



## PORTRAYAL OF EMERGING WOMEN IN CHITHRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "ARRANGED MARRIAGE"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze the struggles the married women undergo to attain their freedom and individuality in the selected short stories in the collection called *Arranged Marriage*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an Indo American writer, has focused the contradictory status of Indian women, who are subjected to all kinds of abuses however, they are worshipped as goddesses. In all the short stories, the protagonists are found as victims. They are suppressed and oppressed in various ways. The male oriented society expects the married woman to unconditionally surrender her identity and be selfless submissive, meek and always dependent on men. The novelist through her work wants to give voice to such unfortunate women. She makes her women characters to question the social conventions and traditions and gives power and courage to over through the old myths and make them to carve an identity of their own.

Key words: Arranged marriage, Patriarchal structure, Marriage bond, Victimization, Pativarta, Transformation, Empowerment and Emergence.

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They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology. Throughout history they have always been subordinated to men, and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change, it is not something that occurred they have gained only what men have been willing to grant, they have taken nothing, they have only received-Simon de Beauvoir

### INTRODUCTION

There is an outstanding growth of Indian women's writing, during the last two decades. Works of most of the authors express their stance towards bringing about social change. Their themes explore the atrocities and maladies women undergo. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among such

writers. She is an Indo American author. Women occupy the central place in her fictional world. Her works are largely set in India and the *United States of America*. She is a co-founder of a helpline called MAITRI, (*Friendship*) to provide legal, emotional and medical help, particularly to the South Asian women, who suffer domestic abuse and violence. Much of her work is partially autobiographical. Her writings are based on her encounters and experiences with suffering women in the organization. It is the fountain head for all the inspiration that, she gets for her writings.

In an interview the author has said:

My work with MAITRI has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I

have heard of acts of cruelty beyond imagination. The lives of many women I have met through this organization have touched me deeply. It is their hidden story that I try to tell in many of the tales in my short story collection *Arranged Marriage* and my subsequent books. It is their courage and humanity that I celebrate and honor.

As she has said, most of her works are an effort to liberate women from the patriarchal structures and an attempt to reinterpret their story in this world. Gender hierarchy and inequality are accepted as normal and unquestionable in most of the arranged marriages solemnized in India. In such marriages the woman is treated as a commodity and not as an individual with identity. Divakaruni is not for victimization of women in the name of marriage. She argues for the recognition of a woman as an individual, with all the natural feelings and emotions and also the recognition of her right to have a control over her body. The Indian social system demands a lot from a married woman, she has to sacrifice her individuality, her likes and dislikes, her freedom, her desires, her feelings and emotions. As Beauvoir says, "An ideal woman is perfectly stupid and perfectly submissive. She is always ready to accept the male and never make any demands upon him" (234).

The collection of short stories in *Arranged Marriage* focuses on the married Indian women settled in America. It portrays the dilemma the women face in following the western culture, as they are tradition bound, and the struggle they undergo to carve out an identity of their own in the land of opportunities. The protagonists in her short stories never protest against the Indian social customs and traditions when, they are married. All the characters are ordinary middle class women and their marriage are arranged by their parents.

Trouble starts for the women only after their marriage. The marriage instead of bringing joy and happiness brings only sorrow and disillusionment to them. There is forced subjugation and subordination instead of freedom love and understanding love.

Chitra Banirjee Divakaruni's feminism do not believe in protest and agitation but, conquering weakness and fear and making the women realize their strength and worth. It is not demolishing the Institutions or traditions but creating new ones.

Divakaruni's characters do the same. Her characters do not want to be obedient, adjusting and forgiving wives, showing feeble protest then and there. They want to emerge from the "Feminist" towards the Female, that is, from the stage of protest against the existing male dominated system towards the process of self discovery. This transformation is the main theme of her stories.

In the story "Ultrasound" the cousins Runu and Anju grow under the watchful eyes of three widowed mothers, with no male contact. Still they are brought up according to the strict mores of the masculine society. Anju is well educated, forward thinking and exhibits a nature of defiance but Runu, on the other hand is very calm traditional, subservient and adjusting.

Anju is married to Sunil who is a computer engineer in America and Runu is married to Ramesh, who works in Indian Railways. After marriage Anju goes to America with her husband. Runu resides in India and looks after a big family as a pragmatic housewife, concerned only with "mildewed quilts and lazy servants" (212). Such a tradition bound women is forced to quit her house, when the amino centesis test shows that she is carrying a female child.

