CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: DIASPORA, A REITERATIVE EXPERIENCE

Diaspora is an essential and inevitable phenomenon of this modern era. Due to the impact of globalization men are moving to different countries for various reasons. Going abroad in search of green pastures has become the order of the day. Pursuits of material benefits and physical comforts have made men and women move out of their roots. A migrant who is uncomfortable in his native land moves to a new land in search of new experiences and enrichment. But, unfortunately his entry into an alien atmosphere lands him in different kinds of troubles like acculturation at different levels.

Migration occurs due to the lack of basic necessities like food, shelter and clothing. But often people undertake mass migration for a better and fitter survival. The International statisticians classify people as immigrants if they state their intention of settling in the country for one year. For people who want to move for better opportunities, immigration becomes the only ultimate choice. Thus, immigration has become a common phenomenon of modern times. However, his entry into an alien soil lands him in different kinds of traumas resulting from acculturation. In
the course of one’s stay in a foreign country one has to face a lot of
cultural and racial problems and prejudices. In the world of immigrants
it is essential for an individual to preserve his identity. Identity becomes
the stamp or hallmark of such a person. The painful and frustrating
search for an identity is consciously and unconsciously experienced by
every immigrant in every progressive stage of his/her life.

Diasporic cultural space is one that immigrants occupy almost
perpetually since assimilation/annihilation is an ongoing process and no
full assimilation ever takes place. Hence, the diasporic experience, its
culture, history, and identity cannot be stated in monolithic or
homogeneous terms. Identity is a socially constructed product formed
by discourse and ideology. So that it is discontinuous and fragmentary
rather than holistic, and is at the heart of the diasporic consciousness.
Diaspora identities are fluid metaphors and the call for repeated re-
negotiation of identity makes the space of diaspora a volatile space
where they are constantly reproducing themselves anew, through
transformation and difference. These pulls of various cultural
encounters lead to the creation of a hybrid new culture that is the result
of the synchronization of the native and the adopted culture, forming a
trans-cultural identity.
Diaspora, as a critical/literary theory explains that cultural identities can never be defined in unitary terms as they constantly collapse in the context of hybridization. Hybridization is closely linked to the phenomenon of globalization where myriad interactions have given birth to cosmopolitan multicultural societies. Diaspora writers form a ‘bridge’ within the diaspora, a creative space with multiple geographical locations, giving them a global citizenship and facilitating border crossings. Globalization has resulted in the formation of large numbers of transnational communities, and since people in the diaspora are transnational, their social, economical, religious, and political networks also become transnational.

Diasporic writing, subsequently, addresses issues related to disintegration synthesis of varying cultures. An immigrant writer shunting between two cultures, the one of origin and the other of settlement, either i) carves a new identity amalgamating the old and the new, and thus erasing the obstructing margins of the polarized socio-cultural milieus, or, ii) is quite reluctant to bid-farewell to his native soil. In the latter, both placed and displaced at once in the new land, he struggles hard to internalize his nostalgia. Past continues to persist, present also dominates; margins adamantly glare; the individual is tossed between the two worlds, on distant, the other immediate. The picture is that of a ‘salad’ bowl, to borrow a phrase used in the context
of diasporic writing, where the individual components exist with distinct identities without any scope for merger.

Diasporic experience, thus, is a spring of agonized inspiration, multiple identities, new subjectivities, creative memories and fresh perspectives of language and life. The earlier diasporas of the neo-colonial and post-colonial works were often a product of forced immigration, of people running away from religious and other political or social persecution. But several Indians who migrated to America in the mid-1970s and afterwards were going in search of a better life, and material success and prosperity.

