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**Identity Crises in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and *Mistress of Spices***

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**Abstract:**

This article focuses on critical examination of the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *Mistress of Spices* which are written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and has a major prominence on the Theme of Quest for Self –Identity experienced by feminine characters. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands out as a chief Indian American writer. In most of her writings, she highlights the challenges that Indian immigrants face as they direct cultural conflicts in unfamiliar environments. She explores the women's difficulties highlighting the indifferences they face both in their surroundings and in native land. It is difficult to assimilate oneself or adapt to a new culture as an Indian migrant, which involves confusion, a sense of rootlessness, and identity crises. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni proficiently articulates these challenges in her writings resemble her intense interest in the experiences of immigrants' grapple with diasporic dislocation and cultural disturbance in their hometown.

**Keywords:** Self-identity, Diaspora, Dislocation, Cultural Conflict.

**Introduction:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a celebrated Indian – American author, poet, and educator, well-known for her heartbreaking and thought-provoking works that explore the complexities of Identity, culture, and belonging. Born in 1956 in Kolkata, India, she moved to the United States in 1976, where she gained a Master's degree in innovative writing from Wright State University. Her experiences as an immigrant woman and writer have deeply informed her writing, which often explores the lives of Indian women both in India and the diaspora.

With a distinctive voice that combines elements of Indian mythology, folklore, and modern realism, she has written a number of critically acclaimed novels, short story collections, and poetry volumes. Her prominent works include *Sister of*

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*My Heart, Mistress of Spices, The Palace of Illusions, and Oleander Girl*, among others. Divakaruni not only explored the chaos and confusion between tradition and modernity, cultural Identity, and belonging but also gave voice to the experiences of Indian women through her writing.

This article will focus on Quest for Identity shedding light on the ways in which Divakaruni's writing continue to captivate readers throughout the world with its rich tapestry of characters, stories and emotions. *Sister of My Heart* was first published in 1999. This novel narrates the tale of two sisters, Anju and Sudha. This novel is the first rate instance of patriarchal society where in female are regarded as not as good as male. In fact, in some fields and some areas, the position of females is very low compared to males. They face many problems in this male-dominated society. Due to cultural practices, women are the ones who always face and are subjected to violence in this male-dominated society. They do not even have the right to express their likes and dislikes. Through this article, one can understand how female characters are struggling to find out their Identity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni speaks for the women and intercedes for them through this novel by discussing problems such as inequality, injustice, and domination in her novel *Sister of My Heart*. It clearly talks about the experience that women go through from their birth as it clearly details the incident where a baby girl was born unlucky in their home. "*Maybe the Bidhata Purush doesn't come for girl-babies.*".....*For girl-babies are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born.* (Divakaruni 1999, P-6) In the case of Anju and Sudha, the offerings are untouched.

This novel shows that women characters are striving hard to gain their identity. The novel also clearly explains the position of women in this society and, at the same time, focuses on the pathetic condition of women in this patriarchal Indian society. In society, women come across many obstacles and troubles on their way, whereas men enjoy their freedom, and women are subjected to suffering, which makes them suffer. In this novel, too, Anju and Sudha go ahead on their merit; patriarchy creates obstacles for them to go forward in society. Patriarchal institutions and social associations are accountable for the substandard or secondary status of women. Indian patriarchal culture gives more importance to men and, to some extent, confines their human rights too. So, Sudha and Anju from their beginning face male domination both in public and concealed spheres.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) is a profound discovery of cultural Identity, mainly through the feminine protagonists and their lives, Anju and Sudha. The novel examines the interplay between tradition and modernity as both cousins direct the expectations of their conservative Bengali family while determined to formulate their own identities. Anju, who moves to the United States, and Sudha, who remains in India, embody the tensions between these two worlds. In her words, Anju says

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...Most of all—when I allow myself to think of him—I hate my father. I hate the fact that he could go off so casually in search of adventure without a single thought for what would happen to the rest of us. I blame him for the tired circles under Mother's eyes and the taunts of the children at school because I don't have a father. None of it would have happened if he hadn't been so careless and got himself killed. (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart* p.11 )

Anju's reflection on belonging as a relational concept underscores the importance of human connections in shaping one's sense of self. Her longing for Sudha reveals the deep emotional bonds that anchor us, even as we navigate the complexities of Identity in a changing world. Anju's journey is a testament to the enduring power of love and sisterhood in the search for belonging.

