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Research Article

Immigrant Narratives in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* intricately explores the emotional and psychological complexities of cross-cultural encounters through the lives of two Indian women navigating immigration, identity, and adaptation in a foreign land. This paper critically examines the novel's portrayal of immigrant dilemmas, including cultural dislocation, emotional fragmentation, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Divakaruni deftly weaves personal narratives with broader socio-cultural commentary, particularly emphasising Sudha's struggle to reconcile her Indian values with the demands of American society. The novel illuminates how immigrant identities are neither fixed nor singular but constantly evolving under pressure from memory, exile, and new affiliations. Through her characters' experiences of loneliness, loss, and longing, Divakaruni foregrounds the gendered Aspect of migration, highlighting how women often bear the double burden of cultural preservation and personal reinvention. This paper draws on postcolonial and diasporic theoretical frameworks to interrogate themes of hybridity, nostalgia, and self-redefinition. *The Vine of Desire* presents a poignant meditation on the immigrant experience, highlighting the costs of cultural displacement and the potential for transformation through empathy and resilience.

KEYWORDS: Immigration; Diaspora; Cultural identity; Cross-cultural conflict; Hybridity



FULL PAPER

Immigration is a complex and multifaceted experience that has been a crucial Aspect of human history. As people migrate across borders, they encounter new cultures, languages, and ways of living that challenge their existing identities and necessitate adaptation. "The transnational dimension of cultural transformation, such as migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation, which makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification" (*The Location of Culture*). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work, *The Vine of Desire*, presents a poignant exploration of the immigrant experience, examining the complexities of cultural identity, the process of adaptation, and the conflicts that can arise from cross-cultural encounters. *The Vine of Desire* extends the narrative of Anju and Sudha, two young women who were central figures in Divakaruni's earlier work, *Sister of My Heart*. Now living in the United States, they navigate the complexities of adjusting to a new cultural setting while maintaining their Indian heritage. Through their experiences, Divakaruni highlights the nuanced realities of immigrant life, showcasing the tensions that stem from cultural differences and the challenges associated with establishing one's place in a new society. "Diaspora is not a singular experience but a multiplicity of experiences that intersect and overlap, creating complex identities" (*Theorising Diaspora*).

This novel explores the theme of cultural identity and adaptation, highlighting the ways immigrants navigate their relationships, values, and sense of belonging in a foreign environment. The experiences of Anju and Sudha serve as a microcosm for the extensive immigrant experience, highlighting the nuances of cultural identity and the challenges encountered in adjusting to a different cultural landscape. The narrative encapsulates the essence of the immigrant journey, highlighting the tensions and complexities that arise from the convergence of diverse cultures. Through the experiences of the characters, Divakaruni explores how cultural disparities can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and ultimately, personal growth and transformation.

This critical analysis aims to explore the themes of cross-cultural confrontations, the challenges faced by immigrants, cultural identity, and adaptation, as illustrated in *The Vine of Desire*. The examination will focus on how Divakaruni represents the immigrant experience, shedding light on the complexities of cultural identity and the difficulties of acclimating to a new cultural setting. His study plays a vital role in enhancing our understanding of the immigrant experience and the complexities inherent in cross-cultural confrontations. By analysing the themes of cultural identity, adaptation, and immigrant challenges in *The Vine of Desire*, this research provides meaningful insights into the ways literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the immigrant experience.

The Vine of Desire offers a profound examination of the immigrant experience, highlighting the complexities of cultural identity, adaptation, and intercultural conflicts. This critical analysis aims to provide a detailed understanding of the themes and characters within the novel, highlighting how literature reflects and shapes our perception of the immigrant experience. Through an examination of the complexities surrounding intercultural encounters and the challenges faced by immigrants, this study deepens our understanding of the immigrant experience. It illustrates how literature can help us navigate the complexities associated with cultural identity and adaptation.

In the exploration of cross-cultural conflicts, novelists typically limit their focus to the cultural experiences of expatriates. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, residing in America and distanced from her homeland, has introduced a fresh perspective to Indo-American literature. Her primary focus is on illustrating the challenges faced by Indian women immigrants in cross-cultural conflicts. The Indian and American cultures act as catalysts for her literary creations. In Divakaruni's narratives, the concepts of nostalgia and home are represented in a distinctly unique manner. Her creative brilliance is fundamentally anchored in the analysis of cross-cultural studies within the context of globalisation. Divakaruni's narrative style is shaped by her experiences as a first-generation immigrant and as a woman navigating the complexities of different cultures and traditions. Her commitment to the women of her heritage is reflected not only in her award-winning short stories and novels but also in her involvement with organisations that strive to assist South Asian or South Asian American women in challenging situations, including domestic abuse, in the San Francisco Bay Area and Houston. Each of her novels introduces one or two notable characters. The portrayal of Indo-American relationships is mainly conveyed through the journeys of Sudha and Anju, two Indian immigrants in America.

