

## DECONSTRUCTING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN RISHI REDDI'S *KARMA AND OTHER STORIES*

Mendekonstruksi Identitas Kultural dalam *Karma and Other Stories* Karya Rishi Reddi

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**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan mendekonstruksi identitas kultural tokoh-tokoh utama dalam kumpulan cerita pendek karya Rishi Reddi berjudul *Karma and Other Stories*, yang menuturkan kehidupan para diaspora India di Amerika Serikat. Metode pengambilan data yang digunakan ialah teknik pembacaan cermat. Analisis datanya menggunakan metode dekonstruksi Jacques Derrida dengan (1) menelusuri oposisi biner yang terdapat dalam tujuh cerita, (2) menemukan ambiguitas dan ambivalensi dari oposisi biner, (3) mengungkap interpretasi dari ambiguitas dan ambivalensi tersebut. Hasil penelitian: (1) oposisi biner yang dioperasikan dalam ketujuh cerpen banyak menggunakan penanda yang mengacu pada persoalan identitas; (2) walaupun pada awalnya terkesan beroposisi antara Hindu dan Barat, sebetulnya keduanya tidak saling bertentangan; hal itu ditunjukkan dengan identitas tokoh yang menjadi adaptif, bahkan terhadap aspek-aspek praktik tradisi dan cara hidup; dan (3) identitas kultural para tokoh dalam cerpen digambarkan sebagai identitas yang cair.

**Kata-Kata Kunci:** ambiguitas; ambivalensi; diaspora India; dekonstruksi; identitas kultural

**Abstract:** This article strives to deconstruct the main characters' cultural identity in Rishi Reddi's short story collection, entitled *Karma and Other Stories*, as the characters deal with their lives as Indian diaspora in the United States. For the technique of data collection, the article uses the close-reading technique. As the method of analysis, this article employs Jacques Derrida's deconstruction approach by (1) tracing the binary opposition found within the seven short stories, (2) finding ambiguity and ambivalence from the binary opposition, and (3) revealing the interpretation from the ambiguity and ambivalence. The article finds that (1) the binary oppositions found within the seven stories have used signifiers which refer to identity issues, (2) although initially the Western and Hinduism oppose one another, both are in fact not contradictory; it is shown from the adaptive identity of the protagonists, even toward traditional practices and way of life, and (3) the cultural identity of the protagonists in the stories is depicted as a fluid identity.

**Key Words:** ambiguity; ambivalence; Indian diaspora; deconstruction; cultural identity

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## INTRODUCTION

Since their proclaimed independence from the British colonial in 1947, there have been numerous Indians migrating to Western countries, particularly the United States, in order to improve their lives. For Indian Telugu community, many of its members have migrated to the US far before India's independence, and the migration has been continuing proliferately ever since (Rani, 2018, p. 111). Many of them have undergone identity crisis for having to maintain their Indian traditional practices and at the same time adjust themselves to the American culture (Firdausiah, 2014, p. vi). Most of the issues that Indian diaspora face are intergenerational conflicts which include the tension circumferencing traditional marital obligations and the contrasting views on sexuality and religious traditions (Reddi, 2007, p. 9). Therefore, many world-familiar Indian-American novelists such as Jhumpa Lahiri (*The Interpreter of Maladies*), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Mistress of Spices*) and Rishi Reddi (*Karma and Other Stories*) have taken similar themes in their works.

Rishi Reddi is an American author who was born in Hyderabad, India, and grew up in the Great Britain and the United States. Her heritage is Indian Telugu, of which she describes originates from Hyderabad. Because of her father's physician career, the family had moved a lot to a few cities during Reddi's childhood and arrived in America in 1971. From her moving experience and life as immigrant connected to lifelong relatives spread across the United States, Reddi considers herself most comfortable with the Indian-Telugu-American cosmopolitan population in Boston. It later inspired her to complete her first work, *Karma and Other Stories* (Reddi, 2007, pp. 2-3). Her interest in producing

literature was initially rejected by her father, and Reddi instead pursued a law career by enrolling to law school and worked in the Massachusetts department of environmental protection for ten years before deciding to write full-time (Reddi, 2007, pp. 4-5).

First published in 2007 in the United States, the seven short stories in Rishi Reddi's *Karma and Other Stories* are set mostly in the Boston area, with side trips to Wichita, Kansas, and Hyderabad, India, during the mid 2000s. The stories revolve around an interconnected multi-generational Indian American community who struggles with the demands of tradition and Western life. At that period, Boston was a place where the biggest Indian Telugu community resided. The seven titles of the stories are "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy", "Lakshmi and the Librarian", "The Validity of Love", "Bangles", "Karma", "Devadasi", and "Lord Khrisna". The book went on to win the 2008 L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award, and "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy" was chosen to appear in *The Best American Short Stories 2005* and received an honorable mention in *Pushcart Prize 2004* (Reddi, 2007, cover page).

