

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CROSS-CULTURAL CONCERNS IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *ARRANGED MARRIAGE***

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ABSTRACT

The paper “Marital Relationships, and Cross Cultural Concerns in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*” deals with domestic violence, gender oppression and racial prejudice and negates the negative stereotyping of Indians and the cultural practices of India. The article questions the author’s attitude towards the institution of marriage in India. The study addresses the impulses and emotions of immigrants and their affect on relationships in the diasporic space. The paper explores the ways women question the dominance of men over their lives, revolt against oppression and try to lead lives on their own terms.

Key words: Marital Relationships, Cross Cultural Concerns, Diasporic Space
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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the collection of her short stories titled *Arranged Marriage*, portrays a negative image of the Indian cultural practices while discussing marital relationships in the diasporic space. The title gives the impression that the Indian marriage system is not only weird but also barbaric. She fails to understand that gender bias is not unique to India, and it is a global problem.

Sarah Elizabeth Webb, a westerner, who works for a rural tribal school along the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in her article “Still Under Siege” comments that gendered oppression is an accepted norm in the USA. She says:
The point, really, is that the U.S. is certainly not innocent of gender oppression. Sure, the gendered norms are less strict than in the rural parts of India. But is that, perhaps, more dangerous? In India, there is political rhetoric surrounding the issue of gender

equality, and laws-made to protect the rights of women. There are often problems with the enforceability of these laws, but the rhetoric is certainly there. In America, on the other hand, most politicians turn a blind eye to the issue, reminding women to be grateful of the rights that they have been given. (Hindu, Magazine 3)

The title of Divakaruni’s book is the result of an aggressive marketing strategy. It is an attempt to carve a market segment in the western societies. Divakaruni looks back at India and its culture from the colonizer’s point of view. Husne Jahan points out, “In demonstrating her indebtedness to western feminist notions and in voicing criticism of women’s subjugation in India, Divakaruni repeatedly maligns far too many facets of Indian society and culture” (43).

Here, Edward Said’s arguments merit specific mention. Said in his work *Orientalism* argues against

the Eurocentric prejudice and romanticized images of Asia in Western Culture. He condemns the practices of some Asians who believe and promote the notions of the West about Asia. (325).

Divakaruni belongs to the class of elite Americans of Indian origin who endorses American hegemony and the westerners' biased views about Indian cultural practices. The institution of marriage in India is not just for the sake of sanctioning sex between man and woman. It is a union between two families and the members of the united family discharge their duties and social commitments based on human values. They inspire each other and strive for their growth morally, intellectually and spiritually. Keeping in view of all these aspects in the life of the couple, parents play a supportive role in the selection of the partners. A number of these aspects are not considered significant in the western marriage system, and trying to assess the institution of marriage in India on the touch stone of the western lifestyle is an act of mere ignorance.

Creative writer and critic Uma Parameswaran observes:

Chitra Divakaruni, the most recent star in the Diaspora sky, delves into the darker dreams and nightmares of womanscape and has an appreciative readership among feminists, but since her women characters are mainly Indo-American, there is a tendency to see them not as individuals so much as representative of the Diaspora, and we are back on square one perpetuation of negative stereotypes that the average north American reader has of Indian life and culture. (34)

In her attempt to make her writings more appealing to the western reader, Divakaruni has done immense damage to the image of India and its cultural practices.

The relationships in the story "Clothes" set in India and the USA, heavily depend on circumstances and unforeseen events. Divakaruni uses different types of clothes and their colours to symbolize the moods and phases in the life of the protagonist. The family tragedy tests the grit and resilience of the protagonist and the ending is character based.

Sumita passes several phases in quick succession as a young girl dreaming about her

marriage, as the wife of Somesh trying to adjust to the new relationship, and the intimate moments it demands, as the housewife in the joint family in the USA serving her in-laws, and as the widow of Somesh. Each of these phases pose new challenges to her and while facing these challenges she is tossed between the traditions of India and the opportunities the new world offers. Divakaruni raises questions about the individuality of a woman and her identity in India and the diasporic space in the role of a housewife in a joint family.

