Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

(1957 - )

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Works:

POETRY

Dark Like the River (Calcutta: Writer’s Workshop, 1987)
The Reason for Nasturtiums (Berkeley Poets Co-op Press, 1990)
Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Corvallis, Or: Calyx Books, 1991)

NOVELS

The Mistress of Spices (London: Black Swan, 1997)
Sister of My Heart (London: Doubleday/Black Swan, 1999; Penguin India, 1999)
Neela: Victory Song (Pleasant Co: 2003)

SHORT STORIES

Arranged Marriage (London: Black Swan, 1997)
The Unknown Error of Our Lives (London: Abacus, 2001; Doubleday, 2001)

OTHER WRITINGS

“Spice of Life” articles in Salon Magazine


Chitra Banerjee was born in Calcutta and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. Attending a convent school run by Irish nuns during her childhood, she earned her bachelor’s degree in English from Presidency College, University of Calcutta. At the age of
nineteen, she moved to the United States to continue her studies, getting a Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, both in English. She held different kinds of jobs to pay for her education, including babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread at a bakery, and washing instruments at a science lab. She did not begin to write fiction until after she graduated from Berkeley, when she came to realize that she loved teaching but didn't want to do academic writing. “It didn’t have enough heart in it. I wanted to write something more immediate.” In Dayton, Ohio, she married Murthy Divakaruni, an engineer by profession, and a friend of her brother. The year was 1979.

For several years Chitra has been interested in issues involving women, and has worked with Afghani women refugees and women from dysfunctional families, as well as in shelters for battered women. Since 1991 she has been founder-member and president of Maitri, an organization in the San Francisco area that works for South-Asian women in abusive situations. She also works for another set-up in Houston called Asians against Domestic Abuse. Her interest in these women grew when she realized that there was no mainstream shelter for immigrant women in distress in America—a place where people would understand their cultural needs and problems. Through her counseling sessions here, female lives opened up to her revealing unimaginable crises. As she tells the stirmag.com interviewer:

My work with MAITRI has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. The lives of many of the women I have met through this have touched me deeply…it is their hidden story that I try to tell… It is their courage and humanity that I celebrate and honor.

For twenty years Divakaruni lived in the Bay Area and taught at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills. In 1997 she moved to Texas with her husband and two sons, Anand and Abhay, where she taught creative writing at the University of Houston. She now lives in Sunnyvale, California. In an interview in The Sunday Statesman, February 2, 2003 when asked what she felt she was—a Indian, an American or an Indian living in the U.S, she confessed:

I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I’m an Indian, but living in America for 19 years has taught me many things. It has helped me look at both cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate.

Chitra went to America as a graduate student of literature. Her idea was to teach, but as she began living there, she became more and more aware of the differences in culture. It was then that she wanted to write as a means of exploring these differences. Initially she started writing for herself. Once she enjoyed doing that, she joined a writer's group in Berkeley University during the mid-eighties. She was also writing poems during that time. She has written several books of poetry, and her work has been included in over thirty anthologies. She has also published non-fictional works for various magazines, including the long list of articles “Spice of Life” section of Salon Magazine. Among the numerous awards and honors that she received as a writer, mention must be made of PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction, Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction, Before Columbus Foundationis American Book Award, Gerbode Foundation Award, Two Santa Clara Arts Council Awards,
Barbara Deming Fellowship, Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize, Pushcart Prize, Two PEN Syndicated Fiction Project Awards, and Orange Prize for Fiction.

For a serious student of Renaissance literature, focused primarily on a teaching career, venturing into the realm of poetry was also very interesting. While going through Berkeley on a scholarship, she received news of her grandfather’s death back in her ancestral village in India. Since she did not have the money to back for his funeral, she felt dejected. Then one day, she woke up to discover that she could not even picture the old man’s face. Shocked, she realized that she needed to write her memories down so as not to forget them. “It was very personal,” she tells Roxane Farmanfarmaian, “and poetry was closest to my psyche. Poetry focuses on the moment, on the image, and relies on image to express meaning. That was very important to me, that kind of crystallization, that kind of intensity in a small space.”