The quest for the self in the immigrant experience is complicated, as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transition, filled with the memories of the native home and conflict with the realities of the new world. In this context, the research is significant because it speaks with eloquence to anyone who has ever felt the yearnings of an exile or the emotional confusion of the outsider. Literature is the best representation of culture that speaks across diverse cultural locations with positive authenticity. It helps to re-locate and re-create the space for human enterprises irrespective of class, creed and country.
A sense of longing, the very basis of the self is ever unfulfilled in trying to overcome incompleteness in man who is always in conflict within and without. The quest for self is a metaphor for existential alienation. Immigration is also a metaphor for the reintegration of the alienated sensibility. The present thesis discusses how the immigrants necessarily transform themselves by taking risks and letting the past go off, in search for the self in order to become assimilated in a new social and cultural role in their adopted homelands.

Diasporic feminist writers today proudly uphold their cause of ‘womanhood’, seen in the poetry and novels of writers like Chitra Banerjee, Indira Ganesan, Meena Alexander and Uma Parameswaran in a variety of theme and style. In the contemporary period, the South Asian diaspora has recently produced a number of writers such as Ismat Chughtai, Monica Ali and Shyam Selvadurai. The relative openness of this small group of writers is largely due to their diasporic locations, as in countries like the United States or Britain the diasporic communities are well-established and enjoy greater artistic freedom.

Cyril Dabydeen, the Indian–Guyanese Canadian who has authored several volumes of poetry, short-stories and novels, in his essay “India in Me” proclaims that he will continue to write about India while longing for a real home or place. Canada, on the other hand, has fed him, had “nourished, brought to fruition his professional skill as a narrator (Begum 65) . Such bicultural pulls loom large in diasporic writings. Jhumpa Lahiri, the first Indian
to win the covetous Pulitzer Prize for her collection of short stories entitled **The Interpreter of Maladies**, now in New York boldly explores the mindscape of the Indian who are tormented by the conflicts arising out of the clash between the old and the new cultures. In **The interpreter**, the Indians still cherish their nostalgic memories, drudge amidst the strange new land and are found incapable of adapting themselves to this alien country. The phenomenon of ‘Salad bowl’ is apparently obvious in their social and psychological existence.

For any diasporic writer, diaspora is a reiterative, obsessive and oppressive experience; the movement of one’s ancestors from one country to another gets reenacted in the next generation’s migration to yet another country. Movement then is one long continuum. Cyril Dabydeen’s poem “Encounter” in the collection, **Goatsong** envelops the false promise of a new land; “Separation” focuses the inevitable corollary of movement. In Jhumpa’s fictional world, the immigrants find their life-journey as a long tedious process thorough despair and agony. The crux of the problem is felt in marital disharmony leading to distress and isolation. Jhumpa’s short-story “a Temporary Matter” perceives marriage as a temporary relationship in New England whereas in India, it has an enduring value, binding the males and females in everlasting ties.

The present study purports to analyze the problems that affect women following the process of immigration and the subsequent identity crisis. Any effort to acquire an identity of one’s own in a multicultural context is a troublesome and tedious task. The focus of this study is to
trace and analyze the aspects and factors which result from this immigration process by the women characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s select short story collections.

As immigration has become the major concern of many modern writers Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is no exception to this. Immigration and identity crisis are the predominant themes in her short stories. Through her short stories she portrays the roles of women in India and America: the struggle to adapt to new ways of life when one’s cultural traditions are in conflict with new cultural expectations; and the complexities of love between family members, lovers and spouses. Divakaruni’s work is often considered to be autobiographical as most of her stories are set in California near where she lives. She confronts the immigrant experience of Indians who settle in the U.S and evaluate the treatment of Indian-American men/women both in India and America.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story collections *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors Of Lives* throwback to the ancient art of story telling, ably nourished by the great masters. Short story has evolved itself into a fine art in modern times. Divakaruni, a significant short story writer of the Indian Diaspora has enriched the corpus of International writing in English. Her heritage and culture are influenced by both India and the United States. This multi – cultural lifestyle plays a central role in many of her stories, which depicts the alienation and
loneliness of immigrants caught between two drastically different worlds.

