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Unveiling the Mail-Order Bride:

Mutated Arranged Marriages in Chitra Divakaruni's "Clothes" and

Linh Dinh's *Love, Like, Hate*

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Abstract

This Master's thesis explores the impact of contemporary globalisation on the nature of the arranged marriages in the Asian diaspora. In order to highlight the differences between the old tradition and the *mutated* form of arranged marriages—the term I use to refer to the renewed method—, I have organised this paper using a contrasting, comparative structure. After a brief sociohistorical contextualisation of the evolution of the arranged marriage procedure, I explore the main ways in which globalisation may have affected the latter and, subsequently, I point out the major transformations of the *mutated* phenomenon. Finally, I illustrate those changes in the close analysis of the proposed textual corpus. In order to accurately portray the greater placement of the arranged marriage business in recent years in the Indian American and Vietnamese American diasporas, I have selected two narratives that deal with such ethnic minorities: "Clothes," by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and *Love, Like, Hate*, by Lihn Dinh. The aim of this study is not only to stress the *mutations* of the arranged marriage phenomenon through its depiction in the literary field, but also to evidence the need for urgent action in order to regulate the current mail-order bride industry.

Introduction

This Master's thesis aims to explore the impact of the globalisation process on the nature of arranged marriages in certain Asian diasporas. With the purpose of contextualising the appearance of new formulas particularly affecting contemporary Asian arranged marriages, I introduce in the first part of the paper a social and historical framework of the evolution from the old to the *mutated* practices and a theoretical approach about the main issues of contemporary globalisation. Likewise, in order to examine how the contemporary arranged marriage method is fictionalised in narratives whose diasporic authors present the most accurate depictions of traditional arranged marriages as well as the larger number of changes, the research engages in a close analysis of two narratives dealing with two ethnic minorities historically associated with the arranged marriage phenomenon: the Indian American and Vietnamese American diasporas. To this end, I have respectively analysed Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Clothes" (1995) and Linh Dinh's novel *Love, Like, Hate* (2010).

The reason for addressing this topic for my Master's thesis was my eagerness to deepen the knowledge about the arranged marriage phenomenon that I had acquired while analysing the particular case of the Japanese American phenomenon of picture brides in my end of degree project. The idea arose from several Master's courses which had tackled theoretical concepts related to contemporary globalisation; after that, I entertained the possibility of intertwining my interest for arranged marriages with globalisation issues in order to investigate the impact that the latter had had on the former. Finally, after carrying out an initial search, the decisive fact for choosing the final topic of my paper was the insufficient amount of studies about such a contemporary and controversial matter.

With regards to the methodology followed in this essay, I have first scrutinised the phenomenon of diasporic arranged marriages and then exemplified the *mutations* of the arranged marriage procedure by carrying out a thorough textual analysis of selected texts. For this purpose, several critical schools have been crucial. Firstly, I use postcolonial ideas such as William Safran's approach to diaspora based on the trauma and nostalgia of diasporic subjects,¹ or Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry"² when I address the cultural Westernisation of individuals involved in diasporic arranged marriages. Secondly, I use feminist topics such as the fetishisation of the Asian female body and the recent impact of feminist movements from the West on Asian women for the study of the female characters of the narratives. In addition, Marxist theories were particularly useful when exploring the capitalist economic interests underlying the contemporary mail-order bride industry, as cultural materialism endorses the relevance of the sociohistorical situation of the time and the thorough textual analysis executed in this paper. Finally, it is worth noting that Marxist and postcolonial brands of feminism have proven especially convenient for the portrayal of the *mutated* arranged marriage industry: whereas the former regards women as a particularly unprivileged class, the latter highlights the double alienation of females from colonised countries and their depiction as exotic "creatures."

This paper is divided into two large chapters: the first section presents a thorough study of the arranged marriage phenomenon and the second one exemplifies the concepts explained in the first chapter through a reading of the selected narratives. The first part of this paper is strategically organised in a chronological manner, in order to denote a sharp contrast between the old tradition and the new, *mutated* forms of diasporic arranged marriages.

¹ See more in Safran's article "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" (1991).

² The postcolonial notion of mimicry was approached by Homi Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man." Bhabha proposes that the copying of the coloniser's values and culture by the colonised results in not only an emulation of the former, but often also in the mockery of the original, so that the colonised becomes "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (122). That is the case, for instance, with the clothing transformation of several characters from the analysed stories.

Accordingly, its first subsection (1.1) introduces a brief social and historical account of the old arranged marriage method in Asian diasporic contexts. Subsequently, the second (1.2) and third (1.3) subsections function as a link and offer an explanation for the understanding of the metamorphosis of the arranged marriage set of practices: on the one hand, I briefly explore the main historical issues influencing the second wave of Asian migrations constituting the Indian American and Vietnamese American diasporas—the ethnic communities portrayed in the selected textual corpus—, and, on the other, I address the main effects of globalisation that may have had an impact on arranged marriages. In the fourth subsection of the first chapter (1.4), which deals with *mutated* arranged marriages, I point out the most relevant innovations in the contemporary arranged marriage procedure. Finally, such *mutations* are illustrated in the second part of the essay (2) through the close reading of Divakaruni's "Clothes" and Dinh's *Love, Like, Hate*. Whereas the main character of "Clothes," Sumita, undergoes a metamorphosis that resembles the *mutation* of the arranged marriage practice itself, Dinh's novel *Love, Like, Hate* presents the contrast between a mother's traditional attempt to secure an arranged marriage for her daughter and a couple's innovative method of using an online agency in order to first contact each other.³

³ It may be relevant to note that I have added an appendix with the summaries of both narratives in the event that the thesis readers may not have had the opportunity to previously read them. This last section may also serve as a backup tool for the better understanding of the close reading of the selected texts.

1. *Old* against *Mutated* Arranged Marriages in the Asian Diasporas

1.1. *Old* Arranged Marriages

Historically, arranged marriages have been a phenomenon particularly embedded in the Asian community. As the name implies, this practice entails a process that aims at forming a couple through an intermediary who is usually a family member of the prospective bride or groom, according to the most traditional type of arranged marriage, or a friend or distant relative in more informal arranged marriages. One of the Asian regions with the most ancient arranged marriage traditions is South Asia, especially India, where parents have been in charge of the organisation of their son's or daughter's marriage for years—a procedure that is still the norm in most rural areas of the country, although to a lesser extent than in previous times. Indeed, Nancy Netting sets the origin of South Asian arranged marriages much further back, "[a]s early as 1500 b.c., [when] Indo-Aryans, who came to dominate the subcontinent and whose religion evolved into Hinduism, believed that people had a responsibility to marry and produce children, preserving the patriarchal family line" (708). Aside from India, other countries where the arranged marriage tradition has proliferated are Japan, China or Vietnam, the latter being a particular case I will be coming back to.

Until the twentieth century arranged marriage practices were mainly "intra-racial" or "intra-ethnic,"⁴ meaning that both individuals involved in the marriage had the same

⁴ The concepts *race* and *ethnicity* have been described by many scholars as problematic notions because of their complex nature. Whereas *race* has traditionally been assumed to refer to the conceptual association of people according to biological and physical—thus genetic—characteristics, *ethnicity* usually concerns groups of people with shared cultural and social traditions. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, over the years, scholars have increasingly discussed the blurred line between both terms, since they are highly subjective notions of identity.

national origin. In addition, bride and groom were also from close geographical locations. According to Mariana Aguiar, the large amount of countries where the arranged marriages take place has propitiated a great variety of types of arranged marriage depending on differing sociohistorical and cultural factors such as "region, religion, caste, class, family preference, and individual interpretations" (183). As a result, by examining the practices used in traditional arranged marriages, Aguiar distinguishes different forms of arranged marriage which go from the "classic" match brokered by an elder relative and/or a matchmaker to other less common strategies such as marriage within the family, the requirement of a dowry, bride-viewing or the fact, common in certain contexts, that the bride and groom may not actually meet until the wedding (182-183).

Apart from arranged marriages taking place inside the Asian frontiers, "long-distance" arranged marriages have proved particularly useful since the beginning of the Asian American diaspora. The appearance of new laws and agreements in the late nineteenth century allowed the movement of Asian people to American lands.⁵ Due to the spread of utopian "American dream" ideas, the United States led the list of countries with the largest number of Asian migrants in the 19th century. The first wave of immigrants was constituted mainly by men, given that women were not allowed to go abroad on their own in many Asian societies, or were not allowed to immigrate by the host country. Since, in the new place of residence, the US, those men were segregated from the rest of citizens, they looked for a native method to be able to find a prospective bride that met their standards in order to form a family and ensure progeny. The most popular type of

Likewise, the concept of *nationality*—the sense of belonging to a certain geopolitical entity—is not always coterminous with "ethnicity."

⁵ During the 1890s, Chinese labourers began to be brought as contractual labourers in sugar plantations. According to Ronald Takaki in *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, "[a]bout one million people [enter] between the California gold rush of 1849 and the Immigration Act of 1924, which cut off immigration from Asian countries" (7). Instead of actual migration laws, the initial migratory regulations from the nineteenth century consisted of agreements aiming to ease immigration restrictions between certain countries. In this regard, the most significant treaties are China's Burlingame Treaty of 1868 (Takaki 114) and Japan's posterior 1908 Gentleman's Agreement (Takaki 46).

arranged marriage at the turn of the century was the phenomenon of *Picture Brides*, whereby a man from the Japanese American diaspora chose a woman residing in Asia from a photograph and then sent her his own portrait through an intermediary (usually a family member of the prospective bride). If the lady agreed, they married by proxy and did not meet until laws allowed women to travel to America. Because of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the later Gentlemen's agreement—allowing Japanese men to bring their wives from Japan—, the Picture Bride phenomenon substantially affected Japanese rather than Chinese women.⁶ It is important to note that most picture brides were in a difficult situation in Asia: some of them because they were the eldest daughters, others due to their economic situation, and others were just not married yet. That is why America became an ideal place to start a new life. Nonetheless, they did not usually find what they expected; life conditions in America were hard and many picture brides ended up in work fields, as servants, segregated by the rest of American citizens—just as Asian men—, or even abused by their husbands.

