



Unmaking the 'Ideal Woman': Gender, Power, and Resistance in Divakaruni's Heroines

Research Scholar Poonam Pareek, Dr. Vineet Kumar Purohit

University of Technology, Vatika, Jaipur

Abstract- This paper, titled Unmaking the 'Ideal Woman': Gender, Power, and Resistance in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Heroines, explores how female agency and resistance is being depicted in selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This study examines how Divakaruni problematizes the patriarchal representation of the "ideal woman" as being socially proper, self-sacrificing, submissive and obedient in *The Palace of Illusions*, *The Forest of Enchantments* and *Sister of My Heart*. The paper examines the social constraint to social self-awareness and increasing social autonomy of Draupadi, Sita, Anju and Sudha using a feminist literary approach with the help of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and postcolonial feminist perspectives. The analysis also uncovers how Divakaruni's characters are traditionally seen as passive subjects, and how they are empowered as actors who question patriarchy, regain their voice, negotiate cultural expectations, and assert their identity. The paper also underscores the importance of female solidarity, mythological reworking, marriage and cultural power in influencing women's resistance. It concludes that Divakaruni's fiction is not just opposition to tradition, but an interpretation of tradition from the women's point of view, leading to new models of femininity developed through agency, dignity, voice and self-definition. The protagonists of her stories then embody a process of transformation from silence to speech, from oppression to rebellion, from the predetermined woman to the woman who chooses herself.

Keywords- Feminism, Female Agency, Gender, Patriarchy, Resistance, Ideal Woman, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Indian English Fiction.

I. Introduction

The concept of "ideal woman" has always been influenced by the patriarchal notion of a woman who is obedient, sacrificing, chaste, emotionally contained, domestic and devoted to her family. These are expectations that are repeated in literature, but also have been an important venue for questioning the expectations. Feminist literary criticism thus looks at both the portrayal of women, and the creation of gendered identities and the allocation of power between men and women in literary narratives. The concept of womanhood is not just a biological state; it is a social state that is created through the cultural expectations and institutions, as stated by Simone de Beauvoir (1949). This awareness is a very significant foundation for the study of literary women who defy imposed identity. In recent years, Indian English fiction has been increasingly destabilising traditional notions of femininity, offering women as complex entities with pleasures and paradoxes, dreams and the power to stand back against male oppression. The transition from the stereotyped "ideal woman" to the self-defining woman is representative of the larger shift in feminist literary discussion. Indian women writers in particular have examined the conflict between man's autonomy and the roles set for



women by the society, and have shown that the women's struggle is inseparable from the struggle of the family, marriage, religion, class, tradition and culture. The stories in this collection challenge the notion of the feminine ideals that have been traditionally promoted: silence, endurance, obedience, and sacrifice. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works occupy a unique place in this tradition since they combine feminism, mythology, diaspora, memory and cultural identity. Her fiction frequently puts women in power structures which try to define them and tell them how to act. However, her heroines aren't always victims. They challenge the norm, voice their repressed desires, manage their cultural expectations and attempt to exert control over their identities. When she revisits culturally dominant narratives and provides the women with the space to voice themselves, her feminist presence becomes all the more pertinent. The greatest example of this is in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). In the latter, Divakaruni recounts the Mahabharata from the perspective of the Mahabharata, giving it a traditionally interpreted woman, but also a woman who is an interpreter of power, frustrations, ambitions and emotions. Sita's story is also rethought in *The Forest of Enchantments*, in this case from the female point of view. Divakaruni does not simply portray Sita as a living example of wife's devotion and sacrifice, but also looks at her inner world, morals, pain and ability to define herself. Such re-tellings thus challenge the cultural definition of the "ideal woman" and reveal the constraints of the patriarchal definition of femininity. Divakaruni's modern fiction breaks away from the mythology to question the roles of women. *Sister of My Heart* (1999) is a film where women face the rigidities of family expectations, marriage, women's inferiority and emotional dependence; and female relationships are a powerful force of resistance and strength. *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) shows how the lives of women over the generations have reflected evolving ideas of independence, migration, motherhood and ambition in education. The following stories show that the construction of the ideal woman is never uniform and never static, but rather differs depending on the historical, cultural, generational and diasporic contexts. Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity proves to be of great assistance in the understanding of these representations. Butler proposes that gender identity isn't a fixed identity, but is rather created through continuous social practices and norms. This view suggests that the "ideal woman" can be considered a cultural construct that is reinforced in society through expectations about what women should do and how they should behave. When the heroines of Divakaruni reject the stereotypical roles they're expected to play, they challenge these performances. They may manifest themselves in speech, emotional independence, refusal, personal education, personal decision making, or withdrawal from oppressive relationships. From a postcolonial feminist standpoint, this analysis is enriched as well. It is essential to avoid lumping women from various cultural settings together and to consider women's experiences in particular historical and social contexts (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003). This is especially appropriate for Divakaruni, as her female characters are navigating Indian traditions, diasporic displacement, class, family and shifting cultural values. Their experiences show that they live in an oppressive society, one that is not dominated by patriarchy alone. Likewise, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) focus on the marginalised voice, its representation and its silencing can offer a useful context for the mythological re-tellings of Divakaruni. Using female protagonists Draupadi and Sita as narrators, Divakaruni provides an alternative narrative to male-centered interpretations. Narrating



