

Theme and Vision of Diasporic Experience in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Disappearance" and "Clothes"

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Abstract: *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an eminent Indian American author, poet, activist and teacher. She is one of the most innovative writers known for her Indian diasporic writings. Her attitude in writing is related to the female psyche and feminine experience. She has a unique style of story writing and her stories are largely set in India and the United States. She goes deep into the female consciousness and tries to present their problems related to sexual relations along with identity crisis in the society. Divakaruni's literary career exhibits her as a diasporic skilled short story writer. In her stories journey motif is very important and one can also find the Trisanku Myth in it which means people belong nowhere so they were sustained by the memories of their land. She displays the colonial binaries of East versus West, cultural conflict, clash between tradition and modernity and lives of immigrant Asian women in her short stories. Divakaruni also presents many themes realistically in her short stories as- dispersal, exile, nostalgia, expatriation, transition, migration, divorce, love marriages, and the question of children etc. Her two famous short story collections are entitled as- Arranged Marriage (1995) and The Unknown Errors of Our Lives (2001). From her well-known collection Arranged Marriage we have selected two stories and they are entitled as, "The Disappearance" and "Clothes". Both the stories will be analysed in the present paper to focus on the diasporic elements as- alienation, displacement, nostalgia, cultural assimilation, survival, rootlessness, migration, dispersal, identity crisis in relation to the journey of women characters.*

Key Words: *alienation; displacement; cultural assimilation; nostalgia; migration; dispersal; identity crisis*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The history of diasporic writing has been very glorious. There is a large amount of Indian Diaspora literature in English which is mostly based on the poetics of recall or memory. There are some acclaimed women short story writers of Indian origin who produced an atmosphere of Indian setting and surroundings in their excellent diasporic short stories, as- Bharati Mukherjee, Mena Abdullah, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meera Syal, Anita Rau Badami, Suniti Namjoshi, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Uma Parameswaran, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, Dina Mehta, Gauri Deshpande, Anjana Appachana, Sujata Massey and few others. These are the prominent writers of Diaspora who have written about their homeland and made it memorable. Among these writers Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the most creative writer who analysed the life as a nostalgic reminiscence through the eyes of sensitive, vulnerable and discerning characters in her works. She is a fascinating storyteller and her works focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. Divakaruni has published a number of novels, short stories and today she is known as a foremost writer of Indian diaspora. In her writings one can see Indian experiences, system of modern American life, history, legend, and challenges of living in a multicultural world. Divakaruni presents the theme of migration along with self-discovery and her writings bring fresh insights of Indian women's lives in diverse settings and also their experience about forced dislocation. Her writings are considered as an influential medium of innovation and feminist assertion. The female characters of her stories can be seen as firm, liberated, outspoken and self-confident who are in search for identity instead of performing the conventional role of enduring or self-sacrificing women. She makes her women characters as individual, conversant and empowered who can assert their identity as well as their right. In her short fictions the impact of diaspora can be seen on the psyche of characters. In her writings it is offered that women consider the West as a place of liberation and emancipation but they are trapped in their marriages and husband. They are marginalised as women and immigrants so they remain puppets. They feel loneliness and nostalgic about their country. They neither feel belonging to their root culture nor for their host culture.

2. DISCUSSION:

Divakaruni's story "The Disappearance" starts with the scene of disappearance where the wife disappears one fine morning all of a sudden about which no one knows, and the police are also unable to search her. The husband is totally confused at this and thinks about himself that he is always right. The story presents marital discord indirectly along with the traditional values and identity crisis in a foreign land. The female character is presented here as a

traditional house wife and the husband is as a conservative male character. He treats her wife as a puppet and his personal property. Though the wife was very caring and looks after the family, the husband never feels it and always compares her with his mother. He only believes that his mother is a better caretaker of the house than his wife. After the disappearance of the wife the husband thinks about the past that he selected his wife against the choice of his mother. The wife who belongs to India comes to America after her marriage with a lot of dreams. Like other ladies she also feels that she will get some space, pleasure and contentment after her marriage, but nothing such happened. Her husband never allows her to do something new like other American women. The wife wanted to go to school, to do a job and to purchase American dress but her husband always refuses her and it is ironic that he feels himself always right because he refuses her softly in all these matters. He even imposes his wish on her regarding her clothes as he says, “--he had to put his foot down, like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes. But he always softened his no’s with a remark like, What for, I’m here to take care of you, or, You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more feminine” (Divakaruni, 172). But his wife never said anything against it in words.

