

The Struggle for Social Justice in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the theme of social justice in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction, drawing on quotes from her novels. Divakaruni's works often center around characters who grapple with societal norms, gender injustice, cultural displacement, and identity struggles. Through these narratives, the author sheds light on the multifaceted nature of social justice issues and calls for a more equitable and inclusive world.

Keywords: *Societal norms, Gender Injustice, Cultural displacement, Identity struggles*

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a renowned Indian-American author, is celebrated for her poignant storytelling that delves into themes of social justice, identity, and cultural displacement. Her novels provide a rich and varied perspective on the challenges faced by individuals and communities in their pursuit of justice, dignity, and equality. This article examines the recurring motif of social justice in Divakaruni's fiction, focusing on the struggles and aspirations of her characters. Popular South Asian American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has written a lot of books. The themes of immigration, sex, citizenship, and a sense of community permeate her writings, which also mix storytelling and social justice. Divakaruni discusses whether or not she would have become a writer if she hadn't relocated to the United States in a blog post on her author website. I can't provide you a satisfactory response to that query. To be sure, "I do know that I couldn't have written the same kinds of stories, hybrids born out of the blending of the Indian and American cultures"(<https://www.chitradivakaruni.com/blog/2013/7/7/america>). Poet, author, activist, and professor Divakaruni was born on July 29, 1956, in Kolkata. She earned a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Calcutta before enrolling in the Master of Arts program at Wright State University in Ohio, USA. In 1985, she earned her doctorate from Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. She is currently the McDavid Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston in Texas, after having taught at a number of other prestigious universities in the United States. She is a social activist, having established the San Francisco-based Maitri to aid female survivors of intimate partner violence. She is also involved with Daya, a similar organization in Houston. She has been honored with the American Book prize (1996), the PEN Josephine Miles prize (1995), and a spot on the Orange Prize (1997) shortlist for her writing.



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Many of Divakaruni's writings center on the difficulties faced by women in the immigrant experience because of the author's own personal experiences as an immigrant. She also represents independent women who forge their own paths in life despite facing challenges. Recently, she's focused in retelling Indian myths and history from a female perspective. The Mahabharata is retold in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) from Draupadi's point of view, and the Ramayana is told in *The Forest of Enchantment* (2019) from Sita's.

The Plight of the Immigrant:

Chitra Divakaruni, like many upper- and middle-caste Indians who settled in the United States, came to the country to pursue graduate studies. The Immigration and Nationality Act, passed in 1965, opened the door for Indian students and professionals to pursue higher education and professional possibilities in the United States. Even though many persons in the technological and scientific disciplines benefited from the legislative reforms, Divakaruni and others who studied the humanities were not left out. Her debut book, *Black Candle* (1991), was a collection of poems that was lauded for its use of South Asian imagery and themes. For instance, in "The Garba," which takes place during Navaratri, the poet alludes to both the subject's longing for home and its removal from its own land by writing, "Light glances/off the smooth wood floor of the gym/festooned with mango leaves/flown in from Florida" (43). The works of other artists and filmmakers served as inspiration for some of the poems. Such works as "The Rat Trap" and "Two Women outside a Circus, Pushkar" were influenced by the works of photographers Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Raghubir Singh, respectively. The last sequence of poems in *Leaving Yuba City* (1997), Divakaruni's second collection, is particularly powerful since it tells the story of the first Sikhs to settle in the Imperial Valley of California. The heartbreak of the immigrant males who were either unmarried or had to leave their wives behind is captured poignantly in her poetry. She describes the early immigrants' daughters' plight to break free from oppressive households, the young men whose interracial marriages to Mexican women altered their daily lives, and the women who arrived years later and found their husbands had changed. The less well-known history of South Asians in the Pacific Coast is the backdrop for the lyrical storytelling in these poems.

First published in 1995, *Arranged Marriage* was Divakaruni's collection of short stories with a female protagonist that tackled pressing issues like domestic violence, immigrant isolation, and the shame associated with divorce. The stories in this book by Divakaruni are noteworthy because they bring attention to the problem of violence among immigrant families, which is compounded by the difficulties of migrating. Her novels from the 1990s tackled under-explored themes for South Asian American authors. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Divakaruni's first major novel, sees her move from the realistic style of her early short tales to a fusion of realism and fable. Tilo, the protagonist, with supernatural healing abilities and travels to San Francisco, where she opens a spice shop and listens to her customers' stories of hardship while offering them spices that bring them comfort. When she decides to commit to Raven, a Native American man, she goes against the unwritten rules that govern the relationships of spice mistresses. Like her clients, she must decide whether to follow the mistress's code or act on her own. The story is thus a jubilation over Tilo's independence. The novel has been criticized by academics like Inderpal Grewal for "producing ethnic identity through exotic difference" (Grewal 76) and "embracing an American vision of multicultural solidarity." Nonetheless, as I have argued elsewhere, the setting of a spice shop demonstrates Divakaruni's awareness of that violent history and traces its continuity in the present day as an exotic grocery store in the Bay area, where, ironically, the customers are unaware of the history of the spice trade but are nevertheless experiencing racism, alienation, and prejudice that have their roots in that colonial trade (Singh et al., 7).

