“Clothes” is the second story in Chitra Banerjee’s collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage*. It is a story of a young bride, whose fairy tale vision of California got shattered when her husband was murdered. The psychological conflict of east and west makes her face the future on her own. In almost all her stories and novels Chitra Banerjee uses female narrators in first person singular. So also in this story the main character Sumita happens to be the narrator of the story. As the story opens, the reader finds Sumita taking bath in “The women’s lake”. She is very nervous because, she is getting ready for her bride viewing ceremony. She is all dressed up in a yellow saree and she looks like a sunflower after rain. Aparajita Nanda, refers to quoting Rose Kemochan’s review of Chitra Banerjee’s *Arranged Marriage* and points out that blue for Divakaruni is the colour of possibility while yellow is the colour of beginning. Her friends Deepali and Radha are working into her hair with Ritha pulp. They were busy preparing Sumita for the special occasion.

But Sumita is filled with an air of nostalgia, when she sees her friends busily in decorating her hair. She looks back at her girlhood days when she and her friends would raid the guava trees of the neighbour,
telling fairy tales that would have an ending like “And she married the handsome prince who took her to his kingdom beyond seven seas” (AM 18). Very simply the writer brings in the first half of the story. No farfetched similes, no rocking metaphors, but with very simple and solid tone the readers are informed well in advance that Sumita will be married to the man named Smoothen from California.

For a girl like Sumita, who is brought up in a small Bengali village, California’s is definitely a “Kingdom beyond seven seas” (AM 19). Her father showed America, in a metal globe. Daringly the writer associates the coldness of the metal globe with the United States of America printed in italics, to serve her purpose of differentiating and identifying the western society. However her target is not only America but the whole western world: “Don’t send me so far away” (AM 18). This is the line that shows the first psychological conflict of east and west that shoots up in the mind of the protagonist. But she consoles herself by recalling her mother’s words. “A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws” (AM 19). This line clearly speaks for the feministic attitude of Chitra Banerjee. She always speaks through her characters. She raises as the single voice of almost all married women in India when she writes these lines; “Wasn’t it every woman’s destiny... to leave the known for the unknown?” (AM 18). The question also highlights the traditional Indian Women towards marriage. Sumita’s
father handed over her a special sari which she is asked to wear on the occasion of the bride viewing ceremony. Its body was of pale pink the colour of transition. The message is clear. She is to undergo psychological transition. Like a typical modern writer Chitra Banerjee adopts spatial narration and all of a sudden, the reader finds Sumita alone in an aircraft moving towards America. The marriage has taken place, though there is no elaborate description of it. The readers are just informed through Sumita that she is now Mrs. Sumita Sen, a name that rustled uneasily for Sumita like a stiff satin saree that has never been worn. Throughout the story, the readers find the writer using the cloth-imagery. Clothes are used as symbols, which reveal different layers of meaning at different levels.

Somesh has to leave for America, within a week after the marriage, to take care of his store named 7-Eleven. The very name sounds risky to Sumita, immediately she is reminded of the names of Indian shops like Ganesh Sweet House and Lakshmi Vastralaya for fine saris; Sumita associates them with Luck. Psychologically, even the very name of the shops brought forth the conflict of east and west in her mind. Hereafter, the reader finds Sumita constantly comparing, contrasting and idealizing India with America. India is picture perfect for her.
As she is travelling in the plane, she feels strange that she cannot recall her husband's face. She longs for something talismanic from her old life to hold on. The line “Talismanic from my old life” (AM 24) indicates that psychologically her life in India becomes old and outmoded to her. In order to soothe herself, she tries to remember the smell of sandalwood powder sachets and relaxes a bit. Her mother has tucked those packets in Sumita’s suitcase to protect her clothes from The unknown insects of America. Chitra Banerjee sufficiently warns both Sumita as well as the readers about the unknown problems of America.

Sumita lands in America and leads a comfortable life. She, in fact, thoroughly enjoys her new American life. Somesh gets her T-Shirts, Jeans and all other types of clothes that one would normally associate with America. But Sumita can wear them only at night, when she and Somesh are alone and definitely not in the company of her in-laws. Traditionally an Indian woman is supposed to wear the traditional sari in the presence of elders.

Somesh, though an American resident is a strong advocate of Indian tradition. He does not like to overlook the traditional values, so he buys her all the American clothes out of his love and allows her to wear them only when they both are alone. Thus he compromises. The writer pities women like Sumita because they are not aware of these
restrictions that are imposed upon them. Sumita feels happy as long as she can wear them at nights. She is so innocent that she does not even bother to mediate upon these restrictions and to decide on her own. Along with other clothes Somesh also buys her a cream blouse and a long brown skirt to be worn by her when she goes to work in America. It is quite ironic that the writer uses this set of clothes as a symbol of the protagonist’s liberty. Somesh wants his wife to work as an Indian girl, with the western clothes on.

Somesh however insists on her attending a college and choosing a career. Even though he restricts her dress code, he expects her to be a career woman. He is even ready to spend for her education. He is not altogether dominating. He suggests to Sumita to take up a teaching career. He loves her so much that he wants to give her the best that he could afford, but not at the cost of his tradition.

Sumita immediately pictures herself in front of a class room of girls and wonders if she can really do that. But, Somesh encourages her. He has a great deal of confidence in her and she feels gratified. But deep inside her heart she conceives a different plan of working in his store, because he has given her a vivid picture about his store 7-Eleven even before she comes to California and the store 7-Elven seems more real than Somesh.
The store 7-Eleven is a multipurpose shop that sells all kinds of American things: apple juices in cardboard cartoons, potato chips and American bread in cell phone paper, beers and wines. The store looks more real to Sumita that she loves to work there. She always visualizes herself in cream and brown skirt standing behind the counter with an air of confidence, counting dollars and pennies. Slowly she gets so much used to that alien country that she feels that she is living in her own village. The strangeness, which she felt earlier, totally disappears. She is even ready to take up a job. She is so confident that she is not afraid of going out in this new world.

The couples do not have much time to spend together because Somesh works overnight in order to earn extra cash so that he along with his family could move out for a better house. But Somesh and Sumita enjoy a very good rapport and lead a happy life. Her in-laws take good care of her. Perhaps, that is the reason why she does not feel any discomfort in living so far away from her motherland.

It is at this time that the second phase of transition ends abruptly; Once again Sumita is found taking a ceremonial bath but, this time as an act of purification. Somesh is murdered by an unknown shop looter. Probably this unknown shop looter is the unknown insect of America that Chitra Banerjee warns the readers at the outset of the story.
All the warning signs like the *Unknown insect of America* the name of the shop which sounds risky to Sumita, the uneasy rustling of the name Mrs. Somesh Sen seems to show the reality hidden so long. Though the readers as well as Sumita get shocked by the death of Somesh they do not get shattered. Sumita clearly understands that the past is over and she has to move to the future. After the purifying bath, she is given a white sari to wear which is symbolic of purity, for according to the Indian culture a widow has to wear a white saree after her husband's death. It is a sign of rejection towards the pleasures of life: “White, Widow’s, Colour, Colour of endings” (AM 29).

Chitra Banerjee puts an end to the transition process of Sumita. She shows Sumita in yellow at the beginning, then in pale pink at the time of bride viewing ceremony for highlighting the transition that she has to undergo and then, at the end Sumita in white, telling the readers that Sumita’s life of pleasure has ended.

The ‘bindhi’ on Sumita’s forehead is erased. Finally there is a bangle breaking ceremony where the widow’s bangles are broken and they get shattered along with the young woman’s heart. From bride viewing ceremony to bangle breaking the story comes round a full circle.
After going through these ceremonies Sumita settles down in a room and calmly contemplates on her husband’s death. She can very well imagine the plight of her husband at the time of his death. Her grief is so strong that she feels as if the entire room would swallow her. In her remorseful condition, she associates the metal coldness that comes out of the metal globe. She is reminded of the globe that her father showed her before her marriage when she asked where America was. Chitra Banerjee interestingly repeats these types of images and symbols in order to create a unified plot-structure. Sumita’s in-laws love her so much that they want her to stay with them when she returns from India. But, Sumita cannot decide, America suddenly becomes a strange land, a land which is responsible for the destruction of all her hopes and her dreams along with her husband.

