Chapter -II

Home and Abroad: Woman Centered Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
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CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the prolific and powerful women writers of Indian Diaspora in North America. Among the younger writers who have begun writing after 1980s Divakaruni is the most popular South Asian American writer with considerably large readership. Born and brought up in Calcutta (Birth, 1956) Divakaruni migrated to US after her graduation in her 20th year in 1976 to pursue higher studies where she completed her doctorate in California University, Berkeley and has eventually settled down in US after her marriage with an Indian. She is presently teaching Creative English Writing Course in the University of Houston. Very well grounded in the cultures of both her motherland and the adopted land (America) Divakaruni keeps a fine balance of both the cultures in her writing which accounts for her popularity in the west. A multifaceted writer, Divakaruni is a sensitive poet, novelist and a critic. Her published work consist of two short story collections, four volumes of poetry, six novels and two fictional works for children and also two edited volumes of creative writing till date. A great part of her creative writing has been acknowledged with popularity and has won her several prestigious literary awards for best South Asian literature. Her short story collection *Arranged Marriage* has won Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Prize, American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction. *Leaving Yuba City* has won Pushcart Award
for best poetry collection. Since my focus in the present study is to analyze gender perceptions from feminist perspective I have chosen only her novels and short stories. These are *The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, The Vine of Desire, Arranged Marriage, The Lives of Strangers, The Palace of Illusions, Queen of Dreams* and *One Amazing Thing*. She is equally active in social sphere which concerns the gender. For the assistance and guidance of battered South Asian women she runs a helpline called Maitri, the name symbolically goes with the feminist concern of sisterhood and social activism.

As noted earlier, Divakaruni immigrated to USA in the postcolonial times for her higher education. She represents the Indian women writers of postcolonial era around 80s during which the image of Indian woman was undergoing a transformation. The Govt. policy of compulsory and free education for children up to primary level after independence opened up several opportunities for Indian women of middle and lower middle classes. Even the rural Indian girl child could avail the benefit of the scheme and this brought changes in the society. In the later years more opportunities for education, career and employment opened up new avenues to Indian women folk. The influence of the West through media also began sweeping the ideas of freedom and independence in the later seventies and eighties after the feminist movement in the west. Divakaruni’s experiences as a postcolonial Indian woman in this transition period are represented in her fictional women characters and give credibility to her fiction which is representative of Indian women’s fiction in its diaspora.
As an Indian Immigrant woman writer in English, Divakaruni's status is twofold. Her migration is not by the virtue of marriage like elder generation writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee or Kamala Markandaya. She has migrated independently for her education. The experiences of a young Indian student and later a woman of career make her experiences unique and different than the other women writers of first generation. Similarly the second generation women writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai have different standing than Divakaruni's since Divakaruni's migration is independent of family ties. As the difference in the mode of migration creates differences in the position and experiences of the migrant, these experiences are carried by the writers in their works. Therefore Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works deal with those aspects of women's lives belonging to her generation more dexterously. The lived experiences of Indian immigrant women form the major themes of her short stories novels and poems.

The most important aspect of Divakaruni's literary creativity is her delineation of gender combined with acute sense perceptions. The feminist themes of man-woman relationship in marriage with a cultural conflict, female bonding or sisterhood, migration woes of elder generation women in diaspora, construction of selfhood and identity, and female resistance against the patriarchal oppression and marginalization find expression in Divakaruni's fiction. Speaking about her gender portrayals K.S. Dhanam writes:

Divakaruni's books are directed mainly to women of all races and faiths who share a common female
experience. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their cultures and religions... she also contrasts the lives and perceptions of first generation immigrants with that of their children born and raised in foreign land. And, inevitably, it includes the Indian American experience of grappling with two identities. She has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos. Her writing course with her identification is with a brave new world forging to life. Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today's issues are threaded through with an ongoing search for identity beyond anthropology, beyond sociology and beyond academia (62).

The feminist consciousness deeply underlying in her works is analyzed here in terms of the gender perceptions.

II

Women and their cultural identity in Diaspora is a predominant theme in diasporic women's fiction. The term cultural identity includes nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, social class, caste, sex and gender. In relation to diasporic writers, ethnicity and nationality are crucial in determining their cultural identity at the diasporic location. In most of the cases ethnicity is equated with national
identity. As a matter of fact women writers of diaspora negotiate their ethnic identity combined with the gendered subjectivity to delineate their diasporic identity in order to find space in diasporic location. Hence home and nation reconfigure in their writing and they write about the transformed identities of female subjects. Transformation here is either to accept and assimilate or merge with the mainstream culture to shape their identities, which may result either in the loss of ethnic identity, or assimilation of the adopted culture in fusion with ethnic culture without foregoing the latter. In the process of assimilation for some writers like Bharati Mukherjee the transformation is total, as Mukherjee wishes to identify herself with the American mainstream and has embraced cosmopolitanism. As already noted her character Jasmine is the best example of such assimilation where her ethnic identity of being an Indian woman in America undergoes a complete transformation to make her an American.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s stand on diasporic cultural identity is different than that of Bharati Mukherjee. Like Meena Alexander and Bapsi Sidhwa Chitra negotiates her ethnic identity in order to relocate herself in diasporic situation. Assimilation for her is not at the cost of surrendering the ethnic identity but it is a combination of east and west. She fuses the traditional values of the east with elite westernization. Gender being the prime concern in her writing, she writes with the woman at the centre stage in diaspora space. In their efforts of relocation and assimilation her fictional characters often challenge the traditional values of their home land and try to adopt the new values of migrated land. In this intersection of east and west, old and new, these women characters find a way for constructing
selfhood, individual freedom and liberty. Commenting on her portrayals Debjani Banerjee writes:

In the diaspora, the nation of origin incarnates itself as traditional identity and implicates the individual in an ostensibly natural relationship with “Indianness”; a fossilized national identity becomes a substitute for a lived relationship with the culture. While the patriarchal structures try to validate an essential national identity, the female protagonists in the works of Alexander and Divakaruni attempt to fracture these identifications that are plotted along the axes of nation, family and the gendered subject (11).

Divakaruni’s women characters essentially belong to West Bengal, especially Calcutta (Kolkatta). There are women of all classes from upper to lower working class and majority belongs to Hindu religion. Most of the diasporic women characters are educated women with career and Divakaruni’s personal experience of migrating for higher education and career is reflected in them. Equally the social status of women in 80s and 90s in India is also reflected in her women characters. For e.g. women’s awareness about education and career are seen in the aspirations of Anju’s character in The Sister of My Heart. The ideals of feminism which were making their impact on the lives of Indian women are reflected in Anju’s reading of Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin etc and also in her wish to look after her family cook shop and assist her mother, her dreams to travel
widely, and finally in the rebellious questioning of patriarchal values of marriage, 
male dominance etc. Therefore Divakaruni’s depiction of cultural identity is 
mainly in terms of east-west dichotomy which is represented in three important 
aspects. In the first instance it is Indian woman’s ethnic identity against the 
dominant main stream culture of America and secondly Indian woman’s 
confrontation within the diaspora in her various gender roles giving rise to 
patriarchal tensions. Thirdly a young woman of second generation, who is born 
and brought up in the foreign location to the immigrant parents, with ethnic and 
cultural roots and upbringing of the homeland of her parents. This second 
generation woman is the one who face the identity crisis more acutely since the 
clash with ethnic identity and that of the host land creates the situation for the 
development of hybrid and multiple identities. The first and the third aspects are 
discussed here in this section and the second case is discussed under the next 
section.

It is a common understanding that for the migrated men and women 
confrontation of national subject position as an alien in foreign land creates 
clashes. Racial and national political identity as a citizen or subject of a particular 
country always brings questions of alienation. This situation is graver in the 
context of globalization, where fundamental Islamic and terrorist threats are 
rocking the nations in terms of security and safety, creating the fear of wiping out 
humanity with modern weapons. Under such circumstances race, ethnicity and 
nationality of a person pose a threat for the peaceful co-existence of a foreign 
subject and put him or her in a precarious position. Divakaruni addresses this
aspect of cultural identity of Indian diaspora in America in a number of her fictional works. Here the national or ethnic identity of a person is pitted against the American mainstream culture and the transformation of identity takes place through assimilation with the new culture by negotiating the ethnic identity. This is seen as a gradual development in Divakaruni’s fiction from her first book *Arranged Marriage* till the novel *Queen of Dreams*, because Divakaruni believes in assimilation and merger of east and west.

Jayanti, the protagonist of the story “Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs” (*Arranged Marriage*) comes to learn shockingly the racist attitude of America towards coloured people. She arrives at America with ‘star-splonged’ eyes and colourful dreams about America for her higher education. She has to stay with her aunt Pratima till the university arranges for her accommodation. She notices with surprise that aunt Pratima’s husband Bikram is bitter towards America. The reason is revealed to her after her shocking experience of racism during the course of a walk on the pavement with her aunt. The young urchins on the street target them and pelt pebbles and grime upon them. Shocked Jayanthi understands that uncle Bikram’s hateful attitude towards America is a result of a bitter racist experience in which his garage was burnt and he was reduced to poverty and helplessness. But as a young generation immigrant Jayanti accepts the situation more easily than uncle Bikram and prepares herself to live under America’s silver roofs and tread the golden pavements. America is a promised land of freedom and opportunity for Jayanti, a neo-colonial woman as against the bitter but inevitable existence for the old couple—her aunt and uncle who represent the earlier generation of postcolonial
diaspora. Though Jayanti paves way for the new generation woman and accepts the American values of freecom and convenience in marriage, she still preserves the Indian values of modesty and chastity. This is exhibited in her dreaming. Divakaruni juxtaposes the differences between the two generations of Indian women in diaspora by creating the situation where Jayanti dreams of her professor slipping ring in her finger and goes near her to kiss her but her dream ends abruptly without the kiss and she says, “but here my imagination, conditioned by a lifetime of maternal censorship shuts itself down” (AM 45). While she is free to dream to some extent, she is aware at the same time that her cultural conditioning will keep her an Indian woman at heart. Divakaruni portrays Jayanti as preserver of her ethnic identity with a combination of American values with the values of her native land conveniently to forge a new existence.

