

## **A Woman-Centric Study Of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Arranged Marriage'**

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'Arranged Marriage' is a short story collection by Indian Diasporic Writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The stories come out with varied themes and issues concerning India and America. Indian Culture, traditions, belief systems, values juxtapose the American way of living; Racial discrimination, Assimilation and Acculturation form part of the stories, the women of India and diasporic space encounter various issues surrounding their lives. All the stories are compact and content in themselves probing the readers to think and empathize with the characters and situations. This paper tries to analyze the women in the short stories and how they lead their lives whether happy or sad, satisfied or dejected.

'The Bats' is a story about a mother and a daughter who unable to bear the violence and humiliation of the father, try to move out from the house and again return, when the moods of the man change. This goes on all through their lives. The setting of the story is Calcutta and the village, Gopalpur. The protagonist is the mother and the narrator is the daughter, who narrates in the third person. The daughter sees the mother crying quite often in the nights. This depicts the typical Indian patriarchal society, where husbands beat up their wives for no big reasons. The daughter sees the bruises on her cheeks and forehead. Unable to bear the pain of a male chauvinist husband attacking her physically, they both go and live in the mother's grandfather's house in Gopalpur. Financial independence is not given to women of Indian society. So, the mother secretly pools up the money to go away from the house. After a couple of days, she decides to go back as she receives a letter from her husband to come back. For a few days, life is happy in her house but the same thing happens again and they both keep shuttling between the places.

Both the mother and daughter become victims in the hands of a male. But their frequent travelling from their house to grandpa's house and again to their house indicates the typical Indian traditional society where women don't have courage to completely part their lives with the husbands but face all humiliation without questioning.

A comparison is drawn between the life of the bats and the life of the mother. Bats move from one tree to the other in safeguarding their lives, but they don't realize where it is really safe. The same thing is with the mother: "I guess they just don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they'll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here" p-8. Bats have vision in the nights but can't see during daylight. Similarly, the wife sees and bears the violence in the night and is blind to her own self-respect due to the society around her and thus stays back with her husband without having a say.

If the protagonist in 'The Bats' is timid and voiceless, in the short story 'Clothes', Sumita, after becoming a widow decides to stay back in America working in a store instead of returning to India. The situations in India, how the society receives widows and imposes restrictions on them make her take the decision which was against her in-law's wishes. Sumita desires to live in a liberal society like America on her own terms.

Sumita grew up in village with folk tales, fables and stories about a girl who was married to a handsome prince: "And she married the handsome prince who took her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas." P-18. Sumita crosses the seven seas with her handsome prince but destiny is not in her hands and has to become a widow. Not all stories have a happy ending is what becomes clear to Sumita. The duties women had to fulfill were put in Sumita's mind by her mother: "A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws" p-18. The word, 'A married woman' itself is restrictive and confined whose boundaries are drawn by her in-law's family even after the bonds are severed with the male counterpart due to unanticipated death. But Sumita dares to defy tradition, and asserts her individuality by staying back in America.

The girl protagonist in the story, 'The Word Love' has a live in relationship with her American boyfriend, Rex and has left her house from India to America without her mother's consent. The mother stops talking to her and the protagonist is in a trauma to rebuild the relationship with her mother. As such she neglects Rex, the love between them dwindles and finally unable to get the love of her mother or boyfriend commits suicide. Though she is educated and progressive in her thoughts, she was bound by moral conditions of her conservative Indian mother which makes the girl end her life. Emotional turmoil may lead even the strongest of human beings to lose control on their lives. The character of the girl in 'The Word Love' is in quite contrast to the Sumita in 'Clothes' or the mother in 'The Bats'

Yet another interesting and bold character is Meera of 'A Perfect Life' who is in America and has a relationship with her American boy friend, Richard. Meera's mother accuses her for her 'Westernized notions' p-76. The fact is that Meera wasn't interested in getting married. She was content with her American life and felt it was quite perfect for her. One day, her life changes totally when she sees a small boy and accepts him into her life. She was happy feeding, educating and enjoying with him. She invests so much of her time in this relationship that she can't imagine a child of her own from Richard, as she did not know of what color and type of eyes he would have. Divakaruni presents such subtleties like how Indians too have their own feelings of segregation and discordant attitudes which do not really play havoc on the relationship but exist at their own level. As it was illegal to keep a boy, she decides to adopt him but an authority of an organization asks her to handover the boy, Krishna to 'foster home office'. Unaccustomed to the life at the foster home, the boy runs away from it. Meera is devastated at it and all through her life searches for the boy. Later she gets married to Richard. There is irony seen in the title of the story. Though her life seems to be perfect with Richard, she seems to have lost her soul for the little boy Krishna.