The psychological conflicts that were raging in Sumita’s mind now reach a climax when she decides to stay in America, because she is aware of the treatment she would get as a widow in India. Widows are “Doves with cut-off wings” (AM 33). What makes Sumita do this is not immediately known, for she herself says:

That’s when 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 with cut-off wings. (AM
33) She feels it is better to stay in a new modern world as a widow; she would rather be insignificant in America as a lady, than be a significant dove with cut off wings in India.

The situation clearly depicts the treatment given to a widow in India. It is against these baseless loopholes that Chitra Banerjee is waging a war. The stigma that still continues in India is like a thorn in our Indian culture. Not only in this story but in most of Divakaruni’s works, the readers find her revolting against social injustices which are laid especially to women in India. The writer compares the whiteness of the dove to the white sari of a widow.

From an innocent village girl, Sumita raises herself as a matured woman. She becomes the deciding authority of her future life. Alongside Sumita, but almost all female protagonists in Chitra Banerjee’s stories become the sculptors of their own destiny. It is as if they wait patiently before the final destruction, and in the end they become so powerful that it is they who decide what they have to do. Similarly we see Sumita left to decide her destiny.

Roshni Rustomji-kerns in her review compares, Sumita with Savitri. Savitri is a mythological character who is supposed to have brought back her dead husband Satayavan alive after fighting with Yamadharma, the Lord of death. Roshini Rustomji compares the never
given up attitude of Savitri to that of Sumita. Like Savitri, Sumita refuses to give up. In other words Sumita is a modern Savitri.

Discussing myth and mythological characters, Wilfred L. Guerin etal, in the book, A hand book of critical approaches to literature remarks, “Myths are the symbolic projections of a people’s hopes, values, fears and aspirations”. (Guerin 159) So, the comparison of Sumita to Savitri by Roshin Rustomji falls under the category of aspiration. What remains a calming factor to Sumita in the beginning later becomes a nightmare. There is a clear shift of momentum in Chitra Banerjee’s treatment of east and west. When the story begins, the momentum is clearly on the eastern side but, towards the end it shifts to the west. This sudden shift takes the reader unawares. The whole image of India collapses. Chitra Banerjee is not reluctant to destroy this image even though she takes great pains to construct them; a perfectly preplanned destruction it is and the readers can understand this only after thorough reading of the story.

Sumita feels as if she is caught in a world where everything is frozen. She is well aware of the unknown dangers in America. But, she will not be discriminated in America on account that she is a widow. Once bitten by the Unknown insect of America she is free from her psychological fear. She is confident of facing America and its vague difficulties. Whether Sumita goes to India or stays in America is left to
the assumption of the readers. The technique of ambivalence is representative of realistic ending in which matters are resolved. But there is a sigh of relief in the mind of the readers when Sumita looks at her own image in a mirror with cream and brown coloured blouse and skirt, the same clothes given by Somesh when she went to work in America. Banerjee implies that Sumita might go to work in Somesh’s shop for Sumita often feels the shop to be more real than Somesh. Ronny Noor in her review, regarding Sumita’s new assignment, says, Sumita “trade(s) her Sari for a skirt and take(s) her late husband’s place in the family business. She chooses to do the later, breaking the age-old custom. This is exactly what Divakaruni’s characters want, freedom from the bondage of tradition”. (Noor 106).

Thus, the story “Clothes” reveals how the external situations bring forth the psychological conflict between the east and the west that takes place in the mind of the protagonist Sumita and how the conflict aids her in deciding her future. Now, the focus is drifted in exploring this same psychological conflict in the story “Affair”, one of the best stories in **Arranged Marriage**. “Affair” is a story between two temperamentally ill matched Indian couples, living in America. The psychological conflict between east and west aids the two women in developing themselves as independent women. The marriage between the two couples Abha with Ashok Mitra and Meena with Srikant has been arranged on the
basis of the match in horoscopes. The story is narrated by the protagonist Abha, in the first person. The primary action takes place in California and though the incidents are presented in chronological order, there are occasional uses of flashbacks. Chitra Banerjee uses flashbacks effectively in order to ably substantiate her views. All these flashbacks serve as a supporting device to the protagonist's reaction to the conflict.

The rising action of the plot begins, right at the start of the story. It begins as a dispute between Abha and her husband Ashok. He discloses to Abha, the extra marital affair of her friend Meena. But he mischievously refuses to disclose the name of the man with whom Meena is associated. Abha wonders why Meena hasn’t disclosed the affair personally to her because Meena would share every inch of her life with Abha. In fact, they talk to each other over the phone regularly, before their husbands’ return from their work, so as to talk freely without interruptions.

Apart from the affair, what irritates Abha is the manner in which her husband discloses the matter. It is done in a casual and sarcastic way while she is flickering through the TV channels and cooking too. Abha busies herself in chopping onion so that she would have a valid reason for the tears. It is quite annoying for Abha to see Ashok switching over to MTV even though he knew how devastated his wife
would be, particularly after the disclosure. Abha sees a blond woman making vulgar and sexy movements while singing a song in MTV, she gets lightly irritated. It is here that the writer gives a vivid picture of Ashok. He was a very ordinary husband who got a sadistic pleasure in irritating his wife. But the protagonist, having been brought up in a traditional Indian culture and thinks that sex is a private matter that should happen only between married couples. Ashok calls this attitude of Abha as prudish Indian upbringing thereby he not only ridicules Abha, but also her Indian upbringing. The conflict between the east and the west starts here. Though the target of Ashok is Abha, it is at a superficial level. The actual target is Indian culture, the eastern world. Thus, Chitra Banerjee displays her narrative skills and the psychological insights with which she portrays her characters.

In a depressed mood, the protagonist dumps some extra teaspoons of red pepper powder into the chicken curry which she was cooking when she hears Ashok talking about the affair, because she knows very well that it would definitely give her husband a terrible heart burn. Abha could take revenge only this way. After all she is like any other typical helpless Indian wife who is the victim of the critical and the sarcastic comments of her husband. She cannot continue cooking and leaves the kitchen, locks herself in her spare bedroom and cries for a while. She says, “But crying has always seemed to me to be a waste of
time. All it does is make my face puff up. So, I stopped….“ (AM 234). These words clearly indicate the other side of Abha. She is not altogether a prudish Indian wife. She has the ability and courage to rise to the occasion whenever one is demanded. She does not label herself as a submissive housewife.

Alone in the spare bedroom, Abha compares herself with Meena. Meena is an embodiment of beauty for Abha. She is slim and sleek and is a perfect symbol of western culture, but Abha symbolizes eastern culture. Abha recalls how Meena would give tips regarding her way of dressing and having a sleek figure. She would insist Abha to dress up properly. But, Abha differs from Meena: “I just do freelance work from home, writing recipes for Indian papers. Why do I need to look good?” (AM 235). Here in these lines the word just is indicative of how Abha has evaluated herself. Chitra Banerjee highlights about Abha’s career only in these lines. The underlying meaning is that Abha has never been proud of what she is. But Meena insists that every woman needs to look good and asks Abha if she does not want her husband’s heart-beat to speed up when he looks at her. This makes Abha think of her mother and she doubts if her mother has ever made her father’s heart beat speed up.

Abha reacts like a typical Indian house wife and warns Meena that she sounds like an American. In Abha’s perception Indian
marriages are neither based on superficial things like clothes nor on sexy looks. But Meena promptly replies that “watch out by the time you realize I am right, it might be too late” (AM 236). While discussing the relationship between women Roshni Rustomji Kerns says, These relationships between women echo the relationships between the cultures and the physical landscapes of India and the United states. The majority of the stories take place in the United States, but the presence of India in the lives of these women in the United States is never forgotten. And as the women work within the web of conflicts they reflect the tensions and extensions which exist within and between their cultures. (Rustomji 284). These incidents and conversations flashback her when she is alone in the room. She suddenly writes her problems in a paper because she feels that she is at her best when she writes things down on a paper.

Again and again the writer intimates that even though Abha is not an outspoken person, she is not altogether a helpless Indian wife who laments for her life. She is positive. She writes down the problems by analyzing and above all, she does not believe in crying. A lot of questions confront Abha and she pens them down. But predominant questions keep on persisting her and she wonders “what kind of man would be worth giving up your principles for? What kind of man would be more important than bring a good wife?” (AM 235)
Now Abha thinks of Srikant, Meena’s husband. Though he is not a prince charming, he is a pleasant person: “Living with Ashok has made me particularly appreciative of good hearted people” (AM 237). The statement shows that Abha does not have a positive image of Ashok. She has no appreciation for this male chauvinistic person. His constant critical and cynical views have made Abha appreciate all good hearted people. These lines are an indirect attack upon Ashok’s character. But it must be understood that the story, narrated in the first person’s view, often tends to be the view of the narrator. Perhaps, Ashok is not the only one to be blamed. The readers don’t get a full picture of Ashok and he becomes a flat character in the hands of the writer. It has to be realized that what the narrator recounts might not be the objective truth. The trustworthiness of the accounting should be subjected to question.

