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IMMIGRANT LIFE AS AN INDIAN WOMAN'S ENROUTE TO HER CULTURAL FREEDOM: A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S SHORT-STORY *CLOTHES*

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Abstract

Many educated Indian women prefer America settled Indian men as their life partners for their greener life outside India. After going there, they establish their individual and independent identity and prove their gender equally superior like the male gender. If they are born and brought up by traditionally strong families, they change their Indian cultural identity and find themselves indented with the American natives by accepting their cultural habits. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story *Clothes* narrates how Sumita the protagonist who was born and brought up in a traditional family at Calcutta changes her cultural habits in her choice of choosing a colour sari instead of the white sari after the death of her husband and stays back in America as a single woman. She does not want to come back to India, wear white sari as a widow and accept her identity as a widow. The writer has brought to light how Sumita finds her American life giving her full freedom from the clutches of Indian cultural habits and enjoys it without any traditional encumbrance.

Key-Words

Tradition, Culture, immigrant, identity, limitations.

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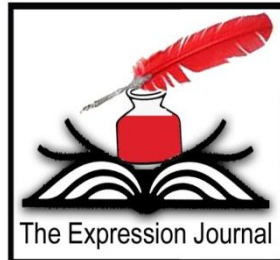
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Introduction:

Indian cultural tradition is as old as the hills. It varies from religion to religion, region to region, and caste to caste. But it has been more concerned with the life of women than with that of men. Dress code is one of such cultural habits, strictly enforced on and faithfully followed by Indian women with traditional bent of mind. Indian men enjoy wearing different styles and shades of dresses without any restrictions. But women, being a discriminated gender, cannot enjoy their independent individuality in the choice of dresses as they like. Religion, tradition and patriarchy dictate what kind of dresses women should wear during their growth and development from childhood to womanhood and in different social functions at home and in the society.

Indian cultural diversity lies in the various practices of the people in their ways of living. It is obviously noticed in religious worships, performance of rites and rituals, conduct of weddings, cooking of food items and eating habits, and wearing a variety of colour dresses. All Indian women, born and brought up in traditional ways, have to wear their attires as prescribed by their respective religious culture. They are to wear different types of dresses in social, familial and religious functions. Their choice of dresses is as per the requirements needed in such functions. Shalu Sharma, an Indian social realist, highlights the existing reality in Indian scenario with regard to Indian dress code meant for women of all religious faiths:

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The customs followed by Indian people vary across length and breadth of the country. Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity are some of the major religions, [which the] people believe and follow. Not only does the [respective] religion affect the way people think, live and dress but also the region or the state to which they belong has a great influence [on their dress culture]. (*Indian Traditional Dress* n.pag.)

Indian women in their diverse religious and social statuses may be traditional or modern, educated or illiterate, professional or house-wives, and the native Indians or the immigrants. Yet, they are quite conscious of the demands of the well established cultural conventions with regard to their dresses. One of the cultural dresses of traditional women with which their religious faiths, social statuses and gender are always identified is sari. However, as times are changing, women being educated, also change their dress code on the style of the western fashion. Of all the Indian religious groups, it is only Hinduism, which still forces its women to be faithful to the traditional ways of wearing different colours of saris on different occasions whether they live in India as the natives or in the alien lands as the immigrants. Wearing of different colours of saris by women depends upon the occasions for which such colours are meant. Besides, different colour saris bring out the mental make-up of women in given situations and the special significance attached to the colours.

