

Between Two Cultures: Immigrant Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* explores the cultural and emotional conflicts of Indian immigrant women in the United States. The novel continues the story of Anju and Sudha from *Sister of My Heart* and traces their different responses to migration. Anju adjusts to American life and seeks independence through education and creative writing. Sudha arrives with hopes of freedom from social judgement, yet poverty, isolation, racism, and emotional conflict weaken her trust in America. Both women resist patriarchal control, but Indian ideas of marriage, motherhood, family honour, and duty continue to influence them. Migration places them between inherited values and the demands of the host society. Their identities develop through memory, choice, conflict, and self-examination. Anju builds a life in America, while Sudha chooses to return to India. Each decision reflects a personal search for dignity rather than loyalty to a single culture. Divakaruni treats immigrant identity as fluid, formed by cultural memory, social conditions, and female agency.

Keywords: immigrant identity, cross-cultural conflict, diaspora, homeland, cultural memory, female autonomy

1. Introduction

Migration and globalisation have brought cultures into closer contact and made immigrant experience an important subject in contemporary literature. Indian English writers often examine the tension between Indian traditions and Western social values, especially in the lives of immigrants facing unfamiliar cultural conditions. Immigration alters far more than geographical location. It affects language, relationships, cultural practices, identity, and personal expectations. Many immigrants leave home in search of employment, security, freedom, or a better future. The host country may also bring loneliness, discrimination, economic hardship, and cultural uncertainty. Memories of home remain active even as immigrants adjust to new demands. Cultural Studies examines such experience through everyday practices, social relationships, and structures of power. Language, food, clothing, gender, family, class, race, and identity all form part of its enquiry. Colin Sparks describes Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary field shaped by literary criticism, sociology, history, and media studies (14). Its broad scope suits the study of migration, where culture intersects with work, gender, family, race, and social status. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes extensively about Indian women living in the United States. Her fiction explores marriage, motherhood, migration, female friendship, cultural memory, and independence. Published in 2002, *The Vine of Desire* continues the story of Anju and Sudha, cousins joined by a bond similar to sisterhood. They reunite in America after years of separation. Their friendship first provides comfort but later suffers under desire, jealousy, marital conflict, and betrayal. Anju and Sudha represent two responses to immigrant life. Anju pursues education, writing, and personal independence in America. Sudha arrives with similar hopes but encounters unstable work, racial hostility, isolation, and emotional distress. Their lives expose the attractions and pressures of both Indian and American cultures. India offers familiarity, family attachment, and cultural continuity, along with patriarchal restrictions. America offers privacy and individual choice, along with insecurity and alienation.

2. Anju and Adaptation to American Life

Anju adjusts more readily to American society. She values education, professional ambition, and personal freedom. Creative writing gives her an identity beyond marriage and domestic responsibility. Her miscarriage interrupts this process. Grief and guilt expose the influence of traditional ideas about motherhood. Anju seeks independence, yet she has internalised the belief that motherhood confirms female fulfilment. The loss becomes

a crisis in both emotion and identity. American life gives her room to reconsider inherited expectations. Still, cultural beliefs retain their emotional force. Anju's struggle lies in choosing which values to retain and which to discard. Sunil's attraction to Sudha creates a second crisis. His betrayal destroys Anju's confidence in her marriage and damages her friendship with Sudha. Anju gradually places trust, dignity, and compatibility above the social preservation of marriage. Her separation from Sunil marks a decisive assertion of self-respect. She refuses a marriage emptied of loyalty and affection. Such a choice challenges the expectation that a woman must endure personal suffering to protect family honour. Anju retains a strong attachment to family, motherhood, and Sudha. Her independence grows from a selective acceptance of American values rather than a rejection of her Indian upbringing. Her immigrant identity combines cultural inheritance with personal choice.

