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THE ROLE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF CHITRA DIVAKARUNI BANERJEE'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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Abstract

Picture getting off a plane in the US and hearing your grandma tell stories about your home country. Then you discover that the world wants you to wear jeans and be yourself. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's book Arranged Marriage tells the stories of Indian women and brings this tension to life. It shows that living in a foreign country can change your cultural identity, but it's quite rare that it will be totally lost. This research employs the narratives and perceptive analyses of scholars such Anil Sharma, Anita Patel, and Rajesh Kumar to examine the conflict between tradition and modernity, the constraints of gender norms, and the innovative potential of hybrid identities. We are given a clear picture of adaptation, which is not loss but rather a dynamic blend of roots and new rhythms. This helps us understand immigrants' lives better.

Keywords

Immigration, Assimilation, Hybrid Identity, and Cultural Identity, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

If you've ever felt like you were stuck between two worlds, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's stories will hit home. She was born in Kolkata, India, in the 1950s. She moved to the U.S. in the late 1970s to go to grad school and never looked back. She wrote books that mix heart, magic, and hard truths based on her experiences as an immigrant. Her work speaks to anyone who has to deal with cultural differences, the strength of women, and the messy beauty of family ties.

Early Life and Becoming a Writer:

Divakaruni grew up in a busy Indian city where she heard myths, spices, and family stories that later inspired her stories. As a young student at Wright State University, she came to America and was shocked by the bland food, lonely nights, and questions like "Where are you really from?" That raw displacement changed her voice, making it honest, clear, and never preachy. She began as a poet, putting out books like *Black Candle* and *Leaving Yuba City*, which have short lines that hit hard about loss and longing. Poetry helped her get better at using sensory details, like the sound of cumin and the ache of homesickness. By the 1990s, she was writing novels and short stories and winning awards and fans all over the world.

She is now a professor at the University of Houston, an immigrant rights activist, and a mother who writes fiction based on her own life. Her books have been translated into 29 languages. Some of her bestsellers are *The Palace of Illusions*, which tells the story of the

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Mahabharata from Draupadi's fierce point of view, and *Independence* (2023), which tells the story of India's partition in 1947 through the unbreakable bond between two sisters. She has written more than 20 books, and they are all different types: adult novels, young adult fantasies like the *Brotherhood of the Conch* series, and even screenplays.

Major Works: A Tapestry of Ideas:

Divakaruni's stories are all about Indian women, immigration, and identity, but each one feels new. Her big hit, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), was made into a movie with Aishwarya Rai. Tilo is an old woman who works at a spice shop in Oakland. She uses magical powders to heal and love, but she wants a love that is against the rules. It's a spicy mix of magic realism and diaspora blues that shows how traditions can heal or hurt. Then comes *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002), which follows two Kolkata cousins, Sudha and Anju, who are like blood relatives even though they live on opposite sides of the ocean. One stays home in an arranged marriage, while the other chases dreams in America. Their letters reveal secrets of betrayal, ambition, and sisterly love, all while being held back by patriarchal chains.

Myth retellings are very bright. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) turns the epic Mahabharata on its head by having Draupadi tell her story of rage, desire, and revenge, making the gods feel like nosy neighbours. *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) gives Sita from the Ramayana her due - she's not just a "pure wife," she's a mother and a survivor of exile. These aren't old, dusty ideas; they're feminist firecrackers that question dharma and destiny. *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) is a newer book that follows three generations of Bengali women from India to America as they deal with ambition, shame, and dreams that aren't written down. *Oleander Girl* (2013) is about a bride-to-be who goes on a quest across continents to find lost love. It mixes thriller elements with cultural differences.

Kids can enjoy magic too: *The Conch Bearer* is the first book in a fantasy trilogy about a boy who carries a shell that grants wishes through mythical India. Feminism, multiculturalism, tradition vs. modernity, and migration putting a strain on human relationships are all themes that run through all of them. The scars of Partition run through *The Last Queen* (2021), which is about Rani Jindan fighting British rule and is as fierce as any modern heroine.

