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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Clothes*: Journey of a Woman

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a poet, novelist and short story writer, known for the works like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Arranged Marriage* and *The Vine of Desire*. Divakaruni mainly writes about Indian Immigrants especially women and their journey to unknown land. In the present paper, I Have taken the short story *Clothes* from Divakaruni's collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage*. This paper focuses on the way Divakaruni uses the image of clothes and colours to depict a women's journey.

Keywords: Immigrants, Journey, Image, Colour, Immigration, Cultural Encounter

Arranged Marriage is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first collection of short stories. There are 11 short stories, and majority of the stories deal with the immigrant experience along with the social-cultural encounter that an Indian experiences when he moves towards the west, which is an important theme in the mosaic of American Indian culture. . It also reflects on the impact of the cultural disarticulation on the protagonist and studies whether they end dejected and disillusioned or they learn to acclimatize and accept their conditions. It also evaluates their attitude and approach to life, whether they abandon their conventional values or preserve them. The women in *Arranged Marriage* are portrayed as strong and willing to change their situations in life but sometimes they do also feel themselves trapped in a myth of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law.

Divakaruni herself admits that, "Not in such depth, but I still have to understand my characters and their central conflict and what they want" (Dill n.p.). While Divakaruni's female protagonists are well- rounded and sympathetic, her male characters seem to be stereotype and flat. In an essay entitled "What Women Share" she even goes to the extent of refuting the male portrayal of women characters as depicted in the epics: But when I did read the epics and other classic texts of Indian culture, I was surprised to find few portrayals of friendships among women. I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women,

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Vol. I & Issue IV

and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers. (Divakaruni)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in the short story “Clothes,” weaves a tale of the struggle that a young Indian girl faces in finding her place in the world. Sumita, the protagonist of the story, experiences the many tumultuous changes inwardly, as one is wont to do—but these changes are exemplified in an exterior way through Sumita’s choice of clothing and particularly the colors she chooses. For Sumita to make significant changes to her attire indicates a drastic shift both culturally and emotionally and these visual cues tell Sumita’s family and acquaintances how her inner self is changing. Sumita also expresses her self-identification of roles through these changes of clothes, where some choices indicate youth, other choices indicate love or duty as a wife, and yet other choices indicate her full acceptance in herself as a woman. Some might argue that this is a story of cultural transition to American life, but that would be a hollow reading as it does acknowledge the importance of Sumita as a being all her own, making her own way.

The short story “Clothes” begins with a yellow sari—a wedding. A future wife is undergoing the dressing rituals necessary to meet the groom to be. Sumita is the yellow-clad maiden, and she must complete the rituals of preparing for her soon to be husband, which includes bathing in a lake. This immersion in water is calming to the maiden and she finds that her anxieties in marrying a man she has never met have lessened because of it.

Also, her worry in losing her family is similarly assuaged. “Wet and yellow, like a sunflower after the rain” is how the saris described (581). It is possible that the use of yellow in this part of the story is meant to signify peace and future; especially considering the analogy of the post-rain sunflower, which would indicate an end of grief and a stretching out to the warmth (or happiness and love) of the sun (new day or future).

For Sumita’s bride-viewing, she is dressed in a sari of lightest pink: “Its body was a pale pink, like the dawn sky over the women’s lake. The color of transition”. This color is meant to symbolize marriage, luck, and possibility. Due to the fact that Sumita maintained the legacy and heritage of donning the pink sari, she has made it clear that she respects and holds faith in that same legacy and heritage that she is taking part in.

Beyond heritage and legacy, which can also be read as connoting wealth of family and therefore desirability of daughter. It is the obvious and logical color choice for marriage attire as the transition of roles, from daughter to wife, is the exact change that the ceremony of marriage embodies. Her appropriate choices in color and attire, which also reflect her appropriate status and upbringing, make her a perfect selection to be chosen by the prospective husband to be, and so she is.

