

Post-Colonial Feminist Perspectives In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Select Novels*

M. Sri Lakshmi*
Lecturer in English
GDC (a), rajahmundry
Part-time Research Scholar
TDR-HUB
Andhra Univrsity
Visakhapatnam

² V. Sudheer
Lecturer in English
GDC S. Kota
Research Supervisor
TDR-HUB
Andhra University
Visakhapatnam
Email: sudheer.chinnee@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Post-colonial literature as an extensive genre includes diasporic, immigrant feminist genres too. The advocate of Post-colonial theory Edward Said has proposed the concept of 'otherness'. This is considered to be an important theory, especially for diasporas from South Asia bearing a colonial past. It also helps in understanding the effect of power relations between the colonizers and the colonized, the reason for otherness and alienation experienced by immigrants in their respective host lands. The representation of women as an object, sexual toys, and a maid before post-colonial had its transformation with the debut of postcolonial literature. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* had a huge effect on the readers in the transformation of stereotyped ideologies and myths about the female gender. Later with the advent of *The Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, the females were made to think of their rights, independence, identity, and the need to achieve them. Many post-colonial feminist writers took it as their prime responsibility to propagate and advocate the rights, efficacies, and strengths of women to the patriarchal chauvinists. The writers who move from one country to another occupy significant positions between culture and countries. They realize that their culture or identity doesn't remain the same as it was earlier. Identity evolves, grows, and is subject to many changes. The act of writing makes him/her explore both cultures of homeland and hostland. Memories of homeland are kept alive in his thoughts and imagination in fact, becomes a channel between the self and the world. (Shailja, 2008, 52)

Post-colonial feminists, who work for the advancement of women, also challenge the assumption that the gendered oppression is the primary force of 23 patriarchy. They question the approbation of the oppression as it leads to the misrepresentation of their lived experiences. Currently, they struggle to fight the gender oppression within their own society to preserve and safeguard the dignity of their women. Thus, the concepts of freedom, equality, and rights to women, stem from the Enlightenment based on the egalitarian beliefs and principles and have become the main area of concern for the postcolonial feminists of today. In short, postcolonial feminism is not just literature written by women, but literature of women voicing their experiences from within. This principle has created a welcoming ambiance for many of the women writers in Indian Writing in English to use literature as a

* Author: M. Sri Lakshmi and V. Sudheer

Corrospoding Email: Email: mopidevisrilu@gmail.com

Received 03 Jan. 2024; Accepted 18 Feb. 2024. Available online: 25 Jan 2024.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#)



vehicle to present the true state of Indian society, its treatment of women, and the psychological traumas of women due to their own traditional and cultural barriers. To this school of post-colonial transformed feminist ideologies belong the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This paper aims to discuss the reformed feministic perspectives with special reference to *Sister of My Heart* and *Oleander Girl*.

Keywords: *Diasporic, Immigrant, Transformation, Stereotype, Ideologies, Feministic Perspectives.*

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who migrated to America in 1976 is the first generation Indian-American award-winning author who is very much conscious about own identity, and talks about alienation, rootlessness, and longing for the homeland of immigrants through her works. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, and some of her novels and short stories have been made into films and Television serials. She closely witnessed the problems faced by the so-called 'blacks' in the so-called 'white' country. Discrimination in the foreign land persuaded her to establish 'MAITRI' a helpline organization for South Asian Indian Immigrant women in America. Chitra Banerjee has effectively made use of writing as a channel to advocate the elements of hybridity through different characters. Divakaruni views the cultural cringe of the Indian women in American cities and their unavoidable urge to adapt to or embrace the values of America, though the future appears to be vague, yet not bad in that alien land. She has described these cross-cultural experiences of Indian womanhood in her works. The investigation of the immigrant experience, especially the difficulties South Asian women encounter in juggling the intricacies of several identities, is a defining feature of Divakaruni's literary works. Her work skillfully combines parts of folklore, Indian mythology, and current events with modern themes to create narratives that are both culturally rich and widely relatable. Her most well-known pieces are *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, and *The Palace of Illusions*, which is a Draupadi-narrated version of the Mahabharata. Divakaruni is a well-known figure in contemporary diasporic literature that explores issues of identity, family, and the complex dance between tradition and modernity. Her narrative skills have garnered her fame and several honors.

