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MARRIED BY MARRIAGE: THE MODERN INDIAN WOMAN AT THE CROSSROADS IN
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the ways in which the (female) protagonists of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's award-winning collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) negotiate and balance the alluring array of choices offered by their new-found liberating life in America where they emigrate, and the pressing obligations of their traditional Indian upbringing that follow them even to their dream land of freedom—America—where they eventually settle. Divakaruni's protagonists are mostly women from Indian middle-class families thriving on traditional family values. Their life as immigrants in the United States, either prior to or post-marriage, unfurls a whole new world of endless possibilities and options. At the same time, it demands a refashioning of their Indian self to better accommodate themselves in the American way of life and cultural set up. But as the women get busy Americanizing themselves, their Indian lineage asserts its claim through their orthodox husbands, mothers or other family members. Thus, these women are constantly torn between the extremities of American ultra-modernism and Indian conservatism. The timeless Indian institution of arranged marriage, embodying the traditional Indian family values, accentuates this contradiction in the life of these young diasporic Indian ladies. The paper will read Divakaruni's eleven short stories in *Arranged Marriage* with a view to establish that the "Modern Indian Woman" is a fusion of Western liberal outlook and conservative Indian values, constantly making choices and redefining herself.

Keywords: Divakaruni, diasporic fiction, arranged marriage, Indian woman

Though Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has titled her collection of short stories as *Arranged Marriage* (1995), not all marital relationships that she portrays in the collection are "arranged marriages" in the conventional sense of the term. The eleven short stories in this collection sketch Indian women, mostly living in California where the author currently resides, operating within world's one of the oldest social institutions—marriage. Though most of the marriages that she depicts in the stories of this collection are typically Indian

arranged marriages where the match is fixed by the couple's family members, there are stories where a romantic affair culminates into marriage—"love marriages" as they are usually termed in India, and also the ones in which there is no marriage, but just a tale of a live-in relationship contemplating marriage. So Divakaruni's subject is basically spousal relationships in its myriad forms.

Divakaruni's stories can be studied under certain broad thematic categories that keep overlapping. Only two of the eleven stories are

completely set in India and deal with Calcutta-based couples—"The Bats" and "The Maid Servant's Story". The rest are all set in California and deal with immigrant Indian couples settled there. The stories about immigrant Indian couples portray the sky-high hopes with which a humble Indian girl gets married to a man employed in California just after finishing her college if not before, and flies over to her dream land longing to live a life she has only dreamt so far. However, in most cases, the reality turns out to be in sharp contradiction to her expectations for the husband happens to have only a modest job out of which it is often difficult to make both ends meet in a city where the cost of living is exorbitant. This is the case with Somesh in "Clothes", Bikram in "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" and Sunil in "The Ultrasound". They all came to America with dreams of making it "big" in a country where they imagined money to flow like water. Only time has taught them that reality is seldom as flattering as imagination. Not all can make it "big" in a city where a non-white person coming from a third-world country has to continually battle with racial discrimination, racist attacks, hooliganism and such nuisance throughout his life. It is thus that Sumita's husband, Somesh, is gunned down by a burglar who breaks into his 7-eleven store in the middle of the night in "Clothes"; Bikram's store is burnt and razed to the ground overnight by a gang of hoodlums, leaving a gaping scar along his throat. Thereafter, life becomes a test of putting together those broken pieces of dreams and creating the best collage possible for these couples. Women like Sumita and Pratima strive to find happiness and contentment in whatever they are able to afford out of the limited income of their husbands.

However, ideological incompatibility and lack of mutual respect in a relationship is something that Divakaruni's protagonists refuse to compromise with. The nameless woman of "The Word Love", Meera Bose of "A Perfect Life", Preeti of "Doors", Anjali of "The Ultrasound" and Meena and Abha of "Affair" go to the extent of separation or at least contemplate the possibility of a separation from their spouses when they diagnose an essential incompatibility between themselves and their respective spouses.

