

TITLE- Overcoming Cross-Cultural Conflicts Through Synthesis of Cultures: A Study of Female Protagonists in Three Selected Short Stories from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of 'Diaspora' is a leading topic in the interpretation and analysis of literature and theoretical deliberations. Cross-cultural conflicts have grabbed the attention of writers all over the world with the advent of technological boom, globalization and multiculturalism. Women have increasingly been contributing to international migration, especially since 1990s, as they have been transcending the barriers of borders, races and cultures in various roles and for myriad motives. Migration exposes female migrants to soul-stirring conflicts. Though women confront different diasporic dilemmas yet they also strive to create an individual niche for themselves by attaining self-realization and self-consciousness. This paper aims to examine the cross-cultural clashes and comingling of cultures experienced by female protagonists in three selected short stories namely "Silver Pavements Golden Roofs", "Doors" and "Ultrasound" from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's debut anthology *Arranged Marriage*. (1995) It analyses not only the complex issues engendered by cross-cultural exchanges but also how synthesis of cultures benefits both the home and host cultures. Divakaruni's heroines are both trapped and emancipated by cross-cultural collisions and they attempt to balance the old world with the new world in order to overcome cultural tumult by adopting resilience, patience and hope. Whatever price they may have to pay, they are determined to blossom in the alien land as they are already aware of the harsh realities back home. An attempt will also be made to comprehend how inter-influence of cultures leads to mature recognition of contrasting cultural attitudes, fostering healthy blend of cultures.

Key Words: Diaspora, Migration, Identity, Cross-cultural conflicts, Confluence

Man has been migrating to various geographical locations since time immemorial. Besides men, the migration of women has also been a crucial aspect of international migration. The trend of the contribution of women to international migration has been changing. In the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a dominance of South-Asian male migrants, along with their dependent wives and children. Males used to be the key decision-makers of migration while women, being unassertive and yielding, used to go along with the dominating males in various gender-specific roles. However, the feministic developments since 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a spectacular transition in the pattern of female migration. Women have now been working as businesswomen or intellectual doctors or engineers or educators or nurses or domestic helpers etc. During the past few decades, women's contribution to international migration has increased tremendously. Currently, approximately a little less than half of the

international migrants are women. A survey of women and migration reveals that women migrate owing to multitude of reasons such as- for marriage / employment / greener pastures / family reunion / better educational and professional avenues / sexual freedom, or to escape wars/ natural calamities / poverty/ unemployment / violence/ political upheaval / racial bigotry/ gender-discrimination and due to many other factors. The levels of acculturation and adaptation of females to migration depends on several familial, social and cultural factors such as personality type, cultural baggage and moral values etc. Women migrants, no doubt, have to reconcile with baffling crisis-ridden situations and have to pay a very heavy price to come out of this quandary but they also open new vistas of emancipation and self-consciousness. All these complex factors will be interrogated in this project to explore how the female protagonists in the selected short stories have been delineated by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who has earned an inimitable reputation in diaspora fiction.

Indian diaspora's role and contribution have been significant. Among several Indian female diaspora writers, though Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-) belongs to the first-generation of diaspora writers yet she is unlike her contemporary writers who are primarily expatriates. She does not even completely resemble second-generation diaspora writers who feel like immigrants. She seems to assume an "in-between" position just like her migrant characters. (Bhabha 5) Besides being a renowned novelist, Divakaruni is also an adept story-teller. Her short stories normally have Indian or American backgrounds and mainly project the challenges faced by South-Asian immigrant women. Her short narratives are mainly autobiographical and are marked by magic realism, supernatural touch, and mythological allusions. Her enraptured prose is enlightened by wonderful imagery, symbolism, mythical references and folktales. Her debut short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995) chiefly portrays cross-cultural issues of the first-generation female migrants whereas her second short story anthology *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) presents most of the female protagonists who belong to second-generation. The writer brings out the idea how pivotal choices lead to modifications in the identities of these heroines.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's female protagonists are not multicultural, outspoken, assertive and violent as Bharati Mukherjee's characters are. They are not fully able to come out of their Bengali sensibilities and that's why they are always confused between their cultural baggage and liberal American culture. Despite these limitations, her heroines are vibrant, life-like, morally strong and endearing as the writer skilfully handles the plot and characterization by dwelling more on the inner turmoil rather than outside forces.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's underwent a cross-cultural shift when she immigrated to America. This transition gets reflected in her initiative of founding 'Maitri' (in 1991)- an NGO to help women who confront the issues such as domestic abuse and human trafficking. The writer's connection with 'Maitri' laid the foundation for the composition of eleven short stories in *Arranged Marriage* (1995) which has won several prestigious awards. These short stories portray themes such as unbridled freedom, gender-bias, domestic abuse, racial bigotry, emotional alienation, sex-determination and illicit relations etc. The writer portrays the harsh realities of arranged marriages which get solemnized due to lucrative dreams of a prosperous

married life. The idealistic dreams cherished by the Indian brides are not materialized due to heterogeneous cultural values and they fall prey to identity-crisis. Minal J. Damor avers that *Arranged Marriage*: “is a realistic portrayal of women living in India under the shadows of patriarchal social conditioning, their internal clash between the hope for change in life and their deep-rooted traditional programming of values.” (25)

