

Dissolving Boundaries: A Perspective on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arrange Marriage*

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian descent American writer. She is a leading writer from the younger generation of the voice of the Indian diaspora. Though most of her writings are set in the Bay Area of California, but she deals with the immigrant experiences of her own. So, her writing can be acclaimed as semi-biographical one. She is not only a women writer but also a women activist. Being a women writer, she always tries to devalue the patriarchal hierarchy through her writings and raises voice against it. As an women activist, since 1991, she has been the president of MAITRI, a helpline for South Asian women that particularly helps victims of domestic violence and other abusive situation. *Arrange Marriage* is a high-power thriller of Devakaruni's creative art. It is an anthology of short story received considerable critical acclaim and 1996 American Book Award, The Bay Area Book Reviews and PEN Oakland – Award for fiction. In *Arrange Marriage* Devakaruni encompasses, a wide variety of themes including racism interracial relationship, economic disparity, abortion and divorce. She focuses her critical lenses on arranged marriage of Indian women living in India and India born women living new lives in America. Specially the women in India are subjected to ghoulish, brutish and nasty-treatment in married lives that they become a martyr as a result of their ages-old-servitude. The hoary tradition of finding matches by matching the horoscopes of the boy and the girl sometimes miserably fails to assures domestic predominates. But Devakaruni's women characters are not a silent spectator of the domestic violence. In her stories, the women characters frequently leave their marriages or relationship in order to re-conceptualize notion of self and home. In this paper an attempt has been made to depict Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arrange Marriage* an arrangement for reconstruction of boundaries of the institution called Marriage. Descriptive methodology has been chosen for discover the hidden meaning of the primary and secondary sources.

Key Words: Arrange Marriage, Domestic violence, Patriarchy, Indian Diaspora, Gender abuse.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'diaspora' derived from the Greek word 'diaspeiro', literally means scattering or dispersion of the people from their homeland. Diasporic writing has been increasingly receiving academic and disciplinary recognition. It has emerged as a distinct literacy genre. As we turn to the Indian diasporic writing, a large number people have migrated from India to various alien land under 'forced exiles' or 'self-imposed exiles. Some of them have made a mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on the one hand, there attachment to the motherland and on the other, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. The diasporic writings which are also known as 'expatriate writings or immigrant writings give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers when they are on the rock owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants, who succeed in assimilating themselves with new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most of the diasporic writers, immigration is not a *delight able* experience. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them which find expression, consciously unconsciously in their writings.

From the desk of U.S.A. house, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the leading voices of the Indian diasporic writers of younger generation. It has been found in her writing that, her celebration of Indian soul and soil, is not a romantic nostalgia but a realization of life itself. It results in the split of psyche, torn between the conflicting pull of ideals – individuals and society, personal and familial, past and present, reality and illusion. These seeming contradictions prepare a pattern of life experience in the writings of Divakaruni An anthology of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* by Divakaruni, becomes Magna-Carta of her life experiences – as a diasporic writer.

Objectives:

1. Focuses on the experiences and struggles of women character in the novel, *Arranged Marriage* and their trying to find their own identities by breaking the red tape of the “Masco-Culture”.
2. Unveil the domestication of women in the patriarchal society through the institution called “Marriage”.

METHODOLOGY

This study has been used the descriptive methodology to analyze the collected primary and secondary sources. It has adopted a library-based approach by which sources such as books, journals and web-based materials, published and unpublished articles are incorporated into this study. While the core matter of this study is the novel *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni.