The nameless protagonist of "The Word Love" lost her father at the age of two and has been single-handedly brought up by her widowed mother who have devoted her entire life and energy towards the upbringing of her only daughter. After finishing her college in Kolkata, she comes to California to do her Ph.D. in English literature. It is here that she meets and then moves in with her American boyfriend, Rex. Things go smooth between the couple only until she feels the need to broach the news of her relationship with Rex to her mother. Being the old-fashioned, orthodox person that she is, her mother gets furious on learning about Rex and snaps all ties with her daughter at once. It is then, while trying to mend her relationship with her mother that the protagonist realizes the invaluable bond she shares with her. She is constantly haunted by the childhood memories of the times spent together—the way she has brought her up against all odds, the sacrifices that she has to undergo in the process, and how she has never failed to feel the warmth of her love and affection in spite of her apparent strictness. The memories of her mother's selfless love disturbs and depresses her.

It is at this juncture that she realizes the essential cultural and emotional incompatibility between herself and her boyfriend who fails to appreciate or even understand her feelings for her mother and feels increasingly irritated with her miserable state of being. Being brought up in a culture where children get separated from their parents at the age of eighteen, his interaction with his mother is limited to sending her a card and wishing her on her birthdays and Mother's Day. Hence, he is unable to comprehend her guilt conscience and longing for her widowed mother who refuses to speak to or even accept her only daughter's letters. This kind of love and attachment to one's parent is beyond the knowledge of an American like Rex who is brought up in a culture essentially materialistic and individual-centric. Hence, his words of compassion sound equally superficial to the protagonist.

Besides, the protagonist grows increasingly doubtful of Rex's fidelity and commitment to the relationship. The late night calls by women of

dubious identities whom Rex claims to be his ex-girlfriends and his lengthy conversation with them in soft, almost inaudible tone, plant seeds of suspicion in her mind. In fact, from her introspection through which the story unfolds in second-person narration, it is not clear if it was genuine love or the mere thrill of getting into a relationship that prompted her affirmative response to Rex's proposal. However, in due course of time, she comes to realize that her love for Rex is no match for her unflinching love for her mother and that the latter is never worth giving up for the former. But in spite of all her attempts to explain her decision to her mother, to repent and apologize to her, when she bars all means of communication—changes her phone number and refuses to receive the letter sent by her daughter—the truth dawns on her that neither of the two relationships is worth the effort for none of them love her just enough to prioritize her happiness and well-being over their ego. It is then that she decides to leave the apartment she shares with Rex and begin a life that involves neither Rex nor her mother.

Meera Bose of "A Perfect Life" shares a lot in common with the protagonist of "The Word Love". She is a modern Bengali woman having a lucrative job in a Californian bank, a lavish apartment in the foothills overlooking the gorgeous Golden Gate Bridge and a steady American boyfriend, Richard, with whom she lives in perfect harmony. Meera believed she has just all that it takes to have a "perfect life" and felt the need for nothing more, neither a formally committed relationship like marriage, nor the consequent obligation of motherhood.

However, the day a little stray boy sneaks into her apartment building, a gradual revisioning of her ideas of a "perfect life" begins. To her own surprise, she brings the kid into her apartment, washes him clean, feeds and clothes him, and decides to keep him with her, much against the liking and advice of her boyfriend. In a country that swears by law, Meera throws all caution to the wind and chooses to follow her heart. She starts doing for the supposedly autistic boy, whom she names "Krishna", all that a mother does for her child—buying him new dresses, preparing his favourite

dish, and reading him bedtime stories from his favourite book.

Problem ensues once she decides to legally adopt the child. As per the adoption laws of California, the boy is required to stay with a licensed foster parent until Meera finishes her parenting course, qualifies herself for adoption and completes all legal formalities to adopt him. Hence, Krishna is forced to move in with one Mrs. Amelia Ortiz by the Foster Homes office.

All this while, Richard has been persistently opposing Meera's decision to shelter the stray boy without fulfilling the legal formalities or to adopt him. Richard detests this sudden intruder who now claims most of Meera's time and attention. Like Rex in "The Word Love", he is unable to make sense of Meera's overwhelming affection for this street urchin for whom she is even ready to flout the state laws and invite legal troubles. He only feels that Meera is doing it all out of her motherly instinct and that their own child is all that she needs to get over this obsession. Their clash of feelings and opinions even leads to a few heated arguments and makes Meera consider the possibility of a "perfect life" with Krishna, without having Richard around. The way Richard pulls her away from Krishna in the Foster Homes office while Mrs. Ortiz took him in her custody makes Meera realize that Richard can never gauge the depth of her love for Krishna. Their years of successful companionship begins to lose its integrity in the face of the essential emotional incompatibility that is now betrayed with the arrival of Krishna in the scenario.

