Chapter: 6

CONCLUSION
For the writers of Indian Diaspora, whether in Newyork, Canada, Australia or England, the subject matter is based on their mother country i.e. India. But their vision of India is different. They focus attention on the strange love-hate relationship that exists between the East and the West and the immigrant’s quest for their identity. The East is shown as traditions-loving and the West is materialistic in this context of human relationship. Their fiction reflects their experience of their inner conflict, the traditional Indian values and the love of the western materialistic prosperity. The protagonists go through a cycle of emotions which Indians experience in the West. The first stage is when there is tremendous enthusiasm- Everything western is marvelous; Second stage- Everything western is not marvelous. They create a little India at home. The initial enthusiasm evaporates and they begin to suffocate in the alien country and long to go back to India.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Ann Bhalla are two prominent diasporic writers of Indian origin. The former deals with the immigrant experience, which is an important theme in today’s world. Most of her stories and novels deal with the experience of migration, the first cultural clashes the immigrants face in America, the nostalgia for the old country, etc. She writes to unite people and she does this by destroying myths and stereotypes. As
she breaks down these barriers, she dissolves boundaries between people of
different background, communities, ages and even different world.
However, it is Divakaruni’s transnational (trans-pacific} concerns that I
want to focus on. We can trace the problematic relationship between Asia
(India) and America in several of Divakaruni’s stories and novels.
Ann Bhalla focuses on assimilation, filial sensibility and cross-cultrualism in
the relationships of Indian living abroad in her novels.
A common thread running through Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Ann
Bhalla’s works is the experience of being “Foreign”. Their characters long
for meaningful connection, but what they find is rarely what they expected.
These trying to adapt to an unfamiliar world do not always succeed. Some
are homesick, many are misunderstood. So their works focus on the inter-
cultural miscommunications and conflicts, all too often experiences by
Indian immigrants and second generation Indian Americans. Many of their
characters struggle against or conform to outside influences that affect their
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s book “Arranged Marriage” was published in
1996. It is the collection of short stories, all about women from India caught
between two worlds. It includes stories about the abuse and courage of
immigrant women. The underlying theme of her short story collection is as
the name suggests marital relationships as they are seen in South Asian
communities where by and large the practice is that parents arrange marriages for their children. However, immigration has widened the mental horizons of the people from the east, and Divakaruni too questions this practice through these stories. After their exposure to the west in various ways e.g. working outside the home their increased independence, particularly in decision making – things they could not do back home in India, makes them respond differently to the marital situation as well. How difficult it is for Indian South Asian women to achieve a clean break from tradition and self consciousness even when they are trapped in unhappy arranged marriages is discussed in these short stories. For the young girls and women brought to life in these stories, the possibility of change, of starting anew, is both as terrifying and filled with promise as the ocean that separates them from their homes in India. From the story of a young bride whose fairy-tale vision of California is shattered when her husband is murdered and she must face the future on her own, to a proud middle-aged divorced woman determined to succeed in San Francisco, Divakaruni’s prose creates eleven devastating portraits of women on the verge of an unforgettable transformation.

She relates the travails of Indian women trying to adapt to the often alienating culture of middle-class America. Her mostly young characters,
students or brides, are negotiating the schism between Indian values and new possibilities here. In “Clothes” the protagonist Sumita moves from a tiny Indian village to be with her husband, who runs a 7-Eleven in California. After he is murdered in a holdup, Sumita questions her naive vision of America. In “The Word Love”, an Indian graduate student living in Berkeley with a man named Rex agonizes over whether and how to tell her mother back in India about the relationship. The narrator, Jayanti, in "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs," comes to Chicago to stay with her aunt before beginning her graduate studies at an American university. When she last saw her aunt, Jayanti was only eight-years-old. The occasion was the aunt's arranged marriage in Calcutta with an Indian emigrant who, the matchmaker had assured her family, was the owner of an automobile empire in America. Immigration to the U.S., the faraway dislocation, made this particular arranged marriage possible, without the customary verifications, between the working-class impostor and Jayanti’s upper-class aunt. On arrival, Jayanti discovers that her uncle runs only a small auto-repair garage and the couple lives in a dingy apartment in an undesirable part of the city.

