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Crisis of Fragmented Identity and Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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Contemporary world literature remains in a dynamic state of flux due to the rising trends of globalization. At the crest of this wave, writers are reverberating myriads of voices of human experiences. Within the new wave of blurring boundaries, diasporic writings emerge as epiphanies of intertwining experiences of hope, joy, pain, conflict and love of migrants and their connected relations. They echo the disheartened music of life that is created by continuous vacillation between contradictory conceptions of culture, identity and belongingness.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni surfaces as the trumpet of several South Asian women who by the twist of destiny deracinate their souls entrenched in their native land and trail to a foreign terra firma, but plunge into a sea of obscurities where the high tidal waves shove them to unwelcoming shores.

This paper attempts to critically analyze Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's collection of short stories entitled '*Arranged Marriage*' and intends to explore the vicissitudes of Indian women as they transit into different social roles. As the shades of time, different cultures, foreign spaces and rootlessness impinge upon their derailed spirits, the self-perception of the women of Divakaruni's stories undergoes a dramatic alteration. They develop a fractured consciousness resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid but rather fragmented. The paper inclines towards reflections on the whirling conflicts between traditions of homeland and cultures of unfamiliar land.

I would like to quote Vertovec who aims to contribute to the meaning of Diasporic Consciousness. He states that "its particularity is variously described as being marked by a *dual* or *paradoxical nature*. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion and positively by identification with a historical heritage (such as Indian civilization) or contemporary world cultural or political forces such as "Islam" (Oonk 238) He defines diaspora as "an imagined connection between a post migration (including refugee) population and a place of origin and with people of similar cultural origins elsewhere.(238)

In many countries, Indian community has been in existence for many years like in UK, USA, Continental Europe and Australia. With the emergence of diaspora as a uprising phenomenon these countries, many South Asian women writers have made significant contribution to the canon of diasporic literature like Bharti Mukherjee, Jumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Meera Sayal, Sunetra Gupta, Anjana Appanchana, Padma Hejmadi, Meena Alexander to name a few. Divakaruni's works portray her the nuances that constitute her own experience – that of an expatriate dilemma. They take us into the bylanes of female diasporic consciousness and

the nuances of expatriation. 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)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, author and poet, is currently a Creative Writing professor at the University of Houston. Born and brought up in Calcutta, India, at the age of 19, Divakaruni moved to United States for higher education. Her works are marked by colors of autobiographical strain and her close acquaintances with immigrant women who migrated to the United States

Arranged Marriage is based on the stories of the some of the women in Maitri, a women’s group founded by Divakaruni. As remarked by the Time Magazine, “The Indian experience in America — and the conflict between the traditions of her homeland and the culture of her adopted country — is the focus of much of Divakaruni’s writing, and it has made her an emerging literary celebrity” (Divakaruni, 1).

Divakaruni’s demonstration of the complexity of combining Western thoughts and ideals with traditional Indian values provides significant insight into the oppositional forces of Eastern/Western culture. The purpose of Divakaruni’s depiction of South Asian women in these situations is to exhibit the identity formation of women shadowed by the colliding lights of traditional and modern cultures.

As the women of this text struggle to define themselves as South Asian and American, they experience a conflict of consciousness. The traditional Indian culture requires woman to follow specific duties and observe strict norms of morality. Very few women who move out these realms of imposed orders, create a paradigm shift in the feminist corners. Diasporic consciousness of dejection, rootlessness, conflicts of identity, dilemmas surface in most of the writings which deal with immigrant experiences. The association with both cultures leaves the immigrants in a mentally displaced position where they eventually hold no grounding in either of the two locations/cultures. The process of physical shift from one geographical setting to the other is pounded by one’s deeprootedness to native culture and inclination towards learning from the newly adopted culture.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her collection of short stories , has roughly sketched the diasporic experiences of Indian-born women living in the United States. It traces the trajectory of evolution of these diasporic women from ground of ignorance and vacillation to a struggle towards constituting their self identity.

The study perceives these female protagonists in the transient period of self recognition and discovery. They find themselves caught between pulls of traditionality and modernity. The intervening phases of these pulls leave them juggling through multiple identities created by their cultural spaces and cultural roles. The women of these stories fight territorial, cultural and ethnic battles.

