

## A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S 'ARRANGED MARRIAGE'

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### Abstract

An individual's Identity is found to be in a state of constant flux while living in a multicultural environment. The process of acculturation often results in the emergence of hybrid identities which are found to be floating in an in-between space. The emergence of diasporic literature over the past few decades is an attempt to capture these fluctuating emotions faced by people who migrate to foreign shores due to various reasons. The following paper is an attempt to explore the complexities of such cross-cultural identities as faced by the women characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story collection *Arranged Marriage*. The stories explore the inner and outer journey of these women while living in a foreign land and also their emergence as empowered beings who use their multicultural experiences to liberate themselves.

"A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing."

(Martin Heidegger 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking')

The landscape of contemporary Indian diaspora has been transformed by the rising tide of globalization. As opposed to the old diasporic community, consisting primarily of indentured labourers occupying contested spaces with other colonized people in places like Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Trinidad etc., the new diaspora consists of those people who have shifted to countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and USA as a result of global migration. The term Diaspora, which is used to refer to any group that has been dispersed outside its traditional homeland, originated from the Greek word diaspora meaning "a dispersion or scattering". Diasporic literature is an attempt to describe the experiences of such people who have migrated from their homelands to foreign shores due to various reasons.

Migration does not merely imply crossing geographical borders rather it involves transcending the barriers of language, cultures and traditions in addition to the internal barriers. placed in a new land, man is often caught between conflicting feelings of hope, fear, nostalgia, and anxiety. The dream of making it big in the new country coupled with a longing for their homeland makes it difficult for the people of the diasporic community to assimilate within the

new environment. The process of acculturation often results in the emergence of hybrid identities which are found floating in an in-between space. The emergence of diasporic literature over the past few decades, is an attempt to capture the essence of these conflicting emotions as experienced by writers living off-shores. These literature, based on the idea of home and nation, are narratives of journeys undertaken for various reasons. A number of Indian women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, have added to the corpus of Indian diasporic literature while focusing on the inner conflict of women characters as a result of migration.

In my present paper an attempt has been made to explore the complexities of cross-cultural identities as faced by the women characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1997). The paper is an attempt to explore how the women characters of Chitra's stories transcend the barriers of culture, race, family relationships and personal problems in search for their identity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian American writer, is one of the foremost writers of diasporic literature. She is an award winning author, poet, activist, and teacher. Her work primarily addresses issues related to cross-cultural complexities of self-identity, family relationships, community values and experiences of Indian and Indian- American women living in a multicultural world. Chitra believed in dissolving these cross-cultural boundaries. It was in 1991 that she, along with a group of friends, established a help-line in order to provide services to Indian-American women. Her award winning short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1997), was inspired by the abuse and courage of these women, who had migrated to the US, primarily as a result of marriage. Through her collection of 11 stories, Chitra Banerjee tries to paint a rough picture of Indian women in their various shades. For some of them it is a journey undertaken with a heart filled with myriad emotions and dreams for a new beginning. The fluctuating emotions that a woman experiences at the thought of beginning a new life with a stranger in a foreign land, are beautifully painted on the canvas of each story. Sumita's ('Clothes') panic at not being able to recall her husband Somesh's face, or Jayanti's ('Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs') fear of not recognizing her aunt upon arrival in America, reflect the state of mind of these young women who are taking their first flight towards a new life.

The women protagonists of Chitra's stories are torn between the old world values and the new world desires. According to K.S. Dhanam, Chitra banerjee, "has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos" (Kulkarni 62). While trying to acclimatize to their new surroundings these women encounter racial, language, cultural and personal problems. Whether it is Pratima Auntie (in 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs'), who is fighting feelings of alienation and emotional isolation in a foreign land, or Asha (in 'Meeting Mrinal') and Abha (in 'Affair'), who are striving to create an identity for themselves while struggling with failed marriages, Chitra's women characters emerge as strong women trying to get a grip on their lives. Through her stories Chitra tries to weave an intricate pattern depicting various issues like divorce, abortion, interracial marriage, adoption and widowhood. The women in these stories are not passive individuals with fixed identities rather they are dynamic women who undergo a gradual metamorphosis emerging in the end as self-reliant women. Sumita, Jayanti, Meera, Anju, Abha, Asha and even the unnamed women in the stories like 'The Word Love' and 'The Disappearance', are women characters who develop multiple consciousness as a result of their hybrid identities.

