

NAVIGATING CROSS-CULTURAL DYNAMICS: AN ANALYSIS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S 'THE SISTER OF MY HEART' AND 'THE VINE OF DESIRE'

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricacies of cross-cultural tensions experienced by immigrants as depicted in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, The Vine of Desire. Within the framework of Cultural Studies, the research aims to explore the multifaceted dynamics of attraction, repulsion, and exploitation that shape the immigrant experience. Immigrants, in their pursuit of a new home within their host culture, navigate a transformative journey fraught with challenges and opportunities. The Vine of Desire continues the narrative of Anju and Sudha, the central characters introduced in Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart. Their journey unfolds in the United States, a world far removed from their childhood home in Calcutta. After years of living separate lives, they reunite, offering a unique lens through which to examine the immigrant experience.

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from Cultural Studies to scrutinize the nuanced interplay of emotions, cultural clashes, and personal transformations experienced by immigrants. It aims to shed light on the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, and the enduring allure of one's roots within the framework of immigrant literature. Through a close analysis of Divakaruni's narrative, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience and the enduring tensions that shape their lives in a new and unfamiliar land.

Keywords: *culture; individual's identity; expatriate's life; homeland nostalgia; cultural studies*

INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a profound mirror reflecting the multifaceted facets of a nation's cultural, social, political, and spiritual evolution (Iyengar 1972). In today's globalized world, the concept of culture has expanded literature's horizons, offering new perspectives and dimensions. India, with its abundant spiritual wisdom and rich cultural heritage, has made substantial contributions to the global literary landscape, enriching it with diverse narratives and perspectives.

One of the most significant themes explored by Indian English novelists is the contrast between India's and America's cultures and value systems. These novelists have provided a platform for the examination of the intricate social, cultural, and political struggles between the East and the West, offering varying viewpoints and insights on this dynamic interaction.

Cultural Studies emerges as a field of inquiry that delves into the processes of meaning production and consumption within a culture. It has left an indelible mark on academic disciplines spanning the arts, humanities, social sciences, and even the natural and physical sciences (Christopher 2005). Cultural Studies has become a ubiquitous presence, engaging scholars and enthusiasts alike. Its primary focus lies in exploring the significance and practices of everyday life within a given society.

In Cultural Studies, the study of cultural practices takes centre stage, these are the various ways in which people engage in specific activities, such as watching television or dining out. Cultural Studies encompasses a broad spectrum of subjects and does not adhere to a narrowly defined topic. It begins with a comprehensive definition of culture that serves as a lens for analysing a vast array of practices and phenomena. Thus, Cultural Studies offers a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to understanding the intricacies of culture, society, and human behaviour. It facilitates a deeper comprehension of the interplay between culture and everyday life, providing valuable insights into the ever-evolving dynamics of our globalized world.

Cultural Studies is a diverse and multifaceted academic field that encompasses a wide range of concepts and approaches. It stands apart from traditional disciplines due to its fluid and interdisciplinary nature. Unlike many other academic fields, Cultural Studies does not adhere to a rigid methodology or neatly defined investigative boundaries. Instead, it adapts and evolves according to its unique interests and objectives. This dynamic nature allows Cultural Studies to draw from a multitude of disciplines and methodologies. It incorporates analytical tools and techniques from various academic domains, including media studies, cultural anthropology, discourse analysis, popular culture studies, and audience studies. This adaptability is both a strength and a defining feature of Cultural Studies, as it allows for a comprehensive exploration of cultural phenomena from diverse angles (Nayar 2009).

'Cultural Studies' does not fit the traditional mould of a discipline precisely because it lacks the constraints of a single, standardized methodology. Rather, it is a study of culture, particularly contemporary culture, and embraces a broad spectrum of theories and frameworks. Scholars within Cultural Studies may employ theories such as structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, post-feminism, Queer Theory, and Postcolonial theory, among others, to analyse and interpret cultural phenomena. Cultural Studies thrives on its interdisciplinary nature, allowing for a dynamic and evolving examination of culture in all its forms (. It is a field that continuously adapts and expands to accommodate the ever-changing landscape of contemporary culture, making it a vital and relevant area of academic inquiry in today's complex and interconnected world.

