



Navigating Margins: Racism and Economic Disparity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage

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Citation: Anushruti, et al. (2024), Navigating Margins: Racism and Economic Disparity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(2), 1879-1882

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i2.9813

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intertwined issues of racism and economic disparity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*, a short story collection that foregrounds the diasporic experiences of Indian women. Through an intersectional lens, the stories expose how gendered racism and economic instability affect immigrant identity and autonomy. Drawing upon postcolonial feminist theory and diasporic studies, this paper argues that Divakaruni critiques both systemic oppression and internal cultural constraints through nuanced portrayals of South Asian immigrant women negotiating their place in American society.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Economic disparity, Immigrant experience, Intersectionality Postcolonial feminism etc

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995) is a seminal text that reflects the challenges faced by South Asian immigrant women in the United States. These narratives transcend the personal to reflect collective experiences shaped by racism and economic disparity. As women straddle two worlds—the homeland and the host land—they become caught in a web of external discrimination and internal cultural expectations. This paper investigates how Divakaruni's stories address systemic racism and economic marginalization and how these forces compound the immigrant woman's struggle for identity, autonomy, and survival.

Understanding the Context: Immigration and Intersectionality

To comprehend the layered oppression in *Arranged Marriage*, one must analyze it through an intersectional lens. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality recognizes how different forms of discrimination—such as racism, sexism, and classism—interact (Crenshaw 1244). South Asian immigrant women in the U.S. are subject to the dual burdens of racialization and patriarchal expectations. Divakaruni presents these burdens through her characters who grapple with alienation, dependence, and social invisibility.

The immigrant experience, as portrayed in *Arranged Marriage*, is not a monolith but a site of compounded vulnerabilities. Women face systemic barriers such as language obstacles, economic dependence on their spouses, and cultural isolation, which often lead to emotional and psychological confinement. In stories like *The Word Love* and *Clothes*, Divakaruni portrays protagonists torn between traditional values and the desire for autonomy, highlighting the conflicts that arise when cultural identity intersects with gendered subjugation. These women navigate a liminal space—struggling to belong to their host country while also meeting the rigid expectations of their home culture.

Furthermore, class dynamics further complicate their realities. Many characters come from modest socio-economic backgrounds, which limits their access to resources and support systems, rendering them more susceptible to exploitation. The intersection of immigration status, gender roles, and cultural expectations creates a form of layered oppression that traditional feminist or racial critiques alone cannot fully address. Through her nuanced storytelling, Divakaruni brings to light the silent struggles of immigrant women whose voices are often marginalized, urging readers to acknowledge the multiplicity of identities and oppressions that define their lived experiences.

Racism in the American Landscape

Racism manifests in Divakaruni's stories not only in overt acts of discrimination but also in subtle forms of exclusion and stereotyping. In "The Word Love," the narrator's American lover refuses to introduce her to his mother, despite their intimate relationship. This exclusion is rooted in cultural othering and racial discomfort:

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"You know how she is about foreigners. She wouldn't understand" (Divakaruni 49). The term "foreigner" becomes a racial category that erases individuality and reinforces a power hierarchy.

In "Clothes," Sumita's American dream collapses when her husband is murdered in a racially motivated incident. Her identity as a widow is not only a product of personal loss but also of racial violence. Divakaruni thus underlines how brown bodies in white spaces become vulnerable to systemic and spontaneous aggression. The "American dream" is revealed to be selectively distributed and structurally inaccessible to immigrant women of color.

Moreover, in both stories, the immigrant characters are caught in a double bind—expected to assimilate into American society while simultaneously being denied full acceptance. In *"Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs,"* the protagonist's idealized vision of America is shattered when she and her aunt are verbally and physically attacked by white men shouting racial slurs. This moment violently disrupts the myth of multicultural tolerance and exposes the undercurrents of white supremacy embedded in the American fabric. The characters' silence and retreat in the face of this aggression reflect the internalized fear and marginalization experienced by many immigrants.