Poetic, Sensory, and Soulful:

Divakaruni's writing is like a warm hug or a slap when you need it. She paints with her senses: the golden sting of turmeric, the squelching of monsoon mud underfoot, and the wary look of a stranger in a U.S. mall. No fluff; sentences flow in a rhythmic way, with short zingers for tension. She waited. Heart pounding. It's like listening in on a friend's late-night call, with contractions, questions, and dashes that draw you in.

Magic realism is her secret ingredient, and it's woven into real life. In *Mistress of Spices*, powders whisper prophecies; in *Queen of Dreams* (2004), a mum reads dreams like tea leaves, connecting her Indian past with her daughter's American present. Myths aren't just extras; they're the air that makes every day pains epic. She is a master at changing points of view. In *Sister of My Heart*, two stories let you feel both sisters' heartbreaks. The dialogue sounds real: Bengali aunties nagging in English that has been switched to Bengali, and teens rolling their eyes at "fresh off the boat" moms.

Her voice speaks for those who can't speak for themselves: South Asian women, immigrants, and those who are often ignored. There are no bad guys, just imperfect people trying to find grace. Sensory depth makes you feel more connected to others. You can smell the curry, taste the forbidden kiss, and feel the panic of the partition. Critics call it "lyrical intimacy," which

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means it mixes the magic of folklore with the harshness of real life. She changes the pace as well: soft in family scenes, urgent in quests, and always ending with a quiet glow of hope.

She Resonates Across Worlds:

Divakaruni doesn't give lectures on feminism or culture; she shows it through characters who make mistakes, get angry, and rise. Immigrant readers agree with the loneliness, while others see hidden Indias. Her style - bright, mixed, and human - matches her themes: traditions change and identities mix. She builds bridges with stories that say, "We're all strangers somewhere, but connection heals." Books like *Independence* (show that she's at the top of her game, looking at history's ghosts in a new way.

Arranged Marriage:

When Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni starts her book *Arranged Marriage,* she does more than just tell anecdotes; she shows how Indian-American women feel when they are stuck between two cultures. Picture a bride in *The Word Love* looking at herself in the mirror and thinking about whether her duty to her family is more important than her desire to be with the person she has always wanted to be with. In the drama *Clothes,* on the other hand, there is a subtle insurrection when a widow throws away her white saree in favour of Western clothes. This pushes the limits of both sorrow and freedom. In *The Black Candle,* art becomes a rebellious canvas that mixes the lights of Diwali with American holiday celebrations. These stories are more than just ideas; they are full of the genuine pain of trying to hold on to one's "Indianness" as the United States pulls you along.

Banerjee weaves together people's desires, their ties with their family, and society's judgement to form a tapestry of cultural identity. She asks, "Is it possible to honour your past without sacrificing your future?" This study tackles the issue by closely analysing the text, with the help of research from universities. Anil Sharma (2017) says that "cultural dualism" is the main source of these disputes. He says that it is the clash between old and new ideals (Sharma, 45). Anita Patel (2019) shows how women may make room for themselves in strict positions by adding gender to the mix (Patel, 112). Rajesh Kumar (2020) gives us hope with his "third space." His "third space" is a mix of several cultures that makes something that is just yours (Kumar, 78). Banerjee shows how good he is at turning his own problems into universal truths about living in the diaspora through all of these examples.

These debates are not just apparent in the stories, but they can also be found in diaspora literature as a whole. Some scholars contend that it is not only a question of survival but of reinvention. Sharma says these characters are people who are trying to balance their heritage with the place they call home. Patel focusses on women, who sometimes have to deal with two problems at once. Kumar is happy with the mash-up. We may look at Banerjee's book not as a collection of separate stories, but as a mirror that shows the lives of millions of people who are on the same unclear path.

