

**THE FUSION OF PAST AND PRESENT IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL *The Vine of Desire***

J. Nasreen Banu

Department of English, Vivekananda College of Arts and Sciences for Women Namakkal, Tamil Nadu

Article History: Received 2nd March, 2016, Accepted 30th March, 2016, Published 31st March, 2016

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses how the memory of past disturbs the immigrants present life. Recollection of past has both positive and negative sides. The positive thing is that the past memories strengthen their lives in the present and it gives them courage to face their lives and the negative side is that it often keeps people idle thinking only the past. In Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*, there remains a blending of both past and present. The paper analyses her characters attitude towards their past memories. Since most of her characters are immigrants and their longing for their past will be never missing in her works.

Keywords: Identity, diaspora, Indian immigrants, cultural dislocations, rootlessness, diaspora writings

1. INTRODUCTION

Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to her fiction *Sister of My Heart*. The story started in *Arranged Marriage* develops in to a full length novel in *Sister of My Heart*. The story centers on the lives of two Indian girls Anju and Sudha belongs to the Chatterjee family in Bengal. They both born in big old Calcutta house and, on the same tragic night both their fathers were mysteriously lost in ruby hunt which make Sudha imagine that they are bad luck to their fathers. The family is deprived of its men. Sudha's mother Nalini, Anju's mother Gowri Ma and, Aunt Pishi are widows which are the biggest curse bestowed upon any Indian women. All the three accept their fates and challenge to bring their daughters in a well-planned manner. They live together by maintaining their own responsibilities.

Gowri Ma manages the book store which is the only financial source for the entire family. Sudha comes to know a dark secret about her father Gopal through her aunt Pishi. Pishi tells that Gopal has deceived Bijoy, Anju's father. Gopal enters into the family with a fake identity as he is the son of Bijoy's uncle. The secret about Gopal is clear when Bijoy comes to know his uncle has no male heir. Since Bijoy loves Gopal as his brother, he wants some private time to know the intention of Gopal. So he too goes along with Gopal for ruby-hunting expedition which ends in their death. Pishi is the only one who knows about the true identity of Gopal, thinks that he might have killed Bijoy in the dispute.

This dark secret of the past makes Sudha to maintain distance with Anju since she feels guilty for her father's deed. Past tale about Sudha's father makes her realize the unknown past is

painful. Anju calls Sudha as her sister of her heart since she is the sole reason for Sudha coming into this world which aunt Nalini says about Gouri Ma's help: "Somehow she walked all the way across the hall with Anju in her arms and put her face-down on my stomach. Anju lay there for a moment, draped over my huge belly....Next thing I knew, the midwife was handing Sudha to me, saying "It's another girl"" (Divakaruni VD 30) which happily Sudha says "That's why Anju is my twin..." (Divakaruni VD 30)

Divakaruni being an expatriate longs for the past. To keep afresh her ideas about immigration and its mythology, she uses story telling as a technique. Aunt Pishi is the one who tells about mysterious moral stories to the girls which Sudha says: "But most of all Pishi is our fount of information, the one who tells us the stories our mothers will not, the secret, delicious, forbidden tales of our past" (Divakaruni VD 16).

Due to the family circumstances Gowri Ma decides to arrange marriages for both Anju and Sudha. Sudha forgets her childhood love Ashok for the sake of Anju because Anju's father-in-law Mr. Majumdar upholds the respect and prestige as more important than individual wishes, he warns: "Even after the wedding, I'm prepared to send the girl back to her parents if I find something ugly, like_" (Divakaruni VD 140). So Sudha cancels her plan of elopement with Ashok for Anju. Ashok as per Sudha's advice offers his match profile to Chatterjee family but the mothers reject the proposal of Ashok as he is of lower caste. Sudha never discloses her love for him to the family. She has no other choice except accepting her mother's choice of an arranged marriage to Ramesh, who is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Sanyal.