Unlike the portrayal of women as weak and stereotype images before post-colonial literature, post-colonial feminism depicts women as strong, efficient, honest, independent, self-assertive, and responsible gender. Taking a step ahead in the subsequent years, post-colonial feminist theory interprets women as indigenous. It ignites the Western feminist thoughts to serve as the voice for many voiceless suppressed and oppressed in this traditional patriarchal social order.

Women were once defined in terms of their own experiences and were later defined as characters attributed with strong, determined, and potent-minded qualities.

The major characters Korobi in *Oleander Girl*, Sudha, and Anju in *Sister of My Heart* are the literary specimens of transformed post-colonial feminist ideologies created by Chitra Banerjee. She reflects on the struggles faced by women in their native lands as well as distant lands for their identity and how they succeed in reaching their goals. The exploitations could not stop their journey, instead make them emerge and evolve as strong individuals. The post-colonial feminist perspective of Chitra Banerjee's female characters is discussed as below:

Independent And Self-Assertive

In Chitra Banerjee's second novel *Sister of My Heart*, we find how Anju and Sudha the protagonists claim their individuality and achieve it by overcoming many hurdles that come across in their traditional brought up. Though born in traditional Indian families very much aware of the values, morals, limitations, and of the supervision of their mothers over them, the two sisters Anju and Sudha try to be self-dependent. We find the mothers Gouri ma, Nalini, and Pishi even as young widows could lead their lives independently without any male counterparts. The notable point here is Chitra Banerjee's protagonists or the other female characters never transform to a mean status or never stoop down in their attempt to be independent or self-assertive.

Sarkar rightly observes:

“Writers like Divakaruni are acutely aware of their already exiled or marginalised state in the male dominated Indian society. For them the physical act of relocation, a deliberate move to a foreign country becomes an act of self determination and rebellious against traditional norms of behaviour”. (39)

Anju after knowing the secret love of her husband towards her cousin Sudha, decides not to depend on him for her studies. She works at a library to save money for Sudha's visa. Sudha had plans to start a boutique after returning to India and no more to depend on her mothers. Even Pishi also suggests selling their house and buy a small flat and using the remaining amount towards Sudha's delivery. We find Gouri Ma restlessly working in the bookstore as the sole breadwinner in the family since her husband's untimely death. Though the mothers belong to the first-generation women category, we find them very bold and assertive.

When Nalini decides the marriage of Sudha at an early age, Gowri Ma though an orthodox, protests her decision –

“But she wouldn't even be eighteen”
“That's much too young-” (SMH 67)

This shows the modern ideologies of Gowri Ma who as the runner of the family wanted to educate her girls for their better future and hoped that their lives be not tragic like theirs because of early marriages. Later due to her deteriorated health, she plans for her daughter Anju's marriage. She reveals her ambition of higher education for Anju with Sunil, her to-be son-in-law. She feels light-hearted when Sunil assures her:

“Promise, as much education as she likes.” (SMH-123)

In *Oleander Girl*, when exploited by Mitra, Korobi sells her hair in America to meet her expenses but she doesn't request a penny from her fiancé. We also find Korobi acts very bold when tries to be exploited by a person in America when in search of her father. She finds it very much important to know her identity. She is very adamant about leaving for America in search of her identity. We find Korobi very honest when she reveals the secret of her illegitimate birth without any hesitation to Rajat. She directly reaches to Rajat's house to tell him about her parentage. But Maman who was already aware of the truth rejects Korobi. Korobi insists upon telling the truth honestly:

“I know you didn't want to see me,” I say, “but I have to talk to you- and especially to Rajat- and explain things. After that, if you want me to leave, I will.” (OG-272)

“I planned to tell him everything the moment I got back. That's why I was coming here.” (OG-273)

We come to know even Korobi's mother Anu too very much adamant about marrying Robin Lacey only with her father's agreement. But unfortunately, she dies before it. We find them as strong, independent women claiming their niche in the world.

