Cross Cultural Experiences of Womanhood in *Arranged Marriage*  
by Chitra Divakaruni  

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**ABSTRACT**

In this paper I am going to focus on the cross cultural experiences of womanhood in ‘Arranged Marriage’ written by Chitra Divakaruni. I am going to discuss the condition of women characters who feel Tug of Cultures and their struggle to create their own individual identity. I will focus on the theme of Indian immigrant women's wavering between old beliefs and new found desires in United States. Particularly, I am going to focus on the story titled 'Meeting Mrinal' which is the last story in the collection 'Arranged Marriage'. I will discuss and examine the experiences and perspectives of Indian immigrant women who have settled in U.S. Women's condition in United States is absolutely disturbed in mind as they are caught between two cultures- restricted but comfortable Indian culture and independent but ruthless Western Culture.

**Key words**: Cross Cultural- Tug of two cultures- identity- dilemma- Indian immigrants-independent-ruthless Western Culture.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born on 29th July, 1956 at Calcutta in India. She got her education at a convent school run by Irish nuns. Later, she did her graduation and received the Bachelor's degree from Calcutta University in 1976. Soon after that she immigrated to the United States. She received the Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. After she completed her doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley. Her career as a writer started just after the completion of graduation. She did different types of jobs to meet with the expenses of her education. In 1979, she got married with Murthy Divakaruni, an engineer by profession. She became the mother of two sons subsequently in 1991 and 1994. In 1989, she had to shift to California. In 1991, she became the founder of an organization in San Francisco with an aim of helping the South Asian women who became the victim of abusive situation. Chitra observed the distress and crisis faced by those immigrant women while doing this social work.

Chitra Banerjee has narrated her own experiences as well as others’ experiences as immigrant Indian women in her works including poetry, short stories and even novels. One of her poetry collection titled *Black Candle* consists of poetry written by Indian, Pakistan and Bangladeshi poetesses. *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of short stories which was published in 1995. Her
work titled *The Mistress of Spices* is a combination of poetry and prose both. It was published in 1997. In this book, she has depicted traditions of mystical and cultural India.

She wrote a novel titled *My Heart* which was published in 1999. In this novel, Chitra has described in detail the conflicts between Indians who are able to adjust with their culture and tradition and those who are ready to accept new ideas leaving their old traditions and culture. She wrote yet another poetry collection titled *Leaving Yuba City* in 1997. Banerjee discusses the same problem of identity concerning women. She depicts women’s struggle for the search of identity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been conferred with many awards for her book *Arranged Marriage*, She received the PEN Oland Josephine Miles Price. She also received Bay Aree Book Reviewers Award as a fiction writer. For her collection of poetry *Leaving Yuba City* in 1994, She received Pushcart Prize. Not only this, She also received an Allan Ginsberg Prize and Gerbode Foundation Award for the same poetry collection.

Chitra is one of those young Indian Writers who emerged on the surface of the literary scenario carrying a post colonial diasporic identity. Chitra achieved a distinct position as a South Asian writer in English. She experienced life with a hybrid identity personally so understood what difficulties one faces regarding identity. As a result, in her stories also she deals with the experience of immigrants to the United States. Her works have been translated into eleven languages and appreciated world wide.

In my paper, I am going to discuss her first volume of short stories titled *Arranged Marriage*. And I will focus my attention on particular story titled *Meeting Mrinal*. In her first volume of short stories *Arranged Marriage*, Chitra Banerjee describes the cross cultural experience of womanhood from the point of view of a feminist.

**View of the book at a glance:**

The book *Arranged Marriage* consist of eleven stories. Majority of these stories discuss Indian immigrants who reside in the United States. All the stories have been narrated from the first person singular point of view. Chitra Banerjee depicts the experiences of immigrant professional people. Even women characters experience and fall victim in the hands of tug of two cultures. All of them are in search of individual identity.

A common theme that has been discussed throughout the stories is that of Indian immigrant women’s walk between old beliefs
and new found desires and dreams in the United States. Author who lived in Ohio had many such experiences as an immigrant. This helped her to describe the feelings of loneliness and cultural differences. In my paper, I will focus only on one story titled *Meeting Mrinal*. It is the last story of the collection *Arranged Marriage*. This story also examines the experience and perspectives of Indian Women who are immigrants in the United States. All immigrant women are wavering between two cultures. On one hand, there is restricted but comfortable Indian culture while on the other hand, there is independent but ruthless Western Culture.

*Meeting Mrinal, The story:*

The protagonist of the story is Asha. She is an Indian who goes to the United States as her husband is already living there. When the story starts, we can see the depiction of Asha’s efforts to compromise and make herself comfortable with her feelings of failure and her desire to live as an independent life in an alien culture. The crisis arises when she happens to meet Mrinal who is her childhood friend and a successful business woman. Asha and Mahesh married traditionally and the marriage was given consent by the elders. But Mahesh joined a white lady leaving Asha aside. Asha wishes to do some work and get a job because she is the mother of one son whose name is Dinesh. Once Asha receives a call from Mrinal, her childhood friend from Mumbai, India. Mrinal is a successful business woman. Now she is planning to come for a conference in California and so she wants to meet Asha and her family who are living in the U.S. Asha feels inferior because Mrinal had insisted in the past that Asha should complete her college studies and also get a job before getting married. She shuns meeting with Mrinal giving excuses but finally agrees and decides to meet her old friend. In presence of her son, she tells lies about her relation with Mahesh which makes her son Dinesh angry. Her disappointment results from her memories of the day when Mahesh had told her that he never had happiness in her company. He had bluntly said that it was the end of their married life.

