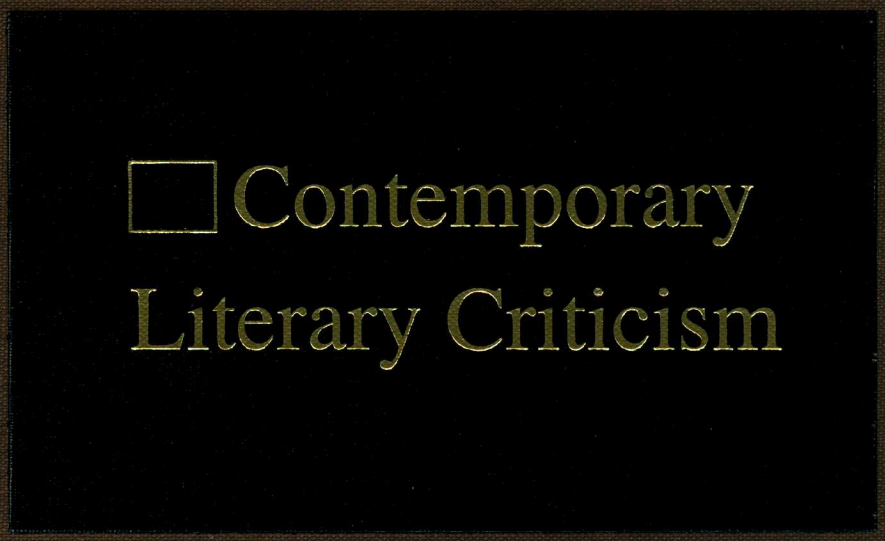

CLC 316

Volume 316

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR

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Contents

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
1956-

Indian-born American novelist, short story writer, poet, and author of children's fiction.

The following entry presents criticism on Divakaruni's career through 2009.

INTRODUCTION

Divakaruni is recognized for capturing the experience of Indian immigrants adjusting to life in the United States from a female perspective. Following in the footsteps of such authors as Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Seth, and Salman Rushdie, Divakaruni has established a respected body of work that invokes themes of cultural hybridity by drawing from personal experience as well as Indian tradition. As Divakaruni's heroines strive to find a middle ground between the value systems of East and West, they reflect the predicament of transplanted people all over the world.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India, to Rajendra Kumar Banerjee, an accountant, and Tatini Banerjee, a schoolteacher. She studied at Loreto House, a convent school run by Irish nuns, and graduated in 1971. In 1976 she earned her bachelor's degree in English from Presidency College, University of Calcutta. At the age of nineteen she moved to the United States to continue her studies as an English major. She earned her master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, in 1978. The following year she married Murthy Divakaruni, an engineer. After receiving her Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1984, Divakaruni held a variety of jobs. She published her first book, a volume of poetry titled *Dark Like the River,* in 1987. She and her husband moved to Sunnyvale, California, in 1989, at which time she began teaching creative writing at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills. For several years she worked with Afghani women refugees and provided her services to shelters for battered women. In 1991 she became a founding member and president of Maitri, an organization in the San Francisco area that works for South Asian women in abusive situations. Her first collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage,* was published in 1995 and garnered an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. The following year, she won the PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles Award. In 1998 she moved to Houston, Texas, to teach creative writing at the University of Houston. The India Culture Center, Houston, bestowed its Cultural Jewel Award on Divakaruni in 2009.

MAJOR WORKS

Divakaruni's fiction is marked by a prevailing concern for the roles of women in India and America, portrayal of struggles of cultural conflict and adaptation, and of complexities of love among family members, lovers, and spouses. *Arranged Marriage* focuses on Indian and Indian American women caught between two conflicting cultures. Each of the stories deals with the difficult complications inherent to the Indian tradition of arranged marriage, incorporating a variety of socially relevant themes such as divorce, abortion, racism, and economic inequality. Most of the pieces are about Indian immigrants to the United States from the author's native region of Bengal and are told by female narrators in the first-person-singular point of view, often in the present tense, which imparts to the stories a sense of intimacy. Some, like "The Word Love," demonstrate the anxiety and frustration of women who attempt to avoid the tradition of arranged marriage. The young female protagonist of "The Word Love" falls in love with an American man while attending school in Berkeley. When she moves in with the man, she becomes consumed with her widowed mother's disappointment and outrage over her life choices. In "The Ultrasound," an Indian American woman, Anju, discovers that she is pregnant. After she views an ultrasound of the fetus, she excitedly calls her cousin, Runu, who still lives in India and is also expecting a child. When Runu informs Anju that she is being pressured into having an abortion because her baby is female, Anju decides to help her cousin run away. At the same time, Anju begins to realize that, despite the freedoms she enjoys in America, she still lives in a patriarchal society that has forced her to remain economically dependent on her husband.

