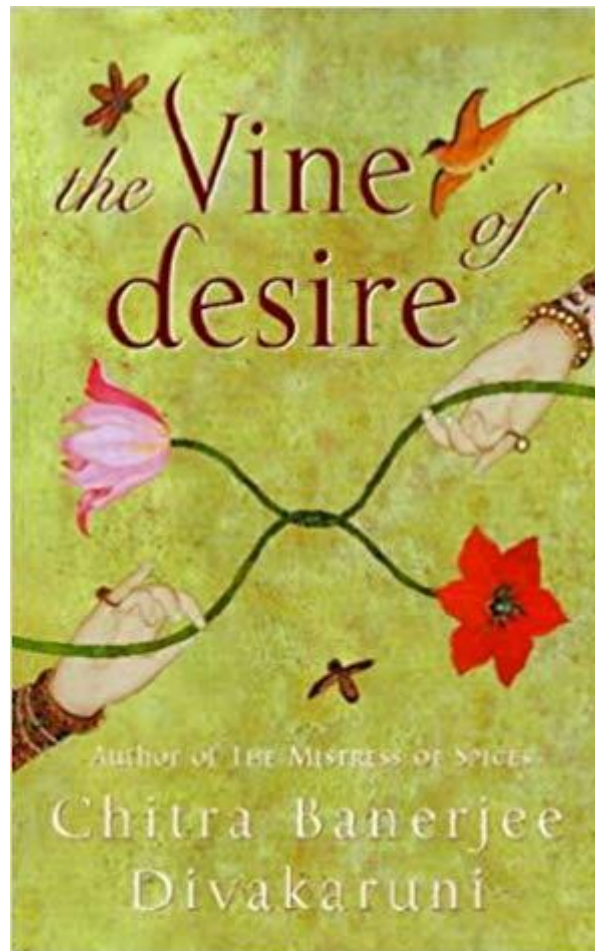


Interface Between Myth and Modernity in Negotiating Issues of
Migration and Establishing Identity in Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

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Feminism and Myths

Feminist writers and critics have emphasized on the need of female bonding and companionship as discussed in the chapter on *Sister of My Heart*, that can help them to fight patriarchal institutions and discriminations based on race class or gender, but there are many

instances where female writers have also tried to problematize this area of female companionship and attempted to address the issues related to the various complications and tensions arising within female friendship, because of the same above-mentioned reasons. Toni Morrison has dealt with the failure of female friendship as childhood friends grow into adulthood. Both in *Sula* and in *Love* we find childhood bonds disintegrating as patriarchal structures like class, racism and marriage intervene. The friends face the challenges of patriarchy together in their childhood but fail to do so as they mature. Louisa May Alcott who exhorted “the religion of sisterhood”, portrays instances of conflict and tension between the sisters as they struggle with life’s challenges in her novel, *Little Women* (1868). Shashi Deshpande has dealt with conflict and tension in one of the most significant female bonds of that between the mother and daughter in novels like *The Dark Holds No Terror* (2003), *A Matter of Time* (1999) or *The Binding Vine* (2002) that deal with the strained relationship between the mother and the daughter. Though in Divakaruni the bonds between mother and daughter or between female friends are not as pungent as in Deshpande, she still views these relationships from different perspectives. *The Vine of Desire* (2002) attempts at viewing female friendship critically and not in a simplistic, linear manner, a critical juncture, a crisis that reaches its climax due to “desire”, which philosophers have defined it in more than one ways and mythology too has its own interpretation. In his *Introduction to the Befriending Our Desires* (1994), Philip Sheldrake delineates human desire to be “the fundamental motivation of all human action”, because of which Buddhism has given “a great deal of attention between unhealthy craving and healthy desire”, and Dimitriadis (2017) expounds Baruch Spinoza, who in the 17th century saw “natural desires as a form of bondage”. Dimitriadis explains desire as “an emotion associated with a need or want. It expresses the strong feeling of needing or wanting to have something. It is an intimate cousin of pleasure, and an opponent to fear and pain. Christopher Alan Anderson, in *The Metaphysics of Sex...in a Changing World* (2014) cites David Hume who opined that “desires and passions are non-cognitive, automatic bodily responses”. Hegel claimed that “self-consciousness is desire” and Freud professed that desire often works in the subconscious mind which can at times be kept repressed, though not always.

Myths, however, hold desire as the reason for human unhappiness, woe and sorrow; desire or craving impedes a person from achieving moksh or nirvana according to Buddhist teachings. In the Indian mythology Kamdev, son of Vishnu and Lakshmi is the god of desire who gives birth to sensual longings in human beings. Divakaruni has worked upon the mythological connotations of desire, interested as she always is to explore the world of myths and the meanings they carry, to show how uncontrolled desire can bring in complexities and complications even within the strongest of bonds. As desire creeps inside the body and psyche of one and spreads its tentacles, relationships stagger and bonding gets snapped, like it does in the present narrative under discussion.

