

## **Navigating Cultural Strains: A Study of Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season***

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### **Abstract**

Amulya Malladi presents the women individuality through her characters in the novel *The Mango Season*. In this novel, Malladi focuses how women caught between two worlds- Eastern and Western culture. The protagonist, Priya Rao struggles to reveal that she has got engaged with Black American Boy Nick. The author portrays a vivid description of how its difficulty to disclose this kind of love marriage in the joint family system. The trauma of the protagonist has been exhibited through the selection of tradition or modern life. The women characters in the novel slowly come out from the clutches of tradition and focusing on their identity in the society.

**Keywords:** identity, patriarchy, tradition, marriage, cultural clash, and psychological trauma.

### **Introduction:**

Cultural dilemma is a common phenomenon in the writings of immigrants like Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Amulya Malladi. The dilemma between tradition and modern culture is inseparable in the life of people with so called hybrid identity. Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* presents the cultural dilemma faced by the protagonist Priya after returning from a foreign country. The western ideology of Priya has not been matched with the Indian patriarchal, social and cultural norms. The protagonist Priya's psyche is confined with the modernization aspects. The generational conflict could be seen when she and her mother were talking about arranged marriages and the caste system that prevailed in India. Priya's parents who believe in eastern culture have tried to withdraw her from adopted American culture. However, the two different poles are unable to cope up with the other. Priya seems to be suffocated after seeing the old practices in her homeland as it would affect

her life. Her psyche is tormented by the cultural practices of her parents. Malladi portrays all her characters' psychological sufferings in a realistic manner.

### **Women's dilemma:**

*The Mango Season* is a panorama of Indian tradition. It deals with an Indian who moves to America and live a multi-cultural existence, which goes against the ideology of her extended family. It is about an Indian woman who hides her engagement to an American man from her traditional Brahmin family. Malladi artfully places Priya in a situation between two opposite worlds. She must go with either the dogmatic tradition of her family or her heartfelt emotions. In the novel, Priya is struggling a lot unlock her secret engagement with black American boy. In *The Mango Season*, Malladi captures a young woman's struggle to make her family happy, respect her past, and follow her feelings. All the commonplaces of culture clashes are on display in the novel. During the mango season, when Priya returns to India to inform her traditional family that the man she is going to marry is not an Indian, she faces the harsh reality of prejudice and cultural clashes in her homeland.

Familial conflict has started when Priya goes home, and discovers her family, her mother in particular, practicing traditional customs and superstitions. Priya is frustrated after seeing all indulge in cultural practices. She says in the first chapter, "It had just been three days, but I was already tired of being in India, at home, and especially tired of my mother."(Malladi 1) Further she describes everyday situations in India. As she says,

The road was bumpy and the auto rickshaw moved in mysterious ways.

There were no rules; there never had been. You could make a U-turn anywhere. Crossing a red light was not a crime. If a policeman caught you without your driver's license and registration papers, twenty to fifty rupees would solve your problem (Malladi 14)

After coming back to India seven years later, Priya finds everything unnatural which was never to be in the past. In the past, she enjoyed the mango season several times with her brother. She never paid attention on the quality of food, but as she thinks "Now, I couldn't imagine putting that piece of white and green fruit inside my mouth, it was not about taste, it was about hygiene..." (Malladi 9) But after years away, everything looks dirtier to her. She further remembers her Indian friends who visited India after having stayed in the United States for a few years, said to her "Everything will look dirties than it did before" (Malladi 10) So, here we see Priya starts showing her concern towards polluted, unclean, and

unhygienic lifestyles of Indians. She starts sweating as if she has never been through an Indian summer before. She makes a comment on load shading and power cuts in India by saying that “The electricity was out. For six hours every day in the summer, the electricity was cut off to conserve it. The cut-off times changed randomly but usually around the times when it was most hot.” (Malladi16)

Priya knows how her mother does bargain whenever she goes shopping. When Priya goes with her to buy mangoes; she gets the experience of her bargaining culture. She is so happy that she doesn't need to bargain for anything in America. As she says to herself “Thanks to happy memories like that I never, ever, bargained. It was a relief that in the United States. I didn't have to do it for groceries and clothes; everything came with a fixed price tag”. (Malladi11)

Priya's bond with her family was a bit complex. She had a very good bond with her father, Ashwin and her brother, Nate, whereas she found her mother, Radha, to be a constant nagging person.

“...You go to America and you want to look like those Christian girls. Why what is wrong in our way?...”

“Wearing shorts in Monda Market?”

“Are you trying to be an exhibitionist?” (Malladi 8)

Radha did not have a smooth relationship with her cousins too. She was always in rival with Lata, her sister-in-law due to Lata's domineering attitude. Radha did not maintain a good relationship with all the members of the family. The rival between Lata and Radha was the usual sisters-in-law rivalry highlighting the attitude of women in Indian joint families.

