



Metamorphosis of Sudha and Anju in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine Of Desire*

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5203260

Abstract

Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are related to native culture and background. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most impressive and dynamic voices among the writers of Indian Diasporic Literature. As an Indian immigrant writer, Divakaruni stands firmly in the native tradition, depicting the change of diasporic experiences of women in her novels. The fiction of Divakaruni is related directly to the twentieth-century revolutions of community and individuals. Divakaruni's "The Vine of Desire" illustrates the female protagonists' struggle for identity, their bitter experiences in a foreign land which transforms their life from dependence to independence. They finally emerge as self-assertive individuals. This paper focuses on the process of attaining the metamorphosis of the two main characters, Sudha and Anju in a foreign country.

Keywords: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Diasporic experience, Identity, Independence.

A blow of fresh air is fanning in the scenery of modern literature with the arrival of globalization. Diaspora is a global sensation which shows the communities of displaced or relocated people who move from their homelands to new lands for social, political or economic reasons. 'Diaspora' means 'to scatter' or 'dispersion'. Diaspora is a main subject to be connected with the rootless, isolated, dislocated immigrants from their native homeland. Immigration has turned into a significant stage in human development. As the immigrants are able to take up the best of both native and alien, they develop into international citizens.

Most of the Diasporas deliberately want to migrate to a foreign country of their choice, with the hope of living there. They migrate to live a happy life, yet in reality they fight a lot for survival. The diasporic person is at home neither in the West nor in India and is thus 'unhomed' (qtd in Bharathi 4) in the most important sense of the term. Thus the concept and interpretation of 'home' become important in all kinds of diasporic writing.

The observable fact of immigration of Indian people to the United States of America and other countries, their status there, and their nostalgic feelings for the mother country as



well as their isolation is the dominant subject treated by diaspora writers. In the same way, the literature of the Indian Diaspora is “that body of writing in English produced by persons who identify themselves as of Indian heritage who are living outside the Mother India in such places as Australia, Canada, United States, Africa and Britain” (qtd in Jha 7).

The Literature of the Indian Diaspora is deeply rooted in the environmental culture and cultural ideology. It is an independent discipline that has many male and female writers as its patrons. The Diasporic Indian artistic writers such as V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc are interested in aiming the real characters of Indian-born men and women, their society and customary life.

In the Post Modernism, Diaspora writing has become popular and the diasporic women writers have special place in Indian Diasporic writings. One of the most significant woman writers of Indian diaspora literature who brilliantly portrays femininity in its liveliness is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. After Salman Rushdie, Divakaruni emerges on the literary scene with a post-colonial diasporic identity. Her position as a South Asian writer in English is diverse and well recognized. Divakaruni immigrated to America and came into spotlight as a female writer in diasporic Indian English Literature.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known and prominent among youth; an Indian-American was born in Kolkata on 29 July 1956 and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. She has graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1976 and received Masters and Ph.D. in English from the University of California. She held many different jobs to pay for education, including babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian Boutique, slicing bread at a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab.

Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned author, poet, activist and teacher. Her works include three volumes of poetry, two collections of short stories, anthologies and a children’s book to her credit. Her novels comprise *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), *The forest of Enchantments* (2019).

Divakaruni’s work has been published in over 50 magazines, including the *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, and her writing has been included in over 50 anthologies. Her books have been translated into 29 languages. Most of her works have been made into films and plays. She has won several awards, including American Book Award and Light of India Prize. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Houston. In 2015, she has been included by the *Economic Times* in the ‘Twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women.’

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has her identity patented in a foreign land but her origin and connections are firmly rooted in India. She has insisted on being read not as an Indian or emigrant writer but as an immigrant writer. Her books are based both in India and in U.S and consistently mark the lives and troubles of women. The fiction of Divakaruni is related directly with the twentieth century transformations of community and individuals. She is



concerned with crossing over from one culture to another without compromising either, negotiating new boundaries and remaking themselves.

