walls and straw on the roof like in my storybook pictures" ("The Bats" 6)

She has a wonderful time with her grandpa. She has never experienced such a calm and interesting life. Her house is always a worthless place to live in. There she cannot live to the fullest. Here at Gopalpur, she is relieved as nobody can hurt or harm her mother. Grandpa is an old man, very polite and loving. He gives them a warm welcome in the house. They go for fishing, to orchards, roam in the village. They kill the bats that destroy the mango orchard. Grandpa tells her magic stories. She calls grandpa her best friend. She praises him saying, "I was learning a lot. He himself was a good fisherman, patient and cheerful, with a stillness about him that drew the fish to his hook" ("The Bats" 7). Grandpa is very caring. She describes, "He was considerate as well, and whenever he bought home a catch for mother to cook, he always cleaned and cut it up first, because the sight of blood made her feel sick" ("The Bats" 7). She is enjoying her stay at Gopalpur. When suddenly on day, mother receives a letter from the father asking them to come back and promises never to hurt her again. The girl gets shattered. She is reluctant to go back. But mother insists. She boards the train with a heavy heart. Her grandpa gives a ring that they found in a fish's stomach. She hides it in the house and keeps on changing its place so as it should not be taken by anyone else in the house. Not many days passed, father starts beating her mother again. When she tries to save her, she is hardly pushed. They again leave the house for a few weeks. When they come back, she does not find her ring. It's gone!

The character of the narrator seems to be self-sacrificing, obedient, understanding. She obeys her mother. She wants to be with grandpa but comes back with mother without any complaint. She tries to do something for her mother, unable to do so. She remains a silent listener throughout the play and no doubt, an effective observer.

"Article 15 of the Indian Constitution says that the state shall not discriminate against only of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them" (www.legalservicesindia.com)

There have been a number of movements for the emanicipation of women. The 19th and 20th centuries witness the women empowerment as well. Many great leaders and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath

Tagore, etc., stood for the advancement of the women. Many acts like The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (1956), The Indecent Representation of Women Prohibition Act (1986), The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (1971), The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Regulation and Prevention Act (1994), etc., are for the safety of women. How far they are helpful, nobody knows.

Gender justice is an integral part of the constitution. The Domestic Violence Act of 2005 of India legally defines domestic violence and the prosecution guidelines of those cases that are reported to the police (Wikipedia). Despite all the efforts, violence against women has not been eliminated. But it seems, it is on the rise. "The percentage of women who suffer serious injuries as a result of domestic violence tends to range from 19 to 55 per cent (Wikipedia).

India has been a patriarchy for long. The women are supposed to be under some male for the safety. Modern India observes the concept of Male-Chauvinism. It is a belief that men are superior in terms of ability, intelligence, etc. (Oxford Dictionary). In every field, women have to face this discrimination. The house is not a rescue place but far most terrible to bear the burden of other's superiority at every step. The orthodox ideologies force the females to bear the sufferings silently, if they do not do so, their children will have to face the hardships. This mindset gives rise to the atrocities against women. A gender-segregation exists in the society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reflects the basic instinct of a male. "The Bats" is a very simple and straight episodic story. The story throws light on the 'jungle rule' in the world of two-legged species. M.K. Gandhi strictly believed that, "subjugation and exploitation of women was a product of men's interested teachings and women's acceptance of them" (Alok Sharma 159). In the story, the father enjoys full right on his wife. He beats her brutally. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that the wife never objects. Her subjugation is a cause for repeated violence against her. Her sufferings regard her as a submissive. The narrator highlights the frequency of beating.

"…I noticed something funny about her face. Not the dark circles under her eyes. Those were always there. It was high up

on her cheek, a yellow blotch with its edges turning purple" ("The Bats" 2). Such revelations shake the heart. The exploitation of the wife is a daily affair in the house. The little girl feels lonely and unable to solve the hidden mystery of the marks. The story reveals that the women are still abused brutally in this free India. Indians boast of their culture, but contrast the image in the four walls of the house. The father of the story is the bread earner and hence feels free to torments his wife.

