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Architecture of Space: Domestic, Public, and Political Spaces in P. Sivakami's Works

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Abstract: This paper offers a semiotic analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story The Disappearance (2024), demonstrating how its central enigma—an Indian woman's unexplained disappearance in the United States—produces multiple, competing thematic interpretations. Drawing on Peirce's triadic model of signification, Barthes's notions of connotation and myth, Saussure's signifier–signified relation, Umberto Eco's concept of the 'open work,' and feminist and postcolonial theory (Butler, Cixous, Bhabha, Spivak), the analysis shows that the story resists closure by foregrounding the instability of meaning. The narrative's signs—clothing, jewellery, the child's cry, photographs, silence, gossip, maternal authority—are not merely details but semiotic fields encoding cultural identity, patriarchy, diasporic anxieties, and female agency. By treating the text as an 'open work' whose silences compel interpretive participation, the paper argues that The Disappearance exemplifies a diasporic feminist narrative where absence itself becomes a signifier of resistance, ambivalence, and haunting presence.

Keywords: Semiotics, Divakaruni, Diaspora, Feminism, Disappearance.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has long been recognized as a prominent voice in contemporary South Asian diasporic writing. Her fiction, both novels and short stories, explores the psychic costs of migration, the regulation of gendered behaviour, and the silences imposed by patriarchal authority. *The Disappearance*, first published online (Divakaruni, 2024), dramatizes the sudden vanishing of a young Indian wife in suburban California. At the level of plot, the story reads like a domestic mystery: a woman sets out for her daily walk and never comes back. But unlike detective narratives, no answers are provided. Readers are left without a corpse, confession, or clear resolution.

This refusal of closure is crucial. The "disappearance" becomes not simply an event but a semiotic rupture—a sign that points to multiple, contradictory meanings. As Barthes (1977) notes, the most powerful texts are those that resist being closed off and instead compel the reader to participate in constructing meaning. Divakaruni's story does precisely this, drawing attention to absence, silence, and erasure as active signifiers rather than mere gaps.

The cultural context intensifies this reading. Within South Asian diasporic communities, the family often becomes a site where cultural identity is guarded, and women's behaviour is policed (Raj, 2000). Against this backdrop, the missing woman represents not only private grief but also a collective crisis. Her disappearance unsettles family honour, marital authority, and the fragile respectability of the immigrant community.

The central problem the story poses, therefore, is not simply "what happened" to the wife but "what does her absence mean?" Different interpretive frameworks—patriarchal, feminist, diasporic—arrive at different answers. A semiotic approach, attentive to how signs operate across levels of denotation and connotation, is uniquely positioned to illuminate how Divakaruni constructs this multiplicity.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Semiotics provides the theoretical lens for this reading. Saussure's (1959) structural definition of the sign as a relation between signifier and signified grounds the analysis in the idea that meaning is relational, not inherent. Peirce (1998) extends this into his triadic model, distinguishing icons (based on resemblance), indices (causal or existential connections), and symbols (conventional associations). These categories prove especially useful when reading textual details such as clothing, jewellery, photographs, and silences.

Barthes (1972) adds another dimension by distinguishing denotation and connotation, showing how ordinary details carry ideological "myths." His later notion of the "writerly" text (1977) describes works that resist singular interpretation, compelling the reader to become a co-producer of meaning. Eco's (1989) concept of the "open work" resonates with this: the most radical texts are those that deliberately resist closure and thrive on ambiguity.

Equally important are feminist and postcolonial semiotics. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity reveals how repeated acts and silences constitute gender roles, while Cixous (1976) and Spivak (1988) remind us that women's voices are often suppressed within patriarchal discourse, leaving absence itself to signify resistance. Postcolonial theory, especially Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity and ambivalence, highlights how cultural identity in the diaspora is negotiated through everyday signs like dress, food, and ritual.

Methodologically, the paper adopts close reading as interpretive semiotic practice. Rather than treating details as inert description, I read them as signs whose meanings shift depending on context and perspective. The analysis proceeds by identifying recurring signifiers—clothing, silence, jewellery, photographs, gossip, maternal authority—unpacking their denotations and connotations, situating them within semiotic categories, and then exploring how they open competing thematic interpretations. In this way, the narrative's apparent simplicity yields a field of polysemous signification.

Divakaruni's *The Disappearance* as a chronology of signs

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Disappearance* can be productively read as a chronology of signs that gradually accumulate into a network of contested meanings. A semiotic approach emphasizes how each stage of the narrative generates its own set of interpretive possibilities, resisting any singular resolution. In what follows, I first recapitulate the story in a sign-bound sequence, consolidating the major motifs as they appear across time, before turning to the interpretive conclusions that emerge from such mapping.

