
Negotiating Identity and Gender through Clothing: A Feminist Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "*Clothes*"

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Clothes" (from *Arranged Marriage*, 1995) studies the concept of gender, identity, and migration through the symbolic figure of clothing. The story is about the journey of Sumita, a young Indian woman who finds a balance in the shift between the duties of an obedient daughter and devoted wife to an individual finding her own identity. Through the symbolism of clothes—ranging from traditional saris to Western dresses—Divakaruni depicts the cultural unsettledness and self realization that characterize many immigrant women's diary. This paper studies "Clothes" through a feminist and postcolonial lens, analyzing how clothes become a metaphor for shifting identities and self-liberation.

Keywords: Metaphor, Identity, Diaspora, Third space

Introduction

In *Arranged Marriage*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni studies women caught between the two worlds: the traditional India and the free spirited America. Her short story "Clothes" explores the struggles and dreams of immigrant women torn between their responsibilities, personal desires and sense of identity. Clothing acts not merely as a cultural signifier but as a medium through which Sumita expresses her self identity. As the protagonist moves from India to the United States, the changes in her attire reflects her emotional and psychological dynamics—from innocence to comprehension, dependence to independence. Divakaruni's narrative thus becomes a thought provoking exploration of what Homi K. Bhabha terms the "third space"—a hybrid cultural position to recreate identity. Through Sumita's story, Divakaruni critiques traditional roles and behaviors society expects women to follow, questions dominant norms and traditions, and celebrates female identity amid loss and displacement.

The evolution of Identity through clothing

The clothing imagery is predominantly present from the beginning of the story. Sumita's saree—specifically the “bright red wedding sari”—represents her entry into marital life and the journey of familial bonding. Indian culture, the colour red connotes auspiciousness and marital bliss. However, beneath this traditional symbolism lies constraint: the saree also signifies the boundaries of Sumita's expected identity as a submissive wife.

When she marries Somesh, she imagines a future of unified desires and mutual dreams. Yet, her saree becomes “a skin she must not shed,” binding her to traditional ethos. As she moves to America, the symbolism of clothing changes—“Somesh bought me a pink nightgown,” she narrates, a color that echoes both sensuality and modernity. The change in attire reflects Sumita's entry into a more liberated world, one that her husband encourages within the privacy of their new nest.

Migration and Cultural Displacement

Divakaruni, herself an Indian immigrant, portrays how the migration complicates gender roles. In California, Sumita faces a culture that questions her orthodox perceptions of female identity. The Western garments—jeans, skirts, blouses—become markers of transformation, “clothes that will make me look like an American wife.” Yet this newfound freedom is fragile. The sudden death of Somesh interrupts her transformation, suspending her between two spheres—tradition and modernity—one inherited and the other discovered. She was no longer the dutiful wife and her evolution of the independent American was stalled.

Here, Divakaruni highlights what Gayatri Spivak calls the “subaltern woman's silence”—Sumita's voice is shaped by forces beyond her control. The widow's white saree, given to her after Somesh's death, enforces cultural restraint once again. It becomes the embodiment of patriarchal mourning, erasing the woman's voice.

However, by deciding to stay in America, Sumita redefines clothing as a medium of resistance. She decides to wear “clothes of my own choosing,” rejecting both constrained grief and cultural adherence.

Feminist Assertion and the Metaphor of Clothing

Through clothing, Divakaruni constructs a nuanced feminist metaphor. Each garment reflects a stage in Sumita's self-discovery. The red saree signifies gendered domination; the pink nightgown denotes emerging self-actualization; the white widow's saree is the suppressed voice; and finally, her imagined Western dress gives her wings for reclamation of self identity.

This metaphorical progression parallels Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex*—that womanhood is not an essence but a becoming. Through Sumita's journey, we see that identity can be reconstructed, in both tangible and symbolic ways, through the acts of choice and defiance.

Moreover, Divakaruni's narrative contests narrow reading through the western feminist interpretations. Instead, it aligns with transnational feminism, acknowledging the overlapping pressures of culture, gender, and migration. Sumita's liberation does not lie in rejecting tradition and orthodox rules but in portraying it through self-determination.

Language, Imagery, and Cultural Hybridity

Divakaruni's prose gracefully interlaces Indian imagery with Western motifs. The sensuousness of fabrics—"silk, chiffon, cotton"—mirrors emotional texture, while metaphors of color and fabric track psychological states. The saree becomes both armor and cocoon; the nightgown becomes a dream of intimacy and independence.

Through the fusion of Indian and American cultural symbols, Divakaruni enacts what Bhabha describes as "cultural hybridity"—a negotiation between belonging and becoming. Sumita embodies this hybrid identity, carrying both nostalgia and hope.

Conclusion

In "Clothes", Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses the motif of clothing to map the emotional journey of migration, gender role and identity. Sumita's journey—from red to white, from saree to Western dress—becomes a metaphor for self-realization in a world of cultural contradictions. The story affirms that liberation lies not in abandoning one's roots, but in having the courage to reinterpret and reshape them.

Divakaruni reimagines the immigrant woman not as a passive sufferer but as a creator of her own destiny and identity—stitching together fragments of two worlds into a fabric uniquely her own.

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