In order to delve deep into cross-cultural complexities, critical concepts of a few leading theorists will be used. Uma Parameswaran has drawn an analogy between Trishanku’s heaven and the diasporic position in “Dispelling the Spells of Memory: Another Approach to Reading Our Yesterdays.” ‘Trishanku’ signifies the halted or trapped position often confronted by the immigrants. On the one hand, this oscillation leads to alienation, on the other hand; it also opens the doors for reconciliation and progress. Her insights will be used in analysing the selected short stories. Homi K. Bhabha’s theoretical concepts of ‘hybridity’, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘third space,’ as enumerated in his path-breaking work *The Location of Culture* (1994), will be employed in comprehending cross-cultural confrontation not only as alienation and but also as a productive point of merger of cultures where the constant negotiation of diaspora identities takes place. Stuart Hall’s theory coincides with Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of ‘hybridity’. In his seminal essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1996), Stuart Hall avers that though the immigrants are put in a state of “being” and “becoming”, a new diasporic person of the “New World” is born which may be considered as “the beginning of Diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference (Hall 110-111) Thus, the theoretical perspectives of these critics, and of a few other thinkers, will help in understanding the selected short stories.

“Silver Pavements Golden Roofs” brings out the theme of American dream visualized by a first-generation Indian Bengali migrant girl named Jayanti who experiences disillusionment and consequently rediscovers herself “through transformation” in the land of relocation. (Hall 111) The writer targets relevant diasporic themes such as- racial discrimination, disillusionment, East-West clash, transformation of subjectivity and cultural negotiation. This story revolves around Jayanti who immigrates (against her mother’s consent) from India to America to fulfil her ambition of pursuing higher studies at the University of Chicago. During her flight, she feels jubilant as she expresses: “The air inside the plane smells different from the air I’ve known all my life in Calcutta.” (IOM 36). However, just like any other migrant, she also suffers from her cross-cultural confusions and insecurities. All her hopes are dashed to the ground when she observes the disgruntled life of the immigrant couple- Aunt Pratima and Bikram Uncle. She sensitively empathizes with her aunt’s “shock at discovering that her husband was not the owner of an automobile empire but only a mechanic who had a dingy garage in an undesirable part of town.” (IOM 44) Her lucrative and rosy image of Uncle Bikram gets shattered as she feels challenged by her uncle’s rough voice and his “staccato American English.” (IOM 39) Their apartment is “not at all what an American home should be like.” (IOM 40) Though her aunt seems to be positive, Bikram Uncle always discourages and demotivates Jayanti: “Things aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we’d become millionaires. But it’s not so easy.” (IOM 43) He always feels dissatisfied as he has felt like an outsider in the mainstream culture and he outbursts his detestation in these words: “The Americans hate us. They’re 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." (IOM 43) Even his wife constantly feels harassed and discriminated.

Jayanti's initial zest gets cooled down and her perspective gets altered during the process of "being" and "becoming". (Hall 110-111) As a migrant, she has to confront the most gruesome form of racial discrimination when during an evening walk with her aunt, she is being taunted, insulted and mocked at by a few American boys who swear at her and use a derogatory slur. Jayanti comes out of the glittery image of her dreamland, undergoes metamorphosis of her subjectivity and realizes the illusory aspects of "Silver Pavements Golden Roofs." However, Jayanti exemplifies profound moral courage and determination as she realizes, through transformation, that ups and downs, and disillusionment and reconciliation go hand-in-hand as she expresses this new-found maturity in these words:

I notice that the snow has covered my own hands as they are no longer brown but white, white, white. And now it makes sense that the beauty and the pain should be part of each other. (IOM 56)

It may be concluded that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: "finely portrays Jayanti's determination to embrace the new culture as she is fully conscious of the fact that opportunities of success in the new land will be accompanied by challenges. (Parashar 5-6)

Through the short story "Doors", Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni investigates the issue of marital incompatibility in the lives of a culturally mismatched couple- an acculturated wife Preeti and her stereotypical husband Deepak. Through this story, the writer unravels cultural dissonance between Eastern and Western value-systems. The title "Doors" has been used for individual liberty and privacy which symbolize the true essence of American spirit. The writer juxtaposes Indian openness with the Western concept of personal space. In American culture, public and private life are poles apart while in India, these two domains overlap.

