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**CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND ASSIMILATION IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S NOVELS**

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Abstract:

This summary draws on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings to examine the complex issue of cultural assimilation and adaptation within the context of the Indian diaspora in the United States. Indian Americans' experiences of trying to balance their heritage with modern American values are examined as a case study in cultural adaptation. Assimilation is represented as a more drastic change, where people may totally adopt American ideals and lifestyle, which may result in a severing of ties to their own culture. To better understand the larger dynamics of identity, immigration, and multiculturalism, this research digs into the intricacies and obstacles experienced by immigrants as they seek to strike a balance between these two processes. Novelist Chitra Divakaruni uses the experiences of her characters to provide insight on the complex relationship between cultural upheaval and individual development among the diaspora's dispersed populations. Adopting a new cultural norm or way of life is what acculturation entails, from either the immigrant's or the host culture's point of view. Assimilation was a phrase used to describe how immigrants gradually stopped identifying with their home culture in favour of learning the language and customs of their new nation of residence. Immigrants of the late 20th century used the word "acculturation" to characterise the profound, mutually transformative process that happens when two ethno-cultural groups engage in continuous interaction with one another. Assimilation and acculturation tactics that immigrants use to integrate into Bay Area, San Francisco society are explored in the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Extraversion, emotional stability, sociability, agreeableness, experience seeking, and openness were all shown to be favourably connected with immigrant acceptance of integrationist in her books.

Keywords: *Cultural Adaptation, Assimilation, Indian Diaspora, Identity, Immigration, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Multiculturalism, etc.*

The Indian diaspora in the United States is a recurring theme in the books of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as are issues of assimilation and cultural adjustment. Her books' main characters, like those in *The Mistress of Spices* and *The Vine of Desire*, have a hard time reconciling their Indian heritage with their new lives in the West.



Her protagonists generally struggle with the choice between being true to their heritage and fitting in with mainstream American culture. This challenge may take many forms, including the need to hold on to cultural traditions, bridge generational gaps, or reconcile Indian and American identities. In her fiction, Divakaruni often depicts the emotional odysseys of people torn between these two cultures. Her books, with their deep and nuanced storylines of cultural adaptation and integration, are a mirror of the struggles and triumphs endured by many immigrants in the diaspora.

U.S.-born Indian-origin author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, depicts adaptation and assimilation as nuanced processes in her work. In her works, she dives further into these ideas, focusing on: Cultural adaptation, as shown by Divakaruni, is how people of Indian origin navigate and assimilate into American culture while holding on to important tenets of their Indian history. Among the difficulties associated with this process include learning new languages and adapting to new social conventions and ways of life. Her protagonists may adopt certain aspects of American society, like fast food or high fashion, as well as some Indian customs, but they will always retain their cultural identity.

In her books, assimilation is shown as a more drastic change, with protagonists potentially losing their Indian identity as they accept more American norms and beliefs. In order to completely integrate into American culture, assimilation typically entails embracing a new way of life and, in the process, losing contact with one's cultural origins. As a result, some people may feel as if they have lost touch with their roots.

Through her narratives, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offers a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, drawing attention to the nuances and difficulties inherent in the pursuit of a middle ground between cultural adaptation and assimilation. Her characters' trajectories mirror those of immigrants more broadly in the United States, offering insights into the difficulties and possibilities of forging a new identity.

She has authored eleven novels, two story collections, and four books of poetry and essays. She has shown her writing prowess, thus the University of Houston has hired her as a professor of creative writing. Her books have been translated into sixteen different languages thus far. Novels by her include *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *Shadowland* (2009), *One Amazing Thing*, and *Oleander Girl* (2013), as well as short story collections like *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001). She excelled herself by bridging the gap in communication between two quite different cultures (<http://www.dynamicpublisher.org>).

Cultural Adaptation and Assimilation:

Many branches of social science may benefit from exploring the concept of acculturation, including anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Acculturation is defined by Berry and Castro as “the cultural interaction between an immigrant person or family and the new host country that the immigrant person or family is moving to.” Personal considerations, such as the immigrant's outlook, and societal considerations, such as the impact on the host nation, both have a role in how this relationship is understood. *Graves* (1967) distinguished between acculturation at the level of the population and acculturation at the level of the individual, the latter of which is referred to as psychological acculturation. Socio-cultural adaptation describes acculturation at the population level. Theories of acculturation have the ability to provide insights into the complex and often varied relationships that occur between immigrants and the culture that is dominant in a given society. The acculturation process is influenced by both the degree to which an immigrant is accepted in the host nation and the degree to which the immigrant adapts to life in the host country. The following factors affected the rate of acculturation: factors such as origin, motivation, age, education, distance from



home culture, reception in new country, racism, generational disparities, language barriers, and social support structure (Berry, 13-29).

