

# Identity Crisis In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Disappearance"

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The term identity refers to questioning one's place in the world and defining a person. People who are migrated to other nations have faced crisis in various circumstances and they struggle to cope up with their native culture as well as in their attempt to accommodate themselves with foreign culture. The discipline Migration studies is the academic study of human movement from one place to another. In recent years, many writers bring out the experiences of the migrated people and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is remarkable one among them. She is an eminent Indian American author, poet, activist, teacher and she is known for her Indian diasporic writings. She goes deep into the female consciousness and presents the problems of women predominantly related to the identity crisis and their relationship with men. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also presents diverse themes realistically in her short stories pertaining to the expatriates such as dispersal, exile, nostalgia, immigration, transition, migration, divorce, love and marriage. The short story selected for this study entitled "The Disappearance" is from the collection Arranged Marriage which was published in the year 1995. "The Disappearance" revolves around an immigrant woman, a nameless wife character, who is stuck in marriage and her struggles to get out of the marital relationship. This study aims at an analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Disappearance" so as to bring out her treatment of the identity crisis of a diasporic woman such as alienation, displacement, nostalgia, cultural assimilation, rootlessness, migration and dispersal.

**Key Words:** Alienation, Cultural Assimilation, Displacement, Identity Crisis and Nostalgia.

The term identity crisis was introduced by the renowned psychologist Erik Erikson in his book *Childhood and Society* (1950) while discussing the psychological theory of development. Erik Erikson defines it as an existential challenge that people experience repeatedly throughout their lives. These experiences influence their personality and their identity. When women go through the existential challenge, the impact it creates is huge. Women in the world whose count half of humanity are undoubtedly as important as men in the society. Unfortunately, men never treat both the genders equally. Indian women are forced to accept the inferior status given by men. Hence, women have struggled against injustice in the male dominated society. In order to gain equality, they have to assert their individuality. Women can make their position strong in the society by attaining education. They can raise their voice against the subjugation which they have experienced in the society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among those

female writers who portrays sad plight of the women in the society. Her writing stands as a beacon to the theme of feminine sensibility. This study aims at an analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Disappearance" so as to bring out her treatment of identity crisis of the immigrant woman who has experienced alienation, displacement, depression, rootlessness and assimilation at the end.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Kolkata in 1956. She is a prolific author and many of her works have revolved around the themes such as women, myth, immigration and the technique magical realism. At present, she lives in Texas and she is working as a Professor of Creative Writing at the nationally ranked University of Houston. She is a co-founder and former President of Maitri. It is a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. She has written numerous short stories, novels and poetry. She has begun her literary career by writing poetry and her volumes of poetry include *Black Candle* and *Leaving Yuba City*. Her first collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* has won the American Book Award, the PEN Josephine Miles Award, and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award. Some of her notable works include *Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *One Amazing Thing*, *Palace of Illusions* and *Oleander Girl*. Her debut collection, *Arranged Marriage* speaks the liberation and limitation experienced by Indian born women in America and their effort to get equal rights in the male dominated society. In America, they are doubly marginalized, first as women and then as immigrants. It is a collection of eleven stories that deal with the aspects of marriage, love, bearing kids and break up and make up of relationship. The stories are different in theme, characters and narration, and yet bound together by the common thread of marriage. The short story "The Disappearance" in this collection showcases the cruelty of an insensitive husband who has never allowed his wife to get satisfaction even for her minor desires which results in the estrangement of her.

