

Diasporic Experience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*: Some Evidence

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper discusses about the issues of diasporic experience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Vine of Desire. The novel under scrutiny, being a sequel to her earlier novel Sister of My Heart and written against the backdrop of California, portrays the trauma experienced by the immigrants due to dislocation, a sense of disquiet longing for home and homeland, nostalgia and memory and thereby struggle for identity. The focal point of the paper is to see how the two women, Anju and Sudha, get doubly displaced from their home as well as homeland; how their diasporic experiences are lime lighted in California; how this displacement helps these women become liberated; how does this lead to their breakdown? Being a story of transformation of Anju and Sudha and their quest for autonomy and identity in the host land, the novel is a fictitious representation of both positive and negative effects of diaspora on immigrants signifying their desperation for home and home land.

Since last few decades, the writers of Indian diaspora have been holding the centre-stage in the annals of Indian Writing in English due to the theoretical formulations being thrown up by their write-ups. The Greek word, 'Diaspora' meaning, 'a dispersion', may be defined as dispersion of people, language or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place. Either voluntary or compulsory, as Nayar evinces, "[s]uch movements were common during colonialism" (187). Diasporic people carry with them a profound sense of attachment with their former place of residence. Bill Ashcroft and others define diaspora: "Diaspora, the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization" (69). Migration of the people from one country to other is easy in transportation but hard to adjust in alien culture, far from one's homeland. The home and identity are very important for everyone. The people who live in alien culture are very connected to their root and to their respective native countries. They have a separate room for their home country in their heart. The diasporic writers are usually obsessed with the issues of nostalgia when they want to locate themselves in different cultures. Such writers carry within their minds and writings the culture of their motherland and simultaneously they try their best to embrace and negotiate that of the host land. Nonetheless, viewing the literature of diaspora in a larger perspective, it is observed that this type of literature helps understand and appreciate various cultures, pulling down the walls of different nations, making the global as glocal, and permeating universal peace, tout court. The diasporic writings, primarily and predominantly, concentrate on the following elements such as the search for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt, etc. The writers like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharti Mukherjee, etc. look back towards their home land for different reasons. They turn to India to quest the roots, to mythologize India's history, to revitalize and to re-energize traumatic and aching soul, and to feel childhood experience respectively.

As an award winning diasporic author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b.1956), whose oeuvre is hugely set against the backdrop of India and the United States, concentrates on the lives of Indian women struggling with cultural shackles to carve out an identity of their own. Here the focus is on the existence of Anju and Sudha and their diasporic experiences in California, where they, after their migration, get doubly displaced from their home as well as homeland. This displacement sometimes helps women to become liberated but this can also lead to their breakdown. In *The Vine of Desire* (2002), which says the odyssey of the transformation of Anju and Sudha and their quest for autonomy and identity in the hostland, Anju's distressing marital relationship with Sunil in California and both the sisters' immigrant experiences play a significant role in their identity formation and re-formation. In this connection, Beena Agarwal points out that, "On one hand the phenomena of migration has helped to break the barriers of traditions; it has also made the life of Indian woman more complex. Indian woman with her traditional moral consciousness and limited professional skills finds herself more isolated and insecure" (10).

Sudha walks out of her marriage. She refuses to have an abortion when the fetus was declared to be a girl. Anju invites her to America so that she could find a job for herself to lead a comfortable life. She decides "I want to bring Sudha to America" (18). On her sister's invitation Sudha goes to America. Her flight to America is a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture. The immigrants who lived away from their homes are away from their cultures, and are grafted on to the other culture. However, they wish to keep their memories alive and preserve their heritage. The multiple selves are painstakingly constructed and maintained to make sense of the new world. The characters are caught drifting between the two worlds, two cultures, two identities, hoping that the twin would meet. Divakaruni highlights a series of strategies that make successful Americanization possible.

