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Research Article

TRANS-CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

Arranged Marriage, all stories deal with the trans-cultural conflicts which the Indian characters suffer in America. Majority of the characters are new settlers in the alien land, and at the beginning of their life in America, they find it extremely difficult to adapt to the American way of life, American culture, conjugal life, and personal morals. In fact, it is a cultural shock to them but slowly they understand the realities of life and it becomes a question of survival for them. Women suffer more than men, and as dependents on men, especially husbands, they adjust themselves to the new environment even accepting the husband's extramarital sexual relationship. Even in the midst of suffering and pain, they develop a positive attitude to life, lest they should end up in conjugal bankruptcy. Most of the female protagonists in the stories discussed in this chapter are compelled to develop a positive attitude to life, and they surmount trans-cultural conflicts in the alien land. It is a diasporic dilemma and a discussion of the problem in the ensuing pages affirms the researcher's contention.

Arranged Marriage story deal with the life of Indian immigrants in America, especially women immigrants. As a woman writer, Chitra focuses on the problems of Indian women rather migrated from India or born of Indian parents living in America. In India, women are said to be the custodians of traditions, culture, morals, religion, and family life, and when they are placed in an alien land, they find their life and culture in jeopardy. As orthodox Indian women, they are unable to adapt themselves to the American culture, which they think has no value. Free society, sexual freedom, cohabitation, neglect of parents and elders are unheard of in India, and when an Indian immigrant woman makes an encounter with such factors in America, she is shaken mentally and trans-cultural conflict crops up in her leaving her in a quandary. Some woman refuse to adapt and they suffer, and return to India, while others accept their destiny, and continue to live there.

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INTRODUCTION

Arranged Marriage explores the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through feminist perspectives, a theme that continues to inform her work (116), says SomdattaMandal, and the short fiction focuses on the female protagonist, Sumita's cultural conflicts in an alien land, America. Sumita's problem is not a personal one, rather it is universal. Every girl, every woman suffers irrespective of nationality, colour, cast and creed, and Chitra, in this regard says, "Some just write about different things, but my approach is to tackle these sensitive topics. I hope people who read my book will not think of the characters as Indians, but feel for them as people," as quoted by SomdattaMandal (116). Sumita suffers pain not certainly inflicted on her by her husband, but what the cruel clutches of destiny cause her. She however emerges unscathed because of her resolute mind. Sumita's American dream blooms in India when her father fixes SomeshSen as her groom. Through

joyous of her prospects in the marriage market, she is fearful of being separated from her parents, as well as of her new life in America with an unknown man who would be her husband. Sumitacrise within, "Don't sent me so far away" (18), but she cannot make a verbal expression of her problem, and for sure, she has a reason like every Indian girl. It is a problem of culture. It is Indian culture that the parents should search for suitable brides and grooms for their sons and daughters because in India, unlike in the West, *Arranged Marriage* is a common practice and children accept their parents' choice of life partners. Love marriage, in the sense, love born out of fascination, attraction and sexuality, is a rarity, not a part of Indian culture. Sumita accepts her parents' choice of a groom for her-Somesh Sen.

Sumita's conjugal life as an immigrant wife commences in America, and the cultural conflict crops up for her right from day one. Her husband runs a store called "7 – Eleven" where

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sundries are sold including hot beverages, and when Somesh recounts the commodities for sale, Sumita shows her aversion, for she cannot think of her husband dealing in liquors. It is a cultural conflict in Sumita, for hot beverages are a taboo in India, and consumption of them is considered a vice, if not a great sin. "7 – Eleven" is the source of their livelihood, SomeshSenContents, and he cannot desist from selling alcoholic drinks. Sumita adapts herself to the American way of life, which helps her adaptation in her conjugal life also. Somesh convinces her: "A lot of Americans drink, you know. It is here (India). And really, there is nothing wrong with it" (21). Sumita makes a positive resolve of her cultural conflict. Even before boarding the plane for America, Sumita foresees the trans-cultural conflict, and mentally, she prepares herself for it. Man and woman kissing in public places in the west including America is not unlawful, and is considered a gesture of exhibiting love and affection, but in India, it is uncivil and indecent, for such a physical proximity is possible only within the limits of four walls of the bed-room, and that too in complete privacy, but as an Indian immigrant's wife Sumita prepares herself to be an American without losing Indian concept of virtuosity. It is a trans-cultural conflict, and the writer shows how Sumita resolves: "We will kiss in front of everyone, not caring, like Americans, then pull back, look each other in the eye and smile" (23). No doubt, the author's portrayal of the cultural problem has a touch of authenticity.

