

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

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The allure of newness. It tugs at me like time tugs at the snake's skin, persuading him to shrug it off. But what if, shrugging off my old life, I find I am not a snake but an onion instead? Peel after peel after peel, and then: nothing

- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

In the last few decades, one has witnessed an engrossingly intricate expansion/unfolding/progression in the field of diaspora studies. The term 'diaspora' has gained currency in the field of academic literature as well as public discourses. From media, social workers, economists, government officials, environmentalists to academicians and research scholars the "the diaspora" continues to be an engaging and enthralling subject that resonates with them all and has become a popular area to focus on. Countless studies and researches have attempted to explicate and correctly understand the term diaspora.

### **Diasporic Theory**

The concept of diaspora historically traces back to the original "dispersion" of the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. From that time onwards, the term has been used and interpreted variedly across the globe in different socio-geo-political

scenarios. Originating from the Greek word *despair* which means “*I scatter*”, some scholars consider and describe Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersions to be the “classical diasporas”. However, in the recent years the term has gained currency in the backdrop of increasing globalization and mobilization and has acquired contemporary epistemological resonances. Now it has come to be used like an umbrella term that encapsulates a varied range and form of experiences and disciplines. However, in its standard connotation, it is still used to represent mass movements, displacements, migration, and geographical heterogeneities especially of immigrants and political refugees.

In this chapter an attempt will be made to shed light on the various types and categorizations of diaspora and to trace the evolution of the term from its inception. Another aspect would be to delve into the contemporary Indian diasporic writing and to explore the emergence of diasporic women writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as she is the author whose fictional narratives I seek to investigate.

The definition of diaspora in the Oxford English Dictionary is “dispersion, verb - to sow, to scatter. The dispersion, i.e. (among the Hellenistic Jews) of the whole body of Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles after the Captivity (John vii. 35); (among the early Jewish Christians) the body of Jewish Christians outside of Palestine”. The Cambridge Dictionary defines diaspora as “a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries, or the act of spreading in this way ”

As far the technical dictionary meaning of the word is concerned, one notices the emphasis on the scattering or dispersing aspect, but the very act of scattering implies an origin from which the moving away takes place, a root from where the uprootedness is starting, a centre from where one is travelling in different directions to. So, this sense of contrasting duality at multiple levels can begin to be deciphered from the outset itself. On the one hand there is the feeling of excitement, the exhilarating anticipation that engulfs the migrants before embarking on the journey to seek newer pastures and touch potentially better horizons and on the other hand there is the feeling of uprooting oneself from one's safe and secure homeland, to leave the known and familiar for the unaccustomed unknown. The thrill of daring to travel to uncharted territories is as strong as the ties that bind the migrant community to one's home country. Thus, when they land in the host country or the adopted land, it is with an intricate bag of mixed emotions. They are all geared up to absorb and learn and 'fit into' the new scenario; and simultaneously they find themselves steadfastly holding on to the invisible but unbreakable bonds they share with the home country. So, the assimilative energies of these scattered communities to establish themselves in the chosen land are simultaneously dissipated by their nostalgic remembering of the departed land. In trying to straddle both realms simultaneously, they find themselves posited at a highly precarious juncture. In Chitra Banerjee's novel *VD*, when Anju is asked by her classmate to join them for a movie, she is reluctant to do so. As she introspects,

“Movies about Indians, in her experience, are bad news. They force her into elaborate explanations and exhausting denials—often to people she barely knows. *No, we don’t eat monkey brains. Or bugs either. Yes, we do worship Goddess Kali, but, no, not usually by sacrificing beautiful virgins.* Even movies made by Indian directors, gorgeously artistic, terrifically poignant, and atmospherically accurate, grow problematic in the contextless movie halls of America. *Yes, we do have street children. Yes, they really live hard lives. Yes, the police are brutal. Yes, famine happens, and then people starve. Yes, widows are often repressed. Wives also. But there’s a lot more to India than what you’re seeing here*”. [ Divakaruni 214]

Indeed, it is this very ‘contextless’ scenario that acts as the crucible from where arise most of the impending traumatic misgivings befalling the diasporic community. Anju’s complete failure in giving her classmates a slice of the real authentic Indian life is a sad but true reflection of the real-world challenge faced by most of the migrant community. Because we cannot pick and choose and recreate scenes from actual reality in a particular country and try to superimpose that image on to an unfamiliar strange new set up. All our feeble attempts to do so collapse in the face of the daunting, harsh, actual, ‘new’ reality. Of course, somewhere along the way, consciously or unconsciously, the migrant community themselves start to let go of their native traditional values and start picking up traits and characteristics of their new adopted culture without even realizing it at times. As Anju find herself questioning her loyalties and allegiances to

her own culture one day, “[...] how it is when you love parts of your heritage so much that it tingles in your fingertips like pins and needles. You’re ready to kill anyone who criticizes it. And then there are days when things about it make you want to drive your fist through a window”. [Divakaruni 214]

This internal tug-of-war that becomes a part of most migrants’ life also manifests as identity crisis at multiple levels. While the immigrant is in their own native land, there is a kind of lack of objectivity about the pros and cons of owns own culture as one is completely submerged in it and there is no ‘other’ way of existence that one can compare with. It is only when you are wrenched from your own territory and thrust into a completely contrasting and seemingly strange new world, so to speak, that one truly experiences a gamut of emotions about what had hitherto been a very mono-dimensional viewpoint about owns culture. The expectations and roles and duties and other socio-religious-ethical norms that had been ingrained in the community and had become a part of their psyche, and hence, their natural behaviour, now begins to be seen through a distance, through an objective lens and in comparison, with an alternate way of existing. And that poses quite a challenge as it involves facing and accepting some not-so-comfortable truths about one’s beloved native community. Sometimes, of course this objective study of your own culture and community in comparison to a one that is wholly new, in every which way also highlights the hidden gems beneath the surface and one learns to appreciate certain parts of it like never before. The author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her live

interview to FICC – FLO, relives the experience of her initial days when she was based in Midwest, Ohio. While reminiscing about her life in India, she says, “When I was living in Kolkata, before I moved, I was just immersed in my culture. I never thought about it. [...] what it meant.” Later, when she moved to Ohio and there was no Indian community that she could connect with, she found herself introspecting about her roots, “It really made me at once miss my culture, appreciate my culture, but also see things about my culture that I hadn’t seen before, including [...] how women were treated both positively and negatively in Indian culture.” The questions of solidarity and loyalty to the country of origin render the term ‘diaspora’ as ambiguous and problematic.