Asha is embarrassed about her meeting with Mrinal because she knows that Mrinal is an independent woman with money and freedom. She had an individual identity. Asha is very nervous because of her state of mind.

When she enters the restaurant, she faces glamorous Mrinal who requests her to share life story. She asks her about her husband. Asha starts describing false stories trying to show that she is very happy in her marital life. Asha tells lies and hides that her marital life is in danger and it has already ended. Here, something happens which Asha had not expected at all. To her shock, Mrinal starts
weeping and she reveals the real state of her own married life. Mrinal expresses her loneliness and sadness. Both women are sad and unhappy within.

While returning home, Asha decides to commit suicide. Keeping the engine of the car on, she closes the garage behind her. She is full of grief and feels helpless. She weeps for Mrinal’s status and her own sad life. She weeps out of helpless and loneliness. But suddenly, her inner feelings get U-Turn. Asha realizes that suicide is never a true answer or solution to any problem of life. Changing her mind, she turns off the engine. She vomits. At that time, her son Dinesh approaches her and shows his love and care for her. He is concerned about her. Dinesh consoles and comforts her. He asks Asha how the meeting with Mrinal was. Asha depicts the meeting and says that it was a mess. She realizes that there was no need of telling lies in front of Mrinal. So, she decides to write a letter to Mrinal and admit her truth. We can see that there is an acceptance on the part of Asha.

Themes Discussed:

Chitra has discussed mainly two themes in the story. The first and major theme is women caught between two cultures. In Meeting Mrinal, author describes the predicament of Asha. Asha has grown up in India. She had married according to the Indian tradition but later she has to accept a new life style and culture when she gets divorce from her husband. When the story begins, Asha feels the harshness of the new culture where there are failing grades, drugs, street gangs and even AIDS. She is culturally shocked but she is happy with that she is going to play the role of a tradition Indian wife and mother. This gives her a great solace. But she is unaware of the destiny that soon takes away this comfort from her. She loses this solace when Mahesh declares the end of their marriage. He gives divorce to Asha.

Asha has to face external and internal challenges after her divorce. She has got the responsibility of a son named Dinesh. She has to support herself and her son financially. She becomes an independent woman. Actually, she doesn’t fit in to this new role of independent woman. She feels that she can’t cope with the new world. She feels incompetent.

Mrinal is a contrasting personality. She lives in Mumbai and lives an independent life. She possesses everything but she feels a kind of vacuum in her life. She feels lonely inwardly. Author reveals that both traditional Indian women or the modern Western women face problems. Both find themselves sailing in the same boats. Both the choices demand sacrifice and both are incomplete. Asha and Mrinal both are sad and discontented in their lives. When they meet, none of them have
courage to admit the reality of their lives. It is because of the fear of judgment. They are afraid of being honest about their personal lives.

The second theme discussed by Chitra is filial, cultural and social expectation of women. Asha wishes to show a perfect image of her life infront of others. She tries to be a perfect wife and mother not in order to fulfil others’ wish but it shows that she is conditioned to do so because of her upbringing. From the very early age, she has been taught to think that family is more important compared to the career. She was more considerate about her family and not her career.

On the other hand, Asha lives in California where she faces totally different circumstances. Asha knows her culture and also knows how to react when necessary. She is also free like Mrinal and Mahesh but she is not comfortable. She faces a kind of discomfort and leaving the role of an ordinary Indian wife accepts the independent life. But later, both Asha and Mrinal admit that they are not able to fulfill their expectations. When they admit this, indirectly they also admit their relationships.

Character portrayal & Point of View:

Asha and Mrinal stand as contrasting figures. Both present different choices. The choice is between following the traditional path of marriage and rearing children or to stay single and pursue a successful career as Mrinal does. However both the ladies face struggle and conflicts. Both doubt their strengths. Author presents the point of view that people judge others by comparing them with their own reality. Asha and Mrinal also do the same.

Asha feels conflict in California between her Indian culture and newly experienced Western culture. She feels like a non-entity and loss of identity. On the other hand, in the new Western culture, she gets more freedom but on the other hand she has to face more challenges in the West. Meeting Mrinal, she appears to be happy and successful but Mrinal does not admit the reality which consists of unhappiness, loneliness and yearning for family.

Locale:

Chitra Divakaruni has depicted the story in the foreground of two locales- India and California. Asha was born and brought up in India. India is seen only through the memories of Asha. But now she is in California – a place with a totally different culture. Both the places are different even in social expectations. Asha being Indian has learnt to be an ideal wife and mother but the U.S.A provokes her to break to break away from those traditions. Author presents
positive as well as negative aspects of U.S. here. At the restaurant, Asha feels insecurity.

**Symbols:**

Chitra Divakaruni has used a few symbols in this story. She introduces cooking as a symbol of unity and nourishment of a family. Asha takes cooking as an investment for the flourishing of her relationship with her husband and son. But later when Mahesh leaves her, she focuses on fast food which stands for her new, independent life. Again when she is worried about the bad effect on her son, she takes cooking as a help. She tries to win her son back by cooking his favorite food.

According to Donna Seamen, the theme of this collection is the vast difference between India and Western culture. Author doesn’t offer any solutions to her heroines. The style of Chitra is quite captivating. Chitra has successfully depicted a common theme. Characters are varied but theme is the same. She explores the nature of traditional arranged marriages as well as the experience of rebellion against social traditions.

**Bibliography:**


*You cannot solve a problem with the same mind that created it.*

- Albert Einstein.