Sumita's parents arrange her marriage with Somesh, a small time businessman in the USA. After the initial adjustments, she finds that her husband is friendly, understanding and caring. Her in-laws too are affectionate to her. Though she appreciates the responsibility of Somesh towards his parents, she wants to stay with him separately. In her view, her family space is restricted to her and her husband, and her in-laws should live separately, of course, with the financial support given by Somesh. Divakaruni points out the paradox in the thoughts of Sumita. She feels that the presence of her tradition bound in-laws may prevent her from realizing her ambitions. When Somesh tells her that he cannot think of sending them to an old age home, she shows her anger. However, she takes back her demand when she thinks of her own parents. "Then I remember my own parents, Mother's hands cool on my sweat-drenched body through nights of fever, Father teaching me to read, his finger moving along the crisp black angles of the alphabet, transforming them magically into things I knew, water, dog, mango tree" (Divakaruni 26).

It is evident that her feelings towards her parents are saturated with love and gratitude. Surprisingly, in the case of her in-laws, she finds it difficult to feel the same emotional bonding and thinks that they are just Somesh's responsibility. She tries different western dresses, night gowns, skirts and jeans in the privacy of their bedroom and dreams of working in the stores helping Somesh and greeting customers.

Sumita enters a different phase of life with the murder of Somesh by robbers. Holding the white saree, she is supposed to wear, Sumita recollects her past and her aspirations and thinks of her future, back home in India, as a widow. Here, Divakaruni

draws a distinction between the traditional Indian society and the "progressive" American society.

Sumita rejects the white saree and opts for the western dress. Her act symbolizes her decision to stay put in America and realize her dreams even without the loving support of Somesh.

Divakaruni uses colours for expressing the sentiments, beliefs and emotions of the protagonist. Sumita wants to wear a blue colour saree while flying to America. She considers that blue is a colour of possibility. The colour stands for vastness. She rejects the white saree as the colour is associated with widowhood, which is also a symbol for retreating from active social life. She picks up an almond colour dress. Almonds symbolize life. Sumita's preference shows her determination to stay put on the American soil and start a new life braving the opposition from her in-laws.

The story "Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs" set in Chicago starts with Jayanti's high expectations about America and apprehensions about her aunt and uncle with whom she wants to stay while pursuing higher studies. The title of the story is derived from her childhood dream song which reflects her ambitions. "Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?" (46).

Jayanti's relationship with her aunt Pratima and uncle Bikram is limited to receiving greeting cards occasionally. Jayanti and her parents have no idea about the financial position and the professional status of Bikram. They are of the opinion that Bikram has a flourishing business in the automobile industry. The reality that Bikram is a mechanic living on a meagre income shocks Jayanti. The racial attack by the children in the neighbourhood further challenges her American dream. However, she remains optimistic about her future in America.

The circumstances in the diasporic space disappoint the protagonist Jayanti, and the author Divakaruni disappoints the Indian reader by continuing to focus on binary oppositions.

Jayanti maintains a formal relationship with her uncle Bikram and shows respect outwardly, but she has a poor opinion about him. Her opinion is influenced by the Eurocentric prejudices against the East. She internalizes the ideas and values of the

West and assesses her uncle Bikram. She considers him uncultured and someone who belongs to the lower stratum in the society. She thinks that he is unsuitable to her aunt Pratima, who has fair skin and is beautiful, where as he has dark skin and is "ugly". Pratima and Jayanti go out for a walk and become victims of the racial attack by the children in the neighbourhood. Bikram hits his wife out of rage and frustration. Jayanti's poor opinion about her uncle is further strengthened. Pratima might have felt humiliated, but she understands his inability in dealing with discrimination and forgives him, and their relationship continues.

