From Tradition to Transformation: Empowerment through Dress in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Clothes"

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2025-14019189

Volume: 14

Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 25.08.2025

Accepted: 18.10.2025

Published Online: 01.12.2025

Citation:
Archana Devi, M. "From Tradition to Transformation: Empowerment through Dress in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Clothes.'" *Shanlax International Journal of English,* vol. 14, no. 1, 2025, pp. 11–15.

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v14i1.9189

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Abstract
"Tradition" usually refers to a protracted-installed custom, perception, or practice passed down through generations, frequently maintained through oral history or repeated behaviours instead of formal documentation or fabric proof. It implies continuity rooted in cultural or communal norms.
The phrase "lifestyle to transformation" shows a procedure of exchange wherein enduring customs, beliefs, or practices are reshaped to align with new societal contexts, values, or needs. This evolution can take region across diverse domains, together with religion, way of life, social structures, and technology.
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a famous Indian-American writer, is pleasant regarded for her works such as The Mistress of Spices, Arranged Marriage, and The Vine of choice. Her writing frequently centres on reports of Indian immigrants, mainly girls, navigating unfamiliar environments. Her brief story "Cothes," from the gathering Arranged Marriage, makes use of garb as a effective image to trace the protagonist's adventure from conventional roles to self-realisation. Through this metaphor, Divakaruni highlights how outwards change mirrors inner transformation, especially within the context of cultural displacement and emotional loss.
The story "Clothes" explores the journey of an Indian woman, Sumita, who moves to the United States for an arranged marriage. The story uses clothing symbolism to represent her transition between traditional Indian and modern American identities and her eventual, independent awakening after her husband's death. These changes in apparel replicate her inner warfare, in addition to her evolving connection to her Indian roots and her edition to lifestyles within the United States of America.
Keywords: ***Lifestyle, Empowerment, Identification, Transformation, Clothes, Culture***

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent, successful author, activist, professor, and public speaker. She has authored 21 books, including *The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, Before We Visit the Goddess, The Palace of Illusions, The Forest of Enchantments,* and *The Last Queen*. Her latest novel, *Independence*, won an American Book Award in 2024 and tells the story of three sisters in Calcutta during a time of conflict as India breaks free from British rule. She has written this novel for both children and adults.

Arranged Marriage is the first work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The majority of the eleven short stories, which are a significant theme in the mixture of American Indian culture, deal with the experience of immigrants and the social-cultural encounters that Indians have when they relocate west. It also examines how the protagonist is affected by the cultural disarticulation and whether they become depressed and disappointed or are taught to adapt and agree to their circumstances. Additionally, it assesses their outlook on life and whether they maintain or reject their traditional values. Despite being strong and eager to improve their circumstances, the women in *Arranged Marriage* occasionally feel stuck in the stereotypes of being a daughter-in-law, wife and mother.

The short story "Clothes" is written in 1995. The story is about a young Indian Woman named Sumita, who has an arranged marriage. The story sets in Calcutta, India, where Sumita lives with her family and her two friends, Deepali and Rhada, before she gets married. Her father has found a good husband for her, Somesh Sen who is from California. She travels to California with her new husband, and is surprised how USA is, compared to India. Somesh works in a store called 7- eleven.

Somesh and Sumita wish to leave their in-laws' home. Somesh works night shifts from 7 to 11 in order to supplement his income. Somesh dies after a robber enters the room one night and shoots him in the chest. Sumita hails from a tradition-and values-based culture. As a result, it is expected that she will marry the man her father finds for her in an arranged marriage. This further demonstrates the patriarchal nature of this culture and the limited voices of women. Her clothing and color choices represent her cultural shift to America.

Sumita has been brought up with the attitude that a married woman should belong to her husband and his family. She finds it completely normal that she is being "showed off" at these bride-viewing, in a light pink sari which signifies luck in marriage and transitions. The transition that she is progressing is the move from being a daughter, to becoming a wife. It shows it is a very ancient culture, where women have no voice of their own, and no right to make their own decisions.

Sumita has great hope to visit USA, but she is extremely also anxious about what her new life will be like. Her husband owns a 7 – eleven, which is a lousy drugstore in reality, but she imagines it as something magical, with romantic lighting and a cosy environment. She views America as a land of opportunities, but also danger.

> "I wanted a blue one for the journey, because blue is the color of possibility, the color of the sky through which I would be traveling. But Mother said there must be red in it because red is the color of luck for married women."

However, her parents decide, and she wears a midnight-blue with thin red border. Once Sumita is in America, the transition from wife to woman begins. Her husband, Somesh, buys her American clothes, and she proudly tries them on and shows them of in the mirror for him. The American clothes is a sunrise orange t-shirt and it says "Great America" on it, and a matching pair of jeans.