The protagonist Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices*, a magical realist novel, is the best example of Divakaruni’s portrayal of cultural identity of women in diaspora. Tilo an Indian girl undergoes a transformation of identity several times till she becomes the mistress of spices and this last role is finally transformed to give her a true human identity in diaspora. Born as Nayantara, a dark village girl, by her talent in foretelling the future she becomes Bhagyavati the Pirate queen. She enters a magic spice island with the help of snakes who abduct her from the pirates. She joins as an apprentice under the magic teacher the First Mother and renamed as Tilo, short for Tilottama, after she is trained as mistress of spices. As the convention goes on the spice island she is transformed as an old woman and her young body is disguised by magic which is only discovered by Raven who is
also a curendra like herself having a magical vision. On undergoing the Shampati fire the magical body inherited by her creates her identity differently. It is a transformation from a ‘sexual being’ to an ‘asexual being’ which is also devoid of class, caste and gender. However it is still confined to nationality and race since the first mother warns her to treat only Indians i.e., her country people with her magic in the words, “Remember, why you are going... To help your own kind, and them only, the others, they must go elsewhere for their need” (MOS 68).

But when she is drawn to Raven beyond the control and cautions of her training, she wishes to identify herself like an ordinary woman so that she can be his lover and mate with an awakened sense of her femininity. She identifies her own sense of loss, longing and loneliness in his psyche, which is a natural feeling of an immigrant in an alien land. So she decides to become a selfish, mortal and sexual human-self for the sake of his love, by shedding the magical, immortal asexual self. It is a gender transformation from an ‘asexual being’ into a ‘sexual self’. She transforms herself into a beautiful young woman with the help of her spice magic. Her union with Raven brings change in her status. She sets out with Raven in his quest of the earthly paradise and soon realizes that it is a myth existing in his mind and not in reality. She persuades him to return to the ruined city of California which is rocked by earthquakes to begin a new life from the ruins.

Tilo once again gives herself a new name and new identity which is going to remain permanently after all the earlier ventures. Her new name ‘Maya’ is symbolic because it represents both ancient and modern civilizations. It spans both
the continents India and America. In the Indian context, “it can mean many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day” and Tilo needs it because she thinks that “I now have only myself to hold me up” (317). The new name also represents the indigenous ancient civilization of America-Mayan civilization – which Raven represents. Thus the name gives a new identity to Tilo. In the merging of the old and new selves of Tilo Divakaruni shows the fluid postcolonial diasporic identity of an immigrant who undergoes a change with past and present giving way to the new self by the merger of the two. This is the process that creates the third space of which Bhabha discusses in *The Location of Culture* in the following terms:

> It is in the emergence of the interstices the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated (2).

According to Bhabha this merger is a part of historical change and therefore leads to “provide the terrain for elaborating the strategies of selfhood-singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity” (2). Thus like an immigrant Tilo undergoes a loss and gain and:

> The reduction in Tilo’s sense of destiny is the corollary of the inevitable sense of loss that accompanies the art of letting go and of stepping into life, of discovering

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what it is to be “a mortal human being, unpowered by magic”, but empowered by selfhood (Domergue 76).

Tilo combines her Indian ethnic identity with that of the diasporic space by accepting Raven, who is also an indigenous person to American culture, as her husband and lover. Both these non-Americans chose to live in America and want to share each other’s lives. In spite of retaining their ethnic identity they adopt American culture also to some extent, for they wish to live their lives here. However Tilo’s identity does not remain ambivalent and hybrid anymore since this last transformation from magical being to a real commonplace woman gives her a definite sense of self and definable identity who can still control and navigate her life’s steering. It is an identity different from home since it reflects an empowered, independent and self-willed woman. Thus Tilo becomes an example of Divakuruni’s idea of cultural identity of Indian women in diaspora who undergo a positive transformation.

The Issue of cultural identity takes a new dimension in the novel Queen of Dreams. In the wake of Islamic terrorist attacks of 9/11 on American twin towers, the south Asian community is placed under the threat of insecurity as they are subjected to suspicion and humiliation. The novel records the impact of this situation on the second generation immigrants and suggests possible solutions for their struggles in locating their identity in the confused world.

Protagonist Rakhi’s mother an Indian immigrant woman in America is a dream teller by vocation, so she is the queen of dreams in the novel. Born in a
slum, raised to the level of a dream teller, hailing to America as a loving wife, a mother later, and finally an Indian dream teller, she creates her own selfhood and distinct cultural identity in Diaspora. All classes of people are tied to her by an unknown thread of relationship. Rakhi is surprised to see hundreds of mourners gathered during her cremation and they mourn as if they have lost their own mother. This accounts for her identity as a savior of people irrespective of her class, caste, race, religion, nationality and gender. It also accounts for her popularity though she conducts her vocation secretly and the need for her vocation, which is serving the grieving humanity with compassion, assurance and consolation- all human needs for the sense of security and happiness. This gift of her mother is however not something inherited by Rakhi but it surprisingly passes on to her daughter Jonaki.

Rakhi the American born young Indian woman grows up with American acculturation. Though she has a fascination towards the culture of her parents, she is attached to the land of her birth like any second generation immigrant and thus has imbibed American values of life and also its lifestyle. Though American-Indian in several respects her Indian cultural expectation from her love marriage with Sonny, a second generationer like herself, that a husband should protect the chastity of his wife is not fulfilled. The liberal American mentality of her DJ husband makes Rakhi seek divorce. She runs an Indian tea shop with her friend Bell for her livelihood. When her shop faces the business competition from Java, an American chain restaurant company, Rakhi’s mother advises them to adopt some authentic Indian elements in their ‘Chai House’. This idea of what is
authentic Indian element is learnt by Bell and Rakhi after the death of the mother especially when Rakhi’s father helps them out as chef and cooks Indian Bengali recipes. The Indian customers in the neighborhood are attracted to it and soon they turn it into a musical house with Indian light music and create an ethnic atmosphere which helps Rakhi’s business to flourish.

However the complexity in retaining their cultural identity by south Asian diaspora in America is realized by Rakhi and others when 9/11 incident of plane hijacking and bombing of twin towers in New York takes place. Suspicion on non Americans especially south Asian and Muslim community vitiates the atmosphere of America. Rakhi’s business place is attacked by racist mobs and the fear of life makes Rakhi think about her identity once again. The dilemma of many like her is voiced by Rakhi thus:

“you aint no American”, one of the men had said. He is a racist idiot, I tell myself. Is that so? My whisper voice gibes. And how many others in this country would have agreed with him today? But if I wasn’t American, then what was I? (QOD 271).

For Rakhi, Bell or Sonny, America is a motherland, or the land of their birth. They have no other imaginary motherland like their parents. Their identity with its markers like place of birth, nation, culture and belonging is all American though their ethnicity is only in the background of their ancestry and family. But 9/11 incident rocks down this belief of their belonging to America and bring to
surface the alien status of their origin. She realizes that and people like Rakhi are pushed to uncertainty, of becoming aliens in their own place of birth. Thus ethnic identity comes in clash with acculturation and assimilation of diasporic people. The social reality of people of an immigrant community facing the distrust, disbelief, insecurity and trauma in the land of adoption by the political events are depicted in the novel. The novel juxtaposes the ethnic identity with hybrid, diasporic identity of immigrant people and its gendered experience.

However Divakaruni suggests the solution in assimilation and accommodation rather than the separatism. Rakhi’s optimism and acceptance of America as her country no matter what happens is the conclusion that Divakaruni gives in the novel. Rakhi’s participation in the club and mixing up with its mob which has created a great terror once in her mind and overcoming the fear is all symbolic of this decision. She understands the truth that, to learn to be fearless one has to face the fear itself. This face to face with fear and terror removes her inhibitions totally and infuses new spirit of self, identity, recognition and understanding in Rakhi. She understands her ex-husband now; she learns to be a fearless being and can be truly an American with a sense of individuality, liberty and with a sense of respect to others. Thus the transformation of Rakhi is from alienated state to assimilation and acceptance. Rakhi here represents the subjective experience of women in diaspora and the predicament of second generations who are perplexed between the past of their parents and the demanding present of their own selves. Besides their ethnicity and cultural identity as Indians is adding to both confusion and chaos as and when the incidents like 9/11 take place.
The child Jona or Jonaki is representing the hybrid identity in the novel. Inheriting her grandmother’s power of dreams and living in the American style with the Americanized parents she tries to combine both the elements in her character. She tries to uphold the family values of Indian culture with regard to her parents and wants the divorced parents to become united again. Her inclination is more towards her ethnic identity which she tries to cling because she has come under the influence of her grandmother more than her own mother. Thus Divakaruni creates three distinct generations of women in diaspora in *Queen of Dreams*. Rakhi’s mother as a first generation immigrant distinctly preserve her ethnic identity as an interpreter of dreams in her diasporic home, inspite of bringing up her daughter Rakhi as an American. Even in her advice to Rakhi she suggests that preservation of one’s own culture would define and distinguish one’s ethnic identity whereas Rakhi turns towards American culture, to define her identity. Her focus is towards assimilation with the host culture rather than home culture. The third generation girl Jona is for the merger of the two, that is home and host culture. Following the footsteps of her grandmother she wishes to use the talent for dreaming, and also continue the family values like Indians though she is born as American citizen with much freedom than that of her parents. She wishes to recognize herself as an Indian American. Thus the novel shows Divakaruni’s gradual inclination towards assimilation and acceptance of the diasporic community in to the mainstream culture of the adopted land by preserving its ethic identity in a harmless and tolerant manner.
III

In India nationality plays an important role in the construction of women's identity apart from sex and gender. Indian traditional values strictly place women in the socially inferior position to men or as subordinate to men. Women are confined to their gender roles as mothers, wives, daughter and daughter-in-laws rather than as individual subjects like men. Their social roles take precedence over their individual subject position. As nationally constructed subjects women act as the repositors of the cultural values through their social gender roles like wife, mother, daughter and daughter-in-law.

In this construction of women, individual values and liberty come in clash with community values and women have to make compromise by sacrificing their individual values in lieu of community welfare. Again in this construction of identity of women, the female body becomes the terrain on which mapping and remapping of the identity is configured because female body is seen as instrumental in giving birth to children, to preserve the sanctity and purity of race, class and caste. Therefore in preservation of cultural identity of both men and women, body becomes an important consideration. This is more so in diaspora as migration to a foreign location demands a preservation of culture not only for the construction of identity but also for the continuation of it in the subsequent generation. This situation creates more responsibility and overburden women in foreign land. Women come in clash with the old values of their native land which are restrictive and new values of the acquired land which are more liberal. Migration opens up new avenues to develop their subjectivity different from their
traditional upbringing. Therefore in questioning the national cultural identity women come in clash with patriarchy since the national construction of women's identity is essentially patriarchal in nature. Indian women's confrontation with patriarchal values in diaspora often lead to the resistance to patriarchy and result in construction of selfhood which form the major theme in Divakaruni's fiction as in diasporic women literature. This aspect therefore is dealt in detail in this section. These values are related to marriage, parenthood, cultural upbringing, cultural shock and such similar things. From the clash women recognize their identification in the diasporic community.