Acculturation methods are strongly linked to successful adjustment. When discussing acculturation, the word “adaptation” is used to describe the measures that individuals take over time to make positive changes to their lives and establish themselves in ways that suit them. This is more or less due to the fact that adaptation may vary from very beneficial to quite detrimental in terms of one's way of life within the new cultural milieu. An immigrant has the option to adapt to their new culture by using one of these four distinct acculturation tactics. Integration, marginalization, assimilation, and separation are all types that fall within this category.

Most common way to measure the passage of time is by generation. Based on their research, Bornstein and Cote conclude that there is a large gap between the first and third generations of immigrants. Second-generation Americans are often believed to have a consistent view of what it means to be an American. Some of the reasons for this feeling of security include learning English and becoming citizens of the United States automatically, meeting people from other cultures, and forming friendships outside of their own. The offspring of immigrants frequently show more cultural fluency than their parents did since they are exposed to more elements of the host society. This is referred to as the “first generation.” The majority of Divakaruni's books include depictions of various stages of the acculturation process.

It is possible that the women in Divakaruni's books are prepared to take on leadership roles in the twenty-first century, yet they nonetheless hold on to certain relics of ancient conventions in their wardrobes, diets, and home design. One of the defining features of a diaspora is the preservation, via cultural practices and ways of life, of a strong connection to a motherland. Another important element of a diaspora is cuisine. There is a significant role for culinary culture to play in the process of diasporic identity. Food serves as the vehicle via which the emotional, ceremonial, and ritual worlds of humans may be depicted. Bengali culture has a rich history that is full of ceremony and beauty. For instance, the Hindus of Bengal have both basic and complex relationships between food and art. For people of that culture, food is more than just fuel; it is also a canvas on which to express their creative selves (Castro).

The Mistress of Spices, published in 1997, delves at the challenge of adjusting to life in a new place while maintaining one's cultural and biological roots. It shows the inner sufferings that were a part of the life of Indian women who immigrated to the United States. It demonstrates Tilo's vacillation between his own duties and the obligations he has to his connections with other people. She has either learned to adapt or to reject the changes. Although a significant section of a person's ethnic group may want to preserve cultural traditions, acculturation may be hampered by a number of issues. The cultural divide between the United States and India might make it difficult for those whose look sets them out from the majority of the host group (here, as a Chicano would) to feel accepted. This is because cultural differences exist between the US and India. Tilo's American girlfriend, Raven, was very interested in Indian culture, especially Indian food. Raven was Tilo's companion. He had a particular fascination with them as well as Tilo. In response to an American's romanticization of Native American culture, Tilo said, “My American, how you have romanticised my land and my people.” You may be surprised by how distinct Indian culture is. Racial discrimination is one of the most serious problems that immigrants face. The protagonists of Divakaruni are persecuted by the white settlers, who harbour resentment for the brown-skinned people because the whites believe that these people are overpopulating their country.

Geeta, the protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices*, is a second-generation immigrant and a member of an Indian diasporic family. There's conflict between the three generations of Indian Americans in this household. Geeta finds herself in the centre of the fight. When asked about arranged



weddings, Geeta bluntly replies, “When I marry, I'll choose my own husband,” making it apparent that she is not willing to compromise on this issue. Ramu and Sheela, Geeta's parents, are devastated by her violation of trust since they had granted daughter so much independence. Their disappointment stems from the fact that she has failed to live up to their expectations of a decent and submissive daughter by opting for an arranged marriage with Juan Cordero rather than with another Chicano.

Tilo's customer Geeta has fallen in love with Juan, a Chicano, over the opposition of her parents and grandfather. Geeta is too appalled by the racist undertone that she detects in her parents' behaviour to express her disgust. When he found out that his grand-daughter had expressed interest in marrying a man from a lower caste, he was unable to take it and began to speak poorly of the community.

Having wed a man who is not a sahib and whose family is comprised of slum criminals and illegals, you are dishonouring our forefathers and bringing shame to your own caste, which will cause you to lose your caste. Because in our culture it is considered a source of shame for a mature woman to be living at home alone, and I did not want to embarrass them by doing so.

In a similar manner, Geeta's grandfather also lauded the Indian culture. He criticised Geeta for adopting an American hairstyle and praised Indian ladies for their simplicity.

