Chapter III

Cultural Cringe

Indian Writing in English now enters a new phase, Indian Women Diaspora – “the phase of an inimitable representation of the New Indian Woman who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the unconscious dawn of the patriarchal India” (Mala, 50). This new woman thinks with her keen power of perception that she has been viewed as the object of the cultural/social oppressions, and so she attempts to rebel against them, consciously or unconsciously, within her living space. Though her relentless battle has prolonged for several decades together, she still reflects the inability to reject her cultural/social background totally and therefore she appears standing at the crossroads caught between tradition and modernity. But, as a valiant warrior, she continues her struggle as if it is one of her major objectives in life to explode the myth of man's superiority and the myth of woman being a paragon of all virtues.

Many women writers in Indian Writing in English, by highlighting Indian woman’s resistance to marginalization and her ideological cultural assimilation, have captured multiple natures of the domestic spaces in the changing world. Following Desai, Sahgal, Deshpande, and other writers who have documented the female resistance against a patriarchally-maintained Indian culture, Divakaruni, comparatively a new face to the literary arena, re-incarnates the new Indian woman and reinforces the female dilemma in her works. For her, literature represents the predicament of the Indian woman placed between two poles: tradition and modernity,
and her vision of the Indian woman tends to be optimistic, though radical. She writes, in general, on feminine themes: the status of women in India and America; the feminine sensibility that gets adapted to new ways of life when her cultural traditions are in conflict with new cultural expectations; the complexities of love among family members, between lovers, and spouses; and the experiences of women in their perpetual quest for identities in America.

Many of Divakaruni’s works, which are set in any one of the metropolises in the United States, expound the immigrant experience, specifically, of Indians who settle in the US and evaluate the treatment of Indian-American women both in India and America. These works are “concerned with the emotions of [Indian] women” settled in the US who are caught between two conflicting cultures and “whose lives are affected by the Indian tradition” (Gearhart: 2001, online). They suggest that life in America, for them, is not a bed of roses. It is all the same for them either in India or America, and indeed they may confront more difficulties because of the contradictory feelings they often experience as they are torn between Indian cultural expectations and American life. Divakaruni never fails to expose the adverse conditions of women living in a new environment with the legacy of good-old Indian traditional values. She highlights their inner struggle and sufferings and also raises many pertinent questions regarding the feminine sensibility, individuality, place and role in the family and society of the modern, educated, sensitive, young woman rooted in and shaped by the Indian customs and cultural traditions.

The problems presented by Divakaruni are relevant to the sensibilities of human beings in the age of globalization. The clash of cultures associated with myriad options of lifestyles in different geographical settings, and the trauma of
rootlessness in the process of hybridization, are some of the problems she elaborates in her writings. Her protagonists lurk at the threshold of two worlds, myth and reality, probing for authenticity and perfection, which ultimately forces them to sever their ties with the root of their heritage and localism. The dilemma faced by them is identical to the postmodern dilemma faced by all those caught at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. “When certain aspects of the conventional pattern of life become morbid and tormenting, one wishes to tear apart all boundaries and escape into a world where everything is replete with novelty, glory and adventure” (Sanasam et al., 34). Thus, Divakaruni voices a prevalent attitude found present among the immigrants. She exults with the same in the sense of rootlessness and uses it as a literary stratagem to explore the possibilities of living in a new world.

Divakaruni’s works have to be viewed as her ambitious attempt to trace the evolutionary chart of the feminine experience from the dark room of the traditional Indian household to the arena of modern political and social activity. The change in position is a reliable index to social change in general. The personality of the typical Indian woman has so far been overwhelmingly swamped by the male-dominated attitudes against the backdrop of an exclusively male-oriented culture. She has been left with no mind or personality of her own. She even derives pleasure in the suffering that has been inflicted upon her by the wanton male. This pathetic condition of woman leads to the debate, the equality-difference debate, everywhere in India, which comes as central to feminist analysis and discussion. It is a debate over whether woman should struggle to be equal to man or she should valorize her differences from man.

Woman, who has been relegated to an inferior or secondary status in societies
because of her natural and sexual difference, is seen as being closer to nature in their physiology, their social role and their psyche, while man is perceived as closer to culture, more suited for public roles and political associations. For this reason, the former has been confined to roles in the home rather than allowed to accede to powerful public positions. She is judged to be less reasonable than man, more ruled by emotion, and thus incapable of political decision-making. She, as a consequence, develops a strong aversion against her own prejudiced, one-eyed culture, for adopting double-standard policies, and for it does not give due weightage to her status in society. This strong dislike and the subsequent dissatisfaction with the basic tenets and beliefs of one’s own culture is called “Cultural Cringe”.

The term, “Cultural Cringe” is defined, in cultural studies and social anthropology, as “an internalized inferiority complex which causes people in a country to dismiss their own culture as inferior to the cultures of other countries” (Cultural cringe: 2010, online). It was first used by the Melbourne critic and social commentator, A.A. Phillips, after the Second World War, in his investigations into the inherent feelings of inferiority that local intellectuals struggled against, and which was most clearly pronounced in the Australian theatre, music, art and letters. The only remedy to overcome this weakness and to hold or project themselves erect in public was either to follow overseas fashions or, more often, to spend a period of time working in abroad. The term has now become common to refer to any dissatisfied feelings or embarrassment caused by one’s belief that one’s own country occupies a subordinated cultural place. People who hold this attitude incline themselves to devalue their own country’s cultural life and to venerate the supposed superior culture of another country.
The cultural cringe is manifested in the individuals in the form of cultural alienation, “a process of devaluing or abandoning one’s own cultural values or cultural background” (Cultural Cringe: 2010, online). This cultural alienation is similar to a sense of dislocation or displacement the subordinated people feel when they look to a distant nation for their values. Culturally alienated societies often exhibit a weak sense of cultural self-identity and place little worth on themselves. The most common manifestation of this alienation among peoples from postcolonial nations at present is an insatiable hunger for all things American, from television and music, to clothing, slang, even names. Indian women who are pushed to the secondary status in the total set-up of their own culture give little value to their social customs as they feel alienated. Divakaruni makes a meticulous and painstaking study on these unsatisfied feelings, otherwise called the cultural cringe of the Indian women immigrants in her writing.

