Chapter 1
Introduction
Binaries and dichotomies have always been an integral part of human race. Man has consistently been vacillating between birth-death, heaven-hell, matter-essence, physical-spiritual, material-ethereal, passion-pragmatism, science-religion, real-hyperreal and so on. Therefore it is very natural for human beings to think in terms of binaries. An investigation into metaphysics and human philosophy reveals that the whole system of thought is fashioned in terms of binary sets. Whether it is Aristotle’s ‘form and matter’, *Samkhya* philosophy’s ‘*Purusha* and *Prakriti*’ or Taoism’s ‘Yin and Yang’ binary sets or binary oppositions have been at the centre of any intellectual discourse. Precisely binary sets mean two-fold or consisting of two and binary opposition means “the system by which in language and thought, two theoretical opposites are strictly defined and set off against one another.”1 Binaries are the corner stone of many social and literary theoretical schools. Some theorize their perpetuation, while some exist by the virtue of challenging them. For example Edward Said’s *Orientalism* advocates the overarching binary opposition of oriental-occidental, colonized-colonizer in which the latter is always held superior to the former. The theoretical empire of ‘Orientalism’ rests on the sustenance of above-mentioned binary, whereas the post-colonialism strives to dismantle it. Thus in presence or negation, binaries are at the heart of literary and cultural theories. The linguistic model of Structuralism also has binaries as its key concept. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* hypothesizes that all linguistic relationships are binary and meaning can be decoded only within and through the system of relations. There are no intrinsic meanings in language, the
meanings of the words are also relational. For instance the term ‘male’ and ‘female’ mark the absence of the characteristics included in the other. Therefore ‘male’ means ‘not female’ and vice versa. The interrelated units can be understood in the context of larger networks. These linguistics units which are made of dyads or binaries, can be conceptualized in terms of polar opposites:

… for it always expresses an opposition of terms; it differs only in that the opposition is particularly significant (e.g. the formation of German plurals of the type Nacht: Nächte). Each term present in the grammatical fact (the singular without umlaut or final e in opposition to the plural with umlaut and –e) consists of the interplay of a number of oppositions within the system. When isolated, neither Nacht nor Nächte is anything: thus everything is opposition.²

The structuralist school of linguistics implies that all communication, literature, ideas, thoughts, experiences, human actions and their products share the pattern of language. This premises has stretched Structuralism to the realm of psychology, sociology, anthropology, mythology and literary criticism etc. Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist and ethnologist takes the concept of binary opposition from the structural linguistics and applies it to the domain of cultural anthropology. Strauss alleges that human brain whether primitive or sophisticated, thinks primarily in binary oppositions which generate hierarchy in cultural context. In “The Structural Study of Myth” Strauss divides a myth into segments called ‘mythemes’ and analyzes that the amalgamation of binary oppositions makes the
meaning possible. Myth, according to Strauss, is a kind of association of an irreconcilable binary opposition with a reconcilable binary opposition—the thesis, antithesis, synthesis triad- creating the illusion, or belief that the former had been resolved. His structuralist anthropology considers “how meaning relies not only on a single entity in the binary set, but also on the relationship of the entities and the beyond things to which the relationship points. So ‘man’ and ‘woman’ each represent a unique idea, but the relationship of the two presents additional layers of meaning.”

Ronald Gerard Barthes, the French literary theorist and linguist adopts Structuralism for narrative analyses. In *S/Z: An Essay* he divides the story into 561 units called ‘lexias’ and organizes them into five codes that form the basic underlying structures of narratives. These codes are the proairetic code (sequence of a narrative), the hermeneutic code (interpretative), the cultural code (common knowledge), the semic code (stereotypes) and symbolic code (semantic and symbolic expansion of semic code). The symbolic code primarily consists of binaries, contrasts, polarities, antithesis and pairings like male–female, good–bad and so on. Human beings perceive and formulate reality through the structures of these binary sets. Barthes in his “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” affirms the hierarchical arrangement of narrative units. He typifies three levels of narrative structures: functions, actions and narration. Thus Barthes derives the idea of structures, codes, units and their hierarchies from Structuralism but parts lines with them by introducing “Death of the Author”. Barthes makes the reader a co-author and puts the text to multiple interpretations, thereby questioning the possibility of a universal interpretation.
The structuralist notions of fundamental units, transcendental signified, universal structures, order, hierarchy and organization seem a misfit to the poststructural/postmodern thought which is characterized by fluidity and flux. Deconstruction, the most influential of all the Post-Structuralist theories has many points of contestation against structuralism. Among these, the difference regarding binary structures is crucial to the topic under study. Jacques Derrida the champion of Deconstruction attacks the hierarchal and ordered structures of binary sets where one member of the set is privileged over the other. Derrida prefers the co-ordination of binaries over their subordination and proposes ‘both/and’ logic in place of ‘either/or’. He demonstrates the constant push and pull, duet and duel, grasping and gapping, fusion and fission between the binaries that leads to the ‘traces of meaning’ because a fix meaning is an illusion. Derrida problematizes the linear logic and ‘centre searching’ of western philosophy which lends “an authorizing pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions.”