The Vine of Desire

The Vine of Desire opens where *Sister of My Heart* ended, with a prologue informing Anju’s pain and agony post her miscarriage, and the extent to which Anju longs

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for Sudha in this hour of crises. Anju is excited to meet Sudha after a long gap of four years, such a big separation for the first time in their lives. But that is as long as there was no man's interference in the cousins' relationship. The string of the narrative in *The Vine of Desire* is taken up from this point where Anju is making all the preparations to welcome Sudha. The narrative is set entirely in the U.S. After learning of Sudha's divorce Anju had been planning to bring her to America where she could begin a new life. She worked extra time to save money for her cousin's tickets which eventually took a toll on her health and resulted in the miscarriage. Sudha, too, longed to go to Anju to heal her emotionally and physically in this distress. The sisters have a re-union after a gap of four years which makes them equally elated. But this communion is not as simple as it seems from the surface. They certainly continue to be the best of friends their childhood bond is renewed. They chat incessantly like childhood days again with Dayita playing about the house, mothered by two mothers. Gradually, and with Sudha's healing Anju comes out of her sorrow and delirious state and gets back to college. Sudha too tries to come to terms with the fact that her ideals about marriage and domesticity have been shattered, forget the scars of her failed marriage and start life afresh in America with her daughter. The land is new to both of them, more to Sudha with an altogether new culture, new environment. Sudha struggles in her endeavours to fit into the new ways of life, and Anju had already been doing so after relocating in America. But as time goes by, complications arise as they are no longer only the two of them in the household; though they love each other deeply they drift apart unable to communicate in spite of living under the same roof. The happiness that one found in the presence of the other has slowly eroded away leaving only past memories of childhood to cling on to.

Anju and Sudha

Anju and Sudha have starkly different characters. Whereas Anju was the more outspoken, smart and confident one, with a keen desire to see the world that come alive in her novels of English literature, Sudha was the demure dreamer who believed in *pishi's* mythological tales about princes, princesses and demons. Whereas Anju would tell Sudha about her favourite characters in the novels she read such as Jo in *Little Women*, Sudha would narrate stories heard from *pishi* "about women who would turn into demonesses at night and the monkey who was actually the bewitched prince" (13). Relocating to America was a dream come true for Anju; to get a chance to live in the greatest nation and see the world around. Little did she know about the inner and outward challenges that the immigrants face; the feeling of rootlessness, the pressure of settling down to a new country with an entirely different culture while retaining one's native culture and identity. The same Chatterjee mansion that she had once hated for signifying everything ancient and redundant tugs at her heart as she misses the nooks and corners of the house infused with memory:

It's gone now.... 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! I think of my room with its cool, high ceilings, and my bedsheets, which always smelled clean, like neem leaves- and which I never had to wash myself!- and the hundred- year- old peepal trees that grew outside my windows. Sometimes I think I hadn't been in such a hurry to come to America. (13)

Debunking the Myth about America

But reality was far different as she herself admits, “But transformation isn’t so easy, is it?” (14). Divakarui also debunks the myth associated with America or rather the West that migrating to the West is the solution or answer to every problem: “I am tired of this mantra that everyone chants, this one cure for all ills. America America America” (330). Anju informs Sudha that “There are a lot of silenced women here. The no-money, no- rights rule work here too. And bribery. It’s just not as blatant” (156). Not only sisterhood, but the space is also problematized. Migrating to America clearly did not work for Sudha who finally returns to India, and as far as Anju is concerned, America did take away a lot from her but gave her a new ground, a new identity in return; so she stays back. Actually, marriage for Anju was an exit door from her dissatisfactory life and her entry into the world of her dreams. And for Sunil it was a duty of life to be performed. But marriage is something much deeper. More than a biological association, it is a spiritual communion of the souls. Sunil and Anju were not able to build this relationship of the soul together. According to Campbell, if one interprets a marriage in terms of their child, and not in terms “of their own personal relationship to each other” (36), then that marriage can disintegrate any time. The death of their child had sapped the already weak relationship between the two, and Sudha’s entry finally destroyed the same.

Difficulties in Settling Down

The narrative also dwells upon the difficulties Sudha face in settling to the new environment in America, the country that promised to heal her wounds and give her a wonderful future, a place which is so different from the joint family set up where she grew up and also from her in- laws’ house in Bardhaman. America is supposed to be the solution to every problem. But here in this new country one of the most difficult challenges for Sudha is to cope with the loneliness that she faces everyday once Sunil and Anju go out for their respective works. She cooks, she cleans she does all the household chores but she does not have a single person to talk to throughout the day except her little daughter Dayita, to whom she rues, “It feels funny eating all by myself” and “Civilized humans weren’t meant to live like this, don’t you think?” the feeling of loneliness, alienation, rootlessness is some of the issues of relocation that the narrative deals with. Divakaruni also points how the cultural differences between the homeland and the country of adoption creates conflict as Sudha snaps, “That’s disgusting” to see a woman shriek, jump and kiss the host of an American television programme on answering a question correctly. While this act is very normal in America, it is something beyond imagination in Indian culture. While after living for a few years in America Anju has adapted to cooking the dishes of the country, Sudha is still unaccustomed to it and prepares Indian dishes for the family, though the narrative does not portray it as a conscious effort to remain connected to her roots. Divakaruni focuses on the constant conflict in the minds of the immigrants who might want to fit into the new culture but are most of the times wedged between the two.

