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In conversation with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Neelu Jain

ABSTRACT: This is an interview transcript of an e-mail interview taken on 1st March 2019 with Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a widely known name in Indian as well as American setting whose prime focus is on emancipation of women thereby highlighting the power of an Indian woman. In pursuing this she takes various diasporic concerns of home, identity, culture, memory into consideration. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was in Jaipur, Rajasthan for the Jaipur Literature Festival in January 2019 for *The Forest of Enchantments* book launch during which I got the chance to meet my favourite author. It was indeed very kind and humble of Murthy sir (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's spouse) to give her email id so as to conduct the interview. In the following interview, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni speaks on the power of Indian woman taking into consideration her latest novel *The Forest of Enchantments*. She also talks about the elements that make a good story highlighting her idea of 'Home' and the role of memory for a diasporic writer.

KEYWORDS: Interview, females, home, memory, identity



In conversation with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A woman whose females have the knowledge of their inner strengths yet balance between tradition and modernity thereby emerging as 'New Woman'

About Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a first generation postmodern Indian writer in English whose female characters achieve association and opportunity and push ahead out of their emergency to achieve positive goals for the duration of regular day to day existence. Divakaruni speaks about the role of women, “Women in particular respond to my work because I’m writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships, I want people to relate my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to (be) prejudiced when they meet them in real life”.

Chitralkha Banerjee Divakaruni born on 29 July, 1956 in Calcutta, India is the daughter of R. K. Banerjee and Tatini Banerjee, who went through the initial nineteen years of her life in India. Going to a Convent school run by Irish nuns amid her adolescence, she earned her four year certification in English from Presidency College, University of Calcutta.

At the age of nineteen, she moved to the United States to proceed with her investigations, getting a Master’s qualification from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a PhD on Christopher Marlowe in 1985 from the University of California at Berkeley. When she came to United States in 1976, completely clad up in a saree, an Indian clothing she was strolling down the lanes of Chicago alongside her relatives, when she was called nigger by certain adolescents there. That was such a stun to her, she understood that individuals didn't have a clue to her identity. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that she didn't conversed with anybody about the scene, yet she was not ready to overlook it and it stayed and played in her psyche, urging her to compose. Thus, migration came as a changing background to her and composing was an apparatus to go end that quietness by making a character of her in country just as outsider land. .She was engaged into various types of employments to pay for her instruction, including babysitting, managing stock in an Indian boutique, cutting bread at a pastry shop and washing instruments at a science lab. For a long time, Divakaruni lived in the Bay Area and instructed at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills. She went to America as an alumni understudy of writing. Her thought was to educate, yet as she started living there, she turned out to be increasingly more mindful of the distinctions in culture. In this respect, she realized that she loved teaching but did not have a passion for academic writing and thus wanted to try writing something more direct. It was at that point that she needed to compose as method for investigating these distinctions. At first she began composing for herself. When she appreciated doing that, she joined an author's gathering in Berkeley College amid the mid-eighties. She was additionally composing ballads amid that time. She has composed a few books of verse, and her work has been incorporated into more than thirty collections.

In Dayton, Ohio, in 1979 she married Murthy Divakaruni, who was an engineer furthermore, a companion of her sibling. Since 1991, she has been author part and leader of ‘Maitri’, an association in the San Francisco territory that works for South-Asian women in difficult circumstances in an alien land. Her enthusiasm for the females developed when she understood that there was no standard cover for migrant women in trouble in America—a spot where individuals would comprehend their social needs and issues. Through her advising sessions here, female lives opened up to her noteworthy inconceivable emergencies. With reference to her association with Maitri, she tells the stirmag.com questioner: “My work with MAITRI has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. The lives

of many of the women I have met through this have touched me deeply.....it is their hidden story that I try to tell... It is their courage and humanity that I celebrate and honor". She also served on the board of 'Pratham', an organization that helps educate underprivileged children in India, for many years and is currently on their emeritus board. In 1997 she moved to Texas with her husband and two children, Anand and Abhay, where she teaches Creative writing at the University of Houston. She currently lives in Sunnyvale, California.

Divakaruni's books have been accustomed to film. Movie producers Gurinder Chadha and Paul Berges have adapted *The Mistress of Spices* into a movie starring Aishwarya Rai Bachhan and Mc Dermott. Suhasini Mani Ratnam adjusted *Sister of My Heart* as a TV sequential in Tamil (2001), for Sun TV in South India, under the title Anbulla Snegithiye.

Divakaruni has judged several prestigious awards, such as the National Book Award and the PEN Faulkner Award. She is, herself, the winner of a number of awards, including the American Book Award. Divakaruni's work has been included in the Best American Short Stories, The O'Henry Prize Stories, and two Pushcart Prize Anthologies. Her book of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995), won an American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award and the PEN Josephine Miles Award for fiction. *The Mistress of Spices* was on several Best Books lists, including the San Francisco Chronicle's 100 Best Books of the 20th Century, and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize.

Divakaruni's works rotate around the journey for self, giving various answers for different issues in diaspora, her answers are sure as in she finishes up giving the message of transnationalism and globalization. Divakaruni communicates the female power turning out with a view that women have the solidarity to cut their very own place in the country as well as in an outsider land. Other than this the theme of male driven characteristics, the loads of changing social character, development of self-hood and character are the subjects she handles gainfully. Her fiction raises essential issues related to sexual orientation in the brisk changing globalized world. Divakaruni's females in this setting select for new social character in diaspora. Right when there are issues identified with females what's increasingly, sexual direction, Divakaruni takes up womens' extremist position and draws in her females to grab the entryway open for opportunity, peculiarity and development of self-hood as a departure from male driven characteristics and doled out occupations of proliferation and going about as a sexual ware to their male partners.