Immigration also brought the couple into an extremely hostile social environment. Although the social environment that the Indian immigrants from the upper social classes to the U.S. come to is not overtly noxious, it
exacts a poignant psychic cost--by challenging their traditional self-concept as integral parts of an extended Indian family and by pushing them instead into the American mould of autonomous, and all-too-often alienating, individualism.

Jayanti and her aunt also face the problem of racism in that foreign land. They are accosted by a gang of four white pre-teenage boys, shouting "nigger" and throwing slush at them. Badly shaken the two women find their way home. In one story, “Doors,” the character Preeti, after moving to the United States, has come to love the western idea of privacy. She faces a dilemma when her husband’s cousin wants to come to live with them. She expresses her discontent with the situation, which shows her newfound decisiveness and her fight against her husband’s view of a traditional Indian wife. The narrator of “Affair” suspects her husband of sleeping with a close friend, realizing eventually that, whether or not her suspicions are correct, her marriage to an old-fashioned, judgmental and bossy man is troubled. Particularly poignant is “Meeting Mrinal”, in which Asha, recently deserted by her husband and coping with an adolescent son, lies to a childhood friend, now a successful, independent businesswoman, insisting that her life is fine. In transparently simple language, Divakaruni places her characters at the volatile confluence of two conflicting pressures; the obligation to please
traditional husbands and families, and the desire to live modern, independent lives.

Shortly thereafter, Divakaruni wrote her first novel, the highly praised “The Mistress of Spices” (1997) which she produced after a near-death experience, giving birth to her second son. It is a beguiling story, full of the smells and taste of India – an allegory about the magical way love can transform us. It is too, a work that resonates deeply with the immigrant experience: how shocking an identity can be, something akin to dying. Divakaruni puts it, “I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable.”

The Mistress of Spices combines poetic language with prose. Tilo, Mistress’s main character, is a young woman from a distant time and place whose training in the ancient craft of spices and initiation in the rite of fire allow her to become immortal and powerful. Traveling across time and space, Tilo comes to live in Oakland, California, in the form of an aged woman and establishes herself as a healer who prescribes spices as remedies for her customers. Tilo -- born far away and long ago -- can see into people’s hearts and heal their sufferings with her herbs and roots and spices. Trained in her magical arts on a distant island, she accepts immortality, and
lands in an Indian grocery store in Oakland, CA. There, she tries to help her customers, mostly new immigrants, in their struggle to adapt to America. She's not supposed to have favorites or get too close to regular mortals, or even leave the store. But her heart goes out to the cab driver who wants a better life, the battered wife who needs courage to leave her husband, the teenager who gains acceptance by getting into a gang. When a handsome, lonely American walks through the door, can she resist the ultimate sin of using her powers to satisfy her own desires? Divakaruni, prize-winning author of Arranged Marriage, spins a tale of pure enchantment, blending the realities of modern immigrant lives with the magic of universal dreams and longings.

**As Lara Merlin put it**, "Addressing the immigrant experience in particular, she [Divakaruni] asks how to negotiate between the needs of each [the self and the community] under the earth-moving stress of desire…. She conjures up a new American identity."

Divakaruni’s themes of love, struggle and opposing culture become apparent in this novel.

Divakaruni’s novel “*Sister of My Heart*” (1999) is a realistic treatment of relationship between two cousins, Sudha and Anju, who narrate alternating chapters of this modern drama that develops over decades. This Bengali
soap opera, set in Calcutta for the most part, follows the misfortunes of these two girls born on the same day to their recently widowed mothers. Although unrelated except in spirit, they grow up as sisters in a distinguished but impoverished family of bitter, disagreeable women who inhabit a crumbling mansion. At an early age the girls enter arranged marriages, which turn out to be disastrous. One moves to California with her aloof, computer-scientist husband and develops into a shrew with an eating disorder. The other rebels against the classic domineering mother-in-law, who wants her to abort the girl child she is carrying, and leaves her weak-willed husband, who agrees with his mother. She then joins the “sister of her heart” in California to start a new life. All appears blissful when the novel finally ends they meet at San Francisco airport – except that the shrew’s husband is eying with unwholesome and questionable interest the new arrival, who possesses an exquisite beauty that far outshines his wife’s plainness. A terrible secret hangs over the narrative, but revelation comes during the plane trip from India.

