

The Matrix of Diasporic Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

Dr. Archana Kumari

Assistant Professor
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (Central University)
Koni, Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh)
archie2004@gmail.com

Abstract: *Diasporic writing in novels, short stories, travelogues, poems, and essays has not been new to post colonial literature. The sense of yearning for the 'homeland' or 'root', a strange and unusual attachment to its traditions, religions, and languages gave birth to the so-called diasporic literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the foremost writers of the diasporic literature, in her American Book Award winning first collection of short stories, Arranged Marriage, beautifully presents inter alia the matrix of diasporic consciousness like alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, cultural conflict, etc. The present paper delves into these elements and highlights Divakaruni's concerns for racism, economic disparity, miscarriage, divorce, etc in her acclaimed collection of short stories, Arranged Marriage.*

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In this age of globalisation, the terms like transnationals, diasporas, expatriates, migrants, etc. have become very common phenomena and the difference between them is often blurred. A striking feature in this age of globalisation is the "transnational movement of people" and the "...intensification in the creation of diverse diaspora populations in many locations, who are engaged in complex interpersonal and intercultural relationships with both their host societies and their societies of origin" (Tambiah 2000: 163). Khaching Tö lö yan in his journal, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* (1991) testifies the significance of the terms of both sides of the colon. 'Transnationals' are migrants who create and maintain multiple ties across several national boundaries along with their homes. The concept of 'Daispora' which is being used extensively in academia over the last two decades or so, historically traced back to later part of 19th century to refer to the dispersal of Jews in terms of exile (galut) and longing for their return to the homeland. Since then this term has been used variedly. From 1960s to 1970s, the classical meaning of diaspora was termed as the dispersion of Africans, Americans, and Irish. From 1980s onwards, this term was used as 'expatriates', 'expels', 'political refugees', 'alien residents', 'immigrants', 'racial minorities', etc. From the mid 1990s, 'diaspora' stands for the people who live outside their national territories (Cohen 1977: 9). Uma Parmeswaran, a noted Indo-Canadian writer has highlighted the diasporic consciousness as follows:

The first is nostalgia for the homeland, left behind mingled with fear in strange land. The second is a phase in which one is so busy in adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno-culture issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and started participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (1998: 108)

The phenomena of diaspora range from global diasporas such as Jewish, British, Chinese, African, Russians, Turkish, Greeks, Labanese, Koreans, and Iranians on the one hand, and South Asian diaspora on the other. In recent years, a new generation of South Asian female writers have begun to make their unique mark upon the world of Diasporic literature which comes under the broader realm of post colonial literature – the works produced from previously colonised countries such as India. Bharti Mukherjee, Jumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Meera Sayal, Sunetra Gupta, Anjana Appanchana, Padma Hejmadi, Meena Alexander – only to name a few female

writers of Indian origin who have influenced the realm of Diasporic literature by expressing the myriad voices of immigrant experiences. Their works are abound with the diasporic consciousness of isolation, mental trauma, dispersion, quest for identity, unresolved dilemmas, unsettled conflicts, unread complexities, and unanswered questions. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such writer who has secured a credible place in the genre of South Asian Diasporic Literature.

People in diaspora are caught physically between the two worlds, which negate their belongings to the either location. To keep hold of values of the homeland in the new atmosphere of the adopted land often leads to mental conflict, dilemma, and unanswered questions, which ultimately leads to identity crisis. The metaphor of 'Trishanku' has been commonly used to define people who live in a state of 'in-betweenness' or more precisely the immigrants. In general, the migrants are caught in the crisis of identity as their intuitive grasp of their native culture inevitably comes into conflict with their rational understanding of a foreign culture. In an alien environment, they try to scrutinize and re-evaluate the tradition and culture of their homelands.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American award winning author and poet who migrated to America in 1976 at the age of 19, witnessed the troubles faced by the so-called 'black' in a country of the so-called 'white'. As an expatriate, she is conscious about her own identity and hence her works reflect the sense of rootlessness and alienation, which are mostly relevant to the Indian diaspora. Disparity in a new land persuaded her to establish *Maitri*, a hotline for South Asian women who were the sufferers of discrimination, cruelty and abuses. The initiative taken to improve the condition of such women motivated her to write *Arranged Marriage*, a work of art to narrate the tale of abuses and bravery of immigrant women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni possesses a high rank in the contemporary circle of Indian Diaspora for being a very keen observer of life of the Indians, especially Bengali women, in the United States of America. Through the characters of her stories in *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni explores the problems of identity crisis, emotional isolation and non-communication, the experience of migration, etc. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, and her works have appeared in over a hundred magazines and anthologies. Several of her novels and stories have been made into films and plays. Before she began her career in fiction writing, Divakaruni had established herself as an acclaimed poet and wrote poems encompassing a wide variety of themes. Her main area of focus is once again immigrant experience as Divakaruni says,

