



## Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Stories Clothes and The Ultrasound: a Study of Women Empowerment.

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### Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short stories provide powerful literary spaces to analyze and to arrive at a nuanced understanding of how the evolving dynamics of equity, inclusivity and diversity lead to women empowerment. Divakaruni's story, 'Clothes', depicts the inequities deeply rooted in traditional gender roles. However, her choices and her decisive nature drive the protagonist Sumita's towards becoming an empowered individual. Another story by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni titled 'The Ultrasound' exposes the exclusion that a woman experiences in domestic spaces, particularly under family pressures and preferences for the birth of a son rather than a daughter. This story espouses the diversity in women's responses to these pressures depicting resistance as well as acceptance, strength as well as vulnerability as the protagonist, Runu, strives to regain her voice and be included in her family's decision making processes. This paper thus seeks to understand as to how gender diversity, equity and inclusivity challenge the traditional boundaries and assert new narratives of women empowerment.

**Keywords:** gender diversity, gender equity, gender inclusivity, women empowerment, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Clothes' and 'The Ultrasound'

### 1. Introduction

'Clothes' is a story by the first generation diaspora writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In the story, Sumita a shy, young bride goes to the United States of America, after her marriage. In America, she follows the Indian customs and traditions. After living in the US for a few months, her husband Somesh is murdered. From then on, she assumes full charge of her life. Rather than returning to India, her native homeland, she courageously decides to run her husband's business. Thus, this story highlights issues of gender diversity, equity and inclusivity as Sumita's life in the US undergoes profound changes, when she as a young widow resolves to carve a niche for herself by fighting and resisting all odds in an alien space and alien country U.S.A.

The other story titled 'The Ultrasound' takes place in India. Here the daughter-in-law Runu feels oppressed and raises her voice against her husband and her in-laws for forcing her to abort her baby after knowing that it will be a girl through the amniocentesis

tests. Runu is helped by her cousin Anju who lives in America. Anju urges her cousin Runu to exhibit strength of mind and will-power to move on in life and makes arrangements for her cousin to settle down in the U.S., 'Clothes' and 'The Ultrasound' are significant stories as they address contrasting dimensions of women's empowerment. The first story highlights transformation and agency and the second story brings to light gender - based exclusion and discrimination.

### 2. Objectives

1. To examine the portrayal of women's empowerment in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Clothes' and 'The Ultrasound'.
2. To understand as to how gender diversity is reflected through the various experiences of the characters shaped by culture, marriage and also by immigration,
3. To analyze the representation of gender equity by examining reproductive rights, power relations within the family, societal structures and economic

independence in the narratives.

4. To explore the role of gender inclusivity as it offers resistance to patriarchal norms through female solidarity, voice and participation.
5. To situate the two stories within feminist and diaspora theoretical frameworks in order to understand women empowerment.

### 3. Methodology

This study is grounded in feminist theory, gender studies and diaspora theory with a specific focus on gender diversity, gender equity and gender inclusivity as pathways to women empowerment. Feminist theory forms the core of this research paper, particularly with its concern for women's autonomy, bodily rights and resistance to patriarchy. This research paper is divided into three sections and it seeks to understand these real world issues through Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives titled 'Clothes' and 'The Ultrasound'. This study examines these issues through a closed reading of the primary sources. It also takes recourse to secondary sources like books, articles and web materials for an in-depth study of the topic of study.

### 4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1 This section deals with the meanings of women empowerment. Such a delineation of meanings will help us enrich our understanding of the meanings of women empowerment. These meanings and definitions of empowerment will thus form the backdrop against which we can understand and analyze women empowerment. The first section also deals with the definitions of gender diversity, equity and inclusivity as they remain the focal point of women empowerment in this research paper.

Women's empowerment it is to be noted is the process by which women gain power and control over their own lives. The women acquire the ability to make strategic and informed choices in different spheres of their lives like social, economic, political and personal spheres. This helps them to acquire power and control of their lives.

Women empowerment involves the access to resources, agency in decision-making and enjoys freedom from structural constraints. According to Naila Kabeer, Feminist Economist, women empowerment is "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer 1999 pp. 435-464). Thus, this definition of women empowerment brings to the fore, choice, agency, transformation and power.

Women empowerment, we note is closely connected to freedom and development of capabilities. According to Amartya Sen, "Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedom that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency" (Sen 1999 p. 3). Thus, we can say that women empowerment is linked to freedom, equity and access to opportunities.

