

The Predicament of Women Immigrants in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels

S. F. Filomine White Sheela,

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of English & Comparative Literature,

Madurai Kamaraj University,

Madurai – 21

Abstract

This paper lays focus on the predicament of women immigrants in the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prolific writer in Indian English Literature. Her works highly stressed the painful emotions of the women immigrants from India to America. Women between the two worlds suffer a lot to accomplish their identity, adjustment with the new environment, tradition and modern, also past and present, where some immigrants are successful and some lost their life in the alien land and become victim. Bringing home the point, the author not only project the pain and sufferings but also an outstanding clarification as a new woman.

Keywords: inter-racial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, divorce, cultural change, nostalgia, patriarchal bond

Women's migration across India is driven primarily by marriage. Marriage migration also triggers a sense of being uprooted and displaced from usual habituated places and established homes to new locations, which requires considerable reorientation and adjustment. Two-thirds of all Indian women have migrated for marriage, across India three quarters of women older than 21 have left their place of birth, almost all on marriage. Parents who expect that their daughters will migrate, may not make educational or health investments in them, since such costly investments are more valuable for their sons who will stay close by.

Beside all these, after marriage the decision on migration was made by the society. The practical and emotional support of wife and family members has a considerable influence on him. Initially they struggle to preserve their identity and further for their safety. The very existence of Indian immigrant women is in oscillation between personal responsibilities and social relationships. Sometimes the process of acculturation can shatter the life of immigrant women. It cannot be denied that immigration can be the new beginning and also a threat to the survival of womanhood in the new context. Nelson Carolyn states this as,

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Representation of strong heroines who rebel against the limitations placed on the lives and demands the same education and economic opportunities as men enjoy. (xii)

Diving directly, Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee is one of the prolific writers in India and also an Indian-American author, born in Calcutta who was the only girl in a family of four children. Divakaruni has interest in the issues involving women in host country. So, she started helpline for woman immigrants in San Francisco. This organization named as MAITRI, she became president of the organization that works for the South Asian women in difficult conditions. It also helps to South Asian women facing domestic violence, emotional abuse and cultural alienation. It works with some other organization to raise their help towards woman. Divakaruni beautifully tells the stories about immigrant brides who are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes and who are struggling to carry out an identity of their own, her novels deal with the immigrant women and their soul struggle through her literary works. She has projected the vital reality of immigrant woman's life and makes the readers aware of subjugated, secondary and marginalized status of woman in male dominated world in alien land. At the same time Divakaruni envisions the journey of ideal traditional woman who is confine in customs and traditions to the modern, educated woman who has become conscious about her status and freedom. Though these immigrant women are placed in new land, they try to grapple with old and new ways of life. Almost all her female protagonists undergo growth, change and psychological development in themselves.

Chitra Banerjee's novels *Arranged Marriage*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, and *The Vine of Desire* which explores immigrant women experience. It mainly deals with the agony of women characters that are displaced from India to America. It also focuses on the portrayal of Indian modern women who torn between past-present, desire-ability and tradition-culture. In the terms of Zupancic Metka,

The characters in these novels are placed in social settings where the "supernatural" is a commonplace and a regular companion to the daily events, although the humans who hold power continue in their endeavors to bend these powers so as to use them for their personal gain. The struggle between the ego, the pride, the greed, and the need to better understand the extemporal, the all pervading, remains at the centre of Divakaruni's reinterpretation of old traditions and her projection of how the future could be shaped if humankind achieved the necessary transformation toward love and understanding. (115)

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65

Her interest in women began after she left India. She heard the problems and experiences of women in host land, much of her writing moves around the immigrant feminine experience. She says that women in particular respond to her work because she has to write, women in love, women in difficulty, also women in relationships. She wanted people, to relate, to her characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will harder to project when they meet them in real.