Expatriates have powerful and poignant experiences when they live away from their original culture – and this becomes home, and never quite, and then you can't really go back and be quite at home there either. (Divakaruni Profile by Arthur J. Pais)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the author of several award-winning volumes of poetry and novels, in her debut collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) which has also won a PEN Josephine Miles Award and a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, deals with the immigrant experiences, especially of women in general. Divakaruni, with her remarkable workmanships portrays diasporic women protagonists, living in two cultures, struggling the insecurities of exile, and questioning their identities. In this brilliant collection, which contains eleven short stories, Divakaruni's focus is mainly on women caught between two worlds, their dejection, and disillusionment and adaption to such conditions. Besides, it evaluates their attitude and approach toward life, abandonment or preservation of their cultural values. Each tale has a freshness and uniqueness of diasporic consciousness. In the majority of the stories, the author skilfully narrates the stories of Indian women immigrants living in the perpetual socio-psychological conflict.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to the first generation of Indian immigrants in the United States who has spent a part of her life in India and has carried the baggage of her native land offshore. She has keenly observed the postcolonial society of India as well the challenges of diaspora abroad. With this observation, she has portrayed the fear of adjustment, struggles and sufferings of her characters, both from India and abroad, authentically. The focal point in almost all stories in *Arranged Marriage* is the problem of adjustment arising from cultural variation experienced by an Indian woman when she moves toward the west, which is an important theme in the mosaic of American Indian culture. The first story of the collection, "Bats" talks about the physical and emotional sufferings and the courage of an Indian woman who leaves her torturer husband and returns home with her child in India. The second story of the collection, "Clothes", which is about the unfulfilled promise of a marriage, also talks of unknown fear of migration and

adjustment of Sumita, the central character, who has to accompany her husband to California. She expresses her anguish in this way:

Would I ever see my parents again? '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. Besides, wasn't it every woman's destiny, as Mother was always telling me, to leave the known for the unknown. (18)

When she moves from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to California just a week after her marriage, she understands more about the place and its culture mostly from her husband, Somesh, who works with his partner in a store called 7-Eleven, selling all kinds of amazing things- apple juice, American bread, potato chips, beer, and wine:

It stayed open twenty-four hours, yes, all night, every night, not like the Indian stores, which closed at dinnertime and sometimes in the hottest part of the afternoon. That is why his partner needed him back....A lot of Americans drink, you know. It's a part of their culture, not considered immoral, like it is here. And really, there's nothing wrong with it. (20-21)

People migrate to foreign lands with the expectations of liberty, gratification, and existence which clashes with the traditional values of their homelands. Caught in between two different worlds, they struggle to maintain their cultural values and adapt themselves in the new environment. Sumita, an Indian bride, living in America, has constantly been fed on traditional ideas that it is her moral duty to act like a good Indian wife...serving tea to her in-laws's friends...covering her head with her sari...not addressing her husband by his name, etc. The traditions Sushmita follows are all signs of respect in India and are strictly maintained in her home in California. Such situations make her impatient and remind her of her homeland, India:

...at other times I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a glass paperweight. It is a world so small that if I were to stretch out my arms, I would touch its cold unyielding edges. I stand inside glass world, watching to scream. Then I'm ashamed. Mita, I tell myself, you're growing westernized. Back home you'd never have felt this way. (26)

Sumita's life in America is not different from the life led by other daughter-in-laws in Indian society yet, she doesn't want to go back to India, her motherland, even when her husband is murdered at his shop as now it would be much difficult for her to adapt herself to her roots than to live in a 'dangerous land'. The conflict of consciousness and sense of assimilation are quite evident in the given lines:

That's when I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings. (33)

Similarly, Jayanti in "Silver pavements, Golden Roofs" faces the dilemma of being an immigrant when she migrates from Calcutta to Chicago to live with her aunt Pratima and uncle Bikram. Jayanti, being the first generation Indian-American, cherishes her past and its memories as an indispensable, integral part of her root and being. The apartment, in which she has to live with her aunt and uncle, is no better than to the house Jayanti came from. Jayanti within the confines of home feels disoriented and caught in the same world:

My monogrammed leather cases are an embarrassment in this household. I push them under the bed in the tiny room I am to occupy – it is the same size as my bathroom at home. (41)

Like other diasporic writers, Divakaruni writes about 'human predicament' and the crisis of identity in the alienated land of America though she has made it her homeland. Identity crisis, alienation, and nostalgia are the chief characteristics of her writings. It is the painful anguish of diasporic identity and the sense of alienation that Divakaruni focuses on in her collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*. In the story "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" Jayanti who came to America with bright dreams, expresses her bitter experience of being immigrant, recalls an incidence when a group of boys shouted at her and her Pratima aunt with racist slurs and attacked them with the 'fistful of slush'. Jayanti, who was proud to be an upper class Indian, questions her

relation to American race categorisation and her entire perception of her own race is thrown into question after this incidence.

Now the others take up the word, chanting it in high singsong voices that have not broken yet, nigger, nigger, until 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)

Though this incidence made her to long for her home in Calcutta desperately, she can't stop thinking of 'the pink-tipped blond hand of the air-hostess' who offered her a warm towelette' and all American hands that she knew will keep coming back in her dreams.

*Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land
Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all
gold?*

The sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and at the same time being an 'outsider' to it creates an inner tension in the characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. An immigrant like Jayanti is compelled to live between two worlds: the imaginary and the real, the past and the present, and the virtual and the material. While standing on the balcony of her aunt's apartment in a snowy weather, Jayanti realises that the 'excruciating pain' of chilly snow falling on her hands fades away when she dreams of her life in America and makes sense that

...the beauty and the pain should be the part of each other'. I continue holding them out in front of me, gazing at them, until they're completely covered. Until they do not hurt at all. (56)

The clash between cultures and the conflict between family and career, which affects immigrant women largely, are interwoven with the other diasporic consciousness in *Arranged Marriage*. Women in diasporic situations struggle with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile on the one hand, and the demands of family and work with the claims of old and new patriarchies on the other. They experience the spatial, cultural, and emotional vacuum in their efforts to settle and adapt themselves in a new land. In "Perfect life", Meera, an Indian girl, rejects the traditional roles of a wife and a mother in favour of her career and education in America.

Because in Indian marriages becoming a wife was only the prelude to that all-important, all-consuming event – becoming a mother. That wasn't why I'd fought so hard – with my mother to leave India; with my professor to make it through graduate school; with my bosses to establish my career. (76)

However, after meeting a six-year old orphan boy, Krishna, she begins to contemplate motherhood and even to adopt the child and raise him by herself. She envisages the child's first day of school, trip to Disneyland and baseball games, and could see herself as the actual mother of the orphan. Now she understands motherly love quite well.

I wanted to tell her.....The need of children came before the needs of adults, I had learned that already. Mother-love, that tidal wave, swept everything else away. Friendship. Romantic fulfilment. Even the need of sex. (98-99)

Caught up in her new role as a mother, Meera after the disappearance of Krishna from the Foster Homes office, considered quitting her job and started distancing herself from her boyfriend, Richard, and even thought to inform her mother in India to consider her an arranged marriage with a widower.

At one point I wrote her a letter saying that I would consider an arranged marriage if she could find me a widower with a little boy of about seven. Such a man, I reasoned, would understand about mother-love far more than Richard – or any other American male, for that matter – ever could. (106)

But she never posted the letter. Even though she was crazy with anger, sorrow and guilt, she knew that would have been a bigger mistake than the ones she'd made already.

