

From Indecision to Assertion: A Study of Divakaruni's Protagonists – Anju, Sudha, Korobi, Tilo and Rakhi

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Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed and prolific writer with an Asian American identity, has beautifully captured the changing ethos of contemporary Indian women through her writing. In fact her writing relates to the 'phase of self-discovery' (Showalter) in the Feminist literary tradition. There is a conscious effort at redefining womanhood, a not so uncommon trait among other contemporary women writers. In an interview Divakaruni declares, "It is very important for me to create strong women characters to break through social barriers and expectations that hold them back". One can easily perceive an unambiguous attempt at foregrounding the inner strength, confidence, latent abilities and an inherent divinity (in women) to underplay the image of the suffering woman.

This paper seeks to study the consciousness of Divakaruni's protagonists as they try to move beyond the male defined confines to seek fulfillment in self-actualisation. In trying to negotiate between tradition and modernity, vis-à-vis, the demands of self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment they emerge as the prototype of the New Woman who "are prepared to face the consequences of their choices". The paper will also analyze the actions and choices of the heroines (Anju, Sudha, Korobi, Tilo and Rakhi) within the framework of the radical feminist thought.

Key words: self-fulfillment, self-actualisation, feminist, radical feminist thought, New Woman.

“Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family : in childhood to the father , in youth to her husband , in old age to her sons .” (n.p)

This code of conduct enshrined in ‘manusmriti’, the ancient Hindu book of law, indisputably assigns a secondary position to women. It also follows that there is a certain dependence syndrome internalized in the female psyche that keeps them relegated to this subordinate position. According to Chaman Nahal, an award winning novelist, it is this social indoctrination that accounts for the plight of traditional Indian women. He writes, “I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome, and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes”(17). Following Nahal’s concept of feminism it would not be difficult to locate fictional characters in contemporary Indian women’s writing who have been able to free themselves of this syndrome. The contemporary literary stage is agog with women writers trying to add a new dimension to the traditional concept of Indian femininity, thereby subverting the stereotype image of the angel in the house. In fact an earnest effort at portraying the changing social reality and women’s empowerment is discernable in contemporary women’s texts. Such portrayals of the New Woman attest to the fact that women are in the process of evolving into conscious, liberated and empowered beings. This is what the radical feminist Mary Daly refers to as the process of “women becoming” (qtd. in Tandon, 45). The modern woman in fiction is no longer the suffering victim cast in the image of the dutiful wife, a pious mother, a confiding sister or an idealised beloved.

A survey of the postcolonial women’s literature would reveal a conscious and persistent attempt at reconstructing

images of women. Also the ideological position to patriarchy has changed over time in women's texts. While the early narratives are found to be firmly endorsing the values of patriarchal society, the texts written between 1960 and 1980 exhibit neither acceptance nor rejection of androcentric norms. But women writing in the last decade of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century exhibit a more resistant attitude towards male hegemony and the various institutions of oppression. Such writers including Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhle and Manju Kapoor focus on delineating women's needs, desires and struggle for self-realisation and individuation through characters like Indu, Rukhmani, Kali, Kunti, Janaki, Virmati, Paro and Ammu. In doing so, they conform to the female literary tradition of "assaulting, revising, deconstructing and re-constructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially the paradigmatic images of angels and monsters" (Gilbert and Gubar, 76). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to this fraternity of writers who have chosen to foreground the inner strength, confidence, latent abilities and inherent divinity to underplay the image of the suffering woman. Her fictional characters like Anju, Tilo, Sudha, Gouri, Draupadi, Korobi, Rakhi and a host of others not only interrogate male traditions and assumptions, but at the same time strive towards a complete development of their potential. The author delineates the dilemma of the modern woman trying to resolve the conflict between the need for self-sacrifice and the need for self-fulfillment. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award winning novelist and poet who has been widely published. She emerged into the literary scene with a postcolonial diasporic identity. An acclaimed and prolific writer Divakaruni is concerned more with women's issues and immigrant reality in her fictional narratives. An analysis of the fictional world of Divakaruni would inevitably unravel the subtle means at voicing resistance against phallogocentrism.

Her endeavour at subverting the male ideology through redefining womanhood forms the focus of this paper. The author herself confirms that writing is a means of breaking barriers. In an interview she says, “The whole point of writing for me is to break down barriers . . .” (n.p.)