Simone de Beauvoir’s famous assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (297) summarizes the argument that women’s inferior position is not a “natural” or biological fact but an artificial creation by society. One is born as the “female” of the human race but it is only the society and their traditions that construct “femininity” in her and define what is “feminine”, and proscribe how she should behave. More important factor is, as Jane Freedman says, “this social construction of ‘woman’ has meant a continued oppression of women” (14) whose individual identity is not positively and open-mindedly realized in social life. As the woman is not accepted as individual entity, she has to face inevitable hardships not only from the external world but also from the near and dear ones. She loses her
identity and sense of belonging and feels as if she is left in the wilderness. These people who are the victims of the cultural constraints, social ills, and traditional yokes are obsessed with the problem of desolation and emptiness in life. The social roles and modes of behavior, that culture has assigned, have kept them in an inferior position to that of man. This social construct of the eternal feminine, which has reduced them to a position of social and economic inferiority, causes a sense of embarrassment over their national culture and to regard it inferior to other cultures.

The woman’s sphere of life and activity, in the complex fabric of the Indian family, society, and culture, has been bounded by the protective and prohibitive walls raised by moralists since the middle ages. The taboos laid down by Manu, the ancient Indian sage and teacher of sacred rites and laws, and also the author of Laws of Manu or Manava Dharma-Sastra [written in Sanskrit, comprising 2684 verses in twelve books], have been adhered during the centuries followed, to restrict woman’s life to the family. In the family itself, her position is almost invariably an inferior one. “No act is to be done according to (her) own will by a young girl, a young woman, or even by an old woman, though in (their own) houses” (Manu, 130). This is the fate of woman in India. He declares: “In her childhood (a girl) should be under the will of her father; in (her) youth, of (her) husband; her husband being dead, of her sons; a woman should never enjoy her own will” (Manu, 130). Such edicts of austerity, propounded by moralists like Manu, have been embedded as an essential part on the Indian psyche from the beginning of the Indian civilization. The statement of the French feminist, Helene Cixious, in her essay, “Sorties”, echoes similar views about the role and status of woman in general:

In philosophy woman is always on the side of passivity. Every
time the question comes up; when we examine kinship structures; whenever a family model is brought into play; [...] it’s the same story. It all refers back to man, to his torment, his desire to be (at) the origin. (265)

Phenomenal progress has been registered in economic, political, technological and industrial fields, but the social structure of contemporary India remains tattooed with certain taboos when it comes to the question of woman. Indian woman’s predicament in this typical Indian milieu, which is like an octopus that binds her hand and foot with its long, supple and insidious tentacles, is intolerable and annoying. She is expected to be cheerful and clever in household business, with the furniture well cleaned, and with not a free hand in expenditure. Furniture here is to be taken symbolically, signifying the meanest jobs which are the bounden duty of the housewife and which she must do with complete dedication and diligence. She not only has to please the master when he is alive, but also cannot discard him even after his death, which means she cannot re-marry after he is no more and after she is rendered helpless and vulnerable. The force of this tradition is still operative and prevalent in many parts of the country.

The ancient traditional thought and action with regard to the secondary status of woman in India is reflected in the Indian classical literatures. For instance, in *Shakuntala*, Kalidasa, the dramatist of the play, presents various binary oppositions like nature-culture, rich-poor, man-woman, and hunter-hunted. He, on more than one occasion, represents Dushyanta as a bee that ever seeks fresh honey. His act of rejecting Shakuntala knowingly degrades his love into disgusting gross lust. It is painful to see the fate of such Shakuntalas who are being exploited and then
abandoned by this rake who could afford this and remain the centre of power, for he is a king. Shakuntala, in the play, is portrayed as an obedient and beautiful beloved with bashfulness of a courtesan. She, as submissive and lacking in confidence, may be viewed as a product of the patriarchal society in which women are subservient to men. The acceptance of this tradition, enunciated by the patriarchy, signals prospective decline in the status and position of women in society.

The imagery of the play, *Shakuntala* (Kalidasa: 2007, online) reveals the subordinate position of woman. The wife, in the play, is referred to as a creeper, and the man as a tree. Further, she is not supposed to go against her husband, even if ill-treated by him. Kanva, the hermit-father, says, in his piece of advice, to his foster-daughter, Shakuntala,

> Obey your elders; and be very kind
> To rivals; never be perversely blind
> and angry with your husband, ever though he should prove less faithful than a man might be.

(Act IV, Scene II)

Thereafter when the hermit-mother, Gautami says, while Shakuntala follows her weeping and lamenting piteously, “what can the poor child do with a husband base enough to reject her?” (Act V), Kanva’s pupil, Sharngarava turns to her and shouts angrily, “Do you dare show independence?” then he continues, “Listen. [...] But if know your vows are pure, obey your husband and endure” (Act V).

Scenes like these in old Indian classical literatures in a way comment on the subservient position of a wife in comparison to her husband in the past ages. She was the husband’s property to be mastered and abandoned if convenient for him. In the
next act of the play, Kalidasa introduces a minor story of Dhanmitra, a childless merchant, who died in a ship disaster. The king says as he (Dhanmitra) had great riches, they should go to the child which was about to be born to one of the several wives he had. It means that the unborn child is entitled to the father’s property but not the living widow, suggesting once again the subordination of woman. Joanna Russ points out: “Culture is male [...]. There is a female culture, but it is an underground unofficial, minor culture, occupying a small corner of what we think of officially as possible human experience. Both men and women in our culture conceive the single point of view – the male” (4)

The dictum laid down by moralists like Manu and others that a woman should have no freedom is so deeply ingrained in women of India. As a dutiful wife, she does not even eat her food till her husband is fed, and the reward for it is a taunting comment: “What a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband [...]” (Narayan, 11). Total submission even when the husband neglects her is also an idea ingrained in the Indian women. She adjusts to the swiftly changing moods of the husband. The majority of wives in India are like Savitri [in Narayan’s The Dark Room] suffering, tolerating injustice helplessly, with their brains washed by traditional taboos and become inert economically and still more emotionally. For them, the traditional ideal held forth is that of merging the woman’s identity in that of her husband’s – having no views or voice different from her husband’s. Savitri says, “I don’t possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father’s, her husband’s or, her son’s” (Narayan, 88).

The patriarchal practices which reduce woman’s status to inferior social beings
are perpetuated by myths and traditions which unfortunately have been embedded in the fabric of Indian society. Woman is considered “as the living embodiment of the spirit of service and sacrifice” (Gandhi: 2001, online). She must be virtuous, chaste, submissive, and must derive pleasure in these relationships. The faintest of any such idea that “every being exists primarily for the realization of oneself can never occur to her in the wildest of her dreams” (Jha, 95). In such a patriarchal society, woman is brought up under the strict control of the any one section of the male domination. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage market. She is groomed to be an object for sale right from her childhood. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent individual self. The decision regarding her career or even marriage is taken by her father, brother or mother. Kamala Das writes in her poem, entitled “An Introduction”,

[...] I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair when
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten. (36)

A woman is always someone’s daughter, someone’s wife or someone’s mother, minus her own identity. She resents these culturally constructed norms which relegate her position to a subject to man in various forms.

