



## A RETROSPECTION OF PAINFUL TRAUMA OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI’S *THE VINE OF DESIRE*

**Dr. P. Arockia Nathan**

Associate Professor

Department of English

Faculty of Arts and Science

Bharath Institute of Higher

Education and

Email Research – Chennai

Email Id:

arockia.india@gmail.com

**Chandra.K.**

Ph.D., Research Scholar (Reg. No.D21SH001)

Department of English

Faculty of Arts and Science

Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research – Chennai

Id:chandra13103@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the trauma and ordeals encountered by women who have immigrated to western nations either voluntarily or because of external pressure in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Vine of Desire*. It also tried to stress the personalities of the two devoted sisters Anju and Sudha and how, while being surrounded by many people, they experienced suffering, sorrow, and loneliness. And how their agonising emotions ultimately drove a permanent wedge between them. In contrast to the Indian culture to which they both belong, both sisters are in free culture. In the male-dominated society of India, women are denied their rights and oppressed. The sisters’ close relationship provided them the fortitude to get through all of their toughest life experiences. Without any assistance from a man, Sudha can provide for her own needs



as well as those of her daughter Dayita. The experience the girls receive while they are in America shapes them in such a way that they learn how to live in their host country. As Divakaruni describes Anju’s pain, Sudha demonstrates how women can overcome their trauma, which is almost always experienced by many women.

**Keywords:** Women, Trauma, Pain, Culture, Struggle

### **A Retrospection of Painful Trauma of Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Vine of Desire***

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the most famous Indian Diasporic writers, has written about a variety of issues in her writings, including the perception of India, life as an Indian-American, the plight of women in patriarchal societies, and the difficulties they face in developed nations. Her novels cover a wider range of topics, including racism, diversity, and economic inequity for women, and the physical and mental anguish of migrants. Her paintings reflect the unfavourable situations faced by women in India and America by mainly relying on narrative methods like doubling and pairing. Through these characters, she also emphasises the complex positions Indian women hold in her works. Her female characters are the prominent ones, and she consistently portrays a female narrative in her works. Her works detail the trauma that her women went through, including their lack of roots, the concessions and changes they had to make, the abundance of options they had in different geographic locations, and the cultural clashes that were part of those situations.

Trauma is a medical condition in which a person’s physical and psychological responses to being exposed to intense experiences and emotions have a lasting negative impact on them, making them susceptible to flashbacks, nightmares, and negative behavioural reenactments. By inflicting traumatic ordeals on her character, the author exposes her own experience through the character’s perspective in the framework of her writings.

The personal tragedies of the two devoted sisters Anju and Sudha are revealed in *The Vine of Desire*, along with the plight of women. This novel focuses more on their current circumstances and experiences. Sunil, Anju’s husband, has taken a backseat



because of the sisters’ reunion. The sisters experienced a calming feeling when Anju and Sudha were reunited in America following a protracted relationship. Anju felt relieved that Sudha was coming to the United States since she had missed having a shoulder to cry on since losing her child. The sisters’ gathering provided Sudha the chance to consider her future, particularly her daughter.

The trauma that the women experience in this novel - whether they are aching for love, buckling under family pressure, battling for respect and dignity, or striving for financial independence - has been given an emotional dimension by Divakaruni. In her inner conflicts, Sudha seeks to exorcise the demons that are her own emotions, which are nothing more than devils. “I came to America in search of freedom but was swept away by the longing to be desired,” she writes to Sunil in her letter. “How foolish we were to believe such things might bring us happiness” (350). Even though she tries to shed her bad recollections of the past, she notices a change in herself and in American culture. Both girls struggle with their lives in different ways and work to establish their individual identities.

Anju and Sudha’s transformation to being free women is illustrated by Divakaruni in both their positive and negative aspects. The female protagonists in the novels accept life’s complexities and dichotomies with tenacity. Due to the misadventures the cousins engage in, their status in the diasporic community is marginalised. They can be distinguished from the homogeneous diasporic populations by this trait. Being in the diaspora, they deal with daily challenges. To forge a new identity in a country where they wished to start over from scratch, they were compelled to give up their previous associations with the Chatterjee’s home and the culture they had learned there. Both had to experience agonising emotions. Their backgrounds range from young women with shattered family history to women from wealthy homes in Calcutta. During this phase, Sudha sees that “Each particle of air is stiff, opposing inhalation. With claustrophobia swelling, the walls loomed inward. All around, guarded pleasantries” (37).

