

DIASPORIC SENSIBILITIES AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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Abstract

The research article critiques the short stories authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni about middle-class Bengali Indian women who migrate to America, imagining it as a place for perfect happiness and a land of promise. Exploring these short stories aims to focus on how Divakaruni creates ephemeral, terse images of women caught between the old and new world, how women deal with cross-cultural sexual interactions and relationships, and how women struggle to attain self-worth and independence denied to them by their own narrow-minded culture. Women in these stories are grappling to forge their own identities. The attempt is to find and fuse a viable identity within the mainstream U.S. culture. 'Arranged Marriage' is a stunningly beautiful and poignant collection that portrays the possibility of change and starting afresh. Independence is a mixed blessing and an opportunity for self-realisation for Indian-born women starting new lives in America. It is like striking an equilibrium between old, cherished beliefs and astonishing newly discovered desires and understanding the feelings and turmoil the conflict brings. Women's struggle in 'Arranged Marriage' is dual; firstly, they struggle for their own identity as an individual free from any patriarchal identity. Secondly, they grapple for an identity that is neither Indian nor American. The standard line of thought that runs through the collection is that every now and then, the native flavour peeps through the lives of immigrants, leaving them with sudden pangs of nostalgia. The pull of the motherland keeps these unfortunate immigrants divided between the two worlds and cultures.

Keywords: Immigration, Exile, Acculturation, Assimilation, Trauma and Alienation

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a highly versatile and prolific writer. Most of her works deal with the theme of gender, identity, and migration. Her works address the problem of current-day America and its non-white people. Divakaruni is a writer with an excellent understanding of the human psyche, and she builds her characters in a way that gives her works a universal appeal. "Arranged Marriage" is eleven short story collection published in 1995 concerning Indian Women. The stories address the issues of domestic abuse, crime, racism, interracial relationships, economic disparities, abortion, divorce, live-in relationships, and extra-marital relationships.

The first story is "The Bats." It is set in the rural village of Gopalpur in India. The story has no foreign connections or instances about the U.S. It is about an Indian family living in India. The story has a strong feminist perspective, which depicts the pain of an Indian married woman caught in the complex web of old traditions. In this story, a young girl struggles to understand her abusive father and her succumbing mother. Despite the pain, anguish and constant battering subjected to her, the mother stays with him. Divakaruni explores a young child's psyche

through a disturbing and violent childhood. The young girl narrates the story of her mother, her father, and her beloved grandpa-uncle.

The second story is "Clothes." In the story, the protagonist Sumita is a Bengali Indian bride who gets married to Somesh Sen, the owner of 7-eleven stores in California. Their marriage was arranged, and she was considered a lucky girl to be chosen. Her excitement knew no bounds when her father showed her the location of America on the globe. She was looking forward to her experiences in the U.S., a country considered a dreamland and an ideal destination for fun and the fulfilment of desires. Sumita comes to America after her marriage with her eyes full of dreams and heart full of desires. She wants to wear western clothes and help her husband in his store, but her passions are considered improper by her in-laws, who are still bound by the notion of cultural conservatism. She dreams of a romantic prince coming across the seven seas and taking her to his kingdom.

Somesh is a freedom-loving husband who believes in giving equal opportunity and space to his wife. He has several dreams for Sumita; he wants her to go to college and choose her own career. He even wants Sumita to dress in western outfits and buys her a long brown skirt and a cream blouse like 'the inside and outside of an almond.' But destiny had a different plan for her, which left her surprised. Her desires and honeymoon end abruptly when Somesh is killed in his 7-eleven store by a gunman in the act of robbery and random violence while managing his graveyard shift in a dangerous urban neighbourhood.

Like all Indian widows, Sumita dresses in a white sari and hears the sound of glass bangles shattering on the floor. Sumita is transforming from a glowing bride into a mourning widow, now forever the property of her in-laws, who will go back to India. But by this time, she knows that America is the place where she wants to be. She denied going back to India and wanted to stay in America to fulfil her husband's dreams of going to college and choosing a career. Sumita's decision to stay back is an act of rebellion. She did not want her fate to be like a typical Indian widow who spent her life taking care of her in-laws after her husband's demise.

Sumita's awakening and development of her life are symbolised by the varieties and colours of her saris and her American dress. Clothes are beautifully used as a cultural metaphor in the story. Sumita's development from a submissive and docile Indian girl to a determined, confident, and independent woman is traced through successive stages of clothing: from her bride-viewing, marriage and travel. A transition from sarees to her clandestine posing in western clothes and eventually to her widow's white sari.

Sumita sees herself as an embodiment of hybridity. Somesh's teaching results at this crucial point when she can adopt her freedom as part of her husband's legacy, religiously adhering to her husband's wishes by 'becoming American' and accepting the U.S. with her open arms and heart.