According to the United Nations "Women's empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development and the achievement of human rights" (UN Women 2000). This definition brings to light the fact that women empowerment means equity, inclusivity and participation.

Feminist writer Jo Rowlands defines women empowerment in the following way: "Empowerment is about bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it" (Rowlands 1997 p. 14). This definition, we can say emphasizes inclusivity and the voice of the woman as the hallmarks of women empowerment.

According to Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, women empowerment is "acquired by conquest, not by gift" (Freire 2000 p. 47). This definition highlights critical awareness and resistance as important parameters of women empowerment.

At this juncture, we would also like to discuss and bring to light the various connotations of gender diversity, gender equity and gender inclusivity as they are examined as the pathways to women empowerment in this study. At the very outset, we would like to examine the term gender diversity. Gender diversity means the presence, recognition and acceptance of the multiple female identities and roles of life. Such a diversity or difference could be in terms of culture, language, religion, social background, appearance, way of life, abilities, values and also perspectives on different issues and matters.

Gender diversity, we note acknowledges that women's experiences are not homogenous. Gender diversity, it is important to note focuses on the varied social roles, varied familial and societal expectations and the lived realities of a woman. These lived realities of women are shaped by various factors such as culture, class, marriage and also by migration. Simone de Beauvoir claims: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 2011 p. 283). This foundational statement establishes gender as a social and cultural construct rather than a biological destiny.

As gender diversity teaches us to acknowledge and accept the differences among people, it helps us

to coexist with the differences. Gender diversity values and attaches great importance to people's different perspectives, experiences and thus celebrates multiple viewpoints which encourages our understanding and creative thinking. We must note that gender diversity proclaims that every person irrespective of differences has a right to belong, to participate and to contribute. Thus, gender diversity also promotes inclusivity and respect for all individuals irrespective of their gender.

Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men according to their respective needs, challenges and power structures. It involves taking appropriate measures to correct historical and social injustices so that each individual is provided with opportunities that he or she needs to succeed. Indian American theorist and philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak once famously remarks: "The subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 1988 p. 308). This powerful statement critiques exclusion and silencing within dominant power structures which emerges as highly relevant to gender inequity.

Gender equity acknowledges that men or women are not always similarly positioned because of long standing discrimination and social norms. It would be pertinent to note that equity focuses on fairness and results. Gender equity ensures fairness as it addresses barriers and biases that prevent people from achieving equal outcomes. bell hooks mentions: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks 2000 p. 1).

Gender inclusivity stresses that spaces are created and differences are accepted and valued. It is to be noted that gender inclusivity promotes a culture where all gender identities are respected and valued. Gender inclusivity, we note addresses systemic barriers and biases that affect people of all genders.

Gender inclusivity refers to a scenario where all genders are acknowledged, accepted, respected and able to participate equally without discrimination. It focuses on accommodating gender diversity and ensures that no one is excluded or marginalised on account of gender identity. It entails the removal of barriers to participation and the creation of safe and supportive environments where all individuals are accepted and valued. Thus, this brings to mind bell hooks' comments: "There can be no feminist revolution without women's liberation" (hooks 1981 p. 194). This quote foregrounds gender inclusivity and empowerment.

Thus, women's empowerment can be understood as the outcome of the interaction and the

interconnection between gender diversity (i.e., recognition of multiple female identities), gender equity (i.e., fair access to rights and resources) and gender inclusivity (i.e., voice, participation and a sense of belonging).

4.2 This section seeks to examine and understand the two women characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's stories titled 'Clothes' and 'The Ultrasound'. We seek to know as to how the author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delineates the two women characters as they strive for empowerment. In this section, we are first introduced to Sumita who is a first generation immigrant in America of the story titled, 'Clothes'.

The gender diversity in the story 'Clothes', refers to the numerous roles Sumita experiences in her life. "Women are not a homogenous group", says feminist author Chandra Talpade Mohanty with reference to gender diversity ( Mohanty 1984 p. 337). At the very beginning of the story, we are introduced to Sumita as a young village girl who recollects enjoying with her friends: "... all the things we did together through my growing – up years - visiting the *charak* fair where we always ate too many sweets, raiding the neighbor's guava tree summer afternoons while the grown-ups slept, telling fairy tales while we braided each other's hair in elaborate patterns.." (Divakaruni 1997 p. 18).

Then we see Sumita as a bride-to-be on her bride viewing day. She recounts: "His name is Somesh Sen, the man who is coming to our house with his parents today and who will be my husband 'if I'm lucky enough to be chosen,' ... He is coming all the way from California" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 18).

