CHAPTER V
A SUMMATION

The landscape of contemporary literature has been transformed by the rising tide of globalization; texts are now crossing the borders of nations and cultures as newly emerging authors express myriad voices of those once considered the subaltern. At the crest of this new literary wave it is a new generation of South Asian female writers who have begun to make their unique mark upon the world of literary genre. In particular, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has distinguished herself as one among the ground-breaking writers in the genre of South Asian diasporic literature. Her accounts of the experience of the diaspora and its effects upon women not only provide the readers with insight into the lives of the 1.4 million South Asians who currently reside in the United States, but also present a model with which we can better understand the processes through which minority identities are constructed.

Divakaruni invariably focuses upon the sensitive protagonists who lack a firm sense of cultural identity and are natural victims of racism, sexism and numerous forms of social oppression. By choosing all her protagonists from, India especially from Bengal, with divergent ethnic, religious and cultural preoccupations she has attempted to explore the multiplicity of this theme which is centred in their struggles to outgrow inherited values. With her evolving creative vision the canvas of her
thematic content enlarges and the complexity of cultural assimilation acquires a new dimension.

The beauty of much of her stories lies in explicating her personal experiences. A particular sense of involvement bordering on total identification with the characters lends her stories a flavour rarely found among the expatriate writers. She feels for her suffering protagonists and empathizes with them but seldom fails to underline their human vulnerability. Though she has undergone the influence of experiences she has not allowed her prejudices to her art.

Divakaruni brings out the cultural differences of America and India through her collection of her short stories namely Arranged Marriage and The Unknown Errors of Our Lives. Each story is based on the effects of American culture on Indian culture. It not only deals with the religion and behaviour of the people of both the cultures but also talks about the economical status and common day – today problems.

The present research study may help the readers understand how the cultural differences have impact on their people and how Indian and American cultures coverage and diverge. By reading the chapters, the readers may get an idea of the advantages and disadvantages of adopting different cultures.
Many people love to go and settle in foreign countries for innumerable reasons. It may be for profession, for imbibing new behaviours, interest in tour programmes or for higher studies. Though there are different reasons, it is necessary for every native to know the other culture. If the new culture is accommodative to the immigrants, they do feel that they are in exile.

Each culture has its own significance and uniqueness. A culture has a set of unwritten but conventional principles, rules and regulations. All over the world, cultures are ‘god’s plenty’. From that, Divakaruni opts for the culture of America and India which she investigates and evaluates in *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. Though she does not follow any compare-contrast method of analysis to bring out the differences in cultures, the varying incidents, she presents unwittingly underlines the differences.

Both the cultures differ in social pattern, child-caring, family set up, marriage system, educational system and so on. Throughout Chitra Banerjee’s works, the readers get ample illustrations for these differences in the eastern and the western cultures. And while reading and analyzing the stories of Divakaruni, the readers may agree that the bicultural theme plays a pivotal role in her fictional world.

Divakaruni focuses on the subtle details in American and Indian cultures through the short stories of her collection *Arranged Marriage*
and The Unknown Errors of Our Lives and by doing so, she influences the readers to look at her texts as bicultural texts. Though she uses both American and Indian cultures as backdrop throughout her text, her major concern is more with American culture than with Indian culture. The fact that she has spent more time in America than in India perhaps is one of the reasons. Divakaruni never suggests that one culture is better than the other. Her main aim is to show just the characteristics of both the cultures and not to rate them. She does not talk about the American citizens alone for she talks about Indians as natives and as immigrants too.

Divakaruni has a sharp creative vision and ability to observe even the subtle differences between Indian and American cultures, which are implicit in every short story. Along with the story she deliberately includes the differences in both the cultures in an unobtrusive manner. Her method of writing allows the readers to identify the differences in the cultures at every incident in a story. The psychological problems of alienation, immigration and identity crisis are dealt with in an excellent manner by Divakaruni.

