CHAPTER IV
CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CULTURAL SHOCK IN
THE UNKNOWN ERRORS OF OUR LIVES

India, with its uniquely glorious cultural and literary heritage, is the home of stories where story-telling has been an art from time immemorial, although the short story as a literary genre is altogether a modern development, thanks mainly to the mushroom - growth of periodicals and newspapers. The Indian-English short story is a successfully established art by now which is fast developing with justifiable confidence and pride. As a matter of fact, the Indian-English short story is in no way inferior to the short story of any other country. That most of the Indian-English short stories are proudly comparable with the best continental short stories is enough evidence not only of their thematic and technical maturity but also of the confident ease with which the English language is being handled.

Story telling is old as campfires. The impulse to embody human experience in narrative form is probably as old as human consciousness itself. Drawn together by the warmth of the fire, by terror of strange sounds in the dark, our early ancestors gave voice in story form to their fears and beliefs and thus made for themselves a magic against the trails of life. The earliest stories, travelling from campfire to campfire and down the generations, marked man’s slow emergence
from his animal status. Their forms like the forms of other rituals helped the early man to create his history and identity. These were part of the creative impulse that made him consciously human. Hence all primitive cultures had their myths and legends-narratives of how things began, how the humans came, how the tribe survived and how the heroes fought. And these stories were in verse form for the reason that it was convenient for memorizing. Historically speaking, the short story dates back to 4000-3000 B.C. In the Bible, the Old Testament is full of stories. The stories of *The Arabian Thousand Nights* and the *Decameron* *Tales of Boccaccio* are some more examples to indicate the antiquity of the short story.

Celebration of women has a long tradition in Indian ethos and literature which recognize the *Shakti* (power) of women in mythology, rituals and worship of gods and goddesses. However, empowering them in real life always lagged behind the declared purposes of our mythology, rituals and spirituality. Immortalizing women in stories is an important feature of Indian literature.

In this thesis, the research scholar proposes to study how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depicts her women in her fictional world and how such depiction fits in the general context of Indian women.

In 1960’s the delineation of women characters in short stories underwent a remarkable change in Indian short story. Many men and
specially women emerged as the champions of the cause of women. And for the women writers, narrative short story became a canvas to challenge the hegemonic practices of a gender-biased society. The concept of women merely as wife and child-bearer was abandoned. The short story writers began to portray many women who overcame odds and liberated herself from male and social oppression at various levels, mental, emotional, physical, social and even political.

Migration and immigration have directly or indirectly affected several generations of contemporary writers in English engendering hybridism and culture complexity within them and urging them to grapple with multiple cultures and countries and tensions between them. South Asian Women writers are the newest voices in America’s multiethnic literature. One of these prominent writers is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni whose contemporaries are Bharati Mukherjee, Bhapsi Sidhwa and Jumpa Lahiri to name a few.

Stories in the past, especially when these stories elated to love and women with all their endless suffering and toil usually ended by directly or indirectly stating that a happy reunion awaited them in heaven. Kalki’s famous Tamil novel Kalvanin Kaathali (The Lady Love of the Thief/ Robber) is an interesting example. Fortunately for the readers, in recent times women could also seek to migrate and be part of the ever-burgeoning Indian Diaspora.
According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word ‘bicentral’ means having or combining two cultures. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* the readers can see the combination of the two cultures of India and America. Many writers have revealed their ideas on ‘Biculturalism’ through their novels, short stories and prose pieces. Henry James’ novel *The Europeans* deals with the lives of an American family and a European family. V.S. Naipaul differentiates the Indian way of life from the English in his prose piece *A Wounded Civilization*. Divakaruni does the same thing. She looks at the clash or mingling of American and Indian culture. Many writers present a framework that conceptualizes ‘bicentral’ identity formation as a dynamic process involving historical experiences of cultural subordination, political consciousness and the various ways in which individuals may respond to cultural conflict.

There are four major response patterns that individuals may engage in as they cope with cultural tensions. The responses are:

1. Alienation from the primary culture
2. Separation from the mainstream culture
3. Adoption of two separate identities
The framework on ‘biculural’ identity and cultural tensions are acceptable, when the readers find that the characters presented in The Unknown Errors of Our Lives have faced the same cultural tensions.

The stories of this text deal with the lives of natives in exile. So, naturally those people feel that they are alienated from their primary culture. Some people alienate themselves from their native culture. Some others accept both the cultures with all the problems. In India, the states are identified and distinguished by the languages of the people, and also, people who speak a particular language form a group and are settled in a particular state. So, normally every state has its own identifiable way of life. For example, if we take Tamilnadu, most of the people speak Tamil and they wear saris and the main food item is rice. And if we take Bengal, there the setting is different from Tamilnadu. The main language spoken in Bengal is Bengali. Their staple food items are mainly based on wheat and potato. They also wear saris but in the North – Indian style. Though there are many differences in traditional forms, every state is filled with multi-religious people. All over the world, India alone is called a “multi-religious” nation. But now a days, each country faces religious quarrels and struggles. As far as American culture is concerned, they follow five definable family types in America.
Max Learner has classified those types as:

i) The Rural Family
ii) Old Family
iii) Second and Third generation Immigrants
iv) Negro Family
v) Middle Class.

The rural family is very large, where the children do field and household chores. The old family is connected with enormous wealth. The second and third generation immigrants are the followers of their old traditional elements in the changing social environment. The Negro family is shaped by the heritage caste conditions, where the father is often an absentee, the mother works in a factory and the children are brought up by their grandparents. The middle class family type is the dominant in American society, where the father is transient figure and mother, a main person of the family.

