

MANIFESTATION OF GENDERED VIOLENCE IN DIVAKARUNI'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an earnest attempt to locate the nuances of gendered violence as it manifests in the stories collected in the volume Arranged Marriage. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes of South Asian women located in their homeland and also those who are part of the Asian Diaspora settled in the United States of America. This population is both rooted to their Asian Cultural base and also negotiating a space for themselves with in the American Cultural Space. Divakaruni herself straddles both these worlds and is well aware of the complex nuances of such transactions. Her narratives locate women at various junctures of their lives negotiating a tenuous space for themselves within the locale of patriarchy. The stories look at women's struggle to create a sense of independent self and the confrontation they face in their endeavours. The women in their efforts to speak up for themselves or their sisters face different forms of violence.

Keywords: Diaspora, Arranged Marriage, Complex nuance, Patriarchy, Feminism, expatriate.

Chitra Banerji Divakaruni is one of the major writers in American literature. She is widely acclaimed as one of the accomplished stylists and prolific writers of her generation. She is certainly among a few prominent expatriates of our time, particularly writers with American background, who have emerged as the most eminent writers in English and made significant contribution to English literature.

Her name comes readily to mind as one of the major contemporary writers whose works show a deep concern for the culture of the colonized countries. Besides, her early works have placed the exotic society of the American on the literary map of the English speaking world and thereafter have projected herself as a journalist, a successful novelist a keen writer of travelogues and a great master in the art of writing novels. It is, however, in her novels that she appears to shake the world with his highly controversial views, stark and naked expositions of the countries she has visited and the realistic pictures of these countries with his high pitched tone of anger, harshness and severity of her statement, as well as a brilliant, dazzling and engaging style. The writer stands on the one hand, as a great master who sweeps the western world off with her brilliant skill of language and fascinating narrative technique in general, and India in particular, and on the other have raised great doubts among her critics regarding the veracity and authenticity of these views.

Violence is endemic to their life and sometimes they get so accustomed to it that they are at a loss to resist it or rebel against it. Part of the problem lies in the fact that women are socialized to accept violence as a legitimate tool of censure. Violence toward, women has legitimate space within patriarchy. In India people quote Manu to support use of violence against women to keep them in control. Patriarchy treats women as dispensable extensive which exist in the market to gratify its demand for sexual pleasure or it is the vessel that delivers the all important.

Male heir failure to do so or reluctances to conform to the dictates of patriarchy expose them to different methods of coercion that are both physical and mental. Women have no separate space within the limits of its domain. In the story, Bats the lower middle class woman is imprisoned within an abusive marriage where she suffers physical battering almost every night. The violence and its debilitating impact on her are witnessed by her young daughter. The child is both a witness and a fellow sufferer. She observes her mother crying every night and understands her need to be comforted. However, she is unable to extend that solace to her. The narrative opens with the daughter account of her mother weeping and her attempts to understand it.

That year Mother cried a lot, nights. Or maybe she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice. I would wake up in the hot Calcutta dark and sound of her weeping would be all around me, pressing in, wave upon wave, until I could no longer tell where it was coming from. The first new times it happened, I would sit up in the narrow child's bed that she had recently taken to sharing with me

and whisper her name. But that would make her pull me close and hold me tight against her shaking body, where the damp smell of talcum powder and sari starch would choke me.

If the mother is portrayed as a victim the child is doubly oppressed due to her gender and age. She feels suffocated and smothered within the small crumpled space of their city house and the demands of her mother for love, understanding and comfort. The father beats and scares her into silence. The house, symbolizes the limitations these women face within patriarchy. These impact the interpersonal relations between men and women and among the women too. The daughter does not connect with the mother, she feels betrayed by her adult world. The only person she connects with is the grandfather who has a caring, sharing attitude with the child and treats her as a companion without being gender biased. He teaches her fishing and tells her about the countryside. The fond memories she narrates are of this man, her mother's uncle who gives them shelter when the mother runs away from the city and seeks refuge in the countryside.

On the other side of the spectrum is the father. The girl has no attachment toward her father; she is relieved when the mother runs away from him. The man is himself depicted as a victim of the city; he has a low paying job as a foreman in printing press and finds it difficult to make both ends meet. The man is frustrated and drinks to alleviate the pain the probably a sense of failure. He comes home drunk and vents his anger on the hapless wife and child every night. There is no break in the pattern of repeated violence and abuse the woman suffers is a vicious cycle.