The story begins with the wife's sudden disappearance during her evening walk, an ordinary domestic activity that is transformed into the central enigma of the text. At this opening moment, her clothing—described as a "yellow-flowered kurta and Nike walking shoes"—becomes the first significant sign. At the denotative level it is no more than sartorial detail, but semiotically it encodes a rich connotative field: cultural rootedness in Indian tradition, patriarchal expectations of modesty, and also her ambiguous negotiation with American consumer culture (Nike). As witnesses recall her more generally in "blue salwaar-kameez," clothing becomes an iconic marker of her difference within American suburbia, while at the same time suggesting her husband's approval of such traditionalism. Already, semiotics demonstrates how a small detail produces conflicting readings: cultural pride, patriarchal containment, or silent refusal to assimilate.

The immediate community response further complicates meaning. Neighbours and acquaintances quickly interpret the event as crime, commenting on how unsafe "this country" has become. Here, gossip functions as a semiotic apparatus, producing interpretations less concerned with the individual woman than with communal anxieties about immigrant vulnerability. For semiotics, gossip is not incidental but rather a discursive sign system that translates disappearance into social commentary, reinforcing group identity through the regulation of women's behaviour.

The husband's reflections on his marriage introduce another cluster of signs. His repeated insistence that "he was a good husband" forms part of a patriarchal myth in Barthes's sense: a cultural code that naturalizes male authority by presenting domination as benevolence. He recalls having chosen her in Calcutta under specific conditions—she had to be "quiet," "pretty," "not brash" and without "too many Western ideas." These recollections are saturated with signs of patriarchal desire for control masked as care. Semiotics reveals that the husband's discourse is not neutral memory but an ideological narrative that encodes gender hierarchy.

The question of silence and refusal becomes more pronounced in his memories of their intimacy. The wife often says, “Please, not tonight,” which he interprets as modest reluctance typical of “a well-bred Indian girl.” Semiotic analysis reveals a more complex scene: her refusal can be read both as submission, where silence denotes repression, and as resistance, where silence signifies non-performance of patriarchal expectations. Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity helps here: refusal to enact gendered scripts is itself a subversive act. Thus, silence itself becomes a polyvalent sign, open to competing interpretations.

The child’s plaintive cry—“Want Mama, want Mama”—represents perhaps the purest semiotic moment of the text. As Peirce would argue, it functions as an index, a direct sign of absence, cutting through discursive elaboration. Unlike the husband’s rationalizations or the community’s gossip, the child’s cry cannot be ideologically disguised; it registers absence as raw truth. Semiotics helps us see how this index destabilizes other readings, exposing the irreducible trauma of maternal loss.

When the husband undertakes public search efforts—advertisements, posters, and reward money—the photograph emerges as another central sign. For Barthes (1981), photographs contain a *punctum*, an affective detail that wounds or haunts. The image of the wife, gazing gravely into sunlight, operates in this way, refusing erasure. Even when the husband later shreds the photos, declaring “Finished,” the semiotic lesson is that erasure is never final: the very act of destruction testifies to her enduring presence.

The arrival of the mother-in-law brings still another layer of signification. Her quick takeover of the household suggests patriarchal continuity, replacing the missing wife with a maternal substitute. Semiotics highlights how this substitution encodes erasure: the wife is overwritten by domestic order, her individuality lost to functional replacement. Yet for the husband and community, this substitution also signifies stability and normalcy. Here again, signs resist closure, oscillating between care and erasure.

Perhaps the most decisive sign cluster occurs with the discovery that the wife’s jewellery is missing from the bank deposit box. On the surface, this might point to theft, but it equally suggests her agency, that she took valuables to finance escape. For the husband, the discovery feeds paranoid speculation that she may have betrayed him. Eco’s (1989) concept of the “open work” is especially apt here: the jewelry is an undecidable sign, equally compatible with narratives of liberation, betrayal, or crime, each plausible but none conclusive.

The narrative concludes not with resolution but with haunting. Even after remarrying and raising children, the husband continues to wonder about her fate. What persists is not clarity but the inescapable memory of her joyful face while playing with their son. The final sign is therefore memory itself, a semiotic residue that refuses closure. The wife, though absent, remains present in the symbolic field, haunting the husband's old age.

From this chronology of signs, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the story exemplifies semiotic polyvalence: every detail—the kurta, the jewelry, the silence, the photograph—produces multiple, often contradictory interpretations. This polysemy is not incidental but structural, reflecting the instability of meaning in diasporic and patriarchal contexts.

Second, the narrative exposes patriarchy's myth of benevolence. The husband's claim of being a "good husband" naturalizes domination, demonstrating how power often disguises itself as care. Semiotics here unmasks the ideological work of such myths, revealing how ordinary language and memory encode systemic inequality.

