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The Thematic Concern in Arranged Marriage by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

Arranged Marriage (1995) is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's debut collection of short stories. The collection has 11 short stories, and majority of the stories deal with the immigrant experience along with the social- cultural encounter that an Indian experiences when he moves towards the west, which is an important theme in the mosaic of American Indian culture. The paper focuses on some of the short stories in this collection and analyzes them from different perspectives. It also reflects on the impact of the cultural disarticulation on the protagonist and studies whether they end dejected and disillusioned or they learn to acclimatize and accept their conditions. It also evaluates their attitude and approach to life, whether they abandon their conventional values or preserve them.

Keywords- Immigrant, Cultural Displacement, Disillusioned, Conventional

Women writings and its evaluation has attracted a large number of women authors and critics over the last two decades and has acquired a substantial space and size in the history of Indian writing in English. Although India has a history of ancient civilization, the surfacing of the first written record of women's literature in India has been traced back to the advent of Buddhism in the early 16th century. According to A.K. Ramanujan, who has translated most of the poems of the Sangam age, the disparity in gender is apparent in the way women have written about their experiences. The rise of Islam in India brought an innovative set of experiences and influences in women's literary world.

However, in the 18th century due to political and social reasons women writing declined. Again, in the late 19th century with the rise of the reformist movement we see women contributing in all spheres of society. This led to a fresh stage in the development on women literature in India. The initial women writings were from the pen of Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. Their writings were aimed at social reform. With Sarojani Naidu, we see a second trend of women writers, who were fluent both in mother tongue and in English. The 20th century women writers, move towards a more complex theme. Writers

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like Mahashweta Devi pooled women's causes with political movement, while Shashi Deshpande in her *Binding Vines*, builds a platform of collective female experience.

Women writers of India in the post-Independence era have in their works originality, authenticity, conflict and the native flavor of the soil. Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya – only to name a few have a hold of their one. Over the years with the alteration in political, social and economical scenario, women's literature by Indian women living in India and abroad have evolved to demonstrate some universal experiences that question the persistent face of patriarchy, the paradoxes, ambiguities and the contradictions of old and new, convention and change, ethics and freedom.

Prominent Indian-American women writers include Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Anjana Appanchana, Padama Hejmadi, Meena Alexander etc. In an article published by the Indian Embassy in 1999, *Titles Women Writers of the Diaspora Create a Big Impact*, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni says that many of us articulate in our books the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here and show them emerge, at least in many cases, as stronger and self – reliant women. Some of our women characters are good role models for women readers and women activists

Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is an assortment of 11 short stories. Her work belongs to the class termed as expatriate literature. It won an American Book Award, a PEN Josephine Miles award and a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award and went on to become a bestseller. Adopted as a text in many college classes, the collection focuses on women from India caught between two worlds. The paper focuses on some of the short stories in this collection and analyzes them from different perspectives. It also reflects on the impact of the cultural disarticulation on the protagonist and studies whether they end dejected and disillusioned or they learn to acclimatize and accept their conditions. It also evaluates their attitude and approach to life, whether they abandon their conventional values or preserve them.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1957 in Calcutta (India). In childhood, she attended a convent school and has a bachelor's degree from the University of Calcutta. In 1976 at the age of 19, she immigrated to The United States. In America, she continued her studies and earned a master's degree in English from *Wright States University* in Dayton, Ohio. Afterward she completed her PhD. from the *University of California* at Berkeley. To pay for her education Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni did a variety of small jobs in America which includes babysitting, selling commodities in an Indian Boutique, slicing bread in a bakery and washing instruments in a science lab. Today she lives with her husband and two children and teaches creative writing at the *University of Houston*. She is an award winning author and poet. Her works are widely known moreover they have been translated into 13 languages.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is also a lively social worker. She became engrossed in women's problems when she went to America and saw the troubles faced by *so-called black* in a country of *so-called white*. In 1991, she established *Maitri* – a hotline for South Asian women who are sufferers of domestic cruelty and abuse. It was her involvement with *Maitri*, that ultimately led her to write *Arranged Marriage* – a work that includes stories about the abuses and bravery of immigrant women. A good number of stories in this collection are based on the lives of Indian immigrants that she has dealt with. Her other works also namely *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sisters of My Heart* etc are set in India and America and features Indian-born women sandwiched between old and new world ethics. She writes with insight and consideration, in a language that is expressive as well as uncomplicated. In all her stories, she 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 work 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.

