

## **Divakaruni's Sumita: An Assertion of Freedom and Individuality**

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**Abstract:** *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most significant writers in the 'Diaspora Discourse'. She breaks away from the conventional 'Diaspora Discourse' as her women protagonists hardly 'look back' to their native land. This approach on the part of the characters has certainly changed the way the world looks at the writings of the immigrant writers. Unlike their conventional counterparts Divakaruni's female protagonists don't cling to the 'past world'. These characters prefer to adapt themselves in the 'new land' whatever the hurdles be. They are not stuck in the by-lanes of nostalgia. On the contrary, they make a bold decision to adapt themselves in the new country on account of the freedom of choice it offers. This paper seeks to drive home this point through the example of Sumita, the protagonist of 'Clothes' in Arranged Marriage. Through characters like Sumita, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights the emergence of 'the new women' and her craving for freedom and individuality*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, American dream, assimilation, Culture, Relocation.*

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*"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 moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings" (Arranged Marriage, 33)*

In the high postmodern world, 'diaspora' has become a loaded and an ambiguous term as it hints to various ideas and images of immigrants. The term originally meant the 'movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live or work in other countries or the movement of the people from any nation or group away from their own'. The term was limited to the Armenian, Greeks and Jewish expatriates. But today it has become an ambiguous in the sense that it refers to two types of immigrants – first, who willingly cut the emotional chord with their 'native land' for the 'new land' in search of a better living standards, economical gains or the opportunities the developed countries seem to offer and second, who straddle between the two worlds i.e. 'old world' which they have left behind and their 'new world' of present living. The contemporary Diaspora writers, especially women, being immigrant themselves, have seen the lives of immigrant women from very close quarters and hence the authors of this paper feel that the portrayal of immigrant women's lives in the works of these writers is very authentic. The present generations of writers are breaking away from the conventional mode of Diaspora writing which depicts the negative side of the (im) migration. The older generation of writers focused more on the difficulties or failure on the part of the immigrants to get settled in the 'New Land'. The characters of always look back to their 'home-land' and its culture to live their life in the West. These writers were more interested in highlighting, on the one hand, the hardships of their protagonists in getting assimilated in the 'adopted land' and its impact on their psyche and, on the other end, depicting them as burden on the host country. They were more focused on portraying women as unwilling immigrants, struggling to get adjusted in the 'New Land'. This inability on the part of the women to get adjusted in the migrated land has offered lot of material to the traditional diaspora writers to write about. But the new generation writers have attempted to change the image of immigrant women. They are no longer portrayed as victims of nostalgia. "Diasporic South Asians are not merely assimilating to their host culture but they are also

actively reshaping them through their own new voices bringing new definitions of identity.”(Kuortti p.6). Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Bapsi Sidhwa and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have attempted to radically change the perception of readers by portraying a very positive picture of the immigrants. Their characters, especially women, live their lives on their own terms in the foreign land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s protagonists, be it Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices*, Jayanti in *Silver Pavements*, *Golden Roofs* or Sumita in “Clothes” (*Arranged Marriage*), are all ‘willing’ diaspora, willing to be a part of the American Culture. They choose to face challenges of living in a foreign land.

The present paper focuses on the short story ‘Clothes’ from *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Divakaruni to explore the various reasons for the women immigrants’ desire to go abroad and get settled there. For some immigrants, “...This separation of self from one’s native place has appeared beneficial, even necessary;...”(Wickramagamage 1992:171). Sumita is a typical Bengali girl brought up in ‘a little Indian village’ (18). Her ‘American dream’ starts from the moment she comes to know that a boy from America is coming to see her. Her marriage with Somesh takes her to America. The colours of Sumita’s clothes, especially her sarees, have significant symbolical reference as they signal to the unpredictable impediments in her life. The traditional *desi* clothes like *sarees* are a kind of blessings from her parents to Sumita. For example, the saree which Sumita’s father has bought her is “...the most expensive ... Its body was a pale pink... The color of transition... A saree that could change one’s life... I knew that when I wore it .... It would dazzle Somesh and his parents and they would choose me to be his bride. (19-20) the saree becomes a representative of the Indian culture. Her desire of giving up the sari for the ‘short skirt’ signifies Sumita’s wish to be free from the constraints of the Indian Culture and to live a ‘liberal’ life.