In her celebrated first short story collection *Arranged Marriage* Divakaruni deals with upper and middle class, high caste Hindu urban Indian women's nationally constructed identity in clash with the new identity in diaspora. This clash with hegemonic patriarchal notions of gender leads her female characters towards liberation as well as construction of selfhood. However it is important to note that these portrayals belong to the early phase of diaspora from 1960s to 1980s when social changes in India for women were initiated. Hence the first generation immigrants that she portrays in *Arranged Marriage* found the space in diaspora more conducive for liberation and social change.

One of the distinguishing markers of national ethnic identity is clothes. The story 'Clothes' symbolically represents the hegemonic pressure on women regarding this burden of preserving their culture and ethnicity in a foreign land. Saree, the most common attire for women in many parts of Indian continent, raises the issue of women's freedom and individual choice in America. Sumita, the
protagonist of “Clothes” follows Somesh her husband to America as a new bride. In America Somesh gifts her some western clothes. But Sumita cannot wear them in public or even out of the privacy of her bedroom since her old in-laws are staying with them. It is her duty to preserve the culture of her home country as a daughter in law. Out of respect for them she wears her western clothes and enjoys them secretly between the four walls of her bedroom. But when her husband dies she comes in confrontation with the Indian cultural practices of widowhood which was harsh on women, especially the upper caste women. As against the wishes of her in-laws Sumita decides to stay in America and continue her education so that she can fulfill the wish of her husband as well as find her living in America, a decision she takes independently first time in her life. The change in her clothes in the mirror image symbolize the change in the construction of identity in a foreign location with fresh affiliation to culture since it marks her freedom of choice. An innocent and naïve woman prepares herself boldly to face the cruelty of life and its unexpected twists and turns with confidence and boldness by constructing her selfhood by overthrowing patriarchal oppressive life of dependency since she is not an educated woman, a venture not easily possible for many in her native land. Her resolution is symbolically highlighted and juxtaposed with the western outfit that she chooses to wear.

I straighten my shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath. Air fills me, the same air that travelled through Somesh’s lungs a little while ago. The thought is like an unexpected, intimate gift. I tilt my chin, readying
myself for the arguments of the coming weeks, the remonstrations. In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the colour of almonds (AM 33).

An expectation regarding clothes as cultural marker of identity is also seen in the husband’s wish in the story ‘Disappearance’ whenever the protagonist of the story expresses a desire to wear the western clothes the husband resists her wish by saying that, “you look so much prettier in your Indian clothes. So much feminine” (AM 172). Similarly Tilo in The Mistress of Spices wears the western outfit to meet Geeta and also being presented with a gown by Raven her lover. She becomes the butt of ridicule by young girls on the beach when they see an old Indian woman wearing a pretty gown. However these outfits regarded as markers of ethnic identity transform Tilo’s identity later. Thus for Divakaruni western clothes, symbolize elite westernization and her women characters show the transformation of their cultural identity by adopting these changes, in their lives.

The ideas regarding Indian gender role of wifehood and values in marriage undergo a change in Divakaruni’s fiction which captures the changing aspirations of women. Women question patriarchal values in marriage and rebel against certain injustices meted out to women in the name of culture and thus pave way for transformation and re-fixation of identity and construction of self. For an Indian woman marriage is a sacred bond between husband and wife. Unlike western marriages it is considered as an irrevocable cultural relationship and women have to carry the burden of keeping it alive irrespective of any hurdles in the
relationship. Women are also given the role models from the Indian epics. Men enjoy the double standard morality and disloyalty on their part is pardoned by the society. These assumptions of Indian marriage, role of wifehood, pre and extra marital relations are all challenged by Divakaruni’s women both in diaspora and home. They raise their voice against domestic violence too and thus boldly opt for new life by way of construction of selfhood through education, career and bold decisions like walking out of unwanted marriage bonds.

Abha in the story ‘Affair’ is brought up in a traditional Indian family with puritanical views about marriage. When she hears about the extra marital affair of her close friend Meena she gets shocked. Abha also misunderstands that this affair is with her husband, so it is more repulsive to her. But when she learns the truth from Meena that her affair is not with Abha’s husband but more surprisingly with middle aged American, Abha learns the real expectations of a female heart out of a marriage bond. This makes her to think about the rationality of Indian marriage because the words of Meena, “he understands me, all of me, even the bad parts. With him I can be myself, like I never could before this” (AM 269), act as an eye opener. This makes Abha to reconsider her own views about marriage, sex and morality. She realizes that her own life is also dry and dull like Meena’s with Shrikant. Her relationship with Ashok is not based on any love and understanding and so she comes to the conclusion that, “the old rules aren’t always right. Not here, not even in India” (AM270). The new found way for freedom with her culinary skills Abha decides to get out of her meaningless marriage without the
fear of the society. America gives her the freedom and self respect, a sense of right and wrong to create a subjectivity of her own.

Marriage becomes a spent dream to Asha in “Meeting Mrinal” since her husband walks out of the wedlock leaving a grown up son and his wife for his own new life of liberty. While she is surviving this shock, her childhood friend Mrinal visits her. Asha keeps her secret & continues to lie to Mrinal as Mrinal always spoke about career, education and freedom and remain a spinster. Their meeting proves each other that the grass is greener on the other side. After the meeting, repenting her secretive behaviour and in frustration suffered by the disloyalty of her husband, Asha attempts suicide but is saved by the timely interference of her son. But the meeting with Mrinal saves Asha from her predicament of wifehood and gives her a new path to start over. Asha and Mrinal set out on a new identity and self respect to live a life of individuality without expectations of marriage bond. Commenting on women’s newfound identity beyond marriage relationship Debjani Banerjee writes:

Chitra Divakaruni’s stories provide a spectrum of feminist resistances in the diaspora; they are part of a complex effort at creating a space for a female subject where she can articulate her desires. This space is necessarily located outside the competing paradigms of traditional identity and modern identity. Abha and Asha, the protagonists of “Affair” and “Meeting Mrinal” respectively, rebel against functioning as the
repository of national / cultural identity. Divakaruni’s protagonists often interrogate their own westernization, but they do not want to be pushed back in to playing crusaders for their community (16).

Similarly violence in marriage due to male dominance and expected female subservience is resisted by women in diaspora. The unnamed heroine in the story “Disappearance” challenges indirectly the hegemonic male dominance in marriage. She disappears from her house leaving a child and the husband gets shocked at her behavior. When he realizes this, his male ego is hurt because it is a rare fact in Indian situation that a woman would dare to desert her husband and children where as men are privileged to do so. Under any circumstances such a move by a woman calls for the degradation of her character in the society which is shunned by most women. The husband in the story all along prides himself being a good husband from traditional Indian standards because “he let her have her way, indulged her even” (AM 171-172), and his indulgence was limited to the extent of accepting the choice of colour of the tiles selected for the kitchen or to go to the park she suggested. But her exercise of freedom was curbed by him if it was against his wishes like when she wished to go back to school, or wanted to get a job or buy western clothes. Besides her reluctance to satisfy his sexual desires and the refusal in displaying her emotions were interpreted by him as her ‘shyness’, a feminine quality of a well bred Indian girl. So without heeding her wishes he forces himself upon her and she gets subjected to rape in marriage. This finally
leads her to walk out of this relationship. Her rebellion towards unwanted marriage finally secures her selfhood and freedom to be a free individual.

Mrs Ahuja and Hamida in *The Mistress of Spices* face the similar situation of domestic violence, and resist patriarchy to construct their selfhood. Mrs Ahuja or Lalita marries a middle aged Indian settled in America. Her family is cheated by the marriage agent who fixes this marriage. When Lalita learns the truth she is heartbroken but cannot escape out of this marriage since she has younger sisters of marriageable age. When she denies her wifely duties to her husband he opts for rape in marriage, which he continues in America. Later he turns suspicious about each act of her and bullies her. Lalita has no allies in America to share her misery. Tilo the mistress of spices gives her a spice remedy to open her mouth and to act courageously. Finally she resolves to leave her husband and begin a new life. Her shedding of the marriage labels “Mrs Ahuja” is symbolic of her resistance and gains her the freedom from the shackles of unwanted marriage. The case of Hamida’s victimization in the patriarchal system is different in another sense. She represents the marginalized Muslim women in India. Her husband divorces her because she does not give birth to a baby boy. The prominence of male child in patriarchal set up is once again reiterated here and there by woman’s victimization due to the social conditioning. Hamida follows her brother to America and begins her life by educating herself and thereby resists the tradition. Daksha a nurse, is tired to balance the role of a good wife and daughter-in-law on the one hand and managing the job on the other. It is her fate to face,
Every night coming home from the hospital to cook, rolling out chapatis hot hot with ghee because her mother in law says old food from the fridge is good only for servants or dogs. Boiling, frying, seasoning, ladling, serving. Wiping up while everyone sits saying, ‘Good’, saying, ‘yes more’ even her husband, because after all is not the kitchen the woman’s place? (80).

Daksh’s case defines the predicament of a career woman who had to bear the brunt of double responsibility; career opportunities and financial freedom on the one hand and home front and the onus to fulfill the expectations of traditional gender roles of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law on the other. However Tilo’s black pepper relieves her predicament “to say no, that word so hard for Indian women” (81) and emboldens her. The resistance of women like Sumita, Lalita and Daksha become significant in diasporic space when we take note of the fact that diasporic time and space are stagnant for an immigrant who has moved out of his/her country at a specific point of time and carry with him/her the image of life in all respects belonging to that period. The women here naturally are the first generation women with the old values prevailed in their native land during their migration and stick to it in the first place and thereby remain oppressed. When they desire a way out of their problems Tilo helps them with her magic which is symbolic of the act of conscious-raising in feminist terms.

Freedom to choose their life partner and engage in premarital relationship brings cultural shock in patriarchal system. Geeta in *The Mistress of Spices*
chooses to marry a ‘Chicane boy’ which brings a cultural shock to her parents. However she walks out of the house to exercise her freedom and Tilo’s interference in the matter solves her case. Her parents and grandfather from India finally accept her decision. The mother in the story, “The Word Love” acts as an agent of patriarchy. When she learns that her daughter in America has engaged in premarital live-in relationship with Rex, an American young man, she cuts off her relationship with her daughter and the girl is reduced to mental shock and reaches the verge of suicide. However her resolve to stay away from her strained relationship with Rex, who acts selfishly and uses male domination over her, brings her back to her selfhood and she becomes a free individual to preserve her own interests.

