CHAPTER 3
Encountering Domestic Space: Marriage, Motherhood and Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Short Stories

Exploring the ‘woman’s questions’ has been of importance lately in diasporic narratives and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* (1995) can perhaps be seen as a manifestation of the concern over the issue of women’s freedom and coming to terms with ‘her-self’. As the title of the book makes apparent, the stories in the collection are all about marital relationships unfolding itself in the distant land of America. Divakaruni’s first collection of stories, they focus entirely on innumerable phases of women’s life. The spotlight is on women as they come into terms with issues such as arranged marriage, motherhood and sexuality, all this coupled with the perils of having to live in a strange land with a sense of ‘exile’, ‘otherness’ and ‘aloofness’. Specific to stories here, they focus on the lives of educated middleclass immigrant Indian women mainly settled in Bay area in California. Marriage is one social institution that characterizes and restricts women’s role. Beena Agarwal in *Women Writers and Indian Diaspora* (2011) notes that –

Culture ideologies are gender specific and women’s predicament in a state of cultural geographical shift generate a complex pattern of feminine mystique. The distinction arises out of three components (a) the realization of inferiority as a woman, (b) realization of insecurity for their inaccessibility to western cultural values and (c) the strong bonding with national cultural identity coupled with the exceptional sensibility for personal relationship. (3)
Lately in the diasporic situation there has been an apparent speeding up of tension in and around gender axioms and on the male–female divide, due to the newer generations of women immigrants when compared to their mothers have become more individualized. Divakaruni here has created such women who struggle to get out of marital confinements and has portrayed their further intricacies at assimilation and identity construction in stories such as “Clothes”, “Doors”, “The Ultrasound”, “Affair” and “Meeting Mrinal”.

For the passive and traditional Sumita in “Clothes”, her move from the conservative Bengal to California—“to live with a man I (she) hadn’t even met” (18) has been both liberating and toughening. Sumita had arrived with high hopes and a fairy-tale vision of America that eventually get shattered as she starts to live with her in-laws in a small two room flat in California. Tom between the two opposing cultures, Sumita finds herself confused, “I grope for something to hold on to, something beautiful and talismanic from my old life” (24). Sumita’s husband’s belongs to a very middle class, average Bengali family that characteristically embodies the notion of the modernized patriarchy that was the norm in the Calcutta society, even in America. In the presence of Somesh’s parents, she is supposed to act as a traditional Indian wife

I must cover my head with the edge of my Japan nylon sari [...] and serve tea to the old women that come to visit Mother Sen, where like a good Indian wife I must never address my husband by his name. Where even in our bed we kiss guiltily, uneasily, listening for the giveaway creak of the springs. (26)

Such a contradiction it is that in spite of her hopes of having a very different life, the immigration promised, her life has turned out to be no different from that of her friends
back in India. At times she feels “caught in a world everything is frozen in place, like a
scene inside a glass paper weight. It is a world so small that if I were to stretch out my
arms, I would touch its cold unyielding edges. I stand inside the glass world, watching
helplessly as America rushes by, wanting to scream” (26).
Divakaruni symbolically uses the imagery of clothes to imply the transformation Sumita
undergoes, a transition from the docile Indian woman to an independent and confident
western woman - “The ‘inner world’ is kept untainted by the multicultural world around
as the jeans and nightie remain hidden in the darkness of her suitcase. The immigrant self
takes on the role of a boundary defining system and does not open its excluding limits to
the other cultures” (Rathor 154). Like the vibrant and modern clothes she tries on, she
secretly yearns for freedom from constraints and restrictions. Clothes are signs of
changing conditions. Saris which Sumita wore represent Indian culture. They are symbols
of happiness and marital bliss, at the same time they stand for entrapment, where as the
western clothes, especially the sunrise-orange T-shirt which she wears, represent her new
found joy in American life. She herself realizes the fact that she is growing westernized.
She entertains dreams of going to college to earn a degree in teaching and pictures herself
in front of a classroom of western girls in “blond pig tails and blue uniforms” (27).
Another dream is to work in her husband's store wearing western outfits. Her American
dreams get devastated when Somesh is killed at his store by burglars. An old woman,
who is a widow herself breaks her bangles and forces her to wear white sari as prelude to
her widowhood. Looking at her own image in the mirror, determined not to wear the
white sari of widowhood, she decides not to return to India with her husband's parents,
where -
I (she) 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 moment, widows in white saris are lowering their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings [...] I am standing in front of the mirror now, gathering up the sari [...] I straighten my shoulders and take a deep breath. In the mirror a women holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds. (33)

Instead, very firmly she decides to follow the dream she and her husband had looked forward to. She takes up her late husband's place in the family business. She takes a resolution to continue her life in the 'new space', breaking the age-old Indian custom and freeing herself from the bondage of tradition. Sumita resembles Bharati Mukherjee's woman protagonist, Shaila from the story “The Management of Grief” from the collection The Middleman and Other Stories. After having lost her husband and two sons in a plane crash Shaila returns to India. But unable to come into terms with traditions and succumb to the sad garb of widowhood she keeps fighting her own destiny.

Like Sumita, for Runu in “The Ultrasound” America comes as a land of dreams, one which will rescue her and her unborn girl child from the cruel clutches of the practice of female infanticide widely practiced in India. Divakaruni believes that violence against women exists in diverse forms and female foeticide is one severe manifestation of cruelty against women. By explicitly criticizing the dreadful practice of female foeticide practiced in India, the story talks about the different notions of motherhood and women's struggles associated with it. By narrating two stories simultaneously, one set in America and the other in Bengal, Divakaruni poignantly depicts the tale of two expecting mothers.
who will face two entirely different predicaments. “Ultrasound” is notable for the striking contrast Divakaruni makes by way of contextualizing Indian patriarchy and American feminism.

The narrator Anjali married to Sunil, lives in San Jose, California, while her cousin Runu, married to Ramesh, lives in Bengal as the obedient daughter-in-law of the traditional Bhattacharjee family. Both women have been keeping close track of each other’s pregnancy. But there is a large difference in their situations. Anjali though alone in her apartment, is happy and eagerly awaits the birth of her child. Living in India Runu’s life is quite different. Her life revolves around household chores and motherhood, more than a personal choice, is an obligation she must fulfill. In order to be happy and accepted in her husband’s family Runu must don the role of a subservient, compliant, unassuming, kind and chaste wife and daughter-in-law. Failure to meet up to the standards set up by the joint family can result in a whole lot of things ranging from disapproval to unsympathetic rejection.

Runu is clearly a survivor of a patriarchal family. The analyses of how the power works within intimate family relationships becomes problematic because the women themselves are not aware of it. The form of patriarchy is so banal, so day to day and so normalized that it is difficult to recognize. Since Runu has to face a form of patriarchy which is non violent in the physical sense of the term, it goes without saying. For women like Runu, who do not realize that they are being restricted, until something outstanding comes up, neither their education, neither economic freedom can free them.
On finding out that the child she is carrying is a girl, Runu’s husband and his family forces her to go for an abortion. Anjali is shocked and horrified on hearing this. Only thing she can suggest to Runu is to leave her husband’s house and save the unborn girl. Anjali suggests that Runu can come to America to stay with her. But her husband Sunil suggests -

That’s easy for you to say from here. Runu’s the one who’ll have to face [the social stigma] everyday. Even if money’s isn’t a problem, what kind of life will it be for her? She certainly won’t have the chance to remarry. She’ll be alone with her daughter the rest of her life, a social pariah, someone the neighbours point a finger at every time she walks down the street. (227)

Taking about the theme of motherhood in the novels *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *Vine of Desire* (2002), which is an elaboration of the story “The Ultrasound” Divakaruni says-

My writing is made more complicated by the fact that I'm exploring the experience of being Indian, of being brought up in a culture where many still consider motherhood a woman’s supreme destiny, and the inability to get pregnant her supreme failure. This is one of the major themes of the novel I'm working on right now. I think I'm not exaggerating when I say that I wouldn't be writing this book had I not had children myself. (Alam 118)

In the story Divakaruni creates male characters that play a hegemonic role in patriarchal society. Anju’s husband Sunil and Runu’s husband Ramesh are shown to be responsible for constricting and entrapping the women by failing to understand them. One area of conflict here is the perception of ‘motherhood’ treated in different ways due to the
different geographical locations i.e., India and America. Indian society is unequal when it comes to the state of women. Cultural norms prevalent from times immemorial give preference for a male child over female.