Like many Indian writers in English, Professor P. Lal of Writer’s Workshop, Calcutta was instrumental in publishing Chitra’s first book of poetry. Long before she began her award-winning career in fiction writing, Chitra was an acclaimed poet and her first anthology of poems published in the United States was called *Black Candle* (1991). The subtitle of this volume, *Poems about Women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* explains her primary interest and she directs much focus to the immigrant experience and to South Asian women. She shows the experiences and struggles involved in women trying to find their own identities. Excerpts from a poem “The Arranged Marriage” can explain her oeuvre better:

The night is airless-still, as before a storm. Behind the wedding drums, cries of jackals from the burning grounds. The canopy gleams, color of long life, many children. Color of bride-blood……

………The groom’s father produces his scales and in clenched silence the dowry gold is weighed. But he smiles and all is well again. Now it is godhuli, the time of the auspicious seeing. Time for you, bride of sixteen, mother, to raise the tear-stained face that I will learn so well, to look for the first time into
As the title suggests, Chitra’s recent volume of poems *Leaving Yuba City: New and Selected Poems* (1997) contains new and selected verse from three previous collections—*Dark Like the River, The Reason for Nasturtiums,* and *Black Candle.* Contextually this is important because much of her fiction draws on similar subject matter as her poetry—womanhood, family-life, exile, alienation, exoticism, ethnicity, domesticity, love and romance. It is a deeply affecting collection that explores images about India and the Indian experiences in America—from the adventures of going to a convent school in India run by Irish nuns to the history of the earliest Indian immigrants in the United States. An abusive father (“the gorilla with iron fingers”) and the suicide of a mother who puts the poet to bed and locks her in “so I would not be the first to discover her body hanging from the ceiling” opens this collection of poems. Entitled, “How I Became a Writer” it concludes with a big affirmation, “I know I’m going to be the best, the happiest writer in the world” Again there are groups of interlinked poems that are divided into six sections; peopled by many of the same characters, and they explore a variety of themes. Divakaruni is particularly interested in how different art forms can influence and inspire each other. The series of poems based on the paintings by the American artist Francesco Clemente is interesting. In a section devoted to his “Indian Miniatures” series, Divakaruni’s words enter into Clemente’s dreamscapes and blossom into moments of startling visual clarity, as in “Cutting the Sun”:

The sun-face looms over me, gigantic-hot, smelling
Of iron……..
The rays fall around me
curling a bit, like dried carrot peel. A far sound
in the air—fire
or rain? And when I’ve cut
all the way to the center of the sun
I see
flowers, flowers, flowers. [#16]

Divakaruni also takes equal inspiration from other artists’ interpretations of her native land—on photographs by Raghubir Singh; and on Indian films, including Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* and Satyajit Ray’s *Ghare Baire.* As with all of her writing, these poems deal with the experiences of women and their struggle to find identities for themselves. Her persistent concern with women’s experience often deepens as it is arrayed against varying cultural backgrounds. As Meena Alexander, another poet of Indian origin aptly states:

Chitra Divakaruni’s *Leaving Yuba City* draws us into a realm of the senses, intense, chaotic, site of our pleasures and pain. These are moving lyrics of lives at the edge of the new world.
The group of poems that talk about the immigrant experiences of the Sikhs is very poignant. Because of immigration restrictions, most of the original Sikhs farmers who settled in Yuba City, California, could not bring their families with them, or, in the case of single men, go back to get married until the 1940s. As a result, in the 1920s and 1930s, several men married local women from Mexico. This section imagines the lives of the farmers who arrived in 1910, and takes on their voices in lush, novelistic prose poems: “I lay in bed and try to picture her, my bride, in a shiny gold salwar-kameez, eyes that were black and bright and deep enough to dive in.” A few lines from another poem entitled “The Brides Come to Yuba City” are self-explanatory:

Red-veiled, we lean to each other, 
press damp palms, try
broken smiles. The men who met us at the ship
whistles a restless Angrez tune
and scans the fields. Behind us,
the black wedding trunks, sharp-edged,
shiny, stenciled with strange men-names
our bodies do not fit into:

............
He gives a shout, waves at the men, their slow
uneven approach. We crease our eyes
through the veils’ red film, cannot breathe. Thirty years
since we saw them. Or never,
like Harvinder, married last year at Hoshiarpur
to her husband’s photo,
which she clutches tight to her
to stop the shaking. He is fifty-two,
she sixteen. Tonight – like us all –
she will open her legs to him.

After three books of poetry, Chitra realized that there were things she wanted to say that would be better expressed through prose. “My poetry was becoming more and more narrative,” she admitted to Farmanfarmaian, “and I was becoming more interested in the story element, and the nuances of character change.” So, in 1992 she enrolled in an evening fiction-writing class at Foothill College, where she had started teaching 20th century multicultural literature the year before. This resulted in her first volume of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) that explores the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective, a theme that continued to inform her work. “It was while I was at Berkeley that I became aware of women’s issues and the need for me to do something for them,” she said. Although today her outlook has softened, and her interest has shifted to more general human themes of memory and desire, at that time, she says, she felt militant. “I really wanted to focus on women battling and coming out triumphant.”

Talking about her forthcoming arranged marriage, the woman narrator in the short story “Meeting Mrinal” says to her dissenting woman friend, “Your mother got married this way and so did mine. And they’re perfectly happy.” The friend responds, “Yes, but our mothers didn’t even complete high school. Times have changed, and so have we.” How the changing times are affecting the cherished Indian institution of arranged marriage is the theme of all
the eleven stories in this anthology, *Arranged Marriage*. Most of the stories are about Indian immigrants to the United States from the author’s native region of Bengal and are told by female narrators in the first person singular point of view, often in the present tense, imparting a voice of intimacy and cinematic credibility. They capture the experience of the recent immigrants, mainly from the professional classes, electronic engineers and business people, and some from the lower working classes such as auto-mechanics and 7-eleven store clerks. There are several immigrant brides who “are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes” and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own. (Holt 1) Though references to local attractions, postgraduate education and her Bengali culture are sprinkled liberally throughout the tales, Chitra says the stories themselves – which deal with issues including domestic violence, crime, racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion and divorce – are inspired by her imagination and the experiences of others.

*Arranged Marriage* received critical acclaim and the 1996 American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers and PEN Oakland awards for fiction. Two stories in this collection had been published earlier. “The Bats” had appeared in *Zyzzyva* (Spring 1993) and “Clothes” appeared in an anthology, *Home to Stay* (Greenfield Review Press, 1990) but the rest were new ones. Some critics have accused Chitra of tarnishing the Indian community’s image and reinforcing stereotypes of the ‘oppressed’ Indian woman, but as Julie Mehta reports, the writer says her aim is to shatter stereotypes:

> Some just write about different things, but my approach is to tackle these sensitive topics.
> I hope people who read my book will not think of the characters as Indians, but feel for them as people.

At once pessimistic and filled with hope, Divakaruni creates contradictory as well as connected fictional worlds through the stories. The story “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” juxtaposes the protagonist’s vision of America as an illusion and reality when a student, arriving in the city of Chicago, is brought face-to-face with the horrifying reality of its mean streets; “The Ultrasound”, which deals with the sensitive issue of female foeticide, was later enlarged into the novel *Sister of My Heart*. In “Affair,” two temperamentally ill-matched Indo-American couples, whose marriages had been arranged on the basis of their horoscopes having matched ‘perfectly,’ divorce after many years of affluent living in Silicon Valley. In one story, “Doors,” the character Preeti, after moving to the United States, has come to love the western idea of privacy. She faces a dilemma when her husband’s cousin wants to come to live with them. She expresses her discontent with the situation, which shows her newfound decisiveness and her fight against her husband’s view of a traditional Indian wife. In another story, “Clothes,” the husband of the narrator, Sumita, dies and she is faced with the decision of staying in America or going back to India to live with her in-laws. Sumita calls widows who are serving their in-laws “doves with cutoff wings.”