On Sunday, the young woman trimmed her hair into a pixie style, leaving her neck bare. What do you expect me to mean when I ask “Geeta, what did you do, your hair is the essence of your womanhood?” she looks at me like I have three heads. Or that Geeta; she has an unbelievable amount of makeup on at all times. To my knowledge, back in my day, only Englishwomen and prostitutes engaged in behaviour like that. The beautiful face that God has given them is something that good Indian females do not hide. You just cannot fathom anything that she brings with her, not even to work. You have an obligation to act in her best interest. A girl's future in-laws become her permanent family unit beginning at birth. Visualise myself with a sari over my shoulders, a scarf over my head, and my house keys tucked under the sari's hem.

Two cousins, Anju and Sudha Chatterjee, portray the main characters in the book *Sister of My Heart* (1999). These two women were born on the same day, but just a few hours apart from one another. Sudha and Anju have had a bond from birth, but none of their mothers can explain it. Anju and Sudha's lives diverge drastically after being forced into marriages, with Anju moving to India and Sudha moving to the United States. The heroine of *Sister of My Heart*, Sudha, musters the courage to integrate and makes the big decision to move to America, where she expects to achieve freedom and anonymity since no one would ask her about her prior life and her daughter Dayita. Because of her upbringing in a conservative family, Sudha, whether deliberately or unwittingly, models herself after the ideal lady. The United States of America is held in high esteem in her mind. She said that although the United States “has its own problems,” moving there would provide me with the benefit of remaining anonymous. No one in the United States would care that I was a former first wife or the daughter of the Chatterjees. I had the ability to craft a new life for myself, make my own money, and provide Dayita with all she need. The best part is that no one will judge her for it since America is full with moms who, like me, have come to the conclusion that it is preferable to live independently rather than with the wrong guy. Sudha moves to the United States with the intention of pursuing her huge aspirations, but instead she finds herself stuck in low-paying odd jobs and is unhappy with her life there.

Reading Farver's work on acculturation has taught me that the greater the gap between the new and old cultures, the more acculturative stress people feel and the more challenging it is for them to mentally adapt to the new setting. According to Sam (2000), the stress that is detected during the acculturation process has an effect on the mental health of ethnic groups. Individuals' levels of self-esteem have been shown to correlate strongly with their general psychological wellbeing. Self-esteem,



in this sense, might be defined as “one's level of regard for oneself as a person.” As a result, high self-esteem is associated with psychological well-being, whereas low self-esteem predicts emotional distress (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*).

In *The Vine of Desire*, a book published in 2002, the protagonist, Sudha, is utterly enamoured with the common American maxim “Live for yourself.” Sudha has made the conscious decision to stop thinking about other people in the same way that she did in the past. In the United States, Sudha struggles to find her place in a culture in which it seems there are no hard and fast norms to adhere to. With greater freedom than she would have had in her own country, Sudha undergoes a dramatic transformation, one that is heavily influenced by American society. When they both get pregnant, they find themselves at the same stage of life at the same time. Sudha is devastated when her mother-in-law puts undue pressure on her to terminate their unborn daughter and her husband does not object. She makes the decision to retain the kid and relocates to the United States, specifically to California, where she believes she will have a better time adjusting to her new life as a single mother after her marriage has ended. Anju begins saving money for Sudha's plane ticket by working, and she does so via several jobs. Because of her profession, she experiences the freedom that comes with being financially self-sufficient. Anju loses the pregnancy she was carrying as a result of being mentally and physically exhausted. Anju has a transformation in her use of odd terms and hobbies not long after she establishes herself in the United States. Sudha realised this when her memories of India began to fade: even their recollections are separated on distinct islands. Although Sunil was finally accepted by society as a whole, he was unable to accept Lalit's feelings for either Sudha or Anju. The story depicts Sunil and Anju's efforts to assimilate into American culture as well as their usage of the English language.

When the old Indian guy living with his American son and his wife needs help, Sudha is there to provide it to him. Now, his mental health problems outweigh his physical ones. He has a strong desire to go back to India, his home country. His health has deteriorated in his new surroundings. Sudha understands his predicament and tells him that she would go to India with him. She feeds him authentic Indian food, addresses him as “Baba,” and assigns Dayita the task of entertaining him. The result of this is that the elderly man's health has improved. The only thing that makes her sad is that she had to cut ties with her old friends and family when she opened her own bank account (Divakaruni, *The Vine of Desire*).

Queen of Dreams (2004) heroine Rakhi is an excellent example of a member of the second generation of immigrants; her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gupta, were born in the United States but still identify with India as their country of origin. Rakhi Gupta, Mrs. Gupta's daughter, was born in the United States and has always had a deep sense of loyalty and belonging to the nation. Rakhi Gupta's place of birth is listed as the USA. She is a young divorcee with artistic ambitions. In this book, Rakhi, who was born in America to Indian parents, is a member of the second generation of immigrants. Rakhi suffers from a lack of clarity about her place in the world since she has no direct knowledge of the region where her ancestors formerly lived. Despite Mrs. Gupta's best efforts, she was unable to fully adapt to the American way of life and hence was unable to educate Rakhi in a way that was wholly American. Rakhi, on the other hand, was able to do so. Because of this, she is interested in the Indian way of life and wants to have firsthand experience with it. It should come as no surprise that the number of generations that have passed within a population is an important component to consider when estimating the level of acculturation that has taken place (Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams*).

