

## ILLUSTRATION OF DIASPORIC ISSUES IN RISHI REDDI'S KARMA AND OTHER STORIES : A STUDY

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### Abstract

This article strives to deconstruct the main characters' cultural identity in Rishi Reddi's short story collection, entitled *Karma and Other Stories*, as the characters deal with their lives as Indian diaspora in the United States. For the technique of data collection, the article uses the close reading technique. As the method of analysis, this article employs Jacques Derrida's deconstruction approach by tracing the binary opposition found within the seven short stories, finding ambiguity and ambivalence from the binary opposition, and revealing the interpretation from the ambiguity and ambivalence. The article finds that the binary oppositions found within the seven stories have used signifiers which refer to identity issues, although initially the Western and Hinduism oppose one another, both are in fact not contradictory; it is shown from the adaptive identity of the protagonists, even toward traditional practices and way of life, and the cultural identity of the protagonists in the stories is depicted as a fluid identity.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Ambivalence, Indian diaspora, Deconstruction, Cultural identity, Diaspora, Cultural Roots, Identity, Home Land.

### INTRODUCTION TO DIASPORA

Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. In this wide context, all those writers can be regarded as diasporic writers, who write outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Rishi Reddi is an American author, born in Hyderabad, India, and grew up in Great Britain and the United States. Her work appeared in *The Best American Short Stories 2005* and received an honorable mention in Pushcart Prize 2004; she is also an Artist Grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Her heritage is Indian Telugu, of which she describes originates from Hyderabad. Because of her father's physician career, the family had moved a lot to a few cities during Reddi's childhood and arrived in America in 1971. From her moving experience and life as immigrant connected to lifelong relatives spread across the United States, Reddi considers herself most comfortable with the Indian-Telugu-American cosmopolitan population in Boston. It later inspired her to complete her first work, *Karma and Other Stories*. Her interest in producing credited to introduce 'fresh' cosmopolitan views with religious tolerance, an end to the racial discrimination, and cultural predicament.

### KARMA AND OTHER STORIES: AN INTRODUCTION

*Karma and other Stories* vividly portrays the interconnected lives of members of the Indian-American community who struggle to balance the demands of traditional Indian culture with the allure of modern Western life. Set mostly in the Boston area, Reddi's stories deftly dramatize the emotional conflict within each of her characters as they overcome feelings of vulnerability and perceptions of themselves as outsiders. Reddi has burrowed so deeply into the lives of her characters as to make them not only real individuals, but very memorable and sympathetic ones. This debut collection of seven short stories revolved around familiar themes of cross-cultural integration. Reddi writes about the struggle of Indians (specifically, the Telugu-speaking Diaspora from Hyderabad) to reconcile their heritage and culture with the life in the United States. These

challenges, which are reflected quite differently among the three generations of characters, are hanged with delicacy, grace, and a certain calm tone. Reddi adeptly captures a range of voices, from that of an indignant elderly ex-judge who can't accept the smallest slight, to a young teenage boy trying to fit into his white-bread Midwestern school, and all manner of husbands, wives, and aunties in between, including a fully assimilated woman.

In *Karma and other Stories*, there is one or two stories that end abruptly and the ending leave much to the reader's imagination. Each story is about people, with the same motivations and conflicts that most of us can identify with. The lenses we see those conflicts through are different, but it just helps to give a different perspective, and see how much alike people are deep down inside. The need of an elder for respect; the conflict between duty and desire for a path; the interaction between husband and wife who have grown a little distant and are trying to figure out what's wrong; the failure of people to fit into others' preconceived roles for them. The fact that they're mostly set in Lexington, MA, in a particular Americanized ethnic community serves more to highlight the commonality than set apart the cultures.