In his chapter titled "The Development of Cultural Studies" from the book entitled *What is Cultural Studies?* (2012) Storey John writes about the definition of Cultural Studies.

Defining Cultural Studies with a high degree of clarity poses considerable challenges. Drawing a definitive demarcation and unequivocally assigning the cultural studies discipline to one side of this divide is not a viable proposition. Moreover, it lacks the capacity to

ascertain a comprehensive theory or methodology that embodies or differentiates it. The field commonly referred to as cultural studies encompasses a diverse amalgamation of ideas, approaches, and issues derived from disciplines such as literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies, and others. (Section 14)

In the portrayal of intercultural conflicts, novelists often turn their focus towards the experiences of expatriates (Agarwal 2011). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indo-American writer, has significantly enriched Indo-American literature by delving into the intricate layers of cross-cultural challenges faced by Indian women immigrants. Her works draw inspiration from the interplay between Indian and American cultures, offering a fresh perspective on the concept of reminiscence and home.

Divakaruni's creativity is firmly rooted in her exploration of cross-cultural dynamics in the context of globalization. As a first-generation immigrant and a woman navigating the nuances of two distinct cultures and customs, her writing is deeply influenced by her personal experiences. Her concern for women from her own heritage is not confined to her award-winning short stories and novels; it extends to her active involvement with organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area and Houston dedicated to assisting South Asian or South Asian American women facing distress and domestic abuse.

Throughout her works, Divakaruni introduces readers to unforgettable protagonists, often focusing on the Indo-American relationship through the lives of two Indian immigrants in America: Sudha and Anju. Her narratives are particularly fascinated with portraying female protagonists who inhabit unique, closed, and secluded worlds, grappling with existential dilemmas, passions, love, and loathing.

One of her notable works, *The Vine of Desire* (2002), a sequel to *The Sister of My Heart*, masterfully explores the cross-cultural tensions experienced by Indian immigrant women Sudha and Anju. Their quest for identity in a postcolonial world mirrors the predicaments faced by contemporary women across all facets of their lives. Divakaruni eloquently illustrates how individuals reinvent themselves as they adapt to new environments, shedding light on the social, political, and cultural shifts brought about by colonization, postcolonial consciousness, and the forces of globalization. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary contributions offer a profound examination of the intricate web of cultural intersections, personal transformations, and the evolving dynamics between India and America, making her a significant figure in the realm of contemporary Indo-American literature.

The Sister of My Heart by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a poignant exploration of the lives of Anju and Sudha, two close friends who, after years of leading separate lives, reunite in America, far removed from their beloved Kolkata, where they spent their youth. Their enduring bond provides them with the essential support needed to navigate the challenges that life throws at them. Anju finds solace and strength in Sudha's friendship as she copes with the emotional aftermath of a heartbreaking miscarriage. Sudha, in turn, draws confidence from their friendship as she raises her daughter, Dayita, independently, without the presence of her husband. However, their relationship

faces a severe test when Anju's husband reveals intense feelings for Sudha, casting a shadow over their connection.

Throughout the narrative, these two sisters make independent choices about their lifestyles, their respective marital partnerships, and the extent of their assimilation into American society. Their interactions with individuals in America, as well as with the immigrant Indian community and their families back in India, significantly influence their lives and decisions.

The Sister of My Heart portrays a clash of values on multiple fronts, with the most profound being the conflict between the traditional values instilled by India's cultural heritage and the transformative forces unleashed by Western science and technology. Anju's adjustment to life in the United States, facilitated by her husband's support, is remarkable. She leads an autonomous life in a culture vastly different from her own, advocating for the belief that relationships devoid of love and compatibility should not be clung to. However, beneath her facade of adaptability, Anju grapples with the weight of centuries-old traditions, the process of arranged marriages, the societal pressure to have children, and her desire for independence through a successful career in creative writing. As Anju seeks to embrace American culture and seize the opportunities it offers, she cannot help but mourn the loss of her child. Her journey is a testament to the complexity of cultural assimilation, the endurance of tradition, and the profound impact of personal choices on one's sense of self.

