



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Representation of Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

Dr. Sarabjit Kaur

Assistant Professor, Department of English, SGGGS College, Chandigarh, India

Abstract:

In the Indian society, the experiences of women are not considered equal in comparison to the perceptions and experiences of their male counterparts. Women writers have mostly presented a narrow canvas of themes like domestic issues, experiences of in-law's place, difficulties in adjustment in post and pre-marital status, sexual harassment at work place, dejection and so on. With the advent of feminism, the image of women in fiction did undergone a sea change -- from traditional self-sacrificing women to characters searching for identity, talking about personal as well as professional life, and defying male dominance. This shift can be seen in the works of the most prominent Indian women writers, to name a few, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy and it has left indelible print in the mind of readers. In case of Diasporic literature, the concern of women writers is different yet the same- alienation and homelessness. This paper will discuss stories compiled in Arranged Marriage authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It will peep into the lives of the women characters, their roles in the new found land and dilemma, which is, whether to adapt to the new way of life in the west or to cling to the old traditions of their motherland.

The emergence of the first body of Indian women writings could be attributed to the advent of Buddhism. Perhaps it was the freedom offered by the religion, the way of life it offered to women, and the principle of equality that it propagated which allowed women to pen their thoughts for the first time. Although we have great history of ancient civilizations as Harappa and Mohenjodaro, there is no written manuscript available to authenticate presence of women writers. The early forms of writings addressed the issue of personal freedom, as Mutta writes,

"So free I am, so gloriously free, from three petty things-- from mortar
from pestle and from my twisted lord" 1

Number of women in the 6th Century BC joined religious communities in attempt to break away from life of frustration they were experiencing in the four walls of what was called "home". As they started writing the gender disparity came up as an important theme as the experiences of women were and are not considered equal in comparison to the perceptions and experiences of their male counterparts. Women writers mostly presented a narrow canvas of themes like domestic issues, experiences of in-law's place, difficulties in adjustment in post and pre-marital status, sexual harassment at work place, dejection and so on. With the advent of feminism, the image of women in fiction did undergone a sea change -- from traditional self-sacrificing women to characters searching for identity, talking about personal as well as professional life, and defying male dominance. This shift can be seen in the works of the most prominent Indian women writers, to name a few, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Meena Alexander, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy and it has left indelible print in the mind of readers.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born Chitralkha Banerjee, 1956) is an Indian-American author, poet, and a professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. Born in Kolkata, India, she went to the United States for her graduate studies, receiving a Master's degree in English from Wright State University in Ohio, and a PhD from the University of California. Divakaruni's writing revolves around the lives of immigrant women and as she mentions them "in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life."2 Divakaruni's

Diaspora as Okwie Envezor mentions, "is a process marked by incessant regrouping, recreations and reiterations", so being in Diaspora is to be pulled in two different directions, the homeland that one belongs to and the land of opportunities to which one wants to develop a belonging. Their sense of nostalgia for the homeland as well as their attachment to its traditions, religions and languages produce, what we call, diasporic literature. There is a constant craving for the homeland as well as to create a home in the new found world; there is an unbreakable attachment with the culture and traditions of the homeland countered by the desire to fit in to the new one. So, diasporic literature dwells upon alienation, loneliness, homelessness, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, and identity; it also involves the clash between the past and the present, between the first generation diaspora and the second, the basic concern for root and rootlessness. Doasporic perception can be seen in the works of famous authors like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton

Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, M.G. Vassanji, Shyam Selvadurai, Meera Sayal, Kiran Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who observe social realities, longings and emotions of the "dislocated" lot.

The women characters under study in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* are either living abroad or happen to be visiting their homeland; they are no doubt conditioned by the Indian upbringing but have risen above the traditional constraints. They seem to be rational but they still carry inside them their traditional beliefs. They are torn between old and new values. These characters, like women characters of the other contemporary writers, question the nature of their lives, and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals. To name a few, the character of Devi in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Virmati in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Nisha in *Home*, by the same author. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the diasporic Indian women who find themselves in an in-between state, struggling to identify. Their journey of immigration is followed by journey into settlement and culminates with their journey into self.