Moreover, the husband becomes much tough and hard in order to gratify his sexual need against the wish of his wife. And whenever the wife doesn't want to do it and pleaded, “Please, not tonight”, the husband always grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her to the bed which is nothing less than marital rape. Even then he thinks that it was not the reason of her wife's disappearance, “He was always careful not to hurt her, he prided himself on that....And he always told himself he’d stop if she really begged him, if she cried. After some time, though, she would quit struggling and let him do what he wanted. But that was nothing new. That could have nothing to do with the disappearance” (Divakaruni, 173). The wife feels much suffocation with all these things in the house so she finally chooses to pursue her deep needs and desires. She takes risk of leaving everything and moves in an unknown land where no one can disturb her and she can live as per her wish. Patricia Waugh throws light in this matter, she says, “off her guilt for being frigid and unmaternal, she leaves her husband and child to preserve her own individuality and seek her freedom” (Waugh, 320). After the disappearance of the wife when the police asked her husband about their personal life as if they had any type of quarrel between them, the husband denied. He feels proud of his statement and of being a man. He only compares his wife with his friend's wife that she was not the quarrelsome type, “They hadn’t really had a fight. She wasn’t, thank God, the quarrelsome type, like some of his friends’ wives. Quiet.” (Divakaruni, 170). She used to keep quiet whenever the husband used to come at home. After complaining to the police, the husband also gives advertisement and puts the reward for searching his wife, but it could not work. When two weeks have passed and nothing happened, he informed his mother and asked her to come as the child is alone and always asked about his 'Mama'. And he is also unable to perform lots of household works. After coming to America his mother somehow takes place of her daughter-in-law and does every work of the house along with taking care of her grandson. But it is ironic that even as a woman instead of understanding the situation of her daughter-in-law she blames her for everything even in her absence. Her husband also complains about her to his mother in her absence, “He’d told her once or twice that his wife had never done that, she had this idea about the boy needing to be independent. What nonsense, said his mother” (Divakaruni, 175).

As one year passed the husband stops thinking about his wife and performs a temple prayer for his wife. His son has also started to call his grandma as ‘mother’ like his father. His mother suggests him to think over the proposal of his second marriage. She said to his son that he should remarry as he is still young, “...you really should think about getting married again, you’re still young, and besides, the boy needs a mother, shall I contact second aunt back home, he remained silent but didn’t disagree.” (Divakaruni, 176). He remembers that when his mother asked him about marriage, he says that he can remarry if she can search a quiet, pretty girl but she should be traditional as well as a little bit smart. This shows that even in present scenario girls do not have their choice and they have to adjust according to the boys’ choice. At the moment a man can remarry without difficulty but for a woman it is rather impossible. After making up his mind about second marriage the husband again thinks about his wife that she would keep her jewellery anywhere carelessly. He imagined about her presence everywhere but she was not around. He did not purchase a second hand car because his wife doesn't know driving. This all shows sarcastically that on one hand the man wants his wife to be smart and on the other hand he doesn't give her any chance to develop herself. He always thinks about his wife that she couldn't manage anything on her own, “Where was she now? And with whom? Because surely she couldn’t manage on her own.” (Divakaruni, 178). One day when the husband finds the fact that the wife has disappeared with all the jewellery, it shocks him very much because it broke out his settled belief about himself that he is a better husband for his wife, “But when he picked up the tin it felt surprisingly light, and when he opened it, there were only empty pink nests of tissue inside. He stood there holding the tin for a moment, not breathing” (Divakaruni, 176-177).

Then the husband started suspecting on her and went each of her wife's male friends but they all were at their home with their wives. And after a span of time when the husband was on his bed, suddenly his son started crying breathlessly and says that he only wants Mama, and no one else. He also feels the same, “The unknown areas of his wife’s existence yawning blackly around him like chasms.” (Divakaruni, 179). He thinks some negative things about

