

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as an Adept in Exploring the Problems of Traditional Arranged Marriages and Rebellious Experience Against Social Traditions: A Brief Analysis

S. F. Filomine White Sheela

Ph. D. Scholar,

Department of English & Comparative Literature,
Madurai Kamaraj University, MADURAI – 625 021, Tamil Nadu, India.

Received Jan. 11, 2018

Accepted Feb. 14, 2018

ABSTRACT

This article examines in detail about the problems encountered in arranged marriages, which focus on different issues relating and resulting from the patriarchal society. All the eleven stories differ in plots but revolve around the same theme, and some stories discuss the contrasting cultural difference between the East and the West and the resistance it creates in women and the subsequent reactions of the society. The protagonist is usually a woman who is, sometimes, married in an arrangement and suffers because of the expectation she is suppressed to have and expectations she must meet. Through the instances in the stories, it can be seen that the choice of the bride depends on whether or not she is submissive, and is skilled in household chores. A girl may be rejected for having too much education because it is believed education corrupts a girl's mind, such practices strengthen patriarchy.

Key words: *individuality, identity, immigrant experience, patriarchal society, cross-culture, brutality, inescapability.*

English literature enriches our lives in all possible ways capturing our heart by its capacity to both entertain and enliven, crossing barriers and borders thereby shirking the space. From the period of Chaucer and Shakespeare till today, English literature remains ever green and is constantly growing in a unique way, telling us truths about human life, existence, power and accomplishment. Likewise, starting as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the late eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India, Indian English literature has proved itself to be nothing but literature written originally in English by authors or writers Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality.

Eventhough Indian writing in English is just one and half centuries old, it has established its firm roots in Indian English literary field so as to convey an experience which is essentially Indian. Indian English literature has come to occupy the centre stage in the world of English literature with the emergence of writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S.Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Arun Joshi, R.K.Narayan etc., who have won international critical acclaim. Early novels narrated romantic tales from ancient Indian history only after India got freedom, popular women novelists appeared on the literary map. Around the dawn of the new century, Indian English women novelists began to dominate the world of Indian English fiction. No doubt, Indian English writing cherished in the hands of women writers after a lot of efforts owing to the prejudice that they wrote what they experienced. These women writers made fruitful attempts in experimenting with various genres in the recent times making them stand tall and unique. Their writings covered various subject matters under the sun giving the readers a sense of variety and individuality. They basically, according to Madhavi Nikam, “dealt with female subjectivity, domestic space and personal sufferings” (vii).

The history of Indian women writers started by renowned writers like Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das was followed by a fold of younger generation. Such younger generation writers started exploring various vital issues in various fields that remained unspoken by many years. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Jumpha Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sahgal, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mahashweta Devi were keen on exploring various female issues like emotional suffocation, psychological conflicts, inner turmoil, marital discard, disharmonious ties in family relationship etc., No doubt, these writers are said to have captured the cultural diversity, social dichotomy, ethnic multiplicity, clashes between the traditional and contemporary, eastern and western ideologies and other such issues rocking the Indian society. In the words of Abha Shukla Kaushik, “They explore the problems and possibilities engendered by the prevailing social realities negotiating and problematizing issues of gender identity, cultural purity and history through the characters. These creative writers have given voice to the agony, despair, trauma and dilemma of the average modern man who has to fight simultaneously at many fronts in the face of multi-farious problems (P VI).

Today women's writing is considered as a dominant and influential medium of modernism. The phenomenal achievement of carving the niche for themselves by these writers has brought a change in the way women's literature is looked at today. These writers deal with not only domestic spaces and personal experiences but also openly describe the women's world with striking honesty. They deal with the most burning issues, sensitive aspects of life and bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. Modern women are no longer confined to four walls and also have become a part of the social, political, economic and academic scenario. Most probably, most of the women writers have laid stress on the male dominated societies, the sufferings and trauma faced by women, exploitation, complexities of man-woman relationship, social and personal dilemmas and such other related issues. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among these leading writers dealing with the above said issues.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an award winning author, was born in India and lived there till 1976. At the age of 19, she left her hometown Calcutta and moved to the United States. She received a Master's Degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and a Doctoral degree from the University of California. Having published her writings in over 50 magazines like Atlantic monthly and The New Yorker, she took to writing seriously and her writings get included in over 30 Anthologies and translated in over eleven languages including Dutch, Hebrew and Japanese. She was the co-founder of MAITRI, a help line for South Asian Women and this experience eventually led her to write the story Arranged Marriage, a work that explains the torments, abuses and also the courage of the immigrant women. In almost all her works, she concentrates mainly on the problem of women. Differentiating the work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with other writers, Husne Johan Comments:

"Chitra Banerjee's material strides multiple cultures and nations as Bharathi Mukherjee's and Meena Alexander's narratives do. But, unlike the works of Mukherjee and Alexander, the problems, pains and erasures brought about by immigration are down played in Divakaruni's work" (P 149).

