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Between Two Worlds: Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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Abstract:

With the rise of diasporic women writers, the images of immigrated women have often been discussed in literature. It has been debated that feminism is now an outdated issue and women have now successfully achieved equality in society and have defied the patriarchal norms. More so, women writers of Indian diaspora are equipped with better themes than the rights of women, social injustice, gender inequality and so on. The present paper analyzes the images of women as depicted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her famous short story collection *Arranged Marriage* and tries to find out whether the immigrated status brings any change in their fate and attitude towards life.

Keywords: Diaspora, feminism, immigrated women, social movement, alteration of social reality, marginalized, repressed, womanhood, muted female, patriarchy, social construct, sexual politics, and gender arrangements.

Feminist approach is one of the most prominent approaches in modern literature. Feminism in general advocates the rights of women. It can also be taken as a set of thoughts allied to a social movement for alteration of social reality. Feminism is not just a matter of theory, but it is a curious fact that serious writing by women is invariably regarded as feminist writing.

Though literature is called the mirror of society which reflects all its cultural and sociological aspects, it had all along been turned to the point of view of the male element, before feminism came into existence. Woman was often 'marginalized', 'repressed', or 'silenced' in literary works. The role of women was restricted by their womanhood and therefore the experiences of the muted female forming almost half of the society was not reflected in literature. But with the rise of feminism women became aware of the fact that their inferiority is not ordained in the heaven and that gender is neither natural nor immutable rather, it is a creation of patriarchy. It is a construct which can be deconstructed. Women realized that the patriarchal system, which existed since long time, no longer served the needs of rapidly changing society where women were trying to emancipate themselves and define their potential. Revolting against their marginalization they started questioning the sexual politics and gender arrangements.

Feminism, in literature proclaimed its existence with the arrival of Mary Wollstonecraft (d1797) and Jane Austen (d1817) on the literary scenario, who are considered as the

foremothers of this movement. For the first time they advocated the dignity, intelligence and basic human potential of the female sex. However, it was not until the late 19th century that it turned into a self-conscious movement.

Feminist criticism, as a distinctive and concerted approach to literature stretched its paws in the late 1960s. Now this is the most discussed branch of modern theoretical discourse, having the women and their social, legal and cultural freedom as well as equality at the centre of what Virginia Woolf called a "patriarchal" society that has hindered and prevented women from realizing their own identity.

In France Simone de Beauvoir made a vociferous discontent in her work *"The Second Sex"* (1949) against the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object or 'other' and remarked that:

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman....it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature."(p.301)

The aim of feminism is to establish and defend equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women. Indian English women novelists such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpandey, Bharati Mukherjee, Githa Hariharan, Kamala Markandeya, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy, Mahashweta Devi, Nayantara Sahgal etc. have attempted to deal with this theme in their works. These novelists have portrayed women's issues realistically, both psychologically and physically in their novels. They break the traditional literary and social norms, studied deep into psyche of their characters and have projected various images of women and their status in the society. They have written about women in a varied cultural perspective.

These woman writers have unveiled the subtle process of oppression and gender differentiation at work in the family as well as in male-oriented societies. One of the features according to them is of their upbringing, their inculcation as girls into the socially defined roles as daughter/ wife/mother etc. They show great sensitivity and awareness in the portrayal of the ways and means through which a girl is prepared for her future status in society. The factors that influence her include cultural aspects, social and psychological factors such as the structure of the family, woman's position in it, female sexuality, the trauma of the monthly cycle and delivery of children.

They have traced the quest for self definition of women, who mostly are educated and modern but who cannot easily shake of their background and the manner in which they have been brought up. These writers have provided the voice of protest to their female characters more or less in their works and in this sense they have created a pattern of new study because they have dared to shatter the myth of the male dominated social system.

The twentieth century women writers move towards a more complex theme. These writers have originality, authenticity, conflict and the native touch in their works which can be felt throughout while reading them. Over the years with the changing political, social and economic scenario, women's literature by Indian women living abroad have evolved to demonstrate some universal experiences that question along with patriarchal social norms, the

paradoxes, ambiguities and the contradictions of old and the new, convention and change, ethics and freedom.

One of the prominent Indian-American woman novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says in an article published by the Indian Embassy in 1999 that many of us articulate in our works the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here and show them emerging, at least in many cases, as stronger and self-reliant women. Some of our women characters are good role models for women readers and women activists.

