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Abstract

Divakaruni was aware of the differences in culture and wanted to write as a means of exploring these differences. During her life at India did not think deeply about the women's issues and remedies but her diasporic status and her deep analysis of the immigrant's life at alien countries made her a writer. The main purpose of her writing is to break the barriers between people of different ages and different ethnicities. Her concerns resemble that of feminists who fight for the women's causes. She wants to guide and motivate the immigrants through her works which will definitely help them lead a victorious life in alien lands. She works hard for the empowerment of women. She also wants to humanise people through her writings.

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 impact of the past causes emotional stress in the main characters. Change is the only word which does not change forever. Past memories, past intimacy can never be regained or recreated as it is in the present. Anju diverts her pain by going regularly to college and makes herself busy in writing assignments which can be filled with historical and social examples but she sketches her familial life as a main concept of her writing which shows her nostalgia for the past life at Calcutta. Her nostalgia thus becomes manageable to her.

Introduction

Divakaruni was born in Calcutta in a Bengali Hindu family. In order to continue her studies she migrated to America. Divakaruni married Murthy in 1979 and has two sons, Anand and Abhay. She now lives in Sunnyvale, California. She was aware of the differences in culture and wanted to write as a means of exploring these differences. During her life at India did not think deeply about the women's issues and remedies but her diasporic status and her deep analysis of the immigrant's life at alien countries made her a writer. The main purpose of her writing is to break the barriers between people of different ages and different ethnicities. Her concerns resemble that of feminists who fight for the women's causes. She wants to guide and motivate the immigrants through her works which will definitely help them lead a victorious life in alien lands. She works hard for the empowerment of women. She also wants to humanise people through her writings. Her writing thus carries a reason "There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious—the essence of spirituality that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds divine in everything. It was important for me to start writing about our reality and that of my community" (Doubleday n. pag.).

Divakaruni, a social worker, becomes engrossed in women's problems. When she gets a chance to visit America, she notices the troubles faced by the Indian immigrants in America. It was her involvement with Maitri that ultimately led her to write *Arranged Marriage* which is a short story collection, talking about the abuses and bravery of immigrant women. Divakaruni tells stories about Indian immigrants who are both modern as well as trapped by cultural transformations, who are struggling to create an identity of their own in an alien land. It also reflects on the impact of the cultural disarticulation on the protagonist and studies whether they end dejected and disillusioned or learn to acclimatize and accept their conditions. It evaluates their attitude and approach towards life, whether they abandon their conventional values or preserve them. It is the socio-cultural encounter that has made Chitra Banerjee a promising literary celebrity and her books a great success.

The Vine of Desire is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. It has two book divisions entitled "Subterranean Truths" and "Remembrance and Forgetting". It continues with the arrival of Sudha with her daughter Dayita. The two married cousins had a chance to migrate to California from their home city Calcutta. Anju desires to live at foreign country but for Sudha, it remains unexpected.

Sudha in the initial stage finds California as a place to escape from her sad past, but failed in her attempt. She wishes Anju to continue her studies.

In *Sister of My Heart* the novelist continues to narrate the childhood joys enjoyed by the two sisters, Anju and Sudha. Born in a big old Calcutta house and on the same tragic night both the sisters lose their fathers mysteriously in ruby hunt which makes Sudha imagine that their birth had brought bad luck to their fathers. Both the girls, though lack their father's love and care, are linked by the mystical bond of sisterhood. The family is deprived of its men. Sudha and Anju live in a female universe as Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* and Mrs. Gupta in *Queen of Dreams* live at the time of practicing their art in an island and caves. Sudha's mother Nalini, Anju's mother Gowri Ma and Aunt Pishi are widows which is the worst curse bestowed upon any Indian woman. All the three accept their fates and they take up the challenge to bring up their daughters in a well-planned manner. They live together by maintaining their own responsibilities.

Sudha comes to know a dark secret through her aunt Pishi about her father Gopal. Pishi, her aunt, 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, which makes Pishi cry that he is not at all related to them in any sense. 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. She suspects 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 cruel deed. The past tale about Sudha's father makes her realize that the unknown past is painful:

"The past is a ferris wheel like the ones at the Maiden fair. A giant ferris wheel, spun faster and faster by my father until it careens out of control. Until it is wrenched from the earth, flung into the emptiness of the hot yellow sky" (Sister of My Heart 52).

Aunt Pishi is the one who tells about mysterious, moral stories to the girls about 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" (Sister of My Heart 16).