According to Derrida any attempt to negate binary oppositions is a kind of conformation. He elucidates:

To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition.
As reported by deconstructionist theory the binary oppositions are determined by “the idea of diffe’rance” which is “the differential and deferred nature of language” and inscribes every concept within the system where it can be understood through “comparisons and contrasts to other concepts.” There is no ranking between these concepts. The one which is generally considered secondary, marginalized or other, can be equally important. Terry Eagleton has endorsed this deconstructionist idea with Marxist zeal by taking the example of man-woman binary where man is given primacy over woman. In Literary Theory: An Introduction Eagleton illustrates that despite his despise man needs this ‘other’ the woman because his own being is inevitably dependent on the act of “excluding and subordinating her.” Eagleton contends “Perhaps she [woman] stands as a sign of something in man himself which he needs to repress, expel beyond his own being, relegate to a securely alien region beyond his own definitive limits. Perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside.”

Deconstruction reiterates that binary sets are not static in themselves they can shift to multiple positions like binary-opposites, binary-pairs, binary-couples or binary-counterparts that can contradict, co-exist or be complimentary to each other. For instance day and night are generally seen as binary opposites but at the dusk and dawn both co-exist. In the ‘rupture’, ‘inversion’, dimentaling, unsettling, crossing and displacement of binary borders:

. . . there exists a blurring, and boundaries and oppositions begin to bleed into one another and alter the discursive field within which they are situated. The idea of otherness can be dismantled,
essentially obscuring the boundaries between the binary opposition. Each half of the opposition is not an isolated concept but a necessary part of the structure as a whole. The signifiers of language itself deconstruct any attempts at separation. Deconstruction seeks to dismantle the logic of these binaries by showing that either half of the binary is not an independent entity but depends on the other through mutual contamination. The boundary that constructs a sense of black verse white, self versus other, man versus woman or high culture versus popular culture, begins to seep and merge into the other….

Thus Derrida establishes the uncertainty, indecisiveness, indeterminacy, circularity andcentredness of language, its binaries and the whole system of thought that runs on the stratification and immovability of the binaries. The linguistic subversion and inversion of binaries can be practiced in literature since “language is literature’s Being, its very world.” What the theory of deconstruction has done to language, literature can do to the society by challenging and dislodging the ages old hierarchies of class, colour, communities, race, gender, ethnicities and so on. In present cosmopolitan and globalized scenario binaries have become so frequent a phenomenon that one is always oscillating and fluctuating between the alternatives. Especially human conditions like diaspora reinforce the polyvalence by positioning the man between the binaries of homeland-hostland, roots-routes, ethnicity-hybrideity, flux-fixity, displacement-belonging, identity-anonymity, natives-immigrants and so forth. The term ‘Diaspora’ originally used for “the dispersion of
the Jews beyond Israel’’\textsuperscript{12} has now become an umbrella term for the migration or scattering of people from their homeland. According to A.K. Sahoo and Brij Maharaj:

A migration can be defined as ‘Diaspora’ if four conditions are met: firstly, an ethnic consciousness; secondly, an active associative life; thirdly, contacts with the land of origin in various forms, real or imaginary; and fourthly, there should be relations with other groups of the same ethnic origin spread over the world.\textsuperscript{13}