The Sister of My Heart weaves together these themes, offering a narrative that is emotionally resonant and deeply thought-provoking. Anju's insistence that relationships devoid of love and compatibility should not be clung to reflects her more independent lifestyle in America. Anju's experiences, particularly following her miscarriage, vividly demonstrate the weight of centuries-old cultural norms that continue to shape her life. The process of arranged marriages, the societal pressure to bear a child, and her unwavering desire for independence through a successful career in creative writing all serve as compelling examples. Despite her eagerness to embrace American culture and adapt to its opportunities, Anju cannot escape the emotional burden of these ingrained traditions, and she mourns the loss of her child.

The conflict between her inherited and chosen cultures looms large for Anju, though it appears to have limitations in its extent and depth. Instead of taking responsibility for her actions and their consequences, she often places blame on others. Furthermore, her husband's revelations about India and the cultural shocks he introduces continually fascinate her, further accentuating the complexities of her cultural identity.

In India, the traditional burden of family often falls squarely upon women, who are expected to uphold ancestral customs and culture at the expense of their own desires. Anju's struggle to strike a balance between the weight of tradition and the need to preserve her own roots for self-fulfilment poses a significant challenge to her individuality. Sudha, on the other hand, experiences a different facet of Indian culture as a married woman living in a joint household. Her life revolves around fulfilling her duties to her domineering mother-in-law and caring for her two younger brothers-in-law. As she becomes consumed by these responsibilities, her passion for sewing and creating

clothing wanes. She also attempts to distance herself from her former love, Ashok, whom she constantly recalls with dissatisfaction as she navigates her married life.

Sudha's breaking point comes when she is pressured to undergo an ultrasound to determine the sex of her unborn child. Her mother-in-law insists on terminating the pregnancy if it's a girl, leading Sudha to make a life-altering decision. She leaves her husband's household, fleeing the oppressive expectations, and returns to her father's house, a moment of liberation from the constraints of tradition and cultural norms.

The Sister of My Heart poignantly illustrates the complexities of cultural identities and the profound impact of cultural traditions on the lives and choices of its female protagonists, offering a compelling exploration of their individual journeys. When Anju learns of the significant changes in Sudha's life, she extends a heartfelt invitation for Sudha to join her in the United States. Anju believes that America would provide a more accommodating environment for Sudha to navigate the challenges of single parenthood and care for her child. Sudha's decision to accept this invitation and make the bold move to leave her mother's house and ultimately her homeland is fuelled by her vehement opposition to female feticide and her profound aversion to the idea of being compelled to submit to the dictates of her mother-in-law and husband for the rest of her life.

Indian culture places distinct and often stringent obligations on women, emphasizing morality based on rigid standards. Sudha's experiences in the American public sphere introduce her to varying degrees of autonomy and self-expression that sharply contrast with her prescribed domestic roles and responsibilities. The emergence of conflicting roles in her life is largely a result of her changing environment, demanding her adaptation to the cultural dissonance she encounters. Sudha's journey mirrors this transformation as she arrives in America, where she begins to experience a newfound sense of freedom. This shift in perspective prompts her to reflect on the plight of Indian women who grapple with social bonds and communal identities both before and after marriage, weighed down by societal expectations.

In the backdrop of Sudha's immigration to America, there is an incident at the American airport where Anju and Sunil eagerly await her arrival, involving a moustachioed man discussing counterfeit visas. This event serves as a subtle reminder of the complexities and challenges surrounding immigration, highlighting the increasing scrutiny and inquiries that individuals face when navigating the immigration process, adding an additional layer of complexity to Sudha's journey as she seeks a new beginning in a foreign land.

The Sister of My Heart adeptly weaves together themes of cultural adaptation, women's autonomy, and the immigrant experience, offering a compelling narrative that explores the evolving identities of its characters against the backdrop of shifting cultural landscapes.

