



BETWEEN WORLDS INHERITED AND CHOSEN: RECLAIMING SELFHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant writers occupy dual spaces marked by conflicting loyalties, and their fiction often dramatizes the effort to reconcile "routes" with "roots". Beyond articulating the vagaries of ethnic existence, such writers foreground gendered experience, revealing how representations of women in South Asian fiction have shifted over the last three or four decades. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a collection of short stories, portrays the abuse and courage of immigrant women who are gradually liberated by cultural change even as they struggle to forge independent identities, while also engaging questions of racism, gender, abortion, and divorce. This paper examines the stories "Affair" and "Doors", tracing how, against a backdrop of cultural collision, they explore universal dilemmas of love, marriage, sexuality, and relational insecurity. While remaining partly reverent toward their ethnic heritage, the younger immigrant protagonists ultimately resolve their dilemmas by reinterpreting their native cultural paradigms rather than rejecting the host culture as corrupting.

KEYWORDS : Routes, Roots, Identity, Ethnicity

Diasporic literature occupies a liminal space in which the immigrant subject is perpetually negotiating between the pull of inherited tradition and the promise of reinvention offered by the host land. Writers of the South Asian diaspora, in particular, have used fiction to interrogate how gender shapes this negotiation differently than it does for men, since women are frequently cast as custodians of cultural continuity even as they are the ones most constrained by its expectations. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* situates itself squarely within this tradition, using the short-story form to examine how Indian American women navigate the competing claims of family duty, romantic desire, and individual autonomy. This paper focuses on two stories from the collection, "Affair" and "Doors", to trace the psychological and cultural mechanisms through which Divakaruni's protagonists move from a state of self-abnegation toward one of self-possession.

The identity crisis produced by the cultural dilemmas of immigrant life—particularly for women—is vividly rendered in "Affair" through the internal conflict experienced by Abha within her marriage. It is intense psychological trauma that ultimately transforms Abha and leads her to embrace her adopted culture. Striving to be the perfect wife, she comes to realize that in doing so she has withheld love from her husband, and that the two can never be a truly matched couple. She therefore resolves to leave him and to claim the cherished American ideal of freedom—a realization crystallized through the example of her closest friend, Meena.

Meena and Abha, though intimate friends, differ sharply in temperament and outlook. Meena is liberal, practical, and progressive, whereas Abha remains thoroughly Indian in her worldview even while living in America. This divergence is not merely a matter of personal taste; it reflects two competing models of immigrant womanhood, one that measures success by fidelity to inherited roles and another that measures it by self-fulfillment. Abha is unsettled to learn from her husband, Ashok, that Meena is having an affair, thinking: "What kind of man would be more important than being a good wife?" (Divakaruni 237). Srikant, Meena's husband, is by Abha's estimation, a good if unpolished man, traditional in outlook much like Abha herself. This shared traditionalism is visible when the two couples dine together. Ashok and Meena walk ahead, easy in each other's company, while Srikant and Abha lag behind, "too traditional to even touch hands" (Divakaruni 239). Ashok's progressiveness stands in stark contrast to Abha's resistance to change, and the physical distance between the two couples becomes a spatial metaphor for the emotional distance within each marriage.

Abha knows Meena intimately, and the two share "another bond that held us close, the unspoken sorrow of being childless" (Divakaruni 240); it is Abha who comforts Meena after her miscarriage. Yet Abha feels betrayed when she learns that Meena confided her affair to Ashok rather than to her, a betrayal that deepens her suspicion of the closeness between her husband and her friend. At a party, watching Ashok and Meena dance with an ease and radiance she cannot match, Abha recognizes for the first time that she has spent years being merely "a good wife" (Divakaruni 249) at the cost of her own selfhood. The dance functions as a moment of painful clarity. What Abha witnesses is not simply infidelity but an intimacy of self-expression that has been entirely absent from her own marriage.

Abha's upbringing has taught her that submission, self-denial, and service to her husband constitute the whole of a wife's duty—an outlook consistent with the traditional belief that a woman's "primary goal was considered to be wifehood, and the ultimate one, motherhood" (Varma 227). Even intimacy has been reduced to obligation rather than desire; recalling how Ashok watches explicit programming despite her discomfort, she interrogates her own passivity: "Had I been wrong all the time, when I refused to let him turn the lights on as we made love, I stayed stiff and submissive under his thrusts until he was done with it?" (Divakaruni 244). This moment of retrospective self-examination marks the beginning of Abha's departure from an identity built entirely around service to others.

Following this reckoning, Abha begins to embrace American ways of living. She takes a new job involving travel and socializing, adopts Meena's style of dress and makeup, yet finds Ashok indifferent to her transformation. Her disappointment deepens when Meena, describing her own failing marriage, unwittingly voices sentiments that mirror Abha's own situation. The irony is striking: Abha had assumed that Meena's marriage, unburdened by traditional constraint, was the happier of the two, only to discover that dissatisfaction can exist independent of cultural conformity or its absence.