Because of their nature, arranged marriages have been a subject of controversy in recent times. Due to blatant economic and gender inequalities, among other factors, for many scholars the picture bride practice should disappear. In fact, Danièle Bélanger, Khuát Thu Hồng, and Trần Giang Linh argue that arranged marriage should be equated to "an obvious case of well-organized, widespread human trafficking that requires state monitoring and law enforcement, which implies that all women are forced migrants in need of rescue" (83). Likewise, it is worth pointing out that, even though the female figure involved in picture bride marriages is generally depicted as the victim of the "transaction," numerous critics have also referred to the displacement and loneliness of

⁶ The prohibition of Chinese migrations to America led to the illegal actions of many Chinese men who took advantage of the San Francisco fire in order to falsely bring their "sons" from China, known as the "paper sons." The fact that their wives did not travel to America, as happened with Japanese picture brides, is the main difference between the Chinese arranged marriage and the extensive Japanese American Picture Bride phenomenon.

the diasporic subjects in the Asian American communities as one of the main factors influencing men's involvement in the phenomenon.

Although it is true that at the present time the Asian arranged marriage practices remain frequent, I argue that the phenomenon has mutated along with the advent of contemporary globalisation. Some of the most influential circumstances are the transnational shifting of cultural perceptions, the technological advances arising from the flourishing of the capitalist market, and the impact of several historical events and new policies.⁷ The following sections will provide a sociohistorical and theoretical account of contemporary forms of arranged marriage, focusing on two Asian diasporas which have experienced the largest amount of *mutated*⁸ arranged marriage practices: the Indian American⁹ and Vietnamese American Diasporas.

1.2. Marriage Traditions: Between the Homeland and the Diaspora

With the aim of providing a historical frame for the subsequent analysis of the *mutated* arranged marriage set of practices, I will summarise the main historical issues influencing the second wave of Asian migrations, which begins with the Immigration Act

⁷ In "Transnationalizing Asian American Studies: Two Perspectives," Capozzola points out "America's Immigration Act of 1965" (3), "[o]verseas Citizenship of India policies" (3), "Vietnam's Doi Moi restructuring" (3), or "efforts based in Beijing to mobilize the Chinese diaspora" (3) as essential historical triggering factors of the intellectual and social change involving the transnational conversion.

⁸ Note that this is the term that I have decided to use when referring to the new form of arranged marriages, particularly contemporary Asian arranged marriages, and the appearance of new formulas affecting the latter.

⁹ The terminology used to refer to the overseas Indians living in America has changed over time. Whereas some people prefer to use *Asian Indians*, others point out that it is misleading because it does not distinguish the Indian subgroup from other South Asian diasporas. In that regard, Pierre Gottschlich claims in "The Indian Diaspora in the United States of America" that [s]ince the US Census Bureau operates with the rather inclusive category 'Asian Indians', it is virtually impossible to distinguish from the mere data whether a person comes from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, or even Pakistan" (157). Despite the fact that it is very similar to the terminology used to refer to indigenous Americans, *American Indians*, in this paper I will use the term *Indian American* in order to specify the diasporic South Asian subgroup that I analyse.

from 1965 onwards. As will be acknowledged, the main difference with the first wave of migrations is that the two recent Asian diasporic models I will be focusing on, Vietnamese and Indian American, are made out of increasingly educated individuals. The following two subsections will briefly present the traditions of each one of the selected homelands.

1.2.1. The Indian American Diaspora

The history of the South Asian region is strongly influenced by long periods of colonial rule, ending with the period when the British Empire became the dominant power, from 1858 until 1947, when the independence struggle and the final partition of the region took place. Accordingly, the diaspora coming from one of the “new” nations after the partition, India, was prompted by tensions inside the country that urged citizens to find escape routes abroad. However, even though Indian citizens had been migrating for years to countries like the United Kingdom, in the case of the United States, the Indian diaspora became one of the latest Asian American diasporas. The 1965 Immigration Act opened the gates for a first wave of Indian migrants with a higher education, as David Ahmad-Stout and Sanjay Nath assert: "the U.S. government only allowed in technically skilled workers in a 1965 post-civil rights immigration law" (44). The result was the emergence of an urban middle class in the Indian American diaspora "including doctors, nurses, engineers, and other well-educated professionals" (Ahmad-Stout and Nath 44).

1.2.2. The Vietnamese American Diaspora

In "Marriage and Family Law in a Changing Vietnam," Steven Wisensale effectively summarises the complex history of Vietnam in a few lines: "centuries of colonial rule, a long-term civil conflict that split the nation in half for 30 years, two major wars against modern Western powers, an awkward reunification process that began in 1975, an abrupt shift from

state-sponsored socialism to free-market capitalism that began in 1986, and most recently, rapid modernization" (602). As a result, the country has experienced a series of events in the last decades that have culminated in the appearance of a new type of citizen coming out of the economic expansion since the 1986 *Đổi Mới*, "an emerging urban class," which contrasts with other social segments "constructed" as "backward, poor, rural" (Bélanger et al. 94). The people from that new urban class are the ones travelling abroad, especially to America, in recent decades so that a new type of educated Vietnamese American citizen began to appear in the United States. In contrast, in the years following the end of the war (1975), most Vietnamese immigrants had been "exiles and refugees starkly divided from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" (Capozzola 2), who were fleeing to America. These are, therefore, the two major groups of *Viet kieu*—the term employed to allude to the members of the Vietnamese diaspora—in the US.¹⁰ Even though a *Viet kieu* generation existed already before the end of the Second World War and the fall of Saigon, they became more visible after the first wave of refugees from the end of the conflict, and the subsequent influx of immigrants in recent years.

1.3. Globalisation and its Effects

As previously stated, the arranged marriage phenomenon evolves at the pace of globalisation. The result of various historical events prompted simultaneous advances of the capitalist system and, therefore, major international changes. In the first place, a speed increase in exchange capacities began to be noticed, culturally as economically speaking: companies and brands that had attained great popularity amongst countries with a thriving economy got to distant countries with the same positive results, and cultural traits which were

¹⁰ According to Simal, the term references Vietnamese diasporic subjects, who are also called "Vietnamese sojourners" or "overseas Vietnamese" ("Andrew Lam's Narratives" 81).

unimaginable for some countries started to break into the population from such places. Secondly, the emergence of faster and cheaper travelling methods intensified transnational relations and encouraged people to go abroad more often, which challenged old notions of fixed geographical boundaries. Lastly, the appearance of groundbreaking technological advances such as the computerisation of general data and the global expansion of the internet facilitated the connection of people from geographically separated locations.

Certainly, the contemporary arranged marriage “business” has benefitted immensely from the rise of contemporary globalisation and the consequent transnational dimension of global flows, most of all in terms of mobility and interconnection of cultures.¹¹ Nevertheless, the seeming dominance of the global over the local has caused a decline of nationalist feelings, which has led the most traditional part of the native population to feel contempt for incoming foreign ideals. Apart from that, global flows have also affected the economic system, which has been shaped by neoliberal policies. Those are the underlying causes of the increasing economic inequalities among countries that, together with racist power relations, form the foundation of the contemporary arranged marriage phenomenon. This can be read within the paradigm of Waste Theory (Simal 2019), which signals neoliberal capitalism as the main catalyst of "social waste" and the subsequent commodification of human beings as subalterns, mostly in poorer areas. Thus, Simal claims that "the environment and the human inhabitants of certain areas of the world bear the brunt of the unsustainable, unequal configuration of globalized capitalism" ("Waste" 220). Given that neoliberal politics affects the most endangered sectors of society, women involved in arranged marriages become particularly disposable.

¹¹ It is worth mentioning the consequent "transnational turn" in literary and cultural studies. According to Simal, "in the last few decades, cultural and literary critics have had to grapple with an approach, transnationalism, that has fundamentally altered the nationalist assumptions prevalent in the field for more than a century" ("Disrupting Globalization," 286).

1.4. *Mutated Arranged Marriages*

At first glimpse, one of the main differences between "old" and "mutated" types of arranged marriage is the term used to define them. In fact, Ahmad-Stout and Nath affirm that this practice should be better understood as "family-facilitated brief courtships" (51) precisely because of the manner in which the procedure itself is conducted. As argued below, new mechanisms diminish the previous relevance of the courtship, which turns the marriage process into a simple cold transaction, performed out of monetary interest and involving external systems such as agencies, catalogues, or web pages. As a matter of fact, the term most commonly used for this practice is now "mail-order bride": on the one hand, the concept comprises the influence of technological development and the internet on the procedure and, on the other, it turns the spotlight on the figure of the woman. According to Lenore Kuo in "Hegemonic Representation and So Called 'Mail-Order Bride' Policy," the term mail-order bride presents negative female connotations: "the identification of the female only, rather than of the couple, in naming the phenomenon, suggests both her passivity and the unequal gender status of these arrangements" (62). Therefore, the protagonism of women is not due to their leading role in the transaction, but because of their characterisation as an objectified property that is being bought.

