

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Portrayal of America in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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Abstract

Indian-American poet, a creator of novels, short stories, children's books, an essayist and a community activist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is primarily a literary voice for Indian immigrants and Americans of South Asian descent. Valuing emotion over form and structure in her writing, she frequently writes of loneliness and cultural separation. Through the numerous male and female characters in Arranged Marriage, Divakaruni criticizes qualities that she sees as typically old or Indian and glorifies those that she sees as new or American. The concern of this research study has been to present United States of America in the selected stories of the collection entitled Arranged Marriage, as a haven and a place where all the dreams happen to be realized as it opens numerous possibilities for the immigrant women troubled and shattered by their marriages arranged somehow in India.

Keywords: Marriage, Immigration, Estrangement, Hope, Freedom

1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a professor of writing at the prestigious creative writing program in Houston University, a symbol of unification between the two extensively distinct cultures, is known for the books like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Arranged Marriage*, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Vine of Desire*. Most of her writing addresses issues pertaining to immigrants and the diasporas. In a television program named *The Connection Special*, the interviewer Patricia Gras had asked about that particular thing which led her to write and to answer that question Divakaruni put these words:

My grandfather in India died at that time and I was living here, I couldn't go back for the funeral and it struck me that as I was living here I was forgetting important things and I was losing important people in my life and I decided I really need to start writing about these places and events and special people so that I can keep them alive in my heart. (Divakaruni)

She began writing not only to remember her grandfather, but also to remember India and to explore what it means to be an immigrant woman living in the United States. She asserts that:

I have a variety of readers from across the diasporic community; not just from South Asia. I like to write large stories that include all of us - about common and cohesive experiences which bring together many immigrants, their culture shocks, transformations, concepts of home and self in a new land. My experiences too are reflected in my work (IANS).

Then, while working as a volunteer at a women's shelter in the Bay Area, Divakaruni was deeply affected by the plight of a battered and frightened South Asian woman. In her literary portraits of South Asian families in the United States, Divakaruni can be counted among South Asian American women writers such as Tahira Naqvi, Susham Bedi, and Usha Nilsson, whose stories are often based against the background of South Asian American communities. In her interview with *Thoughtfulindia*, Divakaruni states that her success lies only in touching the hearts of the readers and asserts that, "On some level to say as long as the books are reaching reader and touching their hearts that's the real success, everything else is finance" (*Thoughtfulindia*). She also asserts that:

It reaches across the all kinds of cultural space to connect with people and once I realized that that became one of my big goals in writing and I said I want my writing to connect people, so I want to write about my people. But I hope and this is something I continue to hope is that people would relate to that and learn about that and that'll reduce the distance. (UHV/ABR)

San Francisco Chronicle appreciates the collection of stories in *Arranged Marriage* as, "These exquisite stories entice us with the Author's gift of storytelling and her characters' originality, independence and insight" (qtd. in *AM*). As *Library Journal* acclaims that, "Young and old, male and female, east and west, modern and traditional, all elements blend in this exquisite

collection . . . Sensitive, elegant and beautifully descriptive” (qtd. in *AM*). The book was acclaimed widely and variously as it addresses issues such as racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. The situation of abused mothers or forced abortions, for example, appears “contrived and overdone” (Huang 70), and the author’s representation of male characters tends to be superficial. Moreover, Indian women, and South Asian women, more generally have been portrayed to be the preserver and holder of Indian culture.

The present study deals with the stories entitled “Clothes”, “The Ultrasound” and “The Word Love” because all the stories reveal the condition of all those women who have shifted from their native place to America after their marriage and to some extent they have suffered due to this relationship. The gist of the study lies in the presentation of their aspirations for their future after their estrangement which lies in the *magic land* (*AM* 46) i.e. America. Divakaruni also explains that she engages this experience because:

The underlying layer issue is of leaving home. Just about all of us have an experience of leaving home, how leaving home changes you and how when you go back, home is changed. It’s never the same. And what of the home you carry with you? the sense of self. How do we deal with that as we move into a place where self means something quite different? If you repress your sense of your past and that heritage, that need comes out in other ways. It is a need in us, to know who we are in terms of where we come from. (qtd. In Huang 69)