The historic, geographic, social, political, intellectual and even mythological
definitions of our world are all male, to the complete exclusion of one half of humanity. And yet it is the male version of the world that has traditionally passed for the truth. The postmodern spirit challenges, among other things, the validity of traditional truths. Each established factor or substance of truth is disputable as it has no stronger foundation than a house of cards for it is constructed on ground whose apparent solidity only conceals a vacuous shallowness beneath. The young women of today are becoming aware of biased attitude of our society. They have asserted their individuality by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms. Instead of accepting the roles traditionally offered to them and sometimes opting for death as the ultimate solution to the man-made mundane problems, they, now-a-days, start asserting themselves or fighting against the odds. No longer do they allow their tradition to groom and condition them for secondary roles in the society. Despite some achievements in educational, professional and legal fields, they have yet to go a long way for their acceptance as equal beings in the prejudiced society where discrimination is practised against women right from the birth.

Divakaruni, a product of the postcolonial feminism, creates a female universe out of the conventional male world. In her works, conventional geography is rejected. The rejection of other male definitions of the world automatically follows. She places her women characters, mostly with good educational background and yet hailing from unfair traditional family set-up, in conflict with a parochial society, and depicts their struggle to pop out of the shells. They break free themselves from the past conventional emotions and resolve to move into the new world of American ideologies due to severe hardships inflicted on them in the name of Indian tradition and custom. As there is no panacea for their social ills in their native land, they find
American culture as the liberating agent that offers relief and redemption for the cultural cringe developed in them by their native culture.

It is clearly evident from the women characters of Divakruni that even after the country has been liberated from the imperialistic clutches for several decades ago, the womanhood still has been subjugated and suffered by the patriarchal oppressive familial system of India in which man is left with great freedom and unlimited privileges with which he seems to enjoy a special status, gaining upper hand over woman. Sumita, the prime woman character in the story, “Clothes”, recollects the words of her aunt that she [Sumita] will be lucky if she is “chosen” (AM, 18) as a life partner by Somesh Sen, an Indian immigrant to California. Traditionally, man is at liberty to choose or select a life partner by visiting the house of any number of brides. He is given unwritten license to visit, reject, visit, reject, etc. whereas the same cannot be done by women. If she is chosen, she has to follow, without any hue and cry, the one who has chosen her. Divakaruni brings to focus the ill-fated traditional custom of Indian marriages through Sumita who says, “Besides, wasn’t it every woman’s destiny, as Mother was always telling me, to leave the known for the unknown? She has done it, and her mother before her. A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws” (AM, 18-19). Woman is selected or chosen like people culling vegetables in the market. She has been denied the rights to air out her opinion even at the crucial moments like marriage, etc. in their life.

Sumita is greatly excited by the expectations of a new phase in her life, losing herself in the alluring glamour of the exotic world of America, hypnotized by its magnetism even as she touches it on the metal globe on her father’s desk: “California
[...] a chunky pink wedge on the side of a multicolored slab marked *Untd. Sts. of America*. I touched it and felt the excitement leap all the way up my arm like an electric shock” (AM, 18). But within such an atmosphere of scintillating dreams and exhilarating aspirations she remembers, with a tinge of pain, the doors of girlhood which had forever closed behind her: “But already the activities of our girlhood seem to be far in my past, the colors leached out of them, like old sepia photographs” (AM, 18). All of a sudden, the magical world of newness, for which she had longed so ardently, becomes frightening, as she realizes that she would never see her parents again. When one of her friends says that she will forget them after her marriage, she wants to say that she will not give up her deep attachment to her native soil. She is so strong in her thoughts to say, “[...] I will always love them and all the things we did together through my growing-up years – visiting the charak fair where we always ate too many sweets, raiding the neighbor’s guava tree summer afternoons [...]” (AM, 18). When she thinks of going to a faraway place with an unknown man after marriage, she wants to cry out not to send her. But she does not do so because she thinks that it would be ungrateful. She needs to preserve the dignity and honor of the family as a responsible and dutiful daughter who has inherent trust and respect for the traditional values. The traditional customs rein back her emotional outburst and cause her pain and discomfort. “Hot seeds of tears pricked my [Sumita’s] eyelids at the unfairness of it” (AM, 19). Tears swell up her eyes as she gauges the unfairness of such a norm [of going with the unknown person after marriage, leaving behind all her dear and near ones], yet she dutifully succumbs to the repressive lessons of her culture.
Divakaruni wields her whip against the male-centered familial system of India where the feminine individuality is very much humiliated and degraded. The pathetic cry of womanhood is further demonstrated by Sumita’s friend, Radha who has been longing for her marriage even after being rejected three times for the reason that “her skin-color is considered too dark” (AM, 19). While men have been left with limitless privilege and discretion to choose their better-half in India, women, if they are not chosen, must be willing to appear before strangers any number of times till they get married. The trajectory of such subordination of womanhood in Indian social system makes them behave like an automaton. Such a mechanical life, with its dreariness and desperation, gets echoed in the words of Sumita who describes her involvement in the love-making with her husband not as a sacred or pleasurable one but just a mere “wifely duty” (AM, 21).

The patriarchal process that treats women as a subjugated race is evidently visible in the traditional mechanism adopted in various practices of the family life. The century-old practice, that man has got every right to keep and feed his parents and his blood relatives with him after his marriage, is denied to womanhood. The tradition-bound woman has to lead the life of servitude not only under the control and custody of her husband but also at the mercy of his parents and dear ones. Divakaruni points out this impartial attitude of the society and the consequent predicament of woman through Sumita. When Somesh says that his parents will be always with them and he “could never abandon them at some old people’s home” (AM, 26), Sumita cries loudly in her mind, “For a moment I feel rage. You’re constantly thinking of them. I want to scream. But what about me?” (AM, 26). The factors like this also
create a perception among women that male-oriented tradition always considers the growth of women to selfhood as a threat to men’s hegemony.

Divakaruni tends to break the traditional androcentric hegemony through her writing, by challenging the prevailing oppressive attitude and harsh treatment meted out on women, with a view to free women from the cultural clutches and create an ambience where they may share the roles the men have so far played in the society. Sumita is aware of the fact that she will not be allowed to share any of the responsibilities with Somesh in running their store. But she is so firm in doing so as she admits that she has a plan, “a secret that I [Sumita] will divulge to him once we [both husband and wife] move [to a separate apartment minus her in-laws]. What I really want is to work in the store” and she continues, “I will the store to make money for us. Quickly” (AM, 27). Sumita is able to derive such strength and confidence from her relentless resistance against gender-based traditional values, which enables her to face life, even when she is let down by America.