If a woman wears a red colour, it is an indication of some happy celebrations such as weddings and festivals. It also displays her mood of happiness, love and affection for all. If she is dressed in a yellow colour sari, the colour reflects her optimistic, positive, intelligent and inspiring character. If she happens to wear a green colour sari, the colour becomes symbolic of her peaceful and gentle mental make-up. If she is seen wearing a blue sari, the colour is a symptomatic of her peace of mind. If she wears a pink sari, the colour exposes her feministic concerns and fills her mind with the hope that “if winter comes, spring cannot be far behind” (Shelley, *West Wind* 70). If she wears a black colour sari, it is considered to be a symbol of grief and sadness. Besides, it is also considered to be a woman’s most preferred colour for evening parties. A woman wearing a white colour sari stands for purity, peace and simplicity. Yet, the white sari in Hindu religion is treated something different because it is symbolical of widowhood. It is always worn by the women who have lost their husbands. Such women are the unfortunate set of people because their presence in any auspicious functions like marriage is treated as unwanted ones.

As far as Christian women are concerned, they are expected to wear only the dresses of modesty, decency and decorum. Their outer garments should reveal only their good inner selves and not their outer beauty to attract men. This is what is said in *1 Timothy* of the New Testament. Women should “dress modestly, with decency and decorum, not

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with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God” (2: 9-10). Nowadays, they wear all types of modern dresses without any restrictions even if they are young, or unmarried or married. Those who are professionals wear the dresses suitable to the nature of jobs they do. But those who are widows do not wear white saris to indicate their nature of status in life like the traditional Hindu women. They wear all types of coloured saris and fashionable dresses, suitable for women.

In Islam, women are expected to dress modestly and they should always wear outer garments over their saris so that their physical attractive and enticing features should not be exposed to the lustful eyes of men. In 59th Verse of the Chapter 33 of Quran, it is said, “O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks [veils] all over their bodies. That will be better, that they should be known [as free respectable women] so as not to be annoyed” (qtd.in Stacey, *Dress Code of Muslim Women* n.pag.). Thus, Islam holds its women in very high esteem and its rules insisting on women covering their head and body are mainly to protect and guard their dignity and honour in public places.

The writer of this article dealt with the well established dress code of women belonging to Hinduism. He has also brought to light the significance of the choices of different colour saris of the Hindu women in life, and the differences between their choices and those of women belonging to the other Indian religious groups. After his critical analysis of the story, he has concluded his argument by saying that Indian Hindu women as the natives cannot escape from the restrictions of their respective religion. But those Indian immigrant Hindu women enjoy wearing any modern dress without any religious restrictions, provided her in-laws do not object to her modern style. This is the theme of this article written on the short story of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni “Clothes” taken from her first collection *Arranged Marriage*. Through his critical analysis, the writer drives home the existing truth that the immigrant life for a Hindu woman provides her with much expected freedom in the choice of her dresses she likes to wear without any opposition.

Analysis:

Sumita, affectionately called ‘Mita’ has got married to Somesh Sen, an Indian American and an owner of a store in America, through arranged marriage as per Hindu tradition. During her wedding, she has been dressed in a costly sari that her father has got her. She thinks positively that during her immigrant life in America, she can wear all types of fashionable western short skirts like any other American women. Her heart is full of expectations and dreams of her happy, prosperous, fashionable, and luxurious immigrant life in America. Though she feels ungrateful leaving her parents for America, she is reminded of her mother’s words that a married woman belongs to her husband. Finding

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herself in her husband's house, she feels shocked because her husband's American house is as strongly traditional as her Calcutta house. Moreover, she is not able to feel completely free and enjoy marital bliss as she has thought. She has to be always dressed in traditional Indian saris.

Being traditionally brought up, Sumita has to live with some kind of inhibition and she cannot enjoy her status as a newly married woman. Her in-laws being every inch traditional Indians even in America in their ways of life, she has to be very careful in her behaviour with her husband in their presence. She cannot even exchange love glances with her husband openly. Every act of her love and affection towards her husband is to be within the four walls of their bed room. Even with her husband all alone inside her room, she cannot feel free to express her love feelings to him:

I have to cover my head with the edge of my Japan nylon sari and serve tea to the old women visiting her mother-in-law. Like a good Indian wife, I must never address my husband by his name. Even during night time on our bed, we have to kiss guiltily, uneasily, listening for the giveaway creak of springs of the bed. . . . But at other times, I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paperweight. It is a world so small that if I were to stretch out my arms, I would touch its cold unyielding edges. (25-26)

Sumita does not experience any dominance either from her husband or from her in-laws. However, she hates to play the role of a typical Indian daughter-in-law even in America. She cannot call her husband by his name affectionately in the presence of her in-laws. She cannot enjoy her martial happiness with her husband freely as she has no privacy. Everything contrary to her expectations is happening in her American house. "Where even in our bed we kiss guiltily, uneasily, listening for the giveaway creak of springs. Sometimes I laugh to myself, thinking how ironic it is that after all my fears about America, my life has turned out to be no different from Dipali's or Radha's" (26).

Sumita enjoys wearing modern American dress before her husband only inside her bed-room during night time. She does it without the knowledge of her in-laws but with the consent of her husband. She starts wearing jeans and T-shirts one after another and displaying her modern look before her husband. She also looks at her reflection in the mirror in modern dress. This is the only freedom she enjoys:

Late at night I stand in front of our bedroom mirror trying on the clothes . . . I model each one for him, walking back and forth, clasping my hands behind my head, lips pouted, left hip thrust out just like the models on TV, while he whispers applause . . . I'm wearing a pair of jeans now, marveling at the curves of my hips and thighs, which have always been hidden under the flowing lines of my saris. I love the color, the same pale blue as the nayantara flowers that grow in my parents' garden . . . The jeans come with a closefitting T-shirt which outlines my breasts. (24)

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But she dare not look like an American woman in her way of wearing dresses openly and identify herself with the natives culturally in the presence of her in-laws. Hence, she is in predicament regarding her preference between two cultures in wearing her clothes. Her thought of immigrant life as an enroute to her cultural freedom turns to be a disappointing one. Indian tradition of wearing only saris haunts her day in and day out.

Sumita's husband Somesh meets with an unfortunate end to his life when a burglar shoots him to death in his shop. His unexpected demise in his working spot places her in a greater predicament still. Now, she has to go back to India with her in-laws and live as a widow like "a dove with the cut off wings" (33). She has to wear a white sari like any other Indian widows as per Indian culture and without any individuality and freedom to enjoy the pleasures of life. Her in-laws decide to go back to India with Sumita. However, the new woman in Sumita emerges and dictates her not to go back to India along with her in-laws and not to be an Indian widow by wearing the white sari. She cannot feel free from the clutches of the Indian culture by accepting the white sari and meet with isolation and marginalization as a widow.

Hence, Sumita decides to get a new identity as an American Indian in words, deeds and thoughts as well as in her way of wearing the colour saris or westerns style dresses. As an American Indian, she can identify herself with the natives in their cultural traits. She can establish her individuality and independence as a single woman. Therefore, she stays back in America after the death of her husband and begins to work as a teacher in order to enjoy the pleasures of life without any cultural barriers. With the death of her husband comes her freedom from cultural limitations.

Conclusion:

Sumita is an Indian immigrant in America with the new woman attitudes. She is not an individual but a type because almost all Indian women immigrants in America change their Indian cultural practices into that of American one so that they can identify themselves with the natives. As they are in America, they want to be Americans in their cultural habits too. They do not explicitly display their identity by wearing the white saris that they are widows. They do not get discriminated on the basis of their widowhood in their immigrant life. As Sumita decides to stay back in America as a single woman, she wants to be an American Indian. Chaturvedi Divi also confirms it in his article about Sumita's decision to be an American Indian when she rejects the white sari and prefers almond colour dress:

Sumita rejects the white sari as the colour is associated with widowhood, which is also a symbol for retreating from active social life. She picks up an almond colour dress. Almonds symbolize life. Sumita's preference shows her determination to stay put on the American soil and start a new life braving the opposition from her in-laws. (247)

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