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**CONTRASTING SYMBOLISM OF CLOTHES AND FOOD- LIBERATION AND BOUNDED IN DIVAKARUNI'S *ARRANGED MARRIAGE* AND *THE UNKNOWN ERRORS OF OUR LIVES***

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the symbolism of clothes and food acting as a means of liberation and trap in the short stories of Chitra Divakaruni. on the position and plight of woman as an immigrant and the changes one has to undergo in their lives. This is examined on the basis of her collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* by Chitra Divakaruni. *Arranged Marriage* [1995] focuses on the 'cross-cultural experience of women'. The plight of Indian immigrants in US is rendered through female narrators. In *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* [2001] she presents the female protagonists caught between the traditional beliefs and customs of their Indian culture and those of their or their children's new 'home', the United States. The theme of brokenness, devastation, helplessness of women to the freedom of choice, liberation is dealt in Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, imagery, cloth, food, liberation, bounded

**Introduction**

Chitra Divakaruni's stories shed light on the economic, social and public life in the US. She explores the immigrant experience through Indian women in American cities. Chitra Divakaruni depicts the life caught between past and present, home and abroad, tradition and modernity in her short stories.

*Arranged Marriage* gives a realistic picture of the emotionally battered woman. It talks about arranged marriage and its impact on women. Making choices, mother-daughter relationship, women in serious danger, physical as well as emotional, are the themes of the stories.

*Arranged Marriage* explores the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective. Chitra Divakaruni uses the themes of memory and desire. She says, "I really wanted to focus

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on women battling and coming out triumphant”. She talks about the immigrant brides who “are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes” as Patricia Holt puts it in her *Women Feel Tug of Two Cultures* (1995) and who struggle to carve an identity of their own.

The common theme that Chitra Divakaruni uses in both her *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is that India-born women living new lives in the US find independence a mixed blessing that “involves walking a tightrope between old beliefs and new found desires. It is the exploration of the nature of arranged marriages and experience of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions”.

“Women in the stories are real flesh and blood protagonists who are awesome in their relationships with their surroundings, their society, their families, their mental makeup and themselves”.

Chitra Divakaruni’s short stories have maintained the rules of the short story as “prescribed” by Kushwant Singh in his Foreword – “On the Short Story”. That it must have unity, a distant beginning, middle and end, a “ring of truth”, “a message to convey”, and a “sting in its tail”. One can see all these qualities in *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. Chitra Divakaruni talks about South-Asian immigrant women. Though she presents the problems of immigrant women in her stories, the

women still overcome their obstacles to be triumphant. *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* explore the immigrant experience through Indian women in American cities. Women born in India are torn between old and new world values which are filled with fear, hope and discovery. They learn to adapt to their new and changing culture and arrive at a self-esteem amidst joy and heartbreak. They find independence to be a mixed blessing that “involves walking a tightrope between old beliefs and new found desires. It is the exploration of the nature of arranged marriages and experience of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions”. (ibid)

Chitra Divakaruni has presented Indian women’s immigration to the US as a journey from oppressed and depressed conditions to the freedom and discovery of the self with western influence, acting as their chief inspiration.

In Chitra Divakaruni’s “Clothes” the character has to travel to a different country, marry someone, leave her family and live in a culture unknown to her. So, the author uses colour symbolism to develop a mood of desperation and nervousness as the main character struggles to find a sense of emotional security. It is the story of Mita, a young Indian woman who is forced to leave her small village to join her husband in California. She struggles to leave behind her kith and kin to lead a life with a man she hardly knows in a

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new country. She loves the excitement in America and develops love, admiration and respect for her husband. She discovers life in America and begins to change into a new woman. Her dreams are shattered with the death of her husband. It is the journey of Mita developing from a young girl, to a wife and finally to a widow and the changes she has to undergo.

**Imagery and Symbolism**

Imagery of clothing acts also as a resolution to problems of culture. Sari acts as a trope of the underlying emotions that a woman feels prior to marrying a man she has not seen in Divakaruni's short story "Clothes". The sari that the narrator's father gives her is described as follows: "The sari was unexpectedly heavy in my hands, silk-slippery a sari to walk carefully in. A sari that could change one's life. I stood there holding it, wanting to weep... It would dazzle Somesh and his parents and they would choose me to be his bride" (19-20). It can be seen as both an enigma and a paradox. Here sari plays the role of marital transition. The word 'slippery' suggests what marriage offers and her life afterwards. Marriage too is a journey where one should walk carefully otherwise it may lead to disaster.

