International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Unsettling Identities: Female Migration and Trauma in the Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Shalu Gupta[1], Devendra Kumar Sharma[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of English & Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan
[2]Assistant Professor Department of English & Modern European Languages, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan

Abstract
The research paper examines the complex interplay of female migration and trauma in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire. The paper contends that migration amplifies the trauma associated with traditional gender roles, as Anju and Sudha grapple with the dual challenges of preserving cultural expectations while adapting to a foreign environment. It further examines how their migration impacts their relationship, which becomes increasingly strained due to the burdens of their unresolved traumas and the demands of their new lives. Through a comparative analysis of the two characters, the study highlights how migration can intensify pre-existing traumas and complicate efforts to adapt, especially for women navigating the intricate dynamics of gender norms in both their home and host countries.

Keywords: Migration, Trauma, Gender, Cultural Displacement, Identity Formation

INTRODUCTION

Migration, a transformative experience often associated with the promise of new opportunities, also brings with it profound challenges, particularly for women who are navigating the complexities of gender roles and cultural expectations. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart (1999) and The Vine of Desire (2002), the female protagonists, Anju and Sudha, embark on journeys marked by physical migration and emotional upheaval. These novels poignantly depict how the act of migration exacerbates the trauma related to their traditional gender roles, while also offering them the opportunity to redefine themselves within new cultural contexts.

The exploration of trauma, migration, and gender has its roots in various fields, including psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies. The study of trauma, particularly as it relates to migration, began to take shape with psychoanalytic theories. Sigmund Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), his early work on trauma, focuses on the individual's psychological responses to overwhelming events and laid the foundation for understanding trauma as both a personal and collective experience. Over time, trauma theory has expanded to include collective traumas, especially those associated with displacement, war, and migration—highlighting the lasting psychological and cultural impacts of such experiences.

The development of trauma theory was furthered by Judith Herman's pivotal work Trauma and Recovery (1992), which framed trauma as a disruption in the standard protective systems of the self. Herman's focus on domestic abuse and political terror helps contextualize the female protagonists' struggles in Divakaruni's novels. The long-lasting effects of gendered expectations, deeply rooted in the family and social structure, exacerbate the traumas these characters face, especially when they are compounded by migration. Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996) also significantly contributes to trauma theory, positing that trauma is not a wound that heals over time but an experience that continues to reverberate in the psyche, disrupting the self and identity, particularly when the person undergoes significant life changes such as migration.

Migration often triggers trauma due to the dislocation from one's homeland, familiar social networks, and cultural frameworks. For women, migration can intensify these issues as they face additional pressures related to gender roles. Cynthia Enloe in her work The Morning After (1993) argued that the trauma of migration is frequently exacerbated by patriarchal structures, which impose specific expectations on women's behaviour and identity. Enloe points out that gender expectation are often deeply intertwined with cultural identity and the trauma women experience when migrating is amplified by the challenges of balancing traditional gender roles with the pressures to assimilate into a new society. (Enloe 56)

Divakaruni, known for her nuanced portrayal of women's experiences, delves deeply into the intersection of migration, trauma, and gender. Through the intertwined stories of Anju and Sudha, she explores how these women are forced to confront their pasts, challenge societal expectations, and navigate the painful process of cultural adaptation. In Sister of My Heart, Anju and Sudha are raised in a conservative Bengali family, where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained in their upbringing. These roles dictate their behaviour, aspirations, and even the relationships they are expected to maintain. For instance, the pressure on Sudha to conform to the ideal of the self-sacrificing daughter is evident in her decision to marry for family honour, despite her desires. As Aunt Nalini defines good and bad girls, "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's names: wicked daughters are firebrands scorching their family's fame" (Divakaruni 43). This internalization of gender roles is a significant source of trauma, as it suppresses women's individuality and autonomy. In his essay "Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century", critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim comments, "Divakaruni's portrayal of her female protagonists often highlights the restrictive gender norms of traditional Indian society, where women are valued primarily for their roles as dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers." (Lim 37)