One common theme that runs through all the stories is that for those Indian-born women living new lives in America, independence is a mixed blessing. It means walking the tightrope between old treasured beliefs and surprising newfound desires, and understanding the emotions which that conflict brings. The possibility of change, of starting anew, seems at once terrifying and filled with promise. Though the characters vary, the themes of the short stories are essentially the same – exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as
the experiences of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions. For several characters, the social environment in the new country exacts a poignant psychic cost by challenging their traditional self-concept as integral parts of an extended Indian family and pushing them instead into the American mould of autonomous individualism.

Divakaruni’s first novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) is unique in that it is written with a blend of prose and poetry, successfully employing Magic Realism. Set in the United States, the heroine, Tilo (short for Tilottama), is the “Mistress of Spices.” Born in India, she is shipwrecked on a remote island inhabited by women. Here she encounters an ancient woman who imparts instruction about the power of spice. Ordained after trial by fire, each new spice mistress is sent to a far-off land. Tilo heads for Oakland, California, disguised as an old woman, and sets up a shop where she sells spices. While she supplies the ingredients for curries and kormas, she also helps her customers to gain a more precious commodity: whatever they most desire. The chapters are named after spices like cinnamon, turmeric, and fenugreek, quite common in Indian kitchens. But here they have special powers, and Tilo can practice her magical powers of healing. Through those who visit and revisit her shop, she catches glimpses of the local Indian expatriate community. This includes an abused wife, a naïve cabbie, a sullen teen, a yearning young woman and an old man clinging to dignity. All are out of balance. To each, Tilo dispenses wisdom and the appropriate spice, for the restoration of sight, the cleansing of evil, the pain of rejection. But when a lonely American ventures into the store, a troubled Tilo cannot find the correct spice, for he arouses in her a forbidden desire—which if she follows will destroy her magical powers. This creates great conflicts, as she has to choose whether to serve her people or to follow the path leading to her own happiness. Tilo has to decide which part of her heritage she will keep and which parts she will chose to abandon.

*The Mistress of Spices* has a very mystical quality to it, and, as Divakaruni puts it, “I wrote it in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable” (“Dissolving”2). In fact, she writes so lyrically and weaves her tale so intricately, that one begins to believe in the spices and their healing properties. She drew on the folk tales she had remembered from her childhood, such as the sleeping city under the ocean and the speaking serpents, but she changed them almost completely. “The speaking serpents are a different kind of magic that I only partially understand. They represent the grace of the universe, and by that, I mean they are not governed by logic but come to us mortals as a blessing we cannot understand.” Unlike her short stories, the immigrant experience in the novel is dealt with rather obliquely. The issues remain the same: racial hatred and violence, traditional women emerging from their chrysalis yet stymied by insensitive men and cross-cultural love affairs. Also, her own immigrant experience in Ohio helped her express the feelings of loneliness and cultural separation that suffuse the novel. Thus it also becomes a kind of metaphor for the struggle between social responsibility and personal happiness.

When asked by Morton Marcus why she had taken the risk of plunging into fantasy when she had already secured a large following and critical praise with the realistic *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni’s candid reply was:

First, I believe a writer should push boundaries, and I wanted to try something new, take risks. But more to the point, the risk-taking came of a near-death experience I had two and a half years ago with the birth of my
second child, Abhay, who was born of a Caesarian operation that went wrong. My incisions became infected and I had to have another surgery.

I was in the hospital for a month and only half-conscious most of the time. I had the sense that I was hovering between life and death. It was a strange sensation – not frightening but dreamlike, and I felt at that point that we could move back and forth between these two states, and that this is something we don’t comprehend when we’re living our daily lives; that, really, we are always moving between life and death and new life. I think that experience gave birth to the main character of the book, Tilo, the mistress of spices, who moves back and forth between one existence and another.

