

## NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORIC SPACE IN DIVAKARUNI'S *THE UNKNOWN ERRORS OF OUR LIVES*

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### Abstract

*The paper documents and analyzes the experiences of the immigrants caught at crossroad moments and their struggle for identity. The study looks into the entrenched gender bias and highlights the painful existence of women immigrants who try to adapt to the norms of the new world. The study further focuses on the generational gaps within the diasporic community, erosion of values and their impact on relationships.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's collection of short stories *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* focuses on human relationships amidst the conflicting cultural codes in the bicultural space. In these stories the women protagonists while negotiating their identity face emotional turmoil. Recollection of their roots in India often plays a significant role in rediscovering their identities. The short story "Mrs. Datta writes a Letter" is partly epistolary and portrays the adjustment blues of sixty years old Indian widow to the new lifestyle and social norms in the USA. Her inability to adapt herself to the new world ways isolates her from the members of her family. She feels that she is a misfit in the Americanised family of her son and decides to go back to India. An in-depth analysis of the story reveals that the conflict is due to lack of understanding and love. Shyamoli has no respect for her mother-in-law. She fails in understanding that even educated people need orientation to get acquainted with the norms of a new country. It is not strange if Mrs. Datta, an old widow who spends her time as a housewife is unaware of the new world practices. Divakaruni does not portray her character as adamant or arrogant. What new immigrants like Mrs. Datta need is care and support which help them in getting adjusted to the new life style. The rude comments behind her back and arguments between her daughter-in-law and her son hurt Mrs. Datta's feelings.

Shyamoli distances herself from the cultural traditions of India and her children have no exposure to Indian culture. Her children's behaviour towards their grandmother is the result of erosion of values. Shyamoli is responsible for their antagonism towards their grandmother. The relationship between Mrs. Datta and her son Sagar is free from antagonism, but he fails in creating the impression in her that she is not an outsider but a valuable member of the family. Both Shyamoli and Sagar ignore Mrs. Datta's rich exposure to the cultural heritage of India and their children lose the opportunity of learning from her the traditions of India and the values they carry with them. It is a journey with in to Mrs. Datta. She rediscovered her identity. The issues that create conflict between Mrs. Datta and Shyamoli and her children are trivial and can be sorted out amicably. Out of habit Mrs. Datta gets up early in the morning, and her activities disturb Shyamoli who is still asleep. Beena Agarwal points out, "Even the habits like early raising and chanting Mantra were a hurdle in the routine of Sagar and Shyamoli" (139). They consider it as a distraction and they criticize her for robbing them off their peace of mind.

Sagar tells his mother not to get up so early. Then Mrs. Datta gets up late, and this time occupies the bathroom when the children are in need of using it. She does not believe in preserving cooked food in the refrigerator, and dumps the remaining food in the garbage. Shyamoli expects her to save the food for use the next day. Mrs. Datta cooks traditional Indian cuisine. Shyamoli complains of too much oil in the food which spoils their health. Above all these differences, Mrs. Datta has to face the outrage of her daughter-in-law though there is no one on one confrontation between them.

Shyamoli's American neighbour expresses her annoyance over Mrs. Datta's act of hanging clothes on the fence. Shyamoli is serious about the developments in the house after the arrival of Mrs. Datta. She argues with Sagar and pours out her mind. "I know. That's why I tried so hard. I know having her here is important to you. But I can't do it any longer. I just can't. Some days I feel like taking the kids and leaving. Shyamoli's voice disappears into a sob" (Divakaruni 30). Sagar loves his mother, and he is sandwiched between his mother and wife. He tries to pacify the anger of Shyamoli but does not take any steps to make his mother believe that she is not an outsider and she is a respectable member of the family. The relationship between Sagar and Shyamoli is cordial. However, Shyamoli is financially independent and is not a submissive wife. She does not hesitate to dictate terms to Sagar. Gender bias has no place in their relationship.