Divakaruni's protagonists are all young, educated, middle-class, urban woman. Despite having proper academic or professional degrees they seek economic independence in the process of becoming liberated. The transcultural setting of the narratives naturally offers a greater mobility to the heroines who are enabled to move between India and America in an attempt to determine their lives and selves. Despite polarities in characterisation, situations and circumstances, it is the quest for identity that binds the narratives. At some point in the story the women are faced with a crisis, being unable to decide their priorities. They find their identities at stake. Whether in India or abroad, the women pass through a period of struggle. At the end of their intense mental turmoil they find themselves in a position where they can make choices through affirmation of will. Though they suffer they do not end up as victims. They are able to transcend their situations to emerge as liberated individuals. Divakaruni discovers in her women an inner strength and courage which enable them to put up with adversity. In an interview the author declares, “ It's very important for me to create strong women characters to break through social barriers and expectations that hold them back” (n. p.) . In the process of negotiating their lives and roles they reclaim their lost identities through self discovery which in turn leads to self actualisation. Defining the term 'self-actualisation' the noted psychologist Carl Rogers states that it is a process of becoming oneself, of becoming fulfilled, of developing one's unique psychological characteristics and potentialities. In Maslow's theory of hierarchical needs, the need for self-actualisation comes after the basic needs (i.e. food, shelter, safety, love, belongingness and self-esteem) of an

individual are met. The nature of self-actualisation may vary from person to person: “In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed atheletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions” (Maslow, 382-383). For Maslow, a person is always ‘becoming’. Divakaruni demonstrates this phenomenon of becoming through the journey of her protagonists. On realizing their true potential Divakaruni’s women feel empowered. They are able to break away from all psychological and social constraints that enslave them. They carve out a niche for themselves by redefining their roles, thereby revising the dynamics of man- woman relationship. These are the general traits discernable among the protagonists who inhabit the fictional world of Divakaruni.

This paper intends to study the journey of Divakaruni’s protagonists – Anju, Sudha, Korobi, Tilo and Rakhi – from a state of indecision to self-assertion in the light of the above discussions. The analysis will proceed through answering certain questions: How do they seek fulfillment? In revising the institution of marriage and readjusting their position within familial relationships? In opting out of oppressive and unhappy marital bonding? In pursuing a lucrative career? Or simply being economically independent? How do they mend their cultural conditioning to reclaim their identities? Are women of the South Asian community in America more radical in redefining themselves than their Indian counterparts?

This paper seeks to study the feminine consciousness in two different situations; firstly in the context of the Indian social reality, and secondly within the framework of the diasporic reality.

Let us begin with Anju, Sudha and Korobi . The girls are very young, between seventeen and nineteen years, and have just stepped out of high school. While Anju and Sudha are distant cousins and the only decedents of the illustrious Chatterjee family, Korobi is an orphan girl and the only

granddaughter of the renowned advocate Bimal Prasad Roy . Anju and Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* are brought up in a household which is governed by the three women, Gouri ma, Aunt Nalini and Aunt Pishi. There is a conspicuous absence of men in this family as all the three women are widows. Nevertheless it is ensured (by the mothers) that the grooming of the girls is strictly in accordance with the societal and cultural norms. Anju and Sudha love each other dearly, and feel incomplete without the other. Anju herself confesses that Sudha is "...my other half. The sister of my heart" (11) It is this bonding that acts as a support system to protect them from hardships and adversity and the snares of patriarchy in their later years . Though they express their dislike over various issues but they could never affirm their choices during their growing up years. When they grew up to be young ladies fresh out of high school, the mothers decide to solemnize the marriages of Anju and Sudha due to a certain crisis in the family. This decision can be perceived as arising out of their social and cultural conditioning that "marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (Beauvoir, 445) to ensure their proper integration into the society. The cousins comply rather reluctantly to this decision. Both the daughters lived an insinuated and happy life in their maternal house, blissfully ignorant of the real world outside. Divakaruni makes her protagonists confront the other ugly aspects of life as they step out into the wider world. *Sister of My Heart* actually records the growth and transformation of a naïve girl into a brave, confident and responsible girl . It is actually the story of Sudha and how she confronts the institutions of marriage and motherhood, and in the process mustering courage enough to subvert the male ideology. But the full development of her potential and further self exploration is effected only in the sequel *The Vine of Deire*. In spite of her efforts to be a perfect daughter-in-law Sudha suffers humiliation and harassment in the house of her in-laws. She tries her best to save her marriage