Every writer's artistic quality is different from others. Chitra enjoys a very special place in literature. She uses colloquial language. Her easy to be read stories get good popularity worldwide. Her unique style makes her stand one in a crowd. Her stories have simple themes. All her works deal with the different phases of life. Such writing style is a modern one. The story of "The Bats" begins with a dramatic sentence and ends in dismay. In "The Bats", no emphasis is made on the thrashing but a mere sentence muttered by a small girl fulfils the purpose. The girl is at the centre of the story. It is she who depicts domestic violence against her mother. Her mother remains a mere puppet at the hands of the circumstances. The story is close to the heart of many because of its realistic beginning and ending. It happens in reality. Nothing changes in a couple of days. Any change needs eras and ample of support from the society. Only history can change history.

She says, "A couple of days later Mother had another mark on her face, even bigger and reddish-blue. This time when I asked her about it she didn't say anything, just turned the other way and stared at a spot on the wall. Then she asked me how I would like to visit my grandpa for a few days" ("The Bats" 3). Actually, the society rules the conduct of a female. She avoids to revolt. The fear of the outer world suppresses her rebellion. She accepts the absurd and tormenting behaviour of her feeder. Her objective aims at the future of her children. The mother of the play is a helpless poor lady with no back-up. She is afraid of the outer world. She is projected as an escapist. She does not stand for her own rights but bear the brutality of a coward man. She mostly leaves her chaotic house for a couple of days. She flees away with her daughter at night to escape the present scene. She forgets that running away is not the solution. She should oppose the reign of

terror and fight for her rights and self-respect. She does the other way round. She gathers energy and leaves the house at night as bats do. They also are active at night and the whole day cling to a particular place. The female lead of the story has only one fear in her mind that is rebellion. She is scared of objecting. She believes what her husband says. She rarely uses her brain. she is depicted as the perfect robotics wife that can come as a blessing for any man.

Tripathi correctly states, "Society may be likened to a thorny tree. In the beginning there are no thorns, they appear later on the tree" (30-31). There is hardly any society that doesn't have any problem. Tensions and adversities are a part of life. Problems get solved sooner or later. But the concern is on domestic abuse. It has always been a challenge for the other sex. It has not got resolved yet, but deep-rooted in the society. The victims like the mother of the play "The Bats" suffers badly in the hands of their own destiny and acceptance of fate. The little girl is a silent spectator who does not respond effectively. When she does so, fails. She says, "Father had flung me against the wall as I tried to stop him" ("The Bats" 16).

"The Bats" is a realistic story. The mother does not foster hopes for her better future. She is buried in the dismayed fake relationship. She feels humiliated and insecure. She lacks courage to oppose, revolt. She realizes any claim of hers against the beating may bring further disruption in the life. She never reacts only sits quietly. She has taken beating as a routine of her life. When she gets tired, she leaves the house for a couple of days or sometimes weeks. She can do this much. It seems as if she prepares herself for further beating.

A number of females can see themselves in the place of the mother. The projection of the episodes of beating brings life to the fiction. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni effectively expresses the social framework we live in. The personal agony of the mother can be blended with the history of many females. The playwright builds a community that remains mum at the defeat of the womanhood. It is she who has to explore a new life for herself full of respect and love. Seemanthini Niranjana firmly states, "Marriage is a critical turning point for a girl" (56). In the wife's exploration of herself, she faces domestic abuse, gets fragmented. Domestic

violence results in trauma that unable a woman to hope for the brightness in her life. She gets shattered and demoralized.

The practice of domestic violence is harmful for the children. The physical harassment leads to the total subjugation of the females. In this manner, society gives birth to more violent beings. Domestic violence should be strictly criticized and condemned. It needs full cooperation and support of the society. A single person cannot bring about the favourable change in the society. We should stand in oppose of this practice. It is not at all concerned with literacy rate but human-psyche. The mothers of the country should inculcate respect and affection for the other sex. The up-bringing of a child plays a very important role in eradicating domestic violence to some extent. What you sow, so shall you reap is a good example for the upliftment of the thought procedure. It is society's responsibility as a whole to support the victim and let down the culprit. Every individual is important and has right to live respectfully. If we all pledge to do so, a new India can come into being with a new ray of hope for many victims who have once left hope for betterment.

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Quest for Freedom in Chitra Banerjee's Divakaruni *Victory Song*

Shubhajit Bhadra

The aim of the paper is to showcase the quest and concept of freedom in the context of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Victory Song*, which is a potent tale of a girl's unrelenting and indomitable spirit in the backdrop of the Indian independence movement. In spite of being its strong context, it is one of the lesser known novels of Divakaruni because of its toned down approach. In comparison to novels like *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Oleander Girl*, the *Victory Song* has failed to generate a strong presence in the overall gamut of Divakaruni's works.