is a power play: women who once were spoken about become speakers. The present paper, therefore, looks at the role of the Divakaruni's heroines in the unmaking of the "ideal woman." Their opposition does not mean total rejection of culture or tradition, it argues. Rather, they inherit values and negotiate these values, selectively challenge oppressive values, and reinvent femininity through agency and self-awareness. The paper highlights especially the interplay of gender and power with resistance in Divakaruni's work, which creates a space for women to become independent agents shaping their own identities instead of a cultural stereotype.

The study consequently seeks to demonstrate that Divakaruni's feminist project lies not simply in portraying "strong women," but in questioning the very structures through which female strength, virtue, obedience, and identity have traditionally been defined. Her heroines expose the limitations of the idealized feminine model and create alternative possibilities of womanhood based on voice, agency, autonomy, resistance, and selfhood.

II. Constructing the "Ideal Woman"

This concept of the "ideal woman" is not fixed and universal anymore, but rather is socially and culturally produced by norms, institutions, traditions and systems of power. As a feminine attribute, it has often been linked in patriarchal societies with the concepts of obedience, modesty, chastity, sacrifice, emotional control, domestic duty, and dedication to family. Such beliefs create a normative model of the feminine role that women are judged on. Important theoretical support to this construction comes from Simone de Beauvoir (1949) who claimed that woman is a social product and not a natural phenomenon. The "ideal woman" from a feminist perspective is thus a cultural construct whose image is constructed from expectations of women's behavior, desires, speech and relations with men.

Traditional Indian stories in the past have helped to create a desired feminine image in the form of a devoted wife, a self-giving mother, an obedient daughter and a virtuous woman. Pativrata, family honor, sacrifice and feminine virtue have been some of the ideals that have often placed the value of women in relation to their capacity to perform socially prescribed roles. These expectations may restrict women's autonomy as a woman's identity is tied to her role in relation to her husband, family, and community. Feminist criticism challenges this model by raising the question of who draws up the "ideal" woman and whose perspectives are represented by the maintenance of such a definition.

Another useful theoretical approach to this process is Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. Gender is sustained in repeated actions, behaviours and practices of society that create culturally constructed identities as natural. The ideal woman is then always "performed", with devout acts of obedience, modesty, care and sacrifice. Conforming women are rewarded for their actions, rebellious, self-seeking, immoral, or socially unacceptable women are punished. The idealization of femininity is then an unobtrusive social control mechanism.



The conflict between idealized femininity and individual identity is at the very heart of the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her heroines are often subjected to expectations which try to shape them before they can shape themselves. The dual role of Draupadi, as a daughter, a wife, a queen and a mother is particularly complex, and her inner desires and aspirations are often given short shrift to the agenda of politics and patriarchy in *The Palace of Illusions*. In the narration of Divakaruni, Draupadi is allowed to communicate her feelings and desires that are traditionally kept under check in epic portrayals. Her anger, her desire to rise, her jealousy, her susceptibility and her intellectual curiosity makes her not the typical perfect woman who sacrifices herself.

Another example that is important is Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Sita is traditionally worshipped as an icon of devotion, purity, patience and fidelity in marriage, and is usually judged on how well she fulfills the patriarchal expectations of the female. But Divakaruni complicates this image by highlighting the intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of Sita. Exile, separation, and social condemnation all highlight the price of the idea of femininity that requires constant giving up from women. Sita's eventual embrace of dignity is a testament that it is not always necessary to submit to be strong.

In the same way, the 'ideal woman' is fashioned in the contemporary novelist Divakaruni's novels. In *Sister of My Heart*, marriage, household duty, and family honour mold the options that are open to Anju and Sudha. This experience shows them that even something that looks like a private relationship can be a place where gendered power is at play. *Before We Visit the Goddess* explores how notions of proper womanhood vary across time as seen through the eyes of Sabitri, Bela and Tara. Inherited expectations and emerging identities of women are in conflict because of education, motherhood, career aspirations, migration, and personal independence.

Idealizing the woman is also deeply linked to power. For Foucault, the concept of power as being exerted through the norms of society and disciplinary practices is helpful here as the power of the patriarchy is not always realized through brute force. There can be expectations and expectations that are internalized by women and that women act accordingly in order to be accepted in society. In Divakaruni's fiction, the internalization produces psychological dilemmas for women to choose whether to obey the norm or act according to their personal desires.

The ideal woman is further complicated by a postcolonial feminist perspective. In Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), women's experiences are explained in specific historical, cultural and political contexts. The concept of ideal Indian woman, in this regard is not definable in the universal feminist mode of westerners. In Divakaruni's fiction, the woman exists in Indian traditions and diasporic and transnational settings, thus illustrating this complexity. Their identities are negotiated between cultural inheritance and aspiration.

