



REVIEW

Soapifically Inclined

A desi equivalent of an American soap or an Asian-American Mills & Boon?

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The Vine Of Desire
By Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni

Abacus

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There is a gaping gully between deep emotion and sentimental slush in literature. Unfortunately, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni unfailingly swims for the latter shore—executing her valiant breaststrokes in trails of taffeta prose.

Her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, was a flaccid romantic conceit about a woman who ran a corner shop in San Francisco and healed fractured lives and migrant despair with Indian condiments. The book—with its array of susurrating sesame and compassionate cumin—reduced India to a culinary trope, melding nostalgia with the worst kind of exotica.

Since then, Divakaruni is several books older, and one would have hoped, several shades subtler. But though the tinselly magic realism is absent, *The Vine of Desire* is vintage Divakaruni. It continues the story of Sudha and Anju, the inseparable but star-crossed cousins of her last book, *Sister of My Heart*, and laves it with every conceivable stereotype. 'Achingly' beautiful Sudha is on the run from a divorce and a threatened abortion in India; Anju is recovering from a miscarriage. Sudha journeys to America to find freedom and help her emotionally comatose sister, but her brother-in-law's smouldering passion for her drives a wedge between them. A resolution of sorts is reached only when America catalyses in them new, unlooked-for versions of themselves: Anju joins a creative writing course; Sudha becomes a hired nurse; and Sunil heads out to Houston for a promotion and a bachelor life.

Beneath all of this, a sensitive story about two sisters struggles to breathe. Divakaruni's problem is that, in theory, she can lay claim to interesting and important territory: the exploration of migrant loneliness; cultural dislocation; the process of forging new selves and the complex ways in which immigrants negotiate their past. But in practice, she does it with her knuckles pressed so hard against her mouth,

the migrant condition devolves into soap in her hands.

In that sense, *The Vine of Desire* epitomises much of what is habitually indigestible about Divakaruni. There is her jejune narrative style, for one, in which quite apart from the artillery of clenched jaws, jarring Americanisms and italicised agonies that one has to combat, there are these searching questions she is prone to ask: 'Have we underestimated Sudha, do we really understand her?' Equally irritating is her style of simpering collusion with the reader: "We want Sudha to open her letter, b t..."

Then, of course, there are the towering clichés: the liberating 'spirit of America', for instance, is embodied in Sara, an Indian woman with iridescent toes and purple top, who seduces Sudha with stories about the amber gleam in the eye of a bear in Yellowstone National Park and such like romances, before disappearing suddenly. There are also regular Chinese-restaurant type prophecies which Divakaruni uses to hint at her knowledge of a larger world: "It is the year of death, the year of discovery. In Sarajevo, Johannesburg, Burundi, the ground is sludgy with blood. Christians and Muslims, Zulus and the ANC, Hutu and Tutsi."

Given all this, for a long time I have been stumped by the curious literary anomaly Divakaruni presents: her saccharine clichés are enough to cure a confection unkie of a sweet tooth, yet over the years she has annexed an enviable place in the American world of letters as a South Asian writer of great significance and immense popularity. How has this come to pass? What does she offer that I am missing? (I see I've been influenced by her penchant for searching questions.)

Today, I have the answer. The reason Divakaruni is so successful is that she has distilled the complexities of the diaspora experience into a simple formula: she has created the literary equivalent of a desi American TV soap. Alternatively, you could say, she has pioneered an Asian-American Mills & Boon with a respectable cover. Either way, the result is irresistible. It is wonderful to take off one's brains at the end of a hard day, put up one's feet, and sip a Chitra cocktail. At that level, I must say, I enjoyed her thoroughly.

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