My aim in this paper is to clinch for itself a sound status as it is a novel of breathtaking content and racy style. The novel tries to present before the readers the concept of quest for freedom in the light of characterization of Neela and the depiction of Indian freedom struggle. The novel titled *Victory Song* presents three kinds of freedom: personal, political and moral.

Divakaruni's protagonist Neela is a small girl who lives in a village in the midst of a well-restricted family where the father is accommodative but the mother is dominating. The dominating pattern and attitude of the mother becomes discernible in the very first chatper of the novel when Neela's elder sister's wedding ceremony takes place. Divakaruni portrays the conservative

Bengali family ambience and the dominating matriarchal and patriarchal society through the ritual of the marriage ceremony. Divakaruni brings to light Neelas's quest for freedom from such suffocating household rules and daily chores, where a small girl is reduced to the stature of a slave or domestic maid servant.

Divakaruni presents Neela as a strong individual character against the backdrop of such a situation where she strives for freedom from a dominating mother. Her mother becomes very dominating on the day of marriage as she dictates the terms to Neela. She has to wear her apparition; a saree instead of a frock which she is accustomed to wear. But Neela's mother does not like her daughter to show her long legs to boys. Neela does not even like to go through the rituals along with her elder sister as she finds all these too suffocating. Her father gives Neela the requisite freedom but her mother seeks to curb the very freedom offered by her father and nurtured and desired by Neela.

Neela's quest for freedom is pitted against the conforming mentality of her elder sister who does not protest but who also expresses her fear of being married to an unknown boy. The time Divakaruni brings alive in *Victory Song* did not permit a girl to choose her husband, rather it was a time when child marriages were a routine affair. In this context, even Neela's open-minded father cannot become an exception as he decides to marry his daughter off to an unknown boy quite early in the life of her daughter.

Neela and her elder sister talk about the latter's impending married life and cast as person on it. But, they are mute spectators as the match has been decided already by their parents. Neela's elder sister is quite afraid regarding her future groom who is totally unknown to her and whom she has never met personally. Neela's quest for freedom even manifests itself when she contemplates why a girl has to bring dowry to her groom's house, when the other family would get a free slave for the rest of the life. It would not be an exaggeration to comment that Neela's fear is deeply entrenched in the very fabric of the orthodox society of which she is a part and parcel. Neela wants to rebel but cannot protest as it would mean encroaching upon the territory of the elders and society. She is freedom-loving and freedom-seeking girl who likes to jump and enjoy, who likes to swim and who

likes to climb a tree of her will. She cannot be measured by the conventional outlook of her mother, who always likes to tame her, neither by the indulging behavior of her father, who likes to accommodate Neela's behavior as he does his best to make her feel better. The fear of the two sisters regarding the existing marriage becomes quite clear in the following lines.

"… But she understood Usha's fears. And yet-that is how it always had been in traditional Indian families like theirs. Young men and women were not allowed to meet alone and get to know each other, not even after then weddings had been arranged. And the thought of choosing one's own husband was, of course, out of the question." (*Victory Song*, 5)

The traditional Indian families were too constricting to allow freedom to their daughters for choosing their husbands. Even Neela's freedom—respecting father was no exception. So unknowingly, Haricharan becomes a part of the trap which he seeks to avoid. Neela's quest for freedom is both personal and interpersonal, she likes to lead life on her own terms, with her head high and feet firmly planted on the ground. She is a pragmatic girl as she does not romanticize the marriage of her elder sister Usha. She wants to crave for a new dawn when girls will not merely be the puppets of their families but rather open minded with the ability to see, discover and choose.

In *Victory Song*, Divakaruni has presented the time, when women were dominated beyond measure and the credit of the novelist is evidently seen in narrating those events, when they were not given proper space to 'breath in'. A sociological study of later nineteenth century and early twentieth century Indian families, particularly Bengali families would clinch the point. It is to the novelist' credit that she has been able to frame and articulate the quest for freedom through the character of Neela.

