

Cultural Crisis and Identity Quest in the Heroines of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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This paper attempts to bring forth the manifold identity crisis as witnessed by women since ages, in reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's heroines who frames an identity for themselves within the patriarchal gamut. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a poignant Indo-American writer who compounds themes of diaspora, identity, crisis, culture and quest of women in the patriarchal pyramid. In a convoluted narration, Banerjee's heroines mostly discover self-realisation once detached from their male counterpart. Subsequently the two cousins of the novel sequence *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, Sudha and Anju acclaims individuality once they shrug off the wifely orbit. While Sudha becomes a nursemaid in America, Anju completes her education and fulfills her desire of gliding. *The Palace of Illusions* is the epic retold through the eyes of Draupadi who becomes a figure more than a wife to five husbands, gambled, humiliated and disrobed. Thus Draupadi achieves a new dimension while she airs out her innermost feelings untold in history. *Arranged Marriage*, the short story collection presents glimpses of longing women disillusioned by cultural conflict and crisis, trying to adopt a pseudo identity that barely tallies with the one in which she grew up. The paper exposes the conjugal identity conflict these women combats through prioritizing self over everything.

Identity is the awareness and knowledge of one's true self which is essential for the eventual achievement of self-actualization. Identity relates to self-image (one's mental model of oneself), self-esteem, and individuality. Consequently, Weinreich gives the definition "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future"; this allows for definitions of aspects of identity, such as: "One's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity" (Weinreich, 1986a). Psychologist Erik Erikson coined the term, "*identity crisis*", which means when the characters are unable to extricate themselves from the conflict between who they are and who they are supposed to be,

which creates a conflict in the psychological arena of the characters. Our identity can be warped at several planes in multitude ways. Usually a woman is the foremost victim of identity crisis in the Indian patriarchal hegemony. First she loses identity after marriage, where she has to adapt and acquaint with a new household system. The second phase of identity crisis arises in women who are married off and settled in a foreign land. They not only have to accommodate with the husband's formulations of life but also to the new cultural set up of an alien land. Thus these women suffer dual identity crisis and to establish individuality out of it becomes a constant challenge. Parallel to it, she confronts a cultural crisis which is a sense of disillusionment in an alienated culture absolutely contradictory to the one she has seen or known. The women, who have migrated, feel the displacement intensely more in comparison to men, but while some use migration as a step towards their freedom and individuality which they never experienced in their own homeland, others submerge in the sunken isolation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a poignant Indo-American writer whose one major concern is directed towards the identity crisis and quest of women. As an expatriate, she is conscious about her own identity and hence her works often reflect the sense of rootless existence and alienation, which are mostly relevant to the Indian Diasporas. Her novels are the powerful representation of women shaped out of cultural hybridization that reflect the experience and social positioning of the author herself. Her women are positioned in an intermediate stage between the identity in relation to western values of independent individuality and the self-sacrificing goddess of Indian accepted culture of the good women. In the process of preserving the notion of an ideal Indian bride in a new contrasting mores they are often confronted with dilemma of whether to end dejected and disillusioned by deliberately choosing to be the pointed other or learn to acclimatize and accept the new cultural disarticulation, which might fetch them some recognition. It also evaluates their attitude and approach to life, whether they abandon their conventional values or preserve them.

Subsequently, when one discusses Banerjee's heroines, they are confronted with cultural clash leading to disillusioned identity and have to struggle in the "in-between" space of dual individuality. From being virtually transferred from the image of 'sita' to an obliquely multicultural freedom, these women undergo a personality crisis of imbalance. In *The Vine Of Desire*, Divakaruni portrays women challenged with multicultural facets of gender politics, whose identity is achieved once detached from their male counterpart. *The Vine of Desire*, written partially in epistolary form, is a striking novel of extraordinary depth and sensitivity which is also considered as a sequel to her novel, *Sister of My Heart*. Sudha and Anju are soul cousins who

grew up in a typical orthodox women run house. Anju's liberated thoughts revolve round her ideas of independent women as she found in the works of Virginia Woolf but Sudha is the traditional submissive Bengali girl. While Sudha undergoes a traumatic divorce with Ramesh in India, Anju is trying to overcome the agony of her recent miscarriage. Refusing to tie her life to another man and realizing Anju needs her, Sudha and her daughter Dayita, decide to go to the United States. The sisters rekindle their friendship and the deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support each of them needs. In Sudha's company, Anju recovers from her depression and Dayita's presence fills the void of her lost child. While Sudha manages the household chores, the story unfolds its manifold past of Anju's husband Anil's long borne love for Sudha. For Sudha America becomes the liberal land of opportunities as she says:

Live for yourself"... "I'm not sure what it means. I'm not sure I know how to do it and still be a good person. And I want to, you know. I still want to be a good person, even if I've failed at being a good wife... Yet I know I can't go back to the old way, living for others.(86)

Anju tries to combat the truth that her husband is in love with Sudha and gets separated from her husband. She completes her education and towards the end metaphorically achieves freedom in paragliding. Sudha establishes her identity and earns a livelihood by becoming a nursemaid to an old man with whom she goes back to India.

