

A Discussion with Chitra Divakaruni

by Erika Bauer

This is a previously unpublished interview from March, 1993.

[Chitra Divakaruni](#) is an established poet who published the book of poems discussed here, **Black Candle**, in 1991. She gained acclaim with **Arranged Marriage**, her first collection of short stories published in 1995. Her first novel, **The Mistress of Spices**, was published in 1997. This early, inspirational discussion reveals Divakaruni leaning from poetry toward prose and sowing the seeds for her powerful, award winning stories.

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I think that if you're a good human being you have a better chance of being a good artist because I think good art is made of compassion. Compassion and empathy."

-- Divakaruni

EB I want to ask you first about the poems you read for the Open Boat reading. ("Open Boat" is an Asian American poetry anthology - editor Garret Hongo. The reading took place at Ft. Mason Center, Cowell Theater, Friday, March 12, 1993). You chose to read "Indigo", "The Brides Come to Yuba City" and "Yuba City School".

CD Well first of all, I wanted to read the poems that were in the anthology. I wanted to start with a poem that was based in India ("Indigo") and then I wanted to do immigrant poems. I've written a whole series of immigrant poems and "Brides" is one of the earlier ones. "Yuba City School" is almost modern day. I wanted to move from India into the immigrant experience and into the modern immigrant experience.

EB I sensed that also in the structure of your book "Black Candle". You

move in the succession of poems toward the present day immigrant experience.

CD Actually, that's what I'm finding more and more. I'm more interested now in writing about the immigrants caught between their past and present. India's always there very much because everything that I write about is India, but the locale is now America.

EB How about your characters? In "Yuba City School" you portray a troubled young Sikh boy. I remember the lines,
They are
waiting for him to open his mouth,
so they can steal his voice.

Where do you find your inspiration for these characters and their stories?

CD Well, what I often do is I listen. People are always telling stories. I was listening to my friend who was very upset. You know, her child came from India and they didn't see in school that it was a language difficulty. For a while they thought that maybe he was retarded. I was really struck by this story and this inspired me to write the poem. I wanted to write about it because assimilation is difficult and I think such assimilation is often expected of immigrants.

EB I often find that here in a large cosmopolitan area it's easier to be different, but outside of the urban centers there is extreme prejudice and fear.

CD I lived in Ohio before I lived in the Bay Area and I understand this.

EB Is this also the period when you studied with Phil Levin?

CD No, this was at U.C. Berkeley. He came to Berkeley for just a year as a visiting professor and I was his T.A., which was really nice.

EB Did he influence your work?

CD Well, I read a lot of his work.

EB His working class/urban poetry?

CD That's what I like. I liked that he wrote of the people. That poetry for him wasn't this esoteric thing and it was very accessible.

EB Who else has been an influence on your work?

CD A lot of the "minority" writers. Just in terms of finding my voice and writing about my everyday experience: Bharati Mukherjee, Cathy Song, Garret Hongo, Al Young, Li-Young Lee, and Rita Dove. And then of course I read all the Indian writers that I could get a hold of such as Ved Mehta and Vikram Seth.

EB How about Indian film and cinematographers? You seem to reference films in some of the poems in Black Candle. I'm very intrigued with the

Indian film culture. The film "Spices" reminds me of your piece, "The Makers of Chili Paste".

CD Yes, the films have been very inspiring in that they made me write about them. I love good film and I love to see good Indian film. The poem was inspired by that movie. Films like "Spices" are the ones that I really like. Those are the ones that have touched my work.

EB How about the rest of your creative process? You said that you find your characters in stories you hear. But when you're actually working, what is your process, and do you work on your pieces for a long time or do you often go with one of the first drafts?

CD What I do is I keep a writer's notebook. So whenever I get an idea for a poem, I write it down. You know, some poems, they come well formed and others you have to rework for a while.

EB How about your writing in its larger context? Do you feel your work is a continuation of what other writers and artists in the community have done or are you (like many other Asian American writers) breaking a lot of new ground?

CD I would like to believe that I am writing about issues that have been taboo for a long time. When my first book of poetry came out I was told by some people (women too) that those things, those issues I write about shouldn't be in poetry. They were really upset. And then I said that's why I'm writing about them. OK? Because maybe they're not traditional subjects. People have not written about the dowry deaths, people do not write about Sati. (My poem about Sati just came out in "Ms. Magazine".)