Srikant is not a big talker and is not as vibrant and bubbly like Meena. Srikant loves his computer nicknamed Lalitha, more than Meena. Abha finds herself and her qualities more in Srikant’s character while Ashok and Meena have similar traits of characters. Thus it is clear that both the couples are temperamentally different persons and so are ill matched. But in spite of all these dissimilarities. Abha can find a special bonding factor with Meena. Both of them are childless and it is this bond which resists Abha from being resentful to Meena.
From these heart breaking thoughts Abha returns to reality to clean up messy kitchen; the half cooked food; unwashed dishes and vegetable peelings in the sink. She mops the floor, washes up, takes the trash and by the time she sits down to eat her extra peppry chicken, it is already two o’clock in the morning. But Ashok has already gone to bed. He orders some Domino’s Pizzas and after finishing a delightful dinner, goes to bed unworried about Abha’s dinner. Abha does all the household chores unwillingly because she knows she would just have to deal with them in the morning. The readers find Chitra Banerjee in the same satiric tone when she writes, “to cook, rollout chapattis hot with ghee..boiling frying seasoning lading serving wiping up because after all isn’t the kitchen the women’s palace” (AM 248), while describing the day today work of a female character in her novel The Mistress of Spices.

Alone like a desperate house wife, Abha now turns on the TV and gets irritated when she sees a couple making love. She switched off the TV hastily. But suddenly she has an impulse to see the scene and she turns on the TV. She is even surprised to find that she never feels ashamed. She feels strange about her shamelessness. It is as if that part does not belong to her. She understands that all her husband’s hatred towards her are only because of her prudish Indian attitude towards sex.
That night she dreams of the same couple making love again but only the faces are different. The man’s face looks like Ashok’s and the woman has Meena’s face. Sigmund Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* quotes Hildebrandt:

> It is impossible to think of any action in a dream for which the original motive has not in some way or other whether as a wish, or desire or impulse-passed through the waking mind. We must admit that the original impulse was not invented by the dream; the dream merrily copied it and spun it out, it merrily elaborated in dramatic form a scrap of historical material which it had found in us. (Freud 101)

Abha suspects an affair between Meena and her husband, and the dream just becomes a symbol of this suspicion. The complication of the plot starts developing.

On the very next day, Abha sees Meena in the wedding anniversary function of their friend. She is shocked to see Meena, wearing a backless Choli and wonders where on earth she has the courage to wear such type of clothing because Meena has a better estimation of their Indian friends, than Abha. Meena once remarks that the men
For in spite of their bill blass suits, and alligator skin shoes... they still belonged to the villages of their fathers, villages where a woman caught in adultery was made to ride around the market square on a donkey, her head shaved, her clothes stripped off her, while crowds jeered and pelted her with garbage.

(AM 246)

This passage is the essence of the entire story. According to Chitra Banerjee, the men in spite of their posh attire are not any better than those villagers. This is the point which the writer wants to drive home. The writer appeals to the readers when she narrates the punishment given to a woman who is caught in adultery. The very similar situation is found Nathanial Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter where the protagonist Hester Pryne is tortured to wear the scarlet letter “A” on her chest as a permanent sign of adultery. Chitra Banerjee describes the plight of such women in the villages, with the same intensity as Nathaniel Hawthorne, in The Scarlet Letter.

Abha’s suspicion gets kindled when Meena and Ashok dance together in the party. In fact they dance very well that even Srikant, Meena’s husband appreciates their combination. They dance so gracefully that Abha curses herself for not learning the dance movements. If she learned to dance well then she would definitely have dancing with Ashok, instead of Meena. She feels deeply hurt and
helpless as she does not have the courage to confront Meena. Thus Meena and Abha converse normally, hiding each other’s problem.

The conflict between east and west between Abha and Meena, between the submissive Indian women and the rebellious American women have a culminating effect on Abha that she daringly goes out to have lunch with her editor Suren Gupta, whom she would have avoided otherwise, since Suren Gupta is a womanizer. Abha, in fact enjoys the little courtesies from Suren, which she is not used to under normal circumstances from her husband. She relaxes a bit and finds fun in being out with a man who is not her husband. Now Abha accuses herself for not dressing up to meet the occasion. She reflects upon Meena’s words of all women need to look good. She feels that there is some point of justification in Meena’s remarks.

The very next day, Abha buys herself a costly sexy silk robe so as to celebrate her new job as a cook book writer sponsored by the “Indian Courier” magazine. Later, in the evening she informs her husband about the job and her outing with Suren. As usual, she finds him responding in an unconcerned manner. Finally, she manages to ask him about the new silk robe that she is wearing. Her husband criticizes the colour of the suit. But, this time she makes sure that his critical remark will not hurt her. She does not even care much for his cynical view. Perhaps, she might have pondered about Meena’s words of all women need to
look good and also Meena’s warning that “by the time you realize I’m right, it might be too late” (AM 235).

This attitude of Abha clearly shows that she would try her last bit to cover her marriage which has reached break up. The reader feels sorry for Abha. She always strives hard to get an approval from her husband, even in her dress. Abha epitomizes the whole Indian women who always wait for the approval from their husbands. No matter how hard Abha tries, she never gets approved. Like all other submissive Indian women, Abha too is rejected uncaringly by her husband. She simply needs a recognition and acceptance from her husband. Chitra Banerjee takes a satirical look at these women. She wants them to be free individuals and not dependent ones, always seeking their husband’s approval and recognition.

It is only on the next day that Srikant comes to Abha’s house. Abha gets shocked on seeing Srikant in front of her house, because he never comes alone to her house. The moment he enters into the house, he compliments Abha over her nice’s dress. Abha feels delighted and satisfied to hear the compliment which she has been expecting from her husband from the day before. Abha invites Srikant for a tea and Srikant again compliments Abha for maintaining the kitchen beautifully. Abha now wonders why her husband, in all these years has never given such compliments to her. Srikant then discloses the affair that had been
going on in Meena’s life. But he too does not specify the name of the man with whom Meena is linked. He is too embarrassed to talk about it. This further aggravates Abha’s suspicion that she no longer can hold on and so decides to confront Meena directly.

But the same night, she gathers all her courage to ask her husband whether he loves her or not. Her husband replies with an uninteresting tone that it is a bit late to answer that question. It is a pity that women like Abha want no more than true love from their husbands. She is just in need of his love and affection and nothing more.

The next day, Abha goes to Meena’s house and waits in front of her car until Meena arrives. Once she arrives, Abha follows him up to the door steps and almost frightened her with her greeting. She now wonders that there will be more. Women like her would be forced to spend sleepless nights because of their husband’s affairs.

Meena explains to Abha that she is in love with an American man who was working in her office. She also accepts the fact that she is worried of Abha’s comment about her affair and explains that the same is the reason for her hesitation to disclose it personally. So she has asked Ashok, rather to do this job, on behalf of her. Abha is a mother figure for Meena and she fears Abha because Abha is an embodiment of perfection to her. She considers Abha as a perfect wife, friend and a
good home maker. Instantly, Abha is taken aback. She expects this compliment particularly from Meena. Thus the story now completely takes a “U” turn because earlier, it was Abha who felt envious of Meena as a perfect person.

Meena remarked that the American lover understands even the bad qualities in her and adds that she could be herself whenever she is with him. She concludes that she and Ashok are really good friends. Regarding the diasporic context of women, Felicity Hand says:

In the diasporic context many women find themselves alone and lacking support system, they had grown up with in India and which provided emotional and psychological sustenance. Thus Meena has deliberately distanced herself from the Indian upbringing, first by refusing to accommodate herself to her husband, Srikant and secondly by denying the female members of her community the opportunity to criticize and lament her decision. (Hand 65)

Abha feels strange that she is not relieved, even when she hears that Ashok and Meena are just friends. Only then, she understands that her problem is deep rooted within herself and not with an extra marital affair of Meena. She feels that she has to be believed her conception of a perfect Indian woman. In this context Ranjini Jothi Singh states,
Thus Divakaruni shows that Abha is a perfect wife and home maker until the concept of duty loses its hold on her. She now realizes that it is not wrong to want to be happy, and to want more out of life than fulfilling duties. (Jothi Singh 19)

Abha goes back home as a different person. Alone in her spare bedroom, she gets answers for all the questions. She wonders “The answers to them had all changed, and so had I. It astonished me how little I’d know then, how shackled my thinking had been” (AM 269). These lines show Abha as a transformed individual. She is aware of the eastern shackles and starts investigating herself in that pensive mood. “Had I ever really been myself?” (AM 269). She feels sorry for spending up all her energy for being “a good daughter, a good friend and of course a good wife” (AM 269). She ponders over Meena’s words: “It’s not wrong to want to be happy. Is it? To want more out of life than fulfilling duties” (AM 270). Felicity Hand remarks.