The novel explores the arranged marriages of the two sisters, Anju and Sudha. Anju's marriage fixes with Sunil, who is

*Corresponding author: **Ms. J. Nasreen Banu**, Department of English, Vivekananda College of Arts and Sciences for Women Namakkal, Tamil Nadu

working in America gets attracted towards Sudha since it is too late, he marries Anju. Anju and Sudha is being separated only on their marriages, Anju moves to America and Sudha stays in India with Ramesh in Bhardhman. The distance keeps them far from their physical bond but it strengthens more in psychological aspects. Both the cousins' pregnancy encourage them to share even silly changes in their health grounds through phone calls and letters.

Harpreet Kaur Sahi comments the position of a woman in her familial life: "If woman is absent, there is ultimately no life in this world. But she is still walking on a tight rope to achieve her right and social justice" (53). Sudha lives adjusting her life in her husband's home, voluntarily does all mean works but still she is not given her own space and due respect. She faces heavy blow in her life and comes out of home since her mother-in-law does not want a girl baby. Sudha is ready to take risk to bring her daughter to this world and goes extreme to accept Ramesh's divorce which upsets Anju. Anju wishes Sudha to lead her life with individuality so she invites her to America.

This incident makes her emotionally sick and she behaves odd. Sudha, knowing this throws all her ties towards her family and homeland and goes to America with her daughter Dayita. She finds it as a chance to rectify her father's wrong. But while travelling in the plane, she reads her father's letter and comes to know that he is not the cause for Bijoy's death. She also comes to know that Singhji, the chauffeur of her family is her father in disguise. The letter relieves Sudha from the guilt. *Sister of my Heart* ends with the guilt free journey of Sudha towards America with full of expectations and hope for her future.

The Vine of Desire starts with the reunion of the sisters in America. The novel deals with the immigrant life of Anju, Sudha and Sunil. The sequel begins with a tragedy of miscarriage, trauma of Anju, since she misses her unborn son Prem which end in abortion. Divakaruni writes: "with the last of her (Anju) strength, she holds on to something she heard a long time ago, in another country, when she was not much more than a child herself: the dead are not irrevocably dead as long as one refuses to let them go" (Divakaruni VD 7).

Past memory causes emotional stress in this novel. Being alone she remains lost in the memories of Calcutta, her home town, and re-visualizes the activities going there. Her craving for India reminds past pleasant memories which heals the wound of loneliness whereas husband's busy with their works. Immigrants lack communication and suggestions about pregnancy and delivery. Anju's miscarriage make her feel lonely as she yearns for consolation. Beena Agarwal says: "Her nostalgia and isolation becomes more intense after her abortion. She unconsciously associates her personal tragedy with the shift of location" (57).

Anju and Sudha faces no big issues in their past, but their marriage bring disaster in the present. For Anju, the best time she has is only in India with her mothers' in the old house, but always complains about the antique things in the home. She prefers many English books and loves Virginia Woolf's writings. She at once wishes her footings at abroad, but after coming America, she begins to miss her homeland and her family. She says to Sunil her husband unthinkingly, "The happiest memories of my life are of growing up with Sudha" (Divakaruni VD 12). She realizes that America is not her

home. She now and then mentions that her life with Sudha in India was so beautiful.

Anju's loneliness reminds her unborn son Prem who is in the warmth of her womb; she shares about her past and conveys reminiscence of her childhood. At some instances she is affected with strong homesickness, goes to the flashback about her old house, the white elephants of the mansion, Chatterjee's family fame and norms and so on. She senses pain for the change of things. She remembers even silly incident took place in the past which she longs to retrieve. Salman Akhtar confesses: "When we leave a place, we lose ties not only with friends and relatives but also with a familiar nonhuman environment" (Divakaruni VD 3). Anju recalls her home at India:

It's gone now. Demolished ...I used to hate that house, how ancient it was, how it stood for everything ancient. I hated being cooped up in it and not allowed to go anywhere except school. But now I miss it! I think of my room with its cool, high ceilings, and my bed sheets, which always smelled clean, like neem leaves – and which I never had to wash myself! – and the hundred – year old peepal trees that grew outside my windows (Divakaruni VD 13).