The mention of words like ‘consciousness’, ‘associative’, ‘contacts’ and ‘relation’ marks the binal existence of the diasporans. Sandra Ponzanesi rightly observes that “diasporic spaces allow for the representation of those who straddle two or more cultures, languages, and ethnicities and offer a way of rethinking postcolonialism as blurring the lines of national enclaves.”\textsuperscript{14} The pain that originates from dwelling between “tradition and modernity, past and present, or peripheries and cosmopolitan life”\textsuperscript{15} becomes the real strength of diasporic writings. Having suffered the pangs of displacement, otherness and dispossession in the form of exile, immigration or expatriation, these writers come up with the possibilities of many unthought of positions in-between. Through the free play of conflicting currents of signification, they attempt to locate diasporic experience amid transition and fragmentation. These writers try to overcome the center periphery binary and articulate “newly changed, merged, differently focused perspectives on their adoptive cultures, and their position as writers with multiple roots in the history of several cultures.”\textsuperscript{16} Metaphorically speaking, diaspora is a journey between ‘being and becoming’. The experiences of this journey are “determined by who travels, where,
how and under what circumstances.” To some it is liberating, while to others it may be imprisoning. Some commence the journey voluntarily as a celebration of mobility and some undertake it forcibly as a traumatic experience of exile. In this context, Sudesh Mishra in his essay “From Sugar to Masala” divides Indian diaspora broadly into two categories: the old and the new. He writes:

This distinction is between, on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of indentured peasants to non-metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam, and Guyana, roughly between the years 1830 and 1917; and the other the late capital or postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centers such as Australia, the United States, Canada, and Britain.

The older generation of Indian diasporic writers majorly includes Raja Rao, Mulkh Raj Anand, Balchandra Rajan, G.V. Desani, Ved Mehta and Santha Ram Rau etc. These writers chiefly focused on the freedom struggle movement, the horror and frenzy of partition, internal exile of colonial period, east-west relationships, social and communal classifications and its resultant issues. Memory and nostalgia played vital role in old Indian diaspora. The ‘longing lingering look behind’ by the older generation is a contrast to the diasporic sensibility of new generation that concentrates on the more variegated themes of globalization, cultural hybridity, cultural insulation and multiculturalism. The writers of new diaspora can further be divided into two categories: those who spent a significant portion of their lives in India and were beckoned by the foreign lands, and those who were raised outside
India and view India from a distance. Kamla Markandaya, from the first category has foreshadowed the diasporic angst in terms of hyphenated identity and racial strife, Anita Desai has dealt with inner alienation and uprootedness, Amit Choudhary has renders the theme of displacement and belongingness, Bharti Mukerjee has discussed fractured identities, Salman Rushdie has viewed diaspora in term of spiritual alienation, Uma Parmeswaran has shown a move from alienation to reconciliation and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has tried to negotiate the boundaries separating men and nations. In the second category of new diasporic writers Jhumpa Lahiri has talked about bi-culturalism and resultant emotional tension, Meena Alexander has delineated diasporic experience from a woman’s stand point and has mentioned it in terms of ‘jostling, shifting and sliding’. Meera Syal has narrated the struggles and adventures of young South Asian women on a foreign land. Sunetra Gupta has recorded the intercultural relationships and Shashi Tharoor has written about India’s klaedeoscopic culture and fifty years of independence from afar.

In the contemporary scenario the writings of Divakaruni have a singular charm since she is “a listener, a facilitator, a connector to people” and to her “the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about.” Divakaruni is one of the most engaging diasporic women writers of our time who has been listed among ‘Twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women’ in 2015 by Economic Times. Her multifarious personality as a professor, poetess, writer, columnist, book-reviewer and activist is clearly manifested in her celebrated works. She is a versatile writer who has explored various genres of writing like poetry, prose, fiction, non-fiction, mythology, fantasy and magic realism etc. Being a South-Asian immigrant in the US, she stands on the threshold of two cultures, histories, nationalities and
ethnicities. She analyzes the differences arising from geographical locations, cultures, and ideologies. She appreciates and celebrates this diversity in her works. The conspicuous autobiographical element and strong psychological appeal creates a special interest in her works. With an unprejudiced outlook she writes about different cultures, classes, communities and generations. Albeit she has a soft corner for the underprivileged section of society and writes with a strong conviction that books can transform lives. Divakaruni is not a typical didactic writer but she does write with a social responsibility. She weaves her writings around various social issues and lets the characters debate over them. Without passing a judgement she hints at the wiser choice. Her robust optimism and faith in ultimate goodness of life permeates her writings. She has firm belief in the resilience of human spirit which is depicted through her characters. What makes her works even more engrossing, is her spirit to connect and to unite.