Arranged Marriage (1995) is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's debut collection of short stories that won critical acclaim and has received the 1996 American Book Award, the Josephine Miles Award, the Bay Area Book reviewers Award and the Pen Oakland Award. It provides a literary representation of women's experience of displacement. The stories deal with a number of issues relating to the experience of South Asian female migrants. The collection has 11 short stories, and majority of the stories deal with the immigrant experience, which the author could undergo as well as understand when she moved to the west in 1976 at the age of 19. Later in 1991, she established Maitri – a hotline for South Asian women who are sufferers of domestic cruelty and abuse. It was her involvement with Maitri, which became her inspiration to pen down these short stories about lives of Indian immigrants that she has dealt with.

The first story in this collection is *Bats*. The protagonist in this short story is chained by societal traditions and is a victim of domestic violence. She is constantly beaten by her husband as revealed by her daughter as "a couple of days 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) and she desperately wants to escape but her traditional ties are so strong that she cannot break away from her role as a wife to her "master". Both the mother and the daughter are victimized and they become mute sufferers of male oppression from which they both escape during nights like "bats" to mother's native village where they experience open sky, river, and trees. Her daughter is happy too being in the lap of nature with a loving elderly figure, who is her mother's uncle. However, a letter from her husband and a small promise, a bit of gesture of love is enough for her to leave the peace of mind that she acquired at her village. Consequently, she returns to her husband and this time she hopes that life will change. What we realize at the end is that nothing changes and past is not "only a word" (AM 15) which can be erased and written again. The protagonist reveals that her suffering mainly arises out of acute sense of gender discrimination and her identity and existence is defined by her gender and the society that she lives in subtly stamps male dominance and power over the helplessness of women. The same theme is repeated in "The Maid Servant's Story", where an English Professor at a University in California goes back home to Calcutta to learn how, when she was a child, her father tried to compel the maid servant when her mother was hospitalized for the delivery of her brother. The narrative tells us relationship between Manish and Bijoy, Deepamasii and Manish, Manish and her mother, and relation between Manish's mother and father. Manish belongs to a traditional Bengali family. However, after her immigration to America, she undergoes a transformation. In her ideas about relationship, she is entirely westernized. She wants a liberated relationship with no strings attached. She is closer to her aunt Deepamasii when compared to her own mother. As a child, she had always yearned for parental love, which she could never experience. She never got the praise she carved - that squeezed – breathless, delirious with joy hug that other mothers gave their daughters. She feels emotionally starved and accordingly in other relationships too she does not feel complete contentment that a perfect relationship should offer. Her relationship with Bijoy also does not make her happy. She persistently feels the guilt that traditions are many a times imposed on us. She also, indirectly blames her mother for her current state. Sarala, the maidservant in this short story is a person dedicated to her work. However, when the mistress of the house is ill, the husband behaves in strange manner. There is no emotion of guilt to be seen as he goes towards Sarala's room, with mal intentions in his mind. He tells the servant not to act so virtuous - once a whore, always a whore. Nevertheless, when he sees that his plans have failed he threatens the maidservant and calls her names. As he is a man and morals in our society are only for women, he does not feel the guilt that is felt by Manish. The writer shows us the double standard of our society. In marriage, fidelity and loyalty are considered to be the greatest virtues that a woman should possess. When the mother comes to know about this she does not have the courage to leave her husband because in the Indian society there was no future for the divorced woman and since she felt that her daughter would "lose all chances for a good marriage if the scandal of a broken home stained her life"(156). Her fear for her daughter and self makes her a mute sufferer and the servant also had to tolerate the sexual advances of her master making both of them victims of male dominance. As far as the female protagonist is concerned, she lives and enjoys a liberated relationship with a foreigner that she possibly will never marry.

In the story 'Clothes' Sumita's, the protagonist, changing clothes at different stages of her life symbolizes her changing characteristics, which describes constant tussle between her emotions and external pressures which in turn gives rise to a new hybrid identity to Sumita. She wears sari at her home in India and migrates to America after her marriage. Sari is a unique and an important part of Indian identity. For Sumita it reflects hopes, her feelings and her thoughts. The different colors of saris manifest stages in her life. When she takes bath and prepares for the bride-viewing day, she describes her wet and yellow sari as a sunflower after rain. It reflects her feelings about a new change which is about to come after her marriage and her immigration to America. The sari which her father brings for her to wear on the bride-viewing day is pale- pink in color, which is color of imagination as she thinks of herself in a new country with her partner. While flying to the new land she wears blue and red, the colors of possibilities and luck. She continues to wear sari at her in-laws home as her Indian identity continues but at the same time she starts making a transition from an Indian woman to a western lady as she tries on western clothes in her bedroom and dreams of working in her husband's store. After her

husband's death, she emerges to the platform with a new identity; identity of an independent, empowered and strong woman. She imagines herself wearing skirt and blouse and working, fulfilling her dreams. The clothes at different stages of her life symbolize her changing identity and at the end it symbolizes her embracing the western culture with empowerment and her freedom of choices. She finally decides to stay in America and work as her husband and she herself has dreamt. She thinks of her new identity, "In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds (AM 33)." She is self motivated, empowered and ready to face the arguments against her decision.