In this way, the "ideal woman" in Divakaruni's works is exposed as a complex cultural imaginary and not a universal norm. Her heroines reveal the paradoxes in the principle of obedience, purity, sacrifice, and devotion. Divakaruni creates the potential for



women to ask questions, to speak, to desire, to refuse, and to choose, and begins to deconstruct the ideal woman--and to imagine a more complicated image of female subjectivity. The key to this change is not that it disturbs all aspects of tradition, but that it allows women to decide which aspects of the tradition they will accept and which they will reject.

Unmaking the Ideal: Draupadi in The Palace of Illusions

The Palace of Illusions (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an important contribution to the Mahabharata from a feminist point of view, as it brings a character that is normally found on the periphery of the epic, to the heart of the epic. The novel isn't just a retelling of the epic; the woman of the novel, Draupadi, is a psychologically rounded woman on whose desires, frustrations, ambitions, relations and experiences of humiliation the entire plot pivots. Using the first-person perspective of Draupadi, Divakaruni questions the notion of 'ideal woman' as the submissive, sacrificing, silent, culturally created image of the woman. Instead, Draupadi becomes a woman who challenges the systems that try to define her identity and fate.

Draupadi is given her identity from the start. She is born of fire and from the moment she is born, unusual, she is connected to political and dynastic expectations. She is not allowed to develop a self-image on her own, but rather will serve as a projection of the dreams of men. Her father, Drupad, identifies her life with his need to take revenge on Drona, and her marriage is linked to the politics of marriage. This illustrates how the patriarchal power can be institutionalised and made to work as instruments of male goals. Draupadi's body and marriage is used as a commodity in political and familial transactions.

Another objectification has been challenged by Divakaruni who has provided the narrative authority to Draupadi. She's not only the woman who is described, but the woman who describes herself. The narrative mode of a first-person perspective is therefore an important feature of the feminist politics of the novel. As readers listen to her voice, they experience her ambivalence and her feeling of being ambitious, angry, jealous, attractive, insecure and in need of recognition. These traits make the stereotype of the "good girl" who is in control of her emotions and always willing to sacrifice herself for others seem more complicated. This adds to the stereotype of the "good girl," who is emotionally controlled and always sacrifices herself for others. The imperfections of Draupadi are significant as they prove her to be a human being and not a symbol of feminine virtue.

Her coming to be married to the five Pandavas also brings out the dualities of the ideal woman. It is expected of Draupadi to accept a very unusual marriage, where she will not have a real say. She puts her family and politics before her own interests. It has shown the unequal agency in patriarchy: Draupadi is a queen, she is a high-ranking woman and her agency is still limited by the authority of the males. From her experience, you can see that not all people who are in the high class of society are free. The royal assembly scene of the disrobing is the most powerful expression of the violence of the patricians in the novel. A woman's public humiliation and treatment as property in a men dominated political arena. Her query on whether Yudhishtira's wife,



Rukmi, can be staked given the loss of her husband is an important act of resistance. She does not agree to the notion that a husband has unlimited authority over his wife. Her questioning allows her to shift the focus from female victimization to intellectual and moral resistance.

What's important about Draupadi's resistance is that she refuses to keep her mouth shut. The authority of the assembly is challenged by her voice, because she reveals the contradiction between what social institutions supposedly do and the violence towards women that happens in these institutions. This episode demonstrates the hypocrisy found in patriarchal systems, and its failure to grant women the autonomy they require. Divakaruni also messes with Draupadi's relationship with power. Draupadi is not a complete non-politician – she is possessive of power and ambitious for it. She has an affinity for power that makes her an outlier in the notion that women should stay out of politics. She wishes to be part of the world around her, to be recognized as a very intelligent political being. This part of her personality is relevant because feminist empowerment does not necessarily mean an antagonism of power; it is the question of who can have and wield it.

Draupadi's relationship with Krishna also plays a role in her growth as an independent entity. Krishna is emotionally and intellectually with Draupadi; yet it is not a matter of dependence. Rather, it offers a venue for her to voice her ideas and feelings that she might not be able to share with anyone else. Her relationship with Krishna is consequently different from the confining forms in which she is surrounded in her marital and political life.

Another idea that is questioned in the novel is the idea of emotional selflessness as a requirement for women. Draupadi is jealous of the other wives and the relationships of the husbands with other wives. In not hiding these feelings, Divakaruni does not hide the truth of how she views herself as a woman. In not hiding these feelings, Divakaruni does not hide the truth of how she views herself as a woman. Rather, she employs them to build herself a replica of a mentally realistic woman. All the flaws in her make up are her resistance to the idealized image of womanhood. She doesn't have to be flawless to have dignity and to have agency.

The path travelled by Draupadi from being an object to a subject can thus be considered as a feminist path. Throughout her early years, others try to define her purpose: revenge is given at birth, and her marriage is arranged for political reasons; then she is made to live her life by the decisions of men regarding her body and her future. However, as the story progresses, she also begins to see the oddities in these systems and imposes her own version of the facts.

