

**A Tale of Courage and Perseverance: Review of Independence by Chitra
Banerjee Divakaruni**

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Abstract

This review examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel "Independence" via a feminist lens, focusing on family, partition trauma, and resilience in India's struggle for independence and its consequences. The article uses a feminist theoretical framework inspired by Betty Friedan's ideology to investigate how the characters traverse the complexity of societal expectations and patriarchal structures. The story develops against the turbulent theme of partition trauma, shedding light on the continuing hardships faced by women and their unwavering efforts to overcome them. Themes of sisterhood are central to the research, emphasizing the relationships formed in the face of tragedy and the importance of family amid turbulence. Divakaruni skilfully ties these themes together, depicting women as catalysts for change who defy established standards and redefine their societal positions. Furthermore, the research investigates the relationship between religious belief and individual agency,

demonstrating how faith may empower women within patriarchal systems. This study provides insights into literature's transformational capacity for transforming society narratives and amplifying marginalized voices. The Novel portrays the complicated Indian society and the ongoing battles and victories of its women by looking at "Independence" from a feminist view. The narrative revolves around the concept of independence, sisterhood, and nationhood.

Keywords: - Independence, Women, partition, India.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel "Independence" covered pre-independence, independence, and the post-independence era revolving around the time period from 1946 to 1954 wherein she talks about communal violence and riots and the frightfully narrow gap between the past and present which makes it impossible to escape or ignore the emotional intensity of the era, which is characterized by weeping widows, burning towns, widespread carnage, and the loss of many lives, among the sombre atmosphere and patriotic verses. Additionally, there is a hint of an inter-religious romance that eventually transforms into animosity (Vagmita, 2023).

The plot exhibits the political turmoil prevailing in Bengal during that above period. Despite its little historical content, the narrative of this work effectively maintains a harmonious equilibrium between the fictitious and historical aspects. This book has to do with the destiny of the three sisters namely Deepa, Priya, and Jaimini, who had the same upbringing as their parents but have

different temperaments. The father of these daughters, Nabakumar Ganguly, who perished in the communal riots, serves as a prime exemplification of virtue. Their father was involved in provided free medical care to impoverished people as a doctor and offered his support to emerging nations and marginalised individuals and also participated in Gandhi's Salt March. In this Novel/Book, Divakaruni has thrown light consequences of men's actions and has critiqued men's display of heroism by saying, "*When men go off to be heroes, do they even realise what that does to the women they leave behind?*".

Priya, one of the daughters, regards Sarojini Naidu as her role model. Whenever she comes across her photo or voice on the radio, something stirs inside her. When she finally met Sarojini Naidu, she held her words closely to her heart: "*You (Priya) are a daughter of independence, the country's future. Women like you are the ones for whom we fought and died—the ones who will transform India. You must carry the flag forward. You may fall from time to time. We all did; what is important is to get up again*" (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, 2022). She has covered "independence" time period, hate speeches, communal violence, patriotic, sorrowful tones, death, widows, burning cities, rioting, etc. and has given a sorrowful yet true accounts of that time as a creative writing lecturer at an American university, Divakaruni presented the story and lines well. She combined history and fiction by mentioning prominent freedom fighters like Sarojini Naidu, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru, and Naokhali riots during pre-Independence time. Although the novel primarily

focuses on subjects of looting, killings, regional divisions, and widespread violence, the author also aims to depict the exoticism of India, particularly in rural Bengal and the bustling Calcutta new market. The novel explores the sounds, radio commentaries, and Bengali independence songs that capture the essence of the time. Additionally, concise Bengali poems are translated into English to convey genuine sentiments. It meticulously captures each sister's appearance and growth. Reading is exciting since everyone has a distinct personality and complex components. Divakaruni's prose is simple, poetic, and lovely. women perform Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam's impassioned nationalistic songs about nature, romantic relationships, love, longing, and melancholy. Divakaruni incorporates several lines of lyrics from numerous songs, along with her own translation. The Bengali music and poems referenced and performed in the book are profoundly vivid. As an illustration, individuals fighting for liberation choose "Bande Mataram," a particular anthem written in Sanskrit, Bengali by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, to express their devotion to the Motherland. The historical context is skilfully interwoven with the fictional storyline, ensuring a meticulous equilibrium that captivates readers while shedding light on significant historical events. The successful translation of tiny Bengali poems into English effectively captures the emotional undercurrents.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Independence" explores how women embrace Betty Friedan's feminist philosophy to reconsider their societal positions, giving it an appropriate lens through which to perform this study. Friedan's piece of