Sumita now recognises herself as a young, attractive Indian woman. Compared to when she left India, she is now more self-reliant. However, her in-laws continue to dictate what she must wear. However, Sumita is dressed in a simple white sari with thick voile following Somesh's passing. "White. Widows color, color of endings." Sumita is now a widow and an almost fully grown woman.

Her in-laws advise Sumita to accompany them back to India. She will start over if she goes back. She can fulfill her dream of becoming a girl school teacher and become an American woman if she stays. "She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds," the story concludes. She decides to remain in America and develops into a self-sufficient woman. Sumita has now experienced the change from a young, reliant Indian girl to an adult, self-sufficient American woman.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni describes the difficulties of a young Bengali girl has figuring out who she is in the world. As is customary, Sumita, the story's protagonist, undergoes several internal changes, but her wardrobe choices, especially the colours she selects, serve as external examples of these changes. Significant changes in Sumita's clothing reflect a profound cultural and emotional shift, and these outwards manifestations reveal to her family and friends how her personal life is evolving. Through these clothing changes, Sumita also conveys her self-identification of roles; some choices reflect her youth, while others show her love or obligation as a wife, and still others show her complete acceptance of who she is as a woman. It acknowledges Sumita as a unique individual who forges her own path, so the claim that this is a tale of cultural transition to American life that would be a hopeless one.

The short story opens with a wedding in a yellow sari wears by Sumita. A prospective companion is going through the dress codes required to meet the prospective husband. The yellow-clad maiden, Sumita, must complete the customs of preparing for her future husband, which includes taking a lake

bath. The bride finds that her fears of marrying a man she has never met decrease as a result of this soothing water immersion.

Sumita is wearing a light pink sari for her bride-viewing: "Its body was a pale pink, like the dawn sky over the women's lake. The colour of transition". This colour is supposed to represent possibility, luck, and marriage. Sumita has made it apparent that she respects and believes in the same tradition and heritage that she is participating in because she upholds the tradition and heritage of wearing the pink sari.

Beyond legacy and heritage, this can also be interpreted as implying family wealth and, consequently, the desire for a daughters. Given that the marriage ceremony symbolises the precise shift in roles from daughter to wife, it is the clear and sensible colour option for wedding clothing. She is the ideal girl to be chosen by the future husband-to-be because of her appropriate colour and clothing choices, which also reflect her suitable status and upbringing.

Sumita must continue to be an example of perfection since she has been chosen for marriage as a result of her perfection. Sumita has dressed in a blue sari for the lengthy flight to the United States. For Sumita, blue is a colour of possibility and a suitable shade for flying through the skies. Flight and possibility seem like appropriate metaphors for entering a bold new territory. Sumita's mother, however, had insisted that she wear a red sari since it was said that the colour would help Indian married women perform their jobs. "Midnight blue with a thin red border the same colour as the marriage mark" was decided upon as an appropriate compromise. Luck and possibility was travelled with her to USA.

Particularly interdisciplinary work from feminist theory, performance theory, and dress studies is relevant. Theories that view clothing as sartorial language or as embodied performance (such as performativity of gender) place more emphasis on how clothes create identity in social interactions than they do on reflecting it. Literary studies have successfully used these methods to demonstrate how clothing can either facilitate, restrict, or reshape power dynamics. Clarifying how a sari/shawl or a Western outfit can indicate resistance, conformity, or transformation is made easier by applying efficiency and material-semiotic approaches to Divakaruni's writing.

Sumita's change to Western attire marks a significant moment of personal and cultural transformation. Upon her arrival in the United States, she is encouraged by her husband, Somesh, to adopt American clothing such as skirts and blouses—an invitation that initially surprises her but soon becomes a symbolic gesture of change. The transition from the traditional sari, which is deeply tied to her Indian identity, to contemporary Western clothing represents more than a mere change in style—it marks the beginning of a transformation in her sense of self.

> "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 solid comforting weight. The jeans come with a closefitting T-shirt which outlines my breasts."

Somesh's revolutionary attitude performs a pivotal position in the narrative. In evaluation to the stereotypical portrayal of domineering husbands often placed in literature on arranged marriages, Somesh is kind, supportive, and open-minded. His suggestion that Sumita strive on Western garments isn't always a command, however an invitation—an invitation to discover her freedom, which she begins to embody cautiously. While she sees herself inside the replica dressed in American garb, it is not genuinely her appearance that changes; she starts offevolved to revel in the emergence of a cutting-edge identity. This reputedly clean act of carrying top-notch clothes marks the preliminary step towards her emotional and intellectual empowerment.