The relationship between the children and their grandmother Mrs. Datta has no traces of either affection or respect. Shyamoli does not pay any attention to helping the children in cultivating human values. They are not even courteous towards their grandmother. They are indifferent and even rude. All these experiences make Mrs. Datta rediscover her identity. A letter from her friend Mrs. Basu in Calcutta and her reply play a significant role in the building of Mrs. Datta's character in the story. She struggles to answer her friend's question whether she is happy in America. Adriana Elena Stoican in her critical analysis points out: The act of postponing the writing of the final letter is related to the character's hesitation and need to process the phenomena encountered. Another significance of the imaginary confessions is that they enable Mrs. Datta to select the content of what she chooses to communicate. Letter-writing becomes a channel of mediating upon disturbing aspects, while concealing them from a potential letter-reader. (62) Though cultural divide appears to be the cause for the conflict, erosion of values is the main reason for the strained relationship between Mrs. Datta and her son's family. Shyamoli's neighbour thinks that Mrs. Datta has violated her space by hanging clothes on the fence. Shyamoli thinks that her social status is at stake because of Mrs. Datta. She is worried about what the American neighbours think of her. She does not bother even if her stature is diminished in her mother-in-law's view.

The story "The Intelligence of Wild Things" is about a sister's attempt to persuade her younger brother to fulfill the last wish of their dying mother back home in India. Their mother Malabika, a widow yearns to see her children before she dies. Tarun is attached to his mother and prefers to stay with her in Calcutta rather than going elsewhere in search of better opportunities. However, Malabika has some apprehensions. She is worried about the influences of political activism and Naxal movement on her son. She insists him to go to USA for higher studies. "I said he was ungrateful, a burden to me. Didn't he see that I couldn't sleep at night, worrying, because he was here? You can imagine how I hated saying it-I could see the abhimaan on his face, like a wound- but it was the only thing I knew that would make him go" (Divakaruni 42). Tarun protests and finally he relents. At that time, Malabika does not know that her good intentions misfire and strain their relationships forever. Tarun after his move to Vermont contacts his elder sister who is in Sacramento for emotional support, but she is occupied with her family issues and do not invite him to her house. Her husband Sandeep too ignores the importance of getting him out of isolation. He strongly opposes the idea of inviting him to their home. Separation from his mother and the cold reception from his elder sister hurt Tarun.

Wild creatures possess intelligence which helps them in protecting themselves against the oncoming dangers. Human beings often suffer from the failure of such intelligence. Selfishness, priorities, expectations and assumptions make them insensible and they fail to understand and assess the closest members of the family. It is a failure of intelligence when Malabika forces her son to migrate to USA. It is a failure of intelligence when Tarun's elder sister ignores his phone calls. It is a failure of intelligence when she does not pay serious attention to her mother's letter, asking her to give emotional support to her brother. "I hated this change in myself, this shrinking of sensibility, this failure of intelligence. But I didn't know what to do about it. Did anyone else suffer from such a disease?" (43). After her return from India, the sister visits her brother at Vermont to fulfil the last wish of her mother. There are no traces of intensity in the relationship between the sister and brother. The intimate relationship between them during their childhood flashes as a memory in her mind. She contemplates on the concept of love and the illusions that associate with it. "My mother is dying- perhaps she is already dead. How much of my husband's fondness for me is based on the convenience of give-and-take? In how many ways will my daughters and I disappoint each other as they grow

from my life into their own?" (49). The boat ride reconnects them to the nature and the sight of a migrant bird which looks like Sharash, a marsh crane often spotted in the country side of Bengal rejuvenates the sensibilities in Tarun. He becomes nostalgic and addresses his elder sister in Bengali for the first time in the trip, and rekindles hope in her. She decides to tell him their story, from the childhood, the struggle their widowed mother has undergone to bring them up, her motive behind forcing him to leave India and finally her last wish.