The story explores the potentiality of gender dynamics have on inter personal relations and ultimately the family. The violence ridden unequal marriage creates a dysfunctional family. The man communicates with the wife and daughter through violence. The earliest memory of the young girl is of being thrown up and down by the father and being scared. She does not share a very warm bond with the mother who remains trapped in her own world of pain and fear to share a happy space with the girl child.

The ideal notion of father is presented in the figure of the grandfather who is gentle, supportive and protective toward the mother and daughter. The complexities of the man-woman relationship are explored within the matrix of patriarchal assumptions and demands through the image of the woman who runs away from an abusive husband only to return to him. It is not that she has no other option, the uncle had given her unconditional shelter and there was no pressure on her to leave him. The young daughter too does not want to go back the father. Nevertheless the woman chooses to return to her abusive husband. The woman is like the Bats in the story.

The place of women within patriarchy is always a fraught and contested space. *The Maid Servant's Story* explores this through the prism of class. The worlds of the upper caste and upper class women are apparently different from those of their less privileged underclass sisters. Manisha, the bright young scholar returns to India for a break after a teaching assignment at the University of California. She is confronted with questions of marriage by her aunt and feels irritated and hemmed in by the need to maintain conservative façade for the genteel folk. She understands that back home things are in a time warp and the two women in her life would strongly object to her relationship without marriage with the young Bengali professor in the United States of America. Manisha feels she is liberated from the protocols of womanly behaviour deemed fit for young American women after her western sojourn and exposure. She nevertheless maintains her silence on her love life and participates in the discussions surrounding her marriage. Thinking about her relationship she realize that she too was initially burdened with a sense of guilt and shame for having given to the demands of Bijoy who wanted a relationship with no strings attached. She convinces herself that she too wants to be sexually liberated like the Americanized Bijoy and be free from prudish notions inculcated into her in India. She suppresses her feeling of insult when Bijoy wants her without the promise of marriage. The nagging doubt that you do not treat a woman you respect as a mere body remains in the background of her mind and the text despite the trope of sexual liberation and a woman's control over her body.

The aunt narrates a story of two sisters and a maid servant which remind the girl of her long forgotten childhood. The narrative of the maid servant is embedded within the narrative of the successful young upper class girl who can make her choices without being fettered by economic constraints. Her life choices are facilitated by her mother who helps her achieve her dreams. The girl remembers vaguely her father and brother who died when she was young'

The story of the maid servant brings the issue of sexual violence and agency within patriarchy that women of the different classes face daily. The young maid seeks refuge in the rich household of the upper class woman who is expecting her second child. Since the first child is a girl the husband and his aunt hope the second one would be a boy. The preference for a son is seen as a natural desire for a male heir and the woman is shown as a docile wife who humours her husband. The pregnancy makes her feel unwell and not

in control of herself and that is why she requests her young sister to come over and stay with her to see her through the pregnancy. The husband and his aunt are not able to fill the need for a shoulder and helpmate that the sister would probably be. They humour her because they do not want to upset her and harm the baby.

The younger sister of the wife feels uncomfortable in the husband's presence. The sexual gaze of the husband is instinctively felt as hidden threat by the girl who avoids being alone with him. The girl is a visitor to her marital home to help her with her confinement. She is dependent on her brother in law and hence vulnerable. The suave upper class man is a sexual predator who camouflages it well and his wife remains unaware of the discomfort her sister feels in his presence.

The young maid instinctively avoids the husband and deliberately dresses in an austere manner to deflect any probable misreading of her as sexually attractive or available. The class she comes from renders her doubly vulnerable to the sexual overtures of men of the upper class who perceive lower class women as easy prey. The fact that she has most probably run away from her home and has no guardian renders her position in the upper class household to be very precarious and solely dependent on the benevolence of the woman who has taken her in.

The husband and his aunt are hostile towards the maid as they perceive her to be of questionable character and morals. The other servants too are wary of her as she is bright and a fast learner. The maid soon becomes indispensable for the wife and gradually a bond of love and trust develops between the two women. The young wife takes the maid under her wing and begins to teach her to read and write. She takes the role of being the maid's benefactress seriously but the rest of the household does not approve of her initiative to educate and groom the maid. The maid reciprocates the wife's love and affection for her and a bond of trust develops between these two women from very disparate backgrounds.

