



Negotiating Home And Hostland: Diasporic Consciousness In Rishi Reddi's 'Bangles'

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Abstract: Rishi Reddi's short story "Bangles", from her collection *Karma and Other Stories* (2007), explores the complex dimensions of diasporic identity through the experiences of an Indian widow navigating between tradition and modernity. This paper examines how the story reflects the psychological, cultural, and emotional dislocations that accompany migration and generational transition within the South Asian Diaspora. By employing a diasporic lens, this paper sheds light on the themes of cultural displacement, hybridity, and the search for identity in the story. It also foregrounds the generational and gendered dimensions of migration, as the protagonist's return to India signifies not a resolution but a re-negotiation of identity. It narrates the tale of an elderly woman named Arundhati who has travelled to the United States to live with her son and daughter-in-law. Migration leaves certain consequences as it finds difficult for her to cope with the socio-cultural changes she has to undergo. In this new land she feels uncomfortable and, in a way, gets disrupted by her belief system. At the end, she has to sacrifice her foremost possession - bangles

Keywords : Diasporic Literature, cultural assimilation, immigrant, transnational issues

Introduction

Rishi Reddi is a contemporary Indian-American writer whose fiction captures the subtle emotional and cultural tensions experienced by South Asian immigrants in the United States. Born in Hyderabad, India, and raised partly in the United Kingdom and the United States, Reddi's multicultural upbringing informs her sensitive portrayal of diasporic life. Her debut short story collection, *Karma and Other Stories* (2007), received the L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award and has been widely recognized for its nuanced exploration of identity, belonging, and displacement among Indian immigrants. Through her

carefully crafted narratives, Reddi presents ordinary characters negotiating between inherited traditions and the realities of migration, illuminating the complexities of cultural continuity and adaptation in an alien land.

Among the stories in *Karma and Other Stories*, “Bangles” stands out for its poignant examination of diasporic consciousness through a distinctly feminine lens. The story revolves around an Indian widow living in America who struggles to accept her son’s growing assimilation into Western culture. Disillusioned and alienated by the moral and cultural transformations of her adopted country, she decides to return to her native village in India, seeking solace in the familiarity of tradition and community. Reddi uses this personal narrative to explore the broader experiences of immigrants who are caught between two worlds—neither fully belonging to the homeland nor entirely assimilated into the host culture.

The concept of diaspora—derived from the Greek word *diaspeirein* (to scatter)—has long been associated with the dispersion of people from their homeland and the subsequent emotional and cultural consequences of such displacement. In the context of postcolonial literature, the term has evolved to encompass not only physical migration but also the complex negotiation of identity, belonging, and hybridity in transnational spaces. Scholars such as Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Homi K. Bhabha have expanded the discourse on diasporic identity by emphasizing its fluidity and hybridity. Hall asserts that identity is not fixed but constantly in process, shaped by history and experience. Similarly, Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” provides a framework for understanding how diasporic subjects inhabit an in-between realm where cultural meaning and identity are continuously negotiated. These theoretical perspectives are crucial in interpreting Reddi’s “Bangles”, where the protagonist’s struggles reflect the psychological dissonance and fragmented belonging inherent in diasporic existence.

Reddi’s fiction, especially “Bangles”, captures the emotional resonance of the immigrant experience through themes of nostalgia, cultural conflict, and generational tension. The story reveals how symbols of tradition—such as the titular bangles—become powerful signifiers of identity and continuity for those who live away from their homeland. The protagonist’s attachment to cultural rituals and objects represents a longing for rootedness in the face of modernity and alienation. At the same time, Reddi exposes the irony of diasporic nostalgia: the homeland remembered is often idealized, a construct shaped more by memory than reality. When the protagonist returns to India, she confronts the disjunction between her imagined home and the changing social realities of the village, underscoring the impossibility of complete return.

Through its exploration of memory, identity, and cultural symbolism, “Bangles” becomes a microcosm of the larger diasporic condition—an ongoing search for equilibrium in a world of shifting borders and identities. Ultimately, Rishi Reddi’s “Bangles” illustrates that the diasporic experience is not merely

about physical migration but about the psychological negotiations that accompany cultural displacement. It invites readers to reflect on how identity is reshaped through the interplay of memory, nostalgia, and adaptation.

“Bangles” is the fourth story in the collection ‘Karma and Other Stories’. It is a story of an elderly woman named Arundhati. She has just traveled to the U.S. to live with her son and daughter-in-law. The story reveals its main plot through the conversation of Rukmini, the narrator and Arundhati. This story is similar to Chitra Divakaruni’s ‘Mrs Datta Writes a Letter’ and Thrity Umrigar’s ‘If Today Be Sweet’. The title of this story, “Bangles”, refers to the jewellery worn in wrist mostly by women and also a sign (especially the golden bangles) of a married one. Arundhati remembers the memories regarding her possession of bangles and the other jewellery as the narrator notes-‘She loved her jewellery. It had been placed on her neck and arms and fingers on the day of her bride making ceremony, fifty-three years ago, by her grandmothers, aunts, and older cousins, women who had journeyed before her through life. She would be a married woman now; she needed to wear the evidence of her status.’ (Reddi, 2007) But this long possessed dear past of her gets collapsed all of a sudden as she faced change after her migration to the United States.

