

Transnational Cultures and Fractured Female Identities: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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Abstract

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, the transcultural/multicultural milieu of America is a space of many possibilities for a woman bonded in arranged marriage setup. However, even while located in this free environment of the metropolitan, multicultural world, they feel attached to home and motherland. These are values they carry from 'home', the country they come from or belong to in the first place. The memories of 'home', therefore evokes feelings of separateness and of constriction in the country they are domiciled. As against this, the multicultural space of America, with its diverse and open culture appears to offer them expressive and behavioral freedom, which they enjoy. This situation of having to live a dual life, however, paves way for a state of conflict in the female protagonist of the stories, leading to fractured identities. The image of 'Home' or the 'Land' associated with that home (Homeland), is thus not as the one which one would want to return to. It remains a cultural memory which one would rather not have. The paper discusses some aspects of such an experience from the gender point of view.

Keywords: Being; Cultural memory; Identity; Multiculturalism; Transnational.

In the era of globalization, displacement of people has resulted into the cosmopolitan multicultural society. Terms like multiculturalism, diaspora, trans-nationals have become the basic tenants of decentered reality of the world which are of major concern for the writers of diaspora. According to Webster's dictionary, the word diaspora articulates a notion of a 'center', a 'home', a 'locus' from where the dispersal occurs. Generally it is perceived as displacement of people who have moved from their homeland to hostland for various reasons voluntarily or involuntary. It is used as an umbrella term which is associated with expatriation, immigration, assimilation and hybridity etc. The concept of diaspora which comes under the broader realm of post-colonialism has been used in academia over the last two decades and have undergone certain changes. From 1960s to 1970s, the classical

meaning of diaspora was termed as the dispersion of Africans, Americans, and the Irish. From 1980s onwards, this term was used as 'expatriates', 'expels', 'political refugees', 'alien residents', 'immigrants', 'racial minorities', etc. From the mid 1990s, diaspora stands for the people who live outside their national territories (Cohen 1977: 9). Binaries of homeland and host land, insider and outsider, pure and hybrid, subject and object etcetera have become more complex and unfathomable with post modernism, post colonialism and post- structuralism making it a more open ended to variety of inclusions. Postcolonial writers, Gayatri Spivak Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, Vijay Mishra, Stuart Hall etcetera have introduced multi referential and multi vocal dimensions of this uncanny term diaspora. They have foregrounded the questions of 'cultural 'polyvalency' and which further stretches to marginality, plurality and perceived 'Otherness'. Vijay Mishra, referring to Derrida marks the intrinsic problem in diaspora:

A critical diaspora theory addresses the following questions raised by Derrida: "Where then are we? Where do we find ourselves? With whom can we identify in order to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own history? First of all, to whom do we recount on?" In a Socratic answer, Derrida suggest, "One would have to construct oneself, one would have to be able to invent oneself without a model and without an assured addressee." (Paranjape, 32)

Edward Said in his *Orientalism* 1978, ascertains the European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism', a peculiar way of identifying the East as 'Other', and inferior to the west. Bhabha's the notion of "hybridity" expresses a state of "in betweenness" as in a person who is torn between two worlds, which negate his belonging to either location. The trauma and existential quandaries of an individual relocating himself as doubled, or hybrid, or unstable are the chief concern for diaspora. 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). These aforesaid transitional phases can be termed as Adopt, Adapt and Adept in post- colonial terminology. These expressions stand for the gradual process of assimilation and acculturation which every migrant goes through. In the process of assimilation in an alien land an individual has to go through mental conflict, nostalgia, longingness, exile and alienation which led to crisis of identity. In new host land their grasp of their own culture conflicts the new adopted culture. The idea of one's homeland

becomes the center that further gives raise to all intricacies of diaspora. Vijay Mishra calls Homeland *desh* to which all places become *videsh*. And the absence of homeland makes rest of all unfamiliar, foreign and other. The notion of 'Other' expounded by Edward Said and 'Subaltern' previously defined by Gramsci is further extended by historians who define these notions in terms of both hegemonic practices and in terms of class, caste, age, gender. In these hegemonic practices gender and culture are predominate the whole diasporic discourse. As Prof. Jasbir Jain writes, "Expatriate writing occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. It generates theory and defines positions as it constructs a new identity which negotiates boundaries and confines and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. Cultures travel, take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia. Writers living abroad live on the margins of two societies and cultural theory are today being created by people who live on the margins" (Jain 11).

