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Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*: A Saga of Peripheral Existence**Darbarsing D. Girase**Assistant Professor,
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Nandurbar-425412**Introduction:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a collection of eleven short stories presents portraits of Indian and India-reared American women who are forced to live a peripheral existence owing to the pressures of cultural norms, parental and familial expectations, traditions and customs aimed at conforming them to perpetuate patriarchal interests. Peripheral existence here indicates the lack of voice, authority and sense of equality for woman in a socio-cultural set up rooted in patriarchy leading to their helplessness, powerlessness, marginalization, subordination and subservience. The alien land of America might hold promise of individual freedom, financial independence, professional betterment, space to reinvent self and assert individual identity but baggage of the past is not easy to give up, holding them back, shaping their consciousness, influencing their actions and decisions. The lives of these women is a saga of peripheral existence caught between pulls and pressures of the old and the past and hopes and aspirations of the new, the present and the future. Sometimes they are seen making bold and courageous choices to carve new identities and at other times seen succumbing to the seemingly overwhelming odds. The present paper attempts to explore and understand the exciting trajectory of the lives of these women.

Development and Analysis:

The Bats shows a docile Indian wife who finally one day dares to leave the house of her wife-basher husband because of more than severe beating. She is sheltered by her old uncle living in the countryside who keeps her with loving care. But the wife could not stay with him for long and decides to go back to her husband because as she says she "...couldn't stand it, the stares and whisper of the women, down in the market place." (Divakaruni, 1995: 11-12) The social norms of wifely duty expect her to live with her husband for better or worse and the pressure of it is too much for the lady to ignore. This happens easily perhaps because, as pointed out by Uma Parameswaran albeit in different context, "...women, with centuries of cultural indoctrinations and expectations are able to adapt more quickly" (Parameswaran, 1998: 32) even to the injustices. As expected the husband does not mend his abusive ways forcing her to again seek shelter with the old uncle in the village when things get unbearable. However she inevitably has to return to the husband and this time even before "...bruises had faded all the way" (Divakaruni, 1995: 16) and the story ends indicating the utter helplessness and subservience of the wife in the given socio-cultural set up where her living away from husband even for the valid reason invites neighbouring women's contempt and derision forcing her into submission.

Clothes is about Sumita, a Bengali young woman married to a Bengali man in America. She leaves her homeland full of dreams about happy married life in America. But the dream turns into nightmare when the husband is murdered by the burglars with pangs of widowhood gaping at her at a young age. The story shows that whether it is India or America life of a widow in Indian home is never easy. Significantly life of a widow in India is described as "Doves with

cut-off wings.”(Divakaruni, 1995: 33) Widowed Sumita here make up a sight of pity and devastation left with limited options. She can either go back home and spend the rest of her life as a widow, a life of pity, humiliation and harassment or remain in America and be with her in-laws serving them with a smiling face who are ‘good’ enough for they do not blame that it was her “...bad luck that brought death to their son so soon after marriage” (Divakaruni, 1995: 31), something that often happens back home in India. She chooses the latter option for it at least offers an opportunity for her to make an independent living and carve an identity of her own “...here in this new, dangerous land” (Divakaruni, 1995: 33) called America. The pathetic case of Sumita is better understood if one ponders over a reverse situation, a curious little uncomfortable question, what would have been the outcome had there been a death of wife instead of husband? Then perhaps the husband would have caught the next flight to India within few days to look for another wife.

