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Subjugation of women and cultural crisis in selected short stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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Abstract

The historic, geographic, social, political, intellectual and even mythological definitions of our world are all male, to the complete exclusion of one half of humanity. And yet it is the male version of the world that has traditionally passed for the truth. The postmodern spirit challenges, among other things, the validity of traditional truths. Each established factor or substance of truth is disputable as it has no stronger foundation than a house of cards for it is constructed on ground whose apparent solidity only conceals a vacuous shallowness beneath. The young women of today are becoming aware of biased attitude of our society. They have asserted their individuality by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms. Instead of accepting the roles traditionally offered to them and sometimes opting for death as the ultimate solution to the man-made mundane problems, they, now-a-days, start asserting themselves or fighting against the odds. No longer do they allow their tradition to groom and condition them for secondary roles in the society. Despite some achievements in educational, professional and legal fields, they have yet to go a long way for their acceptance as equal beings in the prejudiced society where discrimination is practiced against women right from the birth.

Keywords: Domestic Violence Tradition Victims Dilemma Feminism

1. Introduction

Divakaruni, a product of the postcolonial feminism, creates a female universe out of the conventional male world. In her works, conventional geography is rejected. The rejection of other male definitions of the world automatically follows. She places her women characters, mostly with good educational background and yet hailing from unfair traditional family set-up, in conflict with a parochial society, and depicts their struggle to pop out of the shells. They break free themselves from the past conventional emotions and resolve to move into the new world of American ideologies due to severe hardships inflicted on them in the name of Indian tradition and custom. As there is no panacea for their social ills in their native land, they find American culture as the liberating agent that offers relief and redemption for the cultural cringe developed in them by their native culture.

Arranged Marriage (1995)^[1] is her debut collection of short stories. It has 11 short stories, and majority of them deals with the immigrant's cultural crisis along with subjugation of women. She has written with an insight and consideration, in a language that is expressive as well as uncomplicated. It takes the readers deep into the many-layered worlds of her characters, the world that is crammed with terror, optimism and discovery. In an interview in *the telegraph*, March 13th 2005 she says that women in particular respond to her works because she is writing about them- women in love, women in difficulty, women in relationship. She wants people to relate to her characters so that they can feel their joy and pain, since it will be harder to be prejudiced when they meet them in real life.

It is clearly evident from the women characters of *Arranged Marriage* that even after the country has been liberated from the imperialistic clutches for several decades, the womanhood still has been subjugated and suffered by the patriarchal oppressive familial system of India in which man is left with great freedom and unlimited privileges with which he seems to enjoy a special status, gaining upper hand over woman. For instance Sumita, the prime woman character in the story, "Clothes", recalls the words of her aunt that she [Sumita] will be lucky if she is "chosen" (AM, 18) as a life partner by Somesh Sen, an Indian immigrant to California. Traditionally, man is at liberty to choose or select a life partner by visiting the house of any number of brides. He is given unwritten license to visit, reject, visit, reject, etc. whereas the same cannot be done by women. If she is chosen, she has to follow, without any hue and cry, the one who has chosen her. Divakaruni brings to focus the ill-fated traditional custom of Indian marriages through Sumita who says, "Besides, wasn't it every woman's destiny, as Mother was always telling me, to leave the known for the unknown? She has done it, and her mother before her. *A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws*" (AM, 18-19). Woman is selected or chosen like people culling vegetables in the market. She has been denied the rights to air out her opinion even at the crucial moments like marriage, etc. in their life.

Sumitha in *Cloths*, Aunt Pratiima in *Silver Pavement*, Shona in *The Word Love*, Meena in *A Perfect Life*, Manisha in *The Maid Servant's Story*, Meena and Abha in *Affair*, Asha and Mrinal in *Meeting Mrinal* are women torn between the two worlds. The visualization of the future may not be clear to them but it is accurate. From the first story of this collection *The Bats* to the last story *Meeting Mrinal*, the women protagonists constantly try to strike a balance between the old conventional beliefs and their life in America.

The women protagonist of the story *The Bats* is a sufferer of domestic violence. She is being constantly ill-treated and beaten up by her husband, which makes her to run away to her native village along with her daughter. However, her conventional ties are so strong that she cannot break free from him and so she returns to him even when she knows that her native village will be a perfect place for her daughter to grow. With this story we are acquainted with the fact that life will not change much for a woman, her miscalculation concerning her husband may lead her and her daughter's life into another hell-like situation.