There are, at the moment, many diasporic writers of Indian origin who recall with disturbing nostalgia, a past they do not want to return to but somehow hope to resolve by explaining it in fictional form. Divakaruni joins the ranks of those whose work goes further and illuminates human nature in general. The diasporic writer occupies a kind of second space, of exile and cultural solitude. The reality of the body, a material production of one local culture, and the abstraction of the mind and a cultural sub-text of a global experience provide the intertwining threads of the diasporic existence of a writer. *Arranged Marriage* that focuses on Indian and Indian-American, women caught between two conflicting cultures seems to have developed from her poem *Arranged Marriage* in Black Candle. Both the poem and the stories are concerned with the emotions of women whose lives are affected by the Indian tradition of arranged marriages, though *Arranged Marriage* explores a broader scope of issues, including divorce, abortion, racism, and economic inequality. Relying heavily on techniques such as doubling and pairing, the stories expose the adverse conditions of women living in India, though the collection also suggests that life in America is as difficult as in India. Because of the contradictory feelings the immigrant women often experience the trauma caused by the fact that they are torn between Indian cultural
expectations and American life. Arranged Marriage considers both the cultures equally.

In this collection, she beautifully tells stories about immigrant brides who are ‘both liberated and trapped by cultural changes and who are struggling to carve an identity of their own. The book addresses issues such as racism, interracial relationships, disparity, abortion and divorce. In “The Bats” a young girl struggles to understand both her abusive father and a mother who remains with him despite the pain he causes both of them. “Clothes” tells the story of Sumita, a young woman whose marriage to an Indian man in America has been arranged, and she travels to the United States, and discovers a whole new way of life. One of the most moving stories in the book is “The Ultrasound” in which a young woman in India is forced to have an abortion because an ultrasound indicates that her first-born child will be a daughter. In “Doors” the character Preeti after moving to the United States has come to love the Western idea of privacy. She faces a dilemma when her husband’s cousin wants to come and live with them. She expresses her discontent with the situation, which shows her newfound decisiveness and her fight against her husband’s view of a traditional Indian wife.

Another short story collection entitled The Unknown Errors of Our Lives features tales that have been set in India and America. Here, Divakaruni illuminates the transformations of personal landscapes, real
and imagined, brought about by the choices men and women make at every stage of their lives. The female protagonists of eight of the nine stories in Divakaruni’s sensuously evocative collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* are caught between the beliefs and traditions of their Indian heritage and those of their or their children’s new homeland, the United States. Seven out of the nine stories collected in the anthology were published earlier in various journals and anthologies. The diverse range of the stories of this volume is noteworthy. Most of them depict the life-style in East and West perceptively.

The stories in the collection *Arranged Marriage* present her trans-cultural and trans-continental experiences of India and America. She has learnt to live by stretching her imagination to Bengal where her stories are originally rooted, and she is unable to cut off completely the umbilical cord. Divakaruni’s characters are mostly Indians with Bengali identity and she has tried to identify her immigrant self through them. Her stories chronicle the traumas and sufferings of the Indians settled abroad, who fail to identify with a world where they cannot have a sense of belongingness. She portrays faithfully the trauma of cultural dislocation, disorientation and displacement suffered by the millions of exiled Indians and they try desperately to balance themselves between home and abroad.
Though of different ages, nationalities and religions Divakaruni’s characters demonstrate the universality of life experiences. Her stories are the emotional pieces that relate the isolation of immigrants traveling to a foreign country. Through the eyes of young Indian brides, the reader experiences the cultural differences between India and the United States. The interaction among the young Indian brides and the people of the new land highlight how each comes to learn and grow from the other’s differences. Many of Divakaruni’s stories illustrate that all people have the same basic needs for communication, understanding and compassion, in spite of the differences.

All the stories in the collection set in America and India are united by the motifs of exclusion, loneliness and the search for fulfillment. They do not restrict themselves to the experiences of migrant and displaced individuals. Themes that interest Divakaruni such as love, fidelity, tradition and alienation crop up in the lives of Indians and non – Indians alike. Communicating the fact that exile and exclusion are not the experience of any one group of society alone, Divakaruni portrays the specific situations of individuals as symptomatic of loneliness and alienation.

