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Destabilisation of the Traditional Marital Institution in *Affair* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Chocolate* by Manju Kapur

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Abstract:

It's an attempt to focus on the subversion of the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage by women in the two short stories, *Chocolate* and *Affair*, written by Manju Kapur and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni respectively. In both the short stories the two protagonists, Abha and Tara, are shocked into questioning the patriarchal subjugation within the traditional institution of marriage because of their husband's actual and suspected adultery. Once the two protagonists begin to identify their oppression, they attempt to gain ground to rectify their position within the means available to them. The paper focuses on the process of unlearning undergone in order to opt out of or change the oppressive situation women find themselves in. The thematic similarity between the two short stories makes a combined and comparative study of the two short stories insightful and relevant.

Keywords: Gender, Marital, Divorce, Feminism, Heteropatriarchal Subversion, Patriarchal Oppression, Indian Women Authors.

Manju Kapur (born 1948, Amritsar) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born 1956, Kolkata) are two seminal writers of Indian descent who depict the positionality of women within the traditional Indian marital domestic set up in their works. Their protagonists are often women who grapple with issues of displacement, empowerment and disempowerment, alienation, isolation, identity and selfhood in contemporary times within the institution of marriage and family. Manju Kapur, a celebrated novelist, won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, in 1999, for her debut novel *Difficult Daughters*. Post which she went on to pen many critically acclaimed works such as *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008), *Custody* (2011) to name a few. Her short story *Chocolate* was first published in a collection titled *A Storehouse of Tales: Contemporary Indian Women Writers*, in 2001. Appreciated by both critics and readers alike, Manju Kapur's work has inspired many screen adaptations. Her novel *Custody* was the basis of *Yeh Hain Mohabbatein* and *Pardes*

Mein Hain Mera Dil was based on her novel *The Immigrant* - both productions of Balaji Telefilms. A similarity shared by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose works *Sister of my Heart* was adapted into a Tamil Tele series, and *Mistress of Spices* was made into a movie of the same name by Gurinder Chadha and Paul Mayeda Berges, starring Aishwarya Rai. Divakaruni, a notable Indian-American writer, has a number of literary works to her credit as well. She debuted as a writer with a collection of poems, followed by the short stories collection titled *Arranged Marriage* in 1995, post which she went on to write many notable works such as *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Before We Meet the Goddess* (2016), *The Palace of Illusion* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) to name a few. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni arrived in America from Kolkata, in 1976, proceeded to pursue Master's degree in English at the Wright State University (WSU), and later went on to teach at the University level. Another similarity with Manju Kapur, who too had studied and taught English at the higher education level. Divakaruni's works mostly focus on the experiences and struggles of first-generation immigrants from India and their endeavour to adapt to the American culture and lifestyle. In her writings she articulates the quotidian experiences of Indian women in their newly adopted land and especially focuses on their marital experiences and ordeals. Divakaruni's critically acclaimed collection of short stories titled *Arranged Marriage*, published in 1995, which includes the short story *Affair*, focusses on the myriad of issues faced by women concerning their diasporic experience and domestic marital set up. Issues such as clash of culture and tradition between the Indian and American value system, widowhood, racism, divorce, domestic abuse, abortion find articulation in the short stories of this collection. Both Manju Kapur and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni works share a certain affinity in terms of the thematic concerns they focus on in their writing, which then, makes a common perusal and inquiry of their work a potentially rich source of academic insight. The two short stories, *Affair* and *Chocolate*, which are a focus of this paper, take up the theme of domestic discord and abuse which originate within a traditional heteropatriarchal Indian marriage. These works in their own unique way attempt to interrogate the various underlying reason for strife and dissonance faced by women arising from adherence to a traditional set up of a family which in some cases becomes not only limiting but downright abusive for women. The two short stories explore the mechanism employed by women to face, understand, negotiate and manage the situations in which they find themselves.