Third, the story foregrounds silence as agency. The wife's refusals and eventual disappearance are not merely passive; they can be read as active non-performance, a refusal of patriarchal scripting. Semiotics, informed by feminist theory, shows how absence and quietness can signify resistance rather than mere subjugation.

Fourth, the narrative dramatizes diasporic ambivalence. Signs like clothing, jewelry, and community gossip reveal the fragility of immigrant respectability and the pressures on women to embody cultural continuity. Her disappearance destabilizes this myth of coherence, revealing the fractures beneath the façade of stability.

Fifth, the text insists on the haunting persistence of absence. Attempts to destroy photographs or overwrite memory fail, showing how absence itself generates semiotic presence. In Barthes's terms, the punctum of her image continues to wound; in Eco's terms, the open work refuses resolution.

Finally, the overall semiotic lesson is that *The Disappearance* exemplifies the open work par excellence. The wife's fate is undecided not because of narrative oversight but because the story is structured around undecidability. Readers, like the husband and community, must engage in interpretive labor, piecing together signs that never yield certainty. This undecidability is itself meaningful, dramatizing the instability of cultural, gendered, and diasporic sign systems.

In conclusion, Divakaruni's story is less about solving a mystery than about demonstrating how mysteries function semiotically.

The disappearance is not a puzzle to be solved but a sign to be interpreted, and its refusal of resolution compels the reader to confront the multiplicity of meaning. Semiotics finds in this narrative a fertile field: every sign a crossroads, every silence a possibility, every erasure a haunting. The missing woman is never simply absent; she persists as polyvalent presence, ensuring that *The Disappearance* remains not closed but open, a text that teaches us the semiotic power of ambiguity, silence, and resistance.

Semiotic Analysis: Signs and Competing Meanings

A semiotic reading of *The Disappearance* reveals that the story's surface details operate as powerful signifiers. Consider the description of the wife at the grocery store: "She never did wear American clothes" (Divakaruni, 2024). At the denotative level, this merely records sartorial choice; at the connotative level, it encodes cultural rootedness, the immigrant woman's refusal to assimilate. But in the husband's discourse, the same clothing becomes a symbol of patriarchal control—"You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes"—prescribing femininity in terms of tradition. To a feminist reader, however, her consistent refusal to wear "American clothes" may also mark resistance: a quiet assertion of identity against both Americanization and her husband's gaze.

The husband's repeated insistence that he was "a good husband. No one could deny it" (Divakaruni, 2024) functions as another loaded sign. On the surface, it denotes his self-perception as benevolent. Yet, as Barthes (1972) would note, this statement naturalizes the myth of patriarchal goodness—where provision and avoidance of overt violence mask deeper structures of control. His denials of her requests to work, study, or wear different clothes reveal that "goodness" is here a cultural code sustaining male authority. Semiotics uncovers the paradox: what appears as care doubles as coercion.

The child's cry—"Want Mama, want Mama"—is one of the story's most poignant semiotic moments. This utterance functions as a pure index: it points directly to maternal absence without mediation. Unlike the husband's rationalizations or the community's gossip, the child's sign is irreducible. It conveys not explanation but truth of loss, destabilizing adult attempts at closure. The boy thus becomes, unwittingly, the truest interpreter of signs, embodying what Peirce called the "indexical immediacy" of signification.

Jewellery and the discovery of its absence in the bank vault provide another rich field of competing interpretations. The husband's realization that "all her jewelry was gone" (Divakaruni, 2024) could denote theft, but connotatively it suggests premeditation. Did she plan her disappearance, taking resources for survival? Is it betrayal, as the husband's paranoid imagination suggests, proof of elopement with another man? Or is it a clue pointing to crime? Eco's (1989) "open work" is exemplified here: the jewellery becomes an undecidable sign, each reading possible but none definitive.

Silence itself recurs as a crucial semiotic element. Her refusals in intimacy—"Please, not tonight"—can be read as subjugation, the modesty of a "well-bred Indian girl," as the husband interprets it. Yet from a feminist perspective, silence here is also refusal, a disruption of patriarchal scripts of sexual availability. Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity reminds us that refusing to perform prescribed acts is itself an act. Thus, silence in this text signifies both oppression and resistance, its meaning dependent on interpretive position.

The destruction of photographs dramatizes another act of erasure. When the husband shreds her images, declaring, "Finished, he thought. Finished" (Divakaruni, 2024), he seeks narrative closure. Yet semiotically, erasure is never complete. The very act of destruction testifies to the haunting presence of the absent woman. Barthes's (1981) idea of *punctum*—the detail in a photograph that wounds or haunts the viewer—helps explain why the wife's image continues to disturb the husband even after he has tried to obliterate it. The attempt at closure reveals, paradoxically, the impossibility of erasure.

