

Gender Issues across Boundaries In The Select Novels And Short Stories Of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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I. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the foremost writers of the diasporic literature. She has written seven novels, numerous stories, Anthologies and poems. Many of her works deal with the immigrant experiences, especially of women in general. She highlights diasporic women protagonists, living in two cultures, their delineation, isolation, exile, mental trauma, dispersion, dislocation at the level of diasporic consciousness particularly. She is an award-winning author, poet and teacher. Her themes include women, immigration, the South Asian experience, history, myth, magical realism and diversity. She writes for adults and children. Her books have been translated into twenty nine languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Russian and Japanese. Two novels, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*, have been made into films. Her short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, won an American Book Award.

Gender issues find primary representation in the novels and short stories of Divakaruni. Her novels feature Indian- born women torn between old and new world values. These women characters change identities many times to arrive at a final definition of their self-hood. These women evolve different strategies to assert their individuality and act independently with a sense of freedom and conviction. She gives more importance to women characters. In her novels she has explored the physical and psychological tensions and the tortures to which the immigrant women are subjected. She has represented women as actively upholding and shaping class, cultural and gender structures within the community, home and marriage. The search for identity is a major element we find in the delineation of her female characters. She deals with the lives of women both at home and abroad. Even when they visit abroad they face the same gender issues. For them a foreign land has not yet changed their status much. Some people fight against this drawback and carve their identity and escape the drudgery.

Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), is a collection of short stories. It deals with conflicts arising out of love, chronicles the assimilation and rebellion that Indian born girls and women in America undergo as they balance old treasured beliefs and surprising new desires. The collection has eleven short stories, and majority of the stories deal with the immigrant experience along with the socio- cultural encounter that an Indian experiences when he moves towards the west, which is an important theme in the mosaic of American Indian culture. The author skillfully tells stories about immigrant Indians who are both modern as well as trapped by cultural transformation, who are struggling to shape out an identity of their own in an unknown land. The book addresses issues such as racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. The book is awarded the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation.

The women characters in the short stories are portrayed as the victims in the hands of men and society. They are suppressed in various ways. The woman in the short story *The Bats* appears as a victim of a man who frequently comes home drunk. He batters his wife so that she has marks and scars on her face as described by her daughter, "A couple of day's later mother had another mark on her face, even bigger and reddish-blue. It was on the side of her forehead and made her face look lopsided" (AM 3). In this story both the mother and daughter are the victims of men. They are silent sufferers in this drama of male oppression. The women are physically weak and financially insecure. They dare not fight for freedom and also they don't know how to survive without the support of the man. The women are either afraid of their father or husband. They do not want to go away from their homes because people will be spreading false propaganda on them.

The story, *Silver pavements, Golden Roof* which is set in Chicago, depicts the life of an Indian man who comes to America dreaming of becoming a millionaire but he ends up his life as a garage mechanic. He shows his frustration on his wife Pratima who tolerates her husband's abuses and frustration patiently, without protest and without saying a word as a traditional Indian wife. When her relative Jayanti has come to the United States, she stays with her aunt Pratima and uncle. One day she persuades her aunt Pratima to go for a walk with her. Unfortunately some boys follow them and throw slush on their faces. When they escape from the boy and

reach home, her uncle is angry that they have gone for a walk and has been victimized by the white people. As a figure of male authority, his uncle is angry that they went out without his permission. Pratima is the victim of his anger.

In *The Maid Servant's Story*, the servant has to tolerate the sexual torture of the master of that house. When the mistress returns home after the delivery of her child, she is devastated when she learns about her husband's cruel attitude towards the servant. Even though she finds that her husband is not true to her, she does not want to go away from her husband because there is no future for a divorced woman in the society and her daughter will, "lose all chances for a good marriage if the scandal of a broken home stained her life" (AM 156). Hence her fear makes her keep silent. In the story *Meeting Mirnal*, Mahesh wants to escape from his traditional arranged marriage so that he can go and live with his American lover. He leaves his wife Asha and son alone in an alien land and go away in search of happiness. After a long time, Asha and Mrinalini Ghose, her classmate and best friend meet each other and share their experiences of their tragic married life. Now Asha realizes how sad and empty Mrinalini's life is and Asha is now able to accept her own sorrows and miseries as something inevitable. Asha understands that both the married and the unmarried woman are in search of happiness.