3. Sudha's Expectations of America

Sudha's experience begins within a restrictive Indian household. As a daughter-in-law, she must obey her husband and mother-in-law. Domestic duty leaves little space for her interests or creative abilities. During her pregnancy, her husband's family pressures her to identify the sex of the unborn child and abort it if female. Sudha refuses. She leaves the household and returns to her family, choosing her daughter over marital security. Anju invites her to the United States, believing that America will offer freedom to a divorced woman and single mother. Sudha also imagines a life beyond family reputation and social judgement. In *Sister of My Heart*, she explains:

America has its own difficulties, but at least it would provide me with anonymity. No one in America would care that I was the Chatterjees' daughter or that I was divorced. I could create a new existence, earn my own money, and provide Dayita with whatever she needed. The best part was that no one would judge me, because America was filled with mothers like me who had decided that living alone was preferable to living with the wrong man. (Divakaruni 294)

America represents anonymity, employment, and self-definition. In India, family background, marriage, and divorce determine Sudha's social identity. Migration appears to offer a fresh beginning. The airport scene introduces another reality:

I've heard that immigration has been particularly prickly recently, asking many questions. . . . Well, only last week they denied admittance to someone with a false visa. . . . Reportedly, the girl's husband was already in the country, but she lied to obtain a tourist visa. . . . What some individuals will not do to circumvent legal processes. (Divakaruni 344)

The conversation places immigration within systems of documentation, surveillance, and suspicion. Entry into America depends on legal status and official approval. Sudha soon faces economic insecurity. Limited qualifications and immigration restrictions prevent her from finding stable work. Odd jobs bring income but little dignity or security. Her position as a single mother increases her vulnerability. Her experience challenges the image of America as a land of equal opportunity. Freedom depends on education, money, employment, legal status, and social support. Sudha possesses few of these advantages.

4. Emotional Conflict and Female Friendship

Anju and Sudha's friendship has sustained them through family conflict, marriage, motherhood, and loss. In America, Anju's home first gives Sudha safety and companionship. Sunil's desire for Sudha places the women in conflict. Sudha develops feelings for him but fears betraying Anju. She finally leaves the household to protect their bond. Anju experiences the situation as a double betrayal. Sudha carries guilt because Anju offered her refuge. Their friendship changes from emotional shelter to a source of anger and pain. Sunil's behaviour places the women in competition. Male desire weakens their solidarity and turns intimacy into rivalry. The conflict shows how patriarchal relationships can divide women who once depended upon each other. Sudha later recognises a longer history of control. Her mother, mother-in-law, husband, and Sunil have all directed her choices. After an elderly man spits on her, she reflects:

Too many violent acts against me. My mother moulded my life according to her desires. My mother-in-law desired to remove from it whatsoever she deemed unsightly. My spouse retreated, his shoulders regretful and narrow. Sunil penetrated the core of my body, acidic with want. Each time, I rendered myself malleable. I provided a recognisable moniker to their actions. Duty. Family respect. Filial respect. Passion. But now . . . the elderly man's spittle on my face was so openly hostile. I was unable to pretend that it meant something else. (Divakaruni 243)

Sudha sees how she renamed control as duty, honour, obedience, and love. The racial insult strips away such justifications. Its open hostility forces her to recognise earlier forms of violence. The episode connects gender

oppression with racial humiliation. Sudha faces control within family relationships and prejudice within the host society. America no longer represents unquestioned freedom.

5. Cultural Memory and the Desire to Return

Sudha preserves her connection with India through food, music, clothing, memory, and domestic practice. These familiar elements give comfort and continuity in America. Her response to Hindi music and Indian food illustrates this attachment:

I discover a Hindi cassette. . . . I recall hearing it on the streets of India, blasted from the speakers of a hundred businesses and whistled by joyfully unemployed young guys smoking and spitting on street corners. . . . I've left the door open so that our laughter and the music may mix. . . . In Myra's gleaming, contemporary kitchen, I prepare a traditional dish. Pishi would prepare bhate bhat for us when we were upset since we liked it so much. (Divakaruni 245–46)