Sumita further confides that; "For the first time it occurred to me that if things worked out ... I'd be going halfway around the world to live with a man I hadn't even met. Would I ever see my parents again? ... I wanted to cry ..." (Divakaruni 1997 p. 18). Here, we see her as a daughter feeling for her parents who she lives behind in her homeland, India.

After her marriage, we see her as a supportive wife. Sumita opines: "The night before he left, Somesh confessed that the store he was managing wasn't making much money. Sumita declares: "I'll help you" (Divakaruni 1997 pp. 22-23).

After her marriage, in the flight to America we see that Sumita appears a confident woman. For she announces: "I know then that everything will be all right. And when the air hostess bends ... to ask me what I would like to eat, I understand every word in spite of her strange accent and answer her without stumbling

even once over the unfamiliar English phrases" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 24).

As an immigrant in America, Sumita says: "I'm wearing a pair of jeans now ... The jeans come with a closer fitting T-shirt..." (Divakaruni 1997 p. 25). Sumita further announces: "Somesh has bought me a cream blouse with a long brown skirt... 'For when you begin working,' he says" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 26). Therefore, as an immigrant she looks forward to and readily adjusts on her own volition to the life and culture of the host country, U.S.A.

As far as equity is concerned, Sumita's decision to stay in America is an example of gender equity. We see that she refuses to return to India after her husband was shot and killed. She voices her feelings as she says: "I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 33). It is thus, amply clear that she chooses economic independence and thus does not want to return to India where her life will be reduced to being a widow with hardly any voice or rights. She does not want to return to India only to undergo the indignity of being confined at home and to be dominated by the patriarchy. She cherishes her freedom and seeks to assert her right to take decisions that will govern her life including her decision to work and engage with people in an alien space.

Inclusivity is displayed as Sumita's individuality in the story 'Clothes' is recognised. For Sumita says: "Somesh has bought me a cream blouse with a long brown skirt ... 'For when you begin working', he says. But first he wants me to start college. Get a degree, perhaps in teaching ..." (Divakaruni 1997 pp. 26-27). Hence, what we note here is that there is inclusivity in Somesh's behaviour, approach and attitude towards Sumita's desires, her longings and aspirations.

Another instance of gender inclusivity is unearthed when Sumita includes her own voice in life decisions, giving weight and importance to her dreams and ambitions. Sumita avers: "What I really want is to work in the store. I want to stand behind the counter in the cream-and-brown shirt set (color of earth, color of seeds) and ring up purchases ... Confident, I will count out green dollars and silver quarters ... I will charm the customers with my smile, so that they will return again and again just to hear me telling them to have a nice day" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 27). She also adds: "... I will the store to make money for us.

Quickly" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 27).

In the story, 'The Ultrasound', gender diversity is seen in the character of Runu. For Runu plays multiple roles as a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law. Anju recollects their days as school girls. For she says: "In grade school we would race each other to the bus stop, identical gray uniform skirts slapping against identical knobby knees... The loser had to buy *panipuri*s for us both from the street vendor who stood outside the school gates each afternoon" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 205). Anju further recalls: "We would gulp down the crisp spicy rounds filled with sweet and sour potatoes, glancing around to make sure no one who knew our parents was around. (Both our mothers were convinced that eating street food would give us the most horrible diseases). Then, after inspecting each other's mouths carefully to make sure no telltale traces remained, we would make our way home..." (Divakaruni 1997 p. 206).

Anju moves on to inform us about Runu's life as a daughter. Anju reminiscences: "Runu's father, dying after a long illness, had left only debts behind, and Pratima-auntie... was always struggling to make ends meet..." (Divakaruni 1997 p. 206). Thus, as a daughter Runu faces a lot of financial difficulties.

Anju reminiscences about their lives as students in college as she says: "Somehow she never did as well academically either... I went on to win spelling bees and debate contexts, and later in College to grapple with Chaucer and Thomas Hardy and W.B. Yeats in my English Honours classes. Runu took up Home Science, which everyone admitted was the major that the dullest girls chose. She seemed to enjoy it ..." (Divakaruni 1997 p. 207).

Anju dwells on their marriage and the beginning of their lives as daughter-in-laws and wives in the following words: "So maybe it's fitting that Prajapati, the winged and capricious god of marriage, set us down in such different places-me here in San Jose with Sunil, and her in provincial Burdwan, the eldest daughter-in-law of a large, traditional Brahmin family" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 207).