The collection has been a subject of study for its three stories that have intergenerational conflicts (*The Validity of Love, Bangles, and Devadasi*) through applying A. J. Greimas' structural narratology (Riyawati, 2011, pp. 3-4). The study revolves around the similarity and the difference of the narrative structure as well as the cause for the intergenerational conflicts, but it lacks the depth in revealing what is lurking beyond the depicted cultural identity. The second study is concerned in the emerging Indian-American writers such as Shilpa Agrawal, Rishi Reddi, Vikram Chandra, Lalita Das, Neela Vaswani, Tulsi Badrinath, Nandita da Cunha, Sonia Singh, Sunny Singh and so on have been

credited to introduce 'fresh' cosmopolitan views with religious tolerance, an end to the racial discrimination, and cultural predicament (Khan, 2011, p. 57). The study compares those authors with their predecessors in terms of stereotypical issues of identity, homesickness, rootlessness, etc. and finds that this 'new' generation of authors brings individual styles, idioms, and diversity to the Indian-American literature. This, however, still collectively puts the works of those 'new' authors on the surface (or in overall view) and has not looked into each of the stories deeper.

Different from Riyawati and Khan's studies, this article tries to answer one question, which is how the ambivalence and cultural identity are deconstructed in all of the seven short stories of Rishi Reddi's *Karma and Other Stories*. The work is chosen for two reasons. First, the lack of research concerned in deconstructing ambivalence and cultural identity in Indian-American literature by a new generation Indian-American author. Second, there has not been a study which explores all of the seven short stories of Rishi Reddi with the deconstruction approach; therefore, there has not been a revelation toward Reddi's chosen themes.

Jacques Derrida introduced deconstruction as a new thinking method, a criticism toward the previous way of reading text (Rohman, 2014, p. 23). He coined the word *différance*, which means postponement or reversal, to stress on the important role of writing and the space value found among the words that move beyond binary oppositions. It works by delaying the process of marking conducted by signifier and signified of Saussure's structuralism. *Différance* serves as a reminder that all forms of representation are made of repetitions. Derrida started his thoughts from noticing cognitive feelings such as

changeable and wandering thoughts which can beget unthinkable as well as new ways of reading a text (O'Donnell, 2009, p. 56-57). He pays attention to 'slips' that occur during every text reading, which can cause words to have different meanings and that the text can be read very differently. As Derrida refuses to give legitimation to Saussure's rigid binary opposition and Westernized absoluteness (logocentrism), he refuses to define what deconstruction is since he only provides a 'neutral' way of thinking to perceive things differently. Derrida shows how one aspect can mean so different to various people, according to their understanding, cultural perspectives, and so on (O'Donnell, 2009, p. 58). This is why Derrida rejects any centralized way of thinking and chooses to give some room to any form of reading and interpretation.

Derrida's deconstruction has been perceived as an event where anyone can view the 'other' side of the text, which has long been outskirted by structuralists. Thus, deconstruction is eager to show anyone about the instability of meaning embedded in texts (Hardiman, 2015, p. 279). Deconstruction is aimed at highlighting marginalized aspects which have been kept out of sight by structuralist approaches. Through identifying binary opposition, any form of centralized structure which has formerly privileged 'domineering' entities such as men, ratio, and whiteness, is now losing its firm hold. In that way only, one can truly reveal the true meaning behind any given text and therefore will not be trapped in the fixed meaning that the author claims to be presenting. Derrida shows that even in the text itself, there are always inconsistencies which can easily emerge to overthrow the fixed meanings found in texts. The inconsistencies, somehow, can be spotted through the phrases,

sentence choices, and the text's allegiance (Haryatmoko, 2016, p. 134).

Deconstruction is aimed at building a temporary construction which can always be deconstructed again and again. In the perspective of deconstruction, truth/validity is not something that is fixed; it is always open to new possible constructions. For Derrida, "... text has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end" (Derrida, 1974, p. xii), since "*Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; ... Its process involves an affirmation, this latter being linked to the coming [venir] in event, advent invention*" (Derrida, 1992, p. 337). In relation to these standpoints, it is indeed coherent that myriad new interpretations should emerge with ease. There are two steps to deconstruction, which is: a) *undecidable*, the reversal of metaphysical hierarchy, which consists of binary opposition identification, and b) dissemination, the decentralisation movement from logocentrism and absolute truth (Haryatmoko, 2016b, p. 218).

## METHOD

The article analyses seven short stories in Rishi Reddi's *Karma and Other Stories* (2007) which was published by Harper Perennial. The seven stories are "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy", "Lakshmi and the Librarian", "The Validity of Love", "Bangles", "Karma", "Devadasi", and "Lord Khrisna". For the technique of the primary data collection, the researchers apply the close-reading on the words and sentences of the seven stories. To provide the primary data, the researchers make several direct quotes from the novel to support the analysis. The secondary sources are drawn from Derrida and Haryatmoko's books and journals about Indian diaspora in the US and cultural identity.

To analyse the data, there are several steps in order to compose the analysis.