Reddi's short stories are easy to read and move at a good pace. The characters have depth in them and to the readers identifying with them and feeling for them as well. Some stories have a bit of punch at the end that can leave readers wonder about their own mistakes. Overall, it's a good collection. The stories and characters are easily identified and begin to get a feeling of the Indian-American culture. The seven short stories in *Karma and other Stories* skillfully explore the Indian American experience. Since their proclaimed independence from the British colonial in 1947, there have been numerous Indians migrating to Western countries, particularly the United States, in order to improve their lives. For Indian Telugu community, many of its members have migrated to the US far before India's independence, and the migration has been continuing proliferately ever. Many of them have undergone identity crisis for having to maintain their Indian traditional practices and at the same time adjust themselves to the American culture. Most of the issues that Indian diaspora face are intergenerational conflicts which include the tension circumferencing traditional marital obligations and the contrasting views on sexuality and religious traditions. Therefore, many world-familiar Indian-American novelists such as Jhumpa Lahiri (*The Interpreter of Maladies*), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Mistress of Spices*) and Rishi Reddi (*Karma and Other Stories*) have taken similar themes in their works.

The study compares those authors with their predecessors in terms of stereotypical issues of identity, homesickness, rootlessness, etc. and finds that this 'new' generation of authors brings individual styles, idioms, and diversity to the Indian-American literature. This, however, still collectively puts the works of those 'new' authors on the surface and has not looked into each of the stories deeper. Different from Riyawati and Khan's studies, this article tries to answer one question, which is how the ambivalence and cultural identity are deconstructed in all of the seven short stories of Rishi Reddi's *Karma and Other Stories*. The work is chosen for two reasons. First, the lack of research concerned in deconstructing ambivalence and cultural identity in Indian-American literature by a new generation Indian-American author. Second, there has not been a study which explores all of the seven short stories of Rishi Reddi with the deconstruction approach; therefore, there has not been a revelation toward Reddi's chosen themes.

### ILLUSTRATION OF DIASPORIC ISSUES IN RISHI REDDI'S KARMA AND OTHER STORIES : A STUDY

*Karma and other Stories* that falls under the "Diaspora fiction" category which means it's about immigrant sorrow, dislocation, and so on. The collections are stereotypical or aimed at exotic that each work should be judged on its own terms rather than hastily relegated into a category or genre and dismissed because that category is seen as saturated.

*Karma and other Stories* is a collection of seven stories about Indians, originally from Hyderabad now living in the United States. The jacket description "a multigenerational tapestry of interconnected lives, depicting members of an Indian American community struggling to balance the demands of traditional with the allure of Western life" doesn't reflect how gently perspective and absorbing these stories are. There is a real feel here for the interplay between people—the intense moment of anger that comes with a person's realization that a close friend doesn't share exactly the same values and attitudes; the quiet reconciliation that follows shortly on the heels of an argument.

Intermittently, some of the stories clarify popular stereotypes about Indian living abroad, but in many cases they also overturn these stereotypes. The story *Lord Krishna*, for instance, begins with fourteen-year-old Krishna Chander being seemingly hectored by an evangelical class-teacher who hands out a magazine illustration of Lord Krishna as one of many examples of the influence of Satan in modern popular culture. This

may appear to set up the classic minority community as victim scenario, but as the story progresses we see a delicate power shift take place. When Krishna's irate father goes to complain to the school principal about the insult to their religious sentiments, Reddi casually drops in a sentence implying that Mr. Chander is a man of some influence and that can arm-twist the school into firing the teacher. The effect of this is that almost before the reader realizes it, the traditional roles are reversed; now the teacher is cowering, while Krishna's father is the smug bully holding the aces. The scene is a remainder of changing power equations, a reminder that an Indian family in United States doesn't have to be the underdog. Incidentally, the story is set in 1981, which also allow us to reflect how much more things might have changed since then.