The women characters in the works of Divakaruni try to find freedom and happiness not only for themselves, but also for the others, as in *The Ultrasound*. Anju and Runu are cousins. Anju is married to Sunil living in California, and Runu is married to Ramesh, who works in Calcutta. When Runu's in-laws find out that she will be giving birth to a girl, they want her to abort the baby, against Runu's wish. Runu asks Anju for advice, and the cousin in California tells her to leave her husband's home. She hopes to procure a visa for Runu so that she can start her life in a new world. This is how almost all the female characters in *Arranged Marriage* want to break the norms of their mothers, who "believed that women should be happy with whatever their men decided they ought to have" (292).

In several stories such as *The Bats*, *The Maid Servant's Story*, *In Meeting Mirnal* and *the Ultrasound*, the Indian male characters, who often play a hegemonic role in a Patriarchal society, are shown to be responsible for constructing, entrapping, cheating, brutalizing and failing to understand women. Women suffer a lot and they are depending upon men for their basic necessities of life. They adjust themselves to the new environment and they are even accepting the husband's extramarital sexual relationship. Even in the midst of sufferings and pain, they develop a positive attitude to life, lest they should end up in conjugal bankruptcy.

The Mistress of Spices (1997), her first novel has attained fame all over the literary circle of the world. It is the story of Tilo, an immigrant from India, runs a spice shop in Oakland, California. While she supplies the ingredients for curries and kormas, she also helps her customers to gain a more precious commodity: whatever they most desire. For Tilo is a Mistress of Spices, a priestess of the secret magical powers of spices. Through those who visit and revisit her shop, she catches glimpses of the life of the local Indian expatriate community. To each, Tilo dispenses wisdom and the appropriate spice, for the restoration of sight, the cleansing of evil, and the pain of rejection. But when a lonely American ventures into the store, a troubled Tilo cannot find the correct spice, for he arouses in her a forbidden desire, which if she follows will destroy her magical powers. The novel is a spellbinding and hypnotizing tale of joy and sorrow and one woman's special powers to solve them with the help of the power of the spices.

There are many women characters in *Mistress of spices*. Divakaruni demonstrates the suppressed identity of women through the character of Ahuja's wife. The first character Ahuja's wife comes into Tilo's store. She is young and beautiful immigrant woman. Her name is Lalita. Tilo wants to call her by her name but Lalita prefers to be called Ahuja's wife. Lalita's story is the same story of many of the women in India. She does not want to get married. It is only before three days to the wedding, she has seen her husband. He is totally different from the photo shown to her, which has taken years back. He has come from America. She does not like him but the wedding has been arranged to an old man. She agrees to marry him for the sake of her parents. She has to be silent with tears, as she can't explain her desires to her parents. She accepts him as her husband. Lalita's life after her marriage is not a happy one. Lalitha confesses to Tilo about her married life. She also tells that her husband is extremely possessive and harasses her physically and watches her always.

Lalita is an apt example of the oriental culture, where a woman hides her own identity willingly in order to pacify the male dominance of the husband, by referring to her husband's wife. Lalita knows sewing. She has been to a sewing school in Kanpur. Lalita wants to continue to do sewing in America, after her marriage to Ahuja. But she has been denied of her desire, because of her husband's dominance. He has a firm view that his woman should not take up any profession. "Aren't I man enough man enough man enough" (16). She remained Ahuja's wife. This shows how women in general care for their family and how they are restricted by the society. She longs for a child but she does not conceive, "Child- longing, deepest desire, deeper than for wealth or lover or even death" (*The Mistress of Spices*, 16). She goes for a check up and comes to know that the problem is not with her but with her husband. When she tells this to her husband he gets furious and assaults her physically. Tilo realises that Ahuja's wife is a victim of cultural apathy and male domination. She tries to record her inner crisis:

All day at home, she is so lonely; the silence like quick sand sucking at her wrists and ankles, tears she cannot stop, disobedient tears like spilled pomegranate seeds and Ahuja shouting when he returned home to her swollen eyes. (15)

