



# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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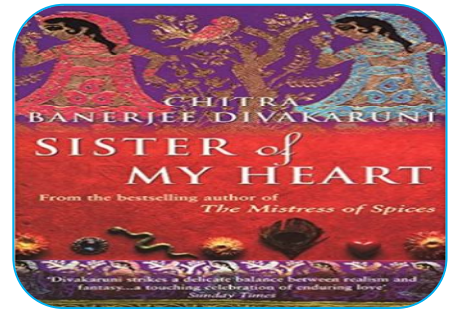
## CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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### ABSTRACT:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born 1956), who has captured the anguish of cultural displacement, disorientation, and dislocation so well, has delivered her unique perspective on immigrant views. Millions of "exiled Indians" are under duress as they attempt very much to bring equilibrium between "home and abroad." Assimilation and cultural estrangement are prevalent themes in modern literature. Characters that are lost, alone, and alienated pass in front of us. Assimilation and cultural estrangement are becoming commonplace occurrences. In her works, Divakaruni paints a vivid image of the isolation experienced by those who have been uprooted. Every character in Divakaruni's books is uprooted from their own country and relocated to the United States, where they face discrimination due to their racial background. And lastly, after being naturalized citizens, they relocate (assimilate) to the United States. Fuller claims to say that "in our age man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem and conviction of isolation, randomness, meaningless in his way of existence" (48).



**KEYWORDS:** *exiled Indians , naturalized citizens , persecution, famine and ruin.*

### INTRODUCTION:

The globe is changing every day, and migration is now a crucial and inevitable aspect of this process. Since the beginning of human history, there has been migration around the planet. Cultural mingling occurs as people move from one location to another and exchange ideas and viewpoints about their own cultures. In terms of identification, a person typically departs from their native country or place of origin, whether consciously or unconsciously. The Indian Diaspora emerged due to a multitude of circumstances, including the varied histories of our nation, cultural diversity, and distinct traditions and customs. The journey made by the diasporic individual or community from "alienation" to ultimate "assimilation" to the host nation is the process of surviving between the "home of origin" and the "world of adoption."

As immigrants assimilate into American society, elements of their own culture are incorporated into it, which changes their own culture as well. Writings were being produced by the rapidly expanding South Asian community in America, particularly by second-generation Indian Americans. The body of work by Indian writers residing outside has improved Indian writing in English. These foreign writers have integrated and became citizens of the nations in which they have chosen to live. They have also expressed in their writings their emotional connection to their new nation. An expression of the growing South Asian population in America may be seen in Divakaruni's interview with Atiya Hassan,

"South Asians are a big part of American culture and they're no longer here just to be exoticized. The first generation of immigrants wanted to continue living their lives in similar ways as they did back home with little to no involvement in American society. The second generation does not want to follow the same path. They want to be a part of it all. I think it'll be interesting to see how South Asian cultures continue to become a part of the greater American culture" (Divakaruni).

The modern environment is also being destroyed by the constant migration of people in search of better possibilities. Relocating to a new place and severing oneself from one's ancestral roots can be quite difficult. The experience of migration is terrible; it causes immigrants' mental, spiritual, and psychological suffering, which isolates them from their culture. One of the most painful challenges facing the Indian Diaspora is alienation. An immigrant must live in his memories when he lacks a feeling of identity in the new nation.

Emotional seclusion or separation from other people might be characterized as "alienation." It is the state of not being able to relate to someone or something. Stated differently, estrangement is a psychological state. As Encyclopedia Britannica defines it, "the state of feeling estranged or separated from ones milieu, work, and products of work or self." Immigrants experience social estrangement and personal criticism when there is a culture conflict. The diaspora of Indians is cognizant of estrangement. In this unstable world, the immigrants are bound by both disgust and assimilation. Seeking solace in the illustrious past, they attempt to draw parallels between it and the present. In his book *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie states, "exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (10).

The identity crisis faced by immigrants after their move becomes a global issue for human society. Things like ethnicity, customs, dharmas, and culture vanish from existence as identity crises strike. Many issues, such as West vs. East, new vs. old, or modern vs. conservative, are at play in the conflicts, interventions, and search for identity. After arriving in a foreign nation, immigrants attempt to protect their native customs since they are uneasy about them in such an unfamiliar environment. They do their hardest to stay attached to their own country. This emerges as the most significant cause of the South Asian diaspora's identity crisis.

Every immigrant who departs from their own country and relocates abroad must acclimate to new cultural norms. They begin to feel alienated from their adopted place as they make an effort to adapt, follow, and absorb its culture. The degree to which an individual can assimilate into a foreign culture varies depending on their generation. The fundamental themes of Divakaruni's works include difficulties with adjustment, homesickness, the inability to return to India, psychological issues with having two identities, and an ongoing sense of disconnection that permeates the South Asian diaspora.