In the first story, "*Justice Shiva Ram Murthy*", the eponymous narrator is a seventy-years-old former judge who has recently moved to Boston to live with his daughter. Justice Murthy's steady but over-formal, occasionally awkward voice reminds us that he probably learnt his English as a youngster in an India that was still permeated by the British colonial influence and that, in a sense, he's twice removed from the American way of life and speech. His refusal to accept that his accent might not be immediately comprehensible to locals leads to an unfortunate misunderstanding in a fast-food joint, which becomes the plot Macguffin for what is really a pen portrait of very lonely old man. Reddi's here lies in giving us a first-person narrative that shows us the many ways in which Murthy deludes himself how his self righteousness and inflexibility make it difficult for him to adjust this new country but also allows us to sympathise with him. In "*Justice Shiva Ram Murthy*", the center point to the binary opposition which forms the text is the 'dignity' of an elderly Indian former judge named Shiva Ram Murthy, who has just moved to the US for three months to live with his daughter's family. He feels intimidated by all of the differences between living in India and the US, as his best friend 'Manu' Manmohan repeatedly points out. Therefore, the shock culture triggers Shiva Ram to act superiorly and all dignified in the way he conducts himself whilst adjusting to living in the US.

The second story, "*Lakshmi and the Librarian*", narrates about a married, middle-aged Indian woman named Lakshmi Chundi who feels lonely. The key frame which constructs the binary oppositions in the text is Lakshmi's 'melancholy', the feeling which ironically has not been caused either by her husband Venkat or her two grown sons, Sridher and Sarath, but by Mr. Elias Filian, the town librarian, as she worries about his evident sadness. Although Lakshmi can be considered to have been freed from child-rearing obligations since Sridher has married and Sarath has gone away for college, Lakshmi keeps on thinking that her contented life lacks something that gnaws on her. Below is the quote that displays Lakshmi's secret dissatisfaction about her own life and her eldest son's choice of life.

In the third story, "*The Validity of Love*", an Indian young woman named Lata lives with her childhood friend Supriya as roommates. One evening, they receive a letter from Supriya's parents telling that they will help arrange their daughter's marriage with a young man Supriya's father has met earlier. They dismiss the idea but the pressures of their family quickly close in. Lata drives Supriya to meet the man, and she herself is reminded of Luke, her American then-boyfriend who broke up with her months ago and her rebellion against her family's wishes to marry a man they chose for her. Lata has many times voiced her criticism about the hypocrisy of her Indian-American community.

In "*Bangles*", the fourth story, an elderly widow named Arundhati comes for the first time to Massachusetts to live with her only son Venu's family after her husband's death. She is asked to take care of her three grandchildren: two girls and one boy. Arundhati starts having difficulty in child-rearing as her grandchildren have been raised more American than Indian, and that her son's lenient treatment to her grandson Rahul reminds her that she herself was less loved by her father, who clearly had loved her brother more.

Afterwards, in "*Karma*", the fifth story, an unemployed professor called Shankar Balareddy and his wife Neha have been evicted from the luxurious house of Shankar's younger brother Prakash. He blames his bad luck in work and life to his own misconduct in the past when he playfully shot a lovebird dead in a forest, knowing too late that lovebirds mate for life. The key of the binary oppositions in this story is the 'failure' of Shankar, who fails to obtain a better profession and life for himself and Neha, although he is a professor of colonial history. Worse, Shankar fails to create a chance in pursuing his dreams as a cook.

The sixth story, "*Devadasi*", narrates about a teenage girl named Uma Reddy who has the chance to go to Hyderabad, India, with her parents on a school holiday. Uma feels disconnected to the culture and is only interested in learning bhāratha natyām dance with a famous Hyderabad dance instructor she has heard for years from her Boston instructor. The key to the binary oppositions is 'growing up', and since Uma was born and raised in the United States, she considers Indian conflicts insignificant to her American teenage life: She was an American who did not care about the differences between Hindus and Muslims. She did not care about saris or Indian jewels, or that women should not be too familiar with the company of men (Reddi, 2007, p. 163). As a matter of fact, Uma's deliberate ignorance towards everything in her homeland grows from her lack of

knowledge and lack of emotional connection to her cultural roots, and above all, her American sense of superiority over the chaotic Indian life.