Highlighting Discrimination

As a novel of the diaspora, the narrative highlights the discriminations and alienation faced by the immigrants on the basis of race and class. Sudha experiences the neglect and coldness of the blond women in the park, as they do not heed “a brown woman in a saree and windbreaker” (81); there is the unfortunate incident of racial hatred and attack at the Chopras’ party, and Sunil’s violent confrontation, and the pathetic stereotypical ideas that Westerners have about Indians that Anju has to face and keep explaining: that Indians do not essentially feed on monkey brains or bugs, or goddess Kali is not as monstrous as demanding sacrifices of beautiful virgins, and accept realities like yes, India has street children, a corrupt and brutal police force, famines, repressed widows and wives; but there is more to India, something which these Westerners have no time to listen to. On the other side of the coin there is Sara, the Indian girl with bold Western dress and looks who has decided against going back to India and settle in matrimony, and fantasizes scouring this dream nation first: Disneyland, Universal Studios, Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Nevada and so on. Because she dared to take up the challenge, she dared to discard the Indian cultural and traditional mind-set and adapt herself completely into American life; Sara was not someone to be mowed down by any kind of social or racial discrimination arising out of resettlement. She embodies another aspect of migration: freedom. Sara wished to see the world, live the great American dream, instead of being locked inside a relationship of matrimony in India, or any other relationship, or even inside an apartment.

Bonding between Sisters

The bonding between the sisters binds their fates too. And when patriarchal forces strike both are equally affected by it, their friendship notwithstanding. The author who has blended reality with myth in the entire narrative, recounts the mythological story of Damayanti, whose beauty made the gods jealous of her husband, Nal, and made them take away all he had, forcing him to wander in the wilderness. According to mythology, the stories of which are often constructed by patriarchy, “a woman’s beauty can be her wealth, but also her curse” (69). But ironically, Anju, who is not beautiful in the traditional sense of the term, too has to face and bear the curse because of Sudha’s beauty. It basically does not matter whether a woman possesses physical beauty or not; what matters is that she is the “other” who has to be controlled and possessed by the “superior” man, who intrudes, intervenes and in the process destroys the companionship between women, just like Sunil does to Anju and Sudha’s friendship.

Two Friends

Anju and Sudha had been brought up in a matriarchal household without the presence of any male figure (except Singhji, who in any case never entered the interiors of the house, and never interfered). So, the bonding not only between the cousins, but also between the three elderly women of the Chatterjee family did not disintegrate. But later, in America the uncomfortable presence of Sunil was the only male intrusion which threatened to snap this sister-bonding, and ultimately succeeds in doing so. Sunil’s presence is uncomfortable on two accounts. First, is his steadily failing relationship with his wife Anju, and second, his attraction for Sudha. Sunil and Anju had attempted to make their marriage successful, in spite of realizing that it was disintegrating but the death of their unborn son

rips them apart, the chasm never to fill in. Sudha entered Anju's household at a time when the couple was passing through the most difficult phase of their marriage trying somehow to cling on to the thread that had already become too weak. All three of them realize the situation, but they can do little about it. Sudha has nowhere to go in America, and Anju needs her friend in order to cope with the loss of her son. Thus, the undercurrent of tension always simmers beneath the plane of normalcy. The subterranean conflicts in their relationships have made their life claustrophobic:

A tableau of silence: three people, inside their chests, small black boxes, holding inside them smaller, blacker boxes. Secrets packed in secrets: Until, at the very center of the chest, the secret of whose existence they are totally unaware. The secret of their own self...waiting to be burst open when they are least prepared for it. (70)

Not only are they two friends locked inside small black boxes, their increasing distance from each other have "marooned" them on separate islands.

The first book is thus named "Subterranean Truths", signifying the secrets, conflicts and tensions that lie beneath the surface of the relationships between the characters. The actions in the narrative mostly take place inside the psyche of the characters, and communication is at a bare minimum, everybody conscious that the other might see the turbulence beneath through the façade of apparent calmness.

Ashok and Sunil

Both Ashok and Sunil's yearning for Sudha is the yearning of the man to "possess" the woman. In her seminal work *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millet states that throughout history, the relationship between men and women have been a power- structured relationship, one of superior-dominance and inferior-subordination. Just like in politics, in patriarchy too "it is the birthright priority where males rule females" (25), the superior group (male) controls the one that is inferior (female). The men (Ashok and Sunil) are the male-subject, the Absolute and Sudha the female- object or the "other" whom the male ego must "possess". Sudha is the "object" which they must "possess" and control. "Loss of control" is one of the inherent fears of Sunil as revealed in Anju's letter to his dead father. And Ashok's desire for control may be summed up in nonchalantly dominating words to Sudha:

Anyway, now that I'm here, you can tell the people you're working for that you're quitting. I've reserved our tickets for next week -I did that as soon as you phoned me. That should give your employers enough time to find a replacement. (334)

Conditioned by patriarchal structures Ashok does not even think it necessary to try to know what Sudha's opinion might be. It is Ashok who initially decides to marry Sudha but keep her daughter, Dayita with the grandmothers; it is Ashok who later revert his decision, agreeing to accept Sudha along with her child. It is Ashok who decides to come to America and take Sudha back. Sudha's views are never taken into consideration. In traditional Indian society it is the men who take decisions for the women who are only

passive recipients of man's orders. In Sudha's refusing Ashok's hand in marriage Divakaruni breaks the myth associated with the traditional Indian woman as mute followers of the decisions.