In the present collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) the author, skillfully 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 a unknown land. The Indian expression in America and the clash between the culture of the native country and the adopted country in which one has to live – is the focal point of most of the stories in this collection. The stories in this collection also focus on and exactly capture the experiences of the immigrant Indian. Divakaruni herself is an immigrant. Consequently, she seems to have a first-hand knowledge and experience about life in India as well as that of USA. It is therefore customary that she draws heavily for the plots of her short stories upon Indian women, Indian beliefs and the changing principles of the Indian immigrants, especially women as they are exposed to the western ideas and values. It is the social-culture encounter that has made Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni a promising literary celebrity and her books an instantaneous success.

It seems that majority of the protagonists in *Arranged Marriage* face the problem of cultural displacement. The characters are caught in the web of dualism of convention versus modernization. This displacement gives birth to situations and troubles that leave them befuddled and helpless. Thus, the protagonists of Divakaruni are trapped between the two ideologies and are desperately trying to find a way out. The dilemma is either to break away from or to adapt with the changing social cultural scenario. Divakaruni says that she writes to help unite people by breaking old stereotypes. The stories in this collection addresses issues such as racial discrimination, inter racial relationship, discrepancy, abortion and divorce.

Divakaruni in an interview to *The Hindustan Times* January 31, 2011 says that she explore complex Diaspora identities. She further states that many of us articulate in our books the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and America-and show them emerge, at least in many cases as stronger and self-reliant women. All characters in this collection of short stories are women of potency and energy, who in some way or other question the value and tradition of the age that has ended. Sumita in *Clothes*, Aunty Pratima in *Silver Pavement*, Shona in *The World Love*, Meena in *A Perfect Life*, Manisha in *The Maid Servants 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 *Bats* to the last story *Meeting Mrinal* the women protagonists constantly try to maintain a balance between the old conventional beliefs and their new life in America.

Chitra Divakaruni questions the basic man-woman relationship in Indian society, which is essentially a patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* tells that marriage is the destiny tradition offered to women by society. Finding a suitable match for their daughter is the sole concern of many parents in our society. This task of finding a suitable match is so inherent in the Indian culture that it is believed that a girl's life begins and ends with marriage. Similarly, the *sati-savitri* and *patiparneshwar* syndrome is also deeply rooted in Indian psyche. In the short story, *The Clothes* Sumita's marriage is fixed, or arranged with Somesh. Sumita surrenders to Somesh only for the reason that she feels that it is her wifely duty. However when after marriage Somesh goes back to America, Sumita feels that she is not able to recall Somesh's face. Chitra Divakaruni shows the readers the paradox of an arranged marriage. Again, Sumita who has constantly been fed on traditional ideas feels that it is her moral duty to act like a good Indian wife.... serving tea to her mother-in-law's friends... covering her head with her sari.... not addressing her husband by his name, etc.

Sumita's life in America is not different from the life led by other daughter-in-laws in Indian society of these days. Her life as she says in the short story is frozen. Her life is a world so small, a glass world and America rushes by. It is this syndrome of playing *sati-savitiri*, which does not allow her to be herself. In this story Somesh, Sumita's husband is also trapped into the deeply rooted cultural bashfulness. He is very much conscious about the American way of life – of impartiality and emancipation. Nevertheless, the fear to break the customary knobs does not allow him to articulate his views or disagree with his parents. He does not have the courage to break the *sravan-image* that is present in Indian traditional male. He is not prepared to live disjointedly from his parents as he feels that he could never abandon them (parents). He is stuck between his love for his wife and his devotion towards his parents. The story reaches its climax when Somesh is murder by some unknown persons. This is an enormous shock to Sumita as she realizes that her life has also ended with Somesh's death. She further realizes that her life, her happiness, her sorrows, her clothes, her

habits etc. had never been her own but always had been for her husband and his family. At the end of the story, we see Sumita standing in her bedroom and seeing her image in the mirror. Tradition asks her to wear white however, the mirror, as personified by the heart, shows a different image. Sumita feels that America is calling her. America that emblematically stands for liberty, gratification, and existence. She rejects what fate has given her and decides that she does not want to become a Dove with cutoff wings. She visualizes a new independent woman in the mirror. Thus in this story she is able to reject the widow's clothes and position that the society and the family customarily imposes on a women.

