

**REPRESENTATION OF SUBJUGATED AND OPPRESSED WOMEN IN  
M.G. VASSANJI'S *THE IN BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL* AND  
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *ARRANGED MARRIAGE***

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**Abstract**

In this paper an attempt has been made to portray the worst condition of the ill treated and subjugated women who try their best to come out of the clutches of male dominated society by reclining on their independent spirit and professional autonomy and but fail to do so. Postcolonial writers focus on the deconstruction of the colonial domination and treachery and the duality between superior and inferior, powerful and powerless, developed and underdeveloped, light and dark etc. They also focus on gender inequality and discrimination and the pitiful condition of the subjugated women. They attempt to empower and uplift them to give them voice to achieve proper recognition of their significant role in the development of society. The paper will take M.G. Vassanji's *The In Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a collection of short stories, as select texts to explore how women of the third world countries have been chained under the patriarchal autonomy compelling them to accept the traditional norms, practices and religious beliefs out of powerlessness, homelessness, alienation, awe, anxiety, and burden of family responsibilities. While Vassanji's novel speaks of the inferiority and subjugation of the immigrant women in Canada bearing Indian identity and heritage, Chitra Banerjee's short stories depict the miserable condition of the Indian women married to Indians living in America for professional establishment.

Gender stereotypes and patriarchal domination are the prevalent themes in the works of many postcolonial writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manju Kapur, M.G. Vassanji, Manorama Mathai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Uma Parameswaran, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Meena Alexander etc. "In the post colonial dialectics 'subaltern' or 'underclass' occupies prominent place which incorporates the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office, or in any other way." (Singh 98) It is a fact undeniable and of great concern that even in the era of twenty first century women are denied their empowered identity, thereby, they suffer from gender inequality and discrimination. They are still treated as the 'weaker sex' lacking proper power and getting entangled in embarrassing situations throughout

their lives. Their condition is like an old key kept unattended on a rack. According to the laws of Manu, “no female - whether girl, young woman or old woman - was allowed independence of action. A woman was to be under her father’s control in childhood, her husband’s once married, and her son’s when widowed.” (Nabar 1995) In society there is a belief or stereotype idea that women are passive, dependent, pure, refined, delicate, subordinate and deemed to be flawed while men are active, independent, coarse, and strong. Susheila Nasta writes, in “the iconographies of nationalism, images of mothers have conventionally invited symbols suggestive of primal origins – birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord of being....” (Ray 129). She finds in the mother both female power and female helplessness. Virginia Woolf, in her book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) quotes ‘there is something wrong with the society’s treatment of women’. Women ‘lack’ the power and autonomy for the fact that ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.’ (Woolf, 7) Third wave feminism, emerging in the 1990s ‘refutes dualistic thinking in general – thinking that divides the world into hierarchical dichotomies with one aspect regarded as superior and the ‘other’ regarded inferior, recognizing instead the existence of multiplicities.’ (Mack-Canty, 2004) ‘Men were identified with disembodied characteristics such as order, freedom, light and reason, which were seen as better than, and in opposition to, women’s allegedly more natural or embodied characteristics such as disorder, physical necessity, darkness and passion.’ (Mack-Canty 2004) The male voice plays the dominating role over Nature, the female voice, the most oppressed. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a third wave feminist, “third world encompasses not only women living in ‘underdeveloped’ countries but also women of color living in privileged countries.” She urges to make third world women, a western construct, a “monolithic misnomer and a subjugating category that again needs to be redeemed.” (Mohanty 334)

The feminist writers and theorists write about the plight of the mute women to bring them into focus giving them voice for manifesting their malice against the inertia of society. M. G. Vassanji and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are such writers who portray a pen picture of the trajectory of the subjugated women who bear a peripheral existence because of lack of independence, profession, individual choices, boldness and financial support. These women are sometimes seen to make bold decisions with independent spirit and vigour and at other times they succumb to their male counterparts preferring rather ruthless oppression and family liabilities. Moyez G. Vassanji, an Ismaili Muslim of Gujarati heritage, was born in Nairobi, brought up in Tanzania and went to the United States for higher studies. He has published seven novels in all namely *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amriika* (1999), *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *The Assassin’s Song* (2007) and *The Magic of Saida* (2012).