Trauma and pain are ultimately a riddle of survival for a person, not just a side effect of devastation. Anju and Sudha are heartbroken upon learning of Sunil’s ardour



for Sudha. Both women are psychologically shattered by Sunil’s proposal to Sudha rather than physically. She began to feel uneasy about her strict moral principles and orthodoxy. She becomes aware of some defence for her identity. She began to understand how much the new American society had influenced her. As the sexual tension between her and he grew, she made the decision to leave Anju, her soul mate.

Now a free modern woman, Sudha approaches the world with bravery and assurance. She gradually begins to adopt the new American way of life. She no longer has the old Chatterjee’s tag on her. She has overcome her timidity and conventionality entirely. Her encounter with Lalit and Ashok provides a description of her mindset and the changes she experiences in her host country. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, she says to Lalit alone, signalling the culmination of her change. But you’re in love with a version of me that, if it ever existed, is gone” (335).

America, the host country, has helped Sudha develop a distinct personality. After leaving Anju and Sunil, Sudha began to take in the fresh air of America as an independent and mature adult. She did her own employment search. Her job has given her a sense of independence, financial security, and confidence. Being a single parent, Sudha had to go through numerous hardships to maintain her freedom. She is also watchful over the welfare of her daughter.

It was not an easy path for Sudha to take; she had to leave her husband Ramesh, her mother-in-law, her mother in Calcutta, and now Anju in America. She finally takes on the role of a maid, doing the cooking, cleaning, and taking care of an elderly person and a family. She finally understands the freedom she has gained for herself. Cultural identity is the sharing of various cultures while maintaining a false identity. Identity is not a thing that can be bought with money from a store; rather, it is the inner feeling of a person that should be resolved or reached, but one that is constantly in transition and development.

The bond between Sarah and Sudha has significantly altered her life. Sarah, an Indian girl, is a young, vivacious woman who approaches life in America with an easy-going attitude and lives it to the fullest. From Sarah, Sudha quickly picks up the virtue of freedom and develops a disregard for the opinions of this world. In the host country,



Sarah is the best illustration of a girl who has changed. After letting her hair grow into dreadlocks for a period, she completely chopped it off. She had her eyebrow and nose pierced, but she eventually allowed the holes to heal. She used all the money she had left when her visa ran out to purchase a used automobile. She occasionally sleeps there. Sarah is seen by Sudha as a free and modern girl, and she even inquires as to how an Indian girl learned to be so casual. She states, “Where did this girl from India learn such recklessness? Who taught her to care so little for what people might think?” (84).

The next person Sudha takes inspiration from is Lupe, her boss. Lupe tells her to be authentic and to stop worrying so much. Lupe is the one who arranges for Sudha to work as a nurse in an Indian family’s home. Lupe cautions Sudha not to get very sentimental when she feels slightly attached to the elderly man in that residence. Even after telling her to “Don’t get attached,” Lupe still advises her. That is a formula for disaster. “Keep in mind that it’s just a job. They might dismiss you and admit him to the hospital the next day. Next, what?” (285). Even after so many setbacks in her life, Sudha’s attitude towards others demonstrates her benevolence. She is still the same girl from the Chatterjee family; the new culture has not altered who she is.

Because of their friendship, Sudha realised that she was good to everyone and aimed to please everyone in both her personal and professional life. She was content with Anju, and she liked it when people were content. She was content with her mothers, who arranged for her early marriage. Even in her in-laws’ home, who only offered her pains and miseries in return, she was content. Finally, she met Sunil, which marked a turning point in her life. She now had to abandon everything, including her goals. Anju and Sudha go through a process of identity development in this part of the novel due to the cultural differences in their new home and their moral predicaments.

