

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *THE BATS***

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Asian American writer with her ancestral roots in Bengal, India. She belongs to the new generation diasporic women writers of India whose primary concern is immigrant sensibility. She is an award winning author and a poet. Her work is widely known, and has been published in over fifty magazines and it has been included in over fifty anthologies. Her works have been translated into thirteen languages including Dutch, Hebrew and Japanese. She has transcended boundaries, negotiating two different worlds from various perspectives.

Chitra Banerjee was born in 1950 in Calcutta and lived there until 1976. She received her B. A. from the University of Calcutta in 1976. She left India in 1976 and settled in the United States. She continued her education in the field of English by receiving a Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and Ph. D. from the University of California, Berkeley. She taught at different colleges. Now she teaches at the University of Houston in Creative Writing program. Chitra Banerjee is co-founder and former President of a helpline for South Asian Women dealing with domestic abuse. The organization *Maitri* was founded in 1991 and she serves on its Advisory Board and on the Advisory Board of a similar organization named *Daya* in Houston.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni started her writing career as a poet. She is a novelist, an essayist, a short story writer, a nonfiction writer, a book reviewer, a columnist, and an activist. Her first short story collection, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) won her an American Book Award in 1997, a PEN Josephine Mines Award, and a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award. Her major novels include *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and second collection of short stories *Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2011). Films and television serials have been made on her novels. Two of her novels, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* have been adapted into films. *Mistress of Spices* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize. Chitra Banerjee's works are largely set in India and the United States, and they often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. Much of Chitra Banerjee's work is inspired by her experiences and encounters with suffering women in the organization *Maitri*, which she has established to help battered women in America.

Her book *Arranged Marriage* (1995) is a collection of eleven short stories about women from India who are caught between two worlds. It deals with various problems that women face in a social system which is still patriarchal to a great extent. It also focuses on family arranged matches, a century old tradition in India. These stories about Indian immigrants to the US show how the dislocations of immigration are making this tradition problematic. The stories outline the

issues, such as domestic violence, crime, racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity and divorce that were the result of her own imaginings and the experiences of others.

In India, love between husband and wife is supposed to be the result of marriage. It is not the love that brings two souls together but a marriage seems precondition to exhibit the love. It is not ‘a marriage of true minds’ as Shakespeare says. When it is compared with the marriage system in the West, it is quite different. In the Western society, love and marriage are interconnected and the individual has a freedom of choice in seeking a partner of his or her choice. This liberal approach puts many Indian immigrants into difficulty when they go abroad and cling to the age old tradition of arranged marriage. Chitra Banerjee’s stories from both the collections, *Arranged Marriage and Unknown Errors of Our Lives* focus on family arranged matches and how the dislocation by immigration makes this tradition problematic. They also depict their traumatized experiences they undergo when they try to balance their old treasured beliefs and surprising new ‘American dreams’.

Chitra Banerjee’s fictional work is inspired by her experiences and encounters with suffering women in *Maitri*, the organization which she has established to help battered women in America. She confesses:

My work with *Maitri* has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I have heard of acts of reality beyond imagining. The lives of many women I have met through this organization have touched me deeply. It is their hidden story that I try to tell in many of the tales in my short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*. It is their courage and humanity that celebrate an honour (Shelvam, 2004: 65).

The characters in these short stories are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes, struggling to carve out an identity of their own. Chitra Banerjee through these stories reminds us of the ancient codification of Manu in his Hindu code book *Manusmriti*. According to him, “Woman must always be protected by a man in her childhood, in youth and in old age” (qtd in Pandurang, 1946: 203). This Sanskrit saying has established its sound footing of patriarchal system and male domination, which has become a universal phenomenon. With changing times, the Western culture has changed its gender norms, but India still has a strong hold of patriarchy. Patriarchy operates through arranged marriage, as a trap to victimize and push a woman to a secondary position in the family. H. M. Parshley in the Preface to *The Second Sex*, an epoch making book on feminism by Simon De Beauvoir, argues that:

Since patriarchal times, women have in general been to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men and this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural ‘feminine’ characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men (1983:9).

Indian women are more vulnerable to domestic violence when they are cut off from family and kinship and social support, which increase their dependence on their male partners, and the in-laws with whom they may be living. When subjected to violence, their options for seeking help can be further limited by nuclear family status, and insecure economic position. Family becomes the prime site for physical brutality frequently directed towards them.

The story “The Bats” in the collection, *Arranged Marriage*, exposes the evils of wife battering and domestic violence. The story is narrated by a young girl who is the witness of

untold miseries of her mother against an aggressive and violent man. The story is set in Calcutta, India. The narrator's father works as a foreman in a printing press. He always comes home drunk and regularly beats his wife. She is an ignorant and timid housewife. She reveres her husband next to god. Her vulnerability is further increased by her total economic dependence on him thereby giving him chance to keep her under control. She is trapped in domestic prison and suffers silently without protest. There is no limit to her woes. She seems always under the threat of her husband so much so that she always tries to hide the beating marks and scars on her face from her daughter. However they don't remain unnoticed by her daughter: "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, 03).

The wife in "The Bats" also puts up with the brutalities of her husband for protecting and securing the future of her daughter. She is fully aware of the consequences of her desertion. Abandoned wife has no respect, no social standing and she becomes the subject of unwanted criticism. Simon de Beauvoir vehemently argues that:

The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure women the promised happiness, there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness-but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine (1983:496).

When beating becomes unbearable, the wife takes her daughter and leaves for her uncle's place to escape brutalities. However, after some days of 'pleasant' stay, the wife succumbs to the entreaties of her husband and returns to his house even though she is aware of her husband's fabricated promises. Her return to her husband underscores the stronghold of patriarchy. Chitra Banerjee symbolically correlates the unavailability of the marriage ties in India in terms of bat's interlude in the story. The wife's uncle is a guard at Zamindar's mango orchards. One day bats descend all of a sudden on the mango orchard and ruin hundreds of mangoes. At first, her uncle tries to flee bats with sticks, drums and magic powder but in vain. Finally, he uses poison and the next day he sees a heap of dead bats lying all over the orchard. To his surprise next morning and in succeeding mornings he sees dead bodies of bats fallen on the same spot. The bats visit the mango orchard even though they know that they are being poisoned. He shakes his head and says:

I guess they don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they will be safe or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here. (AM, 10).

Uncle's helplessness to decipher the tragedy of bats seems to be the present condition of the wife in the story. The enticement may be wifely and motherly duties laid down by patriarchy, religion, culture and society that brought her back to her husband's house. Like bats, she may have realized that by choosing a different life, she would be safe. She knows that in reality it is hardly possible. In India, according to Hindu religion, marriage is a sacred social bond on which the building of family institution is rested. It is like a labyrinth where there are no escape routes.

Thus, Chitra Banerjee brings out the parallel between the bats and the wife in the story. Both of them return to their places even if they know that they are not safe and secure there. She investigates the cultural devaluation of women as the object of violence and discrimination in the psychology of the wife. Finally, though unwillingly, the wife negotiates the crisis in her abusive married life by taking a compromising stand.

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