In a sense, both old picture brides and new mail-order brides in diasporic situations serve the same final purpose: providing a prospective wife for lonely men in foreign countries. However, as Christine Chun claims in "'Mail-Order Bride Industry,'" whereas the former is born from necessity, the latter has developed into "a lucrative and international matchmaking business [relying on] stereotypes and transnational economic inequalities to support a profit-making commercial market" (1155-1156). Moreover, Chun remarks how

agencies foster existent "structures of subordination based on race, sex, and class within countries, among nations, and between individuals" (1156) in order to get economic gain from women who are usually from developing countries. The current model of capitalism allows and supports a global structure that has more consideration for the economic gain of richer countries than for human rights and ethics—a fact that especially affects members of minorities and vulnerable groups of people, such as women from the "Global South."

Whereas the three following sections will approach the most remarkable *mutations* of the contemporary arranged marriage system, when compared with the old phenomenon, the last section will provide an overview the main controversial issues that new, *mutated* arranged marriages have generated.

1.4.1. Cultural Westernisation

The global flow of ideas and the influence of mass media have fostered the taste for romantic love and autonomous marriage even in those Asian countries with more conservative values. Likewise, the influence of feminist movements from the West has boosted women's fight for freedom of choice in most aspects of their lives. As a result of the adoption of these (mostly Western) foreign practices, a strong opposition against the new system of arranged marriages has emerged.

Because of India's long-established marriage tradition, it turns into one of the countries most strongly affected by Western influences. India's case is particularly useful because it is one of the clearest examples of hybridisation of contemporary Indian and Western arranged marriage practices happening inside the national frontiers. As stated by Netting, historical changes spread the taste for the Western type of romantic love, mostly of upper-class youths, when "the dramatic reorganization of the Indian economy in the 1990s spurred an influx of transnational investment, multinational corporations, products, and

ideas" (710), which resulted in a decrease in the importance of maintaining kinship and caste. Indeed, Keera Allendorf and Roshan K. Pandian conclude, in "The Decline of Arranged Marriage," that in recent decades "[y]oung women [have become], increasingly active in choosing their own husbands, spouses meeting before the wedding day became more common, consanguineous marriage [has declined], and intercaste marriage [has risen]" (457). Nonetheless, the taste for romantic love in India is still judged as "lustful, disrespectful of parents, and dangerous to society" (Netting 709) and current trends indicate that the majority of marriages are still—parentally—arranged.¹²

The same kind of fear appears in Vietnam, especially after the *doi moi*. This is the time, according to Steven Wisensale, when the government launches the Decree of Marriage and the Family, which aims to protect the deep-rooted Vietnamese concept of family: this new legislation "clearly illustrates Vietnam's concern about the potential negative impact outside influences may have on its families" (612). As will be seen later, the main resources employed in *mutated* Vietnamese arranged marriages are online websites, inside as well as outside the national frontiers, which resembles the Chinese case. However, in the recent Chinese American diaspora¹³ men have had more possibilities to get married through the mail-order business than men living in China.¹⁴

¹² According to Netting, "[b]y the start of the 21st century, analysts estimated that between 90% . . . and 95% . . . of Indian marriages were parentally arranged" (708).

¹³ The difference with the diasporic subjects in the recent Chinese American diaspora is the appearance of a thriving upper-middle class due to the China's economic growth.

¹⁴ In spite of the greater redistribution of the arranged marriage business in recent years to South-East Asia and Vietnam than to the Chinese diaspora, Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* still portrays the popularity of the arranged marriage phenomenon of the past century in the Chinese American diaspora because it takes place before the appearance of the new Chinese upper-middle class in America. Although *The Wedding Banquet* would be a perfect object of study in order to point out how the first glimpses of acceptance of homosexuality in the "Global North" have affected the arranged marriage phenomenon, its analysis had to be discarded due to space limitations.

1.4.2. The Internet and Online Agencies

In recent decades arranged marriage agencies—also called International Marriage Organizations—have sprouted in both America and Asia to take advantage of a new situation: from the 1960s onwards, arranged marriages have become "an object of fascination . . . , a point of revulsion, outrage, curiosity, and even envy" (Aguilar 181) in the West. Until the late 1970s the women involved in mail-order bride practices came from South East Asia, but the demand grew to a point where women started coming from other parts of the world: "additional flows such as those between Western and Eastern Europe and between Japan and other East and South East Asian countries" (Kojima 199). Concomitantly, recent studies reveal an increase in the number of arranged marriage agencies; Chun determines that "[t]he estimated 100 agencies in the United States in 1986' increased to 200 agencies by 1992. By 1995, roughly 500 mail-order bride businesses operated in the United States alone" (1161).

Agencies end up functioning as the main intermediary between groom and bride in the contemporary mail-order bride phenomenon. For that purpose, marriage brokers gather photographs with small descriptions from women who are mainly "from economically troubled countries" (Chun 1161), in the form of catalogues marketing Asian women with traditional values. Moreover, many other scholars point out the harsh marketing techniques that agencies use in order to attract troubled Asian women as well as lonely American and Asian American men. In this connection, Kuo affirms that those marketing techniques "work to fuel dreams, drive appetites, and excite fantasies on both ends of the recruiting circuit" (61). Accordingly, men in the American diaspora are also pictured as desirable prospective husbands by emphasizing factors such as "middle class origins, suitability to performing housework, gentleness, and ability to work hard" (Belanger et al. 84).

Apart from actual printed catalogues, advances in technology have allowed the appearance of on-line agencies that favour the expansion of the mail-order bride practice by advertising women in web pages.¹⁵ For marriage brokers and their customers this new method presents many advantages because it brings the possibility of getting to a wider sector of population as well as finding women in a much easier, faster, cheaper,¹⁶ and efficient manner. Chun admits that the possibility of using filters is also much easier for the customer, who "can access pictures and statistics of women from specific geographical regions by selecting the country of interest and pictures of the individual women on the computer screen" (Chun 1166). Nonetheless, the use of personal data of women such as "photographs . . . as well as vital statistics such as age, level of education, religion, height, and weight" (So 407) may be perceived by many critics as a violation of vital rights of privacy, as customers can even buy addresses of the women advertised in those pages. After the selection, the mail-order bride agency emails the address(es) of the prospective bride(s) to the customer and, on many occasions, offers the possibility of making a tour to the home country of the bride(s) (Chun 1166). If both agree to marry, the marriage takes place in Asia or they postpone it to a future time in America. In that case, the woman obtains the same desired item that women from the picture bride phenomenon looked for: "the husband-to-be applies for a fiancée visa which allows the prospective bride to travel to the United States" (Chun 1166). In America, they will have to marry in ninety days, right before the fiancée visa expires.

Online agencies have experienced high levels of popularity in Vietnam due to the emergence of "business networks that provide channels for agencies devoted to matchmaking" (Belanger et al. 81). The increased popularity of Vietnamese mail-order

¹⁵ Even though this type of webpages may recall popular dating sites from Europe and the United States, the difference between arranged marriage agencies and widespread dating services is the one-way system of selection of the prospective partner which, in the case of International Marriage Organizations, favours the masculine side; most advertisements are about women.

¹⁶ According to Chun, the cost of "buying" a mail-order bride usually goes from "\$3,000 to \$10,000" (1167).

practices has been perceived by Vietnamese traditional society as humiliating because the phenomenon disregards marriage customs, especially the deep-rooted courtship ritual.¹⁷ Likewise, even though in certain rural regions of India the tradition still remains largely unaltered, Netting also points out the use of online catalogues there for finding prospective partners, as well as the increase in the couple's agency:

Today families still use personal networks, caste directories, and newspaper ads, but also, increasingly, Internet sites. . . . Negotiations for many participants had moved to the next step: meetings between a suitable boy, girl, and both sets of parents. . . . [T]he couple is allowed to go into another room and ask each other questions privately. If at this point a decision is negative, negotiations end without dishonor. (714)

1.4.3. Fetishising the Asian Body

Outside the national Asian frontiers the process experiences several changes. Whereas men residing outside Asia who take part in the arranged marriage practice had been all Asian men from the Asian American diaspora, the new mail-order bride practice begins to include "white Americans." The common point between Asian American and American men is that both are looking for women with traditional values. As before, Asian men pursue future wives with the principles they would find in their country of origin. For their part, American men attempt to find women with traditional values differing from the ones that begin to appear with the feminist movement, especially since the 1970s. For Chun, the portrayal of those American men is always very similar: "usually middle-aged and divorced with little potential of attracting an American woman" (1168).

¹⁷ In that regard, Belanger et al. claim that mutated arranged marriages diminish the intimacy of the procedure: "because the two families do not meet, the spouses rarely get to know each other and the bride's parents know nothing about the groom" (95).

Especially for "white American" males, the possibility of "acquiring" an Asian wife appeals to the erotic myth of the Asian female body:¹⁸ "[f]or white men, buying an Asian body may signify more than acquiring a subservient wife; it may include subscribing to the myth of eroticism associated with racial difference" (Chun 1182). In this regard, agencies have been criticised for promoting stereotypes of Asian women, particularly associated with "Oriental" women from East Asia and South East Asia, as "the subservient 'china doll;' a silent, dutiful, sexually accommodating object devoted to serving her man" (Chun 1178). For numerous scholars such as Christine So, the motif of the catalogue is a literal objectification of Asian females. Indeed, in "Asian Mail-Order Brides, the Threat of Global Capitalism, and the Rescue of the U.S. Nation-State," she defines them as "technologically transgressive, mechanical Madame Butterflies, produced as if off an assembly line" (So 403).¹⁹

This new, *mutated* method of arranged marriage targets mail-order bride agencies as enterprises taking advantage of the capitalist system in order to "collect" females from developing countries. The result is the commodification of women, who remain subjected to a profit-making business: "the industry, especially those companies who work out of Asia, profit from U.S. imperial fantasies about Third World women as well as from global capital's relentless incorporation of Third World women's bodies as labor" (So 397). As a matter of fact, the objectification of the Asian body itself is epitomised by the cold vocabulary of the procedure, which stresses the business-like nature of the transaction: "[t]erms such as 'warehouse,' 'seller,' 'consumer,' and 'money-back satisfaction guarantee'" (So 402).

