

Cloth as Socio-Cultural Trope for the Contestation of Emerging Identities

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Cloth has a gorgeous and grand history of its own, and it is the specimen copy of prevalent ideological discussion and debate in the literary arena which is manifested through the multiple cultures within the umbrella entity of cloth. The vestiges of the cloths have been evolving simultaneously with the evolution of human being from the culture of forestry to the civilized one. There is a strong and untangle affinity between human organisms and inanimate object like cloth, which is full of color and gaiety of its own. Cloth is so strongly intermingled within our culture and tradition that we can say that its inanimate stature is strong enough to stir the world of humans. Its presence is visible from the very birth to the crematory; it is mandatory to extend our culture and tradition, which would lag behind without its vibrant presence at the every stroke of human life. It is not the only precursor of aesthetic beauty, but also an enhancer of the very being of race, gender, class and age as well. It holds its own rudiments to be followed by the particular people in a particular locality or group.

In India, which is famously known as land of unity in diversity, cloths are the façade of its diversified and multiple identities. From birth to marriages, to the last journey of men, there is diversified codes of clothing. Indian festivals, Indian dances, dramas and cinema have specific clothing codes to stick by. Conversely, cloths are constructing the unique and glorious culture of India, while on the other hand, they are turned out to be an apt and camouflage tool for the subjugation and segregation of particular sections of our society regarding their differences of caste, gender, class and locality. Cloths are directly related to the individual and social identity, local and global identity, male and female identity, youth and aged one's identity. Might be this is the fundamental reason behind the inclusion of cloth and food habits of a community, regional and Dalit literature throbs with such issues, in the study of its existence where cloths have had been a prominent apparatus of the ruling forces to subjugate and marginalized the vulnerable group of our Indian society.

Objective of the Research Paper

This paper is intended to find out answers to some of basic questions related to clothing culture of Indian society. How the culture practices are correlated to the subjectivity of the female protagonists of Divakaruni's writings. What are the key issues of discussion and analysis in the study of women's space and identity? Why are these areas included in the writings of Divakaruni? What is the central motif behind her writing? In the light of these questions, this paper is destined to explore the different avenues embedded in the writings of Divakaruni.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian Diasporic author, and her writings revolve around the inner and outer world of women. Women are, like the literary mosses, the principal source of inspiration behind her literary creation. For the research in concerned field of study, this paper is dealing with stories of Divakaruni named "Clothes" and "Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter" which is published, in 1997 and 1995, in the collection of her short stories named *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*.

"Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter" is a classic saga of an old widow lady, whose single purpose of her life is to live for her son, Sagar. She had left India to spend the remainder of her life with her loving son and his family. Since she is leading a life of an old widow lady, it is nearly impossible for her to subvert her habits at this juncture of her life. In the persona of Mrs Dutta, Divakaruni has dexterously highlighted the agony and sorrow of an old widow woman who is striving hard to fit into the paradigm of changed circumstances of her life. Divakaruni is trying to demonstrate the apparent discrimination and negligence of old, who are in the last stage of their life, in the world of young. These differences are the difference of their ideologies. How each and every habit of Mrs Dutta proves out to be the cause of ruckus and disturbance in her family?

In the so called the land of young, Mrs Dutta finds it hard to have of space for her individuality. In this story, her sari is carrying the traces of her past life which was full of movement and gaiety. In America, the first troublemaker in her life was a

soft mattress of her bed, which had clutched her in its bewitching grip, unlike the solid copra ticking she used at her home in India. Throughout her life, she woke up before the rest of the rest of the family members, and she just wanted to carry her habit. Accordingly, she sets the alarm in the early morning which proves out lethal to the peace of her family. Throughout her life, Mrs Dutta learnt to hide her emotions, and not to express her inner for the sake of others.

Cloth at the Centre of Conflict

Mrs Dutta asked her son to settle a cloth line for her cloths in the backyard of his house, but her demand was simply ignored and denied by Shyamoli as she did not willing to provide any sort of opportunity to American to raise finger at her. She suggested Mrs Duttato keep her cloth in the hamper which would be washed by Shyamoli on Sunday along with the rest of cloths. Mrs Dutta unwillingly accepted her offer, but she was not comfortable with her suggestion; first of all, she was keeping the pictures of her gods in her bed room, which would be a bad omen for her family. Secondly, odor of the cloths would create friction in her sleep, even though the hamper was airtight one.

