



Sense of Alienation and Reconciliation: A Study of Select Stories of Chitra
Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

* Dr. Madhvi Parashar

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Abstract

Literature has always remained a source of exhibiting social and cultural scenario. Diasporic literature recounts the alienation and rootlessness ingrained deeply in the minds of the individuals who move from their home to make a new home in some other foreign country and their efforts of reconciliation. The basic question to find peace and the state of bliss, however, remains unsolved for many. One who is able to maintain mental harmony under various conditions and pressures is able to live in the state of bliss whether one lives in India or elsewhere. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's stories deal with the existential predicament of expatriates. This paper discusses the sense of alienation and reconciliation in female characters as portrayed in Divakaruni's select stories, "Clothes", "Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs", "The Word Love", and "Meeting Mrinal" from her short story collection *Arranged Marriage*.

Keywords: diaspora, alienation, harmony, bliss, reconciliation

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* **Dr. Madhvi Parashar**, Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, Government Degree College, Dharamshala,, Distt. Kangra (HP), Email: parashar25688@gmail.com



A person throughout one's life continues to search for something meaningful. This meaningfulness is nothing but the in-depth understanding of the things as described in Vedanta Philosophy. In order to find this meaningfulness, one tries to find meaning in everything of life. Be it rituals, customs, tradition or the knowledge transferred to one through one's ancestors or predecessors. Throughout life one continues to play with the things around and all the behavior repeated throughout life is the replica of one's childhood. As a child plays in childhood, the same is repeated in later stages of life. Whether it is the youth or the fag end of one's life, one continues to toy with one's feelings, emotions without analyzing. The so called knowledge is crammed without using one's intellect. The customs and traditions are handed over with a forceful urge as a child plays making of houses with sand or clay and follow the elders by arranging marriage of dolls and following the customs. The same is followed in later stages.

Literature has always remained a source of exhibiting social and cultural scenario. Every culture has certain distinctiveness of expression which is specific to that culture. Every culture has different beliefs in its approach to life and death. The strength of an art- form lies in its ability to derive its latent energy from the secret and warm womb of its culture and to give it a universalistic concern. One starts from the apparently regional form and seeks to give it a mould, a mode of expression that makes it unique and universal at one and the same time. This is the key to great art. Not only this, the great art with its sizeable slice compels the reader to reflect. Many writers have used the genre of short story writing to paint the inner workings of the minds that are entrapped in the situations that compel deep thinking. One such situation is the alienation and nostalgia of the people who move from their native place to some other place, far distant from their old home and in search of new home which an immigrant reader too can identify.

The word Diaspora, originally meaning scattering, is connected with the dispersion of the people from one place to the other. In this broader sense, the phenomenon of diaspora occurs since the inception of civilization. The global diasporas such as Jewish, Chinese, African, Russians, Tibetan, Syrian etc are striking. Diaspora is not only scattering or dispersion but also involves the multi aspects of two cultures. In literature, it incorporates stories about the people who move from their native country to a new country for one reason or the other. They leave their home to create a new one sometimes a far distant from the place that was known to them. They try to assimilate life in a new country where a new kind of life pattern comes into being. This new will have its own culture, language, beliefs and thoughts. To reconcile with all these create a sense of alienation, rootlessness, displacement, identity crisis and sense of loss. Many immigrant writers explore in their works the theme of complexities of life styles, the subtleties of human ties at the individual level and the dynamics of the confined soul of their own decision. In



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Diasporic literature which comes under the broader realm of post colonial literature – the works produced from previously colonised countries such as India are noteworthy.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American award winning author who migrated to America in 1976 at the age of 19, witnessed the troubles faced by the immigrants. Born in Kolkata in 1956, she now lives in America. As an immigrant, 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 diasporas. She is the co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline for South Asian women that works to redeem the sufferings of the victims of domestic violence, discrimination, cruelty and other such traumatic situations. Her major literary works have highlighted the themes of expatriate experiences and the cultural conflict. She has proved her mettle by revealing the inner landscape of the individuals who try to assimilate life in a new country. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, and her works have appeared in over a number of magazines and anthologies. Several of her novels and stories have been made into films and plays. She is the winner of numerous literary awards and honours.