I've heard that immigration has been particularly prickly recently, asking many questions...Well, only last week they denied admittance to someone with a false visa. I learned this from the mother-in-law of my friend's husband, who travelled on the same aircraft. She told us about the wretched girl who wailed uncontrollably as the officials carried her away. Reportedly, the girl's husband was already in the country, but she lied to

obtain a tourist visa'... What some individuals will not do to circumvent legal processes. (SoH 344)

In the liberal and open society of America, Sudha envisions a more favourable environment for raising her daughter, Dayita, as a single parent. She resolutely opposes the conventions of Indian culture and makes the difficult decision to leave her husband, believing that raising her child independently will be more manageable in the United States. In traditional Indian society, once a woman is married, she often has limited avenues for escape, and running away is not only a source of shame for her family but is also seen as a transgression against societal norms and traditions. Sudha, influenced by her conservative upbringing, may consciously or unconsciously emulate the idealized image of a woman as dictated by societal norms.

However, Sudha's outlook takes an optimistic turn upon her arrival in America. She perceives America as a place where she can find anonymity and create a fresh start. Here, her past as the Chatterjees' daughter and her status as a divorcee would be of little consequence. In this new land, she envisions the opportunity to build a new life, earn her own income, and provide for Dayita without judgment. Sudha is buoyed by the prospect that in America, she will be among many other mothers who have made the choice to live independently rather than with unsuitable partners.

Despite her initial aspirations, Sudha's reality in America turns out to be quite different. She finds herself working various odd jobs and growing increasingly dissatisfied with her life in the United States. Her decision to leave behind the conventions of an arranged marriage to emigrate to America carries a heavy cost, profound loneliness. Sudha's stay at her cousin Anju's home is cut short when she develops an emotional connection with Anju's husband. Driven by her commitment to honesty and loyalty, Sudha resolves to sever the lifelong bond between the two sisters. She takes on the role of caring for Trideep and Myra's disabled father, with the assistance of the surgeon Lalit.

As Sudha navigates her life in America, she begins to realize that she possesses multiple facets of her identity, each of which embraces or rejects certain aspects of both Indian and American society.

In *The Vine of Desire*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the profound impact of unjustifiable violence and behaviour, prompting Sudha to view everything from a fresh perspective. When confronted with an incident where an elderly man spits in her face, Sudha reaches a breaking point and decides that enough is enough, marking a pivotal moment in her journey of self-discovery and empowerment.

Too many violent acts against me. My mother moulded my life according to her desires. My mother-in-law desired to remove from it whatsoever she deemed unsightly. My spouse retreated, his shoulders regretful and narrow. Sunil penetrated the core of my body, acidic with want. Each time, I rendered myself malleable. I provided a recognisable moniker to their actions. Duty. Family respect. Filial respect. Passion. But now... The elderly man's spittle on my face was so openly hostile. I was unable to pretend that it meant something else. (VoD 243)

The Vine of Desire is richly layered with descriptions of the myriad pressures that impact its protagonists, and these pressures often vary depending on the characters' physical and cultural contexts. However, Sudha remains resolute in her pursuit of professional objectives, determined not to let anything hinder her progress. In this narrative, the theme of identity takes on a new dimension—establishing oneself in a new and adopted country. Sudha strives to navigate the conflicts between her personal circumstances and the environment around her, seeking to piece together her fractured sense of self. Through this process, she undergoes a profound evolution of character, experiencing multiple states of consciousness as she grapples with her identity.

Living in America and confronted by the East-West cultural divide, Sudha endeavours to adapt to her new surroundings. Rather than transplanting her Indian culture wholesale or wholly abandoning it, she embarks on a journey of continuous self-reinvention, reshaping her identity as each new experience contributes to its evolution. Importantly, she remains deeply rooted in her traditional Indian customs. Even in the United States, she adheres to her indigenous practices in daily life, attire, and cuisine. As a representative of her Indian culture, she steadfastly preserves her rich religious traditions. Sudha engages in activities such as performing Indian music and preparing traditional Indian dishes, thus ensuring that her cultural heritage remains an integral part of her identity.

