

**MISTAKEN IDENTITY AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN  
ALICE MUNRO'S "TRICKS AND CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S  
"SILVER PAVEMENTS, GOLDEN ROOFS" – A COMPARATIVE**

**Suparna Karkun**  
Research Scholar  
NIT, Raipur  
Chhattisgarh

**Abstract**

Nobel Laureate (2004) Alice Munro's collection of stories 'Runaway' is an unusual book among her huge collection of short stories. Her in-depth observation of gender based concepts and the marked variations of shades in her women characters lend her stories an aura of mystery. Her contribution is all the more significant because she is the thirteenth woman to receive the Nobel Prize and the first in Canada. The study of her unique concepts regarding the role of woman in her novellas is instrumental in understanding the man-woman relationship, gender-bias and the woman's position in the formation of contemporary society today. This paper deals with the immigrant experience and mistaken identity in her story "Tricks", comparing it with "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" written by the Indian-born Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from her acclaimed collection of short stories "Arranged Marriage".

**Keywords:** Immigrant, Mistaken Identity, Race, Suspicion.

"Recognise yourself in he and she who are not like you and me"

– Carlos Fuentes

The "Immigrant", a stranger surrounded by a sea of people who are sometimes in awe of him, at other times are curious about his ways and still at other times despise him just because he differs from them in his looks, race, colour or language. The two stories of Alice Munro and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni- "Tricks" and "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" bring out the immigrant experience with the glaring truth- mistrust and hatred for the man who tries to become one of "we".

The aim of my paper is to present the two different worlds of "Danillo" and "Bikram Uncle" -their effort to bridge the gap of their social displacement and alienation, their longing to be accepted and the unique way in which both the writers justify their mistaken identities and unveil their unusual existence in a foreign world jolting the readers out of their very skin of complacency.

Both the stories bring out the treatment meted out to Danillo and Bikram Uncle because of their being immigrants- beings from a different planet strange and queer in their ways so much so that they can not be considered as one among the rest. The lurking suspicion and doubt regarding the very existence of an immigrant forms the main plot of the stories.

### **Danillo, The Immigrant**

Danillo or Daniel as he is called is a Serb or a Serbo-Croatian living in Stratford. He happens to meet Robin, a nurse, who has lost her purse while watching one of Shakespeare's plays that she has come to watch from a town thirty miles away.

Danillo is concerned and asks if he could be of help and readily agrees to pay for her train ticket back home. He invites Robin to his house and though Robin agrees she is in two minds as she has been conditioned not to trust a foreigner. She realizes that he speaks with a strange accent.

A reason for this might have been his accent. Some of the nurses mocked the accents of the Dutch farmers and their wives – behind their backs, of course. So Robin had got into the habit of treating such people with special consideration, as if they had speech impediments, or even some mental slowness though she knew that this was nonsense. An accent therefore roused in her a certain benevolence and politeness. (243)

Despite being suspicious about Danillo, Robin agrees to take his help and goes to his house with him. He is very hospitable making her comfortable and urging her to stay back for supper. While talking to Danillo Robin comes to know that he is an immigrant from Montenegro in Yugoslavia. She is curious to know more about him, about his language and the Cyrillic alphabet but she thinks- "It was rude, she supposed, to keep asking him things. To make him feel like a specimen."(247)

But Robin enjoys being his guest and the delicious supper that he serves though she feels he is still a stranger. After dinner they agree to walk along the river. As they walk Danillo and Robin get close to each other and kiss passionately Danillo tells her she can repay him back by coming to meet him the same time in June again next year. She must also wear the same dress and arrange her hair the same way. During this one year, they agree not to write letters or be in touch. Robin heads back home.

Once home Robin does not discuss Danillo with her sister Joanne who is an asthmatic and dependent on her because she thinks Joanne would say- "A Foreigner. Foreigners pick up girls that nobody else will have."(253)

During the one year that Robin waits, she tries and finds out all about Montenegro and does not forget even for a minute all that has happened between her and Danillo. Finally as June arrives, she selects a play to watch and travels to Stratford though she wears another green dress as she does not get the previous dress from the drycleaners. She leaves the play in between as she is too nervous and anxious and reaches Danillo's house at Downie Street. She finds the door open and a screen door that is transparent through which she finds Danillo working on the clocks at his shop. When she calls out to him, he doesn't seem to hear and when finally he sees her, he shakes his head and bares his front teeth as he shivers and seems to apprehend danger. Then he comes towards her and slams the door shut on her face.