Repercussions of this in-betweenness, fluid self, unstable nature of personal and gender identity have been beautifully portrayed by new generation of South Asian female writers such as Jumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukharjee, Meena Alexander etcetera. These Indian born female writers have profoundly influenced the realm of diasporic literature being aware of immigrant's experiences in host country. These writers present individual women whose subjectivities are the result of cultural hybridization. These women are neither fully uprooted from their homeland nor were able to fix their identities in foreign environs. They carry their native cultural values with them as N. Jayaram rightly called it "the socio-cultural baggage carried by an immigrant" (Jayaram 49) which comes into contrast with their new understanding of foreign culture. Women's lives in diasporic situation are doubly painful, struggling with western culture and new patriarchies.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such first generation immigrant writer. She has spent part of her life in America. She is a prolific writer, story teller, poet and social activist. She as an expatriate has penned down her minute observations and experiences in her works. Her works majorly deal with feminism and diasporic consciousness of female which are problematic areas of contemporary postcolonial theory. Divakaruni adding a different dimension to female identity shows how an Indian woman becomes prey of patriarchy and orthodoxy in foreign land also. As an immigrant Divakaruni projects the struggle, isolation, rootlessness and anxiety of an Indian woman. Divakaruni beautifully portrays how an Indian expatriate woman synthesize two different cultures Indian and American, as result of which she emerges a fractured self. Her main area of focus is once again immigrant experience as Divakaruni says "Expatriates have powerful and poignant experiences when they live away from their original culture - and this

'becomes home, and never quite', and then you can't really go back and be quite at home there either" (Divakaruni Profile by Arthur J. Pais)

This paper focuses upon her first collection of short story *Arranged Marriage* (1995) which won several prestigious awards. *Arranged Marriage* consists of eleven short stories which are the amalgamation of varied female characters from varied places and different age groups. In these stories Divakaruni has beautifully blended Indian villages and western settings of New York and California, contrasting both cultures. All the stories move around fractured female identities which are the result of cultural variation when they encounter foreign culture. Each story is a unique description of an individual's diasporic consciousness. Divakaruni has skillfully narrated socio psychological trauma and disillusionment of female immigrants and their adaption to such situations. The stories also outline the various issues women face in social system which is still patriarchal to a great extent. Some of those stories are being analyzed in the light of various issues of diasporic female consciousness.

'The Bats' is the first story of this collection set in India. The story depicts the life of a Indian woman and her daughter in a patriarchal male dominating society. The story also shows the trauma and sufferings of Indian wife who shows courage to leave her husband's home but ultimately destined to return to him due to social pressure and norms of Indian society. Divakaruni uses the metaphorical title 'The Bats' who are destined to return to orchards and trees only to be killed by poison which can be seen in the following lines.

"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 is something that keeps pulling them back here." (8)

The second story of collection 'Clothes' talks about Sumita an immigrant Indian woman and her adjustment in California after marriage. The title becomes the symbolic metaphor for different phases in Sumita's life. Unlike the protagonist of the previous story, Sumita is fortunate to have a husband who adores her. But entering into a new alien country creates anguish and fear in her mind.

"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?"

After a week of her marriage in California she finds herself in a very different cultural milieu. Being in another country also she is not able to get rid of traditional values of homeland which she has carried. Performing all the duties of an Indian wife she creates a mini India in her home in California.

The memories of 'home', therefore, do not evoke feelings of belonging but rather those of bondage and constriction. This synthesis of two cultures makes her nostalgic for her own homeland. As Femke Stock in his essay *Home and Memory* rightly says "the act of remembering is always contextual, continuous process of recalling, interpreting and reconstructing the past in terms of the present and in the light of an anticipated future." (24) People in host land struggling with new cultural space are no more able to fix their roots at their homeland again. After the death of her the husband, Sumita has no longing to go back to India. Her conflict of consciousness is quite evident in these lines.

"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).

