

## **Diasporic Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Arranged Marriage"**

**S.Vanithamani, Dr. M.Rajaram, Dr.S.Alexander**

Ph.D. Part Time Research Scholar Department of English  
Government Arts College Karur -5 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan  
University, Trichy) Tamilnadu, India

Assistant Professor Department of English M. V. Muthiah Government  
Arts College for Women Dindigul, Tamilnadu, India

Associate Professor and Head Department of English Govt. Arts  
College Karur, Tamilnadu, India

**Corresponding author: S.Vanithamani**

Ph.D. Part Time Research Scholar Department of English  
Government Arts College Karur -5 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan  
University, Trichy) Tamilnadu, India

ONOMÁZEIN 62 (December 2023): 327-331  
ISSN: 0718-5758



## Abstract

Diasporic writing in novels, short stories, travelogues, poems, and essays is not 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 diasporic literature, in her American Book Award-winning first collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, beautifully presents, among other things, the matrix of diasporic consciousness like alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, cultural conflict, etc. The paper delves into these elements and highlights Divakaruni's concerns about racism, economic disparity, miscarriage, divorce, etc., in her acclaimed collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*.

Keywords: Alienation, Motherhood, Divorce Diaspora, Identity Crisis, Death, Repressed

## 1. Introduction

The phenomena of diaspora range from global diasporas such as Jewish, British, Chinese, African, Russian, Turkish, Greek, Lebanese, Koreans, and Iranians on the one hand and South Asian diaspora on the other. Diasporic literature comes under the broader realm of post-colonial literature – the works produced from previously colonised countries such as India. Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Meera Sayal, Sunetra Gupta, Anjana Appanchana, Padma Hejmadi, and Meena Alexander – only to name a few female writers of Indian origin who have influenced the realm of Diasporic literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a writer who has secured a credible place in South Asian Diasporic Literature. People in the Diaspora are caught physically between the two worlds, which negates their belongings in either location.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American award-winning author and poet who migrated to America in 1976 at 19, witnessed the troubles faced by the so-called “black” in a country of the so-called “white”. She is conscious about her own identity, and hence, her works reflect the sense of rootlessness and alienation, which are primarily relevant to the Indian Diaspora: *Arranged Marriage*, a work of art that narrates the tale of abuses and bravery of immigrant women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is highly ranked in the contemporary circle of the Indian Diaspora. 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 main area of focus is, once again, the immigrant experience. As Divakaruni says, Expatriates have powerful and poignant experiences when they live away from their original culture – and this becomes home. Never entirely, and then you can't return and be quiet at home.

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.

With her remarkable artistry, Divakaruni portrays Diasporic women protagonists, living in two cultures, struggling with the insecurities of exile, and questioning their identities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to the first generation of Indian immigrants in the United States who have spent a part of their lives in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore. She has keenly observed the postcolonial society of India as well as the challenges of Diaspora abroad. *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 essential theme in the mosaic of American Indian culture. 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, all night, every night, unlike the Indian stores, which closed at dinnertime and sometimes in the hottest 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 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 between two worlds, they struggle to maintain their cultural values and adapt to 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, serve tea to her in-laws' friends, cover her head with her sari, not address her husband by his name, etc. The traditions Sumita 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.

Sumita's life in America is not different from the life led by other daughters-in-law in Indian society. Yet, she doesn't want to return to India, her motherland, even when her husband is murdered at his shop, as now it would be much more 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 pretty evident.

Similarly, in "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs," Jayanti 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 roots and being. The apartment in which she has to live with her aunt and uncle is no better than 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 the "human predicament" and the identity crisis 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 an immigrant and recalls an incident 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 race is challenged after this incident.

Though this incident made her long for her home in Calcutta desperately, she couldn't stop thinking of the pink-tipped blond hand of the air hostess "who offered her a warm towlette" and all American hands that she knew would 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 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 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.

The clash between cultures and the conflict between family and career, which affects immigrant women essentially, is 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 to 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.

However, after meeting a six-year-old orphan boy, Krishna, she contemplates motherhood and even adopts the child and raises him alone. She envisages the child's first day of school, a Disneyland and baseball games trip, and could see herself as the orphan's mother. Now, she understands motherly love quite well. 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 of informing her mother in India to consider her an *Arranged Marriage* with a widower. But she never posted the letter. Even though she was crazy with anger, sorrow and guilt, she knew that would have been a more significant 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 reveals her friend's loneliness: "I hated being alone in the house. It was so deathly quiet, not like India, where something is always going on – Street vendors, servants, people dropping into gossip..." (239). 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, Meena did not fear sharing her most intimate joys and fears, even with Ashok, Abha's husband. Keeping aside the consequences and unconsciously ignoring Abha's isolation and anguish, Meena enjoys the company of Ashok to overcome the frustration of her isolated life. Abha, on the other hand, suffers from uncompromising insecurity.

In "Meeting Mrinal", the last story of *Arranged Marriage*, Asha is envious of her childhood friend, Mrinal, enjoying the freedom of movement, power, and economic security in England. Still, she soon is disillusioned with her „perfect life“ when Mrinal admits: "I was going to pretend everything was fine". The disillusionment about the „perfect life“ of Mrinal and the pang of loneliness and sadness 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?

Asha laments 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. Maybe he fled from us because he wanted a last chance to be the virile Arjun, the mighty Bhim. And for a moment, I feel sadness for him because he will soon realise 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, in the traditional Indian culture, women have to perform specific duties and follow strict norms of morality. They are transgressed only by those considered daring and depraved. Sandra Ponzanesi, in her essay "In My Mother's House", states:

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

## 2. Conclusion

Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is set in both India and America. It presents Indian-born women who are torn between Old and New World values and struggling to carve out an identity of their own. Besides, the collection *Arranged Marriage* stories address issues such as racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is stories about women – women in love, women in relationships, and women in difficulties. The stories elicit the pathos of each woman's struggle while adapting to an alien culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing affirms that diasporas are not merely scattering or dispersion but diasporic consciousness encompassing various conflicting characteristics. Being an immigrant in the 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 backgrounds, especially those of Indian women.

## References

1. Cohen, Robin. *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press. 1977.
2. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Arranged Marriage*. London: Black Swan. 1995.
3. Parmeswaran, Uma. "Trishanku and Other Writings". *Current Perspectives in Indian English Literature*. Ed. Gauri Shankar Jha. New Delhi: Prestige Books. 1998. P. 108.
4. Ponzanesi, Sandra. "In My Mothers House: The Mobilization of Home in Women Writers of the Indian Diaspora." *The Literature of The Indian Diaspora: Essays in Criticism*. (Ed) AL, McLeod, New Delhi: Sterling. 2000.