Americans accept the equal rights system and in day today life they follow it. This is proved in many cases, in which familiar persons are questioned by Investigate Committees and a final verdict given to them. But in India, there is no equality between various sections of people. Here, the reputed and wealthy persons are in a position to order, and the others are in the position to obey. This is the common order of American and Indian cultures followed in their own countries.
Amidst this backdrop, the readers can see how Divakaruni brings out the cultures of India and America through her short stories.

Every culture has its own peculiarities and predilections which evoke a mixed response from a different cultural milieu. People quite often try their best to forge a workable synthesis between their native culture and that of the new. This process is not a smooth one and it results in some psychological issues alien to both the cultures. The quest and choice are therefore the two ingredients. Cultural concepts are ancient and contemporary, traditional as well as modern. In cases where cultural dissimilarities are much sharper in terms of ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious determinants, the issue gets irredeemably complex for immigrants to cope with. The process of migration to America that started in the mid-nineteenth century has reached a new peak in terms of immigrant population within a span of one hundred years. People from all over the world are drawn towards this country for a variety of reasons. Notwithstanding their intention, those who choose to stay on and finally settle down, experience a qualitative cultural transformation.

Many women who have moved to the west from India either as professionals or as accompanying spouses have contributed substantially to expatriate literatures in English. Their works describe colonial and postcolonial experiences multiple marginalization due to
patriarchal constraints and as strangers in an alien western society. They delve into the nightmares of womanscape and their writings are bound by nostalgia, memory, frequent questions of ‘where are you from?’. They reveal their search for their roots in their natal culture. Diasporic writings are articulate and intelligent, passionate and are far richer than most of the books of sociology published on Diaspora.

In the past few decades, expatriate Indian writers have created a retreat that is actual and virtual, both and neither. India recollected is an entity that is topographical, ancestral and fantastical, built out of sensory memory carried in the skin, the nostrils and the taste-buds. The conjuring power of forgotten words is reactivated; fading folklores are compulsively resuscitated; cultural traditions mythologized. Diasporic writers invest a lifetime in dissecting and defining the anatomy of homelessness, comparing, puzzling over and all too often agonizing. In the process, a great many fall into what may be called the diaspora trap, labouring culture-specific details, romanticizing the trite, until diaspora and displacement become clichéd.

Propelled by the conventional wisdom that what is unknown in our lives hurts and corrodes more than what we know. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s latest book of short stories The Unknown Errors of Our Lives subtly takes the possibility of good in our lives and gives it a little
twist. Her human but flawed characters constantly err. But, they manage to find tiny pin pricks of redemption in situations.

Much of Divakaruni's work is partially autobiographical. Not only are most of her stories set in Bay Area of California, but are immigrant experiences that constitute a vital theme in today's world, where the immigrant's voice is rarely heard. All her stories are about women from India caught between two worlds. She writes to unite people and she does this by destroying myths and stereotypes. As she breaks down the barriers, she dissolves boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages and even different worlds. The Unknown Errors of Our Lives centres around the lives of the immigrant women. Divakaruni's interest in women began after she left India at which point she reevaluated the treatment of women there. Her stories are about family, culture and the seduction of memory. Her characters are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes where they carve out an identity of their own. One can find the theme of nostalgia and cultural shock prevailing almost in all the stories in this collection. In spite of leading a luxurious life in America the protagonists in these stories very often think of their life in India. There is a great conflict in the mindset of her characters whether to disown their traditional culture of their mother land completely or to alienate from the new. In fact, they are not able to disown their native culture and at the same time they are not able to adapt to the new American culture fully.
There is a balanced view of facts in Divakaruni’s short story collection *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. She does not decry the good influence of the culture of her native land. Every Diasporic Indian who experiences upon touching his or her old country with its myriad complexity and humanity is vividly explored to the readers. They possess good qualities but lack certain strong points. Divakaruni does not advocate defiance towards any culture. She has recognized the strength of mind and potential of the twenty-first century women who gain independence and autonomy leading to assertion of the self. General themes of her short stories range about how east treat west. Short stories in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* criticize the false and profane love of modern man. Her stories hint at the regret as well as the longing for homeland which characterize the various Indian societies.

All the stories in Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* offer a wonderful variety of experiences gathered from cultural clashes. The stories of this collection are based on the predicaments of Indian immigrants in the United States. These characters have been uprooted from the secure life-mode of a traditional set up. They struggle to cope with the new environment by learning new strategies and methods. But in order to provide an alternative life mode, such learning has to be lived and experienced at first hand. Sometimes the process of adaptation is smooth, while sometimes it shatters the innermost defences of an
individual who has no option but to surrender meekly to the brutality of circumstances.

**The Unknown Errors of Our Lives** deals with the problems of the immigrants in an alien land; the yearnings in exile, the emotional confusion. Being an immigrant herself, Chitra deeply felt the importance of family bonds which anchor people in their homelands. **The Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary** defines ‘Self’ as person’s or thing’s own individuality or essence, person or thing as object of introspection or reflexive action, one’s own interests or pleasures, concentration on those. The stories bring out the person’s individuality as an object of introspection. Her stories are actually a gender power game in a subtle form, filtered through the clash of two cultural perspectives of those who were born and raised in the U.S., may be unfamiliar with the land of their ancestors and has hardly any interest in Indian life and culture. Still some stereotypical Indian notions and inhibitions colour their outlook. The stories in this collection usually end in a touching sequence.