Adrienne Rich in her book Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976) has shown how the notion of motherhood is seen more as an institution, and less as an experience. The patriarchy sees motherhood as an obligation, a duty on part of the woman, failing which she ceases to be an ideal one. She says –

Motherhood is a dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and, conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free. An active rejection of motherhood entails the development and enactment of a philosophy of evacuation. Identification and analyses of the multiple aspects of motherhood not only show what is wrong with motherhood, but also the way out. (qtd. in Nnaemeka 23).

The notion of motherhood is dealt with in a different way in the story “Meeting Mrinal”. Donning the role of a single mother to a typical American teenager son is challenging at the same time apprehensive for Asha, a woman in her early forties. Her husband Mahesh’s abandonment of her for the white secretary Jessica and her son’s unruly and self centered life creates an emotional breakdown. The dreadful situation brings to the forefront the inner strength that Asha possesses, for now more than anything she is just a mother. Divakaruni implies that, the inherent strength in a woman comes to
the fore only due to necessity. Asha devices her everyday routine to accommodate the needs of her new role —

That wasn’t bad at all. Since Mahesh left, I hardly cook anymore, especially Indian Food. I’ve decided that too much of my life has been wasted mincing and simmering and grinding spices. I’m taking classes instead at the local college, not something fluffy like Quilt making or Fulfillment Through Transpersonal Communication but Library science, which will (I hope) eventually get me a full-time job at the Sunnyvale Public Library where I now work afternoons. (275)

Prior to her husband’s departure Asha had tried her best to attain perfection at household work, an idea propagated throughout her childhood and adolescence through examples of mythical figures – “I think of how hard I always tried to be the perfect wife and mother, like the heroines of mythology I grew up on – patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti” (298). Housework certainly is not a demeaning or self corroding vocation. But the patriarchal mindset has bequeathed it with a lowest value and lesser skills that it has come to be associated solely with women. It is divided on the basis of gender and thus becomes destructive as a weapon aimed at destructing and restricting women within the household.

For Asha it is her role as the mother that at once makes her bold and daring. Her world now revolves around her teenage son Dinesh, who like any other American born Indian kid, is confused, lacks socialization due to the stigma of being fatherless, a loner, who spends time listening to American hard rock music and shuts himself up in his room. During the initial days of her struggle unable to come to terms with the shame, grief and pain Asha even attempts to commit suicide by choking herself to death in the car by not switching off the engine while it gets filled with carbon monoxide. But her
responsibilities as a mother prevent her from doing so. She says: “I want to respond with something positive and significant, perhaps something about how I love him (Dinesh) too much to abandon him no matter how enticing suicide might seem. I want to hold him tight like I used to when he was a little kid and there had been a thunder storm” (298).

Motherhood of an unusual temperament is portrayed by Divakaruni in the story “A Perfect Life”. Meera is an immigrant who, in all possible ways tries to discard her inherent Indianess. In order to achieve this, first thing she does is to start living with her American boyfriend:

Richard was exactly the kind of man I’d dreamed about during my teenage days in Calcutta, all those moist, sticky evenings that I spent at the Empire Cinema House under a rickety ceiling fan that revolved tiredly, eating melted mango pista ice-cream and watching Gregory Peck and Warren Beatty and Clint Eastwood. Tall and lean and sophisticated, he was very different from the Indian men I’d known back home, and even the work he did as a marketing manager for a publishing company seemed unbelievably glamorous. When I was with Richard I felt like a true American. (73)

What makes the American Richard, different from other male characters such as Sunil or Somesh is that he always gave space to his woman and treated her as an individual. Many of Meera’s friends consider her to be strange and would ask her, “Don’t you mind not being married? Don’t you miss having a little one to scramble onto your lap when you come home at the end of the day? (75). Meera loved her freedom and the carefree life which she had at her disposal. For her to be married and to have children, would mean big responsibility. She looks at her married friends and says -
I'd look at their limp hair pulled into an unattractive bun, their crumpled saris sporting stains of a suspicious nature, the bulge of love handles that hung below the edges of their blouses. (Even the ones who made an effort to hang on to their looks seemed intellectually diminished, their conversations limited to discussions of colic and teething pains and Dr. Spock’s views on bed-wetting.) They looked just like my cousins back home who were already on their second and third and sometimes fourth babies. They might as well have not been to America. (75-76)

Or maybe it was just that Meera could not envisage the possibility of a foreigner, like Richard fathering her child - “Would the baby have a thick dark mop of hair, like Indian babies do? Or would it be pink and bald, like American babies? What color would its eyes be?” (89). Meera's life changes with the coming of the orphan boy whom she picks up from the street. She not only keeps the boy with her but to the utter shock of Richard and her friend Sharmila, she also decides to adopt him. Meera develops motherly affection towards the boy which is clearly evades all the boundaries drawn by nationality, language and societal norms.

The rationality and openness Meera acquires, thanks to her long stay in America makes her confident enough to slip into the role of a single mother. While Asha does it by chance, Meera does it by choice. Asha’s timid upbringing has instilled in her the fact that in Indian setting marriage has always been the acceptable ticket to motherhood. The idea of adoption is still largely looked down in India. It is recommended in rarest cases when the couples are not able to have children of their own. Motherhood in America need not necessarily be of a single kind, generally assumed to be a product of marriage. There are different categories such as single mothers, unwed mothers, married but divorced
mothers, foster mothers, and the adoptive kind. Meera's days with the little boy, whom she names Krishna makes her realize the difference between a natural mother and an adoptive one. Despite the fact that the basic premises of motherhood remains the same, as an adoptive mother she has a lot more to adjust to with the child than a natural mother.

Shifting identities and the cumulative stress of the process of acculturation on two women, namely Abha and Meena forms the basis of the story titled “Affair”. Abha still more Indian than American finds it difficult to adjust with her husband Ashok, who is more westernized in thoughts and attitudes. Her friend Meena, on the contrary is smart, beautiful and fun loving. As opposed to her meek husband Srikant, she enjoys a free life in America, away from all qualms. Unlike the other Indian wives, she does not cook but “virtually lives on fast food and Chinese takeout” (239). She is an extrovert who happily mingles with men without any inhibitions. Indifferent in his treatment towards his wife, Ashok belittles Abha in every possible occasion. Abha finds their relationship lacking in emotion. He makes fun of her and accuses her of “prudish Indian upbringing” (234).

Though Abha worked as a columnist for magazines where she wrote about Indian recipes, she could never bring herself to discard her Indian ways of thought and dressing.