'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' set in Chicago depicts life of an Indian man who came to America dreaming of making big but ends up as a garage mechanic. He throws this bitterness on his wife, Pratima, who tolerates these abuses in a patient manner. The protagonist, Jayanti, who is the narrator, comes to Chicago to meet her aunt Pratima before beginning her graduate studies at an American university. First of all, her dream of a big American house is shattered when she finds, "this apartment smells of stale curry. It is crowded with faded, overstuffed sofas and rickety end tables that look like they've come from a large place" (AM 40). She is shocked to find herself in a tiny room as "it is the same size as my bathroom at home" (AM 41). On Pratima's assurance that soon she will have many American friends, Uncle Bikram interrupts and brings her close to hard realities of the American life – "Things here aren't as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we'd become millionaires. But it's not so easy" (AM43). When one day Jayanti persuades her aunt to accompany her for a walk, they both undergo agony of racial discrimination at the hands of some boys who threw slush on their face. Luckily they escaped but at reaching home they encounter angry Bikram who blames them for leaving home without his permission. Pratima being a traditional Indian wife doesn't protest but Jayanti is unable to comprehend her uncle's anger about the country they are living in until she becomes aware that a similar attack had destroyed her uncle's business and had led him to major financial crisis. So the title of the story 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' metaphorically suggests the aspirations of the immigrants but the reality remains something else. In 'The Disappearance' Divakaruni questions why the protagonist disappears without a trace or giving any reasons for the act. She had been a well bred, college- educated Indian girl and her husband didn't wish her to behave like American women; instead when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes her husband pacifies her with a remark like "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 172) hence she had no opportunity to do as she wished. The night before she disappeared, she again had to succumb to the wishes of her husband as usual, "grabbing her by the elbow and pulling her to bed. . . he was always careful not to hurt her, he took pride in that. Not even a little slap, not like some of the men he'd known growing up" (AM 172-73). Through this narrative, Divakaruni pictures the plight of Indian women who have no understanding or equality in their marriage and it becomes a kind of entrapment from which only an act of disappearance can save.

Talking of her collection of stories, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni states, "this has been a really important topic. It is related to the frequent theme of immigration in my stories and how it changes us, particularly women. My characters are mostly Indian women growing up in India in a very traditional family. In *Arranged Marriage*, many come from a background similar to my own. I grew up with very definite notions of womanhood, of who is considered a good woman and how she is to behave, especially within the family context. Much of that was based on the notion that a good woman makes sacrifices. As a result of immigration, when we find ourselves in the West, there is quite a different notion of what a good woman is and what she is expected to do. Many characters in *Arranged Marriage* are dealing with this sudden change in worldview, at once exhilarating and also terrifying. They have to make sense of the new situation, which begins to transform them as women. It begins to change their relationships with the people in their family – their husbands, who are with them in the new country, and their parents, who usually are back in India. There are children who are now born in the new environment, still caught between two cultures, yet with a completely different worldview."

Search for happiness and peace is what all protagonists are working towards, be it Sumita, Meera, Jayanti, Manish or Pratima. These characters and the author herself too through these characters is questioning the old school of thought, traditions, customs, values that society thrives on. The lives of these women are a saga of peripheral existence caught between pressures of the past and hopes and aspirations of the new, the present and the future. Sometimes they are seen making bold and courageous choices to carve new identities and at other times seen succumbing to the seemingly overwhelming odds.

References

1. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Arranged Marriage*: Great Britain, Black Swan, 1997.
2. The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *Contemporary Women's Writing* (2012) ^{(2)}: 85-101. <http://cww.oxfordjournals.org/content/6/2/85.full.pdf+html>
3. Tharu, Susie and Lalita, K. (Eds). *Women Writing in India Volume 1, 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*. Oxford University Press. New Delhi. 1991. Pg 68