Stylistically experimental, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) combines poetic language with prose to create a modern fable that blends myth and reality. Tilo, the protagonist of the novel, is a young Indian woman who becomes shipwrecked on a remote island inhabited solely by females. Here she encounters an ancient woman who teaches her about the power of spices. The final step in Tilo's training involves being sent to Oakland, California, disguised as an old woman, where she sets up a shop and sells spices. Her unique flavorings carry special powers, and her regular customers allow her a glimpse into the lives of a local Indian expatriate community. Problems arise when Tilo falls in love with an American man and must choose between him and the magic that will be destroyed if she follows her heart.

Divakaruni's second novel, *Sister of My Heart* (1999), is a realistic treatment of the relationship between two cousins, Sudha and Anju, who narrate alternating chapters as their story develops over decades. The women grow up together in the same house in Calcutta and have many similar experiences that strengthen their bond. However, when secrets regarding their births are revealed and the cousins are later physically separated because of arranged marriages, their unique relationship is tested. Although Sudha remains in India and Anju moves to California, their difficult experiences with marriage and pregnancy cause them to seek out one another for strength and support.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics first took notice of Divakaruni with the publication of *Arranged Marriage,* but it was *The Mistress of Spices* that marked her ascendancy in the literary world. Reviewers have lauded the use of magic realism in this novel, comparing the work to Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* for using the genre to emphasize the themes of cultural diversity and plurality. At the same time, they have commended *The Mistress of Spices* for adjusting the tenets of magic realism to suit its own ends. According to commentator Gita Rajan, "[B]y subtly modifying the genre, by not obeying the rules in their entirety, Divakaruni does precisely what magic realism was intended to do—challenge imperial structures of order."

Furthermore, scholars have studied the exploration of culture in Divakaruni's fiction, pointing out the interdependence of multiculturalism and female identity in *Sister of My Heart.* In addition, the interpretation of cultural identity in "The Ultrasound" has been likened to similar thematic elements in Gish Jen's "Birthmates." Likewise, Divakaruni's navigation between the cultures of Eastern and Western audiences has prompted reviewers to align her work with that of fellow Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri. Moreover, commentators have highlighted Divakaruni's ability to alternate between varying narrative perspectives and modes of discourse. As critic Rocío G. Davis contended in an analysis of "The Word Love": "Using the paradigms of monologue but extending the range and possibilities of speaker and listener to embody the dramatic negotiations of immigrant subjectivity, Chitra Divakaruni weaves together the sources of meaning to see if there is a way to ensure the survival of the individuals and the group."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Dark Like the River (poetry) 1987
Arranged Marriage: Stories (short stories) 1995
The Mistress of Spices (novel) 1997
Sister of My Heart (novel) 1999
The Unknown Errors of Our Lives: Stories (short stories) 2001
Neela, Victory Song (juvenilia) 2002
The Vine of Desire: A Novel (novel) 2002
The Conch Bearer: A Novel (juvenilia) 2003
Queen of Dreams: A Novel (novel) 2004
The Palace of Illusions: A Novel (novel) 2008
One Amazing Thing (novel) 2010

CRITICISM

Nancy Knowles (essay date 2001)

SOURCE: Knowles, Nancy. "Dissolving Stereotypical Cultural Boundaries: Allusions to Virginia Woolf in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart.*"[1] In *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf,* edited by Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman, pp. 67-73. New York: Pace University Press, 2001.

[*In the following essay, Knowles suggests that the allusions to Virginia Woolf in* Sister of My Heart *highlight the fact that adherence to a single culture cannot provide adequate support for the growth of feminine self-identity.*]

Like other women writers of Indian origin, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has frequently been criticized by Indians for the "troubling" characterization of the West

as the place where "[. . .] Indian women can finally free themselves from the shackles of tradition [. . .]" (Daswani). While this positive characterization of the immigrant's adopted country may help to rationalize the immigrant's choice of self-exile (Pultar 49) and may evidence the immigrant's desire to build connections with her new culture (Wang 88), creating a utopia of Western culture, such critics argue, reifies cultural boundaries, stereotyping India as irretrievably patriarchal and the West as offering freedom from patriarchy. On an initial reading, Divakaruni's recent novel ***Sister of My Heart*** seems to embody these stereotypes and therefore earn such criticism: the novel chronicles the difficult arranged marriages of two Indian cousins, Anju and Sudha, who both eventually emigrate to the U.S. This trajectory reverses that of *Heart of Darkness* or *The Voyage Out,* British novels frequently discussed in a postcolonial context. In ***Sister of My Heart,*** citizens of a former colony travel to the West. If this journey reveals that they have left barbarism for civilization, then such a story risks reinscribing colonial values. Moreover, it oversimplifies the women's problems and choices.

