

**STRUGGLE OF WOMEN EXPATRIATES OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI
IN SHAPING THEIR IDENTITIES IN *ARRANGED MARRIAGE***

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Abstract:

*In the collection of the short stories *Arranged Marriage*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skilfully and beautifully tells stories about immigrant Indians who are both modern as well as trapped by cultural transformation, who are struggling to shape out an identity of their own in an unknown land. *Arranged Marriage* also includes stories about the abuses and bravery of immigrant women. Chitra Banerjee portrays these women characters as spirited lively and it made people to relate these characters with their own life, so that they could feel their joy and pain.*

Keywords: *Expatriates, Alienation, America, India.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most famous Indian women writers of the 21st century. She specializes in diasporic writing. The common themes of her writings are quest for identity and immigrant experience. She concentrates on women expatriates. Their alienation and the emotional traumas caused are the important themes in her works and the best examples of these are Chitra Banerjee's short stories collection *Arranged Marriage*. Most of her work is autobiographical and she portrays many characters based on the lives of Indian immigrants. Her writings are breaking down old stereotypes to unite people. Her major themes are centred on her desire to investigate the identity of Indian American Women and the multiplicity of experiences- geographically, culturally, psychologically, emotionally- that continue to shape and reshape it.

The second story in *Arranged Marriage* is *Clothes*. It talks about Sumita. Her parents arrange marriage for her. They chose an Indian born American for her. At first, she gets worried that after marriage she would have to leave her parents, friends and go into a new world. Then her father consoles her by saying that he is good man and will take care of her. Her father gives her a gorgeous sari for bride-viewing. Embroidered all over it were tiny stars made out of real gold zari thread. Sumita wears this heavy sari for bride-viewing and Somesh stunned by her beauty chooses her as his wife. Sumita and Somesh get married and at their first night, Somesh tells her about his store. They get ready to go for America. After moving into America, they slowly start the journey of their love.

One day Sumita tries on clothes that Somesh had bought for her. He had bought a pair of jeans, colour of pale blue and T-shirt, colour of sunrise-orange. Soon Sumita becomes a westernized woman. Even though, Somesh's parents live in America, they are still very Indian and one day Somesh tells Sumita that he could never abandon them at some old people's home. Somesh wants Sumita to start to college and get a degree. But she wants to work in his store. One day, Somesh bought her a nightie, which is black and lacy. He admires her beauty in this nightie. This was the last dress that Somesh had bought for her. One night he is shot by the thieves in the store. Sumita wears the white sari that a widow must wear. She then realises her life without her husband. She thought of her relatives who are widow and their miserable life. She decided to spend the rest of her life in America and get a degree as Somesh wished rather than be a typical downcast widow in India. At the end of the story, she stands before the mirror. She sees, in the

mirror a woman who holds her gaze and visualizes herself wearing the outfit of a working woman of the west signifying her choice. Here Chitra Banerjee raises her voice against the hardships poured upon the widows in India and how a woman expatriate overcomes it.

Though Divakaruni's narration of the story switched to America, the plight of the women remains the same. The Indian sari is a symbol of entrapment whereas the western attire of skirt and blouse are symbols of Sumita's liberation. Sumitha seems to be poised to liberate herself only by giving up such Indian customs as wearing saris and caring for elderly in-laws. Interestingly, in Sumita's judgment serving tea to in-laws in India is worse than getting shot by a gunman in a country she terms as "new" and "dangerous".

In the third story *Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs, Jayanti*, the narrator comes to America for her studies and there she understands of her aunty and uncle's life. Jayanti, moves to Chicago from India and she wants to join in the university there. She moves in with excitement and dreams. From the plane itself, she begins to have a different experience than what she expected. She would stay in her aunty's house. Aunty Pratima, and uncle Bikram's house was not as she expected. Her uncle says that Americans always blaming Indians for their dark skin and poor economy. One day, Jayanti and her aunty go for a walk in the snow streets, when four American boys try to scare them and call them 'Niggers'. Jayanti tries to confront them, but her aunty holds her back. When they reached home, uncle scolds them by saying that the Americans had already smashed everything in his shop and still his wife had to go out daringly. Jayanti tries to say something, but she couldn't say anything. She sees that her uncle is crying and aunty tries to console him. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays that though women go out of India to any part of the world, they behave the same. Their husbands want their wives to be always at their service. It problematizes the Indian-American encounter to a certain extent and does not portray America as a simplified and glorified land of freedom and fulfilled dreams. The story ends with Jayanti comprehending the reality of her aunty and uncle's life in America a little better.

The fourth story is *The Word Love*. It is about a woman and her realisation about life. She lives with a man called Rex abroad. She was not able to say the word 'love' to her Mother, because she is very cultured woman who would not accept any disobedient thing. Her mother had an orthodox upbringing in a village where falling in love was often suicidal. These things didn't permit her to confess about her love to her mother. She was always Worried about this matter, so much so that it irritated her lover. One day, at mid-night the Phone rang and a woman sleepily and unwittingly reveals her affair to her mother. Her mother gets angry, she tries to console her, but her mother hangs up the phone. After that, she gets even more worried and is always in a morose mood. She also wrote letters to her aunty and to her mother for a reunion, but they didn't reply. Finally, Rex comes to understand and says "It was never me, was it? Never love. It was always you and her, her and you" (AM 70). At the end of the story, being disgusted, she decides to leave both her lover and the mother for the realisation of the real pleasures of life. She decides to live for herself.