This is the intriguing turning point in the story which the reader will want to read and re read as he visualizes Danillo's stark contrast of behavior that compels the reader to reason out and read more with single minded focus and concentration. Munro's dramatic approach cuts

across with seamlessly effortless flow as she unfurls the extraordinary prowess of brilliant craftsmanship.

Robin is deeply shamed. She realizes that it was her folly taking his words seriously and dreaming about him throughout the year. She returns back weeping, taking the grim reality of the blow on her face. She decides never again to go to Stratford.

The story takes a forty year leap and Robin now works only part time at the Psychiatric Ward. After Joanne's death, Robin has moved to an apartment and has severed all relations with her old associations. She has never been to Stratford again and now goes to Niagara-on-the-lake to watch plays.

### **Mistaken Identity:**

During one of her usual days as a nurse, Robin comes across three patients who have been shifted to the ward as per temporary arrangement. On closer observation she finds the old man familiar despite the tell tale signs of old age. She reads the card at the foot of the bed that says –“Alexander Adzic”. She thinks may be Danilo had lied to her about his name earlier. She asks Coral the receptionist to give her more information about the old man and goes about her duties. When she receives the report from Coral, she can't wait to read it and does so in the solitary confines of the prayer room.

The report says Alexander Adzic has been deaf-mute since birth and has been under the care of his brother Danilo Adzic till Danilo's death. His report also mentions about his occasional bouts of hostility and emotional inaccessibility. Robin is aghast reading the report and registers that the Adzics must have been twins. She finally draws a conclusion on the mistaken identity of Danilo and Alexander. She reflects on the past and tries to put in the pieces of the Jig-saw puzzle together.

It draws on her that it was Alexander who had shut the door on her, may be Danilo was out on an errand and may be the screen door was locked too. If she only would have timed her arrival a few minutes earlier or later, if only would have worn the same green dress- may be the tricks would have worked and she would have met Danilo.

Though her mind is full of regrets she also thinks it would have been difficult for her and Danilo to be together with Alexander and Joanne. Joanne would suffer not by being with the deaf-mute Alexander but because of accepting the fact that Robin was married to a foreigner. Robin is grateful for the discovery, clearing her of the shame of loving and not being reciprocated. She unravels in her mind the “fool hardy” plan that they had made not taking into consideration the loopholes that may befall and wishes she could tell Danilo, her side of the story.

### **Bikram Uncle, The Immigrant**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has exquisitely portrayed the pain of being an immigrant in her story “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”. Jayanti, her protagonist is a young girl full of aspirations and dreams of living a luxurious life in America. She travels to Chicago to be with her maternal aunt Pratima and her uncle Bikram. She has always cherished her American dream of being in a clean, sanitary and sophisticated country away from the sweaty hustle and bustle of a typical life in Calcutta.

She has hardly known her aunt as she was eight when her Aunt got married and migrated to America. Despite this Jayanti is eager to join the University and be treated as one among the elite Americans and even be in love with one of them, breaking all conventions of a typical

Indian love marriage. Jayanti's illusion of Bikram Uncle owning an affluent auto business is shattered by his greasy, untidy look in a mechanics' overalls. She also detests the ugly scar that runs up the side of his neck. "I am struck at once by how ugly he is"(38)

Jayanti feels ill at ease in the presence of Bikram Uncle and wonders how a marriage could be arranged between him and her aunt Pratima. "The overalls are a part of the problem. They make him seem so- I hesitate to use the word, but only briefly- low class."(39)

Jayanti is also disillusioned when she finds her aunt's apartment not at all like what she had seen in the glamorous pictures in magazines. She finds the apartment cluttered with rickety furniture. The walls are dingy and her room is the size of her bathroom back at Calcutta.

