Chapter: 4

Cultural Clashes in Family and Society
Culture is an integral part of a nation. It is taken as constituting the way of life of an entire society and includes codes of manners, dress, language, rituals, social customs and folklore of a nation. In general, Culture is a particular form or type of intellectual development in a society generated by its distinctive customs, achievements and outlook.

Every nation has a distinct culture of its own. Like other cultures, Indian culture is rich and diverse and as a result unique in its very own way. Even though Indians have accepted modern means of living, improved their lifestyle, their values and beliefs still remain unchanged. The rich values which they received from their culture are deeply rooted within their hearts, mind, body as well as soul. But when they cross the border to lead their life in align countries like America, Australia, Canada, South Africa etc., they face cultural clashes in their family and society. There is no doubt; the foreign countries have a lot to offer in terms of day-to-day facilities. But it is a tough decision for an immigrant to choose between the homeland based on personal affection and cultural roots, or the place that provides the present affluence.

Most of the immigrants who have roots in different cultures are involved in maintaining their traditions and heritage, while changing their way of life to assimilate into new cultural world. Respect for elders, family as central,
living by custom, ritual and religion are some of the most apparent values of the East. On the contrary, independence, personal freedom, technological and material developments are rotating values of the West. While Indian American immigrants have rich, familiar and cultural influences, they easily get entrapped in the limelight of American culture. Often they arrive at questioning their identity and sense of belonging in both the Indian and American cultures. For many Asian Americans, questions arise as to how they develop an integrated sense of self inclusive, of their past and present.

Like other diasporic writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s literature is the outcome of diasporic consciousness- a unique feeling emanating in the mind of people who go through a storm of anguishes and emotions while taking efforts to acclimatise to new cultural environment. She also explores in her writings how American culture has reshaped the customs within the Indian American communities on the west coast.

Most of the stories of her book “Arranged Marriage” are about Indian immigrants to the United States from her native region of Bengal. These stories (Arranged Marriage) explore the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni states in an interview by Joan Smith in the *San Francisco Examiner Magazine:*
“When you live away from your original culture and this becomes home, but never quite, and then you can’t go back and be quite at home there either, so you become a kind of outsider to both cultures.”

Stories of **Arranged Marriage** capture the experience of recent immigrants, mostly from professional classes, such as electronic engineers and businesspeople, but also a few from the working class, such as auto mechanics and convenience-store clerks. There are several immigrant brides who “are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes,” and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own.

These stories (Arranged Marriage) reflect the diasporic South Asian women’s battle with cultural assimilation in western world. As the women of this text struggle to define themselves as South Asian and American, they (Preeti, Abha, Meena, Jayanti, Sumita and many more) find that their self-perceptions and self-existence which is uncertain upon the particular realm that they are occupying, face a conflict of consciousness. In the private realm, comprised of the domestic and sexual spheres, traditional Indian culture requires specific duties of women, and strict conceptions of morality. But, in the public realm, comprised of experiences outside of the home and especially in the professional world, there is a sense of freedom of self-expression on many levels. At the same time, the pressures from family and
career often begin to clash, resulting in one of the increasingly common conflicts South Asian women experience in the process of cultural assimilation.

The central place in all of these stories (Arranged Marriage) is the private realm, conceived as a location where time and space cease to progress or reflect change. But, when the women in these stories emerge from the private realm and go into the public, they experience a conflict of consciousness, as the home comes to feel familiar, homogenous and repressive in contrast with the alien, diverse and expressive culture outside the home. The perceptions that the women have of themselves change dramatically as they navigate between these two different worlds, and these characters come to develop different consciousnesses for the private and public realms, resulting in the creation of a fragmentary self.

The domestic world for these women comes to represent all that is “traditional”, specifically in terms of sexuality. As the East remains associated with its suppressed sexual behaviour, taboos and the mysticism so often attached to it, the West is linked with a total lack of sexual restraint and of inhibitions. In Indian culture sexuality is repressed, male- dominated, and most often seen as a negative aspect of female identity. In her book **Becoming American, Being- Indian**, Madhulika S. Khandelwal remarks
upon the relationship between Indian culture and sexuality, suggesting that such a relationship is based upon the desire to retain cultural values:

“Indians widespread belief that sexual freedom was a hallmark of American society placed them on guard with Americans, as it did with their own U.S. - reared children, particularly their daughters. Their fear and disapproval of sexual openness extended to progressive Indians who supported equality between men and women or the right to proclaim a gay or lesbian sexual identity. For most Indian immigrants this was not an issue of an individual's democratic rights but an essential departure from 'Indian' values”. (138)

As Indian culture perceives sexuality itself a dangerous to the values of the traditional Indian family, thus within the homes it remains, as much does, under the control of the patriarch.

Sexuality is an individual practice in India which is not openly discussed in society and it is definitely relegated to the privacy of home. The author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores this aspect of sexuality in one of her story “Affair”. In this story, Abha, a middle class Indian housewife living in United States with her husband Ashok, gives much importance to social relations rather than individual behaviour. For her, duty and love are incompatible. She shies away from any public demonstration of affection,
“too traditional to even touch hands” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 238). She reasons, “Sex for me was a matter between two married people, carried out in the silent privacy of their bedroom and resulting, hopefully, in babies” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 234).

