

Altered Perspectives

The Unknown Errors of our Lives
by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American poet and fiction writer whose recent book entitled, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), is a collection of short stories. Whereas Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and other Stories* (1988) depicts a wide range of immigrants celebrating their new frontier in a changing America and Jhumpa Lahiri's ironic, sometimes disturbing interpretations of the maladies of immigrant experience focus on both men and women, Divakaruni's forte appears to lie in delving within the inner landscapes of Indian American women. Eight out of the nine stories in this collection mirror how the values and attitudes of the two cultures jostle with each other, within the minds of the women protagonists. The issues that come up are universal and human, such as the process of change, the re-negotiation of relationships, primarily with oneself and also with one's parents, children, siblings or spouses.

In one sense, the title of the book relates to all the stories, which do show how humans inevitably commit errors, knowingly or otherwise, whether they lie in their perception or the choices they make. The more significant link within the collection of stories lies in the manner in which these portray a growth within the characters, as they face the consequences of their actions or attitudes. Divakaruni's style of narration pays special attention to details, until subtly, but perceptibly, a delicately nuanced alteration takes place, in the perspectives of her women protagonists. Seen from one aspect, all characters are looking for love and they gradually discover different meanings of it.

"Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" is a sensitively narrated story, in which the

widow, Mrs Dutta, errs by selling her house and proceeding to America, to make her "home" with her son's family. Divakaruni is at her best in the poignant portrayal of the old woman's coming to terms with her disappointments, as she encounters new ways and suffers the peeling away of her illusions. She is lonelier than before as she tries to cope with the generation gap with her son's family, coupled with a cultural gap with their adopted Americanised ways, and her surroundings. The story brings to mind Anita Desai's "Winterscape", which depicts a similar situation, although Divakaruni's protagonist changes and evolves through her experience, much more significantly. When Mrs Dutta compares her working daughter-in-law's assertive, self-satisfying way of life with that of the women of her own time, she initially feels resentment and thinks: "We were good wives and daughters-in-law, good mothers. Dutiful, uncomplaining. Never putting ourselves first." Yet, a private re-view of her own life does jolt her into a reconsideration of her conditioned attitudes. She moves towards an alteration of her perspective and acknowledges: "The more we bent, the more people pushed us, until one day we'd forgotten that we could stand up straight." Her own continual attempts at earning the love of her son's family receive no more than a lukewarm response and she realizes that she is merely being tolerated. Her decision to return to India and live near her old friend springs from her emerging clarity that she must seek her happiness in other ways than the traditional one of being a needed member of her son's family and also that in the given situation, she needs to figure out an alternative way of loving him.

Two of the stories in this collection bring the brother-sister relationship into focus. One of them is "The Intelligence of Wild Things", narrated in the first person by the sister, who is addressed as 'Didi'. As she expresses it, it is about trying to find "a way back across the immigrant years, across the frozen warp of the heart". Both 'Didi' and her brother, Tarun, have been living in America for many years but have lost the warmth of that tie with each other. After a visit to her dying mother in India, 'Didi' visits Tarun, with the intention of requesting him to pay one last visit to their mother. The story opens with the brother and sister on a boat trip together, with 'Didi' introspecting upon the cumulative errors of neglect, which have led to the rifts between the three of them. Although Divakaruni has very well captured the angst of a family slowly growing apart, she strikes an optimistic chord before rounding off this open-ended story. As brother and sister wonderingly notice a white bird, which they both find similar to the "sharash" of Bengal, they instinctively experience some of the closeness they had earlier shared. The white wings of the bird flying towards the sun symbolise the hope of possibilities for the sister. She gets an insight that while approaching Tarun about their mother, she should tap the wisdom of the traditional manner of telling tales, which would mean, "without guilt or blame, out of sorrow and hope, in honour of memory. Maybe he won't listen, and maybe he will." What matters in the present is simply their moment of intimacy.

