



EXPECTATIONS (AMERICAN DREAM) AND EXPLORATIONS: A READING OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "SILVER PAVEMENTS, GOLDEN ROOFS"

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni- a renowned South Asian Diaspora writer, representing the influential and distinct voice of Indian immigrant women abroad, especially in America. Divakaruni's book of eleven short-stories entitled Arranged Marriage unfolds the saga of willing and unwilling immigrant women's lives in America. The writer authentically pens down the women from all walks of life. They are in/dependent wives or girls seeking their careers in America. Divakaruni's intention to do away with the much discussed, old, conventional, passive and unwilling image of Indian immigrant woman who always remain silent against her self-will, desire to freedom and individuality. The research paper proves through the short story that the popular 'American Dream' is for all those who wish and strive to chase it constantly. The tale anecdotes an ambitious girl- Jayanti Ganguli, travelling from India (Diasporal Dream) to America (American Dream). She envisions the 'American Dream of "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" willing to wipe away the conventional image of passive, failed and unwilling immigrant to America to achieve her expectations of better and shackle free life. Jayanti represents the writer's assumption of 'equal opportunities for all- American Dream'.

Key-words: *Diaspora, American Dream, immigrant, Culture and individuality etc.*

INTRODUCTION

"Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold? (Arranged Marriage 46).

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The above mentioned lines from the short story entitled, “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” aptly suggests the willing immigrant women’s dream of pursuing and settling in the magic land. The story appears in the book *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The book portrays various images of Indian Immigrant Women. It’s a collection of eleven short stories. It is a highly acclaimed book and won many awards such as - *American Book Award*, the *Bay Area Book Reviewers Award* and the *PEN Josephine Miles Award for fiction*. It authentically depicts the willing and unwilling women immigrants’ lives with their willingness and dreams, trials and tribulations in America. Their problems, challenges in the new land, new culture gets so well captured in the book. The story for discussion here depicts the expectations and explorations of a protagonist-Jayanti Ganguli. She dreams of achieving a better life of freedom, individuality by going to what immigrants always think of America as *magic land*. The story gradually reveals the contrast in her expectations and explorations. The story ends with a suggestive note of Jayanti’s willingness to accept the beauty and pain together of being there in America.

Chitra Divakaruni- a renowned, well known South Asian Diaspora short story writer, a novelist, a social reformer, a poetess - heralds the positive image of willing Indian immigrant woman in America through her writings. The writer voices against the conventional image of Indian immigrant woman. The writer has made a significant difference to the American culture. Joel Kuortti opines in his Introduction to the book *Writing Imagined Diaspora: South Asian Women Reshaping North America* writes, "Diaspora does not emerge as mere sociological fact..."(5). He also adds, "Diasporic South Asians are not merely assimilating to their host culture but they are also actively reshaping them through their own new voices bringing new definitions of identity"(6). Previously Indian women immigrant women were merely shown as a passive, recluse, nostalgic and unwilling to get assimilate in the new land. Divakaruni tries to wipe out this negative image and asserts, this is always not true. Divakaruni’s writing paves the way and hopes to immigrant women to achieve their expectations in the “...*magic land* [America] where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold (*Arranged Marriage* 46). Of course, Divakaruni doesn’t do away with the trials and tribulations in the way of achieving the Dream but sketches her women with the tremendous aspirations and hopes. And here lies the writer’s skills of penning down a hopeful image of immigrants especially women.

Prior to initiate the narrative of the short story in discussion, we need to focus on the concept of much talked and envisioned ‘American Dream’. It is a concept, an aspiration, a dream, an expectation of almost all immigrants who dream of going to America. ‘The American Dream’ is seldom to need explanation. It is a national ethos of the United States. It includes the set of ideals- equality, freedom, opportunities for prosperity and success, betterment of living achieved through hard work in a society with few hurdles. The American Dream is deeply

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rooted in the United States' Declaration of Independence. Freelance writer, a Historian - James Truslow Adams popularised the term in his book- *The Epic of America* in 1931. He defines:

But there has been also the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement...a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position... The American dream, that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.