Sudha's unwavering commitment to her cultural roots and traditions while residing in a foreign land exemplifies the complexity of identity formation and adaptation in the face of cultural dissonance. Her ability to seamlessly blend elements of both her Indian heritage and her American experiences is a testament to her resilience and determination to carve out a unique identity that reflects the multifaceted nature of her life journey.

I discover a Hindi cassette... I recall hearing it on the streets of India, blasted from the speakers of a hundred businesses and whistled by joyfully unemployed young guys smoking and spitting on street corners... Pyar Diwana hotahai, goes the song... I've left the door open so that our laughter and the music may mix. Gata Rahe meradil, My heart is rejoicing... In Myra's gleaming, contemporary kitchen, I prepare a traditional dish. Pishi would prepare Baatebat for us when we were upset since we like it so much. (VoD 245-46)

The novel presents the potential for intercultural engagement through a relationship founded on profound human empathy, concern, and benevolence, transcending racial and cultural limitations. The protagonist of the narrative undertakes various domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and clothing repair for an older gentleman who holds her in high regard. Over time, their relationship evolves to the point where she assumes the role of his employee.

Many immigrants, like her, face significant costs when they choose to leave their home country and forego the comforts it offers in order to go to a different nation where they must do considerable effort to achieve financial stability. The individual in question possessed a tourist visa and did not possess the requisite educational qualifications to engage in vocations of higher social standing. The individual's experience of loneliness in an unfamiliar nation and their lack of progress in adapting to their unfamiliar environment. In the literary work entitled *The Vine of Desire*, the

protagonist engages in a conversation with an elderly gentleman under her care, wherein she imparts the notion that the United States of America does not offer an equitable experience to all its inhabitants.

Things did not turn out as I had hoped here. Coming back with you would allow me to start over in a society I understand, unlike America, which I can never really comprehend. In a new region in India, nobody knows me. Without the burden of previous memories, the whispers of "we knew she'd fail" or "serves her right" no longer exist. (VoD320-21)

The elderly individual expresses astonishment at her choice to depart from the United States, since his own encounters have led him to believe that "young individuals who arrive in this nation typically exhibit a reluctance to depart" (VoD, 320). The issue at hand pertains to Sudha, who aspires to emulate the behaviour of her Western counterparts, but is conflicted due to her Indian origin, which elicits a sense of moral discomfort. Numerous facets of her experience are indicative of her immigrant status, wherein the concept of home is deeply intertwined with recollections that do not belong to her. The individual in question exhibits no interest in her own identity, since she actively preserves and upholds the vast bulk of her Indian cultural heritage and customary practises.

The individual's experience of seclusion within an unfamiliar location, along with her endeavours to secure financial resources for the purpose of facilitating her repatriation. Sudha makes the decision to repatriate to India, notwithstanding her mother's strongly worded correspondence wherein she blames Sudha of terminating her union with Ramesh and instigating turmoil in two households. The author of the text states,

After a lady leaves her spouse, she has no qualms about doing anything. Even the most unethical deeds are effortless for her. I tremble to consider the impact your actions will have on your daughter's personality." (VoD 272)

Despite her outward appearance as a forward-thinking individual, she holds the belief that marriage is not predetermined for her and that she is not obliged to constantly compromise her aspirations owing to patriarchal limitations. Sudha possesses an understanding that residing in India may provide challenges, however she maintains the conviction that relocating to a different area and enrolling her daughter in a convent school will yield benefits.

Anju opts for divorce as a means to save her dignity and evade cohabitation with a male being who has inflicted harm upon her. Both individuals are modern Indian women who strive for autonomy and liberation from male dominance. Anju has an inability to both forget and forgive her husband's act of adultery. Furthermore, she expresses a desire to avoid being subservient to individuals who ostensibly offer assistance, but would ultimately exert complete authority over her. The individual in question expresses a preference for independently raising her daughter in alignment with her personal inclinations.