What was once hatred becomes a lovable one to Anju at America. Anju, who once longs to go abroad, now regrets, she says, "Sometimes I wish I hadn't been in such a hurry to come to America" (Divakaruni VD 13). Though Anju dreams America from her young age, it now becomes the land of promise to her as Pishi's tales about a fairy kingdom.

The news of Sudha's arrival makes Anju overwhelmed with emotions. A number of memories related with her homeland, ancestral home, and her affection towards three mothers pass through her consciousness. Beena Agarwal confesses: "With the recollection of the memories of joyous days, she feels herself guilty for the motives that had inspired her to migrate to America" (57). Anju says: "I believed that I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn't so easy" (Divakaruni VD 19).

On the day of Sudha's arrival to America, Anju makes a lot of dishes for her sister. Though she resides in America, she does not forget her past life with the mothers who have shown their love and care by preparing so many Indian dishes. Anju utters: "It is the most Indian of ways, what the women of her family had done to show love through the years of her childhood, that simple time which she longs for more and more as her adult plans seem to collapse around her" (Divakaruni VD 20).

When Anju and Sudha are in the Calcutta mansion they both go to see the falling stars to wish on. They go to the terrace, secretly at night to watch it. Anju asks Sudha "Do you miss India?" (Divakaruni VD 37), for which Sudha cannot hide her answer she asks, "How do people here watch the stars?" (Divakaruni VD 37). Both the sisters long for their past. Sudha visits America to help Anju recovers from the psychological trauma that she suffers after the loss of her baby. As Urbashi Barat says both the sisters bond are important in its own way as:

Sister of my Heart exhibits, in fact, many of the features of novels dealing with the bonds between sisters, such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*,

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. Most such novels depict sisters as being very different but as sharing nonetheless a deep primal, non-verbal and inexpressible bond, a bond which makes each a kind of Dostoevskyan double of the other and while somehow survives the continual tension between them over their other relationships, especially if, as usually happens, one of them is prettier, cleverer, more talented or more fortunate than the other (52)

Anju calls Sudha to America to experience the life of liberation and privacy because she has no support of her husband. Anju believes that America is the best place for Sudha to meet her own needs and needs. America offers women to pursue their own goals, desires, and individual happiness. When Anju insists Sudha to join in the college along with her; Sudha understands the financial status of Anju and Sunil's family, and refuses.

Sudha after getting the divorce wipes away her sindoor from her forehead. She thinks that she has got rid of all things of marriage. She flies to America for a new start. But still she confesses: "once in India I scrubbed the colour of marriage from my forehead, believing I was rid of it. But it comes back. Some mornings, my pillow seems family powdered with red" (Divakaruni VD 45). Thus, the past does not allow her to think about her future. Wherever one goes, one cannot forget their homeland. The thought of homeland and its respect towards it unconsciously presents in the blood of the immigrants.

Aida Khorsandi says: "Nostalgia is a psychological response to the sense of loss which is defined as a liking phenomenon which connects the mourner to the past through her symbols and objects of loss" (9). Sudha being isolated at home goes to a park in America which is so clean with new equipment's. She admires its cleanliness. But suddenly her mind reminds her of the Indian parks where:

people would jostle for space beneath the few banyan trees. The hot-gram and ice-cream sellers would sing song their way between families with too many children piebald dogs would follow them, panting endlessly. Bus fumes, spicy pakoras, the too – sweet peaks of old woman's hair candy. The odour of oleanders crushed under small, excited shoes (Divakaruni VD 81).

The comparisons and contradictions from the original home with the adopted land dig out past memories. When Sudha comes to America, the mothers give her the Indian calendar which "tells us which days are auspicious, and which bad luck" (Divakaruni VD 149). Sudha makes it hung on the kitchen wall. Sudha meets a woman named Sarah, an Indian immigrant in a park. Sudha pleads her for a job but Sarah tells her that she will inform it to a woman named Lupe, and she will call Sudha if she finds a suitable job for her.