The use of sari implies, "(the) woman's need for physical acceptance is based on the views of others rather than allowing others to see the inner beauty that only a woman can portray".

The narrator dreams of wearing the 'cream blouse and brown skirt' as parts of a uniform to accompany her husband at their shop 7-Eleven. "I want to stand behind the counter in the cream and brown skirt set (colour of earth, colour of seeds) and ring up purchases" (27). But her dream is shattered with the death of her husband.

American clothes symbolize a tacit acceptance of American society and culture and a transition from grievance to self-empowerment.

Symbols of clothes act altogether as the luminous rays of future and hope, as liberation and celebration of human spirit. Sumita says that widows serving their in-laws are "doves with cut-off wings" (33).

Chitra Divakaruni uses colour to represent emotion and transition involving maturity. She uses colour symbolism "to express the emotional changes that the main character is going through and to anchor her to her Indian beliefs during her transition from girl to woman". Different types of clothes suggest Sumita's transition from Indian life to American life.

The girl describes her bride-viewing sari as follows: "its body was a pale pink, like the dawn sky over the women's lake. The color of transition" (19). She prefers a certain colour of sari for her flight to America. "I wanted a blue one for the journey, because blue is the color of possibility" (20).

She talks about the present as well as remembers her past in India when she is

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talking about her 'blue' jeans. "I love the color, the same pale blue as the *nayantara* flowers that grow in my parent's garden" (25).

She wants to forge a new life after the death of her husband and so she chooses her own colour. "She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds the color of the earth and seeds" (33). This suggests new growth and new beginnings. Color adds a sense of security to the protagonist at the time of a great change in her life.

"Oranges" by Gary Sato can be compared to "Clothes" where the poet uses light and fire and bright colours such as orange, yellow and red to symbolize the main character's excitement about taking out the girl, the possibility for bright and joyful beginnings. He says that all things around him are cold and colourless except for those associated with the girl. The line "making a fire with my hands" symbolizes hope. Colour expresses emotion and hope in this poem.

In "Oranges", the author describes the incident which is of low risk. The boy is nervous of his first date. If it doesn't go good he will go home to his parents. His culture and country will be the same and would not change. That's the reason why the mood is brighter, more hopeful and full of anticipation.

The theme of brokenness is displayed through clothing in the short stories of *Arranged Marriage*. One can see separation from society and self among the women in

the stories. The concept of domestic violence gets articulated through a portrayal of the difficulties of an immigrant woman from the familiar context of her homeland to the unfamiliar world filled with discrimination and prejudice. Dependent women immigrants acquire citizenship if and only when their relationship with their husbands is fruitful. They lack employment, are not fluent in English and emphasise on saving the honour of the family. Their economic dependence, fear of losing custody of their children, social isolation and ignorance about the institutions that offer shelter or assistance are the few factors that make immigrant women vulnerable to domestic violence. As Kimberle Crenshaw remarks "Unfortunately, this priority tends to be interpreted as obliging women not to scream rather than obliging men not to hit" (Crenshaw,N.d). In "Bats", a woman escapes with her child from her abusive husband only to return to him and relive the horror. For example when the wife has received a beating from her husband Chitra Divakaruni shows the symbol of clothing excellently where it (sari) acts as a shield to cover internal and external scars. "...holding the wadded end of her sari to her face, the blood seeping through its white like a dark, crumpled flower" (15). Symbolic significance of bats represents the mother's flight from and return to danger and violence.

In "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs",

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clothes symbolize distinction between upper and lower class. The young girl has lived a life of upper class in India prior to moving to America with her working lower class aunt and uncle. The girl describes her uncle thus: “the overalls are part of the problem. They make him seem so-I hesitate to use the word, but only briefly- low class” (39).

Jayanti confronts American racism time and again. The deprofessionalisation of Indian immigrants is seen. She arrives in America as a graduate student thinking of America as the land of gold but has to face the harsh reality when assaulted on the streets of Chicago.

Violence and racism thwart the dreams of the immigrant in “Clothes” and “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”.

In “The Maid Servant’s Story”, Chitra Divakaruni uses clothing among social classes. While describing the maid servant she says “she was only a poor woman in a coarse, green bordered sari... but no one would have mistaken her-at least on second look – for anything except a working-class girl who’d been out of work awhile” (119).

In “Affair”, Divakaruni uses the symbol of cloth to strengthen the character of Meena, the narrator’s friend, whose husband is having a relationship with another woman. It suggests that Meena is not worried of the affair of her husband but is strong willed and cause her “not to sweat the small things”.