The assimilation of Anju and Sudha into American culture has distinct variations. Sudha's identity encompasses various elements, including deeply rooted perspectives, personal past, early developmental stages, innate personality traits, affinity towards one's original land, obscured

historical narratives, and a sense of security, among other factors. She remains an individual who is not fully integrated into the social fabric of her adopted country. As an immigrant residing in the United States, she adopts a deliberate approach of distancing herself from her past, eschewing sentimental attachments, and actively pursuing assimilation into her selected cultural milieu as her foremost means of ensuring personal survival. While Anju symbolises concepts like as freedom, escape, exploration, discovery, revelation, and the elimination of imaginative boundaries, it is also linked to the pursuit of personal growth, intellectual development, and the overcoming of interminable obstacles.

Divakaruni's scholarly inquiry is evident through her exploration of numerous issues that pose substantial obstacles to fostering harmonious relationships between two disparate races and cultures. The author adeptly portrays the clash between the two contrasting lives. Due to her comprehensive education and profound comprehension of both Eastern and Western concepts, she possesses the capacity to portray the emotional, political, and cultural interactions that occur between these two domains. Undoubtedly, the writer has a keen sensitivity in her work, particularly in her portrayal of the juxtaposition between two diverse civilizations. This accomplishment is noteworthy, as her creative and artistic persona embodies a distinctive amalgamation of conflicting attributes and values derived from two cultural backgrounds.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is recognised as one of the prominent voices within the community of immigrant authors. The author's writings exhibit a significant interconnection between Psychology, Mythology, and Folklore, so indicating her continued engagement with her Indian ancestry. Divakaruni aspired to engage in discourse and written expression within a feminine linguistic framework. The author offers a glimpse into the diverse cultural milieu of her characters and showcases a fervent aspiration to portray a genuine and emotionally impactful narrative. The Indian Diaspora has had a profound impact on the lives of individuals of Indian origin.

In an interview with Neila C. Seshachari (2013) Divakaruni explains that she is a new female novelist due to the physical fact that she has left her nation, regardless of her motivations.

I've decided to settle in a nation and culture that are considerably different from my own. Regardless of the initial aim, I find myself caught between two cultures, especially now that I'm raising children in this country, and I'm torn by the urge to return to India for long or short periods of time. The fact that my mum is alone in India causes me conflict. Her entire family resides in the United States. I believe that the concept of diaspora is very significant to me, and it appears frequently in my writing because I am aware of people whose journey into America was even more diasporic than mine. In addition, I write about them; their stories are significant to me. (Interview with Seshachari)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives delve deep into the complexities of identity and the challenges of establishing oneself in an adopted country. Her characters undergo a process of self-awareness, often observing themselves from multiple angles. Whether they are first-generation or second-generation Indian-Americans, they share a fundamental understanding of belonging to a minority in America. Despite their successful integration into American society, their embrace of

the American way of life, and their heartfelt attachment to their new home, they grapple with concerns about their survival and acceptance in their host nation.

Divakaruni's storytelling is intricately woven within the charged framework of the immigrant experience, resulting in a narrative style that is simultaneously focused and expansive. She is widely recognized for her literary originality and her acute sensitivity to the complexities of cross-cultural issues. Her continued exploration of the experiences of Indian and Native American women is a hallmark of her work.

The recurring theme of the East-West encounter in her stories is closely linked to Divakaruni's own experience as an immigrant who inherited Indian values by birth and acquired Western values by choosing to live in the United States. Much like the author herself, the majority of her characters grapple with conflicting ideals deeply rooted in their cultural, social, historical, economic, political, and philosophical contexts. Not all of them find resolutions to the tensions and injustices that challenge their psyche and spirit, but their brave efforts to confront their inherent weaknesses and the formidable external forces that surround them are a testament to their resilience.

Divakaruni's frequent return to the theme of the East-West encounter, particularly the Indo-American encounter, and her masterful, in-depth exploration of it, reflect her genuine and unwavering concern for the complexities of the world and the contemporary human condition. Throughout her works, she suggests that cultural and political synthesis, as well as a harmonious coexistence between different lifestyles, are attainable goals worth pursuing. Her narratives invite readers to contemplate the possibility of bridging cultural divides and finding common ground in an increasingly interconnected world.

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