Divakaruni also examines a complicated issue of sexuality in the story “Clothes” in which sex is portrayed as the duty of a wife for a successful marriage, regardless of whether she desires to engage in it of her own volition. In this story, Sumita, the protagonist, has been advised by her friend to view sex as a demand that husbands make upon their wives and women must obey that demand not to fail in the fulfillment of their marital responsibilities.

“No, his fingers were stroking my cheeks, my throat, moving downward. I closed my eyes and tried not to jerk away because after all it was my wifely duty. ‘It helps if you think about something else,’ my friend Madhavi had said when she warned me about what most husbands demanded on the very first night.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 21-22)

Sexual subservience is expected of the women in this story to avoid bringing shame up on their families. Khandelwal explains the responsibility attached to sex in terms of the historical pressures placed on women:
“Historically, a woman’s social world had centered on her marriage, while men acted in the world outside the home… . Women who strayed from prescribed gender behaviour risked ruining the reputations of their natal and marital families.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 119)

So for an Indian woman to express her sexuality is to risk the reputation of both herself and her extended familial community.

In Indian culture, relationships are central to a society. The relationship between the individual (woman) and the community is based upon the communal nature of marriage as a social contract, not between two people but rather two entire families. As Khandelwal explains:

“A distinct perception of self and society is contained in Indian notions of family and community…. . Whereas the ‘self’ in American society is an individualized unit that creates a new relationship when two such persons contract marriage, in India persons are embedded in social relationships and communal identities that exist both before and after marriage. As people behave according to their community affiliation, religion, caste, class and gender, it is more difficult to assign neat boundaries between self and others.” (Divakaruni, The Mistress of Spices, 119-120)
The sexuality of an Indian woman is tied to many different social and cultural expectations of marriage and its duties, leading to the repression of females in the sexual realm.

This gendered repression is present not only in the sexual realm, but also in the very space of the domestic itself. As the home is the locus of tradition for South Asian diasporic families, the Indian woman is expected to be responsible for maintaining this Indian home in the diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood. In the diaspora context, being “true” to one’s Indian womanhood means glorifying Hindu mores and codes of conduct in vast. As Padma Rangaswamy suggests in “Namaste America” that the image of the subservient Indian woman stems from Indian mythology and the manner in which Indian females are requested in it.

“…An image of womanhood that has a profound effect on the Indian psyche is that of Sita, the heroine of India’s most beloved epic, the Ramayana. Sita’s chastity, obedience and unflinching loyalty to her husband represent the ideal path for an Indian wife. This ideology survives even among modern, upper-class Indian women who defer to their husbands in an almost instinctive way.” (145)

Divakaruni explores this image of woman in her story “Meeting Mrinal” in which Asha (a divorced mother with a teenage son) attributes her attempt a
familial perfection to the literary figures that were presented as the (impossible) examples of what woman should be, as her mother believes that “women should be happy with whatever their men decided they ought to have”. (Divakarni, Arranged Marriage, 292) After abandoned by her husband for another girl she says, “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.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 298)

The paradigm of Indian female identity in the domestic realm is the essence of submissiveness, thus the culture tends to expect similar behaviour from is actual women, regardless time and place. In Divakaruni’s story “Affair”, Meena, Abha’s friend, reconsiders her identity as that of the dutiful wife after suspecting her husband’s indifferent nature to her, “Had I ever really been myself? I didn’t think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter.. . And of course a good wife.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 269) The inordinate amount of emphasis placed on Indian women to be “domestic goddesses” results in constructing the home as a place where they feel “sane and in control.” (233).

Obviously, the subservience of Sita contrasts greatly with the feminism of America and the emphasis on women’s independence and equality.
Increasingly, this clash between cultures has manifested itself in the conflict between family and society. Indian women in the United States seem to have to make the choice between being traditional or progressive so that it becomes quite difficult for them to get happiness and satisfaction in life. In Divakaruni’s “Affair” Meena, after taking the decision to leave her husband for another man, appears to have chosen American individualism over loyalty to her cultural traditions. She is quite happy with her decision but she is still tormented by doubts as she explains to Abha:

“Sometimes I still feel so guilty. I think of what my parents will say, and Srikant’s mother, when they find out. Selfish, they’ll call me. Immoral. A bad woman. I have to keep telling myself I’m not that. It’s not wrong to want to be happy, is it? To want more out of life than fulfilling duties you took on before you knew what they truly meant? (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 270).”

After getting to know about the affair of her friend, Meena, Abha rethinks about her own marriage. Despite her initial suspicions, her friend’s lover does not turn out to be her own husband, but instead of feeling relief, the effect of this knowledge is to speed up her understanding of her relationship with him. She finally takes the decision to leave him and live her own life
with the possibility of economic independence after she is offered a well-
paid job compiling an Indian cookbook. She thinks:

“But what kind of man would be worth giving up your principles for?
What kind of man would be more important than being a good wife?
We’re spiraling toward hate. And hopelessness. That’s not what I want
for the rest of my life. Or yours.” (Divakarni, Arranged Marriage, 271)

In Indian culture, work is divided by gender, with men working outside the
home and women playing the roles of homemaker and mother. But in the
West, when Indian women choose to pursue a career rather than raising a
family, the battle between the domestic and the public realms is exacerbated.
Working outside the home is simply an augmentation of the Indian woman’s
role as a homemaker rather than an oppositional choice leaking to domestic
conflict. Whereas American women, who are also sometimes equally, loathe
full abandonment of the ‘homemaker’ role, feeling the conflict and
contradictions between home and career, Indian women see the pursuit of a
career as an extension of the homemaker’s role, not as an alternative to it.
The interests of family generally take precedence when they clash or are at
cross purposes with career interests. As careers are not necessarily
alternatives to family, the new generation of South Asian diasporic women
who place emphasis on both career and family, desiring not to have to choose between either one, but granting both equal importance.