In *Arranged Marriage* the stories reflect her continuing concern with the situation of Indian Immigrants in the United States, particularly Indian women torn between the values of the old world (India) and those of the new (America). Rose Kernochan makes the following comment about the characteristics of these short stories in as:

Recently arrived from Calcutta, unsettled in Chicago and San Francisco, Ms. Divakaruni’s heroines are still half-submerged in the dream world of Indian femininity, in an innocence as still and dark as lake water. As America revives them, they rise to its challenges; the new freedoms of their chosen country act on them like extra oxygen. (qtd. in Kuortti & Tajeshwar 91)

As the title *Arranged Marriage* suggests, “Clothes” the story also has been woven around the theme of marriage, but the woman’s representation herein fulfills the gap which had been continuing to exist in the Indian mindset as well as in the Indian writings. “Clothes” comprises of the incidents a woman’s life, which depict as if she is born to fulfill the amorphous social norms only. Sumita, the protagonist, belongs to a little Indian village, has grown up with the traditional and cultural framework in her mind, set by Indian middle class families and now after getting married she is about to settle in America. The story begins with the preparations of her bride viewing and traditionally if the boy likes her, the marriage will be arranged. In this context, “Scholars have noted that contrary to popular Western beliefs, there are different kinds of arrangement: ones in which parents arrange the entire process; a second kind in which the young people meet and interact with family members present; and a third kind in which marriage follows a getting-acquainted period” (Roberts & Arnett 34). Both cultural and ideological orientations, sacramental and mythical doctrines, and patriarchal monopolies which bolster marriage as a “dharma”, marginalize all other thematic involvements from women’s literary world.

Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) also depicts that, “the exchange of women in marriage as a mode of relationship in primitive societies actually renders women as *objects* to unite society. In Mitchell’s words, women’s identities are determined by their “cultural utilization as exchange objects” (qtd. in Nayar 89). But the marriage gets interrupted by the death of her husband Somesh, which made Sumita to hang in between the two worlds i.e. to go back to India and lead a widow life there and the second world was full of promises and aspirations for her future. The Indian views about a widow are expressed through the portrayal of Sumita as: “. . . People would surely have in the village, that it was my bad luck that brought death to their son so soon after his marriage. They will probably go back to India now. There’s nothing here for them anymore. They want me to go back with them. . . . I want you to go to college. Choose a career” (*AM* 30-31). These words of her husband Somesh made Sumita to stay in California and pursue her husband’s dream, “I don’t know yet how I’ll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must” (*AM* 33). “The clothes in this story are symbolic: the Indian sari is a symbol of entrapment whereas the western attire of skirt and blouse are symbols of Sumita’s liberation. Sumita seems to be poised to liberate herself only by giving up such Indian customs as wearing saris and caring for elderly in-laws” (qtd. in Kuortti & Tajeshwar 85).

But unlike the Indian widows who wrapped in white saris and with bald heads serve tea to their in-laws, she decides to move further with the dream of her husband to work and achieve success. At this time she takes a deep breath and feels that, “Air fills me- the same air that traveled through [my husband’s] lungs a little while ago. The thought is like an unexpected intimate gift. I tilt my chin, readying myself for the arguments of the coming weeks, the remonstrations” (*AM* 33). However, when all is said and done the question arises whether these women are simple straw feather idealized and created only to project the ‘Indian image.’ Divakaruni as a major woman novelist is less concerned with personality delineation of her women characters. She is attracted by the double standards of the Indian women and asserts, “I Divakaruni seems to say that if the Indian woman is to be relevant in the United States, she must ground her struggles in the heart of whiteness, rather than graft on cultural components which make no sense in the New World. They should reinvent their personality, which takes “The best of the both together” in order “to raise hell globally” (Divakaruni). When Donna Seaman asks Divakaruni about this particular aspect of her writing if, “You portray young Indian women who come to the States to go to school, or to get married, and they think they’re going to be free and liberated, but instead they’re unmoored, lost, terribly lonely” (Seaman 157). Maintaining both the strands Divakaruni replies thus:

That is at once the attraction, but also the pitfall, of living an individual life: you have a lot more freedom, but you are more isolated. Many of my characters discover that. Ironically, they miss the things that drove them absolutely crazy in India, where the extended family would know everything you’re doing, and interfere all the time in your life. But here when you open the door to that empty apartment, you kind of wish they were there. (Seaman 157)