Community gossip, too, operates as a semiotic field. When neighbours suggest that the mother-in-law seemed prepared for the disappearance, gossip functions as cultural text. Spivak (1988) would remind us that such communal chatter constitutes a collective attempt to reassert patriarchal control by interpreting the disappearance in terms of inevitability or scandal. Gossip is less about truth than about producing social meaning, regulating women's behaviour through narrative suspicion.

Finally, the mother-in-law's arrival symbolizes the resilience of patriarchy. "She would come right away… as though she'd been waiting for something like this" (Divakaruni, 2024). Her efficiency in taking over household tasks and rearing the child erases the wife's absence, reinstating domestic order. Semiotics here highlights how replacement functions symbolically: the absent wife is overwritten by maternal authority, reinforcing patriarchal continuity. Yet to a feminist reader, this substitution may also signify violence—the erasure of female subjectivity beneath communal functionality.

Taken together, these close readings show how Divakaruni saturates her narrative with signs whose meanings are contested. Clothing, silence, jewelry, photographs, gossip, maternal presence—each opens interpretive possibilities that resist closure, exemplifying Eco's "open work."

The Disappearance and The Interpretive Differences

At the heart of the story lies the disappearance itself, which functions as a floating signifier. Saussure's insight that signs gain meaning through difference rather than essence explains why the event's meaning is unstable: the disappearance points not to one truth but to the range of interpretive differences. From a patriarchal perspective, it could signify betrayal; from a feminist angle, liberation; from a diasporic reading, the fracture of immigrant respectability; and from a readerly standpoint, the refusal of narrative closure. Eco (1989) describes such texts as paradigmatic "open works," thriving on indeterminacy.

Disappearance also resonates with feminist theories of silence. For Butler (1990), gender is constituted through repetition; refusal to perform expected acts disrupts gender norms. In this light, the wife's ultimate refusal—disappearing entirely—becomes an act of radical resistance. Cixous (1976) would see in her silence a form of écriture féminine, writing herself through absence. Spivak (1988) would remind us that the subaltern woman often cannot "speak" within dominant discourse, but her absence itself may be read as an unsettling semiotic presence.

From a diasporic angle, the disappearance destabilizes the myth of the successful immigrant family. Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity and ambivalence is key: the wife is neither fully assimilated nor fully traditional. Her disappearance marks the refusal of both categories, unsettling the symbolic coherence of diasporic respectability.

Thus, disappearance is not simply an event within the narrative but the central semiotic rupture that generates multiplicity. It dramatizes the instability of meaning itself, forcing both characters and readers to confront undecidability.

Findings

The semiotic analysis of *The Disappearance* demonstrates that Divakaruni constructs a narrative where every sign yields competing meanings, refusing singular resolution. Clothing oscillates between cultural pride, patriarchal prescription, and quiet resistance. The husband's "goodness" naturalizes domination while masking coercion. The child's cry functions as the purest index of absence, cutting through adult rationalizations. The missing jewelry opens contradictory readings—liberation, betrayal, crime—illustrating Eco's open work. Silence and refusal signify both oppression and agency. The destruction of photographs dramatizes the impossibility of erasure. Gossip regulates communal anxieties through interpretive suspicion, while the mother-in-law's presence restores patriarchal continuity at the cost of erasing the wife's subjectivity.

Collectively, these findings reveal how the story exemplifies semiotic plurality. Patriarchal discourse seeks closure by rewriting absence as betrayal or death; feminist readings recover silence as resistance; diasporic frameworks highlight cultural ambivalence; semiotic theory underscores the undecidability of signs. The unresolved disappearance thus becomes the ultimate sign—an emblem of resistance, haunting, and the impossibility of narrative certainty.

Conclusion

Chitra Divakaruni's *The Disappearance* exemplifies the power of literary texts to function as semiotic fields where meaning is not fixed but contested. Through close reading informed by semiotics, feminism, and postcolonial theory, we see how details like clothing, jewelry, silence, gossip, and photographs resist closure, generating competing interpretations. The story problematizes disappearance not as mere absence but as signification, transforming silence into presence and erasure into haunting.

In this sense, the missing woman is never entirely gone. She escapes not only her husband and community but also the reader's desire for resolution. Her disappearance becomes a sign of refusal—resistance to patriarchy, refusal of diasporic respectability, and assertion of undecidability itself. By compelling us to confront the instability of signs, Divakaruni's narrative dramatizes the politics of meaning in diaspora, showing how silence and absence can carry as much semiotic power as speech and presence.

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