The steps are based on Derrida's deconstruction's structured phase. The discussion is carried out on four layers altogether: 1) identifying the binary oppositions found within the seven short stories in a table, 2) finding the ambiguity and ambivalence based on those binary oppositions from the first step, and then 3) finding interpretation out of the ambiguity and ambivalence, and 4) drawing a conclusion from the reversal to sum up the result of the study. In the conclusion, the researchers relate the findings from the seven stories to the recent identity of the Indian diaspora in the US.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy", the center point to the binary opposition which forms the text is the 'dignity' of an elderly Indian former judge named Shiva Ram Murthy, who has just moved to the US for three months to live with his daughter's family. He feels intimidated by all of the differences between living in India and the US, as his best friend 'Manu' Manmohan repeatedly points out. Therefore, the shock culture triggers Shiva Ram to act superiorly and all-dignified in the way he conducts himself whilst adjusting to living in the US. It can be seen from this quote below:

I looked at him but said nothing. Sometimes he likes to irritate me for no reason. We have many differences, Manu and I. He has lived in U.S. since he was fifty-nine years; I did not move here until I was seventy. I am very well traveled, having visited all over India, north south east west. He has been only to Bombay and Madras. I have my head full of hair, he is almost bald completely. I am a lawyer by training, he is only an engineer. Perhaps that is why I have a slightly more developed moral sense, I do not know.

(Reddi, 2007, p. 5)

From the statement, it is evident that the ideology presented by the text is to make readers see that Shiva Ram is a much more accomplished man than Manu; thus it justifies his dignified self-talk and superior act toward everyone. On the other side, it also wants readers to criticize Manu's incompetencies and lack of concern toward anything in life. The text also emphasizes Shiva Ram's yearning and homesickness of Hyderabad, his childhood and old days when he was still a ruling judge with a small but a well-cared-for family. From the very start, the dignity theme has always appeared convincingly as the main issue. The binary oppositions found within the story are: '*religious Indians-liberal Americans*', '*Old City neighborhoods in Hyderabad - dirty and noisy American city*', '*eating at a restaurant - eating at a fast-food place*', '*a lawyer - a fast-food manager*', and '*driving from home to High Court - walking everywhere in Boston*'. Being investigated closer, the first pole of the metaphysical hierarchy is somehow considered to be more favoured than the second. Still, the reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy occurs on the climax, when Shiva Ram immediately strikes a prolonged misunderstanding with a girl manager at a Mexican fast-food restaurant.

Whilst eating, Shiva Ram refuses to eat the salad menu that Manu has ordered for both of them, and being farsighted he unknowingly insists on ordering another choice of menu, which actually consists of a *beef*-and-cheese burrito instead of a *bean*-and-cheese one. Being a devout Hindu, Shiva Ram is quickly outraged and offended, thinking that he has been deceived by the girl manager. After having a brief but heated argument with the girl, Shiva Ram requests Manu to find him a barrister so he can sue the restaurant. Later, it turns out that Shiva Ram's effort to regain his

dignity is meaningless, since the barrister considers the case to be a mere cultural misunderstanding. Below is Shiva Ram's complaint when he describes his misunderstanding at the Mexican fast-food place to a lawyer he is going to hire:

"I have never, never, eaten beef in my life, before this incident. It has never passed my lips. I am a Brahmin, you see ... I am completely vegetarian. No meat of any kind, or eggs. It is the doctrine of Ahimsa. Nonviolence towards any living thing. Even he is the same."  
(Reddi, 2007, p. 22)

"Then let me tell you, Shiva Ram, that I have been eating meat for years. Not just meat, but beef, since the second day that I came to this country. I haven't told you because it would have disturbed you so much. Now what do you say?"  
(Reddi, 2007, pp. 25-26)

The sentence '*Nonviolence towards any living thing*' is somewhat ironic since Shiva Ram has just failed to maintain his peace and intact logic by losing his temper and insulting the Mexican fast-food manager over a simple misunderstanding, thus unknowingly has violated the rules of his own religious faith. The situation goes more ironic since Manu, who has deliberately violated his religious ethics by eating meat for years, becomes the one who manages to keep his calm composure, be able to understand everything there is to know about American culture, and maintain his respect for himself and others. From this standpoint, it is revealed that Shiva Ram's dignity is much more related to his fear of having to adjust himself completely to the new foreign culture of America in such an elderly age rather than trying to remain a strictly religious man who still holds on to old habits and memories of his ruling days as a judge in Hyderabad. It is also proven since Shiva Ram insists on calling '*Raga Restaurant*', his most favourite

eating place with Manu on Thursdays, to be 'Hotel Raga', following the old habit of many Indians in their homeland. In the Western general knowledge of understanding, the definition of both words certainly differs from one another. Interestingly, Shiva Ram also thinks that Manu still strickly holds on to their religious teachings which forbide them to consume any kind of meat product. This final glaring fact eventually turns Shiva Ram's old principles upside down; however, it is also hinted that Shiva Ram realizes that his dignity and egoism come from not wanting to let go of his old days and pride. It can be seen from this statement:

I gazed through the window at the harbor. In the cold glass of the Boston sun, my old life disappeared: the dark chambers of the Hyderabad High Court; my wife sitting in the shade of our banyan tree; myself as a young man, holding baby Kirti's hand as we walk to the vegetable stand behind our home. Shadows in a seventy-year-old mind. (Reddi, 2007, p. 24)

Shiva Ram's ambivalence and acclaimed dignity towards everything in the American culture reveal his inner rejection toward change and reality, that he cannot readily accept that he is no longer the young, self-sufficient, and influential man as he once was. In Boston, though having an accomplished daughter and childhood friend who have already lived there for years does not automatically make Shiva Ram a respectable man just like he was in Hyderabad. Shiva Ram's misunderstanding and many small arguments with Manu only strengthen his failed expectations for wanting to live in the US in the old Indian ways back then, as well as his failure in being grateful that he has an accomplished daughter who teaches at a prestigious college with a small family of her

own, and a faithful childhood friend (Manu) who manages to accompany him everywhere in Boston.

