

## **Identity Crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*: A Diasporic Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Diasporic literature refers to works produced by authors who belong to a diaspora, a community of people who have been displaced from their ancestral or original homeland and now reside in different parts of the world. Diasporic literature can encompass many themes, including identity, belonging, cultural heritage, displacement, immigration, assimilation, and the tensions between different cultural, social, and political contexts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an inspiring Indo-American writer, is wholly focused on women's quests for and problems with self-identity. She is well-aware of being an expat, and as a result, many of her works deal with the themes of homelessness and isolation that are so relevant to the Indian diaspora. The concept of 'identity crisis' is a prevalent theme in many of the stories in Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*. It refers to the internal struggle individuals face when their sense of self, shaped by their cultural background and upbringing, clashes with the expectations and demands of their new environment. In the context of the stories, the identity crisis often arises from the tension between traditional values and the desire for personal autonomy and fulfilment.

**Keywords:** cultural clashes, identity crisis, assimilation, expatriate experience, immigration narrative, diaspora

South Asian diaspora is just one example of the phenomenon, including the Jewish, British, Chinese, African, Russian, Turkish, Greek, Lebanese, Korean, and Iranian diasporas. Postcolonial literature includes works written by authors originally from nations that were once colonised but are now independent, such as India. Diasporic literature has been influenced by many women of Indian descent, including Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharti Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Meera Sayal, and Anita Desai. Among these authors is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who has established herself as a serious voice in South Asian diasporic literature. Because of their physical situation, people in the diaspora have no real ties to either place. Understanding one's identity is the first step toward reaching one's full potential. One's sense of self, self-image, and sense of worth and individuality are all components of one's identity. According to Weinreich, a person's identity is the sum of their self-conceptions, and the self-conception they have of themselves right now is the thread that connects their ideal future selves to their past selves. This gives us the opportunity to define characteristics of people, such as: "One's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations concerning ethnicity" (Weinreich and Saunderson 198).

As coined by psychologist Erik Erikson, identity crises occur when fictional characters struggle internally between their true selves and the idealised versions of themselves that society expects of them. In the Indian patriarchal system, a woman is likelier to be the primary victim of an identity crisis. After marriage, she must learn a new family routine and often loses her individuality. Women who marry internationally often have a second phase of identity crises after the wedding. They have to adjust to the husband's ideas on living and the norms of a new culture. As a result, these women experience a dual identity crisis, and it is challenging to carve out their identities. Concurrently, she faces a cultural crisis in the form of a profound sensation of alienation within a culture that is diametrically opposed to anything she has ever seen or seen before. Migrant women suffer upheaval on a deeper level than males, but while some embrace their newfound freedom and

independence — something they never had in their home countries — others sink to the bottom of their suffocating loneliness.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a moving Indo-American author, is preoccupied solely with women's struggles and searches for their identities. She is aware of her status as an expat, and as a result, her works frequently address issues of homelessness and isolation that are particularly poignant for members of the Indian diaspora. Her works, which reflect the author's experience and socioeconomic standing, feature strong female protagonists whose identities are the product of cultural hybridisation. These female protagonists of diaspora literature show a slow but steady awakening of identity concerning Western values of individualism and independence, and they are frequently put in a bind, having to choose between giving up and becoming hopelessly depressed or adapting and embracing the new cultural disarticulation. It's a measure of how people think and feel overall, as well as whether or not they've abandoned traditional ideals. Even when the women's ideas about themselves return to more conventional norms, they continue to assert and explore their identities.

*Arranged Marriage* (1995), her first collection of short tales explored the immigration experiences of women and was awarded both the PEN Josephine Miles Award and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award. Divakaruni's outstanding skill shines through in her portrayal of Diasporic female protagonists who are torn between two worlds, face the challenges of exile, and often wonder who they are. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who came to the United States in the first wave of Indian immigrants, has lived much of her life on the other side of the world. She has examined India's postcolonial society and the difficulties faced by the Diaspora with great attention. In the rich tapestry of American Indian culture, *Arranged Marriage* represents the difficulty of adaptation brought on by cultural differences encountered by an Indian lady who comes West. Somesh, her new spouse, co-manages a 7-Eleven store with a business partner and sells various products there, including apple juice, American bread, potato chips, wine, and beer. They married in Calcutta and moved to California a week later, where she learned much about the state and its culture from Somesh. Divakaruni explores the agony of diasporic identity and the isolation that comes with it.

People leave their native countries for a better life, which often conflicts with the norms of the place they came from. They face an uphill battle to uphold their traditional values while adjusting to their new surroundings. Sumita, an Indian woman who recently got married in the United States, was brought up with the traditional Indian belief that it is her duty to behave in a way that is appropriate for an Indian wife. She must cover her head with her sari when entertaining her in-laws' friends, refrain from addressing her husband by his first name, and serve tea to her in-laws' acquaintances. Sumita is very dedicated to upholding the Indian customs that are considered respectful in her California home. Her impatience and thoughts of her native India arise under such circumstances. When her husband is murdered in his shop, in Sumita's mind, adjusting to her native India would be more challenging than adjusting to the frightening world where she now finds herself.