Divakaruni also reveals how racism operates through language and the gaze. Immigrant women are often seen as exotic or submissive, confined to stereotypes that shape their interactions and limit their agency. In "The Word Love," the protagonist's struggle is not only romantic but also existential—she is torn between cultural loyalty and the alienation imposed by her lover's unspoken racial prejudice. Her identity is continuously negotiated in a space where love itself is conditional, filtered through a lens of racial and cultural expectations. Through these narratives, Divakaruni critiques the myth of America as a land of opportunity. Instead, she presents a nuanced portrayal of how racism, both systemic and personal, infiltrates the lives of immigrants, particularly women. The stories highlight that for many, the pursuit of the American dream is laced with the trauma of exclusion, invisibility, and violence—making survival itself an act of resistance.

Economic Disparity and Immigrant Precarity

In Divakaruni's narratives, economic disparity is both a cause and consequence of immigrant vulnerability. Many of her protagonists are financially dependent on their spouses or are trapped in low-income, exploitative jobs. In "The Disappearance," a woman vanishes, and her absence prompts no legal or communal urgency. The husband casually tells the police that she "probably ran away," and the case is quickly dropped. The woman's economic dependence rendered her disposable—a phenomenon echoed in real-world cases of missing immigrant women whose plights go unnoticed due to their marginalized status.

Similarly, in "Silver Pavement, Golden Roof," the protagonist arrives in America expecting prosperity but is confronted with the stark economic limitations of immigrant life. Her relative, whom she expected to live luxuriously, drives a taxi and lives in a modest apartment. The disparity between expectation and reality underscores the myth of American abundance and reflects the economic constraints immigrants face due to structural racism and limited access to upward mobility.

This motif of disillusionment and hardship continues throughout Divakaruni's work, where dreams of economic upliftment often collide with the harsh realities of immigrant existence. In *"The Word Love,"* for instance, the protagonist is a young woman caught between the cultural expectations of her traditional Indian mother and her desire for autonomy in a foreign land. Her emotional and financial dependence on her American lover becomes a symbol of vulnerability—highlighting how economic reliance can restrict agency and silence resistance, especially for immigrant women navigating unfamiliar social terrains.

Divakaruni frequently portrays how economic disparity intersects with gender, culture, and race, compounding the marginalization of her characters. In *"Clothes,"* the protagonist, Sumita, envisions her American life as a space of opportunity and romantic liberation. However, her dreams are shattered when her husband dies, leaving her both widowed and economically stranded in a foreign land. Despite this trauma, her decision to stay in America marks a quiet act of defiance and resilience, suggesting that even within disempowerment, there lies the potential for redefinition and agency.

The tension between hope and hardship in these stories mirrors the broader immigrant experience, where the pursuit of the so-called American Dream is often filtered through layers of socio-economic oppression. Divakaruni does not simply depict immigrant struggle—she exposes the structural conditions that perpetuate inequality, including exploitative labor systems, lack of legal protections, and cultural isolation. Her narratives call attention to the invisible lives of women who are economically silenced and socially erased, urging readers to reconsider how class and gender shape the immigrant experience in both public discourse and private life.

Patriarchy, Culture, and Economic Control

Economic disparity in *Arranged Marriage* is often reinforced by cultural norms that prioritize male authority. Many of Divakaruni's women are economically and emotionally dependent on men, leading to toxic power dynamics. In "The Maid Servant's Story," the protagonist's fate is shaped by her economic reliance on her employers. In "The Ultrasound," economic resources are withheld from the daughter-in-law, reflecting how finances are used as tools of control in patriarchal systems.

These stories show that economic freedom is central to the characters' empowerment. Those who achieve some form of self-sufficiency, such as the narrator in "Meeting Mrinal," begin to assert their identity and autonomy.

The protagonist leaves an unhappy marriage and reflects, "Maybe it's time I stopped living my life through someone else's eyes" (Divakaruni 152). Here, financial independence is not just material but psychological. This psychological dimension of financial independence recurs throughout *Arranged Marriage*, where the lack of economic agency traps women in cycles of silence, sacrifice, and submission. In many stories, cultural expectations push women to internalize their subjugation, making them complicit in sustaining the very structures that oppress them. For instance, in "Clothes," the protagonist initially embraces her new American life and her husband's promises, but her limited economic mobility constrains her when his violent nature is revealed. Her choices are narrowed not just by love or duty but by financial dependency and societal expectations around marriage and obedience.