Even though, Radha nagging mother had much care about Priya and that is why she expressed her anger over Priya by beating her, unable to bear the comments that she heard about her family and Priya from her neighbors. That period was the most difficult period for Priya as she suffered a lot in deciding whether she should stand by Nick or her family. Priya's parents are unable to decide how to handle the situation. They felt the dilemma of deciding her daughter's life or to keep the Indian taboo. At last, Priya's parents accepted her desire, and she also respected her parents' wishes. Soon Priya's parents changed their decision by considering Priya's happiness as primary than other things. The depressed father says,

Probably in a few years, may be, but right now, I am very angry with you and I am very hurt, but I don't hate you. I am your father, I will always love you...

"I am glad though that you didn't marry him in the dark, like Anand married Neelima". I am glad you had the courage to tell us... I am proud that you are who you are. I am happy that I raised you...because I raised you well. (Malladi 213-214)

Priya is in a dilemma in choosing to arrange marriage or love marriage. Each has its own merits and demerits. The children give the priority of selecting their life partner to the parents in arranged marriages whereas in love marriages, the children are taking risks in their life. Since Priya is from Telegu Brahmin family, she must be matched with a groom from Telegu Brahmin background. On the other hand, she was trying, to unite with a black American Nick. The cultural conflict always prevailed in eastern and western culture, and it hindered them from getting married.

There is continuing battle over Anand and the fact that he marries a woman out of his state. Inter-caste marriage means girl and boy are from different castes where one member belongs to the lower caste. In this novel, inter-caste marriage can be seen in the marriage of Anand and Neelima. Anand is a Telugu Brahmin while Neelima is a Maharashtra Brahmin. Even though we can see that both are Brahmins, but they are from different state. Being Telugu is very essential for Priya's extended family since it is the official language of Andhra Pradesh. Being of the same caste is not enough to approve marriage. Typical marriage expects both partners to be from the same state. In *The mango Season*, Maharashtra Brahmins are considered the lower caste because they are not Telugu. Priya's family has fixed opinions on the other caste. They are not in favor of any other caste except Telugu Brahmin, even not the Brahmin from any another region. In western culture, class inequality is based on economic criteria and culturally it is open to an individual to achieve their own class position. Individual class mobility is possible in class systems, and indeed this is the ethos of most industrial class systems in the contemporary world. While caste system is based on religious and ritual criteria, it is still a fairly important reference point for marriage, especially among the first-generation immigrants and short-term visitors. In India, sometimes Brahmin parents would say that Brahmin of any region is acceptable, but, in practice, demanding efforts are made to find matches in one's own linguistic and regional groups.

Tradition plays a vital role in India, and many take it to a higher level, especially in the case of marriage. These traditions are held so dearly because they are tied to patterns, beliefs, and practices by many of India's ancestors. We see a constant conflict between tradition and modernity through changing times and generations. Marriages are cultural as well as religious obligation in India. It is an important institution. In India, most marriages are arranged by the respective families of bride and groom. While choosing the spouse for their son or daughter, both parents prefer the equality of the family in respect of status, financial position, religion, caste, and language. The Indian marriage institution considers the marriage as relation not only with spouses but within their respective families of them. Freedom should not be given to men or women in selecting the life partner.

The cultural clash is also seen in the living styles in America and that of India. Living together before marriage is totally prohibited in India but not in the western culture. Here, we can see that Priya's lifestyle changes when she goes to the United States. She has been living together with Nick on the same roof even though they are not married so far. But in India this living together business is simply not allowed before couple gets married according to Hindu marriage institutional norms.

Approval for love marriage is a tedious task in India. Priya is no exception to this. She is in the position to get the acceptance of her marriage with American Boy Nick from her grandfather. Even in certain cases, the family forsakes their own children due to love marriage. The family frightens against the accusation of society for getting married with the foreigner. If Priya wins the consent of her grandfather for the love marriage, then all the members of the family will also accept it. Happiness and love are treated as a secondary thing in Indian marriages. The family name should not be spoiled at any cost. Every member of the family is very cautious about it. It makes Priya to hide her secret engagement with black American boy.

Priya believes a person's character will be decided by his values and manners. The two extremes of eastern and western culture prioritize things according to its nature. Priya prioritize seems to be opposite what would be practicing in India. The span of seven years has made her very different impact that would not be possible in homeland. The different mores of the countries repel the other. So, the liberalized Priya thought that the bride seeing would be in vain in her life.

On analyzing this novel, one tends to understand how much Priya has suffered in choosing between Nick and her family. Fulfilling the duty as a daughter was a great task as

Priya had so many practical difficulties right from confessing her love till convincing them for her marriage to Nick. At the same time, she had to be loyal to her love by marrying him without any second thoughts despite the family pressures. On the whole, Priya was able to be modern in her social life, but she could not remain the same when it came to her marriage. Finally, Priya and Nick happily got married by winning everybody's consent except that of her Thatha's blessings.