The migration of Anju to the United States marks a turning point in her life, where she encounters a culture that both challenges and reinforces the gender expectations she has grown up with. In the U.S., Anju finds herself in a paradoxical situation while she is expected to adopt the more liberal attitudes of her new environment, the remnants of her traditional upbringing continue to exert a powerful influence over her decisions. This tension is particularly evident in her struggles when she and her husband, Sunil, are initially excited about her pregnancy, but complications arise during the later stages. Anju's health deteriorates, and she ultimately loses the baby. The loss deals a crushing blow to Anju and Sunil, profoundly affecting their relationship. In her book Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture Anita Mannur points out, "Migration often complicates the gendered experiences of women, as they are caught between the demands of their traditional roles and the pressures to assimilate into a new cultural framework." (Mannur 164)

Sudha's journey to the United States in The Vine of Desire presents a different but equally challenging scenario. Unlike Anju, Sudha arrives in the U.S. not as a wife, but as a single mother, seeking to escape the confines of her traditional life in India. Through migration, she finds the opportunity to reinvent herself and transcend the limitations of her past roles. Sudha says, "I could design a new life, earn my 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). However, this redefinition is fraught with difficulties, as she must navigate the expectations of her host culture while dealing with the trauma of her past. The novel portrays her attempts at self-reinvention as liberating and painful, highlighting the complexities of forming a new identity in a foreign land. Geeta Patel in Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji's Urdu Poetry (2002) notes that "Sudha's migration signifies not just a physical relocation but a profound transformation of her self-concept, as she struggles to reconcile her past with her aspirations for the future." (Patel 95)

Before Anju and Sudha migrated to the United States, they each endured significant trauma rooted in their cultural and familial backgrounds. Anju's trauma begins with the loss of her father and the subsequent financial and emotional burden placed on her family in Sister of My Heart. This loss leaves Anju with a deep sense of responsibility, which is compounded by the societal expectations of her as the 'strong' and 'dutiful' daughter. The trauma of this loss and the associated pressures become internalized, shaping her self-perception and her interactions with others. As Judith Herman explains in his work Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (1992), "trauma occurs when the normal protective systems of the self are overwhelmed, leaving the individual feeling utterly helpless and isolated" (Herman 59). Anju's early experiences leave her vulnerable to further trauma, particularly in the context of her migration and the expectations that come with it.

Migration to the United States introduces new layers of trauma for both Anju and Sudha. For Anju, the trauma of migration is closely tied to her sense of identity and belonging. In the United States, she faces the challenge of isolation, disconnected from her homeland and the comforting support networks she once knew. Anju's sense of dislocation is compounded by the cultural differences she encounters, which often leave her feeling alienated and out of place. The pressure to assimilate into American society while maintaining her Indian identity creates a psychological conflict that exacerbates her pre-existing trauma. In her work, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History(1996), Cathy Caruth notes, "Trauma is not simply a wound that heals over time, but a condition that persists, influencing and disrupting the individual's life and sense of self" (Caruth 94). Anju's inability to reconcile her dual identities leads to a deepening of her emotional distress, manifesting in her struggles with miscarriage, which she perceives as a failure to fulfill her duty as a woman.

The psychological and emotional impact of the traumas experienced by Anju and Sudha is profound and multifaceted. Anju's trauma manifests in her feelings of inadequacy and depression, particularly as she grapples with her miscarriage. She is deeply affected by the loss and struggles to cope with her grief While Sudha's psychological trauma is characterized by her constant struggle between her desire for autonomy and the ingrained sense of duty and sacrifice that has been instilled in her since childhood. Her migration initially offers her a sense of liberation, but this is quickly overshadowed by the challenges of single motherhood and economic instability. Sudha's trauma manifests in her feelings of guilt and unworthiness, particularly in her relationships with Anju and her daughter, Dayita. These feelings are further complicated by her unresolved emotions regarding her past in India, including her

failed marriage and the circumstances surrounding her father's actions. Dominick LaCapra in his work Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001) suggests that "trauma often leads to an entrapment in the past, where the individual is unable to move beyond the experiences that have scarred them"(LaCapra 76). This entrapment is evident in Sudha's ongoing struggles to break free from the psychological bonds of her past.

