

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*:

A Metamodern Fiction

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Abstract

Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee is an Indian English author. She has written many novels, poems and short stories. The novelist being a diaspora herself writes diasporic fiction, where she gives voice to the diasporic experience and she brilliantly weaves stories around female protagonists. The novel also is a perfect example of metamodernism. The paper explores the metamodern characteristics in the novel

Keywords: Metamodern, Integration, Postmodernism, Truth, Hope

With the advent of Twenty first century term metamodern gained significance. Postmodernism was a continuation of modernism but differed from it in many aspects. Metamodern is a revolt against postmodernism. Metamodernism oscillates between modernism and postmodernism. There is fear and hope at the same time. There is integration of modernism and irony of post modernism. Whereas postmodernism does not seek to find truth meta modern tries to seek reality or truth. In The novel The Vine of Desire by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, protagonists Sudha and Anju are also the byproducts of this society, oscillating between hope and fear, searching for the reality/truth. The Vine of Desire which is a sequel to Sister of my Heart begins with Sudha's arrival in America which not only gives her an opportunity to stand on her own feet but also allows her the opportunity to make decisions. Her arrival rejuvenates Anju also as both of them are cousins. Sisterhood feeling

emancipates both of them. Anju's life had become stagnant with the death of her unborn son. She is not able to move forward in life. As she thinks she would not be able to reconceive. It is Sudha who helps Anju to come out of her problems. Though Sudha's life is no less problematic, she has arrived in America with her small infant after getting divorce from her husband. Sudha has to transcend bigger barrier as she knows that Anju's husband is obsessed with her. But her desire for being self-dependent has brought her to America as she thinks that she would be able to give a secure future to her daughter.

Divakaruni highlights the concept of "desire" which is difficult to control. The novel highlights Anju's desire to help her cousin and Sudha's desire to be self-dependent.

As both Anju and Sudha are breaking their cocoons and evolving into 'new women' they unleash their respective desires, which they were holding back in the first novel.

The novel *The Vine of Desire* begins with a Prologue which begins: "In the beginning was pain"(prologue). It describes the painful incident of Anju's abortion striking the chords between the two novels. Mothers never want to part with their children. On one hand is Sudha, who threw her marriage to winds because of her child, on the other hand is Anju who is separated from her child due to her desire of bringing Sudha to America. She feels that even the child did not want to leave her. She remembers her painful moments in hospital:

"[...]Keep me with you. She was crying too. Don't you think I want to? More than anything else in the world? Don't you know I'd give up everything in my life, right now, if I could, for that?..." (TVOD 4)

The novel begins with Sudha coming to America with her daughter Dayita: "The day Sudha stepped off the plane from India into Anju's arms, leaving a ruined marriage behind, their lives changed forever..." (TVOD 9). From now onwards, their lives will be coiled and it also entrap other people

Even after discovering Sunil's secret passion for Sudha, Anju feels excited that finally Sudha has come to America. She feels that both of them will support each other and would rise to the occasion.

She could not love her unfaithful husband, Sunil, as she loves her cousin Sudha. She never found a confidante in him as she even found in her unborn son, Prem. She feels that her husband had cheated on her.

Despite having hints of her husband's infidelity, Anju does not break relationship with her husband as she is still hopeful of her future with her husband.

On the other hand Anju believes that by leaving Ramesh, Sudha has shown courage to stand against the norms of patriarchal society. But Sudha thinks that by leaving all things she has relegated her status in the eyes of people of her society where a divorcee is looked down upon.

Sudha too believes that it is not easy to come out of one's past. She is not able to see her existence outside marriage. Sudha says, "Once in India I scrubbed the color of marriage from my forehead, believing I was rid of it. But it comes back. Some morning, my pillow seems faintly powdered with red ..." (TVOD 45).

Sudha helps Anju to move forward in life. Anju, who earlier had discontinued her studies continues it after Sudha's encouragement. In her class she meets women of immigrant communities. They discuss the culture of their countries where women sacrifice their life for the sake of their husbands. Anju tells Sudha that her female classmates give an altogether different interpretation to the "Mrs" degree:

...Sita, Savitri, Damyanti. It's like they all trained at the same academy, got the same M.R.S. degree."

"M. R. S.?"

"You know, short for martyrs.(TVOD160)

Sudha thinks that she has given up “mrs” degree, as her identity of married woman and mrs is lost. She does not want to be a part of this self-sacrificing school anymore.

Sudha wants to live according to the American ideas- "live for Yourself". The society in which she was born and brought up is totally conservative, where women are supposed to live for their families. When Sudha gets this opportunity, she wants to make use of it. She does not want to be a victim or a person to be pitied upon. By going to the party with Anju and Sunil, Sudha starts exploring her freedom. She is well aware of the fact, that her staying in Sunil’s house will create tension between the couple. She does not bother about their relationship as she is enjoying her freedom. She even goes to a party with Anju and Sunil.

Anju and Sudha have started questioning the patriarchal society which always tries to curb the freedom of woman. her and does not want anyone else to support Sudha. When Sudha goes for a date with Lalit after she comes back home, she is shocked to see that Dayita(her daughter) does not listen to her. She wants to take Dayita for the walk but the child shows her reluctance. She thinks that because of Dayita she left her secured life, she left her secured surrounding. If the child were not there she would have enjoyed her life fully. The dilemma of Sudha’s mind is the dilemma of a metamodern woman, oscillating between hope and irony. She is well aware of the fact that as a mother, she has a duty towards her daughter but at the same time she is compelled to think that if her daughter were not there she would have enjoyed freedom fully.