To know her literature better it is vital to know her life first. Chitralekha Banerjee popularly known as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, was born on July 29, 1956 in Calcutta, India, in a middle class family of Rajendra Kumar Banerjee and Tatini Banerjee. She was the second born child and the only sister to three brothers. In a very protective atmosphere she was raised as a devout Hindu. Her formative years in Calcutta have left a deep imprint on her personality. She went to a convent school, Loretto House run by Irish nuns. She completed her Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) at the age of 19 from Presidency College, Calcutta University in 1976 in English and Bengali Literature. Her father’s employment with American oil major, Esso, resulted in the migration of the entire family to Okhlahoma, USA in 1976. Divakaruni, at that time was 19 years old. She continued her education in the United States at Wright
State University in Dayton, Ohio where she earned her master’s degree in English in 1978. Away from the protective atmosphere of home, she learnt to manage things on her own in United States. Divakaruni did a number of odd jobs to fund her college education. She worked as a baby sitter, sliced bread in a bakery, sold merchandise in Indian boutique and washed instruments in a science lab. While studying in Berkley, she lived in the International House and worked in their dining hall. Her work included removing dishes from dishwasher and slicing Jell-O. She married Mr. S. Murthy on June 29, 1979 and was blessed with two sons Abhay and Anand. Later in 1985 she received her Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. Interestingly her dissertation for PhD was titled “For Danger Is in Words: Changing Attitudes to Language in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe”. Owing to her strong penchant for teaching Divakaruni took up teaching job and taught at Diablo Valley College (1987-89) and Foothill College in Los Altos, California (1989). Divakaruni, currently lives in Houston, Texas and works at the University of Houston, where she teaches in a nationally ranked Creative Writing program. At the University, she is widely regarded as the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Creative Writing. Apart from her academic achievements, Divakaruni is a social crusader and activist too. She started working for the Mid Peninsula Support Network for Battered Women in 1990. In 1991 she became a co-founder and former president of MAITRI, a helpline especially for South Asian women. This foundation has collaborated with various mainstream women organizations and acts a bridge to connect battered women socially, linguistically and culturally. She serves on the Advisory boards of NGO’s like MAITRI in the San Francisco Bay Area and DAYA in Houston. Both organizations are involved in helping South Asian or South Asian American women
that are muddled in abusive or domestic violence. She has also served on the board of PRATHAM for numerous years. This non-profit organization aims at imparting education to underprivileged children from slums of India. She is also a volunteer for the Indo American Charity Organization, an NGO which raises funds to help many charity events in Houston.

Divakaruni started her writing career much later in her life as she was fond of reading and always wanted to be a teacher like her mother. Although she inherited love of stories and writing from her mother, still she never had any idea of becoming a writer. It was only after her grandfather’s death she started writing to recollect her past, her childhood, her own people and places, her culture and heritage. Just to keep these things alive in her heart she took to writing. The fact of being an immigrant fuelled this passion and supplied material for writing. Divakaruni in one of her candid interviews with San Francisco Examiner magazine has confessed in this connection:

I think that, in some ways, being an expatriate made me want to write, because it is such a powerful and poignant experience when you live away from your original culture and this becomes home, but never quite, and then you can’t go back and be quite at home there either, so you become a kind of an outsider to both cultures. Which is hard, but very good for writers. I think, to be in the position of looking in from the outside observing.\(^{21}\)

In the long run writing became a tool for her to communicate and connect to people from various cultures, ethnicities, genders and classes. Later on the Bengali
writers such as Guru Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Ashapurna Devi, Mahasweta Devi and Bani Basu became a source of inspiration for her. She kept nurturing her talent by reading multicultural contemporary writers like Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Charles Baxter, Tim O’ Brien, Sandra Cisneros, Amitav Ghosh, Bharti Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri etc. In her initial days of writing, she learnt the craft of writing by joining a writer’s club and being an active member of the blog of South Asian writers. The writing style of Salman Rushdie, Geoffrey Chaucer, Tim O’ Brien, R.K. Narayan and Gabriel Garcia Márquez impressed her a lot.

