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# Cultural Studies of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

*–Savita Yadav**

## Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the complexities and the dilemma of the immigrants in Exile literature with Cultural Studies, by focusing upon its attraction, repulsion and their exploitation by the vested interests. Expatriates leave behind their home and look for new home in their host culture. The *Vine of Desire* continues the story of Anju and Sudha, the two young women at the center of Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart.* Far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, and after years of living separate lives, they rekindle their friendship in America. Anju, adjusts well in the U.S., a place totally foreign to her nature, culture and traditions with her husband's support.She leads a more independent life, independent to the extent of believing that one should not attach to any relationship which lacks love and compatibility. Whereas Sudha who comes with big dreams to America, but she ends up doing odd jobs there and is dissatisfied with her life in the U.S. and finally wants to return to India. This story of the two sisters epitomizes a paradigm of becoming accustomed to a conventional American culture and its effects on a person's individuality.

**Keywords**: Culture, Cultural Studies, America, Kolkata, Immigrants, Cross- cultural confrontation.

Literature is a manifestation of the cultural, social, political and spiritual growth of a nation. Today, global interpretation of culture has given new dimensions to literature. India is known for its vast treasure of spiritual wisdom and cultural heritage that has significantly contributed to the growth and development of the world literature. The depiction of the two opposite culture and value systems of India and America happens to be one of the most prominent thematic concerns of Indian English novelists. The confrontation between the East and the West at social, cultural and political levels has been viewed from different perspectives.

Cultural Studies is the analysis of a culture's systems of meaning production and consumption. Cultural studies have made its presence felt in academic work within

* *Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, UP.*

the arts, the humanities, the social sciences and even science and technology. It appears to be everywhere and everyone seems to be talking about it. Cultural studies concerns itself with meaning and practices of everyday life. Cultural practices comprise the ways people do particular things (such as watching television, or eating out) in a given culture. A cultural study does not have a clearly defined subject area. Its starting point is a very broad and all-inclusivenotion of culture that is used to describe and study a whole range of practices.

Cultural studies is not one thing, it is many things. It is not an academic discipline quite like others. It possesses neither a well-defined methodology nor clearly demarcated fields for investigation. It moves from discipline to discipline, methodology to methodology, according to its own concerns and motivations. It adapts methods of analysis from various disciplines; media studies, cultural anthropology, discourse analysis, popular culture studies and audience studies. This is why cultural studies is not a discipline. Cultural studies is, of course, the study of culture, or, more particularly, the study of contemporary culture. A range of theories are used in C.S. such as structuralism, post structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, postmodernism, feminism and Post feminism Queers Theory, Postcolonial theory.

In his essay "The Evolution of Cultural Studies" from the book *What is Cultural Studies?* (2012) Colin Sparks writes about the definition of Cultural Studies:

> It is extremely difficult to define 'Cultural Studies' with any degree of precision. It is not possible to draw a sharp line and say that on one side of it we can find the proper province of cultural studies. Neither is it possible to point to a unified theory or methodology which are characteristic to it or of it. A veritable rag-bag of ideas, methods and concerns from literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies, etc. are lumped together under the convenient label of cultural studies. (Storey 14)

In the exposition of cross-cultural conflicts the novelists usually confined themselves to the cultural life of expatriates. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni living in America away from her land of birth has lent a new dimension to Indo-American literature. Her basic concern is to delineate the problems of cross cultural conflicts faced by Indian women immigrants. The Indian Culture and American Culture serve as trigger to her writings. In Divakaruni's works nostalgia and home are configured in a totally different way. Her creative genius is primarily rooted in the evaluation of cross-cultural studies in the area of globalization.

Divakaruni's writing is fueled by her own experiences as a first-generation immigrant and a woman between cultures and traditions. Her concern for women of her own heritage is transmitted not only through her award-winning short stories and novels but also her involvement with organizations that aim to help South Asian or South Asian American women in distress and in situations of domestic abuse, in the San Francisco Bay area and Houston. Each of her novels presents one or two memorable characters. The Indo-American interaction is depicted mainly through the experiences of Sudha and Anju, two Indian immigrants in America. In the character portrayal

again, she is primarily interested in the projection of female protagonists living in separate, closed, sequestered worlds of existential problems and passions, loves and hates.

Her novel *The Vine of Desire* (2002) successfully depicts the conflicts of cross-cultural confrontation of the Indian immigrant women Sudha and Anju. Striving for identity in the postcolonial world, they present the dilemma of the modern day woman covering each and every aspect of their life. They make new adjustments in their new surroundings and for this they reinvent themselves. In this novel she has mapped the social, political and cultural changes brought about by colonization, postcolonial consciousness and globalization.