After losing her unborn child, Anju was unable to recover from her depression, but she finds solace after Sudha and her daughter come to live with them in America. When Anju learns that her husband has a thing for Sudha, the sister’s relationship worsens. Anju struggled to digest. She makes a comment on American culture, stating that people cook dinner, check homework, and pay expenses. The brief lapse into sleep came next, followed by sex. These phrases very effectively convey the mechanistic and



disconnected way of life that immigrants in America lead. As Sunil adapts to American culture, he grows apart from his family. The quality of Anju’s life declines. They experience tension in their marriage.

According to Divakaruni, women are victims of the struggle for control in partnerships. The roles of Sudha and her mother-in-law, the victim, and the victimizer, differ from one another. Sudha, in contrast to Anju, is portrayed as a selfless ideal woman simply because she places a higher priority on her family’s happiness than her own. She waits for the saviour with patience, even at the home she shared with Anju as a child.

Divakaruni offers her readers the chance to examine historical cultural contexts from many angles in her works. Domestic violence is not a new idea in the Indian family structure, but it is pervasive due to the imposition of harsh rules and regulations on women. Even the birth of these two girls was characterised by the dads’ departure while looking for a quick buck. Thus, the absence of their fathers serves as a catalyst for all the issues and bad luck that come after. The return of Sudha’s father is likewise not promising for her. She loses her tranquilly, at least until she reads her father’s letter and learns the truth. Unaware of Sudha’s secret, Anju struggles with her marriage and her finances while living in America.

Divakaruni deftly illustrates her idea by demonstrating how control in the family can exist without a male member as well. In their family structure, both cousins experience periods of being both overpowered and overshadowed. Sudha struggles to break free of the male characters’ passion, exile, submission, and banishment till the very end. Sudha is the cousin who receives most of her in-laws’ criticism. She decides to go on a self-imposed exile to United States to cut off all ties to her traumatic past and finally move on. However, fate has other plans for her, and Sunil turns out to be the source of her problems. She is not only physically travelling to America, but also emotionally. She is not only travelling from Calcutta to United States; she is also travelling with her cousin to learn more about herself.

While Sudha needs a shoulder to weep on as she deals with the sadness of losing her baby son, Anju, on the other hand, brings Sudha into United States under the

pretence of offering her support. She also yearns for someone who she can confide in about her unhappy marriage, which is progressively falling apart and could cause fatal damage to her marital relationship. The strange surroundings of the foreign place and the loneliness of the diaspora break Anju’s early spirit and independence. The loss of her child has further widened the gap between her and Sunil, which will finally cause their separation. She also struggles with melancholy and regret about not being able to save her child. Both cousins engage in identity negotiation and reimagine their pasts as they pursue their own selves. Even though Anju asks Sudha to give her financial stability, she believes that her authority and personal space are at danger.

Divakaruni provides her characters a variety of identities based on the roles they take on in the domestic settings they are given. Although Ashok is disposed to remarry Sudha and makes an effort to defy the cultural conditioning imposed by the culture in which he lives, there is no assurance that, should he choose to do so, he would not constrain, condition, and mould Sudha to suit his happiness. Divakaruni portrays the affection and feelings of two young moms, one of whom is holding a baby girl and the other is holding a baby boy who has passed away. Anju brought Sudha to the United States for another reason. She desired a diversion in order to escape her sadness. She develops a bond with Dayita. Although Anju is her soulmate, despite her attempts to be close to her, Sudha was unable to leave her daughter with Anju. The two new mothers had to go through a sneaky trauma on the inside. Anju asks Sudha,

if she could have Dayita to sleep with her, just for a bit. “If she wakes up in the night and wants to be nursed, I’ll bring her back to you, she said. “promise!” “She doesn’t nurse anymore.” “Great” said Anju. “Now she can sleep with Sunil and me half the time. That way, we’ll be able to cuddle up with her, and you’ll get some rest.” “I wanted to say, that kind of rest I don’t need. I wanted to tell my cousin, whom I’d once loved more than myself, Don’t touch her, she’s mine. (86-87)

The narrative seems to leave out the Indian diaspora population in the United States, which may have offered the cousins support during their struggles. Instead, they just look for chances to prey on the women, taking advantage of their isolation. Memories have a calming impact to soften the harshness of unpleasant facts. The



cousins frequently reminisce about their younger years in the hopes of finding some solace from the myriad of issues they occasionally deal with. They can bridge the gaps between the conditions of their adopted homes and their genuine pasts due to their memories as well as myths and stories.