his wife and then feels a shame and started to drink and torn the pictures of his wife into small pieces, “He drew it out and, without looking at them, tore the pictures into tiny pieces.” (Divakaruni, 179) and then decides to remarry and he also tells about it to his mother. This time he only wants a simple village girl who can live according to his wishes and “be a real mother to his boy.” (Divakaruni, 180). Even after his second marriage, he never forgets about his first wife throughout his life. Through the story Banerjee tries to tell about the diasporic experience along with the suffering of a female. This story shows an existence of a wife who is present but every time she is treated as an absent person. Her husband dominates over her every time and she does not have any wish of her own. She has to follow and adjust according to her husband's opinion, but she never said anything. One day suddenly she disappears from the scene and no one could found her even at the end of the story. Here the scene of disappearance is different for both i.e. the wife and the husband as well. By her disappearance the wife wants to get some type of freedom and identity but for the husband the disappearance is harmful for the wife as there was a high crime rate in the society. He always thinks that his wife was very much satisfied with him and she does not have any complain to him. So she cannot go anywhere on her own. He feels proud on him that he gives everything to his wife according to her need while he forgets at the same time that his wife is also a human being like him. The story “Clothes” tells about the journey (displacement) of a girl Sumita not only from her parents' house to her in-laws house but also from an Indian village to America. The title of the story is metaphorical as it portrays the women as ‘objects’ of male desire that pass from one man to another man for the marriage without the wish of their own. It also depicts the entrapment of them in customs and rituals so that they could adapt the cultural variance and their final empowerment. Here Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shows the traditional way of arrange marriage where the girl never meets her husband before marriage and she follows her parents in this estimation. The story starts from the teasing of the young bride Sumita's female friends Deepali, Radha who were talking about Sumita's would be husband. Deepali jokes at Sumita, “Look at her, already dreaming about her husband, and she hasn't even seen him yet!” (Divakaruni, 17). Sumita's friend Deepali clarifies this in her speech, “Who cares about friends from a little Indian village when you're about to go to live in America?” (Divakaruni, 17-18). After that Sumita imagines a lot of things about her future in which she assumes herself as a married woman, but she feels uncomfortable in that role. She sees all the arrangements of her marriage and wants to speak or cries about it but she is unable to do so. Sumita feels surprise to think how a girl can belong to an unknown person only after exchanging garlands. Finally she could not do anything and got married to Somesh Sen, “And she married the handsome prince who took her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas” (Divakaruni, 18). Divakaruni here exposes the destiny of a woman who is the victim of patriarchy and gender inequality, as it is clear in an interior monologue of Sumita “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? She had done it, and her mother before her. A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws” (Divakaruni, 18). In this speech the word ‘belongs’ shows the journey and settlement of a girl in an alien land.

Sumita remembers the occasion of her bride-viewing day when her father brings a special sari for her and tells her about her would be husband and house. After marriage when she leaves, she feels something nostalgic in the plane and also feels the fragrance of America there. After reaching America Sumita learns to blend in the new culture and gratifies her husband's sexual desires. Sumita finds that her husband Somesh was a very good person as her father had already told her. He used to bring many western dresses for her that she used to try in the bedroom and after that hides them among her husband's pants and clothes. Sumita tries to make her new identity by adopting new culture and new outfit as well. She steps out of her meek image and describes her new emerging identity in these words, “Sometimes I laugh to myself, thinking how ironic it is that after all my fears about America, my life has turned out to be no different from Deepali's or Radha's. But at other times I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paper-weight” (Divakaruni, 1997:26). All these things present Sumita's journey from traditional way to modernity where her conventional image deconstructs and provides a way to her new identity. Everything was running smoothly but all of a sudden a tragic turn took place in Sumita's life. Somesh tells her about the financial loss of his store which was his working place. For this reason the store remains open twenty four hours and Somesh has to work late night for remunerating the loss. One day Somesh is murdered in the loot of the store and left Sumita back in the customary white sari. Divakaruni has taken the ‘wrapping of sari’ as a metaphor which becomes a nightmare for Sumita as it has severely changed her life. She clarifies this: “The sari, a thick voile that will bunch around the waist when worn, is borrowed. White. Widow's colour, colour of endings” (Divakaruni, 29). So at last in the story the heroine is displayed as a widow who describes the difference between the Indian village life and American life. She tells about Somesh's parents attitude after her widowhood which is clear in her speech, “They didn't say, even once, as people would surely have in the village, that it was my bad luck that brought death to their son so soon after his marriage” (Divakaruni, 30-31). At last Sumita recollects her husband's memories by which she gets the strength from within and makes her new identity. So she accepts the transition and decides to live in America with confidence, “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” (Divakaruni, 33). In spite of performing the

conventional role of a widow in white sari Sumita determines to run the store and faces the ramifications by defying the social norms. She wears the western clothes and begins to work in the store that shows the strength of a woman. Through the character of Sumita Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to create the dual dilemma of women who have to cross national boundaries after marriage and also have to face the diasporic difficulty of isolation, individuality and cultural dissimilarity. By showing the feelings of Sumita, Banerjee exposes the American society as well as the Indian village life. It also shows the traditional role of a woman and her adjustment in a foreign land. She has to face her life as a widow yet she recollects her confidence to take up a stand in her life. The word 'clothes' changes the perception of Sumita as it gives confidence and courage to her and symbolises her life before and after marriage. The story "Clothes" provides the power to the protagonist from submission to assertion as well as expression.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