The first story in this collection of short stories is *Bats*. This story is quite opposite to what *Clothes* is. The protagonist in this short story is totally engulfed by the traditional ties. The protagonist in the short story is a victim of domestic violence. She is constantly beaten by her husband and desperately wants to escape. However, her traditional ties are so strong that she cannot break from the myth of *pati-parmeshwar*. Her life with her husband had been a hell furthermore, she escapes to her native village with her child. Here in the village the atmosphere is reasonably good, the open sky, the river, and the trees - all that a child requires for a holistic development is present in the village. However, a letter from her husband and a small promise, a bit of gesture of love is enough for her. Consequently, she returns to her husband and this time she hopes that life will change. Nevertheless, she does not realize that by flying somewhere else she may be secure. However, we are acquainted with the fact that life will not change, her miscalculations concerning her husband may lead her and her son's life into another hell-like situation.

In the story, *Affairs* Meera and Asha are two characters that are poles apart. Meena feels that marriage for her is a miscalculated blunder of life. Asha also feels the same however her way of expression is different. Meera and Asha, both in their own way are in search of themselves- in search of their identity. On the other hand, Srikant and Ashok – the male characters in the short stories are also suffocated with their conventional roles. Srikant – Meena's husband knows and accepts the fact that they (Srikant and Meena) are not made for each other. He agrees with the fact that Meena is a falcon and he is a penguin, they do not match each other. Meera also knows this; nevertheless, the traditional ties do not allow her the choice to be herself. For her, her friend Asha she is an icon of Indian traditional womanhood. Her predicament is that she appreciates the qualities that she sees in Asha, but she cannot be like her. As such, she is totally westernized and self-centered in her approach to life and its problems. Nevertheless, she wants Asha's sanction, that is to say appreciation of tradition that is personified in the character of Asha, as she sees her. This mind-set of Meera is quite surprising for Asha, for her Meera is a personification of America and what America stands for. She does not understand why the beautiful Meera whom she envied, admired, and adored wants her approval.

On the other hand, Marriage between Asha and Ashok is also on an edge. They feeling of *the empty ache* is always felt by both. Meena's disenchantment with her marriage has helped Asha to realize that time has changed her priorities of life. She feels that convention gives no scope for transform. Her priority until now had been her husband and her family, which resulted in a state of depression. She realizes that the old rules are not always right, not here and not even in India. To move on in life old cuffs have to be broken. Asha reflects back and she accepts the fact that her own individuality has no place in the system of marriage. Here, gender roles clash with individual goals. Here Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni questions the basic man-woman relationship. She points out that marriage under such circumstances is not a union of two souls and individuals as it should idyllically be, however it is a burden where evolution is not possible. Asha has matured with the experiences and with maturity, she welcomes with open arms all that she has deprived herself of.

To preserve equilibrium between old traditions and new requirements is a tricky task, but with the shifting times, this has become necessary. A radical change is taking place round us and most of the writers of today are aware about it. The solution to the problem may or may not be in sight, but the enormity of the clash is surely felt. In the short story *Meeting-Mrinal*, both Mrinal as well as Asha feel the conflict. Asha is a simple and traditional homemaker, while Mrinal is an unmarried worked woman - slim and fashionable. Asha wants to be what Mrinal is – an independent modern women. She wants to free herself from the traditional role of a wife, of a mother, of a daughter-in-law. Contrary to Asha's expectations, Mrinal feels that Asha has all good things in her life – things that she wishes and envies in life. Mahesh is also feeling the social cultural conflict. He is also caught between the web of tradition and modernism. Mahesh is also feeling the wave of change. All his life, he tells Asha that he has been doing what people wanted, being dutiful son, a responsible husband, and father. Finally, he finds the person who makes him feel alive and happy. This happiness may also be a delusion. Nevertheless, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wants to show that the Indian male is also feeling the load of convention. They also wish to break away from the typecast roles that the society has allotted them.