Asserting that the question of risk has many answers in the context of the novel, Divakaruni explained further;

Since I had been so close to death, I felt I couldn’t save anything for later. I wanted to take all the risks I needed to right now.

Looking at this question from another perspective, you could say that I took three ‘literary risks’ in the book. I bridged the purely realistic world and the mythic one; I extended my subject matter from dealing exclusively with the Indian-American community to include three other ethnic groups living in the inner city – Latinos, African Americans and Native Americans – and finally, I tried to bring together the language of poetry and prose so the idiom of the book has a lyric quality appropriate to the genre of magic realism

……all this risk-taking goes back to my hospital experience, since one way or another it involves bridging barriers, doing away with boundaries: not only boundaries between life and death, the everyday world and the mythic one, but with the thought that perhaps the boundaries we create in our lives are not real. I’m talking about the boundaries that separate communities and people.[ibid]

This concept of the falling away of boundaries leads the reader to the main theme of the novel, that “happiness comes from being involved in our human world.” The Mistress of Spices is also a love story whose outcome keeps the reader in rapturous suspense from beginning to end, and a depiction of the harsh realities if inner-city life, mixed with a sense of a mythic world paralleling this one. Tilo must decide how far to go in helping the troubled mortals. More important, she must also decide if she will allow herself to transgress the taboo of loving a mortal, which will cause her to lose her divine existence. It is interesting to note in this context that when Tilo makes her decision, she changes her name to Maya, the Hindu term that defines the everyday world of desire, pain and joy as the world of illusion, a place of inevitable sorrow from which one is trying to escape. When asked about this definition, Divakaruni states:

Maya to me is the illusory power of the world, yes. The world is not what it seems. At the same time, however, Maya is what makes the world human and
vulnerable. Raven’s mistake is that, like all of us, he’s looking for a gated community. Our concept of earthly paradise is to be separate. I believe we have to look at the problems around us and address them, not turn away. You cannot have personal happiness without caring for the larger good.

[ibid]

Unlike her first novel, *Sister of My Heart* (1999) is written in the realist mode and describes the complicated relationships of a family in Bengal. Born in the big old Calcutta house on the same tragic night that both their fathers were mysteriously lost, Sudha and Anju are distant cousins, and are brought up together. Closer even than sisters, they share clothes, worries, dreams. The Chatterjee family fortunes are at a low ebb, as there are only widows at home – the girls’ mothers, and their aunt. The novel’s forty-two chapters are set as a sort of extended dialogue that is multi-tiered and overlaid. The chapters themselves are alternately titled, Anju and Sudha, and contain within their folds, techniques that are epistolary and exclamative, topography that is trans-cultural, tone that is adjectival and highly lyrical, and style that is italicized and romantic. Slowly the dark secrets of the past are unveiled and this tests their mutual loyalty. A family crisis forces their mothers to start the serious business of arranging the girls’ marriages, and the pair is torn apart. Sudha moves to her new family’s home in rural Bengal, while Anju joins her immigrant husband in California. Although they have both been trained to be perfect wives, nothing has prepared them for the pain, as well as the joy, that each will have to face in her new life. In the story, the Indian discrimination against women stands exposed: the girls consider themselves inferior beings because they are female. Aspects of feminism, both positive and couched, are present in the prose of many passages in the novel. But the story line becomes rather predictable. Anju saves Sudha from the machinations of her husband and in-laws who want to kill the girl child she has conceived, and brings her to America. The novel ends with a rather clichéd sentence, “A rain-dampened sun struggled from the clouds to frame us in its hesitant, holy light.”