Bold and Determined

We find both Anju and Sudha very bold. Though brought up in a very traditional Bengali family ever under the observation of their mothers both of them manage to bunk off the school and go to the movies and join at the school gate again in the evening.

Anju named Anjali understands the meaning of her name 'offering' and decides to offer her life for the well-being of others mainly for her cousin Sudha. It shows her determination to sacrifice her life to Sudha. And Sudha whose name is Basudha as Bidhata Purush had written and she should have patience enough as the goddess Earth.

“ I will be as patient as the earth goddess I am named after”(SMH-8)

Anju is also bold enough to accept and digest the words said by Pishi-

“You will be brave and clever, you will fight injustice, you will not give in.

You will marry a fine man and travel the world and have many sons.

You will be happy” (SMH-9)

Anju understands and accepts that her life is for “beauty, goodness and sorrows”.

Anju and Sunil have a pretext of a fight regarding phone calls to India as they had been running short of money. But Anju doesn’t like it. She doesn’t like being restricted and deprived of her freedom to talk to her mothers:

“Now when I call home-and I make it a point to do so when Sunil’s there, because I don’t like being under handed about such things- I can hear him counting the minutes inside his head. He won’t say anything about it openly-he’s too proud for that. And I’m too stubborn. Why should I give up speaking to my mother just because he needs to prove something to his father?” (SMH-203)

Anju being an inspired lady through the works of her favourite writer Virginia Woolf never wanted to depend on Sunil. She is determined to earn for her expenses.

After marriage, we find Anju suggests Sudha leave Ramesh and go to her mother's in order to save her daughter despite knowing the mother’s orthodoxy and conventions. In the same way, she despite her bad health during pregnancy takes a bold decision not to depend on her husband for Sudha’s flight tickets and goes to work at a library.

Sudha though meek and calm takes a bold step and leaves the house of Ramesh and later gets divorced. This is all to protect her female self in her womb. The mothers also break their conventions and finally accept Ashok to marry Sudha. Though down-to-earth, Sudha is very determined. Anju and Sudha though dissimilar in nature are always together, special and unique in thought and action. The beautiful and calm storyteller Sudha, dreams of running a boutique and helping the family. On the other hand, Anju bears a staunch spirit to study in college. Sudha comes to know of a heart-breaking secret about their family’s past. She sacrifices her love with Ashok by refusing the plan to elope, as it would spoil the reputation of her family which may thus affect Anju’s marriage. When asked by Anju whether she would be happy without Ashok, Sudha says to herself-

“I am,” I say. I am righting my father’s wrong (SMH-129)

Korobi, in *Oleander Girl* bearing the meaning *Oleander*, wonders why her mother had named her after a poisonous plant. Divakaruni portrays Korobi as an ordinary girl with honesty and straightforwardness as her natural ornaments. The simple and intelligent attitude of hers makes her stand out. Korobi is engaged to a wealthy man Rajat. For an ordinary traditional girl, it is a happy ending. But for Korobi who came to know of the truth of her life, it is not. Now she is more curious and worried to know who her father is rather than experiencing the loving

moments with her would-be. Leaving behind all her happiness she leaves for the USA in search of her father though not known of any details about him. In *Oleander Girl* we find Korobi making courageous decisions in every walk of her life. Korobi possesses a set of imbibed traditional values and has an assertive personality too. This is evident for the first time when her grandfather fixes her engagement date without consulting her. She stands up to wear a trendy dress for her engagement though refused by her grandfather Bimal Roy. As a girl who belongs to the advanced generation she respects herself and her wishes. She respects elders but is not ready to surrender herself to them at all times. Maintaining the limitations a youngster should have, she never falls into the trap of the attractions at America during her stay over there. She is mindful of the purpose of her arrival. She also uses her discretion many a times in the case of Vic who expresses his interest towards her. She is very much curious to know of her father. When her would-be Rajat suggests her not to go in search of her father:

“You heard it! Even Mr. Sen advised you against searching further.
You need to put this obsession aside.” (OG-72)