Divakaruni uses this incident to portray the character of Bikram rude, oppressive and violent. She depicts the character of Pratima as submissive, patient and loyal. Divakaruni tries to convey the message that Indian women immigrants in America are doubly disadvantaged as they become victims of hate crimes in the streets and victims of domestic violence in the family space. She highlights the dark side of the relationship between white Americans and Indian immigrants marred by prejudice and hatred through the dialogic interaction between Bikram and Jayanti. "The Americans hate us. They're always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, kala admi. Blaming us for the damn economy, for taking away their jobs. You'll see it for yourself soon enough" (43).

All these bad experiences do not weaken Jayanti's opinion about America as the land of freedom and opportunities. She decides to say no to an arranged marriage and fantasizes the idea of marrying a university professor. It is significant to note that domestic violence has a greater negative impact on Jayanti than the hate crimes. Beena Agarwal observes, "The self-preservation and self-realisation of Divakaruni's protagonists involve the consistent flux of memories between past and present, between homeland and hostland, between glamour of the West and peace of the East" (138).

Divakaruni tells the story "The Word Love" in the second person narrative mode. In this story, she brings out the distinction between two types of human relationships- one nurtured over the years with duty, commitment, affection and sacrifice, and the other solely based on physical attraction, and confined to enjoying sex. By setting the story in the

second person narrative mode, Divakaruni tries to address all the young migrants from India to the USA. The expression "love" has different meanings. The base meaning is passion for sex, and the other meaning is deep affection, which soothes and comforts every one. This is the most cherished human relationship.

The protagonist in the story "The Word Love," a Ph. D scholar in the USA distances herself from Indian Culture, which is rooted in values. She develops a living-in-relationship with Rex who has little respect for the institution of marriage. Even the living-in-relationship is not steady. He flirts with other women.

The protagonist knows that her decision to live with a white American will deeply hurt her tradition bound mother back home in India, who brings up the protagonist with care and love after her husband's death, and who often tells her daughter that they are living for each other. The protagonist finds it hard to convey her decision to her mother and often rehearsals the words she wants to say to her mother over the phone. Rex considers her behaviour crazy and suggests that she should sever the relationship with her mother. The protagonist's thoughts reveal the gulf between Indian and American views about family ties. "What did he know, you thought, about families, about (yes) love. He'd left home the day he turned eighteen. He only called his mother on Mother's Day and, if he remembered, her birthday" (68).

The mother comes to know that her daughter has a relationship with an American, and she stops speaking to her and changes the will related to property transaction. She considers that her daughter lives in sin. She changes her telephone number and rejects all the letters written by the protagonist. The protagonist becomes desperate and even thinks of committing suicide. The feeling of guilt disturbs her. Finally, she decides that she should live for herself on her own terms and not for Rex or anyone else. She feels that she has understood the real meaning of love. She thinks that her mother's value-oriented life, her affection, and her attitude towards those who distance themselves from their roots have a positive impact on her persona. She feels redeemed and looks for a fresh beginning.

The narrative "A Perfect Life" set in San Francisco is based on a weak plot and cannot justify the fondness Meera Bose shows towards an orphan boy Krishna. Divakaruni in the early stages of the story portrays the character of Meera as a woman who prefers to stay away from children and has no plan of having a child of her own in the near future.

The title of the story raises many questions as "perfection" means different things to different people. To Meera, the protagonist in the story, perfection stands for a good living place, decent job and a handsome boyfriend who can be compared to the Hollywood heroes. One indispensable qualification is he should not be like Indian men back home in Calcutta. This is the world of Meera.

Critic Husne Jahan argues that Divakaruni promotes the neo-imperialistic status of America through the characterization of Meera.

Meera's idols are Peck, Eastwood, and Beatty of Hollywood, not Dilip Kumar or Amitab Bachchan of Indian cinema. Also, Richard's distinguishing qualities are tallness, leanness, and sophistication; and as he is described as "very different" from Indian men, the latter are voided of such qualities by implication. Indian men are, thus, culturally, ideologically, mentally, and physically diminished in comparison to their American counterparts. (49)

Meera has a steady relationship with her boyfriend Richard. Both are easy going about the man-woman relationship, and are not in a hurry about marriage and raising a family. Meera believes that her life is under her control, and is moving as per her meticulous planning, and is perfect. Many women in the Indian diasporic community consider that Meera's lifestyle is strange even by American standards.