She didn't feel comfortable with the idea of washing her cloths with that of her son, and felt like leaving the world out of humiliation. To express the turmoil and convulsion her mind, Divakaruni has drawn an analogy of Sita with that of Mrs Dutta. Whereas, at the sight of mixing of her undergarments with the cloths of her son, Mrs Dutta wished that "the ground would be open up and swallow her". The climax of the story was that moment when Sagar was about to wash her clothes in the washing machine. This was something unusual for her, and abruptly she made a cry: "No, no, no, clothes and all is no work for the man". The very thought of her son's hand searching out her cloths and of his wife, had horrified her and shaken her being.

Cloth at the Dagger's Edge: as an Accelerator of the Clash between Tradition and Modernity

As she was not a techno-friendly person; she didn't dare to operate the gazette like washing machine. Moreover she was horrified at the thought of something went wrong, instead of curtailing down the work of home, it would curtail down the peace of her home. Her apprehension regarding washing machine is so genuine that we often relate ourselves with her. Mrs Dutta is representing the confusion and doubts of a novice person who doesn't know anything about newly indorsing gazette of history her life. She has decided to invent her own defense mechanism at the ground of "her experiences of managing a household" which is marked by her as "the promoter of harmony" in the home. She drops her sari along the redwood fence which is a dividing line between her son property and of his neighbor. She was very happy that she had finally learned to manage all things properly, without disturbing anyone. In her letter, she has expressed her overwhelming and pleasant experiences, and she confesses her

pleasure to Mrs Basu: "I'm fitting in so well here, you'd never guess I come only two months back. I've found new ways of doing things, of solving problems creatively. You would be most proud if you saw me". But her happiness proves out to be momentary; she became aware of the fact that she was behind the sadness of Shymoli's life. She overheard the conversation of his son and daughter-in-law that neighbor had complained about the old lady who used "to hang her cloths over the fence into my yard".

In fact, Divakaruni has presented the clash between modernity and traditionality in the form of female characters, which are pole apart from each other. This clash is succinctly submerged to the fore in form of difference of their clothing practices. Mrs Dutta's clothing is window to her culture and tradition where things like privacy is beyond her comprehension. While her Daughter-in-law is trying to accommodate herself in the cultural phrame of America, this complain is like a bolt in blue. She confesses, "All this year's I've been so careful not to give these American a chance to say something like this, and now ". She has to face humiliation at hand of her neighbour, just because of her mother-in-law. Abruptly, states that "Some days I feel like taking the kids and leaving". Mrs Dutta overheard the conversation between her son and daughter-in-law, it is not like, she was spying on her daughter-in-law, but indeed she was trying to find out the main cause behind her sadness.

On that night, Mrs Dutta didn't open her heart to anyone, neither any one strives to do that. She had learnt this thing from her childhood, not to express her sorrow. Intentionally, she laughs at the dinner when someone makes a joke. Here again, Divakaruni has used the image of "a short of Novocain to compare the inner turmoil and upheaval of Mrs Dutta's heart. There is a development in the personality of Mrs Dutta, and it is visible through her letter; letters are like single solace in her life. At the very stroke of the story we have found that Mrs Dutta was trying to hide her true self under the veil of artificial happiness. With the edge of her sari, she was trying to wipe a tear that has fallen on the aerogram. The single reason behind it is that she does not want to trouble anyone and to let the world know about her grief and suffering. But, lastly it was the same Mrs Dutta who has decided to divulge the truth of her life to her friend Mrs. Basu. Divakaruni states that she no longer cares whether tears will "blotch her letter" and she feels no need to suffer silently. Mrs Dutta finally decided to go back to India the place of her possession and belonging, instead of becoming a beast of burden, she had discovered her true self; a self who is independent and free to express whatever she feels like expressing. At the same time, she is "the keeper of the heart's dusty corners".

The Second story from the oeuvre of Divakaruni is "Clothes" which is imbued with the issue of cloth from the prologue to the epilogue of the story. In this story, cloths are symbolizing the different colors of our lives, and somehow directly attached with the 'self of wearer'. Here, cloths are

paving the way of progression and regression of someone's identity. Each and every color of sari is unfolding before us multiple stages of Sumita's life. The story is introducing before us the event of bride-viewing; a girl is getting prepared to be selected by someone unknown to her. For this event, silk sari of pink color is being selected by her parents which will enumerate the whole personality of Sumita. The color pink is a metaphor of transition and change which will be bestowed upon the body and mind of the wearer. It is wrapped around her like "sunflower after rain". The very body of the pink sari is like "the dawn sky over the women's Lake". The embroidery of goldzari which is enumerating the images of stars is exploring the world of imagination; a world full of stars and light. This world is creating a spark in the life of Sumita. While the "damp blotches on the delicate crushed fabric" are marking the inner commotion of her mind at very thought of leaving this place; moving from known to unknown world.