Through the shifts in time and space, Divakaruni depicts the consequences of misfired good intentions and emotional breakdowns which influence human relationships. The story "The Lives of Strangers" revolves around the concept of destiny and its impact on human relationships. People come closer and drift away on the time axis. There are forces which are beyond the control and perception of human beings. The second generation Indian-American young woman Leela like most of the Americans believes in individualism. However, her pilgrimage to Amarnath changes her attitude towards life. When her boyfriend Dexter deserts her, Leela loses interest in life and attempts to commit suicide. She swallows sleeping pills and then calls for help. In this story, Divakaruni brings out how unsympathetic and inhuman people can be, when they are driven by superstitions. Pilgrimage is the main event in the story and at the end Leela comes to the conclusion that the decisions taken by her at the individual level alone are not responsible for both the positive and negative happenings in her life including the failed relationship with Dexter, and she gets some relief. She feels that she is a new being with a greater perception of the self and its social sphere. The transformation is not the result of the spiritual vibrations that emanate from shrines. It is not the result of the holy site of the divine in the shrine. It is not the result of listening to the pithy saying or powerful discourses from spiritual leaders. It is the result of her brief association with an old woman who is considered to be accursed by fellow pilgrims.

From their discussions Leela comes to know that she has lost her husband just a couple of years after her marriage and she loses all her property in the court case filed by her in-laws. Her daughter-in-law insists to stay separately with her husband. During the pilgrimage, she is the only one who suffers from the food poison. Leela compares her own life with of Mrs. Das and feels that she too is born under an unlucky star. She recollects many incidents in her life that strengthen this belief. At the age of four, she meddles with a pot containing steaming lentil and it splashes on her. She falls from a bicycle right in front of a moving car. While travelling with her mother in a car, a stone hits the windshield, and the splintered glass fill her lap. In the dead of the night, an electrical wire in her bed room catches fire. Her attempt to commit suicide is a near death experience. In the pilgrimage to Amarnath Mrs. Das suffers from frost bite and the doctor in the camp does not allow her to continue her journey. She has to go down the hill for further medical aid. Leela follows her against the advice of her aunt Seema. They both check into the only available room on the top floor. That night torrential rain hits, the roof collapses and a piece of wood hits Leela. However, she saves Mrs. Das who is still asleep. Later, when Leela opens her eyes she is in a room surrounded by aunt Seema and other pilgrims. They all tell her that Leela's association with the ill fated Mrs. Das is the cause for the mishap. When Mrs. Das tries to enter the room to check that Leela is doing well they prevent her entry. At their insistence, Leela tells Mrs. Das that she too believes that she is accursed. Mrs. Das leaves.

While travelling back from the pilgrimage, Leela is puzzled to notice that Mrs. Das is not in the bus. One of the pilgrims says that Mrs. Das has left the camp sometime in the night even without picking up her suitcase. Leela feels disturbed. The layered meaning in the story suggests that Leela believes that she too is accursed, and her association might be adding more hardships to Mrs. Das. To save her from the added misfortune Leela sends her away without assessing the impact of her action on the already battered feelings of Mrs. Das. However her good intention is powerless before the invisible forces of the destiny. She cannot even find out whether Mrs. Das is alive or not.

Beena Agarwal contends:

Divakaruni's main occupation in this story is the celebration of humanitarian and spiritual values rooted in the soil of India. More than cultural content, her diasporic sensibility is guided by the sanctity of human relationship and it is the only realisation that generates the real sense of belongingness, rescuing the suffering humanity from being fallen in the seal of despair and despondency. (145)

Though the concept of destiny plays a significant role in the development of the story, Divakaruni makes no attempts to untie the knots of the theory of “cause and effect” and the principle of karma. The story “The Love of a Good Man” brings the role of ethics on human relationships to the forefront. Aristotle says, “The human goodness consists in action with virtue (qtd. in Bebedelis 12). According to Aristotle human action should be directed by logos, the faculty which discriminates between right and wrong. Those who befall to traits like selfishness, distance themselves from goodness. Their actions do not contain any trace of virtue. The protagonist’s father in the story shirks away his householder’s responsibility, ignores the pleas of his wife and the ire of his teenage daughter, Monisha. He moves to USA for reasons he never reveals and does not bother about his wife and daughter. Divakaruni reveals their agony through the memories of Monisha. “And though my mother and I conversed about many things-my college professors, a new movie, the rising price of Ilish fish-we rarely spoke about what we really thought. We buried our hurts inside our bodies, like shrapnel” (Divakaruni 90).

