

**Summer Project**  
**On**  
**Diaspora in the Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

**In partial fulfilment of the requirements for Award of Degree of**  
**B.A English (Hons)**



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## DECLARATION

Date: 11<sup>th</sup> July 2016

I, Vrinda Maheshwari student of B.A English (H) of Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, hereby declare that I have completed the Summer Project on 'Diaspora in the Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni' in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A English (H)

I declare that it is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for award of any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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# AMITY UNIVERSITY

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**Amity Institute of English Studies and Research**

**Date: 11<sup>th</sup> July 2016**

## CERTIFICATE

- This Summer Project titled 'Diaspora in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni' submitted by Vrinda Maheshwari Enrolment No. A0706115096 of Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A. English (H), is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or full, for award of any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This Summer Project may be placed before the examiner/s for evaluation.

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## Diaspora in the Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

This research paper aims to tackle the concept and the heavy influence of Diaspora in the works of the wonderful and mesmerizing writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She is an Indian novelist residing in the United States of America and has been writing about a country she left behind years ago. This is when Diaspora comes into play. Hence, to completely understand Diaspora, it becomes important to learn of its origin and history and understand how it came to be an important aspect of colonial literature. And, why most of Chitra Banerjee's works have strong tones of Diaspora attached to it.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a creative writing teacher in the University of Houston. Her novels have been published in genres like historical fiction, realistic fiction, and magic realism and she is even an acclaimed poet, having won many awards for her work. She is a proud recipient of many awards, like the American Book Award or even the Ginsberg Poetry Prize. Divakaruni regards herself as a feminist, but not in the conventional way. Her view on feminism differs and her novels and poems are the prime example of this. She understands the deep rooted importance of Indian customs but also realises the necessity of women being liberated from the patriarchal shackles. She believes that a woman can still be a feminist but look good at the same time. There is no rule governing that feminist needn't be conscious of their own looks.

"It's very important to balance things, it's imperative to do something for the society and women in particular and help women who aren't in position to help themselves." (Devakaruni)

Diaspora in its most pure form is the displacement of the population from their own country to another, which can be forced or may voluntary but it does have strings of longingness and hopes attached to it. At times, this displaced population yearns to still connect with its own country and hence, nostalgia and memory become viable aspects of Diaspora.

Diaspora transmits values and cultures and helps in building up social and political relationships between people coming together from different boundaries. Individuals, sometimes, are able to find common values and create newer systems of comfort and 'home' as they work along the relationships. Sometimes, Diaspora literature helps in smoothening out the relationship between countries and synergizes freedom and peace.

"The chief characteristic features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The diasporic writers turn to their homeland for various reasons." (Murshid Alam)

Roger Brubaker, an American sociologist and professor, defines the original idea of Diaspora as:

"Most early discussions of Diaspora were firmly rooted in a conceptual 'homeland'; they were concerned with a paradigmatic case, or a small number of core cases. The paradigmatic case was, of course, the Jewish Diaspora; some dictionary definitions of Diaspora, until recently, did not simply illustrate but defined the word with reference to that case." (Brubaker)

When Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wrote *Sister of my Heart*, she knitted the lives of two 'cousins' so close together that the bonds of a normal relationship surpassed to a one that was almost divine. Yet, when marriage and maturity hit them, both of them faced problems they were unable to communicate with the other. One left the country and settled in the USA, much like

herself, while the other stayed back in India. A reader was easily able to make sense of and understand the problems that both the young brides faced and how different it was for each. *Sister of my Heart* can be the perfect example of Indian Diaspora writing. Divakaruni talks of the predicament of woman, the societal pressure, the extent of displacement on her psychological state. Various examples from the book can be quoted to help understand the beauty of her words and the mesmerizing language she uses to convey that meaning.

“Love comes like lightning, and disappears the same way. If you are lucky, it strikes you right. If not, you'll spend your life yearning for a man you can't have.” (Divakaruni, *Sister of my Heart*)

Divakaruni, in one of her interviews with Hindustan Times, made quite a few comments on the psychological plight of women, in India and as well as for the NRIs. In a comment below, she makes it very clear, how amazed she is with the women around her, and how she always draws inspiration from strong hearted women.