Abha and Tara, the protagonists of Divakaruni's *Affair* and Kapur's *Chocolate*, respectively, find themselves faced with marital difficulties, both of them have internalised

typical patriarchal notions of femininity and domesticity which shaped their sense of self and identity. However, their experience of the structural subjugation (of women) implicit within the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage, leaves them reeling, awakens them to the inherent oppression of women and provokes them to subsequently search for ways to challenge and subvert their socially sanctioned systemic enthrallment. Tara the protagonist of Manju Kapur's short story *Chocolate*, is a woman with a typical life trajectory. Educated in an all-girls convent school, she chooses the 'light' and 'graceful' subject of English for her graduation, which to her surprise, turns out to be more difficult than she anticipated, "She chooses English Honours, considered a soft option...turns out to be not such a soft option after all" (Kapur 67). In the initial part of the story Tara's sense of self is defined in terms of her domestic achievements, marriage etc. Indicated by the fact that when the timing of her marriage and final year exams clash, Tara chooses to prioritise the former - "By the time Tara's result are out, she has come back from her honeymoon. She has got a third division, and is mildly surprised that she passed at all" (Kapur 68). This dependence and focus on the marital is encouraged by her husband as well, who, when Tara attains a third division, consoled her by remarking "Never mind darling...You have me" (Kapur 68). However, she faces the consequences of this absolute dependence when she discovers her husband's affair - "After she had gone through a gamut of emotions ranging from shock, confusion, despair, anger and resentment, she toyed with the idea of knocking her brains out" (Kapur 70). Her marriage was what Tara's existence pivoted around, when that is destabilised and revealed as abusive, she faces an identity crisis and considers ending her life. Here we see how her sense of self is so significantly dependent on the domestic and marital, that a threat to that becomes a threat to her life and her very existence itself. However, its noteworthy that the word "toyed" is used to convey her brief consideration of suicide. Toys are associated with children which by extension suggest certain childish impulse and lack of maturity. So, what is implied is that this impulse is capricious, therefore, Tara in the heat of the moment considers taking this drastic step, but she only "toys" with this thought. Hereon, Tara begins to identify the crippling aspects of her marriage, couched in supposed actions of love, and commences to define herself outside of it.

Similarly, Abha, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story *Affair*, has to face the possibility of her husband, perhaps, engaging in an extramarital affair marital before she too begins to identify the flaws of the system and bring about progressive changes. Abha is exposed to the reality of an affair when her husband sadistically drops this information about her close friend - "Meena is having an affair" (Divakaruni 231). On hearing this, Abha cuts her finger while chopping vegetables and starts to bleed. What is significant in this seemingly minor

incident is that a marital upset, whether one's own or not, directly poses a threat to the physical body. This incident has a certain affiliation with Tara's response in *Chocolate*. In both the cases what is noticeable is the correlation of domestic upheaval with the bodily. This then becomes indicative of the paramount status of the marital in the lives of the women where a threat to the domestic quickly translates into a threat to their physical self. Further, the fact that in both the cases (minor in Abha's case) the harm or its thought, is self-conceived and not inflicted by their husbands goes on to exhibit the deep-seated internalisation, of the correlation between marital bliss and well-being.

The individual experiences catalyses both the women into questioning their traditional social training and search for ways to surmount their subjugation. Both Tara and Abha attempt to develop a sense of identity and self beyond the marital and take measures to extricate themselves from the coils of the disadvantageous situations in which they find themselves. Tara comes to realise her husband, Abhay's, infidelity on her own. Abhay is not only sexually unfaithful; he also refuses to acknowledge his sexual impotency and gaslights Tara into believing that their childless state is due to her. Abha, on the other hand is exposed to the possibility of adultery by her husband, Ashok, who breaks the news of her friend, Meena's, affair to her. Later on, Abha suspects him of carrying out an affair with the same friend. The dysfunctionality of Abha and Ashok's marriage is obvious from the way Ashok constantly baits Abha, his intention behind breaking the news of Meena's affair is only to traumatise her. Further evidences from the text point towards a breakdown of genuine communication between the two - "The look of sympathy on Ashok's face was so real that even I, who knew better, was almost fooled" (Divakaruni 232). Their relationship is characterised by faux emotions and twisted manipulation on the part of Ashok. The rupture in their respective marital set ups, in the two short stories, begins with the cognizance or the possibility of sexual infidelity of their husbands, whereon, Tara and Abha, begin to recognize certain underlying problematic concerns specific to their marriages and other inherent problems characteristic of the structure itself. This awareness of the dysfunctional and abusive elements of their marriages triggers an attempt on their part to address and resolve the issue within the means available to them. It is these situations that the two protagonists need to extricate themselves from and take steps to develop a sense of self beyond the domestic - marital identity to arrive at a more favourable situation.