Suddenly Meera's life takes a bizarre turn when a seven year old boy of an unknown ethnicity turns up near the staircase outside her apartment. Meera lets him in contrary to her expressed attitude towards children. Divakaruni fails to explain the reasons for the dichotomy. The story becomes melodramatic. Meera flouts the laws and keeps the boy secretly in her house. For the sake of the boy, whom she calls Krishna, she is ready to jeopardize her relationship with her "ideal" boyfriend Richard and risks even prosecution. She tries to adopt him legally, and as per rules Krishna is sent to stay for at

least a week with a certified foster mother. From there Krishnas disappears, and can never be traced.

Krishna's disappearance affects Meera a lot. She keeps on searching for him and even dreams of his reappearance outside her apartment. Though Meera's brief relationship with Krishna leaves a scar in her psyche and makes her life less perfect, she recovers from the loss, and continues her relationship with Richard, and gets her mother's consent to marry him.

The sentimental and illogical behaviour of Meera hurts Krishna more than anyone else. She instils hope in him and creates a situation, the complexity of which is beyond his comprehension, and leaves the impression in the young mind that she does not love him any longer. He looks terrified when she first finds him outside her apartment. A relationship develops between them in a few days, and he starts trusting her. However he feels betrayed when he is sent to someone else's house, and never comes back to her. This is a misadventure on her part.

In the narrative "Disappearance" all the characters remain nameless. The story speaks about the collective pain of all those women subjugated to male dominance and are denied space. The protagonist in this story fails to spot the silent rebellion in his wife. The pain she feels surpasses even her attachment to her two and a half year old son. Her disappearance is not the result of an impulse decision. She plans it carefully, picks up her jewellery and then deserts her husband and son.

The relationship between the wife and husband lacks affection and mutual respect. She has no identity of her own. She is forced to lead her life as per the terms dictated by him. Yearning for independence, fulfilment and identity, she distances herself from her husband psychologically. Shalini Gupta explains, "In a veiled manner Divakaruni asserts that in arranged marriages, attempts to schedule and expression of female sexuality to coincide with institutional structures of marriage renders impossible an articulation of women's desires" (153-154).

At the opportune moment, the protagonist frees herself from her husband's control. Divakaruni throws light on the kind of relationship he has with his wife through his self-introspection. "Once in a

while, of course, he had to put his foot down, like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes. But he always softened his no's with a remark like, What for, I'm here to take care of you, or, You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more feminine" (Divakaruni 172).

Even before marriage, he has firm ideas about the kind of girl, he should marry. He asks his mother to search for a bride who does not mind and even like to leave all crucial decisions to her husband. He is of the opinion that girls from good Indian families do not entertain ideas like freedom and identity and remain submissive. Sex is another area where he does not care to give any importance to her feelings. "She was always saying, Please, not tonight, I don't feel up to it. He didn't mind that" (172).

He is of the opinion that he has every right to enjoy sex, and it is her duty to offer her body without any protest. Shalini Gupta in her critical analysis says, "The writer has sensitively portrayed the extent of the woman's oppression within the marriage in which the wife is not allowed to pursue her financial independence, rather she is subject to marital rape" (153).

He comes to know that she is not the victim of any crime, and her disappearance is the result of her planned and deliberate attempt to move away from him. He feels the pangs of shame and harbours bitter feelings towards her. He gets some solace and pleasure by imagining that she might have been killed by her lover. He destroys her photos and tries to erase her memories.

This is the most impressive part of the story. Divakaruni touches the depths of the human psyche. The narrator transcends time and space and peeps into the future life of the protagonist, which is beyond the character's comprehension and imagination. The narrator and the reader share this knowledge at the cost of the character. They look at his futile attempts in erasing the memories of his first wife whose whereabouts remain an enigma to him. Divakaruni employs external prolepsis through the narrator's account. "He didn't know then that it wasn't finished. That even as he made love to his new wife (a plump, cheerful girl, good hearted, if slightly unimaginative), or helped his daughters with

their homework, or disciplined his increasingly rebellious son, he would wonder about her. Was she alive? Was she happy?" (180).