Sumita enjoys wearing (within the confines of their bedroom) the western dresses that Somesh has ‘smuggled in’ (24) for her. She marvels at the curves of her hips and thighs which had always been ‘hidden’ under the saris. The sunrise-orange T-shirt which she wishes to wear is a representative of joy, joy of her ‘new American life’. Slowly but surely the American culture gains hold on her mind. She dreams of moving out of the two-room apartment where she is required to cover her head with the edge of her Japan nylon sari and ‘serve tea to the old women that come to visit Mother Sen’ (25). She doesn’t like playing the role of a typical Indian daughter-in-law. She cannot accept the difference between the images of America she had imagined and the typical Indian household ambience in which she has to live in:

*...I must never address my husband by his name. Where even in our bed we kiss guiltily, uneasily, listening for the giveaway creak of springs. 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 Dipali’s or Radha’s.(26)*

Her individualism and yearning for freedom from the traditional roles makes her feel rage. She feels ‘caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paper-weight.’ (26) She wants to ‘stretch out’ her arms. She wants to be a part of America. She tells us: “I stand inside this glass world, watching helplessly as America rushes by, wanting to scream” (26). She feels that Somesh thinks too much of his parents. She expects Somesh to shower more attention to her. She wants to shout at Somesh: “You’re constantly thinking of them...But what about me?” (26)

Though Somesh wants her to go to college and get a degree, Sumita wants to actually work in the store run by Somesh and his American partner. She wants to ‘stand behind the counter in the cream-and-brown skirt set and ring up purchases’ (27). Though she has never visited the store, she dreams of charming the customers with her smile so that they will visit the store again and again.

But her ‘American dream’ suffers a setback when Somesh is murdered in the store. On Somesh’s funeral day, she is made to follow certain rituals like the ‘bangle-breaking’ ceremony. The sting of the cut continues to haunt her: “There’s a cut, still stinging, on the side of my right arm.... It is from the bangle- breaking ceremony...” (29). she is given a white coloured saree to drape: “I hold in my hands the plain white sari I’m supposed to wear. ... The sari...is borrowed. White. Widow’s color, color of endings.”(29) The red marriage mark is rubbed off her forehead. The shattering of

the 'multicolored shards' symbolizes the end of dream of a colourful life with Somesh. In Indian culture, the dignified life almost is denied to a widow as though she does not have rights to live the life of dignity of her choice after her husband's death. This denial of one's existence is a reason for women to emancipate from such Culture. A girl in India is expected to live a life of austerity and follow the in-laws obediently after her husband's death. However, in Sumita's case the situation is good as her in-laws were progressive. She tells us: "When someone asked if my hair should be cut off as they do with widows back home, they said no. They didn't say even once, as people would surly have in the village it was my bad luck that brought death t their son so soon after marriage." (30-31) Sumita anticipates that they will try to convince her to come back with them to India as there is nothing worth enough to live in America as it has snatched their only son from them. But Sumita is determined to chart her own course. She decides to stay back in America. She is apprehensive of her life ahead in the 'new, dangerous land' (33) but she realises that she 'must' stay back. The thought of living a widow's life back in India sends a chill down her spine. She knows the humiliations that widows are subjected to in India. Images of 'widows in white saris...bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws' (33) haunt her. She decides that she won't be one of those 'Doves with cut-off wings' (33). She would not like to be caged in the white sari for the rest of her life. She anticipates that there could be opposition to her decision. But she braces herself 'for the arguments of the coming weeks, the remonstrations' (33). She sees herself, in the days to come, not in white saris but in 'a blouse and skirt the color of almonds'. (33)

To conclude, the researchers are of the view that the American culture inspires Sumita to fulfill her dream of being on her own, of being self-reliant and independent. The American way of life offers Sumita opportunities for empowerment and emancipation. Sumita's decision to stay back in America speaks of her determination to escape orthodoxy. It is a voluntary exile. She is not a victim of 'nostalgia for the homeland' (Parmeswaran 1998: 108 as quoted in Kumari 2014). She is not caught between two worlds. Hers is an affirmative and well considered decision. This act is a means to 'acquiring a more comprehensive...vision of the world' (Wickramagamage 1992: 172). To use the words of Wickramagamage (1992: 171) Sumita's 'relocation' is a 'positive act'.

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