Neela is extremely fond of a wandering minstrel called Bauldadu who epitomizes freedom at its zenith. He sings patriotic songs and other songs of freedom, which strikes a chord in Neela's heart and she can never rid herself of the impact created by her Bauldada on her mind and spirit. The chief purpose of Bauldada is to inspire more and more people to work for the freedom of their motherland from the clutches of the British rule. The discourse of political freedom is deeply embedded into the

very texture and structure of the novel. But that can be discussed towards the later part of this article.

Neela says to herself that it is essential for her to strive towards attaining freedom for her feminine self. However, Neela's gender is a social construction as patriarchy has always been responsible for the oppression, domination, subjugation, marginalization, and even construction of female gender. Neela understands that patriarchy does not necessarily mean a huge assemblage of men, rather it is a system of domination based on power. Even a woman can be an agent of patriarchy, an example being Neela's own mother and one of her own aunt who blames Neela's parents for the freedom which has been assigned to her. Bauldadu sings 'Vande Mataram'and Neela's whole body shivers out of excitement, which brings to herself a portrait of future freedom for the country itself.

On the night of Usha's wedding, a group of freedom fighters who believe in non-violence as a policy to drive away the British from India invade the ceremony and ask for offerings. Among the freedom fighters, there is a boy called Samar who approaches Neela to beg for any offering and Neela offers him her most precious jewellery a gift which she received from her mother on that very day on the eve of the marriage. The initial response to the freedom fighers's invasion is mixed, the lord-owner thinks it to be an act if robbery, but Haricharan thinks it as her moral responsibility to contribute to the cause of freedom fighters. There is the leader of the group, Biren who gives an inspiring speech and says that if every citizen of the motherland contributes to their cause of freedom then the nation would be free soon. He says that he requires food, money and shelter from his own people and that is why he asks for offerings. Neela suffers from a sense of trepidation as she offers her precious jewellery but she thinks that her father Haricharan would understand and appreciate her gesture. He instantly develops a liking for the brave boy Samar who is bent on even sacrificing his life for the cause of freedom and it is precisely at this juncture that the personal and political concepts of freedom collide.

Neela very well understands that without personal freedom, political freedom is never possible and this brings to light her own mature outlook. Bauldadu is also seen as a freedom fighter

but the landlord admonishes him for his so-called daredevil attitude. Some people think that Bauldadau is a vagabond which others respect his integrity and quest for freedom. After the freedom fighters leave the wedding ceremony and a grand feast follows. Haricharan feels the moral responsibility to join in the cause of freedom fighers. Haricharan initially provides a stern attitude to Neela along with his wife but fromm his inner heart he feels proud of his daughter for her offering. After a few days of the marriage, Haricharan discloses his plans to Neela to join independence movement and his purpose of going to Calcutta. However before going, he provides Neela a responsibility and that is to look after their cow Budhi. Neela understands everything and for the first time, she hears the name of Mahatama Gandhi who has always inspired a host of Indian English novelists.

After the departure of Neela's father, she feels enough responsibility to engulf her and in the mean time, she has to give shelter to the elder freedom fighter Saman who lies injured at her house and craves for food, shelter and medication. Neela has no opposition to provide shelter but she is afraid of her mother but finding no alternative. She goes to Panditjee and succeeds in bringing him to take care of injured Samar. Neela thinks that it is her moral responsibility to do positive things for the freedom fighter and it is her second step towards it. During these days she takes care of the cow, helps her mother and always looks after Samar and it is in this context that one might call her a freedom figher as well. During this period, she tries to transcend the limitations imposed upon her by her gender and does everything which a boy might have done.

Seeing Samar for the second time, she becomes aware of her sexuality and she feels the feminine urge to love Samar from the core of her heart. One day during the raid of British Police at their house to find out the trace of a freedom fighter, Neela behaves quite courageously and like a strong-headed girl in which she eventfully succeeds and Samar also manages to escape.

