

# Perfectly Imperfect: Understanding Wabi-Sabi Philosophy in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Short Story "Meeting Mrinal"

Dr Surbhi Saraswat  
Assistant Professor  
AIESR  
Amity University Noida

**Abstract:** Wabi-Sabi is a traditional Japanese aesthetics that focuses on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The concept is taken from the Buddhist teaching of the impermanence, suffering and emptiness. Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni in her story "Meeting Mrinal" focuses on this aesthetics by presenting sentiments of both dislocation and solitude. The author presents the liminal space of diasporic Indian woman by highlighting the plight of Indian women in an unhappy marriage. The idea of perfectly imperfect drifts them to affirm rebellion against social traditions even when after pain and bitterness in life.

**Key Words:** Wabi-Sabi, Dislocation, Diasporic, Liminal Space, Marriage,

"Wabi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect."

Richard Powell

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with her distinctive woman issues writing has made her special place as a diasporic writer. Her acceptance as an Asian American writer with the issues of hybrid identity of Indian woman in a foreign land deals with immigrants experience in the United States. The anthology *Arranged Marriage* includes eleven stories based on different experiences of young women who have shifted to the United States and now face challenges.

Marriage as an institution is critically analysed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in all her works. Especially the space that Indian women share in her household with all its nuances.

This anthology of short stories also presents different shades of marriage and its impact of women psyche.

All the experiences are directly linked with marriage. "Expectations are like hidden rocks in your path all they do is trip you up" (The Palace of Illusions 127). The stories present the clash of tradition versus

modernity, fantasy versus reality. The last story of the anthology 'Meeting Mrinal' has a close connect to the concept of Wabi Sabi philosophy.

Wabi Sabi is a traditional Japanese aesthetics based on Buddhist preaching. It centres on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The three marks of existence as per Buddhist teaching are impermanence, suffering and emptiness. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni beautifully weaves a story of two childhood friends and deconstructs the meaning perfect life by highlight the imperfection as a mandatory part of everyone's life. In her usual style of an excellent story teller Divakaruni brings to the fore culture, individual choices and destiny unfolding the perfectly imperfect life of all the characters.

Originally Wabi and Sabi were two separate concepts describing the loneliness of reclusive life while the term 'Wabi' became a way to express appreciation for the beauty of humble, rustic simplicity and 'Sabi' the way time affects deterioration. The concept is about beauty of impermanence of ageing. Writer Leonard Koen in his book *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, created his own overarching explanation: "Wabi-Sabi is the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete, the antithesis of our classical Western notion of beauty as something perfect, enduring, and monumental." (7)

The story is a about the perfectly imperfect world of Asha with her own insecurities, conflicts, complexities and memories. The story presents conflict between inner and outer world of woman. The idea of the perfect life as an illusion is very well understood and lived by Asha who leads an imperfect life. On the other hand her unmarried friend Mrinal, feels the Asha has been luckier to have happy family, husband and son. The story portrays the psychological dilemma of both the friends in order to present the perfect world that they both dreamt in their childhood days in India. Their upbringing in the Indian setup and their independence in the western world has completely placed them in liminal space.

The story focuses on Asha's relationship with her husband, child and most importantly her female friend Mrinal. The title is based on Asha's meeting with Mrinal as Asha's relationship with Mrinal dates back to their childhood days. Apart from a lovely friend, Mrinal has always been an epitome of success which adds to competitiveness and dishonesty to their relationship. When they meet, Asha cannot admit that her marriage has failed and Mrinal tries to resist but finally admits the tiredness of being single, childless and alone.

### **Food as a Ritual**

The female world of kitchen has been presented by Devakaruni when Asha stops cooking elaborately as she use to do earlier, “I’ve decided that too much of my life has already been wasted mincing and simmering and grinding spices.” (Arranged Marriage 275) Before this for Asha cooking was more like a ritual that has a therapeutic significance as she considers it to be symbolic of unity and nurturing the family life. After her marriage with Mahesh, like most of the Indian households she has shown her love and care by preparing elaborate meals from fresh ingredients. Even at the time of crisis when Asha worries about the negative influence on Dinesh of grades, drugs, street gangs, AIDS she takes refuge in cooking as this as a ritual will safeguard as she writes, “As though the translucent rings of onions and the long curls of carrots could forge a chain that would hold him to me, close, safe forever.” ((Arranged Marriage 276) Further after a heated argument with Dinesh she tries to win him over by cooking his favourite meal. Since Dinesh has already eaten outside his refusal further disappoints Asha who poisons herself with fumes and then vomits-a reversal of healing oneself with food. This lead to a complete change in Dinesh’s attitude towards his mother and he starts to look after her. Towards the end of the story Asha and Dinesh drinks pistachio milk that Asha prepares. Divakaruni writes, Asha and Dinesh drink to their “precious, imperfect lives” symbolising their acceptance to each other as they are and not as they might be presumably ‘perfect family’. The story end on an optimistic note, “The glasses glitter like hope.” Accepting the imperfection as a reality she liberates herself from the burden to expectations and moves ahead with the maturity of accepting the life as it comes; Asha plans to write a letter to Mrinal to share her truth.