When Divakaruni began recording the hardships faced by South Asian immigrants in the United States under the new racialized regime marked by heightened Islamophobia, a major shift occurs in her portrayal of the immigrant experience. Divakaruni, an immigrant from India, wrote an essay about her decision to fly the American flag in her home after 9/11 (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-oct-21-op-59757-story.html>) and how much she valued the American values of liberty, equality, and justice. Like in *The Mistress of Spices*, she employs magical realism in her 2004 novel, *Queen of Dreams*. Her main character, Rakhi, is an immigrant's daughter from India who has trouble connecting with her mother, who can share in the dreams of others but cannot control her own. Rakhi discovers a wealth of information about her ancestry by reading her mother's dream journals after her passing. Islamophobia in the United States saw a sharp uptick after 9/11 shattered people's

feeling of safety and invulnerability. Many Sikhs and other South Asian immigrants were the targets of vicious attacks because they were mistaken for Taliban supporters. Many immigrants' hopes for the "American Dream" were dashed by the recent spike in violence. Rakhi's granddaughter, who inherited her grandma's dream-interpreting abilities, has a hard time sleeping since she dreams about fires. While visiting a friend who is mistaken for a Muslim, Rakhi and her friend Belle see violence. Similar to Tilo's spice shop, their restaurant serves as a gathering place for people of color who have recently arrived in the country.

Korobi, the protagonist of Divakaruni's 2013 novel *Oleander Girl*, travels from Calcutta to New York City in search of her missing father. Divakaruni uses this opportunity to further examine the effects of 9/11 on Indian immigrants. Korobi sets out to find her father using the money and connections her family has amassed over the years. From the Big Apple to the Golden State, she travels on her quest. Korobi has a shallow awareness of race and prejudice due to her privileged upbringing in an affluent Calcutta family and her impending marriage into an even more prosperous family. She faced racism in India due to the color of her skin, and now she's hearing horror stories from fellow Indians about life after 9/11 in the United States. While staying with the Mitras in New York, she sees how prejudice has impacted their relationship and led to violence at home. The Mitras run an art gallery for Korobi's future in-laws, the Boses, and the Boses' financial security is at risk as a result of the attacks on the Mitras' business. When she finally sets out on her journey to meet him, she is taken aback to discover that her father is Black. The realization that she is half-Black forces her to reevaluate her childhood assumptions about her identity and the ways in which she was treated because of her skin tone. When she finally meets him, she learns details of her parents' courtship but very little about his life as a Black man in the United States. A combination of anti-Black racism, casteism, and colorism in India contributed to her grandparents' rejection of her father and the subsequent concealment of her birth. The novel challenges the stereotype of Indian Americans as successful, middle-class professionals. Divakaruni dispels the illusion of the ideal minority by telling the narrative of the Mitras and of Vic, an Indian American from the working class. Korobi appears to abandon her African-American roots and fully embrace her Indian identity upon her return to India and her marriage to Rajat Bose. While Divakaruni makes a connection between American racism and anti-Black sentiments in India, the story ends with an emphasis on Korobi's reacclimatization to her privileged lifestyle.

Modifying Legends and Past Events

Divakaruni's literature has recently changed its focus to Indian mythology and history. She is a feminist author who uses fiction to recover silenced or underrepresented women's voices by rewriting classic stories from their female protagonists' points of view. Her novel *The Palace of Illusions* (published in 2008) is a retelling of the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* from Paanchali's (Draupadi) point of view. Paanchali's life from birth to marriage to five brothers to helping them find their lost kingdom to her close friendship with Krishna are all detailed. Divakaruni retells *The Ramayana* in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) from Sita's point of view. Sita is given center stage, and the novel's focus shifts to other female characters including Surpanakha (Ravana's sister), Mandodari (Ravana's wife), and Sunaina (Janaka's wife) in an effort to reframe the story from a feminist perspective. Divakaruni's version of the Hindu epic is one of "many Ramayanas,"⁽⁹⁾ as Paula Richman puts it, that keep the story of the epic alive. Sita is portrayed by Divakaruni as a healer, an eco-feminist, and a fierce archer. Divakaruni draws not just from Valmiki's *Ramayana* but also from Krittibas's *Ramayana*, Kamban's *Ramayana*, Adbhuta's *Ramayana*, and Jaina's *Ramayana*, and she maintains a focus not only on Rama's greatness but also on the role of the ladies in his life. The kind Kaikeyi and the heartbroken Sumitra, Lakshmana's wife, are both portrayed in this story. Divakaruni's version of events also includes the intriguing idea that Sita is actually the incestuous offspring of Ravana and Mandodari, and that her parents forsake her because of the impending death of her father. When Sita returns to Ayodhya as queen, Divakaruni imagines her reviving a neglected household after many years. She delves deeply into royal intrigues, adding a human element to what is otherwise taken as a divine story.