Anju explains Runu's life as a daughter-in-law when she says: "I had gone down to Burdwan to visit her in the big brick and marble mansion in which her husband's family had lived, her mother-in-law proudly informed me, for seven generations." (Divakaruni 1997 p. 209). This point to the fact that Runu experiences a number of roles as a woman. Moreover, Anju notices that Runu fulfils the role of a wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and also the supervisor of the household

chores and the household helpers.

Anju mentions Runu's experiences as a wife when she notes Ramesh, Runu's husband's behaviour towards her. Anju mentions: "The way Ramesh, who'd returned from his business tour ... had scolded her, his voice rising in irritation. *Arundhati, how many times have I told you not to mess up the newspaper before I've read it.* I wondered if my husband in America would speak to me the same way" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 213). Anju expresses her views that: "But she's happy. I'm sure of it. I would sense it otherwise. I feel her growing into her household, spreading her tendrils like the jasmine she has planted, dispensing fragrance and shade enough to win anyone's heart" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 215). The above description points to the fact that Runu experiences a diversity of women's role in India. At the same time, we also realise as to how Anju understands the multiple gender systems of India and America and sees the different experiences of a married woman in India.

From some of the episodes narrated in the story, Runu did not appear to have a voice in the joint family home of her husband and she also appears to have been excluded from the decision making processes. As regards equity, it is seen that her husband treats her shabbily and does not give her the due respect which shows the low worth of Runu in the family.

4.3 This section brings to light as to how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's two characters, Sumita and Runu emerge as empowered women through gender diversity, equity and inclusivity. This section seeks to explore the meaning of empowerment and presents the various ways how the female characters of the two stories 'Clothes' and 'The Ultrasound' become empowered.

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, "Women's empowerment refers to the process by which women gain power, rights, opportunities and agency-enabling them to make independent choices and control their own lives" (European Institute for Gender Equity n.d.).

Sumita in the story 'Clothes', we note encounters multiple models of womanhood. She is a traditional Indian wife for she says: "Where I must cover my head with the edge of my Japan nylon sari (my expensive Indian ones are to be saved for special occasions – trips to the temple, Bengali New Year) and serve tea to the old women that come and visit Mother Sen, where like a good Indian wife. I must never address my husband by his name" (Divakaruni 1997 pp. 25-26). Again, we also note Sumita's gender

diversity, in her role as an independent American woman as she mentions after the demise of her husband Somesh. She says about her in-laws: "They will probably go back to India now ... They will want me to go with them. You're like our daughter, they will say. Your home is with us, for as long as you want. For the rest of your life. *The rest of my life.* I can't think about that yet. It makes me dizzy" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 31). She announces: "I want you to go to college. Choose a career. I stand in front of a classroom of smiling children who love me in my cream-and-brown American dress" (Divakaruni 1997 p. 31). Thus, we can say that Sumita's different gender identities allows her to imagine a self that is not defined by marriage or restrained and constrained by the demise of her husband. She, we note knows her mind and seeks to exert herself.

In the context of the Indian American diaspora, for the many Indian – origin women living abroad (for e.g. in the U.S.), empowerment, we should note isn't just about overcoming patriarchal norms in the 'home country' i.e., India. It, we should bear in mind, involves navigating a complex mix of:

- Immigration, race and ethnicity dynamics: Indian American diaspora women often face racism and along with it gender discrimination.
- Cultural negotiation/ Identity balance: The Indian American diaspora women often negotiate what N. Jayram famously mentions as 'cultural baggage' (Jayaram 2004 p. 10) in the U.S. The women we note negotiate between the cultural / religious / community expectations inherited from their home country India and the more individualistic 'Western' social norms.
- New structural opportunities: The Indian American diaspora women encounter access to education, career, community participation and legal protection in a much more open and better way than in their countries of origin.
- Intersectionality: The Indian diaspora women the issues of women empowerment are often not just about gender, immigration, status, ethnicity, and culture. Sometimes they encounter intersecting issues like caste and religion which pose unique challenges for the diaspora women in the country of settlement i.e., the United States of America.

Thus, we should bear in mind that women empowerment as a diaspora woman becomes a re-definition of identity and belonging. This paper seeks to understand Sumita's empowerment through the changing dynamics of gender diversity, gender equity

and gender inclusivity in her home country India and also her host country, USA. It is in the backdrop of such an analysis that we interrogate and understand the empowerment of Sumita, the female character of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's story 'Clothes'.