The inability to communicate happens for many reasons – the dynamics of a relationship, cultural differences, immigration and adjustment and sometimes, these disjointed interactions change during
the course of the story. The characters of Divakaruni face some barrier of communication. She likes to write about people who think in a way they can’t fully express. In story after story, Divakaruni successfully achieves the same effect of people hoping and searching for that elusive bit of magic in the lives they seem to lead. What makes all the stories work is the fact that irrespective of whether the protagonists fail or succeed in this quest for the self, their experiences are never portrayed simplistically. Divakaruni emphatically states that most of her characters are ‘semi – real’; most of Divakaruni’s Indian characters are Bengalis, yet their predicaments are universal. Almost all her characters are translators, in so far as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive.

The stories are mostly about the immigrant Indians who have settled overseas and about the cultural displacement they experience in their adopted homeland. Sometimes, the perspective is reversed, the location shifts back to the Indian Subcontinent and we observe how second generation Americans of Indian origins are regarded when they return as tourists to their motherland. The stories are varied and thoroughly enchanting but the ones that work best are those that capture the absurdity of ordinary situations. There are no heroes and villains in these stories but only people who are in search of self, in their immigrant experiences.
For Divakaruni, the self is an important bridge between the individual and society, because most of our feelings about ourselves reflect what others think of us and are based on culturally defined standards. Our identities are intimately bound up with the forms of social recognition from others. The self is in some ways the most private element of experience. The self is both the agent of experience and the object of evaluative feelings. We learn to evaluate the self by thinking about ourselves as others do.

To Chitra Banerjee, self is not innate, as we are the individual’s organic urges – such as hunger and sex – which are subject to homeostatic of the organism. Self is the product of interaction, from infancy onwards, with the individual’s physical and social environment. This interaction is associated with novel and familiar sensations: pain, resistance, acceptance, rejection and gratification. The immigrants who pass into a new habitat or place of residence undergo pain, resistance, rejection, gratification and acceptance.

A sense of pain permeates all the characters presented in the collection, Arranged Marriage. In a series of encounters in a new and alien land, the individual searches for a self – identity which is the sum total of what the individual considers himself. The search is also for the possessions including his body, his traits, his characteristics, abilities, aspirations, family work, friends and other social affiliations.
Identity is the recognition of one’s self. The question of identity has always been a problem for culturally displaced persons, people who transgress the boundaries of familiar surroundings in search of fresher pastures in a foreign land. Divakaruni’s characters spin through a period of turbulence when their identity seems lost in the newness of the surroundings but she makes them come to terms with reality and compromise with the situation. The immigrant’s identity has been lost in the clash of cultures.

All immigrant writers address issues related to nostalgia and identity crisis. Divakaruni has presumably gone through both but has proved to be surprisingly resilient. Her great sense of humour, keen observation, vivid description of places and people, her ear for irony and sensitive and meaningful craftsmanship is appreciable. The moments of revelation and recognition, real turning points in ordinary people’s lives, the odyssey of the self in the immigrant experience are portrayed in an excellent manner in her short stories. As an immigrant writer, Divakaruni has presented her insider’s as well as outsider’s views and native and acquired self in her stories. She admits that the question of identity is always difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case of their children.
Belonging to the group of young Indian writers that emerged on the literary scene with a postcolonial diasporic identity after Salman Rushdie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s position as a south Asian writer in English is distinct and well established. As someone who has spent more time outside India than in it, she has been accepted as an Asian American writer, living with a hybrid identity and writing partially autobiographical work. Most of her stories, set in the Bay Area of California, deal with the experience of immigrants to the United States, whose voice is rarely heard in other writings of Indian writers in English. She has been published in more than fifty magazines, including The Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker, and her writing has been included in more than thirty anthologies. Her works have been translated into eleven languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Portuguese, Danish, German, and Japanese.