‘Double consciousness’, a concept first explained by Du Bois in his publication, *The Souls of Black Folk*, describes the inability of an African American to have one unified identity. One is always viewing oneself through the gaze of the other and there is the constant feeling of having multiple identities at the same time. It is a constant source of conflict, this feeling of “twoness...two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”. Though Du Bois used this phrase to describe the state of African Americans, it is applicable to all the diasporic hyphenated identities.

Most diaspora theorists like Gilroy, Safran and Cohen believe that the concept of diaspora necessarily involves some or the other kind of

coerced movement, exile, loss, nostalgia, marginalization, dispossession, and social exclusion. As is clearly visible in Paul Gilroy's definition of diaspora: "A network of people, scattered in a process of non-voluntary displacement, usually created by violence or under threat of violence or death. Diaspora consciousness highlights the tensions between common bonds created by shared origins and other ties arising from the process of dispersal and the obligation to remember a life prior to flight or kidnap." (1997: 328)

So, right at the outset we see the layers of ambivalence and irresoluteness inherent in the very concept of the word diaspora. In recent times however, this notion of diaspora has been giving way to the notion of 'transnational' citizens who are migrants settled in various parts of the world and yet maintaining intimate bonds with their people 'back home' as well as their other counterparts spread in other countries across the globe; people who feel equally 'at home' in New Delhi or New York, Surat or Sydney. Due to increasing globalized world, regular visits to their native countries, super fast and interactive communication mediums and of course all-pervading omnipresent social media sites, the immigrant's connectivity with their people back home is as strong as ever. Steven Vertovec defines diaspora as "the term often used today to describe practically any population that is considered "deterritorialized" or "transnational" – that is, which has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides, and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe."

His *Transnationalism* (2009) is a seminal text which reflects on the phenomenon of transnationalism and its connection to diasporic cultural studies. Amidst the ever-growing interest in diaspora studies, Steven Vertovec widens the definition of diaspora by categorizing the ‘general meanings of diaspora’ by analyzing it within certain frameworks. The first category looks at ‘diaspora as a social form’ mainly emphasizes the uprootedness, upheaval and trauma felt by the original Jewish migrants who were exiled from their homeland.

The second category looks at ‘diaspora as a type of consciousness’ in which he focuses on ‘the fluidity of constructed styles and identities. In the third category Vertovec looks at ‘diaspora as a mode of cultural production’, where the migrant communities contribute positively to the host land through a variety of mediums such as cinema, cuisine and other socio-cultural norms and values. In the fourth category, he reflects on ‘diaspora as a problem’ by elucidating further that these communities may sometimes be viewed upon as “problems or threats to state security and to the social order when seen from right-wing perspectives within the host-countries (Vertovec qtd in Hussain 8-10).

Avtar Brah offers a wide perspective in his work ‘Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities’ where she dwells upon the constantly shifting realities of the diasporic identities in the chosen new host land. She analyses the questions of culture, gender and identity in various discourses and political contexts and explores the notion of *diaspora space* as the “intersectionality of diaspora, border, and



dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes.” (178) According to her, this space is inhabited not solely by the migrant community but also by “those who are constructed and represented as indigenous”. (209)

Another approach for examining diaspora was formulated by the renowned critic and theorist Homi Bhabha who espoused the concept of ‘hybridity’, the ‘third space’ and the ‘in-between-ness’ in his seminal collection of essays *The Location of Culture* (1994) and is often quoted to emphasize the liminal spatiality of diasporic experience and diasporic positionality in the alien land. His theory of cultural hybridity compels one to rethink the concepts of identity, agency, and national affiliation.

Brij V. Lal in his comprehensive survey of Indian communities settled across the world in the seminal work ‘The Encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora’ traces the changing relationship of the Indian diaspora. It gives a panoramic view of the journey of the Indian diasporic community encompassing various aspects like cinema, cuisine, culture, literature, and political life. He states in the introduction itself, “Due to its varied origins, divergent patterns, of migration and settlement, and different degrees of absorption or integration into the culture of their new homeland, the Indian diaspora defies easy categorization. It is a

complex confluence of many discreet cultures, languages, and histories.” [Lal 10] Interestingly, he cautions the readers about

referring to the Indian diaspora in the ‘singular’. He further differentiates between the ‘brawn’ drain of the old ‘desperate’ diaspora which comprised of indentured laborers coerced into leaving their country of origin to do harsh exploitative, physically demanding work in the colonial host country of the employers and the ‘brain’ drain of the new ‘dollar’ diaspora which comprises of highly skilled and professionally qualified Indians working as doctors, engineers, IT professionals, architects, academicians and entrepreneurs in their chosen adopted countries. [Lal 11]. The journey also emphasizes the changing perception of these professionals in their host country as is clearly reflected in the Indian professionals being amongst those who are educated from one of the best-ranked academic institutions and being one of the best-paid ethnic groups in several sectors of many of these developed host countries. Indeed, for reasons such as an enviable cultural history to its adaptive abilities and positive contributions, the Indian community are often referred to as the ‘model minority’ community which should be emulated by the others. In the words of J.C Sharma, “the Indian Community enjoys the distinction of being one of the highest earning, best educated and fastest growing ethnic groups, and that too in the most powerful country in the world. [qtd. in Pal 2004 23]

According to Robin Cohen, “diaspora works as an insightful way of understanding many aspects of migration and an important trajectory of social identity construction” [Cohen 70-71] He feels that the ancient concept of diaspora was needed to comprehend old minorities that had

not been integrated completely and new migrants. In the article “Social Identities and Creolization”, he opines that diaspora “captured and still captures a world on the move, a world of belonging and alienation, of home and away, of political inclusion and social exclusion.” [...] diaspora became the keyword to explain the hitherto seemingly inexplicable flows and counter-flows of migrants and refugees. [Cohen 70] Robin Cohen comments on the existing connotations of this ever-expanding umbrella term diaspora in his seminal text *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* as being in a perennial state of “formation and reformation”. According to him even minor changes related to religious happenings both in the native and adopted land can influence and modify the situation of the diasporic community. [Cohen 141]

Cohen goes on to classify diaspora studies into four phases and talks about different types of diasporas. According to him, the first type is the ‘Classical’ notion of diaspora which comes from the traditional Jewish Babylonian historical migratory experience of the exiled Jews. The ‘Victim’ diasporas comprise of the Armenian and African migrants who were transported to other destinations as slaves and human cargo and thus this type of diaspora deals with issues related to enslavement, exploitation, annihilation of self-esteem and cultural pride. The third type is the Imperial diaspora that involved mass movement of indentured labour class Indians to suit the vested interests of the colonial regimes. The workers, who had decided to move to another country in search for better prospects were subjected to extremely horrific work conditions and found themselves completely at the mercy

of their ruthless authorities. They had to endure the tyrannical treatment meted out by the oppressors to make a living and manage to save a little so that they could return to their home country. Cohen further states that another type of diaspora could be linked to the movement of Chinese and Lebanese traders and entrepreneurs who decided to migrate outside their home territory for commercial and business purposes.