Though Preeti is a well-educated Indian modern girl yet she is fully acculturated to the American ethos. In spite of her mother's objections, she ties a nuptial knot with an Indian boy named Deepak who has recently immigrated to America and is new to the foreign modes. Her mother feels guilt-ridden about her daughter's liberal rearing which she expresses in these words: "I wish I had trained you better, like my mother did, to be obedient and adjusting and forgiving. You're going to need it." (IOM 184)

Initially both Preeti and Deepak lead a perfectly happy married life. In spite of this initial bliss, cultural rifts occur in their marriage. While Preeti loves privacy and closed doors as she is a "private person," Deepak likes openness. He teases his Americanized wife who bolts the door of her bedroom: "Are the pots and the pans from the kitchen going to come and watch us making love?" (IOM 188-189) During their initial phase, they attempt to adjust, however; the

entry of Deepak's bosom friend Raj (who comes to America to earn a Master's degree) into their house leads to serious cultural tremors between the couple. Raj is just the opposite of what Preeti is. While Preeti arranges for his stay at the guest room, he candidly asserts that he will sleep in the kitchen area and he taunts Deepak in these words: "Have you become an *amreekan* or what?" (IOM 191) When her husband confides in Preeti that he will stay with them till he completes his degree, she retorts acidly: "Isn't this my house, too? Don't I get a say in who lives in it?" (IOM 192) The word 'privacy' Raj does not exist in Raj's dictionary. He infringes upon Preeti's liberty so embarrassingly that she starts feeling disgusted and just like an outsider in her own house. When her close friend Cathy asks her to express her real feelings to her husband, Preeti expresses her insecurity: "Deepak would be terribly upset. It has to do with hospitality and losing face- I guess it's a cultural thing" (IOM 194) She attempts to have a meaningful conversation with Deepak but fails to do so as her husband has totally been impacted by Raj's overbearing personality. She shuttles between contrasting cultural values similar to a "Trishanku." (Parameswaran xlvi) Preeti gives vent to her emotional suffocation and says that she "can't live with Raj in this house anymore." (IOM 197) When she outpours her need for some individual space, Deepak blames her insensitively: "Why, must you lock the bedroom door when you're reading? Isn't that being a bit paranoid? Maybe you should see someone about it." (IOM 198) Preeti undergoes cultural alienation and she decides "to move in for a while with Cathy." (200) At Preeti's act of assertion of individual will, her male-chauvinist husband says dominatingly: "You can't leave... You belong in my home." (IOM 200) Conjugal distance occurs between the culturally-drifted husband and wife. Preeti's libertarian upbringing renders her too obstinate to be flexible enough to save her marriage from cultural shocks. The writer symbolically suggests the shutting of the doors of conjugal love in these words: "And when the door finally clicked shut, she did not know whether it was in the guest room or deep inside her own being." (IOM 202)

Through the short story "Ultrasound," (which has been expanded into a novel titled *Sister of My Heart*), the writer lashes out at the intense social problems prevalent in the Indian society such as- gender-discrimination, female foeticide and abortion. In spite of stringent laws, the brutal technique of ultrasound is used to identify the gender of the unborn child. This story focuses on the lives of two Indian females - Anju who migrates to California (along with her spouse Sunil) and her intimate cousin sister named Runu who is married to a Brahmin boy Raman in Calcutta. Divakaruni has targeted the misogynist attitude of families in India towards the female foetus. Their inhuman obsession for a male child blinds them and makes them torture the expecting mother mercilessly.

Through Anju's transforming subjectivity, the writer draws a striking contrast between rigid Indian practices and the emancipating Western ethos. Anju's reformist American values empower her suppressed Indian cousin to come out of the shackles of outworn dogmas and taboos, and reinvent her identity in "diaspora space." (Brah 71) Divakaruni also highlights the immense importance of female networks which empower Runu to lead her life with dignity. After their marriage, both become pregnant and plan about their amniocentesis. Runu tells Anju that she has a female foetus and her conservative in-laws are intimidating her for an abortion. Her orthodox mother-in-law tells her shamelessly that "it's not fitting that the eldest child of

the Bhattacharjee household should be a female.” (IOM 224) Even her husband tries to manipulate her for an abortion. Gayatri Spivak, a prominent feminist critic, remarks about the subdued identity of a female in these words: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subjects-constitution and object-formation the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is displaced figuration of the third world woman caught between tradition and modernity.” (102)

The writer brings out how women are not supported by women in Indian society as even Runu’s mother advises her to abort her girl child because her daughter’s “place is with them, for better or worse.” (IOM 225) Runu’s deplorable condition, no doubt, initially baffles Anju who feels split between her innate values and American values. But gradually, she undergoes a positive metamorphosis and she is bent upon convincing and assisting Runu to overcome all impediments in the way of delivering her female foetus. All her confusions are resolved as she is determined:

I'll fight back. Already I'm learning how. I'll use what I have to- my pregnancy, even. It's worth it- for Runu and, yes, myself. I'll get my way. *I know I will.*" (IOM 230)

In this story, the writer portrays America as an emancipator as Anju does not adopt stultifying Indian values, rather she accepts the liberal American ethos. Anju’s cross-cultural transformation enables the submissive Runu to flutter her wings in the “promised land” by welcoming the contrasting culture which epitomizes successful confluence of cultures. (IOM 239)

To sum up, the heroines in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* endeavour to step out of their cliched roles by striking a delicate balance between the old and the new set of values. They struggle hard to surmount the barriers created by patriarchal modes and male-chauvinism and ultimately emerge as valiant warriors. The writer’s short fiction conveys a moral that society needs to alter its perspective towards women who are capable of creating a unique niche for themselves by balancing both the contrasting worlds.

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