The action begins with the disappearance of the wife in one fine morning all of a sudden. No one knows about her whereabouts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes: "AT FIRST WHEN THEY HEARD ABOUT THE DISAPPEARANCE, people didn't believe it" (169). Her husband also is utterly shocked at this and he thinks that she must be kidnapped by some. He assumes that Indian traditional wife cannot disappear and leave the family abruptly. His wife is a traditional Indian woman who does not wear any American clothes: "She was in that blue salwar-kameez, yes, she did not wear any American clothes" (169). She is portrayed through the eyes of her husband as the devoted Indian wife who is silent, obedient and self-sacrificing. Her traditional attire is highlighted as a proof for her affinity to her cultural roots. In fact, she faces the dilemma whether to assume the role of devoted Indian traditional wife or to get freedom in the alien soil and lead life independently. The husband asks the policeman to investigate and find out the locale of her wife. The police man in return enquires him about their quarrels. The husband replies that he is an honest man and there is no fight between them. They have two years old son who badly needs his mother. The husband undergoes a mental trauma and he cherishes the nostalgic moments that he spent with her. The conservative husband treats his wife as a puppet but he assumes that he has given freedom to her. The story is written in the husband's point of view and the readers come to know that he is the primary reason for his wife's disappearance. When she disappears, everyone including her husband thinks that this must be a kidnap, a crime committed by some criminals. She may have dreamed a life of independence in the American soil free from the domestic chores and routine. She longs to lead life as she likes without the interference of her husband. People who have known

her remember the last time they met her especially the places like Ram Ratan Indian Grocery where she always buys her groceries and the Mountain View Park where she goes for evening walk. She claims that evening is her self-time and her husband has to take care of their son at that time. A complaint is filed and the police have started the investigation about her disappearance. They ask the husband whether they have any quarrel before the disappearance of his wife but he replies negatively. She never complains and quarrels with him and she is always ready to accept his dictations. She silently suffers without displaying her displeasure and dislike over her husband's hegemony. He could not remember any incident of verbal fight between them.

In India, women suffer from subjugation and male domination. After the arrival of Aryans, as believed by a section of critics, the religious texts could not give prominence to women and they are sidelined from the mainstream social activities. Their voices are silenced. The matriarchal society of India has been transformed into patriarchal one due to the denial of the rightful place for women in religious, cultural and social spheres. It is an irony that the well-educated, the Indian born-American husband could not accept any act of dissent from his wife on any matters of life.

Some years back, the husband's mother insisted him to marry and she wanted to see her grandson before her demise. She has asked him about the criteria which he has in his mind for his future wife. He demands that the girl should be quiet, smart, pretty, at least a sophomore of college, and most importantly, she should not possess any western ideas. He expects that the girl should accept the decision of him in every matter. His mother has searched a bride according to the expectations of her son. He has gone to Calcutta where he has seen many girls but he could remember only the face of his current wife. When he meets her at first, she sits there with head bowed, the hair is plaited and she has jasmine on her head. She does not show great interest in the marriage but he wants to marry her. Her family also has never allowed her to express her feelings or opinions in this regard. They expect the acceptance from groom's family. His mother does not want her to be his daughter-in-law. He likes her very much and it leads to their marriage. Men have the right to choose a girl as their partner even if the family members do not accept. On the other hand, the interest of women is not at all taken into account and they are completely silenced in such matters.

The Indian wife has come to America after her marriage with lot of dreams. When she gets married to a man from America, she thinks that she will get some space and pleasure but nothing that sorts happened. Her journey to America is merely a physical relocation and it is a shift from a daughter of someone to a wife of someone. She wants to create her own identity which later leads to her disappearance. It is a change of identity of her from tradition to modernity. He never allows his wife to do anything like any other American wives do. She wants to work in a school and wear American clothes but her husband always denies all her wishes in a polite manner with a soft "no." Her attempt to assimilate into American culture is displayed in many occasions but all of them are resisted by her husband in the name of native culture and tradition. She makes attempt to assimilate to the American culture but her husband resists it completely. He takes pride himself for having refused all her wishes gently. He imposes his will on her wearing Indian clothes by saying that, "he had to put his foot down, like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes. But he always softened his no's with a remark like, What for, I'm here to take care of you, or, You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more feminine" (172). She accepts everything

politely without arguing anything against him. Once she got married and travelled to American soil, she has started to lose everything of her own self. She has felt the loneliness and alienation in the foreign soil as she has left the native country and the freedom enjoyed in her home of parents. Initially, she thinks of her life of freedom and happiness in America but all her wishes have turned to be futile due to the patriarchal mindset of her husband.