“...and about the cutest little jacket she’d picked up at Nordstrom’s with a real fox-fur collar” (232).

In “Meeting Mrinal”, Mrinal goes to the market and buys remnants from wholesalers with their bales of cottons and silks and she would create new designs from those scraps. This unique ability is symbolized by Divakaruni as the capability of the human spirit, particularly in the woman and the wisdom that leads us to say “when the world gives you lemons, make lemonade”.

Chitra Divakaruni in the *Arranged Marriage* uses the imagery of clothes to imply brokenness, transition and the success that the spirit can bring in despite trouble.

*The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* are the tales of lapsed communication, inarticulate love and redemptive memories. It is a difficult process of adjustment for women in whom memory and duty coexist with a new, often painful disorienting set of standards. Women “prepare to battle the conventions they have left behind to take full advantage of their new lives in America” according to Robbie Clipper Sethi in *Studies in Short Fiction*.

In “Meeting Mrinal” the mirage of perfect life is explored. Food and cooking together act as the central theme. Asha has stopped cooking elaborately as she did earlier. “I’ve decided that too much of my life has already been wasted mincing and simmering and grinding spices” (275).

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Limp and moldy vegetables suggest rot in her marriage and threaten to infect her relationship with Dinesh. Lifeless vegetables and convenience food (pizza) suggests the lack of time, attention and nourishment in her relationship with Dinesh.

Asha has no firm foothold in her old or new life. She is unable to negotiate her way in western culture in a manner reminiscent of her inability to negotiate the city traffic. When in the restaurant she says, "I knew I didn't belong here, and that every person in the room, without needing to look at me, knew it too" (290).

Like in "Meeting Mrinal", Jhabvala's "A Birthday in London" talks about the lack of complementarity between Sonia, a widow and her son, Werner. He is callous to his mother's affectionate concern. He fails to remember his mother's birthday and doesn't even stay for the party arranged by Mr. Lumbik and the landlady Mrs. Gottlob. Sonia seeks happiness in mothering him- "looking after him, doing things for him, bestowing affection on him-but this is denied to her". "It is the enrichment of the relationships which matters in the lives of people; it is the sense of identity bestowed by the principle of complementarity which is crucial to psychic health".

These stories imply that much of human suffering is avoidable if only human beings could perceive the cause of it.

Chitra Divakaruni shows the images of perfection in "Meeting Mrinal", the

wifely perfection where Asha buys a sexy negligee to tempt Mahesh back into her life. But he leaves the same day. "Mrinal" – "She has the perfect existence...-money, freedom, admiration" (288). Mrinal has succeeded where Asha has failed- She is glamorous, has a successful career, lovely home, power over men in her work. Mrinal had warned Asha to finish college and get a job instead of marrying early.

James Bond with his "golden guns and intricate machines and bikini-clad beauties" (293) suggests the western image of male sophistication and success that both Asha and Mrinal admired while in India.

Perfection crumbles when Mrinal admits she is unhappy and lonely. Asha feels "like a child who picks up a fairy doll she's always admired from afar and discovered that all its magic glitter is really painted clay" (296). She wonders, "What would I live on, now that I knew perfection was only a mirage?" (296). Chitra Divakaruni says that perfection in life is not possible. Thinking so is itself our mistake.

Asha finally moves forward into a future guided by truth and self-knowledge rather than false images of external perfection.

The symbol of clay bowl represents Asha's life, in fact all their lives, "far from perfect but infinitely precious". Pistachio milk symbolizes the return of Asha to a nourishing and traditional Indian drink. It's the recognition of the need to go back to her Indian roots and to regain her motherly role. The glasses they raise to their

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“precious imperfect lives” paves way for Asha and Dinesh to come to reconciliation finally. “The glasses glitter like hope” (300).

In “The Maid Servant’s Story”, Chitra Divakaruni throws light on perfect life as a mirage. “...The highest point on a wheel... the moment of balance when everything was as perfect as it can be in this flawed world. Perhaps, by its very nature, such a time cannot last but must topple into darkness as the wheel continues to turn”. It is the revelation of the bitter truth in the life of her mother through the story told by her aunt Deepa Mashi. She indirectly tells how the saffron sari given by the wife to the servant led to the sexual assault on the maid servant, Sarala by her brother-in-law with the latter becoming a whore. The wife who treats the servant as her own sister is unaware of this and it remains a secret with her sister. The daughter imagines this to be her mother’s story and feels “the burden of guilt my aunt must bear and wonder if her loving of me, all these years, has been in part an attempt at reparation” (166). When asked about this her aunt replies “We Indian women whose lives are half light and half darkness, stopping short of revelations that would otherwise crisp away our skins” (167). Both of them hold each other tightly – two women caught in a repeating, looped world of shadow and memory, watching where the last light, silk and fragile, has slipped itself just above the horizon like the palloo of a saffron sari

(168).