Cultural upbringing, Indian family and community values come in clash very often with American values of individual freedom and private life in diaspora. This is more so in the case of second generation women who have to undergo cultural shock due to the confrontation of east and west. This is seen in the portrayals of Preeti in the story “Doors” (Arranged Marriage) and Ruchira in the “Unknown Errors of Our Lives” (Lives of Strangers).

Preeti is a young woman of Indian origin who is brought up with American habits and values of life for whom individual privacy and liberty are most important concerns. A closed door in her house after her marriage to Deepak is a symbol of privacy whereas for Deepak, who is born and brought up in India with joint family and community values, closed doors symbolize secrecy, separation and indifference. Preeti’s mother warns her daughter sufficiently about this matter,
chooses to marry a ‘Chicane boy’ which brings a cultural shock to her parents. However she walks out of the house to exercise her freedom and Tilo’s interference in the matter solves her case. Her parents and grandfather from India finally accept her decision. The mother in the story, “The Word Love” acts as an agent of patriarchy. When she learns that her daughter in America has engaged in premarital live-in relationship with Rex, an American young man, she cuts off her relationship with her daughter and the girl is reduced to mental shock and reaches the verge of suicide. However her resolve to stay away from her strained relationship with Rex, who acts selfishly and uses male domination over her, brings her back to her selfhood and she becomes a free individual to preserve her own interests.

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"It's never too late to stop yourself from ruining your life", her mother said "What do you really know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?" (AM 184).

Though she recommends like many diasporic Indian parents that her daughter should marry 'a nice Indian boy', but the one who is born and brought up in America to Indian parents because according to the mother these men are not born "with a set of prehistoric values" (AM 184). This suggests the Indian male mentality in marriage where the husband expects patience, obedience and subservience on the part of his wife whereas the liberal attitude adopted by Indian Americans of second generation diaspora due to the changed cultural atmosphere compared to their elders. So also Deepak’s friends warn him about American born desi Indian girls "You know how these American Women are, always bossing you, always thinking about themselves" (AM 185). But blinded by love Preeti and Deepak enter the wedlock and initially with a true adjustment and understanding astonish all those who advised them adversely. But the problem begins only after Deepak’s cousin and friend Raj enters their lives and house for he is in America to study in a university. Unlike other people Deepak offers him to be with them till he completes his education and convinces the shocked Preeti with his ideas of Indian values. But Raj’s Indian values, habits and ideas intrude into Preeti’s privacy and lead her to be a mental wreck till she decides to leave her husband permanently and confirm the prediction of her well wishers that a cultural difference in marriage does not ensure its continuity. In the company of Raj Deepak is unable to
see the suffering of Preeti and even his mistakes of hurting her sentiments because privacy and individual freedom are important features of American life which is not understood by Deepak. This lack of understanding of the cultural upbringing of Preeti leads to the break in marriage. The closed doors of Preeti’s room symbolize the individual freedom and privacy which violated by Deepak and Raj. Thus the story brings out the diasporic dilemma of adjustment and understanding of the migrant culture on the part of Deepak and gendered reality for diasporic women on the part of Preeti who undergo the cultural shock.

As opposed to Preeti for Ruchira her grandmother’s stories, shlokas or hymns act as a remedy to her dilemma in accepting Biren as her husband. Woman’s identification in Indian culture as ‘Kshamaya Dharitri’ which means “forgiver like mother earth” mythifies or deifies her personality. This concept acts as a balm to identify one with one’s culture and gives solace to the dilemma of a diasporic mind. Ruchira’s stance of forgiving Biren his pre-marriage exploits and accepting him as her husband in view of his openness and confession as against her own secretive behavior upholds the values in ethnic culture. Divakaruni seems to say here that all things belonging to east are not bad and all western is not glorified. Though born in America her cultural roots give identification as well as comfort to Ruchira and thereby show Divakaruni’s fusion of east and west in perceiving gender.

Rebellion against patriarchal gender discrimination and constructing selfhood is again predominantly portrayed in the female protagonists of the short stories “Names of the Stars in Bengali” and “The Love of Good Man”, and Anju
and Sudha the Protagonists of the novels _Sister of My Heart_ and _The Vine of Desire_. The unnamed protagonist of the story "The Names of Stars in Bengali" is born in an Indian village where discrimination between the girl and the boy is imminent. When her mother restricts her freedom to go to the public pond for swimming the girl resents it. To get away from such gender discrimination she uses education as a tool and gets out of her country. Securing her university education in America she settles down there finally achieving her freedom and selfhood after successfully challenging the patriarchal gender roles assigned to women and there by the control of their existence in the society.

Monisha the protagonist of "The Love of a Goodman" rises against the society to protect her mother from the insults of her clan and neighbours when her father deserts them to go to America. When her mother dies of cancer she assumes the role of a son and cremates her mother without the help of her relatives, the act which decries the patriarchal prominence of the male heir, who alone is authorized to perform the cremation and funeral rites of the parents. In the absence of male issues, the nearest male relatives perform it whereas a biological daughter is denied the rights of the same. This naturally speaks about the importance of son in the family. This act of Monisha defying the rules of patriarchy shows the change in the pattern of women's thinking in the postcolonial India and also registers their resistances against the gender bias. As a stance of her rebellious attitude towards this gender discrimination Monisha also uses education as a tool and eventually ends up in America to find a new life of freedom and dignity.
A greater challenge to patriarchy and gender discrimination is seen in the portrayals of Anju and Sudha in the novel *The Vine of Desire* which is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. Though the seeds of rebellion are sown in the first novel the final touch is given in *The Vine of Desire* which completes the process of construction of selfhood of its protagonists. Sudha and Anju are the two cousins born on the same day and brought up with the patriarchal values of the Chatterjee Mansion, a well known traditional family of Calcutta. Both the girls are restricted under the patriarchal values of Indian households and they adhere to it till their marriage. However these inseparable cousins are separated by marriage to different young men and Anju goes to America with her traditional values of marriage. Sudha has a traditional patriarchal home with a mother-in-law who acts like an agent of patriarchy. When she learns that Sudha carries a female baby she decides to abort the child. The novel *Sister of My Heart* records docile and obedient Sudha’s rebellion against this atrocity on gender and broken marriage. In the mean while to help her cousin, Anju loses her own child and against her husband’s wish helps her cousin to arrive at America and thus the sequence continues in *The Vine of Desire* to give final shape to the construction of selfhood of both the women characters.

Sudha arrives in America much with a plan of her own. Though the surfacial reason is to help Anju to recover from her illness Sudha has ulterior motive to find a new life of independence away from the dependency of men. She is aware that Indian societal circumstances would not offer her an opportunity of independent life. Besides her former lover Ashok’s egoist proposal to accept her
and not her child born of another man makes Sudha to realize the male views about woman's chastity and purity. He is not free from the patriarchal male ego and when he changes his proposal and wants to accept her with her child Sudha rejects it since she understands that such transformation is not honest. To escape such bindings and compromises Sudha decides to go to America as much for herself as for the sake of Anju. When Anju expresses her gratitude, for she considers it a sacrifice, Sudha denies her views and clearly tells her that, "I've given up sacrificing myself for others. It leaves you with the worst hangover", and clarifies her reason for abandoning Ashok's proposal, "I turned him down because I didn't want him to have to take care of me,...I wanted to be independent, and it seemed like America was the best place for that" (VOD 92-93). So Sudha accepts the suggestion of Anju to be self sufficient who puts it in American style as, "owe it to herself". She begins to learn American accents by watching people on T.V. When she learns that her presence in Anju's home is creating a rift in the relation of Anju and Sunil and also in view of Sunil's attraction towards her, she decides to leave the house and starts searching for a job secretly with the help of a newly made friend, who is an Indian woman living on a visiting visa and have learnt frivolous ways of living according to Indian societal standards.

Sudha meets Lalit in a party and befriends him. This enrages Sunil who makes sexual advances to Sudha and after this incident she quits the house with her baby as a nurse to a paralyzed old man at Berkley. The job is difficult in the beginning for her but with her patience she wins over the confidence of the old man. Finally this provides the opportunity for Sudha to return with the old man to
India as his caretaker. Sudha walks to the life of self liberation, independence and selfhood as her new job assures her the economic independence and a source of livelihood. This gives her the necessary courage to live a life of her own and liberation from the suffocating human relationships which Sudha is fed up with. Her freedom to be self willed, earning her own income to support herself and rearing her daughter without somebody’s intervention and pressure is accomplished. When she meets Anju before going to India, she makes her stance clear and apologizes to Anju for ruining her. But Anju forgives this act of Sudha because ultimately this is what she wished for her cousin, to be happy in life, and in an unexpected way Anju’s wish for her cousin is fulfilled.

As regards Anju it is a new birth for her in America. Anju’s first wish to study and continue her education is fulfilled by Sunil since it is his promise to Gourima. Anju joins a college but it is discontinued in the middle due to her pregnancy and later her miscarriage. But Sudha’s arrival helps her to resume her dream. Anju who is considered to be bold, outspoken and fearless turns out to be more sensitive and timid compared to Sudha. Anju becomes responsible for the ruin of her own marriage, which she confesses in her letter to her mother:

And Sudha ... All I sense about her is, she is not happy living with us and nor am I. I think I acted too impulsively in asking her to come … I love her, I do, but sometimes I look at her face, which is so much more beautiful than mine, so much more desirable – mother I’m so afraid, I don’t know what to … (VOD 73).
Sudha's arrival however does not bring happiness to Anju who soon realizes with regret that her husband Sunil has not forgotten Sudha. This makes her sulk and she finds the outlet for her sorrow in writing letters to her dead father. The relation of Sunil and Anju worsens as they engage in blaming each other for the mistake of inviting Sudha to America and it is their separation that leads to Anju's attempt of committing suicide, since she genuinely loves Sunil. However she is saved by her writing group friends. This incident changes the course of Anju's life. Rejecting the alimony of Sunil, Anju decides to stay alone. To her mother's urge to return to India she replies that she will continue to live in America. Now her path is towards her becoming independent by earning her own living and completing her education. Her dream of selfhood is ultimately accomplished in the end of the novel. When Sudha comes to meet Anju for one last time before going back to India, Sudha learns that Anju is now a different person who has put her past behind. The writer symbolically shows this change by the incident where Anju tells Sudha that she has learnt to fly the hang glider. When Anju starts learning it she feels scared thinking that she will fall and die. But with the encouragement of the trainer she finally overcomes her fear.