In an unfortunate event, Somesh is shot dead by an unidentified robber in the dead of the night time when he is alone staying in the shop, leaving Sumita a widow. All hopes and colors about America now become illusion. What is left before her is the solitary, painful life of widowhood. Standing in the middle of the empty bedroom, she ponders upon what America, the alluring new world, has offered her. Hair still wet from the purification bath, she stares at the white sari which she is to wear now: “White. Widow’s color, color of endings” (AM, 29). When she has come to America, she has dressed in a blue and red sari; the former color signifies possibility, and the latter luck to married women. Now she loses all these colors. The red marriage mark
is wiped off her forehead and her bangles are broken. She recollects,

There’s a cut, still stinging, on the side of the right arm, halfway to the elbow. It is from the bangle-breaking ceremony. Old Mrs. Ghosh performed the ritual, since; she’s a widow, too. She took my [Sumita’s] hands in hers and brought them down hard on the bedpost, so that the glass bangles I was wearing shattered and multicolored shreds flew out in every direction. (AM, 29).

Tradition has not only injured Sumita physically, but also collapsed her hopes and aspirations.

Sumita’s desire to lead an independent life in a separate apartment, minus her in-laws, and share some of her husband’s responsibilities in running the store has all become mere fantasies. She trembles with fearful anticipation to what life she is destined in India, perhaps it may be the life of a dutiful Indian widow, leading the rest of her life under the custody of her in-laws, much neglected, pitied, denigrated, and insulted. Instead of accepting such a life of a traditional widow that resembles “Doves with cut-off wings” (AM, 33), she prefers to lead an independent life with the help of the positive, redeeming qualities of America. She thinks she can liberate herself only by relinquishing Indian customs like wearing white sarees and caring for elderly in-laws. Jahan observes, “Interestingly, in Sumita’s judgment serving tea to in-laws in India is worse than getting shot by a gunman in a country she terms as ‘new’ and ‘dangerous’” (85).

Jayanti, a young Indian girl in the short story, “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” who goes to Chicago as a college student with many dreams, stays with Bikram-uncle, a sensitive and aggressive person. He is drawn as an unsavoury
character and is described as dark-skinned and lower class. Jayanti comments on his personality as, “The overalls [...] make him seem so – I hesitate to use the word, but only briefly – low class” (AM, 39). He is also described as ugly, rude, uncultured, and rough, yet vulnerable. He is seen from the perspective of Jayanti, the narrator of the story, as a man characterized by traits of brutality, and lack of sophistication. In contrast, the fictive white professor, Jayanti fantasizes about, is drawn as the uncle’s polar opposite; he is handsome, refined and romantic. He is the one Jayanti imagines as her husband, the man with whom she will fall in love when she breaks away from the Indian tradition of arranged marriages.

The story mainly deals with the horrors of Indian traditional arranged marriage as opposed to the liberal attitudes found in the United States. Indian women are depicted as victims of domestic violence with preconceptions of how the changing times are affecting the Indian institution of arranged marriage. Patriarchy definitely bears a large share of the responsibility for the low status that women have in India, but it should also be equally shared by one-half of the humanity, i.e. the womanhood for their emotional responsibility. Middle class women, such as the characters like Sumita’s mother [in “Clothes”], and Aunt Pratima [in “SP,GR”], are to blame for their lack of group-worth and mainly for their constant deference to male approval. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid state that the recovery of tradition throughout the post-independence India “was always the recovery of the ‘traditional’ woman” (10) who is conceptualized as cultural marker and as the bearer of tradition: she recreates, gives birth, preserves family honor and links all these to the golden past. This is in a peculiar way enabling her and at the same time controlling her also.

Pratima is portrayed as such a tender, faithful, meek and lowly character of
the Indian woman, combined as it is so often with quiet persistence and strength, and with an unselfishness which amounts to self-sacrifice, and thus, she highlights the position of a doubly colonized subject. It is only, after seeing both aggressive Bikram and submissive Pratima, Jayanti takes the decision not to opt for the traditional arranged marriage. She wonders, “how a marriage could ever have been arranged between a man like Bikram-uncle and my aunt, who comes from an old and wealthy landowning family” (AM, 39).

Divakaruni seems to present an insight into the mind of the Indian woman, especially into her subjective self as found in the society. Being a woman writer, she is able to show in her works how woman suffers mentally with or without the knowledge of her husband in a male-chauvinist society. She is of the view that the concept of marriage which is related to delicate union of two minds is not properly realized in most of the Indian male-dominated families. At the same time, she appears not to agree with the traditional view of the Indian society that the woman’s body and soul are subordinate to the male. Contrary to this view, she firmly believes in the concept that marriage is not the total subordination or surrender of one to the other. It is the delicate union of two different minds which requires mutual understanding and mutual adjustments from both sides equally.

Pratima, on more than one occasion, proves herself as a typical Indian submissive wife and behaves as if she has taken this human life only to yield herself to the views and wishes of her husband. When Jayanti asks her to go for a stroll in the evening, she refuses at first as if it is a great sin, and later on, consents to come out and that too with so much hesitation for the reason that, as a traditional wife she could not move out of the house without the knowledge and consent of her husband. She
says, “Your uncle does not like me to go out” (AM, 46). But Sumita suspects that it must be “a ploy of his to keep her shut up in the house and under his control” (AM, 46) and deems it as a serious blow on the woman’s freedom.

Jayanti and Pratima, while going for a walk, get stranded at the cross-roads of an unidentifiable area. They are teased and insulted by a group of American boys. Agitated by this incident, Bikram is very much angry with Pratima and raises his arm to beat her. Though, Jayanti tries to shield her aunt, her vain attempt does not protect the latter. She too has to bear his uncle’s violent reaction. She narrates, “I flinch as if his knuckles had made that thwacking bone sound against my own flesh. My mouth fills with an ominous salt taste” (AM, 53). She feels unhappy and a sense of uneasiness overpowers her while watching the furious and aggressive behavior of Bikram. Such incidents develop a strong hatred in her against male-domination and urge her to swim against the current of her own traditional codes and norms. Therefore, she does not even dream of having an arranged marriage like Pratima to suffer forever in her life. The very thought of having someone, an unknown stranger, by her side as her spouse, she says, “makes the fear something I can see and breathe, like the gray fog that hangs above the smoking section of the aircraft, where someone has placed me by mistake” (AM, 38).

