



Chitra Banerjee's Independence: A Searing Saga of Cultural Conflicts and Upheavals of Immigration from Women's Perspective

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Abstract— Chitra Banerjee's novel "Independence" is an innovative perspective about independence as a beacon of martyrdom on the golden occasion of India's 75 years of independence. To quote Amitav Ghosh: "A spellbinding saga of the decolonization and partition of the Indian subcontinent, with a case of vividly drawn, compelling characters." The novel delves into the tumultuous phases of human life, exploring themes such as the mob mentality, heinous attacks on women, and the clash of traditional, societal, and cultural norms during the partition of India. Throughout human civilization, issues like immigration, communal riots, and social and cultural conflicts have remained crucial topics of discussion. In today's world, multicultural societies are a result of global immigration. Migration can be seen as a determining factor in various aspects such as violent conflict, ethnic tensions, the expansion of national powers, and even economic growth or stagnation. Diasporic literature often highlights the problems and concerns faced by immigrants. Those who have migrated to a new culture often experience various forms of stress that can impact their cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems. Adjusting to a new culture from one's own can be challenging, and cultural identity plays a significant role in this process, whether one is an immigrant or a native. This paper aims to explore the issues of cultural conflicts and immigration as depicted in Chitra Banerjee's "Independence." By examining the novel's portrayal of these themes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals in multicultural societies and the impact migration has on their lives.



Keywords— Beacon, Cultural strife, martyrdom, gendered violence.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a window reflecting the history, culture, and spiritual world of a nation, .. Cultural exchange is a bridge to enhance the mutual understanding and friendship between the people of different nations.
-Hu Jintao

Chitra Banerjee is an accomplished American writer currently working at the University of Houston, Texas. Her short story collection, "Arranged Marriage," received the prestigious American Book Award in 1996. Additionally, two of her popular novels, "The Mistress of Spices" and "Sister of My Heart," as well as a short story titled "The Word Love," have been adapted into films. Banerjee's

writing showcases her immense versatility, tackling themes such as self-identity, immigration, cultural conflicts, history, and myths. She addresses the challenges faced by non-white individuals in present-day America, providing insights into the human psyche. Banerjee's characters are masterfully crafted, resonating with readers from diverse backgrounds due to their universal appeal. As an Indian writer settled in a foreign country, she offers a unique perspective on the day-to-day struggles faced by immigrants as they navigate a new culture. Her novels explore Indian experiences, highlight women's immigration journeys, and shed light on the challenges of living in a multicultural world.

In her own words, "I have a variety of readers from across the diasporic community, not just from South Asia. I like to write large stories that include all of us- about common and cohesive experiences which bring together many immigrants, their cultural shocks, transformation, concepts of home and self in a new homeland". Banerjee's works often feature immigrant women who confront difficulties as they challenge patriarchal beliefs and customs, both within their homes and in broader society. In her novel "Independence," set against the backdrop of India's independence, she vividly portrays cultural clashes, immigration, and the survival of females through the lens of women's perspectives. By delving into Banerjee's writings and analyzing her portrayals of these themes, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience, the complexities of cultural conflicts, and the resilience of individuals navigating a new home.

In today's era of globalization, the world has reached unprecedented heights in terms of economic and scientific advancements. However, despite this progress, it is a universal truth that no society, country, or civilization is completely satisfied. As a result, people often immigrate to other societies or countries with various motives such as education, employment, or seeking a better life. This migration leads to cross-cultural communication among nations. Yet, when individuals fail to understand and appreciate the culture of others, cultural conflicts arise. Cultural conflicts occur when there are disagreements between the beliefs and values of different cultures or societal groups. It is impossible for one person to fully comprehend and embrace all aspects of every culture, and cultures themselves vary widely. Culture encompasses the patterns of behavior exhibited by groups, and it is often referred to as civilization. Cultures and their practices reflect the changes that occur in a society or the lives of individuals. Culture defines the way of life for an entire society, encompassing codes of conduct, dress, language, religion, rituals, art, law, and morality. Cultural identity serves as a means through which we can identify the group or society to which an individual belongs. It is shaped by one's beliefs, values, and way of life, encompassing individual, social, religious, and political aspects. Conflict is inherent in human interaction, and it is closely linked to the concept of culture. When individuals encounter changes in their socio-cultural environment, they often experience a conflict that hinders their complete assimilation and ability to navigate the new cultural norms and beliefs. To effectively navigate these cultural conflicts, it is essential to foster understanding, empathy, and open-mindedness. By learning from and appreciating different cultures, we can bridge the gaps between diverse societies, fostering harmony and mutual respect. Recognizing that cultural