After she learns to fly Anju throws the photograph of her still-born baby, which was the cause of her grief and sorrow, torn in to bits into the valley and also compromises with her situation of desertion from her husband. She also accepts the fact that everybody has a life of one's own to lead. She forgives Sudha and Sunil who in a way have ruined and damaged her life. The moment of forgiveness purges out her sorrow and brings her redemption. She becomes free
from the burdensome and painful relationships, unhappy memories of the past and also the burden of assuming responsibilities for someone, especially Sudha, her sister of heart. Like a free bird she attains her individual self and thus the novel moves towards the construction of selfhood for both the women protagonists. Anju and Sudha’s journey from ill fated married life to independent existence of self make the novel’s theme perfectly a feminist novel.

Apart from her diasporic creations Divakaruni also deals with the theme of resistance and selfhood in her Indian novels. Her _The Palace of Illusions_ is based on the great Indian epic Mahabharata. It is a feminist epic rewritten with a female perspective. The efforts of making use of the epics with a postmodern subversive technique and postcolonial narratives of the nation are well known in the works diasporic writers. Shashi Tharoor’s _The Great Indian Epic_ is a well known example of this category. Though several references to epic characters and situations are found in the works of other women writers, writing a full length novel has been Divakaruni’s achievement. The novel closely follows the version of Vyasa Mahabharata with female gender representation of it. At times the postcolonial feminist concerns are noticeably strong in the narration and also the concept of nation emerges through the diasporic consciousness of a woman writer whose past is strongly rooted in and being influenced by its cultural soil.

Panchali is the protagonist of the novel as well as its narrator. All the major situations in the novel connect her as the central figure including the war of Karukshetra. Panchali begins her story from her birth through the holy fire of the sacrificial Yagna which king Dhrupad performs to attain a son who can avenge
him his enemy Drona, the teacher of Pandavas and Kauravas. Panchali learns about the gender discrimination right from the minute she comes out of the fire, which is the moment of her birth, as her Dhaima, the nurse, tells her the story, that Dhrupad wanted a son and not a daughter because a son can defeat his enemy in the war and not a daughter. From time immemorial in the Indian way of life the scriptures and tradition have upheld the importance of a male child. The belief that, if a person die without a male issue he will end up in 'punnam naraka' the 'under world' for hell, is still prevalent in Indian society in twenty first century, the age of science and technology. It was no wonder a daughter was unwelcome. This is still resulting in gender atrocities like female foeticide in India.

The novel contests several ideas that uphold male supremacy in the matters of birth, education, social and familial status and poses resistance to patriarchy through the character of Draupadi. When it is the question of giving education to his son and daughter Drupad makes distinction. Dhri is taught the skills of warfare and lessons in administration as it was all along believed that wars, adventures politics and administration are always men's domain and woman's domain is only the house hold matters be it princess or an ordinary woman. This is one of the contested opinions of patriarchy by the feminists which Divakaruni shows through the resistance of Panchali. Dhrupad arranges for the kinds of education, skills and art to be learnt by princesses but Panchali is interested in the education of men. She is interested in the state's political affairs and information which takes place around her and her source is only Krishna who gives such information to her without any bias. But gender discrimination all along makes its marks. Her brother
Dhri’s tutor refuses to teach her and only allows her to sit behind the curtain while he teaches the young prince and Panchali’s learning is questioned thus:

A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn?
Such a thing has never been heard of in the royal family of Panchal (23).

In this opinion the tutor was not the only one, but her brother, father including her Dhaima, who thought that such education made the girl “too hardheaded and argumentative and too manlike in speech” (23). This opinion about women’s education prevailed even after ages in India till recently and Divakaruni raises this issue of gender discrimination. It is only after the feminist intervention in postcolonial times that things are changing in India and men’s domains are penetrated by women. Divakaruni’s Draupadi thus represents a subversive female image in the novel.

In Panchali’s desire for learning Divakaruni infuses the female psyche in general, which is the hunger for knowledge, power and dreams of adventures. Panchali’s words, “I hungered to know about the amazing, mysterious world that extended past what I could imagine the world of the senses and of that which lay beyond them. And so I refused to give up the lessons, no matter who disapproved” (23-24), prove this. The learning sessions of panchali with her brother also reveal the discriminatory world of men and women into two factions. Women were relegated to the lower rung where as men occupied higher position in the society.
with the belief that women represented inferior intellect and possessed many weaknesses. The dialogue between Dhri and his tutor manifest this

Most learned one, please forgive her. As you know, being a girl, she is cursed with a short memory. Additionally, she is of an impulsive nature, a failing in many females. Perhaps you could instruct her as to the conduct expected of a Kshatriya woman?” The tutor shook his head. “That is not my area of expertise for it is not fitting that a celibate should think too much on the ways of women, who are the path to ruin (24).

Another popular belief that supports the above proposition in the Indian society till today is the idea that, a woman’s beauty is her enemy. This is once again highlighted in the words of Dhri:

The problem with you is, you’re too pretty for your own good. It’ll get you into trouble with men sooner or later, if you are not careful. No wonder father’s been worrying about what to do with you (25).

When panchali baits him about this he tries to show her, her place in the society as, “Boys are different from girls... when will you accept that?” This accounts for the perfect division that demarcates the gendered world as men to be masculine and women to be feminine and they have to follow these prescribed roles of gender. As patriarchy insists that femininity and the qualities attached to it should be the asset
of a female being that it is not to transgress this gender role strictly. So acculturation makes a person a gendered being. Panchali is thus created here as a staunch feminist, a rebel since she refuses to abide by such gender roles assigned to her by her father's palace. Being professed as a woman to change the course of history, Panchali sets out to change her destiny. Divakaruni probably gives a message through her Panchali that women with their determination and self-will can change their destiny. Thus there is a feminist agenda in the delineation of Draupadi's character to change the case of women to get out of the straitjacket of fixed gender role.

The resistance of Panchali is also shown in the novel by defying the rules of married life. She confesses time and again in the novel that in spite of having five husbands her true love rested upon Karna. Hers is a compromise between duty and love and duty wins. Panchali knows that remembrance of another man by a married woman is a non virtuous behaviour but her heart is always resting upon Karna, his responses and it is only on one occasion that it turns in to anger and curse when Karna joins the dice game. But with the confession of Karna in front of Bhishma during the war, about his desire and love for her, makes her once again to lean towards him. This aspect is slightly touched in the epic but in *The Palace of Illusions* this is an important undercurrent that makes Panchali realistic, human and truly womanlike. At the same time panchali is clever to understand that romantic love is one thing and the married life is another. She admits it herself:

Looking back, I see that I didn't love any of my husbands in that way. I was a good wife I supported
them through good times and bad; I provided them with comforts of the body and the mind; when in company, I extolled their virtues. I followed them into the forest and forced them to become heroes. But my heart was it too small? too fickle? too hard? Even during the best of our years, I never gave it fully to them (213).

Thus the fiction of Divakaruni reveals the feminist resistance to the patriarchal discrimination to gender and the injustice suffered by women in all walks of life.

IV

Articulation of bodily expressions and experiences like biological urges, sexual desire, typical female experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation and motherhood are considered as important part of women’s writing by the feminists in the postmodern and postcolonial times. French feminism especially the call of Helen Cixous to feminist writers that: “write yourself, your body must be heard” (LOM 350), paved way for ‘écriture feminine’ that is feminine writing as against the writing of male writers. As Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl opine in their edited work *Feminisms*, writing of the body or écriture feminine is interpreted in two ways:

First, by celebrating woman’s association with the body there by refusing the subordination of body to mind, and second, by refusing to accept the separation
between the two “writing the body” or “letting the
text Come to the body” are clearly attempts at refusing the
sense of writing as a strictly mental thing (343)

Refuting the patriarchal restrictions on women’s language and expression
feminists advocate the freedom of expression relevant to the articulation of
women’s experiences in writing, and therefore the first interpretation of ecriture
feminine holds good to majority of women’s writing whether they consciously
approve the concept or not. Expressions of sexual desires, bodily expressions,
biological urges are all freely expressed in Indian English women writing in recent
times in the fiction of Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, Arundhati Roy, etc where this
writing more often express feminist resistance to patriarchy. Diasporic Indian
English women writing is much more expressive in this aspect as the yardstick of
Indian society which considers such expressions as a taboo in the literary writing is
much more relaxed in the diasporic space for female writers. Like most of the
diasporic women writers Divakaruni’s fiction explores the female experiences of
body and sexuality in a feminist trend. Her female protagonists boldly express
their sexual desires and other feminine urges. However most of them validate
hetero-sexual relationships though the only story “Blooming of the Cacti” takes up
the issue of lesbian relationship as a means of construction of selfhood and identity
by posing resistance to patriarchal gender exploitation. Most of the stories and
novels of Divakaruni celebrate intimate bodily experiences of female gender like
pregnancy, childbirth, feminine desire to be beautiful, desired etc. It is in both
The story “Ultrasound” (Arranged Marriage) and its expanded version the sequels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* explore in detail the typical female bodily experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. In “Ultrasound” Divakaruni creates the experiences of the expectant mother through the descriptions of acute sense perceptions. The inner female world gets painted colorfully in the story. Besides, the story becomes a critique of patriarchal society which still practices the inhuman practices of female foeticide and gender discrimination. Arundhati the cousin of protagonist Anju rebels against the control of her sexuality to become a mother and Anju helps her in protecting her motherhood against this injustice. Hence the story celebrates écriture feminine in both the senses; it raises political questions of women’s freedom of her sexuality against patriarchal oppression on the one hand and on the other it probes delicately women’s intimate bodily experiences with women’s experience and language as Helen Cixous recommends in the “Laugh of Medusa”:

> We won’t advance backward anymore; we’re not going to repress something so simple as the desire for life, oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive – all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive – just like the desire to write; a desire to live self from within, a desire for swollen belly, for language, for blood. We are not going to refuse, it should happen to...
strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away or cursed – in the classic texts (359).