But Divakaruni does not deal with the whole thing so simplistically. Sudha might be the "object" that Sunil wants to "possess", but Sudha is not just a passive recipient. She cannot ignore the desire of the flesh and so in her mind tells Anju, "I have kissed your husband and liked it". Human mind works in complicated ways and the narrative deals with the emotions, tensions, conflicts and turmoil that take place inside the characters. In *Lectures on Ethics* (1930), Immanuel Kant explains that "when sexuality is exercised outside the context of monogamous marriage it leads to objectification". It is true that the way Sunil wants to "control" and decide over the entire situation, i.e., reject Anju and try to possess Sudha, jeopardizes this sister-bond and makes them move separate ways. But because of this wanting to "possess", Sunil also resents Sudha's going out with, the U.S based doctor, Lalit. Even Sudha realizes this dangerous possessive nature of Sunil as she ponders, "Possession wound it way around me like a nylon line, impossible to break" (116). In spite of having genuine feelings for Sudha, one cannot help but think of Sunil's decision as selfish and irresponsible, on the one hand, resulting from the male ego of taking one-sided decisions on behalf of all three. One may argue that emotions and feelings for a particular person do not develop according to one's wishes and many a time one has no control over it, but one must not forget that we are social beings, a part of society, and that we have certain responsibilities, which, if disregarded, can jeopardize relationships. Though Sunil had been trying to "control" himself, fighting with his inner feelings until he felt "tired" and as if he was "drowning", he could not help the undesirable form happening.

"Anju talking too much, trying to pretend everything was fine" (37) makes it clear that not only Sunil and Sudha, but Anju too understands the attraction that Sunil still feels for Sudha. Or, does she talk too much because she wants to hide the obvious chasm that exists between herself and her husband? If it is the former reason, then the obvious question that comes to mind is why then did Anju call Sudha to America? Sunil had warned her against it. Not only Sunil, Anju herself has a dream that she later reveals to Sudha. She dreams of a meteor replacing a planet. Sudha interprets the dream in her own way and wonders if the planet symbolized Anju and the meteor Sudha herself. Anju's, in longing for Sudha and her desire to help her friend build a life for herself following her failed marriage was so strong and overwhelming that she could not perceive what disaster she was inviting for herself.

Though it is plainly clear that the male (Sunil) intrusion into the Anju-Sudha relationship destroyed the bonding between the two cousins, the other male characters of the novel do not affect the friendship between the sisters. Though the other men in Sudha's life (Ashok and Lalit) wanted to "possess" Sudha too, but they did not cause a stir in the friendship as Anju was not related to them. But Sunil's wish to "possess" Sudha caused havoc in the lives of all three of them. Sunil became the "self" and Sudha (the "other"), following the patriarchal notion, whom he wished to "possess". But the pertinent question is, was Sudha purely innocent in all this? Did she not at all want to be "possessed", to be

“desired”, to become the “object”, the “object of desire”? Yes, she did, as she confesses to Ashok towards the end of the narrative. So the desire to possess is not always arbitrary or one-sided. The situation in the narrative highlights the complexity of Sudha’s character. Sudha had come to America ending her marriage with Ramesh and refusing to marry Ashok, as she wanted to build her identity, she wanted to raise her daughter as a single, independent mother. But what about the call of the flesh, the desire of the body? How far would it be possible for Sudha to resist it? And Sudha cannot resist it ultimately. It is true that ever since she entered Anju’s household she had been trying her best to keep a safe distance between herself and Sunil, but deep in her heart she knew that no caution would be enough for long; still she keeps on staying with them, unconsciously, wanting to be desired.

And so Sudha does not make any attempt of being on her own, knowing very well that she is fuelling Sunil’s attraction by staying over day after day. The reason is not as simple as only because of the love and affection for her friend, Anju. It is not only because Anju needed her in this period of her life. Through the chapters narrated by Sudha one knows that she has premonition of the approaching catastrophe. But she does not do anything about it. She is even reluctant to take up Lupe’s job offer initially thinking aloud, “I’m not that desperate”. It is a complex and complicated situation of life that the narrative portrays. The childhood innocence of sisterly bonding is lost in the complex mesh of adult life, as at one place Sudha confesses: “I came to America in the search of freedom but was swept away by the longing to be desired” (350).

Sudha’s Stay

The outcome of Sudha’s stay is only the one that was expected. Sunil ultimately can no longer fight his emotions, his desire to “possess” Sudha and one fateful afternoon:

He kneels by the bed. He kisses her, her face in his hands. He will crush her into himself; he will swallow her if that’s the only way for them to be together. This is the kiss he has imagined over a hundred unsatisfied nights. (65)