¹⁸ In this paper I will not approach the topic of the "Asian male body," because the narratives I am analyzing only deal with heterosexual marriages.

¹⁹ The term alludes to John Luther Long's short story "Madame Butterfly," which later influenced numerous adaptations such as David Henry Hwang's theatrical play *M. Butterfly* or Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*, among others. Based on real facts, Long's original version deals with the story of a fragile Japanese Geisha, lured into an arranged marriage with an American Navy Lieutenant who chooses her because of her erotic Asian features. After that, he marries another woman in America and abandons her in Japan with their mutual son. In the end, the young female protagonist commits suicide.

Western media and agencies' marketing have been crucial in the creation of an image of Asian women as sexual servants, which "promotes the selling, buying, and possession of the Asian body" (Chun 1180). According to Belager et al., the stereotype of mail-order brides is extremely polarised: from "victims of poverty" (84) to "materialist gold-diggers" (84). Whereas the former are victimised by their poor background, the latter are accused of taking part in the sex trade and, yet, both are questioned about their morality and ethics. Reality, however, hides deeper and diverse motives. As happened with picture brides, the majority of these women accept to participate in order to support their families financially and, if possible, gain upward mobility in a foreign country such as America, which they perceive as "the land of opportunities." Others, as Kojima points out, just want "to fulfil a desire to live in a foreign country" (199-200), "to petition (or support) other members of their families" (200), "to be free from hard work and family pressure" (200), or to avoid social stigmas such as spinsterhood and the patriarchal notion of the wife as the "mother and homemaker" (200).

Consequently, the mail-order business incentivises the relocation of women from Asia in the Asian American diaspora. From the very beginning of the transaction, women are treated as merchandise and portrayed as commodities; this fact, together with the economic disparity between the parties, causes male power to prevail over female choices. As a result, Chun claims that "[t]he modern market completely separates the foreign mail-order bride from cultural and familial support structures, encourages the bride's dependency on her American mate, and renders the bride vulnerable to abuse with very few legal protections" (1183). Even if the woman decides to end her marriage, she will be judged because of the social stigma of divorce. Because of that, many of these women prefer facing abuse rather than risking deportation.

1.4.4. For or Against: An Ongoing Controversy

The contemporary mail-order bride system has a large number of sympathisers who agree on the beneficial functions of the practice. The main arguments are, according to Chun, that "it brings together lonely individuals, it provides women with an opportunity to escape harsh economic conditions, and it allows Western men to marry young, beautiful, and intelligent women from foreign countries" (1168-1169). Nevertheless, numerous scholars agree that those premises rely on old assumptions about the "rescue of the Third World" which America has reutilised: "global capitalism has enabled the rearticulation of U.S. patriarchal and imperial desires to 'rescue' women from 'Third World' poverty and men" (So 396). Apart from that, sympathisers also concur with the polarised image of the "victim" and the "victimiser" attached to the individuals taking part in mail-order bride marriages, which they say does not match the diversity and complexity of reasons that lead them to take part in arranged marriages (Kuo 71).

Conversely, many scholars highlight the damaging nature of the *mutated* arranged marriage practice. According to them, the mail-order bride industry supports the economic exploitation of developing countries, since it relies on monetary difference and irregular distributions of power: "[i]nternational marriage agencies exploit economic disparities and perpetuate inequalities by arranging the bridal transaction to cater to the consumer-husband, the party with the economic power" (Chun 1183). By doing so, they also perpetuate stereotypes of gender and race such as those suggested by pairing "the 'traditional' foreign woman and the charming American" (Chun 1175) in order to create roles of consumption and demand. Consequently, agencies promote negative sexual and racial stereotypes regarding Asian women, which intensifies their alienation in America. Apart from that, a large amount of scholars claim that it is clear that sexuality and economic profit are the underlying network of the mail-order bride system. Speaking from a Marxist feminist perspective, Kojima

contends that mail-order brides have become "a subsystem within the patriarchal order that provides substitutes to maintain the sexual division of labor" (200). In particular, he stresses how the patriarchal notion of the woman as the one in charge of the household and the children has allowed the mail-order bride business to fill the gap of the heterosexual male-headed family that maintains women at home, according to the traditional division of labour, "so that the state or capitalism can externalize costs that they would otherwise have to cover" (201).

Those who oppose the current arranged marriage system also point out that no international legal regulations have been applied to mail-order bride agencies to this day; in fact, it is only recently that their possible damaging effects have been acknowledged, which has enabled the industry to keep on increasing its profit. Chun claims that, for that purpose, agencies have perpetuated transnational politics of subordination while disguising themselves as merely an international dating service (1188). In addition, the lack of legislation is such that the existing norms, which have been perpetuated by the mail-order business itself, are the ones demeaning mail-order brides.²⁰

In the second chapter, I will delve into the chosen narrative corpus, which, I argue, display the new, *mutated* method of arranged marriages. The texts analysed in the following pages correspond to two ethnic minorities historically associated with the arranged marriage phenomenon, which has undergone its transformation along with the advent of contemporary globalisation: the Indian American diaspora, as seen in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Clothes," and the Vietnamese American diaspora, in Linh Dinh's novel *Love, Like, Hate*.

²⁰ For instance, Chun highlights the fact that, once they are married, women are completely at their husband's mercy: this situation "allows [the husband] to pressure his wife, who fears returning to an economically depressed country, to submit to his will" (1199).

2. Arranged Marriages in Asian Diasporic Narratives

2.1. "Clothes"

"Clothes" is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's second narrative from her collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage*, published in 1995. This first generation Indian American immigrant, one of the most renowned Indian American authors, has dealt with the migrant experience from the point of view of Indian women.²¹ Because of her taste for writing about the migrant's nostalgia for Indian culture, in *Arranged Marriage* she addresses one of the most traditional Indian customs, as its title suggests: the arranged marriage practice. For many scholars such as Robbie Sethi, the most important feature of her narratives is the depiction of female Indian characters who regard the migratory experience as rather instructive: "with the range of possibilities created by immigration, few of these characters find themselves defeated. They prepare to battle the conventions they have left behind to take full advantage of their new lives in America" (288). In this case, the main character of "Clothes" undertakes a very traditional type of arranged marriage, since it is organised by her own family. However, I claim that changes associated with renewed or *mutated* arranged marriages are progressively introduced, so that the protagonist's attempt to assume the role of a traditional Indian housewife clashes with her gradual transformation into a Westernised independent woman who is willing to start a new life in America. Divakaruni addresses that metamorphosis making use of the symbolism of clothing and its colours, which change along with her gradual adoption of Western customs and practices. Her hybridisation embodies the

²¹ Other female authors who have written texts dealing with the struggle of Indian women who face their prospective arranged marriage and migration are Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, among others. Such is the case with Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Miss New India*, or several short stories in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

emergence of a new mentality in numerous Asian societies that, previously, only conceived traditional arranged marriage practices.

The beginning of the short story is quite illustrative. "Clothes" starts the day in which Sumita's bride-viewing ceremony is going to take place, and the first two sentences are already an indication of how important that event is for her. Sumita's first statements offer a contrast between the calmness of being at home, symbolised by "[t]he water of the women's lake [lapping] against [her] breasts, cool, calming" (Divakaruni 17) and a "hot nervousness" (Divakaruni 17) arising from the changes that an arranged marriage may bring to her life. The main character is aware of the relevance of the bride-viewing ceremony and the narrative highlights that it is also important for the community: two friends of Sumita help her to be perfect for such an important day. They also voice the envy they feel because of the fact that she has found an appropriate candidate and Sumita notices the "envy in [their] voice only half hidden" (Divakaruni 17); her friends are also in search of a husband but they have not been chosen yet.

The initial procedure of this arranged marriage is very traditional because, firstly, Somesh travels with his parents from California to India to go through the bride-viewing ritual²² and, secondly, his father is the one who has arranged the meeting—as in the most traditional type of arranged marriage. The protagonist describes how, since her childhood, she remembers her mother defining arranged marriage as "every woman's destiny" (Divakaruni 18), a destiny that both her mother and grandmother had embraced. Divakaruni grasps the opportunity to discuss the mental process of Sumita—representing every Indian woman in her situation²³—before the ceremony. Under such circumstances, Sumita seems

²² It is important to mention that this custom has gone into gradual decline. On many occasions the coupling happens by proxy, the woman travels to the United States by herself, and they meet for the first time there.

²³ I am aware that this allegorical interpretation is sometimes criticised for appearing somewhat simplistic, but, in my opinion, Sumita's personal evolution is an excellent portrayal of the Westernisation process of many

ready "to leave the known for the unknown" (Divakaruni 18) and she even admits that "the activities of [her] girlhood seem to be far in [her] past . . . like old sepia photographs" (Divakaruni 18) even though the arranged marriage has not occurred yet. Nonetheless, in spite of her conception of the United States as a utopian dream-land full of opportunities, Sumita has noticed the dangers of not knowing her future husband. That awareness of an uncertain future is symbolised by the electric shock she feels while touching a multicoloured slab marking America on a metal globe, which immediately becomes a "beaten-metal coldness" (Divakaruni 18), signifying the cold nature of the procedure, resembling as it does a mere transaction. In addition, as we shall see later, Divakaruni employs italics in several ironic sentences which introduce an external view of the events, as well as providing a look into Sumita's thoughts: "[d]on't send me so far away" (18).