Even though the voices of the “sisters” alternate chapter by chapter, it becomes difficult to distinguish the two narrators because they sound exactly alike. The two sisters can also be read as two facets of the same person, the
immigrant character who, echoing Meena Alexander, is both “the sister who
went away and the sister who stayed behind.”
Divakaruni returns to the lives of Sudha and Anju in “The Vine of Desire”
(2002). In this sequel, Sudha comes to live with Anju after leaving her
abusive husband and after years of living separate lives, Anju and Sudha
rekindle their friendship in America. It gives Anju the strength to pick up the
pieces of her life after a miscarriage, and Sudha the confidence to make a
life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita- without her husband.
According to a Publishers Weekly critic, the author’s “lyrical descriptions of
the characters' inner and outer worlds bring a rich emotional chiaroscuro to
an uplifting story about two women who learn to make peace with the
difficult choices circumstances have forced upon them.”
The women’s bond is shaken to the core when they must confront the deeply
passionate feelings that Anju’s husband has for Sudha. Meanwhile, the
unlikely relationships they form with men and women in the world outside
the immigrant Indian community as well as with their families in India
profundly transform them, forcing them to question the central assumptions
of their lives.
Spiked with elements of mystery, suspense and the supernatural,
Divakaruni’s novel, “Queen of Dreams” (2004), is a pleasantly atypical tale
of self-discovery. Rakhi, a single mother and struggling artist lives the typical American born desi life – American by birth but having a keen interest to know about her roots. Her painting depicts India as she imagines, her chai house is Indian as per her understanding of what is India. Rakhi’s mother has an incredible gift- the power to dream the dreams of other people, dream warnings and even dream lost dreams –dreams of people long gone. She seeks out people whose dreams she has dreamt and warn them of potential hazards.

But then, that is not what the story all about. It has deeper significances as – relationship between mother and daughter, the daughter’s quest for her identity through her mother’s journals, her struggle for survival post 9/11, and on top of that her love-hate relationship with her ex-husband.

The story flits from Rakhi’s thoughts to her mother’s journal swiftly in an almost ethereal fashion. After her mother’s death, Rakhi finds her mother’s journals. The journals answer most of Rakhi’s questions about her roots – those which during her lifetime her mother was never able to speak about. They explain about her struggle with her choices. Her struggle with herself to come to terms with the fact that to keep her gift intact, she had to give up one of the most precious things in life which normally a woman or a person would choose – her family. Or perhaps in her case, her gift was the most
important thing in her life – over and above anything or anyone else. Or perhaps she is not the stereotypical woman for whom the family comes first. Queen of dreams is the story of an emotionally distant mother and a daughter trying to transcend cultural boundaries. Queen of dreams combines the elements that Divakaruni is known for, the Indian American experience and magical realism, in a fresh mix. The tale succeeds on two levels. She effectively takes the reader into an immigrant culture but she also shows the common ground that lies in a world that some would find foreign. The search for identity and a sense of emotional completion is not confined to small corners of the world. It is the dilemma that all readers can understand.

Queen of Dreams take the power of dreaming to a magical level. The story is built upon the idea that a dream is a telegram from the hidden world. And I interpret the hidden world. And I interpret the hidden world to be the future, the unknown, the yet to happen, because they say the mind sees that which the eye cannot or refuse to see.

Divakaruni’s novels “Mistress of Spices”, “Sister of my Heart”, “The Vine of Desire” and “Queen of Dreams” deal with similar themes and have been taken up in details in the various chapters of the thesis. One feels committed to the land where one is born and always in search of the opportunity to verbalize one’s feelings and memories of the homeland.
George Lamming in his essay “The Occasion for Speaking” tries to analyse the circumstances that led to the migration of certain writers and their absence from the homeland drags them into a state of separation from their roots sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. The questions like “Why have they migrated? and what, if any, are the peculiar pleasures of exile? Is their journey a part of a hunger for recognition?” Do they see such recognition as a confirmation of the fact that they are writers?” keep haunting the critic and the reader alike. Perhaps the answer to all these questions can be found by understanding an artist’s inadequacy of functioning in a society whose past he cannot alter and whose future is beyond him. Therefore, accepting this as a condition, he signs a contract with this changed life thinking “[t]o be an exile is to be alive.” (George Lamming, The Occasion for Speaking, 12). The departure from the very landscape which is in fact, the raw material of his/her books, makes him/her hunger for nourishment from a soil which he/she cannot endure for the present and the paradox of the exile is that he belongs wherever he is.