Anju and Sudha are well educated and economically independent women in search for their identity. Marriage could not bring anything more than doom in the lives of these cousins. They are trying to discover their own '*selves*' amidst joy and heartbreak. Growing up following the Indian norms of life, they had to abandon their love preference and drift towards an arranged marriage which separated the soul sisters. When Sudha goes to America, in a way she detaches all her past identities. America gives her the wings of freedom, thus '*shrug off old identities*'. Slowly she begins to embrace the American world of freedom, something she could not pull off in India.

Sunil and Ramesh are the characteristic emblem of Indian patriarchal set up of male egotism, who control their wives in all possible ways. Ramesh loves Sudha but doesn't have the backbone to protest his mother's atrocities towards his wife who compels him to divorce his pregnant wife. Ramesh although is more tolerant, yet never had the affection for his wife, instead when Sudha moves to the US, Sunil tries to seduce her and Sudha moves out. On the other hand, Divakaruni speaks of Dayita, daughter of Sudha, who is orphan with losing her father, as the new will of womanhood, fighting for the right cause to hold on matriarchal grounds. Thus Sudha splits traditional decree when forced to abort her unborn female foetus by her mother-in-law, she

decides to walk out of her in-laws' and husband's house; and takes care of her own child on her shoulders.

An epic dimension is achieved in *The Palace of Illusions*, where Banerjee narrates the Mahabharata through Draupadi. The novel is a drift from her regular diaspora theme, attempting to render individual identity to mythological heroines. The author takes certain fictional liberties to represent Draupadi's desires in her narrative, giving vent to her thoughts and expressions. This postmodern reworking of Mahabharata offers an obtrusive exposé to several female characters whose identity went veiled behind the hyper masculine characters. In the epilogue, Divakaruni clearly mentions:

“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 husbands,

brothers or sons. 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 lines of the men's exploits.”

(Banerjee Divakaruni xiv-xv)

The portrayals of women characters in the epic were not only meagre but left disgruntled. What history told about Draupadi is a woman of fiercely feminine sensibility, a traditional Hindu wife to five husbands, who was gambled, disrobed and humiliated. Ancient notion held that it was Draupadi's headstrong oath and determination that paved the path of destruction of the Third Age of Man (Dhruvpara Age), and she is dubbed as a *kriya*, one who brings doom to her clan and responsible for the downfall of the Kurus. Banerjee revives the mythological character of Draupadi from being an object to a subject and presents us with a Draupadi who was destiny's child. Named Draupadi at birth (literally meaning daughter of king Drupada), she declares herself as Panchali (meaning derived from the Kingdom of Panchala). She thus detaches her father's egoistic attachment to her name and establishes her desired identity liberated from the men in her life. In the first chapter 'Fire', Draupadi fancies iconic names for herself, “The story inspired me to make up fancy names for myself: Off-spring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One. But Dhairya puffed out her cheeks at my tendency to drama, calling me the Girl Who Wasn't invited. (1) Thus, it is the story of a girl —who wasn't invited yet prophesised to change the course of history. The novel retells the epic of pride, love and revenge, the innermost thoughts of a girl's mind who

revolted to accept the feminine barriers of restrictions and desired the male world of freedom. Divakaruni gets into the psyche of Draupadi (Panchaali), a princess without a mother, who is terribly lonely, with a caring twin brother and her rather upfront but caring Dhai Ma.

In the chapter “Scorpion” she comes to know from Dhri, how Karna acquired kingship, and he is equally capable like Arjuna to win the *Swayamvara*. With each detail of Karna’s story her “flesh hooked with his sufferings binding her to wish a happier life for him” (34) and her obsession for Karna ignited her innermost passion to possess him as a husband whom she rejected in her *swayamvara*. The tale of Draupadi, “buoyant, expansive and uncontainable” (36), emerged out of fire, pre-fated to avenge her father’s humiliation by marrying five husbands. While she gives ideal opinion and judgement with a sense of unwavering revolting spirit, it is Draupadi to whom her five husbands turn for advice and governance. Thus Divakaruni brands Draupadi as a character who brings the destiny of Pandavas rather than being subservient to them. Draupadi says, “I’d played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I’d shared their hardship in Khandav. I’d helped them design this unique palace which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner” (Divakaruni 134). Draupadi’s devotional love for Krishna, her unrequited obsession for Karna, subtle dislike for Kunti, pride, whims and fancies, all establishes her as the woman of multidimensional strength who shaped history. Divakaruni’s handling of feminine quest for identity using the mythological character of Draupadi is distinct in a way that she manipulates myth to symbolically comment on the events of Mahabharata in the plot of her novel, thus serving her purpose right. In Divakaruni’s attempt to voice the feminine quest for identity, one can observe that in her novel she examines how myth and gender shaped both the identity of the women in India, and their feminine response to it. Draupadi, in the novel, says that the palace of illusion (which she designed on her own) will mirror her deepest being; with the obvious implication that the palace will be the closest to her desires and her identity. Divakaruni thus voices the reappraisal of women and their position in the social power structure.

