

# Historical Imagination in the Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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**Abstract:** *Historical imagination in literature serves as a bridge between factual history and creative storytelling, allowing authors to reinterpret the past while addressing contemporary social, cultural, and psychological concerns. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent Indo-American novelist, utilizes historical imagination in her novels to explore the complexities of identity, migration, gender, and cultural memory. Through her narratives, she reconstructs historical events and social contexts, blending myth, folklore, and historical realities to craft rich, multidimensional worlds. Her works, such as *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, and *Queen of Dreams*, demonstrate a profound engagement with history that transcends chronological constraints, enabling readers to experience the emotional and social nuances of past eras. By examining the interplay of memory, myth, and history in her novels, this study highlights Divakaruni's unique approach to historical imagination, emphasizing its role in shaping cultural consciousness and enhancing narrative depth.*

**Keywords:** Historical Imagination, Novels, Cultural Memory, Identity, Migration

## I. INTRODUCTION

History, as traditionally documented, has often been a chronicle of the powerful kings, warriors, politicians, and conquerors. The experiences of women, particularly those from colonized or non-Western cultures, have been systematically erased, marginalized, or filtered through a patriarchal lens. The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed a significant literary turn towards recovering these lost voices, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands at the forefront of this movement.

Divakaruni's historical imagination is not concerned with the fidelity to chronological events alone. Instead, it is driven by a central question: What did history *feel* like for the women who lived it? Her project is to fill the "imaginative gaps" (a term coined by historian Simon Schama) left by official records. She ventures into the uncharted territory of women's inner lives their desires, fears, rebellions, and silences. This approach aligns with what Linda Hutcheon has theorized as "historiographic metafiction," a genre that self-consciously blurs the line between history and fiction, questioning the very nature of historical truth.

This paper will explore the multifaceted nature of Divakaruni's historical imagination through four key thematic lenses:

**The Epic Re-visioned:** Deconstructing patriarchal myths in *The Palace of Illusions*.

**Mythic-Historical Syncretism:** Weaving together legend and the immigrant experience in *The Mistress of Spices*.

**The personal as Historical:** Connecting family sagas to national narratives in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*.

**Reclaiming the Sovereign Feminine:** Resurrecting a forgotten queen in *The Last Queen*.

By analyzing these works, we will demonstrate how Divakaruni's fiction creates a counter-narrative that is essential for a complete and humane understanding of history.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HISTORY, FICTION, AND THE FEMINIST GAZE

To fully appreciate Divakaruni's project, it is essential to situate it within a theoretical framework that connects historiography, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies.

### **Historiographic Metafiction:**

Linda Hutcheon's concept is pivotal. Historiographic metafiction "refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems" (Hutcheon, 105). Divakaruni's novels are prime examples; they are thoroughly researched yet openly fictional, forcing the reader to confront the constructed nature of all historical narratives, including the patriarchal ones she seeks to dismantle.

### **The Feminist Critique of History:**

Feminist historians like Gerda Lerner have long argued that women have been "hidden from history." Divakaruni's work operationalizes this critique in literary form. She embodies what Adrienne Rich termed "re-vision" the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 35). By entering the Mahabharata or the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh from a female perspective, she performs this essential act of re-vision.

### **Subaltern Speech:**

The Subaltern Studies Collective, particularly through the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, questioned whether the subaltern (the oppressed, the marginalized) could ever truly "speak" within dominant historical discourses. Divakaruni's novels can be read as a literary attempt to grant speech to the subaltern woman. Her protagonists the queen, the epic heroine, the immigrant are all figures whose complexity has been flattened by tradition. Divakaruni gives them a platform, attempting to circumvent the structures that silence them.

### **THE EPIC RE-VISIONED: DRAUPADI'S FIRE IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS**

Divakaruni's most audacious act of historical imagination is the re-telling of the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, from the perspective of its central female character, Panchaali (Draupadi). The Mahabharata is a cornerstone of Indian cultural and historical consciousness, but its narrative is dominated by male heroes like Arjuna, Yudhishtira, and Bhishma.