because her cultural conditioning would not allow her to break away from the marital bond, no matter how oppressive it might be. But when things come to such a passe that she has to choose between her marriage and unborn child, it is then that her inherent strength and confidence (that lay dormant so long) get the better of her enabling her to do justice to herself and her baby. Without bothering about the social stigma that would ensue a failed marriage, she returns home. This is to be perceived as a brave act of going against the grain, especially in a traditional orthodox society. With the help of Anju and the mothers who provide emotional support coupled with social security she is able to face the challenges of a divorced single mother. Rejecting all oppressive traditions as baseless Aunt Pishi encourages her to live a better life:

“Why should she care anymore what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole lifetime of being afraid of what society might think? I spit on this society which says it's fine to kill a baby in her mother's womb , but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child”(247).

Aunt Pishi's reluctance to see Sudha the victim that she herself had been all her life rings loud when she says , “go take a nice bath and shampoo the last of that red from the forehead . . . You've got a whole life in front of you , and it's going to be such a dazzling success . . .” (249) .

The iconoclasm begins as Sudha washes away the last traces of the vermillion from her forehead. With the love and support of the three mothers and her dear sister Anju she is able to redefine her role as a woman. She gives birth to her daughter, Dayita, which is a symbolic affirmation of her choice of a single parent. The traditional parameters of femininity are reshuffled and revised , male assumptions of female passivity and dependence subverted through the image of the protagonist. Sudha walks out of her marriage in order to save her unborn girl child. This bold decision empowers her enough

to take many other decisions in her later life. She turns down Ashok's proposal of marriage and accepts Anju's invitation of relocating to America, the land of vast opportunities. The character grows and develops further in *The Vine of Desire* which is set in America. The story in *Sister of My heart* ends with Sudha metamorphosing into a bold and brave girl who now has the confidence to negotiate her life. Even in a different cultural set up that offers more freedom to women, Sudha cannot escape the clutches and ensnarement of patriarchy. Patriarchal authority imposes itself in the form of Sunil (Anju's husband). She falls a prey to the advances and seductions of Sunil. She tries hard to resolve her conflicting passions: "My mind whips about. East and west, east and west. I want my daughter to be loved by Sunil and Anju. I want her for myself alone. I want to help Anju to get back to her old, strong self. I want Lupe to find me a job so I can escape this apartment. The river of my life is speeding toward an abyss. What shall I do? I want an existence iridescent as nail polish . . . I want Sunil" (87).

Subsequently her self-exploration leads to self discovery and an urge for self- actualization. Earlier in India she had already freed herself from certain constraints, and now she (re)negotiates her identity. The multicultural milieu of the American society effects a change in her worldview. She decides to leave Anju and Sunil to seek economic independence. That she becomes an autonomous person with the ability to take decisions is quite evident as she takes up a job of a nurse-maid to an old man in America. Reluctant to consider the issue of a second marriage, she seeks fulfillment in being an independent woman and a single mother. Finally she decides to return to India (in her capacity of a care giver) with the old Mr. Sen to settle down in Jalpaiguri. She chooses to give herself a fresh lease of life.

The other cousin Anju, unlike Sudha, was never the submissive type. Informed with feminist ideas right from her

childhood, she scoffed at the various customs and paradigms that restricted women. An outright modern woman she was very conscious of her rights, position and desires. She was reluctant to accept domesticity as the only vocation for women. So when her mother arranged her marriage, she complied on one condition, i.e., she should be allowed to continue with her studies. Marriage with Sunil, an IT professional based in the US, brings her the opportunity to step into the wider world. In the initial years of her marriage the author portrays her as an efficient woman capable of balancing home and college with ease. Though marriage separates the cousins but it doesn't sever the bond between them. It was Anju who counseled Sudha and provided her with the much needed mental support to walk out of her marriage. She even takes up a part time job after her classes in the evening to save money for buying tickets for Sudha and her daughter. Divakaruni shows her to be a very active and self-willed person. In *Sister of My Heart* this is the image that we get of Anju. But trouble starts brewing the day Sudha joins her in America. *The Vine of Desire* begins with Anju trying to recover from the trauma of a miscarriage which leaves her shattered. The crisis in her life begins and it intensifies with time. The reunion of the cousins in America was intended to help them cope with their individual misfortunes and live meaningful lives. But all efforts are thwarted by circumstances. Anju struggles to make sense of life. The loss of her child and the infidelity of her husband develop in her a sense of insecurity. In a letter to her mother she writes:

“Mother, I need advice. Things are going badly here , not like you imagine at all . . . Oh mother , I'm so afraid , I don't know what to . . .”(73).