Indian men who leave their native country and drift to USA also feel the conflict between traditional and modern way of life. In the short story *Doors* the author talks not only about Preeti's sensitivity, but also about Deepak's. Preeti is a girl who is born and educated in US, while Deepak, as Preeti's mother describes him is a man straight out of India. She is completely against such type of marriage, as she knows that Indian and America stand for different values. In Indians families, 'I' is not a concern, but in America, privacy is a part of life. Preeti's mother feels that the Indian concept of family is an old concept and that is why she says that Deepak is a person with pre – historical values. However, to begin with Preeti and Deepak are *happily married*. They consider that their marriage to be based on mutual esteem, it is something more than the traditional marriage, but ultimately this proves to be a

misconception. Raj a cousin from India comes to stay with them. Deepak is quite happy with Raj. However, their socialization is a burden for Preeti as she faces a problem of a different kind. She is not able to recognize the joint family and the extended family values that an Indian has. She is much used to the American ides of privacy. Here the conflict is between “I” and “WE”. Preeti is not able to and does not even try to appreciate the difference between the two cultures. On the other hand, Raj is also not able to understand the meaning of privacy that Preeti desires in their marriage. The *close – door* system of America is like a riddle to Raj, as he has never seen any door being shut in a traditional Indian family. In due course, Preeti decides to depart from Raj and the door finally is clicked shut. The title of the story is also quite remarkable. In an inter-country marriage when values change, a person has to adapt to new values. However, when this flexibility is not there, marriages are predestined to fail. In this short story, Preeti and Deepak are not able to recognize this fact of life and thus they close their doors. Little more understanding of each other’s value would have led to better appreciation, esteem, and love, but that is a far possibility.

Simone-de –Beavoir in her *Second Sex* tells that feminine literature is in these days animated less by a wish to demand our rights then by an effort towards clarity and understanding. Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short stories show a protagonist in a particular situation and leave the rest for the readers. All her characters look forward to a better tomorrow. In the short story, *Silver Pavements – Golden Roofs* Jayanti is an optimist character. In spite of seeing the horrible face of America, she realizes that an Indian in America is a brown or coloured. Nevertheless, she feels that the situation is not as bleak as it seems. She notices that the snow has covered her hand so they are no longer brown but white. Enlightenment comes a hard way, but she feels that it will come. This story was penned in 1995 and today in 2012; we have a black African American as the President of America. Thus, a change is being seen. As the author puts it, beauty and pain should be part of each day.

Anwar Sheikh the political and social critic feels that the basic association of man and woman is a search of security and happiness through harmony. When this harmony gets disturbed, a marriage fails. Our belief-system, the stereotype traditional roles, literature, religious conviction, myth, movies, and mass media – all, especially in India creates limitations. These limitations in turn create social pressures. Even during pregnancy, contrary to popular Indian belief 20% of women experience symptoms of depression. {*Times of India March 5, 2006*} This fact is brought to surface in the short-store titled *Ultrasound*. Ranu in India and Anju in America are both depressed and aggravated during the time of their pregnancy. The author in this story skillfully touches the topic of abortion. The Indian attitude is biased towards a girl-child. A girl-child is a burden and an unwanted addition to a traditional family. The best solution that many opt for is illegal abortion. The end of the story

is quite absurd – it leads to a void. Yet again, the writer is not showing a path, but is viewing a situation.

Does motherhood complete the picture of a woman? – this question is also asked by the writer in the short-story *The Perfect Life*. Meera the protagonist in the short story feels that she a good life – an interesting job and a supportive boyfriend Richard. She has, as she says space in her relationship with Richard. She appreciates and loves her independence but she also feels the curse of solitude. She is many times miserable as she misses the tenderness that comes from living in a family especially Indian family. Conversely, the scene changes as the child Krishna enters her life. She is psychologically attached to Krishna and wants to adopt him. However, this is not possible due to certain rules and regulations of adoption in America. Ultimately, Krishna’s disappearance greatly affects her. It takes great toil on her, however with the passage of time she comes out of her depression. The mask that she is supposed to wear – the mask of education, the mask of social pressures, the mask of controlled behavior and her own limitations, she feels does not allow her to be the victim of the circumstances She feel the void in her life, but she is ready to compromises. Again, her concept of a perfect life with Richard or Krishna may just be a fantasy.