The third story is "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs." Jayanti, an Indian student from a conservative upper-middle-class Calcutta family, is the story's narrator and protagonist. She travelled to Chicago to be with her aunt Pratima before beginning her graduate studies at a university in the United States. For Jayanti, America is a place of dreams, just like a fairy tale

location. She even aspires to "marry a prince from a far-off land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold." But her illusion of a utopia is shattered when she is subjected to racial discrimination in her dreamland.

The fourth story is "The Word Love." In this story, Divakaruni has skillfully used the second-person point of view to narrate the story. This kind of narrative strategy allows her to challenge conventional ideas of who the reader of the story is by conflating the figure of the protagonist and the reader. This narration technique used by Divakaruni gives the story multilayered meanings on the level of discourse.

The story focuses on the central theme of the mother-daughter relationship. The protagonist of this story feels torn between the love of her widowed mother back in Calcutta and the love of her American boyfriend. The nameless protagonist, a PhD student at Berkeley, has fallen in love with an American boy and lives with him in sin and for love without marriage. The protagonist longs for her mother and wants to be honest with her regarding her relationship with an American.

The protagonist feels progressively alienated from her boyfriend during the ensuing turmoil, who cannot comprehend what her mother means to her. The mother's condemnation of "living together" travelled in icy silences via phone wires from India, destroying her daughter's love affair with a foreigner. Since things did not get better with her, Rex left her. But she does not give up altogether. Caught between the ties of their mother in the Motherland and America, she chooses America and plans to live her life without her mother and her boyfriend. She vows to make a new life for herself and make it on her own, a life that will run on her dictated terms and will not be influenced by anyone.

The fifth story is "A Perfect Life." It is the most touching story in this collection. The central theme that runs through the story is the bliss of maternal love, which sweeps away everything like friendship, romantic fulfilment and even the need for sex. The story's protagonist, Meera, has a beautiful life, a yuppie job, and a perfect American boyfriend. She is a woman who has brilliantly adjusted herself to American society and goes around with her American boyfriend, Richard, without any guilt. She recalls her perfect life before the arrival of the boy. Meera is among those flexible people who believe in the notion of hybridity. She is unlike the protagonist of the story "The Word Love." She detaches herself from the umbilical cord at the right time and possesses the guts to admit her relationship with an American.

The sixth story of the collection is "The Maid Servant's Story." It is the most complex tale. In this story, the protagonist, Manisha, hears from her aunt about the life-changing episode in her mother's life that changed her completely, allowing her to comprehend her mother's aloofness from relationships.

In the story, it is apparent how the woman of the house, the wife, is caught in the struggle to treat her maidservant, Sarala, with respect and dignity, while the other members of the house represent the typical way in which a maidservant is treated in Indian society. Sarala was treated with disrespect merely because she was a servant, and the house members' treatment worsened when they came to know that she was a prostitute, forced into prostitution by her mother and

husband. Working in the wife's house was an excellent opportunity for Sarala to distance herself from that filthy profession. But the family members, after this disclosure, treated her like a whore. Sarala is given no voice in the story to tell her perspective as the story is narrated from the sister's point of view. The story has a strong angle of subalternity. Sarala was a subaltern, so she was not given the respect she deserved. She was an exemplary worker and did all tasks assign to her diligently. The family members also suspected her goodness, except for the wife, who loved and adored her. Even Sarala loved the wife and called her Didi.

The seventh story is "The Disappearance." This is the only story narrated from the husband's point of view. This story exemplifies the use of hybridity for female emancipation. The story also conveys sexual and gender exploitation, which are present at the core of South Asian culture. Divakaruni realises that all human relationships are a gamble, a throw of the dice, a matter of chance and destiny. The girl in the story gets married to an 'NRI' and comes to San Jose with her husband. The girl proves to be a devoted homemaker, fulfilling all her husband's demands and following all his instructions.

The husband was the typical Indian male who wanted his wife to cook food, look after the child and serve herself as a whore in the bed. Despite being a good husband, he did not realise how much he dictated over his wife, especially in bed. The husband gave his wife the freedom to choose the kitchen tiles but never allowed her to work or buy any American clothes.

All marriages, it is said, are made in heaven. Still, we cannot begin to realise what powerful urges and inchoate emotions made the wife in the story turn her back upon her own arranged marriage and quietly disappear into the urban jungles of the cities of America into a self-made exile. She even leaves her son behind and takes only her wedding jewellery, the pieces her parents gave her and no other valuables. The husband loved her and wanted her back. The husband had put up a half-page ad in India west and a notice in the San Jose Mercury; he also decided to reward \$100 to one who locates his wife. He also informed the police and took their help. But the police were not of much help as they could not find his wife. The husband ultimately gives up all hopes of getting his wife back.