Sudha and Anju in the expanded version of the story “Ultrasound” into the sequel *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* become elated at the prospect of becoming mothers. For Sudha her being mother is crucial for her existence as her mother-in-law insists upon Sudha’s responsibility to continue the progeny of Sanyal house. Besides it is the son and not a daughter that she expects. Sudha also craves for motherhood because she knows that “a child is yours (hers) in a way even the most solicitous lover can never be. Carved form your bones, borne in to the world upon your breath, the flame you cup carefully in your palm against the coming dark” (SOMH 238). Even Anju who hasn’t been very feminine earlier in her desires rejoices and starts dreaming about the child when Sunil accepts the news of her pregnancy without many qualms as she expects him to do so because he had already cautioned her about not going for children soon:

For the first time since I found out, I allow myself to imagine my baby – he or she must be no larger than a grape- clinging tenaciously, cleverly, to my insides. I place a hand over my lower belly and think I feel special warmth, a tingly light, the clean, pale green of a California grape, radiating in to my hand, a big,
foolish, sentimental smile spreads itself over my entire

face (241).

The words of Anju speak about a woman’s excited world of intimate inner experiences of pregnancy. But then Anju loses her child in a miscarriage and the pain and suffering of a woman are more realistically presented by Divakaruni who excels in creating women’s bodily experiences and gender perceptions with excellent sensuous imagery and language. The prologue to The Vine of Desire with its symbolic and sensitive imagery of death and human suffering is evident to this art of the writer. Anju’s painful miscarriage and the traumatic struggle for survival is stunningly evocative of the painful experience of a deeply sensitive woman. The experience is true to life since it is based on Divakaruni’s personal experience during her second pregnancy and delivery.

Out of a 1994 near death experience that Divakaruni had following her second pregnancy, following mishaps during delivery, Divakaruni found herself hospitalized caught in the boundary somewhere between life and death for one month. She went in to a meditative state that allowed her to experience a profound understanding and appreciation for life (Dhanam 62).
The title of the novel is coined from one of the shlokas (Hymns) of Lord Shankaracharya’s Bhajagovindam composition which symbolically creates the images of struggle between life and death in the life cycle:

Again birth, again death

Again the dark journey through the womb

In this world of changes, nothing holds fast

Except the coiled vine of Desire (Bhajagovindam, Sri Shankaracharya)

The painful experiences of childbirth also find expression in the story “What the Body Knows”. Thus Divakaruni writes with ease on this intimate bodily experience of women in her fiction.

Similarly feminine desire and feelings of sexuality find expression in Divakaruni’s fiction. The construction of women’s sexuality, the morality and patriarchal control over it and women’s understanding of these issues in the societal set up are expressed in the feelings, questionings and rebellion of her characters. Unlike Indian society which considers pre-marital sexual relationship a taboo, the women in western society enjoy more freedom in this matter. By virtue of migration or by being born, in American Society Indian women tend to be more free towards their sexual orientation. However questions of morality and cultural taboos trouble their consciousness or bring clashes in their family relationships. This is depicted in Jayani’s dream affair with her professor in the “Silver
Pavements and Golden Roofs”. Her dream which goes to the extent of possible sensual relationship through the kiss is prevented by her cultural conditioning. Meera in “Perfect Life” and the unnamed heroine in “The Word Love” enter in to a premarital sexual relationship with the American men, and enjoy their sexual freedom. But the protagonist in “The Word Love” has to face a conflict with her mother who abandons her relationship with her daughter and the guilty feeling of the protagonist due to her cultural conditioning drives her to the mental stress & she reaches the verge of suicide.

Two important stories in the collection The Lives of Strangers which speak of strong female consciousness are “What the Body Knows” and “Blooming season for Cacti”. The first story is about the female sexuality and the other story is about gender sexuality and freedom to choose. In the first story “What the Body Knows” the feminist theme of female sexuality is combined with Indian sensibility where Divakaruni achieves a balance between western feminist ideas with eastern cultural sensibility. The protagonist of the story Aparna develops a post delivery complication in her abdomen and undergoes a surgery for that by a young doctor, a White man. Due to weakness in body and mind she develops a kind of neurosis and goes into a deep depression and is on the verge to lose her life. The doctor gives her a shock treatment through his conversation. During which his expression of anger, irritation and helplessness of losing an achievement of his career just for the foolishness of his patient creeps in. This makes Aparna to come out of her depression. But at the same time she develops an infatuation towards the doctor in spite of having a very loving husband. This infatuation surprisingly cures her and
she goes home with that longing in her mind. Nearly after a year when she meets the doctor in a shopping mall while shopping for her child’s birthday she feels ashamed of her behaviour. Besides the doctor invites her for a lunch and she realizes that it is her attractive body as a woman that has made the doctor to invite her. Aparna is disappointed to find him like any other man with usual gendered behavior of a male, “once she had set up in her sickbed rubbing lipstick in to cracked lips, darkening sunken eyes with shaky fingers, longing for such a look from him. Now it fills her with sadness because it reveals him to be no different from other men.” (LOS 42). The realization that the doctor is also ultimately a man who chooses body over the mind makes Aparna to realize her foolishness. She turns her back on it to look forward to her family, husband and its happiness. Like “Ultrasound” in *Arranged Marriage* here also Divakaruni creates pictures of sense perceptions and ideas of motherhood. A woman’s sexuality and a married woman’s infatuation and desire for another man are uniquely dealt with. It also fathoms the unknown, untouched aspect of female psyche where tradition and society try to control this aspect of women where as men are free to pursue such extra marital longings. Thus a bold portrayal of gender is eked out by Divakaruni’s pen. Expression of unabashed desire for love and lust outside the marriage is considered non virtuous in Indian women but for Aparna it acts as a healing therapy and Divakaruni creates a unique role in Aparna’s character.

Another such bold and different theme is found in “Blooming Season for Cacti”. It is a story of a woman who boldly rejects her gender role of woman and turns to lesbian role of man. The story begins at the backdrop of Bombay riots and
The symbolism of cactus that grows in rocks and blooms only once in a lifetime is very appropriate to represent the birth of true love in human life only once and rest all is an adjustment either leading to tragedy or happiness.

Meena in the story “Affair” chooses an extramarital relationship with an American man which Abha opposes in the beginning. But soon realizes that her views about sexuality undergo a change:

Sex for me was a matter between married people carried out in the silent privacy of their bedroom and resulting, hopefully, in babies. I preferred not to think of its other aspects, and I resented American TV for invading my home with them (AM 234).

So Meena’s affair gives her the clue as to why her own marriage is a failure, irrespective of her obedience to her husband who has married her forcibly due to the decision of his elders. She realizes that the beauty and appeal of the body is equally important to give assurance to a person about her/his personality. However the second generation women have no qualms in creating their relationship with men. Geeta in the Mistress of Spices, Leela in “The Lives of strangers”, Uma in One Amazing Thing etc are some examples of this kind.

The Indian story “The Bats” in the collection Arranged Marriage speaks about the victimization of woman’s position and her sexuality in the Indian marriage where a woman is dependent on man, especially her husband, for her
sexual needs because of which man enjoys superior position and sometimes that leads to the oppression of women. "Maid Servant’s Story" depicts the exploitation of women’s body in class & caste divide. The husband of maid servant and her own mother force the girl to prostitution and the efforts of her mistress, an aristocratic lady to save the girl are defied by her husband who rapes the girl in the absence of his wife.

The narcissistic expressions of women towards their own beauty and their desire to have been sought after by the male are depicted in several female characters by Divakaruni, who tries to bring out the feminine in women. Tilo the mistress of spices transgresses the rules of the mistresses to be loved by Raven. His touch, looks and the confidence in love are won by her body through which he sees the disguise of young Tilo which makes her drawn towards him. In order to fulfill his desire she transforms herself into the most beautiful maiden for one might using her magical powers, which is totally against mistress rules which say that a mistress should not use the magical power for her own benefit. For the love of Raven Tilo transforms herself from an ‘asexual’ being in to a ‘sexual’ being with innate female desires of love and sexuality.

Anju in Sister of My Heart is plain looking and uninterested in any feminine desires from the beginning, unlike Sudha who is very much opposite to her in cherishing beauty, clothes jewels, man’s love and family. Anju’s thoughts are inspired by feminist motives and are unusual and much more man like which she confesses in the following terms:

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As children, each week we would draw pictures of our future life. Mine were different every time; a jungle explorer swinging from vines, a pilot in goggles flying a snub-nosed plane, a scientist pouring smoking liquids from one test tube to another (SOMH 89).

But after she meets Sunil all her feminine dreams and sensibilities get awakened and a drastic change is seen in her attitude which she expresses thus:

I’m sitting at my dressing table, wearing a starched stiff Bengal sari with lots of gold work, trying to arrange the end in a veil over my head. The veil keeps slipping off, so I have to pin it on with hair grips.... I smile at my reflection, imagining how Sunil will remove my clothes later tonight, his lingering hands transforming me not in to the old, familiar Anju but a wild and magical woman. That is what marriage is, transformation into wondrous and terrifying selves we could never have dreamed of (SOMH 181).

Similarly Sudha does not regret her sexual union with Sunil in his house in The Vine of Desire which takes place in the absence of Anju. She is aware that she had not given scope to Sunil intentionally but nevertheless she realizes that she enjoys the act and therefore decides to take the blame on herself. Thus as regarding the sexual pleasure and eroticism, Divakaruni’s women do not make fuss over
such actions but take these things in a normal, human way and thereby they give the representation of bold new woman of diaspora.

The idea of marriage and female sexuality finds a greater expression in Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* through the enigmatic and unusual marriage of Panchali. Polygamy was a common practice among men where as polyandry was rather among a few tribal people in India till British laws came into existence in India from the time of Mahabharata. Most often the marriages of kings were a sort of political arrangements and both these aspects are highlighted in the novel *The Palace of Illusions*. True to the prophesy, Panchali’s marriage turns out to be a polyandry i.e., one woman marrying five husbands, and Panchali learns that she is a pawn in this game being a woman and her position is marginalized in the patriarchal structure when she witnesses the dialogue between her father and Yudhisthir who says “If we can’t agree... that Panchali should marry all five of us, then we brothers must take our leave, returning your daughter to your care” (117). This is an outright insult for a royal family to have their married daughter returned to her father’s house and when Dhrupad says his daughter will suicide if such disgrace comes upon her, Yudhistir does not budge. Instead he suggests making a choice between “An honourable life for the princess as a daughter-in-law of Hastinapur – or a death you force upon her.” Helpless Dhrupad shouts saying disgraced woman should better die than live. Panchali is shocked at the way how her life is discussed by her father and future husband. Thus the situation in the novel clarifies the position of women as instruments or lifeless dolls who are
played with, by men, be it her father or brother or husband. A woman does not have an independent entity of her own.