Apart from the expected estrangement issues related to the physical geographical displacement, the community also undergoes traumatic psychological upheavals. From dealing with isolation pangs, facing cultural crisis, and struggling with racial-social-linguistic challenges in the public arena to coping with their own personal family and gender based, traditional and patriarchal expectations, the expatriates have an extremely tough time trying to stay afloat. As is depicted through many of the protagonists stories of diasporic writers, breakdown at multiple levels – personal as well as professional, is not at all uncommon, especially for the first generation settlers as they are the ones who face the most arduous task of being the repositories of the traditional set up linked to their native value system to be passed on the next one as well as providing financial and social comfort to their dependants in the contemporary set up of the alien land. In [ *Re-Thinking The Post-Colonial*, The Empire Writes Back] it is stated that “Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces. For the impact of the dominant discourse such as imperialism is not only

upon the local society, for the disruption it causes means that global culture itself is affected and transformed by the movement of peoples.”  
[217 – 218]

Although there is no denying the fact that issues of dislocation, fragmentation, and rootlessness predominate the narrative of diasporic studies, .... one can also witness an upsurge in the number of successful migrant stories which reflect perfect assimilation with their chosen Newland and there is hardly any sign of tragic underpinning.

Many diasporic scholars agree on the stance that the experience of displacement and separateness that new migrants have to endure results in the creation of new, creative mediums and methods through which this experience will be positively voiced and shared with the rest of the world. As stated in the introduction to *The Empire Writes Back*, “the experience of a new place, identifiably different in its physical characteristics, constraints, for instance, the new settlers to demand a language which will allow them to express their sense of ‘Otherness’. Landscape, flora and fauna, seasons, climatic conditions are formally distinguished from the place of origin as home/colony, Europe/New World, Europe/Antipodes, metropolitan/provincial, and so on ... [11]

As seen, most of the migrations of individuals or groups of people arise either out of certain socio-economic disintegration in their home country or certain religious- political crisis that acts as a catalyst and in recent times the expanding personal ambitions leads them to take the leap of faith for the sake of monetary and lifestyle benefits that the

migrant assumes awaits them once they set foot in the more modern or progressive or developed chosen country. This dream to 'make it big' in the new unknown country and achieve personal and professional fronts and to be the envy of everyone 'back home' is what seems to be the driving force at least in the case of the highly skilled younger generation who seek to migrate. Majority of the diasporic community are extremely rooted in and connected to their native culture and some of them look at their stay in other countries as temporary; they would like to finally go back to their home ground after their personal and professional goals are achieved. So, from the very outset we see that this diasporic cultural space is in a way a conflictual space, where the cultural values and patterns from the departed country are carried forward and practiced in the arrived chosen country and this hesitancy to completely embrace and imbibe the new cultural value system causes a strained and double stranded relationship right from the very beginning. Although the desire to make the necessary adaptations, to fit and mould themselves into the new lifestyle is present, once the question of cutting oneself from one's cultural rootings and letting go of the sacred and strong moorings comes up, the immigrants, especially the first generation ones, find themselves in a perplexing Hamletian dilemma as they are scared to dive into the unfathomable depths of the unknown and this results in the contestation between the contending cultures. This tug-of-war situation caused due to the shifting dynamics thus becomes an intrinsic part of this community and they start living

their hyphenated lives trying to navigate through the maze of bi-cultural pulls and dual identities.

Mishra in his seminal work *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* states that ‘all diasporas are unhappy’. He further opines that: “the fantasy of the homeland is then linked, in the case of the diaspora, to that recollected trauma that stands for the sign of having been wrenched from one’s mother (father) land.” (Mishra 6)

Although the migrants struggle with straddling the binaries of the host culture and the origin culture, at some point the realization of the impossibility of return starts to sink in. To adapt psychologically with the inevitability of the traumatic situation the community starts reinforcing the myth of ‘return’ to one’s ‘home’. As stated by William Safran in *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*:

“Some diasporas persist---and their members do not go “home” --- because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming page with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora. In the meantime, the myth of return serves to solidify ethnic consciousness and solidarity when religion can no longer do so, when the cohesiveness of the local community is loosened, and when the family is threatened with disintegration.”

Stuart Hall analyses Caribbean diasporic identities in his essay, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* and observes that, “diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return”. He elaborates further on the diversity in diasporic identities and reiterates that “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference”. [Hall 119-120] Through an elaborate, historical analysis of migratory mass movements of people across geographical and cultural borders, Hall analyses the phenomenon of diasporic space and representation of cultural identities.

### **Indian Diasporic Writing**

Considering that the Indian diaspora is one of the largest ones in the world, it is a natural consequence that over the years Indian writers have started to gain tremendous significance in the field of literature. There has been an upsurge in the number of literary figures especially women writers in the arena of diasporic literature.

Indian English writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K Narayan have always occupied an important place in Indian English writing as they are the leaders for their path breaking portrayals of Indian life depicting themes related to casteism, rural-urban divide, poverty and nationalism and their literary and stylistic influence on contemporary writers cannot be negated. However, for the purpose of



this research study, my focus would be mainly on diasporic Indian writers, specifically Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Indian diasporic writers can be categorised broadly under the general term ‘South Asian’ diasporic writers. The writers coming from the Southern region of the Asian continent, which includes countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and the Maldives share certain commonalities not just geographically but ethno-culturally as well. These writers when they have shifted temporarily or permanently to countries other than their country of origin come to be labelled as South Asian Diasporic writers. Most of the common themes underlying this writing, therefore, comprises of alienation, displacement, assimilation and marginalization, disintegration, east-west divide, and the dilemma of occupying two different worlds. About diasporic writing, it has been mentioned in [ *Re-Thinking The Post-Colonial*, The Empire Writes Back]:

“The diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre, and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial, and ethnic formations of identity. For if, as Stuart Hall suggests, the crucial concern of diasporic identity is not subjectivity but subject position, then the diasporic writer provides the prospect of a fluidity of identity, a constantly changing subject position, both geographically and ontologically. Most importantly perhaps, diasporic writing, in its

crossing of borders, opens the horizon of place. What does ‘home’ mean in the disrupted world of colonial space? How can ‘home’ become the transformative habitation of boundaries? For certainly that *unheimlichkeit*, that ‘unhousedness’ or ‘uncanniness’ which characterizes much colonial displacement, is a primary force of disruption in post-colonial life. Can it also be a source of liberation? The phenomenon of diaspora, with its exemplary model of dislocation and displacement begins the answer to this question.”