Monisha’s mother dies of cancer and Monisha moves to USA with her husband Dilip. The memories of her mother often flare up her hatred towards her father. After 10 years he casually walks out of his family, Monisha’s father wants to visit his grandson, before he dies. Monisha opposes the proposal sternly and she softens when she sees her son playing with her husband. Their togetherness ignites a hazy notion of her childhood days. At the insistence of Dilip, she agrees for her father’s visit just for one night. However, forgiving him is anathema to her. She even does not like her husband behaving well with her father. The flashing light of the toy ambulance brought by her father for her son reminds her of the poignant memories of her mother’s last day. When her father tries to explain indirectly, the reasons behind abandoning them, she becomes furious. She does not talk back, but her protests take shape in her mind. “What he did, no amount of talk can make it right. He’d taken my mother’s life, precious and fragile as this silk I am wearing, and ripped it apart. And now he wanted the easy solace of confession” (111). That night when her father falls asleep reading a book, without switching of light, and still wearing the reading glasses Monisha removes those glasses and switches of light. She does not consider this gesture an act of forgiveness, but somewhere in her mind a flash of thought reminds her that her mother may not agree with her. “She’d have said ‘Ocean is nothing but water drop upon water drop’” (116).

Divakaruni uses jasmine flowers as an object of reconciliation. Monisha’s mother loves Jasmine flowers. She even raises jasmine plants in the garden of their home, but stops wearing those flowers after her husband deserts her. When she dies, Monisha covers her body, with a heap of jasmine flowers. When her father visits her for the first time after 10 years, she keeps jasmine flowers in a vase in his bedroom. Dilip plays the role of a good man in the reunion of the father and daughter. In the story “What the Body Knows” Divakaruni focuses on the complexity of the human mind. She brings out its impulses and emotions, and their effect on relationships. Sometimes individuals may find themselves in an intriguing situation, and it may lead to a new relationship. Once they get out of the transitional phase how they relate to each other depends on their perception of life, values, and their basic nature. Divakaruni addresses the thought patterns and impulses and the fluid relationships in the story “What the Body Knows.” According to Sri Aurobindo, mind sometimes is carried away by instinct, impulse, and emotional suggestions, and gives sanction to wrong thought and wrong action (8). In the story “What the Body Knows” Aparna gives birth to a baby boy through caesarean section, and after that her health deteriorates. The doctors conduct several tests and say that she has to undergo a second surgery for removing the intestinal adhesions but the surgeons find it risky and refuse to operate upon her as they think that she will die on the operation table. However, Dr. Byron Michaels considers it challenging and operates on her successfully. Everybody expects her to recover soon but the illness continues. The doctors arrive at the conclusion that Aparna’s vital energies are not cooperating as she has lost interest in life for reasons unknown. The Hospital staff and her husband Umesh are in a helpless situation. They cannot find any clue for rekindling in her the dynamic will to live.

At that juncture, Dr Byron has a one on one interaction with the patient Aparna. He explains to her his struggle in the theatre to save her. The interaction brings tremendous change in her attitude towards life. She feels emotional, and love springs up again rejuvenating her life force. Instinctively she touches him. “A blush springs up under his skin, but perhaps Byron-through the rest of her hospital stay, that’s how she’ll think of him, a Romantic poet resurrected in surgical greens-



understands, for he sits very still and allows her finger to circle the hollow between his jaw and cheek bone” (Divakaruni135). Dr. Byron visits Aparna every day. She enjoys his presence and even expects him to stay longer. Her thoughts switch between Dr. Byron and her husband Umesh. Gradually she regains her health, and after her discharge she works to get her figure back. On the first birthday of her son Ashish she goes to a mall and Dr. Byron who happens to be there spots her and invites her for a cup of coffee. She apologises. He touches her as if she were still his patient. His behaviour annoys her. Aparna no more harbours the gush of emotional feelings of love towards the surgeon. She notices a drastic change in his attitude. “The look in his eyes has changed, and is easier to read. Once she had sat up in her sickbed, rubbing lipstick into cracked lips, darkening sunken eyes with shaky fingers, longing for such a look from him. Now it fills her with sadness because it reveals him to be no different from other men” (142).