(The Epic of America 135)

The American dream of 'equal opportunities for all irrespective of caste, creed, color, gender etc.' that attracts immigrants from all over the world in the hope of a better standard of life. And Indians are no exception to this fascination for the "American Dream".

The short story "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" narrates the journey of a girl- Jayanti Ganguli from Diasporal Dream (India) to American Dream (America). She harbours while travelling to America many expectations of being into a new land, new culture. She dreams of free from all the conventional and cultural shackles. Very beginning of the tale tells us about her dream of going to the 'magic land'. While boarding the plane she thinks, "I'VE LOOKED FORWARD TO THIS DAY FOR SO LONG THAT when I finally board the plane I can hardly breathe..." (*Arranged Marriage* 35). Jayanti is so much eager to shatter the shackles of her culture and its consequent customs. When she looks a blond hair air hostess in the plane she thinks her "...long hair, imprisoned in the customary tight braid... It feels coarse and oily" (*Arranged Marriage* 35-36). Reader can feel her anguish to adopt the new land. She desperately wishes to embrace the new land and its culture, she decides, "As soon as I get to Chicago, I promise myself, I will have it cut and styled" (*Arranged Marriage* 36). The writer aptly captures through her meticulous use of language the willing immigrants' expectations from the new land and their all efforts to adopt its culture.

Jayanti's experience of travelling from Calcutta to Chicago signifies her journey from Diasporal Dream to American Dream. Her willingness of assimilation in the new land is

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metaphorically depicted by her desire to grab the air inside the plane. Divakaruni reliably captures Jayanti's hopes, "The air inside the plane smells different... This air is dry and cool and leaves a slight metallic aftertaste on my lips. I lick at them, wanting to capture the taste, make it part of me forever. (*Arranged Marriage* 36). Jayanti goes to America to pursue higher education. She is supposed to be at her Aunt and Uncle Pratima- Bikram's home till gets an admission at hostel. She wonders how she could stay with them as she hardly knows them. Aunt Pratima is her Mother's younger sister. The former writes hardly any letters that too full of her nostalgia.

Jayanti, when arrives in America expresses her happiness being in America to the Aunt and Uncle as she conveys:

"I can't believe I'm finally here in the U.S.," I tell him. "I've heard so much about Chicago- Lake Michigan, which is surely big as an ocean, the Egyptian museum with mummies three thousand years old, and is it true that the big downtown stores have real silver mannequins in their windows?"

(Arranged Marriage 42)

She becomes too impatient to wait and says, "I can't wait to see it all!"

(Arranged Marriage 42).

But Jayanti explores a very different experience from her expectations in America. Her Aunt and Uncle seem to have a passive approach towards the American life. When the Uncle sees Jayanti's inclination towards the American life, He says, "Things here aren't as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we'd become millionaires. But it's not so easy" (*Arranged Marriage* 43). But Jayanti doesn't understand in her mood of happiness. In fact she feels, "Uncle's tone is dark and raw. The bitterness in it coats my mouth like the *karela* juice Mother used to give me to cool my liver" (*Arranged Marriage* 43). He narrates his experience to Jayanti, "The Americans hate us. They are always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, *kala admi*. Blaming us... You'll see it for yourself soon enough" (*Arranged Marriage* 43). Jayanti when goes to their home, feels being trapped in the typically maintained Indian ambience home. She feels her, "brain is dying. Soon I will turn into one of those mournful-eyed cows in the painting behind the sofa" (*Arranged Marriage* 47). She wants to get rid of it and be in the free and independent environment.