### **About The Author**

Within the context of Indian writing in English, some renowned Indian women writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Manjula Padmanabhan, Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Meena Alexander, Bharti Mukherjee, Gita Hariharan and Nayantara Sahgal have used many innovative and experimental strategies in their work. The women protagonists depicted in their works play multiple roles as they try to mould themselves into the unfavourable circumstances, navigating the manipulative power equation that exist in patriarchal societies and resisting the pressure tactics that are exerted in the physical, political, social, and economic spheres. The common themes that can be found are redefining human relationships, shifting power dynamics, gender role reversal, women struggles and cultural dilemma. Writers such as Mukherjee, Alexander, Desai and Divakaruni focus especially on Indian women immigrants based in the United States of America. Their own diasporic experiences over the years have helped shape the plots and characterization of their

women protagonists. Issues like alienation, cross-cultural conflicts, and rootlessness which these writers would have faced in their own life as new migrants regularly reflected in their fictional narratives. The peculiar predicament of the women at being psychologically pulled in opposite directions – the original culture and the alien adopted one, their attempts at assimilating in the American set up and hesitancy to let go of the traditional ways of the home culture is explicated in their novels. The literature of diasporic women writers is often a product of their own displaced dilemmas and dual cultural pulls. Frederick Monica uses an Indian mythological term ‘trishanku’ to describe the migrant community living in the host land. As per the ancient myth, Trishanku kept oscillating between earth and heaven, and so this term has come to define this sort of in-between, in limbo situation which can therefore be applied to the diasporic community which is constantly straddling between two powerful cultures.

The fiction of these women writers invariably reflects issues of existential rootlessness and amalgamation of cultures. Also, there are the personal struggles of the women migrants, be it combating patriarchal stereotypes, clashes and conflicts related to gender and generation and trials and tribulations as they are physically managing the domestic space and psychologically and emotionally performing the role of the torch bearers of their traditional cultural heritage. This also leads them to start questioning their own identity and so the journey of immigration often mimics their journey into their own self, as is reflected in the women characters in South Asian women’s literature.

As Divakaruni has been associated with women welfare organizations for the last few decades, her narratives comprise of many such women characters who are navigating through numerous trials, maladies, and hardships that many of these exiled women find themselves in on their arrival in the alien land.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent US based poetess, novelist, short-story writer as well as a bestselling children's author is a Bengali immigrant who moved to the United States in 1976 to pursue further studies. Along with obtaining her Masters degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and PhD from the University of California at Berkeley, she has also been actively involved in women's welfare centres and organizations established to help battered women, especially women in situations of domestic abuse. She along with her friends started an organization named MAITRI to aid the distressed South Asian American women immigrants who have been left desolate and helpless. As a first-generation immigrant navigating through the early challenging situations in an alien country, she can empathize with other aggrieved women of her own heritage who have been dealt a cruel hand by fate and her concern for these women is clearly reflected through her award-winning short stories and novels. Quite frequently she depicts the common challenges faced by Indian women on their arrival into the alien country. Many a times she portrays the newly arrived Indian women who find themselves juxtaposed between the western culture embodying freedom and independence and the Indian culture with its restrictive patriarchal shackles. Through her

involvement with women organization as well as her writing, Divakaruni attempts to empower these distressed women with a sense of selfhood so that they can avail the freedom and numerous opportunities available to them in the new country and hope for a better and brighter future.

Apart from being a prolific writer whose work includes over fifty anthologies and has been translated into twenty-nine languages, she has also been the recipient of prestigious literary awards such as the Pushcart Prize, Allen Ginsberg Prize and Gerbode Foundation award. Some of her novels have been adapted into films and her work continues to feature in prominent magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*. She has judged prestigious competitions like the PEN Faulkner award and the National Award and describes herself as “a listener, a facilitator, a connector to people”. Currently teaching creative writing at the University of Houston, she has carved a niche for herself in the field of contemporary diasporic women writing her and work continues to inspire her readers and be examined by students and researchers alike from multidisciplinary perspectives.

With the incorporation of magic realism, mythical, folkloric, and legendary references Divakaruni’s literary works empowers her protagonists and her readers alike with ancient wisdom, ethical and moral values that provides a kind of spiritual anchoring to the uprooted and dislocated diasporic characters. Hailed by critics as a contemporary Jane Austen, she enables her women characters to forge

ahead with their journey in an unknown alien land, being armed by proven traditional rituals including healing culinary and aryuvedic practices. Her lyrical language, immensely captivating storytelling techniques allow the reader to get pulled into this magical mythical world replete with family, foliage, and food. Her richly crafted world of elegance and colour encompasses both the ancient oriental world and the modern occidental one.

Her fiction offers remarkable insights into the life of common Indian diasporic life in the US. Her tales which are at times intergenerational sagas of emotional recollections of geographic and cultural narratives, are mostly articulated from the perspective of newly arrived migrant women's experience of exile and so reflects themes such as alienation in the host country, dislocation from the original land, nostalgia for the homeland, quest for identity, bi-cultural pulls, conflicts at various levels.

Her heroines are dynamic strong women who lead imperfect lives and struggle to overcome their imperfections and flaws while simultaneously meeting the hardships head on, not buckling under pressure, but devising some or the other strategy in order to survive.