In one of her story “A Perfect Life” the protagonist, Meera first rejects the traditional role of wife and mother in favour of her career and education. For her, it is not a question of choosing between career and family because she does not desire a family at the moment:

“Because in Indian marriages, becoming a wife was only the prelude to that all-important, all consuming event- becoming a mother. That wasn't why I'd fought so hard - with my mother to leave India; with my professors to make it through graduate school; with my bosses to establish my career.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 76)

Yet when Meera meets a six-year old orphan boy, she begins to contemplate motherhood, imagining what it would be like to adopt the child and raise him herself. She envisions his first day of school, trips to Disneyland and baseball games, and she soon comes to see herself as the orphan's actual mother. Caught up in her new role as a mother, Meera begins to function in both the professional and familial realm, and sees herself as fulfilling two distinct roles. When these self-perceptions conflict with each other, Meera responds by separating them, by creating a partitioned consciousness, which
is one type of reaction to the conflict of cultural tensions. Watching her "son" play, Meera describes the contentment that she feels:

“It made me ridiculously happy, more than the time, even, when I straightened out the Von Hausen account which had been missing several million dollars (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 91)

Meera sees herself as both a “working woman” as well as a mother, her ability to juggle both roles symbolized by the juxtaposition of her emotional happiness gained from the “Von Hausen account” with the joy gained from watching the young boy play. Meera's consciousness allows for what are seemingly contradictory self perceptions to exist simultaneously, and for two separate realms to retain their importance in her life without compromising (or having to choose between) one role and the other. As Rangaswamy writes:

“Sometimes an Indian woman's behavior is perceived as inconsistent, hypocritical, or even schizophrenic by American standards. She may be assertive and even overbearing at work with her American colleagues, if she feels the situation demands it, but completely submissive and unprotesting toward her husband or even her children. This capacity for 'dual' or even 'multiple' behaviour patterns has sometimes helped Indian immigrant women successfully combine work or career, and
avail themselves of new opportunities without discarding the advantages of a traditional value system.” (152).

Meera adopts this “dual behavior pattern” in order to reconcile the tension between her roles, creating two discrete consciousnesses for her two different spheres of home and work.

Divakaruni explores clashes between two different cultures regarding concepts of love and relationships in one of her story “The Word Love”. In this story, the young woman protagonist, who remains nameless throughout her confession, has a live-in-relationship with an American man. She is wrought with guilt for not daring to tell her mother in Calcutta that she is living with an American. She knows that her mother, widowed when her only child was a mere two years old and devoted to bringing her up ever since, would never understand her daughter’s apparent rejection of customs and traditions. The woman is torn between divided loyalties and her American man fails to understand her dilemma and her feeling of having sinned. For him, their relationship was the logical step for them to take. At first he is almost offended that she cannot bring herself to tell her mother that she has found a man she wants to share her life with, later he dismisses her distress with a simple remedy. If she cannot about him as it would upset her, the best solution for her is to keep their relationship a secret. He says:
“So don’t tell her,” he said, “that you’re living in sin. With a foreigner, no less. Someone whose favorite food is sacred cow steak and Budweiser. Who pops a pill now and then when he gets depressed. The shock’ll probably do her in. You hate it when he talks like that, biting off the ends of words and spitting them out.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 59)

Sexual desire forms an essential part of love, as the key to personal or individual satisfaction and, to a certain extent, to self-knowledge. While the sexual urge is universal and therefore not culturally specific, the relationship between sexual desire and love can be seen to vary according to different cultures. In the West, the nature of sexual love is an intimate and private phenomenon that requires no outside intervention. Other forms of love, such as love of one’s parents, siblings, relatives, are relegated to a subordinate position and do not constitute a form of self-definition as sexual and/or erotic love does. In Indian families sexuality in adolescence is not only suppressed and repressed but even feared as potentially dangerous. Thus the connection made between sexuality and love in the Indian context is not the pursuit of individual self-satisfaction as it may be construed in the Western world but rather one that is intricately entwined with the duties and responsibilities of the family. Thus the conscience of the young woman in
“The Word Love” gradually leaks into her, 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.

“How did you get yourself into this mess, or perhaps why, so you leap in with that magic word. Love, you tell yourself, lovelovelove.

You try to shut out the whispy voice that lives behind the ache in your eyes, the one that started when you said yes (I will move in with you) and he kissed you, hard. (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 59)

In the diaspora context, the daughter, who lives most of her life within the American culture, has little choice but to remain in confusion even when she feels more at home with her American identity. The power of internalized ideals, what a “good Indian girl” should and should not do, constantly make her public life a painful struggle. It is still difficult for an American-born daughter or young woman living in the United States to be disloyal to her parents that may disturb them not to a set of outdated moral codes. This is also true in the case of the troubled young woman in “The Word Love” who feels she has to make a choice between pleasure and duty. She becomes so tired and worn with the deceit and pretence that when the mother phones from Calcutta unexpectedly early one morning, she blurs out her secret. The mother’s response is silent but swift:
“All through the next month you try to reach her. You call. The ayah answers. She sounds frightened when she hears your voice. Memsaab has told her not to speak to you, or else she’ll lose her job.