Abha is similar to Bharati Mukherjee’s Dimple in her novel Wife, who too faces the trauma of bicultural pulls - “Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tension between American culture and society and traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between feminist desire to be assertive and independent and Indian need to be submissive and self effacing” (Asnani 42). The callous and insensitive attitude of her husband is so much to bear that Abha rethinks and envisages about her role as a wife all these years –
My usual activities – fixing bed tea for Ashoke, setting out his clothes, squeezing fresh orange juice for his breakfast, making blueberry pancakes from a new recipe I had seen in *Good Housekeeping* – seemed monotonous and meaningless. The thought that I’d be doing them for the rest of my life pressed down on me like a sudden unbearable weight. (257)

Women like Asha, Abha and Anju in spite of their education are at times seen crawling before patriarchy. It is clearly not because of their lack of agency but that, years of subservient attitude adopted by their peers have rendered their struggles ineffective. Sara Suleri has talked about such stereotyping based on gender –

…it inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for ‘the good.’ Such metaphoricity cannot exactly be called essentialist, but it certainly functions as an impediment to a reading that attempts to look beyond obvious questions of good and evil. (762)

Abha learns that Meena is in love with an American named Charles. Her predicament bought up by her own miserable life where Meena was constantly left alone and neglected by her husband. Meena says “I kept telling him I hated being alone in the house. It was so deathly quiet, not like India, where something’s always going on – street vendors, servants, and people dropping in to gossip....” (239). It’s this strange predicament of leading a loveless life in a far off land that provokes Meena to have an affair – “tired of doing the same things, the proper things” (251). Her relationship with Charles comes as a revelation and makes her discover her real self. And in Charles she finds the man whom she has been searching for, unconsciously, all her life. “And this
man - he made me feel so special. He understood all the things I wanted out of life - he wanted the same things. With him I didn't feel greedy or guilty or ashamed" (267). Two choices are now open before her. She can either lead a self-sacrificing life like a traditional Indian wife or break free from the marital ties in order to start a new life with Charles. She goes in for the second option.

Meena’s decision to get a divorced and start a life with Charles shock her friend, Abha, who is a woman steeped in Indian values. She is initially hurt, tradition and unadventurous as she is; but Meena’s resolution is an eye-opener which helps her evaluate her own life. She realizes that although she has been “a good wife, a good homemaker”, she has never lived for herself. All her life has been “taken up in being a good daughter. A good friend. And of course a good wife” (269).

Abha imagines the lines of the letter she plans to write to her husband as soon as she reaches home: “The old rules aren’t always right. Not there, not even in India....I feel your resentment growing around me, thick and red and suffocating. Like mine is suffocating you” (270). It dawns upon her that even though problems have not cropped up between them so far, they are “spiraling toward hate and hopelessness. That is not what she wants for the rest of her or his life. According to her, divorce is the better way, each of them freeing the other before it's too late, so that they can start learning, once more, to live” (272).

For Divakaruni’s women in the above mentioned stories immigration is emancipatory, freeing them from the clutches of tradition and patriarchy. Sumita, Asha, Meera, Anju, Runu and Abha all emerge triumphant in the end by making their own
choices. Even though her husband is dead, Sumita takes over his place at the departmental store. Asha and Meera’s happiness is brought about by their respective roles as mothers that they choose for themselves. For Anju and Runu, America seems a safe place where, they can bring up their children happily without enduring the stigma of giving birth to a girl child. America is seen by all of them, as Husne Jahan notes—

...not only as the country that holds many opportunities, but also as a mythical ‘promised land’ along with England, on occasions. In most of the stories in Arranged Marriage, the United States of America stands for freedom, enlightenment and promise of fairytale fulfillment. (qtd.in Kuortti and Mittapalli 89)

But women in stories such as “Silver Pavement, Golden Roofs”, “The Word Love” and “Doors” are depicted struggling hard.

In the story titled “Silver Pavements Golden Roofs” Indian American encounter forms the core. The story is told from the perspective of a young Indian girl, essentially a Bengali, who goes to the United States as a college student with many dreams, one being that of “marrying a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold” (46). She feels the difference from the time she boards the flight, “The air inside the plane smells different from the air I’ve known all my life in Calcutta...” (36). Commenting on Jayanti’s high hopes and aspirations about life in America, Ila Rathor in her article “Alone Among Aliens” says

Repeated confessions illustrate this need to overthrow the suffocating non-identity imposed by the patriarchal society. Akin to this need is also the desire to live the American dream. This longing for financial stability and the yearning to enjoy the
moneyed status signals the beginning of an end to ‘otherness’. Time after time the immigrant experience highlights the wish to break free the patriarchal fretters and embrace the so called western concepts of liberty, democracy and freedom.

(Rathor 151)

But the reality around her shatters her dream world. The apartment of her Aunt disappoints her: “This apartment smells of stale curry. It is crowded with faded, overstuffed sofas and rickety end tables that look like they've come from a larger place. A wadded newspaper is wedged under one of the legs of the dining table” (40). Her dreams and aspirations are dampened and further complicated by her encounter with her immigrant aunt’s unsophisticated husband and the racist slurs of the neighborhood boys.

The narrator Jayanti Ganguly finds herself standing at the crossroads wherein she must be true to herself, which demands her to stand up for a postcolonial way of thinking in response to her encounter with racism, at the same time she herself slips on to the colonialist binaries, which makes her despise her black skinned uncle who belongs to the lower class. The story begins with Jayanti boarding a plane to United State from Calcutta. She says, “I have looked forward to this day for so long that when I finally board the plane I can hardly breathe” (35). Jayanti and her aunt both come from an upper caste Bengali family and are fair skinned, while her uncle, whom she addresses as ‘Bikram uncle’ is dark skinned and from a the lower caste. Jayanti describes him as-

Bikram uncle is a short, stocky man dressed in greasy mechanic’s overalls that surprise me. He has a belligerent moustache and very dark skin and a scar that runs up the side of his neck. (Had it been hidden in the wedding photo under the garlands) I am stuck at once by how ugly he is- the garlands had hidden that well-
how unlike Aunt, who stoops a bit to match her husband’s height, her fine, nervous hands worrying the edge of her shawl as she scans the travelers emerging from Immigration. (38)

Jayanti’s views about the uncle are prejudiced by her colonialist opinion of associating dark skin-color with savagery and brutality. This is an illustration of how ways of internal colonization works within colonialism. Jayanti represents how the privileged natives colonize the less privileged lower caste natives. While fantasizing about the man in her life, Jayanti’s imaginary prototype of the male figure is essentially a fair skinned, sophisticated young romantic, who by all means resembles the west or the civilized. She imagines-

   My lobbed hair swings around my face as I spiritedly argue against the handsome professor’s interpretation of Dreiser’s philosophy. I discourse brilliantly on the character of Sister Carrie until he is convinced, and later we go out for a dinner to a quiet little French restaurant. Candlelight shines on the professor’s reddish hair, on his gold spectacle frames. On the rims of our wineglasses. (45)

The character of the aunt seems to be that of an obedient Bengali wife, who has literally shut herself up in her household in Chicago. She looks after her husband, cooks for him his favorite dishes, and tries to retain in all possible ways her innate Bengali traditions. But Jayanti literally acts as a foil to her. Jayanti believes in adapting to the American way of living, which eventually is the reality for her. She tries in all possible ways to assimilate into the varied cultural mosaic. Even the neighborhood boys’ racial slur of “nigger nigger” remind her of British colonialism and American slavery, Jayanti is stunned but only briefly as she knows, in order to live in America, she must face such
situation. But on the other hand, for the aunt, who has been living in the United States for many years now, the incident is actually a shame a traumatic experience. Aunts notion of looking at the American hostility is somewhat shaped by her husband's opinion about the Americans. Her husband Bikram remarks, "The Americans hate us. They're always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, kala admi. Blaming us for the damn economy, for taking away their jobs. You'll see it for yourself soon enough". (43)

Jayanti thinks that the slurs may have been suitable, "in the mouth of a red-faced gin-and-tonic drinking British official, perhaps, in his colonial bungalow, or a sneering overseer out of Uncle Tom's Cabin as he plies his whip in the cotton fields (51). What shocks her more is that they were just young boys, immature for their age to come up with such abuse. Jayanti instead of complicating the whole issue dismisses it as a street prank. She readily accepts the fact that in order to survive in America, she must accept the 'many colored hand', and the 'complexities of race and class'.