Divakaruni extensively highlights the protagonists’ inner thoughts and sentiments by alternately naming the chapters after Anju and Sudha. Sudha is unable to pass the Lakshman Rekha of a traditional Hindu culture and its traditions because she is not as wealthy as Anju. She hence readily conforms to Hindu Indian gender norms. The author teases how the cousins’ futures would vary from the very beginning. They initially had to compromise their traditional values and goals with western culture and beliefs, which had a significant impact on their own generation. They afterwards had to make concessions to their spouses. Anju finds it difficult to comprehend Sunil’s dishonesty. She eventually begins to realise that her chosen country is progressively living up to her hopes.

Divakaruni succeeds in illustrating how the sister’s attempt to escape the constraints put in place and protected through generations in the name of religion, education, and societal norms through her great use of texture. There is no need in torturing oneself over what has already occurred, according to Sudha. As I have previously stated, I say. Ineffective words tumble between us like crooked snowflakes. The melting” (30). Anju tries to embrace her loneliness at the college to distract herself from the incident, but this does not help her. Additionally, it heightens her emotional rapture. It gives Sunil a simple chance to realise a long-held dream. Overnight, Sudha finally gives in to the pull of her body, and their strong link becomes strained.

The two parts of the novel are *The Princess in the Palace of Snakes* and *The Queen of Swords*. The women battle for respect and a decent life in the first part. They are caught up in the uproar over men’s deceit, which ultimately destroys their families. They take the initiative and fight it out their own way in the second part. Despite leading princess-like lives in the beginning of their lives, after getting married, they are torn apart by fate and make judgements based on the circumstances. The sisters’ inability to distinguish between their feelings and reality marks the conclusion of the



first section. The character is shown in a different light in the second section. Anju struggles to get over her strong sense of betrayal by Sudha. She has a psychological rupture in the sacredness of her marriage to Sunil. She allows Sunil to leave her life to maintain her honour and respect for herself. She portrays her husband as being egotistical,

My husband backing away, with his narrow, apologetic shoulders. 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 honor. Filial respect. Passion. (243)

Assignments and letters from Anju, together with comments from her lecturers, highlight the upheavals in her immigrant life. Sudha is compelled to look after Mr. Sen, a resentful elderly man who is immobile and quick to anger, to support her life and the life of her daughter. She decides to travel back to India in quest of a new home after realising that she had been the cause of Anju’s bitterness and abandonment of family life. Anju is pushed to the brink of hopelessness to the point where she makes the decision to forget everything from the past and start over. She sets out on her subsequent adventure to a foreign country.

In *The Vine of Desire*, the protagonists try to free themselves from social oppression, but their means and strategies for doing so are incompatible. The American socio-cultural and economic background, which explains the various paths to women’s personal emancipation, makes it impossible to draw the conclusion that Divakaruni has remained true to either of these forms. She takes pleasure in the fact that every route to freedom ends with the bound woman’s self-containment. In addition to describing the trauma experienced by women in her novels, Divakaruni also provides remedies to women’s issues through her characters. The women’s traumatic experiences are interlinked to feelings of rootlessness, estrangement, nostalgia, and exile from their native land.

### References

Aldama, Frederick Luis. “Rev. of *The Vine of Desire*.” *World Literature Today*, Vol.777, No.1,



2002, p.78.

Barat, Urvashi. “Sisters of the Heart: Female Bonding in the Fiction of Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni.” *Asian American Writing*. Ed. Somdatta Mandal. New Delhi: Prestige

Books, 2000. 44-60.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Vine of Desire*. Doubleday, 2002.

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. The John Hopkins UP, 1995.

Seshachari, Neila C. “Writing as a Spiritual Experience: A Conversation with Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni.” *Weber -The Contemporary Post*. Web. 16 February 2010.

Yadav Vikas. “Exploration of Immigrant Experience and Self-Transformation of Women in

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Vine of Desire*.” *Research Scholar: An*

*International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations*, Vol.1, No.4, 2013. Web. 8 Feb. 2015.