Marriage for Indian woman is almost like a one way street, a point of no return. Once set on the path of marriage she has to march on and on and fulfill the obligations that come with it because the onus is on woman to sustain the marital relationships in all eventualities. This is particularly challenging where marriages are arranged very often between perfect strangers. Pratima’s case in *Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs* testifies it. A rich Bengali landlord’s daughter she is married to a small time Bengali mechanic owning a dingy garage in an undesirable part of certain American town for he was portrayed as “...the owner of automobile empire” (Divakaruni, 1995: 44) by the matchmaker. Such a deception is easy in a land where foreign-based Indians are considered as inevitably rich, successful and fortunate. Pratima’s admission reveals her anxiety when she says, “Things *here* aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 43) Married for years Pratima successfully hides her husband’s poverty and deception from her parents portraying a picture of happy and prosperous married life back home till her niece visits them in America and discovers the unpleasant truth. Pratima hides it firstly because cultural pressure expects her to find her happiness with the man she is tied to, and secondly because she does not want to disappoint her parents and hurt their honour who had boastfully married her off with high hopes to a foreigner. The expectations are fulfilled and the family honour is protected, however, at the cost of poor woman’s happiness, future, security and life.

The mother in *The Word Love* has brought up her daughter warning her about the inevitably disastrous results of falling in love or seeking happiness through it. To her “...an unmarried girl is like a firebrand in a field of ripe grain.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 66) It is so because that is what life of widowhood has taught her. A widow’s life in India is never easy; she has to lead a blemish free life, live simply to avoid stares. Any deviation from it and she can be easily defamed, the punishment of which can be borne by her daughters who may not get married off which is a great risk in a society where woman has her future, happiness, honour, security tied to marriage bond, where woman’s identity and existence is defined by marriage institution beyond which she has little or no future. The mother had brought up her daughter with deep love, care and strict sense of discipline. She naturally feels betrayed and snaps ties with her daughter when the daughter falls in love and enters live-in relationship with an American man while studying in America causing immense heartburn to both. It is the consequence of life on the margins which is a sort of tight rope walk with little options. The mother’s extreme reaction to daughter’s falling in love can be better understood in this context.

The Maid Servant’s Story shows that fettered lives of Indian women remain more or less the same irrespective of their social station. It focuses mainly on two women, the wife of a

Bengali aristocrat and her maid servant named Sarala who comes from lower class background. The wife seems to enjoy some authority in the household but it comes from her husband and depends on his pleasure. The husband put up with the wife's taking pity on Sarala, her keeping of Sarala even if no servant was required, her giving lessons in literacy to Sarala even if he disliked it, because the wife after all was pregnant bearing the heir of the family. But when the wife went to hospital to deliver her baby the husband fired the maid pretending that Sarala's indecent background (namely her parasite mother making her sleep with various men "...for the money" (Divakaruni, 1995: 138) before her becoming the maid in the Bandopadhyaya household) harmed the reputation of the family. The real reason, however is, the maid had resisted the husband's sexual advances. The husband's sexist mindset that the maid must satisfy his sexual hunger because "once a whore always a whore" (Divakaruni, 1995: 145) sends her back to the gutter of prostitution from where she desperately wanted to come out. The wife when back home senses the truth but can do nothing about it in order to save security of home for herself and child. Her going extraordinarily silent since then can be understood in this context indicating her helplessness and powerlessness in the prevailing social system.

The Disappearance shows an Indian wife married to an educated young Indian man in America. From surface it appears a happily married couple devoted to each other. But one day the wife suddenly disappears. From fear of accident, abduction and foul play in the beginning it slowly occurs that she had willingly left in order to escape from the outwardly liberal, 'cultured' but inwardly dominating husband who wanted to 'control' her. A passage that describe the husband's devotion to his wife and his manly firmness also adds that, "Once in a while, of course, he had to put his foot down, like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes" (Divakaruni, 1995: 172), which shows the husband's desire to keep her subservient to him, dominate and control her life almost to the point of forcing her disappear. The story shows that nothing much change for the Indian wife whether it is India or America because the male Indian mindset is conditioned to treat wife as subordinate to him expecting female submission and meekness. That the wife is left with no other option but to disappear to escape his suffocating 'control' serves to prove her marginalized existence.