In India, it is believed that individual as well as familial and social relationships are lived to the full when men and women inter-subjectively relate to one another in a shared socio-cultural space. And that is possible because they have a shared value base. Memories of India do play a vital role in their alien land. To the Indian psyche, marriage is not primarily a sexual partnership, but an undertaking to co-
operate in the procreation and rearing of children. A child strengthens the bond of marriage. Without a child marriage is considered incomplete. Chitra is keenly sensitive to the fine ruptures and sudden disjunctures which make the familiar appear alien, which delink one from the ties of humanity, family, kin, leaving one with the acute sense of being alone.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story collection **The Unknown Errors of Our Lives** is all about rediscovering India from America. It is about collision with new cultural codes and recoil. It is also about unwary choices and necessary retributions, breakdowns in communication, forfeitures and the stressful transformation of sensibility. Most of all it is about recollection – until recollection itself becomes a sort of a heady chant. Divakaruni’s prose has a distinct Bengali lilt, and it’s best it has a pleasing introspective pace. It is melancholy, faintly rhetorical with a mannered poignancy. Only when she discards this cadenced prose does her writing gain strength. The first person singular has its own problems. Much of the content sounds like personal outpouring moulded into situational configurings. The protagonists are too often Bengali women living in America with doting husbands and cuddly kids, all American kitchens redolent with Indian spices and memories of mothers and grandmothers back home. After a while this closetful of domestic emotions get repetitive and tiresome.
The confrontation with America is kept at an elementary degree of interaction and the larger implications of contrasting lifestyle patterns stay unexamined. Too much nostalgia can grow humourless and partisan. The strength of flexible adaptation and the negotiation of new challenges are almost wholly absent in Divakaruni’s stories. Divakaruni describes provocatively one such character in “What The Body Knows” who gives birth and watches as her body weakens and the baby strengthens. The woman’s act of bringing life into the world becomes a literal act of self-mutilation as well as a symbolic social suicide. This story has an original and valuable core, a near-death experience in which the patient grows richly conscious of the subliminal intelligence of the life – force in us, which works tenaciously and often contrary to our disposition, learning to nourish itself on scraps of physical and psychological succour. “The Forgotten Children” shows writing of a high order, competently describing the desperation of two small children living with an alcoholic father and an enduring mother in a style that is for once unaffected. The pressure of narration is kept well under control, and there is no excess of self-dramatization. But “The Blooming Season for Cacti” reads like a writing project with an obligatory lesbian agenda. It also gets the 1947 partition specifies mixed up with the details of Bombay’s 1993 communal riot, confounding two contexts in which the balance of power between the Hindu and Muslim communities is reversed and the communal suggestions of the story become simply
inaccurate. Sometimes when writing about a country which commands our imagination, neither memory nor theory proves enough.

**The Unknown Errors of Our Lives** that focuses on Indian women and their immigrant experience in America is in many ways similar to Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of the Maladies* because of the common theme. Many of the stories in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* also deal with marriages of different sorts and in different stages: arranged marriages, engagements, deteriorating relationships. In nine poignant stories spiked with humour and intelligence, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni captures lives at crossroad moments caught between past and present, home and abroad, tradition and fresh experience.

The first story in the book is entitled “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter”. A widow in California recently arrived from India, struggles to adapt to a world in which neighbours are strangers and her domestic skills are deemed superfluous in the award-winning “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter”. This is a touching story about an elderly widow who moves from India to live with her son’s family in America. Divakaruni shows an aging Indian mother who has left India to live with her son and his family treading the rocky terrain of American culture. Culture shock would be putting it mildly; poor Mrs. Dutta cannot sleep comfortably on her “Perma Rest” American mattress, bought for her with good intentions by her son and his increasingly inscrutable wife.
A little more than a stranger in the house, Mrs. Dutta pens letters to her closest friend Mrs. Basu in India. While her letters contain glowing accounts of American life, nothing could really be further from the truth. Her son tells her “We want you to be comfortable, Ma. To rest. That’s why we brought you here to America” (TUEOL 3). Her attempts to share stories of India and cook traditional meals and help around the house are looked down upon of by her daughter-in-law and she begins to feel un-welcomed. Life with her son and grandchildren in America is not at all what Mrs. Dutta imagined it would be. Her existence is painful and alienating. Here, Divakaruni explicates beautifully the preoccupation of many immigrants who have got accustomed to the American life style. Her son and his wife are worried over what the neighbour’s think when Mrs. Dutta drapes her saris over the fence to dry is both poignant and amusing. Divakaruni’s writing is both precise and contrived in this opening story, perhaps most realistically highlighting at least to some sensibilities of the conflict between the east and the west. While Mrs. Dutta brims with mother’s love, tasty meals and true involvement in the lives of the only family she has set, her efforts are spurned at every turn.

While reading Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter one can understand that Mrs. Dutta is shocked at the customs of American culture because she did not get used to American culture before she moved to California. As a consequence, she gets culture shock when she faces the American
culture that clashes with her Indian. The reason why Mrs. Dutta gets culture shock in California is due to want of information about American culture. Mrs. Dutta shares her problems to Mrs. Basu, her friend who lives in India. Mrs. Basu gives her friend some suggestions to resolve her culture shocks. Finally, Mrs. Dutta is unable to overcome the culture shock but continues to live with her son, Sagar, her daughter-in-law, Syamoli and her grand children. Divakaruni is exceptional at slowly building a story line and quietly tearing it down in the end. Through Divakaruni’s writing, the reader can feel Mrs. Dutta’s pain and disappointment.