In her exploration of character, she is once more focused on the representation of female protagonists who exist in distinct, isolated, and sheltered environments filled with existential challenges and emotional experiences, including love and hate. *The Vine of Desire* (2002), her novel, successfully portrays the conflicts arising from the cross-cultural experiences of Indian immigrant women Sudha and Anju. In their pursuit of identity in a postcolonial world, they illustrate the dilemmas faced by contemporary women, addressing every aspect of their lives. They adapt to their new surroundings, which compels them to undergo a process of self-reinvention. In this novel, the author explores the social, political, and cultural transformations triggered by colonisation, postcolonial awareness, and globalisation.

In this novel, the author has delineated the social, political, and cultural transformations instigated by colonisation, postcolonial awareness, and globalisation. *The Vine of Desire* advances the narrative of Anju and Sudha, the two young women

who are central to Divakaruni's acclaimed novel, *The Sister of My Heart*. Removed from Calcutta, the city of their upbringing, and after enduring years of divergent paths, Anju and Sudha revive their friendship in America. The profound affection they harbour for one another offers the necessary support for each. Anju derives strength in this manner to reconstruct her life following a miscarriage. At the same time, Sudha gains the assurance to forge a life for herself and her infant daughter, Dayita, independent of her husband. Their connection is profoundly tested when they face the intense emotions that Anju's husband harbours for Sudha. The two sisters made independent choices regarding their lifestyles, their respective marital partnerships, and, ultimately, their level of involvement in the host country. Concurrently, the relationships they cultivate with men and women in America, as well as within the immigrant Indian community and their families in India, profoundly reshape their experiences. The narrative illustrates a clash of values on various fronts. However, the most significant conflict lies between India's cultural traditions and the advancements brought forth by Western science and technology.

Anju successfully adjusts to her life in the United States, a land that is utterly alien to her in terms of its nature, culture, and traditions, with the unwavering support of her husband. She leads a life marked by independence, to the extent that she holds the belief that one should not remain attached to any relationship that lacks love and compatibility. Despite Anju's emergence as a confident survivor and conqueror of the host culture, her journey after experiencing a miscarriage suggests that her challenges are deeply rooted in centuries-old traditions, the arranged marriage system; the societal expectation to have children, alongside her feelings of guilt for not genuinely wanting one; and her goal of pursuing education and achieving independence through a fulfilling career in creative writing. While she quickly endeavours to embrace American culture, taking full advantage of the opportunities it offers, and attempts to assimilate into the new society, she does not hesitate to voice her sorrow regarding the loss of her child.

We observe the conflict faced by the young girl who desires to act in accordance with the progressive ideals of her Western contemporaries, while her Indian roots evoke a sense of moral unease. This scenario illustrates the variances that stem from distinct cultural upbringings. Suppose she had been raised in a more progressive and forward-thinking environment. In that case, likely, she would not have undergone the emotional struggles and reactions that she is currently experiencing. The East-West confrontation appears to be limited in both scope and profundity, mainly due to her being depicted in an excessively idealised manner, which fails to reveal the tension between her inherited and adopted cultural frameworks. She does not take responsibility for her actions or the consequences that follow; instead, she chooses to place blame on others. Beyond Anju's curiosity about India and the small pieces of

knowledge she has acquired, her life is also profoundly affected by the new shocks introduced by her husband.

In India, it is traditionally the woman who bears the weight of familial responsibilities, while also being expected to uphold the customs and traditions of her ancestors, often sacrificing her own interests in the process. Her sense of self is continually jeopardised as she strives to find a balance between the obligations of her heritage and the desire to maintain her roots for her own establishment. Sudha, who is married and resides in a joint family in India, dutifully accepts the dominance of her husband's mother and her two younger brothers. She dedicates herself to the everyday responsibilities of life, forsaking her love for stitching and designing garments. Furthermore, she attempts to sever ties with the memories of her former love, Ashok, who remains a constant reminder of her discontent with her married life. However, she persists in living in her husband's household with patience until she is required to undergo an ultrasound during her pregnancy to ascertain the sex of her child. The pressure from her mother-in-law to abort the female foetus serves as the final catalyst, leading her to decide to leave her husband's home. Sudha ultimately flees from her husband's house, compelled by the demand to terminate her unborn daughter, and returns to her family home.