The Indian family has traditionally asked women to forfeit these own ambition and desires for the sake of family unity. Any challenge to the family or, by extension to the Indian community, is seen as a betrayal of national cultural values as the site for preservation of India, Its culture all its tradition is precisely the family. (Hand 67)
Towards the climax, Abha grows up as a mature individual woman. In her mind, she starts writing a letter to Ashok in which she declares that “The old rules aren’t always right. Not here, not even in India” (AM 270). She has freed herself from the old eastern rules. As a break through of all this complication, Abha decides to move away from Ashok. Sumana Sen Bagchee in her review observes,

> Abha, a kitchen centric, unadventurous, housewife, is at first shaken by the views of her best friend Meena’s extra marital “affair” but the incident also offers her the first chance to examine her own marriage and find cracks widening in it. (Bagchee 76)

Abha is not going to bother about the gossips in India, her parent’s anger and her family dishonour. It is her exposure to the western world that has laid the ground work strongly for her separation from her husband. Finally she writes in her mind “so we can start learning once more to live” (AM 272). Thus the story ends and the ending becomes the beginning of a new life for the protagonist. It may be relevant to have the full version of Abha’s letter to Ashok uninterrupted. It reads thus:

Dear Ashok,

The old rules aren’t always right. Not here, not even in India. I feel your resentment growing around me thick and red and
suffocating. Like mine is suffocating your. We’re spiraling towards hate, and hopelessness. That’s not what I want for the rest of my life or yours. It’s better this way, each of us free the other before it’s too late. So we can start learning, once more to live. (AM 272)

To live happily as an individual becomes the primary goal for the protagonist. Not her husband, not her duties as a typical Indian woman, nor her family honour matter to her. She is very clear about her decision and states “Not that I’d got rid of all those chains that would probably take the rest of my life. But I was starting”. There is a state of affirmation in the last line “But I was starting” (AM 269). Abha is not only moving away from Ashok but also breaking and moving away from the cultural shackles of the east. Thus in the analysis of the psychological conflict of east and west in this story “Affair” the protagonist Abha is found leaving towards west.

The next that comes in the analysis of this kind is the story “The Word Love”. The story “The Word Love” is about the understanding of the real meaning of love by the protagonist Sona by focusing the concept of love of the east and the west. Both these concepts of love are of opposing nature and thereby compliment each other in understanding them better and also in understanding the protagonist.
Chitra Banerjee in all her works commonly uses first person singular, in order to create a sense of intimacy with the reader. But here in this story she intentionally deviates from her usual narrative technique and narrates the story in second person. Under normal circumstances, many writers avoid using the second person, because sometimes it has the awkward sense of referring to the reader as well and thus hinder them from understanding the story in a better view of perspective.

In this story "The Word Love", the use of second person is subjected effectively to maximize the understanding level of the reader. Thereby the reader is subjected to the feelings of the protagonist who may feel as if the story is theirs. Regarding the use of this technique in this particular story, Felicity Hand states, “The choice of the second person narrative confessional mode is highly appropriate for Divakaruni to transmit the woman’s growing doubts and anguish to the reader”. (Hand 67) Also for the very first time, the confessional narrator remains as a nameless person throughout the story, but for a few certain occasions.

The effective use of the technique in the second person, along with the homeless protagonist creates a sense of sadness. Thus the exact mode is set among the reader, as desired by the writer. Not only the protagonist, but also all the other characters like her mother and her
lover Rex are referred as she and he respectively, imparting a sense of tightness to the structure.

The opening lines of the story, “You practice them out loud for days in front of the bathroom mirror, the words with which you’ll tell your mother you’re living with the man” (Am 57) indicates that the protagonist is constantly preparing and rehearsing to herself the apt words which she will be using while disclosing to her mother in India, about her love with the foreigner. After rehearsing these words, several times the protagonist washes her face and puts on some makeup to cover her pathetic face from her lover Rex. But as soon as he enters their apartment he sees the sorrow behind her made-up face and gets irritated. Eventually he asks her why she is hurting herself. He being a western is not able to understand the attachment that she has towards her mother. He cannot even tolerate the irrational behaviour. He feels guilty for her sadness. But he is unable to understand that she too is engrossed with guilt, for not daring to tell her mother about her love for Rex.

The conflict between the east and the west starts even in the beginning stages and though she can understand his feelings, she cannot help her keep away from the guilt. She is quite aware of the fact that it is ruining their life. In despair, he throws up all his books and bursts out that she has been behaving as if he were some kind of
criminal. She gathers all the books and notices for the first time the titles of the books that are suggestive of Rex’s nature. Chitra Banerjee very craftily chooses titles like “Control Systems Engineering”; “Boiler Operations Guide”; “Hand book of shock” and “vibration”; they seem to be telling her something. All the titles are in fact, statements about the mechanical and superficial love of Rex. She is seen constantly reassuring that the real problem is not him but her own guilt, she loves him unduly. At the same time she is also in deep love with her mother. The conflict between the east and the west is at strife in her mind. She loves both these people so much that she is unable to compromise for the other. The protagonist explains to her lover the way her mother sacrificed her whole life in bringing her up:

She lives in a different world can’t you see that? She’s never travelled more than a hundred miles from the village where she was born; she’s never touched cigarettes or alcohol; even though she lives in Calcutta, she’s never watched a movie. (AM 58)

The protagonist felt torn between the love for Rex and the affection of her mother she doesn’t have the courage to disclose to her mother the love for Rex. By describing Rex and his Cryptic books, the writer, gives a insight in to his western attitude and while describing the protagonist’s mother, the eastern element springs up. In India, a married woman is supposed to dedicate her entire life for the welfare of the family and its
happiness so much so that one time these women even forget their own inner self. In other words, they become selfless. They loose their own identity not with regret but with utter satisfaction. This very same concept is found in the story “Clothes” when Sumita’s mother reminded her that “A married woman belongs to her husband, her in laws” (AM 19). Thus the writer places the western qualities of Rex and the eastern qualities of the protagonist’s mother side by side, thereby allowing the readers to be the better judge for the ultimate decision taken by the protagonist at the end.

All the protagonist’s explanation about her mother and her traditional Indian culture went in vein. Rex still couldn’t understand her deep attachment towards her mother. He angrily busted out that

So don’t tell her, he said, that you’re living in Sin. With a foreigner, no less. Someone whose favourite food is sacred cow steak and Budweiser. Who pops a pill now and then when he gets depressed. (AM 59)

These lines not only epitomize the western culture, their habits and their life but also ironically ridicule the prudent Indian Culture.

Suddenly, he became a different person to her. She could recollect all those wonderful days when they were in love. Those evenings they spent together seeing the sun setting over the bay and
the discussions they had about his divorced parents. She could no longer see the compassionate Rex.

The word ‘love’ starts taking up a different meaning in her life as days progressed. In front of her colossal mother and her affection and sacrifice Rex and his western superficial love become a tiny figure and starts diminishing slowly in the mind of the protagonist:

Mistake, says the voice whispering in your mother’s tones. Sometimes the voice sounds different, not hers. It is a rushed intake of air, as just before someone asks a question that might change your life you don’t want to hear the question which might be how did you get yourself into this mess, or perhaps why, so you leap in with that magic word. Love, you tell yourself, love love love. (AM 59)

The psychological struggle of the protagonist is portrayed with great depth in these lines. Her own guilty consciousness pains her, taking up different tones sometimes the tone of her mother and sometimes the tone of some other person, constantly distressing her with questions, questions that could never be answered by her.