It positions Divakaruni's collection as a 'matrix' of fragmented identity and diasporic consciousness. The deliberation arises from the wavelength of distinct characters engaged in each of the stories. The male and female, primary and secondary, husband and wife, mother and daughter, divorcee and spinster, aunt and niece are some of the binaries arranged in combination in *Arranged Marriage* that bleed the pain of "in-betweenness" of tradition and modernity, of homeland and place of progress. It focuses on the stories 'The Bats', 'Clothes', 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs', 'Doors', 'Meeting Mrinal'. It intends to probe into the psyche of the female protagonists of these stories.

The Indians that stationed themselves in the United States underwent a metamorphosis of attitudinal change. While leaving their Indian soil, they carried in their luggage bags the clothes of conventionality, tradition, obligations, dutibound actions and tightroped relations. There arises a conflict of consciousness : the conditioned mind constantly reminds them of the culture they belong to- one with social obligations, traditional bearings, domestic roles but the eyes absorb the environmental essence of the new land. The heart vascillates

As the paper employs the technique of critical analysis, the first story 'The Bats' is analyzed and in it, the question which stands unattended, marked by a suggestive reflection upon it. The story is about a compliant wife who endures the physical abuse and emotional torture of her hell-bent chauvinistic husband. Throughout the story, she meekly shuttles in-out of her marital space, by running away with her daughter from the home but returning in full submission as part of her marital duty. The story ends in such continuity of events. There is no road to definition of the wife's role in the marital space. Her only release are the tears that flow out the intensity of pain and its memories. The ill-effect of strained relations of wife and husband have a terrifying bearing on the daughter who introduces her father:

"Since she usually put me to bed before he came home, I didn't see him much. I heard him, though shouts that shook the walls of my bedroom like they were paper, the sounds of falling dishes. Things fell a lot when Father was around, maybe because he was so large. His hands were especially big, with blackened, split nails and veins that stood up under the skin like blue snakes. I remembered their chemical smell and the hard feel of his fingers from when I was little and he used to pick me up suddenly and throw me all the way up to the ceiling, up and down, up and down, while Mother pulled at his arms, begging him to stop, and I screamed and screamed with terror until I had no breath left." (2)

Each story has some event or aspect as a symbolic representation. 'The Bats' has an anecdote narrated by maternal grandfather about the bats flowing into a mango orchard in great numbers and had started destroying hundreds of mangoes. After many attempts of trying to drive them away failed, he used poison. This led to death of bats and their carcasses would lie all over the orchard. Each day Grandpa cleared the area but every next day he saw another set of bodies lying. They both wondered why the bats did not go elsewhere to find home to be safe. Grandpa said that there must be something that would be pulling them towards the orchard. The return of the wife to her abusive husband is relational. "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." (4)

The question that emerges here is what is that brought the bats back to the orchard? What was it that brought mother back to her husband's home and endure further abuse? The issue surfacing is: What made the wife come back to her husband and become susceptible to her his continuous ruthlessness? A plausible deliberation could be that the wife failed to seek an identity of herself as a woman without her obligatory role of a wife. Her fragmented self of being neither a happy wife nor a brave denouncer fractures the totality of her being. In search for her identity, she seeks out escape from the patriarchal clutches of her home, but the traditional pulls of obligatory socio-cultural roles weakens her. "He wants us to come back. He promises it won't happen again...I wrote to him...I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the marketplace. The loneliness of being without him" (11-12) Here comes the answer to the question of her return.

On her way back she kept on reading the letter with gleaming eyes. But when she returned, the violence resumed and she kept leaving the house but coming back to her husband still. Why did she not leave forever? What pulled her back? The fragmented identity establishes itself here: she takes a decision to leave and walk out of the marriage but the social pull is so strong she succumbs to the stereotypical conventions of culture.

The next story, 'Clothes', is a redefining of structural position of a widow exposed to the contradictory aspects of her own aspirations on one hand and the traditional folds of her culture on the other. The colors of her sarees at different time space are symbolic of her trajectory towards self evolution and ascertaining of her identity. Through the significant phases of her life. First is the bride-viewing saree which fills her with dreams of love, romance, new life and aspirations. Next is the saree which she wears on the flight to America; the clothes that her husband Somesh got discreetly and eventually she drapes herself in a white saree: which is a clean slate that has wiped out all her good bad memories of the past as now begins a totally different journey which is a breakdown of her fairytale song: "And she married the handsome prince who took her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas." After her marriage, she experienced a sense of dilemma and was lost in seeking a streamlined path. She expresses:

“But at other times I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paper-weight. It is a world so small that if I had to stretch out my arms, I would touch its cold unyielding edges. I stand inside this glass world, watching helplessly as America rushes by, wanting to scream. Then I’m ashamed. Mita, I tell myself, you’re growing westernized. Back home you’d never felt this way.” (26)

Thus, the story reflects the diasporic South Asian woman’s cultural assimilation and identity formation. As the woman struggles to define herself as South Asian and American, she finds that her self-perception and self identification are contingent upon the particular realm that they are occupying and a conflict of consciousness emerges when contrasting self perceptions exist simultaneously.

