

IMMIGRANT DILEMMA AND FEMINIST SENSIBILITIES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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Abstract

In Divakaruni's short stories entitled, Arranged Marriage one can explore the psychological conflicts struggling in the minds of her protagonists, as they venture in to the western way of life and culture. The protagonists of her novel struggle between the irony of past memory and new situation. Her characters struggle between these two diverse worlds, and crave to assimilate these two extremes for a new future. They are so entangled in their root and origin that every step they take in their new found land is approached with a half-hearted will. The protagonists linger in their past life with nostalgia, amidst the claims of an exotic and coveted culture, gradually sucking up and consuming them completely. Somewhere in the deepest terrain of their memories, they can feel the scars of those long forgotten memories and make them conscious that they still persist. These memories of the past make the characters hesitant to move away freely with their newfound life in America.

In the collection of short stories titled Arranged Marriage, Divakaruni's East/West, Indian/American, negative/ positive binaries become more obvious. As its name implies, the stories in this book are all about marital relationships. Many of these relationships are arranged, and almost all of them involve some oppositional encounter of Indian and American values and customs. One obvious premise of the book is that arranged marriages do not work because they are based on an invalid and unfair custom. Divakaruni's stories which deals with issues such as arranged marriages, deception in marriage, inter-racial marriages, and extra-marital affairs and about pre-marital sex. These permutations and combinations are used with an Indian woman persona at the focal point. The woman, frequently an immigrant, deals with her memories, contemplates her status in marriage (frequently seen as crippling or suppressing), and dreams of ways out. In spite of the lively potential of the subjects, in many of the stories there is a sense of sameness and predictability; the married women always come to dead- ends in marriage, the unmarried are nearly always self-sufficient, self-assured, independent, and successful, and the husbands, with minor exceptions, callous, unfeeling and insignificant. She presents the issues related with the oppression of woman, intricacy of man and woman relationship, the crisis of familial relationship and the clash of values representing tradition and modernity. Her stories can primarily be appreciated as the recreation of the predicament of women in the traditional society of India. Along with the representation of the voices of women, she also creates spaces for her

female protagonists to mark their protest against the oppressive mechanism of patriarchal social structure.

The women characters in *The Arranged Marriage* are found in the role of victim. They are suppressed in various ways; we find that there are some of Divakaruni's protagonists who are so much stuck in the web of social stigmas and prejudices that they find it unable to shed off those bindings and move towards a renewed life and vision. In the first story, *The Bats*, projects such a situation. It is a touching and heart-rending tale of a young girl caught between an abusive and cruel father and a torn and helpless mother. Her mother is a housewife and comes from a village background while her father works as a foreman in a printing press. It is the story of a girl who is yet on the verge of being initiated into the life of experience and the first thing which she notices as the initial stirrings of realizations dawn upon her is that her mother cried a lot. At night in the darkness, she wakes up startled, to watch her mother crying. The child initially fails to understand why her mother is often crying at night and also the cause of her mother's agony.

The woman in the story *The Bats* appears as a victim of a man who frequently comes home drunk. He batters his wife so that she has marks and scars on her face. The next time when the girl notices another mark on her mother's face, she is agonized with shock, the shock being more severe for now she no longer needs to guess the cause. In some hidden corner of her heart, she is well aware of that poignant truth of her mother's life to which no one is given access. The girl describes about her mother's predicament 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" (3). In this story both mother and daughter play the role of victim. They are silent sufferers in this drama of male oppression. The women are physically weak and financially insecure. They dare not fight for freedom for they will not know how to survive alone.

Divakaruni's characters, especially women, feel trapped in arranged marriages, because they have not married following the choice of their hearts but that of tradition. Hence they long for freedom. The woman is unable to bear her husband's cruel attitude and she is vexed with the domestic violence in the hands of her husband and decides to run away to her distant uncle's home in a village. When her mother suggests that they can go to grandpa's house, she becomes happy because by going to her grandpa's house they can escape from her cruel father. Her mother informs her, "We might be staying with him for a while" (5). So begins their escapade, their journey from a torturous and confined life to a life of newness, freedom and liberty from bondage. Life in grandpa's house in the very heart of nature seems no less than paradise. It is a life of unended bliss; all sorrows forgotten, all wounds healed. She says, "My whole chest ached with the wish that I could spend the rest of my life just like this" (10). After sometime, she is surprised to see her mother crying again. She is anxious, "I had never seen her cry in the daytime before, and it frightened me, because somehow I'd always believed that daytime was a safe time into which dark night things couldn't intrude" (6).

In the meantime, the girl develops a good friendship with her grandpa. The girl hopes that, her mother is leading a happy life in grandpa's home. But one day, unexpectedly her mother tells, "He wants us to come back. He promises it won't happen again" (11). The girl is surprised and is unable to bear this pain because she does not wish to return to her father's home. But her mother tries to convince her lot and explains the reason for her return to her husband's home. She tells, "I wrote to him." And then, defensively, "I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the marketplace. The loneliness of being without him" (11-12). The wife decides to go back to her battering husband, once again to flee away from something which she now considers the greater of the two evils. The life of adventure and freedom which she has

envisioned so broadly seems to betray her pathetically with its negative and darker aspects. So, she goes back to the life which she has left behind, even with its tortures, hassles, and heart breaks.