After several days, Neela makes a plan to visit Calcutta and finds out her father who becomes traceless after his departure and the entire family becomes worried, Samar has left an address for Neela of his cousin sister in Calcutta. Neela thinks of visiting Calcutta without seeking permission from her mother, another act

of striving towards freedom. Traditionally, women were not allowed to leave the domain of their house but Neela is a girl with a different spirit. She transcends the traditional 'Laxman-rekha' and makes up her mind to go to Calcutta in search of her father by stealing money from her mother–another act of transgression of female gender. In the meantime, one day Neela is discovered by her mother having a discussion with Bauldadu, an act which her mother abhors and condemns. The Baul immediately departs and this makes Neela even more firm as she certainly makes up her mind to go to Calcutta to bring her father back to home to also to rescue him if he is in any danger. Neela's heart also aches for freedom as she understands that till the Britishers remain in India there is no future ahead for the Indians. Neela believes in what Samar and Biren say about the probable and possible independence of India. Neela firmly believes that the Britishers should and must be driven only by using force and she can be a catalyst in this context to drive out the Britishers from India. Neela makes a departure from the conventional role of an ordinary Indian Bengali girl and moves out or ventures out in quest for freedom.

Neela eventually succeeds in visiting Calcutta and also in finding out the house of Samar's cousin sister, who ultimately takes Neela in her custody. After several days of hibernation, Neela is able to find out a trace of her ailing and injured father who is supposed to be deported to Andman for lifelong imprisonment. Through the help of kind person Neela, Samar and Biren hatch out a plan to rescue Neela's father and Neela strictly behaves like a strong, stout, stern disciplinaries. Neela has a duel edged vision of freedom both personal and political-both to rescue her father and also to get rid of the Britishers. Through a dare-devil act, ultimately Neela and Samar along with the help of Biren succeed in rescuing Haricharan from the clutches of British political soldiers. Neela even goes to the extent of fighting and she displays several acts of evil and bravery in order to bring her father back to home. She ultimately succeeds in her mission and all of them regale themselves with *Victory Song*.

In the paper, I have attempted to deal with the concept of freedom from several angles and tried to provide a textual reading. Neela's quest for freedom in *Victory Song* is explored from personal,

political and moral perspective and thus Chitra Banerjee Divakakruni achieves success in her goal.

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List of Contributors

1. Aju Mukhopadhya: A bilingual award winning poet, author and critic.
2. Dr. Santwana Haldar: Reader (Retired), Govt. College, Odisha.
3. Dr. Anantha Vijay, Asst. Professor, Gandhigram Rural Institute, Deemed University, Gandhigram.
4. Dr. Dwijen Sharma: Asst. Professor, NEHU, Shillong.
5. Dr. Mukta Sharma: Professor, JRN Rajasthan Vidyapeeth University, Udaipur.
6. Dr. Devika Khanna Narula: Associate Professor, Delhi College of Arts & Commerce, University of Delhi, Delhi.
7. Dr. Sumana Gupta: Asst. Professor, HOD, Women's College, Banipur.
8. Ms. Aditi Paul: Assistant Professor, University Institute of Legal Studies, Chandigarh University, Chandigarh.
8. Dr. Poonam Pahuja: Assistant Professor, GGDSD College, Banur, Chandigarh.
9. Ms. Priti Joshi: Asst. Professor, Kanodia College, Jaipur.
10. Dr. Joya Chakarvarty: Professor, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Critical Spectrum

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Dr. Manoj Kumar

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Dedication

To my parents
Sita Devi and **Banwari Lal**
for always being there ...

Preface

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born and raised in Calcutta and then left for America to pursue higher studies. Finally, she got settled there and started working as Professor. She is the McDavid Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston. She is also a co-founder and former president of *Maitri*, and also a member of advisory board of *Daya*, a helpline for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse, trafficking, and other problems. Divakaruni has worked with Afghani women refugees in order to help them. She has many prestigious awards to her credit.

Divakaruni's short stories and poems have been published in many eminent magazines and journals. Her works have been translated into more than twenty languages like Hebrew, Dutch, Japanese, and Hindi etc. Some of her works have been adapted into films such as *Mistress of Spices* by Gurinder Chaddha and Paul Bergers by the same name starring with Aishwarya Rai and Dylan McDermott. Her other work, *Sister of My Heart* is also adapted in a Tamil television serial titled *Anbulla Snegithiye*.