Prior to the bride-viewing, Divakaruni also presents one of the most relevant topics, which gives the story its name: the clothing of the protagonist, the sari, which will later be replaced by American clothes. This highly symbolic piece of cloth conceived as a material sign of Indian womanhood and the nation (Shauna Wilton 197) is her father's present, intended to impress Somesh and his parents in the bride-viewing ceremony. The sari that her father gave her is itself "hybrid," since its role representing Indian culture and femininity contrasts with its pink colour, which Sumita considers a "color of transition" (Divakaruni 19)—probably to her new married life in America. Even though Sumita describes that sari as the most beautiful she has ever seen, she also knows that it is "a sari to walk carefully in. A sari that could change one's life" (19), as may happen with her arranged marriage with Somesh.

Indian women residing in America. Because of that, Sumita represents, in my view, the large amount of Indian women living in a diasporic situation who have experienced the contemporary arranged marriage phenomenon.

As soon as Sumita begins to know Somesh she realises that he is a good man, which differs from many other "arranged marriage husbands" from short stories that Divakaruni and others have produced. A week after the wedding Somesh has to return to America in order to take care of his shop, but the time they are in India is enough for Sumita to know he is "a good man, my husband, a kind, patient man" (Divakaruni 22) because he agrees not to have a sexual encounter until she feels like it.²⁴ Sumita's husband will be a key factor of her Westernisation because of his attempts to transform her into the Americanised woman he wants her to be; notwithstanding this, Sumita willingly welcomes Somesh's efforts because of her predisposition to adopt Western customs and practices.

The first changes in Sumita's attitude begin as she travels by plane to America, right after her visa arrives. She seems eager to assimilate into American culture, something that is emphasised with her desire to carry a blue sari, "the color of possibility, the color of the sky through which [she] would be travelling" (Divakaruni 20), instead of the one her father had given her.²⁵ Actually, the colour blue appears all over the story; Sumita wants every clothing item to be blue because blue represents the future of opportunities she wants in America, as the majority of women in her situation. In this regard, Divakaruni uses the metaphor of the brown case full of saris that smell like her mother as a materialisation of Sumita herself: the case objectifies her desire to look American and her inner Indian self. Nevertheless, as happens later when fear haunts her, the protagonist resorts to nostalgically thinking about home for calmness: "[w]hen the plane takes off, I try to stay calm, to take deep, slow breaths like Father does when he practices yoga" (20). In the plane she also has her first contact with an American woman, the air-hostess and her "curly golden head" (24). At this point Sumita

²⁴ This is a particularly meaningful detail due to the fact that she had been alerted by another woman who was in an arranged marriage that most men force their wives to have sexual relationships in order to become pregnant in the first night: "Bite hard on your tongue,' Madhavi had advised" (Divakaruni 22) in case that happened.

²⁵ It is worth noting that Sumita's mother wanted her to carry to America a red sari. This colour, according to Noemí Pereira in *Fashion, Dress and Identity in South Asian Diasporic Narratives*, "symbolises, inter alia, auspicious fecundity in Hindu culture" (124). Thus, her mother's main desire is to ensure progeny for the couple in America.

finds herself confronted by her mother's smell drifting from the saris and the view of the woman she wants to be when she arrives in America. As the air-hostess wheels the dinner cart toward her seat, she implicitly acknowledges that her inner self is already torn between "the old" (her mother) and "the new" (the air-hostess).

During the journey, Sumita also recalls everything that Somesh has told her about the *7-Eleven* he runs in California. The products he sells in the store sound truly fascinating to Sumita, since that conglomerate of products epitomises American customs and culture, "squeezing" what she believes to be "all kinds of amazing things" (Divakaruni 21) into not only an accessible but also a small place for her. Somesh is so Americanised that he even invites Sumita to try classic American alcoholic drinks from his shop, which in India is regarded as immoral: "[w]hen you come to California, I'll get you some sweet wine and you'll see how good it makes you feel" (21). She does not refuse the invitation, one more proof of her predisposition to assimilate Western cultural values. Nevertheless, the protagonist's expectations about her new life with Somesh in the United States differ from reality: her husband's store is not doing as well as he had told her and the couple lives with Somesh's parents.

At the beginning of her journey Sumita's only method to escape from the cultural shock is "going back home" through flashbacks; in the plane she says that she gropes for "something to hold on to, something beautiful and talismanic from my old life" (Divakaruni 24). The main character constantly compares American traditions with customs from her country of origin: for instance, the name of the store, *7-Eleven*, with Indian shops such as "Ganesh Sweet House" and "Lakshmi Vastralaya for Fine Saris" (21). As soon as she realises the change that is taking place inside her, she feels caught between two cultures. In Metka Zupančič's interview with Divakaruni, the Indian author recognises that she often talks about her own experience when she points out the strict concept of Indian womanhood and how

Indian female migrants are shocked when they find themselves in the West, where "there is a quite different notion of what a good woman is and what she is expected to do" (94), a realisation that "begins to transform them as women" (94). Especially in the early stages of her assimilation, Sumita has to remind herself of her "wifely duty" (Divakaruni 21) to act as the kind of married woman she has been educated to be. In such a way, her mother has instilled in her since childhood that she should be a subservient wife: for example, she should never address her husband by his name, "like a good Indian wife" (25-26), nor visit the store even if she wants to because her in-laws do not consider that "proper for a wife" (27). However, over the course of her gradual transformation, Sumita starts to think more about herself and who she wants to be, even though sometimes she feels it is an "unreasonable desire" (26).

As has been mentioned above, Somesh is directly responsible for Sumita's changes in clothing habits, since he is the one who buys new American clothes for her. The first outfit is a pair of jeans and a t-shirt which, paradoxically, has the words *Great America* written on the front. Divakaruni effectively portrays through this motif the colonisation of American brands in developing countries and, literally, the female Asian body. Clothes are presented as directly activating the fetishism associated with the Asian female body, in the sense that the way in which a woman dresses often triggers fantasies with what is hidden beneath her clothes or, in the case of an Asian girl in Western clothes, links her body to "modernity, non-compliance and even sexual licentiousness" (Pereira 65). Sumita describes how Somesh convinces her to model those clothes "just like the models on TV" (Divakaruni 24). Moreover, the colour of the t-shirt and the jeans fits perfectly: an orange t-shirt, "the color, [she] decide[s], of joy, of [her] new American life" (25), and blue jeans, the same colour of the sari she wanted just a few days before. In her new clothes she feels confident because, like an American woman, "the curves of [her] hips and thighs" (25) are marked by those

jeans and the t-shirt "outlines [her] breasts" (Divakaruni 25). The second item of clothing that Somesh buys Sumita is a "cream-and-brown skirt set" (Divakaruni 27), whose colours are associated by the protagonist to seeds; by using this metaphor, Divakaruni wants to picture the seed that Somesh has planted in Sumita's mind in order to transform her into an "American lady." In addition, Somesh wants her to use it when she goes to university and starts working as a teacher, as he has encouraged her to. The last outfit,—in many senses—the most revealing one, is a nightie. Upon donning this piece of clothing, Sumita is presented with Somesh's compliments and she feels she is fulfilling her wifely duty while satisfying his fantasies about having an Americanised wife: "[n]o one has called me beautiful before. My father would have thought it inappropriate, my mother that it would make me vain" (Divakaruni 28).

Clothes act as a temporary mask: when Sumita is wearing the sari she feels like an Indian woman and when she has American clothing on she acts completely different. In that regard, Pereira points out the close relationship between dress, body and identity, and how clothing marks new meanings on the body: "[i]t is largely through dress that we position ourselves in society, that our identity positionalities are revealed to or concealed from the eyes of others" (xvii). In fact, Sumita's moments of disguise, in which Somesh takes part, happen only in their bedroom because they live with her conservative in-laws. Because of the fact that she keeps living on an Indian household, she claims: "[s]ometimes I laugh to myself, thinking how ironic it is that after all my fears about America, my life has turned out to be no different from Deepali's or Radha's " (Divakaruni 26), her friends in India. Despite this, Sumita's metamorphosis comes to a point where she even asks Somesh to buy her other Western items such as a hair remover.

Partially due to the influence of American films and media, Sumita expresses a strong desire for mimicking the Western type of love affection, a circumstance that many Indian

upper-class youths have experienced, which has altered the old arranged marriage system.²⁶ Even though she cannot do that because they live with her in-laws, the narrator admits that she would like to display spontaneous affection just like any American couple: "[w]e will kiss in front of everyone, not caring, like Americans, then pull back, look each other in the eye, and smile" (Divakaruni 23). Her most genuine desires appear in parts of the narrative that introduce Sumita's stream of consciousness in the form of dreams she occasionally has. In fact, recurrent dreams reveal that Sumita thinks more about her aspiration to work in her husband's shop than about her husband: "The store. It seems more real to me than Somesh—perhaps because I know more about it" (Divakaruni 20). Eventually, she admits that her longing for having a new life in America goes back to those moments in India in which she aspired to escape in the planes she saw flying through the sky. Now that she is in America, Sumita claims that she intends to tell Somesh the truth when they move to a new place: she would like to work in the store instead of going to university as Somesh wants her to. That act of individual will strengthens Sumita's inner metamorphosis into a free-willing Americanised woman.

