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a woman's places

A conversation with Chitra B. Divakaruni

April 9, 1998

Chitra Divakaruni's writing, both fiction and nonfiction, is frequently rooted in the complexities of the home. In the poem "How I Became a Writer," for instance, she describes a fraught scene in her mother's Indian kitchen:

> ... Behind us, a clatter.
> Her hand stiffens over mine, stops.
> We're both listening for that heavy stumble,
> metallic hiss of pee against toilet pan, that shout
> arcing through the house like a rock, her name ...
>
> ... Her skin
> like light, so lovely I almost do not see
> the bruise
> spreading its yellow over the bone ...
>
> ... And I, my heart
> a magenta balloon thrown up
> into the sky, away
> from iron fisted gorillas, from the stench of piss,
> I *know* I'm going to be
> the best, the happiest writer in the world.

By balancing her characters on the high-tension wire of family, Divakaruni is able to explore the issues that compel her most -- identity, loyalty, independence, and tradition. Her explorations typically take place within the charged context of the immigrant experience, making for a writing style both narrow in focus and broad in scope.

Chitra B. Divakaruni

Divakaruni lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her

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husband and two young sons. She teaches creative writing at Foothill College, and since 1991 has served as the president of MAITRI -- a non-profit organization she helped found in the San Francisco area to help South Asian victims of domestic abuse. Divakaruni has written an award-winning collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995), along with four collections of poetry, and, most recently, a novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997).

Divakaruni spoke recently with *Atlantic Unbound*'s Katie Bolick. Her short story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" appears in the April issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

How would you describe the place India occupies in the American imagination?

That is a difficult question to answer, because every reader has a slightly different idea -- and then, of course, the media has an entirely different idea of India. India in the popular media culture is barbaric and splendid and spiritual all at once. Although I think India is unique and distinct in its nature, it is really just like America. One of the things I hope to show in my writing is that although the *ways* of thinking and doing things are different for Indians and Americans, the *reasons* we think and do those things are often the same.

I'm reminded of an American character in your novel *The Mistress of Spices*, who compliments the Indian heroine Tilo by saying she's more authentic than the "bougainvillea girls ... all fizzy laughter and flutter lashes." Tilo thinks to herself that "the bougainvillea girls are in their way as Indian as I. And who is

Character Sketch

Home
San Francisco area, California

Education
B.A., Calcutta University. M.A., Wright State University. Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley.

Age
41.

First Publication
A poem called "At Muktinath," in *Calyx*, 1986.

Last Book Read
Prize Stories 1997: The O. Henry Awards.

Writing Habits
I try to write every day. I start in the afternoon, after I've finished teaching, and write until the baby-sitter goes home. When I'm not teaching I try to write all day. Usually I produce a complete draft and then put it aside for a while;

to say which of us is more real."

That's the idea of the exoticizing of India. When some people think of India they think back to medieval times, and they see palaces and women in saris with jewels in their navels. Tilo's saying that India has changed. The diaspora has changed the lives of Indians immensely. Now that we are in so many places, and are of so many cultures, who is to say what an Indian is or is not? The definition of "Indian" has now expanded to include much more than the traditional woman in the sari with a dot on her forehead. The bougainvillea girls who have lived all their lives here are poised between two cultures and are therefore Indian in a whole new way -- but they are no less Indian. They are like many women I see around me all the time, the ones who are concerned about their identity and the question of being Indian. It's a space that they're negotiating and an identity they're reinventing constantly. I think it's very exciting how people change, how entire communities will take on new identities because of where they've lived or because of their history. That's what's happening in India and among Indians abroad.

after I've picked it up again and revised it I send it to several writer friends. Once I've received their feedback I revise it again.

Advice to Writers

Writing requires a lot of attention and care. You have to be prepared to give things up for writing.

Although your fiction concerns itself with Indian characters, it does not presuppose a knowledge of India. Do you have an audience in mind when you write?