Shiva Ram's situation also speaks for many aspects that are visible after having been deconstructed, as that the acclaimed Hindu religiosity of a person may surprisingly also contain crude aspects such as vanity, pride, egocentrism, as well as rudeness toward other people. He also still holds patriarchal tendencies to disregard women's position and opinions. Meanwhile, for a more liberal person such as Manu, he may seem timid to 'religious' people like Shiva Ram, but for sure he knows manners and can adapt himself well to the American culture. Manu has definitely tried to stick to his Indian roots by speaking some Indian words and marrying his son to an Indian girl, but overall he has succeeded in conforming his original cultural values to the Western culture.

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

She should be happy, she tells herself. What Indian mother wouldn't be happy with a son who was so comfortable with the traditional way? But like a nagging

tug in her mind, she also feels a vague sense of disappointment. Didn't Sridher want more for himself—something of the greatness of life, the vastness of it? She felt this vastness once, when she was young and had a handsome husband with wild plans to come to the United States.

(Reddi, 2007, p. 33)

The binary oppositions are '*should be happy – feels disappointed*' and '*traditional ways – wild plans*', which accentuate Lakshmi's regret that although her life is peaceful and in harmony with Indian traditions, there is no denying that it is boring and monotonous. Lakshmi notices that for many years living in Boston she has never made any close friendship with an outsider, and that her circle of friends only consists of all Indian women who are actually the wives of Venkat's friends. Lakshmi's melancholy comes from the realization that she has never once created a life of her own outside that of her husband's patriarchal 'territory'. Lakshmi comes to a further realization that the patriarchal limitation has also refrained her from truly knowing who men actually are and how they think, especially her husband and sons, since she has followed the rules of never challenging their authority and always keeping her respective distance of not prying on their ways and thoughts. The quote below supports this opinion:

Lakshmi remembers when Sridher was sixteen years old. Long ago, she thought that her boys were always good and that they never tempted to date American girls. But what did she really know about her sons? Didn't Sridher always have a mind of his own? And who knows what Sharath is doing in college? Suddenly she is annoyed. "We never suspect what our children will do, Vijaya. We think we know them, but we don't. We don't know them at all."

Vijaya scowls. "Maybe sons are like that, but definitely daughters are not. Everybody says they want sons sons sons, but in the end, it is daughters who remain close to you and take care of you and are honest. You might not be knowing that, Lakshmi, with your two boys."

(Reddi, 2007, pp. 44-45)

The binary oppositions from the quote are: '*little boys – grown men*', '*being good and obedient – having a mind of their own*', and '*honest daughters – unpredictable sons*'. It is understandable that naturally mothers wish for lenient children who will behave correctly in social situations and later follow through the same path as their parents did. However, on the contrary, this can also mean that many children may have put on an act in front of their parents in order to safeguard their own plans and actions, which perhaps do not comply with their parents' expectations and arrangements. Lakshmi's talk with her usual circle of friends has also proved that gender plays a significant role in the way parents treat their sons and daughters and vice versa. While sons certainly have more freedom to do whatever they want to do, daughters scarcely have the same privilege as they are tied down by marriage expectations.

Interestingly, from the first day she set her foot in the Boston neighborhood until her sons went away from home, Lakshmi has almost never worn pants whenever she goes outside; she has always clad herself in a sari like any good Indian woman has—an epitome of a submissive and traditional Indian wife and mother. Lakshmi's permanent stay in the US literally does almost nothing to her old Indian way of life. Just as she starts to grow curious and worry about Mr. Filian that she finally dares herself to dress in casual Western clothes to visit him: *Even as she looks inside her closet,*

*her boldness surprises her. But her children are grown—she no longer needs to impress upon them the Indian culture. There is one pair of black pants that she bought two years ago, just in case she might need them one day* (Reddi, 2007, p. 47). The words ‘*her boldness surprises her*’ and ‘*no longer need to impress the children*’ serve as reflections to remind readers that the many years of Lakshmi wearing saris and her obedient nature in nurturing her family are actually performative acts in which she tries to suppress her own desires and focus everything to maintain the old Indian conventions to her sons, so that they won’t lose their cultural roots. This kind of patriarchal repression is somehow much lighter than the ‘forced subservience’ possessed by many married Indian female immigrants in the US who have to conceal repression, exploitation and domestic violence (Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 92).