Again in a letter addressed to her dead father she expresses her fears and feelings of being unwanted:

“Here is a fact: I am of no use to my household. If I disappeared tomorrow, Sudha would grieve, Dayita would look

for me behind the curtains . . . Sunil would call the police. But soon they would draw together, the way flesh pulls itself . . .”
(169)

Divakaruni's heroines are not mute sufferers. Like other women of the fictional world of Divakaruni Anju, too, matures as an individual. The change from a jerk to a confident and liberated woman can be traced through the pages of her college assignments. As she writes out the three assignments, one can easily perceive a gradual change in her psyche. In her final assignment when she writes about Draupadi planting the seeds of a mysterious plant (which is symbolic of a new order) , she seems to suggest that she has found new hope in her acceptance of the new order . It takes her some time to break away from the cultural conditioning to accept new values. Her self discovery leads to the realization that her true vocation lies in writing . And self fulfillment would come through writing . She rejects marriage and domesticity to pursue a career in writing . Her soul reaches the final rung of emancipation which is symbolically borne out by her words , “I've learn't to fly” (362) . Korobi of *Oleander Girl* resembles Sudha in some respects . Both are young and compliant , rarely dissenting from elders , and uncomplainingly abiding by family and societal values . But unlike Sudha , Korobi has an assertive nature and a certain stubbornness which gets the better of her in times of crisis . Her grandfather , a veritable patriarch , makes every effort to ensure that the girl has a very strict and disciplined upbringing , so that unlike her mother she does not exhibit defiance . Even Korobi reciprocates his love and concern in every possible way . She always tries to make him feel proud of her . This is a common trait among girls of Indian middle class families who abhor the idea of bringing disgrace to the family by any act of violation of the law of the father . That is why Anju , Sudha and Korobi pass through a period of intense mental turmoil as they try to break away from the stereotype to recreate themselves . Korobi's grandfather , the advocate Bimal

Prasad Roy , takes a quick decision regarding her marriage . Within a very short period of her graduating from high school , he fixes the date of her marriage . But Korobi's dream of a secure and happy marital life with Rajat Bose is abruptly snapped as she learns a dark family secret after the sudden demise of her grandfather on the day of her engagement. The truth that her grandfather had held from her all her life is now revealed . From Sarojini , her grandmother she learns that her father is alive and is an American . Seized by a stubborn determination to find out her father she sets out for an unknown destination , disregarding the pleadings of her grandmother and her fiancée :

“ . . . I couldn't so easily give up the possibility of finding my father , not even for the man I loved” (70) .

Not until she resolves her identity crisis that she would marry Rajat . Stubbornness rings loud as she says ,” . . . I don't care how hard it is! I must do everything I can to find him. He's my *father*, for heaven's sake” (71) . She remains determined and invincible to all opposition as she says , “ I need to understand my parents' marriage before I can enter my own . . .” (72) . She is even ready to “release Rajat from the engagement”(79) if her act would tarnish the name of his family and affect their business . Evidently it is a bold gesture that not only emphasizes her unconventionality of spirit but also her non-conformity to the stereotype . She displays an extraordinary courage , confidence and determination of will in her firm decision . It is indeed quite difficult for a girl from a middle class orthodox family , who is engaged to be married , to travel alone all the way to an unknown destination . Her search brings her to America where she encounters both good and evil aspects of life , and overcomes various impediments before she meets her father . After finding her father and learning other shocking facts about her parents and her identity , she is temporarily taken aback . But soon she gathers herself as she undergoes a psychological transformation . She learns to accept

facts as they are and not squirm away from reality . She learns a greater truth about human relationships . Being able to conquer her psychological inhibitions she gets a better insight into her self . She returns to Kolkata a changed person . Her experiences abroad give her the confidence to face life . She realizes her potential to become an autonomous being capable of resisting the decisions and choices imposed on her by the society . She has the ability to survive despite obstacles as she says , “I’m Korobi , Oleander , capable of surviving drought and frost and the loss of love” (274-275). Korobi which means ‘Oleander’ actually symbolizes strength underneath a delicate veneer . When after her return a misunderstanding crops up between her and her would be in-laws who accuse her of artifice and hiding facts , she immediately walks out on them :

“I pull the engagement ring from my finger , set it on the table . Goodbye Rajat . I walk , one precise foot after another , to the door . When I reach it , I say , without turning , ‘Call Desai . He’ll tell you.’”(275) .