It is an irony that, in the Indian society women are worshiped as Goddesses like Saraswathi, Lakshmi, Parvathi, Durga and Kali, etc, but the same society encourages female infanticide. It gives preference only to the male child and accepts female infanticide as normal and not to be considered as an issue or a sin. The obsession over boy child makes the tyrannical mother-in-law insist that, Runu should go for an abortion because a girl child should not be the eldest child of Bhattacharjee's family. When her husband also supports his mother and asks Runu to go for an abortion, Runu becomes totally disillusioned. Not willing to murder her daughter in her womb, she takes the bold step of stepping out of her house to gain self respect and independence for herself and

to give life for her daughter. Her mother's strong advice not to step out as, her place is with her husband's home and her baby will be called as bastard does not deter an assertive Runu to go back on her decision.

Sumita in the story "Clothes" is an ordinary playful village girl dreaming about a handsome prince, who would marry her and take her to the kingdom of seven seas. Her dream comes true when Somesh Sen comes all the way from California to marry her. As a village girl she grows listening to her mother always saying that "A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-law. But Sumita, unlike other Indian village girls has her own dreams. She refuses to be a meek and submissive housewife as her mother has willed to be,

where I must cover my head with the edge of my Japan nylon sari (my expensive Indian ones to be saved for special occasions-trips to the temple, Bengali New Year) and serve tea to the old women that come to visit Mother Sen where like a good Indian wife I must never address my husband by his name. (25-26)

She has a plan of working with her husband in the store to improve the business so that they can move out of the present two bedroom apartment into a big one. But fate will otherwise. One night, when her husband is alone in the store, someone comes and steals the money killing her husband.

A custom usually followed in India (purification ceremony) when a man dies leaving his wife widowed, her bangles are crushed broken, her red marriage mark on her forehead, removed and her long hair, cut off ; she has to wear only white sari there-after. When the ceremony takes place in Sumita's home, all the women in the room are crying except Sumita because she is determined not to look backward. Her husband's wish that she should go to college and get a degree in teaching and her own dream to help her husband in his business gives her the enough strength to control her emotions and feelings and enough courage to face the reality bravely.

An incidence that happened in her village crosses her memory as a flash, while swimming in a

lake, she was about to drown. Somehow she gains strength,

the desperate flailing of arms and legs as I fought my way upward: the press of the water on me, heavy as terror: the wild animal trapped inside my chest, clawing at my lungs. The day returning to me as searing air, the way I drew it in,in,in, as though I would never have enough of it. (32-33)

The thought of her rebirth due to her undying spirit gives her the strength to carry out her dream

That's when I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I will manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to n-laws. Doves with cut - off wings. (33)

Sumitha does not want her wings to be cut off by the scissors of customs and traditions. She wants to fly freely in the skies of Great America to realize her dream. She does not know what future has in store for her in the alien land. As a new woman she acquires the necessary courage to take up the place of her husband and to continue his business. She imagines herself in the store with a strengthened shoulder, standing tall and ready to welcome the customers.

Divakaruni pictures Sumita as a woman, who wishes to tear apart all outmoded boundaries like orthodox views, social stigmas, taboos attached to a widow and to enter into a new world of adventure and freedom to which America stands for.

"Disappearance" is a story about a woman who is married to a man with a prejudiced outlook. Though settled in America, he hates women with western ideas. For him an ideal wife is a woman, who does not have any individuality of her own, but one, who allows her husband to make all decisions without questioning. He never respects her feelings and emotions or satisfies even the basic needs and wants of his wife. Boasting himself as an honest man, he never entertains the idea of her wife going back to school or taking up a job. Whenever she asks him to buy American clothes for her, he always

calms her by saying "what for I am here to take care of you, or, you look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more feminine" (172).

The ancient male oriented Indian tradition has prescribed certain rules and regulations for women. It expects women to be patient, modest, shy, selfless, self sacrificing, enduring and remain dutiful to her husband till her death. Such a woman is called as pativrata. (a women loyally devoted to her husband, a chaste women)justify the slavery of women, men have glorified and idealized women as pativrata. In this story the husband wants her wife to be a pativrata, his expectation of his wife's total surrender becomes suffocating and intolerable for her. The total denial of desire and identity expected from her husband and her subjection to marital rape forces the woman in the story to disappear, and to find a way towards self discovery, self esteem and self fulfillment. The author hints that she disappears taking all her jewels in the bank locker so that she may be able to start a small business for her financial empowerment.