writing, "The Feminine Mystique" (1963), contends that conventional concepts of femininity have limited women's ambitions for careers, education, political rights, and independence. Drawing on her personal experiences as a wife and mother, Friedan depicts women as victims of social conventions. She contends that many women, rather than pursuing their objectives openly, chose marriage to conceal their desires. Friedan emphasizes the social norms that cause women to accept family chores as their secured fate, restricting their access to public job options as compared to males. Friedan's worldview is based on the concept that both genders should have equal opportunities to acquire domestic and public abilities, and she advocates for women to follow their aspirations outside of the house. Her message inspires women to believe in their ability to succeed beyond established norms.

The Friedan statement encourages women to extend their thoughts and follow their goals rather than succumbing to gender conventions and squandering their strengths (Betty Friedan, 1963). Similarly, in this book, Priya is also shown as educated and idealistic, determined to pursue a career in medicine like her father, despite societal disapproval. She prioritised herself and ended her engagement with her fiancé in order to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor and providing her town with better healthcare facilities. Despite the prevailing male-dominated society, she successfully completed a medical examination and achieved commendable scores. However, she was unjustly identified as having failed. As a consequence, she is compelled to fly to America to continue her

medical studies. This reaction does not explicitly characterise itself as a direct opposition to male authority but instead focuses on exploring women's ability to confront and challenge male dominance. The conviction that every individual possesses the entitlement to develop their aptitudes. Unfortunately, patriarchal systems continue to marginalise women in public areas by dictating their appearance, behaviour, and culinary abilities and emphasising their marriage preferences.

Other novels with independence theme

The feminism-related themes are present in Manju Kapur's novels. In her novels, Manju Kapur explores several feminist themes and most notably amongst others, in her novel "The Immigrant" which explores the experience of displacement of women, focusing on the anguish and hardship endured by women who have migrated to foreign countries by tracing it through three consecutive generations. The novel's topic concerns a woman who boldly challenges and surpasses the limitations and societal expectations imposed by a patriarchal system. Through this defiance, she asserts her unique identity and attains personal contentment and fulfilment (K. Abdul Haq et al., 2022).

Amrita Pritam expresses a feminist perspective through the female character in her novel 'Pinjar'. Her own experience as a victim of partition has influenced her perspective on feminism, which is thorough and distinct. The story illuminates the psychological state of Indians during the partition and demonstrates that communal animosity was firmly and profoundly ingrained in

the brains of both Hindus and Muslims. The narrative emphasizes the protagonist's life's journey, which begins with her displacement from her homeland and her subsequent immersion in a foreign land. 'Pinjar' is a powerful critique of the dominant patriarchal system in which a woman's body is viewed as a battleground and her chastity is perpetually doubted, and forced through physical suffering and psychological distress (Azhar & Kumar, 2023).

Manto wrote multiple literary pieces from the perspective of women, depicting their experiences during the turbulent years that followed after the independence. These works include "Anjam Bekhair" (a girl from Delhi), 'Sharifan' (bitter harvest), 'Khol do' (the return), and 'Khuda ki kasam' (the dutiful daughter). Manto's intention was to emphasise the significant influence of violent social or political turmoil. 'Khol do' and 'Khuda ki kasam' effectively depict the harrowing and mentally agonising ordeals suffered by women during the partition. Large-scale abduction operations specifically targeting refugee camps, overcrowded trains, and secluded communities, resulted in the seizure of around ten thousand girls and women. This occurrence signifies the most extensive human trafficking incident in recent history. The name 'sharifan' elucidates the strife that emerged among women during the division. The women were brutally killed, possibly as a form of revenge and to prevent the opposing tribe from reproducing, unless they were victims of sexual assault or kidnapping (Tiwari, 2020).

Khushwant Singh published the novel "Train to Pakistan" in 1956. Although Train to Pakistan lacks a large number of female characters, the author skillfully depicts gender tensions and complications that reflect the situation of rural women who have been victimized and raped by men. His works depict women as passive creatures who comply with patriarchal ideals and face gender exploitation, marginalization, and subjugation. The women in this story are involved in routine and low-status home activities, prone to victimization, regarded as less significant, quiet, submissive, and living together with others. (Mairhofer, 2013).