Apart from the clothing symbolism and the stream of consciousness portrayed through dreams, Divakaruni employs other mechanisms that reinforce the protagonist's gradual Westernisation, already discussed in the section 1.4.1 as a process experienced by a large amount of diasporic subjects who had undergone arranged marriages. In addition to the aforementioned metaphors—the case with the saris inside, Somesh's seed, or the colours of the clothing, among others—, Divakaruni's vocabulary choice hints at Sumita's metamorphosis. At the beginning of the short story there are many references to the opposition of "Indian against American" but, as the narrative progresses, vocabulary alluding to India's customs goes into gradual decline; thus, the more Westernised Sumita becomes, the

²⁶ See Section 1.4.1.

less she remembers Indian traditions. At the start of the story Sumita uses Indian vocabulary such as "*ritha*" (Divakaruni 17), "*charak*" (18), the "*nayantara* flowers that grow in [her] parent's garden" (25), or "Kanjeeपुरam silks" (24), but as soon as the narrator gets into the plane, typical American signs such as "*fasten seat belt*" or "*no smoking*" (20) begin to appear. Immediately thereafter, Sumita alludes to numerous brand names of typically Western companies such as the *7:Eleven*, "a *Dewar's* sign and a lighted *Budweiser* waterfall" (22), or catchphrases such as the "*Great America*" slogan on the t-shirt (25), among others. Besides that, the narrator makes use of ironic statements, in italics, with the aim of stating her point of view. When she writes, for example, "*[a]nd she married the handsome prince who took her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas*" (18), she is underscoring what she perceives as the unrealistic hopes of Indian women who are going into an overseas arranged marriage. Similarly, she captures the false myth of America as a dream land with the phrase "*Great America, a place people go to have fun*" (31), when she is actually referring to Somesh's death.

In the last part of the narration, Divakaruni abruptly introduces a key event: Somesh has died due to the gunshots of a thief in the *7:Eleven*. The reader's shock meets with Sumita's grief: she feels as though her whole world is tumbling down around her. The narrator knows that the white sari she will be required to wear is a "[w]idow's color, color of endings" (Divakaruni 29), which in India implies alienation. However, even though she seems lost, she claims that "[f]ragments are flying about [her] head, multicolored and piercing sharp like bits of bangle glass" (31), which signifies the clash of the two traditions inside of her and—more positively—the scope of possibilities ahead. Thus, Sumita's empowerment prompts the educational value of the short story's ending regarding female liberation. Even though she recognises that her family will not be happy about her decision, Sumita accomplishes a positive outcome of her migratory experience and decides to fulfil her

wishes by staying in California. In that regard, the last sentence is interpreted as highly significant: "In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds" (33). By symbolically being compared to an almond, that skirt set that Somesh had given to her ends up becoming a reflection of, on the one hand, her own body (her actual skin colour against her interior "white" and Western "soul") and, on the other, the seed that Somesh had planted to prompt her transformation into a much more Americanised woman through the way she dressed, which is now exteriorised through the colouring of what Sumita is wearing. In addition, it is worth noting that in this last sentence Sumita is talking about another woman because she still has a long way to go until understanding who she has become. Sumita's hitherto hidden strength surfaces here, because, in spite of the tragic ending (especially when compared with the calmness of the first image of Sumita taking a relaxing bath in India), the diasporic character admits her desire to stay in America as she has always wanted.

If "Clothes" is analysed in its entirety, a rapid evolution can be traced in the manner in which Divakaruni presents Sumita and Somesh's story. At the beginning of the narrative, Divakaruni emphasises the initial traditional character of their arranged marriage through the allusion to native cultural traits such as the sari or the *ritha*, through Sumita's nostalgic flashbacks about Indian customs and, particularly, through the importance of the ceremony in the Indian community. Nonetheless, as the story progresses, Divakaruni starts to introduce American items and habits, which begin to be assimilated by the protagonist—including Sumita's fight for her freedom of choice, a struggle that is inspired by the feminist movements of the time. Sumita claims female agency; her migration process and Westernisation is used in her favour in order to assert her freedom, "the wild animal trapped inside [her] chest" (Divakaruni 33). She seems ready for a bright new future, but she is aware

that she will still have to overcome her family's strong opposition against what she wants to—or has—become.

It can be argued that the author may imply that Sumita needs to change her clothes for American ones in order to assimilate or become a typical American woman. In her analysis of Divakaruni's story, Pallavi Rastogi wonders whether it is relevant that, in order "to be a 'new woman' the narrator has to westernize herself physically too... Why can't she be emancipated by wearing Indian clothes? Are the two mutually exclusive?" (37). However, other critics reckon that the motif of clothing is a mere reassertion of the new woman Sumita is becoming, a way of reinforcing female's agency by portraying an exterior American self. Sumita's transformation into a liberated woman illustrates, on the one hand, an allegory of the hybridisation process of many migrant women from the contemporary Indian American diaspora—many of them travelling to the United States because of arranged marriages— and, on the other, the conversion of the whole arranged marriage phenomenon itself from a traditional procedure with customary practices such as the bride-viewing ceremony into a *mutated* type of arranged marriages. In this case, the new method is personified by a protagonist who, although she still has a long way to go, grasps at the freedom she longed for in India and by a husband who differs from the stereotype of aggressive or conservative husbands from other arranged marriage narratives.

2.2. *Love, Like, Hate*

In this section I am going to analyse the *mutated* arranged marriage phenomenon as portrayed in Linh Dinh's novel *Love, Like, Hate*, one of his most acclaimed narratives. Whereas the second and third parts of Dinh's novel are set during the Vietnam war, the first part takes place in the second half of the twentieth century. Because of that, it is this part of the novel that better reflects the *mutated* arranged marriage practices held in the Vietnamese city of Saigon (currently Ho Chi Minh), especially regarding new elements, such as the use of the internet as the intermediary between Jaded Nguyen, a Viet kieu, and Huyen's for their first meeting. In addition, Kim Lan's attempt to find a Viet kieu for her daughter Hoa presents the counterpart customary method of arranged marriages.

Unquestionably, Linh Dinh is one of the most prolific Vietnamese American authors.²⁷ His novel *Love, Like, Hate* carries out a trenchant critique of the social reality of the contemporary city of Saigon and Vietnam as a whole, which includes the traditional arranged marriage method. Dinh's narrative depicts the lives of several characters but, ultimately, the protagonist is Vietnam itself. The novel is narrated in the form of a travelogue by a third person narrator who is not afraid to use mockery or irony.²⁸ According to Zhou, travelogues interweave "multiple voices, disparate images, and various points of view" (3), which allows a critical interpretation of the facts by the reader. With reference to the topic of this paper, the novel incorporates diverse perspectives on arranged marriages: Kim Lan's failed marriages and her quest for finding a Viet kieu who marries her daughter as opposed to a *mutated* arranged marriage method that includes the internet with Jaded and Huyen's story.

²⁷ According to Caroline Hong, he belongs to a "growing body of contemporary Vietnamese American literature—by writers such as . . . Andrew Lam, Kien Nguyen, Andrew X. Pham [or] Dao Strom, . . . —that shares concerns with history and memory, the multigenerational and collective, the transnational and global" (13).

²⁸ Dinh belongs to a group of Vietnamese writers who have been sharing their preoccupations about the increasingly globalized context in "transnational texts" (Hong 13). Such is the case with Andrew Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*, which resembles *Love, Like, Hate* in the manner it is written, as a travelogue. Because of their similarities, Pham's work will be further used to provide a counterpoint to Dinh's text.

In addition to that, the implied author proposes a version of the facts told from a Vietnamese perspective, which on many occasions differs from the American one. Because he is aware that the reading public may come from the most varied backgrounds, Dinh also introduces sarcastic clarifications about Vietnamese cultural traits such as the reference to "alligator meat", which, he adds, "tastes just like chicken" (10).²⁹

Certainly, the author strongly emphasises Jaded's Viet kieu status. The truth is that there is no wonder about the fact that the Viet kieu comeback phenomenon, occurring when Vietnam had improved its relationship with America, brought to the country a continuous flow of American influences. In this regard, Quan Manh Ha, in his review of *Love, Like, Hate*, claims that the "'Open Door' policy, issued in the late 1980s, introduced Western popular culture into Vietnam, and many people especially a majority of the young generation became obsessed with everything Western, which they considered to be more sophisticated and exciting than everything Vietnamese" (3). In spite of this, Jaded seems to be alienated by the majority of the Vietnamese community, as happened with other Viet kieu. In fact, in the first chapter of the first part there is no name for Jaded; he epitomises the other Viet kieu, who are just called "the Viet kieu." That incoherence in the Vietnamese society denotes how the country has been infiltrated by global capitalism. Indeed, Dinh describes Saigon as "[a] hodgepodge of incoherence . . . infatuated with all things foreign [that] caricatures everyone yet proclaims itself an original" (9), in order to point out the inconsistency of its citizens when they alienate other Viet kieu but at the same time adopt Western features.³⁰ Dinh builds on the Western brands that appear already at the beginning of the novel when the author is describing Saigon: "there are vendors selling *empty* liquor bottles: Talisker, Hennessy,

²⁹ By using this sentence, Dinh makes fun of the perceptions of foreigners about the exotic culinary tradition of Vietnam, which he implies they actually ignore: when they travel to Vietnam, many tourists would try all sorts of strange foods just because they thought were culturally worshiped, but those foods were actually brought from other places such as the Malay Archipelago or Australia.

