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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*: A Feminist Perspective

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*, a masterpiece is a collection of short stories. This book received the 1996 American Book Award, the Josephine Miles Award, The Bay Area Reviewer's Award and The Pen Oakland Award. The stories in the collection provide a representation of Indian women's experience, their turbulent lives. The stories in the collection deal with conflicts arising due to man-woman relationship in the patriarchal society, that again in a land of their adoption, especially in case of women. So, Divakaruni's fiction is famous as the fiction dealing with the immigrant experience. Divakaruni, like her contemporaries Gita Hariharan, Anita Nair, Meena Alexander, analyses the pressures and conflicts which women experience or face in a patriarchal frame of reference. The milieu of Divakaruni's stories is Kolkata or USA. Divakaruni seems to employ the form of short story 'to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood'. (Showalter 405)

The Book contains eleven stories. All the stories have women as their focus and bring out the issues dealing with women, their search for identity, self-actualisation, self-assertion etc. The recurrent theme of the collection is woman, her various roles and the nuances of these roles. Divakaruni interrogates the patriarchal system, traditional idea of woman and motherhood. There seems to be an attempt at demythologizing the very concept of motherhood in patriarchy.

Therefore, a feminist perspective seems to be an appropriate one to analyse the stories. Feminist literary criticism aims at exposing the malpractices involved in patriarchy and also the images of women as projected in literature. It also poses a threat to the traditionally accepted ideas about woman's problem and demystifies 'woman'. It tries to capture 'heterogeneity, plurality or fragmentation and contradiction', in its readings and thereby, tries to question 'essentialism' and adopts a stance between complicity and critique. Third wave feminist critics embrace 'contradiction and diversity' as inherent components of late 20th century and 21st century women's (and men's) lives and they envision a new model of feminist thinking and practise that goes beyond 'black and white' and situates itself within popular culture in an effort to bridge the gap between consumption and critique'. (Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted* 142)

Therefore, this theory adopts a 'politics of ambiguity' that embraces tolerance, diversity and difference (Gillis and Munford, 'Harvesting' 2; Siegel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted* 140) and states that 'there's no right way to be: no role, no model- instead contradiction.' (Reed 124; Heywood and Drake, 'Introduction to Walker, 'Being Real' XXXIII) and the 'subject' is always in process and accommodates multiple positionalities 'including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving' and maintains that 'the differences and conflicts between people as well as within them should be figured out dynamically (Reed 124; Emphasis in Original). Multiculturalist sensibility marks this theory. So, it forms the ideology that functions as a 'political ideology currently under construction'. It welcomes pluralism and the ideology of post-identity and poses a challenge to a unified subjectivity by endorsing ambiguity and notidentity. (Quoted in Sigel, 'The Legacy' 53-54)

All these issues are crucial to the Writing of Divakaruni. Therefore *Arranged Marriage* has a great potential for a feminist interpretation.

Therefore, this paper aims at studying and analysing Arranged Marriage from a feminist perspective. It is proposed to bring out the images of woman in Divakaruni's stories, their various roles and the nuances of these roles, the women's search for identity and their possible self-assertion. It is also proposed to evaluate how Divakaruni interrogates the existing institutions like womanhood, motherhood, widowhood as the forms of patriarchy. The researcher will also bring out the 'contradictory, hybridised' identities of these women characters and their individual strategies for survival which question minimalism and endorse individualistic worldism.

Chitra Divakaruni's fictional work is inspired by her experiences and encounters with suffering women in Maitri, the organisation which she has established to help battered women in America. She confesses:

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 reality beyond imagining. 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. It is their courage and humanity that celebrate an honour (Shelvam, 2004: 65).

Divakaruni declares her reason for writing about women in San Francisco Examiner article: In South Asian mythological stories, '...the main relationships the heroines had were with the opposite sex: husbands, sons, lovers or opponents. They never had any important friends. Perhaps in rebellion against such thinking, I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers.' (Feb, 1999)

Divakaruni's mode of writing, therefore, becomes a mode of feminist expression.

The first story, 'The Bats' deals with a victimized, helpless life of a housewife whose condition is like the bats who have to return to her uncle's farm where the only alternative is their death. The story also brings in the issue of the societal eye and the demeaning status of women separated from their husbands.

The story is set in Kolkata. A foreman in a printing press, comes home drunk and regularly beats his wife, but her lack of economic independence makes her suffer silently without protest. She hides the beating marks and scars from her daughter. But the daughter states 'a couple of days later, mother had another mark on her face even bigger and reddish blue' (AM 3). However, the wife has to seek refuge at her uncle's place when the beating becomes unbearable. However, she seems to be so conditioned to being with him that she succumbs to his fake promises. Besides, the consequences of her desertion are also unbearable for her and she returns to him. Divakaruni uses the interlude of bats which surround the mango grove but even when their first batch is poisoned, the next batch does come to the same place. Divakaruni uses bats very symbolically to bring out the issue of inevitability of the marriage ties in India. The uncle says:

'I guess they don't realise what's happening. They don't realise that by flying somewhere else they will be safe or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here'. (AM, 10).