India women in the diasporic situation are sometimes subjected to the west's appropriation of them as oriental, thus 'mysterious' and 'exotic'. They are thus caught in the ambivalent situation of being both the 'racialized other' and the 'desired', both 'ugly' and 'exotic'. Sayantini Dasgupta in A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America observes –

Indeed, in white America's categorization of racial others as sexually deviant, the asian - Indian immigrant community is caught in a dual metaphor of both asexual and hypersexual...In this context, the "exotic" Indian American women is associated with the Kama Sutra, primal sexual energy, and other images of
hypersexuality. Simultaneously, the alien, “ugly” Indian American woman is associated with chastity, sexual repression, and hyperintellectualism. (122)

Immigration seems to be a gilded promise for many young immigrants like Jayanti, who conjure up America as the land of ‘the silver pavements and golden roofs’. Vinay Kirpal opines that this tendency amidst the immigrants can be seen as an aftermath of the “repressionist colonial/neocolonial policies of the colonizer/de-colonizer” (3). Even though now in America, Jayanti and her aunt face racist attacks and segregation among the majority white population. This might be “the problem of ethnocentricity repeatedly at the hands of logo centricity” (Barker et. al. 148).

The story, “Doors” illustrates the maladjustments between an American Born Confused Desi, Preeti and her husband Deepak. Preeti, a woman who values the individuality and need for private space is raised in United States, and represents in all possible way the American virtues of freedom, individuality and privacy. On the other hand her husband Deepak, is born and brought up in India and has immigrated to USA recently.

Irrespective of her mother’s apt warnings – “It’ll never work; I tell you….Here you are, living in the U.S since you were twelve. And Deepak – he is straight out of India” (183), Preeti marries Deepak. Confronted with the same fears Deepak’s friends too react the same way – “She has been here so long it’s almost like she was born in this country. And you know how these ‘American’ women are, always bossing you, always thinking about themselves…” (185).
The difference in ways of living and the attitude towards life of these two characters is by large very big. But in order to prove to the society that what matters in the end is love; both Preeti and Deepak begin a lifelong relationship, well-built than the arranged marriage of her parents and his relatives. Deepak knew that, he needs to accept Preeti, “to accept the unique needs of this (Preeti) exotic creature- Indian and yet not Indian- who had by some mysterious fortune become his wife” (189).

The so called happy marriage seems to fall apart with the coming of Deepak’s friend Raj. Preeti herself remarks, “It all started when Raj came to live with us” (183). Raj, a true Indian in every sense is everything that Preeti despises, a complete opposite to the American sophistication and manners. Raj’s long stay in the house brings certain changes in Deepak, which Preeti endures with jealously and envy. Raj’s presence invokes in Deepak the memories and nostalgia of the home he left. With Raj around he finds it easy to be more at home, more Indian in his ways. They both rekindle their friendship and watch bollywood movies and converse in typical Indian accents.

Deepak and Preeti have totally different notion about the idea of space and privacy. Preeti brought up as the only child lacks the sense of sharing space with others. Her idea of privacy and individual space is totally westernized. For her privacy meant closed doors. She says to Deepak, “I guess I’m just a private person. It’s not like I’m shutting you out. I’ve just always done it this way. Maybe it has something to do with being an only child” (189). On the other hand Deepak was puzzled by this entire door shutting –

He had grown up in a large family. and although they had been affluent enough to possess three bedrooms- one for father, one for mother and his two sisters, and the
third for the three boys— they had never observed boundaries. They had constantly
spilled into each other’s rooms; doors always left open for chance remarks and
jokes. (189)

What Preeti believes is the western feminist idea of individual selfhood. Preeti by way of
emphasizing and claiming a space of her own, tries to reclaim her individuality and her
identity as a woman and as a wife, which seems to in danger with the arrival of Raj who
intrudes her privacy and possesses her husband. Preeti’s obsessive door locking could
represent her subconscious attempt to shut out any traces of Indianess that might invade
her life and psyche. Deepak, who is an Indian in every sense of the word associates this
freedom and openness to love and family ties which he tries to keep alive even in
America. Divakaruni’s emphasize is on the fact that, irrespective of where you live, the
woman must have a room of her own.

The notion of individual space differs when it comes to male and female. It has
been of great interest to note how space is gender constructed. Andrzej Zieleniec in his
book Space and Social Theory (2007) observes that —

Feminist analysis makes clear that women and men occupy or are positioned
differently in space. Space thus has a gendered dimension that concomitantly
ensures gender is spatially organized....Thus there is a need for an explicit
acknowledgement of the differences that women experience and perceive in their
lives as well as the structural circumscribing of opportunities that can be
illuminated via analysis of the space the woman have predominantly forced to
inhabit. (160)
Divakaruni in *Arranged Marriage* brings to the forefront the problem of immigrant women who have managed to cross the boundaries in spite of the hostility of the larger white community. Evident from her stories such as “Clothes” and “Silver Pavement, Golden Roofs” is that racial discrimination and hatred are very much part of the lives of immigrant. Strength lies, not in falling a victim to it but in gaining experience that helps these women to survive, is what Divakaruni brings forth. Divakaruni in the stories has captured the subtle ways in which the inherent patriarchy operates within the Bengali traditional society. The male prototypes created in the stories, whether it is Sunil and Ramesh in “The Ultrasound”, Deepak in “Doors” or Ashok in “Affair”, they try to put the pretence of providing security to their wives, gradually beguiling them. Overpowering the individuality of the women with their overpowering masculinity the male snares the women into a subtle and inconspicuous way of slavery.

Women like Abha in “Affair”, Preeti in “Doors” and Asha in “Meeting Mrinal” are testimonies of how white American culture have forced these immigrant women to discover selfhood, identity and freedom. Preeti shuts the door of her inner recesses to her husband, who does not acknowledge her plea for a space of her own. Abha in “Affair” is tired of the already set roles for her such as a dutiful wife, obedient daughter and subservient woman, that she finally moves out and leads a separate life for she believes – “The old rules aren’t always right. Not here, not even in India” (270). Single mother Asha in “Meeting Mrinal” does not need the promise and security of her husband anymore, for she thinks she can work and be capable of looking after her teenage son.
Indian women in diasporic situation are encountering another compound issue of being the preservers of tradition and at the same time attempting assimilation. Women as cultural caretakers come under ever increasing pressure to sustain Indian customs –

The burden of preserving this image of a coherent, united community, faithful to its ancestral customs and tradition is, to a large extent, placed on the shoulders of the women. The site for preservation of India, its culture and its tradition is the family. The domestic space, domain of the woman, is where Indianess is affirmed. The Indian woman is expected to be responsible for maintaining this Indian home in the diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood. (Kuortti and Mittapalli 104)

