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# Reimagining the 'Partition' Narrative in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* through the Lens of its Female Protagonists

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**Abstract**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* (2022) revisits the Partition of India by following three Bengali sisters, Deepa, Jamini and Priya Ganguly, from Direct Action Day in August 1946 to the uncertain months that followed independence. Partition narratives have largely recorded the experiences of men; Divakaruni instead places women's choices at the center of the upheaval. Drawing on liberal feminist thought, this article examines how each sister asserts agency: Priya through her pursuit of a medical career, Deepa by choosing a Muslim partner as the communal divide hardens, and Jamini through her longing to be loved and recognized. It also traces the forms of resistance the sisters direct against family, community and institutions. The article argues that Divakaruni presents female agency as real but costly, and that the novel reclaims Partition as a chapter of women's history.

**Keywords:** Partition, Female Agency, Resistance, Liberal Feminism, Patriarchy, Communalism.

## Introduction

Feminist thought has long measured a woman's freedom by the extent of her independence from those who claim to speak for her. Chaman Nahal, in his essay "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations" (1991), describes feminism as "a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome," whether that dependence is on a husband, a father, the wider community or a religious or ethnic group. Each of these dependencies shapes the lives of the three sisters at the center of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* (2022): a father who shelters their ambitions, a mother who polices them, a village that watches them, and a religious divide that hardens around them.

Liberal feminism offers a productive lens for reading these lives. It holds that women's subordination is produced not by nature but by customs, laws and institutions that deny women the education, work and choices available to men. It therefore insists on equal opportunity, on women's entry into schools, colleges and the professions, and on each woman's freedom to chart her own course. Divakaruni's protagonists test these principles repeatedly: they claim an education their mother withheld, a profession that excludes them, and partners their community forbids.

The historical setting sharpens these tests. When British India was split into India and Pakistan in 1947, somewhere between ten and fifteen million people were uprooted, and up to a million may have died. Women bore a particular share of this violence. Because a woman's body was made to stand for the honour of her family and her religious community, thousands of women were seized, sexually violated and made to change their faith, and some were killed by their own relatives to forestall 'dishonour'. Yet the upheaval also pushed women into public life: many became heads of households and breadwinners in refugee camps, and nationalists such as Sarojini Naidu became symbols of women's political agency. Naidu appears in *Independence* itself. Nabakumar Ganguly, the sisters' father, was jailed and beaten by the police after picketing the Dharasana Salt Works alongside her, and early in 1948 she offers Priya a letter of support for admission to Calcutta Medical College.

*Independence* occupies a distinctive place within 'partition literature'. Much of that literature follows men through riots, migration and political negotiation, and much of it is set in Punjab, where the killing was most intense. Divakaruni turns instead to Bengal, from the village of Ranipur to Calcutta, Dacca and Satkhira, with the Calcutta killings of August 1946 and the Noakhali riots as her backdrop. By telling the national story through a single family, she shows Partition as more than a political event: it enters homes, reshapes marriages and divides sisters.

Two terms guide the analysis. 'Female agency' here means a woman's ability to decide and act for herself even when family, custom or history hem her in. 'Resistance' means any open or quiet refusal of the forces that constrain her, whether patriarchal, communal or institutional. In Divakaruni's fiction it seldom takes a single form: some characters rebel openly, others through small, stubborn choices. The article examines how Priya, Deepa and Jamini exercise agency and voice resistance, and how their mother, Bina, complicates both. It argues that Divakaruni neither idealises nor diminishes her heroines: their agency is real, and each sister pays a price for it.