The novel can also be approached via Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity. Draupadi is often called upon to fulfil cultural roles of women – daughter, wife, queen, woman. However, her actions again and again defy these expectations. All of her questioning, anger, ambition and desire reveal that femininity is not an essence to be taken for granted but a social performance to be contested.



Likewise, the focus on the representation of marginalized voices as a preoccupation in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) work offers a good context for considering Divakaruni's narrative approach. The narrative in Draupadi's voice is a challenge to the authority of the already existing epic stories. Her voice becomes a counter-narration, an interpretation of events according to the female voice historically important.

Draupadi's characterization isn't just about being a strong woman, it's also about her being a woman. Draupadi's character is not just that of a strong woman, it is also a woman. It is not just an unmaking of the ideal woman, however, that it is more complicated than that – it is the unmaking of the ideal woman, in which a heroine who is ambitious instead of passive, questioning instead of obedient, emotionally complex instead of perfectly composed, politically conscious instead of domestically confined is presented. The empowerment of Draupadi begins by her awareness of and articulation of the power structures that are trying to control her. Ultimately, The Palace of Illusions transforms Draupadi from an epic object of male action into a female subject possessing narrative, emotional, and intellectual authority. Her journey demonstrates that resistance can begin with the simple act of questioning what society presents as unquestionable. Through Draupadi, Divakaruni challenges inherited definitions of feminine virtue and proposes a more complex model of womanhood—one based not on submission and perfection but on voice, agency, desire, consciousness, and resistance.

III. Reimagining Sita in The Forest of Enchantments

The Forest of Enchantments (2019), written by a feminist rewriter, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a major reimagining of the Ramayana, especially the reconstruction of Sita as a woman of independent thought, feeling and moral agency. Divakaruni does not limit Sita to being portrayed as the perfect wife, with her characteristics defined by obedience, chastity, patience, and sacrifice, but instead allows her to tell her own story. The novel thus moves away from the epic heroine who admires Sita as an object, to the Sita who is able to challenge social norms, engage in self-examination, and have agency over her own life.

Sita's traditional image has been linked to the idealized notion of womanhood in Hinduism. She is often read as the loyal wife who accompanies Rama into exile, who is loyal while in exile, who goes through a fire test, and who accepts the hardships for the sake of her family and society. Divakaruni doesn't dismiss these attributes, she examines the emotional and psychological toll of such expectations. She is thoughtful, questioning, aware of the inequities that are part of the world around her, and compassionate and devoted to her Sita. Often, this complexity is at the heart of the novel's feminist intervention.

Narrative voice is one of the significant ways in which Divakaruni reimagines Sita. The novel, inspired by Sita's own narration, undermines the explanatory powers of traditional epic narration, normally given by men. Historical events are reprised from Rama's perspective and now given another perspective through Sita's experiences. Her past experiences, feelings, perceptions, and thoughts become meaningful sources. As a



result, the practice of storytelling is also a statement of agency, as Sita is not just the woman whose story is told by others but is the one who tells her story.

Sita's relationship with Rama is also treated more complexly. Divakaruni does not just see their relationship as a perfect picture of a perfect marriage, it is a relationship that has love and problems for one another, emotional distance, a different way of thinking. Sita is fond of Rama, but her love doesn't take away her critical thinking. Little by little she begins to realize that she doesn't have to give up her own identity to be a faithful wife. Her experiences thus pose a question to the notion of the purity and perfection of women, which are always understood in terms of unquestioning obedience to the husband.

An important part of Sita's growth of consciousness is the episode of exile. Her willingness to go out with Rama to the forest is a first, but the forest is now a place of discovery. In the absence of the formal structures of the kingdom, Sita gets more in tune with nature and her own emotional and spiritual power. The forest is thus metaphorically a place to reframe social identities.

Divakaruni's representation of Sita also emphasizes her relationship with other women. While women like Kaikeyi, Kaushalya, Urmila, Mandodari and others are endowed with emotional and psychological qualities, this obscures the easy distinction between good and bad women. This female-centred approach helps to broaden the understanding of the impact of patriarchy on women. Instead of competing with each other in a masculinity-driven hierarchy, Divakaruni uncovers their common pains and weaknesses.

It is interesting to note that the depiction of Sita in Lanka, her captivity, goes against the common perception of female vulnerability. Ravana is unable to destroy Sita's mind-set. Though physically bound, she will not give in to her moral and emotional freedoms. Her resistance demonstrates that agency does not necessarily depend upon physical power. When Sita refuses Ravana's proposal, it is an important statement of personal dignity.

The biggest conflict between the feminists is visible when Sita returns to Ayodhya. The experience of her own was a case in point of double standards of women. She is publicly suspected and judged when she is innocent and suffering. This worries Rama, and it finally puts Sita in an unfair situation. With this episode, Divakaruni unveils a patriarchal system whereby the purity of a woman is regarded as public property and social respect.

