

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12, Issue 3, 2025 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Diaspora Concerns in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.3.187](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.3.187)



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Article information

Article Received:12/08/2025
Article Accepted:20/09/2025
Published online:26/09/2025

Abstract

Diaspora literature are the writings of the people who have migrated or been displaced from their homeland, often exploring the themes of belongingness to their native land.

The present article explores the diasporic aspects in a short story collection of a prominent Indian English Writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's. Chitra's collection of stories, *Arranged Marriage*, depicts the experiences of Indian immigrant women in America, navigating cultural conflicts, identity crisis, and the challenges of adapting to a multicultural setting. Through a critical analysis of the stories, this article highlights the ways in which Chitra's work portrays the complexities of diasporic identity and the immigrant experience.

Keywords: Immigrants, Identity, Indian English women writers, Short fiction, Diaspora.

Introduction

Diasporic literature falls under the more general category of post-colonial literature, which includes writings from nations that were once colonized, like India. Among the female authors of Indian descent who have impacted the field of diasporic writing are Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Meera Sayal, Sunetra Gupta, Anjana Appanchana, Padma Hejmadi, and Meena Alexander. One author who has established a solid reputation in South Asian Diasporic literature is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In the modern Indian diaspora, she is highly regarded for being a keen observer of Indian life in the United States, especially that of Bengali women. The experience of immigrants is the primary concern of Divakaruni.

Elements of diaspora in *Arranged Marriage*

Indian-American poet and award-winning novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who immigrated to the United States at the age of 19, observed the struggles of the so-called "black" in a so-called "white" nation. Because she is aware of her own identity, her artwork reflects feelings of alienation and rootlessness that are particularly pertinent to the Indian Diaspora. For example, her short

story collection, *Arranged Marriage* is an artwork that tells the story of the bravery and atrocities experienced by immigrant women. Within the modern Indian Diaspora, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni holds a prominent position. Divakaruni examines issues of identity crisis, emotional isolation and non-communication, the experience of migration, etc., via the characters in her stories in *Arranged Marriage*. Her characters in the diaspora are stuck between two worlds, negating their belonging in either one. According to Divakaruni, expatriates have profound and moving experiences when they live away from their native culture, which in turn becomes their home.

The stories and the diaspora

In her first collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, discusses the experiences of immigrants, particularly women in general. With her extraordinary artistic ability, Divakaruni depicts diasporic female heroines who are living in two different cultures, battling the uncertainties of exile, and doubting who they are. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the first generation of Indian immigrants to the United States, having lived in India for a portion of their lives and brought with them the burdens of their home country. She has paid close attention to both the difficulties faced by the diaspora outside and India's postcolonial society.

In *The Bats*, the first story of *Arranged Marriage*, the mother often is abused by her husband leaves to her uncle's home in Gopalpur, telling the narrator that they are leaving for a vacation. The narrator likes the place very much by enjoying and celebrating with her grandpa-uncle. The mother and the narrator flee to the place multiple times but go back to their home again. This shows the identity crisis of the mother shuttling between the two homes. In this story, the bats which move into the grandpa's mango grove come back again and again even when they are poisoned symbolizes the predicament of the mother and narrator.

In the second story, *Clothes*, Sumitha is being prepared for a bride-viewing, a tradition in which a girl is viewed and evaluated as suitable for a groom belonging to a prosperous family. At this time, Sumitha feels nervous since the groom's family resides in California while she belongs to a village and the groom has already rejected her friends. To her surprise, her husband, Somesh is loving and caring. On a graveyard shift Somesh was shot at his store where he works and Sumitha has to leave to India with her in-laws. However, Sumitha decides to stay back in America and run the store of her husband which was her lasting dream. Sumitha's decision of residing in America projects the fear of traditions and customs she would come across in her home land as a widow and the reason of her choice to continue her living alone in the new land.