The migration of Anju and Sudha highlights the profound sense of cultural displacement that accompanies their physical relocation. Cultural displacement, as experienced by these characters, involves a loss of familiar social norms, values, and community support systems, leading to a crisis of identity. For Anju, who initially migrated to the U.S. with her husband Sunil, the shift from a close-knit, traditional Bengali household to the more individualistic and alien environment of America is disorienting. This displacement is not merely physical but deeply psychological, as she struggles to reconcile the cultural expectations of her Indian upbringing with the realities of her new life. Anju's sense of loss is palpable when she reflects on how different her life has become, noting that "everything she had once relied on seemed to have slipped away like sand through her fingers." (Divakaruni 56)

Sudha's experience of cultural displacement is similarly intense but takes on a different dimension due to her status as a single mother in a foreign land. The cultural dislocation she experiences is compounded by the economic and social challenges she faces as a woman outside the traditional structures of marriage and family, which were central to her identity in India. The U.S., while offering her opportunities for independence, also confronts her with the stark reality of being a woman of color navigating an unfamiliar society. This duality in her experience of freedom versus alienation reflects the complex nature of cultural displacement in the diaspora. Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture (1994) describes this condition as "unhomeliness," where the migrant finds themselves caught between cultures, feeling at once part of both and yet belonging to neither. (Bhabha 145)

Anju and Sudha employ various strategies to adapt to their new cultural environment, though their approaches and outcomes differ significantly. Anju's adaptation process is heavily influenced by her desire to fulfill the dual expectations of being a good Indian wife and integrating into American society. Initially, she attempts to maintain her cultural identity by holding onto traditions and customs from her homeland. Sudha's adaptation strategies are shaped by her immediate need to survive and provide for her daughter in a society that does not always offer the communal support she was accustomed to in India. Unlike Anju, who grapples with cultural integration at a more abstract level, Sudha's adaptation is pragmatic. She takes on menial jobs, learns to navigate the welfare system, and slowly builds a support network within the diaspora community. Her adaptation is not just about cultural assimilation but also about redefining her role as a mother and a woman in a context vastly different from what she had known. Despite her efforts, Sudha often feels disconnected from her Indian roots and the American culture she is trying to navigate. This disconnection is evident in her interactions with Dayita, her daughter, who represents both the future and a new identity that Sudha struggles to embrace. As Stuart Hall argues "cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a continuous process of becoming" (Hall 79), and this is reflected in Sudha's ongoing efforts to adapt and redefine herself in the diaspora.

Sudha's trauma is rooted in her experiences of familial betrayal and the subsequent collapse of her marriage. Her decision to leave her husband and migrate is driven by a desire to escape a stifling environment, but it introduces its own set of challenges, including the stigma of being a single mother and the economic struggles of supporting herself and her daughter. The trauma of her past and her current struggles reflect a different aspect of gender expectations, focusing on autonomy and survival

rather than traditional familial roles. Cynthia Enloe points out that "gender expectations and trauma are often shaped by the specific social and cultural contexts in which individuals find themselves" (Enloe 86), highlighting how Sudha's experiences are influenced by her past and her new life in the diaspora.

The migration and trauma experienced by Anju and Sudha have a significant impact on their relationship with each other. Initially, their bond is marked by deep affection and mutual support. As Anju says about Sudha, "I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart. Like no one else in the entire world does. Like no one else in the entire world will" (Divakaruni 24). However, as their respective challenges intensify, their relationship becomes strained. Anju's husband, Sunil, begins flirting with Sudha. This drives Sudha to consider living separately from Anju and Sunil, deepening the trauma for both women. Anju feels devastated by her husband's actions, while Sudha struggles with protecting her child and distancing herself from a once-trusted friend. This situation further strains their relationship, compounding their traumas and complicating their efforts to adapt to their new surroundings.