The words that are used are noteworthy. Sunil will “crush” and “swallow” Sudha. The words are not indicative of merely seeking sexual pleasure. Rather, both the verbs connote “power” and “possession”. Here we come to Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) explanation of the satisfaction of the male ego, which does not merely seek sexual pleasure in a physical relationship but wants to “conquer” or “possess” the woman. It is Sunil who decides to leave Anju; it is Sunil who decide to possess Sudha, thus making both the women fall prey to patriarchal hegemony. Ashok is no different either and walks along the expected lines of patriarchy. His patronizing attitude only infuriates Sudha as she too, like Anju about the general conviction “that if a man owns a woman, he is entitled to do whatever he wants to” (344). “Hundred unsatisfied nights” tells all about Sunil’s feelings for Anju. Sudha too falls prey to her physical desires as she herself confesses to Ashok later in the novel. She confesses that she wished to be wanted by Sunil. Though she is in a dilemma and her guilty-conscience gnawing inside that she has slept with her sister’s husband, the “desire” is nevertheless there. This is how Divakaruni puts forth the complexity of life through Sudha’s mind:

What shall I do? I want an existence iridescent as nail polish. I want sleep. I want to bite into the apple of America. I want to swim to India, to the parrot-green smells of childhood. I want a mother's arms to weep in. I want my weather-vane mind to stop its maniac spinning. I want Sunil. (87)

Want or desire is at the core that helps the narrative to proceed. The hidden, subconscious, forbidden desires of the characters that they at times utter, but mostly they are kept repressed deep inside each of them. Even the smart, confident and outspoken Lalit cannot express his desires fully to Sudha. But the narrative shows how forbidden desires can bring about catastrophe and calamity in life, destroying relationships; it reworks and narrates the story of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, in *The Mahabharata*. Draupadi was born of fire, leaving "scorched footprints" wherever she went. She was a woman who dared to desire and dared even to fulfill it; but her desire for revenge brought destruction to not only her enemies but also the Pandavas. But nonetheless, in a patriarchal society where even queens like Draupadi can be gambled away like a piece of property, where it is forbidden for a woman to even have a wish, let alone fulfilling it, she was able to establish her own agency in spite of the price she had to pay. Nobody tries to save her in the entire court as society is paralyzed by the conviction that "if a man owns a woman, he is entitled to do whatever he wants to her" (344).

Sudha's desire for Sunil is juxtaposed with her guilt-ridden conscience: "I've done that which I shouldn't have...I have kissed your husband and liked it." (108), but this guilty conscience does not stop her from desiring more: "I fear my body. I fear his. Because bodies can pull at us, whispering. Why not. I deserve more. I am young, and life is passing" (80). The narrative keeps on working on this ambivalence. Where at the one hand Sudha feels happy and satisfied in her physical involvement with Sunil, at the other hand her conscious mind keeps on chiding her for deceiving her friend and snapping the already weak tie that Anju and Sunil had: "I can't stay in my cousin's home. My presence saws at the frayed rope that holds Anju and Sunil together. Maybe it would break anyway- but I can't bear to be the reason" (104).

Anju's reaction to the whole complication of relationships can be traced through the writings of her college assignments, her letters to her dead father and to her mother back in India, though most of the times she tears them off and rewrites a matter-of-fact casual one which do not reveal the upheavals going on inside her, and from her dreams. In her college assignments, she reveals her fears regarding a mysterious "She" who "flew all the way from India" (166) and for whom her husband "kicked off morality and obligation like a pair of worn out shoes" (166), or her dream about the planet (Anju) being cast off its orbit by the streaming meteor (Sudha). She has known all along about Sunil's attraction towards Sudha but she has been passively waiting for Sunil to realize his fault and come back to her. Conversely, it might be her pride and dignity, or even vulnerability that kept her from broaching the topic ever with either Sunil or Sudha. The complexity of her situation lies in the fact that both Sunil and Sudha are her closest people and she could neither reject her husband nor her cousin. Thus she suffers silently for the longest period for no apparent fault of her own. But her fault was her passivity; she suffers for not being able to take things on her own hands, for allowing herself to drift away from Sunil

after her miscarriage, for not letting Sunil come near her emotionally in her state of delirium, and she suffers the most for her psychological complexities. It is a kind of subjugation that the narrative highlights, something very unnatural for Anju who was so strong, confident and outspoken as a child. Divakaruni depicts how dislocation and patriarchal forces mould and change a person. Just like Anju can see through the disintegration of her marriage, similarly she can also see through the gradual corrosion of her relationship with Sudha. In one of her letters to her mother which she eventually tears off, Anju writes: “Mother I need advice. Things are going badly here, not like you imagine at all. Sunil is so tense, he’s like a rubberband stretched to breaking. And Sudha- I was looking forward to so much having her here, but it isn’t the same as when we were young. Oh mother, I am so afraid, I don’t know what to do” (73).

Sunil, Anju and Sudha

Sunil, Anju and Sudha, all three were aware of the underlying tension in the household resulting out of Sunil’s attraction for Sudha. Thus, evenings appeared grim and somber with everybody trying to feign normalcy. It is the lack of communication in the part of all three that made matters worse. Anju never talked to Sunil about his feelings for Sudha, and never took any active initiative to salvage their marriage. Sudha and Anju, in spite of their deep bonding did not open up about the situation that they were unwittingly in. Sunil did not for once try to take up the subject with either Anju or Sudha until it was too late. Loss of communication results from the complexities and secret feelings/desires that they fail to share. Each of them fights their own battle of conflicting emotions but never make an attempt to reach out to the others. It seems that the apparently closest three people have become aliens to one another:

A tableau of silence: three people, inside their chests small black boxes, holding inside them smaller, blacker boxes. Secrets packed in secrets. Some of these they know, some they guess at, until at the very center of the chest, the secret of whose existence they are totally unaware. The secret of their own self, already pollinated by time’s spores, waiting to burst open when they are least prepared for it. (70)

Quite naturally, the first part of the book is titled “Subterranean Truths”. None of the characters come out of their boxes, none open up to the others truthfully, pent up feelings and emotions gurgling under the surface of apparent calmness waiting to be burst open and carrying away everything in its sway. The first part of the book, “Subterranean Truths” depicts the debates, arguments, confusions and conflicts going on in the minds of the characters especially the two sisters.