Loneliness and disillusionment are the burning problems of the expatriate community in the nation of their choice. In the story "Affair", Abha recalls how Meena, her close friend, failed to

adjust because she found herself lonely and isolated in the over-involvement of professional commitments of her husband, Srikant. Abha used to reveal her friend's loneliness: "I hated being alone in the house. It was so deathly quiet, not like India, where something's always going on – Street vendors, servants, people dropping into gossip..." (239). Further, Abha recalls the secrets of Meena's loneliness: "... how she still turned on the TV evenings when Srikant was late coming back so she wouldn't have to listen to the silence, how she slept with the light on when he went out of town" (240). Meena's loneliness intensifies after her first miscarriage. This loneliness brings her closer to Ashok, "that was another bond that held us close, unspoken sorrow of being childless" (ibid). Under the sway of emotions, now Meena had no fear to share her most intimate joys and fears even with Ashok, Abha's husband. Keeping aside the consequences and ignoring Abha's isolation and anguish unconsciously, Meena enjoys the company of Ashok just to overcome the frustration of her isolated life. Abha, on the other hand, suffers from uncompromising insecurity: "I wondered how many women were lying sleepless like me, through the night dark, eyes burning tears that wouldn't come, because their husbands were having affairs with their best friends". (265)

In "Meeting Mrinal", the last story of *Arranged Marriage*, Asha is envious to see her childhood friend, Mrinal enjoying freedom of movement, power, and economic security in England but soon is disillusioned of her 'perfect life' when Mrinal admits: "I was going to pretend everything was fine". The disillusionment about 'perfect life' of Mrinal and the pang of loneliness and dejection in her own life made Asha cry who has been divorced by her husband, Mahesh and who is not getting along too well with her teenage son, Dinesh:

And I am crying – all those tears I didn't shed when Mahesh left, and when Dinesh turned away from me down that harshly lit night corridor. I'm crying for Mrinal in her spacious bed in her luxury apartment, lying alone for the rest of her life, and for myself, who will probably do the same. But most of all I'm crying because I feel like a child who picks up a fairy doll she's always admire from afar and discovers that all its magic glitter is really painted clay....What would I live on, now that I knew perfection was only a mirage? (296)

Further, Asha laments on the disillusionment and the imperfection in the psyche of Indian mythology:

I think of how hard I always tried to be the perfect wife and mother, like the heroines of mythology I grew up on – patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti. For the first time it strikes me that perhaps Mahesh had a similar image in his head. Perhaps he fled from us because he wanted a last chance to be the virile Arjun, the mighty Bhim. And for a moment I feel a sadness for him, because he's going to realize it too, soon enough...that the perfect life is only an illusion. (298-99)

The women of these short stories experience a conflict of consciousness and struggle to define themselves like those of several South Asians and Americans. In the private realm, the traditional Indian culture women have to perform some specific duties and follow strict norms of morality and are transgressed only by those considered daring and depraved. Sandra Ponzanesi in her essay "In My Mother's House" states:

As far as the condition of migration and diaspora is concerned, women are often called to preserve their nation through the restoration of a traditional home in the new country. The idea of home entails the preservation of traditions, heritage continuity; there is even an intense emotive politics of dress for some communities. (245)

The South Asian Diaspora is currently one of the world's largest Diasporas. The diasporic Indian writers of the first generation like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have established their credentials by winning numerous literary awards and honours. Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is set in both India and America and it presents Indian-born women who are torn between the values of Old and New World and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own. Besides, the stories of the collection *Arranged Marriage*, address the issues such as racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. In fact, Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is stories about women – women in love, women in relationships, and women in difficulties. The stories elicit pathos of each woman's struggle while trying to adapt to alien culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing affirms that diaspora is not merely scattering or dispersion but a matrix of

consciousness that encompasses various conflicting characteristics. Being an immigrant in USA, Divakaruni through the stories of this collection, seems to capture the experiences of the Indian immigrants with all its colours. Thus, *Arranged Marriage* is not only an assortment of short stories but also an assortment of immigrant experiences, especially those of Indian women.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Archana Kumari, M.A., NET, Ph.D, is an Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English & Foreign Languages, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh. She has to her credit about nine published research papers in National, International peer reviewed journals. Her areas of interests include Linguistics, English Language Teaching, Communication Skills, Indian English Literature, Diaspora Writing, etc. She is the member of Professional bodies like Teachers' Association of India (ELTAI) and Linguistic Society of India (LSI).