Due to the family circumstances Gowri Ma arranges marriage for both Anju and Sudha. Sudha forgets her childhood love Ashok for the sake of her cousin Anju since Anju's father-in-law Mr. Majumdar upholds respect and prestige more important than one's 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—" (Sister of My Heart 140). So Sudha cancels her plan of elopement with Ashok for the sake of Anju's marital life. Ashok as per Sudha's advice offers his match profile to Chatterjee family but the mothers reject the proposal of Ashok because he is of lower caste. Sudha never discloses her love for him to her family members. She has no other choice except accepting her mother's choice of an arranged marriage to Ramesh, son of Mr. and Mrs. Sanyal.

The novel explores the arranged marriages of the two sisters, Anju and Sudha. Anju's marriage is fixed with Sunil, who is working in America who later gets attracted towards Sudha. Since his marriage is fixed with Anju he marries her with no other choice. Anju and Sudha get separated only on account of 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 their psychological bond.

Sudha faces a heavy blow in her life, when her mother-in-law does not want a girl baby and Ramesh is of no help to save their daughter and comes out of her home. Sudha is ready to take risk to bring her daughter to this world, goes to the extent of accepting Ramesh's divorce which upsets Anju. Divakaruni's portrayal is such that arranged marriages are not based on love which should be long-lasting in a marital relationship. Olive Banks, a professor at Leicester University who worked upon the sociology of education and the history of feminism opines: "This attitude to the loveless marriage was shared to a large extent by feminists. They too believed that marriage should be based

on love and not on property, and they deplored the pressures, economic and social, that not only forced women into such marriages but kept them in a husband's power after marriage" (54).

Anju without the knowledge of her husband works to earn money for Sudha's tickets to America which brings a disaster to her own. Due to heavy work, Anju loses her unborn child which is a boy. She cries yearning for Sudha's presence: "I need you so much. I'm starved for you. I was trying so hard to get the money together for your ticket, but I messed everything up" (Sister of My Heart 310). She develops guilt complex which is "an emotional state produced by thoughts that we have not lived up to our ideal self and could have done otherwise" (n.pag.). This incident makes Anju emotionally sick and she behaves odd. Coming to know of this Sudha throws all her ties towards her family and homeland, and goes to America with her daughter Dayita to help Anju recover from the psychological trauma that she suffers after the loss of her baby. 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 of Anju, which ended in abortion and it shatters Anju's life. Adding fuel to the fire, her loneliness is aggravated by the loss of her son. Divakaruni writes: "With the last of her 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" (7).

The impact of the past causes emotional stress in the main characters. Anju is migrated to America just like Ashima in JumphahLahri's *The Namesake*. Both suffer isolation in their life in an alien country, though their situations and problems differ. In India they are surrounded by a number of relatives and family members, but they face loneliness during their pregnancy in America, Ashima, cannot imagine her delivery in the United States hospital without the presence and care of her mother and grandmother. She wonders her present isolated situation "If she is the only person in the hospital . . ." (Lahri 3). Being lonely she remains lost in the memories of Calcutta, her hometown, and re-visualizes the activities going on there.

The immigrants' craving for India fills their minds with past pleasant memories which have the power to heal the wound of loneliness whereas their husbands are busy with their work. During their pregnancy and delivery the immigrants lack suggestions from their family. Anju's miscarriage makes her feel lonely and 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).

The immigrants find themselves out of place from their home and society which make them emotionally upset. The memories about their homeland soothe their hearts. Janelle L. Wilson in his book *Nostalgia Sanctuary of Meaning* says: "Through our nostalgia, we are recreating happy memories, pursuing happiness in the past. We may face constraints in the present, but in past there are no constraints" (26). Anju and Sudha face no big issues in their past, but their marriages bring disaster in their present. For Anju, the best time she had is only in India with her mothers' in the old house of the Chatterjee family. Such memories bring back the past happiness and relieve the stress of the immigrants some times.

Anju prefers many English books like *Anna Karenina* and *Sons and Lovers* and *The Great Gatsby* and *A Room of One's Own* and loves Virginia Woolf's writings. Anju understands the comments made by Sudha's mother about her reading English books who says it is in no way good to Anju since it fills only dissatisfaction with her present life and make her long for distant places. Anju at once wishes her footing at abroad, but after reaching America, she begins to miss her homeland and her family, she says: "I believed that, if 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 . . ." (14). She says to Sunil her husband, "The happiest memories of my life are of growing up with Sudha" (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 of her unborn son Prem. She shares with her unborn baby about her past and conveys the reminiscences of her childhood. At some instances she is affected with strong homesickness, she goes to the flashback about her old house, she says to Prem, "... about the old house, that white elephant of a mansion that had been in the Chatterjee family for generations: its crumbling marble facade, its peeling walls, the dark knots of its corridors, the brick terrace where she and Sudha went secretly at night to watch for falling stars to wish on" (12-13). She senses pain for the change of things and remembers every silly incident that took place in the past, which she longs to retrieve. Salman Akhtar very aptly comments about this condition: "When we leave a place, we lose ties not only with friends and relatives but also with a familiar nonhuman environment" (3).