The stories reflect various shades of an immigrant woman's relationship with her parent culture, according to her individual understanding and response to it. The title story, "The Unknown Errors

of Our Lives" shows how the young Ruchira gives an artistic expression to her need "to connect" with her Indian heritage, by secretly working on her private collection of "mythic series" paintings. She paints life-enhancing images from Indian myths and legends and puts in human faces of her own family elders, her future husband, Biren, and herself. She thus creates in them an immediate relevance and meaning for herself, a private fiction which provides her an empowering value base, amidst the pressures of her American life. For instance, although Biren has already confessed to her about a brief, misjudged past liaison with a woman of ambiguous identity, she goes through agonizing doubts about her marriage, after meeting his pregnant ex-lover. She gets her answer after she feels inspired to add the face of a baby boy on her painting of the wish fulfilling Kalpataru tree, trusting that whether or not there is such a tree she would have the wisdom to deal with the issue, when needed. She knows that she loves Biren dearly and the story gently reveals how she moves towards finding a new meaning of love, by learning to accept the consequences of his error.

In both "The Lives of Strangers" and "The Names of Stars in Bengali", the protagonists' journeys to India become symbolic of an inner quest. Although what they discover, turns out to be different from what they thought they were seeking. In "the Lives of Strangers", Leela's visit to India brings to the surface, the unresolved tensions, within her diasporic consciousness. Seeped in her pragmatic American upbringing, emphasizing rationality, individual responsibility and detachment, in India she has to contend with the seductive concept of destiny and the lure of intimacy. Through certain incidents and relationships, she begins to discover hitherto unknown aspects within herself, although the end of the story leaves her somewhat baffled, perhaps a little like

Adela in *A Passage to India*, by her inability to make a passage to what she has barely begun to understand as "India". The underlying tone of the third person narration successfully captures the distancing from the parent country which might colour the perspective of a second generation, non-resident Indian, like Leela, whose approach appears more like that of a foreigner. For instance, when she hears the guide accompanying the pilgrimage to Amarnath, saying "something about sin and expiation", it "seems to her *terribly complex and thus very Indian*." At another time, she thinks that India is like "entering a murky, primal lake" in which "she has to watch her step."

"The Names of Stars in Bengali" engages with the ambivalent web of attachment and detachment, which shapes the experiencing sensibility of immigrants. As the protagonist, addressed as "Khuku", visits her mother in her native village in Bengal, along with her two sons, and revives the warmth of her tie with her mother, she begins to see that her relationship with her mother country is more complex. There's an interesting juxtaposition of Khuku's point of view with that of her children. The children are clearly outsiders, "the little Americans" who approach the visit as an adventure, until one of them falls sick. "Khuku's" continual introspection reveals her attempt to make sense of her mixed response to a changing India, which does not sufficiently interest her with her craving for an India that she would like to believe in and pass on to her children. Her growth is only towards greater self awareness.

"The Blooming Season for Cacti" is narrated in the first person, by Mira, who has shifted to America, after losing her mother in the communal riots, in Bombay. It appears to be the weakest story in the collection; perhaps Divakaruni's own "unknown error". She has stirred so many thematic chords, such as guilt, the trauma

of past experiences and particularly, lesbian love, which she has not been able to explore, beyond the surface level.

Divakaruni has a simplicity and clarity of style, which is stamped with an unmistakable flavour. She conveys emotions without sentimentality, through the use of suggestive images, metaphors and understatement. There's the terse line about the changing mother and daughter relationship: "They were coming to terms with erosion, how it changes the balance of a landscape." The old widow's realization of her redundancy in her son's family is imparted through an image: "A silhouette—man, wife, children—joined on a wall, showing her how alone she is in this land of young people."

In the context of contemporary Indian diasporic women's writing, the significance of this collection of stories lies in its sensitive exploration of the migrant state and how it can engender the anguish of displacement as well as the pain of growth and an altered and sometimes more enriched perspective. The stories lead us within the intimate, private worlds of these immigrant women characters and foreground their movement towards attaining self-awareness, maturity and creative possibilities for living in their diasporic present. Without any statements or philosophising, they fictionalise their protagonists' attempt at finding a meaning in their lives, from within a bicultural awareness, by re-creating self and its relationships, which can provide a homeland of its own. The book would not only be of interest to diasporic Indian-American women whose lives it reflects but would also engage a wider readership, since the stories mediate between cultures, to explore newer aspects of the all embracing quest for love and connected-ness.

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