

My Mother Combs My Hair

MEET CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

Imagine stepping off a plane to live in a foreign land. It's a confusing world: Traditions and values are different from anything you've ever known. That's what it was like for Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In 1976, she left her home in Calcutta, India, to live in the United States. She was 19 years old.

Since then, Divakaruni has straddled two worlds. As a poet and fiction writer, she gives a voice to immigrants who, like herself, struggle to create a new life while maintaining ties with her homeland. Divakaruni says the immigrant experience is often difficult, but it's also a source of inspiration. "We draw from a dual culture, with two sets of worldviews," she has said. She records that experience in her award-winning poems, novels and short stories.

Poetic Beginnings Divakaruni didn't start out as a writer. When she first came to the United States, she wanted an education. She worked odd jobs – as a sales clerk, a baby sitter, and slicing bread in bakery – to earn money for college. Eventually, she earned her Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley.

Divakaruni studied literature, but she didn't write her own works while she was in college. That changed when her grandfather died. Says Divakaruni, "I felt like I was forgetting things, forgetting him, and how things were in India and how people thought." She joined a writing group, and by 1990 she had published her first book of poems, *The Reason for Nasturtiums*. Another poetry collection, *Black Candle*, followed in 1991.

Literature and Activism Divakaruni's first poems were deeply personal, but she soon found new inspiration. While working as a volunteer in a women's center, she witnessed first-hand the plight of battered women. To help these women, Divakaruni founded a nonprofit group for South East Asian women called Maitri.

The women at Maitri inspired Divakaruni. "The work I did definitely influenced my writing," she says. "It made me think a lot more about the issues I was seeing and how it relates to the lives of immigrants." Soon she was writing short stories based on these experiences. Her first collection, *Arranged Marriages*, was published in 1995. It won the American Book Award.

Creating a New Tradition Divakaruni followed her early poems and short stories with her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*. It tells the story of a mystical figure who must choose between her heritage and her love for a non-Indian. The novel was included in the New York Times' list of best books of 1997. Since *Mistress*, Divakaruni has published numerous novels, short stories, and poems. Like the characters in these works, Divakaruni's writing crosses boundaries. She often blends poetry and prose, fable and fiction, to bring together different traditions.

Divakaruni has also helped create a new tradition in the classroom. She teaches creative writing at the University of Houston. As the editor of *Multitude*, a cross-cultural anthology designed for writing classes, Divakaruni brings together diverse perspectives for a new vision of the American experience.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1956.