Sumita's empowerment emerges from gender diversity, which is understood as multiplicity in roles and identities. Feminist philosopher and writer, Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 2011 p.283) highlights Sumita's transformation. Initially, a submissive wife, she reconstructs her identity after her husband's death, embracing multiple roles-worker, independent woman and decision maker. Her changing relationship with her clothes, i.e., from beautiful bridal saris to functional attire of America demonstrates this fluidity and emphasizes her empowerment.

Sumita's decision to stay in America enables her to get the benefit of greater gender equity. Equity further enables her to become more empowered. This is because America provides numerous opportunities, considerably more choices, easier access to resources and affords greater voice as compared to India, her homeland. Access to employment and economic independence allows Sumita to act on her choices, reflecting Noble Laureate Amartya Sen's idea that development and empowerment require freedom to act and access opportunities (Sen 1999 p. 3).

We note that inclusivity also helps Sumita attain empowerment. The social environment of U.S.A. is relatively conducive for women empowerment. It acknowledges her voice, allowing her to claim autonomy and to shape her future according to her own wishes. Hence, we can say all these factors help her to become empowered through agency, choice and participation.

Thus, we note that for Sumita in the story 'Clothes', women empowerment means more than just gender equity. It is about agency, identity, belonging, opportunity and voice. It is we understand, about carving a space where the character, Sumita can be proud of her heritage and also feels free to define and set the boundaries for her own life. It is interesting to note that empowerment is a dynamic process that involves balancing cultural roots and new social realities, overcoming social and structural barriers, while balancing personal, economic, social and community strength.

In the story 'The Ultrasound', Anju once mentions: "I sat there in that backyard watching the sun's rays falling dappled and golden over Runu ...

Through the dust notes that hung in the heavy afternoon light, her small animated face seemed suddenly far away, beyond reach, like something at the bottom of the sea which might at any moment ... blur or even disappear. It frightened me" (Divakaruni 1997 p.212). Thus, Runu we see experiences a diversity of gender roles where we also notice her silent resistance, her quiet disagreement to all cultural expectations and cultural conformities. Thus, this is Runu's empowerment. It is her inner strength and her inner voice which patiently bears it all for the greater good of the family.

In the story 'The Ultrasound', we see that Runu gains a voice, a power within her to raise a voice against discrimination, against a wrong done to an unborn female foetus. Runu tells her cousin, Anju: "They want to kill my baby... They want me to have an abortion" (Divakaruni 1997 pp. 223-224).

Feminist writer bell hooks asserts: "Feminism is for everybody" (hooks 2000 p.1). This inclusive vision is reflected in 'The Ultrasound' in the portrayal of female solidarity and support especially through relationships among women. In the story 'The Ultrasound', Runu's empowerment comes from the fact that Anju realises the difficulties that her friend Runu faces owing to the discrimination meted out to her unborn female foetus. Anju opines: "Maybe Runu can come to the U.S. with her daughter, I think. Maybe she can live close by in a little apartment and sew clothes for all the Indian ladies. She can sell chutneys and sweets and samosas-maybe even open her own restaurant" (Divakaruni 1997 pp. 229-230). Thus, Anju tries to help her friend Runu and also make her economically independent. Anju's emotional support for Runu despite the physical distance, illustrates how inclusivity fosters empowerment by mitigating isolation and neglect. We see that inclusivity also evolves challenging norms that exclude women from decision making especially regarding marriage, sexuality and reproduction.

Thus, we can finally say that Runu achieves internal and personal empowerment through awareness. She develops consciousness about gender injustice and the wrongs of patriarchy. Though Runu faces constraints because of social structures, this recognition advances her towards empowerment, even though her agency or her ability to make independent choices is limited.

## 5. Conclusion

Sumita's empowerment emerges from gender

diversity which is seen as the multiplicity of roles and identities. Initially, she appears as a submissive wife who goes to the U.S. with her husband. After her husband's death she reconstructs her identity as a worker, as an independent woman and as a decision maker. Equity further enables her empowerment. Access to employment and economic independence allows Sumita to act on her choices. Inclusivity is also seen as she voices her opinions and shapes her future. In contrast, for Runu, gender diversity is suppressed through sex-selective abortion, demonstrating rigid patriarchal control. Equity is non-existent for Runu as

the decisions are imposed by the family and inclusivity is also denied because Runu's voice is silenced. However, Runu attains internal empowerment through her awareness and recognition of the gender injustice and the moral wrongs of patriarchy. Thus, though she suffers constraints, yet this consciousness and recognition helps her to move towards empowerment. It is therefore, evident that these two characters i.e., Sumita and Runu, in the two stories written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, challenge the traditional boundaries and assert new narratives of women empowerment.

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