Stress on Tradition, Culture and Mythology

Divakaruni’s works lay stress on tradition, culture and mythology in negotiating the issues related to migration. Myths and culture, she believes, provides us with a stronger foundation which helps one in dealing with the problems of dislocation and relocation. In one of her letters to Anju, Gouri Ma writes, “*Pishi* hopes you two are telling stories from our epics to Dayita. These stories, she says, have much old wisdom embedded in them” (72). Divakaruni laid stress on the stories of human heritage that is being gradually eclipsed in the modern world of violence and discrimination. As Campbell surmises, we are so “interested in the news of the day

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and problems of the hour” that we miss out on being acquainted with the “literature of the spirit”. Stories, according to Divakaruni, have a resonating power that bind people across borders. In spite of relocating to an entirely different country and assimilating with the new culture, it is equally important that one retain one’s own culture too: “It is important to keep track of our holy days and celebrate them, even in a simple fashion. How else will you pass on our heritage to Dayita...? (72). With life’s different incidents and various experiences, one finds relevance to the stories of mythology and can relate to them, gain wisdom from them; the stories guide people in understanding the inner mysteries of life in a better way. In the narrative, life’s bitterness makes Sudha grow disenchanted with stories, but still she can relate to some specific ones and so she can only think of the bitter story of Ravan’s stealing of Sita from *The Ramayana*. In recounting the story Sudha talks about the golden deer, symbolizing desire, a desire that ultimately leads to such consequences of Sita being taken over to Lanka by Ravan and the Ram-Ravan war. Desire, illogical and beyond premise, leads to destruction. If Sita had to face the consequences of her desire to get the golden deer, Ravan’s downfall was a result of his immoral desire. That is why myths are important as they impart valuable wisdom about life. In crossing the *lakshmanrekha*, Sita went beyond her limits. The *lakshmanrekha* is essentially a patriarchal concept of limiting a woman’s space, and the amount of space that a woman needs to be given is decided by the patriarchal society. If one crosses the boundary, one shall be punished in the harshest way. Divakaruni presents another perspective of the lakshmanrekha myth. “Each of our lives” she says, “has a magic circle drawn around it, one we must not cross. Chaos waits on the other side of the drawn line”(80). Sudha’s desire for Sunil makes her cross her magic circle, it makes her continue to stay on in Anju’s household even after her first sexual encounter with her sister’s husband. On the other hand, it is through chaos that we find cosmos. In order to find one’s identity, one needs to journey through chaos to find peace and harmony. The chaos and violence of the modern world, according to Rollo May results from the absence of great myths in modern societies that might have helped men in comprehending this world and in a more humane way. Sudha finally leaves Anju’s house unnoticed, just as she had left her in-laws’ place, unseen, and embarks on her journey to self-discovery. No matter how much she desires, to her Sunil’s reality shall always be that he is her sister’s husband. The importance of cultural roots is repeatedly emphasized in Divakaruni’s works. On the one hand she talks of a borderless world where there would not be discrimination on the basis of gender, race or class, and on the other she talks about retaining one’s ethnic culture. An assimilation of the two can negotiate the issue and lead to a harmonious existence.

Search for Identity

Sudha’s search for identity and independence begins once she leaves Anju’s house where she can stay no longer. In her first job in she comes across Trideep’s father, an old man refusing all communication with anybody in his desire to go back to his native North Bengal in India. The old man embodies yet another facet of dislocation. His son has brought him to America from his native India so that does not have to live alone, uprooting decades of existence in a particular place. Naturally, the elderly man is not able to relate to the new country, new culture and surrounding resulting in acute depression followed by an ardent desire to go home. Dislocation has robbed him of his desire to live. After facing much initial resistance Sudha manages to gradually develop a bond with him. She makes him believe that he, with Sudha’s help can go

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back to India. In her relationship with the old man, and in her endeavour to take him back to his roots Sudha, unconsciously, tries to redeem her lost relationship with her father (Singhji as she later comes to learn). Even after knowing Singhji's real identity, she had never tried to make or keep any contact with him. Thus, her bonding with the old man was something of her bonding with her father, in helping the old man, Sudha, as if atones for neglecting and never trying to reach out to her real father even after knowing his identity. It becomes a way of communicating with her lost and dead father. Though Sudha always was inquisitive about her father and was interested in learning more about him from *pishi* since childhood, the same was not with Anju, who had a kind anger against the man who could be gullible enough to go on a foolish adventure and jeopardize the lives of so many people. But with maturity, Anju learns to analyze incidents from different perspectives and when her own life in America is in disarray, she resorts to communicating with her dead, unknown, unseen father and opening herself about things she could not express to any living being. The search for the father becomes a cathartic to both the sisters. Sudha finds it through her relationship with the old man and in going back to India with him; Anju finds it in communicating with her father through her letters.