After the death of her husband, Arundhati had come to Lexington, Massachusetts to live with her only son Venu. Venu and his wife Kamlesh lived with their two daughters and a son. Arundhati remembers that sweet experience as she gets relieved into the thought of being taken care by her son earnestly. Her son guided her through a dim hallway to a bedroom with matching drapes and bedspread. Everything was clean. Venu smiled and extended his arm, showing the size and luxury of the space. “This is your new room... this is your new city, new country, new life”. (Reddi, 2007) She loves her grandson, Rahul as he is the one who would carry on her husband's name. Though she is very impressed to see her son's success and his well settled life, she finds their daily routine uncanny as they do not regularly attend the temple. To her belief, a happy life must entail some religious generosity in the daily course of life. However, she finds some fallibility in this new circumstances, particularly into the household activities. She is sceptical of her daughter-in-law who takes her son Rahul's misbehavior lightly. The narrator records one such experience: “He jumped on the sofa where Arundhati slept, and woke her. “Nanamma wants to sleep, Rahul,” Kamlesh said sweetly, but she did not lift her son to the floor” (Reddi, 2007). Arundhati later found Kamlesh unable to take proper care of Rahul as it was expected of her to attain the needs of the children. In Indian culture, parenting was really an ideal one, but here not so much care was taken regarding it. As the story progresses, one can find that Arundhati becomes more engaged in household duties. Arundhati's typical mannerisms and her notion of conducting the traditional Indian household duties enable her to criticize the indoor practices of an Indian family and the flexible social circumstances of the West. Here she experiences the clash between the values, customs, and traditions of her ancestral

culture and the norms of the new culture she find herself in. This clash often creates tension and confusion as she navigates her everyday life. She faces a constant balancing act of preserving her tradition and assimilating into the new culture. This conflict often leads her towards an identity crisis.

Rukmini, the narratorial voice as well as a character into the story is a distant relative, who eventually becomes Arundhati's friend. Arundhati does not share most of the family matters with Rukmini as she believes it is unethical and unjust to disclose the family problems to an outsider.

However, Arundhati contradictorily finds a kind of solace in this foreign land when conversing with Rukmini. They go together in the cultural functions, as Venu does not have time to attend them. Arundhati gradually becomes separated into the familial enterprise that Venu and his wife cultivated. She now has none to talk to nor anyone to take care of except Rukmini. Arundhati feels about this transference of care given from Venu to Rukmini and realizes "she was being handed over, like a burden, to a stranger" (Reddi, 2007). Arundhati finds herself as odds one out in American Venu's family. Arundhati realizes that as a newcomer elderly immigrant, she is helpless and highly dependent on other people: 'In India, she was nothing without her husband. But here, even her husband was nothing.' (Reddi, 2007, p. 110).

She almost lost her freedom and gradually becomes a caretaker of the house. Her orthodox belief that only a son will take the responsibility of his parents also gets shattered when an unknown woman, Rukmini, cares for her. The dilemma highlighted here is the loss of community and support systems. The elderly migrants find themselves disconnected from the familiar surroundings and the people they know. This loss of community support can be especially challenging in old age when individuals often rely on social connections for emotional and practical support. Thus, at the end of the story, she tried to buy her freedom in exchange for her bangles, as she says Rukmini, "Then take these." She slipped the gold bangles off her wrist. "We need not tell anyone. Take them and sell them for me" (Reddi, 2007). Arundhati gives off her last possession, the bangles that are most dear to her, to buy ticket back to her home as she finds Venu incorrigible for this. However, the thought of giving up on her possession creates an emptiness in her mind which signals her traumatic loneliness into the experiences away from her home and her urge to return to her homeland. Arundhati is just another woman who falls short into this transnational idealization of close family circle under one roof. Once she realizes her space into this strange land being shrunken up, she feels trapped. What she can do to get out of this is to return back. She grapples with the question of where she truly belongs. She feels detached from her homeland due to physical and emotional distance, and she struggles to fully integrate into the new culture. This sense of displacement contributes to her feelings of isolation.

Furthermore, the symbolism of the bangles in the story plays a crucial role in exploring cultural identity. The bangles represent both a connection to Arundhati's traditional roots and a source of restriction. Her

gold bangles are both the symbol of her wifhood and a mode of retaining independence as they can finance her return to her village where her brother stays.

In "Bangles," Rishi Reddy skillfully explores the dilemmas of old age and migration, painting a poignant picture of the emotional and practical challenges faced by elderly migrants. St. Louis dispatches a post – “Through close observation of human behavior, the author presents characters grappling with the immigration experience in America. The story reminds us of the complexities of human experiences and the difficult choices individuals must make when confronted with the realities of aging and migration.”

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