While stories like 'Clothes' and 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs', begin with the journey of Sumita and Jayanti from India to the US, Meera in 'A Perfect Life', Abha and Meena in

'Affair' and Asha in 'Meeting Mrinal' , are women who have been settled in America for a considerable period of time. Having grown up in a traditional Indian Bengali household, Chitra's women protagonists imbibe certain values which they begin to question once placed in a foreign environment. Their whole identity seems to come under question while facing problems of racism, multiculturalism and familial relationships. Jayanti, from the story 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' , finds her whole identity in a state of flux when she and her aunt face racial abuse from a group of young boys, while out for a walk in the neighborhood. Having grown up in an upper-class Indian family in Calcutta, she is unable to understand the racial slurs thrown at her by these boys. "I want to scream, or weep. Or laugh, because can't they see that I'm not black at all but an Indian girl of good family" (51).

In the Indian society marriage is an issue that concerns most parents. finding a suitable match for their daughters is the biggest concern of parents. Chitra Banerjee portrays the realities of arranged marriage as they exist in our society. An educated boy, living overseas, seems to be the perfect match. Sumita dreams of a perfect life with Somesh. "And she married the handsome prince who took her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas" (Divakaruni 18). Yet she is filled with sense of fear of having to leave her family behind. "Don't send me so far away, I wanted to cry, but of course I didn't. It would be ungrateful. Father had worked so hard to find this match for me" (Divakaruni 18). Although living in America, they try to hold onto their old values and traditions. Sumita has to cover her head while in front of her in-laws and must not address her husband by his name. She finds it strange that even though she is living in a completely different part of the world, her life is no different than those of her friends back home in India. " I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place" (26). At the same time Sumita is filled with a feeling of guilt at becoming westernized in her thinking. She tells herself, "Back home you'd never have felt this way" (Divakaruni 26).

Sumita dreams of working in the store, wearing the "cream-and-brown skirt set", counting the cash at the counter and charming the visitors with her smile. She had never been to the store as it was not considered appropriate by her in-laws, but it is something she longs to do. Her dreams are soon shattered when her husband Somesh gets murdered and she becomes a widow. She is expected to wear the white sari and perform all the rituals of widowhood. While the sari here becomes a symbol of entrapment for Sumita, the "Cream-and-brown-skirt set" symbolizes liberation. The thought of going back to India and living like a "Dove with cut-off wings" scares her. Having left her homeland after marrying Somesh, she cannot now think of going back and living like the other Indian widows. Her stay in America has transformed her, filling her with a new found desire to do something in life. She gets up ready to face the new challenge thrown at her. Her husband's Store- 7 Eleven, is where she wants to be.

Identity, rather than being a fixed entity for these women, becomes a dynamic construct, while they are found adjusting continually to the changes experienced within the new surroundings. Memories play a crucial role in an individual's struggle to create an identity in the new world. Preeti, the protagonist of the story 'Doors', has grown up in America since the age of 12. Much against the wishes of her mother, she wants to marry Deepak, who is "straight out of India" (Divakaruni 183). While Preeti's mother's concerns are based on her knowledge of what Indian men are like, "What do you *really* know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?" (Divakaruni 184). Deepak's friends too try to warn him against marrying Preeti as they feel she belongs to what they refer to as "American-Born-Confused - *Desis*" (185). Despite all speculations and Preeti's penchant for closed doors, Deepak is in love with "this exotic creature- Indian and yet not Indian" (Divakaruni 189). Their marriage is a

success till Raj, Deepak's cousin from India, descends on them. Threatened by this intrusion in her privacy and Deepak's sudden change of behaviour on Raj's arrival, Preeti's life is thrown out of gear. When she decides to move in with her friend Cathy for a few days, Deepak cries out in horror, "You can't leave. What would people say? Besides you're my wife. You belong in my home" (Divakaruni 200). Deepak's patriarchal notions of a wife belonging to a husband's house and the fear of what people would say, brings out the cultural disparity between the two. Preeti begins to doubt her decision and realizes the cultural disparity between the two of them. She tells her friend Cathy, "It has to do with hospitality and losing face-I guess it's a cultural thing" (Divakaruni 194). Although Deepak eventually requests Raj to leave their house as Preeti is uncomfortable in his presence, Preeti and Deepak's relationship remains strained. A door deep inside her heart closes as the reality of their cultural difference dawns upon her.