Interestingly, two stories in the collection entitled “The Intelligence of Wild Things” and “The Forgotten Children” focus on brother-sister relationships; both the stories place their female narrators in the familial roles of conciliator and interpreter of emotions, not to mention the ever present mother figure to their brothers, regardless of whether younger or older than themselves. As in “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” the story “The Intelligence of Wild Things” brings up issues of keeping old world traditions alive after immigrating versus becoming Americanized. “The Intelligence of Wild Things” a woman from Sacramento visits her younger brother, Tarun in Vermont to inform him that back in Calcutta their mother is dying. She discovers that his girl friend is an American girl with “freckled skin and reddish-gold hair” (TUEOL 37).
She wonders how her brother who had never wanted to come to America has become so Americanized while she, who agreed to an arranged marriage in order to move to America, still clings to the tradition she learned growing up in India. Indeed, in “The Intelligence of Wild Things” a sister attempts to heal an ever-growing rift between her brother and their mother before death intervenes. Because she cannot do this directly, the sister decides to implore her brother with a story, a fable of sorts, conceding whether or not he ‘listens’ and whether or not he ‘hears’ is now a roll of the dice. Towards the end of the story, she thinks to herself: “We stand side by side, shoulders touching. The wind blows through us, a wild, intelligent wind. The white bird flies directly into the sun” (TUEOL 53).

This is a placid and surrendering image in sharp and violent contrast to the young brother and sister in “The Forgotten Children” who are alternately brutalized and loved, yet fiercely loving parents who fail to protect them in any fundamental way. In “Forgotten Children” Divakaruni’s female narrator recalls her experience as a poor young girl living hand to mouth, she is constantly uprooted as her family moves from one northern Indian factory town to another because her tempestuous father cannot hold down a job. Because he always manages to find a new one because he is a skilled machinist. The eleven year old girl who is the narrator of the story has fantasy since her childhood days. When the story opens she says,
Those rum-scented evenings when Father’s slurred yells slammed into the peeling walls of wherever we were living at the moment, I would lie wedged behind a sofa or under a bed, and close my eyes and slide into it. Sometimes my brother lay there also, curled tight against me, sucking his thumb, although Mother had told him he was too old to be doing that. (TUEOL 145)

She cultivates a rich imaginative life which she shares with her eight year old brother. When they live in the servant’s quarters where the bamboo has grown so thick she cooks and cleans and teaches her brother everything she learns at school. She catches fish in the stream behind the cottage, lots of fish and sells some of it in the bazaar to buy rice, salt, shoes. They begin to look like the children in the family-planning poster. When her innocent brother asks his sister whether she will be able to catch many fish she replies positively. At this juncture, she tells her brother,

In our fantasy, no one drags us over the cracked drive-way so that its exposed brick scours and backs. In the dark garage, no one lights a match and brings it so close that we can feel the heat of it on our eyelids. In our fantasy, entire sections of words have disappeared from the dictionary: fear, fracture, furious, fatal, father. We keep on living like this. (TUEOL 153)
The sister in this story attempts to forge a perverse sort of normality and shelter her younger brother throughout the story. Towards the end of the story, the sister tells her brother, “Perhaps to disappear is the next best thing to being forgotten” (TUEOL 165). Here, Divakaruni describes the abuse of the children in a matter of fact way and this unemotional tone is unnerving, but achieves what she probably set out to do: enrage the reader before they even realize what is happening.

The stories in The Unknown Errors of Our Lives depict the external struggle to find a balance between the pull of home and the allure for change. The female protagonists of eight of the nine stories in 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. Most of them depict life in East and West perceptively. The problem of acculturation is dealt with in “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter”, a story in which a widow discovers that her old-fashioned ways are an embarrassment to her daughter-in-law.

And the post suicidal character Leela in “The Lives of Strangers” discovers her own healing power and strength as she cares for and grows intimate with the older mother like figure Mrs. Dasin. There are characters who fail to crate coping mechanisms to survive. A young American woman’s pilgrimage in Kashmir is the subject of “The Lives of Strangers”. In this story Divakaruni relates the experiences of two
women who make such a journey to a sacred place in Kashmir. This story is about Leela, a young Indian woman from America who visits her aunt in India. They go on a pilgrimage in Kashmir with a group of women. One of these women is Mrs. Das whom the rest of the women believe that she was born under an unlucky star and they all had fear in their mind that her bad luck may rub off on them. Divakaruni does a fantastic job in this story by portraying Leela’s struggle with guilt and a conscience that directs her to do what is right despite what others say. Communication gap and distancing in brother-sister relationship are the pivotal themes of “The Intelligence of Wild Things”.

Ruchira, the protagonist of The Unknown Errors of Our Lives, while packing up for her forthcoming marriage with Biren, discovers her childhood ‘book of errors’, a teenage notebook in which she writes down the ways of improving her life. She has written down the mistakes committed by her from her teens. According to Ruchira, errors are the part of everyone’s life. If there are error-free people in the world she does not want to know them. Her errors include her dating in college with Indian boys, white boys, and black boys and even with a young man from Bolivia with green eyes. She has decided to show the book of errors to Biren. She expects her husband to know everything about her errors she has committed. Biren too reveals her about his ex-lover Arlene with whom he has very close relationship before Ruchira enters
his life. Through these incidents, Divakaruni conveys to the readers the type of life lead by people in abroad.

This type of culture gives a real shock to the people who are brought up in Indian culture. The dichotomy of cultures are so well evoked in this story in which Divakaruni’s gift for writing image-filled prose illuminates Berkeley resident Ruchira’s gift for painting mythic figures from Indian legends and poignantly underscores a very contemporary marriage dilemma, which Ruchira solves by intuiting her dead grandmother’s advice. Ruchira has great interest in paintings for which she draws inspiration from Biren. In fact her favourite college class is “Myth and Literature”. But when she started painting she never talked to anyone about it.