Divakaruni has attempted to create an inclusive picture of South Asian family life. She is at her best exploring the themes of love, friendship, assimilation, self-analysis and discovery: “involved in the process of social transformation” (qtd in Bharathi 19). Her novels have great significance in the present age. The immigrant writer, Divakaruni reevaluates the role of Indian woman in her novels. In this novel, *The Vine of Desire* Divakaruni brightly predicted her women protagonist transformed to new icons of independence by taking up the problems faced as the Indian immigrants in America. This article deals with the theme of woman’s empowerment and their desire for independency, which make them to break the restrained boundaries of the society. This metamorphosis makes them emerge as a New Woman from Interdependence to Independence. This is brilliantly portrayed in the novel *The Vine of Desire* through the characters of Sudha and Anju.

In Divakaruni’s fiction, sisterhood is always strongly embedded, inborn relationship that brings people together. This especially shown in “The Ultrasound” in her short story collection *Arranged Marriage* and later enlarged into the novel *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. To know about the novel, *The Vine of Desire*, one must know about the previous novel, *Sister of My Heart* (1999). The title *Sister of My Heart* itself speaks of the emotional ties between two women. The novel consists of two cousins- Anju and Sudha, their mothers- Gouri, Nalini and Pishi their widowed aunt. Anju and Sudha are cousins belonging to the same patrilineal family who consider one another as the sister of their hearts.

Anju and Sudha are very different in appearance, personality and attainment, and grow up together under similar yet very different conditions. Anju and Sudha from their entry to girlhood relish a set of new values and accompanying their dreams to their urge for freedom, their desire for adventurous experiences and their feeling to have a stronger experience of the world beyond the overprotected home. Sudha, the more beautiful than her cousin Anju, is quite and submissive while Anju is the rebellious one. The differences in their outlook and manner, instead of making them apart, pull them together to help each other in their times of need. Only the marriage separated them from one another.

Marriage has brought not only physical separation but also emotional separation for them. Anju moves to California with her charming husband Sunil, where, she becomes free, performing outdoor works on her own, learns her favorite subject in college. But still the unhappiness in her life makes her think that it’s not what she imagined about American life would be. Here, Sudha settles in Calcutta by marrying a wealthy man Ramesh. She becomes submissive wife and does household chores under the control of her dominant mother-in-law.

Life brings them to the same stage when they both become pregnant. Sudha’s mother-in-law insists Sudha to abort her child because she wants to have a boy baby. However Sudha decides to keep the child. So she is forced to run away from her husband’s house in order to guard her child. Here in America, Anju is upset over her miscarriage. Sudha is ready to go to America to take care of her beloved sister Anju. Sudha divorces her husband and prepared to leave India. Ashok, her first love approaches Sudha to come and live with them. Sudha



refuses his proposal and leaves India with her daughter Dayita and go to America to live with her sister Anju. *Sister of My Heart* ends when Sudha lands on American airport and the two adored sisters are united again.

The Vine of Desire is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart* published in 2002. It is a novel of strength and sensitivity and continues the story of Anju and Sudha, the two cousins of the earlier book. The two young women now live in America. *The Vine of Desire* opens with Anju's miscarriage; this really affects her mind and her relationship with Sunil. The reunion gives Anju the stamina to live on after her personal tragedy. Sudha also rises the confident of giving a life of herself and for her baby in spite of her lonely condition.

Sudha's arrival in the novel, *The Vine of Desire* seems balanced for a standard flight of adultery, clash of allegiance and a shocking breakdown of relationships. The novel picks up where Sudha, now a divorcee comes to America to visit Anju and her husband Sunil, who has an early crush on Sudha. The happy reunion of the two sisters is again stained by Sunil's passionate feelings for Sudha and by Sudha's surrender to his desire.

The novel, *The Vine of Desire* is divided into two parts. The first part entitled, 'Subterranean Truths' describes the life of the two sisters in America after Sudha's arrival. The second part of the novel named 'Remembrance and Forgetting' opens out Sudha's new journey as a caretaker of an ailing old Bengali man, Mr. Sen in Berkeley and her decision to return to Bengal with him to a small place, Jalpaiguri in Bengal.

After her marriage, Anju came to America who felt some trouble to adjust with the American culture. The sense of longing is often seen among the displaced people in most of the diaspora writings. In *The Namesake*, *Brick Lane*, *An American Brat* and *The Vine of Desire*, one can find women characters leave their home to foreign countries after their marriage in order to settle in a new land with their husbands. Anju's isolation over her miscarriage exposes nostalgia caused due to immigration.