Both the wife and the bats know that they are not safe and secure there but it is an inevitable place for them. Divakaruni exposes the cultural devaluation of women as the object of violence and also women's helplessness which is a recurrent pattern of life for women like the wife in the story. The story ends on the note: 'we came back few weeks later, this time even before our bruises had faded all the way'.

In the 'Maid Servant Story', the wife belongs to the rich class but her fate is no different from that of the poor wife in 'Bats'. Divakaruni in this story shows how patriarchal power works across classes. The wife in this story comes to know about her husband's sexual

exploitation of her maid, still she does not leave her husband as she has no courage to do so and as it will harm the prospects of her daughter in the marriage market if 'the scandal of a broken home stained her life' (AM, 116). She becomes a silent sufferer. So her position is nothing but that of an unpaid prostitute and her status is similar to that of the maid who has become a paid prostitute.

This is how patriarchy harms women and they have to live dual lives or maintain their multiple identities. For the two wives in 'The Bats' and the 'Maid Servant Story' respectively, deviation is not possible as both of them have daughters and their future is a matter of great concern for them and this condition reduces their capacity to take risk and to deviate from the traditional path. No movement is possible for them within patriarchy and since they are Indians, living in India, the mythological Laxman-rekha dominates their psyche. They will never cross the Laxman-rekha as they know the possible severe punishment.

'Clothes' brings out the metamorphosis of Sumita, a 20th century young Indian wife living in America with her husband and in-laws. From a traditional wife, with the help of the indirect agency of her husband, she changes into a rebellious assertive woman who rejects the traditional idea of widowhood and all that accompanies widowhood as she decides to stay in the US even after the sudden death of her husband since she perceives widows in India to be 'doves with cut off wings' (AM p.33) and she knows she 'cannot go back'. She is determined to liberate herself by denouncing the 'Angel', the traditional 'feminine' image of herself. One can see the similarity between Sumita and Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist, Jasmine who is obsessed with her husband's dream regarding his wife. This seems to be a strategy which is adopted by these protagonists in order to justify their behaviour. These protagonists become their own persons and initiate a movement beyond their confined space. Of course, their husbands seem to have been the catalysts in the process of their development. Sumita's identity is both, traditional virtuous wife and a 'lovable daughter-in-law' that she is, on the one hand and on the other, she breaks away from the traditions as she shares her husband's dream of herself wearing Western clothes and becoming a teacher. Her rebellious nature is hidden beneath the surface but the shock of her husband's death makes her come to terms with life and decide for herself.

'The Word Love' and 'Perfect Life' are stories which deal with the issue of motherhood, biological and psychological respectively. The traditional Indian image of mother is that of a sacrificing, selfless, loving, caring woman. Divakaruni interrogates this motherhood in 'The Word Love' by bringing out how motherhood can become an institution which has the power to silence, annihilate and alienate a daughter, especially in the Indian patriarchal frame of reference.

The female protagonist lives with an American man as she is westernised but as the process is not complete, she experiences the pull of her Indian traditions and possessive love intensely represented by her mother. She is grateful to her mother and remembers how her mother sacrificed her life for her. So, the recurrent thoughts of the bond between the mother and daughter and deceiving the mother as she has not disclosed her relationship with Rex, leads to a traumatic experience for her and she is almost thwarted. However, for confessing the truth, she faces the wrath of her mother who disowns her completely. The return of her letter by being 'Not accepted' (AM p. 69) is very symbolic as she has been fully rejected by her mother. Besides, her obsessive love also results into her boyfriend's feeling 'it was never me(him), was it, never love. It was always you and her, her and you' (AM p. 70). Divakaruni's introducing an interlude regarding the punishment to a deviant woman also points to the possible behaviour of the mother. Nevertheless, Divakaruni's protagonist masters the situation in the true sense of the term by being 'ready to begin' (AM p. 71) as she sees that 'there's another choice' (AM p. 70) and she is 'going to live for herself'. (pg. 71)

Divakaruni shows how the forces of patriarchy are not unleashed only through men but through women also and how these patriarchal mothers are trapped in the stringent traditions which, at times, nullify the existence of an individual. For these mothers the societal controlling eye is so important that they become inhuman in their treatment of their daughters.

'Perfect life' brings in the conditioning of the feminine and the patriarchal thought that a woman can become a whole or perfect being only when she becomes a mother. Meera, the protagonist of this story becomes a psychological mother for an unknown boy whom she names Krishna and whom she also loses due to legalities. Her experiencing a deep bond of love between her and the boy suggests how biological motherhood is not an essentiality. Divakaruni, thus poses a threat to 'essentialism', in this story. On the one hand In the 'word love', Divakaruni brings out the dangerously possessive biological motherhood functioning as an annihilating power and on the other, she creates a possibility of a very positive, deep bond of love as the possibility of a psychological motherhood. Meera's consciousness permits seemingly contradictory existence – her role as mother and her role as a careerist but she is able to adopt the dual behaviour pattern and creates a possibility of a 'contradictory, fragmented, ambiguous identity'.