Her collection of short-stories, *Arranged Marriage* appeared in 1995, it included eleven short stories and most of them deal with immigrant experiences of womanhood on the view of female perspective. Time changes the life of immigrant woman and how it effects on the Indian institution of arranged marriage, it is the main theme in all the eleven stories in this anthology. Most of the stories' protagonist character is Indian immigrants to the United States. In this fiction Chitra Banerjee portrayed wide variety of themes including racism, inter-racial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, divorce, cultural change, nostalgia, cross the patriarchal bond etc., in these stories. K.S. Dhanam states that, Chitra Banerjee, "has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos" (Kulkarni 62). Divakaruni explain the picture of immigrants and Indian couples settled in American society with their unchangeable bonding with their national identity and their desire to redefine the man- woman relationship in trans-cultural space.

Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* portrays the bi-cultural identity of woman in the host land, as a writer Divakaruni gives sense of reality with magical element and also her writing mainly focuses on women perspectives, through this novel the author presents a wide spectrum of life and experiences of immigrants. The female protagonist Tilo was a mystical woman and faced loneliness along with immigration in America, where she runs the spice bazaar in California. Tilo settled in California and sell spices to the western people, through the power Tilo was able to solve the sufferings of customers. In California, she faced a lots of problems, being immigrant she fell in love with Raven, an American. Tilo has transformed herself, like changing her names and changes in every steps of life too, immigrant characters lead a life of warriors and fight against the struggle to live. Divakaruni through her writings raised the problem of immigrant women faced in the society as well as in the life. Lau has mentioned that,

From the contemporary writings of the diasporic South Asian women, it appears that South Asian women of diaspora feel the tug of loyalties and confusion of identities until they learn to balance dual-identities or double consciousness and combine those into a certain equilibrium. (253)

The novel *Sister of my Heart* deals with the inner world of Indian women, immigrant feeling of women and considered friendship as her main theme. She focused on (Sudha and Anju) female friendship, where women are trying to balance that bond between them as

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daughters, lover, wives and mothers. She believes the female friendship is unique because of they have more experience in life and faced many problems and crossed the ages as they shared feelings with each other. Usually females have sentimental bond, the bonding between them always support each other in different incidents, faced by them in their life.

Overpowered by the torrents and tribulations of life, these women seek refuge in each other's company, compensating for their deprivation. An empathic bond, in which each acts as a mentor, guiding their destiny to a safer shore, knits their relationships together. (Singh 154-155)

The culture and customs are totally different from their mother land and they have to learn the social habits of the alien land. The novel *Vine of Desire* parted the immigrant women sufferings and their dilemma to live. It has shown the vast difference between the Indian and American culture, for Indian born women they are roasted in the mid of new and old ethics. All the immigrant characters in the novel had highlighted their pain, discovery and alienation in America, especially, woman goes through the society with pain, love, difficulty and relationship. The characters wanted to know about the American country and their lifestyle, but when they experienced it they find it very painful.

The next novel is *Queen of Dreams*, it talks about the trials and tribulations of Indian immigrants, experience in America. The novel is in contrast between India and USA, although the entire story took place in America. The novel mainly portrait the quest for identity and sense of emotional completion. This novel is all about inner alienation of the daughter, who only heard about her origin land, her mother doesn't much share about her origin. According to Oliver Blackwell,

Both migration and displacement can be understood as processes which bring about changes in people's physical locations as a result transform economic, social and political relationships. (Koser 19)

The main intention of this novel is mystery and changing realities, also it focuses on Indian immigrant experience of diaspora and balancing them between the two worlds. Particularly, through this novel, Divakaruni as an Indian immigrant mother proved how a mother struggled for their life in America.

Therefore, in our study women got confidence and tend to get more decision-making powers and of course not passing through the economic crisis, they are able to succeed the inflow of profits and quite successfully managing their resources. They even took big decisions,

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which were beyond the imagination for women, finally, it can be stressed that Divakaruni is a writer with specific purpose, one cannot ignore her contribution to the Indian Novel in English. The study of her works can help to widen and direct our thoughts to relevant problems affecting immigrant women.

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