Colorful Cloths Impregnate with Colorful of Meaning

The multiple Colors of saris are pointing at the prevailing notion and meaning attached to the entity of cloths; red color is the color of good luck for a newly married bride, while blue color is color of sky, of hopes and desire. Cloths are one of the prominent reasons behind the clash of ideology; Sumita wants to clothe in the sari of blue color, while her mother wants to see her in the sari of red color. Here, this is not an argument between mother and daughter, but indeed it is a clash between tradition and modernity. While her father has settled down the discussion by the selection of midnight blue colored sari with the border of red, which is again marker of married life. Red border, like the marriage marker of her forehead, is attaching new meaning to the anatomy of the protagonist. At the starting, Sumita was quiet confused with her changed identity; Mrs Sumita, and further her words are complementing her state of mind, and she compares her condition with that of a fabric "the syllables rustle uneasily in my mouth like a stiff satin that's never been worn".

The varieties of the saris in her suitcase are marking the lavishness of Indian marriages, where parents spend their earning of their lives in the marriages of their son and daughters. Thick Kanjeevaram silk, Hand-woven cottons of the Bengal countryside and flame orange colored Benarasi sari are consolidating this point. Cloths are an important medium of transition and transformation in the lives of Divakaruni's characters; Sumita has tasted the flavor of change in form of her "American cloth". She had explored each and every ripple of this change in the mode of imitation of acts and activities of TV models. In her words, it was a "delicious excitement" for her.

The color of the jeans was like the color of the nayantara flowers in the garden of her parents, here, she had tasted the joy of nectar in form of cloths. While the T-shirt of sunrise and orange color is symbolizing the joy of the life and letters

"Great America" refers to the amusement world, and picture of roller coaster is winging her imagination to the world of excitement and exploration. The white coloration of her sari is indicting at the vacuum which is constructed in her life with the sudden demise of her husband. White is the color of death, ending and the color of widow; a life which is devoid of gaiety and energy. Presently she was battling a fight against the white sari which is indexed at the rigorous life of widow. The impending calamity has tried to devour the very identity of her, and she isn't willing to accept the offer of white sari. But at the same time, it is hard for her "to flee from the soft clutches of the sari". White sari is indicting at the death of her husband and demise of her dreams; dreams of life of freedom. White sari is presenting the discriminatory forces of the Indian society.

As we know that there are certain ordinances and regulations which are assigned to the clothing of a widow in India. Clothing etiquettes are designed and controlled by powerful agencies of India to exploit and subjugate the vulnerable section of our society. Indian cultural history is replete with the instances of subjugation, and it is still prevalent in our society in a camouflaged form. Dalit writing is vociferously asserting this point, where women are driven to follow certain dressing code, Bama's *Sangati* is narration of such hegemony. These codes are the hidden agendas of patriarchal forces to control the body of women.

Her blouse of cream color with a long brown skirt was fetched by her husband as a token of love to her. It harps a clarion and reminds her of her dreams and visions; to lead a life of selection. Her dream of becoming a helping hand of her husband is attached with these cloths. While her husband wanted to catch Sumita in college dress with a college degree in her hands. The color of her skirt, cream and brown, is the color of earth and of seeds, which are alluring her to a new world and a new life. Like the Nangeli of Kerala, she has decided to remonstrate against the suppressive laws of Indian Society. The last lines of the story are courting her point: "Her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt".

These two stories are documenting the bildungsroman development of her female characters, who are able to break the shackles of society and of family for the celebration of their identity. Stories are narrating their tale from the state of silence to the stature of voiced one. Divakaruni has tried to portray the subtle nuances of her women character who are caught within the mirage of their societies, but able to dismantle all the preconceived notion related to status and stature of widow. Mrs Dutta who considers that the single aim of her life is the happiness of her son, but her selection proves that though she is old, but not blunt and powerless to select a life of her individuality. Both stories are celebration of women choice and selection, instead of imposition and silence acceptance. Cloth is one of the main factors behind their selection. It proves that though it is inanimate, but strong

enough to fervent the world of human beings. It is capable of incubating human desires and aspiration.

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