diversity is a source of strength rather than a cause for conflict is crucial in embracing the benefits that come with globalization while also preserving unique cultural identities. When we compare men and women, it becomes evident that women face significant challenges in terms of social, political, and cultural clashes, particularly within the world of diaspora. In this predominantly male-dominated society, women often find themselves struggling against their own families, societies, and nations for their right to live a fulfilling life. They encounter various forms of discrimination and barriers at different stages of their lives, such as building a career, choosing a partner, and being allowed to express their thoughts and beliefs. Within diasporic communities, women's circumstances become even more precarious when their lifestyle, clothing choices, and patriarchal beliefs do not align with those of others in the community. Despite being essential members of the Indian diaspora, women's experiences have often been overshadowed by male-centric assumptions and narratives. While feminist scholarship on migration studies has brought gender issues to the forefront, most research on Indian migrant women has portrayed them stereotypically as victims or passive carriers of Indian cultural traditions. In reality, women face conflicting conditions and subjectivities in both public and private spheres during the process of migration and settlement. Chitra Banerjee, as a female writer, skillfully portrays feminism in her novels and, as a diasporic writer, she adeptly explores the lives of women in other nations and societies. Her work offers a more nuanced and authentic representation of women's experiences, shedding light on their struggles and resilience in the face of cultural clashes and societal expectations.

Banerjee's latest novel, "Independence," published by Harper Collins on November 30th, 2022, masterfully captures the emotional turmoil experienced during India's partition. The story revolves around three sisters and their tragic circumstances amidst the communal violence that unfolded during this historical event. Banerjee's vivid descriptions bring to life the atrocities of the time, immersing the reader in the unimaginable horrors faced by millions. The partition led to a wave of communal violence, resulting in the overnight displacement of millions of people who became refugees in their land. This period witnessed the loss of countless lives, with thousands of women enduring torture and rape, homes being looted, and villages set ablaze across the country. Civilization seemed to be suspended as customs and rituals were torn apart. Amid this chaos, the Ganguly family, headed by the respected doctor Nabhkumar, finds themselves grappling with the devastating impact of the riots. Tragically, Dr. Nabhkumar loses his life during a riot, leaving his wife and daughters to face a harsh and relentless reality. Struggling without any

male support, they are met with social problems and daily challenges that they must confront head-on. They face not only physical, mental, and economic hardships but also criticism and ostracization from society. Living in a male-dominated society, women are often exploited and suppressed, perpetuating the cycle of suffering. After Dr. Nabhkumar's death, the female members of the Ganguly family encounter numerous hurdles. They are abandoned by society, enduring rude behavior, impolite comments about their purity and chastity, and being avoided as if they were bringers of ill fortune. Bina, the doctor's wife, loses her sanity, falling prey to sleepwalking disorder. That is why the people comment rudely: "Look look, the strange and unfortunate women of the Ganguly family". (Chitra Banerjee. P-). The daughters, determined to support their mother, work tirelessly to care for her amidst the harsh judgment of those around them. Keeping their lives, professions, identities, and livelihoods intact becomes a daunting task. The absence of a male figure in the family forces them to work tirelessly to survive in a society that shuns them. The sisters divide responsibilities, with Jamini taking charge of household chores and running errands while Priya spends her days in her father's clinic, where patients are scarce due to the social stigma associated with their family. People distance themselves from the Ganguly family, considering them unfortunate due to the lack of male support. In a patriarchal society, a woman without a man is often viewed with pity and inferiority, stripped of her involvement in auspicious events.