In both *Chocolate* and *Affair*, we see a subversion emerging out of the quotidian ordeals of the two women protagonists. Food which is an intrinsic and crucial part of the feminine domestic everyday space in the traditional Indian household, plays a vital role as an apparatus

of extrication from oppressive situation in the two short stories. Cooking falls in the ambit of conventional duties of a married woman. However, preparation of food apart from being a customary familial responsibility is often used by women as a means of assertion and expression of their agency. Therefore, its function goes beyond a mere responsibility of providing physical nourishment for the husband or the family and yields emotional, economic sustenance while also being a medium of venting emotions for the woman. Both, Tara and Abha, utilise food and their culinary skills as a crucial instrument of deliverance from their infelicitous marital circumstances. At the very beginning of Divakaruni's short story *Affair*, we see Abha using food as a medium of expressing her displeasure. When her husband, Ashok, breaks the news of her friend, Meena's, affair to her, she at first fantasises about throwing something at him "the bowl of green lauki squash...Or maybe even the cutting board, arcing through the air and smacking the smile off his face" (Divakaruni 231), she then settles for vindictively dumping "...a couple of extra teaspoons of red pepper powder into the chicken curry." (Divakaruni 233) as "Hot food gives Ashok the most terrible heartburn" (Divakaruni 233). Here we see that the women while occupying the traditional domestic space of the kitchen and performing the duty of cooking, utilises these conventional means as a way of expressing herself and exerting her agency. The ingredients – cutting board, green lauki, spices - that are tools of completing a daily domestic chore, in a moment of agitation becomes means of expression and assertion, both, within an imagined and the real scenario. In this particular incident Abha is far from the role of a traditional wife whose cooking provides sustenance, here rather than sustaining the body, food is used to cause it discomfort. This message is not lost on Ashok who thwarts Abha's attempt and orders the meal from outside. However later on in the story Abha utilises these skills more successfully to her advantage. It is through her culinary abilities that Abha maintains a modicum of independence. She contributes weekly recipes to *The Indian Courier*, and later takes on the project of compiling a cook book for Bay Area Indian restaurants. When she decides to start the divorce proceedings, she turns to her culinary skills as a means of sustaining herself - "I'll got to that Mughal restaurant. Offer to cook for free for a few days. Surely when the owner saw how good I was he'd give me the job." (Divakaruni 271) The typically feminine skill and duty of cooking becomes a means of attaining economic sustenance and independence, therefore, this traditional domestic responsibility is used to subvert the very order that perpetuates it.

The importance of food in Kapur's short story *Chocolate* is obvious from the title itself. Tara too uses food as a means of asserting herself and finally coming to terms with her situation. In Tara's case her initial relationship with food is far from desirable. As suggested

by the title she has a certain fondness for chocolates, in the beginning of the story this fondness is somewhat detrimental, since she uses food as a coping mechanism to deal with the various stresses in her life. A tendency which is manipulated by her husband Abhay. For example, when they can't conceive a child, he "...took to feeding her chocolates" (Kapur 69). Tara uses food as a crutch to deal with unsavoury situations, an obvious illustration of this is when she learned about her husband's affair her first response is to turn to chocolates – "To help reach a conclusion she automatically went to the fridge to take out her chocolates. She needed consolation" (Kapur 70). Eventually "It was chocolates that drew her attention to a certain lack of something on the part of Abhay" (Kapur 69). Food, chocolates, in this case, at first entrap Tara, however, later it becomes a means of setting her free. Once Tara realises that Abhay is engaged in an extra marital affair, the same enticing chocolates "...tasted like sawdust. She bit into it...and gagged...Nausea overcame her..." (Kapur 70-71). Post this she transforms her relationship with food from using it as an emotional escape to providing emotional nourishment and empowerment. "Tara joined Mrs. Singhal's Cooking Classes...Tara dived into the experience like a duck into water. Cooking was endlessly creative..." (Kapur 71). Not limited to mere consumption any more, food and cooking, for Tara become a means of creative expression, self-empowerment and eventually this patriarchal domestic responsibility becomes instrumental in attaining her goals, even exacting revenge on her husband – "She experienced the joys of putting before her husband – however errant - things he could not resist" (Kapur 71). Tara successfully uses her patriarchal role in a subversive capacity to turn the situation to her benefit "Imperceptibly Abhay began to put on weight...and her sense of power grew" (Kapur 71). Both Tara and Abha use cooking to attain their personal goals. They use food to resist and manoeuvre within their respective contexts and to further change, challenge and get out of the abusive situations that they find themselves in within the traditional heteropatriarchal marital setting.