*The Vine of Desire* continues the story of Anju and Sudha, the two young women at the center of Divakaruni's best selling novel *The Sister of My Heart*. Far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, and after years of living separate lives, Anju and Sudha rekindle their friendship in America. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support each of them needs. Anjugets strength this way to pick up the pieces of her life after a miscarriage and Sudha gets confidence to make a life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita without her husband. Their bond is shaken to the core when they confront the deeply passionate feelings that Anju's husband has for Sudha.

The two sisters made their own choices-regarding their lifestyles, their respective matrimonial alliances and finally their level of association in the host country. Meanwhile, the relationships they form with men and women in the America as well as immigrant Indian community with their families in India profoundly transform them. The clash of values occurs in the novel at several levels, but the most crucial encounter remains between the ideas inculcated by cultural traditions of India and the forces of progress unleashed by Western science and technology.

Anju, adjusts well in the U.S, a place totally foreign to her nature, culture and traditions with her husband's support .She leads a more independent life, independent to the extent of believing that one should not attach to any relationship which lacks love and compatibility. Though Anju becomes a confident survivor and conqueror of the host culture but through her, after her miscarriage, we feel as though whatever happens to her is a result of centuries of traditions- the arranged marriage process; the need to have a child but feeling guilty because she really didn't feel she wanted one; her aim of studying and achieving independence through a sound career in creative writing. Though she immediately tries to embrace American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can to the new society but she does not stop herself to condemn on having lost her baby.

We find here the dilemma of the young girl who wishes to behave in the progressive manner of her western counterparts but whose Indian background makes her conscience prick. Here we find the difference of cultural upbringing. If she had come from a different society, more progressive and forward thinking she would not have gone through the emotions and the reactions that she experiences. The East-West

confrontation is appears limited in scope and depth mainly because she is too idealized to bring out the clash between his inherited and adopted cultures. She would not accept the responsibility for her actions nor for the consequences that resulted; choosing instead to blame others. Apart from Anju's interest in India and the little facts that she has discovered, her life is also shaken by new shocks given by her husband.

Traditionally in India, the burden of the family is borne by the woman she is also expected to preserve the traditions of her ancestors and culture, even at the cost of her personal interest. Her individuality is ever endangered because of her efforts to strike a compromise between the burden of legacy, and the need to preserve roots to establish a position for her. Sudha who is married in India and living in a joint family selflessly accepts her husband's dominating mother and two young brothers. She occupies herself with the daily responsibilities of life. She forgets her passion for stitching and designing clothes. She also tries to divest herself, of the memories of her past love, Ashok of whom she is always reminded because she is dissatisfied with her married life. But she continues to live in her husband's house with forbearance till she is made to undergo an ultrasound test during pregnancy to find out the sex of her child. The insistence by her mother-in-law to abort the female fetus is the last straw and she decides to depart from her husband's home. Sudha flees away from her husband's house because she is being urged to abort her unborn daughter and returns to her paternal home.

When Anju learns of this development in Sudha's life therefore she invites her to America where she feels it will be easier for Sudha to live as a single parent and look after her child. Sudha takes the rebellious step of running away to her mother's house and then to her cousin Anju in the U.S., mainly because she is opposed to the idea of female feticide and hates the thought of enduring life-long submission to the old fashioned views of her mother-in-law and an ineffective husband.

Indian culture demands specific duties of woman and strict conceptions of morality are held in high-esteem. While outside home, in the public realm in America, she has begun to experience a sense of freedom and self-expression at many levels which is conflicting with her domestic role and duty. The development of a divided roles is largely due to circumstances, created to cope up and respond to the cultural dissonance that surrounds her. This happens with Sudha also. She comes America and begun to experience a sense of freedom which changes her attitude towards Indian woman who is weighed down by social relationships and communal identities that prevail both in her pre and post marital life.

About the immigration issue there is an incident in the novel when Sudha arrives to the American airport, a mustached man speaks about fraudulent visa which shows immigration as a very prickly lately, including a lots of questions, at the airport where Anju and Sunil comes to receive her in *The Sister of My Heart*.

> I hear immigration's been very prickly lately, asking lots of questions…Why, they even denied entry to someone last week, some kind of a fraudulent visa. I heard it from my friend's mother-in-law-she came on the same flight. She

> was telling us about the poor young woman, crying and crying as the authorities took her away. Apparently the girl's husband was already here, but she lied about it in order to get a quick tourist visa'…What some people won't do to try and bypass the legal channels. (Divakaruni 344)

When Sudha comes America, she thinks she will be able to bring up her daughter Dayita in a better manner in a liberal society like America, as a single parent. Under this thinking she defies traditional Indian culture and leaves her husband to raise her child independently, which she thinks is much easier in the U.S. Once bound in marriage, woman has little room for escape and running away is a disgrace not only to her family but also to the whole of society and its tradition. Sudha knowingly or unknowingly emulates the ideal woman because of her traditional upbringing. She thinks positively in *The Sister of My Heart* about America.