Reception of *Sister of My Heart* has been overwhelming. For most western readers, it was a new look at female bonding. Amazon.com for example called it “A mesmerizing exploration of familial complexity, in which sisterhood turns out to be powerful indeed.” Divakaruni’s own responses during the reading sessions from the novel give us a better insight about her aims as a writer and also about the nature of love that binds women in literature and in the real world. She confesses that though “Indian men are good people, “ she has chosen to write “about the women.” Within the first few minutes of the commencement of the reading she described *Sister of My Heart* as “a book about the past.” She said, “The past affects us positively and negatively. This book explores the place of women in the world – their challenges and boundaries – it honors the bonds women have – which outlast time and geography. Also, Divakaruni’s impetus to write about a women-centric theme in a South Asian setting was deliberate. The novel is her perception of an utter lack of emphasis on women with personalities independent of men in the South Asian literary genre. “Women are the center of the novel and the reader experiences life through their eyes. It is important to see the world as women see it because for many years, there have been only stories about men.” Chitra identifies the novel as ultimately about storytelling. Influenced by her grandfather who told stories from South Asian epics, she has woven those childhood folk tales into her novel. She explains that the “aloneness” of the epic heroines seemed strange to
her even as a child. In a *San Francisco Examiner* Magazine article (February 28, 1999), she discusses that in the South Asian mythological stories, the main relationships the heroines had were with the opposite sex – husbands, sons, lovers, or opponents. They never had any important friends. Perhaps in rebellion against such thinking, I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers,” she posits. Chitra truly believes and shares the emotions of her protagonists and finds in them a mode of feminist expression. An avowed believer of female bonds and friendships, she continues, “In the best friendships I have had with women, there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation, perhaps because of the life-changing experiences we share.” (*San Francisco Examiner*, 28 February 1999). She adds a disclaimer when asked if she has created a comprehensive picture of South Asian family life, “It is impossible to believe that all Indian families are like my characters. It is like saying that all American families are like the characters in Flannery O’Connor’s books,” she tells the reporter in stirmag.com. Though *Sister of My Heart* is set in Calcutta, Chitra candidly admits that the rest of the story is far from autobiographical and is based on observation and imagination – “Story-writing is like transforming life into art.” Ultimately, the way she handles everyday detail, language and organizes text, one realizes that she is at heart a poet. A simple quote would attest it: “Dust embroiders the lining of my lungs. It presses down upon me like an unkempt promise, it sucks up my voice.”


The diverse range of stories in this volume attracts the readers’ attention and most of them depict life in East and West with touching perception and color. While the problem of acculturation is deftly dealt with in “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter,” where a widow discovers that her old fashioned ways are an embarrassment to her daughter-in-law; a young American woman’s pilgrimage in Kashmir in “The Lives of Strangers”; miscommunication and distancing in a brother-sister relationship in “The Intelligence of Wild Things”, to the protagonist Ruchira in “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives” who while packing up her flat in preparation for her forthcoming marriage, discovers her childhood ‘book of errors’, a teenage notebook in which she wrote down ways to improve her life—Divakaruni writes about the problems of life which she knows best. “The Names of Stars in Bengali” is the beautifully nuances story of a San Francisco wife and mother who returns to her native village in India to visit her mother, in which each understands afresh the emotional dislocation caused by stepping into “a time machine called immigration” that subjects them to “the alien habit of a world they had imagined imperfectly.” All of the stories are touching
tales of lapsed communication, inarticulate love and redemptive memories. They illuminate the difficult adjustments of women in whom memory and duty must co-exist with a new, often painful and disorienting set of standards.

