

ISSN:0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## Identity Crises in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Clothes*

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### **Abstract:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights the different problems faced by immigrants in her works. Her short story collection *Arranged Marriage* is a chef-d'oeuvre in women writing. *Clothes* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays the struggle faced by the protagonist right from her landing in America till death of her husband. The object of this paper is to explore the search for the meaning of life, which the female character depicted in this story engage in and the various outcomes she reaches. In this, she projects her protagonist Sumita who faces discrimination, identity crisis at different levels of her life. The tolerant Sumita is much agonized with the unfair treatment of the people at her husband's death. However, at the end of the story, she realizes what she lacked in her life and achieved her individuality with her brave declaration of her right to independence. She represents the modern educated woman who always stands at the cross roads of tradition and modernity. She explores the way in which woman raised with traditional values try to balance the new realities of a new existence in America. The search for identity is a major issue in delineation of her women characters. She portrays the life of woman at home and abroad.

### **Keywords: Culture, Tradition, Women, Identity Crises**

In the firmament of literature Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an excellent writer who portrays the piteous plight of persecuted women in the male dominated society. She is a scintillating Indian woman novelist who delineates the identity crisis of modern educated women in the patriarchal system of family. Her stories focus on the experiences and struggles of women trying to find their own identities:

Indian born girls and women who are torn between two cultures receive a fine collection of stories, which examine women's independence and roles under India's social constraints. These are excellent, hard-hitting stories, which are revealing and engrossing. (Midwest Book Review)

Today's modern Indian woman seems to be in a similar situation as Divakaruni has depicted in her stories. As stated in her numerous interviews and non-fictional writings, she focuses her critical lenses on arranged marriages of Indian women living in India and India born women living new lives in America. An identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. In situations like starting a new job, the beginnings of new relationship, the end of a marriage or the birth of child are the different levels where people experience this crisis. When one explores the different aspects of oneself in the different areas of life, including her/his role at work, with in the family and in romantic relationship can help strengthen one's personal identity. Her women show a heightened awareness of life in all its sordidness.

The diasporic sensibility, in spite of being a prominent creative force in the stories of Divakaruni, appears as complex phenomena beyond the issues of migration, spaces and location. She dwells upon exposing the conditions of post-colonial India, the clash of ritual and modernity, the intricacy of human relationships, the dilemma of human behavior with issues pertaining the question of female identity in diasporic surroundings. Her main concern is the exploration of feminine psyche in the order of patriarchy where woman seems to make her futile efforts to carve her own spaces, may it be within her native cultural milieu or in the form of escape to an alien land. The central theme of the story *Clothes* is the incessant urge of Sumita to seek independence in the form of marriage and to romanticize that marriage would bring immigration.

Through Sumita's character, Banerjee presents a highly evolved, decisive and bold woman. She desperately wants to work in the store to make much money. She nurtures her own dreams of professional life. "I want to stand behind the co-center in the cream and brown skirt set and ring up purchases. The register drawer will glide open. Confidant, I will count out green dollars and silver quarters" (AM 27).

The story begins with Sumita being displayed at her 'bride viewing'. She recalls her mother's words about the Hindu belief that 'A married women belongs to her husband, her in laws' (AM 19). As according to the Dharma Shastra the males must keep women in dependence. It is a traditional Hindu belief that a woman is never fit for independence, as she is incapable of handling her own life. She must be in constant dependence of someone; otherwise, she will become wayward and unmanageable.

The beginning part of the story is the exposition of Sumita's romantic quest for 'marriage' and 'immigration', both as modes of freedom. She has a romantic dream of her conjugal relationship with a husband who is settled in America. She remains unmindful of the fact that the codes of marital life are drastically different in India and America. She is over-excited with the fantasy of migration like other immigrant women protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee. The idea of immigration is like an 'electric shock' to her. She conceives the dream of marriage as a process of freedom against all conventional norms of traditional Bengali culture. After her first appearance in America, she is over-enthusiastic about shopping in big malls. Somesh, in spite of being Indian, modifies himself, according to the spirit of the American society. He tries to make Sumita aware of American living against the moral consciousness governing the life of Indian immigrants.

Divakaruni notices the complex matter of sexuality in the story, in which sex is portrayed as the duty of a wife in her marriage, regardless of whether she desires to engage in it of her own volition. Sumita has been taught to view sex as a demand that husbands make upon their wives, a command that women must follow so as not to fail in the contentment of their marital responsibilities as supposed in Indian tradition and culture. She has no hesitation in her absolute surrender to her male partner who should be a young man. With conversion, Somesh is rash and over-possessive in matter of sex relations. He does not care for the emotional involvement of wife in the whole affair, though the first physical contact with Somesh brings her to a state of romantic excitement. In order to impress him she indulges in wearing exuberant American dresses that might lead to the exhibition of the secret part of her body. She is ready to accept all the mechanisms that can ensure happiness and position to her in American society. It highlights her inherent insecurity, her dependence on male support and the lack of awareness about her own dignity and identity. She is highly aware of her good physique and beauty to attract her husband.