The process of assimilation between immigrants and the native population of their adoptive country is never-ending. Diaspora writers discovered that when two or more cultural groups reside in the same geographic area, they interact with one another and form relationships. Assimilation is the final stage of this interaction between immigrants and natives. As a result, many societies throughout the world have become multicultural during the 20th century. Milton Gordon, a specialist in the multifaceted methods of assimilation, characterizes it as "a process in which a group of distinct and separate people come to share a common culture and merging towards the host society" (46). The integration of immigrants into their host society takes several forms. The acculturation tactics are divided into four categories by John Berry, the founder of acculturation psychology: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. He characterizes integration as "a process of adaptation whereby the migrant or migrant group takes on the customs, values and social attributes of the host society to the extent that the immigrant becomes indistinguishable from the majority. Integration may be defined as a similar process by which the immigrant or immigrant group becomes an active member of the host society, yet simultaneously maintains a distant ethnic identity. Separation occurs when ethnic minorities seek to maintain distinct identities, refusing active participation in the larger society and marginalization refers to when one neither identifies with his or her original background nor with that of the host society" (27).

Some elderly immigrants, who have since left their homeland, felt compelled to embrace western culture to some degree as it had increased their prospects of surviving in a distant country. Others come to our country of liberty voluntarily and embrace the American way of life. Their goal is to raise their kids to be idealized Americans from infancy. One of the most important things that happens to immigrants as soon as they arrive in a foreign or Western nation is assimilation. P. A. Abraham writes in *Writers of Indian Diaspora*, "Crisis of Unbelonging in Some Expatriate Stories from the Canadian and Indian Context", "Caught between two worlds the expatriate negotiates a new space, caught between two cultures and after languages, the expatriate writer negotiates a new literary space. Therefore, an anxious sense of dislocation is characteristic of expatriate writings. The shifting designation of 'home' (where's it) and the attendant anxieties about homelessness and the impossibility of going back are perennial themes in these stories" (51).

Divakaruni's writings are shaped by themes that reflect her experiences as an immigrant throughout her life. When the protagonists accidentally come into contact with western life, they display accepting cultural features and nostalgia for their cultural background. Ambivalence is a problem for Indian immigrants because they find it difficult to separate from their long-standing cultural history while also being drawn to the shallowness of the new culture. The preserved past and the esteemed western civilization are clearly at odds with one another. The experiences of immigrants pique Divakaruni's curiosity. She contrasts the lives of second generation immigrants with her own immigration experiences. She discusses Uma and her boyfriend Ramon from *One Amazing Thing* in her Girija Sankar interview, "I am very interested in the immigrant experience. It is interesting to see how much branching out there is, in careers for instance. People are now especially interested in the arts. So many immigrants are writing today. Self-expression has become more important than ever before. When we came here, there was a sense of survival, how we fit in and integrated with society. But now, the current generation is confident in a whole new way. It is perhaps because of their parents too. People marry outside of their caste or communities. We see that in Uma's relationship. Her boyfriend Ramon, who is Hispanic, is accepted by her parents. They even give him an Indian name, Ramu!" (Divakaruni).

The Divakaruni protagonists march through their own encounters with the other lands and embark on an exploration of the uncharted territories. One nation is not given precedence over another by them. However, they are constantly eager to investigate the prospect of joining the host nation because they wish to maintain their options for going back home. Divakaruni requires a relocating self when one is reinventing his own cultural background on a new canvas in order to overcome dislocation. And this is why Divakaruni's writings are so excellent—she upholds and validates the native ancestry of immigrants. As noted by Padma Rangaswamy in *Namaste America*, "the post 1965 Indian immigrants [writers] are a different breed. As articulate and organized professionals they have expressed themselves in literature and recorded their immigrant experiences for posterity" (147). Divakaruni's fiction primarily focuses on the experiences of Indians in America and the growing tension between her chosen nation's culture and her own customs. In her interview with Parayath, she declares, "as immigrants we have this enormous raw material, which is often very painful and puts us in a position of conflict, which is very good for a writer" and further expands her view, "We draw from a dual culture, with two sets of worldviews and paradigms juxtaposing each other" (Divakaruni).

The main goal of Divakaruni is to portray the lifestyle of the Indian diaspora. She illustrates how people manage to reconcile the customs and traditions of their home country with their ethnic background. They encounter an incomprehensible alien environment on a daily basis, without any bias. All of Divakaruni's fictional works feature recurring themes like as emotional and physical alienation, uprooting, communication difficulties, relationship breakdowns, discord in married life, and misconceptions. She delves into the minds of her characters and enlightens us about their inner lives with her exceptional knowledge and comprehension. According to Daphne Grace's study article "The Self-Reflexive World: Consciousness and Social Responsibility," "Both Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Salman Rushdie are authors concerned with migration and trans-national concepts of ethnic identity in

the Diaspora and with trans-cultural experiences of exile and belonging, alienation, and the hope of reconciliation" (117).