The actual complexity of Anju's and Sudha's border crossings is illustrated by the novel's few but significant allusions to Virginia Woolf, which in such a non-European context perhaps demonstrate Brenda Silver's claim that "[. . .] Virginia Woolf is everywhere" (xv). In these allusions Woolf becomes an icon explicitly coded in terms of feminism and implicitly coded in terms of empire. This textual coding has little to do with Woolf herself—whether she had imperialist tendencies or not—and more to do with popular perception of her. My purpose here is not to analyze the icon itself but how that icon is deployed. In ***Sister of My Heart,*** Woolf-as-icon fails to fulfill its stereotypical promise as a symbol of liberation for all women regardless of culture; specifically, the allusions to Woolf ironically represent part of the reason Anju marries the wrong man. Thus, Woolf-as-icon is a metaphor for the West, "civilization," indicating it represents only a mythical answer to the problems of former colonies. When contrasted with the more positive allusions to the Rani of Jhansi associated with Sudha, these allusions to Woolf demonstrate that no culture can guarantee fairy-tale happiness, and women, particularly colonial women who may be tempted by circumstance to see the West as utopia, should not passively expect such utopia. Rather, all women must learn to build empowerment actively from the positive aspects of the cultures they encounter, including their own. They need to create what Henry Schwarz yesterday, in his discussion of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray, called a "third space." This paper will first provide necessary background information about Divakaruni's ***Sister of My Heart*** and then analyze the Woolf allusions in contrast with the Rani of Jhansi allusions.

Divakaruni's ***Sister of My Heart*** is the story of two girls, Anju and Sudha, raised as close as sisters in a household of women. Anju and Sudha are opposites. Where Anju is practical, challenges tradition, enjoys reading, and hopes to travel, Sudha is beautiful, romantic, and conventional and likes clothes and storytelling. The girls are raised in what is nearly purdah for 1980s Calcutta society: they attend an all-girls convent school, and during their few social outings, they sit among the women. Their mothers also intend to marry them off in the traditional way, despite Anju's desire to attend college. Unfortunately, Sudha is already in love with a young man she met in an unapproved outing to the movie theater. Her plans to elope are foiled when Anju falls in love with the Indian-American man, Sunil, whom her mother has chosen; if Sudha were to elope, the scandal might ruin Anju's anticipated marriage. Instead, Sudha marries her mother's choice, Ramesh. Again misfortune courts them, as during the double ceremony, Sunil reveals his infatuation with the beautiful Sudha.

Neither marriage results in happiness. When Sudha finally becomes pregnant with a girl, her mother-in-law insists she have an abortion and her husband will not oppose his mother. Sudha, flouting convention, takes refuge with her family and is divorced for desertion. Although her girlhood love proposes to her, he doesn't really want Sudha's child, so Sudha refuses him and eventually comes to Anju in America. Anju, too, has marital difficulties. She loves Sunil, but imagines he is having affairs and is disturbed to find he expects her to be grateful to him for marrying her. When Anju becomes pregnant and Sunil discovers she has been secretly working at the campus where she takes classes, they fight, which results in a miscarriage for which Sunil blames her. These marital difficulties are complicated, because of Sunil's infatuation with Sudha, by Sudha's arrival in America at the end of the novel. The novel leaves this complication unresolved.

This summarized progression from India to America might easily be understood as a stereotypical reification of cultural boundaries where India manifests all the traditional Indian patriarchal restrictions under which Anju and Sudha suffer and where America promises possibilities not only for Anju, who can work, take classes, and wear jeans, but especially for the divorced Sudha who would, along with her child, face discrimination in India. However, the novel

doesn't treat this situation so simplistically. The allusions to Woolf demonstrate that it is dangerous for women to trust stereotypes of the dominant culture as means of self-empowerment. Rather than believing these myths, women must read culture critically in order to take an active role in choosing the most satisfying lifestyle.