Women in Divakaruni’s stories try to find an identity other than that of wife and mother – “The situation of women is that she, a free and autonomous being like all creatures, nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other” (Beauvoir 173). The women here remind us of Henrik Ibsen’s character Nora from his play *A Doll’s House* (1879). Treated all throughout her life as a mere doll, first by her father, and later by her husband Torvald, Nora towards the end of the play, realizes the need to fulfill her duties towards herself. In the years leading up to the agony of being a dutiful daughter, an obedient wife and a loving mother, she had forgotten to live for herself. When she proclaims her decision to leave Torvald, he reminds her of her duty –

Helmer: Before all else, you’re a wife and a mother.
Nora: I don’t believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are ... or at all events, that I must try and become one.” (Act iii, 145)

Susan Stanford Friedman in her book *Autobiography and Questions of Gender* says—“A...man has the luxury of forgetting his...sex. He can think of himself as an ‘individual’. Women.... Reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex... have no such luxury” (2). By making her women characters speak for themselves, Divakaruni has given voice to the so far pregnant silence and the psyche of the female diasporic self, wherein by way of adapting and adopting to the alien country the women understands her innate potential. Ila Rathor beautifully puts this in words, while she compares the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee—

Women as a part of the cultural ethos cannot escape the gendered roles of passivity, acceptance, and subservience. Whether in India or the west they need to make choices which might prove to be a difficult task....This signals that the continuity of the Indian patriarchal system is preserved and sustained, at the cost of women, to mark the boundaries of the immigrant ‘self’ in the multicultural environment....Divakaruni and Mukherjee both, while delineating the options, have taken care to stress the fact that a multicultural world might offer a range of choices to the Indian woman where previously she had none. (Rathor 157)

Published in the year 2001, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, a collection of nine stories depicts with compassion and poetic renderings the lives of immigrants at crossroads. As the blurb of the book describes—“Divakaruni captures lives at crossroad moments- caught between past and present, home and abroad,
tradition and fresh experience" (n.pag.). Pertaining to the tradition of diaspora, the stories in the collection emphasize and intelligently depict with awe and bewilderment the inevitable possibilities of change. In contrast to her women characters in *Arranged Marriage* who are caught up in the duality of domestic and individual space, the women she creates here are totally different – aging mother, a guilt ridden daughter, siblings who are drifting apart, a young and ambitious woman in search of financial independence and so on. In praise for the collection, as compiled in the jacket of the book, Junot Diaz keenly observes –

A current of compassion and heartache runs through this remarkable collection – from old immigrant conundrums Divakaruni has spun something wondrous and new; she has created the stories that will require in this Age of Diasporas. Divakaruni is a brilliant storyteller; she illuminates the world with her artistry and shakes the reader with her love. (n. pag.)

The diverse range of the stories of this volume is noteworthy. Most of them depict life in East and West perceptively. In an interview with Esha Bhattacharjee published in *The Sunday Statesman* on 2 February 2003, when asked what she felt she was — an Indian, an American, or an Indian living in the United States, she confessed: “I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I’m an Indian, but living in America for 19 years has taught me many things. It has helped me look at both cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate” (Alam 119).

The opening story “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter” recounts the bittersweet experience of cultural shock experienced by old Mrs. Dutta who has come to Sunnyvale,
California to stay with her son Sagar and daughter-in-law Shyamoli. An old widow now, she has a sense of old world duty instilled in her and this motivates her more than anything else to move to America. But very soon she realizes that she is a total misfit in the family of her son and her old and worn out values are just not meant to be the way they were back in Calcutta.

Mrs. Dutta undergoes the difficulties all first generation must endure – “Though it has now been two months, she still has difficulty sleeping on the Perma Rest mattress Sagar and Shyamoli have bought specially for her. It is too American- soft, unlike the reassuringly solid copra ticking she is used to at home. Except this is home now, she reminds herself” (1). Her traditional Bengali ways are a hindrance to the ultra modern sophisticated lives of her son and his family. The joys of motherhood are of no rescue. Her habit of keeping the alarm at five every morning and getting up to chant the mantras are dealt with displeasure. She cannot help it - “But the habit, taught to her by her mother—in-law when she was a bride of seventeen, a good wife wakes before the rest of the household…” (2). Mrs. Dutta’s habit of drying her saris outside also invites contempt - “It’s just not done, not in a nice neighbourhood like this one. And being the only Indian family on the street, we have to be extra careful” (14). As readers we get to see a sneak peek into the mind of Mrs. Dutta through the letter she intends to writes to her friend Mrs. Basu who is in Calcutta. Mrs. Basu’s letters to her enquire whether she is happy in the foreign land. Her greatest dilemma is to answer to the question whether she is happy in America or not. Since she does not know what the meaning of happiness has become, she postpones the reply now and then.
Divakaruni in the story brilliantly depicts the growing disparity in the attitude of the first and second generation through the characters of Mrs. Dutta and Shyamoli. They are held in sharp contrast to each other. Shyamoli, a second generation immigrant is educated and is a working woman. Dressed up in shimmery skirts and blouses, she with her unusually white skin “could pass for an American” (3) while Mrs. Dutta’s skin is “brown as roasted cumin” (3). Shyamoli believes in the freedom of women and supports the equal division of household labour between man and woman. Mrs. Dutta is shocked to note that her son equally shares the household chores. Shyamoli remarks “This is why Indian men are so useless around the house. Here in America we don’t believe in men’s work and women’s work” (15).

During the day time when she is left alone in the house, she busies herself in the kitchen where she feels she has recovered her spirits. She utilizes this time to prepare elaborate three course meal which she feels the family has been deprived of this far – “At least the family’s eating well since I arrived...proper Indian food, rutiis that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee” (9). But Shyamoli complains of high cholesterol, which according to her is harmful. Mrs. Dutta cannot understand such terms, for her cooking these Bengali foods is her means of showing love. Having lived all her life in a busy Calcutta neighbourhood with people at home all the time, the loneliness she faces in America is unbearable. Though she wants to get out of the house and meet her neighbours she is reprimanded by Shyamoli, who reminds her of how precious privacy is to Americans – “You didn’t just drop in on people without calling ahead. Here everyone was busy: they didn’t sit around chatting, drinking endless cups of sugar tea” (21).
Growing aloof from the older generation the grandchildren are typical Americans—"The children....Like so much in this country they have turned out to be – yes, she might as well admit it – a disappointment" (9). With little affection or love towards the grandmother, they busy themselves with T.V shows which Mrs. Dutta cannot even comprehend. They live their own world shutting themselves up in their rooms—"...their American voices of power rangers, Spice Girls, and Spirit Week at school, she almost cannot believe it" (13).

Convinced that she cannot spend the rest of her life in America, hope of assimilation diminishes day by day. The gap between her and her son’s family is so wide that it clearly marks how easily they have modified themselves to a life in America. The necessity for a mental re-orientation proves to be a upsetting for the old mother. America for her is a place that lacked warmth of relationships, where everyone was at a mad rush to make money and live their life as they wish. Mrs. Dutta finally writes down a letter to Mrs. Basu. The letter, philosophical and temperamental in tone, dwells deep into the recesses of her mind where she works out hard to find the meaning of real happiness. Convinced that happiness is not "about being with family" (33) she figures that it is in being loved, being wanted and being cared for. This is possible only if she returns home, to Calcutta, to her people. The letter closes with subtle hints that Mrs. Dutta will soon return back to Calcutta. Beena Agarwal observes that—

Mrs. Dutta’s anguish is again a justification of Divakaruni’s vision that Indian immigrants suffer the loss of emotional bonding in personal relationship. Divakaruni’s emphasis on the craving for personal relationship in the life of women immigrants has come close to the vision of Bharati Mukherjee. (77)
"The Intelligence of Wild Things" shows the hitherto unseen and adverse effect the peril of immigration has upon the relationship in a close knit Bengali family. At the heart of the story is the narrator, a young woman who is visiting her younger brother Tarun in Vermont. The visit of hers has a definite purpose, to break the news to him about their ailing mother back in India and to convince him to visit her at least once.