### **Claiming Narrative Authority:**

The novel's opening line, "I was born from fire," immediately establishes Draupadi's agency and mystical power, a stark contrast to her traditional origin story where she emerges to be wife to five brothers. By employing a first-person narrative, Divakaruni plunges the reader into Draupadi's subjective experience. We witness her political acumen, her deep friendship with Krishna, her complex relationship with her mother-in-law, Kunti, and her secret, unresolved attraction to Karna, the epic's great tragic figure. This interiority transforms her from a pawn in a male-dominated war into a strategist, a critic, and a feeling human being.

### **Re-interpreting Key Events:**

The central traumatic event of the epic Draupadi's public disrobing (cheer-haran) is re-imagined not just as a humiliation of the Kuru dynasty but as a profound violation of a woman's selfhood. Divakaruni focuses on Draupadi's terror, her rage, and her spiritual resilience. Similarly, her polyandrous marriage is explored not as a divine mandate but as a challenging social reality that she must navigate with intelligence and emotional fortitude. As Draupadi reflects in the novel, "All my life, I have been known as the other half of my husbands... But I have a story, too" (Divakaruni, *Palace*, 1). This single statement encapsulates Divakaruni's entire project.

### **Challenging Patriarchal Myth:**

By centering Draupadi's story, Divakaruni exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of the epic. She questions the motives of the male heroes, the righteousness of the war, and the price paid by women for men's conflicts. The "palace of illusions" (Maya Sabha) becomes a metaphor for the illusory nature of power and glory, a truth that Draupadi, from her marginalized-yet-central position, understands better than anyone. Scholar Anjana Narayan notes that Divakaruni's Draupadi "is not merely a victim but a strategist, a speaker of truth to power, and a woman with a keen understanding of the political games men play" (Narayan, 45).

### **MYTHIC-HISTORICAL SYNCRETISM: TILO'S JOURNEY IN *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES***

While not a historical novel in the conventional sense, *The Mistress of Spices* demonstrates a different facet of Divakaruni's historical imagination: the use of myth to frame and understand contemporary historical experiences, specifically that of immigration.

#### **The Immigrant as Mythic Figure:**

The protagonist, Tilo, is an immortal mistress of spices who travels from a mythic past in India to present-day Oakland, California. Her character bridges a timeless, legendary India with the gritty reality of the American immigrant experience. The spices in her shop are not just condiments; they are repositories of cultural memory, ancient wisdom, and healing power. Through Tilo's interactions with a diverse cast of Indian immigrants, Divakaruni charts a history of displacement, cultural negotiation, and the struggle for identity.

#### **Magic Realism as Historical Lens:**

Divakaruni employs magic realism to articulate the disorienting and wondrous experience of living between two cultures. Tilo's magical powers are a metaphor for the unique strengths and cultural knowledge that immigrants possess. However, the novel also explores the limits of this magic; Tilo cannot solve all problems with a pinch of turmeric, just as cultural heritage alone cannot shield immigrants from racism, loneliness, or economic hardship. This blending of the fantastical with the historically specific realities of diaspora creates a powerful narrative about the enduring presence of the past in the present. As critic Prabhjot Parmar observes, "Divakaruni uses the allegorical framework of the mistress to explore the complexities of a hyphenated identity, making the history of migration a central, mythic event in the lives of her characters" (Parmar, 112).

### **PERSONAL AS HISTORICAL: THE CHRONICLES OF CALCUTTA AND AMERICA IN *SISTER OF MY HEART AND THE VINE OF DESIRE***

This duology shifts the focus from national epics and myth to the intimate space of the family, demonstrating how the currents of history shape personal destinies.

#### **Family Secrets and National History:**

The story of Sudha and Anju begins in a traditional, upper-caste Bengali household in Calcutta. The mysterious circumstances of their fathers' deaths are a family secret that mirrors the lingering shadows of post-colonial India class conflict, political violence, and the burden of tradition. The novels meticulously depict the social history of Bengali life: the rituals, the expectations for women, the claustrophobic yet comforting world of the joint family. The personal struggles of the two cousins with love, marriage, and autonomy are inextricably linked to these larger social and historical forces.