In every sense, Sumita tries to adapt herself to the American style of life, and at the same time, she remains Indian to the core. When she flies to America, she carries with the Indian, Kanjeeपुरam (a town in South India renowned for silk saris) silk saris. Saris, jewels and idols of deities are part of Indian culture and every woman treats such personal belongings as memorabilia of great value, and Sumita too has such sentiments. "Thick kanjeeपुरam silks in solid purples and golden yellows... green as a young banana plant, gray as the women's lake on a monsoon morning"(24). When such an orthodox Sumita lands in America, she is astounded to see white American buxom girls. It gives rise to trans-cultural conflict in her and she resolves it positively. She changes herself to the American way of life, and her metamorphosis commences with her donning American dress which she starts liking:

I'm wearing a pair of jeans now, marveling at the curves of my hips and thighs, which have always been hidden under the flowing lines of my saris. I love the color, the same pale blue as the *nayantara* flowers that grow in my parents' garden. The solid comforting weight. The jeans come with a close-fitting T-shirt which outlines my breasts. (25)

An exposure to "the curves" of her "hips and thighs" is an unheard of, unseen and titillating experience to Sumita, and she relishes it, for her husband likes to see her in American robes. The Indian wife never allows for laxity in her dress code which is always strict in the Indian soil, but Sumita lives in America, and therefore, she changes herself for her good only, lest her husband should feel displeased, in addition to her being looked down upon as if she were a strange creature by white Americans. Culture is dynamic, and Sumita adapts herself without making any compromise on virtuosity and personal morals. In fact, it is not a conflict at all, for Sumita readily accepts it for her good.

In the changing social scenario, even in India, women take up jobs which, as a part of Indian culture, were prohibited in the past; An Indian woman should confine herself to the domestic chores, only. Adopting modernity, Sumita in America decides to work, and Somesh advises her to qualify herself first, and become a teacher about which Sumita has her misgiving. She observes: "But first he wants me to start college. Get a degree, perhaps in teaching.... "Do you really think I can?" I ask. 'Of course,' he replies" (27). Even though it is not her wish that she should become a teacher, Sumita accepts her husband's proposition. An Indian woman has to confine to the domestic chores, but in an alien land, unlike in India, she cannot sit idle throughout the day, and Sumita breaks the cultural barriers deciding to go ahead with her plans. The adaptation of Sumita helps her greatly in making a right decision when the occasion crops up.

It is the greatest misfortune for Sumita who turns a widow in America within a short spell after her marriage, and Somesh is killed during a robbery attempt in his shop: "Someone came into the store last night. He took all the money, even the little rolls of pennies. Before he left and emptied the bullets from his gun into my husband's chest" (30). Sumita is stranded in the emptiness of immigrant life, and now she is a young widow who is in a quandary. It is not only a personal shock but a cultural affliction to Sumita because a widow is ominous, a harbinger of the evils of life. Unlike orthodox Indian parents, Somesh's parents do not contend that the ill-luck of Sumita has brought about Somesh's death. In the absence of Somesh, nothing remains for them in the alien soil, and they decide to return to India planning to take Sumita along with them, for to them Sumita is more a daughter than a daughter-in-law. Sumita wages a war of conflict within as to whether she should go back to India or continue to live as an immigrant in America. It is a trans-cultural conflict because as Indian girl setting alone abroad has its impediments. As a widow, she will not have a status in India, but at the same time, life in America, a "dangerous land", has its hazards for her, for she has to live alone. She finds that she is a nowhere woman. But she makes a resolve that, and her chances of suffering widowhood there are less than it is in India, and it is this kind of thinking of Sumita which makes her take such a decision:

I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves are with cut-off wings. (33)

Widowhood has its ordeals, and Sumita prefers lesser ordeals in America. A widow in India should don a white sari only, a symbol of her widowhood, a symbol of aridity of life. Sumita thinks that she will not be despised in America for being a widow, and she need not wear even a white sari. She would wear "a blouse and skirt the colour of almonds" (33) unlike widows in India. Whiteness inflicts trauma and pangs on her, and coloured clothes relieve her from the trammels of widowhood. It is a question of trans-cultural conflict, for it involves the cultures of two nations, and Sumita resolves positively, and she could foresee that life will not be bleak. Sumita has by now grown; rather she has escaped from the Indian sentiments. She would prefer the free life in America

with all its risks which is better than the life of a widow in India. Sumita overcomes the trans-cultural conflicts in her life.

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