Somdatta Mandal in his "The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction" explains the clash of culture:

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)

Most of Divakaruni's writings describe the United States as a safe haven and promised-land for her immigrant characters. The United States is repeatedly sanctified with some classic mythical terms as the promised-land, the land beyond the seven seas, and the fairy kingdom, in her stories. The United States and India are depicted as opposites to each other, with the United States being represented with most of the positive and redeeming qualities and India being portrayed as the backward and the evil in need of redemption. The immigrants from India are identified as the lucky ones from a primitive society who receive the benefits of the advanced society of the promised-land.

Sudha also visits America with a hope to make a life for herself and her daughter Dayita. Divakaruni follows the trend, shows America as the land of opportunities and a life saver from difficulties. Sudha undergoes cultural changes on immigration. She breaks all the restrictions bound with Indian marriages and security. Single handed she risks about bringing up her a daughter. She sheds her traditional conservative role of a pathetic female and evolves into liberal and self-dependent woman. Through Sudha's understanding of the new land (America), Divakaruni clearly portrays the cultural problems and possibilities. Sudha with the fire of independence inside her asks a girl Sara, whom she meets in a garden, to find a job for her. Sara was an Indian and believed in highly self-centered thoughts which inspire Sudha. Sudha is surprised with Sara's decision of cancelation of her marriage only because she could not lose her privacy. She frankly accepts in front of Sudha that, "In-laws, kids, servants, you know how it is in India So I bought myself a bus ticket to California" (83). Through Sara, Sudha gets information about Lupe, a woman of connections. She heaves a sigh of relief as she is confident of acquiring a job, if any crisis arises. She becomes nervous and reflects thus; "East and west, east and west ... I want Lupe to find me job so I can escape this apartment. The river of my life is speeding towards an abyss. What shall I do? ... I want to bite into the apple of America" (87).

The immigrants have to experience an important change which is the difference in the dressing sense they have to follow in their adopted country. Dress becomes another indication that symbolizes the adjustments made by the immigrant in a foreign country. While people are in their own country, they can wear any kind of Indian dresses which represents the region in which they live. But as soon as they have to leave their own country and goes to a foreign country, they have to quit their traditional way of dressing. And it becomes a compulsion to be accepted by the people of the new country. Sudha in America wonders about Sara's dressing style of wearing jeans; "She wears cutoff jeans, makes the swing go way past safely. No, it's a grown woman. Her back hair streams out, sealsleek, as the swing sweeps forward. She

wears her tight purple T-shirt with a nonchalance I envy" (81-82).

Sudha and Anju face new challenges: Anju's husband's treacherous attractions to Sudha's beauty and Sudha's difficulty in finding a true home for herself. Divakaruni follows the trend, shows America as the land of opportunities and a life saver from difficulties. She brings about the contrasting cultures of India and the US. The novel constantly focuses on the trans-culture and the characters seem to shuttling between two worlds. Anju in *The Vine of Desire* migrated to America and lives a lonely life there. In America, she is shocked at Sunil's attitude and a misunderstanding develops between them. Most of the time, Sunil stays out of home, comes late at night and if he is asked about his whereabouts, he avoids Anju and gives irrelevant answers. Anju becomes desperate and longs for a companionship as she is all alone in this alien land and no one is there to share her sorrows and sufferings.

In India, her life was filled with a number of relatives but in the US, when her husband leaves for job, there is no one to communicate and later during her pregnancy not a soul to give suggestions. Anju, during her miscarriage, yearns for someone to console her feeling of loneliness. Her isolation reveals nostalgia caused due to immigration. All through the story, there is sentimental attachment displayed by different characters. Anju in this novel often talks to her unborn son whom she names 'Prem'. She tells 'Prem' about her old house in Calcutta when she suffers from nostalgia and homesickness. She senses pain for the change of things. She remembers even smallest of the incidents in the past which she used to loath and hate as a child, but as an immigrant she longs to retrieve the past.

