

Analyzing Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* Through the Lens of Diasporic Experience

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Abstract

This research article explores the short-story collection, *Arranged Marriage* which is written by the diasporic writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The paper emphasizes the immigrant women's experiences and their struggle to create an identity on the new land. Divakaruni is one of the famous writers of South Asia settled in the United States. She frequently explores the themes of migration, experiences of immigrant women and their struggle, Indian culture and tradition. Her novels usually begin in India, especially in West Bengal, where the characters are highly influenced by traditional values and cultural practices before leaving India to America. Divakaruni's literary works highlight the experiences of Indians negotiating between their native country and the migrated country. Her works present the complexities of diasporic life. Throughout her works, the theme of cultural displacement, belonging, alienation, identity, gender, cultural conflict are described. In the short-story collection, *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni portrays multiple types of characters. They go through psychological and emotional changes while handling several cultural identities. The female characters of the stories challenge patriarchal constraints. They seek dignity, autonomy and self-realization. So, Divakaruni uses her writings to describe the conflict between traditional culture and adaptation to a new society. She also focuses on how Indian immigrants develop and form their identities.

Keywords: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Diaspora, Migration, Experience, Cultural clashes, Females' struggle, Identity crisis

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary works highlight the complexities of women's lives. They are continually struggling with social, cultural, and familial needs that block their personal space and growth. The protagonists face the challenges of society, culture, and tradition, which restrict them to confined spaces and traditional roles. Although these women characters struggle with traditional values yet they oppose societal norms in pursuit of individual space and growth. The women of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are not weak and submissive. They emerge as strong, courageous, and rebellious. They are logical and rational, who have a quest for identity and

freedom. Her writings explore the experiences of immigrant women. She keenly depicts the lives of Indian women in the USA, particularly those of Bengali women.

Through the short story collection *Arranged Marriage*, she highlights the cultural clashes between traditional and modern environment in the women's lives. She also highlights the conflicts of women. They are struggling between their stereotypical roles imposed by society and their inner urge for personal choice, space, growth, and identity. Her female characters are not the passive recipients of actions, but the active individuals who rebel and break through barriers, and establishing themselves as strong and independent women. Her characters are an epitome of women's empowerment. In the short story collection, from *The Bats* to *Meeting Mrinal* is an exploration of immigrant women's experiences and their quest for identity.

The first story of the collection, *The Bats*, highlights the condition of women in a man-woman relationship. The abusive relationship of the mother to her husband has a deep impact on the narrator, who is their daughter. Her mother's consistent sufferings compel her to flee to her grandpa's place, Gopalpur (a remote area in Calcutta). The decision was a surprise and excitement for the narrator. Soon, she became involved in the daily activities of the grandpa-uncle. Divakaruni has symbolically portrayed the scene of bats. The bats were used to visit mango orchards instead of being killed many times. The narrator and her grandpa-uncle were worried and analyzed the situation. The grandpa uncle says, "I guess they just don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they'll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here" (*Arranged Marriage* 08). Through this scene, Divakaruni has tried to show that the mother, being in an abusive relationship, returns to her husband's place again and again. The mother is represented as the stereotypical woman who is conditioned to be dependent and submissive. She cannot dare and does not have the strength to make a free decision.

The next short story in the collection is *Clothes*. The title is very significant and symbolic. It symbolizes the different phases of life, emotions and identity of the protagonist, Sumita. Divakaruni describes that Indian families always care for their daughters in the form of a marriage to an NRI groom. Sumita was dressed in a pale-pink saree for bride-viewing. Its colour and the incident signify the transition in her life. Sarees are a symbol of Indian culture and identity. During her journey to America, she was advised to wear a red and blue colour saree. These colours symbolize possibility and good luck for married women. Her clothes in America changed in colour and variety, which represents the encounter of two contrasting cultures. In America, her husband purchased special dresses for her in pale-blue, sunrise-orange, cream and brown colours. These were different in patterns like Jeans, t-shirts, skirt-set, etc. These clothes and colours symbolize the joy and colour of the earth, but the challenges on the new land were never diminished. Her husband, Somesh, in his store, 7-Eleven, was shot on a graveyard shift. This tragic incident changed her life completely, and she was moved from multiple vibrant colours and dresses to a white saree, which is the symbol of the widows' colour and the colour of the ending. At the end of the story, she was advised to return to India, but Sumita, as a strong and independent woman, decided to stay in America and fulfill her dream of a job by working in the store. She evolves from a traditional Indian woman to a Western lady embracing the new culture and identity.

In *Silver Pavement, Golden Roofs*, Divakaruni has exposed the harsh reality of immigrants' experiences. She focuses on the racial discrimination in the land of 'Whites'. Jayanti, the protagonist, reaches America with her dreams and desires as a student. She shares the space

of her maternal aunt and uncle, Pratima and Bikram. They are in an abusive relationship. Pratima was confined to the home and daily chores only, and not allowed to visit even nearby places. Jayanti finds a terrible scar on the neck of Bikram. Divakaruni highlights how the new land provides an impression of joy and possibility, but turned out to be a pathetic experience. Jayanti experiences that living in America is not going to be an easy one. But she encourages herself with the consoling thought that pain and pleasures are parts of life. She accepts the challenges of a new land. And she emerges as a strong and independent woman.