On the other hand, the woman's position in the family was greatly tested in relation to Priya's state of love. All the women characters were suppressed by the men in the family including Thatha. Lata, being the elder daughter-in-law of the family, was forced to conceive for the third time just to have a baby boy, an heir to the family. Such a patriarchal attitude caused a transformation in her and stood by Priya's side. Similarly, Neelima was ignored for her love marriage and received ill-treatment even during her pregnancy. She survived with the hope that a baby boy would change her ill-fate. Sowmiya, though the daughter of the family was not given freedom of choice, she was restricted in every aspect of life including her dressing and education. Finally, Sowmiya threw up all those restrictions and transformed herself by opting for salwar kameez. In the patriarchy tradition, the girls must sit out of the doors during her menstrual period where even ladies hesitate to touch the person.

Apart from this realization, the characters also entered an existential and transpositional state. They start accepting life as it is because women, self-respect is denied. Priya, waiting to win her parents' consent, was the most traumatic period for her by merely existing. Nate proceeding his life after his breakup with the Punjabi girl; Priya's parents who got collapsed after the confession of their daughter were trying to be casual; the women in Thatha's family who did not have freedom in life so far were cracking such stereotype and also Thatha who gave up his own daughter's family for his orthodox mindset all reveal the pressure of culture over the characters for the sake of family reputation by still leaving behind unsaid pain in the hearts of all the characters.

Indian society traditionally places great importance on family honor, obedience, and arranged marriage. In *The Mango Season*, marriage is portrayed not as a private decision but as a social institution controlled by elders. Priya's family expects her to conform to this system, viewing it as a continuation of cultural heritage. Priya's fear of revealing her relationship with Nick, reflects her understanding of how deeply embedded these norms are.

The family's insistence on finding a "suitable Indian boy" underscores how women's lives are often planned without their consent. This lack of choice illustrates how autonomy is constrained by collective expectations, particularly for women. Malladi highlights the emotional pressure placed on daughters, who are expected to sacrifice personal happiness for familial harmony.

Priya's character embodies the tension between independence and obligation. Having lived in the United States, she has learned to value personal choice and self-expression. However, her return to India reawakens childhood conditioning that emphasized obedience and conformity. Despite her fear; Priya does not abandon her commitment to Nick. Her determination to reveal the truth to her family demonstrates her growing self-confidence. From a feminist perspective, this moment represents an assertion of agency against patriarchal control. Priya's autonomy is not impulsive rebellion, but a carefully considered decision rooted in self-respect. Her internal conflict reveals the emotional cost of autonomy. She experiences guilt, anxiety, and fear of rejection, illustrating that independence often comes at the price of emotional pain.

Male family members enjoy greater freedom, while women are expected to comply with tradition. Priya observes how women in her family accept arranged marriages as inevitable, reinforcing patriarchal norms. Through feminist theory, this acceptance can be understood as internalized oppression. Priya's resistance challenges this mindset, positioning her as a representative of the modern woman seeking equality. Malladi critiques patriarchal authority without demonizing individuals. Instead, she exposes how tradition perpetuates inequality, limiting women's choices while appearing culturally justified. It has been noted Malladi's use of irony and sarcasm to critique traditional behaviors, highlighting Priya's internal conflict shaped by humor and cultural expectations. Priya's dilemma within larger cultural structures reveals how diasporic individuals renegotiate identities and norms upon returning to their homelands.

The mango season functions as a central symbol in the novel. Mangoes represent cultural continuity, childhood memories, and familial bonding. At the same time, the season becomes a period of emotional turmoil for Priya. Food and domestic rituals symbolize the comfort of tradition but also its constraints. The sweetness of mangoes contrasts with the bitterness of Priya's situation, reflecting her mixed emotions. From a postcolonial

perspective, this symbolism highlights how culture can be both nurturing and restrictive. Malladi uses the mango season to show that autonomy does not require rejecting tradition entirely. Instead, Priya must decide which aspects of her culture she wishes to preserve and which she must challenge.

**Conclusion:**

Finally, the characters end up oscillating between tradition and modernity as both have different ends and that is where their lives become traumatic. The diasporic life of Priya is well expressed through her nostalgic expressions towards her native land. The author, Amulya, has well depicted the significance of tradition through her characters by portraying how each character in the family were striving to be modern in some aspects of life by getting rid of certain norms in the practical world for a better life. It is clear that the characters in this novel were actually throwing their mask of tradition or norms and have started opting to be realistic and independent.

**Work Cited**

**Malladi, Amulya. *The Mango Season*. Ballantine Books, New York, 2003.**