Arranged Marriage (1995), is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's debut assortment of short stories. The collection has 11 short stories, most of which deal with the experiences of immigrant women along with the socio-cultural encounter that an Indian woman experiences when she moves towards the west.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1957 in Calcutta (India). She spent her childhood there, attended a convent school and afterwards had her Bachelor degree from the University of Calcutta. In the year 1976 when she was nineteen years old she moved towards the United States. In America she continued her studies and completed her Master's degree from Wright States University in Dayton, Ohio. And after that she completed her Ph. D. from the University of California at Berkley. Presently she is working as a teacher of creative writing at the University of Houston and is living with her husband Murthy and two children Anand and Abhay.

Chitra Banerjee is an award winning author and poet. Her works are widely known and have been translated into more than 13 languages.

She is also a social worker. She became engrossed in women's problems when she saw the so-called black women suffering in the country of white men, America. Seeing the troubles of these women she established Maitri- a hotline for South Asian women who are suffering from domestic violence and other abuses.

In the present collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, Chitra Banerjee tells stories about immigrant Indian women who are both modern and at the same time are trapped by cultural transformation. All of them are struggling to shape out an identity of their own in an unknown country. The clash between the cultures of the native land and the adopted country is the focal point of all the stories in this collection. All the protagonists in this collection face the problem of cultural displacement. They are caught in a web of dualism-tradition v/s modernization. Their displacement gives birth to situations in which they find themselves helpless. Thus all these protagonists are trapped between the two ideologies and are desperately trying to find a way out. Their problem is to decide whether to break away from or to adapt with the changing socio-cultural scenario.

In this book Divakaruni has explored complex diasporic identities and has articulated deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and America and has showed them emerging in many cases stronger and self-reliant women. All the women in these stories are full of energy and potentiality, who in some way or other question the rotten values and tradition of the age which is forcibly imposed upon them by the society. All these women

challenge their present and take risks in their lives even though future is not very clear to them whether it is Aunty Pratima in *Silver Pavements and Golden Roof*, Sumita in *Clothes*, Meena in *A Perfect Life*, Shona in *the Word Love* or Arundhati in the story *Ultrasound*.

From the very first story of this collection *Bats* to the last one *Meeting Mrinal*, the women protagonists are portrayed constantly trying to strive a balance between the old conventional believes and the new way of life in America.

Through this work Divakaruni has questioned the basic man-woman relationship in Indian society, which is essentially patriarchal. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental text *The Second Sex* says that marriage is the destiny tradition offered to women by society. Finding a suitable match for their daughters is the sole concern of parents in our society and this task of finding a suitable match is so inherent in the Indian culture that it is believed that the whole responsibility of parents towards the girl is to get her married. Similarly the syndrome of Patipermeshwar and Satisavitri is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche which is very difficult to be overcome. In the story *Clothes* Sumita's marriage is arranged with Somesh, a boy who runs a store in America. After marriage Sumita surrenders herself completely to Somesh because she was taught that the biggest duty of a wife towards her husband is to keep him happy and satisfied. However, when after sometimes Somesh returns back to America Sumita finds herself unable to recall even his face. Through this story the writer has in fact presented the paradox of an arranged marriage. She writes again, Sumita who has constantly been fed on traditional ideas feels that it is her moral duty to act like a good wife...serving tea to her mother in law's friends, covering her head with her sari...not addressing her husband by his name etc.

When Sumita goes to America we see that her life there is not different from that of other women living in India. Her life as she herself says in the story is 'frozen'. Her world is a small, glass world. It is this syndrome of playing Satisavitri that does not allow her to be herself, to live life as she wants for herself. However the awakening comes towards the climax of the story when Somesh is murdered by someone and Sumita feels that her life has also ended with Somesh's death. She further realizes that her life, her happiness, her sorrows, her clothes etc had never been for her own but had always been for her husband and his family. At the end of the story we see her standing in her bedroom in front of a mirror in a state of introspection. Tradition asks her to wear white clothes and live an austere life of the widows while the mirror, which symbolizes her inner self, shows her a different image. She visualizes a new independent woman in the mirror. Ultimately she listens to her heart and rejects what fate has given to her and decides not to become a dove with cut-off wings but an independent bird ready to fly over the sky. Thus in this story she is able to reject the widow's clothes and lifestyle that the society customarily imposes on a woman.

Bats, the first story of this collection is just opposite to what *Clothes* is or stands for. The protagonist here is completely tied by the traditional ties. She is a victim of domestic violence and desperately wants to escape from her husband. But despite all her efforts she finds herself unable to break from the myth of Patiparmeshwar. Her life with her husband has turned into hell so she escapes to her uncle's home in her native village with her child where

she finds little comfort. However, a small letter from her husband and a promise not to repeat the mistakes again is enough for her to compel to return once again in that hell like world.