Life once again becomes an infernal experience and their life gets reduced to a never-ending cycle of escapes and returns, as they move out, and move in, always back to the world of battering, thrashings, crashing agonies. They flee from home like bats, sometimes in the middle of the night, to escape for a few days to her mother's uncle's home in the country; but in the end they return even before their, "bruises had faded all the way" (16). There seems to be no permanent escape from this cycle of violence because in India, divorced woman has no future. The sufferings of women in silent agony are depicted in the story *The Bats*. In spite of the suffering, how a woman in India longs to stay with her husband shows the significance of the tradition of marriages which are not easily broken here. The protagonist in this story leads imperfect life.

The dilemma faced by the woman in the story is not dissimilar to the postmodern dilemma faced by all those souls stuck between the crossroads of tradition and modernity, unable to find solace in either. When certain aspects of the conventional pattern of life become morbid and tormenting, one wishes to tear apart all boundaries and escape into a world where everything is replete with novelty, glory and adventure. However, this allure of a magical world proves illusory as soon as one is confronted with its bitter facts. The new kind of claustrophobia which comes with this new world shatters all dreams and convinces one that what one has been visualizing so long is no concrete form but an insubstantial mirage. In this story, the journey of the wife and the child from a suffocating environment in an urban setting to a natural and rural backdrop symbolizes the flight from the inadequacies of modern life. The wife reverts to the past in search of peace, but when the buried past resurrects itself with its same old troubles, the prejudices of blind and orthodox customs, the irony of culture, the social stigma, the unbearable tauntings, the wife finds herself stranded once more on the shores of loneliness. She is in a precarious position, on the fringes of a shore from which she can witness the ebbing waves of the past securities, and at the same time feel the trembling and slackening of the present ground beneath her. She faces two opposite directions, but none seems to offer any relief.

The story *The Bats* is also a hallmark of feminist sensibility. Here we find a woman whose life is full of untold miseries, agonies, unheard dirges and a deep ocean of betrayals. The readers' hearts tear with painful empathies as they follow the sorrowful journey of the mother who runs away from the endless beatings of her husband in the hope of discovering a life of quietude for her child and herself, but agonized recoils to the same intolerable situation when she realizes that conventional society has no place for a woman who has crossed the determining bounds of her home. The condition of the wife becomes akin to that of the bats who are hunted down by grandpa in the village home because they prove to be a nuisance to the solace of the house. However, the strangest part is that the multitudes of bats haunting their house do not seem to decrease. Grandpa says, "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" (8). The wife, like the bats, attempts initially to fly away to a safer place, but the pull of a fake sense of honour which can at least shield her from the pricking taunts of the world keeps pulling her back to the same claustrophobic atmosphere, the battering, the thrashings, and the unending schedule of tormenting.

The story *Clothes* provide another perspective to Divakaruni's awareness of feminist sensibility and immigrant dilemma. It is the day of wedding; Sumita marries Somesh, an Indian

immigrant who owns a 24-hour convenience store in California. After marriage, she moves to America with her husband with a hope of bright future. In America, she lives in one cramped apartment with her in-laws. Somesh and Sumita secretly dream of living the American life, once Somesh has made enough money to finish paying the loan for his shop and to lead an independent life with her wife in America. In the meantime, Sumita maintains the status quo and remains the meek, submissive daughter-in-law. Her husband buys her the American clothes, though she can't wear these clothes while she and her husband live with his parents, she models them for him in the privacy of their bedroom and dreams of wearing them when they move from their joint-family. Sumita's joy and her honeymoon come to an abrupt end, however, when one night Somesh is killed at his store by a gunman in an act of robbery and random violence. She is transformed from a glowing bride in to a mourning widow, all hopes, all colours vanish and what is left open before her is a solitary, painful life of widowhood. Standing in the middle of the empty bedroom, she ponders upon what America the alluring new world, has offered her. "Great America, a place where people go to have fun" (31). Hair still wet from the purification bath, she stares at the white sari which she is to wear now. "White. Widow's color, color of endings" (29). When she has come to America, she is dressed in a blue and red sari, blue being the colour of possibility, red being the signifier of marriage.

All these color are lost to her now. Her bangles have been broken; the red marriage mark has been wiped off from her forehead. Someone has wanted her hair to be cut off, but her in-laws are good people, kind. They did not allow this humiliation. She tells, "They didn't say, even once, as people would surely have in the village, that it was my bad luck that brought death to their son so soon after his marriage" (30-31). Her mother-in-law wants to take her back to India, they convince her by saying like this, "You're like our daughter...Your home is with us, for as long as you want. For the rest of your life" (31). Instead of submissively accepting her fate as a widow, instead of returning to India with her mother-in-law, she decides to follow the dream she and her husband have worked towards. They have planned a life in America, which includes Sumita going to college, selecting a career, becoming a teacher. Looking at herself in the mirror, Sumita is determined not to wear the white sari of widowhood, not to become one of the widows who live their lives submissively. She describes these widows as "Doves with cut-off wings" (33). She indeed, emerges as a triumphant woman.

The cause of Sumita's emergence as a bold and victorious woman is clearly due to the fact as a woman, as well as an immigrant and member of high culture; she knows how to make all ends meet. She knows how to delve in to the past in order to overcome its torturous bondages, at the same time she knows not to disown the positive aspects of the past heritage. As an immigrant, she embraces the promoting feature of both cultures and as a woman, she strikes a remarkably admirable balance between the various roles and norms assigned to her. The dilemma presented by Divakaruni is relevant to the sensibilities of human beings in the age of globalization. The clash of cultures associated with myriad options of lifestyles in different geographical settings, and the trauma of rootlessness in the process of hybridization, are some of the problems she delves with in her writings. Her protagonist lurks at the threshold of two worlds of myth and reality, probing for authenticity and perfection, which ultimately disable them to shiver the root of their heritage and localism.

WORKS CITED

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