³⁰ In this regard, in "Viet Kieu" Pham's narrator also claims when he arrives to Nha Trang that "the city center is far more developed than anything [he has] ever seen" (323).

Teacher's, Baileys..." (9). Moreover, the menus of successful restaurants, which are mainly visited by Vietnamese citizens, contain Western items such as "pizzas, cheeseburgers, fried chicken and cheesecakes" (10). According to Dinh, it seems like the Vietnamese community fails to stand for Vietnam; for example, Kim Lan claims that she has heard that "all the countries on earth are clean now. Except Vietnam" (12).

Against this backdrop, the arrival of Viet kieu provided an opportunity for Vietnamese single women to find a prospective husband who would take them to America, much like what had happened in similar Asian American diasporic situations. This became a widespread phenomenon in Vietnam and caused changes in the manner arranged marriages had been handled: "[b]elieving that the Viet Kieu had acquired financial strength and wealth abroad, many Vietnamese women wanted to secure marriage for their daughters with the Viet Kieu, hoping that such a husband might rescue them from poverty and offer them a luxurious life in the U.S." (Ha 4). Dinh also claims that many of these men return to Vietnam because of their bond with their native country, which reflects Safran's premises of the diasporic feeling. Nevertheless, when they arrive in Vietnam they usually become alienated by part of the Vietnamese population because of stereotypes associated with their Westernised appearance. For instance, Dinh notes that "[y]ou could always spot a Viet Kieu by the way he dressed, by the size and shape of his body, and by his body language. A Viet Kieu always took up more room and he usually overtipped" (Dinh 10). The author highlights as well their clothing, as Jaded and his "gray T-shirt and blue jeans" (11),³¹ whereas Pham likewise remarks the way they wear their sandals as the main physical hint to detect them (325). Nonetheless, their controversial appearance and reputation attracted many women who searched for opportunities in America and, thus, new methods such as technological advances

³¹ As happened in the previous chapter, jeans are often an indicator of the American dressing code, which the protagonists attempt to adopt. Even though this clothing item is a symbol of American culture, one should also remind their initial manufacturing process, which may imply the essence of jeans is not as American as it may seem: for instance, the indigo used to tint them came from the plantations of the British colonies.

to be able to communicate with "the overseas Vietnamese;" since then, *mutated* arranged marriages such as the one of Jaded and Huyen started to appear.

Because of the fact that Kim Lan is in charge of choosing a prospective husband for her daughter, as happened in traditional arranged marriages in which the mother was also a key figure in the intergenerational transmission of values of "wifely duties," she symbolises the old arranged marriage tradition. Even though the main focus of the present analysis is the first chapter of Dinh's novel, it is worth noting that the second part of the novel deals with Kim Lan's previous marriages. This factor is specially relevant because Hoa's negative marriage experiences are the ones that cause their despair at finding the right husband for her daughter. The evolution of arranged marriage practices that she acknowledges through Huyen and Jaded's engagement can be read allegorically as representing the substantial change of mentality of Asian people about arranged marriage practices. Consequently, the juxtaposition of both types of marriage highlights the cultural and intergenerational differences between Kim Lan's customs and a couple who has met through an internet website. Apart from the possibility of communicating easily while being in separate geographical locations, the "shrinking" of the world has also been boosted by the increasing chances to travel in a much cheaper and more efficient manner, usually by plane. As happened with the couple in "Clothes," diasporic subjects such as Jaded, who had engineered an arranged marriage from afar, were able to travel several times to the country of origin and back in order to meet their prospective partners before the wedding—something impossible for diasporic Asians such as the picture brides (and grooms) who had engaged in arranged marriages in the past.

Another important point is Kim Lan's decision to educate her daughter Hoa in Western values with the intention of being able to arrange her marriage by attracting a Viet kieu, as Huyen had achieved: right after her encounter with the couple, she asserts "[m]y beautiful girl deserves nothing less than a Viet Kieu" (Dinh 13). Hoa attends an English

language school, eats American fast food, wears Western clothing, reads American magazines, and listens to American music, but none of that is enough to coerce her to search for a Viet kieu. Kim Lan even sends a letter to Huyen after she has left Vietnam asking her and her husband if they know any Viet kieu who may be interested in marrying her daughter: "Done with the final draft, she sent it away with several photos of Hoa—the latest, most improved version—including one in pajamas. Huyen and her husband must count among their acquaintances a lonely Viet Kieu or two, no?" (31). Finally, the reader gets to know, further on in the novel, that Kim Lan's effort to Americanise her daughter results in the attraction of some candidate from the West, but not the type of husband that she wanted for Hoa: the French man that Hoa gets to know will treat her just like the Vietnamese prostitutes he often meets.

One of the key elements in Jaded and Huyen's arranged marriage, which I have discussed in the first chapter of this essay, is the use of the internet to first contact and later get to know each other. Unlike what was the norm in more traditional arranged marriages, Huyen is the one taking the initiative to step forward and search for a man to "choose" her as her prospective wife: she is the one who decides to enter the online agency in which she meets Jaded. As many other Vietnamese women, she advertises herself in web pages. Another issue which surprises Kim Lan when Huyen tells her how she met Jaded is the fact that she does not understand the vocabulary used by Huyen, as, for instance, the "chat room" (11) where they "meet"—which is another sign of the generational gap between them.

The diasporic Jaded, on his part, decides to look for a Vietnamese woman online after the failing of his search in Philadelphia. The ironic names of the websites used by Jaded, purposely presented by Dinh, and the variety of women that can be found in them are remarkable too: "He also subscribed to nastycheerleaders.com, republicanbabeswithguns.com, sexykitchens.com, innermostdreams.com, and even

youngpee.com. Upskirt, downskirt, dominatrix, hog-tied, slaves, elderly nuns in combat boots, [or] elementary schoolteachers made to kneel naked then spanked" (15). In that regard, the author uses a satirical sense to highlight how easy it is to steal personal data on the internet: "Jaded envisioned a day, very soon, when one could google any name and find nude photos of that person on the internet" (15). Moreover, Dinh adds a touch of humour with the logging names that Jaded chooses for his internet activity: "<alonlyvietkieu99>" (16) and "<ahornyvietkieu>" (16). The latter, which sounds more desperate, ends up being the one that actually attracted more girls, girls who sent him pictures "posing in *ao dais*, prom dresses, pajamas and bikinis" (16). Jaded filters the results by selecting only Vietnamese women. .As though it was a beauty contest, Dinh describes Jaded's final decision of choosing "a dozen semifinalists and [inviting] them to video chat with him" (16). After rejecting the rest of the "candidates" for being too poor or for including their mothers in the video chat, Jaded decides to choose Huyen after seeing her naked (16), which implies the importance of the candidates' appearance. Once she is chosen Huyen interrupts her architecture studies, a decision that suggests that, for many Vietnamese women, the priority is getting married, not educated: "she didn't dare make Jaded wait. If he changed his mind, she would lose the chance of a lifetime" (17), as if she was devoted to serving him.

The fact that Jaded and Huyen have met online is more dangerous for Huyen—or any other woman in her situation—, because Huyen's expectations about her prospective life in America differ from reality. It is worth noting that, whereas Jaded knows everything about Huyen because of his trip to Huyen's city and the exhaustive test he did to choose one of the Vietnamese women from the online agency, Huyen does not know that much about the authentic condition of Jaded's life in America; an unbalanced situation that was also present in Divakaruni's narrative. When Jaded chooses Huyen, she claims that she has scored "a trip to paradise, and not for a two-week vacation but a lifetime" (Dinh 16). At the same time,

however, she is aware that her only knowledge of the country has been acquired through American movies: "She had seen hundreds of American films in which smiling, beautiful people lived in vast houses, with slick space-age appliances [where] [e]ven the dogs and cats appeared gorgeous" (17). It is at this moment that the implied author profits from the situation to introduce his own opinion about the real issue of immigration in America: "The American films that made it to Vietnam were wet dreams of glamour concocted by Hollywood. These, more than anything else, were the root cause of America's immigration problems" (17).³² In addition, Jaded contributes to creating false expectations, since he asserts that he runs a restaurant in Philadelphia, but the fancy restaurant Huyen may think about is actually a McDonalds (14).³³ The place where his husband lives is also described by the narrator as "one of the dumpiest neighborhoods in Philadelphia" (14). The unbalanced amount of information about each other causes Huyen to ignore how he is actually treated in the United States.³⁴

In *Love, Like, Hate*, there are three recurrent motifs and topics that point out the objectification and sexualisation of the Vietnamese female body: prostitution, the status of women in online websites, and Kim Lan's advice to her daughter on how to behave with men taking into account her own experiences. Firstly, prostitution is a recurrent theme in this novel, since it is mentioned on many occasions: "the many whorehouses dotting Can Tho" (Dinh 54), Cun stealing money from his mother, Kim Lan, to pay for prostitute services, or Kim Lan's husband Sen spending his days "playing chess and going to the whorehouses" (13). Dinh underscores how prostitution has spread a wrong image of Vietnamese women as

³² The implied author's allusion to "wet dreams of glamour" signifies the impact of the erotic images of Asian women that films promote on the rise of hyper-sexualised arranged marriages such as Jaded and Huyen's. Such circumstances prove Louis Althusser's insistence of the major influence of media on the gender ideology of the audience, a theory particularly connected to Marxist feminism.

³³ The fact that Jaded works in a McDonalds is itself an epitome of globalisation, since it indicates that Western companies (especially such a representative American enterprise) have conquered every aspect of his life, just as is happening in his country of origin, Vietnam.