Anjana Appachanna’s *Listening Now* talks about the existential psyche of women who are trapped in the universe of absurdity. They are victimized by their own preposterousness i.e., anxiety, fear to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. The six women narrators are mothers, daughters, sisters and friends. Like Chitra Divakaruni, Anjana Appachanna focuses on women because they are the better spokeswomen of the feminine world known to them than men who naturally are not part of the inner core. Through the protagonist Padma’s story each narrator reveals his/her own complex world, of despairs, desires and adjustments. It is the story of Padma’s chance meeting of a boy in a Delhi University bookshop leading to a growing intimacy between them, their long walks, endless cups of coffee, plates of dosa and gulab jamun followed by betrayal of a growing love and parting ways. The themes of female bonding, female sexuality and the mother and child relationship are depicted.

Young women often receive conflicting messages from their parents and society regarding femininity and mainstream success that are difficult to reconcile. The double standards that parents uphold for daughters and sons regarding dating and pre-marital relationships and tightening of control over daughters’ sexuality are the issues that are ultimately tied to immigrant parents’ own desire to preserve the culture of origin.

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Unfortunately this prejudice itself is deeply embedded in Native cultural practices.

Divakaruni's "Doors" talks about the perfect life of Preeti and Deepak despite their upbringing in different backgrounds- America and India respectively until the arrival of Deepak's friend Raj from India. Deepak has great respect for women and puts down the notion of women as dolls or slaves and gives full independence to Preeti. He even accepts her closing doors in the name of privacy. He considers his wife to be an "exotic creature- Indian and yet not Indian – who had by some mysterious fortune become his wife" (189). But this habit of closing the doors, after arrival of Raj, paved way for shutting of her own self. The space, privacy, independence all lead to the loss of love for Deepak.

"The Ultrasound" is the story of two cousins, Anju and Runu, married and settled in America and India respectively. Both pregnant share their joys and anxieties until the amniocentesis results arrive saying that Runu will give birth to a girl and Anju to a boy. Runu who grew in her in-laws household by "spreading her tendrils like the jasmine she had planted, dispensing fragrance and shade enough to win anyone's heart" (215) is now compelled to abort her child. She was restrained from going to her mother's place as her mother felt that "Abortion is lesser of the two evils" (225). Finally, Anju decides to welcome Runu and her daughter to America and wishes both the children-

Anand and Dayita- she has named, to grow together as their mothers. "Anand and Dayita- It sounds beautiful, complete, like a line from a ghazal" (230).

"The Lives of Strangers", tells about the pilgrimage to Amarnath undertaken by the American young narrator along with her Aunt Seema to understand the exotic nature of India. The pureness of the yatra-the physical aspect of sin and expiation - is laughed at when the pilgrims make fun of the ill-fated Mrs.Das.This suggests only the physical purity and not the mental one. Leela had preferred a private life. Even with her boy-friend she maintained privacy which made him desert her and tell her "You're like one of those spiny creatures that live at the bottom of the ocean... Everything just slides off of that watertight shell of yours. You don't need me – you don't need anyone" (60). This was not true as she attempted suicide and now she caressed the ailing Mrs. Das and accompanied her to the hotel. When aunt Seema calls her a woman of misfortune who has bewitched her, Leela wonders, "How many unguessed layers there were to people, skins that cause loose at an unexpected tug, revealing raw, fearful flesh. Amazing that folks could love one another in the face of such unreliability! It made Leela at once sad and hopeful" (75). The earthquake changes Leela, in the hospital, who throws away the golden chain gifted by Mrs. Das and accuses her of being cursed. Later when she finds that there was no news of Mrs. Das she feels guilty and thinks of expiation. When she



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wants to see through the window she finds an empty oval shape.

Conclusion

Divakaruni's plots feature Indian-born women torn between old and new world values. She uses her "laser-like insight" and skilled use of story, plot, and lyrical description that gives readers a many-layered look at her characters and their respective worlds, which are filled with fear, hope and discovery. Whether in California, Chicago or Calcutta women learn to adapt to their new and changing culture and in turn discover their own sense of self amidst joy and heartbreak.

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