Her body language and the firmness in her tone is a clear indication of her transcendence . The act of putting down the engagement ring is symbolic of her rejection of hegemony . Finally her marriage on her own terms , her decision to stay back in her grandfather’s house with Rajat , and to help Rajat in his business indicate a strong self will and an independence of spirit .

Thus we see that Anju , Sudha and Korobi seek fulfillment in different ways . Self fulfillment is defined as the feeling of being happy or satisfied by an act that fully uses one’s abilities and talents . They are able to carve out a niche for themselves and make their lives meaningful . For Anju and Sudha it is through the rejection of traditional roles for an alternative existence . They seek happiness in their decisions to step out of unfulfilled marriages . In case of Korobi it is the restructuring of the institution of marriage and revising the male female dynamics . Anju realizes her potential to be a

writer and chooses her vocation accordingly . Sudha realizes the need for economic independence to rear her daughter as a single parent . She finds fulfillment in being an independent person , spiritually and financially . On the contrary Korobi's fulfillment lies in redefining her role within the traditional patriarchal structures . In this regard she appears less radical than the other two . But a more insightful perception would reveal that Korobi's alignment with the Bose family through her marriage with Rajat is in itself a radical step towards acceptance of the new order . This is because Divakaruni advocates a reversal of the old order through her portrayal of the revised gender dynamics of the Boses . Further Korobi marries on her own terms which again signifies a restructuring of the institution of marriage , the traditional weapon for patriarchal oppression. Anju and Sudha manifest a moderately radical attitude in their 'feminist separation' . Defining the term Chandra Nisha Singh says , “ Feminist separation is a separation of various sorts and modes from men and institutions , from relationships , roles and activities which are male defined and meant for the maintenance of male privilege . Feminist separation from systematic misogyny and aims at attaining independence , liberty, growth , invention and sisterhood. Separation is registered in a number of alternative : withdrawal , break out , regrouping , shoving aside , stepping outside , migration , transcending or saying “ no” .” (21)

Turning our focus to the diasporic condition, it is perceived that the immigrant reality is not so much about countering patriarchal forces as about resolving an identity crisis arising out of a cultural conflict. Here the author explores the immigrant reality to underscore the need for acculturation and identity construction. The narrative in *Queen of Dreams* depicts how a modern woman in a progressive society can also suffer from an identity crisis . The protagonist , Rakhi , is a young aspiring artist and a divorced mother who runs a chai shop in Berkley in collaboration with her friend Belle . Unlike

Sudha , Rakhi does not face any social stigma on account of her divorce from Sonny . It is not considered scandalous in the Western society . Like Sudha she is also a single parent to her daughter Jona . A second generation immigrant born and bred in America , she grows up to be independent and self –reliant person who believes in American value system . But her faith in the American values and beliefs is vigorously shaken as she becomes a victim of the ‘othering’ tendency of the dominant culture ensuing the 9/11 militant attacks in America . As an impact of the incident their chai shop is attacked forcing them to stay indoors . It comes as a shocking revelation that she is an alien in the American society . She finds herself in a state of utter confusion and suffers from a sense of fragmented identity : “ If I weren’t an American , then what was I?” Divakaruni portrays the agony of a modern woman in a multicultural society suddenly pushed back to a minority status , and who is completely oblivious of her cultural roots . In order to counter the cultural antagonism and the stiff professional competition she realizes the need for reconstructing her identity to lend her both originality and a certain distinctiveness . It is then that she reaches out to her cultural heritage. It is only after she connects with her ethnic culture that she is able to find a purpose and meaning in her life . An understanding of her cultural heritage through her mother’s dream journals and her father’s stories finally enable her to grapple with her identity crisis . Her father becomes instrumental in transmitting the ethnic culture through his storytelling (about his experiences in Kolkata) , and this leads to the construction of her identity . With her father’s help she is finally enabled to integrate her ethnic heritage with her American identity . They transform the coffee shop into an authentic “Indian snack shop , a chaer dokan , as it would be called in Calcutta”(185) . Further her father’s singing talent attracts some ethnic minority musicians who form a cosmopolitan band at the coffee shop . Through these various incidents Rakhi gets an opportunity for self –