Among South Asian diasporic writers, Chitra Divakaruni stands out as a major figure. From poetry and essays to realist short fiction, magical realism, and historical fiction, she dabbles in them all in her writing. Along with Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, she is a prominent feminist author who has brought to light the challenges faced by Indian middle-class women due to immigration, social isolation, familial strife, and racism. Her optimistic perspective on the difficulties of diasporic life is reflected in the stories of women who persevere through adversity and achieve independence. Divakaruni has made a major impact on the recognition and acceptance of South Asian American voices in the field of American ethnic literature.

The Palace Of Illusions: Unveiling Gender Injustice

In "The Palace of Illusions," Divakaruni retells the Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, a central character who has long been a symbol of gender injustice. Draupadi's narrative sheds light on the oppressive roles women often find themselves in:

"Every woman has a story. So does every man. But for women, they say, the story must always be one of suffering."

Through Draupadi's character, Divakaruni highlights the need for gender equality and the empowerment of women. "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a retelling of the Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, a central character who has long been a symbol of gender injustice in the epic. Through Draupadi's narrative, Divakaruni unveils the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society and highlights the need for gender equality.

One of the main themes of the novel is the subjugation of women and their fight for justice and autonomy. Draupadi is portrayed as a strong and intelligent character who questions societal norms and refuses to be defined by the expectations placed on her. Despite being mistreated and humiliated, she remains resilient and determined to seek justice for herself and other women.

Draupadi's journey in the novel reflects the broader struggle for social justice, as she challenges the power dynamics and gender roles prevalent in her society. Her character serves as a powerful voice for women's rights and empowerment, and Divakaruni uses her narrative to highlight the need for a reevaluation of traditional norms and a commitment to gender equality.

Through "The Palace of Illusions," Divakaruni calls attention to the ongoing struggle for social justice and gender equality. The novel serves as a reminder of the importance of challenging oppressive systems and advocating for the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their gender.

Sister of My Heart: Challenging Family and Social Norms

"Sister of My Heart" explores the intricacies of family and societal expectations. The protagonist, Sudha, reflects on the weight of societal obligations:

"Sometimes I think the entire system of family and society is designed to get the better of a woman, to put her in her place, to keep her from getting too big for her britches."

Divakaruni's portrayal of the struggle against familial and societal constraints emphasizes the importance of social justice and reevaluation of traditional norms.

"Sister of My Heart" is a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that tells the story of two cousins, Anju and Sudha, who are as close as sisters and share a deep bond despite their different backgrounds and family circumstances. The novel is set in India and the United States and explores themes of family, love, and identity, as well as the ways in which the characters struggle against societal expectations and cultural norms.

One of the central themes of the novel is the struggle for social justice and the ways in which the characters challenge and resist the oppressive social and cultural norms that shape their lives. Both Anju and Sudha come from traditional Indian families that have certain expectations for women, and throughout the novel, they grapple with the restrictions and limitations that these expectations place on them.

For example, Anju is raised in a more liberal and progressive family that encourages her to pursue her education and career ambitions, while Sudha comes from a more conservative and

traditional family that expects her to marry and fulfill her duties as a wife and mother. Both characters are faced with difficult choices and must navigate the complex web of familial and societal expectations in order to assert their own agency and independence. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle against the expectations and limitations placed on them by their families and society. Anju rebels against her family's expectations by pursuing a career in art, while Sudha challenges her family's conservative views on marriage and gender roles by choosing to marry for love rather than for social or economic reasons. The novel also explores issues of social justice and inequality, particularly with regard to gender and class. Both Anju and Sudha are acutely aware of the ways in which their gender and social status limit their opportunities and choices, and they each grapple with the challenges of navigating a society that often values them based on their gender and family background rather than their individual talents and abilities.