Divakaruni initiated her writing career with poetry. In 1986 she published her first poem, “At Mukhtinah,” in Calyx. Her first volume of poetry *Dark Like the River*, was published in Calcutta in 1987. Another venture into poetry followed after three years in 1990 in form of *The Reason for Nasturiums*. This work set the stage perfectly for her breakthrough collections *Black Candle: Poem about Women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* and *Leaving Yuba City*. These volumes of poetry majorly “reflect South-Asian women’s intense emotional experiences of troubled marriages, domestic violence and concerns resulting from immigration.” Having ventured into poetry, Divakaruni decided to write prose. She enrolled herself in a fiction writing class to pursue the same. Her professor was so impressed by her work that he referred her to an agent, who offered her an contract. In 1995 Chitra published *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of eleven short stories about immigrant women who are in a way “liberate and trapped by cultural changes” and are struggling to “carve their own identity.” The women in these stories grapple with the idea of individuality, independence and insight, and issues concerning with
racism, relationships, broken marriages. The book was widely acclaimed for its perfect blend of modern and traditional cultures, eastern and western values and their effect on immigrants. It consist of immigrant women’s burning problems, their psychological conflicts, their rebellion against the patriarchal dominance, their demythologizing of the womanhood, their search of identity, self-actualization, self-independence in their lives. This collection covers the theme of immigration in the entire range i.e. women emanicipation, ethnicity, racism and democracy. This collection won American Book Award, Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, PEN Joshephine Miles Award. One of the short stories "The Word Love" from this collection was made into a bilingual short film, in Bengali as well as English. It was titled “Ammar Ma”. Another story “Clothes” was adopted into a play and in 2010 performed by the Sacramento Theater Company. In May 2016 it has been performed in Ryerson Theatre School, Toranto. This overwhelming response was enough for Chitra Banerjee to move towards fiction.

In 1997 she came up with her first full length novel The Mistress of Spices. Woven with magic and realism it gives holistic insight of human condition and addresses the prevailing problems of South-Asian community and non-whites in multicultural United States. It is “a comprehensive attempt to construct the poetics of spices to decode the Indianness rooted in the psyche of Indian immigrants.”24 The Central figure is Tilotamma who is trained in mysterious magical powers of spices by the Old one on a magical Island of India. She is reincarnated as an old woman who runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. She is instructed to help people of her community in fulfilling their wishes and aspirations with the help of magical powers of spices. Tilo has to abide by three rules: not to step out of the store, not to fall a
victim to feminine passions and never to use spices for her own good. Tilo, rebellious by nature breaks these rules one by one. She goes out of store to help her customers, she falls in love with a young American. Out of offence spices start having counter effect on her customers. Old Mother warns Tilo to return to the island and have her punishment. Tilo agrees but before that she wants to spend only one night with her beloved Raven. She breaks the third rule and uses the spices for her own beautification. She makes passionate love to Raven, her lover. As per her promise, she returns to the store and sets it on fire with herself in the middle, as penance. Between her desires and duty, she chooses a bit of both. Seeing her repentance Old Mother forgives Tilo. She is permitted to have love of her life Raven and is restored with her magical powers too. Tilo’s story represents the dilemma inherent in human life at large. The author has represented a clever blend of mystical and real to further exemplify the differences between and eastern and western culture and how the Indian immigrants adapt themselves in America. Through Tilo’s customers Divakaruni has explored the convenience and complexities of western world. She has also given glimpses of the terrible immigrant experiences, racial and gender discrimination and cultural differences with sexual liberalism. The emotional side of the story is phenomenal. In 2005 this novel was adapted into an English film by Gurinder Chadha and Paul Berges, bearing the same name, starring Aishwarya Rai and Dylan McDermott. The film was shortlisted for Orange Prize. By the San Francisco Chronicle this novel has been selected as one of the top 100 books of the 20th century.

Chitra’s second collection of short stories *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* includes nine heart touching stories. These stories signify the transformation of
ideologies, cultures, people through the choices they make in their lives. Chitra has beautifully dealt with the issue of changing identities of first and second generation immigrants and the resultant predicament. This collection unveils women centric challenges and women’s experiences as Indian American immigrants.

Dangling between physical and metaphysical Chitra’s next novel *The Queen of Dreams* unfolds the complexities involved in filial and marital love. It also hints at racism and the emotional turmoil faced by second generation of immigrants. The story revolves around Mrs. Gupta and her daughter Rakhi. Mrs. Gupta is a dream teller and her daughter Rakhi is a divorced single parent and an artist. Since childhood Rakhi idealizes her mother and is always curious about her enigmatic profession. On the other hand Mrs. Gupta deliberately makes her life a mystery for her daughter because she doesn’t want her to know the grim realities of it. Rakhi wants to inherit the talent of dream telling from her mother and Mrs. Gupta is helpless as dream telling needs an innate talent which Rakhi lacks. Mrs. Gupta helps people with her powers but she fails when it comes to her own daughter. Like Tilo, the mistress of spices; Mrs. Gupta’s loyalties are also divided between her talent and her family but unlike Tilo she fails to justify any of them and ends up with guilty confession, “Worst of all, I have not loved anyone fully, not my husband or child, not the suffering souls that have come to me for help. Try as I might, the core of my heart remains moldy and desolate.” In this novel Divakaruni has also introduced the 9/11 attacks and its backlash faced by South-Asian Immigrants.

Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* is a path breaking novel. It has been a national best-seller for over a year. It is a re-telling of the Indian epic the
Mahabharata from Panchaali’s perspective. At an early age Divakaruni noticed that literature, oral tradition and history have been men centered. This is what triggered her to overthrow the patriarchal dominance and show women’s perspective to the society. The Palace of Illusions takes the readers ages back in order to have glimpses of Panchaali’s life, She has been presented as an embodiment of strong matriarch. The novel is about her wisdom, individuality, intelligence, mistakes, her decisions and their effects on history at large. In it, Divakaruni has narrated how bravely Panchaali dealt with the restrictions of royal family, five husbands, her harassment in the court, her revenge, the death of her children and the consequences of war. Divakaruni has written the novel as gracefully as she has given voice to Panchaali’s heart and mind. She has made Panchaali a timeless character.

Inspired by the memories of hurricane Rita in Houston, Divakaruni has written One Amazing Thing. It is an epitome of multicultural literature in itself with its nine characters of different ethnicity, age, class and nationality. They all are waiting in the basement of visa office of Indian consulate when suddenly they are struck by an earthquake. At this crucial juncture all of them overcome their differences and work as a community for survival. They share their food, water as well as their lives through their stories in the manner of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. As per glitterati film news One Amazing Thing is currently been selected by the Hollywood production company, Gillen Group.

Divakaruni has penned some of the fantastic works for juveniles also. Her novel Neela: Victory Song, set against the backdrop of Indian freedom struggle, is about a young girl Neela. She is from a small village Shona Gram in Bengal. She
leaves her village in order to search her father who went to Calcutta to participate in a protest against British Rule. In her adventure she is helped by Samar, a young freedom fighter and his cousin Bimla. The way courageous Neela and resourceful Samar manage the safe return of her father from the jail, inspires the young readers.

Divakaruni has also written a young adult fantasy *Brotherhood of the Conch*. It is a triology starting with *The Conch Bearer*, followed by *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* and ending with *Shadowland*. This fantasy novel series is full of magic, mystery and fiction that makes an everlasting impression on the reader’s mind. The first book introduces main characters like Abhaydatta the master healer; Anand, a twelve year old boy who is fond of magic and fairy tales; a poor girl Nisha from Kolkata; and evil-minded Surabhanu who has stolen the Conch. Apart from them there is a magical Conch. Although a non living thing yet it talks and speaks to human beings and addresses their problems with its magical powers. Anand and Nisha help Abhaydatta in restoration of the magical conch to the silver valley, thus securing a place there as apprentices. In the second book events take such a turn that Ananad gets separated from Abhaydatta, Nisha and the magical conch. He finds a magic mirror that allows him to travel through time. Using the mirror, Anand travels to the 16th Century of Mughal empire in India where an evil sorcerer Kasim is hell bent to attain superior powers by using a Jinn. There he meets Abhaydatta and Nisha who are in alternate identities. Anand rescues the Mughal court from the evil magician and finds the lost Conch. In this book Divakaruni has woven a story full of nerve chilling suspense and action. She has proficiently illustrated the exoticism of India through majestic Mughal empire. In the third book Anand and Nish travel to future to find out the Conch. This part of the trilogy series takes the readers into a
dystopian future where the scientists are adamant on committing ecocide. They have stolen the magical Conch and want to use its powers for their selfish motives. The scientists and the magicians are at war for the energy resources. Finally Anand and Nisha reconcile both of them to establish social and ecological balance in Shadowland and safely return to the Silver Valley along with the Conch. Unlike the previous book that represents the centuries old tradition, Shadowland lists the harmful effects of scientific innovations. The Conch Bearer, the first book of her series in 2003 was nominated for the Bluebonnet Award. This book was listed in the Publisher’s Weekly Best Books of the Year, the Rebecca Caudill Award Master List, Pacific Northwest Young Reader’s Choice Master List and Booklist Editor’s Choice.

Grandma and the Great Gourd is Divakaruni’s first picture book based on Bengali folk tale. The story is about an old grandmother who lives in an Indian village along with her loyal dogs Kalu and Bhulllu. One day she goes to meet her daughter who misses her terribly. The clever and witty old woman douses all the animals she meets on her way, by offering them to eat her when she returns fatty and tastier. On her return journey, grandma sits inside the huge hollow gourd and her daughter fixes the gourd with rice glue, stitches it and gives it a push towards the old woman’s village and ensures her safe return. Divakaruni has not made major changes to the original story, she has only added to it, her qualitative innovation of pattern, rhythm, rhymes and onomatopoeia.