After the heated argument, with the intervention of sage Vyasa the marriage gets solemnized with the five brothers and with a boon of virginity to panchali by sage with each husband. Once again women’s chastity is defined by the men in society. A woman is constructed by the patriarchal norms and her sexuality is there by controlled. Virginity is a feminine virtue and a woman has to dedicate herself to her husband where as men have no restrictions to marry many women. Possession of women is also a yardstick to measure the prowess, power and potentiality of men and their masculinity. These perceptions of patriarchal gender roles running in the consciousness of men and women since ages till present day India have been explicitly delineated through the consciousness of Divakaruni’s Panchali.

Woman’s body has always been a site of contention for feminists since patriarchal assumptions consider female body as impure and inferior both in western and eastern societies, especially the taboos associated with women during menstruation. De Beauvoir writes about this in *The Second Sex* thus:

Since patriarchal time only evil powers have been attributed to the feminine flow. Pliny said that a menstruating woman ruins crops, destroys gardens, kills bees, ants so on; and that is she touches wine, it becomes vinegar; milk is soured, and the like, An English poet put the same notion in to rhyme.... such
beliefs have survived with considerable power into recent times (149).

Sudha’s words about the conventions followed by Pishi for drying mangoes for pickling, proves the treatment of woman’s body and physicality in Indian context:

Drying mangoes is an important job, not something she can trust to a maid servant, who has not bathed, or has lain with a man that day, or is menstruating, they will turn with fungus (SOMH 32)

Similarly widowed women had to undergo an ugly treatment of their body by shaving their heads and wearing white clothes and they were restricted to seek any common entertainment. So Pishi has to go for temples to listen to prayer sessions and kirtans which she considers only fit for widows. In the story “Clothes” Sumita has to change her coloured clothes to widowed white clothes though shaving her head is spared by her in-laws. Behind such ugly look patriarchy attaches its reasons that the deceased man would go to hell if his wife does not practice these things but the hind motive of the practice is to control woman’s body and sexuality lest they give way to amorous pleasures. Thus the perceptions of gender especially that of upper class Hindu women’s lives in a patriarchal society which controls women’s freedom of body and sexuality are depicted by Divakaruni in the creations of her characters in her fiction.
The idea of female bonding or sisterhood is one of the central issues in western women's fiction. Woman's relationship in familial and societal set up with other women in different social roles forms a major theme where the bonding serves the purpose more often to gain solidarity in order to resist the patriarchal hegemony. As already discussed in chapter one majority of Indian women novelists in English have not attempted this feminist theme in their writing with a claim to be androgynous. But Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores this theme fully in her fiction following the footsteps of western feminists. The theme of sisterhood has helped her to explore the immigrant women's experiences and predicaments like alienation, helplessness and trauma in a foreign location as she herself has undergone such experiences personally. In such situations women can find solace and solutions by reaching out to other women of their background, and Divakaruni's social activism through her helpline “Maitri” which means friendship has inevitably brought her close to the lives of women and their problems especially the immigration woes. Divakaruni’s understanding that sisterhood or female friendship can create solidarity among women to fight their problems or make their lives livable is instrumental in her choice of the theme of female bonding in her fictional works.

In her handling of the theme Divakaruni is also inspired by her own Bengali tradition. Tracing her affiliation with Bengali pre-feminist Indian women novelists Urbashi Barat writes:
Novel after novel by Bengali women of the past continue to provide portraits of a constricted and limiting women's community in which its members triumph over the psychological bondage or masculine domination through friendships that provide both a source of personal fulfillment and a challenge to patriarchal attitudes (49).

In her interview with Arthur J Pais for the Author Speak column of twenty fifth January 1999 issue of India Today Divakaruni states that she is inspired by the role models like Rani Laxmibai of Jansi, her own childhood experiences of family traditions of west Bengal and the folktales of her grandmother have given impetus in creating her female characters. Female bonding as a theme is evolved out of these experiences. Therefore her novels and a few short stories have this theme as one of the major aspect. The novel Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire epitomize this theme.

*Sister of my Heart* (1999) is a story of two cousins Anju and Sudha grown up together in an Indian traditional Bengali family, bonded from the moment of their birth till their youth up to the age of marriage and with a brief separation in between, coming together for life on a foreign soil. Divakaruni creates a galore of female characters in this novel, and all pervasive female consciousness rules over the pages of the book. Unlike her other novels, the male characters are either shadowy figures in this novel who act like puppets in the hands of women or they are the male reflections of patriarchy. The novel evidences notable influences of
western feminist concepts on Divakaruni’s sensibility, though the bonding depicted is a fusion of east and west traditions.

Though feminists consider that female bonding is a concept evolved in western feminism in Indian society it is an age old concept as the idea is embedded in the joint family structure of Indian society. Here the lives of women who live under a single roof are intricately connected with each other with multiple layers of relationships. Each relation, whether with men or women, has a distinct name. An individual born in a joint family had to grow up with these relationships, which usually consisted of grandparents, paternal uncles and aunts, sometimes widowed paternal aunts, poor relations etc. Unlike in western society, here every individual relationship is distinct whether the bonding is by blood or by virtue of marriage, adoption etc, and it reveals the nature of that relationship. Divakaruni adopts this traditional aspect of Indian joint family in her background in *Sister of My Heart*.

The affairs in a joint family were run by a male member and this often gave way to the pettiness among the female members to gain power over the male for their survival or even to satisfy their limited needs and sometimes ambitions. This aspect is disputed in Indian feminism because the power politics among women like mother-in-law with daughter-in-law; wife with her sister-in laws and under patriarchal feature even between daughter and mother were considered against bonding, and the conclusion is negation of the concept of bonding in Indian feminism. The bonding survived in the needs of women like pregnancy, delivery, death and disease in the family and neighborhood. Besides, Indian rural society and even urban society till postcolonial times was a close knit one. The bonding
was seen even among the neighbouring women, friends and servants. The recent times have witnessed the dwindling of joint family structure in Indian society due to western influence and colonial rule which brought economic and social changes rapidly in India. It has also given way to nuclear families and individualism. The younger generation urban women are less exposed to such relations in the family and are also not aware of the advantages or disadvantages of such system though rural society still has its glimpses here and there. Divakaruni with her well grounded Bengali tradition therefore creates a heartening picture of female bonding by her personal knowledge and experience which credit her portrayals authentic.

The bonding in the *Sister of My Heart* is at two different stages and generations. One at the level of family roots among the three elderly women characters Gourima, Nalini and Pishima—the three mothers of Anju and Sudha; at the other level between Anju and Sudha, the younger cousins and protagonists of the novel. The house of Chaterjee’s is an all female house because the men have embraced death in a mishap on an adventure. As it is natural under such circumstances the mistress of the house, Gourima assumes the role of a man to bring up the children born on the same day of their fathers’ death and look after the other two women of the house, Nalini and Pishi. Gouri and Pishi share the relationship of sister—laws but Pishi is elder and maternal hence there is no antagonism between the two women. Instead they are very much tied to each other affectionately. This is evident in the words of Pishi who describes it to Sudha:
Especially your Gourima, I’d known her since she came to this house as a bride of seventeen. I’d held her and comforted her in the first homesick days when she wept for her parents, just as she would hold and comfort me a few years later after my husband’s death (SOMH 48).

This affectionate knot survives till the end of the novel and supports them throughout their life in the hardships and joys together. Though each of them knows the dark secret about Nalini and Gopal who cheat Bijoy and also become the cause of his death, they never reveal it to each other and cause unhappiness to one another. Instead they jointly support Nalini and her daughter Sudha even though they are not responsible for her in any way, and they also tolerate the petty, snobbish, secretive nature of Nalini and her pride. The understanding, support, love, respect and affection between the two women create a commendable picture of female bonding. Nalini in the beginning is tied to them by helplessness but in the end she realizes the value of these women. Their genuine affection brings greater transformation in her character and she too remains bonded to them.

In the younger generation Sudha and Anju remain bonded for life. Born on the same day both the girls grow together in the Chatterjee’s mansion in Calcutta and are always inseparable. Their fate is similar that they are born on the same day of their fathers’ death. But socially their status is different as Anju is born to rich parents and Sudha to a poor relative of Anju’s father. This creates their subjectivity differently, Sudha to be timid and submissive whereas Anju to be bold and
outspoken but their natures change in the end. However their lives are woven inseparable from one another and this is seen from the instance of their birth itself.

The news of their fathers’ death has speeded up their arrival on the earth. In fact Anju is born a few minutes early and when Nalini’s labour becomes too difficult Pishi-places Anju on the stomach of Nalini and Anju’s cry speeds up Nalini’s delivery and that is the reason Anju always thinks that she has called her sister Sudha in this world and so she is responsible for her joys and sorrows, and the same is what Sudha too believes “she called me out in to the world” (SOMH 30).

Anju never treats Sudha as a poor relation but a twin, a sister of heart. She protects Sudha from all kinds of humiliation and fights when ever such occasion arises in the society & even at home. Her love and affection towards Sudha does not get vitiated at any circumstances till the day of marriage. Totally contrasted in nature, Sudha learns the secret about their fathers’ death, especially the role of her own father who is responsible for the death of Anju’s father. This creates a guilty consciousness in her mind towards Anju and also increases her allegiance to her. When Sudha falls in love with Ashok and prepares to elope with him but cannot do so as Anju’s proposal with Sunil arrives. Sudha changes her mind after she learns that Mr Mujumdar, Anju’s father-in-law is an orthodox person. For the fear of breaking Anju’s marriage Sudha consents to marry Ramesh, a groom fixed by the elders. Thus she sacrifices her joy for her cousin out of loyalty.

When Anju meets Sunil she falls instantly in love. But this does not diminish her love for Sudha since she is aware of the fact that their love to both these persons is different in nature. But during the marriage ceremony the first rift
between Sudha and Anju comes due to the man Sunil in their lives. Anju’s feelings get embittered when she notices that her husband is fatally attracted towards Sudha’s beauty and she first time feels jealous. She also realises that how a woman’s beauty is a source of jealousy, hatred as well as love and she confesses:

I am so scourged by rage and helpless love and jealousy that I cannot trust my voice to make a civil response. Yes, for the first time in my life, I am consumed by jealousy of Sudha, sister of my heart (SOMH 169).

Anju also goes to the extent of hurting Sudha by accusing her to have attracted her husband which takes Sudha by surprise and her efforts to clear the misunderstanding of her cousin fails. However they patch up when Anju leaves the country to go to America, her new home. Their bond revives and in spite of the objections and control from their husbands and in-laws they keep their bond of love alive.