In conclusion, "Sister of My Heart" is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that explores the ways in which individuals struggle against societal expectations and cultural norms in order to assert their own agency and independence. Through the experiences and choices of its central characters, the novel challenges readers to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about family, love, and identity, and to consider the ways in which they can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

The Vine of Desire: Cultural Identity and Displacement

In "The Vine of Desire," Divakaruni delves into the challenges faced by immigrants as they navigate issues of identity and belonging. Anju, the main character, grapples with the internal conflict of being caught between two worlds:

"Who am I? Where is my place in this world? I don't belong here, and I don't belong there."

This quote underscores the struggle for cultural recognition and inclusion, highlighting the need for a just society that embraces diversity.

"The Vine of Desire" is a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that explores themes of cultural identity, displacement, and the struggles for social justice faced by its characters. The novel follows the lives of two Indian sisters, Anju and Sudha, who move to the United States to pursue their dreams and aspirations. However, as they navigate their new lives in a foreign country, they encounter numerous challenges and obstacles related to their cultural identity and the social injustices faced by immigrants.

One of the central themes of the novel is the struggle for cultural identity and the ways in which the characters grapple with the complexities of navigating two different worlds. Anju and Sudha are both torn between their Indian heritage and their desire to assimilate into American society. They struggle with the expectations and norms of their traditional Indian families, while also trying to assert their own agency and independence in a new and unfamiliar cultural landscape. The novel also explores the theme of displacement and the ways in which the characters are affected by their status as immigrants. Anju and Sudha both face numerous challenges and obstacles as they try to establish themselves in a new country, including language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and discrimination. They are often treated as outsiders and are forced to confront the social injustices and inequalities that are prevalent in their adopted country. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle against the social injustices and inequalities that they face as immigrants and as women. They are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society, and they must navigate the complexities of being both insiders and outsiders in their new cultural environment. They also grapple with issues of gender and sexuality, and the ways in which their identities are shaped and constrained by societal expectations and norms.

In conclusion, "The Vine of Desire" is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that explores the challenges and struggles faced by immigrants as they navigate their new lives in a foreign country. Through the experiences and choices of its central characters, the novel challenges readers to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about cultural identity, displacement, and social justice, and to consider the ways in which they can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

Queen Of Dreams: Socio-Political Turmoil

"Queen of Dreams" weaves a narrative that reflects the socio-political issues and upheaval that impact individuals. The character Rakhi contemplates the interdependence of personal lives with the broader social and political landscape:

"Every change in the world changes the world around me. And I, in turn, must change with it."

This quote emphasizes the importance of addressing social injustice at all levels and the interconnectedness of personal and societal well-being.

"Queen of Dreams" is a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that explores themes of identity, family, and socio-political turmoil. The novel follows the lives of Rakhi, an artist and single mother, and her mother, who has the ability to interpret dreams. The novel is set in the United States and also delves into the lives of Indian immigrants and their experiences in a foreign land. One of the central themes of the novel is the socio-political turmoil faced by the characters, both in their personal lives and in the larger context of the world around them. The novel explores issues of immigration, cultural identity, and the challenges faced by individuals who are caught between two worlds. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle with social injustices and the ways in which their identities and lives are shaped by the socio-political climate. Rakhi's mother, for example, grapples with the expectations and norms of her traditional Indian family, while also trying to assert her own agency and independence. Rakhi herself faces challenges as a single mother and an artist, and must navigate the complexities of raising a child on her own and pursuing her creative ambitions.

The novel also explores the ways in which the characters are affected by the larger socio-political events happening around them. For example, the novel touches on issues of racism, discrimination, and the ways in which immigrants are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society. The characters must confront these social injustices and inequalities, and must navigate the complexities of being both insiders and outsiders in their adopted country.

In conclusion, "Queen of Dreams" is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that explores the challenges and struggles faced by individuals as they navigate their personal lives and the larger socio-political climate. Through the experiences and choices of its central characters, the novel challenges readers to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about identity, family, and social justice, and to consider the ways in which they can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

Oleander Girl: Identity And Adoption

"Oleander Girl" explores themes of identity, adoption, and the quest for one's roots. The protagonist, Korobi, embarks on a journey of self-discovery:

"I had a life that was not mine. A name that was not mine. I had to find my own, even if it meant going far, far away."

This quote represents the struggle for justice in the context of adoption and identity, underscoring the significance of individuals having access to their true histories and origins.

"Oleander Girl" is a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that explores themes of identity, adoption, and the struggles for social justice faced by its characters. The novel follows the life of Korobi, a young woman who discovers that she was adopted after the death of her parents. This revelation sends her on a journey of self-discovery as she searches for her biological parents and grapples with questions of identity and belonging.