Bikram Uncle maintains a cold and brusque attitude towards Jayanti and rarely ever responds to her innocent queries. Jayanti feels he is always trying to thwart her golden American dreams. She is taken aback by his rude, rough behavior and finds his attitude very raw and bitter. Bikram Uncle says- "Things here aren't as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we'd become millionaires. But it's not so easy."(43)

Despite Bikram Uncle's warning Jayanti continues to revel in her new found glory of reaching America and being a part of the popular, spectacular American culture. She rarely believes Bikram Uncle when he says-

"The Americans hate us. They are always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, *kala admi* . Blaming us for the damn economy for taking away their jobs. You'll see it for yourself soon enough."(43)

Jayanti remains angry with Bikram Uncle for alienating her from the Americans and detests him with a ferociousness that she deems fit for an ugly, sloppy man like him. She protects her American dream, holds it tight and remembers the song she used to sing as a child-

"Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?"(46)

She finds her aunt's apartment stifling and so she pleads with her to go for a walk. Her aunt Pratima is hesitant and tells Jayanti that her uncle does not like her going out but ultimately yields to her desire for fresh air and they both go out for a walk. Jayanti assures her aunt that they would come back home well within time and before Bikram Uncle returns back.

As they are returning home, they come across a group of four boys playing in a street. As they see the two women, one of them yells- "nigger" and the other boys keep chanting behind him. The boys throw slush at them making their clothes, hands and face dirty. Both the women run home weeping , breathless, trembling and stumbling. Jayanti still can't register all that has happened and is even more stunned to find Bikram Uncle opening the door.

### **Mistaken Identity**

Bikram Uncle is furious seeing them in the sorry plight with slush on their faces and clothes. Jayanti hears him yell-

"Haven't I told you it wasn't safe? Don't you remember what happened to my shop last year, how they smashed everything? And still you had to go out, had to give them the chance to do this to you."(53)

Bikram Uncle is unable to control his wrath and strikes Aunt Pratima across her face and then breaks down much to the astonishment of Jayanti. He is comforted by Pratima as he reminds her how his shop was gutted in the fire set by racist miscreants and they were left with nothing. He regrets not being able to give her any comfort.

Jayanti is taken aback by this sudden transformation of Bikram Uncle and muses- “How little I’ve understood”(54)

Later Jayanti reflects on the entire situation and also on the helplessness of Bikram Uncle, his alienation and humiliation and absorbs his rudeness as she yearns to go back to the welcome warmth of Calcutta. She finds it is snowing outside and the snow has covered her brown hands turning them white. She assimilates that beauty and pain are a part of one another and tries to lull her pain watching her hands turn snowy white, completely covered in snow.

### Conclusion

Both the writers have introduced the immigrants on a suspicious note. Danillo, an immigrant helps Robin who is a stranger to him. It is the utter helplessness of the situation that makes her trust him. As she becomes familiar with his personality she falls in love with him but there is mistrust always lurking at the background. Robin spends her entire life thinking Danillo has not reciprocated her love but realizes her mistake as truth dawns on her. Danillo’s mistaken identity comes as an eye-opener and it is unbelievable both for Robin as well as the reader.

Jayanti, herself an immigrant, eyes Bikram Uncle with suspicion, distrust and even loathes his very existence. She feels Bikram Uncle falls far short of her expectations in every aspect. She can hardly understand the logic behind why her aunt married him in the first place. She does not believe him when he says Indians are not treated well. But very soon Jayanti realizes the mistaken identity of her uncle’s personality when she finds he is their only saviour in the foreign land. She discovers that her aunt is deeply in love with him as they have stood side by side in times of adversity. She finds he has been really suffering as an immigrant trying to get a foothold in the vast country.

Both the immigrants though initially looked upon with suspicion clear the air about their existence as foreigners. The role of mistaken identities brings in the drama and intrigue that is central to both the stories. The inherent intent that all immigrants need not be always suspected comes out strongly through the characters of Danillo and Bikram Uncle. Without being protagonists in the stories both the men keep the attention of the readers focused around them and the stories twirl and twist around Danillo and Bikram Uncle making them no less significant than Robin or Jayanti.

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