You hear your mother in the background. “Who are you talking to, Ayah? What? How can it be my daughter? I don’t have a daughter. Hang up right now.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 65)

Her mother’s rigidity only strengthens the young woman’s feelings of guilt. She becomes frantic about the loss of contact with her mother, and perhaps by extension, with her Indianness. What Rex sees as an obsession, she views as a rupture within her own self. Ironically, her disclosure to her mother of her relationship with an American ends in her being left by both of her loves, Rex and her own mother. The choice between emotional dependence and cultural loyalty has led to the realization that there exists a third choice—personal liberation. She rejects both the worlds to rejoice in her newfound freedom. It is the craving to escape the trishanku existence in her life:

“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 lift your face to it, like rain it washes away inessentials, leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 71)
Generation divide is crucial to the immigrant life and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a marriage between a first generation Indian immigrant, Deepak, and a second generation one, Preeti, in her story “Doors.” Before Preeti and Deepak get married, they have to face both subtle resistance and overt censure. Preeti’s mother warns her against Indian men’s yearning for their wife to be “obedient and adjusting and forgiving” in accordance with what she calls their “prehistoric values” (Doors, 184) while Deepak’s friends mistrusts those girls they disparagingly call ABCDs, that is, “American-Born-Confused-Desis”. (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 185) However, despite the opposition on the part of both family and friends, Preeti and Deepak seem to get along fine once they get married. This marital harmony is suddenly disrupted by the coming of Deepak’s childhood friend, Raj. He becomes a long-term houseguest, which in itself would have disturbed the peace and tranquility of Preeti, a self-confessed private person, but Raj’s presence brings out the Indianness in Deepak that has lain dormant since he has lived in America with Preeti, “this exotic creature – Indian and yet not Indian.” (189) Raj’s physical presence also brings “India” back in the form of Bollywood films, traditional Indian music and the like. In the presence of his friend, Deepak’s accent becomes significantly more Indian and his duty as host leads him to allow Raj’s welfare to take precedence over
his wife’s. Moreover, the underlying tensions between Preeti’s clear cut conception of individual space, that is totally westernized, is a complete reversal of Deepak’s Indian upbringing within the boundary-less atmosphere of an extended family, where “they had constantly spilled into each other’s rooms, doors always left open for chance remarks and jokes.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 189)

Space is not only culturally but also gender constructed. In India women enjoy the company and support of other women in what is understood to be the women’s part of the house. Indian women’s identities are often articulated through this female network of interdependence as opposed to the Western feminist idea of individual selfhood. What for Preeti is an individual right that must be respected, for Deepak is a rejection of the open, caring family ethos he was brought up in and an attitude bordering on the offensive:

“Even family members sometimes need time and space away from each other. In my family no one ever intruded […].”

“Well, maybe they should have,” Deepak interrupted in a hard tone that made Preeti stare at him. “Maybe then you’d be a little more flexible now.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 198)
Preeti’s almost obsessive door locking could represent her subconscious attempt to shut out any traces of Indianness that may still remain. Her outburst at Raj when he enters her bedroom uninvited to tell her some good news forces her to rethink her situation in the house. She has become Raj’s bhaviji rather than Deepak’s wife. Preeti feels stranger in her own house as she possibly cannot share their enthusiasm for Hindi movies, samosas and Kishore Kumar’s songs.

When Preeti announces she is moving in with her friend Cathy in the hope that this temporary separation will help them both to straighten things out, Deepak’s reaction proved her mother to be right when she warned her that the couple might one day show signs of cultural incompatibility:

“It’s never too late to stop yourself from ruining your life,” her mother said. “What do you really know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 184)

“You can’t leave. What would people say? Besides, you’re my wife. You belong in my home.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 200)

Preeti’s reaction towards Raj when he comes with a tiger bottle balm also shows her frustration of loosing her individuality. She goes berserk, yells for him to get out and throws the bottle “against the wall where it shatter[s]
and [falls] in emerald fragments.” (200) This incident brings about the last confrontation between husband and wife and, although it is Raj, not Preeti, who finally leaves, the harmony between the couple seems as shattered as the tiger balm bottle, impossible to restore. Raj, with his presence, has materialized the cultural chasm between Preeti and Deepak:

“She closed her eyes and tried to recall the happiness of that day [when they had bought their big bed, just before the wedding], but there was only a black square filled with snow and static, as when, while watching a video, one comes across a portion of the tape that has been erased by accident.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 201-02)

The fact that Deepak chooses to go to sleep to the empty guest room, leaving Preeti alone for their first night in their marriage, emphasizes not only the breach in their relationship, but Deepak’s option for Raj’s shadow, for the shadow of India that Raj has left behind. Loosing face, having people gossip, fearing his izzat to be jeopardized, are situations that cannot be tolerated in Deepak’s world. The rift opened between Deepak and Preeti seems to be only the beginning of an arduous negotiation between a South-Asian American woman and a transnational man. Adequately enough, it is a closing door that wraps up the story:
“And when the door finally clicked shut, she did not know whether it was in the guest room or deep inside her own being.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 202)

The final click of the guest room door, where Deepak has moved his belongings, signals the end of the honeymoon for the “perfectly matched couple.” (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 187)

The cultural divide created as a result of living between two worlds cannot be bridged by the skin color and the doors remain closed.