Negotiation of Tradition and Modernity:

How many times have you had to choose between a family meal and fast food? You will have reached the heart of the idea of *Arranged Marriage* after multiplying it by a lifetime. The main character in *The Word Love* is forced to marry someone who looks and feels like chains. The marriage is beautiful and anticipated, but it stops her from wanting real love. Banerjee doesn't criticise; instead, she shows how beautiful rituals may be and how terrible they can be when they clash with the individuality that is common in the United States. You might be able to do bharatanatyam while wearing trainers, but it will be hard and you will fall a lot.

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Sharma (2017) says that the main theme of diaspora writing is the warm embrace of tradition against the cold challenge of modernity (Sharma, 45). He talks on how people, like our bride who was married in an arranged marriage, have to find a balance between what their parents want and what they want, which is something that happens a lot in immigrant communities. Patel (2019) also says that women are the ones who suffer the most since they have to find a balance between their personal enjoyment and the honour of their family (Patel, 112). In her work *The Black Candle*, the artist combines Indian festivals with Yankee crafts. The candle she makes is a bright, symbolic picture of compromise.

Kumar (2020) posits a correlation between it and hybridity, asserting that the protagonist in *The Black Candle* navigates a third path that is neither wholly novel nor fully archaic, but rather teems with vitality in the interstice (Kumar, 78). What makes Banerjee so smart? It seems like these fights are happening in real life, not in a book. Like sitting down to supper with people of different ages, the reader may feel both the tiredness and the small achievements. In the end, tradition and modernity are not enemies; they are fighters who help people in the diaspora become stronger and smarter.

Gender and Cultural Expectations:

What about the gender dynamic in the diaspora? You are in a double bind that is far tighter than a corset. In the setting of "Clothes," the widow's simple act of putting on bright clothes breaks all the other rules. People in her community whisper as her heart pulses quicker. In the US, people are encouraged to be themselves, while in traditional societies, people are supposed to follow the rules and not speak up. You want Banerjee's quiet revolution to work because she can show both the thrill of violating the rules and the fear of being condemned.

Patel (2019) offers extensive insights, asserting that Banerjee's female characters are not victims; instead, they negotiate, resist, and transform in reaction to gendered conventions (Patel, 112). Think of it like a game of chess: if you make a move that goes against the family's rules, you may lose, and if you stay in the same spot, you could win. Sharma (2017) concurs, emphasising that women have intensified identity crises, particularly in reconciling the responsibilities of wearing saris with the aspirations of donning skirt suits (Sharma, 45). "The Word Love" is a whole other level. The bride's planned fate shows how marital traditions take away women's freedom, but she finds a way out of the dilemma.

These stresses affect other people's life. In other occasions, parents are seen setting rules, while their daughters are shown breaking those rules. Instead of lecturing, Banerjee shows her scars and victories, like a woman who has taken back her clothes as a kind of protection. In the diaspora, gender is not just a personal choice; it's a kind of cultural currency that people trade in the marketplace of belonging.

Cultural Hybridities and Identity Formation:

In Banerjee's world, no one may be called "this" or "that." They all go together; just like curry with herbs you didn't anticipate. "The Black Candle" is the best because the artwork of the main figure combines Lakshmi puja and Halloween illumination to make a new glow that heals old wounds. This is why the title is what it is. This circumstance results in a wonderful mess that shows how being part of a diaspora makes you stronger than being from your own country.

Kumar (2020) calls this the "third space," which is a creative mess where diverse cultures may live together without losing their own identity (Kumar, 78). What about her candle? The best symbol that shows others the way to go. Sharma (2017) believes that it is the consequence of effective negotiation: people like her weave together threads from India and the United States to

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make a strong fabric (Sharma, 45). Even the book *The Word Love* mentions it briefly: the bride's inner pain causes little changes that eventually lead to the creation of a hybrid heart.

Banerjee is happy with this. He doesn't sugarcoat it. You will feel pain because hybridity is less pure and more complex, but it will make you stronger. The collection has examples of this, such as trying new foods, parties that bring people together, and love that crosses borders. Last but not least, these new identities are not compromises; they are changes that happen when diverse realities meet.

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