> America has its own problems, she said, but at least it would give me the advantage of anonymity. No-one in America would care that I was a daughter of the Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, give Dayita everything she needed. Best of all, no one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man. (Divakaruni 294)

Sudha comes with big dreams to America, but she ends up doing odd jobs there and is dissatisfied with her life in the U.S. She had come to America after defying the traditions of an arranged marriage, and does it at the cost of ostracism isolation and intense loneliness. Her stay in her cousin Anju's house is terminated by the emotional involvement that grows between Sudha and Anju's husband. However, she does not want to cheat her cousin so she decides to leave and the life-long candid relationship of the two sisters. She looks after Trideep and Myra's incapacitated father, a position she obtains with the help of Lalit, who is a surgeon.

Sudha after coming in America finds that she is comprised of multiple selves accepting or rejecting certain aspects of both Indian and American culture. Analyzing the unjustified violence and behavior of the people to her, she thinks herself everything with a new perspective in *TheVine of desire* of Chitra Divakaruni thinking enough is enough when the old man spits on her face.

> So many violences done to me. My mother pounding my life into the shape of her desires. My mother-in-law wanting to cut from it whatever she considered unseeingly. My husband backing away, with his narrow, apologetic shoulders. Sunil plunging into the center of my body, corrosive with need. Each time, I made myself pliant. I gave a bearable name to what they did. Duty. Family honor. Filial respect. Passion. But today…The old man's spit on my face, so frank in its hate. I couldn't pretend it meant something else. (Divakaruni 243)

The novel is abounding with many examples of the description of various kinds of different pressures on its characters; though the nuances of it may differ due to the physical and cultural placement of their characters. But Sudha does not want to

allow anything to come between herself and her professional goals. Here the identity issue takes on another color, that of making a position for themselves in their adopted country. She tries to resolve the matters between their circumstances and environment and put the pieces of fragmented selves together. Her character develops multiplicity of consciousness in viewing herself.

While living in America and facing the East-West encounter she tries to adjust herself to the alien culture. Instead of transplanting Indian culture or disposing it off altogether she tries to assimilate her Indianness through reinventing her identity as experiences forever keep on molding it into something new. Though she never compromises her orthodox Indian ways. Though living on the American soil she adheres to her Indian ways of living, dressing, eating. As a typical Indian woman she never compromises with her rich religious tradition. She plays mostly Indian music and cooks Indian dishes to maintain her culture:

> I find a cassette of Hindi music... I remember it from the streets of India, blasted from the speakers of a hundred shops, whistled by cheerfully unemployed young men who stood on street corners, smoking and spitting… Pyar Dwanahotahai, goes the song… I've left door open so our laughter mingles with the music. Gata Rahemeradil, My heart is singing… In Myra's sparkling modern kitchen, I prepare an old dish. Bhatebhat… when we were sad, Pishi used to make it because we loved it so much. (Divakaruni 245-46)

The novel holds out the possibility of intercultural meeting through this relationship founded on profound human sympathy, care and compassion to the exclusion of racial and cultural barriers. She cooks, cleans, mends the clothes of old man who admires her and later she becomes a sort of permanent employee of him.

Though she pays a big price, which in a way all immigrants pay when they leave their homeland, give up the comforts it offers them and come to a new land where they have to work hard to make two ends meet. She was not well educated to do the dignified jobs and besides this she was there on a tourist visa. Her loneliness in a new country, her failure attempts to adjust there, She wants to return to India and tells the old man she is nursing in novel *TheVine of Desire* that "America isn't the same country for everyone, you know. Things here didn't work out the way I'd hoped. Going back with you would be a way for me to start over in a culture I understand the way I'll never understand America. In a new part of India, where no one knows me. Without the weight of old memories, the whispers that say, we knew she'd fail, or Serves her right." (Divakruni 320-21)

The old man is extremely surprised at her choice of leaving America because in his experience "Young people who come to this country never want to leave" (Divakaruni, 320). It is the dilemma of the Sudha who wishes to behave in the progressive manner of her western counterparts but whose Indian background makes her conscience prick. All these factors describe her condition as to the immigrant person whom as for immigrant, as home is deeply embedded in memories that are not one's

own. To her, her identity is no great an issue as she maintains most of her Indian culture and tradition.