'The Disappearance' exposes the malpractices involved in the institution of marriage. The patriarchal arranged marriage involves a lot of hypocrisy, double standards and at times, it results into legalised rape as in the case of the protagonist with no name, indicating the loss of identity and a complete marginalisation. All her wishes and dreams are questioned and suppressed by her husband, 'what for, I'm here to take care of you or you look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more feminine' (AM p. 172). So, she leads a pathetic life and finally asserts her protest in the form of silence and sudden disappearance. The disappearance is symbolic, she already did not exist metaphorically as her own person but this time it is actual disappearance.

'Doors' presents the only protagonist in Divakaruni's stories who is an Indian but American national who has married an Indian. The story deals with space, privacy and shows how the clash of cultures results in a traumatic experience for a woman like Preeti who becomes hysteric: 'a hand snatched the bottle and hurled it against the wall where it shattered and fell in emerald fragments. Dimly she recognized the voice, the hand. They were her's. And she was alone in the sudden silence.' (AM p. 200)

'The Ultrasound' has two expecting mothers as the protagonists; Runu who is in India is castigated for not giving birth to a male child. Divakaruni showcases the injustice meted out to women and girl child and also shows how female foeticide is common in India. Anju, her cousin who lives in America invites her to America in order to give her reprieve from her ill-fated life. Through Anju's character, Divakaruni creates a possibility of a sisterhood and also seems to indicate the flexibility and freedom in the US. Anju is determined to fight against her husband or even use her 'pregnancy' and get her 'way' to get Runu to America. She says: 'I know I will, I say to myself smiling.' (AM p. 230)

'Affair' brings out yet another arranged marriage, invisibly broken, in which the husband and wife are 'spiralling toward hate' (AM p. 271) and therefore, the wife states, 'it's better this way, each of us freeing the other before it's too late...(AM p. 271). The wife decides to 'start learning, once more to live' (AM p. 272). The story suggests infidelity which results in the psychological separation between the husband and wife. Thus, the protagonist, Abha; who leads a troubled life, protests against the same by deciding to end the relationship which has lost its essence.

'Meeting Mrunal' is a story about a divorcee and a single woman. It brings out the nuisances of both the positions. Asha, attempts to be a 'good' wife as she followed the literary figures. She 'always tried to be the perfect wife and motherlike the heroines of

mythology ---patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti' (AM p. 298). Both, Asha and her friend Mrynal seem to experience their 'in between' existence or space and they become fragmented beings once they cross the Laxman-Rekha, the confining borders. Of course, they have to face the consequences of their deviant behaviour. Asha, with her son, drinks milk to their 'precious, imperfect lives'. (AM p. 300)

Therefore, it may be concluded that Divakaruni deals with a variety of roles of Indian women who have migrated to America and she deconstructs, demystifies and demythologises these roles. Most of these women lead victimized, submissive, alienated and marginalized lives in their marriages which are 'arranged'. But some of them are rebels and assert themselves by deviating from the traditional patriarchal ideology. The process poses a threat to their identities but they successfully adopt multiple behavioural patterns and gain a new identity which is contradictory, diverse and ambiguous. In a way, it is an acceptance of 'no identity' but 'ambiguity'. Fragmentation also qualifies their identities. These women adopt unique strategies for their survival and though they are all Indian women, there is no generalization possible. Their responses also underline rejection of essentialism and assertion of individualism and an imperfect life.

Divakaruni interrogates the very institutions of arranged marriage and family by exposing the double standards and hypocrisy involved in these. She perceives motherhood as an institution unleashing the dominant ideology so as to control individual behaviour. She also creates the possibility of psychological motherhood being able to assert the value of 'the feminine'. Divakaruni does not reject the traditional 'feminine' outrightly but seems to respect the difference. The miserable condition of Indian widows has also been exposed: there are widows belonging to the old generations in India, spending a life of sacrifice and penance and the new generation widows like Sumita who refuse to go back to their native land since they see the advantages of being in the land of their adoption and denounce the traditional Indian widowhood. Divakaruni's divorcee is also ready to accept her 'imperfect life'.

Of course, women living in India are not able to be rebels, so they lead a submissive life and accept their victimisation. But their sisters in the US certainly have better chances. They are able to defy victimization since they seem to be more conscious about their rights than their sisters in India. The burden of Indian traditions seems to fade away at least to a certain extent, as the women migrate to the US.

Divakaruni seems to have a definite feminist agenda. She seems to write for not only the East but especially also for the West as she describes certain customs in elaborate manner or she even provides a glossary to the text. She creates the orient through her stories but indirectly maintains that the US creates a possibility of the survival of 'contradictory, fragmented identities'.

Divakaruni demythologizes images of women like Sita and Savitri and probes the psyche of women so as to analyse 'the problem that has no name'.

Divakaruni is a feminist as she shows the women characters in a sympathetic light and exposes the malpractices of patriarchy by questioning the patriarchal institutions, bringing out 'postidentity' and at times, no identity but ambiguity as all identities seem to be fluid and not at all fixed and at time, quite reversible.

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