In the book *Queen of Dreams*, author Divakaruni uses the character Rakhi to explore the sentiments of an immigrant who is attempting to live up to the standards of a western society while having a history that is rooted in an eastern tradition. Separation from one's home country of India may cause emotional sorrow, cultural alienation, and identity conflicts for the displaced. Rakhi speaks out against these issues. Rakhi is motivated to make the required changes to her life by her



overwhelming feelings of isolation and dislocation. She has to make these adjustments so that she can get her life back on track. She tries to adopt the customs of a nation from which she is culturally distinct. As a consequence of this, the traumatic and upsetting experiences that she had with her spouse and her family are no longer there in her thoughts (Kezia, 53-60).

The environment, social conditions, political climate, religious beliefs, and other essential aspects of a society may all have an impact on the way a culture develops through time. The term “diaspora” refers to a group of people who have moved to a new location and brought with them their language and cultural practices. But Rakhi's mom didn't let being a dream interpreter come between being a good mom and a good marriage. Instead, she avoided publicity by not discussing her work publicly. Mrs. Gupta was a staunch cultural preservationist, and her Indian cooking was no exception. In her own words, Rakhi says, “At home, we almost never ate anything other than Indian food because that was the one way my mother kept her culture.” Rakhi, much to Mrs. Gupta's dismay, appeared more interested in exploring the possibility that her mother's dream life was real. Rakhi believed that if she could learn to interpret dreams for a profession, she might find acceptance in the world. Ever since I can remember, I have had the ambition to work as a translator or interpreter. But when I reached twelve, I developed an unhealthy fixation with the concept. I saw it as a virtuous career, one that was both mysterious and beneficial to the wider world. It felt very Indian to take on the role of an interpreter of the inner sphere.

By the end of the book, Rakhi has developed an appreciation for Indian instruments that play music that is neither purely Indian nor purely American. This exemplifies how Rakhi has used her background to her advantage. Rakhi is making progress toward success and stability in her life by embracing American habits, despite the fact that she is momentarily suffering from a setback owing to uncertainty over her feeling of belonging and identity. Her identity is now in jeopardy as she is forced to choose between two cultures. Even when being exposed to criticism and cruelty, she has made every attempt to defend herself in the most compelling manner possible. Instead of inheriting her mother's gift for dream interpretation, her daughter has inherited it. She felt a need to connect with her Indian heritage by uncovering her mother's identity, but her mother never did. Finally, she tried to integrate into American society, but she was rejected. She abruptly severed ties with her spouse, but circumstances eventually compelled her to change her mind (Mari).

During the period of transition between her identity crisis and her acculturation, Rakhi's major connections go through a period in which their dynamics shift. The protagonists in this book are going through a process of self-discovery, and they are caught between the conventional values that they have internalized from childhood and the contemporary ideals that they have been exposed to during their time spent living in a foreign country. Finding one's own identity requires a direct confrontation with the values of Western civilization (Vanjulavalli, 87-90).

To conclude, Divakaruni's take on ethnicity fits well into the worldview of the south Asian diaspora, which emphasizes the need of reconciling one's Indian roots with one's new life in the United States. Her works show how bicultural identity may be formed. She is an advocate for reconciling eastern and western worldviews. She often writes about people trying to juggle conflicting priorities, most notably Indian immigrants to the United States. Almost every protagonist in Divakaruni's books makes some kind of effort to assimilate to American society. She wrote on the age gaps, cultural tensions, and identity shifts that come with uprooting people in her books.

The works of Divakaurni are evidence that Indian Americans have gone to great lengths to honour their cultural heritage. Both ethnic parents and their assimilating offspring face unique challenges and rewards as they work to reconcile their shared bicultural identities. Her writing exemplifies the possibility of a dual cultural identity. Divakaruni's worldview is influenced by the south Asian diaspora, which she says places a premium on blending Indian culture with the immigrant experience



when discussing issues of ethnic identity. She made the argument that even fictitious characters have unique life experiences. Characters in Divakaruni's works explore a wide range of acculturation concerns, including generational differences, cultural differences, culinary differences, assimilation, racism, an identity crisis, low self-esteem, and loss. As her characters have a deeper appreciation for the nuances of acculturation, they are more likely to choose for the integration approach.

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