Chitra Banerjee was born in Calcutta on 29 July 1956 and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. Her father, Rajendra Kumar Banerjee, an accountant by profession, and her mother, Tatini Banerjee, a school teacher, brought up their four children in modest middle-class ambience. As the second-born child and the only girl among three brothers, Partha, Dhruva, and Surya, Chitra spent her childhood days in sibling rivalry and camaraderie. She studied at Loreto House, a convent school run by Irish nuns, from where she graduated in 1971. In 1976 she earned her bachelor’s degree in English from
Presidency College, University of Calcutta. At the age of nineteen she moved to the United States to continue her studies in English major and got her master’s degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, in 1978.

Working under Stephen Greenblatt on the topic For Danger Is in Words: A Study of Language in Marlowe’s plays, she received her Ph.D. in English from the University of California at Berkeley in 1984. She held different kinds of jobs to pay for her education, including babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread at a bakery, and washing instruments at a science lab. She did not begin to write fiction until after she graduated from Berkeley. When she came to realize that she loved teaching she did not want to do academic writing as it did not have enough heart in it. She wanted to write something more immediate. In 1979 in Dayton she married Murthy Divakaruni, an engineer by profession. Her two sons, Anand and Abhay, were born in 1991 and 1994.

Divakaruni and her husband moved to Sunnyvale, California, in 1989. For several years she was interested in issues involving women and worked with Afghani women refugees and women from dysfunctional families, as well as in shelters for battered women. In 1991 she became the founder-member and president of Maitri, an organization in the San Francisco area that works for South Asian
Women in abusive situations. She also associated herself with Asians against Domestic Abuse, an organization in Houston. Her interest in these women grew when she realized that there was no mainstream shelter for immigrant women in distress – a place where people would understand their cultural needs and problems in the United States. Because of the experience she gathered from counseling sessions, the lives of Asian women opened up to her, revealing unimaginable crises.


Divakaruni’s journey from being a young graduate student to a mature writer seems to have come full circle. She believes that there are both pluses and minuses in the growing body of Asian American writers. Her writing is now available to many people, both within and outside the community. Her stories have helped us to understand our mother, helped us to understand our culture. Indeed, she is expected to be a spokesperson for the community, and that is just an unfair kind of burden. She always tries to make it clear that she is presenting one vision about what is true about the Indian American community. It is a very diverse community, and her work is just one angle of looking at it.
As Divakaruni has changed, her style of writing has changed accordingly. For example, *Arranged Marriage* includes a detailed glossary of Bengali and Hindi words, which were italicized in the stories. Through this means she seems to be attempting to get the reader to accept these as a natural part of the characters' world and of their language. When asked by Bhattacharjee as to how she has matured as a writer, she replied that with each new book, she found a new challenge. Whatever the narrative technique of each of their books might be, she hoped it would connect with the readers.

Divakaruni’s first volume of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) explores the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective, a theme that continues to inform her work. When she was at Berkeley she became aware of women’s issues and she wanted to do something for them, although her outlook has now softened and her interest has shifted to more general human themes of memory and desire. How changing times affect the cherished Indian institution of arranged marriage is the theme of the eleven stories of *Arranged Marriage*.

Most of the stories are about Indian immigrants to the United States from the author’s native region of Bengal and are told by female narrators in the first-person-singular point of view, often in the present tense which imparts to the stories a sense of intimacy. They capture
the experience of recent immigrants, mostly from professional classes, such as electronic engineers and business people, but also a few from the working class, such as auto mechanics and convenience-store clerks. These are several immigrant brides who are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes. References to local attractions, postgraduate education, and her Bengali culture are sprinkled liberally throughout the tales; and her stories deal with issues such as domestic violence, crime, racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce which were the result of her own imaginings and the experiences of others.

Arranged Marriage received a considerable critical acclaim and the 1996 American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, and the PEN Oakland Award for fiction. Divakaruni creates contradictory as well as connected fictional worlds through the stories in Arranged Marriage. In “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”, the protagonist- a graduate student, newly arrives at the United States which she considers a land of illusion; she is brought face to face with harsh reality when she is assaulted on the mean streets of Chicago. “The Ultrasound which deals with the issue of female feticide was later enlarged into the novel Sister of My Heart (1999).

