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CULTURAL CONFLICT AND THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY IN WOMEN IN THE WORKS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent Indian-American author, has gained recognition for her evocative portrayal of immigrant life, especially focusing on women caught between the cultures of India and the West. Her works illustrate the complexity of cultural conflict and the struggle for identity among women who migrate from India to the United States. Through -- novels such as *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Arranged Marriage*, and *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni delves into the psychological and emotional turmoil faced by her female characters as they navigate their dual identities. This paper explores how Divakaruni's writing reflects the cultural dissonance and identity crises of immigrant women, highlighting their resilience, transformation, and quest for selfhood in Diasporic settings.

Key Words: Cultural conflict, Identity, Protagonist.

INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly globalizing world, literature has become a mirror reflecting the tensions, contradictions, and negotiations of identity that accompany transnational migration. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American author, intricately captures these struggles, especially through the lens of women. Her fiction explores the lived experiences of South Asian women straddling two worlds—the homeland and the adopted country. This duality often results in cultural conflict and identity dilemmas. The aim of this paper is to analyze the representation of these themes in Divakaruni's works, focusing on how her female characters deal with dislocation, cultural assimilation, and the forging of hybrid identities.

Cultural Conflict and Identity

Cultural conflict arises when individuals face challenges in reconciling the norms, values, and customs of their native culture with those of a new environment. Stuart Hall (1990) asserts that identity is not fixed but rather a fluid construct shaped by history, culture, and personal experience. For Diasporic individuals, especially women, identity formation involves a constant negotiation between tradition and modernity, between the collective past and individual present.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" is particularly relevant to Divakaruni's characters. This space allows for the creation of new identities that are neither entirely Indian nor Western but a unique amalgam of both. It is in this space that Divakaruni's female protagonists often find themselves, caught in cultural interstices, striving to construct a sense of self. The female characters are analyzed from Divakaruni's works.

Cultural Conflict in 'Arranged Marriage'

Arranged Marriage (1995), a collection of short stories, provides a vivid canvas of immigrant experiences, especially those of Indian women trying to assimilate into American society. The stories are replete with instances of cultural dissonance, traditional expectations, and the harsh reality of immigrant life.

In "The Word Love," the protagonist struggles with the pull of familial obligation and romantic independence. Raised in India, she is torn between her desire to please her mother and her own emotional needs. Her mother's disapproval of her live-in relationship with an American man

underscores the cultural divide and generational conflict.

Similarly, in “Clothes,” the transformation of a young bride from India to a widow in America illustrates the disorientation and vulnerability experienced by immigrant women. The protagonist, Sumita, initially adheres to traditional norms but gradually discovers a sense of autonomy in the U.S., especially after her husband’s tragic death. Her choice to remain in America rather than return to India signals a break from tradition and the emergence of a new identity forged in pain and resilience.

This moment signifies the protagonist’s assertion of agency—choosing her path, rejecting a life predetermined by cultural expectations.

Identity Formation in ‘The Mistress of Spices’

In *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Divakaruni weaves magical realism into the immigrant experience. Tilo, the protagonist, is a mystical figure trained in the art of spices, helping

members of the Indian diaspora deal with personal and cultural challenges. However, she herself remains trapped in a cycle of denial, bound by rules that restrict emotional and cultural integration.

Tilo’s identity is multifaceted: she is an ancient mistress, a healer, and a woman grappling with human desires. Her internal conflict reflects the broader theme of identity confusion. While she helps others assimilate, she is unable to reconcile her mystical past with her present American life. Her eventual decision to forsake her magical powers for love and personal fulfillment marks a significant identity shift—from a symbolic guardian of tradition to a modern woman seeking individual happiness.

This decision captures the essence of transformation that many diasporic women undergo—moving from roles assigned by culture and tradition to self-defined identities.

Generational and Cultural Conflict in ‘Sister of My Heart’

In *Sister of My Heart* (1999), Divakaruni presents the intertwined lives of two cousins, Anju and Sudha, raised in a conservative Calcutta household. When Anju migrates to the U.S., she is faced with the reality of cultural and marital disillusionment. Her initial romanticization of the West is challenged by her experiences of isolation, marital discord, and the loss of agency.

Sudha, who remains in India initially, embodies the traditional woman—submissive, dutiful,

and self-sacrificing. However, she too eventually defies cultural norms by refusing to remarry for the sake of her daughter and moves to the U.S. to live with Anju.

The novel vividly illustrates how geographical dislocation intensifies internal conflict. Anju's miscarriage and Sudha's defiance both mark pivotal moments in their identity reconstruction. The novel ends on a note of solidarity and redefinition of womanhood, where both characters learn to support each other outside the constraints of patriarchy and tradition.

Myth and Modernity in 'The Palace of Illusions'

The Palace of Illusions (2008), a retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, serves as a powerful commentary on historical silencing and the assertion of female agency. Though set in ancient times, Draupadi's narrative resonates with modern themes of identity, gender inequality, and self-realization.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is not the submissive wife of five husbands but a thinking, feeling woman who challenges societal norms. She questions the roles assigned to her and seeks meaning beyond the identities imposed by family and mythology. Her palace, an illusionary architectural marvel, becomes a metaphor for the constructed nature of female identity—grand yet fragile, dazzling yet hollow.

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Regional Focus: Indian Women from Gujarat in Diaspora

While Divakaruni does not focus specifically on women from Gujarat, her characters often reflect the broader Indian diasporic experience. However, the values traditionally emphasized in Gujarati culture—such as joint family systems, strict adherence to customs, and gender roles—are often visible in the backgrounds of her characters.

For instance, in *Arranged Marriage*, several stories feature protagonists whose families come from conservative Indian regions, echoing the socio-cultural constraints familiar to many Gujarati women. Their struggles to break free from patriarchal expectations resonate with real-life narratives of Gujarati women in the diaspora—particularly in the U.S., where traditional customs may clash with modern lifestyles.

Resistance and Redefinition of Womanhood

Divakaruni's female characters often begin their journeys as submissive and culturally bound individuals. However, through personal tragedy, love, motherhood, or confrontation with discrimination, they undergo significant transformations. They resist in subtle ways—choosing divorce, opting to stay in America, seeking education, or pursuing love outside caste and culture.

These women embody a dynamic process of identity formation. Rather than assimilating completely or rejecting their heritage, they forge hybrid identities—negotiating the space between two worlds. Such assertions of individuality redefine what it means to be a woman in diaspora. Divakaruni portrays not just cultural victims, but active agents of change.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary world is populated with women who reflect the tensions of cultural hybridity, gender oppression, and diasporic displacement. Through a blend of realism, magical elements, and mythological reinterpretation, she presents complex female characters struggling to define themselves in a world of shifting borders and identities.

Whether it is Tilo's relinquishing of tradition, Anju and Sudha's transnational sisterhood, or Draupadi's mythic resistance, these characters reflect the broader challenges faced by immigrant women. Their journeys are stories of pain, perseverance, and ultimately, self-realization.

Divakaruni's work remains a vital contribution to diasporic literature and feminist discourse, offering a nuanced portrayal of how women navigate cultural conflict and emerge with redefined identities.

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