exploration . She develops as an artist . It affects her perception of her ethnic culture as well as her adopted culture . She finds fulfillment in being able to develop a unique painting style that relates to her Indian-American experience . She is able to reclaim her true identity . Both Rakhi and Sudha remain a single parent for whom marriage and domesticity are of secondary importance.

As in the previous novel, Divakaruni explores the immigrant reality in *The Mistress of Spices* as well . But the basic difference lies in the fact that while Tilo , the protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices* , is a first generation immigrant completely rooted in her ethnic culture, Rakhi is a second generation immigrant with an American identity and completely oblivious of her cultural roots . Written in a magic realist technique the narrative provides glimpses into the immigrant situation through Tilo's interaction with her customers . From the very beginning her identity is shrouded in mystery . Though a young girl she has to don the guise of an old woman to run an Indian grocery store in Oakland , California . Besides she is endowed with a special power to cure the various maladies of the Indian expatriate community by way of dispensing the appropriate spice . Her adherence to her culture is symbolically rendered through her role as a spice mistress . At the very outset Tilo declares :

“I am a Mistress of Spices . . . I know their origins , and what their colours signify , and their smells . . .the spices of true power are from my birthland , land of ardent poetry , aquamarine feathers . . . They are the ones I work with . . . I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this” (3) .

Divakaruni's earnest endeavour at upholding the rich and indigenous cultural heritage of India through the image of the spice mistress cannot be overlooked . But Tilo's integration into the mainstream culture is prevented by her strict allegiance to the Order of Mistresses . Further she is required to work under

restrictions and any violation of the Order would render her powerless . Her confinement within the store , her emotional detachment from her customers and her self denial are parameters that define the stereotype . Viewed metaphorically all the limitations imposed on her signify the patriarchal confines and ethos that keep women relegated to a subordinate position . The internalization of the cultural norms is so strong that she cannot easily break away from it . Ironically the very seed of defiance is embedded in her name . She takes her name from Tilottama , the divine dancer in Indra's court , who was punished for her defiance . Like the divine dancer Tilo also commits certain acts of violation . Working under restrictions Tilo realizes that it is not a fulfilling existence . In defiance of the Order she goes out to meet her clients , uses the magical powers to restore her age and beauty , dates with Raven (a native American) and also makes love to him . These acts of transgression are symbolic of the iconoclasm of the stereotype . Being tired of living a life of self-denial she finally chooses to reclaim her identity and recreate herself even at the cost of abandoning her mistress identity .The transformation comes after resolving intense mental conflicts and confusions . The earthquake towards the close of the narrative and Tilo's consequent emergence from the rubbles like a phoenix symbolise the crumbling of the old order and usherance of a new era . Further her union with Raven , a native American , and her subsequent rechristening as 'Maya' is significant enough . Viewed under a feminist lens it marks the rejection of her male defined role as she recreates herself as 'Maya'. At another level the Tilo-Raven union advocates a strong communion between the ethnic minority to enable them combat the forces of cultural hegemony. It is perceptible in her determination to transform herself from Tilo to Maya that she has no regrets for her decision . It is a celebration of hybridity and Tilo is evidently happy about the choice of her name : "One that spans my land and yours , India and America , for I belong

to both now . . .”(316) . Thus she acts like a true New Woman confident of herself . Resolving the cultural conflict she adopts a hybrid identity that incorporates the best of both the cultures . Thus it is not difficult to infer that both Rakhi and Tilo “achieve a cultural identity that recognises the difference yet does affiliate to a pre-given set of ethnic traditions” (Gupta , 84) .