One of the central themes of the novel is the struggle for identity and the ways in which the characters navigate the complexities of their own lives and the expectations placed on them by society. Korobi, in particular, must confront her own beliefs and assumptions about her family, her heritage, and her place in the world. She also grapples with issues of adoption and the ways in which her status as an adopted child shapes her relationships with her family and her understanding of herself. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle against social injustices and the ways in which their identities are shaped and constrained by societal expectations and norms. For example, Korobi faces challenges as a woman in a traditional Indian family, and must navigate the complexities of being both a daughter and a wife in a

society that often values women based on their roles in the family rather than their individual talents and abilities.

The novel also explores issues of social justice and inequality, particularly with regard to adoption and the ways in which adopted children are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society. Korobi must confront the social injustices and inequalities that are prevalent in her world, and must navigate the complexities of being both an insider and an outsider in her own family and community.

In conclusion, "Oleander Girl" is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that explores the challenges and struggles faced by individuals as they navigate their own identities and the larger socio-political climate. Through the experiences and choices of its central characters, the novel challenges readers to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about identity, adoption, and social justice, and to consider the ways in which they can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

Arranged Marriage

In her novel "Arranged Marriage," Divakaruni explores the lives of Indian women who have immigrated to the United States and the challenges they face as they navigate between two cultures. The stories in the collection address issues such as domestic violence, arranged marriages, and the pressures placed on women to conform to traditional gender roles. One of the central themes of the collection is the struggle against social injustices and the ways in which the characters navigate the expectations and limitations placed on them by their families and society. The stories explore the complexities of arranged marriages, and the ways in which the characters grapple with the challenges of navigating their own lives within the confines of cultural and familial expectations.

Throughout the collection, the characters struggle against the social injustices and inequalities that they face as women in a patriarchal society. They are often marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes, and must navigate the complexities of being both insiders and outsiders in their own families and communities. They also grapple with issues of gender and sexuality, and the ways in which their identities are shaped and constrained by societal expectations and norms. The stories also explore issues of social justice and inequality, particularly with regard to gender and cultural identity. The characters must confront the social injustices and inequalities that are prevalent in their world, and must navigate the complexities of being both insiders and outsiders in their adopted country. They also grapple with issues of cultural assimilation and the ways in which their cultural identity is shaped and influenced by their experiences in a foreign land.

In conclusion, "Arranged Marriage" is a powerful and thought-provoking collection of short stories that explores the challenges and struggles faced by individuals as they navigate the complexities of arranged marriages and cultural expectations. Through the experiences and choices of its central characters, the collection challenges readers to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about identity, marriage, and social justice, and to consider the ways in which they can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

The Mistress of Spices

Divakaruni's novel "The Mistress of Spices" also tackles issues of social justice, telling the story of an Indian immigrant who becomes a magical spice mistress with the power to help others. Through this character, Divakaruni explores themes of identity, belonging, and the challenges faced by immigrants in a new country.

One of the central themes of the novel is the struggle against social injustices and the ways in which the characters navigate the expectations and limitations placed on them by their families and society. Tilo, in particular, must confront her own beliefs and assumptions about her role as a spice mistress, and must grapple with the challenges of navigating her own life within the confines of cultural and magical expectations. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle against the social injustices and inequalities that they face as immigrants and as members of a marginalized community. They are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society, and must navigate the complexities of being both insiders and outsiders in their adopted country. They also grapple with issues of cultural assimilation and the ways

in which their cultural identity is shaped and influenced by their experiences in a foreign land. The novel also explores issues of social justice and inequality, particularly with regard to race, gender, and cultural identity. The characters must confront the social injustices and inequalities that are prevalent in their world, and must navigate the complexities of being both insiders and outsiders in their own community. They also grapple with issues of gender and sexuality, and the ways in which their identities are shaped and constrained by societal expectations and norms.

In conclusion, "The Mistress of Spices" is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that explores the challenges and struggles faced by individuals as they navigate the complexities of cultural expectations and social justice. Through the experiences and choices of its central characters, the novel challenges readers to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about identity, culture, and social justice, and to consider the ways in which they can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels are a testament to the ongoing struggle for social justice, highlighting the experiences of individuals who navigate the complexities of societal norms, gender roles, cultural identity, and socio-political dynamics. The quotes from her novels serve as poignant reminders of the myriad challenges faced in the pursuit of justice and equality. Through her storytelling, Divakaruni calls for a reevaluation of societal norms, recognition of cultural diversity, and a commitment to creating a just and equitable world. Her work inspires readers to engage with the struggle for social justice in its many forms.

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