The narrative "Doors" is a misfit in the collection of stories titled *Arranged Marriage* as the marriage between Preeti and Deepak is not fixed by the elders of their families. It is their choice, and Preeti's mother and Deepak's friends oppose it.

In this story, Divakaruni focuses on the conflicting lifestyles between new and old immigrants. Preeti, now a Ph.D scholar migrates to the USA at the age of 12 along with her parents. When she wants to marry Deepak, a recent immigrant, Preeti's mother discourages her daughter. Through the dialogic interaction between the mother and daughter, Divakaruni portrays the Indian men, as undesirable husbands. Preeti's mother makes a derogatory remark about Indian men. She considers them uncivilized with "a set of prehistoric values" (184).

Divakaruni uses the house warming party to describe the men from the "old country" India as "terribly chauvinistic" (187).

The story is another attempt to attack the relationships between men and women in the family space in India and the Indian diasporic community. Preeti continues working on her Ph.D thesis, and Deepak joins a computer firm, and they are steady in their relationship for three years. Their American friends and their neighbours and those from the Indian diasporic community opine that they are made for each other and a perfect couple. However, one difference between Preeti and Deepak escapes their notice. Privacy is an essential aspect in her life, and she does not tolerate if anyone tries to violate her private space like most of the Americans. She works behind closed doors. Deepak finds it difficult to understand her attitude. He comes from an extended family in India, where all the rooms are thrown open for everyone. He considers the door shutting business weird, but he does not want to trouble her and accepts her needs. "And he was more than ready to accept the unique needs of this exotic creature-Indian and yet not Indian- who had by some mysterious fortune become his wife" (189).

The arrival of Raj, a close relative of Deepak disturbs the peaceful coexistence of the couple. Raj wants to stay with them while pursuing his master's

degree in the USA. He is not sensitive enough to understand the preferences and needs of Preeti, and moves freely in the house, violating her private space. He treats her as his sister-in-law, and considers himself a member of the family. He is just a guest to Preeti and is supposed to observe the norms befitting to a guest.

Deepak gets on well with Raj. Together they watch their favourite Hindi movies and eat Indian cuisine. Raj's presence brings back to Deepak those childhood memories. He thinks Raj's behaviour is friendly and affectionate where as Preeti considers his presence a nuisance, and she finds it difficult to concentrate on her research work. Her advisor says that her thesis is below par and asks her to reconstruct the argument. Preeti decides to move away from home and stay with her friend Cathy at least for a semester, leaving the house to Deepak and Raj. She reaches home disturbed and Raj, who fails to understand the concept of privacy in the family space, intrudes into her room further irritating her. "A voice pierced the haze, screaming at him *to get out, get out right now*. A hand snatched the bottle and hurled it against the wall where it shattered and fell in emerald fragments" (200).

Raj moves out of the house, but a barrier is created between Deepak and Preeti and the relationship remains strained. Preeti thinks of apologizing to Deepak and allow Raj to stay with them, but she fails to open up in her emotionally battered state.

The "door," is not just a physical barrier. It symbolizes the psychological barrier between people of different cultures. When they fail to understand each other's needs, preferences, interests and attitudes they cannot maintain positive relationships.

The story "Ultrasound" told in the first person narrative voice is set in the USA and India. It focuses on the gender bias prevalent in some families in India, and its influence on relationships. Divakaruni compares the lives of Women in America with those in India, and enforces the idea that escaping to America is the most effective solution for Indian women who wish to free themselves from bias and oppression.

In the story "Ultrasound" Arundhati and Anjali are cousins and are of the same age. Arundhati marries Ramesh and settles down in India and Anjali marries Sunil and moves to America. Arundhati and Anjali maintain good relations and are in touch with each other through letters and phone calls.

