

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Bibliographic Review of Resources for Teachers

By Mary Louise Buley-Meissner

As a poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born Chitrakleha Banerjee, 1957-) has gained a wide national and international audience since the publication of her early poetry collections, *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990) and *Black Candle* (1991). Most highly acclaimed has been her first short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*, which in 1995 received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, the Bay Area Book Reviewers award for fiction, and the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles prize for fiction. Prize-winning single stories include "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" (*The Best American Short Stories*, 1999) and "The Lives of Strangers" (*The O. Henry Prize Stories*, 2003 as well as *The Pushcart Prize*, 2003). Her poetry also has garnered many awards, such as those from the Santa Clara Arts Council (1990), the Allen Ginsberg poetry competition (1994), the Pushcart Prize series (1994) and the C.Y. Lee Creative Writing competition (1995). *The Mistress of Spices*, her first novel, became one of the top-selling books on the West Coast in 1997, not only listed among the "Best Books of the Year" by Los Angeles and Seattle reviewers, but also chosen as one of the "100 Best Books of the Twentieth Century" by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In 2005, Indian film star Aishwarya Rai played the title role of Tilottama ("Tilo"), a California spice shop proprietress with magical healing powers, in the movie version of *The Mistress of Spices* directed by Paul Mayeda Berges (Balle Pictures). Divakaruni's more recent fiction also has been well-received, including her ambitious effort in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) to retell an ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata* (a sacred text of over 100,000 verses), from the perspective of its central female character, the legendary Princess Panchaali, loyal wife to the five heroic Pandava brothers. Considered by many readers and reviewers to be among her most impressive accomplishments to date (e.g., Cullotta, Lofton and Seaman), *The Palace of Illusions* has been described as "a creative, illuminating feminist work that compels us to re-examine the original text . . . a healing, aesthetic experience" (Sanzgiri). Divakaruni also is a prolific essayist who regularly contributes to publications as diverse as *Amerasia Journal*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Boldtype*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon.com*.

For teachers offering courses in Asian American literature, modern American literature, or multicultural literature, Divakaruni is recommended for incorporation into high school or college curricula. The wealth of her work to date includes four poetry collections – *Dark Like a River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1991/2000), and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997); two short story collections – *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001); and five novels – *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My*

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Heart (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). For young readers, Divakaruni has completed four novels set in India; these include *Neela: Victory Song* (2002) and the fantasy trilogy consisting of *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) and *Shadowland* (2009). Divakaruni's writing in multiple genres has appeared in over forty anthologies and more than fifty magazines and journals. With translations of her fiction now available in twenty languages – including Spanish, French, Italian, German, Japanese and Hebrew – Divakaruni's national and international audience is steadily increasing.

In academic as well as popular reviews of her work, Divakaruni has been praised for her literary creativity and personal sensitivity in dealing with cross-cultural complexities of self-identity, family relationships and community values. Most notable has been her continuing concern with these issues in connection with the experiences of Indian and Indian American women. As Divakaruni has explained: "My hope is always that what I write is artful enough that art and social criticism are balanced and the social criticism comes to us through the lives of the characters" (Lanham in "Author Interviews" section of bibliography following this essay).

In both poetry and fiction, the heart of her work has been her desire to "go beyond the silence" about Indian and Indian American women who are striving to achieve strong individual identities, often in opposition to the demands of their families and communities ("Chitra" *Time.com* in "Author Profiles" section of bibliography). The majority of readers have responded positively to this approach, although some have accused her of stereotyping characters in order to fulfill the expectations of a predominately white audience. Samrat Upadhyay, for example, asserts that Divakaruni in *Arranged Marriage* "feeds the exoticized fantasies of Westerners" and "fails to explore the women's complex psychologies in their journeys from a 'Third World' to a 'First World.'" In direct contrast, C.J.S. Wallia contends that the same book is "a welcome addition to the rich multicultural literature of the immigrant experience in the U.S," especially because it reflects the historical and psychological reality of South Asian American experience. Reinforcing this assessment, Dharini Rasiah observes that Divakaruni's story-telling power is grounded in social awareness: "(She) deftly reworks questions that assume a polarized East/West cultural conflict that all South Asian Americans/immigrants uniformly encounter to address a more complicated reality that recalls histories of colonialism, geographic distribution, and racism, and she often draws parallels to the experiences of other ethnic and racial groups" (Rasiah 141 in "Author Interviews" section of bibliography).

As of 2010, formal literary criticism addressing her work is rare, a situation likely to change as her books are given more attention in educational circles. Tracing her artistic development over the years, book reviews are a major indicator of Divakaruni's public reception, consistently emphasizing her skill as a cross-cultural communicator. Reviews listed here represent national and international responses to her work; these are ordered according to the chronology of her publications in the U.S. (starting with *The Reason for Nasturtiums* in 1990 and continuing through *The Palace of Illusions* in 2008). Also listed are other secondary sources useful to teachers who would like to become more familiar with Divakaruni's literary aims and achievements, including author profiles, author interviews and critical commentary by contemporary scholars on South Asian American literature. Students as well as teachers may find special value in Divakaruni's own essays about the challenges that she has faced as an Indian American author who identifies her audience as "everyone, every reader in America, in the world

. . . who is willing to sit down with my book(s) and consider what I am trying to say” (“Response” in “Selected Essays” section of bibliography).

Public and scholarly reception of her writing suggests that Divakaruni has been most admired for four qualities in her overall record of work to date: (1) an empathetically personal and boldly imaginative style of story-telling that draws readers into the lives of people across cultures, particularly the lives of Indian and Indian American women; (2) a poetic sensibility and love of language that makes reading itself a richly textured experience; (3) an unusual ability to break down many different kinds of boundaries (e.g., those between East/West, prose/poetry, magic/realism, past/present and native/immigrant) through the dramatic style and social content of her work; and (4) her continuing growth as a writer who wants to “bridge the divide between high literature and mainstream fiction” (Softky 27 in “Reviews,” *The Mistress of Spices* section of bibliography). Also significant has been her substantial role in making South Asian American women writers more visible to the general reading public, as emphasized by the editors of anthologies such as *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (Sunaina and Srikanth) and *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asia Diaspora* (Women of the South Asia Descent Collective). To a remarkable degree in her poetry, prose and fiction, Divakaruni has capably met her own challenge: “Writing must come out of what we know, what we feel . . . must be rooted in a people and a place . . . But ultimately it must transcend all that to reach across time and space and memory to touch those who have never – and who will never – live as we have lived” (“Response” in “Selected Essays” section of bibliography).

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