In one of her novel “Sister of My Heart”, Divakaruni has combined the desire for strong bonds between women with her experience of the rift between the old India and the Westernized India.

This novel describes the life of two Calcutta women, Sudha and Anju, who grow up negotiating their mothers’ traditional Indian value systems and desires with the Westernized philosophies influencing their own generation. They are much fascinated towards the seductive powers of the West so when their mother gives them “each a slim packet of rupee notes” (Divakaruni, Sister of My Heart, 54) and permission to buy whatever they want with them, Sudha decides to spend that money on designer clothes that are different from “the drab, decorous dresses” (62) she is forced to wear. She says dreamily:
“I will buy clothes with mine. Salwar-kameezes soft as a baby’s skin coloured like dawn. Saris made of the finest translucent silk, the kind that can be pulled through a ring. Scarves shimmering like a peacock’s throat. I will buy satins and stitch them into puff-sleeved sari-blouses with tiny mirrors embroidered in, and white lace nighties light as gossamer for summer nights.” (Divakaruni, Sister of My Heart, 62)

Sudha’s cousin, Anju, who is an ardent admirer of Western literature decides to send away that money for books “that are hard to find in this country”. (62) She says:

“I want the latest novels, to give me a taste of London and New York and Amsterdam. I want books that will spirit me into the cafes and nightclubs of Paris, the plantations of Louisiana, the rain forests of the Amazon and the Australian outback”. (Divakaruni, Sister of My Heart, 62)

Her love for Virginia Woolf’s novel, entitled “A Room of One’s Own” shows her mental attitude which carries the colonial baggage:

“Woolf has been a favourite of mine since the time I stumbled upon one of her books at the store. It was a beautiful old leather-bound volume, printed in England, with an intriguing title: A Room of One’s Own. When I put my nose to the thick pages, they smelled totally unlike our
Indian books with their sweet rice-glue binding. I thought of it as the smell of distance, of new thinking. That smell stayed with me a long time. It stood for something I wanted but didn’t know a name for”. (Divakaruni, Sister of My Heart, 134)

Her love for Western literature is most evident in her act of falling in love with the man named Sunil, a computer scientist from America, who walks into her mother’s store and demands a book by Woolf:

“When he asks me if we stock any books by Virginia Woolf, he wins me over completely.” (Divakaruni, Sister of My Heart, 134)

In Indian tradition, men assumed assertive role while women are regarded as icon of national values or idealized custodians of traditions. They are taught into feeling that they have to be the ones who take care of others the ones who gives things. In the novel “Sister of My Heart”, Sunil’s father treats his wife like an object and never shows respect to her. She is not even allowed to prepare something for her own son. When she makes tamarind chutney for her son, Sunil, her husband “flings the bowl across the table at Sunil’s mother”. (182) She feels humiliating but does not say even a single word because it is believed that a woman’s first duty is to support her husband. When Sunil stands up to protect his mother, his father shouts on his American upbringing:
“So this is what you have learned in America, how to defy your father? Who was it that sent you there, I’d like to know? Who bought your ticket? Who paid all your expenses so that you could… Want to impress your new wife, huh? I wonder how impressed she would be if she know about your American exploits, all that drinking and whoring”. (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, 183)

He also does not like the way in which Sunil “helps Anju take the teacups around everyone” (139) at the time of bride viewing and promises her mother, Gauri Ma, to give “as much education as she likes”. (139)

Multicultural situation is an important subject matter and a powerful mode of perception as well. Angst, loneliness and above all material prosperity are pointed out as the main reasons for the migration. At the same time, there is no total collapse of a shared background of values; bonds with family, community and religion are more or less intact. Divakaruni’s characters are not the deracinated, de-regionalized Indian individuals in the West. What is striking about the short stories in the selection “The Unknown Errors Of Our Lives” is that there is no deliberate attempt on the part of the author to pit the spiritual, community-oriented value system of India against the racist, materialistic and individualistic society of America to show that the former is superior.
As a writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni captures the life of a widow in an alien country in one of her story “Mrs. Dutta Writes A Letter”, selected for the Best American Short Stories award in 1999. Perhaps this can be seen as a therapy that immunes the writer against the mounting alienation in a White man’s land. Mrs. Dutta, a widow in California, recently arrived from India to live with her son’s family. She struggles to adapt to a world in which neighbour are strangers and her domestic skills are deemed superfluous. For the Bengali widow, Mrs. Dutta, there isn’t a hope of assimilation to the Western way of life. Her son, daughter-in-law and their two children have acculturated themselves to America with the adoption of a visible set of changes in their external behavior for a smooth acceptance in the new society. But the need for a psychological re-orientation proves to be a traumatic experience for the old mother. The joys of motherhood clearly remain one-sided. The story ends with Mrs. Dutta trying to figure out happiness, back at home in the rented portion of her friend’s house in Calcutta.

The drama resulting from the contact between two cultures and the trauma it creates on some characters are wonderfully portrayed in the second story, “The Intelligence of Wild Things”. Tarun is a typical Indian Boy, the mother’s son with an American face (a face that gets washed away in the
torrent of nostalgic memories). As the fish show an exceptional intelligence to stay away from the advancing boat, Tarun, with a wild fervor, tries to avoid the thought of his Bengali home and native food as a precaution against an emotional breakdown. But during that boat ride with his sister, the sight of a ‘sharash’ like bird weaves for the young hero, a way back home across the immigrant years. Unconsciously he calls his sister ‘didi’ after a long time which lends a moment of great poignancy to the story. That single word is potent enough to keep alive the spiritual and the symbiotic ties with the mother country. There is a pervasive inwardness in Divakaruni’s characters, which at times presents a dark and confused vision of life that is universal rather than particular. The native landscape in a retrospective view is sentimentalized, even when the Indians in America try to see themselves in terms of white expectations.