The narrator has been living in America for over a decade now. A much self-centered life with her husband Sandeep and two daughters. Her arrival in America was a choice she made as any other girl with ambition of crossing the sea would do “...agreed to have a marriage arranged with Sandeep mostly because he lived abroad...” (41). Her brother on the other hand “never wanted to come to America” (41). That attached, he was to his mother, that she had to force him to move to America. The mother feared for his safety as Calcutta was gripped in the fear of naxal uprisings, where the youth were mainly targeted. Hence Tarun’s arrival in America was a persuasive one, an outcome of his own mother’s intelligent maneuvers, and he as a result distanced himself from her.

The visit brings the sister face to face with certain realities that astonish her. Her brother, her only closest blood relation in the alien land, has grown too far from her that their relationship now lacks the old warmth and selfless love. While they travel in the ferry crossing the chilly lake, they look more like two strangers than siblings. The move to America has affected Tarun so much that after his initial days of confusion and shock he has distanced himself from his mother and sister. It is a prelude to his life in America that will for sure lack the warmth and love of any true relationship. The sister is taken over by guilt as she feels she is to an extant responsible for his brother’s behavior. His
sense of abandonment first by his mother and later by his sister has made him grow as a
detached person, devoid of emotions or sense of responsibility.

Trying to be one among them Tarun now has a white girlfriend. The sister’s
conservative bend of mind still cannot take it “You never told me you had a girlfriend,
especially a white one! What is Ma going to say when she finds out” (37-38). Even after
her long stay in America, the attachment she has with Calcutta, her mother, the Bengali
tradition still has not loosened its grip over her mind. She still yearns for her days in
Calcutta –

This is what I would have brought to Tarun today: that dim kitchen, our own
cave, with its safe odors of coriander and fenugreek; the small blue glow of the
gas stove in the corner; three people, cross legged o the cool cement, making food
for each other while the stories wrapped us in their enchantment. (40)

Salman Rushdie has remarked “To migrate is to experience deep changes and wrenches
in the soul, but the migrant is not simply transformed by his act, he also transforms the
new world. Migrants might well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that
newness can emerge” (Kuortti and Mittapalli 154). Exile in Tarun brings about a sense of
homelessness and nostalgia. In his case it involves the sense of punishment he has to
undergo, knowing well the fact that return is a distant dream that is impossible. His sense
of identity is at first place defined by his collective memories of the past, his idea of
home and sense of belonging and also the lack of it. In his case the most formative
feature of his identity formation in the adopted land is brought upon by his sense of
exclusion. Tarun undergoes the psychological syndrome of withdrawal, blaming oneself
and developing self-hate thus trying to distance himself from his own peer group. He
thus negates his native Indianess and attempts assimilation. He moves towards the white community by seeking acceptance by way of integration.

Lives of two women is poignantly compared and contrasted in a deeply disturbing tale titled “The Blooming Season of Cacti”. The women Mira and Radhika represent two facets of a woman’s life. Mira the narrator is educated, free willed and ferocious. Reminding the readers of Bharati Mukherjee’s heroine Jasmine, of the novel by the same name, Mira travels through the vast expanse of California to find her own destiny and to live her own life without the shackles of patriarchy and moral policing of tradition. Radhika on the other hand is an uneducated village belle who lands in California, by the mercy of her husband Malik. Entrapped in an apartment that her businessman husband owns, she pines for freedom, happiness, respect and all the more love. Immigration here is projected as freedom for one, and entrapment for another.

Holder of a troubled past, Mira lands at his brother’s house in Dallas escaping the horrors of the Hindu – Muslim riot in Bombay – “How else could I begin to bear the memories, the city smoldering in the aftermath of riot? Hindus and Muslims, that inexplicable frenzy, smoke that rose solid in hundred pillars. On the streets the screams of women whose accents you could not have distinguished from mine” (169). Though she escaped the rioters by hiding in the water tank above her house her mother falls a victim to the mounting violence. A move to America was inevitable in such a circumstance and was her only hope to start anew. In her imagination she painted pictures of “open country, dust rising from the hooves as herds headed home. Fountains of iridescent oil. Cougars. Cowboys with creased smiles and eyes blue as sapphire stone. Behind us in the
night, rockets would take off for the moon, searing a path brighter than any meteor” (169). But what welcomed her here was a dull two bedroom apartment and the rigid and tradition bound life of her brother and sister-in-law who were too eager to marry her off to any Indian stranger who passed by. Her sister-in-law cautious in her ways remarked – “time doesn’t wait for women to recover. Today men are buzzing around Mira. Tomorrow, who knows? (183). Marriage according to them was the only cure for Mira’s troubles. Its then that Mira decided to move out of her brother’s house and travel west. Her decision had invited a lot of criticism – “He explained how dangerous it was, a girl traveling America alone” (175). Traveling through the desert Mira lands at Malik’s restaurant where she gets a job that of the cashier. Radhika and Mira are drawn closer to each other. Mira forms a sympathetic bond with Radhika after learning that Radhika is Malik’s second wife. A wedding arranged in haste were Malik had clearly taken advantage of Radhika’s poverty. On knowing that Malik had cheated her, she had even attempted suicide. Reduced to a status of his mistress, she is pushed to a small apartment where Malik meets her every Friday night for sexual favours.

For Radhika immigration is not synonymous to freedom and happiness. And entrapment and sexual exploitation by her husband is heart wrenching. Her situation is what might be termed as a kind of sexual colonialism, where the relationship between the man and woman is one that of dominance and subservience. It also refers to the imbalance of power between the two sexes. It’s a relationship between sex and power and as Kate Millet puts it “interior colonization” has been achieved. Men are the colonizers and women colonized.
Divakaruni in the story has used the metaphor of cactus blooming in the desert to symbolize the friendship between the two women. Together they read a book on cactus—

“The blooming season for cacti is very short, a few weeks at most in the spring. But during this time the barren and sere landscape is transformed by the vibrant coronets of hedgehog cactus, candy cactus and prickly pear that push out through the plants spiny armament” (186). Radhika’s life is symbolic of the vast desert of California. Devoid of life’s simple pleasures and bliss of marriage it’s arid and dried up. Patriarchy has always shut its ears to women’s unbridled desires. The moral policing of the society have always been harsh on women who love to explore their individuality and freedom, or even right to their own body. Radhika’s unrequited love from the side of Mira is opposed to the love she receives from Malik which is purely sexual in nature. Mira’s friendship is like the spring in the desert that blooms and spreads happiness. But like the desert spring it is also short lived as Mira falls in love with Ajit, her attempt to find permanence in a life of transit.