All the streaming romance and love for Rex become mistakes for the protagonist; mistakes done unconsciously under the magic spell of the word love. Now her mother’s affection removes the magic spell of
love and exposes her to reality. It shakes her off from a dreamy world, back to real life. Now she understands that her love for Rex was not genuine. Again to quote Felicity Hand,

Thus the conscience of the young woman in “The word love” gradually leaks into her, textually represented by italics, challenging her confidence in her decision because her relationship with Rex is based on physical attraction, sexual passion and the lure of the forbidden fruit. (Hand 69)

Although she has been living in California, she can never altogether erase the eastern influence, her mother and her past life in India. Hence she can not hear the crash of broken glass and the police sirens of the city, instead she hears only the street vendor’s calling out “momphali, momphali fresh and hot” (AM 60) as if her own home town is Calcutta.

The past keeps on haunting her down. She starts thinking about her mother’s phone call through which she would receive information about the weather in Calcutta, her aunt’s arthritis problem, her treatment with turmeric poultices, the death of Shiul flowers. Her mother would also enquire with deep concern about the protagonists health and the progress of her Ph.D work, while the protagonist would silently be listening to the concerning voice of her mother. Her mother would even sense that struggle in the protagonist’s mind and would ask worriedly
“you’re so quiet. Are you ok Sona? Is something bothering you?” (AM 60). Taken aback by her mother’s receptiveness, the protagonist tries her best but she cannot disclose the matter and she suffers like a netted bird. The writer compares the trapped unlet emotions of the protagonist to that of a netted bird and thereby intensifies the situation. It is for the very first and for the very last time, the protagonist’s name gets disclosed. It is again for the first time that information is provided about the protagonist’s reason for her stay in California. She is doing her Ph.D work in America and apparently her mother wants her to complete it soon and return to India so that she can arrange her marriage.

In a pensive mood, the protagonist remembers the punishment given to her when she secretly went to see a Hindi movie with her girl friend. The very next day all her clothes have been stuffed in a suitcase and it is lying outside her house with her mother’s note on it “Better no daughter than a disobedient one, a shame to the family” (AM 62). Even now, she could remember the dizzy fear which crept into her on that day when she sat on the door steps all alone feeling ashamed, while the by-passers glanced at her curiously. Finally when her mother opened the door it was quite midnight and immediately they both started crying. The line “Better no daughter than a disobedient one, a shame to the family” (AM 62) becomes ironical, because once again it becomes the shock to
her mother when she gets the news about her daughter living with a foreigner.

The very first month, when she and Rex move together to a new apartment, she feels as if the fear and guilt pound her head whenever the phone rings. She would rush to pick up the phone, hoping that it would be from her mother. She even has him promise not to pick up the phone. But mostly, her phone calls are for him. They are from his former girl friends. “Women, ex-girl friends, he would explain with a guileless smile, stressing the ex” (AM 63). The line explains the superficial nature of love among the westerners. Rex, not only has ex-girl friends but also has many such ex’s. That is the reason why Chitra Banerjee repeats ex once again in italics. But, the protagonist can hardly digest those Ex(s). Although she resides in California, during her Ph.D, she continues to be a typical Indian girl for whom love and affections are bondages of life.

Usually her mother calls her during Saturday mornings and the protagonist is prepared to tackle the situation. However, one Tuesday morning, her mother calls her unexpectedly and when Rex attends the phone the matter gets itself revealed to her mother. The protagonist hates herself for being careless. Her mother actually called her on that day to inform her of her cousin’s wedding. But after hearing the news she gets upset and asks her not to come.
From then onwards, the protagonist keeps on trying to reach her mother through phone. She desperately wants to explain the matter to her mother. But there is no positive response from her mother’s side. Only the ‘ayah’ answers her calls and informs her that her mother has changed her will. In the background, she hears her mother’s voice ordering the ‘ayah’ to hang up phone and say “I don’t have a daughter” (AM 62). This line can easily be associated with her mother’s note that was tucked in her suitcase earlier when she was punished for going to a movie secretly during her college days. Chitra Banarjee carves beautifully the love of Sona for her mother in the following passage:

Mother ..... You cry, the work ricochets through the apartment so that the hanging shivers against the wall. Its black centre ripples like a bottomless well. The phone goes dead. You called again, your fingers are shaking. It’s hard to see the digits through the tears. Your knees feel as though they have been broken: the phone buzzes against your ear like a trapped insect. No one picks it up. You keep calling all week. Finally a machine tells you the number has been changed. There is no new number. (AM 65)

The above passage exemplifies the protagonist’s pathetic longing for her mother. Minute details like “black center ripples like a bottomless well” (AM 68) “fingers are shaking” (AM 69), the comparison of the
buzzing of the phone to that of a tapped insect and a machine which
announces the change of the number are all very craftily worked out to
create a sense of profound sadness not only in the mind of the
protagonist but also in the mind of the readers. Having failed in her first
venture, she opts for the second on of writing letters and that too proves
futile; she tries her next option of writing registered letters which are
returned with remarks, “Not accepted, return to sender” (AM 69). Thus
the protagonist meets with failure in all her ventures towards
reconciliation with her mother.

She could suddenly remember an old story that her mother told
her when she was very young; it was a story about a girl. Her father was
a roof thatcher and since she lost her mother at a young age, he spoiled
her by pampering her too much. He let her freely to roam about, to run
wildly, to climb trees and to swim in the river. He never took much care
for the words of the elderly people who warned him not to leave the girl
unmarried at that age. He believed his daughter so much and thought
she knew very well the difference between right and wrong. Later on, he
found a good carpenter as a match for the girl, but a few days before
the consummation of the marriage, the girl committed suicide by
drowning herself with a rock tied to a sari. Her father learned from the
villagers that she had been in love with a travelling actor and had
become pregnant by him and hence committed suicide as he refused
to marry her. The heart broken father left the village and nothing was known about him after there.

Chitra Banerjee very effectively makes use of the technique of meta-narrative and that too an intrusive frame narrative in order to portray the psychological trauma undergone by the protagonist. According to Peter Barry, as explained in “Beginning Theory”,

The meta-narrative is a narrative within the narrative .....an intrusive frame narrative is a kind of alienation device which deliberately breaks the spell of the narrative reminded us of it's moral complication. (Barry 236-37)

The protagonist can understand the moral implication of the story even in the middle of the meta-narrative. “You know already this is a tale with an unhappy end a cautionary moral” (AM 66). This line substantiates that the meta-narrative is intrusive in nature and the focalization is internal. Again, to quote Peter Barry about internal focalization, “The focus is on what the characters think and feel, these being things which would be in accessible to you even if you had been present” (AM 233).

Eventually Rex gets irritated by her lifeless behavior and their relationship starts decaying. The protagonist, though was well aware of this slow decay does not feel apologetic about Rex’s behavior because he is a thorough westernized American who would think of his mother
only on ‘Mother’s day’ by sending her a card. On the contrary Shona is constantly thinking about her heart- broken mother and is found striving her best to reprimand the mother- daughter- relationship. Regarding the different levels of love, it is worth quoting the remarks of Felicity Hand:

Two different attitudes of Sexuality and love, western and Indian are held up to scrutinizing in this story. While reducing concepts of essentialisms always results in over-simplification, it is reasonable to posit that erotic love has long been privilege in western Discourses while other form of love, in particular the familiar, is regarded as outside the erotic or romantic relationship. (Hand 68)

These lines capture Rex’s love and the affection of the protagonist’s mother. It also describes why Rex, could not understand the affinity of the protagonist towards her mother. Such a love, observes Felicity Hand, is “of one’s parents. Siblings relatives are relegated to a subordinate position in the west” (Hand 68). It is explicit that Shona cannot tolerate her guilty feeling as well as the separation from her mother and it is this same denunciation of her guilt that destroys her relationship with her.

Rex alone however cannot be blamed for the whole episode that led to their separation. Initially, he wanted Shona to hide their relationship to her mother. Then as days passed by, he could not
tolerate the protagonist’s irrational guilt and wanted her to cry it out and get it out of her system. He wanted her to cut the umbilical cord. Then towards the end he left the apartment saying, “It was never me, was it? Never love. It was always you and her, her and you” (AM 70). Thus, it is evident that he has tried his best to understand her feelings. But only the level of understanding is different. Deeper level of love and affection become unreachable, alien territories to him and hence he fails to understand the deeper level of love required by the Shona.

Agitated by the rejection of both Rex and her mother, Shona thinks of committing suicide by swallowing his anti-depressant pills. But suddenly outside it started raining and she went out to enjoy the rain. “The rain runs down your cheeks, the tears you couldn’t shed” (AM 70). Thus the rain helps her to cry out, or in Rex’s words, to take it out of her system.