Sudha's journey highlights the ways in which cultural expectations can create a sense of alienation, even within one's own community. Sudha's Perspective:

I am not so sure. Perhaps they do not have the huge teeth, the curved blood-dripping claws, and bulging red eyes of our *Children's Ramayan Picture Book*, but I have a feeling they exist. Haven't I sensed their breath, like slime-black fingers brushing my spine? Later, when we are alone, I will tell Anju this. But in front of others, I have always been loyal to her. So I say, bravely, "That's right. Those are just old stories." (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, pp. 3-4)

Sudha reflects on her inner fears and her loyalty to Anju, showing her struggle with her Identity as someone who feels the presence of unseen forces (demons) but must conform to Anju's skepticism in public. This duality highlights her internal conflict between her true feelings and her need to belong to the family dynamic. Sudha's narrative highlights the isolation and displacement felt by many women who are uprooted from their homes and placed in unfamiliar environments, whether through marriage or migration. Her sense of belonging is fractured as she navigates her roles as a wife, mother, and immigrant. Sudha's longing for her childhood bond with Anju underscores the importance of relationships in shaping one's Identity and sense of self. Her reflections also reveal the generational aspect of belonging, as she worries about her daughter's ability to navigate the same cultural divides. She also says"

...And my mother, who— it comes to me, now—is my other secret. My beautiful mother always had that haughty look on her face. My mother, who was really the daughter of peasants, was washing soiled clothes by a muddy river, and she thought of eradicating her ancestry with a clever tongue. (Divakaruni, *Sister of*

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*My Heart*, pp. 38)

Sudha's narrative illustrates the gendered dimensions of migration and belonging. As a woman, her Identity is often defined by her relationships—daughter, wife, mother—leaving little room for self-definition. Her sense of dislocation mirrors the experiences of many South Asian women who migrate to the West, as discussed by Bidisha Banerjee in *Imagining Women: The Politics of Representation in South Asian Diasporic Literature*. Sudha's longing for her childhood bond with Anju underscores the importance of female solidarity in resisting patriarchal norms. Divakaruni's use of first-person narration allows readers to empathize with Sudha's internal conflict, making her a compelling figure in the exploration of Identity and belonging. Anju's harsh words highlight Sudha's struggle with her sense of belonging in the Chatterjee household, especially as she grapples with her family's financial dependence.

If you're so full of self-respect, how come for the last thirteen years, you and your mother have been eating our rice and taking up room in our house? If you're so full of self-respect, why don't you go tell your mother to find a home of your own? (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, p. 45)

Divakaruni's exploration of these themes underscores the impact of migration and cultural hybridity on identity formation, showing how the characters' sense of belonging is continually challenged and renegotiated.

In *Mistress of Spices* (1997), Divakaruni employs magical realism to explore themes of Identity and belonging, blurring the boundaries between myth and reality. The protagonist, Tilo, is a mystical figure who uses spices to heal and transform the lives of her customers in Oakland, California. Tilo's dual Identity as a mystic and an immigrant reflects the novel's central tension between the ancient and the modern, the mythical and the mundane. As Tilo herself observes, "I am a woman of two worlds, the old and the new, the real and the magical" (*Mistress of Spices*). This duality is emblematic of the diasporic experience, where individuals must navigate the complexities of living between cultures. Also, she utters as;