Lakshmi’s complete submission to the patriarchal system has also worked in refraining her from getting into a deeper relationship with Mr. Filian, who is a white American. Although she has known him for fifteen years since her first moved to Boston with her family, Lakshmi has never struck a close friendship with the town librarian until now. Lakshmi soon learns that Mr. Filian is grieving for his estranged mother, who is dying. She tries her best to cheer him up by visiting him in his house and bringing some food for him, and in the process ends up starting gossip among her Indian female friends that she is having an affair. Still, Lakshmi’s experience of entering Mr. Filian’s personal life and sharing their life experiences with one another for the first time brings her wonder and self-awareness, as seen from this quote:

In that moment it occurs to Lakshmi that she has lived her life always seeking convenience, traveling the safe

middle road which does not bring sweetness or severity, fearing to invite sorrow into her world and therefore never knowing joy, adjusting herself to every circumstance, challenging nothing and no one, not her traditions, not her husband, not herself. She had been a coward; she had never asked Venkat to be the husband he could become. (Reddi, 2007, pp. 57-58)

The binary oppositions are as follows: ‘*convenience – sorrow*’ and ‘*coward – courageous*’. In this state, Lakshmi finally understands perfectly that her complete obedience to her customs and traditions has put blinders on her growth as a human being. While Lakshmi has never been treated with adversary, she realizes that she has been a ‘flat’ figure most of her life—someone who does nothing but perform things that are expected of her. Eventually, the change and the new realization drive Lakshmi to convince Mr. Filian to see his mother, and Lakshmi herself reconciles with Venkat.

In the deconstruction’s views, Lakshmi is actually more open and flexible to change than the rest of her family and friends. It is understandable that she does not undergo such dramatical change, but still Lakshmi embraces the possibility of knowing and striking a friendship with Mr. Filian, a Westerner she has known for years. While strict and ‘rigid’ people such as Vijaya go on about making gossips and sticking their noses on other people’s business, a more ‘homely’ person such as Lakshmi could take the initiative to step outside her domestic boundaries to do kindness to a longtime friend. It shows that the degree of obedience of someone does not necessarily influence the open-mindedness of the person.

In the third story, “The Validity of Love”, an Indian young woman named Lata lives with her childhood friend

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

For a moment, I saw the whole room full of girls and young women, their shining black hair and their round hips and the lovely eyes that took in everything. They thought that every opportunity was waiting for them, careers, travel, love, the world; their parents had told them that's why they'd moved to the United States—so they could have these things. But in the end, the talons of tradition would close in. Perhaps they, too, would simultaneously have a failed love affair and a screwed-up marriage proposal that would alienate them from their parents. (Reddi, 2007, pp. 73-74)

The binary oppositions, '*every opportunity was waiting – talons of tradition would close in*' and '*could have love in the United States – a failed love affair and a screwed-up marriage*' are again reinforced to show readers that although Indian immigrants have resided permanently in the US to have better lives and opportunities, many of them are still unable to shake their strong adherence to their Hinduism customs and family traditions, especially marriage affairs. Lata's criticism toward her own ethnic group also reflects her own condition of not being able to marry an outsider, hinted in her own self-deprecating words: *I felt sorry for them. No, I can't lie, I felt sorry*

*for me* (Reddi, 2007, p. 74). Lata's situation aligns with the research that finds that there is a greater maternal control towards the Indian second generation diaspora children in their family life, and this younger generation ends up growing up to be adults with higher depressive symptomology (Varghese and Jenkins, 2009, pp. 235-236).

More importantly, Lata realizes that the Indian marriage tradition, although considered sacred in their Hindu belief, also consists of a guarantee of mutual material exchange between the two parties: *I felt a chill in my gut, because I was thinking, too, that he must have considered that I was from the correct sub-caste, and that my skin was fair enough so that he could have what he thought were attractive children, and that my father was a doctor, so it would be an appropriate marriage* (Reddi, 2007, p. 75). The binary oppositions, '*correct – wrong*', '*fair skin – dark skin*', '*attractive children – unattractive children*', '*doctor – worker*' mean that the 'sacred' marriage bond between man and woman is indeed infiltrated with material aspects such as social class elevation, financial benefits, good looks, and work connection which of course would benefit the couple and their family in the eyes of the society.

The same thing also jibes with the parents' love to their children: *My mother had assured me that I had "veto power," but when I exercised it, my father refused to speak to me afterwards* (Reddi, 2007, p. 73). The binary opposition of '*veto power – refused*' is a profound mark of evidence that the love of the parents is only intact under the suppressing condition that their children obey their demands. Once they disobey mandatory affairs such as rejecting their parents' spouse choice or marriage arrangement, the children will be 'exiled' and given the cold shoulder by their parents. Therefore, in this regard, love and marriage

are indeed highly conditional in the way they are decided and conducted, thus shattering the old doctrine that they are unfailingly unconditional. In the 'sacred' marriage union, there are actually materialistic matters and family expectations that are at play, and in the intercultural relationships that are frowned upon there is sincerity and honesty in love.

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

"He is disrespectful to me," Arundhati said once to Venu, as they were watching television. Kamlesh was not in the room.

"He doesn't mean it. He's just a child."

"But you allow him to do it."

"It's no more than what you allowed me." His voice was sharp.