The protagonist and the narrator of the story *Disappearance*, faces a very different situation. The protagonist this time is a man, who is married to a quite, pretty, well-bred Indian girl. It is an arranged-marriage. The narrator who is also the protagonist in this case is quite happy, contented, and comfortable with the marriage. But one day his wife suddenly disappears. Now he is a lost man, not knowing the why and how about the person he has married. His concept of realism is traumatized. He loses his peace of mind as he realizes that he knows nothing about his wife. The unknown areas of his wife’s existence keeps on yawning blankly around him like a charm. Having a child does not help here. A child is no insurance for a perfect life. The police ask him if he had quarrel with his wife – this interrogative question makes him reflect back on his married life. He believes that he is an honest person but the introspection of his past reveals the hidden skeletons in his cupboard. He reflects that many a times he had to put his foot down and refused his wife - like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes. These aspects of her life were useless by him, he has never tried to understand the person his wife was. The story is written from a pure masculine viewpoint. Some act or thought that may be quite typical for a traditional man may not be the same for a woman. Silence does not always mean agreement. The protagonist who is quite busy with his own world and views does not notice the anxiety felt by the wife. Again, for him forced sex in marriage is quite customary. He thinks it is the husbandly rights and wife’s duty to do what he thinks is right. There is no understand and equality in this marriage. In this short story for a change the writer does not presents before us the viewpoint of her female character. However, the act of disappearance itself suggests that the wife has escaped from the cage. Marriage for her has become a prison – physically as well as

intellectually – in which no progress was possible. The only solution that she saw was to break the oppression furthermore this also requires guts.

At the same time, *The Maid Servant's story* is a story that requires some particular consideration. In this short story, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deals with human relationship at various phases of life. We are shown the relationship between Manish and Bijoy, Deepamasii and Manish, Manish and her mother, and relation between Manish's mother and father. However, it is Sarala's story– Sarala the maidservant. In this story, the writer introduces us to women from different generations and economical groups in our society. Manish belong to a traditional Bengali family. However, after her immigration to America, she undergoes a transformation. In her ideas about relationship, she is entirely westernized. She wants a librated relationship with no strings attached. She is more close to Deepamasii when compared to her own mother. As a child, she had always yearned for parental love, which she never got. She never got the praise she carved - that squeezed – breathless, delirious with joy hug that other mothers gave their daughters. She is emotionally starved and accordingly in all her relationship she does not fell the complete contentment that a perfect relationship should give. Her relation with Bijoy also does not make her happy. She persistently feels the feeling of guilt that tradition many times imposes of us. She also, indirectly blames her mother for her current juxtaposition.

Sarala, the maidservant in this short story is a person dedicated to her work. However, when the mistress of the house is ill, the husband behaves in a typical manner. Emotion of guilt is not to be seen as he goes towards Sarala's room, with mal intentions in his mind. He tells the servant not to act so virtuous - *once a whore, always a whore*. Nevertheless, when he sees that his plans have failed he threatens the maidservant he calls her a Bitch. Now because he is a man and morals in our society are only for women, he does not feel the guilt that is felt by Manish. The writer shows us the double standard of our society. In marriage, fidelity and loyalty are considered to be the greatest virtues that a woman should possess. Well! What about men? Does not our tradition Divakaruni once explained her reason for writing she says that there is certain spirituality, not necessarily religious – the essence of spirituality – that is the heart of the Indian psyche that finds the divine in everything. It is important for her to start writing about her own reality and that of her community. She writes with a purpose and for a purpose. Barbara Anna Barabara, the spiritual writer says that happiness will not be ours until we do what is right for us. The quest for happiness and harmony is what the characters in this collection of short stories – Mita, Jayanti, Meera, Preeti, Abha, Meena, Mrinal - 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.

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