When she responds to this injustice, it is a key point in her transformation. She's become more aware of the fact that you can't have justice without obedience. The best woman who endures without complaint starts to come to life as a woman who values herself. Her last act of rebellion against the judgment of men can thus be seen as a statement of self-affirmation, not defeat. Her departure is a rejection of society's valuation of her worth.



The gender performativity concept of Judith Butler (1990) is useful to understand the transformation of Sita. Sita is continually expected to embody socially acceptable versions of femininity, as an obedient daughter, a faithful wife, a virgin woman, and a giving mother. The conflict between these set plays and Sita's inner thoughts is reflected in Divakaruni's narration. Her eventual claim to a sense of self suggests that femininity doesn't have to be limited to socially accepted actions.

It is also an observation that applies to the concept of a woman as a social construct of Simone de Beauvoir (1949). Sita is continually described as Rama's wife, Ayodhya's queen and the mother of her children. As they are intermingled, Gradually, Divakaruni gives her a name that transcends these relational roles. This is evidence of her spiritual and intellectual growth, which shows that a woman is not defined by her role in the family and society.

A postcolonial feminist approach also highlights the significance of culture. Divakaruni is not just bringing a Western understanding of liberation to Sita. Sita is not, however, resisting from the Indian cultural, spiritual or familial point of view. Her empowerment is one of negotiation and not rejection of tradition. This will make her representation especially pertinent for an Indo-centric feminism.

Sita's metamorphosis is thus seen as a shift from idealized femininity towards independent womanhood. She is still caring, loving and spiritual, but that is no longer submitted to. Divakaruni shows how strength and tenderness, resistance and cultural identity can coexist. Ultimately, The Forest of Enchantments "unmakes" the conventional ideal of Sita by presenting her as a multidimensional woman rather than a fixed cultural symbol. Divakaruni's Sita possesses love but also self-respect, devotion but also critical consciousness, compassion but also resistance. Her journey demonstrates that empowerment can emerge through the recognition of one's own worth and the refusal to allow patriarchal judgment to determine personal identity.

Thus, Divakaruni's reimagining of Sita constitutes an important feminist intervention in Indian mythological literature. By restoring narrative authority to Sita and emphasizing her psychological complexity, the novel transforms her from an idealized figure of sacrifice into an active subject of her own story. Sita's journey ultimately challenges the notion that the "ideal woman" must suffer silently and suggests instead that true strength lies in the ability to define one's own dignity, identity, and truth.

IV. Marriage, Sisterhood, and Resistance in Sister of My Heart

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* (1999) is a complex feminist look at marriage, family, female friendship, resistance, and the traditional Indian social structure. The novel focuses on two cousins, Anju and Sudha, who raise together in a staunchly Bengali family and build a bond that becomes crucial for their emotional existence. Divakaruni explores how patriarchal expectations influence women's decisions, and illuminates the possibilities of sisterhood for another kind of strength, solidarity and agency.



Marriage is a crucial element in the creation of women's identity in the novel. In the traditional family, marriage is seen not just as a relationship between two people, but rather as a social institution that helps to control women's sexuality, movement, reproductive options and conduct. The tension can be seen in Sudha's relationship with Ramesh. Sudha feels marriage ought to offer security and social respectability but is denied autonomy to it as a restriction. Her husband's family expects her to follow the precepts of the "good wife", reinforcing the power of the fathers in seemingly respectable domestic institutions.

Sudha's pregnancy also brings out the gender bias of marriage. When her in-laws have expectations around the birth of a male child, it reflects the power of women's bodies to be controlled by family and culture. Sudha's value is somehow implied as she is linked with her reproductive ability and the production of son. The patriarchy is thus revealed in Divakaruni's account, as the role of mother is both lionized as a feminine task and is used as a control tool. Sudha's final act of self-defence and her daughters are a significant step away from submission towards self-preservation.

But the experience of marriage has been different for Anju and is equally revealing. Her relationship with Sunil reveals emotional and psychological aspects of marital issues. Sudha is seemingly more dependent and subservient than Anju, who is more outspoken and independent, but marriage brings new vulnerabilities into play. A sense of security and identity is challenged by the emotional distance of her husband and his attraction to Sudha. Anju is Divakaruni's portrayal of how education, geographical mobility or apparent modernity does not automatically spell the end of the patriarchal and gender inequalities.

But the best feminist aspect of the novel is the portrayal of sisterhood. The relationship between Anju and Sudha challenges what is often proposed as a strategy in the patriarchy, of pitting women against each other. The two women provide each other emotional support and protection, rather than seeking social approval or male love. The relationship is a form of resistance, because it allows women to talk about things they might not be able to talk about in the patriarchal family.

Women solidarity also enables Anju and Sudha to negotiate their individual identities within the context of women. They are not the same; they do not act or feel the same; they have different personalities, needs, and reactions to social pressures. Anju is more of an intellectual adventurer and a more vocal voice, while Sudha is initially more accepting of the old conventions. Their differences show that feminist awareness can be gained by various means. Their common trait is their ability to defend each other and face situations that endanger their independence.