Divakaruni’s “The Word Love” is also one more perfect picture of the truncated life of an Indian woman immigrant. Shona, a young unmarried Indian woman in Berkeley, suffers the torments of the oppressive practices of her tradition. Her decision to conceal her secret affair with Rex pricks her consciousness very much. It is not her act of cohabitation that worries her much but it is only the act of hiding it from her mother that gives her unbearable tension. This kind of affairs, i.e. a
woman living with a stranger and having sexual relationship before marriage is generally an accepted factor in a country like America. But in India, where even the issues like love and sexuality require the intervention of others, an unmarried woman’s affair with an unknown stranger will be vehemently condemned as illicit and summarily rejected as a great sin. Here also, the unethical and impartial approach of patriarchal familial system of India comes under heavy criticism. Neena Arora writes, “In Indian society, the one unpardonable crime for an unmarried girl is to have sexual intercourse with any man, though, strangely enough, it is considered no crime at all for a man to have sexual relations with other girls before or after his marriage” (77).

Shona’s pre-marital involvement is an attempt to fulfill her inner desire for love. Her struggles to make a choice between the maternal authority and her love for her boyfriend ultimately land her in the middle of nowhere. She experiences an ideological conflict for she respects her mother’s ideals on one side and yet continues her live-in relation with her foreign boyfriend. Perhaps, her blind obedience to her mother, one of the characteristics in Indian tradition, must have made it difficult for her to hide her affair from her [mother]. Still, she thinks that her act of living with someone before marriage is not immoral. Therefore she says, “I will not feel apologetic” (AM, 58). Something in her, probably an inexplicable dislike over her tradition, that must have brought a dramatic change in her present life which is completely different from the dark recesses of the past. It brings her a newer option, to revive her spirit and regain her strength to tackle the mistake, she is believed to have committed by living with a foreigner outside the sanctity of traditional marriage. The present cosmopolitan culture gives her new strategy to deal with her dilemma and
chalk out ways of surviving without the blessings of the old past.

In Indian families, sexuality in adolescence is not only suppressed and repressed but even feared as potentially dangerous.

Rarely does a mother discuss the mystery and seriousness of sexual awakening with her daughter. Sex education is left to nature precocious peers. It is a taboo which has handed down for generations. [...] These repressions are justified with the unspoken agreement that such a potentially dangerous awakening of body and psyche must be controlled and deferred until after marriage. (Roy, 103).

Women have the responsibility to preserve the family honor, and by extension, they have been assigned guardianship of community honor as well. Thus, both sexuality and love are inextricably entwined with the duties and responsibilities of women in the Indian families.

Shona is aware of all these various traits of Indian culture and also understands how her mother stands as an embodiment of her tradition. She admits to herself, “How when he [her father] died [...] she [her mother] had taken off her jewelry and put on widow’s white and dedicated the rest of her life to the business of bringing you [Shona] up” (AM, 58). Yet, as she lives most of her life within American culture, she has little choice to remain with her native identity. The power of internalized ideals, about what a good Indian girl should do, represses her constantly and makes her public life a painful struggle. Moreover it is important to note that young women do not feel guilty about having relationships with boys that their parents may not approve of. It is only the disloyalty to their parents, and not their
violation of their moral codes, that often disturbs them. Shona is not ungrateful to forget her mother’s genuine dedication and sheer endurance in bringing her through appalling hardships. At the same time she does not repent for having a secret affair with a boy friend, a common practice accepted in the western countries.

Shona repeatedly makes attempts to contact her mother by telephone to convince her, but very much shocked to learn from her servant that, “she [her mother] had the lawyer over yesterday to change her will” (AM, 65). She calls again and again for weeks together till the receiver says, “the number has been changed. There is no new number” (AM, 65). She feels very much agitated and in such a conflictual state, she takes the extreme decision of disconnecting her relationships with both her mother and her native culture. She decides to lead the life of a western woman adopting American individualism for the fear of the restraints and controls of the Indian customs. She vacates the apartment with a “few clothes, some music, a favorite book” (AM, 71), leaving behind the hanging. The rejection of the hanging implies her resolve not to hang anymore on her tradition.

Meena’s action, in Divakaruni’s short story, “Affair”, i.e. the divulging of her secret affair to Ashok, is a grievous blow to Abha’s understanding of Indian female solidarity.

Until today I’d thought I knew all about Meena’s life. […] We talked to each other every day – on the phone if we couldn’t get together in person. […] She’d told me about the office, how the new ad campaign she’d thought up had already increased their sales. And about the cutest little jacket she’d picked up at Nordstrom’s, with a real fox-fur collar. She hadn’t said a thing
about an affair. (AM, 232)

Maintaining social networks and family connections is of vital importance to Indian women immigrants. Through this network they manage to preserve a certain degree of influence within home and in society at large. In the diasporic context, many women find themselves left forlorn; lacking the support system they had grown up within India, which provides emotional and psychological sustenance. Thus, Meena has deliberately distanced herself from her Indian upbringing, first by refusing to accommodate herself to her husband, Srikant, and secondly by denying the female members of the community any opportunity to criticize and lament her decision.

Divakaruni uses Meena as a foil for Abha in order to contrast and comment on the possible adaptations for women in the migrant’s world. Meena has totally reconstructed her identity, she has no hang-ups about preserving the family honor, she has completely shaken off the chains of patriarchy. “Now she [Meena] leaned forward to give me – and then Ashok – a kiss on the cheek. It was not something Indians did as a rule [...]” (AM, 246), Abha observes. Even in moments of despair, when contemplating suicide as the only outlet to her unhappy marriage, Meena knew that her friend would accuse her of being “so melodramatic, [...]. So Californian” (AM, 267). She takes pride in her appearance, she wants to be admired and have all the men gathered around her. Abha, on the other hand, bears the burden of being Indian in a foreign context having assumed the public role that is assigned to women.

Women are made responsible for community morals and the good name of the family, and, by extension, the community. This notion of honor clearly lies with the women who are assigned the role of the bearers of tradition and culture as well as transmitters to the next generation. Abha, on knowing Meena’s affair with a stranger, thinks of her
culture being violated by Meena. “Villages where a woman caught in adultery was made to ride around the market square on a donkey, her head shaved, her clothes stripped off her, while crowds jeered and pelted her with garbage” (AM, 246), she thinks.