Cloths, the second story of this collection is about Sumitha, a newly married, and her life in America. In an unfortunate event, Somesh, her husband, is shot dead by an unidentified robber in the dead of the night time when he is alone staying in the shop, leaving Sumitha a widow. All hopes and colors about America now become illusion. What is left before her is the 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. 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" (AM, 29). When she has come to America, she has dressed in a blue and red sari; the former color signifies possibility, and the latter luck to married women. Now she loses all these colors. The red marriage mark is wiped off her forehead and her bangles are broken. She recollects,

There's a cut, still stinging, on the side of the right arm, halfway to the elbow. It is from the bangle-breaking ceremony. Old Mrs. Ghosh performed the ritual, since; she's a widow, too. She took my [Sumitha's] hands in hers and brought them down hard on the bedpost, so that the glass bangles I was wearing shattered and multicolored shreds flew out in every direction. (AM, 29).

Tradition has not only injured Sumitha physically, but also collapsed her hopes and aspirations. She is not ready to live a dependent widow life with her in-laws back in India. At the same time she is not familiar with the new American culture. She was born and brought up in a village where Indian culture is cherished more than life itself. She finds herself in a dilemma.

That's when I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I'll manage,
Here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India,
At this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws.
Doves with cut-off wings. (AM, 33).

Finally she decides to accept the new culture and tighten up for a new adventure. The point to be noted here is that this story reveals a painful fact; though she considers American

culture to be dangerous, for her, it is a better option than suffering with Indian traditions and subjugations.

When the stories *The Bats* and *Clothes* reveal subjugation of women both physically and culturally, Jayanthi and Prithima of *Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs* are the victims of American racism and cultural change. They both are abused for their colored skin as "nigger" (AM 50) by their neighborhoods. They are physically harmed to,

I don't see which boy first picks up the fistful of slush, but now they're all throwing it at us. It splatters on our coats and runs down our saris, leaving long streaks. (AM 51)

Later from the words of Prithima's husband, the author portrays the painful life of Indian immigrants in America. There are many, who think, life abroad especially in America is a pleasure. But in reality America is prejudiced and life is hard especially for women. Toward the end, Jayanthi is convinced and consoled, not in a positive note; she learns to accept the harsh reality, the way every other are convinced. The story point up that subjugation is not the only problem of women; culture too has its own part to play.

A Perfect Life is about Meera, an immigrant of America from India. Though she is portrayed as young, well-educated and independent in the beginning, she drops all her courage and feels lonely when she couldn't adopt a son. The world and the culture have made her to believe that she is nothing, if not a mother. From the time of history, women are made to visualize themselves as mothers, which is again a weapon of subjugation. These cultural ideas and values have greater impact in them than their education and exposure.

The highest of all (in terms of subjugation), *The Maid Servant's Story* from *Arranged Marriage* requires some special consideration. Sarala, the maidservant in this story is sexually mistreated by her master. When she confronts, he abuses with her past.

"Don't act so virtuous," the man hissed.
"Once a whore, always a whore." (AM, 145)

Dadababu, master of the house, represents the society through whom it is clearly expressed that women are always looked down. Helpless women like Sarala could never escape from the clutches of male chauvinistic world. Patriarchy definitely bears a large share of the responsibility for the low status that women have in India, but it should also be equally shared by one-half of the humanity, i.e. the womanhood for their emotional responsibility. Middle class women, such as the characters like Sumitha's mother [in "Clothes"], and Aunt Pratiima [in "SP, GR"], are to blame for their lack of group-worth and mainly for their constant deference to male approval. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid state that the recovery of tradition throughout the post-independence India "was always the recovery of the 'traditional' woman" (10) who is conceptualized as cultural marker and as the bearer of tradition: she recreates, gives birth, preserves family honor and links all these to the golden past. This is in a peculiar way enabling her and at the same time controlling her also.

The patriarchal process that treats women as a subjugated race is evidently visible in the traditional mechanism adopted in various practices of the family life. The century-old practice, that man has got every right to keep and feed his parents and his blood relatives with him after his marriage, is denied to womanhood. The tradition-bound woman has to lead the life

of servitude not only under the control and custody of her husband but also at the mercy of his parents and dear ones. Divakaruni points out this impartial attitude of the society and the consequent predicament of woman in all her writings. The quest for happiness and harmony is what the characters in this collection of short stories are trying to achieve. They are also questioning the values of old traditions and seeking to accomplish something innovative and different. It is time to alter and the priorities of human beings are changing. In this changing scenario, writers like Divakaruni are rewriting the history of their characters.

2. References

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