Indian sounds, tastes, and memories enter an American kitchen. Sudha recreates parts of home within the host culture. Food and music connect her present life with childhood and family. Her work as a caregiver also creates a small space of intercultural understanding. She cooks, cleans, and repairs clothes for an elderly man who gradually responds with affection and respect. Personal care bridges cultural and racial differences. Yet kindness from one person cannot solve her financial insecurity and isolation. Sudha remains dissatisfied with her life in America. She later explains her decision to return:

Things did not turn out as I had hoped here. Coming back with you would allow me to start over in a society I understand, unlike America, which I can never really comprehend. In a new region in India, nobody knows me. Without the burden of previous memories, the whispers of "we knew she'd fail" or "serves her right" no longer exist. (Divakaruni 320–21)

Sudha seeks familiarity, language, and social understanding. She plans to settle in a new part of India where her past carries less power. Her mother's letter reminds her of the judgement she may face: "After a lady leaves her spouse, she has no qualms about doing anything. Even the most unethical deeds are effortless for her. I tremble to consider the impact your actions will have on your daughter's personality". (Divakaruni 272) The letter condemns Sudha for leaving her husband while ignoring the demand to abort her daughter. Patriarchal morality treats resistance as disobedience and marital separation as female failure. Sudha still chooses India. She hopes to educate Dayita and build an independent life away from those who know her history. Her return expresses agency rather than surrender. She chooses a setting she understands and plans to live there on her own terms.

6. Immigrant Identity and Cultural Negotiation

Anju and Sudha respond differently to America. Anju accepts education, professional ambition, and individual freedom. Sudha remains attached to Indian cultural practices and returns home. Both women carry mixed identities. Indian ideas about marriage, motherhood, family, and guilt continue to influence Anju. Migration, employment, racism, and independence alter Sudha's relationship with India. Their identities develop through selection and revision. Anju keeps parts of her Indian inheritance while building a life in America. Sudha returns to India with a stronger sense of personal choice. Migration changes both women, regardless of where they finally live. Divakaruni connects this condition with her own experience. In an interview with Neila C. Seshachari, she states:

I've decided to settle in a nation and culture that are considerably different from my own. Regardless of the initial aim, I find myself caught between two cultures. . . . I believe that the concept of diaspora is very significant to me, and it appears frequently in my writing because I am aware of people whose journey into America was even more diasporic than mine. (Seshachari)

Her fiction repeatedly addresses migration, memory, conflict, and belonging. Adaptation may change daily life, but cultural difference remains part of immigrant consciousness. In *The Vine of Desire*, grief, betrayal, work, motherhood, racism, and family expectations reshape identity. Anju and Sudha revise their understanding of freedom as their circumstances change. India provides familiarity and emotional continuity but enforces patriarchal expectations. America permits privacy and personal choice but brings economic risk and social alienation. The women take values from both cultures while resisting pressures from each. Their freedom depends on self-respect, practical choice, and resistance to control. Anju seeks that freedom in America. Sudha seeks it after returning to India.

7. Conclusion

The Vine of Desire links migration with gender, family, and cultural belonging. Anju and Sudha face different forms of conflict as Indian women in the United States. Anju develops independence through education, writing, and separation from Sunil. Sudha arrives with hopes of freedom but encounters poverty, racism, loneliness, and emotional distress. Her return to India reflects her search for cultural familiarity and personal control. Memories, food, music, family values, and gender expectations connect both women with India. American life changes their views of marriage, motherhood, duty, and freedom. Their identities draw from both cultural settings. Divakaruni gives India and America equal complexity. Each offers possibilities and restrictions. Anju and Sudha choose different futures, yet both seek dignity and autonomy. Immigrant identity remains open to change. It develops from memory, material conditions, relationships, and individual decisions. For Anju and Sudha, belonging becomes an act of personal construction rather than complete acceptance of either culture.

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