As an outstanding voice of the immigrant writers, C.B. Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* is an assortment of eleven short stories, juxtaposing narratives of women in India and abroad. In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni “beautifully tells stories about the immigrant brides who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own.” (Holf1)

Focusing on the post marital tale of longings, abuses and bravery of immigrant women her works are fine example of expatriate literature. Most of the stories deal with the cultural disarticulation and identity clash of the traditionally conservative diaspora women living in

America and the challenges faced in a new freedom exposed environment. The challenges further intensify when their husbands add to their pre-existing suppressed traumas. As Divakaruni says, “Expatriates have powerful and poignant experiences when they live away from their original culture and this becomes home, and never quite, and then you can’t really go back and be quite at home there either.” (Divakaruni *Profile*).

In the short story, “The Clothes”, the title itself alludes to the changing identity. Sumita is married to Somesh in America. Sumita’s life in America is not different from the life led by other daughter-in-laws in Indian society of these days. She lives with her in-laws in America who are traditionally Indian culture bound thus expects their children to adhere to Indian customs. Her life as she describes is a frozen small world, a glass world and America rushes by. It is this syndrome of playing ‘*sati-savitiri*’, which does not allow her to be herself. Sumita’s changing clothes at the different phases of her life symbolizes a changed characteristic of hybrid identity formation. She wears sari in front of her in-laws and tries on western clothes in her bedroom in front of her husband. Within the small apartment, Sumita balances between two different identities of being an Indian woman and a western lady at the same time, the one in which she grew up and the one she wants to embrace, either of them impossible to neglect. Sumita’s husband is very much conscious about the American way of life – of the impartiality and emancipation.

Unlike other Indian husbands, Somesh ushers in her the need of a self-governed individuality of her own. He tells her about his plans of sending her to college and then to work but even he is trapped into the deeply rooted cultural bashfulness. Nevertheless, the fear to break the customary knobs does not allow him to articulate his views or disagree with his parents. In a heated matrix, the story reaches its climax when Somesh is murdered by some unknown person. This is an enormous shock to Sumita as she realizes that her life has also ended with the death of her husband. She is confronted with two choice, to opt a white *saree* meant for widows and return to India and become “ a dove with cut-off wings”, or to don the skirt and blouse and fulfil her and her late husband’s dream of being an Independent working woman. She thinks of her new identity, “In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the colour of almonds (“Clothes” 10).” While she chooses to stay back in America, She is determined, empowered and ready to face the arguments against her decision.

In the story ‘Affair’, Asha’s husband Ashok is having an affair with their common friend Meena. While Meena’s husband, Srikant, informs Asha about their divorce notice, he also hints at her to consider a possibility between them. While Meena feels that marriage for her is a miscalculated choking error, Asha also feels the same bitterness however her way of expression is

different. Meena and Asha, both in their own way are in search of themselves, in search of their identity. Until then Asha was the introvert and shy woman whose confidence was broken by her husband's consistent taunts and cutting remarks. Asha as such suffered from uncompromising insecurity, "I wondered how many women were lying sleepless like me, through the night dark, eyes burning tears that wouldn't come, because their husbands were having affairs with their best friends" (44).

Meena's disenchantment with her marriage has helped Asha to realize that its time she prioritizes herself over other things. She feels that convention gives no scope for transform. Her priority until now had been her husband and her family, which resulted in a state of depression. She realizes that her relation with Ashok had always been empty and vacant, devoid of any intimacy. To move on in life, the shackles of bonded relation have to be broken. When she receives a new job opportunity that is sure to raise her to considerable heights, she sets off to shape her future in an environment of self-autonomy. She writes a letter to Ashok stating that she wants a separation, which not only restores her lost confidence but also ushers hopes of prospective opportunities. Thus parting from her husband becomes the gamut of her self-identification.

Chitra Banerjee's portrayal of women comes from her vivid observation of the patriarchal Indian communal set up that confines her to loss, lack of space and isolation, offering very less scope to acclaim an individuality. In this changing scenario, writers like Divakaruni create women who emerge from the passive role model status of male subservience and explore themselves by filling the vacuum and abolishing the redundant customs. Her heroines are the everyday women like us, who struggle in the paranoid of disillusioned identity crisis in a closed space as marriage particularly after travelling abroad. Coming out of this cynical flux is an achievement towards their self-effacement. Thus postmodern women like Banerjee's heroines are ready to alter the preordained gender roles, giving a tough challenge to their male counterparts to combat the truth that their patriarchal insight might not work well with all women.

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