Korobi wants to explain him how she feels one more time:

“I need to understand my parents’ marriage before before I can enter my own” (OG-72)

Through this, we understand how honest and fair she wishes to be before entering into the marriage bond with Rajat. She wants that there should be no secrets of her life to be left by the time she gets married. Hence in search of her identity, she even sacrifices the happy moments with Rajat and goes to America. Despite her bitter and harsh experiences of humiliation and exploitation in America she never drops her courage. She withstands the odds and knows her identity, who her father is. Though requested many times by Grandma and Rajat to come back to India Korobi insists upon her determination to find out who her father is. She is bold enough to wear the American dresses, and move with Vikram in the American streets with a strong determination to know her father. We even find Anu, Korobi’s mother very determined when she doesn't agree to marry Rob without her father Bimal Roy's permission. She is determined to convince her father. In that process, she loses her life. Divakaruni’s protagonists are courageous enough to assert their female selves and create their own identities. The notable thing is that the effect of diasporic elements is not the same in all aspects. They vary from character to character created by Chitra Banerjee. Whatever may be the element, the characters at last emerge to be decision-makers and achievers.

Self -Respect

Women come out as a survivor of subjugation.

“Reared by women within the feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting upon still solid economic and social foundations”
says Simon de Beauvoir.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has a deep interest in India and, more specifically, in the relationships between Indian immigrant women and the new environment in which they have been destined for survival. She analyses the complex psyche of these women, the inevitable changes occurring in their self-perceptions and the subsequent creation of consciousness in the process of immigration, and their ultimate resolve to move beyond this duality to get submerged in the course of cultural adaptation, the final lot perhaps most of the Indian immigrant women would prefer to do in order to escape from their native repressive cultural values and social stigmas.

Self-respect is another prominent factor that makes women fight discrimination and injustice against them. Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* does not undergo any physical abuse but undergoes psychological abuse as she is carrying the girl child in her womb. Her mother-in-law insists her to get aborted. Sudha finds it inhuman and feels it a humiliation to her self-respect. She leaves the house of Ramesh in order to protect her foetus. She feels that killing a foetus is killing her self-respect. When Sudha receives divorce papers from Ramesh in which ‘Desertion’ was written under “Reason”, she immediately widows herself out of immense self-respect.

“ I take off my wedding bracelets later that day,
wipe off the sindur powder inspite of
mother’s lamentations.” (SMH-247)

The mothers finally accept to marry Sudha to Ashok, whom she loved previously. She is very happy that she is going to have a new life again. She feels that she had overcome her fate written by Bidhata Purush:

“Whoever knew that when I scrubbed away what the Bidhata Purush had written on my forehead I would uncover this? A rosy happiness has dyed my body through and through. Happiness beyond deserving. It frightens me.” (SMH 262)
Even when Ashok suggests that they may leave Dayita with their mothers
“ While I don’t care about your previous marriage”
“I don’t think I can welcome your daughter as fully as she deserves.” (SMH-263)
“You and I need to be alone, at least in the beginning, so we can build

a strong relationship. The mothers will be happy to keep your daughter and make sure she never lacks for love. I promise I'll give her every opportunity that money can bring." (SMH-263)

Sudha doesn't agree to his proposal. She is not ready to leave her child parentless for her happiness. She had sacrificed her marital life just for the sake of protecting her baby. Now she is ready even to sacrifice her love with Ashok for the sake of her child. She plans to start a boutique after her return to India, to be independent with self-respect. Anju out of her self-respect strives hard to earn income for Sudha's tickets. Her self-respect doesn't allow her to beg Sunil for her needs. Anju's problem pertains to the psychological void created in her by her husband Sunil. She faces psychological trauma in silence.

Divakaruni describes the feelings of her protagonists, who are torn between familial expectations and career pressures, and the difficulties of reconciling their Indian heritage with American mores. Their identity, which has been solely circumscribed by their ethnic affiliations, inflected by familial obligations and cultural traditions, now moves towards American liberal feminism.