Then she decides not to commit suicide because she understands that life is worth living. She is also aware of the fact that her death will not change either her mother or Rex. Both of them become strangers to her because, both of them fail to understand the inner feelings of Shona. Felicity Hand, while commenting on the choice made by the protagonist, remarks, “The choice between emotional dependence and cultural loyalty has led to the realization that there exists a third choice – personal liberalization” (Hand 70).
She gets transformed into a new person and decides to move away both from her mother and boy-friend. She decides to lead a life of her own. Rebecca Haque writes, “But she does not give up altogether. She rows to make a new life for herself and to make it on her own”.

(Hague 207) She is not going to lead the rest of her life working for Rex and feeling guilty towards her Mother. She feels that there is no point in clinging on to those people who have already rejected her. The word ‘love’ takes a different meaning to the protagonist from that moment.

And a word comes to you out of the opening sky. The word love you see that you had never understood it before it is like rain, and when you lit your face to it, like rain it was has away Inessentials, leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin. (AM 71)

Thus the story comes to an end which also happens to be a new beginning for the protagonist the title too is quite suitable for the story. "The Word Love" shows different layers of meanings to Shona at different levels and situations and finally she manages to get the true meaning of the word ‘love’. The Word ‘Love’ at the end gets refined, as a result of the psychological conflict between the east and the west in the mind of the protagonist.

Sona’s mother is a symbol of east and her boy friend symbolizes west and she rejects both of them. Usually Chitra Banerjee, in all her
stories that surface the element of conflict of east and west, makes the protagonist incline either towards west or east. For instance, Sumita in “Clothes” is inclined towards America, the west whereas Jayanti in “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” like the east. But here for the very first time, the protagonist rejects both to lead a life of her own. She discovers a new level of love, a love for herself which is different from the love of west and love of east. In this context, Ranjini Jothi Singh says, “The women who face conflicts come to a crisis before they can make a decision to be free from traditional values”. (Jothi Singh 22) Thus here too the protagonist after facing the conflict emerges as a new woman with individualistic thinking, consummating the battle between the east and the west. Finally the story ends with an analysis of the psychological conflict between the east and the west, where the protagonist daringly rejects both these worlds and is found preferring her own new way.

The next story that comes under the analysis of this conflict is “Meeting Mrinal”. “Meeting Mrinal” is a well crafted story of a middle aged divorced woman Asha who is determined to lead her life happily without succumbing to the sorrows of her past life. In this story the development of the plot becomes secondary to that of characterization. The narrator Asha is a thirty eight year old woman, living with her rebellious teenaged son Dinesh in California. Her husband Mahesh has
left her to live with “Jessica, his red haired ex-secretary”.\textit{(AM 276)} Thoroughly shattered by his departure Asha struggles hard even to lead a normal life. She does not look those Indian recipes, does not care much about the house and in fact is not the typical Indian woman. To make things worse both the protagonist and her son do not have a good rapport between themselves. They hardly talk to each other and she is worried much over the son’s behaviour, especially after his father’s moving away.

This story, unlike other stories, does not begin with the rising action, but instead begins with a complication. The psychological conflict between the east and the west begins and starts progressing in the mind of the protagonist even at the outset of the story; when her husband leaves her for an American woman when he leaves the east for the west. It is again this psychological conflict between the east and the west that makes the protagonist worry too much for her son’s behaviour as an American. As an Indian mother her eastern temperament is in conflict with her son’s western attitude. However, Asha understands her son’s problem and consoles herself that they are just signs of teenage. She is very much aware of the fact that her son is drifting away from her and she feels guilty about it.

While Asha is absorbed in these painful emotions and sober thoughts, she receives a phone call from her class-mate and her best
friend Mrinalini Ghose. Though she cannot recognize Mrinal’s voice at the beginning, but she soon recognizes it and at once is flooded with a mixture of happiness and sorrow.

Hereafter, the writer is found using a combination of analysis and prolepsis, to generate the basic narrative momentum. According to Peter Barry a writer should make the best use of these two narrative techniques. In “Beginning Theory” he writes, “with analeptic material sketching out what went before, and proleptic devices hinting at what the outcome will be, [the author]..... engages the readers and generating the basic narrative momentum”. (Barry 235) Asha starts recollecting her girlhood days when she feels that Mrinal is always smarter than herself. From getting higher rank, her attrite and until her present status as an executive of a reputed computer firm, Mrinal is always well ahead of Asha, or Asha thought so.

Asha could even recollect the day in which she called Mrinal to share her excitement of getting married to Mahesh in California. But Mrinal in a quite voice questioned whether that is what Asha really wanted? She warns Asha that marriage is a big decision and that she does not even know Mahesh. This sounds as a Westernized nonsense to Asha. Asha considers the tradition of Indian arranged marriages, superior to that of the western tradition. Regarding tradition, Debjani Banerjee remarks, “Tradition is good, essentially indigenous and
unintepellated by western influence while modernity is evil, degraded and a western ethos”. (Banerjee 14) Mrinal, having moved to a western country at her early age, thinks like a typical modern westerner. While observing Jaidka’s remarks in this context Ranjini Jothi Sigh opines, “When individuals travel across half the globe from India to America, it can alter one’s belief and affect one’s perspectives” (Jothi Singh15). This is what happens to Mrinal. But conservative Asha cannot tolerate such elements which furnish adolescent fancies with no connection to her real life.

Mrinal insists Asha to reconsider her plan, to complete the college course and choose a career and become a financially independent woman. But Asha does not realize the real meaning of Mrinal’s warning. Later, when she talks to her friend Mrinal, She is able to understand the proper meaning of these warnings. She wonders if she was too hasty, if she had made a wrong decision. In her opinion Mrinal has once again proved that she is smarter by remaining a spinster all these years.

Shacking off from all these meditative thoughts, Asha can now hear Mrinal’s wish to meet the protagonist and all her family members. It is obvious that Mrinal is unaware of the protagonist’s family problem. All these years, Asha has been sending happy family photos to Mrinal, just to prove that Mrinal is wrong about traditionally arranged marriages. Even now the protagonist never discloses her problem to Mrinal over
the phone because of her fear to taste meet before the smart Mrinal. Asha lies to Mrinal that both her husband and her son are busy and that she would come alone to meet Mrinal. Debjani Banerjee in her interview remarks, “She manufactures stories that reflect an ordered perfection that her life, in reality, lacks”. (14) Thus, she manages to convince Mrinal that her son is busy and her husband is out of town, on business. But she cannot convince her own son for these are invented stories about him and his father. The protagonist’s son wants her to be frank to Mrinal about her ruined marriage. He asks her to simply face reality, as she cannot digest and tolerate those invented stories. He thinks that by denying her problematic marriage, his mother is actually denying her own reality.

Infuriated by the heated argument Asha slaps her son and shouts, “just remember, I am not the only one you father left when he moved out. I didn’t hear him asking your along, Mr. Smart ass!” (AM 283). The argument between Asha and her son further strains their relationship and she becomes aware of it immediately after slapping him. She knows for sure that it is not in any way going to help either her son or her in their healing process. So for the next few days all her mending ways to please her son get wasted. One evening when she waits for her son with his favourite food Kachuris, she goes into a dream. She dreams of her son as a bot. It is worth noting Sigmund
Freud’s remarks about the stimuli of such dreams in his “The Interpretation of Dreams”. According to him, “Dreams come from indigestion and this helps us to see what is meant by the Stimuli and the source of the dreams”. (Freud 55)

Obviously, the stimulus for that dream is the psychological conflict between the east and the west in the mind of the protagonist. She wants the eastern culture from her motherland in order to nourish her son’s growth. On contrary, he is growing under the influence of the western pressure. The conflict becomes so intense that he was not even spared in her dreams. Asha fears that her son too would leave her like her husband Mahesh.

Finally, on the day when Asha goes to meet her friend Mrinal, she feels very nervous because Mrinal is a symbol of freedom to her. She has a perfect existence with money and freedom. And Asha wonders how Mrinal feels about being single all those years. In the hotel where she met Mrinal, both the women get excited on seeing each other after a long period of time and as a mark of their celebration they drink vodka and start sharing their experience. Asha congratulates Mrinal for having been able to overcome their childhood conditioning and compliments saying that she wishes to mutually change places. Mrinal too accepts the fact that she has been leading a carefree life.
Mrinal, however, starts confessing that in some mornings she does not feel happy over the monotonous and easily predictable life. Asha feels helpless when she sees Mrinal breaking down right in front of her. She too like Mrinal wants to confess about her ruined life. But she cannot do that. She feels as if she is trapped inside a tunnel. Towards the end, both the friends say good bye to each other and depart.