Divakaruni focuses on Anju's insecurities after the miscarriage of the child. Despite Anju's dissatisfaction of motherhood gets to tie up in the beauty and innocence of Dayita. Anju easily gets attached to Dayita and Dayita is also fond of her. Slowly, Anju gains her strength after her sister Sudha's care and support. With Sudha's appearance in the edge of Anju's marital life, a new web of personal relationship is to be constructed. Everyday seeing Sudha in his house tempts Sunil to lose his consciousness that he is Anju's husband. He even kissed Sudha when she was sleeping with Dayita. Sudha became annoyed and went away.

Sudha is a woman who walks out of her in-laws house and begins a fresh new life in America with her daughter. In India, she faces many restrictions where in America she does not face any restrains. Even in India, nobody would accept a woman like her, who dares to smash the rules and who wanted to live on her own with her daughter. Chitra Banerjee depicts the outstanding characters and every character takes a hope in an alien country; she says "No journey is commonplace. Each person's journey is unique and changes that person in a special way. I hope I am able to show that through my different characters". (qtd in Swamy 7)



In America, women are free and they emancipated themselves capable of working, living, having fun, doing things unbelievable for the Indians. The scene of the women flying in glides in the novel *The Vine of Desire* is the best example of this. Anju and Sudha are very excited to see women who are flying in the glides and admire their liberated spirit. Sudha admires them. She thinks, “Are such things possible? To be so free of gravity, so deliciously loosened from earth?” (VD 41). Immigrants always make themselves fine and free from the hardships and so Sudha came to America for her better life.

The protagonist, Sudha represents transformation in motion, from submissive wife to liberal woman to resist on her own to reject a home to save her daughter. She transforms herself from traditional passive women to modern independent women. Getting out of the house, Sudha emerged herself as a feminist woman. Feminism is a movement that gained importance in the 20th century, which fights for cultural roles and socio-political rights of women. Apart from the struggle for their rights, they begin to create their own identity in society. They are revealing themselves as strong and intelligent. Because of this change, they begin to establish themselves as one of the major parts of the society. The women who are having the above traits can be called as New Women.

Unlike typical Victorian woman, the New Woman is not habituated to self sacrifice. She picks up her career for a living and attains self fulfillment and independence. As Sangeetha Jain affirms, “There was a sudden change in the outlook of women towards themselves and society. Capturing this transformation of women’s ideas about themselves, critics and journalists coined the term New Woman which reflected a diversion from self-sacrificing old woman” (Jain 21). The early example of the new women in fiction includes Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, a woman who leaves her husband to chase her own desire. In the novel *The Vine of Desire*, Sudha leaves her husband to live her life independently with her daughter.

At first, Sudha feels bored about her life in America as she uses all the time cleaning Anju’ home and cooking other than taking care of her daughter. So Sudha gets some relaxation out of the house, spending some time in park near Anju’s house where Dayita happily played with sand. In park, Sudha tried to mix with the other American ladies but they are not ready to talk with her and there she felt an immigrant sensibility. But she meets a woman named Sara in a park who is young Indian immigrant, leading an unknown and lively life in America. Meeting Sara is a turning point in Sudha’s life.

It is from Sara that Sudha learns of being free and independent and develops a “don’t care” attitude towards the comments of this world. Sudha admires Sara’s view of life and her attitude to life has shocked Sudha and wonders: “Where did this girl from Indian learn such recklessness? Who taught her to care so little for what people might think?” (VD 84). Sudha’s interaction with Sara makes her think of a job for herself so that she can be independent. Sudha seeks a new job through Sara who tells her that she will inform it to a woman named Lupe, the job facilitator.