Much of Divakaruni's work is partially autobiographical which is evident from the fact that her novels are set in Bay Area of California. Apart from being autobiographical, her novels deal with the immigrant experiences which is an important theme in Today's world and most of her stories focus on Indian women caught between two worlds. The characters, are "both liberated and trapped by cultural changes, struggling to carve out an identity of their own" (Hand 61). She has to her credit publication of such popular novels as 1. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), 2. *In Vine of Desire* (2002), 3. *Queen of Dreams* (2004), 4. *Palace of Illusion*, and 5. Short Story Collections including *Arranged Marriage, the Unknown Errors of Our Lives, Neela Victory Song* and *Conch Bearers*. Describing the problems and issues focused by Chitra Banerjee, Felicity Hand writes in her review as:

"Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni transmits particular message to her reader. First and foremost, she shows the South Asian Community to be heterogeneous with its internal divisions, far from the monolithic construct the United States media and in part the Indian community itself would like to portray. Secondly she uses her stories as a means to empower women, to encourage them to be themselves. She knows how personal choice is the birth right of all humans, men and woman, Indians or Americans and those traditions can frequently encumber more than inspire" (75).

Chitra Banerjee's debut collection of short stories subtly chronicles "the accommodation and the rebellion - Indian born girls and women in America undergo as they balance old treasured beliefs and surprising new desires" (Nowale 49). *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of ten stories where in each story is complete in itself; together they create a tapestry as colourful, and enduring as the finest silk sari, 'The Bats' is the story which presents the patriarchal society and depicts the helplessness of a lady in India. The protagonist is married with a child but is a victim of the atrocities of the husband:

"... Not the dark circles under her eyes. Those were always there. It was high upon her cheek, a yellow blotch with its edges turning purple. It looked like my knee did after I beefed into the chipped mahogany dresser next to our bed last month" (P 2).

Unable to bear the ill-treatment, the protagonist leaves the house along with her child to her uncle's place. Divakaruni presents a typical Indian society which criticizes such women and so is forced to go back to her husband. 'Clothes' is the story that depicts the relationship of Sumita and Somesh settled in Canada. The confession of Somesh that the store where he is a partner was not making much money yet, brought the

couple closer. A tug of war between the Indian dressing, mannerism and Indian life style that the in-laws of Sumita expect from her and the western outfits that Somesh brings for her which she wears in the late night inside closed room is well presented by the writer. She desperately wants to work in the store to improve the conditions:

“I want to stand behind the co-centre in the cream and brown skirt set and ring up purchases” (P 27).

But unfortunately someone kills Somesh at the store, and steals the money from the store which is a shock to the family. Her in-laws want her to return India. But she feels like “Doves with cut-off wings” (P33). So she wears the skirt and blouse that Somesh brought for her and decides to stay back in Canada. Through Sumitra’s character, Banerjee presented a highly evolved, decisive and bold woman. ‘The World Love’ presents the experience of the Indian born girls and woman living in America and the mental trauma that they experience as they balance between the old treasured beliefs and surprising new desires. In almost all the stories like *The Bats*, *Clothes*, *Maid Servants Story*, *Meeting Mrinal*, *A perfect Life*, *Doors*, *Affairs*, Chitra Banerjee has painted the women in detail, pointing to the realities of life after marriage and most of these women are depicted as dislocated both geographically and emotionally and they become almost institutions of passive suffering both in India and abroad alike. Marriage is projected by Banerjee as an institution which mostly undoes women who are brutalized and marginalized and become victims of a patriarchal society in India. For those abroad find themselves dissatisfied with their new lives because of the clash of the opposite cultures and the constant thought of being trapped in an atmosphere which they are not wholly ready to accept because of a sense of hypocrisy.