**Female Agency in *Independence***

The novel opens in August 1946 in Ranipur, a village in Bengal some hours' journey from Calcutta. Dr. Nabakumar Ganguly, a former freedom fighter, runs a clinic where he treats the poor without charge. His wife, Bina, is a skilled quilt-maker, and their three

daughters have distinct temperaments. Deepa, the eldest, is beautiful and her mother's favourite; Jamini, the middle sister, walks with a limp and shares her mother's gift for quilting; Priya, the youngest, hopes to follow her father into medicine. The family's crisis begins a year before Partition. On Direct Action Day, Nabakumar steps out of his Calcutta clinic to drag a wounded man to safety, is caught in crossfire, and dies that night. From this point the sisters must make their way without the man who sheltered their ambitions.

Priya's agency takes the form most closely associated with liberal feminism: the claim to education and a profession. Her ambition runs against her mother's conviction, voiced years earlier when Bina withdrew the girls from the village school, that too much learning ruins a girl's chances of marriage. When her father warns that the medical college is hostile to women students, Priya refuses to be deterred. She insists that she "can be as good a doctor as any man" and asks, "How will things ever change for us women if we—and our families—are unwilling to fight for what matters most?" (17).

Priya frames her ambition not as a private wish but as a question of justice for women. By turning her father's own ideals back on him, and with the support of his friend Somnath, she wins his reluctant consent to sit the entrance examination. Her argument anticipates the liberal feminist case that society loses when women's talents are shut out of the professions.

Deepa's agency is exercised in love. In Calcutta that August she meets Raza, a Muslim and the nephew of her father's friend Dr. Abdullah; when the riots break out, Raza risks his life to bring the family to Nabakumar's side before he dies. Their relationship continues in secret, through letters and meetings, and when Bina discovers it, she offers Deepa an escape: Deepa may say that she was seduced. Deepa refuses the excuse and defends Raza instead: "It was not like that. Raza is a good man, better than anyone I have met" (89). Bina turns her out of the house. Deepa then refuses to convert to Islam, since conversion would close the door to any reconciliation with her mother. The couple's nikah exists only on paper, completed with forged signatures, and Deepa lives with Raza without a legal marriage before moving with him to Dacca. Her agency is therefore not a cautious negotiation within traditional roles but a deliberate break with family and community, and she accepts its cost.

Jamini's agency is the most conflicted. Overlooked because of her limp and overshadowed by her sisters, she learns early that no one will speak for her. The narrative states her creed plainly: "A girl like her—not as beautiful as Deepa, not as smart as Priya—has to look out for herself" (170). Her longing to be loved centres on Amit, the man engaged to Priya. After Amit breaks with Priya, and after a mob attacks Ranipur in 1947, Bina asks him to marry Jamini. When Priya returns from America and Amit wavers, Jamini tells her sister that she will take her own life if Amit abandons her, and she refuses to free him from his

pledge. On the morning of the wedding, a warning voice inside her is overruled by another: "I did not ask for this marriage. It came to me. Now it is my right. I will not give it up" (227). The line marks a real move from passivity to self-assertion. Yet Divakaruni presents it as a darker voice drowning out Jamini's conscience: her agency is genuine, but it is purchased at her sister's expense.

Bina, finally, complicates any simple account of women's agency in the novel. Once widowed, she collapses into fainting fits and withdraws into a darkened room, and Deepa, nursing her, can no longer find in her "the intrepid woman whose quick thinking saved their lives on the night of the riots" (58). Bina's courage is real, and it returns in 1947, when she is injured defending Jamini. But she is also the household's enforcer of patriarchal limits. She takes the girls out of school, forbids Priya's examination unless an engagement follows, and turns Deepa out of the house. In Bina, the novel shows how a patriarchal order survives by recruiting women to guard it. The sisters' agency is therefore exercised not only against society at large but also against the mother who carries its expectations into the home.

**Voicing Resistance in *Independence***

Resistance in *Independence* is inseparable from the violence of the period, in which communities fought over honour and shame on the bodies of women. Divakaruni makes this concrete. When a mob attacks Ranipur in 1947, Jamini, leading a neighbour and her small daughter to safety, is caught and assaulted by one of the attackers. Bina is injured trying to save her, and Jamini, fighting him off, is burned. The sisters' resistance unfolds against this backdrop, and it takes forms as different as the sisters themselves.