Sunil, Anju's husband has strong desire towards Sudha even before the marriage. Sunil cannot wipe his thoughts of Sudha though he tries hard. Anju after the abortion refuses to do the wifely duty to her husband. This gives a long space in the marital life of Anju and Sunil. This makes Sunil to decide for a divorce. He asks Sudha to marry him but Sudha refuses that

she cannot live with her sister's husband. But the temptation towards body attracts them both for a physical bonding. This makes Sudha feel guilty about her injustice towards her sister. So she decides to go out of home.

She remembers about the job of a care-taker for an old octogenarian man told by Lupe. Now she has no other choice to take up the job and moves from her sister's home in order to save the marital relationship of her sister Anju. She takes Dayita and moves out with Lupe for a new job; without informing Anju and Sunil. Divakaruni through the character of an old man named Mr. Sen brings out how the Indian immigrant who has spent his prime years in India cannot make his mind adjust to live in America. Mr. Sen's Son Trideep, takes his father to America since he marries a woman named Myra.

Trideep doesn't want his father to live all alone in India. At first Mr. Sen is happy to live in America with his son. The initial enjoyment of the immigrants at foreign countries will be memorable which very soon gets converted to homesickness. Trideep says, "when he first got here, he wanted to try everything. Like America was a great big toy store, and he was a kid. He loved Ice cream. We'd go to Baskin – Robbins every few day so he could try a new flavor" (Divakaruni VD 237).

Old age reminds one's own homeland. Their hunger towards their homeland will be heavy on them since it's the custom where people wish to spend their last minute of life in their home and in homeland since they want to be the part and parcel of their homeland. Mr. Sen is affected by stroke and becomes bed-ridden suffers from extreme longing for the landscape of his childhood and home. After this incident, the old man fears that he may never see his homeland again as he cannot imagine his death at America, an alien country. For people who have strong nostalgia like him, returning to their homeland is the best treatment. He wants to go bare to his native home and breathe the native air. Trideep says to Sudha. "All he'll say – in that painful stammers - is send me home, Deepu" (Divakaruni VD 237).

Though the old man wishes to go back India, he cannot go due to his age of dependence. Trideep cannot send him back because there is no one at India to look after him and he is also not in a condition to look after him. So the refusal of Trideep for sending the father back makes the father angry towards the family. He becomes an adamant and starts showing his anger in various ways. He refuses to eat, talk and even look at them. The old man becomes sick both physically and mentally. Sudha realizes, that Trideep's "father closes his eyes because he can't stand to be here. In this bed, in this house, in this country, all of which is alien to him" (Divakaruni VD 278).

At first Sudha has tough time with the old man. Sudha makes him eat the food but the old man hurts Sudha by spitting the food at her face. None can blame him since he is like a child resolute towards his home country. Gradually Sudha understands the mental anguish of the old man. She thinks that she is doing the duty of a daughter, since she did not do anything to her real father Singhji. The doctor Mihir says that "the problem is primarily mental, compounded by

malnutrition. He's suffering from severe depression and Mihir doubts whether he can recover by himself" (Divakaruni VD 283). Mr. Sen's only aim is to go back to his homeland. He tries in all ways to go away from America.

According to Anju, Sunil accepts the American culture has his own past memories but it does not disturb him in the present. He shares his past to the little girl Dayita every day. He remembers his home at India where he has no freedom and individuality. He expresses his nostalgic moments describing how as a child he is threatened and mesmerized by the threats and strange characters in films. He says "I went back to see the place, after I was grown and in college. But it was gone and some kind of air-conditioned market had taken place. I was relieved. For the rest of my life now, could continue thinking of it the way I remembered it, without my critical adult eye running the spell" (Divakaruni VD 119). He wishes to cherish those memories in his real life.