In the final and seventh story, “Lord Krishna”, an Indian teenage school-boy named Krishna feels dismayed about his un-American name that everybody mocks at school. He wishes that he could change it from ‘Krish’ to ‘Kris’, in order to be more American. Krishna’s agitation grows more as one of the school teachers, Mr. Hoffman, teaches the class about ‘new testament references to Satan’ which include Western Biblical ‘occult’ aspects such as Lord Krishna, a deity of the Hindu religion, from which Krishna’s own name has derived. His father, Ramesh, a devout Hindu, strongly rejects this idea and after finding out that his son has been bullied as well as wronged by Mr. Hoffman, Krishna ends up regretting confiding in his father for his problems.

The motif of old people losing power over their lives after they move to an unfamiliar setting is also reflected in *Bangles*, about Arundhati, an elderly widow living with her son and his family and feeling increasingly alienated by their lifestyles and attitudes. She briefly feels in control when she enters a temple this was her domain but even here she is destined to be disappointed. Incidentally, both *Justice Shiva Ram Murthy* and *Bangles* contain passages where the protagonists have a vision of their past an idyllic childhood or youth, living in a world that they truly belonged to, in control of their own lives (in Arundhati’s case, this is like a rose-tinted memory, for we never get the sense that she was ever independent of the men in her life first her father and brother, later her husband).

Reddi is equally insightful about the personal conflicts of younger people. In *The Validity of Love*, two friends, Lata and Supriya, privately make fun of their conservative parents’ attempts to find a suitable Indian groom for them, but their friendship is severely tested when Supriya conveniently “falls in love” with such a boy. In *Devadasi*, sixteen-year-old Uma thinks herself as “an American, who does not care about the difference between Hindus and Muslims” but later realizes that such distinctions can matter after all; by the story’s end, she is confused enough about her identity to wonder how she could ever have imagined sleeping with an American boy.

The two last stories are also reminders of small ways in which culture and tradition can insinuate itself into even the most liberal, cosmopolitan lives. But equally importantly, for nearly every character who is afflicted by cultural confusion, there is a counterpoint: Justice Murthy’s recalcitrance is balanced by the pragmatism of his friend Manmohan, who has adjusted much better to life in the United States. And in the title story *Karma*, the frustration of the jobless Shankar Balareddy is tempered by the support he gets from his insensible wife.

## CONCLUSION

*Karma and other Stories* is a reminder that we live in a world where people travel more extensively than at any earlier point in human history, where an increasing number of people are moving out of their comfort zones and settling down in places that their grandparents, even parents, might have regarded with suspicion. Given all this, the very label “Diaspora fiction” can be restrictive one, more exotic-sounding than it needs to be, and not indicative of how commonplace immigrant problems are in today’s world. It’s like the recent comic stripe in a daily newspaper, with two children standing by a globe, one of them pointing and saying, “That isn’t the world, it’s the Diaspora”. Therefore *Karma and other Stories* introduces a luminous new voice especially for the new generation from a diasporic view point.

The success of the characters in the short stories in building their lives in the US has also revealed another fact, which is that in the Hinduism way of life, the concepts of pursuing material success, intellectual achievement and living well is also greatly encouraged in order to improve its adherents’ quality of life. Hence, it correlates very well with the idea of Western values in the United States. Therefore, it is appropriate to declare that Western values go together with Indian Hinduism values; indeed, they in fact do not oppose each other in regards to their core values and teachings. The deconstruction reading of these seven stories also provide an insight that these characters in the stories, either consciously or unconsciously, have chosen to adopt both cultural values and they have finally adjusted each to suit one another well. Rishi Reddi’s collection of short stories makes the defixation of its binary opposition to be labile. The key to the deconstruction reading of *Karma and Other Stories* is ‘the real Indianness’ offered by the common perception of Indian diaspora in the US that is captured well by the author in the book. The contrasting details of the stories serve as the proof that can resist the Westernized ideologies found within the book.

## REFERENCE

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