Big Dreams

Sudha had come to America with big dreams, with the hope of starting a new life in a new land with her daughter, and having the support of her friend, Anju. But things do not turn out to be what she wanted. In the few months that she stayed there she gathered new perspectives of life, she gained experience, good and bad, found her true identity and returned India a much stronger and more confident person. She learns to establish her own voice and identity when she shows the courage and confidence to defy Sunil and go out with Lalit. Sudha finally refuses to marry Ashok when he visits her in America; she actually refuses all the men in her life as she can no longer live her life depending on somebody else. She understands the importance of economic independence to free oneself from patriarchal bondage. Not that patriarchal structure can be completely overcome by financial independence, but it certainly makes the woman stand in a firmer stead. Education makes this process easier as it has done in Anju's case, but if a woman aspires to, economic freedom can be achieved by those who do not have a formal degree just like Sudha.

Anju, on the other hand, moves away to a different city, gathers the bits and pieces of her life, becomes a more competent and confident writer with each project and finally "learns to fly", in both literal, as well as metaphorical sense of the word. She learns to break herself free from the fetters of negativity; she seeks to experience "being alive". Anju gains courage to write the truth of their entire situation to her mother, her letters getting closer to reality; she becomes wise enough not needing to feign a perfect life anymore. She becomes strong and tranquil enough to face Sudha and even overcome her sense of betrayal by the sister of her heart. Finally, while gliding through in the sky even releases Prem's ultrasound photograph kept in her breast pocket. The act signifies her final freedom of the spirit. She does not even keep any ill-will against Sunil; though she does not reply Sunil's letters, she does not ask him not to write. Sudha too, breaks herself free of her wish to be desired by men; she decides to remain a single mother, refusing both Lalit's and Ashok's offers, both of whom had wanted to "protect" Sudha, the way male chauvinists do, thinking women to be too weak and unable to be on their own. But Sudha

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attains her identity through her struggles and emerges as a confident, modern woman, prepared to face life without the support of any man. This new Sudha has come a long way from believing that she was a princess waiting to be taken by the prince charming as in fairy tales. Both the sisters accept and reconcile with the events of their lives, learn to live with their decisions, their strengths and weaknesses and make the best of the given circumstances of their lives. Both women decide to remain single. Divakaruni does not project marriage as the only way for a woman to live in society; rather make both Anju and Sudha emancipated women who have found their agency and their identity. Divakaruni debunks the myth that a woman must have a man to look after her and must be married. Anju masters her writing skills, becomes more confident and strives to fly higher; Sudha finds her long- desired economic stability in working for the old man. With time and life her desires have changed. She wants to be independent, to be truthful: “Now there are many Sudhas, each wanting something different. To be independent. To be desired. To be true” (195). She gains peace of mind in deciding to take the octogenarian back to his native place in North Bengal, deriving a sense of satisfaction from helping this man, something that she could not do for her own father. The author also reworks the myth associated with the traditional Indian woman, as somebody chaste and “purer-than- pure”. And this newfound identity makes the sisters face each other, empowered in their own ways, and reconcile with one another. Their resilience has made winners out of them. As Anju says, “Whatever happened...is like a dream... What does it matter if it was a good dream or a bad one? Neither kind is going to help me live my life today, is it?” (362). Both of them learn to “turn inwards” and attain the wisdom of deciphering the meaning of the messages that life has put forth to them in the form of symbols. Draupadi was saved by divine intervention. Anju and Sudha do not experience any such divinity; they overcome the challenges of patriarchy through their love and bonding with each other, once again establishing the victory of human endeavours.

Reworking Draupadi’s Myth

In reworking Draupadi’s myth Divakaruni reworks the desire for revenge into a desire for harmony and peace, something that can arrest destruction and sow the seed of harmony in order to make this world a better place to live with people having more tolerance and compassion, blurring discrimination of every kind. Thus, Anju’s reinterpretation of Draupadi has her planting a seedling in her garden instead of seeking blood and revenge. The “desire” is still preset but it is no longer the sensual desires or the desire for revenge; it is a desire for bliss and harmony- a kind of catharsis that the characters arrive at. Though the narrator keeps the name of the plant unknown it is not one that might carry symbolic reference to revenge, because avenging somebody or making one’s enemy suffer cannot bring peace or satisfaction. So the plant is neither the *agni-rekha*, “the flowers of virtuous courage, or the fragrant parijaat that “Krishna wrested from Indra” nor the desire- fulfilling vine, *asha- lata*. Though undiscovered and unnamed it would be a flower that is associated with the state of bliss where the mind arrives after rage and vengeance. Anju too realizes this. The more she wanted to make Sudha suffer, the more she bled. No matter how righteous Anju’s rage against Sudha might be, it does not console her, but rather makes her ooze blood too: “I, too, love her too much. I think I have just rediscovered that” (324).