#### **The Diasporic Continuum:**

*The Vine of Desire* continues the story in the United States, exploring the second phase of the historical immigrant narrative. The contrast between Sudha's life as a single mother in India and her experiences in California highlights different forms of patriarchal pressure and female resilience. The novel delves into the history of skilled Indian immigration in the late 20th century, tackling issues of interracial relationships, the pressures of the American dream, and the redefinition of family and sisterhood in a new land. The "history" here is the ongoing, living history of diaspora. The personal traumas, joys, and conflicts of Sudha and Anju become a microcosm of the collective experience of a generation of Indian women navigating rapid social change on a global scale.

### **RECLAIMING THE SOVEREIGN FEMININE: THE RESURGENCE OF JINDAN KAUR IN *THE LAST QUEEN***

Divakaruni's most recent foray into historical fiction marks a return to a documented historical figure, but one largely forgotten by popular history: Maharani Jindan Kaur, the last wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and mother of Maharaja Duleep Singh.

### **Resurrecting a Forgotten Queen:**

*The Last Queen* is a quintessential act of reclamation. Jindan Kaur was a formidable regent and a key leader of the Sikh resistance against the British Empire after her husband's death. British historians often depicted her as a seductive and scheming figure ("the Messalina of the Punjab") to discredit her political influence. Divakaruni, through a compelling first-person narrative, overturns this colonial and sexist caricature.

### **History from the Zenana:**

The novel provides a vivid portrayal of the Lahore court, not from the battlefield or the throne room, but from the zenana (the women's quarters), which is re-imagined as a center of political intrigue, intelligence, and strategy. We see Jindan's political education, her fierce love for her son, and her unwavering commitment to her kingdom. Her story is one of war, betrayal, imprisonment, and epic escape. By telling it from her perspective, Divakaruni restores Jindan's agency and highlights the brutal tactics of the British East India Company in annexing the Punjab.

### **A Contemporary Resonance:**

The story of a powerful woman being maligned and imprisoned by a patriarchal colonial power has strong contemporary resonance. It connects the historical dots between 19th-century imperialism and ongoing struggles for female leadership and postcolonial sovereignty. As Divakaruni herself stated in an interview, "I wanted to bring her voice back, because she was silenced for so long... She was a freedom fighter, and her story is one of incredible courage" (Divakaruni, *The Hindu* Interview). The novel is a powerful reminder that history is not just about the rulers who held power, but about those who fought to retain it against overwhelming odds.

## **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF RECLAMATION**

Across these diverse novels, Divakaruni employs a consistent set of narrative strategies to execute her historical imagination:

**The First-Person Voice:** This is her most powerful tool. It creates immediacy, fosters empathy, and directly challenges the third-person, "objective" voice of traditional history.

**Emotional and Domestic Focus:** By detailing the sensory and emotional worlds of her characters the feel of a sari, the taste of food, the pain of childbirth, the intimacies of friendship she grounds grand historical narratives in tangible human experience.

**Blending Genres:** She seamlessly mixes historical fact with myth, folklore, and magic realism. This syncretism reflects a non-Western worldview where the boundaries between the historical, the spiritual, and the mythical are more fluid.

**Intertextuality:** Her novels are in constant dialogue with other texts the Mahabharata, colonial records, Bengali literature. This intertextuality highlights the multiplicity of perspectives and the instability of any single historical account.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's body of work constitutes a profound and ongoing project of historical recovery. Her historical imagination is a form of ethical and creative labor that corrects the omissions and distortions of the past. By giving voice to Draupadi, Tilo, Sudha, Anju, and Jindan Kaur, she does more than just tell compelling stories; she challenges us to reconsider what we accept as history.

She demonstrates that history is not a closed book but an open field of interpretation, and that the stories of women their resilience, their intelligence, their love, and their rage are not peripheral but central to our understanding of the human past. In a world where women's voices and agency are still contested, Divakaruni's novels are both a literary triumph and a political necessity. They ensure that the fires lit by the Draupadis and Jindan Kaur of history are not extinguished by the silence of the record books, but are instead fanned into a blaze that illuminates the path for generations to come.

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