Meena, having taken the decision to leave her husband for another man, appears to have chosen American individualism over loyalty to her cultural traditions. Though she is tormented by some doubts, she is firm in her stand which she admits to Abha, “Sometimes I still feel so guilty. I think of what my parents will say, and Srikant’s mother, when they find out. Selfish, they’ll call me. Immoral. A bad woman. I have to keep telling myself I’m not that. It’s not wrong to want to be happy, is it? To want more out of life than fulfilling duties you took on before you knew what they truly meant?” (AM, 270). Social relations rather than individual behavior are the hallmark of Indian people and as identity is constructed in family terms, it follows that there is a little space for discussion of individual pleasure. Sexuality and love, for Abha, are definitely relegated to the privacy of the home. As she reasons, “Sex for me was a matter between married people, carried out in the silent privacy of their bedroom and resulting, hopefully, in babies” (AM, 234). Duty and love, for Abha, are incompatible. She shies away from any public demonstration of affection, and tends to be “too traditional to even tough hands” (AM, 238). Meena, however, has no qualms about indulging in free physical contact as she kisses both Abha and Ashok on the cheek in front of others.

Abha’s thoughts, which first constitute a running commentary on Meena’s affair, gradually develop into a soul-searching analysis of her own marriage. Her slow realization, that her marriage to Ashok is empty, runs parallel with her gradual sexual
awakening and the understanding of her own selfhood. Several questions have come up from her confused mind. “Had I ever really been myself? I didn’t think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter. A good friend. And of course a good wife. [...] What are you [she asks herself] going to do about your own life, Abha?” (AM, 269-270). While driving back home from Kuldeep’s marriage anniversary party, she resolves to part with Ashok, choosing an independent life minus not only Ashok but also [by rejecting him] the oppressive patriarchal familial system of her own tradition. “The old rules aren’t always right. Not here, not even in India” (AM, 270), she thinks hopefully. Seen in this light, the decision of both Meena and Abha to terminate their unsuccessful marriages is a direct attack on the established institution of arranged marriage and a challenge to parental repressive authority.

Divakaruni’s The Mistress of Spices assumes a strategy of narration to evoke a world of dislocations and non-belonging. The double-edged narrative in this fiction succeeds in exploring the changing face of diaspora, its inherent pain due to its own repressive cultural codes and ethics, and the subsequent rewards. Tilotamma, shortly called Tilo, the prime character who becomes a victim of her own expatriation getting trapped in the many layers of her own migration from many worlds, renders the painful experiences and angst of the Indian women immigrants like Lalitha, Geeta, and Hameeda for their strict adherence to their traditional values. The parallel quest for emerging identities on the part of the other characters, involved in the central narrative structure, coupled with the narrator’s own increasingly desperate search for meaning and identity creates the fiction a successful one. These immigrant characters are almost more real and their predicaments are more immediate and more sensitively
portrayed than the narrator’s long-winged struggle to break free from the clutches of both the spices and tradition.

Tilo’s beginnings are as uncertain as her future as seer and mistress of the spices. Named Nayan Tara, she is at once gifted with special qualities, of being able to foresee the future, a gift which brings followers and believers to her and make her rich. She begins her initially reluctant travel to a distant world which she neither understands nor desires – a travel which demands of her the stripping of her every existing identity. Of the sea serpents, she says, “They were the first among all that the spices were to take from me” (TMS, 24). Her being catapulted into American society at Oakland, running a grocery store in a dilapidated part of the town at once merges myth and reality. Tilo’s gifts make it now possible for her to peer into the lives of the immigrants – lives of suffering, frustration, loneliness, and pain. The merging of Tilo’s gifted sense of understanding and possible cure not only provides an immediate insight into contemporary American society but also creates a perspective from which such predicaments of her followers could be solved. Her gift of the spices endows her with an inner eye through which the sufferings of the culturally alienated, the persecuted, and the damned find a voice.

Lalitha, a poor immigrant who is ensnared in a trap of an arranged marriage with a bald-headed, ageing man and restlessly seeking alternatives to her suffering, discovers much to her horror and disappointment that the voices of tradition and social expectations are not different for Indians in America. She comments, “Here in America maybe we could start again, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling us how a man should act, what is a woman’s duty. But ah the voices, we
carried them all the way inside our heads” (TMS, 102-103). Married to an abusive, tyrannical man, Ahuja, she has given up her dreams of setting up her own tailor-shop in India, and followed him to an alien land where she has no support, no friend or job. Patriarchal tradition places her within her husband’s power and control so completely that she is regularly beaten and bruised. She becomes helpless and is destined to lead a restrictive life, more or less like an animal chained to a tether and subjected to harsh and grueling experiences. Being not able to control her frustration and anger, she cries out, “[...], the rules. No going out. No talking on the phone. Every penny I spend to be accounted for. He should read my letters before he mails them” (TMS, 103).

Lalitha becomes speechless because of the forced subservience by her often abusive husband and therefore could not express her feelings. Even if she tries, her husband, who is always suspicious about her character, is not in a position to understand her feelings. She pathetically says, “[...] the calls. All day. Sometimes every twenty minutes. To check on what I’m doing. To make sure I’m there. I pick up the phone and say hello and there is his breathing on the end of the line” (TMS, 103). She looks longingly at the stitched clothes inside the store as she remembers the fondness with which she could stitch and embroider for a baby she does not have, and for the life gone waste in the shadow of a violent husband.

The second generation immigrant, Geeta’s dilemma reveals the typical conflict between Indian born parents and their Americanized daughter. There is always a clash of values between the parents and the daughter. The parents’ Indian mind-set is not compatible with the daughter, a modern girl of American outlook. Her affair with a foreign friend is almost doomed to failure as her parents desperately cling to an Indian past, which, they hope, can be passed on to the future generations in America. She
blames her grandfather for having pitted her parents against her, and for having forced her to confess her love for a foreigner to her parents, suddenly and viciously without preparation. She blames him with deep resentment to Tilo, “He’s the one who turned them against me with all that shit about good women and family shame. They never would have behaved so prehistorically otherwise. Dad, especially.” (TMS, 134) She thinks, at first, that she can very easily convince her parents by informing them her affair when they are in the right mood. But the conflict comes to a head when her grandfather tries to arrange a match for her in India. Geeta, finding no other way to go, discloses the fact and, with a rebellious tone and temperament, she admits that she wants to marry only her lover, Juan Cordero.