When he turns away, she drops his visiting card into a dustbin as she has no inclination to meet him again. At that moment, she closes her eyes. Images of her husband and son, and the three of them in a joyful mood flash in her mind. Aparna makes a journey into her psychic being and emerges wiser though she misses a step or two somewhere in the journey. The striking observation of the protagonist Mira in the story “The Blooming Season for Cacti” unties the knots of the complexity of human relationships. “My sister-in-law bit her lip and was silent. When she spoke again, her voice was different. For just a moment it made me see that all our lives have depths which strangers can never chart. And that’s what we were to each others, strangers” (182-83). Mira’s sister-in-law fails to look into the depths of Mira’s inner being, and cannot understand her antagonism towards marriage creating a gulf between them, and Mira moves away from her brother’s family, and even does not care to reply to his letters. Radhika too fails in looking into the inner being of Mira and cultivates lesbian feelings towards her which result in disaster. Through the backdrop of Bombay riots, erupted due to religious intolerance Divakaruni portrays the bruised persona of Mira. She loses her mother in the riots, and as she does not feel like staying in Bombay (now Mumbai) she leaves for Dallas where her elder brother has settled. The traumatic experience of the riots, anger, helplessness, and the poignant memories of her mother haunt her. She feels that her brother and sister-in-law can never understand her wounded feelings. “How could I tell them that when I thought of a man touching me, I smelled the water tank: smoke and corroding metal. Below, the streets were filled with weeping, struggling women, their blouses ripped open, their bodies pinned down right there, on the pavement’s dirt. The mob yelling encouragement. (183).

Mira moves to California though her brother suggests her to go to New Jersey where he has family friends. Mira chooses California as her mother used to consider it a place of fascination and prosperity. She starts her life as a receptionist in Sacramento in a restaurant run by Malik, an acquaintance of her brother. Malik’s second wife Radhika befriends with Mira. She tells her how Malik has cheated her by not revealing the fact that he is already married and has children. Mira comes to know of Radhika’s earlier attempt to commit suicide. Mira has to move into the apartment of Radhika and they spend their leisure time reading books together. Mira is at ease with English and so she reads and Radhika listens and provides additional details as she has greater exposure to the state of California, its flora and fauna and its deserts. One detail that fascinates them is about the blooming cacti in the book titled *The Great Deserts of the American West*. Malik introduces Mira to one of his regular customers Ajit, a second generation Indian- American. He even encourages Mira to date with him. Mira’s intimacy with Ajit disturbs Radhika, but Mira considers her disgusting and perverted. “She pushes away a wisp of hair from my face, kisses my cheek. ‘My love,’ she says. Then her lips are on mine” (200). Mira thrusts her away, calls Ajit, and spends the night with him. The next morning she comes to know that Radhika makes another attempt to commit suicide. Mira finds a short poem written on a piece of paper in Radhika’s room. In the poem, Radhika compares her heart to the Californian desert, and Mira to a thornless cactus flower. Divakaruni uses cactus metaphor to highlight the significance of the blossoming of love in hearts as arid as deserts.

The ending is symbolic. A shadow changes the balance of light in a photograph. Similarly, the relationship between Mira and Radhika tilts the balance in their lives. Mira leaves Sacramento on her further journey in life. Ruchira and Biren, Indian origin Americans in the title story “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives” consider that the arranged marriage system works better when compared to the western style of choosing life partners and they endorse the suggestion made by their parents who propose the marriage. To Ruchira her grandmother is a role model. Both Ruchira and

Biren appreciate the Indian cultural ethos. Whenever Ruchira is in dilemma, she thinks of her grandmother, and how she behaves if she faces similar situations. This helps her on many occasions even while dating with boys. Ruchira takes up painting, and her paintings depict the mythical images from the Indian legends. Through the thematic content of Ruchira's paintings, Divakaruni brings out Ruchira's fascination for Indian mythology, her patriotic feelings and her admiration towards the members of her family. Ruchira gives Hanuman the kind face of her father. Kamadhenu, the wish fulfilling cow, gets the face of her grandmother. She gives Jatayu the face of her grandfather, a freedom fighter who dies in Andaman prison. Ravan gets the face of British. The paintings establish Ruchira's cultural roots and patriotic fervour.