Divakaruni goes into great detail in *Sister of My Heart* about the closeness that exists between Anju and Sudha. Unfortunately, once they reach their midteens, things get really complicated in their life. Through Aunt Pishi, Sudha discovers the family's sinister secret. She learns that Anju's father and the enigmatic death are both the result of her father's actions. Sudha puts Anju at a distance. Anju notices that Sudha has changed her conduct, and she considers, "Whenever Sudha thinks she's alone, she gazes into the distance with her great dark eyes, and sadness seeps over her face like a stain. I must've asked her a hundred times, Sudha, What is it, what's wrong? But all she'll say is nothing. Then she'll make an excuse and go to her room, and if I follow her, she'll say she has a headache and wants to lie down" (56).

After learning the secret, Sudha feels bad and gives in to the situation. Her father's betrayal has left a lasting impression on her, and it is filled with regret. Sudha falls in love with Ashok when they first meet in the movie theater, but their moms don't support the relationship because of Ashok's lower caste. Sudha and Ashok decide to elope. Meanwhile, Anju and Sunil finalize their marriage, and Sudha gives up on her plan to elope with Ashok because she knows what would happen to them after. Anju is worried about damaging her marriage and not causing her father's issues in the future.

Redemptive memories, inarticulate love, and poor communication have left Sudha profoundly distraught. In accordance with her mother's expectations, she marries Ramesh and experiences additional alienation. She doesn't protest to her mother-in-law's strange and inappropriate behavior. She doesn't say anything and does as her mother-in-law requests, managing households without raising any concerns. The silence of the women in Divakaruni's writings causes them to part ways. Her main character, Sudha, says nothing and gives in to compromise after compromise. Sudha is constantly occupied with household tasks, day and night, and she laments the absence of company. Not even her husband, Ramesh, can provide her the kind of company she wants.

Anju immigrated to the United States with her spouse Sunil, who works there as well. However, Anju is taken aback by Sunil's actions in America, and they start to misunderstand one another. Sunil rarely visits the house throughout the day, arrives late at night, and avoids Anju when asked where he is, answering questions that don't pertain to him. Anju, alone in this foreign nation with no one to share her grief and sufferings with, is frantic and yearns for company.

Divakaruni draws attention to the plight of the Indian girl who has settled in America with her husband through Anju. Anju finds it tough to accommodate in the fresh surroundings and way of life right away. The woman misses her own India and is often reminded of it. Anju enrolls in classes to keep herself occupied while visiting this foreign country. Anju lost hope after suffering a miscarriage three years later. However, Sudha leaves her husband's house since her mother-in-law is pressuring her to terminate her unborn daughter.

While Anju is still in America, she becomes pregnant for the first time, but sadly, she miscarries the child. She feels like she's "being snaked in" amid the scents of lotions and medications, as well as the speckled ceiling above her head. In this state of physical agony and mental seclusion, she looks back in an attempt to resurrect her early recollections. Anju sees this return of her childhood memories not just as a cultural nostalgia but also as a way to make up for her lost relationships, motherhood, and the hazy remnants of her national identity.

Sudha travels to America at the invitation of her sister. After taking a plane to the United States, she gradually assimilates into American society. After leaving their native countries, the immigrants are grafted into the host culture, removing them from their own. On the other hand, they want to protect their legacy and memory. To keep up with the new reality, the various selves are meticulously created and maintained. Hoping to meet the twin, the characters find themselves vacillating between two identities, two worlds, and two civilizations. Americanization can be accomplished using a number of tactics that Divakaruni has noted. Somdatta Mandal elucidates the clash of cultures in his work "The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction", "Through the eyes of people caught in the clash of culture, and by constantly juxtaposing Calcutta with a Californian city, Divakaruni reveals the

rewards and the perils of breaking free from the past and the complicated, often contradictory emotions that shape the passage to independence" (15).