The question here lies: In search for identity, the cultural with the modern or the South Asian identity collides with the American identity. And the clash here is resultant of a ‘conflict of consciousness’ which becomes an obstacle in identity formation. Does the cultural assimilation and subconscious baggage of both cultures influence in distortion of real self?

A symbolic anecdote is the swimming experiences of Sumita during her pre-marriage days when she often used to swim towards the middle of the water backstroke: how she would coil and fight herself upward like a wild animal trapped inside her chest. Similarly, at the time of her husband’s death, she stands upon a pedestal where there are forces towards embarking upon a new shore of fulfilling the dreams of running the store while there is a strong shadowing of her identity as an individual, only to be substantiated by the traditional role of following the customary widowhood roles.

Her inner thought processes depict her attempt to bring together the fragments of dual identity and move towards a defined consciousness: “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) Hence, she determines:

“ I tilt my chin, readying myself for the arguments of the coming weeks, the remonstrations. In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds.” (33) she is creating her space and identity in the unknown land in the difficult situation by standing strong and not breaking down by her husband’s death and succumbing to the stereotypical dogmas and Indian customs.

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, 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)

The quest for making a fortune in the American land and the desire to relocate from homeland to a foreign space of possibilities is fractured. Jayanti’s aunt responds to her letter requesting to stay with them in US is answered in one line that they live simply. It expresses the disconnectedness from their native land and family. It is not the charm of the American world that leads them as such, but the rupture of the hope of a better life is what disassociates them and distances them from their loved ones. One picture of the Indian culture and living is presented. The other is the presupposed picture of the life in US as stated by Jayanti “ Americans I heard , liked their privacy. They liked their lives to be smooth and uninterrupted by the claims of relatives” (38)

Another is the real experience of living in that land as Bikram uncle remarks harshly, “Things here aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think. We thought we’d become millionaires. But it’s not so easy...The Americans hate us. they’d 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) detesting the country he has moved too Discontentment.

Before reaching the place, the mind is churning questions of all sorts. The American vision of Jayanti that she had believed in about the life of her aunt and uncle is changed when she reaches there : uncle’s attitude, his house, dressing sense, aunt’s meek attitude and home which appeared worst than her own Calcutta.

As she persuades aunty for a walk, she hesitates even though she wishes to, out of uncle’s fear as he did not allow her to go out. As they walk back home they are called out as ‘nigger’ by some young boys playing cans and sticks on the street. Two contrasting shout outs : one out of respect for the family she belongs to in Calcutta and the other is disrespectful for the race she belongs to.

Earlier Bikram had faced an incident at his shop where the Americans had smashed the things in his shop. “ I tried so hard Pratima. I wanted to give you so many things-but even your jewellery is gone. This damn country, like a *dain*, a witch – it pretends to give and then snatches everything back.” (54)

The snow as symbolic of each day that comes as a cover to the past, subsiding the pain while also retaining its beauty. Beauty and pain go side by side. This story is about how the American picture is more grey color than other bright vibrant hues. The discontentment brewing in the hearts of the ones living there is portrayed.

'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs', is a story revolving around the shattering of the American Dream. One is the conceived pre-suppositional viewpoint about American world that people hold : this may be glorified by the charms of economic growth, strong political forces, unconventional cultural setup and liberal thinking. But the dream of America to be the gold mine of success and happy living is often distorted as we recall the experiences of migrants stated in diasporic literatures. The disturbance occurs when the pre-concieved notions turn out to be different. As Jayanti in this story moves to Chicago for higher studies, her notions of American life and her aunt's family life changes perceptibly over time.

In 'Meeting Mrinal', the last story of *Arranged Marriage*, Asha is envious of her childhood friend, Mrinal, an independent woman living in England and economically and socially strong but soon she 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)

To conclude, Divakaruni' s *Arranged Marriage* is stories about women – women in love, women in relationships, and women in difficulties. To live in a state of multiplicity with oppositional conditions exactly within a fragment self, is the essence of the diasporic experience. The identity of the south Asian diasporic woman cannot be categorized as simply Eastern or Western, submissive or dominant, but rather it is comprised of numerous consciousnesses that encompass various conflicting characteristics.

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