"I'm really amazed and touched by women I've worked with. Women who have recovered and have started all over again from difficult situations. I wouldn't call them Draupadi because she was strong in a particular way but these women strong in many ways." (Divakaruni)

Another book of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that surprisingly can come under the category of Diaspora is *Palace of Illusions* which is basically Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view; a female's scrutiny on a patriarchal war of the Olden days. Divakaruni gives Draupadi a strong voice, unheard of in a female, especially in the days of male dominance. In the *Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni writes that Draupadi was forced out of heaven to take birth on earth, a daughter to King Drupad. This strange 'exile' can be compared to the displacement that

people from one country to another, face. But rather than nostalgia for her “lost home”, she was curious about her surroundings but never felt like she belonged. Panchali, in *The Palace of Illusions*, was a resolute woman with a blazing voice that always demanded to be heard. She knew her words had strength and never tried to stop her clicking tongue.

“Divakaruni has convincingly retold Draupadi's tale from a feminist perspective *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel*. Her Draupadi is unabashedly the most prominent queen with pride, sharp intellect and a strong will.” (Sonakshi Babbar)

Chitra Banerjee believes in feminism and urges it to be the need of the hour. Her characters, Sudha and Anju, in *Sister of my Heart*, represent two sides of the same coin. While one is a fiery, ever-ready to fight tomboy, the other is a submissive, tradition abiding girl. Even though united by the ties of sisterhood, the girls starkly contrast each other in their values and their beliefs. Anju wishes to travel the world and be a free flier, and even wishes to choose the one she loves. While, on the other hand, Sudha walks close to the ground and understands the risk of high flights and fancies. But, as the book proceeds, it is Sudha who falls in love with a man who is forbidden and Anju is left to cover the tracks. Love and relationships are, time and again, tested in this heartbreakingly beautiful novel.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been living in USA since almost forty years, and her works and novels all represent the hardships migrants, especially women, face in a country where culture, traditions, laws and society vastly differ from their own country, India.

Once, in conversation with, Patricia Gras, Divakaruni said and it is quoted here,

“Immigration is such a major fact of life here in the United States. You could come from different parts of the world but that whole experience of being in a whole different environment almost a new world where you have to learn the rules over again that is something a lot of people here share” (Divakaruni)

The San Francisco Chronicle complimented Banerjee’s book of collected short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, saying that the author writes with a special gift which overwhelms the reader with mesmerizing stories that individuals can easily relate to. The characters are seen as strong, vocal, and gives an insight in the dramatis personae’s mind that not many authors have learned to master.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni looks upon herself as “a listener, a facilitator, a connector to people,” and, “to me, the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about” (Divakaruni).

Patricia Gras asked Divakaruni, in *The Connection Special*, “What was most challenging for you when you came here as far as culture (is concerned)”. To which Divakaruni replied saying,

“I think one of the things that were difficult is that I missed my family I’d always been around a lot of family and here, I was on my own and I really had to look after myself and take care of myself and become a private individual in a way that I’ve never been in India. What is ironic is, that after I lived here for a while I really grew to love that, that freedom, that individuality and then it was going to be hard to go back” (Divakaruni)

Various themes colour the course of the two novels, *Sister of my Heart* and *Palace of Illusions*. One of the major themes is that of identity and, multiculturalism comes as a close second. This runs with the idea of Diaspora. The author has been “displaced” from her own country and is struggling to get used to and in tune with another. India and America differ vastly in terms of traditions, culture and even mentality. Coming from a place which held its head high with the norms and rules of a god fearing society, USA had offered a fresh breath of air to the



nineteen year old graduate. Divakaruni believes that women reel in more in jolt due to cultural shock and acculturation. Both the books talk about the plight of women and how they can overcome their stance and place in society through a strong voice. Hence, feminism is also an important theme in her books.