Nonetheless, critics have also pointed out that some stories, particularly in this collection, may be read as “a stereotyping of the polarized concept of freedom for a woman in America versus loss of freedom for a woman in India” (Huang 70). Like many Divakaruni’s stories “The Ultrasound” is also in the first-person narrative voice revealing the condition of the two cousins as it begins, “My cousin Arundhati and I are pregnant with our first babies, a fact which gives me great pleasure. Although she’s in India and I here in California, we’ve kept close track of each other’s progress” (AM 201). Anju describes her cousin Runu as the traditionally feminine type, who studied Home Science, while Anju studied English and American literatures. Being the narrator of the story Anjali states that:

. . . like good Indian girls, we both allowed our mothers to arrange traditional marriages for us. . . . Prajapati, the winged and capricious god of marriage, set us down in such different places- me here in San Jose with Sunil, and her in provincial Burdwan, the eldest daughter-in-law of a large, traditional Brahmin family” (AM 206-07).

After marriage the cousins has to face difficult situations and circumstances with their husbands and family in different regions and circumstances which Divakaruni depicts in an intricate details. The predicament of Arundhati comprises of disrespect by her family members and husband as well as the immense burden of household work which has been depicted as:

There is always so much to be done! Early in the morning I have to supervise the maid as she milks the cows. Then I make tea for Mother, she’s very particular, I have to get it just the right color. Then I tell the maid to get what to get from the market. After that there’re vegetables to cut, and breakfast and lunch and dinner to cook. . . . The way one of Runu’s brothers-in-law had made a rude comment when she’d burnt the rice pudding. The way Ramesh, who’d returned from his business tour a couple of days before I left, had scolded her, his voice rising in irritation, Arundhati, how many times have I told you not to mess up the newspaper before I’ve read it. (AM 210-13)

On the other hand, Anjali gets confrontation with her husband mostly on the economic issues as Anjali informs, “Sometimes when I bought something I shouldn’t have, he shouted that I was a spendthrift, letting money flow through my fingers like water. *Your mother should have married you to a maharajah, not a mere working man like myself*” (AM 214). The concrete plight begins when the two pregnant cousins, undergo ultrasound and amniocentesis tests during their pregnancies and when it is revealed that Arundhati (Runu) is pregnant with a girl; her husband and mother-in-law pressure her to have an abortion, because they would only accept a male child as the family’s firstborn. When Runu decides to end her marriage to save her child, in a fleeting moment of apprehension, Anju questions herself about her part in taking away Runu’s traditional Indian womanly qualities by her own “misplaced American notions of feminism and justice” (AM 227). Runu opposes and leaves her husband’s home with the guidance of Anju (Anjali), who thinks that Runu’s immigration to America will be the only panacea for all her problems. She herself says, “Tomorrow I’ll ask Sunil about sponsoring Runu, maybe getting her a student visa. I know he will fight it at first, give me a hundred reasons why we can’t do it. Why we shouldn’t. But I’ll fight back. . . . It’s worth it- for Runu and, yes, myself. I’ll get my way.” (AM 230).

From at least 1825, when William Thompson published his attack on the ‘white slave code’ of marriage, feminists have persistently criticized marriage on the grounds that it is not a proper contract. In 1860 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, stated in a speech to the American Anti-Slavery Society, that “there is one kind of marriage that has not been tried, and that is a contract made by equal parties to lead an equal life, with equal restraints and privileges on either side” (qtd. in Pateman 154). Although Anju’s feminism is actually expressed through her childhood drawings about her future occupations, which predate her readings of English and American literature in college and her migration to America, she declares that her notions of feminism and justice are “American”. So in spite of the story’s flashback device showing Anju as a budding feminist in her childhood drawings, the authorial voice denies that pre-existing feminist and places her feminism in the geographic and cultural boundaries of America. Although a woman’s role may also include being an economic contributor to the family, the primary role for a woman is the maintenance of the home and the family under patriarchal definitions of a woman’s role.