Jayanti's expectations and exploration of being actually in America has a vast contrast to each other. Jayanti expects to achieve the 'American Dream'- of being all equal and all get equal opportunities to develop and make better future in the magic land of America. But the reality there is stark and dark, which she experiences so soon. The prediction of her Uncle of



the hostile nature of American people comes to true as one day Jayanti forces her Aunt to go out who was not willing at all as her husband has warned her against it. Still Aunt Pratima goes with Jayanti. They while walking the lane down confront a group of young boys who teased them as *nigger*. They become victims of racial conflict. There were four thin boys who scared Jayanti. They stared at them and then "...bent their heads together, consulting, then the tallest one takes up a step toward us and says, "Nigger" (*Arranged Marriage* 50). The writer narrates the incident of racial attack in details:

"Now the others take up the word, chanting it high singsong voices that have not broken yet, nigger, nigger, until I want to scream, or weep. Or laugh, because can't they see that I'm not black at all but an Indian girl of good family?"

(*Arranged Marriage* 51).

One of them threw the slush towards Jayanti and Pratima. It splatters on their faces; coats and ran down their saris. Jayanti wants to retaliate to them by throwing the same towards them but Pratima pulls her saying, "*Let's go home, Jayanti-*" (*Arranged Marriage* 51). Both of them started sobbing when tried to help each other. "The voices follow us for a long time" (*Arranged Marriage* 52). After reaching home Jayanti has to bear her Uncle's frustration and anger.

Though Divakaruni shows through Jayanti's eagerness to embrace the American dream as, "*America, I think, and the word opens inside me like a folded paper flower placed in water, filling me until there is no room to breathe*" (*Arranges Marriage* 46). But the writer doesn't do way with the problems confronted by the immigrants in the new American land. Divakaruni authentically depicts the hostility of new land towards the immigrants. Her skill lies in portraying her characters with the hope to strive for the betterment of life unlike the conventional diaspora writers. Same applies to Jayanti too. Jayanti also becomes emotional and breaks down after experiencing the hostility of the new culture. She also becomes nostalgic and seeks to taker recluse in her home back in India. Divakaruni writes down Jayanti's nostalgia :

"Home, I whisper desperately, homehomehome, and suddenly, intensely, I want my room in Calcutta where things were so much simpler...I want my childhood again... But I am too far away for the spell to work, for the words to take me back, even in my head.

(*Arranged Marriage* 51)

Whatsoever trails and tribulation Jayanti experiences through the confrontation she still determines to be in America. She hopes to achieve her expectations, dreams of better career. As Jayanti experience:



Then out of the corner of my eye I catch a white movement. It is snowing. I step outside onto the balcony. It's cold... But I don't go back inside. The snow has covered the dirty cement pavements, the sad warped shingles of the rooftops, has softened, forgivingly"

(Arranged Marriage 56)

The narration signifies meticulously the willingness to adopt the American culture to achieve that American dream which Jayanti expects when she boards the plane to America. She again dreams of:

*Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land
Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?*

(Arranged Marriage 56)

To conclude, Jayanti prepares herself to adopt the new land by accepting all odds in the way of her dream. The last lines make her decision of assimilation make clear to readers as Jayanti says, "I notice that the snow has covered my own hands so they are no longer brown but white, white, white." (*Arranged Marriage 56*). Divakaruni's subtle use of metaphors makes her writing stronger in driving her intension home. Emotions speak more through her less but significant use of words and figures of speech. The above quote depicts Jayanti's willingness towards the American land through the metaphor of her hands becoming 'white, white, white'. The use of repetition makes the meaning more clear and strong of her becoming white like an American and disappearing of brown like an Indian. But while doing so she understands and ready to accept, "... that the beauty and the pain should be part of each other" (*Arranged Marriage 56*). Thus, the research paper proves Chitra Divakaruni's intention of portraying a positive image of Indian immigrant women in the new land-America. Jayanti represents the writer's intention and chooses to be free and individual instead being imprison in the cultural shackles accepting the fact of confronting the problems while achieving the 'American Dream'. Jayanti accepts both the opportunities for prosperity as well as challenges in America like any immigrant who hopes to assimilate in America.

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