

**Cultural Conflict in Divakaruni's Select Short Stories:  
*Silver Pavements, Golden Roof***

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**Chitra Divakaruni**

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**Abstract**

Expatriate writing is born out of the clash between displacement and relocation, belonging and alienation; it also implies cultural travel from nostalgic reminiscences of home, their original culture to the anchoring in the new world, their adopted culture. It is the diasporic writers, who are concerned by the need to re-establish their roots, straddling between the psychological and physical borders of two cultures. This paper discusses the cultural conflicts portrayed in Divakaruni's select stories, especially with reference to *Silver Pavements* and *Golden Roof*. Disillusion felt by the migrants are detailed. Confronting people from other cultures is a special feature in these stories. Spiritual and psychological conflicts are discussed.

**Key words:** Divakaruni, short stories, cultural conflicts, spiritual and psychological elements

### **The Birth of Expatriate Writing and Dimensions of Expatriate Writing**

Expatriate writing is born out of the clash between displacement and relocation, belonging and alienation; it also implies cultural travel from nostalgic reminiscences of home, their original culture to the anchoring in the new world, their adopted culture. It is the diasporic writers, who are concerned by the need to re-establish their roots, straddling between the psychological and physical borders of two cultures. Traditions and cultures are exchanged and their effort to locate and assimilate in a new culture suffused in bouts of nostalgia for their native country. It is in this vein that Divakaruni, a second generation expatriate writer, has very powerfully described the diasporic experiences of immigrants.

### **Disillusionment, Exile and Surprising New Desires**

Divakaruni approaches the themes of disillusionment and exile in innovative ways. She projects varied themes in her stories like inter-racial marriages, home and family, ethnicity, identity and sexuality through which she articulates a perspective of women's experience of exile in particular and women's alienation in general. She brings her ideas into the stories, which make us feel about the character, and the reality with which she interweaves the stories is really appreciable. The characters are very close to reality and we find a balance between old treasured beliefs and surprising new desires. The protagonists in Divakaruni's stories lead an imperfect life which shows how women struggle hard for their personal identity.

### **Indianness**

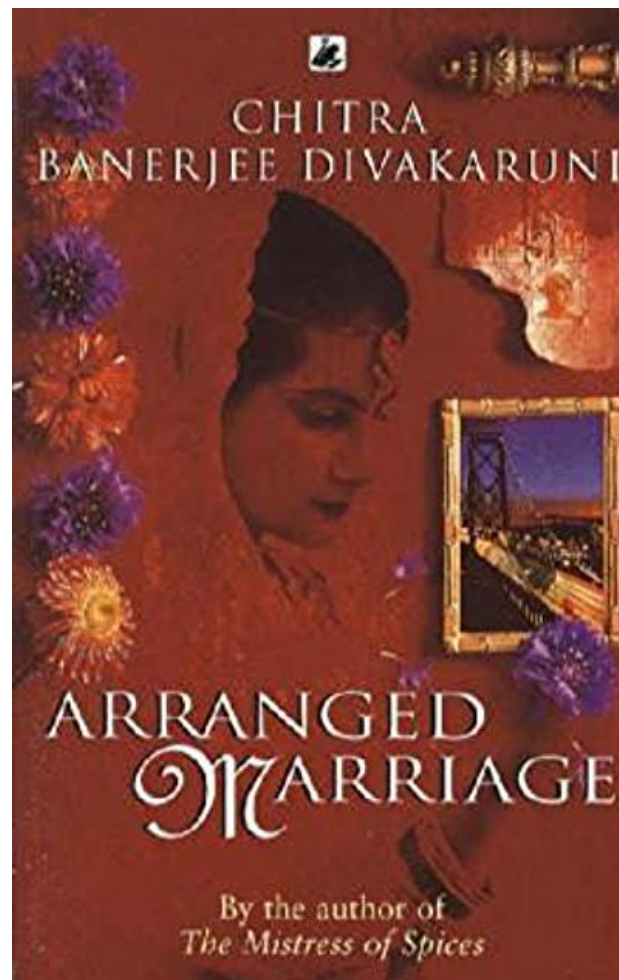
There is a remarkable significance of the cultural conflict in most of Divakaruni's short stories. The Indianness in her stories is stunning. She gives prominence to her native

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culture in which she is born and brought up. For several years she is interested in issues involving women and works with Afghani women refugees as well as in shelters for battered women. She says that, while she is working at Berkeley, she becomes aware of women's issues and the need for her to do something for them. In 1991 she becomes founder-member and president of Maitri, an organization in the San Francisco area that works for South Asian women in abusive situations. She also associated herself with Asians against Domestic Abuse, an organization in Houston. Her interest in these women arouses, when she realizes that there is no mainstream shelter for immigrant women in distress, a place where people will understand their cultural needs and problems in the United States.