Bina, who had been a successful quilt maker, now faces the collapse of her business. People withdraw their orders, fearing that her misfortune may taint the quilts. Instead of helping them, the villagers harass and mistreat the family, perpetuating their hardships. Bina, feeling defeated, starts to believe that the villagers are right, accepting that her presence and work may bring bad luck. The villagers' fear of contagion from the family's misfortune mirrors the unfortunate circumstances faced by Bina and her daughters, both mentally and financially. The plight of the Ganguly family paints a poignant picture of the challenges faced by women in a society that devalues them without male support. Through "Independence," Banerjee skillfully portrays the struggles and resilience of these women, shedding light on the societal biases and injustices they endure. "They think our misfortune will taint the quilts"

Partition not only physically divided the land between India and Pakistan but also created deep divisions among people, eroding love, brotherhood, companionship, and humanity. Previously harmonious relationships between Hindus and Muslims were tainted by hatred and enmity. People began viewing each other as enemies solely based on religious identity. This tragic transformation is depicted in

"Independence," where Bina, the protagonist, blames Muslims for the death of her husband. "My husband went to help you and then your people killed him"

Bina harbors a deep-seated resentment towards Muslims, refusing help from Abdullah, her husband's friend, and Abdullah's nephew Raza. She holds them responsible for her family's tragedy, believing that their involvement led to her husband's demise. This animosity fuels Bina's unwillingness to accept support from them, further exacerbating the divide between the communities. The consequences of this hatred extend beyond personal relationships. Bina's quilt business, once successful, suffers as a result of communal tensions. When Deepa, Bina's daughter, tries to negotiate a deal, a shopkeeper refuses to engage with her upon seeing Raza, a Muslim, by her side. "I don't want anything to do with you people or your friends". The shopkeeper's own experience of violence at the hands of Muslims causes him to react with anger and prejudice, reflecting the cycle of hatred perpetuated by the partition. This deeply entrenched communalism has far-reaching effects, impacting the lives of women who already face challenges in raising their voices against injustice. Throughout history, women have been unjustly judged and their character tarnished when they speak out against oppression. This echoes the prevailing gender inequalities that persist in modern society. In "Independence," when Deepa defends Raza, the shopkeeper resorts to taunting her character, implying that good Hindu girls should not associate with men like Raza. "Good Hindu girls like you should not be associating men with like him". This type of character assassination is all too familiar for women who dare to challenge societal norms. Banerjee sensitively presents these struggles, highlighting the plight of women in a patriarchal society plagued by communalism. The novel serves as a reminder that the fight for equality and justice requires empathetic understanding and the dismantling of divisive prejudices.

Deepa, the eldest daughter of Nabhkumar, was known for her beauty and talent in singing. Her life took a sudden turn when she met Raza. The two fell in love and Deepa would often visit Calcutta to expand her mother's quilt business, where she would frequently meet Raza. However, their secret relationship did not remain hidden for long. In a time when religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims were high, Deepa's association with a Muslim man became unacceptable to society. The flame of the religious divide had consumed the hearts and minds of many, turning love into poison. As Sahadat Hasan Manto remarked: "When religion leaves the heart and climbs on the mind- it becomes the poison".