Mostly it is the reality of the experiences at home that leads the characters into a sense of disillusionment. The loss of culture and compassion among their Indian counterparts bewilders them more than their expatriate experience. Over-idealization of the nostalgia for the motherland is noticeably absent in the stories of this collection. Yet, most of the characters have not lost touch with their homeland or do not hope of being so. “In the Lives of Strangers”, Leela is bound for an Amarnath pilgrimage with her
aunt. She has attempted suicide after a failed affair with Dexter, a fellow computer programmer in USA. But even as she tries to seek solace in ‘real’ India, she remains a staunch believer in individual responsibility, a philosophy too American and shocking for Aunt Seema. The niece is severely rebuked for being an aid to Mrs. Das, considered to be an ill omen by all others in the pilgrim group. A mystic bond of love and companionship ensues between the two. But after her bad, unlucky experience with Mrs. Das, Leela too thinks in terms of expiation, a change too abrupt and intangible even for an Indian reader. She gropes through the labyrinths of life, existence and reality and in a telling affirmation of Indian spirituality interprets the gestures of a Bharathanatyam dancer as one that connects humans to the Gods. Interwoven into the rich topographical details of the renowned pilgrim centre of Amarnath on the foothills of the Himalayas, is a sketch of the intricate inner landscape of the protagonist.

The next story “The Love of a Good Man” is set against the backdrop of marital discord in the life of Monisha’s parents. The memories of loneliness and seclusion in her mother’s life way back in India haunt her even when she is happily married and settled with Dilip in America, where marriage is usually a temporary affair. Monisha’s father seeks her permission to come and meet his little grandson. Divakaruni’s maturity as an artist is illustrated
when se uses the same jasmines that adorned her mother’s pyre as the object of reconciliation with her estranged father. The drop of forgiveness that sets in from the daughter’s heart seeps into the reader’s mind. The jasmines in the vase on the bedside table blossoms into the spring of joyous reunion between the father and the daughter. Grandpa’s love for little Bijoy blows like a cool breeze and endears the readers to the characters in this story.

“What the Body Knows” is a subtle exercise on the part of the author to balance the complex equation between the physical ailments and the emotional dilemma in an individual’s life. Aparna repeatedly falls sick immediately after the childbirth. The unending days in hospital casts her into a zone of emotional frigidity. In remarkably simplistic terms, Divakaruni unfolds the inner psyche of the ailing woman through her lost feelings for the newborn child. New meanings are infused into the reader’s mind when Aparna, all of a sudden, begins to look good and made up during Dr. Michaels, one of its strings remains tuned to her husband’s foot – steps arriving with her little son. Though the author is not particular about driving her stories into a moralistic conclusion, “What the Body Knows” ends with the protagonist’s silent affirmation of the fact that the urges of the body are to be patiently and silently endured.
Both the context and the narrative pattern of the story “The Forgotten Children” have an Indian flavour. But the insecure feeling arising in the mind of two kids whose father is always on his heels certainly enjoys a universal appeal. They invent their own means of escapes, building their own castles of fantasy where the tone of discord is never sounded. The servant’s cottage set far from the dilapidated British Bungalow, which is their temporary residence becomes the children’s haven. The most striking character in the story is the ever compromising Mother who even manages to extricate some simple acts of love from her seemingly callous husband. There is the moving depiction of the complex love-hate relationship involved in an Indian marriage. Perhaps for the children involved, disappearing is the next best thing to being forgotten from such a life.

Journey motif predominates in most of the stories in this collection. There are not only journeys between countries or over continents but also between cities and localities within the same country. Very frequently, this perpetual movement marks the characters’ transition from a state of innocence to a state of experience.

“The Blooming Season for Cacti” tells the story of such transitions undergone by the protagonist Mira. She and her mother come to stay with her brother in Dallas after the outbreak of communal violence in their native
city in India. When the family offers the Indian cure of marriage as the panacea for the girl’s emotional trauma, she sets out to travel across the vast desert to California in search of a job. Finding a job at Malikji’s restaurant, Mira befriends Malikji’s second wife Radhika, with whom she shares her accommodation. In the dried, deserted life of Radhika, Mira blooms like a wild cacti without thorns. But in a truly American way, Mira runs away with her boy friend seeking the ecstasy of life. For her, no cactus bloomed in her deserted life, so she seeks to mine gold from the desert sand. Mira’s search for a distinct self rather than a quest for spatial identity is punctuated with a kind of restlessness and nervous energy that pervades most of the stories in this collection. In the story, the writer employs the desert metaphor to couch the aridity and barrenness of the young protagonist’s inner psyche as well as to imply the futility of Radhika’s lesbian love for her.