Divakaruni depicts both old and new generations of immigrant women with different gender problems. Mrs. Ahuja in the *Mistress of Spices*, represent the old generation of women who follow their husbands to America by virtue of marriage and they suffer same patriarchal oppressions and treatments from their husbands as many women do in India. Besides, diasporic conditions make their lives worse as they are alienated totally from their homes of mother land on the one hand and differentiated in the foreign land on the other. Mrs Ahuja's case is one of the cases of rape in marriage and the match is made by deceit. In the end, Tilo gets the letter from Lalita through the mail woman. Lalita writes that she has some organization's help, because her husband is cruel to her and then she is living away from her husband and seeks refuge at a battered women's shelter. Lalita plays her role as daughter and a wife. But she loses her desire. At last Lalita reveals herself and she decides to manage her life to suit her heart and pursue happiness in her own way. Lalitha expresses her feelings when she writes Tilo:

I cannot write what else he did to me. It is too shameful. But in a way it was also good. It broke my last hesitation, my fear of hurting my parents. There are other women here. Some cry all the time. Some don't talk at all. They're afraid to press charges, afraid to leave this place. There are voices in my head every day. They whisper, He's learned his lesson, things will be different now, would it be so bad to go back?

I try to push them away. I remember what you said to me just before I left. I tell myself, I deserve dignity, I deserve happiness. Mataji, pray for me that I will remain strong enough to find it. (270-271)

Daksha is another character in *The Mistress of Spices* who is a nurse in AIDS Ward. She works at the hospital and also takes care of her old mother-in-law. It causes too much trouble if she says she can't do anymore work. She has to sacrifice her life. She has to sacrifice everything for her mother-in-law and her husband. Hameeda, another character in the same novel stays with her brother in America. She escapes the problems of rigid customs and seeks for a new life in America with her daughter. She is divorced by her husband because she has no boy child. Also he has seen another girl, younger and prettier than her. However she feels "luckier than many other women to whom this happens because I have such a good brother" (227).

Geeta is yet another character who is brought into light by her grandfather. He complains about Geeta's behaviour because he is an Indian- a Bengali in America. He always shouts at her American style of life. Hence he is not able to acknowledge the American way of living and Geeta follows modernity, and her employment with foreigners and her returning home at uncivilised hours. Her grandfather is of the view that, "from birth a girl's real home is with her future husband's family" (91). In the meantime, Geeta tells her parents that she is in love with Juan who is a Chicano. However, Geeta's family counters this decision with a serious reproach, for not respecting their culture, while Geeta feels they have no interest in respecting her marriage choice. Everybody at home gets upset. She quarrels with her dad and mum and leaves the house without telling anybody. In her search for happiness through love, Geeta is threatened by her own reluctance to abandon traditional Indian culture. This could invite excommunication from her family, the only support system that she has in America. Geeta is an acceptor of diverse consequences. In opting against the ambiguous outcome of arranged marriage, she distances herself from familial love. Here we see an Indian family in America who still tries to follow and keep their culture.

In America, Tilo meets many characters who have different problems in their life. Through the characters we know that it is women who face more problems when compared to men. For men, the main problem is to earn. Whereas for a woman it starts when she is formed in her mother's womb, Parents abort their child when they come to know if it is a girl baby. The characters Tilo, Ahuja's wife, Hamida, pratima and Asha are some examples. The characters in the novel and short stories are very clearly torn apart, often into multiple pieces both physically and emotionally. Her female characters struggle in their balance between family responsibilities and individual happiness. It shows how complex is the problem of identity crisis that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land. Majority of the characters are new settlers in the alien land and at the beginning of their life in America, they find it extremely difficult to adapt to the American way of life, American culture and personal morals. In fact, it is a cultural shock to them but slowly they understand the realities of life and it becomes a question of survival for them. Women are still undergoing sufferings because of male chauvinism. To lead a comfortable life, adjustment is an indispensable way to everyone. When there is no adjustment there will be problems in the married lives of the people.

Works Cited

- [1] Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee, *Arranged Marriage*. Great Britain: Black Swan, 1997.
- [2] Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee, *the Mistress of Spices*. London: Black Swan, 1997.