It is a complete renunciation of the wife's alliance with her husband and total disapproval of her parenthood that made her leave her home. The husband agrees to marry again because he wants to part away from his wife's memories which means physical and psychological survival for him. He also wanted a mother for his son, and one day, he asked his mother to look for a girl for him. Even after remarrying, the husband cannot get over his wife's abandonment and still feels haunted by her memories. The husband all his life tries hard to guess the answer to what compelled his wife to leave him and his son.

In the story "The Disappearance," the basic situation is the very opposite, with the unnamed wife tricking her chauvinist and sexually violent husband. Divakaruni's narrative strategy of presenting most of the story (except for the beginning and the ending) from the internal perspective of the baffled husband allows us to trace how the wife misled him into believing that she has disappeared. Whereas he pictures his wife as obedient, helpless, and appreciative of his generosity and kindness, we, as readers, establish that she is brilliant and fed up with his

condescending and authoritarian behaviour. She violently resents his customary enforcement of marital sex. The wife in the story is an example of those women caught on the border between a traditional patriarchal society and a world free from male domination and full possibilities, choices, and freedom.

The eighth story is "Doors." The protagonist of this story is Preeti, whose obsession with privacy and personal space alienates her from her husband. The story also powerfully portrays the difference between the Indian and American cultures, believing in privacy and private space. Through this story, Divakaruni skillfully shows how cultural differences can spoil close relationships like marriage.

The ninth story is "The Ultrasound." The story's protagonist is Anjali, who is married to Sunil and lives in California. Anjali is pregnant, and so are her cousin and her best friend Arundhati, to whom Anjali is deeply attached. The story "Ultrasound" emphatically portrays the misuse of technology in South Asian countries. Doctors use the scientific technique of ultrasound to know the fetus' condition. Still, in countries like India, it is a weapon of increasing female feticide, as Indian society is partial towards male child and unfair towards the female child.

"Affair" is the tenth story of the collection. Abha, who is married to Ashok, is the story's protagonist. Meena, Abha's best friend, is married to Srikant. Abha and Ashok, and Meena and Srikant are two temperamentally incompatible Indo-American couples who married because their horoscopes were perfectly matched. After several years of luxurious living in America's Silicon Valley, these perfectly matched couples divorce each other.

The story "Affair" exemplifies a woman's search for her identity. American culture gives a woman that freedom which Indian culture denies her. Meena and Abha liberate themselves and opt for American culture to search for their identity. Indian culture binds a woman to the traditional role of a housewife. In contrast, American culture gives her chances and opportunities to make her own decisions and live life on her own dictated terms. The quest for identity and belongingness is one of the immigrant emotions people experience when they come to terms with a different culture.

"Meeting Mrinal" is the collection's last story. The story's protagonist is Asha, an Indian woman who immigrates to California following an arranged marriage to join her Indian husband. In America, she lives the life of a traditional Indian woman, doing things like cooking extravagant meals for the family and looking after her son. Her husband leaves her for a younger white lady. This occurrence pushes her to move beyond her usual role.

Through this story, Divakaruni brilliantly explains the immigrant's struggle for identity and belongingness in an espoused culture. Asha struggles to make sense of her feelings of despondency and forge an independent existence in an unfamiliar culture. During a meeting with Mrinal, a childhood friend from India, who is now a famous businesswoman, the process hits a breaking point?

Divakaruni depicts that both the traditional Indian female and the modern Western female roles have their own sacrifices, troubles, and uncertainties in the flawed lives of Asha and Mrinal.

She also highlights a fundamental irony: the Indian woman who stays in India develops a more Western-style life for herself; the Indian woman who immigrates to the United States tries to maintain a traditional Indian lifestyle and only abandons it when her marriage falls apart and she is forced to live alone. The story is replete with symbols, and food is used as a cultural metaphor to symbolise the different conditions of Asha's life.

The women in these short stories are in a state of flux, stuck between a patriarchal culture and a world of possibilities and opportunities. Sometimes their choices or inability to adapt – lead to frustration, as with Preeti in "Doors," whose obsession with privacy alienates her husband or the mother in "Bats." The widowed Sumita in "Clothes" and the protagonists of "The Word Love," "Disappearance," and "Affair" all conclude with the woman breaking free—physically and emotionally—from expectations and prescribed modes of existence and beginning over.

Divakaruni fulfils her purpose through her beautiful stories from both perspectives, i.e., hybridity and feminism. She excellently portrays her protagonists, adopting American culture and at the same time not untying Indian values. Some stories are profoundly sad, but some are full of revelation, and all are unforgettable.

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