The title story “Unknown Errors of Our Lives” presents how a second generation immigrant Ruchira, through an evaluation of her own errors in the past comes into terms with the errors committed by her fiancé Biren. For immigrants like Ruchira life abounds imperfections and errors. It is after she discovers her book of errors that she realizes the ultimate truth that it is maladjustments and shortcomings that constitute the immigrant existence. And being an immigrant her life is not foolproof. Ruchira had prepared herself for an arranged marriage with Biren, whom her aunt describes as—

Not only is the boy just two years older than our Ruchira and handsome looking, 173 centimeters tall, and holds a fast-rising job in the renowned Charles Schwab
financial company, he is also a nephew of the Boses of Tullygunge — you recall them, a fine upright family — and to top it all he has intelligently decided to follow our time-tested traditions in his search for bride. (213)

Neither Ruchira nor Biren, could fit into the moulds of well behaved, demure an culture oriented Indians, their respective families expected them to be. Ruchira had her own share of adventures, “She had dated in college, Indian boys and white boys and black boys and even, once, a young man from Bolivia with green eyes” (214). And so did Biren, who had confessed all of it to her, “How he dropped out of college for a semester during his freshman year to play electric guitar with a band aptly named The Disasters….How, for a short time last year, he got involved with a woman who had a knife tattooed on her chest, even though he knew she did drugs” (216).

Ruchira’s only association with India is through her grandmother, a woman whom she loves more than anyone else. Her love towards the grandmother forced her to do things out of her usual ways. She tried to learn how to read and write Bengali “just so she would be able to read her grandmother’s letters and reply to them without asking her parents to intervene” (220). It was the death of her grandmother that brought Ruchira closer to India. Her love for her grandmother, her ways of life etc influenced her to paint a series based on Indian myths and legends. She painted the monkey god Hanuman and then the Kama Dhenu. Her last painting of the series was Jatayu from Ramayana, who died trying to save Sita from Ravana. She painted Jatayu’s feathers in saffron, white and green, symbolic of Indian flag. Painting for her comes as a way to control her frustration, relive her own experience and understand her self-worth.
In the face of the impending arranged marriage, Ruchira confronts Arlene, Biren’s former girlfriend now pregnant with his child, who drops at her door. Even though she knows the truth now, Ruchira keeps calm. Instead, she transforms her sorrow into a beautiful painting which she had been working on, the painting of “kalpataru, the wish fulfilling tree” (226). The love she has for Biren overpowers her anger and her sense of having been cheated. But she cannot claim that, for “He had never pretended Ruchira was his first. How could she blame him for a past he had admitted to right at the start, just because it had come to her door wearing a pierced eyebrow, an implosive, elfish smile? (233).” Ruchira conjures that the painting will have a bird with a boy-face, inevitably of the little boy’s, Arlene and Biren’s son. He will have spiky golden hair like his mother and square chin like the father. Ruchira’s only boon she needs from the kalpa taru is that, when Biren asks her about the image, she should be empowered to ask him back. This is how she intends to reply to his deeds, by confronting him later one day without fear.

Ruchira’s broad sense of mind, her ability to forgive and forget the errors committed by Biren, points to a new direction in which the institution of arranged marriage has been modified in the context of diaspora. Had it been India, incidents such as this would be considered blasphemous and insulting enough to call off the marriage. Ruchira and Biren’s long years of stay in America have broadened their perspective and have made them realize that no one is perfect. Life consists of imperfections and inadequacies, a book of errors both known and unknown.

After having lived long in adopted homelands, it is difficult as well as problematic for the immigrant to make the journey homeward. The image of homeland that is frozen
in the imagination of the diasporic communities is the one they perceive at the time of departure. In his article “The diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora”. Vijay Mishra states—“Diasporas construct homelands in ways that are very different from people of the homelands themselves. For an Indian in the diaspora, for instance, India is very different kind of homeland than for the Indian national” (424). Return might not be that easy as they might have conjured up. In many cases the immigrants once again have to go through a similar process of change and assimilation they experienced while settling abroad, only difference being it is in reverse order. Through the stories “The Lives of Strangers” and “The Names of Stars in Bengali” Divakaruni seems to throw light on the complex process the return journeys constitutes. Divakaruni in these stories strategically place two young immigrant women, back in India for a short while only to prick the bubble of the utopia image that the diasporans built up in their imagination while abroad.

The diaspora’s involvement to the homeland, their relationships are complex and dialectic, which invariably depend of varied aspect of geographical location, religion, class and caste. As immigrants they are temporarily removed from the mechanism such parameters hold within. But once they return their identity is further negotiated based on these rigid terms. Divakaruni uses these women’s narrative to expose the realities of inherent evils such as superstitions, caste system, class based division and double standards of the Indian society.

Leela in “The Lives of Strangers” is trying to absorb as much of India as possible while on a short visit after long years. A second generation immigrant, Leela was brought up in America savouring all the freedom, good education and individualism. Her parents.
as opposed to other first generation Indian immigrants were liberal. They supported her
decision to become a computer programmer. They had even approved of her relationship
with the white man Dexter, another programmer. But unfortunately the relationship did
not last long and after the breakup Leela tried to commit suicide only to be saved by the
timely intervention of police and medical team. Leela always felt that, in America true
emotion and lasting relationships are always lacking. It is then that with a reeling heart
she decides to come to India in search of love and stable relationships. But before her
departure she is aptly warned by her parents – “Try to stay away from the crowds....Just
be sure to take your shots before you go, drink boiled water at all times, and don’t get
involved in the lives of strangers” (61).

Her initial encounter with Calcutta seems to be heartwarming. Her hitherto
unknown aunt takes her in happily. Leela tries to transform herself into one among them
in cotton saris, matching bindis and tries to converse in Bengali. She is heartily fed on rui
fishes, moglai parathas and so on, “she was thrilled by the vibrant unreality of the life she
was living” (63). Leela embarks on a pilgrimage with the idea of seeing real India with
her aunt. It is here that Leela gets involved in ‘the life of a stranger’ – Mrs. Das, an old
widow. The other middle aged Bengali women detest the presence of Mrs. Das since they
consider her unlucky. Mrs. Das’s husband had died soon after their marriage and she was
thrown out of her husband’s household. Even her son and his wife are not ready to
provide her shelter. This make the women comment “some people are like that, born
under an unlucky star. They bring bad luck to themselves and everyone close to them”
(58).
Leela who does not believe in such trivial superstition forms a sympathetic bond with Mrs. Das, who becomes a mother like figure for her. She associates with Mrs. Das's sufferings and her sense of loneliness, that she starts taking care of the old woman. Leela thinks – “How amazing that it should be a stranger who has opened her like a dictionary and brought to light this word whose definition has escaped her until now” (69). With Leela by her side Mrs. Das is confident that she can take the journey further. But this happiness is short lived as terrible things happen as they both are severely injured in a snow storm. Leela is harshly rebuked by her aunt for being with Mrs. Das whom they all find responsible for the tragedy, an ill omen. Blinded by the beliefs Leela too starts thinking if it might be true.

Leela’s experiences in India leads her into a sense of disillusionment. The lack of human sentiments, of culture and most importantly of compassion among the other women in the group bewilders her more than any of the diasporic experience she might have faced in America. Beena Agarwal in her evaluation of this story comments –

Divakaruni emphasizes the uncompromising faith in human values that are rooted in Indian soil. More than cultural content, her diasporic sensibility accepts the significance of personal relationship that contributes to redeeming despair. This dimension of diasporic sensibility suggests that bicultural experiences are not a matter of cultural confrontation only but it also stands for the aftermath of colonialisms in which community of immigrants makes persistent search for making and remaking of identities. (81)
Second generation immigrants are always at a loss, where they seem to lose their grip over their culture, value system, native language and native Indianess. "The Names of Stars in Bengali" depict the dilemma of an immigrant mother, belonging to the first generation wailing over the predicament of her young sons who are visiting her village in rural Bengal for the first time. The story dwells on the premises of the troubles they face as visitors while trying to assimilate into Indian way of life. Divakaruni, who hitherto had been talking about assimilation process of Indians in America, reverses the situation to expose the troubles of second generation immigrant children. Divakaruni captures with ease the after effects that the visit of the mother and her American born sons creates in the village.