The short story *The Word Love* is a reflection of cultural clashes and an individual's urge to have their own personal space and choice. Indian culture and traditions have always emphasized morality. It does not have space for personal choice and freedom. The narrator, living in America with her boyfriend, Rex, is not able to convey her feelings and emotions to her mother. She has a deep desire to share her decision to marry her boyfriend. But the stereotypical attitude of her mother insisted on hiding her feelings. Divakaruni clearly points out that when her mother learns about the fact, she abandoned her and never connected with her. On the contrary, Rex's mother, a divorced woman, gave space and freedom to her son. The writer has presented the cultural clashes of two different lands by an immigrant woman. The narrator got depressed, and she had suicidal thoughts. But Divakaruni's women are strong and independent. She decides to have a fresh beginning by leaving her boyfriend and mother. She proves herself to be a courageous woman seeking her own identity.

The Perfect Life, as the title suggests, the protagonist, Meera, was living a perfect life with a reputed bank job and a loving boyfriend, Richard. Meera was living in America, so she chose to be independent, self-sufficient, and empowered. Divakaruni presents that the characters having experience of two contrasting cultures change according to the circumstances. Meera is an ambitious girl and conscious of her identity and existence. A seven-year-old boy kindled the emotion of motherhood in her. In spite of being busy and burdened with work, she accepts motherhood and takes proper care of the boy. The story further depicts that one should be a legal foster parent to take care of any orphan child in America. During the process of becoming a legal foster parent, she loses the boy. Throughout the time, she could not overcome the loss. Later, she chooses to move ahead in life and will marry Richard, her boyfriend, but not to have the experience of motherhood.

In *The Maid Servant's Story*, Divakaruni highlights the infidelity between husband-wife relationships. The mother knows that her husband is disloyal and cheating on her, yet she stays with him in the relationship. In a patriarchal society, women are confined to social norms, and they have not courage to go against them. Deepa Masi, who has the experience of life, warns the narrator to be extra careful in starting a new life with Bijoy. Here, Divakaruni presents the beautiful relationship of sisterhood between women. Deepa Masi advises Manisha to consider all the circumstances when she is about to marry Bijoy.

The Disappearance is a very pathetic story of a married woman. She never expressed a word throughout the story; her husband projected her to the readers through his own experiences and perspectives. The married woman disappeared at the beginning of the story. The story is speculation about the reason for her disappearance. After a year, her husband discovered that she had left the home willingly. Divakaruni presents a picture of marital life. The husband does not give attention to his wife. Through the observation, one can see he never cared about her desires and choices. He did not let her pursue education, build her career, wear Western clothes and

having autonomy over sex. His neglectful behaviour led to the disappearance of her. She found relief and comfort in breaking the boundaries of marriage and living an independent life.

In the short story, *Doors*, Divakaruni explores the importance of freedom and personal space in a relationship. Preeti and Deepak, both are nurtured in two different cultures. One is traditional, and the other is Westernized or modern. Both fell in love with each other and decided to marry. But the mother of Preeti was concerned about the ideology that Indian men have towards women. Preeti, instead of her mother's objection, started a new married life with Deepak. The clashes started after the marriage. Preeti was born and brought up in the more liberated surroundings of America. She understands the value of freedom and space, while Deepak is very stereotypical in his behaviour toward his wife, Preeti. Conditions became worse when Raj came from India and invaded their personal space. Divakaruni depicts that the discomfort of Preeti and her multiple approaches to resolve the problems was completely ignored by her husband. Later, at the peak of intolerance, Preeti lashes out at Raj. Consequently, she decided to leave the home to stay with her friend. Deepak shifted Raj to another place in anger but did not contemplate the cause of the circumstances. So, this incident creates a deep rift in the couple.

All the stories present a stunning and poignant portrayal of Indian women in various roles and circumstances. The collection beautifully blends modern and traditional elements, as well as perspectives from both the East and the West, and people of all ages and genders. The author captures the diverse histories of women who, at times, struggle to assert their identities and, at other times, conform to traditional roles. The characters offer a realistic depiction of women facing challenges at various stages of life, both in India and abroad. The stories highlight that the women endure and show that it takes courage to create one's own identity. At the end, the short-stories present women as independent, self-sufficient, empowered, and resilient in the difficult situations of life.

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Bio notes

Shalini is a research scholar in English literature from the Department of English and Modern European Languages at University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. Her research interests are based on her fascination for women empowerment. She has been exploring this phenomenon from different perspectives in both her research and other practices. She has been working as an Assistant Professor of English also at Baikunthi Devi Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India since 2020. She has a teaching experience of more than a decade at secondary and higher level. She has published many articles in journals as well as contributed chapters in books. She has presented papers in national and international conferences and seminars also.