When Meena speaks of Charles, the new man in her life, Abha initially assumes she means Ashok. Seeing Charles's photograph and finding him unremarkable in appearance, Abha is struck by Meena's explanation for her attachment: "I know he isn't much to look at. But he understands me, all of me, even the bad parts. With him I can be myself, like I never could before this" (Divakaruni 269). The remark prompts Abha's own reckoning: "Had I ever really been myself? I didn't think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter. A

good friend. And of course, a good wife" (Divakaruni 269). Meena presses further, asking, "It's not wrong to want to be happy, is it? To want more out of life than fulfilling duties you took on before you knew what they truly meant?" (Divakaruni 270), to which the newly awakened Abha responds, "It's not wrong. This way you both get another chance" (Divakaruni 270). This exchange marks the turning point of the story. Abha's answer is addressed as much to herself as to Meena, and it signals her acceptance of a value system in which personal happiness is not incompatible with moral integrity.

Driving home, Abha resolves to leave Ashok and begin an independent life, taking half of her savings, her wedding jewelry, and her car, and imagining a modest but self-sufficient existence—keeping accounts, cleaning, or cooking in exchange for lodging. The plainness of this imagined future is significant: Abha does not fantasize about romance or reinvention in glamorous terms but about ordinary, self-directed labor, suggesting that what she seeks is not escape but autonomy. By the story's end, Abha emerges as a self-assured woman confident in her ability to sustain herself. She chooses, in effect, to reconcile with her routes rather than cling to her roots, resolving her identity crisis through assimilation. As a diasporic subject, her selfhood is continually reconstituted through transformation and difference, reflecting the broader "responsibility of bridging a long-standing cultural gap between an ideology of individual freedom and equality and a reality in which women are discriminated against severely" (Chitnis 25).

The companion story "Doors" traces a parallel identity crisis in an unnamed young woman who lives, unmarried, with her American boyfriend, Rex—a relationship troubled by her guilt at transgressing Indian moral standards. She fears her mother's rejection should she learn that her daughter lives with a man "whose favourite food is sacred cow steak and Budweiser, who pops a pill now and then when he gets depressed" (Divakaruni 59). Her devotion to her mother, and the internalized authority of that relationship, is central to her unfolding crisis. She recalls how her mother first saw her own husband's face only at their wedding, and how, widowed, she submitted entirely to the constraints of Indian tradition, a memory that continues to shape the protagonist's sense of filial and cultural obligation even from a distance of thousands of miles.

The mother is depicted as a woman rooted wholly in village custom, one who "lives in a different world, never traveled more than a hundred miles, never touched cigarettes or alcohol, never watched a movie" (Divakaruni 58). This description positions the mother almost as an emblem of an unreachable, unreconstructed past, against which the daughter's American life appears as a near-total rupture. Aware that Rex, shaped by his own parents' discord, cannot grasp the depth of the mother-daughter bond, the protagonist nonetheless faces rejection when her mother disowns her upon learning of her engagement to a "wonderful" man. An inner voice, echoing her mother, warns: "Mistake, says the voice, whispering in your mother's tones" (Divakaruni 59), suggesting that the daughter's crisis is not simply external but has been internalized as a kind of maternal conscience she must actively silence.

The protagonist resolves her conflict by rejecting inherited Indian norms and choosing to begin life anew, alone. She comes to understand that love "washes away the inessentials leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin" (Divakaruni 71), and that she no longer needs even the batik hanging given to her by her mother "as a college-gift, a talisman" (Divakaruni 71). The relinquishing of this object is symbolically significant, marking her willingness to let go of a tangible link to her mother's world in favor of an unencumbered future. Her imagined future is one where "there are no people in this

memory, only the sky, rippling with exhilarating light" (Divakaruni 71). Her ethnic identity proves largely situational: she redefines her native cultural paradigm through the lens of her adopted culture, embracing her routes at the expense of her roots in an act of voluntary assimilation.

Both Abha in "Affair" and the unnamed protagonist in "Doors" embody the predicament of second-generation immigrants suspended between native and adopted cultural values. Though each begins bound to the values of her roots, both ultimately set aside inherited norms, drawn by the freedom and opportunity the host culture offers. Importantly, neither woman's transformation is framed as a simple rejection of her heritage; rather, each redefines the meaning of that heritage through the values of her new environment, arriving at a hybrid selfhood that is neither wholly Indian nor wholly American. Divakaruni thus resists a reductive binary between assimilation and cultural loyalty, presenting instead a vision of diasporic identity as an ongoing, unfinished process of negotiation—one in which women, in particular, must continually renegotiate the terms of duty, desire, and selfhood as they move between the worlds they have inherited and the worlds they choose.

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