Whether it is the two very different women of Affair or the divorced mother of Meeting Mrinal or the abruptly widowed protagonist in Clothes or the protagonist harassed by racism or the liberated personality of Sona in The Word Love, they all seem to have come from
the same centre. India, their motherland is the central point for them, whether they lean back to it or be independent of their individualistic nature. Regarding this centre it is worth quoting -Kerns:

   It consists of a constant voice which rises out of an implicit acknowledgement of the women’s roots in India as well as their strong awareness of their narratives as being influenced by both India and America. The degree of ease with which these women accept and function between and within these two cultures varies with each story. (Rushtomji 285)

All the protagonists of Chitra Banerjee’s stories have a psychological awareness about the conflict between the east and the west even before their immigration. But the conflict does not seem to be pronounced one. The psychological conflict gets a pronouncement only when they are subjected to externalities like racism as in “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”, alienation as in “The Word Love”, destruction of individualism as in “Affair” and “Meeting Mrinal” and identity crisis as in ”Clothes”.

   Apparently, the stories of all these women are stories of different women placed in a same situation. But they all face a crisis before they start proving themselves out. Initially, they are unaware of their own inner strength and they rely upon someone else’s strength. For instance Meena, Abha, Sumita, Pratima and Sona all bank on either their
husbands or lovers for their support. But after facing the crisis, they free themselves from their own shackles and become aware of their inner strength.

The result of the crisis is that, for most of the protagonists America becomes a land of promise in their psychological conflict between the east and the west (e.g. Meena, Abha and Sumita). But for others, like Pratima, Bikram and Jayanti India becomes their home, sweet home. Occasionally, for a character like Sona both these elements, east and west get rejected and she opts for liberation from both these influences.

Whether the protagonists opt for east or west Roshni Rushtomji-Kerns says, “They stand as testaments to Chitra Divakaruni’s willingness and her ability to present the complexities and the richness of women’s lives, of their cultures as they take form in different places at different times”. (Rushtomji 286)

Chitra Banerjee’s stories are realistic stories and her characters are the ones we see in our day today life. Her protagonists make their own destiny, though they undergo crisis during the moments of their psychological conflict between the east and the west. But even in their crisis they never cry out, for they know for sure that crying does not help them. For instance, in The Word Love, the protagonist is helped by the rain to cry. “The rain runs down your cheeks, the tear you couldn’t shed”
In “Clothes” Sumita does not even cry. “All the women in the room were crying except me” (AM 29). Abha in “Affair” believes, “crying has always seemed to me to be a waste of time” (AM 234). And in “Meeting Mrinal” Asha is made to cry by the smoke that comes out of her car’s engine. “It laps at me, rises past my hips and breasts and mouth to my eyes. And I’m crying—all those tears I didn’t shed” (AM 296). This proves that they are all highly individualistic women who were curtailed by a number of factors like parents, husbands and society and at large by the Indian culture that blocks their path to know their own inner strength.

Regarding their inner strength and their attempts to break away from the traditional shackles Ronny Noor states:

Divakaruni turns every day events into masterful stories that evoke Chekhovian subtlety in the depiction of social and cultural realities of India and America. Her stories are sad, crying out in protest against traditional arranged marriages. We see the faces of Tolstoy’s Anna, Flaubert’s Emma and Ibsen’s Nora in her characters, all desiring to break traditions and traditional values.

(Noor 108)

All her protagonists are willing to bend but they never break. For this reason almost all the stories end with a note of optimism and confidence. But all these women seem to be confused and are devoid
of spirituality. The reason for making these characters devoid of spirituality is not clear, for India is known better as a land of Gods, Goddesses, holy-men and yogis for a westerner. Perhaps, Chitra Banerjee intentionally avoids it, for her protagonists are not ordinary, traditional female characters, they are very strong individuals who do not weep even over a crisis and hence they do not need any spiritual comfort. Moreover, they emerge as such powerful and highly practical beings that they do not rely on spirituality to take charge of their life. But they all have one thing in common. They all come from a highly conservative family and it is their traditional upbringing that instigates the psychological conflict east and west when they migrate to America.