"Affair" is a story about two close friends Abha and Meena. Though they are faithful and abiding wives to their husbands, they find that there is an unfulfilled vacuum in their life and finally they decide to extricate themselves from the meaningless relationship and to rewrite their strategy of survival.

Abha's husband Ashok breaks out the news that her close friend Meena is having an affair. Abha is shell shocked to learn it from her husband instead of Meena herself .Abha fancies that the person Meena having an affair is none other than her own husband because Meena is more pretty and bold than her. Ashok always irritates Abha and makes fun of her prudish Indian upbringing, making her feel small and insignificant. It becomes intolerable and leads to frustration. This often makes her to cry alone. Soon Abha learns that Meena is having an affair not with her husband as she suspected but with an American. According to Meena, the person with whom she is having an affair is not as good looking as her husband Srikanth but the reason she gives for her liking is,

"he understands me, all of me, even the bad parts, with him I can be myself, like I never could before this"( 269 ). Meena

knows pretty well that she will be looked down upon by her parents and she will be called as rebel and a traitor

I think of what my parents will say, and Srikanth's mother, when they find out .*Selfish*, they'll call me. Immoral. A *bad woman*. I have to keep telling myself I am not that. It's not wrong to want to be happy is it? To want more out of life than fulfilling duties you took on before you know what they truly meant? (270)

Meena, a lively and pretty woman, wants to be different and does different things and hates doing monotonous things. According to her husband Ramesh "she is like a falcon or something, wild and beautiful and filled with need to soar" and he himself admits that "I guess I am more of a penguin, waddling along my every day path" (260-261). Ashok expects Meena's qualities in Abha, but Abha is very conservative and her only wish is to be a good housewife and remain faithful to her husband throughout her life. This misplaced expectations of both the women and men lead to a loveless and unfulfilled life.

The reappraisal of her life and the changed perspective of Meena give a chance to Abha to reexamine her own marriage. She realizes that her concern for being a good wife throughout her married life never made her to think about her married life. Meena's decision makes her to ruminate "Had I ever really been myself? I didn't think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter. A good friend And of course a good wife" (269). This leads her to realize that she is a victim of the system of arranged marriage. So she decides to break her marriage as her friend, to reinvent herself, because "the old rules aren't always right". She decides to take an adventurous and challenging job of compiling a cook book. The new job, she believes will empower her to be self reliant and independent. Abha and Meena take this extreme step to liberate them from the inferior state their husbands have offered.

Willingly or unwillingly women accept arranged marriages. Mostly marriage, instead of bringing joy and happiness. leads to dejection and frustration to the women due to the indifference

and inferior treatment meted out to them by their husbands. The unfulfilled dreams and expectations makes their marriage a mirage. Jain rightly says "Despite the fact that men and women need each other, complement each other, it is women who is left wanting and wholly dependent on the man who she marries" (105).

The author encourages imprisoned women to come out of the tangled marriage.

Anuradha Roy in her book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* observes:

Indian women writers are thus finding new ways of asserting female self hood, showing increasing courage in breaking age old strictures regarding woman's existence. By depicting protagonist having courage to constructively modify, change or transform their lives, Indian women writers are helping to break the stereotype of eternally suffering Indian Woman hood. (140)

It is true of Divakaruni also, comes under the category of Indian women writer. Her women characters are normal human beings, they have their own weaknesses like having a strong ego, committing mistakes, taking hasty decisions and exposing their frailty, but finally, she makes her characters rise to the occasion successfully.

#### Summing up

The women characters portrayed in the short stories are not ready to accept life thrust on them in the name of arranged marriage. When their husband or in-laws bad behavior and treatment leads to frustration and life becomes intolerable, then only they break the marriage bond. The author is not for her characters to rebel against the established social institutions. What her characters want is a democracy within the family setup. When they are oppressed and suppressed by their male counterpart they are not ready to endure and suffer silently. The author champions the cause of women's empowerment through her works.

All the four women characters discussed, are somehow pushed to the wall due to the circumstances. Instead of brooding over their cursed spite, they transform themselves as assertive

women and they show to the world that they have the ability and maturity to take decisions and emerge as confident women to lead a life of their own liking to realize their dreams. The author through her short stories has beautifully shown the transformation and the emergence of the confined woman into confident woman.

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