“The Unknown Errors of Our Lives”, the title piece in this anthology, is a fine evidence of Divakaruni’s maturity as a creative artist. With a deep sensitivity she delves deep into the folds of individual conscience in Ruchira’s book of errors and confronts the truth that maladjustments and slippages constitute the warp and woof of human existence. Ruchira’s fiancé Biren is thrilled to discover her painting series on the mythic images from Indian legends. The human aspect of the paintings of Hanuman, Kamadhenu
and Jadayu is, in fact, a surrealistic mockery of the physical and emotional infirmities of mankind in general. Ruchira meets Arlene who is pregnant with Biren’s child and quietly engages in an imaginative reconstruction of the painting of Kalpatharu which is a gift for Biren. One of the singing birds in the portrait will have a boy’s face with Arlene’s spiky gold hair, Biren’s square chin and an unsuspecting dimple, may be her own. The story ends with a grim reminder that despite the unknown, unlisted follies and foibles in everyday life, its placid flow can be maintained through sweet sacrifices and compromises.

The last story in the collection “The Naming of stars in Bengali” is detailed analysis of an emigrant situation. The daughter, significantly called the Mother, who has married a half-Hindu, comes home for a vacation with her two sons. With masterly strokes, Divakaruni captures those simple, yet striking reverberations that the visit of the daughter with her US born sons creates in that traditional Bengali household. The whole house echoes with the sound of children mispronouncing Bengali words. Grandma is narrating bedtime stories and women are pouring in to make enquiries. Returning to the mother country after several years accentuates the protagonist’s awareness of how distant and different she is from her native people and their traditions. But the remembrance of old times rings a tone of nostalgia
in her mind. This note of nostalgia reaches its full circle during the Mother’s night ride with her cousin in his scooter, when she tries to recollect the names of stars in Bengali.

A phase of introspection marks the lives of most of the characters in this short story collection. They carry their country with them but an anxiety for a deeper, indefinable need consumes them. The true, final destination remains an enigma. There is a deep and extended insight into the intricate relationship between the mother/land/tongue and children who move to better pastures. Even Divakaruni’s language is fraught with the sweet aroma of Bengali dishes and the vibrant beauty of Bengali culture. At the same time it has an ease and spontaneity of its own that affects the expatriate sensibility. Whether in America or in the traditional homes of Bengal, the protagonists find it easy to bridge the gaps intellectually, but not emotionally or psychologically. Very often a sojourn to the ancestral village or the recollection of past moments aggravates the emigrant’s feeling of loneliness and incompatibility. Fortunately absent in the stories is the stereotypical blatant confrontation between ‘Us’, the value system of our country and ‘Them’, the decadent social setup of the West. Divakaruni’s narration of human experience is an assertion of the bold attempt of her characters to sift the strategies of survival out of the grain of opportunities strewn around
them with a lot of intellectual and emotional maneuvering. The lucidity of the plot structure and the imaginative intensity with which it is rendered distinguish Divakaruni’s stories from the bulk of expatriate narratives.

In her debut novel, “The Season for All Things” Ann Bhatta also narrates a story of a couple, struggling hard for saving their marital life with a spouse of different culture and keeping their culture simultaneously.

An extramarital affair, whether it is a short or a long affair definitely hurts a person. The reasons for someone to have an affair are many and the temptation to start an affair does not seem to wane. The temptation to stray from a monogamous relationship has existed for thousands of years and comes in many forms. As having an extramarital affair is common in western culture, it is a taboo in Indian culture.

It can be more easily understood by the incident when Chantal, the protagonist, and Tom are loitering in Janpath and seen by Mrs. Chopra—a friend and neighbour of Roopa. The way Mrs Chopra narrates the scene, it is quite visible that the behaviour of Tom and Chantal is more on “intimate terms” and influenced by West as hanging around with some guy other than one’s spouse holding hands and public demonstration of affection may not be a big deal in West but such things are taboo in Indian society and they both are more into western culture instead of Indian culture.
“Guess who I saw yesterday at Janpath, Roopa ji? Your daughter in-law! She was with a young foreigner; blond and very beautiful….I couldn’t make out whether he was American or European, though. To tell you the truth they all look alike. Don’t you think so? …she didn’t even see me…I am sure she would have said hello if she did …her attention was only for the young man she was with. He was trying to put his arm around her and she kept pushing him away, both of them laughing all the time. It was so funny…they looked so happy together…” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 21)

An Indian wife can never hang around with some other guy that too in a crowded area. But somewhere or the else, Chantal is sure that whatever she is doing is not according to the culture she is supposed to assimilate with, that is why she hides her meetings with Tom Carter from her Indian husband.

Chantal is reminded of her eagerness to be assimilated into her new surrounding, to adopt the customs and mode of dress, and to be accepted and loved as a daughter. She is distraught as her efforts to overcome the cultural barriers have come to a naught as the other end is not supportive. Comforts that she had “taken for granted” (35) in the States, central heating and air conditioning, are unheard of, except in the houses of the very wealthy where
built-in generators could combat the vagaries of the Delhi Electric Supply Undertaking. She asks Ranjit the first day after she arrives:

“No shower?”