In the story *Affairs* we meet Abha and Meena, best friends but two characters quite unlike to one another. Both the women feel somewhat that marriage for them has proved blunder of life, for their husbands are not like persons they had thought to spend life with. Abha and Meena both are in search of themselves in their own ways. Both the women are not happy with their mismatched partners in their married life. They feel suffocated with their conventional roles as wives but the traditional ties do not allow both of them to the choice to be themselves. They realize that time has changed their priorities of life and feel that convention gives no scope to transformation. They make us realize that old rules are not always right, neither in America nor even in India. It is essential to break from traditional rules that are rotten and are putting hindrance in our way to move on in life. Abha accepts and realizes the fact that her own individuality has no place in the system of marriage. Through this story the author has tried to shatter the romantic notion of marriage. She suggests that marriage is not always the union of two souls and individuals who are made for each other, under such circumstances it becomes a burden where no evolution is possible.

In the story 'Meeting Mrinal', both the characters Mrinal as well as Asha feel the conflict between tradition and modernity. Asha is a simple homemaker, while Mrinal is a single working woman, smart, modern and fashionable. Asha always wants to become independent like Mrinal and wants to free herself from the traditional roles of a wife, a mother and a daughter in law. But we are surprised to see that Mrinal feels that Asha has all good things in her life which give her completeness.

Migration and displacement does not cause problem to women only, even men after leaving their country and settling in an alien country also feel the conflict between traditional values and way of life, which they carry with themselves to the country of migration as "socio-cultural baggage" and the modern way of life which they are expected to adapt in the new country. Divakaruni has dealt with this issue in her next story of this collection "Doors". Doors is the story of Preeti. She is a sensitive girl who is brought up in America and her husband Deepak who has settled to America before sometimes after getting a job there. Preeti's mother is not ready for her marriage with Deepak as she understands very well that America and India stand for two different ideologies and are like two poles apart. They can never go together. Indian values are based around the concepts like "Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam", "I" is not a concern there, but in America privacy is an important part of peoples' lives. In the beginning we see Preeti and Deepak living a happy and contented married life and think that their marriage is based on mutual esteem, it seems to be something more than the traditional wedding but ultimately this proves a misconception. Problem in their lives arrives when Raj, a distant cousin of Deepak comes to stay with them. Deepak is quite happy to imagine that he will stay now a good amount of time with his cousin whom he loves a lot, but Raj becomes a burden for Preeti who is not able to understand the joint family or extended family values that an Indian has. She is very much used to of the American notion of privacy. Here the conflict is between "I" and "We". Preeti does not understand the Indian values and on the other side Raj is also unable to understand the concept of privacy that Preeti wants in her marriage. The close-door system of America is a riddle to Raj as he

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had never seen any door being closed in the Indian families. Here the writer has suggested that in an inter- country wedding when values change a person has to adapt to new values. In the absence of this flexibility, marriages are predestined to fail.

Divakaruni, in these stories has presented characters who look for a better future and this she does in her own unique ways. She has showed the protagonists in particular situations and has left the rest for the readers.

Jayanti, whom we meet in the story "Silver Pavements and Golden Roof", is an optimistic character. She is the victim of racial attack in America, but she does not lose hope and feels that the situation will surely change one day.

In the short story Ultrasound Chitra Banerjee has touched upon the issue of abortion. Both the characters in this story are pregnant, and through the ultrasound reports we come to know that Arundhati is carrying a girl child in her womb and Anjali a boy child. In most of the Indian families people are biased towards a girl child who is considered a burden and an unwanted addition to the family. The best solution that many of them opt to get rid of it is abortion. Arundhati is also forced to abort her unborn child but she decides to escape from it leaving the house of her in laws. But Divakaruni has not tried to justify this decision of leaving the husband's house anywhere in the story, she has merely showed us the consequences, not the path.