"Your father was very strict." Even as she said it, she realized it was a lie. (Reddi, 2007, p. 117)

The binary oppositions, '*disrespectful-respectful*', '*child-man*', '*allow-scold*', '*lenient-strict*' underline the contributing factors and qualities that can emerge from such a child upbringing which privileges sons. This type of child-rearing is actually encouraged in the patriarchal Indian culture, but the result is indeed devastating since sons become men who are proud, harsh, arbitrary, and disrespectful toward others, even elders and women. Arundhati and her late husband

had raised Venu in this way, which finally leads Arundhati to her regret, as she witnesses the ignorant, selfish man her son has become.

What is more, Arundhati finds herself at odds with the American ways Venu's family has adopted. Similar to Shiva Ram's story, for the first time, Arundhati realizes that as a newcomer elderly immigrant, she is helpless and highly dependent on other people: *In India, she was nothing without her husband. But here, even her husband was nothing* (Reddi, 2007, p. 110). Arundhati undergoes a culture shock against the American culture, in which people act individually and apathetic towards family members, and that strangers with authority can come between family matters. Furthermore, Arundhati's helplessness makes her to be cared for by a family's close acquaintance named Rukmini, to her dismay: *Venu helped Arundhati across the ice on the driveway, although she felt she did not need it. When he tucked the end of her sari inside the car and closed the door behind her, she felt she was being handed over, like a burden, to a stranger* (Reddi, 2007, pp. 113-114).

The binary oppositions: '*need help – does not need*', '*handed over-accepted*', '*burden-present*', and '*stranger-acquaintance*' underline Arundhati's annoyance that everything that is happening around her is not meeting her expectations and old cultural standards. Thus, her love and loyalty to her family are traded for a new friendship with Rukmini, a new companion who can sympathize with her. According to the deconstruction views, it is therefore ironic since the family members of Arundhati herself, her only son and daughter-in-law, have the heart to 'abandon' her while a stranger such as Rukmini would gladly accompany her to pray in the temple.

Afterwards, in "Karma", the fifth story, an unemployed professor called

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

The world was a sad, unjust place, he thought. It sometimes felt like an illusion; what was real existed under the surface of the blue sky and the green grass and the happy or tearful faces of children. He often did not understand why certain things happened to him, but he had always been able to rely on his family. Now, he could not do even that.

(Reddi, 2007, p. 135)

The binary oppositions are: '*sad-happy*', '*unjust-fair*', '*surface-bottom*', '*illusion-reality*', and '*able to rely-rejected*' which reveal the inner dissatisfaction and anger of Shankar as he fails to live up to his own dreams and standards. Shankar regrets his current situation: being only a lowly check-out clerk who is paid little and has his self-worth suppressed by his more superior younger brother for over a year. Those binary oppositions also reveal another blinder: Shankar's fear of failure in embarking on an independent business through opening his own restaurant: "*I have seen the office downtown. I don't know if I am that kind of person ... Such things seem like they are for dreamers*" (Reddi, 2007, p. 152). The binary oppositions of '*downtown-uptown*' and '*dreamer-realist*' in

this statement prove that Shankar keeps a mindset that in the fast-paced city of Boston, only the so-called 'realists' with clear business plans will succeed.

Moreover, it is also evident that Shankar is still haunted by his past of shooting a bird, as the incident is considered a violation to one of the most well-known Hinduism spiritual principles, that is not to harm any living creature. Another Hinduism principle which becomes the story's title, *karma*, dictates that one's action or deed contributes to his/her future; therefore Shankar concludes that his badluck certainly has something to do with that mistake. Jobless, Shankar wanders the downtown Boston in search for work, only to find a dying bird lying on the street. He rescues the bird by taking it to an animal hospital and continues to do that for other dying birds the following days. Later, Shankar has a change of luck when he manages to find a job as a ward attendant in that animal hospital. Shankar's act of helping the dying birds has certainly filled himself with new energy that motivates him to be a braver person. Seen from the eyes of the deconstruction theory, although Shankar's brother Prakash has managed to achieve success in his occupation, he has certainly failed in sticking to his own religious values. Prakash's banishing act to his older brother has violated that values, while the unsuccessful Shankar has shown that he is a man with a kind heart who has managed to save the lives of tiny birds.

The sixth story, "Devadasi", narrates about a teenage girl named Uma Reddy who has the chance to go to Hyderabad, India, with her parents on a school holiday. Uma feels disconnected to the culture and is only interested in learning *bharatha natyam* dance with a famous Hyderabad dance instructor she has heard for years from her Boston instructor. The key to the binary oppositions is

'growing up', and since Uma was born and raised in the United States, she considers Indian conflicts insignificant to her American teenage life: *She was an American who did not care about the differences between Hindus and Muslims. She did not care about saris or Indian jewels, or that women should not be too familiar with the company of men* (Reddi, 2007, p. 163). As a matter of fact, Uma's deliberate ignorance towards everything in her homeland grows from her lack of knowledge and lack of emotional connection to her cultural roots, and above all, her American sense of superiority over the chaotic Indian life. It is most evident in this quote:

*Do you like India?* She did not like their driver's furtive glances at her through the rearview mirror when she sat in the backseat. She did not like the experience of the day before, when, following her mother inside a sari store, a man had hung his tongue at her hungrily ... *Do you like India?* Perhaps her mother did not notice all these things. (Reddi, 2007, p. 165)