As one might expect based on the stereotypical India-vs.-the-West dichotomy, Anju, the cousin who questions tradition and looks forward to a college education and international travel, is the one who values Virginia Woolf. Anju discovers Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in the family bookstore and describes the book as having "the smell of distance, of new thinking" (118). Having been raised in the traditional way where "[. . .] a good woman is to offer up her life for others" (8-9) and "*the husband is the supreme lord*" (49), Anju is understandably inspired by Woolf's passion in *A Room,* Woolf's anger at women's "hav[ing] served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35) and her ardor in believing Judith Shakespeare "would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while" (114). Anju convinces her mother to buy a complete set of Woolf's novels for the store and then "devour[s]" them herself (118). For Anju, therefore, Woolf becomes an icon of all she dreams about her future—reading, education, and travel.

However, Woolf-as-icon loses her stereotypical quality almost immediately, for on the same page that Woolf is introduced as Anju's passion, Anju also meets her future husband. Still unknown to Anju, Sunil enters the bookstore and asks immediately for any books by Woolf. Although Anju doesn't yet know he is her mother's choice for her, she is immediately attracted to him. She "bring[s] down the full set and start[s] extolling Woolf's virtues" (119). Sunil purchases the set, exchanging pleasant conversation and drawing Anju into discussion of "Mr. America," her mother's choice for her bridegroom. In the course of conversation, Anju wants to say, "'Don't go.' Or even, shamelessly, 'Marry me'" (120), and when Sunil reveals himself as "Mr. America," Anju can't believe her luck. And Sunil even seems to merit Anju's immediate affection, promising to fulfill her non-traditional dreams of education and travel if she will marry him. Despite the fact that Anju is attracted to this man, who seems to be kind and to have a sense of humor, this juxtaposition of Woolf and marriage is ironic. For Anju, and for many other women, Woolf represents the possibility of freedom and self-worth while marriage represents the possible threat of submersion of the self in the needs of others. Therefore, the enmeshing of the Western icon with the traditional patriarchal institution of marriage, regardless of its apparent benefits in this particular instance, already undermines the stereotypical dichotomy between India and the West. The promise of the West has become merely a seemingly better version of the tradition one finds in India.

In her immediate infatuation with Sunil, Anju accepts marriage without questioning whether it will truly fulfill her desires. She imagines that, although the marriage is traditionally arranged, Sunil will provide all the freedoms she associates with a westernized lifestyle, and she therefore romanticizes him in a very traditional way. Her whole-hearted conversion is expressed by another allusion to Woolf: "[. . .] I've traded in Virginia Woolf for Elizabeth Barrett Browning." Anju's statement implies not the Barrett Browning of *Aurora Leigh* but of the sonnets, "*How do I love thee*?" (132). Yet, this romantic sensibility metaphorically colonizes Anju's idea of Woolf. Because Sunil apparently enjoys Woolf, Anju thinks to herself, "Maybe we could even read Woolf together" (120), and "I look forward to the evenings when we'll read *To the Lighthouse* to each other" (121). Because of this romantic vision, she expects Sunil's constant sympathy. When she is daydreaming during the wedding ceremony and is teased by onlookers as having forgotten him for another man, she imagines he will understand: "I expect no less of a man who loves Virginia Woolf" (150). Yet, shortly after this, Sunil reveals his love for Sudha in the midst of the wedding ceremony. Anju thinks, "His face is naked and open, like a house with no curtains. And because I'm so deeply in love myself, I recognize exactly what I'm seeing in there" (151). Anju continues with the remainder of the ceremony, her romantic dream shattered, and perhaps more devastatingly, her relationship with Sudha marred by jealousy. Where Woolf-as-icon had seemed to Anju to promise a healthy, happy relationship with Sunil according to a Western model of equality and respect, the Western image has actually trapped her into a conventional bond with all the associated problems.

It is only after Anju and Sunil have been living for a while in America that the final blow is delivered to Anju's dream-marriage; Anju discovers that Sunil is not really "a man who loves Virginia Woolf" (150) at all, and this discovery represents the tensions in their marriage. When Anju suggests they read Woolf together, Sunil refuses, saying, "'All that arty-farty stuff is not for me'" (188). When Anju presses him on the issue, wondering why he bought the complete

