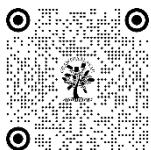


NEGOTIATING BORDERS: IMMIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT, AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN DIVAKARUNI'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a renowned Indian-American writer, presents a compelling portrayal of the immigrant experience in her literary works, particularly emphasising the intertwined processes of immigration and emigration. This article explores the nuanced representation of diasporic life in Divakaruni's fiction, focusing on key themes such as intergenerational conflict, cultural displacement, and identity negotiation. Her characters often inhabit the liminal space between cultures, struggling to balance assimilation with cultural preservation and the deep human need for belonging. This study situates Divakaruni's work within the broader landscape of immigrant literature through a critical analysis of her narratives and the incorporation of secondary sources. It highlights how her storytelling contributes meaningfully to contemporary dialogues surrounding diaspora, cultural hybridity, and the complexities of transnational identity.

Keywords: Immigration, Diaspora, Identity, Displacement, Intergenerational Conflict, Cultural Hybridity

1. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an eminent Indian-American novelist whose writings intricately delve into the complex mechanics of immigration and emigration. Her writings explore the emotional and psychological aspects of people who find themselves torn between two cultures, providing a subtle and detailed depiction of the immigrant experience. This article analyses Divakaruni's portrayal of the challenges faced by diasporic groups, including the search for identity, feelings of displacement, and tensions between different generations. The tapestry of voices and critical interpretations in her work enhances it, reflecting wider issues and resonances found in immigrant writing.

Divakaruni's art often explores the profound challenge faced by immigrants in their quest for a sense of identity and belonging. Her protagonists often experience a conflict between the cultural norms of their own country and the requirements of their new surroundings. The heroine Tilo in the novel "The Mistress of Spices" has the challenge of reconciling her two identities: that of a mystical healer from India and an immigrant in America. Tilo's struggle epitomizes the wider encounter of immigrants who often find themselves torn between upholding their cultural legacy

and integrating into a novel culture. "I am Tilo, Mistress of Spices. I can command the spices, and make them do my bidding. But they must never know this" (*The Mistress of Spices*, 1). Tilo also feels stranger in America: "To be in America, this land of cars and television, of all things quick and easy, is a strange dream" (*The Mistress of Spices*, 34).

Vijay Mishra, a scholar, delves further into the issue of identification and asserts that Divakaruni's characters embody the concept of the "diasporic imaginary." According to Mishra, the homeland is seen as both a tangible and imagined place, influencing the identities of those who have departed from it (Mishra 1). Mishra's thesis is essential for comprehending how Divakaruni's characters navigate their identities in a liminal area, where they do not quite belong to their new nation but are not completely disconnected from their origins.

In the novel *Queen of Dreams* (2004), the main character Rakhi is an artist residing in California. She has challenges in comprehending her identity due to her Indian origin and American upbringing. Rakhi's path of self-discovery is deeply influenced by the dreams and narratives of her mother, who is an expert in interpreting dreams. The story effectively depicts the intergenerational conflict between Rakhi and her mother, highlighting the wider cultural divide that often arises between immigrant parents and their offspring. "My mother used to say that only the very rich or the very poor could afford to live in the past." (*Queen of Dreams*, 8). In his work, Suman Gupta examines Divakaruni's use of the theme of dreams as a narrative tool to delve into the underlying tensions and the dual nature of the immigrant experience, therefore enhancing the characters' quest for self-identity. Divakaruni aptly brings out the dual nature: "I am an immigrant's daughter, caught between the way of the dreamers and the way of the keepers of memory" (*Queen of Dreams*, 153).

Divakaruni's stories often emphasize the feeling of dislocation and estrangement that comes with immigrating to a new country. The characters often undergo a feeling of deprivation when they are displaced from familiar surroundings and put in unfamiliar situations. The issue is prominently shown in *The Vine of Desire* (2002), when the main characters Anju and Sudha relocate from India to the United States. Although they have access to many possibilities and liberties in their adopted nation, they grapple with emotions of seclusion and longing for their homeland, which are intensified by the cultural disparities they face. "They had hoped that America would bring them closer together. Instead, it widened the gap, each becoming a continent unto herself" (*The Vine of Desire*, 122). Anju thinks that "The silence of the new country made her think of death" (*The Vine of Desire*, 47).

Arranged Marriage (1995) delves at the experience of estrangement among Indian women who have immigrated to the United States. "My dreams were in Hindi, or sometimes in English, but always back in India" (*Arranged Marriage*, 14). The protagonists in these narratives often experience a sense of alienation from both their own culture and their chosen country. "I had thought arranged marriages were always unhappy, and love marriages the only way to find happiness. How wrong I was" (*Arranged Marriage*, 76). In her analysis, critic Gayatri Gopinath (1997) explores the intersection between Divakaruni's tales and gay diasporic literature. Gopinath highlights that displacement in these narratives goes beyond mere physical relocation, but also involves a detachment from conventional cultural norms. Gopinath offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending the many levels of estrangement encountered by Divakaruni's characters, especially as they manage their gender and cultural identities in an unfamiliar country.

Divakaruni's art explores the issue of intergenerational conflict, which highlights the conflicts that emerge between immigrant parents and their children who were born in America. These disagreements often arise from divergent cultural expectations and ideals. The novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) delves into the intergenerational dynamics within an Indian-American family, focusing on the connections between three generations of women. "Three generations of women who had lost their way to each other, searching among the ruins of the past" (*Before We Visit the Goddess*, 32). The story explores the impact of the immigrant experience on individuals, resulting in misinterpretations and clashes. The younger generation's desire to defy conventional expectations conflicts with the elder generation's commitment to cultural conventions, thereby emphasizing the intricacies of cultural inheritance and adjustment. "She knew what it meant to carry a country in your heart" (*Before We Visit the Goddess*, 110).

Susan Koshy (2004) examines the notion of "cultural citizenship" in immigrant literature within this framework. She asserts that Divakaruni's writings portray the process of navigating cultural norms and values across several generations. Koshy's research highlights the interconnectedness between the individuals' personal challenges with cultural identification and generational conflict, and the larger societal dynamics within immigrant communities (Koshy 160). In addition, Uma Parameswaran (1998) examines the persistent theme of the generational divide in immigrant families across South Asian diasporic literature. Parameswaran emphasizes the way in which Divakaruni's characters

represent the conflicts between preserving traditional history and adjusting to modern contemporary standards. This struggle often results in a reevaluation of one's identity and family connections (Parameswaran 33).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's examination of immigration and emigration is characterized by profound compassion for her characters and a comprehension of the intricacies of the immigrant experience. The author's writings include a diverse range of subjects, such as identity, displacement, alienation, and intergenerational conflict. Divakaruni's story offers readers unique insights into the experiences of individuals who face the difficulties of living in two different cultures, managing two different identities, and struggling to get solace from the two. Her works provide insights into the wider social, cultural, and psychological aspects of the immigrant experience, establishing her as an essential voice in modern literature.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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