ANALYSIS

Arranged Marriage, 1996 American Book Award winning fiction deals with the domestication of women living in India and India born women living new lives in America. Specially, the women in India are subjected to ghoulish, brutish and nasty treatment in married lives that they become martyr as a result of their ages-old servitude. The hoary tradition of find in matches by matching the horoscopes of the boy and the girl sometimes miserably fails to assure domestic bliss to the *beleaguered* women instead the domestic violence predominates. Neeta Banerjee asserts that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni “was really consumed by these stories and the need to write them. (2019)

“The Bats” is the opening story of *Arranged Marriage*, where Divakaruni exercises the domestic violence of an Indian family. Here, *Ma* the Protagonist represents the whole Ma of the Indian society, who becomes a prisoner in an arranged marriage. The domestic violence is unleashed upon her each night. It seems she has formed and interminable alliance with sobs, sighs and tears. Ma bears with the subhuman existence as she has no one to go back to except an old uncle in the countryside. One night Ma stealthily slips away, along with her daughter, from the cruel clutches of her husband, to an uncle living in a remote village. Some time passes gleefully for the mother and the daughter but, “the stares and whispers of the women in the marketplace” and the “loneliness of being without him” (*Arranged Marriage* – 12) proves too much for her and she fires off a letter to her husband. The husband writer back and promises “it won’t happen again” (AM – II) and she readies herself to join him. But after return of the protagonist, her husband did not keep his promise and again begins to assaults on her physically. Here, Divakaruni, postulates the condition of an Indian husband and wife and wife’s tries to rejects the patriarchal ethics of the age-old culture.

Affair is an interesting story involving two couples – Ashok and Abha and Meena and Shrikant. Like other stories in the collection this story too throws the light on the existential dilemmas of the immigrant Indians who carry the baggage of Indian Cultural values, which in the changed scenario of freedom and choices becomes anachronistic. The two couples are leading a transparently peaceful life but beneath the surface there seems to be a simmering discontent which never get articulated either in words or in actions. The revelation of Meena having an affair becomes the *flash* point in the life of Abha who begins to evaluate herself and the *insipid* marriage in which she feels trapped and “still suffering from prudish Indian upbringing” (AM – 234). These two childless but young couples’ *prima-facie* lead a tranquil life but gradually the coolness creeps invisibly into their relationships Meena regards her husband Shrikant’s obsession with his work and computer beyond tolerance as “Shrikant would stay on at work till all kinds of hours, even though I kept telling him I hated being alone in the house. It was so deathly quiet” (AM – 239). She, unlike her friend Abha, looked for excitement, novelty and charm in married life. Abha’s husband Ashok too expects *forbidden* thrills in marriage which she regards as *obnoxious* and *antithetical* to the values that have been ingrained in her. Essentially Meena and Ashok – complement each other, while Abha and Shrikant have certain defined common frequencies. Meena’s search for her Animus ends in finding an American lover but it triggers off a process of self-introspection in Abha who “has begun to pull the unraveled edges of existence into a new design” (AM-272). What colors Shrikant or Suren Gupta would bring to the envisioned – design of Abha, is left for the readers to speculate. One thing, however is absolutely clear that like Meena, Abha too has cleared the gates of her vision and is all set to have it out with her husband Ashok. A voice inside Abha intones; “It’s better this way, each of us freeing the other before it’s too late – so we can start learning, once more, to live”. (AM 271 -72)

According to Debjani Banerjee, (2000) the tradition of arranged marriages that ostensibly underpin Indian culture, implicates individuals in gender hierarchies and naturalizes these inequalities through stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Deemed as superior to other kinds of marriage where the individuals assert their choice, the institutions is notorious for its co modification of women, especially in the context of bride viewing sessions that unmarried girls are subjected to. The relationship between *Abha* and *Meena* in *Affair*, builds the space of intervention that enables both women to extricate themselves from meaningless relationships and re-write their strategies of survival. As in Divakaruni’s stories, the women frequently leave their marriage or relationship in order to re-conceptualize their nations of self and home.