The maid and the wife create a space through their mutual trust which subtly challenges the patriarchal hold of the husband and his aunt on the household and the woman. The woman does not need her husband's advice and takes the girl in without any references and only on instinct; that in itself is a silent challenge to his authority. The man treats the wife like a fragile piece that needs protection. His concern for her is an extension of him, the mother of his child and not as an independent self. The moment she asserts herself with regard to the maid servant he feels threatened and becomes angry. The moment the woman wants some agency to decide her domestic affairs she faces resistance from both the patriarch and the surrogate patriarch the aunt. For both these figures the woman's prime importance is due to her unborn child. Probable male heirs for the family pamper her and give in to her wishes in order not to harm the unborn child. She matters not an individual but as a vessel body that will deliver the male child. Her important in the household is not for what she is but for what she gives of herself to the man of the house. Her pregnant body constrains her in giving him sexual pleasure and he feels it legitimate to look for it elsewhere.

The sister witnesses episodes of sexual indiscretion by the husband's he embraces the maid from behind and pretends that it was a mistake as she was wearing the wife's saree, he also attempts to forcibly enter the maid's room at night. He feels the maid would willingly surrender to him because she has nowhere to go. On being rebuffed he threatens to send her back to her mother. The girl had run away from home to escape being sexually exploited by the mother who wanted to push her into prostitution. Her so called husband is in connivance with her mother to commercially exploit her body. The girl's body is a commodity that each one of her guardians wants to use for their profit. Violence is used to force her to put her body for sale in the market. The only one who appreciates her potential is the young wife who wants to hone her skills. Ironically she too notices her beauty and gives her own dress to her to wear which attracts the gaze of the husband and other men toward her body. Till that moment the girl had successfully deflected people's gaze from her body by dressing unattractively. Her instinct for self preservation makes her choose to stay in the store room, the most unattractive and poorly ventilated room in the house that can be bolted from inside. She hopes to find a safe space within the cloistered seclusion of this room but the penetrating gaze of the patriarch finds her and wants entry. The barter or exchange offered to her by him for not throwing her to the wolves that are waiting outside the boundaries of the house is her body. His argument is simple and flawless; she has to barter her body for money or safety because that is the only currency she has. In that case it is better to be a rich man's mistress, in secret, than be up for sale to many in the open market.

The girl's refusal to bow down to the patriarch is based on her belief that the young wife would stand by her and protect her. The circumstances prove contrary to her expectation as the wife becomes critical and is hospitalized till the delivery and the young sister is not match enough to counter the machinations of the man and his aunt to ouster the maid servant. The maid has to pay the price of saying no to him.

The maid servant's story raises some critical issues regarding gender and violence. The upper class women apparently seem safe within their well provided homes but this turns out to be a false premise. The wife has to go through a very difficult pregnancy in order to give the family a male heir. The space given to her in the marital home is dependent on how well she performs the role of the dutiful wife. Initially the wife conforms to the roles ascribed to her by patriarchy; she is a good wife, mother and a dependable daughter-in-law. She allows when the maid comes into the family and the wife begins to assert herself in order to protect her. The maid gives the wife a sense of purpose and agency. The woman treats her like a younger sister and suffers a lot of mental agony and verbal violence on her account from the husband.

The wife is sent to hospital and in the gap the maid is thrown out of the house on the pretext of the security of its inmates. The mother of the maid comes and creates a scene in the house and this opportunity is seized by the husband to chuck her out. He is fully aware of what awaits her outside yet he is remorseless in his vengeance toward the maid. The narrative then moves on to talk about the pampering the wife gets after she delivers a boy, The young sister's marriage is fixed and everybody seems to have conveniently forgotten the maid. The wife's question about her remains unanswered and she too gradually stops asking about her. It is coincidence that the paths of the two women cross again. The woman and the children get caught in a traffic jam and the husband orders the driver to take a route that passes through the red light area. She observes the young maid garishly made up soliciting customers on the road. The woman rolls down the car window, calls out to the girl and extends her arm out of the car. The girl spits on her extended palm with a look of hatred. The woman's hand becomes stained with the blood red pan juice which she tries to erase. The husband scolds her but from that day a part of her dies.

Violence perpetrated by patriarchy on these women scars them and mars the psychological growth of those around them. The mother's in both the stories are so traumatized and scarred by the violence that they fail to perceive its impact on their daughters. In Bats the daughter has no connect with the mother, similarly in *The Maidservant's Story* Manisha is not able to penetrate the wall of ice the mother has built around her. The violence thus creates a ripple effect. It cascades from one generation of women to another and also impacts man woman relationship. The narratives are also stories of betrayal wherein the men betray the wives and the women as victims are so benumbed by the violence that they are unable to give emotional solace and sustenance to their daughters. The violence thus creates a vicious cycle which is difficult to break.

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