Chitra Divakaruni has not only shown Sudha’s dilemma related to her daughter but she has also shown Sudha’s dilemma related to Sunil. She is split in two parts, one part of her yearns for Sunil (American notion of living for own) and the other part of her wants to run away from the apartment as by loving her sister’s husband.

Once when Anju had gone to attend her history classes and Sunil returns early from his office, despite knowing the consequences of crossing their limits, both Sudha and Sunil

fall an easy prey to their desires. After the love making scene, Sudha is seen as a person torn into pieces. She is a traveller who does not know the path, on which she should tread upon. One part of her wants to be desired and the other part of her wants her to be independent. Sudha realizes her mistake, and she turns immediately down the offer of marriage which had been made by Sunil. She runs away from Anju and Sunil's house.

From here the second section of the novel begins which has the title "Remembrance and Forgetting" where both sisters are separated and would try to make a real search Anju comes to know about the infidelity of her husband. Anju does not remain silent now but she kicks Sunil with her "Fists, knees, words" (TVOD231). Being a traditional wife, Anju was not able to break the shackles of values, she had learnt from childhood. She had earlier thought of leaving Sunil but when finally the moment arrives, it was not easy for her, as everything in her life was connected to Sunil and Sudha.

Anju now decides to leave the apartment and stays with one of her friends from the Writers Group. In all her previous decisions, she had to take the permission of her husband but now for the first time she takes a major decision of her life keeping all her relations at bay.

Sudha after leaving Anju's flat, takes the job of a caretaker to an old man(Mr Sen). The old man is difficult to handle. Not only has she started earning money on her own i.e. she has become monetarily independent, but she also sees her life in a new light and realizes that she had no say in the things that happened to her as a person. She ponders over the injustices done to her due to others who governed her life:

So many violence has been caused to me. My mother pounding my life into the shape of her desires. My mother-in-law wanting to cut from it whatever she considered unseemly. My husband backing away, with his narrow, apologetic shoulders. Sunil plunging into the center of my body, corrosive with need.Each

time, I made myself pliant. I gave a bearable name to what they did. Duty. Family honor (TVOD243).

Anju is determined to go on with the legal procedure of divorce. She tells Sudha that she has accepted the reality now. In the response to Sunil's letter in which he writes that half of his pay- cheque would be deposited in Anju's account, she writes that she does not want his money and she has also removed her name from their joint bank account.

Now, she is ready to face reality as she has stopped writing to her dead father. She has done away with the memories of the dead. The title of the second book of the novel is "Remembrance and Forgetting", in which Anju has decided that she would stop remembering sad events of her life and will face the reality bravely. In spite of writing honey-coated words to her mother about their well being in America, she makes her aware of the hard reality of her separation from Sunil, Sunil, Sunil's secret passion for Sudha and possibility of Sudha's staying with Sunil in Houston. She accepts her broken marriage. Like a coward, she had earlier contemplated about suicide but now she has courage to live alone.

I want to show them that I can survive in spite of what they've done to me.

(TVOD 270)

This is a movement on the path of reality, where she does not want to hide her feelings from anyone. When she has finally accepted that Sunil does not love her anymore, she does not have anyone in America, on whom she can depend upon, except herself.

Anju writes an essay for her assignment (as an exercise of her history class) where she is supposed to write a mythical story. She chooses to write the story of Draupadi and describes a scene where she writes about Draupadi, who is planting a sapling of "asha-lata" in the garden, the mythical desire vine which gives one, what he/she desires. She writes that it is "not that the wronged one who emerges victorious revenge is like a spiced mango chutney: delicious at first, it leaves your tongue stinging" (TVOD 345). Anju does not want to take

revenge like Draupadi. She wants that one should always think of alternatives of revenge and in her case she wants to “forgive” both Sunil and Sudha.

When Sudha reveals to Lalit about her plans of going back to India, Lalit advises her to stay back in America. She confidently says that she is determined to go, as she has realized by now that she cannot adapt herself in a place like America and besides this she does not have any professional skills. She is determined to leave America. She also does not want to repeat her mistakes which she had made earlier by getting dependent upon others. Sudha says:

I always allowed myself to be dependent on someone else's goodwill. I was the one who was always taking, the one who was taken care of.
(*TVOD* 331)

In the letter Sudha writes to Pishi, disclosing her about her future plans and returning back to India. She writes that for the first time she will have her own account and that makes her feel like a grown-up person. On Sudha's request, when Anju comes to meet her, Sudha wants to clarify everything to Anju but Anju has also detached herself from past and is trying to move ahead.

Finally, Sudha tells Anju that she has decided to leave for India as a care-taker of an old man for which she would be paid in foreign currency by Trideep (old man's son) and this would be a sufficient amount for her to rear her daughter independently. She has also decided that she would not be rearing her daughter in the manner in which she was reared. She wants her daughter to become a self- dependent person who has an identity of her own. Anju tells her that she has decided to pursue her career in creative writing.

The epilogue of the novel brings the novel to a beautiful closing. Anju is seen flying a hang glider which symbolizes flight of freedom. She has gained wings of confidence which help her in this flight.

She fails at her first two at hang gliders attempts but finally succeeds in the third. The wind is cold and un-cooperative and the glider is bulky. Both Sudha and the instructor are watching her flight. Both have faith in her. Finally she is able to lift herself up against gravity. When she is in the sky she does not bother about the instructions given to her by her instructor. She is completely relying on herself. She thinks: “It would be a fine end, to keep going like this, into the light” (*TVOD* 370).

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