The landscape of contemporary literature has been influenced by the rising tide of globalization; texts are now crossing the borders of nations and cultures as newly emerging authors express myriad voices of those once considered the subaltern. At the crest of this new literary wave is a new generation of South Asian Female writers who have begun to make their unique mark upon the world of the novel. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of such novelists she has emerged as a ground-breaking novelist in the genre of South Asian Diasporic literature. Her account of the experience of the Diaspora and its effects upon women not only provide the readers with insight into the lives of 1.5 million South Asians who reside in the United States, but also presents a model with which one can better understand the processes through which minority identities are constructed. Though South Asians comprise such a significant (and ever-increasing) portion of the U.S population, still they have not received their fair
share of focused attention. The realm of South Asian diasporic literatures though now more prevalent than ever before, is still largely undiscovered in its talents and contents. The experience of the south Asian immigrant woman remains somewhat of a mystery.

In the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one can paint a rough picture of the South Asian diasporic experience in the United States. This experience, common to all diasporic communities, is created by the constant oscillation between contradictory conceptions of race and culture, time and geography. As a result of existing in this “in-between” space, the South Asian woman living in America develops an altered consciousness in order to relate to her South Asian culture while at the same time adapting to her current American surroundings. The women in Divakaruni’s texts are caught between the traditional customs of south Asia from which they have emigrated and their present experiences with the more westernized culture of America. While living in such a “in-between” space, the self perceptions of these women are dramatically altered, for the manner in which they see themselves changes due to the uncertain nature of their interstitial environment and as a result the characters move towards a condition that is more complex and numerous divided. Thus the women of these texts develop multiple consciousnesses resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented. As the women perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses throughout the course of the texts they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is a fallacy and that the reality of the South Asian diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity. This multiplicity is a significant plight for the characters for as their different consciousness contradicts each other the
women are left uncertain as to the nature of their identities and not knowing where they fit in American society. Yet paradoxically this multiple consciousness appears ultimately to be a positive psychological element, a possible solution to the tensions that arise from cross-cultural adaptation. The women that Divakaruni create are capable of living in a world in which the individual exists not as a Unified One, but rather as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibilities of creating consciousness and inventing identities.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s collection of short stories ‘Arranged Marriage’ reflects the vicissitudes of the diasporic South Asian women. The underlying theme of her short story collection ‘Arranged Marriage’ is as the name suggests marital relationships as they are seen in South Asian communities where by and large the practice is that parents arrange marriages of their children. However, immigration has widened the mental horizons of the people from the east, and Divakaruni too questions this practice through these stories. After their exposure to the west in various ways e.g working outside the home, their increased independence, particularly in decision-making, etc., makes them respond differently to the marital situation as well.

As the women of this text struggle to define themselves as South Asian and American, they expect a conflict of consciousness. In the private realm, the traditional Indian culture requires specific duties of women and strict norms of morality are held in high esteem and are transgressed only by those considered daring and depraved. Sandra Ponzanesi in her essay “In My Mother’s House” states:

As far as the condition of migration and Diaspora is concerned, women are often called to preserve
their nation through the restoration of a traditional home in the new country. The idea of home entails the preservation of traditions, heritage, and continuity; there is even an intense emotive politics of dress for some communities. (245)

The home is the locus of tradition for South Asian diasporic families, and within this domain, traditional gender roles often endure while outside the home, there is a dramatic shift in the nature of cultural expectations. The image of the subservient Indian woman stems from Indian mythology and the manner in which Indian females are represented in it. The image of ‘Sita’ has a profound effect on the Indian psyche. Her chastity and loyalty to her husband represents the ideal for an Indian wife. This ideology survives even among modern, upper-class Indian women who defer to their husbands in an almost instinctive way. In one of the stories, “Meeting Mrinal” Asha, a divorced mother with a teenage son attributes her attempts at familial perfection to the literary figures that were presented as the examples of what a woman should be. “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, p. 298). The image of Indian female identity in the domestic realm is the essence of submissiveness, thus the culture tends to expect similar behavior from its actual women, regardless of time or place i.e whether they are in 18th century or 20th century, or whether they are in India or America. As a result of existing in such a “in-between” space these women move towards a condition that is more complex and numerous divided. They develop multiple consciousness resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid but rather fragmented. Though there is multiplicity of consciousness
and uncertainty of their identities, and the individual exist not as a Unified One, but rather as Many, But on the positive side this situation of no borders creates infinite possibilities of creating consciousness and inventing identities.

Similarly, In another story “Affair”, the central character Meena reconsiders her identity as that of the dutiful wife after suspecting her husband’s infidelity. “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, p. 269). But this subservience of Sita contrasts greatly with the feminism of America and emphasis on women’s independence and equality.

Another theme that Divakaruni tackles In ‘Arranged Marriage’ is the clash between culture, and the conflict between family and career. The entire financial structure changes when women leave the home and begin to work thereby changing the traditional power dynamics within the marriage. Indian women see their career as an extension of their roles at home, and not as an alternative. Their family generally takes precedence when there is a clash between career and family. The interplay of gender roles manifested by the development of multiple consciousnesses is reflected in Divakaruni’s texts.

In “A Perfect Life”, Meera first rejects the traditional roles of wife and mother in favor 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, p. 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. “Mother-love, that tidal wave, swept everything else away”.

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 Van Hausen account which had been missing several million dollars”. (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, p. 98). 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 “Van Hausen account” with the joy gained from watching the young boy play.