Even her parents don’t know. When they came for dinner, she removed the canvases from the wall and hid them in her closet. She sprayed the room with Eucalyptus Mist and lit incense sticks so they wouldn’t smell the turpentine. The act of painting was the first really risky thing she had done in her life”. (TUEOL 219)

She has painted Mythic images from Indian legends like Hanuman, Kama dhenu and Jatayu. But she gives human faces to these images. She gives her father’s face to Hanuman; grand mother’s face to Kama dhenu and her grand father’s face to Jatayu, and she is painting the pictures of ‘Kalpa Taru’ for Biren as her wedding gift which will be really
liked by him. One can understand that Ruchira turns to creative expression by painting mythic Indian legends passed down from her grandmother as a way to channel her frustration, understand her experiences and come into a sense of self-worth in the face of her new life as an arranged wife. Ruchira’s painting and connection to a matriarchal oral tradition act as her slave.

Equally excellent is “The Names of Stars in Bengali”, the beautifully nuanced story of a San Francisco wife and mother who returns to her native village in India to visit her mother, in which each understands afresh the emotional dislocation caused by stepping into a time machine called immigration that subjects them to the alien habit of a world they had imagined imperfectly. All of the stories in The Unknown Errors of Our Lives are touching tales of lapsed communication, inarticulate love and redemptive memories. They illuminate the difficult process of adjustment for women in whom memory and duty must coexist with a new, often painful and disorienting set of standards. In an interview with Esha Bhattacharjee published in The Sunday Magazine on 2 February 2003, when asked what she felt she was an Indian, an American, or an Indian living in the United States, she confessed:

I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I’m an Indian, but living in America for 19 years has taught me many things. It
has helped me look at both the cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate. (Bhattacharjee 3)

In “The Love of a Good” Man the protagonist Monisha learns not to bury her feelings deep inside “like shrapnel” but rather to find strength by giving voice to her and her mother’s abandonment by a man – the father who took “my mother’s life, precious and fragile as this silk I’m wearing, and ripped it apart” (TUEOL 111). It is a tale of a happily married woman who must confront her past when her long-estranged father begs to meet his only grandson. This story touches one more than the others and it typifies Divakaruni’s style. Story telling is not so much weaving as it is unraveling. She pulls at the threads of perception, memory and pretense that hold together a character’s core truth until each has been unraveled to expose the bare knot that precariously holds that truth together. And in the unraveling, a far more insightful truth is incarnate.

In this story, the adult Monisha tells us that she has not been totally honest in relating her feelings about her father’s abandonment of her mother and herself when she was a child. She asks herself, “But perhaps my first mistake lies in trying to find motive, in thinking of humans as rational beings whose actions spring from logical causes” (TUEOL 112 ). She both dreads and longs for a chance to reunite with
her father. She misjudges, she presents herself inaccurately, she feels not worthy, and she recognizes that the answers to her questions about why her father left cease to matter. And in this recognition, she sees a “little thing - not forgiveness, she says –but the first drop in what could become an ocean of absolution for her father, and more important of herself”. (TUEOL112)

Such enlightenment comes frequently to Divakaruni’s characters. Change is crueler than loss; illusions are essential. All these truths are given voice by a master of human nature. A master of the blues, Divakaruni has said that her writing is a means of remembering the impressions of her Calcutta childhood. Her memories weave a tapestry rich in cultural myths, sights, sounds, smells and textures that she uses to colour the relationships among her characters: fresh ground ginger and chilli paste, his smell of Teen Patti tobacco, hers of sweet Neem soap, a worn silk sari, the call of the knife-sharpeners “scissors-knives-choppers,” and the faces Ruchira imposes of her loved ones on paintings of Indian mythological figures including the face of her future husband’s unborn child with another woman.

The story “The Blooming Season for Cacti” is filled with the richness of character and imagery. In “The Blooming Season for Cacti” one can find the two women who uprooted from their native land by violence and deception find unexpected solace in each other. She tells
of both the geographic movement and the internal shift of a heroine who
discovers her unknown self. When the story opens, the narrator Mira is
found landing California from Bombay. The description of California’s
desert shows the poetic skill of Divakaruni. The description goes like
this:

The sand rippled into a thousand lines of cursive, a dangerous
alphabet. Everywhere, mica glittered like eyes. Above, vultures
waited to swoop down on the helpless skitter of smaller creatures.

(TUEOL 168)

After the communal riot in Bombay which kills many Indian’s lives she
has come to Texas where her brother lives with the hope that her
brother will help her in getting a job. She gets the job as a cashier in
Malik’s restaurant in Sacramento which is run by her brother’s friend
Malik. And she has been provided a room in an apartment - building
along with Priya who is also working there. Priya shares her personal
life with Mira. Through the story of Priya Divakaruni gives awareness to
the readers about NRI grooms in which most of the parents of India are
interested in. The story goes like this:

He saw her on a trip back to India – by chance, just like in the
movies! He’d gone to his cousin’s village for a wedding, and saw
her in the crowd of guests. He liked her so much he married her
that same week, didn’t even ask for dowry. Her parents were
delighted; they knew how rich he was. But when she got there she found he was married already, even had kids and all. So she tried to kill herself. Slit her wrists, right here in this building – he’d put her on the top floor, in the best apartment. What a mess it was, ambulances, police, scared us all to death. (TUEOL 178-79)

One can find the theme of nostalgia from Mira’s frequent recollection of her lifestyle in Bombay even after having left the land. The western culture where a man can have more than one wife is portrayed by Divakaruni through Radhika who is the second wife of Malik with whom she stays in the apartment after Priya leaves for India. Again back in Dallas where her sister-in-law’s house is situated her sister-in-law and her brother compel her to marry Arpan Basu which Mira refuses. But the same Mira has started moving very closely with Ajit who is one of the regular customers to Malik’s restaurant. Here, Divakaruni implies how some Indian girls like Mira gets easily affected due to the western culture. She fails to understand her brother’s intention of trying to provide her a secured life in an alien land. At this juncture Mira’s sister-in-law remarks, “Time doesn’t wait for women to recover. Today the men are buzzing around Mira. Tomorrow, who knows?” (TUEOL183).