When Anju was in India she hated to be in her home; she did not know the value of antique things, who once said to the mothers to sell the house but once she came far from home, she yearns for those values of life and she shares with her unborn son as follows:

It's gone now. Demolished to make space for a high-rise apartment building . . . I used to hate that house, how ancient it was, how it stood for everything ancient . . . But now I miss it! I think of my room with its cool, high ceilings, and my bedsheets, 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. (13)

What was once hated becomes a lovable one to Anju at America. People will never know the true value of a moment until it becomes a memory. Absence sharpens love. Likewise Anju, who once longed to go abroad, now regrets: "Sometimes I wish I hadn't been in such a hurry to come to America" (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.

Anju happens to watch children playing and that reminds her about her own childhood days: "My favorite place of all was the family bookstore. For the longest time all I wanted was to be allowed to run it when I grew up . . . There was a special corner with an armchair, just for me, so I could sit and read all I wanted" (13-14). She also shares about Sunil's first meeting with her unborn son Prem: "The bookstore was where I met your father. He had come dressed in an old-fashioned kurta and gold-rimmed glasses—a kind of disguise so that I wouldn't guess that he was the computer whiz from America with whom Gouri Ma was trying to arrange my marriage" (14).

The news of Sudha's arrival makes Anju overwhelmed with emotions. She recollects a number of memories related with her homeland, ancestral home, and her affection towards three mothers. 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). She wishes to stay back in the past, where the memories are sweet and harmless. Objects often trigger nostalgia. Anju carries the photograph of Sudha and herself during their school graduation day. She examines it for a longtime recollecting the incidents which took place during that particular day.

On the day of Sudha's arrival at 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 and she remembers how their mothers have shown their love and care by preparing so many Indian dishes. It is the custom in India; especially Indian mothers express love by preparing homemade dishes and serve with love. 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" (20).

Chris Barsanti comments about portrayal of love in *The Vine of Desire*: "Love is a tangled ticket of thorns in Divakaruni's new novel of Indian immigrants who try to keep their lives together in San Francisco despite the distractions of family pressures and unspoken tensions" (n. pag.). Anju and Sudha are happy being reunited, Anju confesses: "I press my face against Sudha's face and hold her, not wanting ever to let go. For one illogical moment I wish with all my might that the boundaries of our bodies could dissolve, that our skin and bone and blood could melt and become one" (Sister of

My Heart345). After the sisters' reunion in America, they have inner conflicts in both their hearts and they are not ready to share their recent past which is related with their painful marriages which make Sudha utter: "We were afraid to touch each other's pasts, the way one is with a cut that's just stopped bleeding. We read, in each other's eyes, the questions that couldn't be asked, couldn't be answered" (31). Sudha does not like the western life and puts forth her feelings: "We were imprisoned in the apartment. . . After a week, the sound of rain takes on relentlessness. It dredges up memories fetid as corpses. I had to press my face against the fogged-up window to keep in things it does no good to speak about" (36-37).

When Anju and Sudha were in the Calcutta mansion they both go to the terrace secretly at night to see the falling stars to submit their wish. They continue the same practice even at America. Anju asks Sudha "Do you miss India?" (37), for which Sudha indirectly replies that she misses India by asking, "How do people here watch the stars?" (37). Both the sisters long for their past. Anju feels isolated even when she is in the midst of her husband and her sister. Anju's unsecured marital bond with Sunil at America allows her mind towards the reminiscence of the past happy days with her mothers at India. She shares her pain by replying to her mother: "On receiving your letter, I couldn't stop myself from weeping, I missed you so much. How I wish you had indeed married me to a Calcutta boy, so I could take the #37 bus to your house and put my head, with all its troubles, in your lap" (73). Mobilization is not easy for immigrants like Anju who reach United States on dependent married visa. Most of the immigrants never share their adversity to their parents since they do not want to give any pain to them. Anju also did not post the letter since it may hurt their mothers.

Change is the only word which does not change forever. Past memories, past intimacy can never be regained or recreated as it is in the present. Anju feels Sudha is not with the same qualities what she had in her childhood: "And Sudha –I was looking forward so much to having her here, but it isn't the same as when we were young" (73). Anju diverts her pain by going regularly to college and makes herself busy in writing assignments which can be filled with historical and social examples but she sketches her familial life as a main concept of her writing which shows her nostalgia for the past life at Calcutta. Her nostalgia thus becomes manageable to her.

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