The cordial relationship between the tradition-bound parents and the daughter, a modern brought-up, gets broken and further widened beyond mending when her grandfather tries to thrust more and more traditional ethics and norms on her. His attempts of instilling in his grand-daughter some of the sterling values he has learnt in India, which are supposed to be totally neglected in America, produce no favorable result. He stands for old-fashioned traditional values of India, and, each and every word he utters shows him as “an old man who holds on to his past with all the strength in his failing hands” (TMS, 87). He feels terribly disturbed by the way his grand-daughter behaves - going out for work during night times and coming very late at midnight times, and, that too sometimes, with some boyfriends. When both the father and the grandfather try to force Geeta to accept the marriage proposal of an Indian boy, she feels very much enraged by that proposal, and out of mental agony, she asks her father, like a wounded tigress, whether he wants to see her “with a veil over my [her] head sitting in a sweaty kitchen all day, a bunch of house keys tied to
the end of my [her] sari” (TMS, 88). It is a question to the Indian society whether it likes to keep the women anymore behind the veil of impracticable values and customs. Finally, the problem in the story comes to an end with the exit of Geeta from the house. Her exit implies her coming out of the hard shells of the Indian tradition.

One more pathetic character who falls as a prey on the web of tradition is Daksha, a nurse. Being caught between an ageing mother-in-law and a conservative husband, she is denied the real independence even in the host land. She is destined to “the kitchen the woman’s place” (TMS, 80), doing all the household works – “coming home from the hospital to cook, rolling out chapatis hot hot with ghee [...]. Boiling frying seasoning ladling serving wiping up [...]” (TMS, 80). She leads the life of servitude without having the courage to deny any of the works assigned to her. Rose Kernochan writes: “Recently arrived from Calcutta, unsettled in Chicago and San Francisco, Ms. Divakaruni’s heroines are still half-submerged in the dream world of Indian femininity, in innocence as still and dark as lake water” (20).

The past, in the form of traditions and memories, leaves an inimical impression in the mind of these expatriates and it is this past that they need to turn in moments of loneliness and emptiness. But for all their faith in the past, they receive in return only the pain of revulsion and a sense of non-belonging. The idea of home, of a land left behind so eulogized and often mythologized in much of diasporic writing, is almost non-existent for most of the emigrants. If anything existing, it is conservative, unsympathetic and binding for people like Lalitha, Geeta, and Daksha. Home becomes a world of disaster for the women in the traditionally arranged marriages. Tradition offers a safe and comfortable haven for tricky men who can easily and conveniently bend its values adequately to suit their needs and requirements. Such
norms, which are elastic and flexible to men, manifest themselves as rigid and stern
codes to women. As a result, women strictly adhere to these values and lead the life of
austerity with pain, while men find loopholes in them and deceive the womanhood.
Lalitha, calls her husband, a “liar cheater son-of-a –pig” (TMS, 101), for he has
cheated her by sending a photo which had been taken before. As tale after tale of
migrant narratives unfold before Tilo, the entwined, confused, and frightened voices
of the affected, desolate women reflect the collective experience of marginalization
that assumes urgency.

India is once again found as a land of hostility for women with its old-
fashioned and outdated traditional practices and control in Divakaruni’s *Sister of My
Heart*. Sudha’s restrained life is contrasted with the liberal atmosphere of her cousin,
Anju. Both cousins have had traditionally arranged marriage but fate has ordained
Sudha to live with Ramesh who works in Indian Railways “that requires a great deal
of travelling on his part” (SMH, 101), leaving Sudha “to stay home with her [her
mother-in-law] and be the daughter she never had” (SMH, 101). Anju gets married to
Sunil, a computer programmer and gets settled in California. Her husband, despite the
fact that his salary is modest, has encouraged her to pursue her academic
commitments. Though Anju gives her consent for the traditionally arranged marriage,
she does not hesitate to express her severe and sharp disapproval to it before her
marriage. She says, “To think that I’ll have to go and live with a stranger. That I’m
supposed to belong to some man I haven’t even met as soon as he puts a garland
around my neck. Oh, why can’t I just remain single? Why must I be yoked to a man
like a cart to a buffalo?” (SMH, 113). Hence, the lifestyles and expectations of the
two cousins have little in common. Anju looks forward to her academic work and
sharing parenthood with Sunil, while Sudha’s world revolves around domestic chores and motherhood is an obligation that she must fulfill. Her role is to be accommodating, self-effacing, serving, kind, and chaste and failure to comply with these approved standards can end up in anything ranging from mild disapproval to callous rejection.

Sudha’s initial happiness is short-lived when the news that the child she is carrying is a girl is not greeted with the same joy by her in-laws. She is forced to kill her baby. She sobs her plight to Anju, “My mother-in-law wants me to have an abortion” (SMH, 237). Again, the relentless tradition meddles in the life of an innocent woman with its unwanted and impractical moral standards. Her mother-in-law sticks to the belief that still prevalent in many parts of orthodox families in India that a female child born as eldest of the family will bring ill to that family and mar the family prospects. Hence a woman, during her first pregnancy period, has to carry along with the baby, the anxiety and excitement that the child should not be a female, if not for the welfare of her family, at least for her future betterment. When Anju asks about that cruel decision of aborting the child, Sudha replies, “my mother-in-law said the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to be male – that’s how it’s been in the last five generations. She said it’s not fitting, it’ll bring the family shame and ill luck” (SMH, 237-238).

Sudha’s options to avoid abortion to save her child are limited as public opinion would brand her as a bad woman, if she opts to leave their home. She would not be seen to have abandoned her husband’s home; they would have her thrown her out for transgressing the norms of accepted Indian wifely behavior. When Anju advises to seek her mother’s help, Sudha replies that her mother wants, “I [Sudha]
mustn’t leave, absolutely not. My place is with my in-laws, for better or worse. She’s afraid they’ll never take me back, and then what would happen to me? Everyone will think they threw me out because I did something bad. They’ll think my baby is a bastard” (SMH, 240). Anju is horrified both by her cousin’s dilemma and by the indifference shown by Sudha’s and her own mother and Sunil. Her sense of justice and gender equality is grievously insulted first when she learns that her cousin has had to undergo a gynecological examination to check she is fertile and later when she discovers the abortion plan. Anju believes that her advice to Sudha to leave her house and fight for her baby is the only solution that her cousin can take if she is to preserve her dignity and integrity. Anju believes that she can offer Sudha and her daughter a new life in the United States.

Sudha decides to go to California to save her unborn daughter, from being aborted in India as determined by her husband and her mother-in-law. Although in India, Sudha gets unending, unselfish support of Ashok who is her first love and stands by her throughout her troubles; the plot weaves its way to an American airport where Sudha arrives with the support of Anju, the sister of her heart. Her long road of suffering leads her to America and not to Ashok, though he loves her unselfishly through her marriage (to someone else), pregnancy, and divorce. Being situated in India, Ashok is not seen as being able to provide the safe harbor that the American sister is expected to provide. Sudha happily recollects Anju’s promise that

[...] it [America] would give me the advantage of anonymity.