The novel thus challenges the traditional idea that a woman's first allegiance is always towards her husband and marital family. Anju and Sudha's feelings for each other offers an alternate definition of female belonging. Their sisterhood becomes a counter-space to the patriarchal authority and they can imagine other forms of identity that are not completely bound up in marriage.



Marriage is also associated with the “ideal woman” by Divakaruni. Initially, Sudha is supposed to be the loyal daughter-in-law, who takes her husband's family with her and performs all her duties submissively without any opposition. Anju, on the other hand, will be expected to acclimate to married life, along with the emotional effects of relocation and loneliness. As both women become aware and realize that meeting societal expectations does not automatically equate to happiness or dignity. These experiences thus enable the “unmaking” of the ideal woman of this paper.

It is helpful here to recall a feminist theoretical concept of Simone de Beauvoir (1949) which divides woman into two parts, woman as subject and woman as the “Other”. The women in *Sister of My Heart* are often characterized by their association with men: daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, or mother. Divakaruni rejects this relational definition by focusing on their own thinking, wants, fears and choices. The women slowly gain an awareness of themselves as subjects, not subservient to their given social roles.

Judith Butler's (1990) theory on gender performativity is also applicable. Anju and Sudha are constantly called upon to do socially expected things; to be obedient, modest, domestic, sexually proper, and responsible mothers. These roles are not natural and not inevitable, because of their resistance. The characters throw these into doubt and change them, making the conventional femininity appear constructed.

A postcolonial feminist interpretation also shows that gender is not the only lens that can be used to interpret the novel. Class, family structure, cultural tradition, migration, and generational expectations influence the women's experiences. Their struggles are placed in a particular setting of India making the novel of special relevance to an Indo-centric feminist reading of the text. Divakaruni is not a critic of tradition, but rather an examination of the conflicts that arise between tradition and individualism.

Resistance is also depicted as a gradual process in the novel. Both Anju and Sudha are not totally liberated women. They are empowered as a result of their experiences of disappointment, emotional pain, marriage, motherhood, displacement and interpersonal conflict. Their metamorphosis is more true to life than a transition from oppression to rebellion. Resistance takes the form of decision making, emotional awareness, solidarity and safeguarding dignity of the individual.

In the end, *Sister of My Heart* refutes the notion that the greatest success for a woman is to be married and that women's relationships are less important than relationships with men. In the form of Anju and Sudha, Divakaruni shows how sisterhood can be a strong means of emotional survival and resistance. Marriage is a space of contestation where masculine expectations are revealed, and sisterhood is a space where women can reclaim agency and selfhood.

So, Divakaruni's novel is an important step in the feminist agenda of deconstructing the “ideal woman. Complex characters rather than either dutiful or defiant, Anju and Sudha are women struggling for love, family, tradition, motherhood, and independence. Their journey demonstrates that female empowerment can emerge through solidarity, self-recognition, and the courage to challenge roles that restrict individual freedom. In this



sense, *Sister of My Heart* presents sisterhood not merely as an emotional relationship but as a form of feminist resistance against patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

Gender, Power, and Female Agency

Gender and power are the key issues in the understanding of the feminist aspects in the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This oppression of women is not caused by the actions of any single woman or man, but by social systems that set forth who can speak, who can make decisions, who has a legitimate desire, and who has a valued identity. As used here, the term female agency describes a woman's ability to make decisions, to exercise judgment, to avoid being assigned to roles, and to be active in her own life. Divakaruni's heroines continually wrestle with these kinds of power, constantly challenging the identities given to them.

One helpful theoretical framework is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) that explores the historical development of woman as the Other in relation to man as the norm. For women characters of Divakaruni, this framework is significant as the characters are often shaped by their relationships with fathers, husbands, families, kingdoms, and communities. It starts when they become aware of themselves as agents, not daughters, wives, mothers or objects of desire.

The Palace of Illusions is a remarkable example with Draupadi brought to you by Divakaruni. As a princess and eventually a queen, her social status does not mean that she is in control of her own life. She is married, she enters into political alliances, she is publicly humiliated, all of this is decided by men's power. But Draupadi always challenges these structures. Her interrogation, in the episode of dice-hall in particular, is important because she does not take for granted that a husband has a monopoly on his wife. Through her questioning, she becomes a speaking subject rather than an object of patriarchy, and challenges the legitimacy of patriarchy.

Another example of Draupadi's agency is her political awareness. She is not content with a domestic or symbolic femininity. She watches political goings-on, gets an idea of how power is used, and forms attitudes towards other men's choices. Divakaruni thus takes on a critical re-thinking of the traditional male-dominated monopoly of political ambition and intellectual authority. Draupadi's wish to get involved in political life is a part of her opposition to the defined roles of women.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita is another instance of female agency. While her power is not as political as Draupadi's, it is strongly psychological, ethical and spiritual. Divakaruni portrays Sita as a woman who has a healthy sense of duty, marriage, morality and social norms. Her experiences show that agency does not always require the control of others, either physically or politically. It may also include the ability to maintain one's inner independence in the face of external forces trying to take control.