When it comes to satisfying the sexual need of her husband, he is very rough and hard that too against the wish of his wife. The wife sometimes has pleaded him by saying: "Please, not tonight" (172) but the husband has always grabbed her and satisfied his biological urge and it is almost like marital rape. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes about the wife's appeal: "I don't feel up to it. He didn't mind that. She was, after all, a well-bred Indian girl. He didn't expect her to behave like those American women he sometimes watched on X-rated videos, screaming and biting and doing other things he grew hot just thinking about" (172). Though she is not at all interested in physical relationship at times her wish is not at all important to him. He wants her to fulfill his desire without hesitation. He could not think that his rough handling of her on bed could be the reason for her disappearance from the home. He thinks: "that could have nothing to do with the disappearance" (173).

Two weeks after the disappearance of his wife, he has given the advertisement, which says, "WOMAN MISSING, read the ad. REWARD \$100,000" (173). He keeps on calling the police to find the whereabouts of his wife. He calls his mother and conveys her about the disappearance of his wife. She is shocked and saddened by the news. She cries for her son and grandson. When her son requests her to come America, she immediately takes the emergency visa and reaches her son. She maintains the home and takes care of her grandson in the absence of her daughter-in-law. Just like any other traditional Indian husband, he expects the house keeper to take care of routine of his house and his son.

Her presence somewhat reduces the stress and burden of her son. Being a woman, she tries to understand the truth behind disappearance of her daughter-in-law. She blames her often. The husband also blames his wife: "He'd told her once or twice that his wife had never done that, she had this idea about the boy needing to be independent" (175). A year has been passed without his wife and he has removed all the photographs of his wife by replacing them with the photos of him along with his son. By this time, he has started to call his mother as Ma as he used to call her. His mother has urged him to marry again, but he says neither no nor yes. His silence shows that his willingness to marry again and he starts to forget his wife.

One day, while cooking, his mother searches of hing and asks him bring it. Immediately, he remembers that his wife used to store all the spices at the top shelf, so he reaches there and searches but he could not find it. Instead of hing, he comes to know something which is more important. He and his wife keep the jewelry in old tea tin. Now the tin is surprisingly light, when he opens it, it is empty. The next day, he reaches the bank and searches jewelry in the locker. To his shock, the jewelry provided to him at the time of marriage is not found there. He understands that his wife has taken all the jewels given by her family at the time of marriage. Slowly, he realizes the fact that his wife has eloped with someone with the jewels and she could never return again to him. She has deserted not only him but also her son. It obviously reveals the influence of the alien culture on her. She has given up her husband and son to start a new life with some other person which is not viewed seriously in the foreign culture. She undergoes the process of acculturation here.

His mother is reluctant at first to accept the girl as her daughter-in-law. Her son has insisted the marriage with the girl. She has accepted the girl due to his insistence. Somehow, she has sensed that something is not good in the girl and it has become true by her elopement with someone with the jewels of her. He feels the absence of her very much and it really hurts him: "The unknown areas of his wife's existence yawning blackly around him like chasms" (179). Her mother too is disturbed by the elopement of her and she is ready to pick up another girl for her son as his second wife. For that she contacts his second aunt to find out a suitable village bride for him to take care of his son. He marries a village girl who is not educated much. He thinks that such a girl can take care of him and his son. He may have thought that educated girls could not conduct themselves to the expectations of their husbands. Hence, he has preferred an uneducated girl for this time. He could never digest the disappearance of his first wife.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes the existence of wife in her absence throughout the story. By her disappearance, she wants to get some type of freedom and identity. She dreams of a life of mutual respect in which her choices also prioritized, and freedom to wear what she wants, the sexual autonomy and most importantly, an identity beyond marriage and motherhood. Unfortunately, her husband is unable to understand her feelings and expectations. Her silence is not a submission but her opposition to male domination and it culminates in the disappearance of her. She wants to create an identity for herself instead of being someone's daughter or someone's wife. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skilfully portrays the characters of both husband and wife. The husband has not allowed her to get entrance in any institution for studies or job. He has not permitted her to wear American clothes. The wife seeks her independence and she could not digest the male domination. Initially, she accepts his will with the hope for change but when there is no change in the attitude of her husband, she breaks up the relationship and runs away with some other man. It shows clearly her quest for freedom and self-assertion. Her education and exposure to American culture have made her to take the bold decision of breaking the relationship with her husband.

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