For her adjustment in American life requires the strategy of artificiality. In contrast to her dreams, she comes to the realization that the reality and trauma of existence in America is easy.

The second part of the story is highly tragic and mystery prevails and base on the discrimination because of color. Unfortunately, someone kills Somesh at the store and steals the money from the store, which is a shock to the family. Sumita walks nervous and isolated in the middle of the room. Against her preference for her red and blue sari, she is expected to wear a white sari. The death body of Somesh covered in white sheet arrives. She is fond of colorful clothes but now she has to wear white clothes. According to India custom white clothes is made for a widow. Moreover, it represents the meaningless existence of a woman without her husband: “The sari thick voile that will bunch around the waist when worn, it borrowed widow’s color, color of ending..... there’s a cut, still stinging...It is from the bangle-breaking ceremony...rubbed the red marriage mark off my forehead” (AM 29).

Her in-laws want her to return India but she feels like “Doves with cut-off wings” (AM 33). However, she is in America but she has to perform all Indian customs of a widow. However, she is not compelled to cut her hair nor do her in-laws believe that she has brought an ill luck. She has decided not to move to India. The decision to stay in America and work where her husband has inhaled his last breath conveys of Sumita’s plan to escape from the cultural oppression of widows in India as well as being sentimental in her attitude as an Indian. Divakaruni through Sumita, records how desperately they have been craving for liberation against the bondages of patriarchy that ruins their human sensibility born out of gender prejudices. She is disgusted but she realizes that retreat for her will be no consolation against the ‘white sari’, the symbol of widowhood in India. The image of her in a mirror at the end of story, dressed in blouse and skirt, symbolizes her decision to remain in America and becomes a teacher.

In the story, *Clothes* conflict between South Asian and American culture finds prominence. One finds a more positive portrayal of an arranged marital relationship between men and women. The story portrays the character of a young Indian woman Sumita. She is the chief character and prospective bride in the tale. She is an Indian woman indecisive about whom she wants to marry. Her marriage is arranged with Somesh. She is a round character of the story. She is beautiful and typical Indian daughter-in-law. After her arranged marriage, she moves to America where she realizes that life in America is not different from the life led by other daughter-in-law in India. Being a traditional wife, she feels that it is her moral duty to act like a good Indian wife: “Where I must cover my head with the edge of my Japan nylon sari and serve tea to the old women that come to visit Mother Sen., where like a Indian wife I must never address my husband by his name” (AM 25).

The death of her husband is an enormous shock to Sumita when she feels that her enjoyment of life was not for her but always for her husband and his family. At Somesh's death, Sumita must make a final decision on whether she will succumb to tradition and return home (to India) or if she will follow her dreams of being independent and running her own life in the United States. Despite her sudden loss and unforeseeable future, Sumita develops remarkable strength and realizes she cannot return to a land. Where she will have to face the traditional beliefs of being, “I straighten my shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath. Air fills me- the same air that traveled through Somesh’s lungs a little while ago... she wears a blouse and skirt the colour of almonds.” (AM 33)

Here we find Sumita breaking away from the orthodox belief of the society to emerge as a completely new person. She is ready to face pressure and frustration for her decision, but we find her at peace with herself, knowing she has made the right decision. At the end of the story she becomes an independent woman and is able to reject the widow's cloths and position that the society and family customarily imposed on woman: "That is when I know I cannot go back. I do not know yet how I will manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must." (AM 33)

However at Somesh's death, Sumita is in a fix as she must make the final decision on whether she will succumb to tradition and return home or if she will follow her dream of being independent and running her own life in the United States. Sumita is portrayed as a character who develops remarkable strength despite her sudden loss and unforeseeable future. She will be among the "Widows in white sari...bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings" (AM 33).

Sumita very well realizes that she will have to face the pressure and frustrations of traditional ways for this decision of hers but she stands firm at her decision knowing that she has taken the right decision and finds herself at peace.

### **Conclusion:**

This story is as irresistible as the impulse that leads her characters to surface into maturity, raising her head above floods of silver ignorance. Her Indian wife and daughter is too imperfect who draws with a rich, dense, detail that allows the reader to feel the silent, strong undertows directing her life. Both liberated and cultural changes on both sides of the ocean she struggle fiercely to carve out an identity of their own. Sumita from starting to end has created many selves and ultimately realized her uniqueness of creating even more identities.

### **Works Cited:**

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