Now having the additional status of having been selected for marriage due to her perfection, Sumita must continue to exemplify this perfection. On the long plane ride to the United States, Sumita has donned herself in a blue sari. The color blue for Sumita represents

The Creative Launcher

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Vol. I & Issue IV

possibility and also because it was a fitting color to travel the skies in. Possibility and flight seem fitting symbols with which to approach a brave new land. However, Sumita's mother had wanted her to don a red sari as the color, when worn, was rumored to provide luck to the married women of India in carrying out their duties. "Midnight blue with a thin red border the same color as the marriage mark" was decided upon as an appropriate compromise. Now luck and possibility traveled with her.

In the United States, Sumita experiences the transition between herself as wife and herself as woman. When she arrives Sumita's husband buys her American clothing and she models them for him in the mirror. "The T-shirt is sunrise-orange—the color, I decide of joy, of my new American life". While this may only appear as one color in a choice of many, Sumita experiences it as the newness of life in the United States, the newness of living the American life. Sumita has assigned this meaning to the color of the shirt without relying on the traditions of the past to inform her choices on how to think of a thing. This new direction in absolute control and assignment of meaning, significance, and whether or not something was right and appropriate is an independence which is Sumita assuming control of herself as a woman. It can be argued that this is an Americanization of Sumita, but it is much more truthful to suggest that Sumita is experiencing a "Sumita-ization" as opposed to an Americanization, because she is calling the shots, and that is a universal theme that is not proprietary to any one culture. There are many cultures and countries in which the color white signifies being clean, chaste, and pure. There are also cultures that exist where the color white signifies godly divinity or royalty. Sumita chooses to wear white in the mourning of her husband after he is shot and killed pulling a double shift at the 7-11 convenience store that he owned. He was attempting to earn extra money for he and his wife so that they could move into a place of their own. In the context of the earlier known symbolism of the color white—"white widows color, the color of endings . This choice seems to suggest that Sumita is reverting back to tradition as a way of escape, but a mourning bangle breaking ceremony takes place that add additional meaning to her choice.

Sumita's arms are clad in multi colored bangles, which are taken and broken to pieces, sending the shards of multi-colored plastic flying all over the room—some even landing to rest on the sheet which is covering her departed husband's body. Of course the shattering of the bangles is easily linked to the shattering of poor Sumita's emotional ties and foundations, leaving her scattered and afraid. But the multi-colored shards could also represent the component parts of white. When white light is shone through a prism, it separates into the various spectral colors that exist in nature. By Sumita choosing to wear white, she is choosing to show that she is overwhelmed with emotions that she cannot choose or contain because they are all upon her, all at once.

The various experiences in Sumita's life have shaped her into the person she has become. Her nerve-racking efforts to be desirable, her selection, her long journey into the

The Creative Launcher

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Vol. I & Issue IV

unknown, her bonding emotionally and legally with her husband- all of these has informed her conception of herself and helped to create the person she really is, unveiled from behind all the tradition and decorum she had been hiding behind before. The American culture had helped her to realize her desires in being her own person as opposed to meeting the ideals of others, but it is she herself who chose to accept this view as an ideal for herself. Her desire to get an education and teach “blond kids in her cream-and-brown American dress” states very clearly that this is now her view. The significance with which she holds color is still very real to Sumita, but it is in her own paradigm now. In a moment shared between Sumita and her husband, the colors cream and brown signify earth and growth—which is exactly what Sumita will experience as well as foster by becoming a teacher. This description also echoes Sumita’s own blossoming through her varied experiences thus far.

Sumita saw the world through color, and so she grew through it as well. The complacent happiness of yellow gave way to the possibilities of an unknown future of blue where the sky was the limit and only luck was her guide, which soon burst forth into the burning crimson orange of the new burgeoning dawn that was her vibrant new life with her husband, only to be upended by the cacophony of a loss and death in white (i.e., all colors, all feelings at once) wherein a new path had to be forged, which would indicate the new direction of growth in creating foundational roots for herself and others in her new conception of the world as the earth and as the seed together—cream and brown. For Sumita, life is defined, and goes on, in the colors of her own mind.

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