Thus in the above story one finds that 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. Meera adopts the “dual behavior pattern” in order to reconcile the tension between her roles, creating two distinct consciousnesses for her two different spheres of home and work. In the public realm as
professionals, there is freedom of self expression on many levels, but 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. And this leads to the fragmentation of their self.

In the other story titled “Clothes” the central theme is the private realm, conceived as a location where time and space cease to progress or reflect change. When the woman emerges from the private realm and into the public, she experiences a conflict of consciousness, for home comes to feel familiar, homogenous and repressive in contrast with the alien, diverse and expressive culture outside the home. The perceptions that the woman has of herself changes dramatically as she navigates between these two disparate worlds and the character comes to develop different consciousnesses for the private and public realms, resulting in the creation of a fragmentary self. The development of these forms of consciousness is largely an effect of circumstances but it is also a psychological coping mechanism created as a response to the cultural dissonance that surrounds them.

Thus In the story “Clothes”, Sumita, the central character moves from Calcutta to California, into a small apartment that she shares with her new husband and his parents. She describes the delineation between an Indian home and the American world outside and the contradictory feelings that emerge from the disconnection between the two spheres. Sumita describes her home as a “world where everything is frozen in place”, as if she had never left the India and her friends of her youth. Time and space are motionless, whereas outside, in America, they are “rushing by”, constantly shifting and transforming while the onlooker simply observes from a rather removed
perspective. The traditions Sumita follows (of covering her head with her sari, serving tea to her mother-in-law’s friends, hiding overt sexual activity, and never addressing her husband by his first name) are all signs of respect in India and are strictly maintained in this home in California. Sumita recognizes that she feels resentment toward these traditions and the utter “Indianness” of the home, and she longs to partake in the America that is outside her re-created Calcutta world. She is then plagued by feelings of shame for what she perceives as her increasing yearning for a more westernized self, even while she does not want to ignore her strong desire for change and assimilation. Sumita develops different perceptions of herself in response to this emotional tension: while in the home, she sees herself as the traditional sari-clad Indian housewife—subservient, meek and modest, living life “the Indian way”. The moment that she entertains thoughts of leaving her home, however, she views herself as independent, confident and progressive. But Sumita is also aware of her conflicting desires and her liminal psychological position, thus she perceives herself as “in between” the guilt-ridden subservient wife and the confident yet claustrophobic woman. While Meera of “A Perfect Life” sees herself as fulfilling two separate roles, Sumita comes to perceive herself multiply, with various self-perceptions existing simultaneously.

Although Sumita has not actually left her home, she has created a romantic vision of her husband’s store, and with it, an entirely new self-perception. “But I have another plan, a secret that I will divulge to him once we move. What I really want is to work in the store. I want to stand behind the counter in the cream-and-brown skirt set ……and ring up purchases. The register will glide open. Confident, I will count out green dollars and silver
quarters…..(I have never visited the store-my in-laws don’t consider it proper for a wife – but of course I know exactly what it looks like)….I will charm the customers with my smile, so they will return again and again just to hear me telling them to have a nice day”. (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, p.24). Since actual physical movement away from the home is forbidden to Sumita she must resort to creating her own picture of that which lies outside and simply envisioning what she imagines America to be, becomes enough to change her self-perception so that she is no longer an Indian housewife only, but also a working “westernized” woman as well as in between these two roles.

Thus the above story reflects the diasporic South Asian woman’s cultural assimilation and identity formation. As the woman struggles to define herself as South Asian and American, she finds that her self-perception and self identification are contingent upon the particular realm that they are occupying and a conflict of consciousness emerges when contrasting self perceptions exist simultaneously.

Jayanti in “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”, also provides focus on a similar dilemma of being an immigrant when she migrates from Calcutta to California to live with her aunt Pratima and Uncle Bikram. Their house is no different from the India that Jayanti left. Jayanti within the confines of home feels disoriented because it appears that time and space has not changed for her as she expected from her immigration. Rather, she is in the same world, where the Indian tradition remains the norm, and assimilation is but a distant glance out a window. Jayanti appears totally isolated and “protected from American culture but she soon realizes that the “little India” that has
been created is merely an illusion of security”. (Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage, 35-36).

As Jayanti and her aunt walk around their neighborhood, they are approached by a group of young boys who attack them with racist slurs. Jayanti does not understand how circumstances can shift so dramatically once she leaves her home. Her entire perception of her own race is thrown into question upon leaving the house. Jayanti who was proud to be an upper class Indian, questions her relation to American race categorization. The harsh words of the young boys have affected her to the point where she cannot help but perceive herself differently. Jayanti has developed a multiplicity of consciousness in viewing herself. One consciousness with which she understands herself as a minority living in America another with which she sees herself as the upper class Indian girl of her family and third with which she perceives herself as in between the two. Although these self-perceptions conflict with one another, Jayanti comes to understand that this paradoxical condition is her fate. To live in a state of multiplicity with oppositional conditions exactly within a fragment self, is the essence of the diasporic experience.

The identity of the south Asian diasporic woman cannot be categorized as simply Eastern or Western, submissive or dominant, but rather it is comprised of numerous consciousnesses that encompass various conflicting characteristics. The manner in which Diavakaruni’s characters perceive themselves is based upon this multiplicity of selves, and the notion that one’s relation to one’s surrounding space determines the process and outcome of self-perception allows for paradoxical views of the self to exist, thereby deconstructing the concept of identity as unified and perception as singular. For these
women, to exist is to be many; it is to embrace the paradoxes of perception that arise as life is lived astride the boundaries of many worlds.

**Works Cited:**


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