Tara revolts from within, she uses her conventional role and responsibility to empower herself and to a certain extent break free from the mould of a traditional wife. The scope of her subversion is obvious from her decision to engage in an affair with her husband's friend - "Given the circumstances of her revenge, she needed an affair to give it a finished ending" (Kapur 72). It eventually culminates into the birth of her daughter, a particularly significant development that enabled her to cleverly use her husband's unacceptance of his impotency, thereby, turning the tables on him – "...she found herself pregnant, she was exhilarated...A puzzled look crossed Abhay's face as he took in the air of quite triumph in his wife's manner. He started spying on her...he found no traces of it (affair)" (Kapur 72). Tara's transgression

challenges one of the foremost norms of patriarchy, that of sexual chastity and obedience of the woman. She manages to thwart the patriarchal control over her body and sexuality, and realises her objectives covertly from within the traditional set up rendering it meaningless and hollow to an extent. Further on she decides to bring up her daughter as an empowered individual, who would perhaps in the future dismantle the regressive system further – “When Tara’s daughter was born, she crooned her lullabies of brave women warriors, and made sure that all her education was oriented towards a career that would make her independent” (Kapur 72). Tara comes to recognise the importance of education as a means of developing an independent identity a significant departure from her beliefs in the initial part, where she prioritises her wedding ceremony over preparation for her exams. Furthermore, Bravery and independence are qualities that are traditionally associated with masculinity, by attempting to inculcate these qualities (among others) in her daughter, she attempts to unsettle the systemic social indoctrination of typically feminine characteristics in women that starts shaping them into docile individuals from the early years of their life. As Simon de Beauvoir stated in her seminal work *The Second Sex*

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature...If well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy, she seems to us to be already sexually determined, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry maternity; it is because influence of others on the child is a factor almost from the start, and thus she is indoctrinated with her vocation from the earliest years” (Beauvoir 273-74).

The social instruction which shapes women, needs to be disrupted for affirmative changes to take place. Tara through her actions attempts to hamper and challenge the routine discursive practices that embolden patriarchal dominance over women.

In Tara’s case, her husband’s sexual betrayal acts as an impetus that drive her actions. Abha on the other hand has no concrete evidence of her husband’s sexual infidelity, for her the fissures in the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage first appear with her friend, Meena’s, affair. Remarkably, suspicions about her husband and Meena only come to her later. Her first response is that she feels “betrayed” (Divakaruni 232), at the fact that her friend didn’t confide in her – “She needed me more than anyone in my life ever had-the way I’d hoped, my husband and babies might.” (Divakaruni 240). It is a testimony of the emotional depth of their bond that Meena’s affair so significantly impacts Abha that it sets her on the path of introspection, self-discovery and finally forces her to confront her own desires, the lacuna and lapses within her

marital life. Even after Abha realises that Meena never sexually engaged with Ashok, she cannot go back to the old ideas and patterns. *Affair* significantly takes up the concern of female bonding and friendship, as is obvious in this instance, where we have women seeking affirmation and solace in their associations rather than in a traditional heteropatriarchal relationship. A point noted critic Liesel King makes about Divakaruni's works-

“Without going so far as to introduce an erotic dimension to the relationship, Divakaruni nevertheless counters a Western literary tradition which has historically privileged “the romantic couple” since the medieval period, as well as the larger global and patriarchal traditions which repeatedly remind women that their first duty is to men.” (King 39)