Woolf set, Sunil reveals that Anju's mother had informed Sunil that Woolf was one of Anju's favorites before he'd come into the store, "[. . .] so [he] thought that would be a good way to start a conversation" and bought the set to make her happy (188). Thus, by excluding himself from what Anju always expected would be a mutual pleasure, he destroys the founding idea of Anju's marriage. His deception demonstrates that he wants the kind of relationship where he gives Anju the world and she is eternally grateful. Anju reflects, "Unlike some of the other Indian husbands I know, Sunil's always encouraged me to feel comfortable in America. He taught me to drive and introduced me to his colleagues at work. He bought me jeans and hiking boots, and when I said I'd like to see how I look in short hair, he said, 'Go for it!'" (187). Yet, after all these things, plus the travel and education that Anju has always dreamed of, he expects gratitude (193). Gratitude is the basis of his pleasure in the relationship, and this forces Anju into a position of dependency. This dependency resembles a colonial relationship, as Sunil's nickname "Mr. America" perhaps signifies, where the one with symbols of power expects the one who eagerly wants those symbols to be grateful upon receipt. Rather than having accomplished her dreams for herself, Anju must thank someone else for them. This is the ultimate irony in the allusion to Woolf: Anju's faith in Woolf as a symbol of everything she desired has tricked her into an inappropriate, unhappy marriage. Thus, the allusion demonstrates that Western culture cannot simply erase colonial women's problems. Rather, women must begin to read cultures critically in order to negotiate the webs of power embedded in them. By taking this active responsibility for their own happiness, women can avoid the kind of trick Anju has essentially played on herself.

The allusion to Woolf that tricks Anju into an unhappy marriage is contrasted by an allusion to the Rani of Jhansi, who acts as a touchstone for Sudha similar to Woolf for Anju. The difference between the Western and Indian allusions is that, where Woolf-as-icon leads Anju astray, the image of the Rani empowers Sudha. Unlike Anju, Sudha has been anticipating becoming a wife and mother since childhood, and she sees her role in accomplishing that dream as primarily passive. Sudha romanticizes this passive role through the story of the princess in the palace of snakes who wakes to the kiss of a prince and loves him because he "tell[s] her about the magical universe of men" and "[w]hen she looked into his eyes, their dark center, she saw herself for the first time, tiny, and doubled, and beautiful. [. . .] Without him she'd never have known who she was" (86). Note the reduction of the woman here in comparison with the magnification of the man Woolf describes in *A Room.* It is this romanticism that Anju reverts to when she falls in love with Sunil. However, when Sudha's marriage threatens her unborn child, Sudha must change her self-conception. She can no longer be the sleeping princess trusting a prince to kiss her awake. Instead, Sudha turns to another Indian story, the tale of the Rani of Jhansi, which she recalls when viewing a video (225). In March of 1858, the Rani led a rebellion against the British who intended to annex the state of Jhansi because, according to their law, the maharaja, the Rani's husband, had died without an heir. However, the couple had adopted a relative, who according to Hindu law, should inherit. His inheritance had religious as well as political significance for the populace. The siege of Jhansi lasted two weeks, and when the city fell, the Rani escaped on horseback, rallied other Indian rulers, and captured the fortress of Gwalior. She died there on the battle's second day (Bois). By identifying with this legendary Indian woman, Sudha is able to brave traveling alone in public in order to escape from her husband's house. Fighting her way through the crowd at the Calcutta station, a man "grope[s] at [her] breast," and Sudha reports, "I swat his hand away furiously and kick at the ankles of a fat man blocking my path. [. . .] Maybe this is how the Rani of Jhansi felt the first time she went to war" (243). Sudha's courage, her love for her daughter, and her success in reaching her family's house safely reaffirm her choice to leave her husband. When Sudha speaks to Anju on the phone after Anju has lost her baby, Sudha retells the Rani of Jhansi story, blending it with Anju's, reaffirming Anju's power and encouraging her to heal herself. In this way, the allusion to the Rani becomes not a trick, like the allusion to Woolf, but rather a source of power. And significantly this source of power is Indian, even anti-colonial, not Western.

Rather than reifying stereotypical cultural boundaries, the allusions to Woolf in Divakaruni's ***Sister of My Heart*** reveal the complexities of cultural difference. Anju's love of Woolf's writing is not a stereotypical portal to Western paradise but rather her excuse for loving and marrying a man for whom she is ultimately unsuited. The failed romance acts as a metaphor for the failure of Western values to meet the needs of former colonies. Paralleled by the novel's more positive allusions to the Rani of Jhansi, the allusions to Woolf dissolve cultural boundaries by demonstrating that the individual cultures themselves cannot guarantee a productive, happy life. This is particularly true of Western cultures in the postcolonial world. A woman