In 2013 Chitra Banerjee came up with another novel Oleander Girl. This novel is a kind of transcontinental novel that spans United States and India. It is about evolution of a seventeen year old girl Korobi into a woman of nerve. Korobi is
orphaned at birth but her childhood remains blissfully cocooned under the affections of her maternal grandparents. It is only after her grandfather’s sudden demise on the evening of her engagement, that the family secrets are revealed and she comes to know that her father is still alive. This revelation shatters her completely. She sets for America to search her father and determine her identity. Apart from depicting Korobi’s journey of selfhood, the novel throws light on the fact that even in 21st century class, caste, race and religion have pivotal role in framing one’s world view which is evident in the novel through the aftereffects of Godhra riots and 9/11 attack.

Divakaruni has written a chamber opera in 2013 titled River of Light for the Houston Grand Opera which reflect the life of an Indian woman in Houston. In 2014 it has been performed by Houston Grand Opera (HGOCo) and received the excellent reviews for her work.

Recently in April 2016 Chitra has once again shown her feminist spirit with another enticing novel about three generations of women. The novel is entitled Before We Visit the Goddess. It is a story about grandmother Sabitri, her daughter Bela and granddaughter Tara. The complexities of parent child relationship and generation gap have been beautifully delineated. The novel makes a shift from rural Bengal to Houston, Texas. The book is fine example of east-west binary as it begins with quotes from both the Manusmriti and Jean Thompson. This book continues to be national best seller since its publication in India. It has been described as a must read book by media both in India and abroad.
Chitra Banerjee has also written some Anthologies that are *Multitudes: Cross Cultural Reading for Writers*, *We Too Sing America*, and *California Uncovered: Stories for the 21st Century*.

The wide range of her works has made her internationally acclaimed author, novelist, poet and philanthropist from Northern America with her roots from the traditional India. To her credit, Divakaruni has won various awards and many of her work have become bestsellers in recent times. Her works have been published in more than fifty magazines which include, *Mainstream, The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Her short stories have found their way in over fifty anthologies that includes the *O.Henry Prize Stories*, the *Best American Short Stories* and the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*. Her works have been translated in around 29 languages that include Bengali, Dutch, Russian Hebrew and Japanese. Many of her celebrated works have been employed as campus-wide and city-wide reads. Her works spread the cultural aptitude through her ingenious literature that influences the masses across the globe. Still she is such a humble soul that she doesn’t take the credit as an extolled writer and thinks herself merely “the instrument of creative power.”

The major themes of Divakaruni’s writings are women and their dynamic roles, immigration and its changing contours, cultural exploration and orientation, mythification and demythification, interrogation of stereotypes, and the matrix of human relationships. Divakaruni has rendered these themes with freshness and creativity.

A large chunk of her writings revolves around women. Keeping in mind the position and disposition of women, Divakaruni has carefully mapped the changing
demographics of family, marriage, career, love, empowerment, freedom, cultural values, and marginalization. With the shrunken boundaries of time and space, the dynamics of Indian diaspora’s relation with non-Indian diaspora and the natives have undergone a big change. According to Angshuman Kar “The slash in the binary that was earlier thought to be the marker of separation and association between the natives and Indian diasporans only has now shifted itself to many new and un-thought-of positions . . . . beyond the old binary of the native/ diasporan.”

Besides the problem of acculturation the immigrants in Divakaruni’s works generally struggle with their innerself for balancing the preservation of old and simulation of new. It is author’s migration to America that gives her a platform to compare and contrast Indian cultural system against the backdrop of multicultural hype and hoopla. She looks at people and the world in a different light. Her novels and short-stories are a microscopic study of two opposite cultural systems. Unlike other diasporic writers Divakaruni doesn’t create a mythic narration of her native land. Instead she applies the myths of her native land to comprehend the realities of her hostland. The plentiful use of Indian myths and mythological allusions imparts a rare richness to her works. She is adept in creating her own myths and deconstructing the existing ones. With equal ease he can use a single myth in various references. In her works she has strongly demythified Indian exoticism and ‘American Dream’. She has hit the hideous realities of both Indian and American society and has tackled intricate social issues. The pivotal theme of her works is to challenge the stereotypes by making bold choices and overcoming the restrictions that are irrationally imposed. The psychological penetration into immigrant psyche makes her writings more compelling. The undercurrent of compassion and heartache
inherent in nuptial, filial and sibling bond has been rendered beautifully by her. She has exquisitely canvassed the expression of love, hate, betrayal, envy and sacrifice by way of powerful storylines and situations. The writer’s body of her work has played a vital role in showcasing the different colours of human life and society. She wants to connect with maximum readers especially women, therefore, deliberately avoids elitism. As a writer, Chitra Banerjee has been very experimental. She has tried innovations in themes, writing style as well as in narrative techniques. Her knack for eclectic characterization is rare. Her characters are vivid, strong and well defined. From their mien and motives to their moods, nothing escapes her penetrative eyes. Her capacity to give life, identity and relationship to the characters is amazing that bounds and touch the core of readers. She is a great narrator, who understands the pulse of her readers and offers the best of the lot.