The conflict between cultural values that these women carry with them and the ones that they encounter in the adopted country results in what Homi K. Bhabha terms as 'hybridization'. However, rather than being a debilitating factor, Chitra's women use their multicultural experiences to create a new identity for themselves. While the men in Chitra's stories are filled with bitterness after the racial encounter, as in the case of Uncle Bikram (Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs), the women characters are filled with hope. For Uncle Bikram the racial attack at his shop was an end to his American dream of becoming a millionaire, filling his life with a feeling of bitterness. "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" (Divakaruni 43). His tone is bitter when he says, "The Americans hate us. They're always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, *kala admi*" (Divakaruni 43). However, Jayanti does not let the horrifying encounter with the boys on the street dampen her spirit. The incident awakens her to the harsh realities of life making her realize that "beauty and pain" are a "part of each other" (Divakaruni 56).

Each of Chitra's stories delves deep into relationship issues that these women face. Along with the cultural baggage that the women carry with them, is a preconceived notion of how a wife should be. Conditioned since birth, the women in Chitra's stories strive to be the perfect wife, mother and daughter-in-law. The encounter with the new culture however, shakes the very foundation of these beliefs, making them feel stifled under the dominant need to conform. Asha, in 'Meeting Mrinal', took the mythological 'faithful Sita' and 'selfless Kunti' as her heroines, but her failed marriage with Mahesh makes her realize that "the perfect life is only an illusion" (Divakaruni 299). While Sumita in the story 'Clothes' feels "caught in a world where everything is frozen in place" (26), Abha, in the story 'Affair', is shocked to hear about her friend Meena's extra-marital affair and wonders "What kind of man would be more important than being a good wife?" (Divakaruni 237) Having grown up in an Indian Bengali household where every woman is taught how to be a good wife to her husband, Abha is unable to come to terms with Meena's decision. Meena, who has always looked up to Abha for her approval is filled with guilt. She tells Abha,

I think of what my parents will say, and Srikant's mother...Selfish, they'll call me. Immoral. A bad woman. I have to keep telling myself I'm not that. It's not wrong to be happy, is it? (270)

On hearing Meena, Abha gradually begins to accept the reality of her own marriage to Ashok. For the first time she is ready to overcome the cultural conditioning of her birth and think of the unthinkable, "each of us freeing the other before it's too late" (Divakaruni 271). She is prepared to face "the pity in the eyes of the Indian women when they hear", her "parents anger" and "family dishonor" only to "start learning, once more, to live" (Divakaruni 272).

In the story 'Meeting Mrinal' , while Asha hides the truth of her failed marriage from her friend, Mrinal is honest about being jealous of Asha's happy life. Though independent and successful, Mrinal misses a family life. The sharp contrast between the two is brought out by Chitra in the following lines,

She wept like she laughed, unashamedly, without reserve . . . I wanted to weep like that too, to confess. But it was as though I were trapped deep inside something, a tunnel perhaps . . . cold water passing down on me.  
(295)

The meeting with Mrinal, awakens Asha to the illusion of a perfect life. She accepts the truth and is filled with a new hope and is now ready to celebrate her "precious, imperfect" life (Divakaruni 300).

Through her stories Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni celebrates the liberation of women who have been carrying the cultural baggage for far too long. Her women characters are free-spirited, young individuals who, for a short time are caught in an in-between space with multicultural, hybrid identities, but use this experience to enrich their lives. Rather than being pulled down by the hardships of failed relationships, Chitra's women emerge as triumphant individuals, ready to face the challenges of the world with a new found sense of individuality. From moving into an in-between space with multiple fragmented consciousness, Chitra's women emerge as dauntless, independent and buoyant women, who though unsure of their future are filled with an indefatigable spirit.

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