### *Arranged Marriage*

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*Arranged Marriage* is a collection of eleven short stories which deals with conflicts arising out of love. The changing times affect the cherished Indian institution of arranged marriage is the theme of the eleven stories of *Arranged Marriage*. Most of the stories are about Indian immigrants to the United States from the author's native region of Bengal and are told by female narrators in the first person singular point of view, often in the present tense, which imparts to the stories a sense of intimacy. They capture the experience of recent immigrants, mostly from professional classes, such as electronic engineers and business people, but also a few from the working class.

### ***Silver Pavements, Golden Roof***

In the story entitled, *Silver Pavements, Golden Roof*, one can explore the psychological conflicts struggling in the minds of her protagonists, as they venture in to the western way of life and culture. The protagonists of her novel struggle between the irony of past memory and new situation. Her characters struggle between these two diverse worlds, and crave to assimilate these two extremes for a new future. They are so entangled in their root and origin that every step they take in their new found land is approached with a half-hearted will. The protagonists linger in their past life with nostalgia, amidst the claims of an exotic and coveted culture, gradually sucking up and consuming them completely. Somewhere in the deepest terrain of their memories, they can feel the scars of those long forgotten memories and make them conscious that they still persist. These memories of the past make the characters hesitant to move away freely with their newfound life in America.

### **Focused More on the Complexity of America**

The story *Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs*, is perhaps one rare example in which the author makes an attempt to look at the complexity of America rather than presenting a simplified and glorified land of freedom and fulfilled dreams. In the story, a young Indian girl

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comes to the U.S.A. as a college student with many dreams, which are complicated by her encounter with her immigrant aunt's unsophisticated husband (both of Indian origin) and the racist slurs of the neighbourhood boys. Although the protagonist Jayanti Ganguli appears to stand up for a postcolonial way of thinking in response to her encounter with racism, her thoughts and words are imbued with colonialist binaries. She carries within her prejudices that make her judge people according to hierarchies of caste, color and class. She and her aunt Pratima come from an upper-class, upper-caste Bengali family and both are described as fair-skinned; while her uncle Baikram, who is drawn as an unsavoury character, is described as dark-skinned and lower class. He is also ugly, rude, uncultured and rough yet vulnerable.

### **Narrator's Perspective of Characters**

The uncle is seen from the perspective of Jayanti, the narrator of the story and Jayanti's perspective of her uncle is inscribed with European colonialist notions of equating dark skin-color with a lower breed of humans characterized by traits of brutality, vulnerability and a lack of sophistication. In contrast, the white professor Jayanti fantasizes about is drawn as the uncle's polar opposite; he is handsome, refined and romantic. He is the one Jayanti imagines as a husband, the man with whom she will fall in love when she breaks away from the Indian tradition of arranged marriages as she declares, "No arranged marriage like Aunt's for me" (45). When she reaches the apartment, she is disappointed because the house is too small and dirty. She says, "Not at all what an American home should be like" (40). Later, she learns from her aunt that her uncle is not the owner of an automobile empire but only a mechanic. She describes about the apartment as:

This apartment smells of stale curry. It is crowded with faded, overstuffed sofas and rickety end tables that look like they've come from a larger place...

My monogrammed leather cases are an embarrassment in this household. I

push them under the bed in the tiny room I am to occupy – it is the same sizes as my bathroom at home. I remember that cool green mosaic floor, the claw-footed marble bathtub from colonial days, the large window that looks out on my mother’s crimson and gold dahlias, and want to cry. (40-41)

### **Exploration of Two Different Worlds**

Divakaruni explores India and America as two different worlds epitomizing two different cultures and for the immigrant Indians, new life in America is like being thrown into the sea even before learning how to swim. It is really a new and a very different setting. For the immigrant Indians, it is a mixed experience too, at one time it acts as a boon that shatters the inhibitions and taboos, with which they have long been associated, and at other time they experience the void and nothingness of a superficial culture. This is typical to all the immigrant Indians where freedom does not come without a price. It places all the protagonists on the same plane with Sita in the *Ramyana*, who becomes more vulnerable after crossing the *Lakshman Rekha*.

### **Expectations and Unknown Realms**

The expectation of a different culture and the pull towards the unknown realm is altogether a new experience, and this aspect is well substantiated when we come across these lines where the protagonist craves to assimilate in her speech certain English words as a sign of westernization. “Sorry,” I say, “So very very sorry,” like the nuns had taught me to in those old, high-ceilinged classrooms cooled by the breeze from the convent neem trees” (35). The young girl Jayanthi fancies in her dreams, “Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?” (56). She spends most of her time in America thinking about her native home. She is unable to concentrate on her studies due to the perplexed situation at aunt’s home. She feels that, “the walls are closing in on me.