In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), the author also explores the role of women within the framework of the independence of the nation. Undoubtedly, Rushdie's story exhibits a feminist perspective, condemning the severe mistreatment of women in both societal and political-economic domains. Nevertheless, there are those who argue that Rushdie's portrayal of women is contentious. Critics have both applauded and questioned Rushdie's portrayal of women in his novels. Hybridity, which has its roots in the internal construction of gender, is the main theme Rushdie explores in the book *Midnight's Children*. It seems that according to certain reviewers, the negative aspects of this discussion have been primarily attributed to female characters, while the male characters are shown in a positive light (Nagar & Nazzar, 2021).

Story of three sisters

The three sisters' journey unfolds against a political backdrop, giving the story a sense of intensity. The narrative includes the tragic incidents of violence and killings in Noakhali. Divakaruni's representation of women in her work reveals their inner lives and ambitions against the backdrop of an important event in Indian history. Divakaruni continuously focuses on women who are navigating their everyday lives, dealing with subsistence issues, and struggling to retain their integrity. The profound feelings of despair, sadness, uncertainty, hope, and, most notably, love is presented. (Shah, 2023). Dr. Nabakumar Ganguly's daughters, Priya, Jamini, and Deepa, live in Ranipur, Bengal, safely away from the country's rising violence. Their lives are entirely turned upside down after their father is assassinated on Direct Action Day. Priya, the youngest, has an exceptional mind and she is determined to follow in her father's footsteps and seek a career in medicine, regardless of the obstacles that may occur. She is fortunate to have the support of Zamindar Somnath Chowdhury, who is her father's closest companion. Jamini, a devout, diligent, and skillful individual, helps her mother create quilts to supplement their income. She craves emotional intimacy with Amit, her sister's future husband. Deepa, the eldest sibling, who is expected to have a successful marriage, unexpectedly develops romantic feelings for Raza, a prominent Muslim League member. Following India's partition, the sisters are separated, remaining concerned about their different fates and the future of their relationship. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Independence* is a heartfelt story of commitment, affection, unity, and

sisterhood (*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's New Novel "INDEPENDENCE" Slated to Release End of This Year, News18, n.d.*).

As shadows loom over the country, these three sisters are led by their destiny from one another. Priya attends a medical college in America. Deepa gets involved with Raza, who is a prime member of the functioning Muslim League. While Jaimini stays with her mother during the communal conflagration attack in the village, where she almost gets raped. Nabakumar also died in the riots on direct-action day. His last words to this family were *to take care of each other*. Uttered in the middle of the communal frenzy, they all acquire a special meaning to it. Divakaruni showed freedom and its prime, the love, sublime. She also revealed the heartbreak of a bereaved nation.

Character sketch

The three sisters make mistakes, gain wisdom, and eventually emerge resilient. Women in "Independence" are prevalent in a society where women are still excluded and scrutinized for their opinions and goals. The ladies shown in this novel displayed determination as well as the aptitude and talent to achieve great things. the character that stands out prominently is Sarojini Naidu who made significant contributions to the struggle for independence. She demonstrated, was incarcerated, and sustained injuries. She held significant influence as a woman and served as a source of inspiration for women, just as she does for the girls in the novel (Anushree Madhavan, 2023).

Nabukumar and Bina raised their daughters by giving them a basic education compared to their peers. They also received training in conventional feminine skills like culinary arts, needlework, delicate embroidery, and musical performance. They were encouraged to always behave and dress modestly. They were fluent in Bengali, their mother tongue, Hindi, and English, the language. Bina's priority was to find suitable brides for her daughters, but her main concern was that her husband's income might not be sufficient to provide a respectable dowry for these arranged marriages. She created quilts with distinctive patterns and intricate needlework that friends and peers ordered in order to increase their income. The eldest daughter, Deepa, was skilled in embroidery and provided assistance to her mother. Bina expressed concern about their middle child, Jamini, who, despite being devout and diligent, may face challenges in finding a suitable marriage partner due to a noticeable limp. She was born with a congenital condition where one leg was shorter than the other, and this discrepancy could not be corrected through surgery.