When I write I try not to think about audience. When I begin to wonder what particular readers would think, what they would like, and what might offend them, I often come back to thinking about what my mother would have to say -- and that really freezes me. So I try to forget about it as I'm writing. But I have always thought in terms of gender rather than race, if I have thought about it at all. And since my writing is so much about women, I would ultimately say I write for women and intelligent men.

I would very much like women of all backgrounds to pick up my books, because women's experiences are much more similar than we ordinarily think. We can learn so much from one another. When I read something by Mary Gordon, Andrea Barrett, Mary Gaitskill, Louise Erdrich, or

Sandra Cisneros, for example -- people writing very different stories out of very different traditions -- I still see the heart of a woman's experience right there, and I can relate to that. I certainly hope people will do the same with my writing.

Indian writers have enjoyed a certain vogue of late. Last year, for instance, *The New Yorker* dedicated an entire issue to Indian writing, and Indian novels have been topping the best-seller lists in this country. How do you explain this American fascination with Indian writing?

So many wonderful multicultural voices have been coming to the forefront of American literature and publishing over the past ten to fifteen years that I think this phenomemon is part of a larger movement. There have been many Indian writers working in English for a long, long time, of course, and I think people have been reading them in America, but they haven't all appeared at once, or been on the best-seller lists. Certainly India's fiftieth anniversary of independence from the British last year focused a lot of attention on India. But I think there has also been a movement of Indian writers *to* America in the past ten to fifteen years as well -- Amitav Ghosh is in New York, Anita Desai is also on the East Coast, Vikram Chandra is in Washington D.C., and Bapsi Sidhwa is in Houston.

How do you feel about the influence Salman Rushdie wields over Indian fiction?

Rushdie has a strong influence, but I wouldn't say it is as overwhelming as *The New Yorker* issue led us to believe. He is a very important writer, but there are also many other important Indian writers -- among them V. S. Naipaul, who is of Indian origin and has influenced many writers enormously. And there are Indian vernacular writers who wield great influence, too -- over one another and over those writing in English. Most Indian writers have a vernacular that they relate to closely, even if they don't write in it. My mother tongue, for example, is Bengali.

Is there a community of Indian writers within this literary "movement"?

Yes, very much so. There are communities on all levels. In San Francisco's Bay Area, for example, we have an Indian writer's group that meets quite regularly. And I have been fortunate enough to meet and form friendships with a

number of Indian writers now living in the United States; we let one another know what is happening and show one another our writing from time to time. This sense of community is very important to me.

Do you ever feel that, as an Indian writer, you are *expected* to be supportive of other Indian writers?

I have noticed recently that just about every new Indian book that's coming out is sent to me to write a blurb. So, yes, there is a slight expectation. But I don't know from whom -- the writer or the publisher. There is no obligation, certainly. There are many Indian writers living here, and I associate with the ones that I really like and whose work I admire. But I also associate myself with a larger community of writers -- not ethnic based, just people whose work I like. There are several women writers whom I associate with, but there are also men writers whom I'm very fond of and whose work I like very much, and I'll do a lot for them if I can. So I don't see myself belonging primarily to one community of writers.

Yeats found being "rooted in one dear perpetual place" to be very important. As one who has had a home on two continents, what is your feeling about being rooted?

It is very important, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you physically live in just one place. My imaginative roots are in India, and always will be, so it is important for me to go back to India from time to time to immerse myself once again in that reality. But I write just as much about America, about what coming to America does to people and for people, and what immigrant people do to America and for America.

I think being an expatriate is good for writers. Moving away from a home culture often allows a kind of disjunctive perspective that is very important -- a slight sense of being the outsider, being out of place.

Gertrude Stein is supposed to have said, "What good are roots if you can't take them with you?" That sounds like what you're talking about.

Exactly. I bring my Indian roots with me no matter where I go. Right now I'm in the process of making a big change -- my husband and I are going to divide our time between Houston and California -- and I'm sure my Californian roots will be very much with me as I'm in Houston. New

landscapes and new people and new kinds of experience add a whole different energy and complexity to one's writing.