"Everyone knows a daughter belongs to her parents, a wife to her husband." (Divakaruni, 1995: 150) When this is the rule that governs a particular society what woman wants, what she desires, what her wishes and aspirations are, are of little consequence because basically she belongs. She is an object, a thing to be used and an object's existence has purpose only in relation to its use. In the patriarchal scheme of things woman's existence has purpose only in so far as it serves the patriarchal interests. *The Ultrasound* testifies to this naked reality in Indian society where Runu, a daughter-in-law in a rich provincial Bhattacharjee family in Bengal, is made to abort her foetus because it is female for the simple reason that it is not "...fitting that the eldest child of the Bhattacharjee household should be a female." (Divakaruni, 1995: 224) Being a mother after all Runu does not want to abort her baby but who cares. Even her parents feel too weak to protest for what is at stake is their daughter's future and security of home. Runu is served with the ultimatum to either fall in line or leave husband's house. Such objectification of woman in old times was normal but it is this unashamed presence of it even in contemporary times that makes renowned feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argue (in her essay "Feminism and Critical Theory") that society has not moved far away from the slave mode of production of yesteryear.

To seek happiness, love and pleasure in life is natural. But when one is brought up with certain values that expect a person to conform, meekly accept whatever comes one's way, good

or bad, one is bound to feel guilty while wishing to be genuinely happy. The pursuit of happiness in such case can never come without guilt and embarrassment which is the side effect of subordinated and marginalized consciousness. Something of this sort is seen in the character of India born and reared woman Abha in America in the story *Affair*. Even while living for years in a free and liberal society of America it takes long for Abha to realise that “*The old rules aren’t always right. Not here, not even in India*” (Divakaruni, 1995: 270) and that “It’s not wrong to want to be happy...To want more out of life than fulfilling duties you took on before you knew what they truly meant.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 270) After “...all those sexless, loveless years” (Divakaruni, 1995: 248) in her married life and playing for years “a good wife” (Divakaruni, 1995: 249) Abha finally decides to “...start learning, once more, to live” (Divakaruni, 1995: 272) by pursuing happiness to her heart’s content.

The final story *Meeting Mrinal* shows two Calcutta born and brought up girlhood friends, Mrinal and Asha; one pursues education and career to become a top executive in the multinational company but remains unmarried while the other halfway leaves her education in India for she is ‘lucky’ to get chosen by an Indian American to happily play his housewife. Life seemed beautiful for Asha till one day after years of seemingly happy married life her husband ditches her with their teenage son for his secretary. The story shows Asha’s desperate attempts to pretend happy married life and hiding of her failed marriage from her best friend when the two meet after years, and the story ends with somewhat awkward situation with materially successful Mrinal admitting pain of loneliness and admiring Asha’s happy married life which is not. Curiously Asha feels herself responsible for her failed marriage which is not in the least her fault which underscores the fact that the grooming of female Indian consciousness is such that even for man’s fault woman is conditioned to feel the burden of guilt. The man who turned unfaithful merrily went away with another woman without remorse or regret leaving Asha with a sense of shame and humiliation which is typical of the subordinated consciousness of India-bred women. If the subordinated consciousness makes the wife in *The Bats* submit herself to the abusive husband, the same makes Asha feel guilty for the fault of her husband.

Conclusion:

The above analysis shows that the social pressure of adhering to wifely duty forces the wife in *The Bats* to submit herself to abusive husband. Sumita’s fate in *Clothes* shows the pity and pain of widowhood in Indian cultural context. Pratima’s case in *Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs* shows that arranged marriage system practiced in India intentionally or unintentionally serves to strengthen female subservience. *The Word Love* show’s that the mother’s extreme reaction to her daughter’s liberating experience of live-in relationship is the result of the mother’s subordinated consciousness. *The Maid Servant’s Story* shows that fettered status of Indian women remains irrespective of their social station and it also remains the same whether it is India or America is seen in *The Disappearance*. *The Ultrasound* highlights the objectification of woman’s life at its worst. Abha’s case in *Affair* demonstrates that subordinated consciousness makes a woman feel guilty even in pursuing happiness in life or feel the burden of guilt even for man’s fault as seen in Asha’s case in *Meeting Mrinal*. These illustrative cases show that life of a woman portrayed in *Arranged Marriage* is a saga of peripheral existence.

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