In order to complete the objectives of proposed research paper, the following resource material and research methodology are employed:

- The essential information is achieved from primary sources i.e. select short stories written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.
- Descriptive qualitative analysis i.e. exploratory study is used as a method to analyse the characters, situations and themes of the select short stories.
- For reaching the result, accessible secondary sources are also used, like critical books on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, views and articles in the scholarly journals, anthologies, interviews, theses and internet sources, etc, along with different libraries.
- The help is also taken from the seventh edition of MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Paper throughout the paper to categorize it logically.

4. RESULTS:

The data gathered from the research that the female protagonists of the stories try to reframe the mirror for themselves in which they can perceive their real identity. In the study, the main theme i.e. 'alienation' and 'identity crisis' were examined and it was found from the analysis that the impact of diaspora was visible on the characters, especially on the women characters. They have to face a lot of difficulties including home sickness in the foreign land. It was recognized by the result that only the women have to adjust according to men in the society, especially after their marriage. It is also discussed that the man not only affects the physical body of a woman but the mental status also as it can be seen in these two stories. The women have to follow everything which the men say to them as if the women have no choice of their own. It is analysed from the study that even in the family women have to face some issues which are related to their equality and harassment. For the purpose of investigating the status and condition of women in a foreign land, various facets of diaspora were explored which were prevalent in the society. It is important to note that in both the stories, only the women characters were found as sufferers. In regard to the importance of women's 'identity' in an unknown land, male characters have the better opportunities as compared to women characters. Other studies i.e. Waugh (2003) and Shameem (2016) also illustrated that most of the female characters may sacrifice their family for the sake of their new identity in the society. Along with, the women characters are discriminated and considered as second to the men.

5. CONCLUSION:

Thus the stories "The Disappearance" and "Clothes" explicate the rudiments of diasporic literature, as-isolation, homelessness, dislocation, cultural dissimilarity and identity crisis very well. It is clear from both the stories that even in the family women have to face some issues which are related to their equality and harassment. For the purpose of investigating the status and condition of women in a foreign land, we explored various facets of diaspora which were prevalent in the society. It is important to note that in both the stories only the women characters were found suffering. In regard to the importance of women's 'identity' in an unknown land, male characters have the better opportunities as compared to women characters. Other studies i.e. Waugh (2003) and Shameem (2016) also illustrated that most of the female characters may sacrifice their family for the sake of their new identity in the society. Along with, the women characters are discriminated and considered as second to the men. Thus the two stories depict the final process of becoming a woman after going through the displacement and transformation. These two stories show that the women create new image against the tradition and with the help of this image they are able to express themselves without any restraint. Here the short story writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni very perfectly describes the identity crisis, social and gender disparity, alienation and adaptability through her women protagonists. In her stories she examines the method of supremacy and oppressive power structures where women seek out their equality and identity. Her two stories "The Disappearance" and "Clothes" manifest the diasporic consciousness and sensibility from a feminist angle. It is clear that women are still at the marginal level and are assaulted on the ground of femininity. In these two stories, the women characters reframe the mirror of the society to claim their own space and

individuality. And in the course of action they appear as new women who can think rationally and can go beyond the traditional constraint. Furthermore, where the women characters of Divakaruni feel sorry about their distorted lives, at the same time they also feel nostalgic about their 'imaginary homeland'. It is clearly depicted that the women characters were not satisfied in the distant land. In the two stories "The Disappearance" and "Clothes" the female characters were neglected and were unable to enjoy their life freely. They also feel themselves as both liberated and trapped by cultural changes and takes action against it. Because of their gender and identity problem, they are challenged sexually and mentally not only in the family but also in the patriarchal society. On the other hand, the study pointed out that it is quite a pity situation that women cannot speak against the wish of their husband. Divakaruni's women characters confront a lot of problems in their life and create a sense of independent self after facing the resistance of the society. Divakaruni exhibits east-west encounter along with the diasporic experience and consciousness through the stories of the families living in the United States of America. We come to know that the female protagonists of these two stories evoke the question about the home sickness, dislocation, segregation, loneliness, identity crisis.

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