On the other hand, questions like “‘Who am I?’, ‘Where am I from?’, ‘What am I doing here?’,’ What is home and my relation to it?’(Padel Ruth, Ways of Looking at a Poem, 35) gather force in the context of postcolonial emigration because of their ethnic and personal resonance. The writers
cannot escape such self-questioning and find questioning through their protagonists the most suitable. Divakaruni’s writings raise themes of alienation and self-transformation at various levels and try to voice such questions by exploring their roots, allegiance, family, origin, community and identity through her works.

The nation provides the individuals with their fundamental space-time identities and they are located in the world system in terms of their identity as residents of a particular country. The natives experience a feeling of nationhood that is caused by a feeling of belonging and ‘belonging’ causes a feeling of protection. There is an understanding of the tacit codes of the people one lives with because these are the people who understand not only what is said but also what is meant.

‘Expatriates’ voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal and social reasons, as they are not forced to live in other countries. They may “share in the solitude an estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid prescriptions.” (W. Edward Said, Reflections on Exile, 181)

In “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives” (2001), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni continues to delve into the mixed up psyche of the American-Born-Confused-Desi, bringing up nuggets of wisdom about home and the
world. “Don’t we all have to pay, no matter what we choose?” a young woman asks in “The Love of a Good Man”, one of the unforgettable stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s beautifully crafted exploration of the tensions between new lives and old. In tales set in India and the United States, she illuminates the transformations of personal landscapes, real and imagined, brought about by the choices men and women make at every stage of their lives. All the stories of this book deal with family and relationships. Home, as this collection explores, is not necessarily found in a country, or in the blood ties of family. Instead, Divakaruni’s characters discover that sense of belonging and safety through struggles faced negotiating relationships with family, friends, strangers and self. The protagonists must face the disparities between the lives they have and the realities of human existence. They face the limitations of love, the disappointment of dreams, and the consequences of errors that beg to be resolved.

Much of Divakaruni’s work is partially autobiographical. Most of her stories are set in the Bay Area of California, and she also excels at depicting the nuances of immigrant experience, she writes to shatter stereotypes and myths. She breaks down the barriers between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and different worlds. She focuses on the bicultural lives of Indian women struggling with cultural shackles to carve
out an identity of their own. Divakaruni being born in a very traditional household in India, was insulated from women’s rights and movements and thus totally a part of the traditional culture of Bengal but only when she came to the US she could compare the physical and the psychological landscapes of India and America and look back on her culture objectively. She could draw the contrast between the selflessness required of women in India and the freedom they got in their adopted land.

Before she began her career in fiction writing Divakaruni was an acclaimed poet. She writes poems encompassing a wide variety of themes. Her main area of focus is once again immigrant experience as Divakaruni says,

“Expatriates have powerful and poignant experiences when they live away from their original culture – and this becomes home, and never quite, and then you can’t really go back and be quite at home there either.” (Divakaruni Profile by Arthur.J.Pais)

Ann Bhalla’s first book, “A Season for All Things” (1999), is an intimate attempt to investigate and explore the cross-cultural relationships. This novel can be cited as a story of a couple, struggling hard for saving their marital life with a spouse of different culture and keeping their culture simultaneously. Set in Delhi and partially in US, “The Season for All Things” is all about an Indian traditional family, Pascal, Chantal, Ranjit,
Roopa and Sarika with her two kids, and the shocking consequences of a pivotal event in their lives. In magical and poetic language, the novel paints a vivid picture of the thoughts and feelings of the small child, and the complexity and hypocrisy of the adults in their world. It is also a poignant lesson in the destructive power of the caste and religion system and moral and political bigotry in general. It has well written and well knitted story line comprising of multi-layered characters. It contains myriad emotions- love, conflicts, misunderstandings and resolutions. Prologue 1990 and Epilogue 1990, the beginning and the end of the book, contain in their inside shell to emergence and departure of various characters that run through the entire story laced in, ‘A Time to Gain and a Time to Lose’; ‘A Time to Love and a Time to Hate’; ‘A Time to Weep and a Time to Laugh’.