As a feminist writer, Banerjee could see the protagonists as her neighbours and sympathize with them in their little joys, sorrows, and could reveal the pretty selfishness and strong bond which dominates human life, the harsh realities faced by Indian women once they are married, and the brutality and inescapability from the patriarchal society’s glaring and determining their rights as human. It is commonly understood that even if the women want to escape the institution of marriage, they have no choice except to stay as ‘passive sufferers. Truly speaking, in her stories, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni describes cross-cultural experience of womanhood from the point of view of a feminist. Women characters are pictured by her as the immigrant professionals experiencing and falling victims in the hands of tug of two cultures. All of them are in search of individual identity. All immigrant women are found wavering between two cultures on one hand, there is restricted but comfortable Indian culture while on the other hand there is independent but ruthless western culture. The story ‘Meeting Mrinal’ examines rather beautifully the experience and perspectives of Indian women who are immigrants in the United States. The protagonist of the story is Asha, an Indian woman going to the United States as her husband is already living there. When the story begins, one can see the depiction of Asha’s efforts to compromise and make herself comfortable with her feelings of failure and her desire to live as an independent life in an alien culture. The crisis arises when she happens to meet Mrinal who is her childhood friend and a successful business woman. Chitra Banerjee discusses mainly two themes in the story. The first and major theme is women caught between two cultures. In ‘Meeting Mrinal’ the author describes the predicament of Asha. Growing up in India, Asha got married according to the Indian tradition but later she has to accept and a new life style and culture when she gets divorced from her husband. When the story begins, Asha feels the harshness of the new culture where there are failing grades, drugs, street gangs and even AIDS. She is culturally shocked but she is happy with that she is going to play the role of a traditional Indian wife and mother. This gives her great solace. But she is unaware of the destiny that soon takes away this comfort from her. She loses this solace when Mahesh declares is the end of their marriage. Asha has to face external and internal challenges after her marriage. For supporting herself and her son financially, she becomes an independent women and she feels incompetent. Mrinal is a contrasting personality. Living in Mumbai an independent life, she possesses everything but she feels a kind of vacuum in her life and feels rather lonely inward. The author reveals that both traditional Indian Women or the modern western women face problems finding themselves in the same boats. Both the choices demand sacrifice and both are incomplete. Asha and Mrinal both are sad and discontented in their lives proving themselves to be typical modern women facing a kind of discomfort in life situations and not fulfilling their expectations, due to arranged marriages. In short, it may be said that ‘Meeting Mrinal’ is “a story that presents the isolation and self-centred but utterly unhappy postmodern individuals” (Nawale 55). Feminist perspective is visually seen in Chitra’s characters for “Feminism is an analysis of women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it” (Singh 8).

A woman is like the sand dunes that transform every second into a new form and shape; like the desert sand, she blows with the wind creating new identities for herself. In case of a migrant, the process of self-identification is more complex and fluid. A migrant in the words of Rushdie come unstuck from their roots and for a woman to thrive without them is on impossible task. So she has to strike her roots into the new soil and create herself a new. "A woman has always been an enigma; a mystery, who is far more capable of adaptation and flexible to change; a capability she imbibes from a young age as a result of social conditioning. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has given a voice to the enigmatic persona of a woman; the carrier and protector of her Culture and the disguised enchantress possessing secret powers of magic. In *The Mistress of Spices*, she represents the shifting nature of a woman's identity and her powers of transformation" (Ghanshyam 45). Tilo, the protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices* represents the journey of a woman not only from innocence to maturity but a voyage that crisscrosses the realm of reality and magic, and transcends the confines of geographical borders and cultural specifications. She symbolizes a woman's quest for identity that evolves and transforms with every milestone in woman's life.

To conclude, the style of Banerjee is simple and quite captivating for she is the author successfully depicting a simple but common theme in fiction. For instance, even if characters are varied theme is the same. She has proved herself to be an adept in exploring the nature and problem of traditional arranged marriages as well as the experience of rebellion against all social traditions and customs existing in the Indian society.

References

1. Ghanshyam, G.A. "Shifting Identities: Re-Invention of the Self in Chitra Banejee Divkaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*". *Postmodern Indian English Fiction* (ed.) Abha Shukla Kanshik. Jaipur: Aadi Publications, 2012.
2. Hand, Felicity. "The Old Rules Aren't Always Right. An Analysis of four short stories by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" *The Atlantic Review*, Vol.5, 3-4, 2004.
3. Jahan, Husne. "Colonial Woes in Post-Colonial Writings Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's immigrant Narratives" *South Asian Review*, Vol.24-2, 2003.
4. Kanshik, Abha Shukla. *Postmodern Indian English Fiction: Some Perspectives*. Jaipur: Aadi Publications, 2012.
5. Nawale, Arvind. M. *Indo-English Fiction: New Perspectives*. Jaipur: Aadi Publications, 2011.
6. Singh, Sushila. *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.

Success usually comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it.

~ Henry David Thoreau