Suffusing the culinary space by mingling memories and stories is an art Divakaruni seems to have excelled at. As she confesses, it works for her in her personal life and the same is reflected in her fictional narratives as well. The way she connects the culinary with storytelling techniques and how this process brings about holistic healing at the

individual and the collective community level is an area that my study seeks to explore. Being a quintessential storyteller, she has extremely fond recollections of her childhood memories that revolve around her listening in awe and wonder to story narrations by her grandfather:

I spent childhood vacations with my grandfather in a little village three hours outside of Kolkata. At night, he would bring me and my cousins together, light a kerosene lamp, because there was no electricity, and tell us wonderful stories. from folktales, fairytales, and epics.... It made me understand the power of storytelling, and how, through stories, so much is communicated and passed on from generation to generation. (Divakaruni 2015)

The art of storytelling that she has perfected enables her to create magical mythical worlds alongside her contemporary realistic migrant world. Various myths and legends are woven delicately in tales, thus imbuing the commonplace harsh reality with a fairy-tailish quality. This makes her readers ponder over complex issues related to diasporic existence and seek inspiration from the larger-than-life mythical legendary characters who are the embodiments of traditional Indian values and ethics. Her alluring world of stories has a far-reaching impact on people from all cultures as they can relate to basic human emotions like courage, compassion and sacrifice common to diverse cultures and can comprehend the relevance of a unified vision that arises when the best aspects of different cultures come together collectively for the creation of a better, more humane world. *Toward*

*an Understanding of Storytelling Events* is an essay written by Robert A. Georges, in which he discusses the significance of stories, which in his opinion can be “surviving or traditional linguistic entities” that are closely connected to the “history and nature of man and culture” (1969:314).

Divakaruni’s work can be categorised in the following manner:

### **Poetry**

*Dark Like the River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle* (1991), and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) - these are some of the early poems written by Divakaruni and they reflect the typical challenges and trials of the South Asian women diaspora.

### **Young Adult and Children’s Fiction**

*Neela: Victory Song* (2003), *Grandma and the Great Gourd* (2013), *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005), *Shadowland* (2009)

### **Prose**

Divakaruni’s novels *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) and *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and *The Last Queen* (2021)



## **Anthologies**

*Arranged Marriage* (1995),

*The Lives of Strangers* (2001)

## **The Culinary Space**

As this thesis studies memories and rituals woven around culinary patterns of the diasporic identities as reflected in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives, this chapter will provide an outline of the diverse aspects related to the culinary patterns employed by the diaspora. The movement from the parent country to the adopted country, be it a forced migration or a voluntary move for better prospects, it is inevitably complex and challenging. To cope with the trauma the diasporic community seeks to establish a sub-culture in the new land through certain commonalities in the shared heritage like language and religion. The culinary aspect plays a crucial role in this matter as it provides an interstice where memories of the past tradition meet the influence of the present environment.

Food is an important part of maintaining strong bonds back home. Foodscape as well as the new landscape combine and help create the diasporic individual's identity and the through the culinary lens one can explore immigrant's experience in the home and host nation, gender, and the newly forged transnational identity. Most immigrants can relive the bygone good old days of the past by recreating homeland through the culinary processes in their kitchens. Through the culinary,

the immigrants seek to redefine their marginalized, ambivalent position in the host land and establish some kind of ‘settledness’ in their uprooted lives. In my thesis, I will attempt to explicate through the selected works, the narrative and stylistic strategies employed by the Divakaruni through which her uprooted protagonists armour themselves with the culinary weaponry to combat the threats and challenges that befall them in the host land.

Various anthropologists, research scholars, writers and the like have reiterated the fact that food and eating have a far-reaching significance in our existence other than just fulfilling our basic need of satiating hunger by providing nutrition and sustenance. Be it at the individual or society level, certain culinary patterns and preferences are exhibited, and they play an immense role in shaping the unique identity. In diasporic writing, culinary aspect works as an interstitial space where food can locate and negotiate between the ancestral and the adopted culture. This aspect will be explored through the theory of signification propounded by Barthes and Saussure.

As Barthes posits that many activities revolving around food, from buying to cooking and consuming it, transmits certain key features. From the ingredients used to the style of preparation and other culinary preferences of the community, each feature serves as a ‘signifier’. Therefore, food is a classification that can enable members of the diasporic community of shared origin to form a sub-culture.

Traditionally women have been assigned the role of the nourishers and nurturers of the family. In the diasporic context, they are also seen as the torch bearers of their culture, responsible for strengthening the familial bonds and relationships not only within the immediate family members but also with the extended family group back home. Thus, apart from cooking and serving food, they must additionally ‘serve’ and symbolically ‘pass on’ the cultural values, practices, and ethics of the parent country. Thus, the kitchen space becomes an engaging and dynamic space where women not only display their culinary prowess but also help shape and mould the newly formed hyphenated identities. The act of cooking thus becomes an empowering one that helps the diasporic women take charge and reshape and reform their own position in the family as well as in the society at large.

Celebrating traditional festivals, performing ethnic practices, and indulging in religious rituals are few strategies employed by the settlers to cope with the nostalgia and homesickness. And most of these involve food. From the use of ‘authentic’ ingredients (preserved from one’s last home visit or best available substitutes bought locally) and elaborate time-consuming preparation to the actual setting it down on the table in a set, prescribed manner as is ‘done at home’, all the steps involve the culinary space. At least temporarily, the trauma of displacement and severe loneliness is healed, and the ‘aroma’ of security and warmth fills up the home away from home. From the smells, the taste, the sound that engulfs the diasporic home through the culinary space, the traditional culture is revived, relived, and restored.

Thus, the peripheral kitchen space slowly transforms into the central domestic space, an empowered space where sacred memories are preserved, traditional food culture and customs are established, and familial and cultural bonds are strengthened and appreciated.

Also, this space where women experiment, grapple with diverse issues like anxiety of being away from their motherland, challenge the prevalent patriarchal mindset, experience authority and healing becomes in Bhabhanian terms, an ‘interstice’ where new diasporic identity formations take place. These border situations and thresholds thus act as the sites where identities are contested, reshaped, and re-formed. In the Introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha comments on “the borderline work of culture” that “demands an encounter with ‘newness’ (Bhabha 7) and the conflicting, contesting culinary space in the diasporic setting allows for this.

Most of the women immigrant writers make use of their literary space to highlight these themes and issues. Through the lives of the women characters in their fictional narratives, diverse themes such as gender representation, marginalization, sexuality, and other existential dilemmas faced by diasporic identities are explored. The culinary narratives of these writers emphasize how women are considered the ambassadors of culinary culture and custodians of food traditions and rituals in the host land and how they must become crucial agents whose cooking skills can help heal and transform individuals and

communities; and how the culinary space becomes a sanctuary for the agitated hyphenated settlers, a space which sustains and solaces them.