“Then Ranjit has shown her how to take a bath Indian style.” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 35)

When Roopa presents her with a number of saris with gold ornaments as a “fulfillment of custom” (37) which obviously are not given to her out of any fondness or love, the way they are dumped on her bed with the words:

“There will be many people visiting us, relations, friends, who will want to meet Ranjit’s wife. You must wear one of these saris whenever they drop in. And do remember to keep your head covered with the pallu”. (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 37)

It is obtrusive that Roopa does not bother to inform her, the expected norms for a newly married girl in India, that it is sign of modesty besides showing decorum and respect towards the elderly members of the family. Further “a stream of curious visitors would pour in everyday” (38) meant no set hours for visiting. It surprises Chantal that no liquor is served in Roopa’s house albeit the forewarning by Ranjit not to ask for alcoholic drinks in Roopa’s presence. She hates deception but:
“…She would accept camouflaged beverages like Rum and Thums-up which Ranjit would quietly hand her to help her get through the tedious evenings”. (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 38)

Role of Ranjit is rather supportive, having been to both the cultures, resultantly he understands well how to deal the situations in a positive way. That’s why when Chantal asks:

“Why can’t we be open about this?” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 66)

Ranjit is quick to defend his mother:

“Ma can’t serve liquor in her house. It is socially unacceptable for a woman, and a widow at that, to dispense alcohol to guests.” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 38)

Furthermore, guests will be staying overnight often. English is not the Lingua franca for most of them; hence communication has to be conducted primarily through sign language. For most part she feels ignored as an outsider in her own house. Chantal airs her regards when guests departs, adding to her mother-in-law’s displeasure at “another foreigner trait”. (39)

For Chantal, a shopping sojourn is not a big thing at all. But big enough to be done and noticed by a daughter-in-law of Indian society. Chantal is loitering there on very intimate terms blowing tosmithereens the norms set
by the Indian society for a daughter-in-law. Later, when Ranjit confronts directly Chantal on this:

“**You didn’t tell me you’d gone shopping with Tom?...**”

“**It was not terribly important. I don’t usually go over everything I do while you’re at the office, do I?...**” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 29)

This shows that Chantal’s aloofness about Ranjit’s feelings of possession over her because in her culture going out with a friend is not a big deal.

Martial discord occurs either when the individuals start substituting their individual aims for the family aims, or their common objectives disappear and the emotional attitudes become antagonistic to the overall interests of the family.

Ranjit looses his temper when Chantal parries to answer his query though he has started in an even tone:

“**Where was Pascal?... Hope you didn’t leave her alone?...**”

Chantal answers coldly:

“**Really Ranjit! ...do you think I’m so irresponsible? ... I didn’t think you’d expect me to call you and sk for permission to go...**” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 29)
Ranjit’s practicality is hindered by his Indian mind that doesn’t allow him to take it in his stride. Then he tries to control his rising temper with little success and gives her an advisory:

“Still, I wish you had taken Anju or Rita along with you. Remember, this is India, not the States and people here get easily scandalized…”

(Divakaruni, A Season for All Things, 29)

Later, Chantal would rage at Ranjit for their bad manners. Gradually, Chantal’s disenchantment and disillusion set in. She finds the male dominated society of India hard to accept. Ranjit and Ravi, Ranjit’s brother-in-law, takes precedence over her and her sister-in-law and when Chantal remarks about it Ranjit retorts:

“It’s the custom. … Mother-in-law has to be nice to their son-in-law so that their daughters are treated well.” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 40)

And then she retaliates by sounding our:

“Shouldn’t the same rule apply to daughter-in-laws so that their sons are equally well treated?” (Bhalla, A Season for All Things, 40)

In Hinduism, each day in a week is dedicated to a particular deity in the Hindu pantheon. Tuesday is dedicated to Lord Hanuman. People who
believes in astrology observes fast to alleviate the harmful effects with the planet ‘Mangal’ or Mars.

Food plays a very important role in the social and ritual life of the Hindus. Food is mentioned in the early Hindu sacred writings the Vedas (Sanskrit, “knowledge”). Klaus in his book “A Survey of Hinduism” quotes the words of ‘Taittiriya Upanishad’:

“Food is life, therefore one should give food; eating is the supreme sacrifice.” (189)

Hindus have traditional health rules, mostly encircling food. A traditional Hindu housewife spends a large amount of time cooking. Caste borders are sharpened by the many rules on eating, or rather not eating together. In Vadic times (1500-500 B.C.E.), people ate everything, including beef, but later, meat eating became a taboo as was killing of animals, either for food or for a sacrifice. One can argue that these taboos are instigated by climate conditions and ideas about hygiene. Different groups and castes developed their own rules, albeit with regional differences. The Vaisnava community classifies food according to the three qualities (guna) of the Samkhya philosophy; sattva food, which is pure; rajas food, which is energetic or exciting; and tamas food, which is impure. Abhorring from specific substances during certain periods is a well-established part of Hindu spiritual
practices. In the early times, it was related to tapas, ascetic practices, and is still a major aspect of the religious practices of many creeds of the sadhus or “holy men” in India. Many Indian families abhor food or restrict their diet on specific days.

Ranjit brings his wife to his mother’s house after marriage and his mother Roopa is very particular about the customs of a Hindu family and the reason Ranjit keeps reminding his foreigner wife Chantal. As her cultural background perceived nothing like this. Even then she exerts herself in trying to assimilate in this new environment, which she reminisces about the day. Her weary reply that she now knows, “No meat” (11) can be marked as Chantal’s effort to manifest in this alien land as her mother-in-law does not like to cook or eat meat in the house on Tuesdays much against Chantal’s upbringing.

So culture of the new land, the proverbial land, the El Dorado may be assimilated as a catalyst for acceptance by aliens but rejection always has a chance to raise its head at the smallest inopportune moment giving a veritable shock thereby making an individual fall back on his roots thereby define the cultural assimilation.
Works cited