As for narrative technicalities, Chitra Banerjee makes sure that she uses all relevant techniques to tell her stories, assist and aid her perception of the psychology of her characters and the conflict that turmoil in their mind. So in many stories, she craftily uses first person singular except in the story “The Word Love”, where she uses second person. But whatever narrative viewpoint she uses, she moulds it down to cater to her needs and hence both these techniques create a sense of familiarity and intimacy among the readers. It is for this same purpose that she uses internal focalization with great craftsmanship and cinematic credulity. It is no wonder that two of her novels were made into movies. Her novel Sister of My Heart was made a tele-serial by Suhashini Manirathnam and Paul Meyeda Bergeshas has directed The
Mistress of Spices into a movie in which the leading character Tilo is being played by former Miss World, Ms. Aishwarya Rai.

Apart from Divakaruni’s narrative technique, it is her poetic skill which gives relief and also aids in further intensification of moods like profound sadness or extreme happiness. Her anthology, “Hot seeds of tears pricked my eyelids all the unfairness of it” (AM 19) stands testimony to the fact that her poetic skill intensifies the already prevalent sadness. The sentence, “Snow has covered my own hands so they are no longer brown but white, white, white” (AM 56) portrays the torments that the protagonist undergoes due to racism or the line, “The old rules aren’t always right, Not here not even in India” (AM 270) clearly describes the positive attitude of the protagonist: “It is better way, each of us freeing the other before it’s too late….so we start learning once more, to live” (AM 271-72). Lines like these win the appreciation of the readers for the tradition oriented Abha, when she decides to move away from her husband.

While describing the poetic skill of Chitra Banerjee, Roshni Rushtomji-Kerns remarks:

The voice of the poet-story teller that permeates the narrative in this collection of short stories fulfills the promise of a skilful, strong poetic voice, which was heard in Chitra Divakaruni’s earlier works. In Arranged Marriage Chitra Divakaruni has proven herself
to be an important writer of 20th century American literature as well as of world literature in English as it is being written today.

(Rushtomji 286-87)

Chitra Banerjee also utilizes her skill of using the visual images, Aural, olfactory, tactical and gustatory. She sometimes combines these images, to produce startling effect in portraying the psychological struggle of her characters. In the story “Clothes” the girlhood days of the protagonist are compared to that of “old sepia photographs” (AM 18) which is a good example for the use of visual imagery. “Metal coldness against my fingertips” (AM 18) is a good example for the use of tactile imagery. “The smell of Death” (AM 32) exemplifies olfactory imagery. “Sweet white kheer” (AM 41) in the story “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” is an example for the gustatory imagery. “The desperate whee-whee of a siren, the wind sighing” (AM 44) stands testimony for aural imagery. So, there is a combination of all these images and Chitra Banerjee uses them so excellently that it caters to her needs in expressing the psychological profundity of her characters.

Chitra Banerjee uses words in a highly economic way and she also uses emotive language. Hence, fast reading will not do justification to Chitra Banerjee’s works. Many crispy and very short lines in these stories reveal different and deeper levels of meanings. Thus her pithy, precise and emotive language can no longer be seen as a transparent
art form like clear glass which if used correctly allows us to see through the reality; rather it is seen as a complex phenomena hiding out multiple layers of meanings.

The next simple but effective tool that Chitra Banerjee uses in enhancing her level of characterization is the usage of italics. She uses them effectively for fulfilling two purposes. First, she uses them whenever she is referring to any particular thing pertaining to India, Indian culture or any typical Indian term. For example in Clothes ‘rita pulp’ is in italics since it refers to a typical Indian item. She also provides an extra word, a contextual clue which is suggestive of the nature of the Indian material, keeping in mind the western reader. So even if the western reader is not aware of ‘rita’ he can easily associate it with some pulpy substance. Apart from this contextual clue, there is a separate glossary for typical Indian terms (AM 301-07). The second purpose behind her use of italics is to create stress. The statement “The old rules aren’t always right, Not here, not even in India” (AM 270) stresses the liberation of the protagonist. Chitra Banerjee also gets a helping hand from mythological characters like Sita and Kunti in delineating certain aspects of Indian culture.