EB Is that a powerful issue for you, bringing out these things that are taboo and making them known?

CD Yes. And it's more from an angle that these stories have moved me. I'm really upset about the wrongs that have been done to women for a long time. I feel very strong about them imaginatively. I share their lives imaginatively.

EB And I have that sense when I read your work, that it's on that level and not just a political issue. You don't seem to present a political agenda.

CD It's not a political agenda. But of course I think everything can be political.

EB I was thinking of that when you read for "Open Boat". It was particularly interesting that you opened the reading because I see that so much has come out of Southeast Asia that has influenced all of Asia, but so much is unseen/unnoticed. Especially here in the US. It is the women's culture, the feminine aspects of the culture. It is so vast and strong but perhaps we don't sense this depth and complexity outside of Asia or India. Only fragments and pockets. I thought that it was significant how you opened the reading (opened the boat). It appeared political, as a subtle action, hearing your voice, your speech.

CD Yes. I think in the best sense of the word, political. Garret Hongo has made an effort to include a larger Asian American identity in (the book) *Open Boat*, bringing in the South Asian writers.

I also want those women I write about to come alive for people. A writer who has affected me a lot is Anna Akmatova. In her long poem, "Requiem", she gives a voice to the women who suffered during the Stalinist era in Russia. There is the sense that we all need to get a voice.

EB So you create a voice for the voiceless, for the people who don't speak.

CD Yes. Yes.

EB How about the tone of *Black Candle*? It seems to me it is tragic and horrific because of the severity of these women's traditional lives. This is the quality of the poetry and narrative that terrifies me. As a western woman I want to say, "Oh my God, I can't believe these things actually occurred and women were subjected to lives of such horror!" It's terrifying; it's horrible.

CD But on the other hand, the women are powerful. They survive.

EB Well, this is what I see happening. A duality, with this tone and sense of these women. Their strength seems in the end, pervasive. For instance, in the poem "Sudah's Story" where she dances the Nataraja with a final triumphant force, as she sets her house or her husband's bedroom on fire, invoking this female power.

CD Well, you know I think that is a paradox that's right at the heart of the Indian culture. It's hard to explain these deep rooted paradoxes. You know, I think it's going back so far. I do see this paradox. How an Indian man will go to one of the goddesses temples and he'll worship the goddess sincerely, I'm sure, and then he'll come home and he'll beat his wife. I think that is very much at the heart of the book.

EB But this paradox I see also as fuel for your work -- that the energy from this empowers your poetry, adds a great complexity.

CD Yes, this is true. I think Indian women have a great spiritual strength. There's a poem in *Black Candle* which I like a lot. It is called "Two Women Outside a Circus." It is based on a photograph by Raghbir Singh that I saw. Anyway, at the end of the day, you know, these women whose lives are very restricted as to what they can do, lie down in the dark and imagine themselves as beautiful women from the circus, as acrobats or animal trainers.

EB What are some other poems in the book that you love?

CD A prose poem called "Restroom".

EB I think it is a wonderful piece. There is a line at the end of this poem, "I turn on the faucet. Water flows and flows over my hands, warm and full of

light, like a blessing." That is a hopeful line.

CD I think so. I also think that in many of my poems there is always that hope because that's how I see the life of these women, including myself. That there is a lot of hardship but there is spiritual strength in the women.

EB I was going to address another related issue and ask you about the present situation for minorities and women, and your perception of it improving or not improving in India and here in the U.S.

CD Well, it's hard for me to say what's going on in India because everything I hear is second hand. But I can address what's going on here because I'm very involved with a local battered women's shelter, and I'm also founder and coordinator of MAITRI (it means "friendship"), a free helpline for South Asian women in the South Bay Area. MAITRI provides a listening ear; just talking to someone with a similar background is helpful. It helps to break out of destructive situations.

I see problems arising out of isolation, and see that it is important for immigrant women to interact, speak with each other, fight their loneliness . They need to have a listening ear, like they had in India . I think the stresses on the men are also many. And sometimes the men are not addressed. It is a complex situation here in the U.S. because the men also fight discrimination and have problems with their new roles.