'The Maid Servant's story' puts into perspective the precarious condition of an Indian wife, whose husband has an affair with a maid servant. The wife develops a bonding for the maid, Sarala and Sarala too likes the wife. The wife's sister knows about the relationship but doesn't reveal it to her sister as she may ruin her life. The maid is sent out of the house due to the pressure given by maid's family members. But the wife thinks about Sarala always. Unable to find her, she burns the things left by her and the saffron sari which she gave to the maid. She becomes hysterical. The husband starts the relationship once he sees the maid dressed in the saffron sari. Manisha, the narrator of the story seems to be the daughter of the protagonist/wife in the story. When she knows about the maid's story, Manisha thinks about the lives of Indian women how they are filled with 'half light' and 'half darkness' p-167. Indian women despite the faults of male counterparts have to live oblivious to them thus showing the helplessness of Indian women in such situations. Manisha then understands why her Mashi, mother's sister asks her not to wear Saffron sari as it does not bring good luck to her.

Another story is about a diasporic woman in 'The Disappearance'. The wife who lives in the U.S with her husband and two year old son leaves the house without informing anyone. We get hints in the story that the husband didn't quarrel much but was dominating. She takes away the jewelry that she usually puts in a tin and even the things from the bank locker which the husband comes to know only later. He is neither happy nor shocked about it but after a year, he asks his mother to set-up another alliance and gets married. Typical male attitude of superiority feeling, callousness and living a life of his own choice is seen in the husband's character. He sometimes thinks if his first wife is alive or not. But the little boy thinks of his mother and says 'Mama', 'Mama'. The mother's character is totally different from the other protagonists of the short stories, as she knows what she wants in life and does what she likes to do. All the sympathies are with the boy, who wants to desperately see his mother.

Another woman character who is called American Born Confused Desi, ABCD by her relatives is Preeti of the short story, 'Doors' who lives in California with her husband, Deepak. Preeti enjoys her personal space and privacy with closed doors of her room but Deepak likes to keep his room open. Deepak's friend, Raj stays in their house, but Preeti was not comfortable in his presence as her privacy was lost and shouts at him when he comes to her room to give her medicine. Deepak wasn't happy when this happened and after Raj left the house, he keeps his doors shut. The word 'Doors' has a metaphorical significance as the doors not only mean the doors of the house, but the doors of the hearts as well. The distance between Deepak and Preeti grows thereafter.

'The Ultrasound' is another short story where the protagonist, Runu initially was unable to conceive after her marriage. The traditional Indian society which is full of conventional values, beliefs, superstitions considers such women as 'bad luck' people p-217. They are humiliated, 'chastised, beaten' p-217, Such kind of atrocities against women reflect the darker aspects of Indian society apart from the rich culture and heritage. Runu was taken to the 'Shasthi's shrine' p-217 for the blessings of the Goddess for Runu to become a mother. Runu later conceives and Anju too at the same time. Anju says, "And now, to make everything perfect the babies are coming." P-215. But unfortunately, Runu who lives in her in-law's place is asked to abort the foetus after knowing that it is a girl in the ultrasound test. For this, Runu's sister, Anju asks her to leave her family and live on her own in America and that she would take care of her. But later feels guilty for the suggestion she had

given her and questions herself, "Had I taken all of that away from her by my misplaced American notions of Feminism and justice?" p-227.

Abha, a typical Indian housewife who spends most of her time cooking and housekeeping appears in the story 'Affair'. She doesn't enjoy her life like her husband, Ashok and her friend, Meena. Meena has an affair with an American, Charles. She wants to have a life like Meena's as she feels it's high time for her to free herself from her loveless marriage with Ashok. The thought of an affair seems to be confined to her mind though she feels like having one but it is not allowed for married women.

Another character is Asha, a divorced woman in the story, 'Meeting Mrinal' who wants to keep up her marriage as the psychological bent of any woman in general would be to uphold values and relationships. She always recollects her past experiences. She understands that there is no use putting up a façade of happiness until she meets her friend, Mrinal.

Every short story comes with a different situation, women encountering various concerns and issues in their own cultural and familial environment mainly in their married lives. Divakaruni's art lies in depicting the hearts of Indian women, gives a voice to them and brings them to the forefront through these stories.

### REFERENCES

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