Thus the unambiguous attempts of the author at portraying modern women as dynamic and strong , who loath to accept things in passive resignation , are clearly discernable . They are what Forester calls ‘round’ characters who grow and develop in the course of the story . Divakaruni’s fiction offers a realistic portrayal of contemporary women who have the ability to change and liberate themselves from all constraints . The author herself confirms , “ Perhaps what distinguishes my characters is their courage and spirit and a certain stubbornness which enables them to keep going even when facing a setback . . . it came out of a desire to portray women as powerful and intelligent forces in the world” (n.p.) .

As regards the question of marriage, domesticity, motherhood and career Divakaruni’s women display an unconventionality of spirit that distinguishes them from their literary predecessors . Their priority lie not in reverting to traditional roles within patriarchal structures , but in the full realization of their true potential . While Sudha and Rakhi find complacency with their single parent status , Korobi and Tilo seek fulfillment in striking a balance between marriage and career . But the matrimonial alliance between Korobi and Rajat and Tilo and Raven unequivocally envisions the new revised order in its reversal of the traditional gender dynamics . The women marry on their own terms and ensure that the immediate environment is changed to their advantage. As in the case of Anju , she displays a matter-of-fact rational outlook in her dismissal of the past : “Whatever happened . . . I tell myself is like the dream I had last night . What does it matter if it was a good dream or a bad one ? Neither kind is going to help

me live my life today, is it ?” (362) . Skillfully harnessing the opportunities that America provides, she moves on in pursuance of her true vocation , firmly establishing Helen Cixous’ idea : “The future can no longer be determined by the past” (875) . Like Rakhi who finds her true identity in art , Anju remains focused on developing her creative sensibility as a writer . Both these women choose the path of art for emancipation and empowerment . Anju , Sudha and Rakhi have no qualms about their independent single status . It is a fairly wholesome choice that brings fulfillment in their lives . These women exhibit a somewhat radical attitude in the choices that they make . Going by the radical feminist statement offered by Dana Densmore that defines women’s liberation as synonymous with “spiritual freedom , intellectual freedom , freedom from invasions of privacy and the insults of degrading stereotypes . . .” (qtd. in Tandon , 45) , it can be unambiguously concluded that Divakaruni’s protagonists have achieved emancipation .

Divakaruni’s ideological stance comes to the fore through the portrayal of her protagonists . In an internet chat with Scott Rettberg she confesses , “ I’ve given up a lot of traditional notions about the place of women in the home , and what is not okay for them to do . I really do believe in women making their own choices , standing up for their own beliefs , fighting for them when they have to . And this has certainly influenced my writing” (n.p.) . Evidently she advocates changes but not through a complete rejection of one’s cultural roots and traditional values . It is obvious that she seeks to propagate Margaret Gibson’s theory of ‘Multilinear Acculturation’ for her immigrant heroines. It implies that immigrant groups selectively acquire linguistic and other cultural practices of the majority culture without rejecting their own ethnic identity and culture . (217) . Endorsing a similar theory of selective rejection , retaintion and adoption of values for women settled in India , she enables her protagonists to strike a balance between tradition and modernity . In an interview with *The Hindu* she

says , “ One must be careful with such rapid changes , though , and make an effort to preserve , at the same time , the positive traditions of Indian culture” (n.p.) . Neither Sudha , Korobi , Anju , Tilo nor Rakhi forsake their Indianess to adopt Western ideals . The women are able to assert their individuality. They are enabled to transcend their situation, whether it be the stifling patriarchal confines of a hierarchical society or the discriminatory practices of a progressive Western culture. They device their own strategies of survival appropriate to their situation. Enabling them to resolve the conflict between the old and the new the author envisions a new revised order that combines the best of both. Divakaruni’s women appropriately relate to Neeru Tandon’s definition of the New Woman :

“The emerging ‘new woman’ is contemplative about her predicament and chooses to protest or fight against the general, accepted norms and currents. What is new and different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. Their protest is not for equality only but for the right to be acknowledged as individuals –capable of intelligence and feeling. They do not look for freedom outside the house but within too . . . She is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society, and in exploring her true potential, along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs .” (126-127) .

The above study of the journey of the protagonists from a state of indecision to assertion, from obliteration to identification foregrounds the fact that the shifting ethos of modern women is a result of “ rapid transformation and intense churning taking place in the society due to various struggles for women’s autonomy and empowerment and new consciousness arising out of modern learning , knowledge and awareness” (Rathee , n.p.). Evidently Divakaruni’s protagonists have invalidated the myth of dependence by the affirmation of will .

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