Giller Prize winning novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* tells the story of Vikram Lall living in exile in Canada. The story centres on Vikram with other characters like Vic’s sister Deepa, Njoroge and British siblings – Bill and Ann. Mau Mau uprising tolls the lives of many people. Njoroge, a boy of Kikuyu upbringing falls in love with Deepa under the detestation of the latter’s mother Shiela. She is forced to marry an Indian Dilip and Njoroge joins the government. Vikram becomes a corrupt man taking bribes and changing currencies and gets involved in political turbulence to become “one of Africa’s most corrupt men.” (3)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, was born in July 1956, grew up in Calcutta and moved to Dayton, Ohio, in 1976 to obtain a master’s degree in English at Wright State University and then she went to the University of California at Berkeley, where she obtained her Ph.D. in 1984. Her first book of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, won the Before Columbus Foundation American

Book Award in 1996. It explores eleven devastating portraits of women – ‘migrant wives’ on the verge of transformation. It is a collection of emotionally fraught short stories where ‘daughters of India’, the ‘cultural baggage’ (Sangeeta 5) living in peripheral existence are seen trying to adapt to the displaced life in America. She schemes to write about “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.”(2012) She explains her motive behind writing these stories “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. Many characters in *Arranged Marriage* are dealing with this sudden change in worldview, at once exhilarating and also terrifying. 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.”(2012)

In most of the stories, ‘Indian-born girls and women who are torn between two cultures’ (Mid-west Book Review) have come to the United States after marriage with the NRI grooms. They are mostly docile traditional Indian housewives like ‘patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti’ (AM 298). Sumita in ‘Clothes’ moves from Calcutta to California - a ‘world where everything is frozen in place, like a glass paperweight... I stand inside glass world, watching to scream.’(26) Well acquainted with the fact that “married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws” (19), she “must cover (her) head with the edge of (her) Japan nylon sari... and serve tea to the old women that come to visit Mother Sen, where like a good Indian wife (she) must never address (her) husband by his name.” (26) Abha in ‘Affair’ and Asha in ‘Meeting Mrinal’ wear Indian clothes at home, cook Indian food and serve their husbands and in-laws. As a divorced mother with a teenage son, Abha has led the life like the heroines in mythology. A well bred Indian girl in ‘The Disappearance’ desires to dress like an American woman but her husband does not indulge it. ‘When she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes, her husband always softened his no’s 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.’ (172)

According to Uma Parameswaran women are compelled to adapt to the worst beating of her husband – “...women, with centuries of cultural indoctrinations and expectations are able to adapt more quickly and to accept and love two homes without conflict or ambivalence.”(32) As Beauvoir says, “An ideal woman is perfectly stupid and perfectly submissive. She is always ready to accept the male and never make any demands upon him.” (234) The daughter of a docile Indian wife in ‘The Bats’ hears the weeping of her mother: “the sound of her weeping would be all around me, pressing in wave upon wave, until I would no longer tell where it was coming from.” “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” (3) She escapes at night from her husband with outwardly ‘cultured’ but inwardly an entrapped life like ‘bats’ to go to her mother’s native village.

After their marriage Divakaruni’s women dream of a prosperous life with their seemingly good husbands but the reality is something different. Jayanti in ‘Silver Pavement, Golden Roofs’ migrates from Calcutta to California and dreams of a big American house but discovers that “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.” (40) “It is the same size as my bathroom at

home.” (41) She feels herself as a minority in America – a ‘new, dangerous land’. Pratima does not want her parents know that her husband works in a garage and identifies him as ‘the owner of automobile empire.’ (44) In fact “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” (43).

Indian wives do not acquire independent space, rather is controlled by her husband’s choice and decision. The wife in ‘The Bats’ decides to go back to her husband because she cannot bear “the stares and whispers of the women, down in the market place.”(8) Moreover, her ‘bruises (had) faded all the way.’(16) Preeti in ‘Doors’ is brought up in America. She marries Deepak, an Indian and withdraws her decision to leave him in spite of her mother’s repeated warnings: “it’ll never work I tell you. Here you are, living in the U.S since you were twelve. And Deepak - he’s straight out of India. Just because you liked how he talks, doesn’t mean that you can live with him.” (183) The wife in ‘The Maid Servant’s Story’ keeps mum about the injustice done to Sarala only for the sake of her family. She fears to ‘lose all chances for a good marriage if the scandal of a broken home stained her life.’(156) The husband does like his wife’s taking pity on Sarala, her giving lessons to her because of the maid’s refusal to the husband’s sexual approaches. He knows “once a whore always a whore.”(145) ‘Ultrasound’ depicts the misuse of technology in the third world countries. The ultrasound shows that Anjali is going to give birth to a boy while Runu is found to give birth to a girl child. The in-laws force Runu to have an abortion (though she conceives after five years) because it is not “...fitting that the eldest child of the Bhattacharjee household should be a female.” (224) While Anjali insists Runu to leave her husband she dies as she knows very well that the society will throw her out and her in-laws will never accept her once she leaves her husband.