Upon discovering this pivotal moment in Sudha's life, Anju invites her to America, convinced that it would provide a more conducive environment for Sudha to assume her role as a single parent and care for her child. In a defiant act, Sudha chooses to escape to her mother's home and then to her cousin Anju in the U.S., primarily motivated by her resistance to the practice of female feticide and her disdain for enduring perpetual subjugation to her mother-in-law's outdated perspectives and her husband's ineffectiveness. Indian culture places specific expectations on women, and there is a strong emphasis on strict moral values. However, in the public domain of America, women have begun to experience a degree of freedom and self-expression across multiple dimensions, which can sometimes conflict with their roles and responsibilities at home. The development of these conflicting roles is primarily a result of the circumstances created to address the cultural dissonance they encounter. This situation is also reflected in Sudha's experience. After moving to America, she begins to feel a sense of freedom that transforms her views on Indian women, who often find themselves constrained by the social ties and communal identities that influence their lives both before and after marriage.

Regarding the issue of immigration, the novel features an incident in which Sudha arrives at the American airport. A moustached individual talks about a fraudulent visa, illustrating how immigration has become a particularly sensitive topic lately, with many questions arising at the airport where Anju and Sunil come to greet her in *The Sister of My Heart*:

“I hear immigration has been very prickly lately, asking lots of questions...Why, they even denied entry to someone last week, claiming it was a fraudulent visa. I heard it from my friend’s mother-in-law, who came on the same flight. She was telling us about the poor young woman, crying and crying as the authorities took her away. Apparently, the girl’s husband was already here, but she lied about it to get a quick tourist visa...What some people will not do to try and bypass the legal channels”. (Divakaruni 344)

When Sudha comes to America, she envisions having the opportunity to raise her daughter, Dayita, in a more progressive environment within a liberal society, such as the U.S., particularly as a single parent. This belief leads her to challenge the conventions of traditional Indian culture, prompting her to leave her husband and take on the responsibility of raising her child alone, which she perceives as much more manageable in America. Once a woman enters into marriage, she typically has very few avenues for escape, and the act of leaving is seen as a dishonour not just to her family but to the entire community and its traditions. Sudha, whether she realises it or not, reflects the characteristics of the ideal woman shaped by her traditional upbringing. In *Sister of My Heart*, she holds a positive perspective regarding America:

“America has its own problems, she said, but at least it would give me the advantage of anonymity. No one in America would care that I was a daughter of the Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, and give Dayita everything she needed. Best of all, no one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man”. (Divakaruni 294)

Sudha comes to America filled with ambitious dreams. Still, she ultimately finds herself performing various odd jobs and feeling discontented with her existence in the U.S. She arrived in America after rebelling against the customs of arranged marriage, enduring the repercussions of social exclusion, isolation, and deep-seated loneliness. Her stay at her cousin Anju’s home is cut short by the emotional connection that blossoms between Sudha and Anju’s husband. However, unwilling to betray her cousin, she resolves to leave, which also impacts the enduring candid relationship between the two sisters. In the aftermath, she assumes the role of caregiver for Trideep and Myra’s incapacitated father, a position she acquires with the support of Lalit, who is a surgeon. After moving to America, Sudha realises that she embodies multiple identities, either accepting or rejecting specific facets of both Indian and American cultures. As she reflects on the unjust violence and conduct exhibited by others towards her, she gains a new understanding of herself in *The Vine of Desire* by Chitra Divakaruni, feeling that enough is enough when an older man spits on her face.

“So much violence done to me. My mother is pounding my life into the shape of her desires. My mother-in-law wanted to cut from it whatever she considered unseemly. My husband is backing away, his narrow, apologetic shoulders hunched. Sunil plunging into the centre of my body, corrosive with need. Each time, I made myself pliant. I gave a bearable name to what they did. Duty. Family honour. Filial respect. Passion. But today...The old man spat on my face, so frank in its hate. I could not pretend it meant something else”. (Divakaruni 243)

The novel is filled with numerous examples illustrating the diverse pressures exerted on its characters; however, the intricacies may vary depending on the physical and cultural settings of these figures. However, Sudha is resolute in her intention to keep anything from obstructing her career ambitions. Here, the question of identity takes on a new hue: carving out a space for themselves in their adopted nation. She seeks to address the conflicts between their circumstances and their environment, working to assemble the disjointed aspects of their identities. Her character showcases a multiplicity of consciousness in her self-view.

While residing in America and encountering the complexities of East-West interactions, she endeavours to adapt to the unfamiliar culture. Rather than completely discarding her Indian heritage or merely transplanting it, she seeks to integrate her Indianness by continuously reinventing her identity, shaped by her experiences, into something novel. Nevertheless, she remains steadfast in her commitment to her traditional Indian values. Despite living in America, she upholds her Indian lifestyle, including her modes of dress and dietary choices. As a quintessential Indian woman, she adheres to her rich cultural and religious traditions. She predominantly plays Indian music and prepares Indian cuisine to preserve her cultural identity:

“I find a cassette of Hindi music... I remember it from the streets of India, blasted from the speakers of a hundred shops, whistled by cheerfully unemployed young men who stood on street corners, smoking and spitting... Pyar Dwanahotahai, goes the song... I have left the door open so our laughter mingles with the music. Gata Rahemeradil, My heart is singing... In Myra’s sparkling modern kitchen, I prepare an old dish. Bhatebhat... when we were sad, Pishi used to make it because we loved it so much”. (Divakaruni 245-46)

In *The Vine of Desire*, the protagonist, Sudha, grapples with the emotional and cultural complexities of immigrant life in America. Despite establishing a caring and empathetic relationship with an older man defined by a mutual understanding that crosses racial and cultural lines, Sudha finds herself profoundly isolated. She undertakes domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and mending clothes, tasks that underscore her limited opportunities as an undereducated woman on a tourist visa.