Korobi in *Oleander Girl* is a woman with the utmost self-respect like her mother and her self-respect lies in knowing her identity. She determines to leave for America in search of her father just with his name as the address. When all the money with her is over, she sells her long hair which women do feel is a symbol of beauty and femininity. She doesn't think of seeking financial help from Rajat or Vikram. Seema almost on the verge of tears asks her why she had done such a stupid thing of selling her hair, Korobi says:

"If I hadn't sold my hair, I wouldn't have the money to go to California. I would have had to go back to India without-without doing what I had come all the way to do." (OG-178)

On knowing that her father is an African-American, she decides to tell it to Rajat. Though her grandmother Sarojini warns her not to open that can of ants Korobi is determined to do that.

"Please don't ask that of me." "I can't! Not after getting this far!" (OG-225)

After her return from America to find her father, she leaves Rajat for the humiliation from his mother and for his distrust. She is not ready to sacrifice her self-respect for her love. Self-respect is superior to Chitra Banerjee's protagonists. Korobi's mother also doesn't like to marry Rob secretly. She wants to convince her father and get married. Anu as a woman with self-respect wants to bring her baby into the world respectfully. In every phase of her life, she struggles for her own identity as a mother and wife. Korobi's biggest strength is her morality,

truthfulness, and loyalty. Korobi's ability to withstand against any odds is exemplary. Divakaruni through this novel gives a message to the youth to accept the facts as they are and should strive to overcome the adverse situations instead of delving into depression and disappointment. Korobi's character is one of the best portrayals of post-colonial youth who aspires to change and challenges in life.

Conclusion

The post-colonial literary generators use literature as a weapon and voice to address and discuss the odd, problematic, and dilemmatic situations that the diasporas face between their hostland and the homelands. The immigrants experience and showcase their strong association with the notions like 'home', 'nation' or 'culture' and create their selfhood as a hybrid identity. It is the culture of the West to follow materialism whereas the East like India follows spiritualism. Due to these diametrically opposed cultures, the characters in the novels of Chitra Banerjee face psychological and ethical dilemmas of which culture and ethnicity is to be followed. Chitra Banerjee's deep introspection into the lives of many women (her personal examination of the problems of women in MAITRI) helped her in depicting women emerging as powerful forces after many struggles and hurdles. She also has depicted the empowerment of women through the characters of Sudha, Anju, Pishi, Gauri, and Nalini in *Sister of My Heart* and through Anu, Sarojini, Korobi, and Seema in *Oleander Girl*. These characters display their individual self by surfing against societal patriarchal norms and restrictions. She moves her focus from the stereotyped depiction of women succumbing the oppression and suppression to the portrayal of women as transformed, refined, bold, courageous, determined, and self-assertive individualistic gender.

References:

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. "Childhood" *The Second Sex*. Penguin, 1972.
2. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Sister of My Heart*. Anchor, 1999.
3. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee, *Oleander Girl*, India: Penguin Books, 2013.

4. Sarkar, Parama. “The Old Rules aren’t always Right, Redefined Gender Roles in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Narratives.” *South Asian Review*, 28.4, 2007, 39
5. Mano Ranjani G.M. “Sufferings of South Asian Immigrant Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart*.” *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, Vol.5, 2017.
6. Shailja, P. *From Scene to Scenario : Expatriate Writers Journey, Postcolonial Literatures : Discourses on the Praxis and the Pedagogies*, edited by Raja ShekharPatteti, Prestige Books, New Delhi, ISBN: 978-81-906183-6-6, 2008:52.
7. Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Psychology Press.
8. Bhabha, H.(1992). *The World and the Home*, Social Text, 141-153.
9. Vasigaran, S. *Cross cultural experiences of the Indian woman hood through a post colonial feminist perspective a study on the select works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*.
10. Yadav, Anoopama, Swain Tamishra. *Hybrid Identities: Postcolonial Insight into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Mistress of Spices*. *JETIR* May 2019, Volume 6, Issue 5.
11. Narwal, Anju. *A Quest for Her Roots: A Study of Divakaruni’s Oleander Girl*. *Notions* Vol. 7 No 2. 2016.