In this patriarchal society, women had limited desires and choices. They were forced to suppress their desires and accept decisions made for them by others. Deepa's mother, upon learning of her relationship with Raza, became furious. Fueled by her hatred for Muslims, she could not accept her daughter's love. "It is true, isn't it? You did slink around behind my back with a muslim". She accused Deepa of sneaking around with a Muslim and cursed her, demanding that she leave the house immediately. "Get out ! Pack your things and leave . Now, I do not want you under my roof another moment ". Left with no other option, Deepa moved to Calcutta, where she faced numerous challenges due to her customs, beliefs, and cross-religion romance. She sought shelter with a Muslim woman in a tiny flat, but she felt uncomfortable and suffocated. To fit in, she completely changed her appearance and disguised herself as a Muslim girl named Aliya. She adopted the burkha, hiding her face from others. The elegant Deepa in a saree was lost, replaced by a new identity governed by societal frowns. Deepa started working at a political office, specifically the Muslim League Office. Here, she faced countless complications concerning her culture, identity, and beliefs. All her coworkers were Muslims, and their thinking, dressing sense, and cultural practices were very different from hers. Deepa's true identity was completely erased as everyone knew her by a different name or a different persona. She learned Islamic customs from her roommate to survive and even accompanied her coworkers to the mosque. Throughout this journey, Raza remained a constant support for Deepa. However, their relationship within the office remained hidden until they decided to announce their marriage. Deepa, who was not particularly religious, loved her religion and its customs. Initially, when asked to convert to Islam, she refused but eventually did so for the sake of her love for Raza. They moved to Dacca together. However, the move to Dacca did not bring the betterment and peace they had hoped for. Tragedy struck when Raza unexpectedly passed away, leaving Deepa and their daughter alone. Deepa's struggle for survival became increasingly difficult, especially with the mistreatment from the members of Raza's political league. They demanded that she vacate the house provided by the league and even disconnected her phone line. To make matters worse, one member of the league, a friend of Raza, tried to trap Deepa into a marriage of convenience. Despite all these challenges, Deepa remained resilient and determined to protect herself and her daughter. The story of Deepa's transformation from a beloved daughter to a secret lover, then a hidden Muslim woman, and finally a widow facing unbearable hardships showcases the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. It also highlights the cruel impact of religious divisions on personal relationships and lives. Throughout it

all, Deepa's strength and resilience shine, proving that love and determination can conquer even the most difficult circumstances.

Jamini, the second daughter of the Ganguly family, was a victim of society's torment and the horrors of the partition. Living in a conservative village, she faced constant criticism for not being as sharp-minded as her younger sister Priya, or as beautiful as her eldest sister Deepa. Adding to her burden, Jamini had a defect in her leg which became gossip fodder among the villagers, leading them to believe that no man would ever marry her. This narrow-minded society only accepted women who fit their idealized image, leaving no room for imperfections or shortcomings. Women, who are the backbone of society and inherently valuable, were not given the respect they deserved. In this patriarchal society, men could not tolerate women being seen as superior or having any deficiencies. Such social evils have repeatedly destroyed countless women's lives, perpetuating the cycle of oppression. The partition also had a horrifying impact on Jamini's life. The riots unleashed during that time brought devastation and irrevocable change to people's lives. Villages were attacked, houses were burned down, and women became targets of unspeakable violence. Jamini's village fell victim to a mob attack, resulting in the destruction of her home and injuries to herself and her mother. She narrowly escaped a rape attempt and was burnt alive. The flames of partition left people blind to the value of women and their physical purity. The lust that consumed people overshadowed the lives of millions of women, robbing them of their bodies, their dignity, and everything they held dear. Jamini managed to escape the terrible attack, but the wounds inflicted upon her soul were deep and everlasting. Physical wounds may heal, but the scars etched in her mind, heart, and soul remained. In the eyes of a society that equates a woman's worth with her physical purity, nothing else matters. Society fails to recognize the strength and resilience of those women who have endured such tragic incidents. Their tarnished reputation makes them unacceptable to others, particularly when it comes to marriage. Jamini's image was tarnished in the eyes of the people after her ordeal. Despite escaping before being raped, her life was forever altered, and nobody believed her. She became a victim of society's judgment, left to bear the weight of their prejudice and narrow-mindedness. It is crucial to present these stories in an impactful manner to shed light on the plight of women like Jamini, highlighting the injustices they face and the urgent need for societal change.

Priya, the youngest daughter of the Ganguly family, is a beacon of bravery and determination. She possesses an unwavering courage that drives her to speak out against narrow-minded thinking and societal evils. Priya dreams of