She never thought to come in the writing field. But, it is appositely said that whatever is to happen, will happen; she has touched almost all the genres of writing viz. poetry, essays, short

stories and novels. She has a wide range of themes such as marriage, alienation, pain of immigrants, coming of age, search for roots and identity, the finding of love, loss, self-dependence, betrayal, the interaction between women and men etc. Her writings reveal Postcolonial Consciousness, Cultural Studies and Postmodernism to a large extent and therefore, she stands at par with other Women Diaspora writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande etc. She writes in numerous narrative styles such as realism, magical realism, fantasy, historical, and existentialism.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, like an efficient magician, has been successful to create magic through her writing among her readers. Though, she is alleged to keep women characters as her protagonists in her novels like *The Palace of Illusion*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Oleander Girl*, *Before We Visit the Goddess, Sister of My Heart*, and etc. but she manifested her craftsmanship in carving out other themes as well. She states in one of her interviews that "Women are conditioned since childhood; they are always seen as shadows to men. I wanted women to be the centre of my novels and let the men revolve around them."

Being an immigrant, she understands the pain and agony of living in foreign land. Her characters depict the problems faced by Indians outside the country. Her first volume of poems *Dark Like the River* was published in 1987 which centers immigrants' problems. Her own experience has reflected her writings.

Being rooted in Indian tradition, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni seems to have adjusted well in an alien country. It can aptly be said that she is a perfect blend of Indian and American culture and is celebrating Hybrid Identity in true sense. She says in one of her interviews that "I'm quite comfortable with a hyphenated identity. I'm American in some ways and Indian in some ways. For instance, when I come here, I feel very much at home and I fit right in".

The book in your hand is an authentic endeavor to put together selected critical papers on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing. All the contributors have made a sincere attempt to critically analyze Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works. This book also presents a comparative study of other writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Virginia Woolf, Laura Esquivel, Pratibha Ray, Neil Gaman, and Jhumpa Lahiri. I firmly believe that this book will be

a great help to the researchers as well as the students of Masters who have Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in their courses. It can indubitably open doors of further research on her works and other contemporary writers as well.

At the very outset, I am thankful to all the learned contributors for their unique contributions. Without their support, it would not have been possible. Besides, I extend deepest gratitude to Mr. Saytendra Jain, Publisher, YKING BOOKS to have suggested me to work on Chitra Banerjee.

Muriel Strode, one of the great thinkers quotes 'A great work demands a great sacrifice, and who is not capable of a great sacrifice is not capable of a great work'. This book is the repercussion of the varied sacrifices bestowed on me by the loved ones particularly my reverent supervisor Professor Hemendra Chandalia for his incessant motivation. I would also like to express my cordial thanks to my friends Dr. Rantadeep Roy, Dr. Jagdip Singh Sohal, Mr. Vikas Chauhan, Dr. Vinod Singh Gour, Dr. Swati Kumari and Dr. Parul Mishra for their unstinted assistance. I am also grateful to Management 'Amity University Rajasthan' for their uninterrupted support to do such scholarly task.

I owe to my parents for their blessings. My wife and children, keen observer of my every work, have helped me a lot for completing this task in an appropriate manner. Many a times, I had to avoid my household duties to complete this task. Their cooperation and happiness helped me to continue my work assiduously.

Dr. Manoj Kumar

Contents

About the book

The book is an anthology of critical essays of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works. The essays throw light on various themes such as Diaspora, alienation, searching for identity, mythology, pain of immigrants, marriage, problems of women etc. It will be experiencing the varied experiences of existential characters, diasporic problems and the novice theme of Magic Realism in a new perspective. The book also encompasses certain papers which compare Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works with other contemporary writers such as Juhmpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, Laura Esquail, Neil Gaman etc. The book is a compilation of multiple critical views in a nutshell. The book will guide the students as well as researchers to broaden their threshold of knowledge about the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in greater detail.

Profile

Dr. Manoj Kumar has earned his Ph.D. (English) from JRN Rajasthan Vidyapeeth University, Udaipur. Besides, He has done M.Phil.(English) and M.A. (English and History). He also has some certificates and diplomas to his credit such as Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching of English (PGDTE), Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching of English (PGCTE) from EFLU, Hyderabad and Post Graduate Diploma in Folklore and Cultural Studies (PGDFCS) from IGNOU, New Delhi.

Presently, he is working as an Assistant Professor in Amity University Rajasthan. His areas of interest include Folklore, Cinema and ELT. He has published several articles in national and international journals of repute on various topics. Dr. Kumar has also participated and presented papers in several national and international conferences. He has authored a book titled *Exploring Folk Literature*. He has experience of more than a decade in teaching English Language, Literature and Communication Skills to UG and PG students.