Moreover, the protagonist's internal response to this change underscores a broader warfare common among immigrants—the sensitive balance between maintaining cultural history and embracing a cutting-edge identity. Sumita's preliminary reluctance, observed via slow attractiveness, does now not advise a rejection of her Indian roots. As a substitute, it symbolises a spread of self—an evolution formed via the usage of every history and edition. On this

context, clothing serves as a symbolic bridge—now not exceptional among jap and Western cultures however additionally between her past and her growing sense of corporation.

Through this metaphorical transformation, Divakaruni emphasises that empowerment regularly starts off in diffused, deeply non-public moments. A change in attire is not necessarily splendour; it signals a willingness to reimagine oneself, to check new possibilities, and to venture the restrictions imposed by means of the use of subculture or societal expectations.

The turning factor in Divakaruni's "clothes" takes place with the sudden and tragic demise of Sumita's husband, Somesh. This loss abruptly dismantles the delicate feel of desire and belonging she had all began to cultivate in the usa. The trauma momentarily halts her emotional journey and places her at a crossroads—by herself in an unexpected US, grieving, and pressured to return to the familiar confines of her antique existence in India. But it's far precisely on this 2nd of profound loss that Sumita discovers a greater resilient and enduring form of empowerment.

In the right away aftermath of Somesh's loss of life, she is engulfed in sorrow, confusion, and cultural expectation. She is advised to wear white—the conventional colour of mourning in Hindu custom—and return to her circle of relatives, successfully leaving behind the fast dream of independence she had started out to recognise. At all other times, garb becomes a powerful image. The vibrant purple sari of her bridal ceremony day stands in stark contrast to the silly white garments of widowhood, illustrating the dramatic shift in her social identity and perceived characteristic in society.

> "I'm lying on the floor now, on the spilled white sari. I feel sleepy. Or perhaps it is some other feeling I don't have a word for. The sari is seductive-soft, drawing me into its folds."

But, in desire to passively yielding to cultural expectancies, the protagonist makes a bold and transformative preference: she chooses to stay in the USA and forge a new direction for herself. This preference represents a profound act of resistance and self-redefinition. No longer is her clothing a manner of conforming to societal roles—whether or not or not as a bride, partner, or widow. Alternatively, it becomes an expression of her autonomy, a photograph of reclaiming her identity on her non-public terms.

Sumita's choice to stay in the us, even in the face of profound non-private grief, stands as her most empowered moment. It isn't expressed via dramatic gestures, however through quiet, determined electricity—a silent defiance of traditional constraints and the proscribing identification of a bereaved widow. Through this diffused but powerful act, her re-empowerment turns into both an internal transformation and a symbolic one, made seen thru the tale's persisted emphasis on clothing and look.

> "That's when I know I cannot go back. 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 uses this pivotal to reflect at the broader realities confronted via the usage of immigrant ladies, a whole lot of whom have to navigate the complicated intersections of gender, cultural expectations, and personal grief. Through the protagonist's choice, the tale emphasizes that empowerment is not a sincere or linear course—it is common thru resilience, preference, and the courage to redefine one's identity even within the midst of sorrow.

This study uses a qualitative approach to textual analysis that is based on close reading and influenced by material culture studies and feminist literary criticism. Through reading, one can pay close attention to symbolism, narrative structure, and imagery, paying special attention to how clothing functions as an agent of identity negotiation in the text. The protagonist's clothing choices can be interpreted as acts of gendered resistance and self-fashioning through the analytical lens of feminist criticism, while clothing is framed as a social object with performative potential and cultural memory by material culture theory. By integrating these methods, the analysis transcends the idea of clothing as a static symbol, treating it as an active participant in the protagonist's journey from diasporic tradition-bound conformity to empowered self-assertion.

In "Clothes," Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skillfully weaves apparel into the narrative as a wealthy and multilayered photo of identification, exchange, and empowerment. From the protagonist's early adherence to conventional Indian clothing to her slow shift in the direction of Western dress, and in the end to her empowering desire to remain in the USA. after her husband's death, each trade in apparel reflects a corresponding emotional and psychological transformation. Garb, on this context, turns into some distance extra than mere fabric—it embodies her employer, her internal struggles, and her developing power.

Thus, Divakaruni's short story "Clothes" shows that clothings are not just pieces of fabric but carriers of meaning—of who we are, what we inherit, and who we hope to become. For Sumita, clothes are more than her outwards appearance; they trace her inner journey. At first, they represent tradition and duty, binding her to the role of a wife shaped by family and culture. But gradually, as she faces loss of her husband and begins to see her life differently, those same clothes take on a new meaning. They become symbols of choice, freedom, and self-discovery. In this way, Sumita's story reflects the larger idea of moving from tradition to transformation. She does not abandon her roots; instead, she reshapes them to fit her new reality in a foreign land. Through her, Divakaruni reminds us that tradition and transformation are not opposites—they can exist together, with change breathing new life into continuity.

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