One can find Mira busy in reading the library book The Great Deserts of the American West. She reads,
The blooming season for cacti is very short, a few weeks at most in the spring. But during this time the barren and sere landscape is transformed by the vibrant coronets of hedgehog cactus, candy cactus and prickly pear that push out through the plant’s spiny apartment”. (TUEOL 186)

How the innocent Mira who has the greatest taste for reading books gets spoiled in the western culture is revealed to the readers through Divakaruni’s writing:

And even though I’ve never danced in my life, in the dimly lit nightclub where music ricochets off every glistening surface and swaying bodies brush against us unselfconsciously, I find that I can do it. I shimmy my shoulders and how throw back my head, dancing my way into the new life I’d begun to dream – it seems so long ago – on the Greyhound bus. When Ajit spins me so I end up against his chest, I don’t shove away as an earlier Mira would have done, the Mira on whose hair rust flecks from a water tank had settled like dried blood. I lean there a moment, savoring the wholesome, lemony smell of his skin. When after a walk along the riverfront with its glimmering waters, he kisses me, I find it pleasant, and not the disgusting, spit and groping occurrence I’d feared. And when, somewhat timidly, he asks if I would come to
his apartment, I am not outraged or even embarrassed. (TUEOL 198-99)

There is nothing in these stories but rich, pungent, fertile involvement between the readers and the characters. Thus, 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.

In *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* Divakaruni uses the short story form to bring to life a complex array of South Asian characters and their struggles to survive within the restrictive social conditions of rural and urban India and a suburban USA. Characters at the social margins take center stage in these stories. Through this collection, Divakaruni not only presents the human problems but also brings out the cultural differences between Americans and Indians in an indirect way. The readers can identify the bicultural elements, almost in all the stories. She inserts the cultural details in every situation.

Chitra Banerjee’s stories are like short journeys that delve into the emotion of her characters leaving us closer to them than some authors can accomplish in an entire book. Each story is about a choice made, not always the best one for the moment but an adventure in living none-the-less. Divakaruni expresses the human feelings very effectively not in one story but throughout the book. She has enlightened us with her
book of tales. She has made us feel at home in her characters heart. She writes tales almost any woman can understand. Many of us grew up with the idea that we were moving towards some destiny. Often this was the way our own life would reveal itself over time. An aspect of the progress of our life might be a pilgrimage to a ‘holy site’. And many of us have had the reaction of the young woman in The Unknown Errors of Our Lives who discovers the unknown errors are the ones we commit unknowingly over and over. Many women opt to make their own choices like one of the characters in “The Names of the Stars in Bengali”.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is often accused of gross misrepresentation and consequently pronounced guilty of pandering to colonial perceptions of India by their tongue-in-cheek presentations of specific Indian traditions. This research work attempts to demonstrate that instead of scouring for misrepresentations, it is much more enriching to look at the redefined gender roles in the works of expatriate women like Divakaruni and how that overturns the traditional western stereotype of Asian women as submissive and overtly sexualized beings. Here is a focus on how the sense of exile that migration brings functions in a positive manner in her writings. Writing gives her vide opportunity for the writers like Divakaruni to articulate their needs and desires in a new, comparatively liberated society and thus creating a
new identity. They are aware of their already exiled or marginalized state in the male-dominated Indian society.

In fact, writing is a way of going beyond silence. The writings of Indian Diasporic women are therefore articulations of the silences that had permeated their stifled existence. The angst of a transplanted life as well as issues of gender, power and ethnicity can now find manifestation in her works. Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Lives* invalidates the accusation of misrepresentation brought against immigrant women writers. By giving voices to the women and making them perform both acts of agency and resistance by defying and countering patriarchal authority, writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are in fact redefining the notions of Indian feminity.

While the patriarchal structures try to validate an essential national identity, the female protagonists in the works of Divakaruni attempt to fracture these identifications that are plotted along the axes of nation, family and the gendered subject. The stories in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* reflect a major area of anxiety for first generation immigrants from South Asia. The tradition of Indian culture implicates individuals in gender hierarchies and naturalizes these inequities through stereotypes of masculinity and feminity. The stories are about women’s relationships with one another as friends, as daughters and mothers. This ironical contrast is perhaps the loudest
critique in an otherwise subdued tonal structure, where differential patterns of representation in each of the stories open up original and unique ways of locating the diasporic's cultural and textual space. The protagonists of the stories play out their conflicts in the theatre of the family. It is the internal logic of the characters that work through and re-imagine identity in the new spatial parameters of the diasporic world. The anxieties and impossibilities of assimilation is a common thematic pattern in diasporic literature.

An understanding of national identity belies its multiplicity and blocks the perception of cultural practices as living processes that can be challenged, modified and transformed. The strategies of national identification that function in the name of the people hinge on an artificial binary of tradition and modernity. Tradition is good, essentially indigenous and uninterpellated by western influence while modernity is evil, degraded and a western ethos. For the female protagonists in Divakaruni’s short stories, clothes, education, thinking about their rights and pleasures become a signifier of modernity.