Similarly, Janayanthi Ganguli in the story, *Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs*, is another such character developed by Chitra Banerjee to put forth the diaspora of Indian women. Jayanthi, in the story, is a student who goes to America for her higher studies stays with her aunt Prathima. Initially, Jayanthi enjoys the scenic beauty of America and has many fantasies about her life in the country. On the contrary, her dreams fade away when she sees the abusive marital relationship between her aunt, Prathima and her husband Bikram who often assaults his wife. Jayanthi wonders if her life would be the same as Prathima and remains in a dilemma to stay in America or leave to India.

In her fourth story, *The Word Love* Chitra Banerjee portrays the narrator, an Indian immigrant woman who is in a dilemma and falls in love with a U.S. born young man. She is in a living relationship with him and doesn't want it to share it with her mother as she considers it as a sin. The narrator mentally suffers since she tries to cross the traditional boundaries of her native Indian culture where Indian mothers do not accept their daughters getting married to native Americans. The mother of the narrator come to know about the relationship and disowns her daughter as a shame to her family. The mother neither receives the narrator's calls nor letters. Added to it, her partner doesn't accept her anguish. She becomes depressed and suicidal with her dilemma. Recollecting a tale from her mother, she decided to commit suicide but takes up a walk first. During the walk, she comes to a realization

and leaves both mother and her partner and starts a new life. The story suggests that the narrator finds herself in an ambiguity and cannot choose either Indian way of life or American style of living.

In the story, *A Perfect Life*, the protagonist Meera seems to have a happy life with a beautiful apartment in San Francisco, challenging job and a loving boyfriend, Richard. He always gave personal space to Meera unlike other Indian man. Meera habituated to the American style of living was not interested in marriage and kids. At this juncture, Meera finds a Mexican boy huddling under a staircase. She takes care of him affectionately and names him Krishna. Unable to leave him, she plans to become Krishna's legal foster parent on the advice of Richard and her friend Sharmila. Meera left Krishna in another foster home when she was in the process of getting a foster parent certificate. Unfortunately, Krishna escapes from his new foster home and was never found. Meera was inconsolable with the loss of Krishna. Her relationship with Richard also starts to weaken as she feels him to be inconsiderate. She keeps on searching for Krishna and takes a year for Meera to get over the phase. The character of Meera, in this story depicts the diaspora of an Americanized Indian.

In *The Maid Servant's Story*, we encounter women from different generations and various economical classes of the society. Manisha is a girl, daughter of a traditional Bengali family. Her personality changes took place with her migration to America. She appreciates the notion of freedom and liberty in her life and longs for it. Her idea about relationship is entirely westernized. She is more closed to Deepamashi, her aunt than her own mother. As a child she had always craved for parental love which she never got. She is emotionally starved and accordingly in all her relationships she does not feel the complete contentment that a perfect relationship should give. We find her restless even in her relationship with Bijoy and many times feeling guilty being tackled by traditional values.

In the story, *Disappearance*, Divakaruni portrays a male protagonist. He marries a beautiful, well-bred Indian woman through an arranged marriage. Initially, they seem to be happy, but when his wife disappears, he becomes distraught, realizing he knew little about her despite having a child together. He feels that he has rejected and refused her. Reflecting on their marriage, he understands that he often dismissed his wife's desires - like working, pursuing education, or wearing American clothes. He didn't consider these aspects of her life valuable and never made an effort to understand her as a person. He assumed his wife's silence meant agreement and was preoccupied with his own life, neglecting his wife's anxieties. In their marriage, he viewed sex as a husband's right and a wife's duty without considering equality or mutual understanding. Through this male character's experience, Divakaruni shows how he failed to treat his wife as an individual with her own needs. The wife's disappearance implies she's seeking freedom from a marriage that felt like a physical and intellectual confinement with no room for her growth. Breaking free from the marriage seemed her only option.