His father Mr. Manjumdar is a very strict man and Sunil's mother is under his subjection. Sunil tells: "a scabby boy with pencil – thin arms and legs, Khaki half – pants, white shirt – the school uniform of Deshbandhu boys school, ... trees" (Divakaruni VD 116). He also explains about his mother's miserable condition to Dayita. This provokes him to hate his father and returns the money which the father has spent for him for his upbringing. Since he needs to free himself from the bond of his father, every month he deposits some amount to his father's account. Lisa Lamor says the responsibility towards immigrant men "Men from India who migrates to America are expected to be strong and successful, dominating their work or study field and ultimately prevailing in a position to provide for their families both in America and in their country of origin" (Divakaruni VD 52).

Sunil's memories are so limited. He tells only about his childhood days to Dayita and he has no longing for the past or homeland because his past was only a worry to him. He attains his freedom by moving to America as he wants to be free from his father's views and clutches. He diverts his mind from past by keeping busy himself in music as his profession is a Disk Jockey. Anju says about the importance of music.

It's not just the excitement and glamour, the money and easy popularity, as she'd accusingly thought. But to make a roomful of people lose themselves to the mood and become one with the sound! To throw up their arms to the sky and never want it to stop _the music that you've created from random bits and castaway pieces and made it sound like no one thought it could. To make people shed suspicion and memory of pain. Why, it was a little like being God!. (Divakaruni VD 306)

Sudha cannot forget her past though she busies herself with the new job. She confesses: "I will not think of the past. I will not think of the past. But now, again, she feels it: the press of a man's lips on her soul" (Divakaruni VD 227-228). By looking at the old man, Sudha is reminded of her father Singhji. Sudha gets an idea of playing music to cure the mental inability of the old man. She gets the cassette of Hindi music and plays. "I turn up the volume and swing my daughter around to the beat. The past is the past is the past" (Divakaruni VD 245).

Divakaruni's various characters with different generations suffer in the clutches of the past memories as they are not in a condition to shed off Indian ways and follow the American. There is a tug of war between homeland and host land. Though Sudha wants to forget all her past, her mind yields to the past from time to time. When she receives a package from the postman she thinks: "For a little while she made herself new under a new roof, among people innocent of her history. But the past has the habit of catching up with you, even in Berkley. Now she must deal with it" (Divakaruni VD 295). Sudha wants to forget all her miserable past and always wants to cherish her days with Anju. She wants to remember that whenever she feels sad, she thinks about her childhood days with Anju. That is the only past, she wants to remember till the end.

In Divakaruni's Immigrant's life, the past is never hidden. Memories are the symbol of innate bonding with one's native cultural roots and it positively obstructs the process of assimilation. In an Interview Culeton says:

Memories some memories are elusive, feeling like butterfly that touches down and is free until it is caught others are haunting .You'd rather target but won't be forgotten. And some are always there. No where you are, they are there too. I felt most of my memories were better avoided but now I think, it's best to go back in my life before I go forward.

2.CONCLUSION

Thus, throughout the novel, the readers can find a longing for the homeland or the past life but only in the minimum characters like the Old man, Anju and Sudha, all the three live with their memories of past in present and long to attain it. The other characters like Sunil, Lalit, Trideep, Sarah, Lupe never allow their mind to cherish with their past memories. The past occupies the mind of the characters for a limited time and they busy themselves with their work.

3.REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. 2003. *The Vine of Desire*: Paperback.

Secondary Sources

Agarwal, Beena. 2011. "Aesthetics of Exile and personal Relationship in *The Vine of Desire*,". *Women Writers and Indian Diaspora*.

Sahi Kaur, Harpreet. *Negotiating with the past and contemporary life of Indian woman: A study of the works of Sashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*.

Barat, Urbashi. 2000. "*Sister of My Heart*: Female Bonding in the Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." Ed. MandalSomdatta. *Asian American Fiction*. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Prestige Books,

Khorsandi, Aida. *Music-Related Nostalgia Experiences of young people living in Migration*, Master Dissertation, *Music, Mind, and Technology*. University of Jyvaskyla,

Culeton, Beatrice. "In Search of April Rain Tree" *Windspeak*, 8.8. July 6, 1990. Print.