In the stories in The Unknown Errors of Lives, the challenge to normative narratives of nationhood is launched through the explorations of female subjectivity. The diasporic community valorizes an unquestioned perpetuation of traditions through even the colonizing influence of the dominant culture on the one hand and the
contaminating influence of other minority groups on the other. When confronted with the threat of co-optation and assimilation by discourses regarded as western, South Asian communities use women as historic signifying objects who are made to be the bearers of culture. Women on whose bodies, cultures are mapped and re-mapped become the targets of protection, so that they continue to function as stable signifiers of womanhood for a community anxious about preserving its identity in foreign soil. In any encounter involving the east and the west, selfhood and nationhood are problematized. Defined against the external threat of westernization, the woman’s body in a foreign land becomes inflated as the metaphoric co-relates of the nation.

Circumscribed by the makers of traditional identity, women find themselves living their lives as symbols of a national/communal identity, symbols that are often easily challenged in the home country but acquire a particular charge in the diaspora. But the attempt on the part of patriarchal powers to retain the homogeneity of their discourse is continually undermined by the female protagonists in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. 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 of competing paradigms of traditional identity and modern identity. Divakaruni’s protagonists often interrogate their own westernization, but they do not want to be pushed
back into playing crusaders for their community. In the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, connections between women consolidates the platform from which women struggle to find their identity.

One can find the theme of cultural heritage and cultural shock in the story "The Intelligence of Wild Things". The sister in this story comes to Vermont to meet her brother Tarun. She has come all the way from Sacramento to inform her brother Tarun about the dying condition of their mother in Calcutta. The readers can easily find out the vast change that takes place in Tarun after moving to Vermont. Because Tarun in Calcutta is very fond of his mother. He never wants to leave his mother under any circumstances. In fact, he has no idea of settling in America. It is due to the pressure given by his mother he has come to Vermont to pursue his higher studies. But his sister settles in Sacramento after her marriage with Sandeep. Even after coming to America his sister sticks to the Indian tradition whereas Tarun has become so Americanized in his behaviour.

Tarun who loves his mother more than anything else in the world does not even drop a letter to his mother in Calcutta which makes his mother worried greatly. It is very important to know about Tarun in Indian soil. A few weeks before Tarun arrives in Vermont, the mother writes a letter to her daughter in Sacramento. The content of the letter reads like this:
Today Taru and I had a terrible fight. He still refuses to go to college in America, although his acceptance letter has arrived. He says he wants to stay with me. But I’m terrified to keep him here. You know how bad the Naxal movement is right now in Calcutta. Every morning they find more bodies of young men in ditches. Taru keeps telling me he’s safe, he doesn’t belong to any political party. But that means nothing. Just last week there was a murder right on our street. Remember Supriyo, that good-looking boy? He didn’t belong to any party either. I heard from Manada Pishi next door that his face was sliced to shreds. His poor mother has had a nervous breakdown. I reminded Taru of that. He still wouldn’t listen. Finally I called him a coward, hiding from the world behind his mother’s sari, a fool who lived in a fantasy land. How could he throw away this opportunity, I shouted, when I’d worked so hard to bring him this far. I said he was ungrateful, a burden to me. Didn’t he see that I couldn’t sleep at night, worrying, because he was here? You can imagine how I hated saying it—I could see the abhimaan on his face, like a wound—but it was the only thing I knew that would make him go. (TUEOL 41-42)

Through the character of Tarun, Divakaruni means as how boys easily get accustomed in an alien land by adopting the new western culture whereas the girl is not able to do so. The sister in “The Intelligence of Wild Things” maintains the cultural heritage of India whereas her
brother is not able to. Divakaruni also focuses on the character of mothers in India who are known for their ever lasting love and affection for their children even when they become grown up boys and girls. Through Divakaruni’s portrayal of Tarun’s mother one can understand that the love of one’s mother remains the same for ever.

In the story “The Names of Stars in Bengali” one can find the most beautiful description of natural atmosphere which shows the poetic excellence of Divakaruni. The two male children in this story are known as ‘Little Americans’, as they are brought up in America by a Bengali mother who moves to America after her marriage. As they are growing up in a foreign land they are not conversant with Bengali language which is their mother tongue. As little boys they are fond of listening to stories narrated by their grand mother during their visit to India. The Bengali words misspelt by the little boys provide laughter to the readers. Not only their mother and their grandmother but the boys too laugh at their pronunciation. At this context Divakaruni says, “Then they’d laugh again, they hadn’t laughed so much in their entire lives, they’d never thought India would be this much fun, they wished they could stay forever”. (TUEOL 239) One can find the theme of nostalgia when the boys’ mother starts thinking about her swimming class experience at the age of twelve while her children were busy in playing in the pond in India. Divakaruni narrates the childhood experience of the mother thus:
There was an incident. She has forgotten the details by now. She only remembers the boys waiting by the road, smoking beedies as she returned home from the pond. That sour, wild stench. Those thin corkscrews of smoke. They’d shouted comments, made vulgar kissing sounds, though she had been careful to wrap a large towel around her frocked and knickered body. She had run home, her heart rattling like a stone inside a box that someone shook and shook. It was her first encounter with terror.

(TUEOL 245)

As Divakaruni is an Indian born writer she makes use of the Indian terms throughout her writing. This story is not an exception. The readers can find many Indian terms like ‘mothballs’ and so on. The word ‘mothballs’ captures the readers’ eyes towards the climax of “The Names of Stars in Bengali” when Divakaruni writes,

When her father died, her mother packed his books into a green trunk filled with mothballs and had it carried into the storage space under the staircase. Maybe there’s a book in there, listing the names of stars in Bengali and explaining how to identify them, which she can read to her husband and children. As soon as she gets home, she will ask her mother. She leans forward until her mouth is close to the cousin’s ears. Faster, she says. Faster.