What I really like is when I see the younger women who are not the immigrants but the next generation. I think in general most of them are very confident. They think about things, and they've adjusted. I think it's really hard for them during adolescence, but once they get beyond that and they've figured out, to an extent, who they are (something we're always trying to figure out), they do very well.

EB Yes. I think this may be a pattern with many groups who migrate here and deal with displacement.

I also wanted to address your upcoming projects and what you're working on now. I was wondering to myself after reading your narrative poems, is she going to write any stories or fiction?

CD In fact, that's exactly what I'm working on now. I'm working at this moment almost exclusively on writing stories. I think that those prose poems were a transition. I'm sure poetry will always remain something I love and go back to, but I just want to tell these stories now.

EB I really enjoyed the prose poems in Black Candle. They're very rich. Do you have plans for another book?

CD I just finished a manuscript which I've sent out to a publisher. It's a collection of poems, but poems in a series, groups of poems. So there is a series of poems based on photographs by Raghbir Singh. At one time I did a reading of my work (at the Museum of Modern Art) accompanying an exhibition of the Indian miniatures by Francesco Clementi. I'm attracted to

those forms; I'm a visual person. I think even my poetry is very visual.

EB Yes. I find that very strong in your work. For instance, the child dancing in the forest in "Bengal Night". It is a very lush and tactile landscape. I also pull from sources like this in my own writing -- drawings, photographs, paintings, sculpture.

CD I think that is wonderful if artists can be inspired by each others work. But you want to say something original right? You don't want to repeat the form. You have to have an angle, I think, and that's very important to know.

EB So which other artists or writers inspire you?

CD Some people that I've read such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabelle Allende or other mainstream magical realists. I was very influenced by them, that whole magical universe that they create. Magic is very important in my work.

EB Imaginary worlds?

CD Imaginary worlds but with all kinds of different rules, not like our world.

EB Do you see yourself eventually working on something like that in your own work?

CD Yes. In fact I just finished a short story called "Omens" which is about a guy who can read omens from just about anything.

EB Your new work sounds wonderful. I like these magical ideas.

I would like to know if there is anything else you would like to address regarding your work.

CD One thing I would like to address is my philosophy as a writer. I work and I teach full time and that's always difficult because I feel like I don't have enough time (to write) and I also have a baby. I have a family. So having time is probably the most difficult thing in my life. Fortunately, a few months back, I got a big poetry award (from the Gerbodi Foundation) and was very happy. I freed me up a little. Gave me time. But on the other hand, I think its really important for writers to have this other world of experience because even if I had the financial freedom to sit and write, I don't think I could do a good job. I think writers need to be out there, be in contact with people, struggle with other things and then come back and bring it to their writing.

EB When you say "be out there", what do you mean?

CD You know, be out there working, teaching, coming in contact with people, not just in a social way. For me to be out there in my paid job or in my volunteer jobs. I come across a lot of people and they're really very important to me. And I learn a lot from my students (at Foothill College) all the time. And since I teach English, they write things that tell me about

themselves, as people often do, and that's very important to my writing. Whether it directly influences my writing or not. It makes me more aware of human beings and what goes on with human beings.

EB You like to have your work grounded and you like real people, as we discussed earlier.

CD Yes. Real people are important to me. It's also important just in terms of audience because otherwise you forget who you are writing for. What are people thinking? What touches them? You're off in your own world and you don't see or speak to anyone. I think that can really happen easily for poets and fiction writers.

I think a poet, a writer or an artist basically needs to be a full human being. I think that's very important for artists, to have a rounded life. I think especially in the 20th century, artists have become so isolated and so alienated, and they believe they inhabit this intellectual universe and most people are just not as good as they are. I don't agree with that at all. I think if your art is good enough everyone should be able to get something from it. And if it's good enough it should attract people to it. And if it's good enough it should be about people and touch something in people.

I think, I know this is not always true, but I think a good artist needs to be good human being. It's difficult to explain that. I think that if you're a good human being you have a better chance of being a good artist because I think good art is made of compassion. Compassion and empathy. And if you don't have that you can create some very interesting pieces, but it won't be great art. It won't be something that people of other times and other places will be touched by. I think when we look back at the great artists (not saying that all writers and artists were wonderful people), we find that they had to have that compassionate vision in order to be great.

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