Priya's resistance is directed at the institutions and customs that bar women from the professions. After she is failed in the medical college entrance examination, a result the novel presents as unfair, Bina and Amit move at once to arrange the wedding. Priya loves Amit, but she refuses to enter marriage as a defeated woman; she had meant to come to it "bearing success like a gift, not as a beggar maid from some outdated fairy tale" (110). A different route opens when Mrs. Avery, a librarian at the American Library in Calcutta, tells her of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, which admits students on the strength of a written statement rather than an entrance examination. Explaining why she must become a doctor, Priya says: "If I get the right training, I can help thousands of women, uneducated, poor, who would never go to a male doctor, women who are dying . . ." (114). The statement ties her ambition to women whom male medicine cannot reach. She takes up the place in Philadelphia although Amit, unwilling to come second to her ambitions, ends their engagement, and although Bina declares that she wants nothing more to do with her. When she later returns home on emergency leave, she loses her place, yet she does not abandon her goal. By the Epilogue, set in 1954, she is a practising doctor whose village clinic bears her father's name.

Deepa's resistance confronts communal and patriarchal power at once. Her love for Raza grows out of shared grief: "The infatuation that would have died away in the course of time here has sent its roots, watered by tragedy and shared trauma, deep into her heart" (59).

To love across the communal divide in 1946 is itself an act of defiance, and Deepa sustains it against her mother, her community and the logic of Partition. Her resistance continues after Raza is killed in an ambush late in 1947, leaving her stranded in East Bengal, a young widow with a baby daughter and no way back to India. When Mamoon, an ambitious officer, suggests that she may go back to India only as the wife of a powerful man, clearly meaning himself, she hides her revulsion and feigns gratitude to buy time for her child. With her sisters' help she escapes, and by 1954 she manages the Chowdhury estate as a firm and capable administrator.

Jamini's resistance is the most understated and the most morally ambiguous. For years she has been the sister no one chooses, and when Amit breaks his engagement to Priya, she secretly wonders whether "she will finally have a chance at love," and savours the prospect of becoming "the claimant to all of Bina's affection" (132).

Her refusal to remain overlooked first turns coercive, in the threat that secures her marriage. Divakaruni, however, does not leave her there. When the village is attacked, Jamini risks herself to save a neighbour and her child, and afterwards she helps nurse the injured. Her last and boldest act of resistance is also her redemption. When Deepa is due to sing for an army battalion at Satkhira, near the border, Jamini takes her place on stage so that Deepa and her baby can slip away, knowingly offering herself up for her sisters' safety and to leave the man she loves free. Amit is fatally wounded carrying her to safety. Jamini's arc thus moves from self-assertion at another's cost to self-sacrifice on others' behalf.

**Conclusion**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* reimagines the Partition through the choices of three sisters, each of whom defines independence differently. For Priya, it is the right to an education and a profession; for Deepa, the right to love and to live beyond the boundaries set by religion and family; for Jamini, the right to be seen and loved. Their mother, Bina, shows how deeply rooted the limits they resist are, since she both protects her daughters and polices them. Read from a liberal feminist standpoint, the novel affirms women's claims to equal opportunity and self-determination, but it refuses to present those claims as free of cost. Priya loses a fiancé and her place at medical college, Deepa loses Raza and her home, and Jamini's assertion of her own desire wounds the sister who loves her before her sacrifice redeems it.

The Epilogue, set in 1954, gathers these threads into an image of women's independence in the new nation. Priya is a practising doctor who runs a clinic named after her father; Deepa manages the estate on which the family now lives; Jamini and Bina sell their

quilts at Calcutta's New Market; and the sisters raise their children side by side. In making these women the protagonists of a history usually narrated through men, *Independence* adds a distinctive voice to Partition literature. It recovers the experience of women in Bengal and insists that the story of a nation's freedom is also the story of women's struggle for their own.

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