*The Vine of Desire* (2002) is a novel of extraordinary depth and sensitivity and is also considered as a sequel to her earlier novel, *Sister of My Heart*. With sequels one can trace the growth of that character. This one is the story of Anju and Sudha, two young women far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, who after a year of living separate lives are rekindling their friendship in America. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support they need: it gives Anju the strength to pick up the pieces after a personal tragedy, and Sudha the confidence to make life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita – without her husband. The unlikely relationships they form with men and women in the world outside the immigrant Indian community as well as their families in India profoundly transform them, especially when they must confront the deep passionate feelings that Anju’s husband has for Sudha. Sudha, seeking a measure of self-worth and trying to assuage loneliness, succumbs to Sunil’s need for her and then flees from home, cousin and cousin’s husband to be a nursemaid to an old and ailing man. Sunil also moves out and away. Anju does her writing coursework, and makes it to the dean’s list. The story ends with Anju’s metaphorical declaration, “I’ve learned to fly,” and makes Divakaruni deal with a new facet of immigrant experience in the sense that the movement is not necessarily a physical one or from east to west. By making Sudha decide that she’s not interested in America any more and would like to go home, the author wants to tread new ground. Thus *The Vine of Desire* stands on its own as a novel of extraordinary depth and sensitivity. Through the eyes of people caught in the clash of cultures, 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.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni once explained her reason for writing:

> There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious – the essence of spirituality – that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds the divine in everything. It was important for me to start writing about my own reality and that of my community. (Doubleday)

She is happy and impressed that “there is an outburst, and all of a sudden there are many Indian American writers saying in loud print what we have been wanting to say for a long time.” “It is natural that we are once more linked with South Asian women’s groups, isn’t it,” asks Chitra. “Many of us articulate in our books the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here – and show them emerge, at least in many cases, as stronger and self-reliant women. Some of our characters are good role models for women readers and women activists.” (Kamath). Living in North America has also had a beneficial effect on many women writers. Speaking about women who read books with multicultural themes, she states in her interview to Esha Bhattacharjee:

> We cannot ignore the crucial part played by the growing number of immigrants who read our books because they understand their own communities better since we write from a perspective that is not available to a writer who has lived in India or China for the most part…..But a growing
number of American women—who are curious about the foreigners living in their middle—want to read their stories too......Many of us articulate in our books the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here—and show them emerge, at least in many cases, as stronger and self-reliant women. Some of our characters are good role models for women readers and women activists.

Of course, she also admits that her position as a woman writer in America has been far more meaningful vis-à-vis that of those writers in her home country. “Had I lived in India, I would have been expected to get married, raise children and pursue a career – if at all – that was not very demanding. Of course, women writers have succeeded in India but the struggle there is far bigger than the one here,” she tells Kamath.

Apart from her poems and fictional writing, Divakaruni has written different kinds of non-fictional articles as well. In an article entitled “Uncertain Objects of Desire,” she sifts through the several hundreds of carefully categorized matrimonial advertisements in The Times of India and surmises that in India, a country that straddles the old and the new, a good place to look for signs of shifting values are these columns. Usually the ads and responses are handled by parents – proof that the arranged marriage is alive and well in India. But reading between the lines of two ads typical of their eras, one from 1969 and one from 1999, she feels that a great deal about the nature of desired partners then and now, and the protocol for finding them has changed. Apart from other factors, Chitra feels that perhaps “this echoes a larger pattern of social movement in which the Indian woman’s role is changed more rapidly than the Indian man’s.” In a short article she wrote for rediff.com, “Wheat Complexions and Pink Cheeks,” she hits out against the Indian obsession for fair skinned women. In a series of articles she wrote for the Salon magazine, for their “Spice-of-Life” section, Divakaruni focuses upon issues she know best. A cursory glance at the titles of some of these articles written every fortnight throughout 1997 will suffice. These range from themes like: “Some of the moments of motherhood are best appreciated later, after your blood pressure returns to normal”(12.11.97); “Talking to strangers: by protecting our children from the world, we sometimes also teach them to fear it”(11.13.97); “Protecting children with the death penalty”(10.29.97); “What is the price of freedom for child laborers if a ban on the goods they produce leaves them worse off than they were before?”(10.16.97); “No one can judge a battered woman until staring into her eyes – and her heart”(10.02.97); “Blood Brothers: Why do my kids want to rip each other to shreds?” (09.04.97); “The disappointment of aloneness”(07.10.97); “The smell of childhood never fades (06.26.97); “Indian, born in the USA: Will the children of immigrants – no less American than Bruce Springsteen – ever stop having to answer the question “Where do you come from?”(08.21.97). In a very interesting piece entitled, “My fictional children”(28.01.98), Divakaruni mentions how everything she ever tried to write about her children has turned to hallmark mush but the fictional mothers in her stories have become much more complex and full. The concluding paragraph of this article is interesting:

My writing is made more complicated by the fact that I’m exploring the experience of being Indian, of being brought up in a culture where many still consider motherhood a woman’s supreme destiny, and the inability to get pregnant her supreme failure. This is one of the major themes of the novel
I’m working on right now. I think I’m not exaggerating when I say…that I wouldn’t be writing this book had I not had children myself.

Apart from such revelations, Divakaruni is also the editor of *Multitudes*, an anthology she uses in her own classroom. She states about the book, “I didn’t want to sacrifice quality, and [the stories] focus on problem solving, not just how terrible things are.” (quoted in Softky). The anthology includes stories about communication styles across cultures, expectations of friendships, the Los Angeles riots, and prejudice against gay people. The book contains works by a variety of authors, and some are even by her own students.

Divakaruni’s journey from a young graduate student to a matured writer of repute seems to have come to a full circle. She believes that there are both pluses and minuses to belonging to the huge influx of Asian American writers. The interest in Asian American literature makes it easier to get published than maybe ten or fifteen years ago.

The best part is that your writing is now available to so many people, both within and outside of the community. Young South Asians have come up to me and said, ‘I really relate to this story. This story has helped me understand my mother, helped me understand my culture.’ That’s a really good feeling [Neela Banerjee 3].

Along with the positive sides, Divakaruni admits that the classification as an Asian American writer can have its drawbacks:

> You are expected to be a spokesperson for the community, and that is just an unfair kind of burden. I always try to make it clear that I am presenting one vision about what is true about the Indian American community. It is a very diverse community, and mine is just one angle of looking at it. [ibid]

Also noted is her change in her style of writing. For example, the first volume of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* included a detailed glossary of Bengali and Hindi words, which were italicized in the stories. In her latest novel, *The Vine of Desire*, she has not only done away with italics and glossaries, but has been using deliberate Bengali and Hindi words within the text with a vengeance, so to say. It seems a new tool by which she wants to exoticise the East in its newest avatar. When asked by Esha Bhattacharjee as to how she has matured as a writer, Divakaruni’s candid reply was:

> With each new book, there’s a new challenge. *Arranged Marriage* was a more contemporary exploration of women moving to the West. *Sister of My Heart* was set in traditional Kolkata, and there was this dual narrative I experimented with. One of the main issues of the novel was the foetal sex selection …. I felt very strongly about it. *Mistress of Spices* has been very different because I tried to weave some magic into it. My research included Bengali folk tales, Indian myths, oriental magic and also the immigrant experience. *The Vine of Desire* is more about the unknown error of our lives. Here I’ve experimented with an omniscient narrative voice. I’ve looked into things more deeply here, and I hope my book connects with its readers.
In her recent visit to Kolkata in January 2003, as part of her ‘research trip,’ she spoke to a cross-section of people, trying to note the changes in lifestyles and the way they think. Since the break in the traditional family structure interests her, since she has realized that women here have become a lot more confident, we might expect the next novel to deal with the many changes that the city of her birth and growing years have undergone. In an interview given way back in May 2001 she had mentioned: “When I write a book, I try to make it the best it can be. But once a book is done, I put it aside. I do my part of the job, and then let the universe do the rest because, when I look back, the best things, in terms of my career, have been serendipitous.”(Farmanfarmaian 46). Divakaruni’s versatility as an Asian-American writer is once again established as her first children’s book, Neela: Victory Song (2003) has just been released and it follows the story of a twelve-year old girl caught up in the Indian Independence movement. Since life to Divakaruni seems forever mysterious – always complicated by the conflict between destiny and desire, it is difficult to predict her next fictional venture.

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