“„the darkness is a cresting wave. It sweeps me up out of my body until I float among the stars, those fine bright pores on the sky's skin. If only I could pass through them, I would end up on the other side, the right side, shadow less, perfectly illuminated, beyond the worries of this mundane world” (Divakaruni, *Sister of my Heart*)

These lines perfectly capture the immense desire of the protagonist Sudha who wishes to mingle with the darkness and be one with the night. She longs to lose herself in infinity where worries and stress wouldn't be a problem, something a migrant would desire. Divakaruni uses beautiful metaphors and words that even the reader feels what the 'speaker' wishes and desires and hence, connecting with her novels becomes an easy manoeuvre.

In *Sister of my Heart*, the reader finds that the relationship between the old generation and the new one is always in friction. While the two mothers and Pishi live in a world of mystical and mythical tales where the supernatural is an important part of life, Anju and Sudha are able to relate more to the western culture which made more sense to the two young girls. For them, love wasn't supposed to be found by the elders but needed to be connected by them. Love was something that pure and quiet personal and not to be shared by their culture abiding elders. In *Sister of my Heart*, Anju seems to be in trouble with Sudha's mom quiet a lot who believes that women are there to be graceful and pretty and not hard hearted and vocal like Anju. Anju's mother in contrast to Sudha's is seen as a wise old lady who understands the importance of the ancient traditions yet doesn't ward off the new change that globalisation was bringing in.

Relationships in *Sister of my Heart*, between mother-daughter and husband-wife or even between two lovers are realistically portrayed and the way a woman overcomes them is a challenge that the rest of the female population reads with bathed breath. The beauty of *Sister of my Heart* comes alive through beautiful phrases and metaphors.

The *Palace of Illusions* is a novel that is based in the days of the Ancient War. Even then, the strong touch of Diaspora becomes evident time and again as the novel progresses. For example, in the quote below, the desire of Draupadi to go into a familiar place, a home, is starkly evident. The way she describes the ‘palace’ makes it tangible even for the reader and they can observe it in their mind’s eye. The desire to be go into a homely surrounding is the most important feature of Diaspora where a migrant is always trying to get used to the new surroundings and wishes to get accepted in their new country.

“Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere. We rise; the shapes cluster around us in welcome, dissolving and forming again like fireflies in a summer evening.” (Divakaruni, *Palace of Illusions*)

Again, in *Palace of Illusions*, identity and relationships play a major role. Draupadi never seems to be content with who she is and is always trying to find someone or the other to affiliate herself with. For her, Kunti and Gandhari were strong queens, united by the loss or inadequacy of their husbands. A quote from the book reads:

“Gandhari's marriage like Kunti's was not a happy one. I wonder if that was what gave them strength, both these queens. But perhaps I'd got the cause and effect mixed up? Perhaps strong women tended to have unhappy marriages.” (Divakaruni, *Palace of Illusions*)

This makes one wonder about the state of Draupadi's psyche and how she graced herself in public. She always knew she was destined to greatness, owing to the prophecy by the strange and exotic "sadhu" in the jungle.

In conclusion, it is seen that the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is heavily laced with Diaspora. And, it is also realised that even though she misses her country and longs for it, work clearly accepts the western culture above the Indian one. Interweaving of memory, nostalgia and displacement are undoubtedly evident in the stories of Sudha, Anju and Panchali. All the three female protagonists, Sudha, Anju and Draupadi, are displaced from their 'home' and are have to come to terms with their new surroundings. It is expected from the women to do it without questions or whims. Whilst reading, a person understands, and sometimes even associates with the struggles faced, in the contemporary times, and in the primordial days, in India and in America. Divakaruni has made their desperation and desire to be accepted and be accepted in a new culture painfully evident and it is the women who tend to connect more with her novels, more than anyone else; a woman on the brink of womanhood and maturity, a woman who has found love or yearns for it, or even a woman who wishes to know that she is not alone, that she isn't the only one who suffers that her army of strong warriors stand strong and tall.

"The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies."

(Divakaruni, *Palace of Illusions*)

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