³⁴ In that regard, Pham enlightens the reality of the Viet Kieu alienation in the United States: "*In America you, I mean all you Viet-kieu, are guests. And guests don't have the same rights as hosts*" (327).

merely sexual objects. Another example of this issue is Vietnam has become the destination of many males who only want "to fulfill their carnal urges" (Ha 4), as Hoa's French tourist, who "views Vietnam as an exotic bordello in which he can satisfy his lusts in a purely business-like way and then fly away without fear of complications or attachments" (Ha 4). Secondly, women—in this case Huyen—are portrayed as commodities in the online agencies that appear in the novel. The man—Jaded—is provided with a wide scope of personal data and revealing photographs of women who appear as sexual objects. This online method increases Jaded's agency to choose a prospective woman from a catalogue to the detriment of Huyen's capacity of choice. Lastly, Kim Lan's husband had committed adultery with a younger nurse while they were married, and she is aware of the dangers of marrying the wrong man. This is the advice she gives to her daughter:

'Don't even let them touch your hand! If you let a man touch your hand, then he will grab your breasts the next time, then he will pull your pants down, then everything will be wasted, everything I've done for you will be wasted. Look at my ridiculous life: I've had two ridiculous men, two clowns! You must have a strategy, then everything will work out fine. You must be patient. Do not sleep with the first clown who grabs you.' (Dihn 35)

In this quotation, Kim Lan highlights the strategy that Hoa should follow if she wants to find a worthwhile husband. Her mother is aware of the image of Vietnamese women for many foreigners, because of the influence of prostitution in Vietnam and how that stimulates the continuous sexual harassment of men when approaching any Vietnamese woman, particularly those males from the West who are attracted to the country by the erotic myth of the Asian female body. Kim Lan does not want her daughter to have the misfortunes she has had with men and that is why, according to her mother, Hoa should follow the patient strategy of waiting for the right man, a Viet kieu, to take her as her wife.

The arranged marriage stories from *Love, Like, Hate* depict and ultimately satirise the repercussions of global capitalism. The novel depicts the ways in which contemporary globalisation has influenced the arranged marriage phenomenon, which has consequently “mutated,” as argued throughout this paper. By using Jaded and Huyen's meeting through an online web and confronting that with Kim Lan's traditional vision of arranged marriages, Dinh attempts to capture the transformation of a rather traditional method into a contemporary practice which has become heavily influenced by technological advances and global trends. Whereas Kim Lan's attempts to Westernise her daughter apparently fail, the internet succeeds in bringing together two strangers who live thousands of kilometres away. In so doing, Dinh portrays the victory of a benign form of globalisation.

Conclusions

As has been stated throughout this paper, there has been a profound transformation in the nature of contemporary Asian arranged marriages, a phenomenon that has been particularly addressed in the literary field. Before engaging in a detailed reading of arranged marriages in the selected narratives, I provided a social and historical framework for the evolution of the arranged marriage phenomenon in the Asian and Asian American community from the old practices to the appearance of *mutated* ones. In addition, I also presented a historical and theoretical framework introducing the issues of contemporary globalisation that have influenced arranged marriages, such as the faster and cheaper travelling methods and the technological advance of the internet. Likewise, a short summary about the developments in the second wave of Asian migrations, specifically the Indian American and Vietnamese American diasporas, serves as an example of the rapid changes in the diasporic Asian communities examined in the posterior literary analysis; for instance, the late migration of a new type of skilled Indian workers after the partition of the region and the 1965 Immigration Act, and the transformation in Vietnamese diasporas produced by Vietnam's economic expansion after the *Đổi Mới*.

By introducing a detailed examination of the circumstances surrounding arranged marriages in Asian diasporas, it can be determined that the old arranged marriage procedure—marked by the traditional Indian arranged marriages brokered by older relatives or the pivotal picture bride phenomenon in the first Japanese American diaspora—has been substantially affected by a capitalist market that relies on economic and gender inequalities; as a result, a profit-making business has emerged out of the arranged marriage tradition, a new development that mail-order bride agencies eagerly embrace. Apart from the appearance

of online agencies, other significant changes are the increasing fetishisation of the Asian female body that agencies also promote, and the cultural westernisation of the individuals who face arranged marriages due to the global influence of the West. The first social, historical and theoretical parts as well as the subsequent subsection, which addresses the *mutated* practices individually, are essential for the understanding of the second part of the paper, in which the selected narratives illustrate the changes that have been previously outlined.

The second chapter engages in a close analysis of the two chosen narratives, Divakaruni's "Clothes" and Dinh's *Love, Like, Hate*, which respectively concern the Indian American and the Vietnamese American diasporas—historically examined in the previous chapter. Firstly, Sumita's Westernisation in "Clothes" embodies the *mutation* of the arranged marriage practices. Her metamorphosis, portrayed through the motif of clothing and its cultural value, and through her desire to mimic the Western type of love affection, demonstrates the emergence of a new mentality in many Asian societies where the arranged marriage procedure was extremely fixed. Furthermore, the erotisation and fetishism of Sumita's Asian female body seems to be intensified for Somesh when she wears American clothes. The protagonist's final decision to continue her path towards female agency restates the influence of Western feminist movements. Secondly, the analysis of the first part of *Love, Like, Hate* demonstrates the current taste of an increasing number of the Vietnamese population for the use of web pages in order to secure an arranged marriage. By means of the contrast between Kim Lan's traditional attempt to lure a Viet kieu for her daughter against Huyen and Jaded Nguyen's revolutionary method of using an online agency—a contrasting, comparative structure that resembles the organisation of this paper—, the differences between old and *mutated* arranged marriages are highlighted. Besides that, Huyen and Jaded's meeting

through the web page reveals the misogyny and the fetishisation of Asian women that online mail-order bride agencies build upon in their search for mere economic profit.

To conclude, by dint of the analysis of Divakaruni's "Clothes" and Dinh's *Love, Like, Hate*, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that the *mutation* of diasporic arranged marriage practices is a direct consequence of the influence of contemporary forms of capitalist globalisation and the impact of several historical events regarding the second Asian migration waves. Although I previously believed that old arranged marriage forms had not been sufficiently addressed and I turn the spotlight on the lack of studies about that matter, after this study I definitely consider that legal action should be taken against the contemporary commercial practices that surround the *mutated* forms of arranged marriage. It is necessary to stop contributing to mail-order bride agencies that sell and trade the life of—particularly—Asian women, taking advantage of the erotic myth of their bodies and the gender and racial inequalities that the capitalist market has embraced. Consequently, there is a need for urgent action in order to regulate an industry that is on the rise, and which has transformed a historical tradition into a profit-making business that unveils the dark side of contemporary globalisation.

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Appendix

I. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Clothes"

The short story begins right before Somesh and Sumita's bride-viewing ceremony takes place in India. Sumita's father has been the one in charge of selecting her prospective husband and, in addition, he has bought a beautiful sari (a highly symbolic Indian garment) for her daughter in order to impress Somesh and his parents, who are coming from America for the event. His strategy works and they end up getting married. A week after the wedding, he returns to California—where he lives with his parents—to work in his store, a 7:11. As soon as Sumita's visa arrives, she also travels by plane to America. It is on the plane when she has a flashback about her first failed sexual encounter with Somesh during their first week in India; she recalls how understanding he was with her.

Upon arriving in America, Sumita continuously thinks about Indian cultural traits: however, she gradually begins to use American clothes that Somesh buys for her, such as jeans and a skirt set—a fact that they hide from her in-laws. Whereas he also wants her to go to university, she dreams of working in the 7:11. As time goes by, she is the one who asks Somesh for more American clothing. In the last part of the short story Somesh is killed during a robbery in his store. Sumita is required to wear a sari again but this time it is white, the widow's colour in India. She is aware that in her country of origin she will be alienated, but Sumita plans on returning to America. She looks at herself in the mirror and sees a new woman.

II. **Linh Dinh's *Love, Like, Hate***

Despite the fact that the analysis of the novel focuses primarily on the first part, Linh Dinh's narrative is divided into three sections; the first one happens in the present, and the second and third chapters deal with events that, chronologically, occurred in the past.

In the first part, Jaded Nguyen—a Viet kieu—has travelled from America to Saigon to meet a young Vietnamese woman, Huyen. The couple has met through an internet website and she has been selected by Jaded in order to conduct an arranged marriage. Jaded Nguyen and Huyen meet Kim Lan in her cafe and the latter is surprised by Jaded's decision to—in her opinion—choose such a plain girl. Under such circumstances, the narrator highlights the fact that Kim Lan has spent years trying to find a prospective partner for her daughter Hoa, whom she has educated in typically Western values.

The second and third parts describe Kim Lan's previous failed marriages and her later attempts to lure a Viet kieu for her daughter. After being engaged to Dai Trieu, an army medic who passes away, Kim Lan marries Hoang Long, a promiscuous captain in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. While he is in the Vietnam War, Kim Lan gives birth to their son Cun. After that, she meets Sen, a local Chinese Vietnamese chess player. Because of the fear for communism in 1975, Sen proposes Kim Lan the possibility of escaping to China, but she does not accept his plan. Sen confesses that he is in love with Kim Lan and, finally, they end up living in Saigon with Cun because Kim Lan has given up the idea that Hoang Long may still be alive. In 1986, Kim Lan and Sen have a daughter, Hoa. It is in the second part that the narrator describes Kim Lan's specific attempts to make her suitable for a potential Viet kieu candidate. Unfortunately for Kim Lan, in the end Hoa runs away with a French tourist who treats her as a prostitute.