As Anju grasps this she does not feel any bitterness towards her sister any more. She has also forgiven Sunil. In fact, she has raised herself beyond these. Anju realizes that more than her break up with Sunil, she actually suffered for her estrangement with Sudha. Sudha too is relieved and happy that Anju has accepted her back in her life once more. It is a kind of a new birth for Anju, a new consciousness and calm after the storm. Neither is she angry with her sister or husband nor is she angry with herself. It is as if she has found her salvation from the bottom of her abyss. Divakaruni has kept her conviction in the mythological dictum that after darkness there is light. Myth helps in finding harmony in an imperfect world, with imperfect people. According to Campbell, perfection would be inhuman: "The umbilical point, the humanity, the thing that makes you human and not supernatural and immortal- that's what's lovable" (30). Friendship is not about being judgmental; it is not about being right or wrong. True friendship goes deeper; it calls for a deeper understanding and an open- mindedness with which to accept a friend's failings or drawback. The sisters bond together again, reviving their friendship as is shown metaphorically by: "Sudha nods, takes the bottle from Anju, drinks. When she hands it back, Anju drinks from it too. Her lips touch the mouth of the bottle where Sudha's mouth had been just a moment earlier" (361). Maybe that signifies the title of Book Two of the novel: "Remembrance and Forgetting". None of the sisters' lives have been the fairy tale ones that Sudha had surmised but rather, as Anju opines, the Cinderella type where one crashes down to reality after the stroke of midnight. But they manage to win the challenges that life has thrown towards them and establish their agencies. Myths and tradition have helped them in knowing the wisdom of life; how to deal with life's travails, but it is ultimately human agency that wins in establishing their own identities.

Enigma of Female Bonding

Divakaruni goes back to the enigma of female bonding, which might be under crises temporarily, but would not be completely destroyed. The strength and intensity of the bonding between Anju and Sudha finally succeeds in overcoming the challenges posed by external intrusions like patriarchy. Their friendship prevails over their loves for the men in their lives. The deep and genuine love the sisters have for each other saves the relationship from disintegrating; the novel closes with the sisters once more discovering each other at the core of their hearts; though their future takes different courses again, one remaining in America and the other choosing to move back to India, the novel ends with the anticipation that geographical distance shall no longer be a hindrance to this bonding. The way both of them kept thinking about each other even after parting ways only validates the nurturing quality of female friendship that feminist writers have been talking about. Whereas race, class, marriage and patriarchal structures bring about destruction of female friendship in Morrison, the same is not the case with Divakaruni. The basic reason for this difference is the latter's belief that myths give a harmonious and constructive foundation to the characters and help them in negotiating with the challenges that life poses at different junctures. Myths teach us the wisdom that helps in having a greater understanding of the mystery called life, its various facets and characters. It can also help one in facing the patriarchal powers and overcoming them. Through the novel Divakaruni seems to show that female friendship shall be put to test and challenge by the patriarchal structures but a strong foundation of cultural roots and knowledge and understanding of the myths can help women cope with the various challenges that are thrown at them. Throughout the narrative the

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author has stressed on the necessity of telling the stories and teaching the values of the ancient Indian epics to little Dayita through *pishi's* letters, thereby emphasizing on the importance of myths. There has been much chaos in both the sisters' life but in the end Anju can forgive Sudha even after the fact that Sudha's sexual liaison with Sunil resulted in the break -up of Anju's marriage. Anju and Sudha have grown up to be two distinct characters with separate identities, their differences; but the deep bonding between the two make them accept each other with their individualities. Neither Anju's marriage nor Sudha's single status ultimately proves to be more important than their friendship. Each undertakes their separate journeys, at the end of which they come face to face with one another from the point from where they had deviated. Divakaruni makes the journey of the sisters unique in their own ways as she herself says in an interview, "No journey is commonplace. Each person's journey is unique and changes that person in a special way" (As told to Lavina Melawani). The narrative not only depicts the journeys of Anju and Sudha but also other women characters like Sara, Lupe and Myra who remain at the peripheries of the narrative but are important in shaping Sudha's journey and her perspective in the new country. Though not explicitly stated, all these women form a kind of companionship with Sudha just as Anju connects with the women writers. It is to one of these writers that Anju reaches out to in her crises when Sunil walks out of the marriage, revealing that she is in trouble and that she needs help. This is the essential bond that women writers stress upon, a bonding, a connection that heals women in their crises and helps them to overcome difficult situations. The positivity of female solidarity is summed up by Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter*: "My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest difficult: social constraints are ever-present, and male egoism resists" (88). Through the healing both Sudha and Anju find strength to regain their friendship once again because the bond between the sisters transcends their separate journeys and their differences. As Sudha moves back to India, the novel ends with the hope that the bond shall transcend distance as well. Wisdom acquired through knowledge and understanding of myths of one's culture along with its healing power combined with the healing power of female friendship allows the sisters to overcome patriarchal structures and arrive at reconciliation. The novel ends on a positive note on the issues of female companionship. In Divakaruni the clash between tradition and modernity dissolves as the essence of female companionship that had been present since ancient times in various cultures have only been further stressed upon by the modern women writers who consider it to be an effective way not only negotiate with patriarchal forces but also with the other complexities that arise due to dislocation and relocation. It also helps in validating a strong connection with one's culture and a knowledge of the myths that help in negotiating the issues relating to displacement, issues relating to the intrusion of patriarchal structures and lead to a more peaceful and harmonious existence.

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