Woman is considered the most complicated creation of God. It is very difficult to answer what makes a woman complete, is it a family, a husband, her own children or something else? Does motherhood complete the picture of a woman? Divakaruni has tried to deal with this question in the story A Perfect Life. The protagonist of this story Meera feels that the life she is living having a good job, a caring and supportive boyfriend who gives her enough space, is perfect in every sense. She appreciates and loves her independence but sometimes also feels the curse of solitude. Her life changes when she undergoes the experience of motherhood after meeting an unknown child, whom she names Krishna. She becomes psychologically attached to the child and wants to adopt him but she can't do this because of the rules and regulation of adoption in America. Ultimately Krishna disappears from the house he is bound to live in as ordered by the adoption law. His disappearance greatly affects her but with the passage of time she comes out of her depression. The mask she is supposed to wear- the mask of education, the mask of social pressure, the mask of controlled behaviour and her own limitations, she feels don't allow her to be the victim of circumstances.. Thus she is ready to compromises. But her dream of living a perfect life with Richard and Krishna remains to be just a fantasy.

The protagonist of the story Disappearance faces a very different situation. For the first time Divakaruni has presented a male protagonist in this story, a man married to a quite pretty, well bred Indian girl. It is an arranged marriage. They are happy in their married life, but one day his wife disappears. Now he is a lost man, not knowing how and why about the person he has married. He loses his peace of mind as he realises that he knows nothing about his wife even though he has a child. This realization makes him look back to his married life. He realizes that in his married life he has rejected and refused his wife so many times- like

when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes, he didn't allow her to do so. These aspects of her life were considered worthless by him, he had never tried to understand the person his wife was. He failed to understand that silence doesn't always mean acceptance or agreement. He had always remained busy with his own world and had no time for his wife. He never noticed the anxieties felt by his wife. Again for him forced sex in marriage was a normal thing and he thinks that it is the right of husband and duty of the wife to satisfy him with her body whenever he needs it. There is no understanding and concept of equality in their marriage. In this story the writer has presented before us for the first time the viewpoint of a male character and has interestingly made him to feel that he has not treated his wife properly as an individual. However the disappearance of wife itself suggests that she has taken her step towards liberty. It is very clearly suggested in the story that marriage for her had become a sort of confinement both physically as well as intellectually in which no progress was possible. The only solution she could find was to break the wedding tie and leave the house secretly.

In *The Maid Servant's Story* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has dealt with human relationships at various phases of life. Here we have the relationship between Manisha and Bijoy, Deepamashi and Manisha, Manisha and her mother and the relationship between Manisha's parents. However, it is the story of Sarala, who is the maidservant in Manisha's parents' house. In this story we meet women from different generations and economical class of the society. Manisha is a girl, daughter of a traditional Bengali family. Her migration to America brings a transformation in her personality. Now she appreciates the notion of freedom and liberty in her life and longs for it. Her idea about relationship is entirely westernized. She is more closed to Deepamashi as compared to her own mother. As a child she had always craved for parental love which she never got. She is emotionally starved and accordingly in all her relationships she does not feel the complete contentment that a perfect relationship should give. We find her restless even in her relationship with Bijoy and many times feeling guilty being tackled by traditional values. She blames her mother for her current juxtapositions.

Sarala, the maid-servant is a person dedicated to her work. However when the mistress of the house is ill and is admit to the hospital, her husband tries to seduce Sarala. No sign of guilt is seen anywhere on his face when he enters into Sarala's room with mal-intentions in his mind. He tells her not to act so virtuous- "once a whore always a whore". And when he finds his plan not working he threatens her and calls her a bitch. Sarala is bound to leave the house and adopt the profession of a prostitute. Now because he is a reputed man, and the morals in our society are made only for women, he does not feel the guilt that is felt by Manisha. The writer has here questioned upon the double standard values of society. In marriage, dedication and loyalty are considered to be the most essential things that a woman should possess for long life of her marriage. Well what about men? Does not this tradition stand on double standard values?

Through these stories Divakaruni has suggested that modern women are ready to move towards a life of their own in which there is no one to command them or restrict them from doing what they want to do for themselves, for their own happiness in life. All these stories very clearly prove that the change in country or displacement does not bring any

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change in the notion of 'womanliness' for a woman, she remains a second class citizen even in so called developed countries which are world famous for their ideas of equality and liberty. There can be no change in the predicament of women until and unless they themselves recognize and realize their own potentialities and capabilities and take their steps into the direction of making themselves free from traditional ties and conventional roles. A woman's predicament is associated always with her body and thus to attain power she should look at herself as an entity not only possessed with the body of women but as an individual having feminine strength.

Explaining her reason behind writing Divakaruni has once said that it is important for her to write about her own reality and that of her community. She writes with a purpose and for a purpose. Through her writing she tries to help people knowing what is right for them for she believes in the fact that happiness will not be ours until we know what is right for us. The quest for happiness and harmony is what the characters in this short story collection are trying to achieve. They are also questioning the values of old traditions and are seeking to accomplish something innovative.

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