No-one in America would care that I was a daughter of the Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, give Dayita [Sudha’s newborn baby]
everything she needed. Best of all, no one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me who’d decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man. (SMH, 272)

Sudha’s flight from her husband’s family indicates the start of a new life away from the constraints of a traditional Indian household and the tyranny of patriarchal traditions that deny women any agency.

Divakaruni, who strongly believes that writers have a social responsibility, views the lives and experiences of Indian women immigrants through the diasporic woman's lens that facilitates the empathetic understanding of the plight of them. In an interview, she says: "what I try to do in my writing is to make you [the readers] empathize with the joys and sorrows of characters [the immigrants] whose lives maybe very different from yours" (Divakaruni: 2001, online). As an immigrant writer, she "is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, [...]. The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed" (Rushdie, 11). She displays a gloomy picture of the female body captured in the close ups of rituals and ceremonies from birth to death, constantly brutalized by greed and patriarchal power.

While depicting Indian woman as a passive victim of social injustice, suffering in silence at home and abroad, Divakaruni attempts to weave "the elements of myth, magic and ancient culture alongside contemporary culture" (Mangla, 2). She projects varied themes in her works through which she articulates a perspective of women's angst of alienation in general and their exile in particular. Her protagonists are very close to reality and treading a tightrope, balancing between old treasured beliefs and surprising new desires. They lead an imperfect life which shows how women struggle
hard for their personal identity. Uma Parameswaran aptly writes in "Home is Where Your Feet are, and May Your Heart be There too!": "Chitra Divakaruni, the most recent star in the Diaspora sky, delves into the darker dreams and nightmares of womanscape and has an appreciative readership among feminists, but since her women characters are mainly Indo-American, there is a tendency to see them not as individuals so much as representative of the Diaspora, [...]" (34).

Divakaruni writes about the transformed lives of the women who are earlier trapped [in their orthodox beliefs and practices], but now liberated by cultural changes to show the line of demarcation between the cultures of India and America. The century-old social norms, customs and traditions of Indian woman have been gradually overshadowed and replaced by the new thinking of “living together”, “dating” and “staying as unwed mothers” which are common things in a liberated society like America. In such a different atmosphere, even if woman feels discontent with her married life, she no longer hesitates to take a decision of breaking it. Immigration to America makes such infinite impacts on Indian woman who is delegated with the major responsibility of maintaining the cultural identity in the middle of the evolution of the new being. "Such schisms generate personal crisis for many immigrant women" (Uhland, 2), yet it is one of the major issues with which Divakaruni interweaves her stories.

Much of Divakaruni’s writing are born of inspiration, she has drawn from her experiences and encounters with suffering women in the organization – MAITRI. She herself admits, “My work with Maitri has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I have heard of acts of cruelty beyond imagining. The lives of many of the women I have met through this
organization have touched me deeply. It is their hidden story that I try to tell in many of the tales in my short story collection” (Divakaruni: 1997, online). She deems it her professed manifesto to celebrate the courage and humanity of suffering women who rebel against oppressive patriarchy thereby joining the universal sisterhood. Both MAITRI and her writings are efforts in the direction of creating a feminine universe. While giving an exhaustive picture of the lives of Indian women immigrants, she takes the readers into female psyche and its lasting disruptions and damages through real forms of violence. She not only shows how iniquitous are the Indian traditional practices in its harsh and partial treatment towards women but also how men’s greed have caused havoc and horror in the women’s world. Hence, the mind-set of the suffering women changes and they prefer to get adapted to a liberated society like America where they may break the harassing cultural constraints easily, which, they believe, boomerang on them and discredit their reputation. Further, if they stay in a close knitted society like India, where every act of women is watched with a microscopic view, they are afraid that they need to suffer in silent agony.

Divakaruni can be viewed as the representative writer of Indian Women Diaspora and the predicaments of her protagonists may be identified with the predicaments of the larger section of women in contemporary India where the socio-economic forces have started shedding their old cultural models. The break-up of the joint family, the nucleus of the Indian cultural life, is the immediate and visible symbol of this imminent change. This breaking up affected relationships at various levels, especially relationship between the husband-wife, mother-daughter, father-daughter, etc. When women come up to share many of the familial responsibilities [which were earlier supposed to be the men’s], there arise the problems of
incompatibility, maladjustment, expectations and despair. The society that continues
to be male-dominated is now being intercepted by the attitudes of women. These
changes, brought about by western culture and education and the simultaneous
improved economic conditions, prove powerful lever to bring the woman out of the
shadow of the subordinated, self-suffering status. She gradually comes out of the
cocoon of the pride-in-suffering and start looking on herself as a human being. “
Woman, deified as the centre of culture, but actually imprisoned in the walls of the
family and shackled by tradition, now looks upon herself from a different angle”
(Shirwadkar, xi-xii). Even man has begun to think what he has made of woman. This
has resulted in the emergence of the new image to woman in society.

Divakaruni’s works deal mainly with the clash of the primitive way of life
with the western ideals of high culture. Her protagonists, mainly Indian women
immigrants, dream of walking past their lived experiences and practices to experience
exotic land, and explore unknown realms. Though they resolve to adapt themselves to
their newfound world, they find it hard to cross over the borders set by patriarchy, to
experience what has so far been restricted in their life. As their roots are very deep
into their culture, though they resolve to adapt, they need to overcome the
psychological conflict that is accompanied with the new situation. Divakaruni vividly
presents the dilemmas of Indian women hailing from the traditional society. Her
women characters represent the sentiments of women swirling round within the
traditional boundary. Their expectations in the new cultural set-up along with the pull
towards the unknown realm is a new experience, and this aspect is well substantiated
in her writing, for instance in SP,GR where Jayanti craves to assimilate in her speech
certain English words as a sign of westernization:
“No problem”, she replies, her smile as golden as the wavy hair that falls in perfect curls to her shoulder. I have never heard the expression before. No problem. (AM, 35)

For these immigrant women, the past and its associated traditions have their limitations, in spite of their beauty and assurance. This realization which dawns from the experience of limitless freedom offered by the new culture creates a strong dislike against their culture and tradition. This also gives the protagonists of Divakaruni’s stories, a sense of new judgment and understanding of their culture and traditions. They, who are so much stuck to the web of social taboos and prejudices of the native culture, finally decide to shed off those bindings and move towards a renewed life and vision.