In the immigrant literature, we find that the writer is not only a narrator of stories but also becomes a kind of a cultural ambassador through whom various issues are highlighted. As in Divakaruni's case, their own immigrant experience gets woven into the experience of their diasporic protagonists which is mirrored in their literature. The significance of the kitchen and food space in Divakaruni's own life gets reflected in her fictional narratives where we find her women characters negotiating their identities, assessing the cultural clashes, debating their own position in their family, community, and the host land, all this within the culinary sphere. Through various literary and stylistic nuances Divakaruni delicately delineates how the culinary space within the larger perspective of the domestic space becomes a secure and sacred haven for the dismantled diasporic communities. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard talks about the "home" space, and has been quoted by Edward Said, as: "The inside of a house, he said, acquires a sense of intimacy, secrecy, security, real or imagined because of the experiences that come to seem appropriate for it. [...] a house may be haunted, or homelike, or prisonlike, or magical. So space acquires emotional or even rational sense of a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here." [55] Realizing the sacred healing and creative power connected with this space, Divakaruni in her blog entry on July 20, 2013, makes the observation that, "In all cultures,

particularly in India, food gives us so much more than physical nourishment. It is woven into customs, history, family lore. Through cooking, people demonstrate craft, creativity, love, and pride.” And that is the reason she confesses, “One of the things I most enjoy writing about in my novels is food.”

Food is also deeply connected to memory. Susan Whitborne, who is a professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Massachusetts explicates on the matter in an interview given to Huffpost, “Food memories are more sensory than other memories in that they involve all five senses; so, when you’re that thoroughly engaged with the stimulus, it has a more powerful effect.”

Food and memories and emotions are thoroughly connected and the diasporic community traversing between the ancient and the new. the developing and the developed countries vouch for the fact. The intense longing of the diasporic writers to recapture the savoury select moments from their brief visits to the home country is reflected in their works. Narrating a personal incident, the much-acclaimed USA based Indian writer Jhumpa Lahiri writes about how she and her family members carried back “arsenal of lentils and every conceivable spice”, traditional utensils like *karhais* and *boti* and *sil-nora* (kind of an ancient food processor) in their “treasure chest” which was actually the food suitcase. She makes an interesting observation about how despite all the food stuff they brought with them the first meal that they had once they were back in the US, was a very simple one. She further

clarifies, “That first meal was never an occasion to celebrate but rather to mourn, for the people and the city we had, once again, left behind. And so my mother made food to mirror our mood, food for the weary and melancholy. I remember thinking how strangely foreign our own kitchen felt that first night back, [...] It was enough, that first lonely evening, not only to satisfy our hunger but to make Calcutta seem not so far away.”

Indeed, the comforting memories along with the aroma and taste that engulfs the culinary space of the diasporic kitchen truly nourish and nurture the inhabitants. Memories and rituals around food involve not only the actual cooking and eating of the meals but are inherently linked with the place and emotions and this is ably supported by the following statement made by the renowned psychologist Hadley Bergstrom, “Food memories aren’t just based on facts or our need for survival; they are mostly shaped by the context – the company, the situation and the emotions involved.” This explains why certain foods are to be cooked for certain festivals and occasions and in the diasporic context, this gains further significance as the community is overcome with nostalgia for the motherland, especially around festival times. Indeed, the memories and rituals woven around the culinary are an intrinsic part of not only the history of the diasporic individual but also part of the home country’s intangible heritage. And it is the way Divakaruni employs this space in her fictional narratives – to provide solace and strength and rejuvenation and to ultimately help in healing

the trauma of the hyphenated migrant community that this study will be focussed on.

It is the healing capacity of the culinary space has come to the forefront in recent Post Covid times. All across the world, from magazines to newspapers to social media, we find splashed all over – pictures of people indulging in various activities like baking, brewing, chopping and frying, to name a few. Apart from the fact that people had been home quarantined and there were limited activities to do, the underlying reason for the upsurge in culinary activities was that people derive immense satisfaction and solace from creating dishes in the kitchen space. Whether it is facing the challenges and uncertainties of the outside world, tending to herbs and plants in one's kitchen garden, improving one's immunity through home remedies, or simply finding comfort in 'comfort food', there is no denying the fact that culinary therapy works and is therefore practised by people across the globe especially when faced with the threat of the global pandemic. The celebrity chef and travel documentarian Anthony Bourdain made an interesting observation about food, "Food is everything we are. It's an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It's inseparable from those from the get-go."

Various other essayists, food journalists and research scholars have used different theoretical approaches, ranging from semiotics to psychology, from anthropology to ethnography to comprehend the



intricacies and mechanisms of the complex culinary universe. Apart from food memoirs, food documentaries, travel shows with celebrity chefs, another new entrant in the culinary studies universe is – food porn, a new form of art which raises food-ography [food + photography] to the next level by using aesthetically ‘touched up’ glamorized, appetizing food images to appeal to the audience. These tantalizing images and videos are often found ‘trending’ or becoming ‘viral’ after they are splashed across social media networks. Used by commercial makers, advertisers, sellers, and consumers alike these visual images of cooking or eating influence our psychology greatly and therefore can sway the opinion of the public regarding certain culinary cuisines and rituals to a great extent. Apart from this, the various social influencers, either on you tube or other social media networks have started their own personal chat shows or audio podcasts to advice and counsel and spread awareness about their own culinary preferences and the pros and cons of it. In India, food influencers like Swayampura Mishra, Archana Doshi, Amrita Kaur and Karan Tripathi have become household names due to their blogs which are replete with these yummilicious, appealing culinary images and recipes. Sometimes these influencers could be famous health experts, medical practitioners, celebrities, or models who connect their lifestyles with their culinary habits and are generally able to exert significant impact on their fans and followers who emulate them as their role models.

Over the last two decades, food studies have emerged as a significant field and its growing popularity has led to publication of various magazines and journals like *Food, Culture and Society* and *Gastronomica*. One of the reasons for the growing relevance of this field is also that it lends itself to interpretation and analysis through the lens of various theoretical frameworks like anthropology, ethnography, psychology, and literary criticism, to name a few. As women are invariably connected to all things culinary, feminists have critically analysed this subject from a variety of perspectives. For instance, *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies* edited by Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (2005), Sidney W. Mintz's *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, Barbara Haber's *From Hardtack to Home Fries* (2002) and Laura Shapiro's *Something from the Oven* (2004). Also, in recent times there has been a proliferation of literary anthologies that focus on the relationship between food and cooking. They chart interesting pathways for the reader to analyse their own reading patterns in terms of their consumption patterns.