What do you think about the altered relationships writers have with their native landscapes once they've left? I would imagine, for instance, that thinking about landscapes is a nostalgic business for expatriates.

Yes. A good example of a place-evocative book is *Snow Falling on Cedars*, which is rooted in the landscape of the Northwest. One gets the sense as one is reading it that David Guterson is living in that landscape and walking that landscape and looking at that landscape as he's writing it. In my case -- or even in the case of Salman Rushdie and others who are certainly expatriates -- I think landscape becomes surreal in a way, symbolic. I find that often to be the case when I'm writing about India. The rural landscape that I grew up in when I was young, for example, has taken on a kind of potency which is more surreal than real.

Did you consider yourself a writer before you left India?

Not at all. I come from a very traditional, middle-class Indian family. I was expected to be educated and then get married and spend the rest of my time bringing up a family. I didn't think of myself as a writer until I'd been in America for many years. Coming to America made me into a writer by giving me a number of experiences that I really wouldn't have had in India. It wasn't until after I finished my studies and started working, when I was about thirty-one or thirty-two, that I began to write. I became more and more interested in exploring what it meant to be an immigrant woman living in the United States, and so I started writing mostly as self exploration.

Who are your influences?

Mahasweta Devi -- an Indian feminist writer -- has been a wonderful role model for me. She wrote about women's issues long before it became fashionable or political to do so -- when it was really dangerous -- and she suffered a lot for it. I look up to her enormously. She's in her seventies and still writing.

But a lot of women from different traditions have influenced me as well. When I started writing I didn't have any confidence in my writing. I didn't have the confidence

that my subject would be of interest to anyone. So reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* for example, was a big moment in my life. I thought, Wow, this is the kind of thing I want to write about. If she can do it, maybe I can too. The poet Adrienne Rich also gave me courage to write. Anita Desai gave me a lot of inspiration. And I've admired the work of Sandra Cisneros and Louise Erdrich immensely. I think of these writers as my extended community. They gave me permission, as it were, and inspiration, to write my stories.

In your story "The Ultrasound," the narrator worries that her "misplaced American notions of feminism and justice" have adversely affected her traditional Indian cousin's ideas of domesticity and motherhood. Have you had to tailor American feminism to fit your own experience?

Yes, absolutely. Here in the West feminism started largely as an academic movement of the privileged and the educated classes. In India there's a strong grassroots tradition of feminism in the rural areas. These women are not necessarily educated in the academic sense of the word. They can't write or discuss things philosophically, but they have a strong sense of what's right and what isn't, and are enormously courageous. That has been very exciting to me. There is, of course, an urban feminist movement, too, which is closer to feminism in the West. But I don't think we have something as strong as the grassroots Indian women's movement here in the West.

Your fiction features many women caught in violent domestic relationships, both in India and America. In response to the accusation that you stereotype Indian women as submissive abuse victims, you once said, "I write what I see." Do you see domestic violence everywhere?

I do. I work a lot with victims of domestic violence, both in the Indian community and in the larger community. I know that domestic violence crosses cultural barriers, but since I feel most comfortable writing about Indian women, I feel the need to talk about domestic violence in that context. My hope is that the intelligent reader will see this and not say, Oh, look at these poor Indian women in situations of abuse, but instead will see it in a larger context: the human tragedy of abuse.

You are an activist as well as a writer. How have these

pursuits informed each other in your work?

Being helpful where I can has always been an important value for me. I did community work in India, and I continue to do it in America because being involved in my community is something I feel I need to do. Activism has given me enormous satisfaction -- not just as a person, but also as a writer. The lives of people I would have only known from the outside, or had stereotyped notions of, have been opened up to me. My hotline work with MAITRI has certainly influenced both my life and my writing immensely. Overall, I have a great deal of sensitivity that I did not have before, and a lot of my preconceptions have been changed. I hope that translates into my writing and reaches my readers.

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