(TUEOL 268)
One can understand that Divakaruni’s stories are really beautiful, pleasurable and challenging. Cultural miscommunications are deftly wrought and are heart-breaking in their clarity.

Divakaruni’s empathy with her characters shines through her writings. A current of compassion and heartache runs through this remarkable collection from old immigrant conundrums. Divakaruni has spun something wondrous and new; she has created the stories that we will require in this age of diasporas. Divakaruni is a brilliant storyteller; she illuminates the world with her artistry and shakes the reader with her love. *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is a collection, intelligently conceived and passionately written. The stories illuminate the pain, loss and alienation of the immigrant experience and transform them into the drama of our common human existence. Besides elegance and delight, we can also find wisdom here. Divakaruni’s elegance of her writing and her innate empathy has won her fans. Indeed, in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* shaped by the voice of a true storyteller, each piece is filled with private charm and wise empathy. Along with the repudiation of the conventions of romance, Divakaruni also deconstructs the idea of America as a retreat against gendered oppressions and offers a far more nuanced understanding of the geographies of suppression, women’s desires and circuitous passages to fulfillment.
The stories in this book are crafted extremely well. They reveal Chitra Divakaruni’s ability to blend the sounds and textures of Bengal as well as of South Asian-America within the cadences of twentieth-century American English. The author is also able to avoid the pitfalls of over translation and explicit, lengthy explanations of cultures and languages. And her concerns about the lives of women, mainly of women from India, do not turn her stories into academic documentation of socioeconomic, cultural problems and solutions.

The characters in her short stories do not remain dazed into inaction by the memories and traditions of India. They do not exist on the fringes and margins of American society. The lives of these women lead as individuals, as members of a family and of a society fled into and flow through the main texts of contemporary American society and American literature. This collection of short stories *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* reminds us that so called ‘marginalized’ and so called ‘ethnic’ literature is literature which very often makes its presence felt as the omnipresent, impossible to ignore spaces in a society or on a page or in literature. It is a margin that cannot be ignored because it is where the voices are neither silent nor weak. And in that, Divakaruni’s works reminds one of some of Bharati Mukherjee’s stories. Bharati Mukherjee resorts very often and with undeniable skill to portraits of excellent literary stereotypes who continue to function within their stereotyped roles. But, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays characters,
mainly women, who break out of their stereotyped roles to become distinct, literary individuals. The women in the short stories remind the reader of the widely different forms of action taken by either the famous or the notorious mythological, legendary and historical women of India. But the women portrayed by Divakaruni are not obscured behind centuries of sentimentally pious, self-serving and patronizing readings of their actions they refuse to be hidden behind the roles and patterns set for their lives by their families and their cultures.

Many folks of Indian descent migrated to the United States from India as well as places other than India. One reason Americans may identify with Divakaruni’s stories is because we are a nation of immigrants, but folks of Indian descent, folks blend relatively seamlessly into U.S. culture because many of them speak English from birth, hold middle class values and migrate from what used to be British East Africa, England, Canada, Fiji and the West Indies. The Indian diaspora took place long ago and since the U.S. is a former British colony, folks from other British colonies have much in common with us including our language.

Divakaruni writes about women from India and sometimes also about women from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Her books are inhabited by women facing different types of oppressive conditions: forced into detrimental arranged marriages, enslaved by a husband’s extended
family for childlessness, socially isolated because of premature widowhood, forced to abort female fetuses, burnt for dowries, beaten by husbands, made to co-exist with a husband’s second wife, compelled to burn at the funeral pyre of a husband, and expected to sacrifice life to the service of the temple as a living goddess. Her volume of short stories reconstructs the colonial binaries of East versus West as primitive versus civilized. Many of the short stories celebrate Indian women’s Immigration to the United States as a journey from oppressed or depressed conditions to freedom and discovery of self with the inspiration of western influences. In demonstrating her indebtedness to western feminist notions and in voicing criticism of women’s subjugation in India, Divakaruni repeatedly maligns far too many facets of Indian society and culture. The culture people of a once colonized nation are represented as primitive, outmoded, inferior, and evil, in comparison to the Euro-derived culture and values of the new centre of the world towards which all the characters of Divakaruni’s stories and novels gravitate.

For all of the pain, and oppression of women in the traditions, myths and histories that Divakaruni invokes in her poetry, short stories and novels, the writer hardly finds anything that could be redeeming, inspiring, or liberating. It seems that the literary, cultural and political traditions of the Indian sub-continent have never produced any resistance from oppression in its entire history which is of course far
from reality. Indian women in past and contemporary history and Indian male and female writers have spoken up for women's rights long before feminism became a fully realized notion in the west.

A current of compassion and heartache runs through this remarkable collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* from old immigrant conundrums Divakaruni has spun something wondrous and new; she has created the stories that we will require in this age of Diasporas. Divakaruni is a brilliant storyteller; she illuminates the world with her artistry and shakes the reader with her love. This is an extraordinary collection, intelligently conceived and passionately written. The stories illuminate the pain, loss, and alienation of the immigrant experience and transform them into the drama of our common human existence. Besides elegance and delight, we can also find wisdom here.

Divakaruni’s writing is complex, filled with imagery, lyrical and very much like the tales told by that great Canadian author Alice Munroe. If one likes Alice Munro’s short stories one will like Divakaruni’s tales. Some stories in this collection are definitely stronger than others. But over all, the collection offers an excellent look at the Indian immigrant experience from the female point of view. Through her short stories Divakaruni has proven herself to be an important writer of twentieth century American literature as well as of world literature in English as it is being written today.
WORKS CITED