Like Tara, Abha too has to first unlearn years of social conditioning before she is awakened to the sexual and emotional aridity of her marriage and can arrive at the decision of divorcing her husband. On being faced with the possibility of her friend Meena's affair, the question that haunts Abha is “What kind of a man would be more important than being a good wife?” (Divakaruni 237). Abha at the beginning of the story believed a “good wife” to be a woman who has no desires but allowed “her husband to satisfy himself no matter how unpleasant she found it?”, is sexually so chaste that she responds to a book on “*The Joys of Sex*” (Divakaruni 244) with “undisguised horror” (Divakaruni 244), keeps a good home, cook and cleans uncomplainingly, dresses modestly and never dismays patriarchal social expectations. Abha's shock at her friend Meena's backless choli is indicative of her internalisation of conservative ideas of femininity. Her imagined censure of her friend Meena's daring sartorial choice is not far from truth - “Indecent...And to have the boldness to wear it...it's not telling she needs. It's a good beating.” (Divakaruni 245). At this point Abha fails to adequately condemn and see the inherent misogyny of such responses. However, as the story progresses, she comes to prioritise herself over her fear of social castigation. She gradually comes to commence the process of unlearning inhibiting ideas and starts viewing herself as something more than an addendum of the man in her life. Abha's questioning eventually leads to a certain sexual awakening, a far cry from her initial reticence. For instance, in the later part of the story when she comes across an erotic encounter on a television program, she uncharacteristically goes back to see it carefully and feels “...none of the shame that would have ordinarily overwhelmed...” (Divakaruni 243) her. This in tandem with the doubts and uncertainty she has been harbouring about her long-established ideas sets off further questions regarding her notions of sexuality within marriage— “Had my mother, too, been wrong, when the night before my wedding, she had explained to me that a good wife's duty was to allow her husband to satisfy himself no matter how unpleasant she found it? For the first time I wondered

how happy my father had been with her, and she with him?” (Divakaruni 244). These doubts translate into tangible actions when she decides to dress up, goes on a lunch with Suren and realises that she actually enjoys it - “It was fun to be out with a man who wasn’t my husband. In my entire life I had never done that” (Divakaruni 254). These questions and doubts are crucial part of the unlearning Abha must go through before she can finally take the momentous decision of separating from her husband. Susan Moller Okin in her essay “Mistresses of their own Destiny: Group Rights, Gender, and Realistic Rights of Exit”, talks about the right to opt out of the social norms of one’s original culture and religion. She focusses upon the difficulty faced by women in making the choice to “exit” from their culture due to the misogynistic conventions internalised by them which have a rather debilitating effect on their choice to challenge their unequal existence.

“However, because of the general tendency of most cultures to try to control the lives of girls and women more than those of boys and men, women’s capacities to exit their cultures of origin are usually considerably more restricted than men’s. There are at least three major reasons this is so, which are often closely linked...education, practices concerning marriage and divorce, and socialization for gender roles and gender hierarchy... Other cultural practices that can radically affect a woman’s capacity to exit her culture of origin are early or involuntarily arranged marriage and other practices that result in significant inequalities in marriage...” (Okin 216 -218).

Opting for a divorce might not seem to be an overtly radical step. However, for someone with Abha’s traditional social background this decision is quite significant. She first needs to identify unequal gender ideals that have been dinned into her social DNA and only after that can she take steps to challenge, subvert and / or opt out of the traditional institution of marriage. It is no mean feat that Abha by the end of the story decides to face “The gossip in India...parent’s anger. Family dishonour” (Divakaruni 271) rather than continue in an unhappy marriage. Abha’s final action of starting a letter to her husband announcing her decision to leave is an affirmation of her new found ideas (which she is still examining) and a certain blow against the old patriarchal notions.

Chocolate and *Affair*, bring to focus discord within the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage. Tara and Abha might have begun their narrative with conservative patriarchal ideals of femininity and wifehood, but they eventually come to identify and acknowledge their subjugation and negotiate within their given situations to assert their agency. Abha and Tara’s personal experiences are instrumental in their disregarding of the traditional social norms. Abha attempts to envision an economically independent future separate from her husband for

herself through reliance on her culinary abilities. Whereas, Tara channels her experiential knowledge into her daughter's upbringing, so that her child is not hampered by the debilitating patriarchal social ideals and develops into an independent woman. Their subversion is neither radical nor overtly drastic, nevertheless, its potency is unquestionable and represents the means adopted by women to deal with or extricate themselves from abusive marital situations. A point that noted gender theorist Judith Butler makes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

“If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.” (Butler 43)

Their actions represent the intervention of women and a tangible rupture of the patriarchal institution of marriage vis a vis the steps undertaken by them to improve their daily lived realities and strive towards a more empowered self and future. The supposed sanctity of the patriarchal order is destabilised by the choices made by these women, in that it signifies a very real resignification and destabilisation of the limiting gendered training that they have undergone as women. The eventual paths and resolution adopted by them differ, but what remains common between them is the successful manipulation and negotiation of the conservative paradigm.

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