Sara promised her “entry into the real American life and more importantly- escape from herself” (VD 92). The idea of having something of her own and being economically free



and independent gives an enormous enjoyment to Indian immigrant woman. However, Sudha has her own theory of life. She has her own reasons for the refusal to Ashok and she declares, “I turned him down because I didn’t want him to have to take care of me,” Sudha said, “I wanted to be independent. And it seemed like America was the best place for that.” (VD 93)

Sudha gets fascinated by the American proverb, “Live for Yourself”. She wonders: “Especially since I came here. Everywhere I turn in America, they say, Life for yourself” (VD 177). Sudha knows that her arrival causes the distance between her sister Anju and her husband Sunil. She felt the heavy ambiance in Anju’s house. They don’t talk much after Anju’s miscarriage. Sunil kindles his relationship with Dayita who is comfortably close with him. As an alternative for her crisis with Sunil, Lalit appears in her life. Lalit is an Americanized Indian surgeon, become friend with Sudha. Sudha looks happy and enjoys Lalit’s company who often makes fun. Anju delights to see Sudha’s happiness who gets over from her past. But Sunil does not like this intimacy between Sudha and Lalit.

In the fear of losing Sudha, he reveals his love for her. He wants to marry Sudha and he is ready to ask for a divorce form Anju. If marriage is a social compulsion, love is anxious with the personal completion. Though Sudha is not pleased about Sunil’s decision, she for a while discovers the complete fulfillment of her hinder sexual and emotional desires. In a weak moment, she provides him his physical desire.

Sudha surrenders to the call of her flesh. She has deceived Anju’s trust. She is not able to guard it. She feels guilty for her behavior. She is unable to take the fact that she got into physical relationship with her sister’s husband. So she decides to leave Anju and Sunil’s house immediately. She dialed Lupe, the woman who offers job and leaves Anju and Sunil after writing a letter for both.

Sudha asserts herself independently. She appears as a woman of individual strength. Among the various complexities that confront her, she grabs the opportunity to search for a job. She attempts to make development in her own way. Sudha’s interaction with Lupe, taught her to be brave and to deal with the challenges of life. Lupe has taught her not to be emotional and attached to any person or thing. Meeting with Sara and Lupe, Sudha has transformed and even demolished the principles that she had kept so far in her life. Before that Sudha has trusted in the attitude of favorable to everyone in her life. She gratified Anju and made sacrifices for her; she gratified her ‘mothers’ and in-laws who gave her problems in her life. She gratified Sunil and it gave the turning point in her life. She had to discard all those who were close to her heart, her ideals, and her dreams as well. Sudha took the job of taking care of an ailing old man in one Indian family.

In spite of Sudha’s physical sufferings, she confirms her boundless ambition and adventurous spirit of a postmodern woman. Through Sudha, Chitra Banerjee presents a new woman who is neither surrendering nor compromising. As exactly said by Neeru Tandon, “She (a new woman) is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential, along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs” (Tandon 127). New women’s eager for job make her to stand as economically free independent women. Sudha symbolizes this new woman.



Chitra Banerjee makes excellent depiction of an Indian immigrant woman. Sudha who chooses to accept the job as nurse takes care of an old man. On the other hand, the author eminently portrays one of the protagonists, Anju's dauntlessness when she knows about her messed life. Anju transforms herself as a woman of independent strength. After knowing the departure of Sudha, Anju asks Sunil what he had done to Sudha which makes her leave the house. Sunil informs Anju that they won't be able to live together because he loves Sudha and does not further want to ruin both their lives.

Anju is not like Sudha who doesn't like definite aspects of her native culture but Anju's view is quite balanced about Indian and American culture. Divakaruni illustrates the inner struggle of Anju who finally has to embrace the fact that life offers to her. Anju stands boldly and signs the divorce papers. After the separation, Anju declines every possible help from Sunil. In this way, Chitra Banerjee shows the liberal American notion of feminism that promotes Indian women to fight for liberty and independence.

Anju informs Sunil not to contact her and refuses Sunil's help that he has offered. This proves Anju's dauntlessness attitude which she gives priority to her self-determination, free will and independency, instead of need and defensive shield. Anju attempts to create her own identity, a place for herself in the splendor of America which she discovers hard to break. Chitra Banerjee justifies Stuart Hall's statement: "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, though transformation and difference" (Hall 235).

Sudha accepts the job of nursing an ailing man which makes her to stand on her feet to earn money on her own: "Most important of all, for the first time in her life, she has her own money. She's finally starting her new life in America" (VD 221). She starts believing that she owes something to herself. Being confident on her own strength, Sudha opts to lead a significant life of her own and for her daughter.