In “Affair” two temperamentally ill-matched Indo-American couples, whose marriages were arranged on the basis of perfect
matching of their horoscopes, divorce after many years of affluent living in Silicon Valley. In “Doors” the character Preeti, after moving to the United States, comes to love the western idea of privacy. She expresses her discontent with the situation, which shows her newfound decisiveness and her determination to oppose her husband’s view of the traditional Indian wife. In “Clothes” the husband of the narrator, Sumita, dies, and she is faced with deciding whether to stay in the United States or to go back to India to live with her in-laws. Sumita calls widows who are serving their in-laws “doves with cutoff wings”. (AM 33).

One common theme that runs through all the stories of Chitra Banerjee is that Indian-born women living new lives in the United States find independence a mixed blessing that involves walking a tightrope between old beliefs and newfound desires. Though the characters vary, the themes of the short stories are essentially the same – exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as the experience of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions.

The critical acclaim and increasing recognition that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has received has established her as a promising writer interested in the immigrant experience which is not simply that of those who move from East to West; it is a cross-cultural scenario where, through her writings, the diversity of Indian writing in English is
revealed. There is a balanced view of facts in Divakaruni’s short stories. She does not decry the good influence of the culture of her native land. Diasporic Indian’s experiences regarding his/her old country with its myriad complexity and humanity are vividly analyzed to the readers in Divakaruni’s work.

A notable feature of Divakaruni’s writing is that she does not portray men characters as cruel or dominating. They possess admirable qualities but lack certain strength. Divakaruni does not advocate revolt against, or defiance of one culture, or a total acceptance of another. She recognizes the strength of mind and potentials of the twenty-first century men and women who gain independence and autonomy leading to assertion of the self. Common themes of her short stories range over how east treat west. Divakaruni implies that the west symbolized by America does not leave any room for the east. She is of the view that there is every relevance for Indian culture as seen in the Bengali language used by the immigrants. As a matter of fact, some of them still persist in embracing various Indian ethos and codes. The use of Bengali language, Indian names, appreciation of family ethics and the reference to Indian mythology and religious rites, and the Indian attire, all these signify how Indian/human identity though marginalized will always be permanent. This is due to the fact that Indian identity is located in mind, soul and physical domain. In a new land, one’s identity is formed after encountering a series of tough cultural struggle. Chitra
Banerjee’s short stories such as *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* criticize the false and profane love of modern man. Her stories remark the regret as well as the longing for homeland which uniquely portrays the typical Indian society.

The topic chosen for this research, “Diasporic problems in the short story collections of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni”, may be post-colonially significant as these stories deal with the search of the protagonist in various situations for their identity. Search for identity is the discovery of oneself. Discovering oneself is discovering God in each one and a path, which leads to God. But on the way, each and every individual has to face several trials. It’s an identity crisis for it involves the issues as to one should give it up or continue to live with it. The topic has a direct bearing on themes of the short stories. While going through these stories, one is likely to pause and involve himself in an identity crisis and search for identity. We live in a world where people wear masks and assume multiple identities and at times they lose their original identity with which they are born. A study on these short stories throws light on the immigrants’ struggle in building up their identity.

The dissertation entitled “Diasporic Problems in the Short story Collections of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni” aims at portraying an individual’s search for identity and the crisis he/she faces while he/she is on the search. Here is another study on a subaltern group. Writers
such as Homi Bhabha define subaltern groups as oppressed, minority groups. The term ‘subaltern’, in their perception, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. A diasporic study that addresses issues governing the problems and predicament of, perhaps, a discriminated group in a new, alien soil is in a way a study on the subalterns. Segmented into five chapters the dissertation works on select works of Chitra Banerjee consolidating her position as a writer and more particularly, as a woman writer in the global diasporic ghetto.

WORKS CITED