Anjali enjoys constant support from her husband. He encourages her to pursue higher studies and helps her with the household chores. Sunil is not just a husband to Anjali; he is a good friend too. Her cousin Arundhati, a housewife in a traditional joint family in India is deprived of the freedom Anjali enjoys. She is confined to the household activities and is often the victim of the wrath of her mother-in-law and brothers-in-law.

Anjali compares her position to that of Arundhati and feels that she is fortunate. They both become pregnant at the same time. The scanning reports say that Anjali will have a baby boy and Arundhati will have a baby girl. When her mother-in-law insists her to abort the foetus as a baby girl is unwanted, Arundhati escapes from her home and contacts Anjali. She tries to help her out. She even thinks of asking Sunil to sponsor Arundhati's trip to the USA. She is of the opinion that the USA is a safer place for Arundhati compared to India. The story ends here leaving the outcome to the imagination of the readers.

Divakaruni asserts that patriarchal Indian society often victimizes the women and girl children, where as in America they get fair treatment, and they can enjoy their rights.

The narrative "Affair" set in the USA reinforces the negative image about the arranged marriage system by focusing on the strained relationships between Abha and Ashok, and Meena and Srikant.

Abha and Ashok, during their eight years married life, do not find anything common between them. They view life from different angles. Ashok yearns for the American way of living and Abha prefers the traditional life style of Indian women. The conversations between them on most of the occasions are punched with sarcasm. He makes use of every opportunity to hurt her feelings. He watches MTV when she is around as he knows that she dislikes that channel. "I averted my eyes from

the slow undulation of her hips, the pointy-red tip of her tongue moistening her lips. Her painted fingernails moving suggestively over her breasts. I knew Ashok was watching me, a mocking curl to his lips that seemed to say, *Still suffering from your prudish Indian upbringing, Abha?*" (234).

Abha spends her time doing household chores and writing a recipe every week for The Indian Courier. Abha ignores her close friend Meena's suggestions about attire, gait and beauty tips. She does not pay attention to the hints given by Ashok regarding body care and appearance, and the distance between them further widens as they hold fast to their varied lifestyles.

Abha often compares herself with her close friend Meena who does not hesitate to wear western dress including bikinis. Meena even tries a backless blouse while wearing a saree, and dance with men in parties thrown by Indian diasporic community. Meena too is not happy as her husband Srikant is traditional and quiet like Abha. There is more in common between Meena and Ashok than between Meena and Srikant. Meena's American habit of kissing men on their cheeks in public is considered to be outrageous in the Indian diasporic community. Srikant compares himself to a penguin, and his wife Meena to a falcon, a mismatch and their marriage is on the edge.

Divakaruni points out in the story that in India, parents bother more about matching the horoscopes of prospective brides and grooms and pay very little attention towards matching the personality traits of the brides and grooms.

When Ashok discloses that Meena has an affair, Abha feels betrayed. The fact that her best friend Meena keeps her affair a secret from her hurts Abha. She suspects that Meena has an affair with Ashok. She feels that both her husband and her best friend are not faithful to her. Meena discloses that she has an affair with Charles, an American who works in her office. She says that he is not at all handsome but understands her more than Srikant.

Surprisingly Meena who enjoys the western lifestyle considers Abha an ideal woman, and even looks for her approval for her decisions. Abha who is not at ease with the American social norms yearns to emulate Meena. In the inmost recesses of their hearts, there is an inclination for adapting

themselves to totally different cultural and social norms, but it is suppressed and does not manifest in their daily lives. However, Meena's decision to give divorce to Srikant has a cathartic affect on Abha. She introspects and feels that her married life with Ashok lacks charm and is empty. She writes a note to Ashok conveying her decision to pull herself out of the relationship. The first man that comes to her mind with whom she can share her future life is Srikant, but she stops thinking about him as she feels that she can contemplate on such ideas sometime later. Shalini Gupta writes, "The relationship between Abha and Meena in *Affair*, builds the space of intervention that enables both women to extricate themselves from meaningless relationships and re-write their strategies of survival" (153).