The initial days are fun filled as the mother is happy to see that her children are particularly fascinated by the village. They loved the bamboo forest, listened to the bedtime stories narrated by their grandmother and loved playing in the village pond – “Then they’d laugh again, they hadn’t laughed so much in their entire lives, they’d never thought India would be this much fun, they wished they could stay forever” (239). Their inability to understand Bengali comes as a drawback as it restricts the boys from communicating freely with the larger crowd in the household consisting of great uncle, aunts, servant women and the unending visitors. The children are referred to as “little Americans” and the neighbourhood ladies dropped by all the time.

Returning home after quite a few years aggravates the mother’s awareness of how isolated and dissimilar she is from her native people and their traditions. She blames herself and her marriage with a foreigner for this lack of affinity with her people and her
Bharati Mukherjee echoes the same sentiment in her essay “Two Ways to belong in America”. Having married Clark Blaise, an American of Canadian decent, Mukherjee too faced the predicament of many woman immigrants such as the mother in this story. In her essay she says,

I was prepared for (and even welcome) the emotional strain that came with marrying outside my ethnic community. In the thirty three years of marriage, we have lived in every part of North America. By choosing a husband who was not my father’s selection, I was opting for fluidity, self-invention, blue jeans and T-shirts, and renouncing 3000 years (at least) of caste-observant, ‘pure culture’ marriage in the Mukherjee family. (qtd. in Kumar 272)

The mother hence made all attempts to reclaim her identity. Taken over by the guilt of marrying a foreigner, she tries to do penance by bringing back her sons to her mother, in way of forming an emotional bond that was lost due to her act of disobedience. She at first brings changes to her appearance, which made the boys think her to be a complete stranger – “...this woman who had put away the jeans and T-shirts they were familiar with and now wore blue striped sari and a dusty red dot in the middle of her forehead. They liked the change...She laughed more than at home and ate with her hands...” (238). On arriving in the village the boys see their mother in a different outlook, she seem to be less complicated, her smiles are wider, her voice bolder.

Her perceptions change quickly once her younger son falls ill. Divakaruni beautifully captures the duality of feelings in the minds of immigrants by realistically depicting changes in the character of the mother. She was the one happy about being in the village, but after her son falls sick she starts blaming the unhygienic conditions in
India – “Oh, she should never have brought them to India, just to assuage the guilt she felt at depriving her mother of her grandchildren” (257). The villagers suggest different remedies from poultices to visit to the durga shrine. The village doctor prescribes Indian medicines, for they work well for Indian germs. All this is of no avail as the boy grows weaker and demands for “7- UP, his father…and pepperoni pizza” (256). Finally after sending numerous letters and telegrams her husband finally arrives – “...when he received the telegram, he hadn’t taken time to pack anything except two cases of 7-Up and three boxes of Nabisco saltine crackers (a baggage that has already begun to take on the status of legend) for his sick child” (263).

The East’s notion of the West is always that of a land of dreams. For the villagers the west has been always enchanting. Everything is viewed under an eastern gaze here. They had previously poured the mother with questions such as –

...is it true you have machines that do all your housework? Is it true that a pound of mangoes can cost as much as a watch from Taiwan? Is it true that everyone drives a car, even old people? Is it true that when the old people can’t drive their cars anymore, their children put them into nursing homes? (251)

She told them just about all the good things, of the luxuries and the envious lifestyle. But she was careful not to mention “about the high insurance rates or the drivers who cut her off during rush hour or honked and yelled, fucking Dothead go home” (253).

This inheritance of loss is the sense of exile that second generation Indian Americans struggle with. When examined from this point of view, second generation
immigrant children are twice removed from the reality of what they call ‘home’, or in this specific case Calcutta. The mother was born and brought up in the village hence she has memories of it. The familiar village scene invoked in her memories of her own childhood. The remembrance of old times rings a tone of nostalgia in her mind. But for that fact, the boys will only listen to the mother’s version of this; their association to Bengal is through her eyes, her memories, and her nostalgia. In the London based novel, *A Wicked Woman*, the novelist Ravinder Randhawa says that second generation immigrants are twice removed from home, while on the other hand their parents try their best to bring them closer to home. She comments, “They attempt to replicate the frames that informed their lives, but they can’t hold on because the frames they make here are constructed of material foreign to them and like anti-climbing paint it repels their grip” (104). The incidents make the mother realize that no matter how hard she tries to assimilate, things are not that simple. For people like her, a retreat back to India is never possible. So accustomed they are to the hassle free life in America that the poverty, lack of infrastructure and development certainly ruin their chances of coming back –

With such confession Divakaruni develops the thesis that the process of assimilation cripples man to interact with its own native cultural identity. the narrator expresses her helplessness, “May be there’s a book in there, listing the names of stars in Bengali and explaining how to identify them which she can read to her husband and children”. (Agarwal 82-83)

The narratives of Leela and the unnamed mother, both suggest how the idea of ‘home’ no more connotes to a place with which one feels a sort of attachment or a sense
of belonging, but it is rather a matter of priority where ‘home’ and ‘homelands’ assume the status of different units. Leela and the mother, both are exposed to two contradicting choices, two ideologies, two social realities – one of the homeland and the other of the adopted land. Unable to withstand the discrimination, social injustices and the colonial legacy of the homeland that haunt them in different ways, these women choose to return back to America. Once an immigrant, a person always has to live with the perpetual sense of not belonging anywhere, hence for them ‘home’ can be on the either side of the globe. Bharati Mukherjee in her interview with Bill Moyers talks about the immense possibilities America holds with, which is applicable to the two woman here –

I am coming out of a continent of cynicism and irony and despair in many ways – a traditional society where you are what you are according to the family that you were born into, the caste, the class, the gender, and suddenly I found myself in a country where I can choose to discard that part of my history that I want to and invent a whole new history for myself. (qtd. in Kuortti and Mittapalli 155)

Summing up her observations about the women in Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, Beena Agarwal suggests –

Divakaruni within the compact structure of these stories creates strong situations to deconstruct the sensibility of immigrants. With her sensitive imagination, innate sympathy for human relationship, keen consciousness for gender prejudices and man’s innate bonding with national boundaries, she has inaugurated a new era of diaspora literature. In the background of the anguish for personal relationship, she constructs a unique pattern of East – West encounter. (84)
A notable point to make with regard to the stories in Divakaruni’s collections is that we clearly see the radical changes that have occurred in the zone of marriage in these years. Altering the situations of women in the stories to reflect the realities of the present hour Divakaruni has portrayed inter-racial, inter-cultural relationships. Interracial marriages occurring in diasporic zones have altered the way we think about diaspora. It has helped to expand the intercultural friendship and social relations. And the concept of East-West encounter has undergone a great change. In Stories such as “The Word Love”, “The Prefect Life”, “The Intelligence of Wild Things”, “The Lives of Strangers” and “The Names of Stars in Bengali” women from India are married to foreign men or are in a relationship with them.

The study of the short stories by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has raised several questions of women’s autonomy and selfhood in relation to diaspora. The stories explored in this chapter had a clear Bengali frame of reference and were mainly first generation immigrant tales all surrounding the domestic enclave which women have stepped ahead by all means. It would be interesting to see how in the next chapter her younger counterpart Shauna Singh Baldwin, with a definite Sikh identity, respond to these debates.