When Divakaruni’s female characters in any of these stories stand up for themselves, America is given a definite role in their awakening. As Anju, one of the two protagonists in the story “The Ultrasound”, attributes her sense of justice and feminism to America, it is a clear articulation of the way in which every liberated female character from *Arranged Marriage* seems to find freedom and awakening by discarding India and embracing America. America itself is seen not only as the country that holds many opportunities, but also as a mythical “promised land” (AM 293), in most of the stories of *Arranged Marriage*, the United States of America stands for freedom, enlightenment, and promises of fairytale fulfillment. Much of Divakaruni’s writing portrays the United States as a safe haven and a promised land for her immigrant characters. In her stories the United States is repeatedly anointed with such classical mythical terms as the *Promised Land*, the *land beyond the seven seas*, and the *fairy kingdom*. Clear binaries are also constructed between the United States and India, with the United States being endowed with most of the positive and redeeming qualities and India being portrayed as the backward and the evil in need of redemption. As *Indian Women’s Short Fiction* describes that, “The heroine immigrants of her narratives, who are able to find passage from India to the United States, are designated as the lucky ones from a primitive society who receive the benefactions of the advanced society of the promised land” (qtd. in Kuortti & Tajeshwar 93).

“The Word Love” represents the story of a young Indian girl who is living with an American man in the same apartment without even being married to him, which has been quite a shocking aspect from an Indian perspective. The persistent memory of her mother’s simple living and her teaching of traditional values to her becomes the obstacle in her interracial relationships. The separation between the two leads the heroine to seek her new self as she asserts that:

A few clothes, some music, a favorite book, the hanging. No, not that. You will not need it in your new life, the one you’re going to live for yourself. And a word comes to you out of the opening sky. The word, love. You see that you had never understood it

before. It is like rain, and when you lift your face to it, like rain it washes away inessentials, leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin. (AM 71)

Divakaruni's idealization of America makes her ignore the possibility that when migration pulls people away from their known environment and culture and places them in a culture that puts a tremendous emphasis on homogeneity and assimilation, they could be socially outcast even if they are technically accepted in their new home. All the complexities of America's past and present race and class relations are also brushed aside with nothing more than a few passing references in Divakaruni's narratives of immigration. America becomes its unique, exceptional, magical country which offers a safe refuge to the female characters of Divakaruni's fiction, mostly middle-class Indian women oppressed by Indian traditions and having the means of passage to European-style advancement in the "exceptional" promised land of the United States. Divakaruni's western critics repeatedly reiterate the notion of America being the rejuvenator of her Indian female characters and endorse the binaries the writer creates between India and America. How the effect of American individuality and distinctiveness overcome the Indian vision of marriage of a girl can be seen in the story entitled "A Perfect Life", where Meera, an Indian-American professional woman, describes her concept of desirable men in terms of Hollywood hero charms:

Richard was exactly the kind of man I'd dreamed about during my teenage years in Calcutta, all those moist, sticky evenings that I spent at the Empire Cinema House under a rickety ceiling fan that revolved tiredly, eating melted mango-pista ice cream and watching Gregory Peck and Warren Beatty and Clint Eastwood. Tall and lean and sophisticated, he was very different from the Indian men I'd known back home. . . . When I was with Richard I felt like true American. (AM 73)

The images from Hollywood movies projected on the screen of the "Empire" Cinema dictate notions of desirability, good looks, and true Americanism. Also Richard's distinguishing qualities are tallness, leanness, and sophistication; and as he is described as "very different" from Indian men are, thus, culturally, ideologically, mentally, and physically diminished in comparison to their American counterparts. To become a "true American", the woman of Indian origin must associate herself with a man who looks like an archetypal Hollywood hero. All the other kinds of Americans avoided or marginalized by Hollywood are not seen to be qualified as a so-called "true American". Indian women are also characterized by many limitations in Divakaruni's short stories unless they already are, or in the process of being, westernized.

2. Conclusion

Conclusively it can be stated that the theme of marriage plays the role of a pervasive social institution which causes turbulence and misery in the lives of all the women characters by one way or the other. The women in these stories are in transition, caught in the border between a traditional patriarchal society and a world of possibilities and choices. The stories entitled "Clothes", "The Ultrasound", "The Word Love", can be read as a stereotyping of the polarized concept of freedom for a woman in India. But Divakaruni is too perceptive and skillful a writer and her narratives are much complicated too for such generalizations. In writing about South Asian women's struggles, defeats, and successes both in India and in the United States, Divakaruni proves her courage as a writer who is willing to address difficult issues through her stories.

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