Divakaruni masterfully illustrates how cultural ideals of femininity—rooted in sacrifice, patience, and obedience—often work hand-in-hand with economic disempowerment to uphold patriarchal norms. Women are praised for endurance, not agency. Even in the more progressive settings, like in "The Disappearance," the wife's vanishing serves as a grim metaphor for how women without financial or emotional support can be erased from their own lives.

However, empowerment in these stories does not always stem from large acts of rebellion. It often begins with quiet awakenings—a realization of self-worth, a decision to speak up, or an inner shift in perception. These moments of clarity are deeply tied to economic awareness. In "Meeting Mrinal," the protagonist's assertion of self comes only after she starts envisioning a life where she isn't financially or emotionally beholden to a man. The recognition that survival, dignity, and selfhood require independence becomes a recurring theme, offering a subtle yet powerful critique of cultures that equate a woman's value with her capacity to endure rather than to choose.

Ultimately, *Arranged Marriage* critiques how patriarchy manipulates cultural and economic structures to restrict female agency. Through nuanced storytelling, Divakaruni invites readers to examine how deeply economic control underpins gender inequality—and how liberation, though fraught, begins with reclaiming both narrative and financial space.

Resistance and Resilience

Despite the overwhelming challenges, Divakaruni's characters also exhibit resilience. They resist not only cultural patriarchy but also the racial and economic structures that seek to diminish them. In "The Bats," a young girl and her mother flee domestic abuse. Their journey toward independence, though incomplete, signals a refusal to be complicit in their oppression. Resistance in *Arranged Marriage* often takes quiet forms—leaving, remembering, refusing silence—but these acts are radical in contexts where speaking out is dangerous.

These small acts of defiance embody a deeper strength, one rooted in the characters' enduring hope for transformation. In "Clothes," for example, the protagonist's decision to leave her abusive husband is not marked by dramatic rebellion but by a quiet, resolute departure. It is in this moment of reclaiming agency that she asserts her identity beyond cultural expectations. Similarly, in "The Word Love," the narrator grapples with the emotional burden of filial duty and romantic betrayal. Her eventual recognition of the need for self-worth over cultural approval speaks volumes about internalized resistance.

Divakaruni masterfully portrays how resilience is often forged in silence, memory, and small choices rather than overt rebellion. These women do not necessarily overturn patriarchal or racial systems, but they carve spaces within them to assert their humanity. Their survival is not just about endurance but about subtle redefinitions of selfhood, love, and belonging. Ultimately, *Arranged Marriage* becomes a testament to the everyday courage of women navigating multiple marginalizations, and finding strength not just in confrontation, but in the very act of persisting.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is a powerful exploration of racism and economic disparity through the lens of immigrant women's lives. The collection critiques the myth of the American dream by exposing the systemic inequalities faced by diasporic communities. Through economic subjugation, cultural expectations, and racial marginalization, Divakaruni's characters illuminate the complex negotiations of identity, survival, and resistance. Her stories urge readers to recognize that immigration is not merely a journey across borders but a passage through intersecting systems of power.

Divakaruni does not offer easy resolutions; instead, she presents the fragmented realities of her characters with honesty and empathy. The strength of *Arranged Marriage* lies in its nuanced portrayal of women who, despite their vulnerability, assert their agency in subtle yet profound ways. These narratives reveal how acts of resistance—whether through leaving an abusive partner, choosing personal autonomy, or silently enduring—are radical within the oppressive frameworks of patriarchy, racism, and class. By centering the voices of immigrant women, Divakaruni not only humanizes their struggles but also challenges dominant narratives that often render them invisible. Ultimately, *Arranged Marriage* is both a critique and a celebration—of pain endured, voices raised, and identities reclaimed in the face of systemic erasure.

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