The protagonist of the story is Pascal. She is the daughter of Chantal, a French-Canadian woman and Ranjit. The love story of Pascal’s parents settled in Delhi was nipped and diverged due to lack of adjustments of alien cultures. Chantal became close to Tom Carter, got married and flew to the U.S., but she could not forget Pascal. Ranjit married Sarika who had deep silent love for him. She was Pascal’s young teacher. Roopa- Ranjit’s mother played a critical role in the entire episode.
Pascal is in utter imbroglio like a sapling uprooted, replanted and undecided whether to flourish or not in the unfamiliar soil it had been set down in. She can not forget and forgive, Chantal, her mother. She does not find any dearth of affection of Ranjit and Sarika for her, neither that of the Dadima for her; till she learned how Dadima deprived her of her mother’s many beautiful letters. However, at the end she decided to take shelter in the bosom of Chantal, her first mother.

So the book depicts the theme of identity and alienation and cross-cultural relationships.

Getting Khushwant Singh to recommend a tale of ardour is no easy job. But Ann Bhalla has managed just that with “A Passing Shadow” (2002), a novel set in Delhi which deals with an action and event carried out furtively by two men and the far-reaching consequences that visit their families.

“An absorbing tale of illicit love set in Delhi… and its nemesis very well told”, says Khushwant Singh. A few pages later, most reader will probably agree.

Bhalla tells this tale of the below-the-belt joys rather well, only to come back to tell us that for all such moments of furtive pleasure, there is a heart-felt pain to be absorbed, sooner or later.
Born in South India, before moving to Delhi, Bhalla tells us that life allows us our joys. But it also makes us pay for them, particularly the amorous ones. For every moment of gratification stolen by the roadside, there is a nemesis down the lane. Bhalla wants to convey as much with “A Passing Shadow”, a novel set in Delhi, a tale of Ramesh Gupta who inherited business and a mansion from his forefathers and added a dash of ardour, only for fate to catch up with him. From Kashmiri Gate to Connaught Place, he sneaks in moments of furtive privacy, forbidden joys. Across the city he moves to avoid retribution.

Bhalla, who has earlier authored “A Season for All Things” may not have anything new to say in her 341 page book brought out by Ocean Books but she picks up things from day-to-day life, adds a dash of simplicity and sobriety to put together her second novel. She tells tales of human weakness and the very human hypocrisy. She tells us that it is “easy to be morally correct and pontificate until opportunity dressed as temptation comes knocking at our bedroom door.” Then everything slips off, morals first, then inhibitions.

Yet, Bhalla is no in-your-face approach. It is not a tale of slimy sex either. It is simply a saga of changing values, changing times in a person’s life. All built around beautifully with interplay of sunrise and sundown around the
life of the man at his peak and then an irreversible decline. That person could be anybody, or at least given to human weakness.

Settled in America, she has managed to deal with Indian values not as a dispassionate, non-participant observer but as a caring individual with a heart as Indian as that of a man in Karol Bagh or Chandni Chowk. After all, it is not easy to get Khushwant Singh, that master raconteur of tales of forbidden passion to suggest a reading of someone else’s tale of illicit love!

From her debut, “A Season for All Things” through her second novel, “A Passing Shadow”, Ann Bhalla has steadily probed her stand on the issue of the mutual and relational dialogue inside the social network. The characters have been profusely moving in and out the story. At certain places, the characters have blended their process of adaptation. Diaspora could not be justified to the hilt because the degree of migration is limited. Assimilation in a new land is an art though it is considered a survival trait in most of the societies. Charles Darwin has rightfully postulated:

“Struggle of Survival and Survival of the Fittest.”
262

Works cited