The character of Anju exemplifies the author's idea of "melting-pot assimilation" as she attempts to marry into the American nationalistic community. From early childhood, Anju has believed that being married to an American will redefine her American identity and fortify her. As she waits for her American highness to come, she says that "it's going to happen to me any day now, probably as soon as Mr. America gets here" (136). However, Anju discovers in *The Vine of Desire* that she is not content with her married life as she had previously believed, and she makes an effort to live in American style. In her autobiographical essay "How America Made Me into a Writer," Divakaruni expresses this kind of estrangement and assimilation, "I appreciated the freedom and anonymity of being in a city where only a handful of people knew who I was. I missed my family and their sheltering arms so much that it was like having a hole in my heart. I thought about India more than I had ever before. I realized what I appreciated about it--the warmth, the closeness of extended family, the way spirituality pervades the culture. But I also recognized problems about how women are often treated, and a rigid class system because of which many doors are closed to all but the most fortunate and most well-connected people" (Divakaruni).

Despite all the material luxuries bestowed to a lady, an emotional vacuum remains. The woman is perpetually dejected. Every time she looks for a way to communicate. Anju feels emotionally cheated out of her marriage. She starts to feel low, insecure, and lonely. At times, she even starts to despise her spouse. Her existence is filled with hollow pretenses, meaninglessness, and emptiness. Sudha has always taken a passive approach to life, allowing events to happen to her and allowing others to determine how her life will unfold. The woman is abnormally depressed and feels emotionally alone. "In spite of all the times we made love, all the sweet words Sunil whispered afterwards into my hair, all I had to do close my eyes and I could see the look on his face and her stared after Sudha, as he picked up the handkerchief that had fallen from her waistband. I'd never seen the wide-pupiled, out-of-control look on him again, note even at the height of our lovemaking" (209).

Nevertheless, Parekh feels that Anju's broken consciousness captures all the hues that are frequently present in Indian immigrant women, and says that "fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humour, as well as pathos underline her observation as she discovers for herself the undefined medium between the preservation of old world and a simulation into the new one" (197). Even as the immigrants relish their newfound independence and monetary prosperity, they long for the support of their families and communities back home. In *Sister of My Heart*, Anju's perplexity about her choice to bring Sudha to America serves as an example of this. "Did I push Sudha into making the wrong decision, misled by my American feminist notions of right and wrong? Have I condemned her to a life of loneliness" (272)?

More than cultural alienation, the psychological effects of loneliness and unhappiness on Indian immigrants' minds and sensibilities are felt. In her writings, Divakaruni observes this rather accurately. Cross-cultural crisis representation has emerged as one of the major issues of contemporary writing. In the current era of globalization, this topic has become extremely important. Even though Divakaruni left India for the United States many years ago, her close family ties are what have kept the author in her birthplace. She acknowledged, during her interview with Bhattej, "I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I am an Indian, but living in America for 19 years has taught me many things. It has helped me look at both cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate" (Divakaruni).

As they live far from their roots and culture, the literary migrants acquire a distinct perception regarding their own nation. People from different cultural backgrounds who live in mainstream American society are required to acculturate. It's a complex social process. When people from diverse cultural origins come into direct touch with one another without any intermediaries, both social and cultural changes happen. By defining, redefining, evaluating, and explaining it from every angle conceivable from the perspectives of both men and women, the search for national identity is demonstrated. According to C. Bharathi's book *Diaspora Allegiance: Fiction by Chitra Banerjee*

Divakaruni, "The diasporic novelists are constantly in search of answers to questions of identity, pulled apart as they are between their country of origin and the country of adoption. They exist between the two poles of being and becoming and remember their past through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth as their present renders them rootless. This experience has substantiated the themes of international and inter-cultural interface. Chitra Banerjee's protagonists face a multicultural society and exhibit a deep awareness of the social reality surrounding them" (137).

For themselves, the immigrants create new cultural "routes." With these freshly created "routes," people are able to travel to various locations both virtually and practically. They create new connections between their past, present, and future as a result of meeting a lot of people, which aids in the achievement of their goals. According to Shyam M. Asnani's work, "Identity Crisis of Indian Immigrants: A Study of Three Novels," "Though the writer's individual talent should be rooted in the tradition of a particular society and culture, the real strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of individual's predicament in terms of alienation, immigration, expatriate, exile and his quest for identity. Culturally and linguistically estranged as the individual feels about himself, the whole question of his social, emotional, ethnic or cultural identity assumes mythic proportion and thus becomes an unattainable ideal" (73).

It has been investigated how India and America are two unique universes that reflect their respective cultural diversity. Even before they learn how to swim, the recently moved Indians compare their new life in America to being "thrown into the sea." When Sudha and the other female Divakaruni characters travel to America, the same thing occurs to them. It is a whole new and distinct environment for them. For the Indian immigrants, it is a mixed experience; sometimes it breaks the unease and superstitions they have been associated with for a long time, and other times it reinforces the sterility and pointlessness of a shallow culture. It is evident that assimilation remains the sole means by which an individual can maintain both their native culture and the culture of the land they have adopted. They can maintain their identity and have tranquil lives through acculturation.

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