Sudha's yearning for connection and stability ultimately drives her to renounce the American dream. She confides in the elderly man:

“America is not the same country for everyone, you know. Things here did not work out the way I had hoped. Going back with you would be a way for me to start over in a culture I understand, the way I will never understand America”. (Divakaruni 320–321)

This demonstrates her personal turmoil, a wish to embark on a new chapter unencumbered by her past, while simultaneously retaining ties to her cultural roots. Her resolution to head back to India takes the old man by surprise, as he states, “Young people who come to this country rarely desire to leave” (Divakaruni 320), underscoring the immigrant challenge of aligning dreams with stark realities. Societal and familial expectations further complicate Sudha’s struggle. Despite her mother’s scathing letter, which blames her for destroying her marriage and threatens her daughter’s future, Sudha chooses to return home. Her mother writes, “Once a woman leaves her husband, she does not hesitate at anything. Even the most immoral acts come to her with ease. I shudder to think of the effect your behaviour will have on your daughter’s character” (Divakaruni 272). Sudha’s experience illustrates the cost of migration not just in material hardship, but in emotional alienation and identity conflict. She preserves her Indian traditions, yet her journey reveals that home is not simply a place, but a space entangled with memory, loss, and cultural belonging.

Though she seems quite progressive in her mindset, she does not believe that marriage is her fate and feels compelled to compromise due to societal patriarchal pressures. Sudha understands that life in India will not be straightforward, yet she believes that relocating and providing her daughter with a convent education will be advantageous. Anju also distances herself from her husband, preserving her dignity instead of remaining with a man who has betrayed her. Both women represent modern Indian ideals, aspiring to live independently of male dominance. Anju struggles to forget and forgive her husband's infidelity and refuses to be a captive of men who, while appearing to offer assistance, would ultimately exert total control over her. She prefers to raise her daughter on her own terms. The process of adapting to American culture differs for Anju and Sudha. Sudha embodies deeply ingrained viewpoints, her background, initial experiences, inherent personality, the allure of her homeland, her concealed past, and her sense of security. She continues to feel like an outsider in her new country.

As an immigrant in America, she sheds her previous status, relinquishing nostalgia in favour of assimilating into her new culture, which she views as her primary strategy for survival. In contrast, Anju symbolises freedom, escape, exploration, discovery, revelation, and the liberation of imagination, striving for new

heights, aspirations, achievements, and confronting the challenges of the unknown. Divakaruni illustrates her profound and essential artistic concerns by exploring the various elements that obstruct harmonious relations between distinct races and cultures. She skillfully portrays the clash between these two lifestyles. Her extensive understanding and insight into both Eastern and Western life values allow her to depict the personal, political, and cultural exchanges between the two.

She is a sensitive writer, and her precise portrayal of the contrast between two distinct civilisations is a remarkable achievement, as her own creative and aesthetic identity embodies a unique blend of opposing qualities and values from both cultures. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands out as one of the prominent voices among immigrant writers. In the majority of her novels, the themes of Psychology, Mythology, and Folklore are intricately connected, reflecting that the author has not lost touch with her Indian roots. Divakaruni aims to articulate and express the experiences of women. She offers a glimpse into the multicultural landscape of her characters and harbours a fervent desire to tell a sincere and poignant story.

The East-West encounter, as a recurring motif in her novels, is intrinsically linked to her experiences as an expatriate who was born with Indian values and subsequently adopted Western values by choosing to reside in America. Similar to her, many of her characters find themselves in circumstances where they must grapple with values that are deeply entrenched in contrasting cultural environments, historical developments, economic frameworks, political ideologies, and philosophical doctrines. Not all of them succeed in resolving the tensions and disparities that threaten to fragment their own psyche and spirit. However, even in their defeat, there is a sense of redemption found in their courageous attempts to surmount their inherent vulnerabilities or the relentless forces surrounding them. Divakaruni's recurrent exploration of the East-West encounter, particularly the Indo-American interaction, along with her adept handling of this theme with considerable depth and seriousness, reflects her sincere and steadfast concern for the global and contemporary landscape. In her novels, she appears to propose that a cultural and political synthesis, as well as a compromise between these two ways of life, is perpetually attainable.

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