In *The In Between World of Vikram Lall*, Deepa was getting seriously involved with Njoroge, a grandson of their former servant and her childhood lover, but her mother opposed this alliance. She thought that the community where they lived might ridicule them for having found “a pukka kalu for a damad” (absolute nigger for a son-in-law). ‘It was Mother who still said, we have to think of the samaj, the community, don’t we; the world watches us...’ (IBWVL 233) Her father warns, “What do you mean you will marry anyone whom you want? We are not Europeans, remember that, we are desis, Indians. Proud Indians, we have our customs, and we marry with the permission and blessings of our parents! You will do as you are told, girl!” (184-185) ‘Deepa would wail and sob, she beat herself tore at her hair.’ (231) While Vic was involved with a white girl Sophia, the mother did not object to her different race and culture. Is it because of the reason that she belongs to the colonisers, the superior class, the people of white skin? Vic spent a night with an Italian girl at her hotel and father made embarrassing remarks: “sabash!”, “well done.” Even Mother ‘had not objected to Sophia – not to her different race and culture, not to her occupation...’ (264)

However, from traditional self sacrificing characters, the women have formed a sea change into women of individual identity defying the dominance of patriarchal society. They have to search the identity on their own by crossing the patriarchal ‘Lakshman rekha’. ‘South Asian women living in America have an altered consciousness relating to her south Asian native culture side by side they try to adapt to their current American surroundings with its westernized culture.’(Damor 23) They are the New Women – “physically vigorous and energetic, preferring comfortable clothes to the restrictive garb...” “She often has short hair, rides a bicycle, and smokes cigarettes – all considered quite daring for women at the turn of the century. Significantly, however, the ultimate fate of the fictional New Woman is frequently hysteria or some other nervous disorder, physical illness, or even death, often by suicide, her unhappy end

reflecting the fact that society was simply not yet ready to accommodate her new ways.”(Finney 1989)

Anita Nair in her novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001) depicts the self discovery and assertion of identity in the character Akhila who after the death of her father becomes an income tax clerk and main breadwinner of her family. Divakaruni's characters have realised the fact that “It's not wrong to want to be happy...To want more out of life than fulfilling duties you took on before you knew what they truly meant.” (270) The sugar coated dreams of a prosperous life lead them to search for their existence by reclaiming and establishing their self struggling against their husbands and other migrants. Sumita makes a transition from an Indian woman to a western lady trying to put on western clothes in her bedroom. After the death of her husband she becomes a ‘dove(s) with cut off wings’ (33). But she emerges as self motivated, empowered and independent woman imagining her wearing ‘a blouse and skirt the color of almonds.’(33) Sumita takes a bold decision to handle her husband's business in America. The middle aged bride has to face her rough future as her husband is murdered with the destruction of her fairy world of California. In ‘A Perfect Life’ Meera appears to be a new woman rejecting the traditional role of a wife and mother in favour of her job and education. Shoma in ‘The Word Love’ has assimilated to the new American life. Jayanti lives between two worlds - the real and imaginary, the past and present and tries to assimilate to the American life. Her ‘excruciating pain’ fades away when she dreams of her life in America and realises that ‘the beauty and the pain should be the part of each other’. (56) Forgetting “...all those sexless, loveless years” (248) Abha, “a good wife” (249) discerns to “...start learning, once more, to live.” (272)

Deepa is obviously a Nairobi girl – ‘westernized, fashionable, and presumably free in her ways.’ (216) She proclaims “I'll marry whom I want, Mother, and I'm not going to marry Dilip.”(184) She disappears leaving a sad note: “you (the parents) have changed the course of my life without my consent and I want to go away from you forever.”(232) Telling Njoroge: “If you stop loving me I will die! Let's run away to London”, she pleaded, “that's what Indian girls do to marry outside their community or religion.”(206) She had shown exemplary courage and resolve to emerge out of ‘the chaos of a mental breakdown.’ (277) Emerging as an Indian wife ‘she would not do anything indiscreet to jeopardize her husband and her children. How carefully she had been held together following that devastation she suffered in love.’(276) ‘Her widowhood had devastated her. This was not just because of Deepa's loss but also for the shadow that her widowhood cast upon her, the shadow it turned her into.’(367)

The authors portray the subordinated and degrading condition of women treated as mere objects. They trace the women's journey from ‘self sacrifice to self-realization, self denial to self assertion and self negation to self affirmation.’(Deepa 2013) The women experience a kind of tension between their native culture and American life. They preserve traditional Indian culture with nostalgic experiences, certain duties, beliefs and norms of morality. They are in a dilemma between tradition and modernity, between family duties and self discovery. ‘Women are often called to preserve their nation through the restoration of a traditional home in the new country.’ (Ponzanesi 245) Deepa assimilates between western culture and native influences. The in-betweenness or liminality of their situation leads them to live a life bereft of stability or fixity. In spite of their struggle against the patriarchal set up they can hardly explore themselves with new identity rather they succumb to their destiny surrendering to the male dominated society.

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