Ruchira has the habit of maintaining a journal of mistakes committed by her or wrong decisions taken by her. She believes, by doing so, she can take better and wiser decisions by not repeating the same mistakes. "She's come to terms with misjudgements and slippages, she's resigned to the fact that they'll always be a part of her life. If there are errorless people in the world, she doesn't want to know them. She's certain they'll be eminently disagreeable" (136). She appreciates Biren as he admits his mistakes, including his affair with a tattooed woman. Three days before her wedding day, when Ruchira thinks that everything is going well, the tattooed woman, Arlene, the ex girl friend of Biren, visits Ruchira and tells her that against Biren's advice, she has decided to keep the baby, and Biren is not aware of her decision. The revelation disturbs Ruchira. She even thinks of cancelling the wedding. Biren's honesty makes her re-examine her decision, and she decides to marry Biren. Divakaruni does not give any logical support to the sudden appearance and disappearance of Arlene. She does not accept money. What will she do after the birth of the baby? Will she try to prove that the baby is Biren's and sue him for financial support? Her motive is open for different interpretations. The ending of the story is melodramatic. The story "The Names of the Stars in Bengali" focuses on the process of healing of wounded relationships of long time. The protagonist's husband is from a hybrid family. His father is an Indian Hindu, and his mother is an American and belongs to Episcopalian Church. To the wedding, celebrated in a court house in Calcutta, the protagonist's mother and a few close relatives attend, and they all do not hesitate to express their disapproval of her choice. Though there is an air of strong disapproval, the relationships are not totally severed.

After three years, the protagonist's mother visits her daughter's family in California, but the mother and daughter fail to maintain cordial relationship though this time the subject of argument is not about the transnational marriage. They fight, argue, and at the end one of them, hurt and humiliated, runs out of the room with tears welling in her eyes. Divakaruni points out that the differences between the protagonist and her mother are due to the conflict in the lifestyles. "But of course what they were fighting about was not trivial-it was an entire geography (real and imagined), endangered by the knowledge of new things, by the transformation of desire" (259-260). The protagonist's mother decides to return to Calcutta and vows that she will never visit America again. A couple of years later, the protagonist decides to visit her mother along with her children, though she considers it risky to travel to India with the boys without her husband. Her trip to India makes a terrific impact on the relationships between families divided geographically and culturally too. The children who are in India for the first time find their grandmother's bed time stories fascinating and the surroundings interesting. The bamboo thicket and the pond behind the house are places of special attraction to them. Unlike in their American home they are allowed to sleep just by the side of their mother. They even feel like staying in India for ever. However, the protagonist and her mother do not say anything encouragingly with the children, and they are silent on this issue as they have in their minds the racial and religious differences between their father and the people in their ancestral home. In this traditional family of India, he remains the other they believe.

The situation takes a dramatic turn when the younger of the two children falls ill and as he does not recover quickly as expected, a telegram is sent to his father and he flies to India. The reception he gets is different this time. The child too recovers soon. The protagonist feels relieved when she finds that her husband is able to feel free in her childhood home and impresses everyone including the grandmother. "He dipped his head in a little bow- a gesture of old courtesy rarely seen nowadays, and the grandmother flushed with pleasure and said, long life to you Baba" (263-264). All these positive developments make the protagonist become nostalgic. While visiting places in her home town as a pillion rider on her cousin's scooter, she recollects her childhood days, and her

father's futile attempts to teach her the names of stars in Bengali. She feels the intense urge to know those names by consulting her father's books. She insists her cousin to drive the scooter faster and faster. The protagonist's desire to know the Bengali names of the stars is a metaphor. It is her urge to get back to her cultural roots. Her husband's ability in quickly and amicably mingling with the traditional Indian families showing respect and interest in their cultural practices hitherto unknown to him, and the children's adaptability to the new environment with enthusiasm have a positive impact on the relationships between the hybrid American family and its extended family in India. The short stories of Divakaruni touch the mind and soul of the reader by exploring the facets of gendered issues and marital relationships in the diasporic space. These stories are a powerful portrayal of the hearthrobs of women caught in crossroads and their struggle for identity.

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