Asha drives back to her home and in a frustrated mood, shuts down the garage door without switching off her car’s engine. The smokes start filling the entire garage and all the sorrows which she has been retaining for all these days come out as tears. She starts crying for Mahesh, for herself, for her son and also for the lonely Mrinal. But above all, she cries for the false impressions that she has about Mrinal and her perfect life. Now, having known that even Mrinal’s life is not a perfect one. Asha does not have enough support to hold on. She understood that the strong foundation on which she has been relying for happiness all these years is not real. And all she can do is to cry and cry.

All these emotions start flooding into her and together with the effects of vodka; create a sense of numbness in her that she is not even aware of the heavy smoky garage. But by the time she manages to stumble out of the garage, she sees her son Dinesh, with a worried look
on his face. Asha feels happy to see her son wearing a blue Pyjama outfit. She considers this eastern outfit as a sign of his willingness to change his western attitude. With great care he helps her to get back into their house and starts vomiting. Dinesh gives her a refreshing drink and takes her to her room and puts her sleep.

Back in her room Asha hates herself for being a complete failure. “I’ve lost my husband and betrayed my friend and now to top it all I’ve vomited all over the sink in my son’s presence” (AM 298). She thinks about the mythological characters like the devoted Sita and the selfless Kunti: “I think of how hard I always tried to be, the perfect wife and the mother like the heroines of mythology I grew upon patient, faithful Sita, selfless kunti” (AM 298). Regarding the importance of these mythological characters, Joseph A. Dorairaj in his book Myth and Literature states “Though they belong to a preliterate and prehistorical era they keep recurring in all ages as a part of our contemporary society” (Dorairaj 27).

All these years, Asha has been trained and tamed by her parents, the society and the Indian culture to think like these mythological characters. Chitra Banerjee uses images of Sita and Kunti as images of Indian culture. Suddenly Asha gets a hallucination of the image of a fired clay bowl that has been shown to her in her art class with a small flaw as a signature of the master potter, the flaw which “he left in all his
later works, believing that it made them more human and therefore more precious” (AM 299). She understands that every human being in this world has problems of his own and that she need not be envious of the ones leading a perfect life because, nothing is perfect in this world. Having realized this truth, she moves away from her self-denial. It is worth quoting Ranjini Jothi Singh’s remarks, “She accepts her own sorrow and miseries as something inevitable” (Jothi Singh 17).

Asha decides that she and her son will not remain in the state of shock and grief just because her husband divorced her. She understands that it is impossible and impractical to follow the images of Sita and Kunti and starts loving herself, her son and, above all, her life with all its flaws, because it is these flaws that make them more human and therefore more precious. A very similar attitude is found in Abha in the story “Affair” when she liberates herself. Both Abha and Asha are obviously not for their own true needs for half of their lives until they can liberate themselves from their allegedly worn-out Indian values. When Chitra Banerjee’s female characters stand up for themselves, America is given a definite role in their awakening.

The western image of the fired clay bowl destroys the traditional image of Sita and Kunti. Finally, in the psychological battle the west wins by its sheer practicality and reality over the idealized and impractical eastern tradition. The title too suitably fits the story, because
it is only after “Meeting Mrinal” the writer makes Asha aware of herself and her own inner strength. Thus, in “Meeting Mrinal” Asha takes a western side in the psychological conflict between the east and the west, which is totally different from the hand taken by the protagonist of the next story “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”.

In the above stories, “Affair”; “Clothes”; “The Word Love” and “Meeting Mrinal” Chitra Banerjee takes up the tone of Anglo American feminists who, according to Peter Barry, “treat literature as a series of representations of women’s lives and experiences which can be measured and evaluated against reality.”(Barry 124) But here in this story, “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”, there is a combination of English feminism, which according to Peter Barry “tends to be Socialist feminism in orientation, aligned with cultural materialism or Marxism…” (Barry 124) With psychoanalytic feminism promoted by French feminists the main topics of these French feminists are mothering and living with enclosure.

The writer deviates from her usual theme to deal mainly with the impact of racism and its influence with regards to the psychological conflict of east and west in this story. She describes vividly how the external conflict of east and west shatters the psychology of the immigrants, especially the women. But apart from racism she also deals
with the evils of class distinctions in India and how racism in American gets a highlighted against the backdrop of class discriminations.

Like all the other stories, the protagonist Jayanti is the narrator, narrating often in the present tense, imparting a voice of intimacy and cinematic credulity. The time factor of this story does not exceed more than two weeks and it is set in Chicago. When the story opens, Jayanti is found traveling in a plane from Calcutta to Chicago. She is all excited about her immigration to America. The line, “I’ve looked forward to this day for so long” (AM 35) is the opening line of this story. It has been written in capital letters, in an ironical way and its importance can only be understood at the end of the story.

Jayanti is so thrilled to be in the plane that she can hardly even breathe. Hastily, she bumps into the airhostess and says ‘sorry’. She is very particular in pronouncing ‘sorry’ in the right American accent. When the airhostess says ‘no problem’. Jayanti whispers the word to herself and falls in love with its exotic syllables. After scrutinizing the American accent, she compares her coarse hair with that of the golden hair of the air hostess and decides to style it fashionably when she reaches Chicago. In fact, she loves even the smell of the air inside the plane, which left a “slight metallic after taste” (AM 36). She licks them “wanting to capture the taste” (AM 36). She compares and contrasts the air in Calcutta with this metallic smelling American air.
As a crown to this excitement, she tastes the delicious American food and she cannot stop appreciating its cleanliness. Again she compares the food provided to her which is spicy with the Indian food her friends would be eating. She pities for them for not having the opportunity to taste the exotic American food. Thus even at the outset of the story the reader finds the protagonist idealizing America.

It is quite interesting to derive a comparison between Jayanti and Sumita. Sumita never gets excited when she lands in America for the first time, whereas Jayanti starts loving America even at the first sight. Jayanti is totally an extrovert, caring much for the worldliness. Sumita is a soul searcher and Jayanti is not. It is important to get a good picture of Jayanti because as the story progresses, she too emerges as a soul searcher like Sumita.

All of a sudden fear creeps into her mind and she starts pondering over her aunt Pratima and her husband Bikram uncle. She wondered whether they would come to receive her in the airport, because though she loves her aunt very much she does not know much about her uncle. She has already written a letter seeking their permission to stay with them and her aunt has written very simply, “yes, of course, but we live very simply” (AM 37).
Jayanti’s mind rattled, unable to decipher any meaning from those simple words in the letter, because all the women she knew in India including her mother were voracious talkers and would spend even a whole day in gossiping. On contrary, her aunt’s crispy letter was a bit of shock to her. She definitely didn’t want to ask her mother about the precision of her aunt’s letter because she feared that her mother would take advantage of it and would prevent her from going to Chicago for her studies. All she could do was to comfort herself that “Americans (anut Pratima had lived there long enough to qualify as one) expressed themselves. Economically” (AM 37). But she was sure that both her aunt and uncle lead a comfortable life because her uncle had his own auto business.

At the same time she wondered why they haven’t kept in touch with their relatives. In a troublesome mood she questioned herself whether they would permit her to stay with them or not. She told herself that “Americans, I’d heard, liked their privacy. They liked their lives to be smooth and uninterrupted by the claims of relatives” (AM 37-38).

However, all these worries disappeared when she saw both her aunt and uncle waiting for her in the Airport. Like a typical Indian girl, she touched their feet for blessings and got kissed by her aunt as if her aunt hasn’t done a thing like this for a very longtime.
Upon seeing her uncle, Jayanti wonders how a marriage could have been arranged between Bikram and her aunt; “A man like Bikram uncle and my aunt, who comes from an old wealthy land owning family. They make him seem so I hesitate to use the word, but only brief, low class” (AM 39). The word low class is in italics. She is definitely class oriented, says Husane Jahan:

She carries within her prejudices. That makes her judge people according to hierarchies of caste, colour and class. She and her aunt come from an upper – class, upper – caste Bengali family and both are described as fair – skinned; while her uncle who is drawn as an unsavory character, is described as dark – skinned and lower class. He is also said to be ugly rude, uncultured and rough yet vulnerable. (Jahan 155)

It’s only when she reaches their dingy Stale smelling apartment that she actually understands the hidden meaning of those words, “but we live very simply”(AM 37). It is very obvious for Jayanti that her uncle is just a mechanic and does not have a business of his own.