In the story "Clothes," Sumita, a newlywed Indian woman living in the United States, has been taught from a young age that it is her moral obligation to fulfil the role of an excellent Indian wife by, for instance, she would prepare and serve tea to the friends of her in-laws. Her household in California is steadfastly committed to the Indian customs taken very seriously in her native country. Her temper flares up, and her mind wanders to India whenever one of these situations arises:

...at other times, I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a glass paper weight. It is a world so small that if I were to stretch out my arms, I would touch its cold, unyielding edges. I stand inside the glass world, watching to scream. Then I'm ashamed. Mita, I tell myself, you're growing westernised. Backhome, you'd never have felt this way (Divakaruni 26).

Even when her husband is killed in his store, and she is left a widow, Sumita does not want to go back to India because she believes that adjusting to her roots in India would be more difficult than in the "dangerous world" in which she presently inhabits. In these lines, the tension between individuality and a desire to blend in is made clear:

That's when I knew I could not go back. I don't know how to manage this new, dangerous land here. 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).

When Jayanti, the protagonist of “Silver Roads, Golden Roofs,” moves from Calcutta to Chicago to live with her aunt Pratima and uncle Bikram, she is put in a position to confront the difficulties associated with being an immigrant. Having been born in the United States to parents of Indian descent, Jayanti regards her family’s history as fundamental to her identity. Jayanti’s aunt and uncle forced her to move to an apartment worse than the house she had left. Within the safety of her own house, Jayanti feels lost and trapped:

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 (Divakaruni 41).

The short story “The Word Love” begins with an unidentified character who, during her time at college in the United States, is continually involved in sexual misconduct with an American male. She behaves very differently from what her mother had anticipated she would. Her mother has a highly rigid upbringing. Her mother hopes her daughter will follow in her footsteps by possessing a demeanour that appeals to others. But she is not successful in doing so. In the society, she does not have a good reputation. As a direct consequence of this, she is travelling with a man from the United States. It looks like she’s all set to see a movie. Her mother has disowned her since she has brought shame onto the family. Her family members abandoned her as well. Her mood has been very down lately. She could recall the story her mother had once related to her. The peasant gives her daughter the freedom to pursue her path in life. She is never under his power. She is self-sufficient and takes life as it comes without much fuss. He has granted her unrestricted permission to do whatever she pleases. She has an inappropriate connection, leading to her becoming pregnant and ultimately taking her own life. A melancholy feeling overcomes the farmer as he departs the village because his daughter is the source of the family’s disgrace.

In the same way, the narrator has suicidal intentions for themselves as well. She gets up and starts walking. She has come to terms with her error. Simultaneously, she decides to break up with her mother and lover and embarks on a new life free from limitations and criticism. “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” (Divakaruni 71).

In a story titled “Bittersweet Beginnings,” the protagonist, Meera, is an Indian-American woman raised in the United States. She returns to India to marry a man her parents chose through an arranged marriage. As the wedding preparations unfold, Meera grapples with a profound sense of cultural clash. In one particular scene, Meera’s thoughts reflect her internal struggle:

As Meera sat on the ornate swing, wearing a traditional silk saree and heavy gold jewellery, she couldn’t shake off the feeling of being a stranger in her own culture. The wedding rituals, so meaningful to her parents and relatives, felt like a maze of customs she had never fully understood. The scent of incense mixed with the sounds of traditional music created an atmosphere that was both nostalgic and foreign (Divakaruni 138).

She caught sight of herself in a mirror – a reflection of a woman caught between two worlds. She had grown up celebrating Thanksgiving and Halloween, not Diwali and Holi. Her conversations flowed effortlessly in English, but she stumbled over the words in her mother tongue. Meera could not help but wonder: “Who am I in this moment? Am I the Indian daughter my parents want me to be or the American woman I’ve become?” (Divakaruni 140).

The clash between her two identities threatened to unravel her as she embarked on this new chapter of her life. In this passage, Meera’s struggle with cultural clash is evident. The sensory details and her introspective thoughts reveal her feelings of being caught between her Indian heritage and her American upbringing. The conflict between her parents’ expectations and her own sense of self generates a palpable tension, leading to her identity crisis. This internal struggle becomes a central theme as Meera navigates her journey through the intricacies of an arranged marriage while reconciling her dual identity.

South Asian immigrants make up a significant portion of the world’s diaspora population. Many literary prizes have been awarded to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and other members of the first generation of Indian writers to work in exile, demonstrating their worth as authors. In Divakaruni’s novel *Arranged Marriage*, the action takes place in both India and the United States. The novel’s characters are Indian-American women who are torn between adhering to the traditional and contemporary conventions of both their Indian and American cultures. In addition, the stories in

Arranged Marriage tackle controversial subjects such as racism, interracial dating, economic disparity, abortion, and the breakdown of marriage. In point of fact, Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of short stories focused on female characters and their adventures in love, relationships, and overcoming adversity in their lives. Hearing each woman's unique experience of assimilating into a new culture breaks my heart. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni contends in her literature that the term "diaspora" refers to more than just a physical or temporal divide but rather a matrix of consciousness that incorporates a wide variety of characteristics that are in competition with one another. Although Divakaruni is herself an American immigrant, the stories in this collection portray the complete range of life for Indian immigrants in the United States. This is despite the fact that Divakaruni is herself an American immigrant. As a result, *Arranged Marriage* is not simply a collection of short stories; rather, it is also a collection of the author's reflections on the experiences of immigrants, focusing notably on the lives of Indian women.

**Works Cited**

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