



Assimilation, Resistance and Cultural Memory: Indian-American Women's Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction vividly portrays the struggles and negotiations of Indian-American women navigating the complex terrain of diaspora. This paper explores how her female protagonists embody the tensions between **assimilation, resistance, and cultural memory** in a globalized world. Drawing upon novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), the study examines the ways in which Divakaruni reimagines migration as a multidimensional experience—one shaped by nostalgia, cultural hybridity, and feminist agency. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, the paper analyzes how her characters resist erasure by preserving inherited traditions while simultaneously adapting to the cultural codes of the host nation.

The study situates Divakaruni's work within the recent theoretical discourse of **transnational feminism** and **diasporic subjectivity**, arguing that her narratives transcend the binaries of East and West,

homeland and hostland. The protagonists' struggles to redefine identity illuminate the evolving contours of South Asian diaspora in twenty-first-century America. By emphasizing cultural memory as both burden and resource, Divakaruni re-centers immigrant women as agents of transformation rather than victims of displacement. Ultimately, her fiction underscores that belonging in diaspora is not about complete assimilation or rigid resistance but about crafting fluid, hybrid selves that reconcile the past with the present.

Keywords: Diaspora, Assimilation, Resistance, Cultural Memory, Indian-American Women

Introduction

The diaspora, as both concept and lived experience, has long fascinated postcolonial scholars for its complexity and emotional resonance. It encompasses not only geographical dislocation but also a psychological negotiation between memory and modernity. Among contemporary diasporic writers, **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni** stands out as a literary voice that



intricately captures the emotional fabric of Indian immigrant life in America. Her narratives portray the nuanced intersections of identity, culture, and gender, often through the lens of Indian-American women who attempt to balance traditional values with the demands of an alien land.

The notion of diaspora has evolved from being seen as exile or displacement to becoming a “productive site of hybridity and negotiation” (Bhabha 37). Stuart Hall defines identity as a process that is “always in formation, never completed” (Hall 394). This fluid understanding perfectly aligns with Divakaruni’s women characters who constantly oscillate between belonging and unbelonging. The diasporic experience, for them, is not merely a physical journey but an emotional transformation.

Divakaruni’s fiction often mirrors her own transnational identity. Having migrated from India to the United States in the mid-1970s, she became acutely aware of the challenges faced by women immigrants—loneliness, racism, and the pressure to conform. Her narratives, particularly *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, articulate the tension between **assimilation into the American mainstream** and **resistance to cultural erasure**, all while rooted in the **memory of homeland**.

This paper explores how Divakaruni’s female protagonists—Tilo, Anju, Sudha, and others—embody this triadic negotiation. Through postcolonial feminist perspectives, it argues that Divakaruni’s diaspora is a living space of struggle and empowerment, not a static condition of loss.

Theoretical Framework: Diaspora, Gender, and Cultural Memory

The conceptual triad of **assimilation, resistance, and cultural memory** must be

contextualized within postcolonial and feminist frameworks. Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space” proposes that cultural identity is neither pure nor fixed but formed through negotiation (Bhabha 55). This in-between space allows immigrants to rearticulate belonging beyond binary oppositions. In Divakaruni’s novels, the “third space” manifests through women who mediate between India and America, creating hybrid cultural forms.

Avtar Brah’s seminal work *Cartographies of Diaspora* deepens this idea, suggesting that diaspora is not just about migration but about how people “imagine themselves in relation to places and histories” (Brah 181). For women, this imagination is further complicated by gender roles and patriarchal norms. The **feminist diaspora** framework recognizes that immigrant women’s identities are constructed at the intersection of race, class, and patriarchy (Mohanty 27).

In Divakaruni’s fiction, cultural memory becomes the axis around which resistance and adaptation revolve. Her characters are haunted by memories of India—its scents, rituals, and familial expectations—while seeking freedom in the West. This memory, as Pierre Nora observes, is not a static repository but “a living link between the past and the present” (Nora 12). Divakaruni’s women thus reinvent tradition rather than abandon it.

The theoretical foundation of this study combines **Bhabha’s hybridity**, **Brah’s spatial mapping**, and **transnational feminism** to interpret how Divakaruni’s protagonists balance cultural heritage and personal autonomy. Her portrayal of Indian-American women suggests that identity is a continuous dialogue between memory and transformation.



Negotiating Assimilation: Cultural Adaptation and Identity Reconstruction

Assimilation, though often seen as cultural surrender, appears in Divakaruni's fiction as a survival mechanism. Her protagonists enter the American landscape not as passive recipients but as negotiators of dual existence.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo represents an immigrant who straddles the border between myth and modernity. As the custodian of Indian spices in Oakland, she helps fellow immigrants heal their emotional wounds. Yet, her love for Raven, an American man, signifies the desire for personal liberation. Divakaruni presents assimilation here not as betrayal but as a transformative act—"the spice of freedom that cannot be confined to one pot" (*The Mistress of Spices* 214). Tilo's acceptance of her own desires marks her emergence as a hybrid self, negotiating both Indian spirituality and Western individualism.

Similarly, *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of short stories, illustrates varying degrees of assimilation among immigrant women. In "The Word Love," the protagonist's relationship with an American man collapses under the weight of cultural guilt. Divakaruni reveals that assimilation is not merely external adaptation but an internal conflict shaped by patriarchal conditioning.