Her loneliness in a new country, her attempt to earn money to finance a return journey. Sudha chooses to return to India, even after her mother's condemnatory letter where she accuses her of destroying her marriage with Ramesh and throwing two households into turmoil. She writes "Once a woman leaves her husband, she doesn't hesitate at anything. Even the most immoral acts come to her with ease. I shudder to think of the effect your behavior will have on your daughter's character." (Divakaruni 272)

Though she appears very progressive in her thinking, she does not think that marriage is destiny for her and that she always need to compromise due to patriarchal pressures. Sudha realizes that life back in India is not going to be easy but she thinks that going to a new place and getting a convent education for her daughter will be beneficial.

Anju also separates herself from her husband and maintain her dignity rather than live with a man who has betrayed her. Both are modern Indian women who wish to survive independently of the male influence. Anju cannot forget and forgive the infidelity of her husband and does not want to be a prisoner at the hands of men who apparently wish to come to her aid, but would finally exercise complete control over her. She would rather bring up her daughter alone according to her own wishes.

The process of assimilation into American culture for both Anju and Sudha is different. Sudha's stands for deep-rooted view points, background, one's initial stages, the personality one is born with, the pull of the native land, the buried past and, the security etc. She remains an outsider in the adopted country. As immigrant in America she leaves the status of her past, discarding nostalgia and seek assimilation into her adopted culture, which for her, is the chief survival strategy. Whereas Anju stands for liberty, escape, exploration, discovery, revelation and removal of the imagination, for balancing new heights, for thoughts and aspirations and achievement and for facing the test of the indefinite.

Divakaruni reveals her serious and vital artistic preoccupation by examining various factors that entirely hinder cordial relations between the two different races and cultures. She depicts judiciously the confrontation of the two modes of living. Her thorough knowledge and perception of both Eastern and Western values of life enables her to portray the personal, political and cultural interactions between the two. Undeniably she is a sensitive writer and her accurate depiction of the juxtaposition of two diverse civilizations is a true accomplishment because her own creative and aesthetic personality is a unique combination of opposite qualities and values of two cultures.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the outstanding voices of the immigrant writers. In most of her novels, Psychology, Mythology and Folklore are interrelated which reflect that the writer did not get displaced from her Indian origin. Divakaruni wanted to speak and write the language of women. She opens up a window into the multicultural world of her characters and entertains a passionate desire to tell an

honest and moving story. The Diaspora has changed the lives of Indians immensely. As a new woman novelist, Divakaruni, in an interview with Neila C. Seshachari says:

> I am because it is a physical fact that I have left my homeland, whatever my motives were. And I have decided to settle in a land that is very different and a culture that is very different. So whatever the original motive or intent was, I do find myself torn between two cultures especially now that I'm bringing up children here, and I'm torn by the desire to go back to India for long or short periods of time. I'm conflicted by the fact that my mother is alone in India. All her children are here [in the United States]. I think the idea of the diaspora is very important to me and in my writing it comes up many times because I'm aware of other people whose entry into America was even more diasporic than mine. And I write about them too; their stories are important to me. (Seshachari)

In Divakaruni's novels the identity issue of her protagonists takes on another color, that of making a position for themselves in their adopted country. Her characters develop multiplicity of consciousness in viewing themselves. One basic consciousness with which they understand is, a minority class living in America whether they are the first generation Indian-Americans or the second generation. Though these people have been settled in America, adopted the American way of life and feel and mourn at the loss that the country has undergone but at the same time are worried about their own existence in the host country.

Her depiction typically take place within the charged context of the immigrant experience, making for a writing style both narrow in focus and broad in scope. She has been praised for her literary creativity and person sensitivity in dealing with cross-cultural complexities. Most notable has been her continuing concern with the experiences of Indian and Indian American women.

Thus, the East-West encounter as a recurrent theme in her novels is directly related to her experience as an expatriate who inherited Indian values by birth and acquired Western values by choosing to live in America. Like her, most of her characters find themselves in situations where they must confront values rooted in opposing cultural milieus, historical processes, economic systems, political ideologies, and philosophical traditions. Not all of them are able to resolve the tensions and inequities that threaten to disintegrate their own psyche and spirit. But even their defeat is redeemed by their heroic endeavor to overcome their innate weaknesses or the inexorable forces around them.

Divakaruni's frequent return to the theme of the East-West encounter and especially of the Indo-American meeting and her masterly treatment of it in great depth and seriousness shows her genuine and resolute concern for the global and contemporary situation. She seems to suggest in her novels that cultural and political synthesis and a compromise between the two modes of living are always possible.

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