Sudha's decision to leave the US and settle in India, her homeland, also places additional strain on their relationship. Anju, while sympathetic, is unable to fully relate to Sudha's circumstances, leading to feelings of resentment and misunderstanding on both sides. The emotional distance between them grows as Anju focuses on her struggles and Sudha grapples with the practical challenges of single motherhood. Their relationship evolves from mutual support to a more complex dynamic marked by jealousy, guilt, and unresolved emotional conflict.

This paper explored the nuanced experiences of migration, trauma, and gender expectations as portrayed through the depiction of Anju and Sudha in Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart and its sequel The Vine of Desire. The comparative analysis of these characters reveals several key findings, as Anju and Sudha's responses to migration are shaped by their unique personal circumstances and pre-existing traumas. Anju's migration is a transition from a traditional Indian role into a new life in America, where she faces the dual challenge of managing her miscarriage and reconciling her cultural identity with American norms. In contrast, Sudha's migration is driven by a desire to escape an oppressive marriage, which leads to a more immediate and pragmatic adaptation process focused on survival and establishing a new identity. These divergent responses highlight how migration can amplify personal traumas and impact adaptation strategies.

Migration and trauma profoundly affect the relationships between Anju and Sudha, as well as their interactions with their families. The emotional rifts and conflicts between them highlight the profound toll that personal traumas and displacement can take on even the most enduring relationships. Anju's and Sudha's adaptation to their new cultural contexts reveals the complexities of negotiating between inherited cultural values and the demands of a new environment. Anju's struggle to balance her traditional roles with American expectations highlights the internal conflict faced by migrants who seek to preserve their cultural identity while adapting to new norms. Sudha's more pragmatic adaptation reflects the immediate challenges of survival and self-reinvention in the diaspora, illustrating the varied ways migrants navigate cultural displacement.

Conclusion

Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire explores the intersection of migration, trauma, and gender expectations. Through the experiences of Anju and Sudha, Divakaruni portrays the multifaceted nature of migration as both a transformative opportunity and a source of profound personal struggle. The

characters' journeys reflect the broader themes of cultural dislocation and adaptation, highlighting how migration exacerbates pre-existing traumas and influences personal identity. Anju's and Sudha's responses to migration illustrate the diverse ways in which individuals navigate the complexities of cultural change and personal trauma. Anju's conflict between maintaining her cultural heritage and adapting to American norms contrasts with Sudha's focus on practical adaptation and survival. Both characters' experiences underscore the profound impact of gender roles and societal expectations on their mental health and personal relationships. The paper offers valuable insights into the challenges faced by women in the diaspora, revealing how migration can reshape identities and relationships in profound ways. The comparative analysis of Anju and Sudha highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the interplay between cultural adaptation, gender expectations, and personal trauma. By exploring these themes, this paper contributes to a broader discourse on the experiences of diasporic individuals and the complexities of navigating multiple cultural landscapes.

Works Cited

1. Bhabha, Homi K.The Location of Culture.Routledge, 1994.
2. Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
3. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. The Vine of Desire.Random House, 2002.
4. ---. Sister of My Heart.Black Swan, 1999.
5. Enloe, Cynthia. The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War. University of California Press, 1993.
6. Freud, Sigmund.Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Hogarth Press, 1920.
7. Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence &Wishart, 1990, pp. 222-237.
8. Herman, Judith. Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. Basic Books, 1992.
9. LaCapra, Dominick. Writing History, Writing Trauma.Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
10. Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Namesake.Mariner Books, 2003.
11. Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century. University of Hawaii Press, 2001.
12. Mannur, Anita. Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture. Temple University Press, 2003.
13. Mukherjee, Bharati. Jasmine.Grove Press, 1989.
14. Patel, Geeta. Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji's Urdu Poetry. Stanford University Press, 2002.