In the course of this research paper, an attempt has been made to reflect over the social and psychological borders of two different cultures resulting trauma and the efforts to adapt with life around especially in case of women characters in four short stories of Chitra's work 'Arranged Marriage'. This work of art narrates the tale of cultural differences, alienation and reconciliation of immigrant women especially Bengali women. Being an immigrant herself, she is a keen observer of the life of the Indians in America. The book has eleven stories set in the United States. The central characters are all Bengali women. Divakaruni's forte lies in giving expression to the emotions that arise out of the conflict and blending of cultures. She delineates in her writings the tightrope walking of the characters to maintain a fine balance between old treasured beliefs of their native land and the new hopes from the new land America, to start a new life with dreamy eyes of American independence and modernism without breaking the ties with Indian culture and tradition.

The story entitled 'Clothes' describes the dreams of a young girl, Sumita, from Kolkata. After her marriage to Somesh, a store-manager in California, she like any other Indian girl, is ready to leave the known and embrace the unknown. Though certain apprehensions make her emotional yet for the love and duty for the family she prepares herself for the destined truth that every Indian girl acknowledges.

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)

Hailing from a land where everything is deeply delved in rituals, she considers everything a part of the 'wifely duties' and tries to re-locate a niche in an alien land. Somesh is a caring husband who encourages her to keep pace with the changing world around. But, all their dreams get shattered when Somesh is shot dead in a midnight robbery.

Someone came into the store last night. He took all the money, even the little rolls of pennies I had helped Somesh make up. Before he left he emptied the bullets from his gun into my husband's chest.

This horrible side to life in America - the land of freedom and hope where people work day and night to make their lives and the lives of their loved ones comfortable are not safe. The harsh reality of interracial tensions is often faced by the people who move to foreign land for a safe and secure future. Hope makes the life go even after facing disaster. The young widow decides to stay back, getting spirit from her husband's unfulfilled American Dream. The writer uses the metaphor of different colours to explain the different shades of life. At the end of the story, Sumita prefers a long flowing skirt of brown colour gifted by her husband to the white sari, which is supposed to be meant for widows. This proves that she has been able to synthesize the best in both the cultures thus stepping towards reconciliation. Chitra also throws light on the perverted social conventions related to widows in Indian society that demand reflection. Sumita's decision to continue her life in America is again a step towards reconciliation in an alien land.

... 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. ... (AM 33).

Uma Parmeswaran, a noted Indo-Canadian writer has highlighted the diasporic consciousness:

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



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issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and started participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (1998: 108)

The next story, 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs', is the expression of beauty and pain in the realization of the dream of Jayanti, a young girl from a conservative Bengali family who wins admission to the University of Chicago. Staying as paying guest with her relatives in America she realizes the hollowness of the dreamy vision of living in States. Her uncle Bikram is a frustrated man who has come to America to be millionaire like many others who come from India with the same hope but ends up as a poor garage mechanic. He feels that he has become a victim of racial discrimination prevailing in the new land. He narrates his experience to Jayanti, "The Americans hate us. They are always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, kala admi. Blaming us... You'll see it for yourself soon enough" (Arranged Marriage 43). Due to the fear of racial attack, Aunt Pratima is not allowed to move outside freely. Jayanti too faces this racial violence when she persuades her aunt to go out for a walk with her. Feeling nostalgic of her village life in India, Pratima was narrating her childhood memories, when some boys throw slush on their face. Jayanti tries to retaliate but is forbidden by her aunt. On their back home, Bikram scolds his wife, "Haven't I told you not to walk around this trashy neighbourhood? Haven't I told you it wasn't safe? Don't you remember what happened to my shop last year, how they smashed everything?" (53). This reveals the harsh reality that the Indians face. While Jayanti envisions America as a magic land with silver pavements and golden roofs, her uncle Bikram calls America a witch who pretends to give and then snatches everything back. Her experience with the bitter reality of racism is in sharp contrast with beautiful snow-covered landscape that converts her alienation in the strange land to reconciliation

.... the snow has covered my own hands so 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 (AM, 56).