Through the story "Affair," Divakaruni stresses that unless women break the chains of tradition and become "progressive" by adapting the western social norms they can never be emancipated.

In the narrative "Meeting Mrinal" Asha and Mrinalini are childhood friends, and treat each other as a competitor. However, they maintain friendly relations. Both of them strive for achieving perfection in life though they nurture diametrically opposite views about perfection. Asha thinks that Mrinalini is more successful by realizing some of her ambitions and career goals. Mrinalini is of the opinion that Asha is leading a happy and fulfilled life in the company of her affectionate husband and an ideal son.

Asha learns the hard way that worldly life cannot be perfect, and aiming at perfection in life is akin to running after a mirage. She writes to Mrinalini and shares her experiences. This may finally help Mrinalini too to come out of the void she feels in her life as an unmarried working woman.

Divakaruni focuses on the fate of women whose lives are at the mercy of the whims and fancies of their husbands. Asha's husband Mahesh falls in love with Jessica, his secretary and gives divorce to his wife. Asha suffers from the trauma of separation and the social stigma too. "Behind the pity would be a flicker of gratitude that it hadn't happened to *them*, or a gleam of suspicion because

now I was unattached and therefore dangerous (277).

Her relationship with her teenage son Dinesh too is not going well. He too is affected by the sudden separation from his father. The interactions between Dinesh and Asha are limited to bare necessities these days. When he is at home Dinesh spends most of his time behind closed doors listening to the western music.

The phone call from Mrinalini further strains the relationship between Asha and Dinesh. Desperate to project to her childhood friend and competitor that she is leading a happy and perfect life, Asha lies to Mrinalini that her husband and son are busy. Asha is too embarrassed to admit to her friend that her husband has deserted her. She wants to avoid inviting Mrinalini to her house during her stay in the USA.

Her lie irks Dinesh. "Why couldn't you just tell her the fucking truth- that he got tired of you and left you for another woman" (283). Deeply hurt by his comment, Asha slaps him. The gap between them further widens.

Asha visits Mrinalini at Hyatt in San Francisco. This is their first meeting after twenty years. Unlike Asha, Mrinalini is frank and admits that her financial independence and career success do not confer happiness in her life. "I was going to pretend everything was fine," she said. 'I wanted you to admire me, envy me. That old competition thing. But when I heard of you talking about your husband and your son'- her voice faltered on the word- "when I saw the love shining in your face, I couldn't keep it up." (295)

Mrinalini's candid talk makes Asha further embarrassed as her real life is quite different from the one projected by her. The farewell words of Mrinalini, "Take good care of those two wonderful guys that God has given you," (295) have a telling effect on Asha. She loses interest in life and even tries to commit suicide in the garage. However, she gathers strength to overcome those suicidal tendencies and gets out of the garage. Her son Dinesh finds something odd in her behaviour. He helps her into the house and hugs her. He regrets his rude behaviour.

Asha learns, despite all the imperfections, human life is precious. She feels that the lesson she

has learnt is valuable. She wants to share her experience with her childhood friend Mrinalini, and help her out in enjoying life, despite all its flaws. Divakaruni compares human life with the work of a famous potter who deliberately leaves a flaw in his works. That flaw symbolizes his signature, and his signature makes it precious.

The concept is highly significant from the spiritual point of view too. Sri Aurobindo says: Pain and grief are nature's reminder to the soul that the pleasure it enjoys is only a feeble hint of the real delight of existence. In each pain and torture of our being is the secret of a flame of rapture compared with which our greatest pleasures are only as dim flickering. It is this secret which forms the attraction for the soul of great ordeals, sufferings and fierce experiences of life which the nervous mind in us shuns and abhors. (33-34)

Despite the drawback of maligning the cultural practices of India, the short stories of Divakaruni touch the mind and soul of the reader by exploring the facets of gendered issues and marital relationships in the diasporic space. These stories are a powerful portrayal of the heartthrobs of women caught in crossroads.

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