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CONNOTATIONS OF SPACE AND IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

The aesthetic of dislocation created by writers of South-Asian origin evokes the anxiety, anguish and violence characterizing cross-cultural mobility and displacement. The multicultural trajectory of thought involves the possibilities of occupying two or more distinct worlds simultaneously. People who live in a foreign country experience the dominant-subordinate relation or the centre-margin divisions. They suffer economic and political inequities on the grounds of discrimination and are sometimes forced to occupy a subordinate and stigmatized social position. The experiences that the immigrants encounter in the host topos due to the clash of cultures are complex and they experience tremendous identity crisis, which is the most inevitable part of their immigrant experience. The concepts of "identity" and "difference", informed by historical, economic, political parameters, are crucial to a discourse on ethnicity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an immigrant writer with Indian ties, has grappled with the promises and problems embedded in immigration. Her anthology of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) chronicles the regeneration and relocation of the immigrant women in America. This paper analyzes the stories "Clothes" and "Meeting Mrinal" in *Arranged Marriage* and attempts to depict Indian women's immigration to the United States as an opportunity to escape themselves from the oppressed or depressed conditions of their primary space (homeland) to freedom under the influence of the norms of their secondary space (hostland).

In the globalized world, the culture, lifestyle and other social processes are largely determined by cross cultural interactions embodied in immigration and socio-cultural dislocation. In this process, the "self" is subject to numerous influences and impulses, which are often contradictory. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an immigrant writer with Indian ties, has grappled with the promises and problems embedded in immigration. Her anthology of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) chronicles the regeneration and relocation of the immigrant women in America. *Arranged Marriage* is a celebration of Indian women's immigration to the United States as an opportunity to escape themselves from the oppressed or depressed conditions to freedom under the influence of alien norms.

The story "Clothes" best illustrates this. It is the story of Sumita, a typical Indian village girl, and the traumatic experiences of her life; her transplantation from the Indian soil to the "Great American City" (Divakaruni 23) made of desire and promise, "a kingdom beyond the seven seas" (Divakaruni 18), as the wife of Somesh, and how at the pretty young age she becomes a widow but becomes self-reliant in the end. Sumitha's story illustrates the fact, that many women have in the first place, no choice to immigrate. Sumitha thinks, "Don't send me so far away, I wanted to cry, but of course I didn't. . . Besides wasn't it every woman's destiny, as mother was always telling me, to leave the known for the unknown?" (Divakaruni 18-19).

Sumitha's thoughts critique the typical Indian way of controlling the aspirations of children, especially daughters, who are groomed right from their childhood to go through the vagaries of an arranged marriage. During her journey to America, Sumitha craves for something to hold on to from her old life. She finds comfort in the calm fragrance emanating from the sandalwood sachets that her mother has tucked into each fold of her Kancheepuram silk sarees. At this stage, the Indian attire of saree gives her solace and symbolizes her attachment to the native culture. But the moment she reaches America she is fascinated by modern outfits. Sumitha wants to relish the newly acquired freedom to its full and she develops a tendency to discard the Indian practice of covering her head with the edge of her sari, serving tea to guests and "where like a good Indian wife I must never address my husband by his name" (Divakaruni 24). She is unable to decide whether the American life style suits her Indian tradition bound temperament or not.

Sumitha's initial predicament in her secondary space shows that she is more or less in the position of "Trishanku", neither here nor there. She tries to find comfort in the love and care Somesh has for her. She wishes to assist him in the store but he wants her to complete her education and seek a job as a teacher. She spends a lot of time dreaming about the working of the store. But in an unfortunate turn of events, her beloved husband is murdered by a gunman at the store for money.

Sumitha's in-laws, though kind, want her to follow the customs and rituals expected of a widow. She, who takes delight in the flamboyant American clothes, is forced to wear a plain white sari, usually worn by widows in India. Just as the red mark on the forehead is considered auspicious for a married woman, white is "widow's color of endings" (Divakaruni 32). One of her relatives, who is also a widow, performs even the bangle breaking ceremony and rubs the red marriage mark off her forehead. The fact, that she must now wear the traditional white sari representing widowhood rather than her prized American clothing, suggests that she is being forced back into her traditional Indian role. Her Indian in-laws exert tremendous pressure on Sumitha to conform to ancient Indian norms. Finally, her evolved identity makes her decide that she will stay back in America. Sumitha decides to assimilate. She breaks the fetters of patriarchy too.