Banerjee’s male characters like Somesh Sen, Mahesh, Dinesh, Ashok, Srikant and Rex are stereo-typed men who become flat characters due to being portrayed in first person. Only Bikram escapes
from this kind of portrayal. But he too dims down as a shadow before the strong protagonist. Sometimes, these men act as a reality checking factor to the protagonist and they get themselves sacrificed in order to give the women protagonists the desired recognition. Regarding this kind of sacrifice made by her male characters Chitra Banerjee in an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama observes:

Yes, and it’s like (Laughs) Marc Antony, who said, Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. I have nothing against men, but I’m just more interested in the dynamic of women’s characters, relationship and growth right now. (Aldama 10)

And that’s what exactly she does to the male characters in her stories.

Time is yet another important element in Chitra Banerjee’s works. The physical time in the hands of Chitra Banerjee becomes the psychological time. Through forward, backward movements and by juxtaposing events of different times, Chitra Banerjee is able to portray the psychology of her characters that are under the conflict of east and west. Thus, time is used efficiently as a kind of structuring device.

Most of Divakaruni’s stories as well as her other works have a touch of autobiography in them. In an interview to Frederick Luis Aldama, Chitra Banerjee states, “Many situations that my fiction begins withdraw from things that either have happened to me or have
happened to people that I am close to”. (Aldama 12) It is only because
she has personally experienced those problems, she is able to produce
with great ability, the intense movements in the mind of her
protagonists. But like a master - craftsman she is able to blend these
autobiographical elements with that of the life of her characters, along
with the culture and texture of Bengal as well as South Africa. The
blending is so perfect that there is no awkward pronouncement of either
of these elements and thereby aids in the smooth flow of the story.
Roshni Rustomji-kerns in her review remarks, “And her concerns about
the lives of women, mainly of women from India, do not turn her stories
into academic documentation of socio-economic, cultural problems and
solutions”. (Rushtomji 282).

But above all these technical tools, the key word for Chitra
Banerjee’s ability in characterizing her fictional beings are her
straightforwardness. She chooses a limited number of characters and
weaves a web of magic in her works. Ranjini Jothi Singh is right when
she states, “Divakaruni breathes life into South Asian characters who
struggle to discover freedom in a world that would restrict them to
certain social conditions”. (Jothi Singh 17).

In spite of all these remarkable technical strengths, many critics
condemn her for portraying stereotyped women. Her women
protagonists readily approve of being cheated, dominated and sexually
manipulated. The flaw of Abha in the story” Affair” is that she spends most of her time in cooking and she has no relationship with her husband. Similarly, Asha in Meeting Mrinal carries around the shame of her husband’s abandonment. In one such remark Sumana Sen-Bagchee states:

There is a sense of sameness and predictability: the married women always come to dead-ends in marriage, the unmarried are nearly always self-sufficient, self assured, independent and successful and the husbands, with minor exceptions callous, unfeeling and insignificant. (Bagchee 76).

In addition, the repeated use of food items particularly Indian cuisine unnecessarily acts as a monotonous jargon, thereby hindering the smooth flow of the story. For instance, “Spicy almonds-chicken curry over hot rice, a spinach lentil dal, a yogurt cucumber raita, fried potato pakora, crisp golden papads and sweet white kheer” (AM 41) can never escape the jargon and it is a pity that even her sheer poetic skill cannot rescue her from these commissions. But like a typical internal focalization, poetic imagery, psychological time, emotive language, autobiographical elements and characterization in a wonderful way that all of these above said skills together, cumulatively aid the reader in understanding the psychological conflict of east and west in the mind of her protagonist. Through her writings she conveys to her readers that
her objective behind writing these stories is to expose the Americans to
the energetic voices of the new settlers in their country. She described
the American experience as one of fusion and immigration, a two-way
process in which both the whites and the immigrants grow by
interchange of experience.

It would be a rewarding experience, if scholars undertake an
analysis of the works of Chitra Banerjee from a feminist angle, or work
on the elements of her magical realism that is prevalent in many of her
works. The magical realism of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni along with
that Salman Rushdie will be a next worthwhile study. Perhaps, a
comparative investigation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a female
diasporic writer with any male diasporic one such as Cyril Dabydeen or
Stephen Gill may throw light on where gender cuts across their fictional
framework. A profound study of a few diasporic writers of South Asian
origin may be one more productive space for a researcher who aspires
to step in. Thus, research on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni may direct the
researchers towards several avenues and destinations, all worthy and
relevant in this era of globalization.
WORKS CITED