Ahuja's wife is young and seems even younger. She is not a brash, buoyant young person but raw and flinching, like someone who's lately been told she's not good enough. She comes every week after payday and buys the barest staples: cheap coarse rice, *dals* on sale, a small bottle of oil, and maybe some *atta* to make *chapatis*. Sometimes, I see her holding up a jar of mango *achar* or a packet of *papads* with hesitant desire. But she always puts it back. (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, p. 14)

The use of magical realism in the novel serves to highlight the fluidity of Identity in the diaspora. Tilo's mystical abilities, which are rooted in her Indian

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heritage, set her apart from the world around her, yet they also provide her with a sense of purpose and connection. However, her growing attachment to the people she helps, particularly a young Indian-American boy named Jagjit, forces her to confront the limitations of her mystical role. Divakaruni's portrayal of Tilo's inner conflict underscores the challenges of reconciling multiple identities as Tilo struggles to balance her responsibilities as a healer with her desire for a more ordinary life.

The tension between preserving cultural Identity and assimilating into a new culture is a central theme in *Mistress of Spices*. Tilo's interactions with her diverse clientele, who come from various cultural backgrounds, highlight the ways in which cultural Identity is negotiated in the diasporic space. For instance, Tilo's relationship with Jagjit, who is caught between his Indian heritage and his American upbringing, reflects the broader challenges faced by second-generation immigrants. In Tilo's Perspective;

I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work with others, too. Mineral, metal, earth, sand, and stone. The gems with their cold, clear light. The liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island. But the spices are my love. I know their origins, what their colors signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true name it was given at first when the earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood. From *Amchur* to *Zafran*, they bow to my command. (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, p. 3)

Tilo's narration explores the conflict between her mystical Identity as the Mistress of Spices and her human desire for connection and love. The spices symbolize her cultural and spiritual roots, grounding her in a sense of purpose and Identity. However, her growing attachment to Raven and the people she helps forces her to confront the limitations of her role and the possibility of a different kind of belonging. Tilo's journey reflects the universal struggle to balance tradition with personal fulfillment, as well as the difficulty of finding a place in the world when one's Identity is tied to a higher calling.

The Theme of cultural consensus is developed through the novel's examination of the emigrant experience in *Mistress of Spices*. Tilo's interactions with her customers, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, reflect the multicultural reality of contemporary America. Tilo says;

No. One more thing is mine. My name is Tilo, short for Tilottama, for I am named after the sun-burnished sesame seed, the spice of nourishment. They do not know this, my customers, nor that earlier I had other names. (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, p. 5)

Through these interactions, Divakaruni highlights the ways in which cultural Identity is not fixed but is continually negotiated in response to changing social and

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cultural contexts. The novel's use of magical realism serves to underscore the fluidity of Identity, as Tilo's mystical abilities allow her to transcend the boundaries of time and space, connecting her to both her Indian heritage and her new life in America.

Critics have lauded *Mistress of Spices* for its innovative use of magical realism to explore themes of Identity and belonging. As critic Susan Koshy notes, "Divakaruni's blending of myth and reality creates a narrative that is both deeply rooted in Indian cultural traditions and reflective of the diasporic experience" (Koshy 112). The novel's portrayal of Tilo's dual Identity as a mystic and an immigrant highlights the complexities of cultural hybridity as she navigates the competing demands of her heritage and her adopted culture.

Child-longing, deepest desire, deeper than for wealth or lover or even death. It weighs down the air of the store, purple like before a storm. It gives off the smell of thunder. Scorches. O Lalita, who is not yet Lalita, I have the balm to lay over your burning. But how, unless you ready yourself, hold yourself open to the storm? How, unless you ask? (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, p.16)

### **Conclusion:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels have offered great thought in construction, agreement, and redefining Identity in the aspect of Post Colonialism and the South Asian Diaspora. In Divakaruni's novels, *Sister of My Heart* and *Mistress of Spices*, the idea of Identity and belonging are shown as complex and dynamic which are influenced by the exchanged communications of personal relationship, cultural heritage, and the obstacles come in contact with the diaspora. In these novels, the Identity is depicted clearly.

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