It's gone now. Demolished to make space for a high-rise apartment building. And I'm the one who kept at your grandmothers—do you know you have three grandmothers: my mom, Sudha's mom, and Pishi, who's my dad's sister? — to sell it. I used to hate that house, how ancient it was, how it stood for everything ancient. I hated being cooped up in it and not allowed to go anywhere except school. But now I miss it! (13)

Anju dreams of foreign countries from the time she started reading books like *Anna Karenina* and *Sons and Lovers*, *The Great Gatsby* and *A Rooms of One's Own* and America has become a promised land of her dreams. She thinks that her life would only be transformed when she could get out of Calcutta. The America which becomes the promised land of her dreams filled her with dissatisfaction with her life. She utters:

So in my teenage years, I read things like *Anna Karenina* and *Sons and Lovers* and *The Great Gatsby* and *A Room of One's Own*. I'm glad I did, but maybe Aunt Nalini—that's Sudha's mom—was right. They were no good for me. They filled me with a dissatisfaction with my own life, and a longing for distant places. I believed that, if I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn't so easy, is it? (14)

Sudha comes to America to console her sister in her great loss. With the news of Sudha's arrival, Anju recalls her childhood and all the associated evidences and objects. Against the sophistication of American life, she feels her refrigerator with dishes that reminds her of her Calcutta and her Bengali culture. She collects the dishes like spaghetti, metaballs, potato salad, tuna, banana, pudding, apple pie. She also misses her old mansion in Calcutta. She cries out:

I miss it! I think of my room with its cool, high ceiling and my bed-sheets, which always smelled clean, like neem leaves— and which I never had to wash myself and the hundred year old peepal tree that grew outside my windows. Sometimes a sense of loss grips her consciousness. I wish, I hadn't been in such a hurry to come to America. (13)

Sudha also has her own big dreams to 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. 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. (294)

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, Anju is getting curious to know Sudha's reaction about immigration. She asks Sudha, "Do you miss India?" Sudha finds that in America people watches the stars from the window and even Anju is ignorant of the cycle of seasons and the name of stars. Once Sudha looks at a calendar gifted by her mother and it reminds her of all those details that are related to her Indian life and sensibility. Such kind of awareness for minor details of Indian astrology is an index to find out that her sensibility remains rooted in Indian soil. She becomes emotional with the slowly moving memories of the past and therefore she comments:

The future is after all serious thing? The Indian months and days are marked in Red Bengali lettering. The English ones are printed underneath in a small, innocuous blue. It indicates all our festivals, even minor ones like Jamai Shasthi, when son-in-laws are invited and served their favourite dishes. Little diagrams mark full moons and no moons, and the thin silver of the eleventh night, which is a time for women without husbands to fast and pray for purification.

Hand written notes on the bottom of each page warns us of the dangerous hours; rahukul which shifts each day with the movement of planets when it's good to lie low. (149)

There is an exposure of cultural changes, which is accepted by Sudha in a party of Mr. Chopra where she sips wine. In this party Sudha meets with Lalit, she walks with this young man holding on to his sleeve. She is the one who has never been to a dance before "moves fluidly, comfortable with her body's rhythm.... She closes her eyes and sways to the beat. Sometimes she clicks her fingers and mouths the words" (134). On the other hand, she revives her Indian ways of living and eating. 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 Divanahotahi, 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. (245)

She had come to America after violating the traditions of an arranged marriage but 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 comes to an end. She looks after Trideep and Myra's disabled father who suffers from an extreme depression for home and India, a position she obtains with the help of Lupe, who provides work for such kind of people. She is not well educated to do the dignified jobs and ends up by doing odd jobs there. She is dissatisfied with her life in the U.S.A and finally wants to return to India.