The *Disappearance* is another story in the anthology which explores the cross-cultural experiences of women through a feminist perspective. The writer has sensitively portrayed the extent of the women's oppression within the marriage in which the wife is not allowed to pursue her financial independence, rather she is subjected to marital rape. The husband is completely confounding when his wife disappears as for him his wife is a symbol of his financial and sexual power. Carrying the patriarchal baggage the husband cannot even begin to understand individual desire for some space and autonomy. Despite that they (male gender) always use the female gender of the society, as the material for their "maldevelopment". (Vandana Shiva – 1994)

In a *valid* manner Divakaruni asserts that in arranged marriages attempts to schedule an expression of female – sexuality to coincide with institutional structures of marriage renders impossible and articulation of women's desires. At the end of the story the wife leaves with her jewelry to set up her own economic unit within which she can reformulate her own identity. *Doors*, is another short story, which epitomizes the conjugal clash between Deepak and Preeti as that of confrontation between two cultures. Preeti loves the western idea of privacy. Their domestic peace is shattered when Deepak's friend Raj from India arrives to live with them the new arrival intrudes into the space commonly shared by the husband and the wife. Deepak's traditional self-emerges strongly much to the chagrin of his wife and he begins to enlighten his wife about the virtues of the traditional Indian wife, "to be obedient and adjusting and forgiving (AM – 184). Preeti yearns for moments of privacy and some space in her own home, "Even family members sometimes need time and space away from each other. In my family no one ever intruded" (AM – 198) Reeling under the unbearable weight of encroachment upon her sense of privacy and space. She thinks – "this can't be happening to me" (AM – 196) because patriarchal society doesn't allow her to do her own self. Towards the conclusion of the story there is little doubt that the *door* which symbolized space and privacy for Preeti, finally "clicked shut deep inside her own being". (AM – 202)

Meeting Mrinal is another manifestation of how marriages arranged or otherwise go sour when the anticipations of the partner in a marriage do not fructify. Mahesh divorces Asha after more than ten years of marriage to live with Jessica and Asha is left to fend for herself and take care of the growing teenaged son, Dinesh who like most of the American born children of Indian immigrant adopts the ways, manners and jargon which exasperate his mother, born and bred on a rich diet of Indian cultural values. Asha too, like the *Ma* in the story, "The Bats", cannot tolerate the jibes and taunts of the wagging tongues of the women at the social, gathering about her divorced status.

When life depressed Asha with its clutter and its ordinariness, she thinks of her friend Mrinal who she thinks "has the perfect existence – money, freedom, admiration" (AM – 288) in being unmarried. Both of them had been brought up by mothers who believe that "women should be happy with whatever their men decided they ought to have. A woman who grasped things for herself, we had heard over and over, was greedy selfish". (AM – 292) Deep down to her heart Mrinal is conscious of what she has lost in the process as she advises Asha to adore the two men in her life, husband Mahesh and son, Dinesh then she grounds her knuckles into her eyes and weeps her heart out. At this point of time Asha has a revelation that "perfection was only a mirage". (AM – 296)

FINDINGS

1. Studying this novel, we found that only Arranged Marriage is the root cause of domestic violence in a family.
2. Although the situations and characters vary the themes of the short stories in *Arranged Marriage* are essentially the same exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as the experience of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions.
3. Dissolving the traditional boundary of Marriage by the women executed by Divakaruni through the novel *Arranged Marriage*.

CONCLUSION

Domestic violence prevailed the short stories of the Anthology *Arranged Marriage*. Reference to the novel that Arranged Marriage is the only strategy by which domestication of women is done in our society. Domestication of women brings the domestic violence into a family. Though the majority of domestic violence in a family arises because of the fault of male gender but sometimes it is not reasonable to throw the baby with the bath water. Sometime it has also been seen that male gender of the family always tries to bring the peace and prosperity to them. Twisting the blame game to one another could not solve that problem like domestic violence. If we actually want to solve the problem like it we must change our mindset towards women and set out a joint venture of men and women to solve that deep rooted disease called domestic violence. On the other hand, Arranged Marriage is not only the root cause of domestic violence, there may be another reason too, which needs some further investigation in that case.

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