In *One Amazing Thing*, nine characters trapped in an embassy basement share migration stories that traverse borders and languages. Uma, an Indian-American student, functions as a metaphor for the hybrid consciousness that connects diverse migrant experiences. Her empathy across cultures reflects Divakaruni's vision of **transcultural harmony**—a contemporary necessity in globalized society.

Divakaruni's women are not victims of assimilation but agents of selective

adaptation. They absorb Western ideas of autonomy while retaining emotional ties to their Indian ethos. This dual belonging, though fraught with contradictions, forms the heart of her diasporic vision.

Resistance and Reclamation: Feminist Defiance in a Foreign Land

While assimilation offers survival, resistance ensures dignity. Divakaruni's female characters often confront the constraints of both Indian patriarchy and Western stereotyping. Through acts of defiance, they reclaim their voices in a world that demands conformity.

In *Sister of My Heart*, Anju and Sudha's intertwined lives reveal the complexity of cultural expectations. Sudha, married into a conservative household, resists patriarchal control by returning to America with her child after a failed marriage. Anju, on the other hand, grapples with infertility and emotional isolation in the U.S. Their sisterhood becomes an emotional refuge that defies distance and diaspora. As Sudha tells Anju, "Sometimes, the only homeland we have is each other" (*Sister of My Heart* 289). This statement encapsulates Divakaruni's feminist ethos—female solidarity as a mode of survival in displacement.

Similarly, in *The Vine of Desire*, the same protagonists evolve into more autonomous individuals. Their resistance is subtle but powerful, manifesting through self-redefinition and forgiveness. Divakaruni reframes resistance not as rebellion but as the quiet assertion of agency.

In *Queen of Dreams*, the protagonist Rakhi inherits her mother's mystical gift of dream interpretation. Rakhi resists the consumerist emptiness of America by reconnecting with her mother's spiritual legacy. Her art becomes a form of protest against cultural amnesia. As



critics like Nair observe, “Divakaruni’s women transform resistance into creative energy” (Nair 2021, p. 44).

Through these narratives, Divakaruni asserts that diaspora is not a passive condition but a site of **feminist awakening**. Her women resist not only external oppression but also internalized cultural guilt, crafting identities that bridge continents.

Cultural Memory and the Quest for Belonging

Cultural memory forms the emotional nucleus of Divakaruni’s diaspora. Her characters constantly revisit memories of India—festivals, flavors, songs, and family tales—as anchors in an alien environment. Memory, for them, is both a source of comfort and pain.

In *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, stories like “The Blooming Season for Cacti” show how nostalgia shapes immigrant identity. Characters cling to fragments of the past to preserve their sense of self. Yet, Divakaruni cautions against excessive idealization of the homeland. The remembered India is often romanticized, existing more in imagination than in geography.

Before We Visit the Goddess (2016) spans three generations of women whose lives move between Bengal and Texas. Through Sabitri, Bela, and Tara, Divakaruni charts the transformation of cultural memory across generations. For the grandmother Sabitri, memory is tradition; for Tara, it becomes a myth. The novel portrays how memory evolves—what is sacred to one generation becomes symbolic to the next.

Divakaruni’s treatment of memory resonates with **Pierre Nora’s** concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, where history and emotion intersect (Nora 23). Her women preserve India not in geography but through storytelling, cuisine, and ritual. These

memories sustain their diasporic identity amidst alienation.

Ultimately, Divakaruni shows that belonging in diaspora is less about physical homeland and more about emotional connection—a continuity of roots reimagined in new soil.

Synthesis: Hybrid Identity and Transnational Belonging

Across her works, Divakaruni envisions hybridity as liberation rather than loss. Her protagonists illustrate Homi Bhabha’s “third space,” where cultural negotiation leads to the birth of new identities. The immigrant experience thus becomes a **creative synthesis**—a balance between continuity and change.

In today’s globalized world, such hybridity mirrors broader social realities. The digital diaspora—online communities connecting across continents—further extends Divakaruni’s vision of connectedness. Her fiction anticipates this twenty-first-century phenomenon, where identity is fluid, and belonging transcends geography.

Divakaruni’s contribution to diasporic literature lies in her portrayal of **Indian-American women as transformative figures**. They rewrite narratives of migration from within, shifting focus from male nostalgia to female renewal. Through assimilation, resistance, and cultural memory, they construct transnational selves grounded in empathy and strength.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s literary universe offers a nuanced understanding of the Indian-American diaspora, especially through the lives of women negotiating cultural borders. Her protagonists neither wholly assimilate nor rigidly resist; instead,



they create fluid identities sustained by memory and choice. Assimilation provides them access to freedom, resistance grants them dignity, and cultural memory roots them in continuity.

Her fiction thus becomes an ethical and emotional map of belonging—one where identity is dynamic, dialogic, and inclusive. By weaving myth with modernity, Divakaruni reshapes the diasporic narrative into a story of **female empowerment and cultural resilience**.

In an era of globalization and transnational mobility, her works remain profoundly relevant, reminding readers that home is not merely a place but a state of being continuously negotiated between memory and transformation.

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