Priya was the most diligent and driven among the girls. She aspired to enrol in a university and pursue a career as a physician. During that time, women were prohibited from attending the Medical College of Calcutta. Priya would personally experience, when her written entrance examination was unjustly assigned a failing grade. The British Civil Service, responsible for conducting the tests and overseeing the admission process, strongly opposed the education of women in fields such as medicine, law, and business (Hitchcock, 2023).

Where areas, Jamini is willing to embrace the position of a conventional Bengali woman and Deepa who wants to support her family as elder daughter and goes to Calcutta to sell quilt made by her mother.

During their struggle due financial crises Priya handover Deepa, a stack of currency that she has earned and instructs her to retain it. Impoverished women are compelled to make unfavourable decisions due to their lack of financial resources. "I wish to prevent that from happening to you," she states.

Partition

The leaders of India, including both British and Indian officials, hold contrasting perspectives regarding the envisioned structure of an independent India. Jinnah aspires to the creation of a distinct nation exclusively for Muslims, which is known as Pakistan. In order to gather support for this vision, he advocates for Direct Action Day, a designated day for all Muslims to mobilise and assertively demand the establishment of a distinct nation. The work is organised into five sections, each delving into themes of secret romance, role reversal, military conspiracy, audacious rescue, and incomprehensible acts of selflessness. The initial segment, taking place in August 1946, is characterised by its rapid pace and captivating nature, serving as a foreshadowing of future events—some eagerly anticipated and well-orchestrated, while others are unspeakably dreadful and horrifying. India's nationalistic fervour and determination to gain independence from British colonial authority are

juxtaposed with the destructive communal violence that ravages the nation, resulting in gruesome acts of dismemberment and bloodshed on the streets. The seemingly insurmountable differences in life vanish in death, when lifeless bodies lie scattered on the streets, devoid of limbs. "Are you Hindu or Muslim?" There is no distinction between life and death. The book is filled with a strong call for togetherness and peace. (Pillai, 2023).

Conclusion

Divakaruni delves into the inner thoughts and emotions of women, vividly portraying their aspirations and imperfections. This work is highly noteworthy in its portrayal of the feminine perspective. Additionally, it portrays the strong familial ties of Indian culture as the family members strive to remain united. This book explores the theme of dreams, specifically focusing on Priya's decision to leave her fiancé Amit in order to follow her dream of becoming a doctor. This novel provides valuable insights into the plight of women during the independence era and their arduous efforts to navigate the hurdles they faced. Women endured hardships during this era, regardless of their religious beliefs.

The narrative maintains a steady pace as it recounts the journey of its group of characters in a chaotic environment while skilfully depicting the deep emotional experiences of the three daughters. The plot exhibits a comprehensive examination, specifically concerning the political upheaval transpiring in the state of Bengal throughout that era. The historical part of the narrative is

understated, yet the book aptly achieves a seamless blend of fiction and history. The depiction of each sibling, their distinct characteristics, and their development is skilfully handled. Each person has their own unique characteristics and personalities, which add depth and complexity to the reading experience with subtle differences. The use of succinct Bengali poems translated into English successfully expresses the emotion.

Divakaruni's 'Independence' provides readers with a captivating look into the turbulent period surrounding India's quest for independence. The novel vividly depicts the nuances of this watershed event in history through detailed research and great storytelling. The characters in 'Independence' are intricately formed, each with their difficulties, goals, and complexity. From the protagonists negotiating personal relationships to historical titans determining the history of nations, the diverse ensemble gives depth and realism to the story. At its foundation, 'Independence' celebrates the human spirit's tenacity in the face of adversity. Divakaruni depicts women's hardships and successes through a feminist viewpoint, emphasizing their agency and tenacity in the face of societal standards and injustices. Divakaruni's literary prowess shines through in 'Independence,' which captivates readers from the opening page. The novel's blend of intrigue, romance, and historical drama keeps readers engaged until the final chapter, making it a must-read for everyone interested in Indian history and culture. While set in the context of India's war for independence, 'Independence' explores modern issues of identity, belonging, and the pursuit of freedom. Divakaruni's investigation of communal conflicts, religious struggle,

and the yearning for peace is timely in today's global climate. Overall, 'Independence' demonstrates Divakaruni's skill as a storyteller and her ability to clarify complicated historical events via a feminist lens. Whether one is a history-toned fan of literary fiction, or simply looking for a compelling read, 'Independence' has something for everyone.

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