A little more than a year later, after she has permanently lost Krishna who escapes from Mrs. Ortiz's apartment never to be found again, Meera finally agrees to marry and settle down with Richard on condition never to have a child of their own. The "mother-love" that little Krishna has kindled in Meera is not to be showered on any child ever again.

The epiphanic role that Krishna plays in the relationship between Meera and Richard is played by Raj in the conjugal relationship between Preeti and Deepak in "Doors", though a little differently. Living in the United States since the age of twelve, Preeti has grown up to be a sorted and sophisticated

person whose "perfect life" with husband Deepak goes topsy-turvy with the arrival of Deepak's old friend, Raj, who comes all the way from Mumbai to live with them in California to complete his post-graduate education. Raj's typically Mumbaiiyya attitude with his loud, over-the-top body language and over-indulgent behaviour rend the nerves of Preeti who is a rather introvert person, demanding her own private space and time. Not being able to understand the kind of person that she is, Raj goes overboard to get friendly with Preeti which makes her all the more uncomfortable, irritable and distant from Raj.

However, Deepak is overjoyed to have his old friend around, being completely oblivious of Preeti's sense of discomfort and resentment towards the whole situation. Rather than trying to help Preeti deal with the situation, he busies himself with entertaining and indulging his friend, adding to Preeti's frustration. The situation culminates into Preeti's decision to leave the house which compels Deepak to ask Raj to leave. Nevertheless, the turn of the events leaves a bitter taste in the mouth of both husband and wife. Thus, Raj's inability to understand Preeti, Deepak's incapacity to empathize with her sense of discomfort and Preeti's incapability to adapt to the changes brought about in the household by Raj's arrival lead to a souring of the relationship not only between Raj and Deepak, but also between Deepak and Preeti for whom Deepak loses his face before his friend.

The inharmoniousness between Anjali and Sunil in "The Ultrasound" is laid bare owing to their disagreement over Anjali's cousin, Arundhati's decision to walk out of the house of her in-laws who urge Arundhati to abort her female foetus. When despondent Arundhati makes a secret call from Burdwan to her other pregnant cousin, Anjali, in California to seek her counsel as to how to save her unborn daughter whom her husband and in-laws want to be aborted, Anjali advises her to go to her mother's. When Arundhati tells Anjali that even her mother has advised her to comply with her in-laws' decision, the latter advises her to go and live with Anjali's mother who is aunt to Arundhati.

Sunil accuses Anjali for this piece of advice which he believes will only push Arundhati to a

more precarious future. He mouths the ideologies of a typical Indian patriarch that it is judicious for Arundhati to concede to her in-laws' wishes and do accordingly instead of walking out of her marriage. Meeting the conservative patriarch in Sunil for the first time makes Anjali wonder, "I know far less about this man than I had naively, romantically, believed" (228). Though Sunil has time and again resented the international calls that Anjali used to make to Arundhati to share the thrills of their pregnancy for the additional expenses it incurred, Sunil's support for the unscrupulous behaviour of Arundhati's in-laws is shocking to Anjali. It generates a stream of questions in her mind: Does Sunil love *me*, or only the mother-to-be of his son? Would he have cared for me as much if we had been in India and the baby had turned out to be a girl? What if I hadn't been able to have a baby at all? Would he be asking his parents to look for another wife for him? (228) However, Anjali's disappointment with Sunil did not make her leave him like Abha and Meena of "Affair". In "Affair", both the women decide to put an end to their respective marriages when the relationships cease to be fulfilling. After fighting years of loneliness and boredom in her conjugal life with workaholic husband, Srikant, and failing in her attempts to keep herself entertained with parties and socialization, Meena decides to get a divorce and marry Charles, the man she falls in love with at her workplace. Abha's decision to leave Ashok, on the other hand, is not led by her love for another man, but by the realization that in spite of her best efforts, they have failed to find happiness in the company of each other and she, her due respect from her husband, who has increasingly become a sadist. Hence, Abha decides to liberate both Ashok and herself from the shackles of this barren relationship and begin a life of freedom and dignity for herself.