The loss of the old culture is neither an exciting nor an exhilarating experience for Sudha. She faces disappointment on all planes- physical, mental and emotional. In this new culture, she is free from all kinds of boundaries of caste, gender and family. But this freedom does not make her lively, rather it leaves her utterly lonely and desolate as she says, "we have been running from place to place hoping for shelter, for such a long time. And finally I thought I'd found it here. Sanctuary, if only for a few months. Enough time to lick my wounds, catch my breath" (244). Like Sudha, Anju also tried to be perfect wife but she also failed in her attempts. Her feeling of fragmented identity deepens her depression after her miscarriage. She is in a feeling duality of belonging to two nations with extensively different cultural traditions. Though she is revolutionary towards certain aspects of her Indian heritage, but she is also protective towards it when the native of America make fun of its heritage and culture. It is possible only in the state of diaspora that she can understand both the cultures, of her home and of America. She does not find refuge in any of the nations. She starts writing and joins a creative writing community through which she attempts to encounter the fragments within herself.

Sudha decides to go back to India with the old man with a deal of serving him in turn for a good school for her daughter. She is excited with her own bank account but leaving the old relations is the only regret. Nevertheless she is not going back to the old home but to a new abode, to start a new life as she believes, "I never have to depend on any one again" (321). Sudha redefines herself, and her relocation is an assertion of her independence. Her loneliness in a new country and her failed attempts to adjust there become the cause of her return to India. She tells the old man whom she is nursing in novel *The Vine of Desire*:

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. (320)

Sudha describes her American experience as a 'fusion' between India and America. She describes immigration as a 'two way process' in which both the natives and the immigrants grow by the interchange and experience. The immigrants have to go through an inevitable psychological violence in their life which later becomes a positive factor of their character as it hardens their will to survive. The transformation in them is smooth. Sudha is happy about her life and income as she points out, "for the first time in my life, I'll have my own bank account. It makes me feel— finally—like a grown-up" (350). Unlike Sudha, Anju doesn't like certain aspects of her home culture but her view is quite balanced about both Indian and American culture. She is realistic in her judgment and deliberately decides to stay in America appreciating the changes that have occurred in her life in that place, some of them having thrown her into deep grief, but others have given her hope to relocate herself. Her stay in America makes her more alert that helps her to adopt a more westernized way of thinking. In that, she starts believing that she owes something to herself.

In America, she finally finds her 'voice'. As she tells Sudha about her assignment, "this new woman thinks it's one of the best in the class! She writes on the paper that I have Originality and Voice" (106). She further says, "You won't believe it, Sudha. I've learned to fly" (368). Anju has learnt that she can do anything and finally, we see Anju is flying free of the burdens of the past. She allows the photograph of the still born baby Prem to fly away. "She does not want that anymore, not now. Her life is just beginning" (370). Thus, Anju masters the art of living, showing resilience in her attitude and finds home in the 'world', the home of solitude in an alien land. As it is pointed out by Sunal Sharma:

By presenting Anju, growing with the passage of time during tragedy done to her in America; assimilating the American culture for her personal growth and ultimately deciding to stay in America which made her confident, Divakaruni shows that all migrants carve their own routes in the course of time and it is not necessary that they want to

settle in the countries of their origin. Thus new subjectivities are born, the migrants go 'beyond' the binary fixities of natives/ migrants and carve new 'route' instead of lamenting over the lost roots as Homi Bhabha theorizes in his *The Location of Culture*. (123)

Both the sisters learn to make peace with the events life seems to thrust on them. They try to correct their mistakes. Realization dawns on them that if they have to progress for the better and march towards freedom. They are no more passive agents; they have become activists who have taken steps to remove many of the misconceptions imposed on them in the family as well as in the society and grow as they hope for progress and peace.

Besides Anju and Sudha, there are other immigrant characters in the novel such as Lalit, Sunil and the Old Man. Lalit, the second generation immigrant, a doctor by profession displays modern youth assimilated to host country. He speaks fluently in Californian English. His sense of humor catches up with people and attracts them with friendly charm. Sudha confides on him and shares the secrets she couldn't share with her sister. His depiction in the novel is a blend of assimilated immigrant, connected with Indian roots and gets attracted towards Indian people and Indian society. His outlook towards life is liberal and he does not think in terms of marital harmony. With a firm voice he admits, "Not having a husband isn't always a problem" (132). Lalit is completely assimilated in American culture. Though he is fascinated for India yet ridicules Sudha's idea of going back to India. He tries to convince Sudha, "Here are so many opportunities for you and Dayita" and further emphatically pleads, "Don't ruin your life, Sudha" (330). Sudha and Lalit come closer with their similar interest in each other. In the company of Lalit, Sudha confesses that in America she seems to survive in a strange land with unfamiliar conditions. She expresses her anguish:

There is a terrible pull to the India of living for myself, and a terrible emptiness. I feel like a flyway helium balloon – all the people I know are on the ground somewhere, but so far away and small, they hardly matter. Yet I know I can't go back to the old ways, living for others. (177)

Sunil, the first generation immigrant, mostly an introvert finds it difficult to express his desire to marry Sudha. He goes through a feeling of nostalgia. He often talks to Dayita in this novel, he tells her stories about Indian culture and myths. When he suffers from nostalgia and homesickness, he tells Dayita about his childhood fascination for the grandeur of theatres and enchanting characters in films in India.

I went back to see the place, after I was grown and in college, but it was gone and some kind of air-conditioned market had taken its place. I was relieved... For the rest of my life now, I could continue thinking of it the way I remembered it, without my critical adult eye ruining the spell. (119)

Sunil also feels alienated in America. In the absence of appropriate information and arrangements, he failed to join the

funeral of his father. He feels alienated in India also. He feels "disoriented" when he lands at the airport in Calcutta. Sunil, who never came back to India after his wedding with Anju, tries vainly to read Bengali on the play cards because they had been written in a hurry. Though he has a fascination for India, yet he is bewildered to find bandhs, strikes and processions. The same feeling is expressed by Divakaruni in her interview with Scott: "I do go back to India regularly... It is a strange experience to go back, I love India, but I am not at home in it the way I was before I left. I see things with an outsiders' eye, and of course that is my experience in Houston as well" (interview).

The old man makes life very difficult for his modern assimilated son Trideep, and daughter-in-law Myra. The initial enjoyment is only momentary in America which gets converted to homesickness in no time. Trideep says about his father; "when he first got here he wanted to try everything. Like America was a great big toy store, and he was a kid. He loved ice-cream... but now whatever I bring him... he doesn't even look...All he'll say- in that painful stammer –is *send me home, Deepu*" (237). The life in an alien country becomes too agonizing and leaves him in depression, nostalgia for home for his own country where he wants to spend rest of his life.

He knew the song too. He thought of the rivers he would not see again. Green water, kalmi rushes Cranes setting stiffly on the silt. All excess fallen away. The evening has aged into ten-fifteen. Ten-thirty. Eleven. She touches the pillow cover, but it's dry. Some things are beyond tears. (261)

Sudha tries to shake old man's awareness back in India by giving references about their own country. She tries to bring him out of his tension to go to India. She makes tea for the old man. She uses her own typical Indian style for making tea, the

milk and water mixed together in a pan, "the ground cloves and cardamom sprinkled in". Further with upmost care of a daughter, she warns old man "careful, it's very hot. Do you like it" (318). She makes old man reminds of, "of course, this probably isn't as good as what you are used to in India" (318). In our Indian culture and heritage, food contextualizes the entire spectrum of life.

Thus, the ending of the novel with a metaphorical declaration "I've learned to fly" displays a new aspect of diasporic experience in the sense that the dispersion is not necessarily a physical one from east to west. By sending Sudha back to India the novelist treads new ground. 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. In the novel, *The Vine of Desire* the life of the immigrants faces failures and they have to struggle hard to survive in the new land. The immigrant rooted in the new land is always haunted by the past and the immigrant issues arise between culturing and capturing. But Divakaruni has cleverly brought Sudha and Anju out of the failure and made them fly independently. Time and again, people in a foreign land suffer for their motherland so much so that even things they used to despise during their stay in their native country often tempt them. This is how Chitra Divakaruni artistically deals with the awards and perils of diasporic experiences of immigrants and successfully highlights the Indians and Indian culture in America in the twenty first century.

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