### **Divakaruni's Engagement with The Culinary: An Overview**

This study will focus on the way Divakaruni employs the narrative techniques, language, character along with the culinary theme to describe entire journey of the immigrant, starting from the initial shocking experiences, and oppressiveness and alienation to the gradual assimilation in the host land. Her hyphenated protagonists whose lives are explored through culinary rituals and memories will help make this

thesis a valuable contribution to the growing body of diasporic culinary writing.

This research will examine the expression of emotions felt by the women characters and unravel how the food and kitchen space becomes an empowering one. A space where regular mundane kitchen chores like looking up recipes and planning meals over a time becomes a place where they start gaining confidence in their inert ability to take charge, organize, manage, plan execute even crucial decisions. How, slowly, they start to be looked upon as repositories of practical wisdom and inner strength, the ones who truly nourish and nurture the immigrant and the society. Indeed, the healing aspect, the journey to become a better adjusted, better version of oneself is in Divakaruni's own words one of her aspirations as a writer. In an interview, she gives an insight into her own literary craft is empowered by her close connection to her heritage and that gets reflected in her literary goals as well. As she confesses in an interview:

“I think I am going back to a very old tradition of literature or art that is supposed to bring out our better selves. Literature therefore becomes an instrument of opening our spirituality. That is why the ancient epics in India continue to be read, studied, recited, and venerated, in the hope that they will make us into better people.”

In recent times, there has been an explosion in the field of food studies. Food blogs, food memoirs, food writing and various culinary based television shows and films have sprung up across the globe. The

tendency of some feminists to label kitchen and domestic space as oppressive to women has been questioned as some radical new feminists have now started rethinking and redefining this space as a nurturing empowering space for women. In an article published in HuffPost, titled *Kitchen Conversations: Food Studies and Food Writing*, Judith Newton, Professor Emerita in Women and Gender Studies at U.C. Davis, articulates her views on the increasingly popular food related courses in the following manner: [...] “courses that focus on the emotional meanings of food and how food helps define identities, communities, and power relations. Some of the questions always posed in approaching food blogs and memoirs for analysis have to do with the gender, sexual, class and race relations the blog or memoir acknowledges and/or supports.” This study, however, focuses specifically on the role of the culinary space in the fictional narratives of the renowned diasporic women writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

### **Culinary Semiotics**

Even though Food comes in the category of ‘primary’ need; it is intricately layered and comprises of ingredients, rituals, methods of preparation and consumption and Barthes delves into the ‘signification’ aspect of food. In his seminal work *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, Barthes opines: “What is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and

behaviour... When he (modern consumer) buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies.”

This structuralist perspective has been further analysed by Claude Levi-Strauss who opined that food could be considered as a language that reflected social structures and cultural systems. From introducing the concept of the ‘Culinary Triangle’ to establish the unseen connections between cooking and ‘fire’, to exploring underlying relationships between sex and food and the creation of culture specific food taboos, as well as the ceremonial uses of food in religion, Strauss’s contribution in the field of food studies is undeniable and the way this has been creatively depicted in Divakaruni’s writing will be studied in detail.

This aspect of the food narrative where food related rituals and practices will be effectively analysed in the larger context of the signification and communication process in the subsequent chapters. Divakaruni herself considers food to be an important symbol. In an interview to Guernica, she describes the importance of food for immigrants, as it is “the one thing they hope to be able to carry forward that’s relatively easy to recreate”. She admits that due to the dearth of the authentic food substances, sometimes one must make do with the local replacements as she narrates, “[...] it was much harder in the early days when there weren’t many Indian groceries. Immigrants

learned to make substitutions, like using *Bisquick* for gulabjamus, tricks like that.” She confesses on the presence of the culinary in her own personal life as well as in her novels. “Food exists on many levels in my books. It reflects changes in our culture as we take shortcuts in how we cook our food, how it remains a comfort regardless.” The connection between the culinary and cultural changes is something that is clearly embodied in her prose writings.

Indeed, it is through many such migratory journeys in Divakaruni’s diasporic narratives that this study will explore how culinary memories, be it individual or collective, act as a cohesive agent and enable the space to function as a site where reconciliation and renegotiation takes place between the rich past and the modern future.

In Divakaruni’s works, we have a detailed account of how certain Indian culinary traditions which comprise of ancient food and ayurvedic diet-based medicinal practices, have immense healing properties that work not only at the personal, individual level, but also helps reenergise and reinvent the diasporic community at large. One of her most memorable characters Tilo, from her acclaimed novel *Mistress of Spices* is, as the title states - ‘mistress’-in-charge, the dispenser of the ancient healing herbs of India. Her name also is a play on words, as ‘til’ is the hindi translation of the word ‘sesame seed’, spice for nourishment. She is portrayed as this part magical, part mysterious enigmatic woman dispensing healing herbs and spices that are rooted in traditional wisdom to the seekers who comprise of the local Indians as

well as Americans who are open to cross cultural interactions and getting relief for materialistic ailments from ancient Indian culinary capsules. Along with the culinary advice meted out at the spice store of this poignant tale are the ancient pearls of wisdom as well. These strands are beautifully woven and depicted as ancient healing strategies belonging to the ‘natural, magical’ world and have been brought by this mystical mistress from across the seven seas to cure and alleviate the physical and psychological afflictions of the ‘modern, materialistic’ community.

The healing properties attributed to culinary practices also owe to the fact that they originate from countries where the human-nature bond is very strong. In most ancient cultures like Indian and Japanese, nature in its various forms, is worshipped and deified. There are numerous songs and fasts and feasts and rituals woven around trees and rivers and seasons. Also, the trend of consuming local farm fresh vegetables and fruits, rather than cosmetically polished ones available in stores to some extent ensures that the ‘natural’ core has not been interfered with too much ‘technology’ and that works wonderfully for the human system. The spices and herbs can therefore say to be having properties that not only heal the affected organ but promote well being and holistic health of the individual and the community at large due to its inherent deep-rooted connection with the natural earthy elements. They act as a panacea to alleviate the pain and trauma of the displaced people, striving for ‘belongingness’, uprooted from, yet yearning for a closer connection with their mother earth, and/or mother land.