The binary oppositions: '*furtive glance-look directly*' and '*hung his tongue hungrily-smiled politely*' show how lowly Uma thinks about the people in India; she sees them as uneducated yokels who cannot act like the stereotypical sophisticated gentlemen in the US. Uma's unspoken distaste toward anything Indian seems to reflect her pride upon being brought up in a Western country, in which she is more accustomed to the more modern ways of America. Uma quickly grows attached to the dance class and befriends her family's driver Hafeez, a Muslim Urdu; with the latter is strictly discouraged by Uma's parents. Most notably, with Uma thinking so little about the Indian-Muslim conflict happening, she finds her Indian relatives, their constant gossiping, and their

customs tiring, thus making her more drawn to the Muslim people and their tradition. Still, this new interest reveals another side of Uma: her denial of belonging towards the Indian roots, her denial of having any close relation to the 'lowly' people she has viewed earlier.

On Uma's last day in India, whilst on her way to her dance instructor's house, Uma and Hafeez get caught in a Hindu-Muslim violence in Ayodhya, in the area of Old City, and they are forced to return home without taking her last dance class. As she is trapped in the middle of a barricading lot of the Muslims, Uma's sudden bursting ethnocentric feeling as an Indian is described as such:

His eyes were rimmed with kohl, and he stared at her slowly, his eyes traveling from her face to her breasts to her stomach. She felt anger rise up in her, and it was familiar; it was connected to the wedding of the night before and the way she had been brought on this trip to India. She had been stupid to think that she was American, that differences between Hindus and Muslims, men and women, meant nothing to her. She had been stupid to think that she could sleep with Karl.

(Reddi, 2007, p. 184)

The binary oppositions, '*anger-calm*', '*familiar-alien*', '*connected-disconnected*', '*stupid-clever*', '*difference-similarity*', '*nothing-everything*' are laid out to show that in this climax when Uma finally faces adversity for the first time in her life, she finds herself at crossroads about her own identity as an Indian-American. Uma sees for herself now that any person will take her as Indian and not at all American: *For a moment, Hafeez looked at her and then looked away, and she felt a surge of despair about her place at home and in the world* (Reddi, 2007, p. 185). The binary opposition of '*despair - hopeful*' highlights the

most profound point, which is the absolute confirmation of her cultural identity and cultural baggage, that is when Uma realizes she can never deny and alter her cultural and ethnic identity, along with all of the aspects that establish her Indian identity. Uma's 'despair' represents her fear and confusion about her future since she is an Indian, but her American upbringing has somehow blurred her sense of identity and belonging to the Indian culture. Also, the story also suggests that although Uma's parents are Indians who have moved and settled down in the US for many years, they still consider themselves 'real' Indians who have the rights to instill the old stereotyping hatred toward the Muslims. This means that though they may call themselves educated and sophisticated, they are more or less still the same people, just like their counterparts in their homeland.

According to a study, the 'identity turn' of these Indian-American youngsters are somehow hindered since they are limited by their cultural patrons—their parents and relatives (Ellwood, 2011, p. 960). It is proven from the way most first generation Indian diaspora pass on their religious traditions and customs to their children, and only allow them to marry Indian spouses of the equal caste and social strata, thus repeating the traditional Indian ways. What is more, these limitations only produce failure in cultural blending and productive change, thus preventing young Indian generation for having freedom in entering any relationship with non-Indian American citizens.

In the final and seventh story, "Lord Krishna", an Indian teenage school-boy named Krishna feels dismayed about his un-American name that everybody mocks at school. He wishes that he could change it from 'Krish' to 'Kris', in order to be more American. Krishna's agitation grows more as one of the school

teachers, Mr. Hoffman, teaches the class about 'new testament references to Satan' which include Western Biblical 'occult' aspects such as Lord Krishna, a deity of the Hindu religion, from which Krishna's own name has derived. His father, Ramesh, a devout Hindu, strongly rejects this idea and after finding out that his son has been bullied as well as wronged by Mr. Hoffman, Krishna ends up regretting confiding in his father for his problems, as seen from this quote:

Krishna sighed, put his arms across his folded knees and lay his forehead on them. He had trusted his father enough to tell him what had happened, but his father had stolen the situation. It had become *his* insult, *his* experience, to be dealt with in *his* competent way. (Reddi, 2007, p. 206)

The way the narrator repeatedly stresses on the word '*his*' reveals Krishna's annoyance that his father has been too involved in his problems at school. It is also a strong indication that Ramesh has taken everything to satisfy his ego (since he is a very accomplished and affluent businessman, and once a former first-class student in his younger days) instead of letting Krishna deal with his own problems. Krishna's enraged parents demand that Mr. Hoffman be fired, but in the end, Krishna musters up the courage to accept Mr. Hoffman's apology. The quote below presents the situation in which it clearly displays Mr. Hoffman and Krishna's reversed position:

Hoffman seemed to have shrunk; he was as helpless as Krishna was when Harlan called him "towel head" while other students laughed. For a moment, Krishna loathed him. Then, Krishna saw him through that familiar window, through the glass that separated him from American life, and he sensed, for once, how to step through it. He knew

he'd been mistaken; it had nothing to do with changing his name at all.  
(Reddi, 2007, p. 212)