Using language meticulously, Chitra finely portrays Jayanti's determination to



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embrace the new culture as she is fully conscious of the fact that opportunities of success in the new land will be accompanied by the challenges. In the broader sense the writer deftly expresses the expectations of the immigrants in the new land and their efforts to reconcile amidst the pain of alienation in the hope of success.

Another story, 'The Word Love', is the depiction of emotional and cultural conflict of an Indian Ph.D. student in US who is straddled between the emotional love of an Indian mother and the passionate love for a young American. Brought up in a conservative atmosphere in India, she finds it difficult to disclose to her widowed mother about her live-in relationship with an American. In India where a bride meets her husband only at the time of her marriage, as is the case of her mother, sharing a live-in relationship with an American to her is quite horrible. She is appalled by the thought of how she would break the news of her relationship to her orthodox mother. When she does, the mother as is expected disapproves. She faces dilemma, whether to continue her affair with her lover or to return to her mother. The dilemma ends with the triumph of maternal love over physical love. The bond of love with her mother is above all. Her lover fails to understand the bond of this mother-daughter relationship and the Indian way of life which is just the opposite of his own culture where children move out of the house in adolescent age to make their own niche and to be independent. With the course of time, she overcomes the infatuation for the American and he abandons her for another girl in his life. She reconciles by deciding to live for herself, enlightened by the new meaning of the word 'love'

...Surely there's another choice. your new life, the one you're going to live for yourself. And a word comes to you out of the opening sky. The word *love*. You see that you had never understood it before. It is like rain, and when you lift your face to it, like rain it washes away inessentials, leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin (AM 70-71).

The last story 'Meeting Mrinal' depicts the life of two Indian friends Asha and Mrinal. Asha after her marriage to Mahesh moves to US where she is struck by the cultural shock. A new culture with a new life style is to be adopted but she feels satisfied that she has to play the traditional Indian role of a wife and mother. This western culture which offers more freedom also brings challenges. The alien place is harsh, fast-moving and she feels herself unfit there. Another



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setback comes in the form of divorce when Mahesh leaves her and their son for a younger and whiter girl. She is afflicted by the sense that she fails in her traditional Indian roles of a woman. Now she has to make herself ready for the internal as well as external challenges in the western culture. The internal challenge relates to the emotional upheaval due to the breaking of a family, the family which is a supporting unit in Indian culture. The external challenge is to go out and to find her a full time job to support her living and the living of her son, Dinesh. Culture, which includes food habits, taste, language etc., is one of the prominent components of diaspora. Her preference for takeouts to elaborate cooking symbolizes the initiation of a change in her life style.

On the other hand Mrinal has made the opposite choice of remaining in India. She is a successful business woman and enjoys all the luxuries but is not happy as she is unmarried, without any family. She flouts away the traditional Indian wifely role under the garb of so called western successful modern woman. Chitra hits the nail of cultural conflict by presenting both the characters. Asha who lives in US finds herself unfit in the sophisticated sheen of the west and Mrinal in India falls in the frills of the idea of the western successful woman. The story highlights the struggle of women caught between tradition and change. Both the women maturely tackle the situations in their life reconciling at the end – “...The perfect life is only an illusion...” (AM 299). They realize that despite one's best efforts, one can never have a perfect life but the experiences teach one to move on and to create the best out of waste with the acceptance of the fact that no one is perfect.

One wanders at various levels of emotions to solve the conundrum of life. As is well said by a renowned writer 'No man is an island'. No man can live individually. One always needs a company or society to develop oneself. The individual as well as the groups depend on each other to a large extent. While living in isolation one feels pressures of solitude and living in society one finds it difficult to keep with the outside pressures. So one keeps on rolling like a pendulum and is never at rest. Solace comes only in the state of mental equilibrium or mental harmony which is difficult to attain. One who is able to maintain this state under various



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conditions and pressures, is able to live in the state of bliss whether in India or in America. A person of insightful eyes and deep feelings can realize the true meaning of life. The contribution of women writers to literature is of immense importance as it can make a significant difference to the viewpoint of the whole society. The time is to act and create a positive influence on women and women's creative efforts.

As Mohanty asserts:

...Thus, the existence of Third World women's narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally that is of paramount importance. After all, the point is not just to record one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant.

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