People migrate to host land with many expectations and ambitions but assimilation a new land is not as easy as per their expectations. The process of assimilation is full of dark realities which are often faced by the migrants. The next story 'Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs' set in Chicago deals with the same dark realities of diaspora such as exile and racism. The protagonist of this story is a young ambitious girl Jayanti, full of expectations and dream in new host land. But her dreams and expectations are shattered when she becomes the prey of racism and exile like her uncle and aunt. Martin Bauman in his essay *Exile* counts repercussions of migration and exile in an alien country. "The term 'exile' is resonant with ideas of forced emigration, displacement, social and political marginalization of an individual or a group of refugees. It aligns to experiences of loneliness, foreignness, homesickness, and an enduring longing to emigrate to the place of origin" (19) Jayanti's sense of alienation when she is left with no identity of her own is quite evident in these lines. "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) Jayanti's beautiful image of America as silver pavement and golden roofs is shattered with the encounter of contrasting realities of this new world. As an immigrant, she is destined to tear between two worlds imaginary and real, joyful and painful. She tries to escape the cruel realities of America by thinking about her dream life in America.

"It is snowing. I step outside onto the balcony, drawing my breath in at the silver marvel of it, the fat flakes cool and wet against my face as in a half-forgotten movie. ... The snow has covered the dirty cement pavements, the sad warped shingles of the rooftops, and the rough noisy edges of things. I

hold out my hands to it, palms down, shivering a little. The snow falls on them, chill, stinging all the way to the bone. But after a while the excruciating pain fadesthe 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 55, 56).¹

Cultural fracturedness is pivotal to the entire rubric of diasporic consciousness. This cultural fracturedness sometimes leads to transcendence of the individual self. In next story "Perfect Life" the protagonist Meera, an Indian girl in favour of her dreams and American life rejects the traditional roles of motherhood and wife. As she says:

"Because in Indian marriages becoming a wife was only the prelude to that all-important, all-consuming event – becoming a mother. That wasn't why I'd fought so hard – with my mother to leave India; with my professor to make it through graduate school; with my bosses to establish my career." (76)

The story further encompasses the metamorphosis of Meera as an individual after meeting a six-year-old child Krishna. It rejuvenates her soft emotions which were buried under some corner of western consciousness. Divakaruni has beautifully shown diasporic woman's material and spiritual insecurities which create the vacuum in them.

"I wanted to tell her....The need of children came before the needs of adults, I had learned that already. Mother-love, that tidal wave, swept everything else away. Friendship, Romantic fulfillment. Even the need of sex." (98-99)

The next story titled 'Doors' transmits a perfect example of marital relations that are ruined because of the cultural clashes. Title of the story 'Door' does not only mean physical barrier but it is a metaphor for the cultural and psychological barriers in people. Preeti, an Indian girl but brought up in the US, falls in love with and marries Indian boy Deepak, who has recently become the part of US culture. Their easy-going relationship gets complicated with the arrival of Deepak's friend Raj. Preeti being an Americanized girl is very conscious of her privacy and preferences which get disturbed with Raj's intrusion. Losing her personal space she becomes almost paranoid or insane. Divakaruni has been able to show Preeti's anguish and trauma as follows:

"Instead for the first time, she lay down alone in the big bed they'd bought together the week before the happiness of that day, but there was only a black square filled with snow and static, as when watching a video, one comes across a portion of the tape that has been erased by accident. She lay there; feeling the night cover her slowly, layer by cold, clean layer. And when the door finally clicked shut, she did not know whether it was in the guest room or deep inside her own being."

On the other hand, Deepak is not able to understand her preferences, attitude, her interests and needs. Preeti finds it difficult to adjust with the man with Indian scenario and Indian attitude. The story beautifully portrays clashes of Indian American attitudes and how convictions are not easily changed. Moreover, it accentuates the fact that how cultural differences and convictions also change the attitude towards relations and how Indian and American cultures are seldom harmonized.

Aforementioned stories deal with assimilation, dissimilation, disjection, isolation, female sensibility, identity, consciousness, exile, alienation which constitute the entire rubric of diasporic consciousness. The title of the story collection *Arranged Marriage* seems to mock itself by showing disarrangement in the lives of the characters of the stories. It may be clearly expounded that *Arranged Marriage* traverse through the experiences of varied characters and proves to be a tapestry of the existence of individuals with diasporic consciousness. Their fractured identities, especially as those of female characters, are the result of geographical dislocation, socio, psychological, political and cultural changes. Divakaruni has also been able to show the plentitude of women qualities to assimilate and synthesize different cultures and also the fact that how this dual life with multicultural identities leads to fractured female self.

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