The binary oppositions are 'shrunk – flourished', 'helpless–powerful', 'loathe–love', 'familiar–alien', 'separate–join', 'mistaken–praised'. The first three binary oppositions have shown the reversed position between Mr. Hoffman as teacher and Krishna as student; the teacher is clearly helpless as he is pressured by Ramesh's strong financial power and pride. What is interesting, Krishna becomes the one who eventually ends the conflict: he utters his acceptance to Mr. Hoffman's apology. Krishna's calmness is shown from this sentence: *There was no hint about what happened during the day; his parents had no indication of the clamor of his life: the petty alliances and friendships, the battle of egos, the cemented pecking order. He seemed to be above it all for a moment* (Reddi, 2017, p. 213). The binary oppositions, 'clamor–peace', 'petty–immense', 'alliances and friendships–discord and adversary', and 'above–below' show that although Krishna has faced enough hardship in his school days, the last binary opposition reveals that Krishna has finally seen that his school conflicts do not matter. The bullying and the arguments have been caused by his peers' immaturity and Krishna's own cultural identity as Indian; he has somehow understood and accepted that the treatment would always be a part of his entire life as Indian diaspora. From the perspective of deconstruction, it is interesting to see that while Krishna's parents' wealth makes them feel entitled to sue and condemn Mr. Hoffman, it actually makes them snobs rather than respected people. Their acclaimed 'strict' adherence to religious teachings reveals more of their pride as people with money. While for Krishna himself, though he's indeed a powerless and quiet child, Krishna's attitude and openness have

proven that his modest and humble way of life is closer to the Hinduism values which his parents have claimed to be strongly adhere to.

Still, it is also noted that in the US, Asian Indians and Pakistanis' strong adherence to their religious traditions and customs have been proliferating through a huge number of temples, mosques, gurdwaras, and churches building plan, and that their religions will draw more attention, support and participation from most of the US citizens (Williams, 1998, pp. 194-195). This has been proven since Indian and Pakistani immigrants have been coming to the US in greater numbers, including their religious leaders. Therefore, Krishna and his family's strong adherence to their Hindu principles will possibly be preserved and of course prevail for a long time. In addition, Krishna's choice of attitude shows that both Hinduism and Western values can coexist together without having to trample one another. This standpoint also coincides with the fact that although in India modernity has been accepted and absorbed into tradition, it has been adapted to strengthen the tradition so that it will always persist (Condorelli, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, new changes still strongly adhere to older traditional orientations, and for decades this essential core element has certainly been passed down and reformulated from one generation to another transnationally.

The deconstruction of the seven stories have shown that although many Westernized Indians have managed to achieve success as intellectuals and urbanized elites, they are still strongly tied to their Hinduism principles and family life, particularly in marriage arrangements. All of the issues presented in the stories occur because of the characters' strong affiliation to Hinduism and Indian family tradition and inner fear of losing their identity by completely

adopting the Western lifestyle. One by one, their internal and external conflicts come to an end with the solution that each of the main protagonists has managed or has tried to take the first step to absorb Western values in order to renew their principles and ways of life. Still, their adherence to their Indian traditional conventions will remain intact since the ties they possess with their extended family members will continue to serve as reminders and patrons of where they originate. Therefore, the cultural identity of the Indian-American diaspora in Rishi Reddi's *Karma and Other Stories* has moved beyond socio-cultural fixity, but its essential core values and forms have dominantly prevailed despite any changes from the Western influences.

### CONCLUSION

The success of the characters in the short stories in building their lives in the US has also revealed another fact, which is that in the Hinduism way of life, the concepts of pursuing material success, intellectual achievement and living well is also greatly encouraged in order to improve its adherents' quality of life. Hence, it correlates very well with the idea of Western values in the United States. Therefore, it is appropriate to declare that Western values go together with Indian Hinduism values; indeed, they in fact do not oppose each other in regards to their core values and teachings. The deconstruction reading of these seven stories also provide an insight that these characters in the stories, either consciously or unconsciously, have chosen to adopt both cultural values and they have finally adjusted each to suit one another well.

Rishi Reddi's collection of short stories makes the defixation of its binary opposition to be labile. The key to the deconstruction reading of *Karma and Other Stories* is 'the real Indianness' offered by

the common perception of Indian diaspora in the US that is captured well by the author in the book. The contrasting details of the stories serve as the proof that can resist the Westernized ideologies found within the book. The 'fluid' construction that emerges from the deconstruction reading is 'temporarily right', meaning that it is open to other changes and deconstructive readings in the future. In terms of adapting to the American culture, the Indians have no permanent cluster about choosing which aspects of their culture that should be kept and which that should be let go. In the end, the Indian diaspora have become fluid in absorbing new cultural aspects such as achieving higher education and elite occupations, but on the other hand, they have also remained firm about their traditional cultural aspects such as food preferences, religious affiliation, and marriage arrangement. That being said, the cultural identity of the Indian diaspora in Rishi Reddi's *Karma and Other Stories* have shown themselves adaptable to traditional practices, since Western and Indian values are actually more similar than one might think. Therefore, the cultural identity of the Indian diaspora has transformed into a more fluid and adaptable form rather than a fixed, unchangeable one.

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