Sita's story highlights one of the many gendered inequities of a patriarchal world. She should be absolutely pure and loyal, and male rule is hardly held to the same standard. The need to prove her purity is the unequal responsibility imposed on women to maintain the honour of the family and society. She will eventually refuse the public



judgment and that is a big statement of self-respect. Her resistance therefore negates the notion that it is “normal” for a “woman of excellence” to suffer without worrying about the legitimacy of that suffering.

It is also important to consider the role of power in *Sister of My Heart* in relation to gender. Anju and Sudha do not experience patriarchy in an epic political context, but in marriage and family. In Anju and Sudha's lives, the patriarchy is not experienced in an epic political setting, but in marriage and family. Their experiences show that power can be enacted in routine behaviors, such as marital norms, reproductive constraints, family honour, domestic duties, and limiting women's choices. Sudha's act of self-protection and protecting her own daughter is a case in point of the emergence of agency under conditions of hardship. Her resistance isn't some dramatic political uprising; it's a personal declaration that her life, and her child, can't just be governed by the patriarchal expectations.

Another theme of the novel is the sense of female solidarity as a source of agency. Anju and Sudha's relationship enables them to defy the isolation that can stem from a patriarchy. They form an alternative network of emotional power, where women protect, advise, support each other. Divakaruni, then, transcends the notion of empowerment as an individualistic achievement and shows how collective agency can be female.

Another perspective can be found in Judith Butler's (1990) gender performativity. Women repeatedly learn how to do femininity from a social perspective: to be an obedient daughter, a devoted wife, a caring mother, and an emotionally controlled person. In a manner that disrupts the expectations, Divakaruni's heroines perform femininity in ways that are not predictable. Their anger, ambition, sexuality, intellectual interests and independence show the fragility of the “natural” feminine role.

In fiction, however, power in Divakaruni's work is not exclusively one of straight domination. It is also manifested in language, culture, family expectations, marriage, social reputation, and female body control. These hard-to-neglect social institutions and practices are more easily understood, however, in the context of Foucault's (1978) more comprehensive definition of power. The characters continually have to settle for power, not destroy it.

This relationship of course becomes more complicated when looked at from a postcolonial feminist point of view. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) stresses the need to be mindful of women's experiences in their specific historical and cultural context. Indian traditions, family structures, mythology, migration, and evolving cultural norms have all influenced Divakaruni's women. Their agency is thus negotiated with culture, not simply lived against it. This is significant, as far as an Indo-centric analysis is concerned, because Divakaruni's feminism is especially relevant in this context.

Female agency may therefore be seen as a process of transformation throughout the novels that were selected. Divakaruni's heroines are not quite independent beings. They grow conscious that injustice, displacement, feelings of suffering and social constraint



produce their consciousness. They learn to recognise the structures that restrict them and slowly begin to gain confidence in their ability to challenge the structures. Agency is thus characterised as a process of self-recognition and self-definition.

In Divakaruni's feminist imagination, the three axes of gender, power and agency are closely intertwined. Gender is the expectations placed on women regarding their roles, power refers to the institutional mechanisms that enforce women's roles, and agency is the power women have to negotiate, resist, and reframe women's roles. Draupadi challenges political and patriarchal authority, Sita asserts moral and personal autonomy, while Anju and Sudha demonstrate the significance of female solidarity and resistance within domestic and familial spaces.

Ultimately, Divakaruni's fiction challenges the conventional understanding of female empowerment as simply becoming powerful in traditionally masculine terms. Her heroines demonstrate multiple forms of agency—narrative, emotional, intellectual, moral, relational, and personal. Their resistance lies not merely in opposing men but in reclaiming the authority to define themselves. Through this process, Divakaruni transforms the “ideal woman” from a figure of obedience and sacrifice into a complex subject capable of choice, dissent, self-respect, and self-determination.

V. Results

The analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's selected novels—*The Palace of Illusions*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, and *Sister of My Heart*—reveals that her female protagonists challenge conventional constructions of femininity and progressively develop forms of personal, emotional, intellectual, and social agency. The findings demonstrate that Divakaruni's feminist concern is not limited to depicting women as victims of patriarchy; rather, she presents their gradual transformation into self-aware subjects capable of questioning and negotiating structures of power.

1. Rejection of the “Ideal Woman”

The study challenges the conventional notion of women's ideal from a traditional perspective as one who is both submissive and self-sacrificing, who is defined mainly by relations with men and who is always subservient and obeying her husband. The desires and views of Draupadi, Sita, Anju and Sudha are not solely dictated by the socially constructed roles that fall upon them. The characterisation confirms that femininity is not a given but a cultural product.

2. Development of Female Agency

One of the significant discoveries is the emergence of agency of the female characters. Draupadi questions, politically becomes aware; Sita grows moral, spiritual autonomous; Anju and Sudha negotiate with the patriarchal expectations in marriage and family. Agency is thus conceptualized as a process of women gaining more control over decisions about their identities and lives.