The fifth story is *A Perfect Life*. It is about motherly love towards an unknown child. The narrator, Meera had a good life before the boy came. She lives in a beautiful apartment in America and works in a bank. She had lots of friends and also had an American boy friend named Richard. They went for movies, restaurants and discussed about books. Her mother tries to arrange a marriage for her. But she never accept her offer and even she didn't tell her about Richard. Meera's best friend was Sharmila. Meera is not against marriage or having a child. After the boy came, her life totally changed. The boy is about seven and she named him Krishna. She would take care of him. She did not legally adopt him and also did not know about his parents. But the boy became very close to Meera. They ate together, watched movies about animals went to library and read books at night. At first, she kept this matter as a secret, but later she shared this matter with her friend Sharmila as well as with Richard. They both surely said that this would be a dangerous thing. So, she went to Foster Homes Office and meet Ms. Mayhew. Meera told them everything

about Krishna. Ms. Mayhew said that this was an illegal thing and only after a week, Meera would become a Foster Mother. For that, she would have to give the child to anyone for one week. Meera gets depressed and shared this matter with Sharmila. She also said that this would be a right thing. At night, she cooked Krishna's favourite item and read the book with him. But she didn't concentrate fully on the book. She also said that from the next day, he would be living with someone else for a week. Ms. Mayhew introduces Mrs. Ortiz to Meera. Meera told everything about Krishna to Mrs. Ortiz. Mrs. Ortiz assures Meera that she would take care of him. Meera is reluctant to leave and Krishna too raises a furore at the separation. Meera feels terrible, but Richard pulls her away from that place. For this reason, she hates Richard and scolds him. After three days, there is a call from Ms. Mayhew, who wanted Meera to come to the office. At office, Mrs. Ortiz said that Krishna had gone. Meera gets furious and scolds her. She also says that if she finds the boy, will never give to anyone. She looked for him everywhere, but could not find him. A year passed by and Meera gets back to her normal life. She gets promotion at the bank, speaks happily with Sharmila and again she gets back with Richard. Even her mother accepts Richard. Finally, she gets her peace only when she imagines that the boy is here with her in her apartment.

In the 7th short story "The Disappearance", the wife is a Calcutta woman who lives in America with her husband and manages to get out of a marriage that she dislikes, due to no apparent reason as the husband sees it, other than the husband's exercising of his normal authority. So the immigrant woman in an uninteresting marriage exercises greater freedom of will than the women who are non-immigrants and stuck in marriages that are far worse. She even dares to abandon her two and half year old son. She disappears with the wedding jewels which were kept in the bank safety deposit box. The husband always thought her to be like the delicate purple passion-flower. He denies all her wishes like continuing to study, going for a job, etc., which forced her to come to the decision of disappearance.

Divakaruni while seeing the failings of the Indian patriarchy and Indian men, she mostly fails to notice any flaws in American men and American patriarchal society. In fact, she creates clear binaries between men from "the old countries" (Arranged 187) and American or Indian-American men. In the 8th short story "Doors", Preeti, an Indian girl who has been in the United States since the age of twelve, is warned against marrying Deepak, who is "straight out of India" where "men have a set of prehistoric values" (184), according to Preeti's mother. As per the warnings of mother, though the starting was good, Deepak proves the mother's warnings "true" by falling into such Indian ways as inviting an old friend from India to live in their house, enjoying Indian snacks and movies, and neglecting the value of privacy and closed doors as much as his Americanized wife. So even a love match between an Indian and an Indian-American does not work because of the mismatched values in which the American values are the privileged and overwhelming norm in the Indian-American heroine's life.

In the 11th short story "Meeting Mrinal", the protagonist Asha is a divorced wife and carries around the shame of her husband's abandonment. She was never truly loved by her husband. Asha is desperate to cling to her marriage and later to the appearance of being married, to maintain the appearance of a perfect life. She has to face the imperfections of life and she has to accept the fact of the failure of her marriage. Asha feels depressed with her own life because of its clutter and its ordinariness. After she received love and care from her son Dinesh, she eventually sets out to redeem her life and she says: "Somehow believing in Mrinal's happiness, thinking that unregretful lives like hers were possible, had made it easier to bear my individual sorrow. What would I live on, now that I knew perfection was only a mirage?" (Arranged 296). She also wishes that one day Mahesh also will realise that the perfect life is only an illusion.

In Arranged Marriage, Divakaruni through the numerous male and female characters criticizes qualities that she sees as typically Indian and glorifies those that she sees as European-American. In these short stories, Divakaruni's feminism causes her to speak against Indian men in various ways. In several stories the Indian male characters, who often play a hegemonic role in a patriarchal society, are shown to be responsible for constricting, entrapping, cheating, brutalizing and failing to understand women.

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