As such she does not have a good opinion about her uncle and she is even frightened by the scar that runs up at the side his neck. But for the sake of her loving and innocent aunt she hides her fears about her uncle and her dissatisfaction about their apartment. Pratima
expresses her joy over Jayanti’s arrivals by preparing a variety of delicious dishes. Pratima was even happy to see her husband wearing the kurta – pyjama, presented by Jayanti.

Pratima and Abha share a very similar trait. They constantly want their husbands’ approval. Pratima congratulates Jayanti for getting an admission in the reputed university in Chicago and is happy about Jayanti’s new life in America. Regarding Jayanti’s educational background Felicity Hand in her review establishes the fact that Chitra Banerjee

Does not fall back on the stock character of the helpless Indian Women immigrant at a loss in a foreign a society and lacking the most basic linguistic skills. Divakaruni’s protagonists are educated women frequently either studying or doing dissertations …. Albeit still connected for India codes of conduct and belief systems. (Hand 62)

But, Bikram warns Jayanti that “The Americans hate us. They’re always putting us down because we’re dark - skinned foreigners, Kala admi. Blaming us for the economy, for taking away their jobs. You’ll see it for yourself soon enough” (AM 43). Obviously, Jayanti gets irritated over Bikram’s detest towards America. She actually tastes his bitter tone which resembles the Kerala juice that her mother used to give her. Chitra Banerjee is at her best in using a simile while comparing the
bitterness in the tone of Bikram with that of the Kerala Juice. Smiles like these give relief to the otherwise gripping story.

More than a week passed by and Jayanti still cannot get accustomed to the noisy American nights. To soothe herself, she imagines romantic things like, getting married to an American professor in her university and about her settlement in America. In this regard Husne Jahan remarks, “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…..” (Jahan 156). She hates arranged marriage. She remembers the song which she uses to sing as a girl: “Will I marry a prince from a far – off magic land where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold” (AM 46).

The next day, Jayanti persuades her aunt to go for a walk in the evening. It is here, the complication of the plot starts. Her aunt refuses by saying that Bikram does not like her to go out. He has warned her that it is dangerous to do so. But Jayanti feels otherwise. She considers the warning as a part of her uncle's foul play to keep her aunt shut up in the house and under his control. 

Jayanti gets infuriated by this foul play and she persists her aunt in a still more consistent tone and some how manages to get her aunt out for a walk by assuring that they can soon return before uncle's
arrival. Pratima replies, "He worries too much since ..." (AM 47). There lies an element of suspense in these lines represented by an ellipsis which gets disclosed only at the end of the story.

As they start walking, aunt Pratima enquires about the latest happenings in Calcutta and finally, when they decide to return to their apartment it is almost dark. Hence they start hurrying back. Describing the love for India for an Indian in immigration, Felicity Hand quotes Vijay Mishra's view, "India is a very different kind of home land than for the Indian nationals" (Hand 63-64). Only then, they see four American boys, between eight to fourteen years of age, standing in a group. Even at the very first sight, Jayanti feels some sense of vague fear. But she erases those fears by affirming to herself that they are just boys after all and glances at her aunt who in fact reciprocates the same fear as that of the protagonist.

The boys, after consulting, start calling the protagonist and her aunt as Nigger and throw slush on them. Thoroughly shattered, the protagonist questions herself:

Can't they see that I'm not black at all but an Indian girl of good family? When our chauffeur Gurbans Singh drives me down the Calcutta streets in our silver-coloured fiat, people stop to whisper,
Isn't that Jayanti Ganguli, daughter of the Bhavanipur Gangulis? (AM 51)

These lines clearly show the damage caused by the evils of class system in India. Chitra Banerjee very effectively handles these two issues i.e., racism in America and class system in India because it is only against the backdrop of class system that an Indian reader gets a highlighted picture of racism in America and vice versa if an American reader. The writer is very conscious of the readers from these two countries and manipulates her thinking process in eradicating the social evils of the two countries.

Perhaps, Jayanti would have tolerated the word Nigger from a British person and not from those young American boys "younger than my cousin Anup, saying it as easily as one might say thank you or please. Or no problem" (AM 51). It is a great irony that she compares the word Nigger to the words like ‘thank you’, ‘please’ and ‘no problem’ which sound exotic to her.

When Jayanti and her aunt reached the apartment, they find Bikram already there, waiting for them. When he sees their condition, he gets infuriated and in a fist of anger, beat Pratima and asks her if she had forgotten how the Americans have burned their shop. It's only here, that the suspense gets unfolded. "He worries too much since ..." (AM
The protagonist can now fill up the ellipsis in that statement. It must be, since the fire accident. For the very first time, the protagonist understands her uncle’s detest for this country because like her, he too has been a victim of racism in America and the scar in his neck is just a souvenir of the fire accident. When the protagonist sees the couple settling down consoling and comforting each other with love and care, she feels how little she understands people, particularly her own uncle.

Unlike the other men characters, in Chitra Banerjee's stories, Bikram does not play a flat character role. The writer, through descriptions; conversations and actions of the character, has characterized him in such a way that he gets full marks in the writer's hands and passes off as a round character. All of a sudden, Jayanti desires to go back to Calcutta:

Home, I whisper desperately, home home home, and suddenly, intensely, I want my room in Calcutta, where things were so much simpler. I want the high mahogany bed in which I've slept as long as I can remember, the comforting smell of sun dried cotton sheets to pull around my head. I want my childhood again. But I am too far away for the spell to work, for the words to take me back, even in my head. (AM 55)
As the psychological conflict between the east and the west in the protagonist mind nears its end, she idealizes east, her mother land India, which is just the reversal of the result of the conflict of Sumita in “Clothes”, because at the end, Sumita stays in America whereas Jayanti wants to go back to India. The reader can not help remembering the irony of the words in capital letters, "I'VE LOOKED FORWARD TO THIS DAY FOR SO LONG THAT" (AM 35). When she lands in America for the very first time, Jayanti sights the snow falling and once again is reminded of the old song, in an ironic way, "Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?" (AM 56) which justifies the title of the story, “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”.

Chitra Banerjee describes in this story by portraying the protagonist as well as the other characters as helpless persons. Regarding this helplessness of the protagonist Debjani Banerjee states, "Her experience of powerlessness provides her with the prism with which she can view race and class relations and understand what it means to be South Asian in North America". (Banerjee 12)

Again, only in this story, she makes a rare attempt of not making America a land of promise, because in all other stories like “Clothes”; “Affair”; “Meeting Mrinal” and “The Word Love” she makes America a land of hope. But in this story she is presenting the complexities of
America. Husane Jahan remarks that 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. The writer is very careful in portraying the two women characters, Jayanti and Pratima, in two different perspectives, each significant in its own way. Ranjini Jothi Singh observes, "The woman is thus placed in a variety of roles and each woman works hard at achieving self-fulfillment. Unfortunately, each of these women finds herself a victim and must find a means to free herself” (Jothi Singh16). Thus the conflict is resolved.

The story in its core is realistic, very true to life, explaining the damage made at the psychological level, from the victim’s point of view. No one is spared from racism whether it is the great Mahatma Gandhi. Rabindranath Tagore once said that Jesus could not get into America because first of all, he would not have had the necessary money, and secondly he was an Asiatic. If such great giants would be victimized by racism, how can tiny figures like Jayanti, Pratima, or the male character Bikram, be expected to survive? This is the primary question that lingers in the mind of the reader. Also it has to be noted that for Pratima and Bikram, there is no psychological conflict of east and west, because they both know for sure that their own country India is the place for them and that living in America is misplacement. But for the protagonist
Jayanti, the issue of conflict is different. There is definitely a psychological conflict between east and west in her mind. In the beginning, she idealizes America. Later on, as the story progresses, the issue of racism enters to her mind to play its part. It completely erases the picture of ideal America. At the end she joins Pratima and Bikram psychologically and gains a deeper understanding about India and starts idealizing it. So the east becomes the winner, in an unusual way.

Chitra Banerjee prefers to compare the America seen by the protagonist Jayanti with that of the land seen by Sumita, Abha and Meena. For them America is a land of promise but for Jayanti, America is a dangerous land full of racism and she knows that she has to struggle hard to fit into this dangerous land. The women characters that Divakaruni creates are capable of living in a world in which the individual exists not as a unified one, but rather as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibilities of creating consciousness and inventing identities.

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