What makes Divakaruni’s writings more convincing is the fact that the themes of her works have been derived out of her real life experiences. During her social activities with MAITRI and DAYA Divakaruni has personally observed the harassment, exploitation and emotional stress of South-Asian immigrant women which has been poignantly expressed Arranged Marriage. The intersection of two realms—the real and the mystical presented in The Mistress of Spices comes from author’s own near death experience during second delivery. She felt herself “hovering between life and death” in a dreamlike state and projects it through Tilo, the mistress of spices “who moves back and forth between one existence and another.”28 The theme of contention vis a vis compassion explored in One Amazing Thing struck Divakaruni when she was volunteering with Katrina refugees in 2005. She formulated this novel during her first hand experience of Hurricane Rita in
Houston. In both the cases she noticed different reactions of people in life-threatening situation. Some people were angry, some were panic-struck, some were joking to lessen the tension and there were others who were calm and composed, and were busy in sharing their meager supplies with other victims. She decided to outline the entire spectrum of human behaviour and let the readers learn “how to deal with catastrophe in a humane and compassionate manner, overcoming that primal ‘survive at any cost’ urge that is probably hardwired into us.” The theme of female friendship became central to her writings as a rebellion against mythological representation of Indian women. It was shocking to Divakaruni that the male heroes enjoyed important relationships with both the sexes while their female counterparts had most of the interaction with opposite sex only. Divakaruni tried to understand how the life of these epic female characters was different from that of women in Calcutta. In her hometown Calcutta, life was much liberated and women were more active in social sphere. They would meet in the afternoon to extend advice about their household work and enjoy chatting, gossiping and sharing their experiences. She finds some uniqueness in friendship between women and writes:

But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other. Ourselves with all our imperfections. Ourselves uncomplicated by all the emotions that complicate our other relationships: duty, lust, romance, the need to impress or control. We can be women and know that, as women, we are understood.

This celebration of female friendship is manifested in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desires*. The tales from Indian mythology, being all men centered
disappointed Divakaruni further. She developed a strong urge to rewrite these tales from women’s perspective and highlighting all the women characters that were neglected in the original writings. She materialized her desire in The Palace of Illusions which is a retelling of the Mahabharta from Panchaali’s stance. The tragic memories of 9/11 clubbed with the pain of otherness and the repercussions felt by the non-American communities in the US supplied materials for Queen of Dreams. Divakaruni wrote this novel to stir the feelings of empathy and solicitude for all the communities under American flag. She makes her intentions clear by saying “If I could make the pain and the hope powerful enough in the book, then maybe I might stop some of the prejudice out there, and have some sort of counter effect to what followed 9/11.”\(^\text{31}\) Her books for the juvenile including Neela: Victory Song, Brotherhood of the Conch and Grandma and the Great Guard, were intended to give children “multicultural heroes to relate to, familiarizing them with folk tales and beliefs of India, creating values and plan having fun.”\(^\text{32}\) Apparently with such vast experience of varied situations, Divakaruni’s capabilities as an author have enriched and evolved with every new piece of work. Her life as well as her writings are aimed at dealing with the opposing binaries and creating a balance that will be discussed in this research under four heads: East vis a vis West, Men vis a vis Women, Tradition vis a vis Modernity and Realism vis a vis Magic Realism. The author intends to add rhythm to the regular chimes of pendulum like existence.
References

9. Ibid.
15. Ibid. 12.
16. Ibid. 21.


25. *Queen of Dreams* 209.


31. Terry Hong, “Responding with Hope to 9/11 Talk with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni About her Latest novel, Queen of Dreams” 5