3. Transformation of Silence into Voice

The novels show a good degree of change from silence to self-expression. In her mythological fiction, the use of the female centred narration is of particular importance. She puts the Mahabharata and Ramayana in the hands of Draupadi and Sita, to demystify male-dominated versions of both epics. The narrator voice then is a resistance to the patriarchy.

4. Patriarchal Power and Female Resistance

It is concluded that power of the patriarch is exercised in various institutions and practices such as the marriage, family, social honour, political power, culture, and control over the body of the women. But Divakaruni's female protagonists are not victims in these constructs. They challenge, bargain and sometimes refuse expectations that are placed on them.

5. Marriage as a Site of Gendered Power

Both *The Forest of Enchantments* and *Sister of My Heart* show that marriage can be a significant source of inequality between women and men. Women often are expected to give up on themselves in order to maintain their families and social standing. Throughout, Divakaruni illuminates these imbalances and how her characters come to understand the value of self-respect and independence.

6. Female Solidarity as Resistance

Sisterhood and female solidarity are key factors associated with empowerment identified in the study. Anju and Sudha provide an example of which women's relationships can offer emotional support and resistance to patriarchy's isolation. Empowerment, then, is an individual accomplishment, but also an accomplishment that could develop from supportive relationships between women, according to Divakaruni.

7. Reinterpretation of Mythological Women

Analysis indicates that Divakaruni's re-tellings of the myths defy the dominant images of Draupadi and Sita. Draupadi is reimagined as an active, emotional, and politically aware woman, and Sita is made a reflective, morally strident, and judgemental woman. Myth is thus a vehicle for challenging and re-writing the narratives of a patriarchal society.

8. Cultural Negotiation and Identity

Selected novels show that empowerment of the women does not mean the total rejection of the Indian culture and tradition. The heroines in Divakaruni's stories face a choice between tradition and freedom. They are formed through a constant process of accepting, challenging and adjusting the cultural expectations handed down to them.

9. Multiple Forms of Female Power

The study finds that Divakaruni presents power in several forms:



Form of Agency	Major Representation
Narrative agency	Women tell and reinterpret their own stories
Emotional agency	Recognition and expression of personal feelings
Intellectual agency	Questioning established beliefs and authority
Moral agency	Making ethical decisions independently
Relational agency	Female solidarity and mutual support
Personal agency	Making choices concerning identity and life

10. From Oppression to Empowerment

The most striking thing about it is that Divakaruni's female leads experience a definite metamorphosis:

Patriarchal Constraint → Awareness → Questioning → Resistance → Self-Assertion
→ Empowerment

This transformation supports the central argument of the paper: Divakaruni does not merely represent “strong women”; she unmakes the culturally prescribed “ideal woman” and reconstructs femininity around agency, voice, dignity, and self-definition. The study shows that the novels chosen by Divakaruni are an important feminist intervention in the field of Indian English fiction overall. Her protagonists defy the notion that a woman's purity is based on submission, sacrifice and silence. Draupadi, Sita, Anju, and Sudha offer alternative visions of what a woman can be: one who is capable of asserting agency, resisting, asserting individuality, and asserting self-respect, while also maintaining cultural identity and emotional relationships. These findings thus help to substantiate the central thesis of this paper that the de-construction of the ideal woman is also a process of reclaiming female voice, negotiating power and building an independent identity.

VI. Conclusion

The study ends by asserting that the works of fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni defy the traditional notions about the “ideal woman,” ideas that have been defined as being “obedient,” “submissive,” “self-sacrificing,” and “dependent.” In the characters of Draupadi, Sita, Anju and Sudha, Divakaruni brings to life women who challenge the patriarchy and assert their own voice and personal and emotional agency. The Palace of Illusions, The Forest of Enchantments and Sister of My Heart illustrate that resistance can come in the form of speech, self-awareness, female solidarity and independent decision-making. Divakaruni's feminist perspective is not overtly anti-traditional, but rather is reinterpreting and negotiating this tradition, letting the female define her image in her own way. Her heroines are thus a progression from silence to voice, from oppression to resistance, from prescribed to self-defined femininity. To sum up, the study demonstrates that Divakaruni makes valuable contribution to the feminist Indian English fiction by focusing on female agency, female dignity, and female empowerment in her narratives.



References

1. Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). The second sex. Alfred A. Knopf.
2. Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.
3. Divakaruni, C. B. (1999). Sister of my heart. Anchor Books.
4. Divakaruni, C. B. (2008). The palace of illusions. Doubleday.
5. Divakaruni, C. B. (2016). Before we visit the goddess. Simon & Schuster.
6. Divakaruni, C. B. (2019). The forest of enchantments. HarperCollins.
7. Foucault, M. (1978). The history of sexuality: Volume 1: An introduction. Pantheon Books.
8. Mohanty, C. T. (2003). Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity. Duke University Press.
9. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), Marxism and the interpretation of culture (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.