Before reaching to the maturity of accepting Wabi Sabi as a way of life Asha was determined to project an image of perfect life. Asha tries to be a perfect wife and mother due to the naturalization of cultural conditioning. As a girl Asha was taught to cook elaborate meals for her husband, to keep her family before her choices of career, dress as per husband’s choice. Though both the men in Asha’s life are not tyrants still we find her to be suffering. This exploitation is not because of patriarchy at home but due to cultural values and norms. The story is set in both India and the United States.

### **Liminality**

“Meeting Mrinal” addresses issues that concern Indian women from different trajectories establishing transcultural web. For Divakaruni, Diaspora is a tool to project transcultural strategy of examining and re-

examining the 'Indianness' of the characters and their experiences. The experience of being in-between two cultures is what

Homi K. Bhabha refers as liminality. It is a transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change: "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (The Location of Culture, 4). Migrant culture has this duality of being 'homely and unhomely' original culture and the culture of the new land. The same is termed as "Liminal" or "Third Space of Enunciation"(Bhabha 209).

In the story both Asha and Mrinal are caught in between two stages of development, who do not hold clearly defined positions within their social system, feel marginal, excluded, without identity or influence. The story presents the immigrant experience of Asha where the idea of being and other, home and homelessness puts her in a liminal space. Asha experiences the double liminality as it is both temporal and spatial. Asha is portrayed betwixt and between the socio-cultural expectations in which she has grown and the independence that the American culture offers for which Asha is not mentally prepared and struggles. She lives on a metaphorical threshold, shaped by India culture and her experience and reality of her life in America.

Writings of the South Asian diaspora focus on the double marginalization of women: One is within the patriarchal setup that they are part of and second as a dislocated, disillusioned individual trying to relocate self in an alien culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through this story presents two basic choices of Indian women. One is to choose a traditional way of getting married and have children and second is to stay single and pursue your profession. Divakaruni highlights that in both the cases choosing life exclusively to one of these options ultimately leads to suffering. Just like the concept of *Wabi Sabi* holds the meaning in togetherness similarly keeping a balance of tradition and modernity is the only answer that the author gives through the characters of Asha and Mrinal.

### **James Bond as a Trope**

The reference of James Bond in the first reading of the story seems to be a casual reference to girls' fascination to the popular culture hero. James Bond is a Byronic hero of English author Ian Fleming and one of the most popular Hollywood characters. He is symbolic of romanticized image of the West, full of "golden guns and

intricate machines and bikini-clad beauties." (Arranged Marriage 293) Asha and Mrinal vowed that if they will ever make it to visit they will celebrate their common interest by drinking Bond's drink, "vodka martini, shaken not stirred" (Arranged Marriage 292 ) Indeed when they meet in a restaurant Mrinal orders this. In the beginning Asha felt that Mrinal belonged to the glamorous, sophisticated, affluent and powerful, idealised world of Bond. It was only when Mrinal broke into tears that Asha realised that this ideal world only exist in thought and with this knowing even the James Bond becomes pitiable character. The parallelism drawn between more than perfect lives of Mrinal and Bond also presents their love less life. Mrinal admits that she is not happy and envies Asha for having happy blissful life with loving husband and a nice son. Once again, Asha avoids telling the truth, but inside, she is plunged into a crisis by Mrinal's revelation: "I feel like a child who picks up a fairy doll she's always admired from afar and discovered that all its magic glitter is really painted clay." (Arranged Marriage 296) In story transpires that for Asha, images of perfection are not only her torment, but her sustenance, compensating for her own messy and confused life. She wonders, "What would I live on, now that I knew perfection was only a mirage?" (Arranged Marriage 296) Divakaruni presents the wabi sabi philosophy by giving caution for not measuring their life in terms of materialistic cultural values.

### **Conclusion**

Living and sustaining in a state of multiplicity with the fractured self is the essence of Banerjee's women characters. She is often criticised for presenting this fractured identities of her Indian women. In her interview to Neela Banerjee she answers:

"You are expected to be a spokesperson for the community, and that is just an unfair kind of burden. I always try to make it clear that I am presenting one vision about what is true about the Indian-American community. It is a very diverse community, and mine is just one angle of looking at it."(27 April-3May 2001)

At once pessimistic yet full of hope and optimistic outlook Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Meeting Mrinal" portrays the Wabi Sabi world of contradiction with the strong women characters who are ready to embrace the change with the changing situation. Divakaruni wanted to convey that within the institution of marriage, women are circumscribed by traditions that are instilled in them through the process of naturalization. No matter how far the person travels the ethos remains.

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