Initially, Sudha does not cop up with the old man. He does not want anyone to come near him. Sudha senses that the old man is not leading his life happily because he lives in an alien, "he can't stand to be here. In this bed, in this house, in this country, all of which is alien to him" (VD 278). Sudha believes that Mr.Sen would get healthier only if he is taken to his home land. She also wants to return to India, she decides to pick up an unknown area where nobody knows her to avoid the tortures of both past and present. She says, "In a new part of India, where no one knows me. Without the weight of old memories" (VD 321). The old man is extremely happy to leave the foreign land and hope of returning to his hometown.

Sudha goes through an unexpected twist in her life which metamorphoses her courageous woman who tackles her problems in front of her. This transformation of Sudha also gives the old man the source for his survival. In this way she believes she will bring her daughter Dayita properly: "I want to be able to send her to a really good school. And put away enough in savings so I never have to depend on anyone again" (VD 321). Like New Women, Sudha believes in having a career to establish their worth and independence. Thus Sudha gets rid of her traditional conservative role of weak female and emerges as a New Women.



Chitra Banerjee considers on the issue of immigration and acculturation on the harsh grounds of nationality. Sudha is ready to leave America. This country of hopes and ambitions gave her nothing in a way she wanted; instead it makes her strong to stand on her own. It transforms her from interdependence to independence and she was happy about it.

Ashok suddenly visits to America to take Sudha back with him to India and doesn't want her to continue her job. His concern makes Sudha angry and scolds him: "I don't like people making high-handed decisions without consulting me" (VD 335). Through this, Sudha confirmed that she has completely emerged as an independent woman. America moulds Sudha into a strong and independent woman.

On the other hand, Anju transforms and nurtures by taking up the opportunities that America offers to her. After her separation from her husband Sunil, she makes her mind clearly never to go back to him. She regularly goes to college and takes up the class and leads her life independently without depending on others. She wants to get rid of the past that all things done to her. She even cuts her hair and loses her weight which astonishes Sudha when she meets her.

As her name Anju, which implies 'a good woman who offers up her life for others', Anju forgives her husband Sunil and her sister Sudha who deceived her. Anju and Sudha share their life incidents after their separation. Anju accepts her life as it is and there she comes out as a new independent woman after having come out of all the difficulty in her life. The novel ends with Anju's metaphysical assertion of liberty and independent life. Anju says: "You won't believe it, Sudha. I've learned to fly" (VD 368). This is the transformation in Anju, a truly independent woman whose self is formed through compromises, conflicts and combination with the American and Indian values. Thus, two Indian immigrant women finally emerged as independent women through their survival in America illuminates them to understand that life can never be regularly smooth.

The Vine of Desire probes the themes of love, friendship, self-analysis and discovery and it is also the tale of ardor, jealousy and emancipation. Anju and Sudha are bothered by the disaster in their lives, the impact of love-triangles. All of these add to the breakdown of these sisters and steadily their final emancipation to freedom and independence. Both the sisters, Anju and Sudha seek self respect and self discovery in their life. The two sisters travel in their own ways in order to create their identities.

After a period of time they discover each other and find their close ties once again. Thus Chitra Banerjee presenting the strong female characters in her novels would be the role model for the real world women. Her female protagonists give an impact on the real world women to live economically independent without leaning on others. They can learn something from New Woman characters. For instance, Sudha teaches the reader how to live a life independently even the society stands against her. Even Anju teaches how to be bold and give priority to the self-esteem in critical situation of life. Both the heroines teach how to live independently as self-assertive individual women without depending on others.

The novel, *The Vine of Desire*, both sisters, Sudha and Anju find out that they cannot allow themselves of being interdependent on men. So they search for a life of independence.



Both Anju and Sudha move themselves from interdependence to independence by breaking the restrained boundaries of society. So the sisters decide to lead their life independently. This novel, *The Vine of Desire* analyzes the sisters' struggle highly in the revelation of immigrant feminine experience. Through her writings, Chitra Banerjee represents Indian women who break down the stereotypes and this metamorphosis emerge them as New Women. The author recognizes the strength of mentality and potential of the twenty-first century women who wish to get liberty and live an independent life.

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Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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