becoming a doctor, a pursuit that requires tremendous perseverance in the face of numerous challenges. She firmly believes in women's freedom and self-reliance. "The best protection any woman can have is courage". While her mother aims to marry off her daughters and start saving for their dowries, Priya adamantly refuses, prioritizing her aspirations over conforming to societal expectations. She rejects the notion of being confined by the constraints of marriage, as it often entails sacrificing dreams, independence, personal identity, and appearance. Priya yearns to break away from these restrictive traditions, beliefs, and societal boundaries, striving to carve out her own unique identity. Dowry has long been a source of tension within households, and unfortunately, continues to be prevalent today. Everyone desires to marry their daughter into a wealthy and respected family, but without a sufficient dowry, such aspirations seem impossible to achieve. Dowry reduces women to mere commodities, perpetuating the idea that they are inanimate objects to be exchanged. In this society, prospective grooms expect not only a bride but also a housemaid whom they do not have to compensate financially. On top of that, they demand a significant dowry at the time of marriage. Priya staunchly opposes this system of dowry and society's demeaning treatment of women. She questions, "Is a woman not valuable enough in herself?" Yet, the weight of custom and tradition proves to be too formidable to challenge, especially for a lone girl who lacks the support of her family. Thus, Priya is forced to suppress her voice, continuing to navigate a life filled with societal struggles, patriarchal beliefs, and inner conflicts. Priya's dream of becoming a doctor, like her father, becomes both a source of suffering and a catalyst for her detachment from close relationships, her village, and her home. She exists within a society where education is scarce, particularly for women, who are largely confined to the roles of wives and homemakers. Despite the difficulties she faces, Priya perseveres, determined to forge her path and break free from the limitations imposed upon her by society. As Alfred Lord Tennyson observed: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth: Man for the sword and the needle she: Man with the head and woman with the heart: Man to command and woman to obey; all else confusion."

Priya finds herself at a crossroads as she contemplates pursuing her dreams abroad while also maintaining her relationship with her fiancé. It is disheartening to witness how women, throughout history, have been hindered by social customs, rituals, and the demands of their relationships when striving to achieve their aspirations and build successful careers. The burden of societal expectations often creates an insurmountable barrier between women and their dreams, forcing them to either sacrifice their identity or face relentless criticism. Priya's predicament mirrors the

common struggles faced by countless women who find themselves torn between personal ambition and conforming to societal norms. Adding to Priya's challenges is her difficulty in expressing her emotions and finding understanding from those around her. While she has friends, it seems that they may not fully comprehend the complexities of her situation. This can be particularly challenging for immigrants who are navigating a new environment and seeking support and empathy from others. Furthermore, financial burdens often plague immigrants as they strive to live and study in well-developed countries. The high cost of living can make it challenging for them to manage their finances effectively, resulting in limited resources for necessities and social engagements. In Priya's case, her lack of funds prevents her from affording seasonal attire and attire for parties and other occasions, leading her to shy away from travel and social interactions with her friends. Banerjee's narrative sheds light on the unique challenges faced by immigrant women, particularly regarding gender roles and societal expectations. The female characters in the novel grapple with the pressures of conforming to traditional gender norms while simultaneously longing for independence and self-fulfillment. Banerjee skillfully explores the complexities of these dual identities, highlighting both the internal conflicts and external obstacles faced by immigrant women as they strive to find their place in a new society. By delving into these multifaceted issues, the novel serves as a powerful reflection of the experiences of immigrant women and gives voice to their struggles and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

In her novel, "Independence," Banerjee delves deep into the cultural conflicts and upheavals experienced by immigrant women with a poignant and compelling narrative. Through her masterful storytelling and well-developed characters, she skillfully explores themes of identity, assimilation, and the unique challenges faced by female immigrants. The concept of independence in the novel goes beyond just gaining freedom from colonial rule; it also delves into how the three women protagonists strive to gain independence in their own lives and find their paths. Banerjee's "Independence" serves as a testament to the resilience and strength of individuals who navigate the complexities of cultural conflicts and immigration. By presenting the story from a woman's perspective, the novel invites readers to embark on a transformative journey that challenges preconceived notions, fosters empathy, and ultimately celebrates the indomitable spirit of those who dare to seek independence amidst adversity. Through its powerful narrative and thought-provoking themes, "Independence"

stands as an important work that sheds light on the struggles and triumphs of immigrant women seeking to forge their own identities in a new and unfamiliar world.

“There are many stories which are not on paper; they are written on the minds and bodies of women”. –
Amrita Pritam

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