Thus, it is seen that Divakaruni's heroines in *Arranged Marriage*, who are mostly Calcutta-born Indian immigrants in California, are confronted with an unsettling sense of disillusionment at some point in their relationship with their respective spouses. Though most of them are brought up in Calcutta-based traditional Bengali families with conservative values, the benefits of Western liberal education

and progressive American values have made them acutely conscious of their individuality, self-respect and dignity. Hence, the slightest clash of cultural values or ideological conflict with their spouses, whether Indian or American, make them doubt the integrity of the relationship and consider the option of separation. They are unwilling to continue with a relationship that seems unfulfilling and deem it better to call it off. To them, marriage is no longer the safe haven from which they will hesitate to walk out. Self-respect and ideological compatibility gains a priority with them over romantic sentiments. Being educated and financially independent, they are in a position to live as a divorcee or a single mother in a society that champions individual freedom above every other social and familial commitments.

However, in certain circumstances, this uncompromising attitude can even lead to actions which are not only irresponsible but also heartless. This is the case with the anonymous wife in "The Disappearance", who vanishes with all her wedding jewellery one fine morning, leaving no clue for her husband and two-and-a-half-year-old son. While education and financial self-sufficiency boosts their spirit of struggle and survival against all odds like that of Abha in "Affair" and Sumita in "Clothes" who decides to take charge of her dead husband's store in California rather than returning to a life of ascetic widowhood in India. They are no longer mute sufferers like the Calcutta-based woman in the first story, "The Bats", who continues to return to her neurotic husband, in spite of being repeatedly battered. Such dead old Indian notion of a woman's undaunted love and devotion to her husband, even in the face of an utter lack of reciprocation, can no longer inspire the modern, independent, self-respecting Indian women living in California. They have several paths to a happy and fulfilling life of which marriage is just one and not the only one.

Marriage has never been an utterly conducive institution for Indian women as is evident from the story of the wife in "The Maid Servant's Story", who in spite of being a perfect wife and mother could not help her husband's infidelity. A successful marriage demands both the partners to

rise above their petty differences and stick together with an eye to the commonalities. Compromise and sacrifice at various levels, at times, even at the level of one's individual choice and freedom, lies at the heart of a strong marriage.

After exploring the various shades of marital disharmony in her stories about marriage and companionship in this collection, I feel, Divakaruni offers the key to a successful companionship and life only in the last story, "Meeting Mrinal". Asha, whose husband, Mahesh, leaves her and their adolescent son, Dinesh, to live with his red-haired American ex-secretary, Jessica, used to look up to her old friend, Mrinalini, who she thought had a perfect life. Mrinalini, alias Mrinal, did not get married like Asha right in the middle of her college education. Suave, intelligent Mrinalini chooses to build a career for herself rather than resigning to a life of domesticity. She succeeds in her aspiration, rises to a respectable position in a computer firm in Mumbai and owns an impressive apartment where she lives a self-contained, luxurious life. Asha idolized Mrinal's life only until she meets her years later in San Francisco when Mrinal breaks down in front of her talking about the utter monotony and boredom of her loveless life that has little surprises to offer. Though Asha successfully hides her circumstances from Mrinal, the truth dawns on her, "the perfect life is only an illusion" (299). Life is worth living as long as we have people who make it worth the struggle. Asha finds that inspiration in her young son for whom she is ready to bear the pangs of life in order to savour the joy of his company. She is ready to overlook the fights and arguments to follow in future as long as they conclude in the happy reunion, strengthening the bond they share. Only such an undying love for relationships can help them to sustain.

Thus, *Arranged Marriage*, the collection of stories which earned ace Indian-American author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an American Book Award, a PEN Josephine Miles Award and a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, is a study of Indian women, native as well as diasporic, vis-à-vis the timeless institution of marriage. The relationships portrayed in the collection range from marriages conventionally arranged in India to live-in

relationships between an Indian woman and her American boyfriend in California. Divakaruni explores the myriad expectations which propel Indian women to go for a marital or romantic relationship, the test of mutual understanding and co-operation that ensues, failing which leads to a sense of disillusionment and frustration, resulting in a termination of the relationship. Cultural difference, ideological disparity, lack of empathy and infidelity are some of the most formidable banes to a successful marriage. Most of the relationships portrayed in this collection go dysfunctional as one of the partners grows increasingly self-seeking, betraying a complete disregard for the feelings of his/her spouse. Such an attitude of selfishness is bound to jeopardize a relationship founded on the principle of togetherness, as it happens in most of these stories by Divakaruni. In situations such as these, Asha's wisdom that life is indeed a challenge of discovering beauty in imperfections seem to be the only healing potion that can foster successful human cohabitation.

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