Comparing to this impacted by the western culture Chitra's female characters put on the western dress and propensities, sustenance affinities, calling and guidance. They are progressively productive in bringing these movements in spite of the way that they respect their Indian inheritance, culture and history. They go progressively with budgetary and social chance and opportunity of thoughts. Anyway in the contention with ethnicity and culture of her country she settles on its security and calm simultaneousness.

By remaining to the points of Indian culture Divakaruni prescribes that the broke American culture needs to recognize and use old learning of various systems presently related with it through various Diasporas, to ponder itself as a prospering multicultural society. For this she utilizes different literary devices as magical realism, letter writing,

stream of consciousness technique, to give the perusers a chance to feel the aches of diaspora thereby associating with the characters of her works.

Excerpts from the email interview

Neelu: How are you viewed as ‘a writer who happens to be a woman’? Did you ever consider writing under a pseudonym?

Divakaruni: No I never wanted to write under a pseudonym. I take full responsibility for what I write. And since my writing is very woman centric, it is not a problem that I am a woman!

Neelu: How your female characters Tilo, Sudha, Korobi get the power and energy, when they do not have any structural power in the society? Which among them is your favorite?

Divakaruni: My female characters such as Tilo and Sudha Have some power because of their situation or their family. But their main power comes from within themselves – that is something I show in all my novels including my newest one *Forest of Enchantments*. Women have a deep well of strength within them and can draw upon that when really needed

Neelu: What are your views regarding ‘Home’? How do you feel when you make a journey to India your homeland and a return journey to Houston again? Does the memories haunt you?

Divakaruni: Home is a complicated concept for immigrants. I always feel like I am coming home when I visit India, but then when I return to Houston, I feel like I am home, too. One can have more than one home, I have realized. This is true of my immigrant characters as well. Memories haunt me and them – that’s the nature of memories!

Neelu: How do you relate culture and identity in your fiction?

Divakaruni: Culture and identity are difficult concepts. In each book they take a different shape. But often they come out in the way my characters think about their lives and their place in the world.

Neelu: What do you think makes a good story?

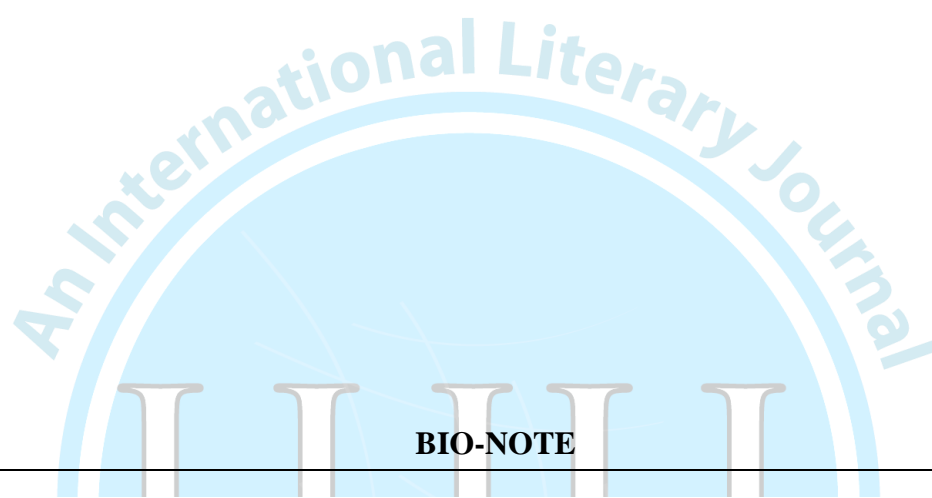
Divakaruni: A good story is made out of conflict and desire, and how characters behave when they are under great pressure.

Neelu: Is there an autobiographical element in any of the novels written so far? To which character you relate yourself?

Divakaruni: No, I try to stay away from autobiographical elements. They limit the story in ways that I find unhelpful. I do relate to all my characters and try to understand them deeply before I write them. Otherwise they would be wooden.

Neelu: What made you to choose writing *The Palace of Illusions* from Draupadi's point of view and *The Forest of Enchantments* from Sita's. Which one did you enjoyed writing and imagining? How the idea of retelling Indian epics in this manner came to you?

Divakaruni: To me, Draupadi and Sita are the most important characters in the two Epics. They are also the most misunderstood. They are also powerful instances of female strength Dash each one different and unique in her way. That is why I wanted them to be the narrators of their own tales. I hope their strength inspires my readers. Our Epics are very powerful and wonderful stories. I don't want them to get lost. That is why I retold the stories especially for young Indian women.



BIO-NOTE

Neelu Jain is a well-known academician in the Department of English and Humanities at Jaipur Engineering College & Research Center, Jaipur, with 7 years of experience. Presently she is working as an Assistant Professor in the Department with a strong inclination for research. She has done her BA, MA, and MPhil from MDS University, Ajmer. She did her MBA from IGNOU, New Delhi and is pursuing PhD in Diaspora Studies from the IIS University, Jaipur. She has written several research papers and has participated in a number of conferences with a focus on Diaspora Studies, Indian Writing in English.

Email: neelushallbe@gmail.com

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