In "Meeting Mrinal", the author focuses on identity crisis experienced by the protagonist, Asha. In addition to this, the story shows, how mothers are subjugated by their children (or how Indian women are further subjugated by their motherhood), and how the family life of a woman, for whom the role models are the Indian mythological figures Sita and Kunti, is ruined since her husband comes under the influence of the liberal American norms. The story seems to convey the message that "the perfect life is only an illusion" (Divakaruni 299).

Asha's husband, Mahesh wants to be free from his arranged marriage, so that he can live with his American lover, Jessica. When Mahesh tells Asha of his decision to leave her and their teenaged son Dinesh, she listens to him calmly. Instead of bursting out, she tries to fight the divorce. She tries to bring about a change in him by making him happy by cooking his favourite food and dressing up herself according to his choice. She even pleads with him not to leave her. She possesses several cherished Indian virtues like patience, fidelity, perseverance and endurance. Another noteworthy

trait of her nature is her intense love for her son Dinesh. She tolerates the typical American ways of her teenaged son and she allows him to occupy the master bedroom she has once shared with Mahesh. She is relieved that her son has begun to accept the situation of the marital discord in the life of his parents. She feels that she should not show too much concern about his hairstyle and clothing as they are “just signs of teenage growing pains made worse by his father's absence” (Divakaruni 276). At times she is afraid of losing her son, she feels helpless and powerless before his boisterous adolescence. When she feels that Dinesh is drifting from her, she starts fixing “salads, lots of salads . . . As though the translucent rings of onions and the long curls of carrots could forge a chain that would hold him to me, close forever” (Divakaruni 276).

Dinesh, born and brought up in America, does not attach any value to Indian ideals. He does not even respect his mother. At one point, Asha loses her temper and slaps him when he tells her that his father has left her because he is tired of her. But later, out of motherly love, she wants to apologize to him even though she knows that it is her son who ought to apologize. The intense cultural dilemma, that the first-generation mothers encounter while trying to make the second generation preserve the native cultural values has been well depicted in “Meeting Mrinal”.

Divorce is one factor that prompts Asha for self-examination. Another element that paves the way for her self-realisation is her friendship with Mrinalini, who has taken the firm decision not to marry in her life. Asha feels that Mrinal has “the perfect existence, money, freedom, admiration . . . and she doesn't have to worry about pleasing any one” (Divakaruni 288). Asha realizes that it is her craving to become perfect that makes her unhappy in her family life. In sheer desperation, Asha considers suicide. But her son Dinesh prevents her from this. Following this, she decides to live life as it is, with all its imperfection, follies and foibles. She decides to reconcile to the challenges and problems that life offers. Jolly-Wadhwa is of the opinion that a major factor distinguishing the immigrant experiences of women from those of men is the “emotional variable” (58). While men roam around freely, women hold on to their emotional basis and preserve the sanctity of family ties. Asha tries to adapt herself to her adopted home for the wellbeing of her son. She first arrives to her foreign space with, “baggage, both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, customs, traditions, behaviours and values” (McLeod 75) but later adapts herself to the new home.

When it comes to the question of the “connotations of space”, especially in the context of the multiplicity of cultural homes through which the immigrant moves, it is clearly seen that there is no “bridging of the gap between different cultures, nor does it mean a homogeneous amalgamation of cultures: the psychological boundaries continue to exist, enclosing different experiences into their own space (Narula 97). Sumitha in “Clothes” and Asha in “Meeting Mrinal” never return to their homeland for “though in memory it remains a desired space, in reality the situation has changed” and the secondary space “offers more opportunity and hence is more attractive” (Narula 96).

The stories amply show that the diasporic community is concerned, not only with memory and nostalgia, but also with place and the experiences of displacement, where “place is signified not only as a geographical-physical space, but also as the mentally conjured psychological cultural space” (Narula 98). The anthology *Arranged Marriage* raises the issues of identity and positionality. Most of the women protagonists in this anthology illustrate how one's socio-cultural identity has its validity only in that particular context, and in a new space, the immigrant has to start afresh and establish herself.

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