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My brain is dying. Soon I will turn into one of those mournful eyed cows in the painting behind the sofa” (47). So, she persuades her aunt Pratima to go for a walk with her. While going for a walk, her aunt Pratima narrates about her childhood memories in India. She tells, “In the village before marriage I was always walking everywhere-it was so nice, the fresh air, the sky, the ponds with lotus flowers... Of course, here we cannot be expecting such country things...” (47). Unfortunately some boys follow them and throw slush on their face. So in Jayanti’s experience, racism is not an issue of exploitative policies and power struggles, but only a street prank of young boys in a poor neighbourhood. She says:

I don’t see which boy first picks up the fistful of slush, but now they’re all throwing it at us. It splatters on our coats and runs down our saris, leaving long streaks. I take a step toward the boys. I’m not sure what I’ll do when I get to them- shake them? explain the mistake they’ve made? Smash their faces into the pavement?- but Aunt holds tight to my arm. (51)

### **Racial Conflicts and Violence**

When they escape from the boys and reach home, uncle is angry that they have gone for a walk and has been victimized by the white children. As a figure of male authority, he is angry that they went out without his permission. He scolds her, “Haven’t I told you not to walk around this trashy neighbourhood? Haven’t I told you it wasn’t safe? Don’t you remember what happened to my shop last year, how they smashed everything?” (53). This story depicts the life of an Indian man who comes to America dreaming of becoming a millionaire. But he ends up as a garage mechanic, a victim of discrimination, he believes. The women are afraid of their fathers or husbands and are afraid to leave their homes in protest because they fear a scandal in society. Pratima Auntie tolerates her husband’s abuses and frustration patiently, without protest. She is the victim of his anger. “When the back of



his hand catches Aunt Pratima across the mouth, I flinch as if his knuckles had made that thwacking bone sound against my own flesh. My mouth fills with an ominous salt taste” (53). But later, he tries to convince her wife Pratima by saying, “I tried so hard, Pratima. I wanted to give you so many things- but even your jewelry is gone... This damn country, like a dain, a witch- it pretends to give and then snatches everything back” (54).

### **Struggle for Assimilation**

In Divakruni’s writings, we see the struggle of the protagonists as they progress to assimilate their past and their new found situation, and feel the unfulfilled longings of the characters who, finding themselves stranded in the middle of nowhere, desperately try for a way out and suffer in the process. Her uncle tells her, “Things here aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we’d become millionaires. But it’s not so easy” (43). This dilemma is the core of Divakruni’s writings. “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).

### **Hollowness of Superiority**

The domination of a superior culture or race hindering the local culture, hypnotizing us with their outward superficiality, whose theme ultimately is hollow and void, is quite obvious as we explore her writings. Her protagonists struggle to find solace, assimilating the two worlds, her past and the present, but the conflict that arose makes the protagonists, at times, schizophrenic and disillusioned. This phenomenon gulps down the minds of the protagonists in their aspiration to achieve something in life. “But here my imagination, conditioned by a lifetime of maternal censorship, shuts itself down” (45). The hungry yearning for “homehomehome” (55). When disillusioned by the stark reality of the American



culture, makes evident the realization of a lost essence of the past. Then the ultimate realization that, “the beauty and pain should be part of each other” (56).

The snow becomes an anesthetizing agent, a symbol of the kind of erasure that Jayanti is about to embrace in order to survive in America. She tells, “I notice that the snow has covered my own hands so they are no longer brown but white, white, white” (56). However, in this story, the author does not simplify Jayanti’s entire experiences as much as she does with the characters of the other stories, many of which unabashedly simply the opposition between the Indian and the American ways of life in terms of oppressed and backward versus free and full of promise.

## **Conclusion**

Divakaruni’s stories deal mainly with the clash of a primitive way of life with the western ideals of high culture. Her protagonists, mainly immigrant Indians, dream of walking past their lived experiences and practices to experience exotic land, and explore unknown realms. For the immigrant Indians, the past and its associated traditions have their own beauty and assurance, in spite of their limitations. This realization, which comes with the experience of freedom, makes one sympathetic towards one’s own prejudices against one’s own culture and tradition. This awareness gives the protagonists of Divakaruni’s stories, a sense of new judgement and understanding of their own culture and traditions. Culture changes according to the demands and needs of the protagonists, but to detach old memories and old past from their psyche, as they move further away to suit expectations of the present and future, becomes a conflicting task. Other than the problems of immigrant Indians in American society, she also presents very vividly the dilemmas of Indian women in traditional society. Her women characters represent the sentiments of women within traditional bounds and outside traditional bounds.

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