Divakaruni herself is a devout believer in the conviction that the kitchen space should be used for transferring not just culinary skills but most importantly to pass on Indian cultural, moral, values and ethics. She confesses that she learnt from her mother not just cooking Indian dishes, but also stories and memories. In an article written for the Redbook magazine on parenting lessons through cooking, she candidly narrates that the most important thing her mother taught her during her elaborate *pakora* making sessions was: “Mingle stories and memories with love and learning. That’s what really nourishes you. What makes you strong.” And so she follows her mother’s instructions as she conducts ‘*pakora*’ making sessions with her sons in the kitchen. And while she’s at it, she narrates stories about her mother as well as her mother land, as she fiercely believes that food and food rituals play a crucial role in transferring cultural and traditional values from one to the next generation. As she admits, “Food. It’s how we pass on so much to our children: Culture, memories, ways of being in the world.”

### **Revised Objectives**

Strauss’s contribution in the field of food studies is undeniable and the way the food space has been creatively depicted in Divakaruni’s writing will be analysed in detail in the following chapters. Though Divakaruni’s works do not fall under the genre of “food writing”. there is no escaping the fact that food is certainly used as a motif and a tool to express one’s hyphenated identity.



This aspect of the food narrative where food related rituals and practices help in identity formation will be effectively analysed in the larger context of the signification and communication process in the subsequent chapters and the objectives would be:

1. To explore Divakaruni's writings and their engagement with the culinary metaphor
2. To look at food as a space of cultural as well as literary rootings, as depicted in the fictional works of the author
3. To analyse the selected novels within the conceptual framework Strauss's semiotics of food and Frye's archetypal theory
4. To uncover the stylistic and linguistic strategies adopted by Divakaruni to exploit the food narrative to offer an insight into the inner, psychological space of her woman protagonists

### **Relevance/Scope**

As the review of literature has revealed that though a lot of work has been done on Divakaruni by students and professors, mostly the common themes underlying this research revolve around the following: quest for identity, sisterhood, intergenerational and cultural conflicts, feminist aspect, mythical elements, and magic realism. This thesis will be a one-of-a-kind attempt to delve into Divakaruni's use of the culinary space along with its accompanying elements of food related memories and rituals, to depict the traumatic experience of the diasporic women characters in an alien land and how this space eventually helps them deal, recover, and heal. Hence, we can say that

there is much relevance for the issues that this thesis attempts to highlight. From various disciplines like food and nutrition studies, psychology and medicine, literary storytelling narratives as well as womanist feminist studies, this study can provide valuable insights and stimulate further research in these fields.

### **Limitations**

This thesis will attempt to study the selected novels of Divakaruni and the children and young adult's fiction as well as poetry written by Divakaruni will not be studied for the purpose of this study. As the thrust of this research is on the culinary aspect and the author's literary expertise in dealing with the culinary metaphor, her other fictional genres have not been investigated. The scope of this study can therefore be said to be limited to the chosen fictional works only.

### **Research Questions**

Some of the questions that this study seeks to investigate will be:

- How can 'culinary space' be re-conceptualized?
- How is this space used in Divakaruni's fictional works?
- What are the underlying structures beneath the kitchen cocoon which help allay the fears and insecurities of the migrants?
- Is it possible to completely 'assimilate', in the true sense of the word, in an alien land?
- How do the marginalized women empower themselves through the food space?

- Are the food pathways helpful for these women in their quest for identity?
- What strategies does the author use to exploit the food narrative to delve into the emotional and psychological landscape of her characters?

### **Structure Of the Thesis**

This study comprises of six chapters and focuses on three pivotal characteristics associated with the culinary space and they are memories, rituals, and healing. The structure of the thesis begins from the larger context of the diasporic discourse to the diasporic characters depicted in Divakaruni's fictional world and to the culinary narratives woven into it. The chapters are as follows:

1. Chapter One: Introduction
2. Chapter Two: Review of Literature
3. Chapter Three: Displaced Migrant Women and the Culinary Space
4. Chapter Four: Culinary Memories and Rituals in Divakaruni's select novels
5. Chapter Five: Culinary Healing in Divakaruni's select novels
6. Chapter Six: Conclusion

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the culinary motif explored in diasporic discourse. It gives an insight into Divakaruni's place within the context of South Asian diasporic women writing. It highlights the viewpoints of various diaspora theorists like Safran, Hall, Gilroy, Brah, Cohen and incorporates concepts related to Semiotic theories propounded by Barthes and Strauss as well. Along with giving an overview of Divakaruni's engagement with the culinary motif, this chapter also reveals the basic structure of the thesis and the plan of the subsequent chapters.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

An attempt has been made to comprehend the work done in this field till date and the review of literature bears testimony to the fact. All the previous research published on the author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni including numerous journal articles, published papers, presentations, interviews, critic reviews and blogs have been perused to gain the overall perspective on the topic and understand the deeper context. This chapter highlights this and alongside gives the readers an overview of the relevant concepts in this thesis – displacement, memory, and culinary space.

## **Chapter Three: Displaced Migrant Women and the Culinary Space**

This chapter will highlight the way migratory journey, as depicted in Divakaruni's fictional world, is navigated through the trope of food. It

will attempt to analyse the marginalized position of diasporic women protagonists and their engagement with the food and kitchen space. The connection between culinary space and identity will be explored while highlighting critical aspects of Strauss's theory of the 'culinary triangle' as well.

#### **Chapter Four: Culinary Memories and Rituals in Divakaruni's select novels**

By strategically incorporating food memories and rituals in her novels, Divakaruni establishes a strong connect between culinary and cultural identity through which slowly, her displaced characters are able to find some semblance of rootedness and stability in their ambiguous, hybrid existence. This chapter will delve into culinary memories and rituals and how they signify to become identity markers of the original culture and assist the displaced women protagonists to recreate 'home' space and regain their foothold in their family as well as society within the host country.

#### **Chapter Five: Culinary Healing in Divakaruni's select novels**

This chapter will seek to explore the transformative power of food, especially as reflected in the selected works of Divakaruni. Through the culinary presence, the lives of her characters undergo tremendous changes – from being peripheral and powerless, they now become active agents of change who contribute significantly not only to their own personal growth and development, but also the enrichment of their

home and host culture. And the narrative techniques used by the author to achieve this is what will be explored here. Archetypal and Semiotic theories will be referred to again to understand the underlying ‘structures’ beneath the culinary motif and the way it ‘signifies’, nourishes, and nurtures the ‘starved’ settlers and recreates a home in the host land for them.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The concluding chapter will reiterate and reemphasize the significance of food motif in Divakaruni’s fiction and its relevance in bringing about recovery and healing in the lives of diasporic characters depicted in her works. The research findings based on the primary texts chosen for this study will be presented. The crucial role that the depiction of food memories and food rituals play in the given texts will be examined. The conclusion will be a summation of the core points analysed and explored in each chapter.