It is happier and surprising also that both women get pregnant at the same time and undergo an ultrasound scanning which reveals that Anju has a male baby and Sudha a female. Again the crisis appears to Sudha in the form of a threat of abortion of her baby planned by her mother in law and husband. Panicked Sudha asks the advice of Anju who suggests her to go back to their mothers’ house. Though Sudha’s own mother Nalini does not accept Sudha, Anju’s mother Gouri and aunt Pishi support Sudha and respect the decision of Anju. Sudha’s child is
rescued though she is divorced from her husband. In order to provide a new life to Sudha, Anju invites her to America and when Sunil protests her, she decides to act on her own and starts overworking to save money for Sudha's passage. In their tussle she loses her baby and goes into a trauma, but Sudha's voice and her consoling through telephone brings back Anju to this world and again gives her an impetus to live. Her life is again to be dedicated to the well being of her sister Sudha. This feeling brings back her recovery and she finally succeeds in bringing Sudha and her daughter to America. Thus the bond of the two women survives all patriarchal obstructions and pressures with a happy note:

I slip an arm around Sudha and support Dayita cautiously with the other. Sudha places her arm under mine, so we're both holding Dayita up. If a passerby who had the eyes to notice such things looked at us, she would see that we, have formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have travelled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already, Madonnas with child (SOMH 347).

Thus sister of my heart depicts two generations of women in binding against the society and against the patriarchy.
The Vine of Desire continues this bonding of Sudha and Anju though the theme of selfhood is central focus of the novel. The binding is disrupted because of men in the events unforeseen after Sudha’s arrival to America but finally they are resolved as the two women identify themselves in the western society and construct their selfhood against patriarchal forces. They reunite in the end and their bond survives through the clarifications of their mis-understandings and acceptance of faults and forgiveness. As a sub theme the novel celebrates sisterhood where women realize that more than the love of man the love of sisterhood is more important and sustaining in their lives.

In The Mistress of Spices the idea of sisterhood is explored as a minor episode. The Island of spices is an all female island, a depiction of miniature female utopia. The first mother is the head of the island and teaches the art of spice magic to its students. The apprentices live like sisters and Tilo describes this bond of sisterhood which helps them to be a part of a group with a common cause and their solidarity in sharing the joys and the sorrows thus:

We learned to be neat and industrious so work together, to protect one another when we could from the old one’s anger, her tongue that could lash like lightening (MOS 52).

Similar circumstances are created in the novel The Queen of Dreams. Women apprentices were taught to interpret the dreams of others in a magic cave. Women’s living under a single roof in solidarity, love and affection for one single
cause or purpose is a recurring motif in Divakaruni’s fiction. Their relationships are not personal or familial in nature but governed by adopted sisterhood and friendship for the sake of vocation or training. In both these situations the teacher figure is associated with maternal affection, and understanding so as to ensure happiness of the younger one. It is also cautionary to make the younger one bold to face the society. But it is also common that younger ones revolt and rebel against the caution and advice and this confrontation brings unhappiness but there by it also helps to build the selfhood of these women protagonists which is also a common theme in these novels.

Women reaching out to women as help and also in friendship so as to create a female bonding is typical in Divakaruni’s fiction. At the end of the Great War it is the aura of Draupadi and her words that prevent the mass suicide of thousands of widows, mothers and other women of the soldiers who gather like sea on the war field. Later as a true queen she sets up a woman’s court in Hastinapur the woman who have lost much due to the war, an incident which is again not heard in Vyasabharat but incorporated by Divakaruni in her Panchali which gives greater subjectivity to her character. Divakaruni speaks through her Panchali describing the common lot of women then and now:

I knew how I feel it to be helpless and hopeless. Hadn’t I been almost stripped of my clothing and my honour in this very city? Hadn’t I been abducted in the forest and attacked in Virat’s court when men thought I was without protection? Didn’t I, even now, mourn my
blood-clan-dead, every one of them? And if I wasn’t careful, might I not turn in to one of these women empty eyed, capable only of churning through futile memories? It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women (323).

So Panchali expresses the hope of womankind to live in sisterhood and the idea of sisterhood once again recurs in the novel like other novels of Divakaruni.

The bond of friendship helping the women to survive their tragedy is depicted in Abha and Meena’s relationship in the story “Affair” (AM) and “Meeting Mrinal”. Tilo helping Mrs Ahuja to become Lalita and get out of her tragic marriage bond is an example of women’s relationships of female bonding through help in foreign location although the major focus of these stories is not on female bonding. They nevertheless speak about woman’s relationship with other women for seeking help, trying to support in misery and need, forming future of others and learning the art of living. They also fulfill the major aim of bonding especially resistance to patriarchal domination of women which is detrimental to their development and construction of selfhood.

The major focus of female bonding as resistance to patriarchy and creating psychological and physical bond is portrayed in the story “Blooming Season for Cacti”. The characters of Meera and Radhika have been drawn on Indian
mythology & history of Radha and Meera who both reject human love and confront the patriarchal society in order to find the divine love of Lord Sri Krishna. It is interesting to note certain similarities between them that both were married women but were not interested in human physical love and sexuality. Their love was a divine god for whom they dedicated their life. Divakaruni creates some parallels in the story “Blooming Season for Cacti” where both women protagonists reject the men in their lives to bond with each other & here the divine presence is missing and the queer human interests are developed as a resistance to hegemonic pressure of the male world and as survival techniques.

Mother daughter relationship in bonding of women is more intimately sketched by Divakaruni in her stories and novels. The daughters in “Intelligence of Wild Things” and “The Love of Goodman” try out to help their mothers and express their indebtedness to their mothers whose influences have taught them the wisdom of life. The protagonist of “The Love of Goodman” supports her mother in India after her father goes to America and abandons them for his own pleasures. After several years when she confronts her father in America her wish to take revenge on her father is abandoned as she is reminded of her mother’s maxims which save her rude act. Here the daughter’s relationship with mother even though she is dead turns out to be valuable for the daughter as it teaches a value to lead the life.

Similarly bonding of women in “Maid-Servant’s Story” (AM) is revealed through the mother-daughter, aunt-niece and mistress-servant relationships. The antagonistic relationship of Monisha with her mother is due to the
misunderstanding created by her mother's seemingly hard-hearted behaviour. So she develops affection with her aunt who clears her misunderstanding which results in a happy bond between the two women. So also the maid servant's relation with the mistress is exceptional since the mistress tries to protect the servant girl from the husband and mother of the girl who try to exploit the girl economically. Her protest is to the hegemonic pressures of patriarchy which oppress women by trying to control their bodies and also their labour. The mistress goes to the extent of resisting her husband and her social class and status. The aunt-niece relation between Deepa Mashi and Monisha also proves valuable as the Mashi provides love and affection in the childhood of Monisha which she is robbed of by her mother's attitude. Later it is her advice which saves Monisha in forming a wrong relationship with a married man. So Monisha arrives at the conclusion:

I wonder if the story (though not intended as such by my aunt) is a warning for me, preview of my own life which I thought, I had fashioned so cleverly, so different from my mother's but which is only a repetition, in a different raga, of her tragic song, perhaps it is like this for all daughters, doomed to choose for ourselves, over and over, the men who have destroyed our mothers (AM167).
Thus female bonding in various relationships of women is explored by Divakaruni in her fiction. Urbashi Barat makes an appropriate observation about Divakaruni’s themes on female bonding in the following words:

Female bonding in all its forms which constantly makes its presence felt through images and through the lyricism and the romantic fantasy that breathe through her fiction. This is where her greatest achievement lies. She had discovered this in *The Mistress of Spices* as much as in her stories (59).

**Conclusion:** In this chapter the gender portrayals and the themes of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novels and short stories are analyzed from feminist perspectives. As a major South Asian woman writer of Indian Diaspora, Divakaruni creates the world of women both out of memory and experiences of home and abroad. Her gender delineations are strong, powerful and true to life. They also reveal the feminist consciousness of the writer. Divakaruni as a diasporic writer fuses the ethos of east and west and portrays all class of women though majority of the portrayals belong to urban, middle and upper class, Hindu Bengali women both at diaspora and home. These characters represent the writer’s perceptions and thoughts. The values of Indian culture like harmonious relationship between male and female, women’s bonding drawn on both Bengali and Western tradition, motherhood and its value in the society, womanhood, all shape the cultural identity of women in diasporic situation and also at home. At the same time her women rebel against the hegemonic pressures of male dominance
and certain oppressive elements of culture like thrusting of widowhood and its cruel rituals, domestic violence, denial of selfhood, controlling woman’s body and sexuality and its exploitation in the social structure of class and caste. Divakaruni’s writing records the social transition in the status of women in India of late 80’s and 90’s and therefore her protagonists represent the heartening changes of women’s lives in India like securing education, employment and career as Anju in *Sister of My Heart* and Jayanti, Monisha, Meera and many others in *Arranged Marriage* and *The Lives of Strangers*. They are bold and courageous in opposing the male dominance in carrying over the superstitious barriers of culture in the name of values. Sudha’s opposition to abort her female baby and leaving her husband and in-laws, seeking divorce is an example of this change in the attitude of women in the society of 80’s. So also women like Abha, Meena, Lalita, the heroine of “Disappearance” leave their husbands and desert their homes paving way for woman’s individua.ity and selfhood against the societal norms. This speaks about the bold decisions taken by women in marriage bonds and the changed matrimonial values in India and its diaspora. So also the women of old generation opening themselves up to the new waves of change by revealing their inner dreams and secrets as in the case of Jiang, Mrs Prittchet in *One Amazing Thing*. Women in diaspora who believe that home is best for them follow the decision to return to India without hesitation. Sudha in *The Vine of Desire*, Mrs Datta in “Mrs Datta Writes Letters”, and the mother in “Names of Stars in Bengali”, are the women who return to find a respectable living and peace in their native homes. Divakaruni’s themes and characters explore the lives of women
with the most intimate feelings, emotions and thought processes with great perception and perfection combined with descriptions of keen sense perceptions which make her art at once true to life and highly imaginative. In order to delineate gender in its complex situation of globalised world Divakaruni uses the postmodern device of magical realism in several novels like *The Mistress of Spices, Queen of Dreams* and *The Palace of Illusions*. Combined with social realism very often this proves to be powerful in bringing out a sharp contrast to the reality of the gender issues that she addresses in her fiction. Therefore, as a first generation diasporic woman writer Divakaruni’s contribution to Indian diasporic writing is insightful, as it delineates gender in most vivid patterns.
WORKS CITED