In *Doors*, Preeti, an NRI student, and Deepak, an immigrant, marry for love despite their families' concerns about cultural differences - Deepak being traditional and Preeti being westernized. Initially, their marriage seems perfect. But on one day, Deepak's friend Raj comes to stay with them. Preeti prefers closed doors for privacy, while Deepak likes doors open. Raj, unaware of their preferences, doesn't respect boundaries. He refuses to sleep in the guest room and frequently enters Deepak and Preeti's personal rooms without knocking, which annoys Preeti. Deepak starts to align with Raj's behavior. However, Preeti feels overworked, overwhelmed, and struggling with her work. When she scolds Raj for invading her space, Deepak asks Raj to leave to avoid further conflict. Later when Raj left, Preeti packs her bags, but Deepak asserts that she belongs to his house. They sleep in separate beds for the first time, and Preeti feels an emotional distance has grown between them.

In the short story, *Ultra Sound*, Chitra Banarjee depicts the sorrow of isolation with two women characters. Anjali and Arundati are cousins waiting the results of their pregnancies. Anjali, belonging to an affluent family is married to Sunil, an NRI, while Arundati, belongs to a modest household, is married in a large family to an employee of Indian Railways. Anjali feels that Arundati's in-laws are

too demanding. However Arundati has always dreamt of getting into such family. Sunil is supportive of Anjali but she feels that his love is because of their child and not for her as a wife. Anjali is happy to discover that her baby is a healthy boy while Arundati's in-laws are pressurizing her to abort the baby as it's a girl. Arundati escapes from her in-laws to Anjali's mother as Anjali asks her to, but Sunil is not supportive of the action and feels that abortion might be good for her as Arundati can never escape the clutches of the stereotypical Indian society and will have no financial support. Anjali doesn't like Sunil's opinions, but tries Arundati's rehabilitation as a financially independent woman with Sunil's help, deciding to use the status of her motherhood as a leverage. In the story, we identify the two women alienated in different ways. Anjali feels that she is not taken by her husband as a person without her child while Arundati is in quest of livelihood for herself and her girl child.

Solitude and discontentment are the central conflicts in the story, *Affair*. These problems are faced by the expatriate community in a foreign land. Abha recalls about how her close friend Meena, who suffers loneliness as she fails to adjust with her husband. Meena's husband Srikant always involved in her professional commitments. Abha depicts her friend's loneliness: 'I hated being alone in the house. It was so deathly quiet, not like India, where something is always going on – Street vendors, servants, people dropping into gossips...'. Meena's loneliness increases after her miscarriage. This loneliness brought Meena close to Abha's husband Ashok. She did not hesitate to share her intimate joys and fears with Ashok. Meena enjoys her companionship with Ashok to forget her isolated past keeping apart all the upcoming consequences and Abha's anguish. Meena and Ashok's relationship turns fruitful while Abha's concept of ideal marriage starts dissolving. Abha begins to develop the feelings of abandonment and insecurity.

In "Meeting Mrinal" the last story, we find a sense of disillusionment in the lives of two friends. Asha, a divorcee, is jealous about her friend Mirnalini's happy marriage. Asha dreams to be a perfect wife, but still her relationship with her husband and is about to break down. She feels that Mrinal is economically independent and has freedom to express opinion and also has power. When Asha meets Mrinal and lies that she has a perfect life Mrinal reveals about her own loneliness and longing towards having a life like her friend. Asha laments the disillusionment and the human psyche.

From all the stories, we identify many characters experiencing conflicts coming from alienation and disillusionment. These people caught between western culture and traditional norms suffer from diasporic concerns like many other South Asians and Americans.

Conclusion

Arranged Marriage is a powerful exploration of the diasporic experience, highlighting the complexities and challenges faced by Indian immigrant women in America. Through a critical analysis of the stories, this article has examined the diasporic aspects in Divakaruni's work, focusing on the themes of cultural conflict, identity crisis, and the immigrant experience. The collection provides a nuanced portrayal of the diasporic experience, highlighting the ways in which immigrant women explore multiple cultural identities and find ways to belong in a new cultural context.

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