

Search for Self: A Critical Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Female Characters in *Arranged Marriage*.

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Abstract: *One of the most prominent voices of Indian writing in English at present, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents the concept of 'New Woman' in its true colour. She depicts the unending struggle of Indian woman against patriarchy, society and her own family. Her female characters are strong and fearless. The present paper aims to focus at the optimistic outlook of Indian woman in her search for self-realization with special reference to Arranged Marriage(1997). Rich or poor, educated or illiterate and married or unmarried, all the women characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in Arranged Marriage rebel against those who try to suppress their individuality.*

Keywords: Independence, Patriarchy and Self-fulfilment.

Giving voice to the unspoken, unexpressed and unheard problems of Indian women living in the United States, in *Arranged Marriage* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has established a new trend in the field of feminist literature. An Indian by origin, she lives in the United States with her husband and two grown up sons. Her literary achievements include a number of famous poems, exotic fictional works and her maiden story collection *Arranged Marriage*. A short story collection of eleven stories written in the backdrop of Indian culture and values, it provides a strong link between the women living in two different directions but facing the same hardships in their way. Chitra Divakaruni offers a glimpse in the frustrated lives of Indian women belonging to the different strata of society. Living in world's most powerful country, these women make fruitful attempts in order to gain their deserved and desired place within their houses and outside. She wants to get what she is deprived of. Betty Friedan's comment in this regard is quite significant, "For woman, as for man, the need for self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization- is as important as the sexual need .(Friedan282) .The self-fulfillment of a woman is crucial for the betterment of family and the society as she is considered the focal point of all human relationships. Breaking her traditional image of an obedient daughter, a dedicated wife and fully devoted mother, she starts touching new heights in different spheres of life. She is not ready to tolerate the unjust restrictions imposed upon her by the patriarchy.

The story *Clothes* depicts the narrow mindedness of Indian people living in the United States. The story Sumita loves her husband and fulfils all her social obligations very effectively but the sudden

death of her beloved husband breaks her golden dreams into pieces. She does not know what to do and where to go now. Due to the social pressure, she has to perform all the rituals prescribed for a widow in our Indian culture. Wearing a white sari symbolizes her colorless lonely life after her husband's death. Darkness prevails all around in her life and she starts moving towards her ending, i.e. death. Here the author gives a vivid description of an Indian widow's miserable plight at the hands of patriarchy through the character of Sumita.

"The sari, thick voile that will bunch around the waist when worn, is borrowed. White Widow's color, color of endings. I try to tuck it into the top of the petticoat, but my fingers are numb, disobedient. It spills through them and there are waves and waves of white around my feet. I kick out in sudden rage, but the sari is too soft, it gives too easily. I grab up and edge, clamp down with my teeth and pull, feeling a fierce, bitter satisfaction when I hear it rip."(P.29).

Unlike other traditional Indian widows, she is not ready to give up all her dreams and desires. In fact, she is determined to give a new start to her life independently. "I straighten my shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath. Air fills me the same air that traveled through so mesh'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." (P.33).

The situation of a single independent woman is not much different from a widow in our taboo ridden society. It is believed that the life of a woman is nothing without a man. Marriage is supposed to be the most important part of a woman's life. But the

female protagonist of *A Perfect life*, Meera moves her life in a different mode. she leads an independent luxurious life in America having all the pleasures of the materialistic world- money, job, house and a young and vibrant American boy friend. She does not want to bind herself in the golden chains of marriage as she is not ready to accept the domination of others on her. As she believes "Not that I was against marriage or ever against having a child. I just wanted to make sure that when it happened, it would be on my terms, because I wanted it." (P.77). she loves her freedom, her own individuality and her status in society. She does not want someone in her life who is always present to suppress her. For her, marriage is the main cause of a woman's agonies and anxieties. As Aruti Nayar says, "If reasons for marriage are evolving, so are the reason for calling it quits. Matrimony is no longer a valid passport for a better life, just as remaining married only for separate lives and not rock the boat is unacceptable." (Nayar 1).

Like Meera, Asha in *Meeting Mrinal* makes efforts to move out of the part memories of several years of togetherness with her estranged husband and thinks about the future in terms of her own. She takes interest in those things which she likes. To make herself financially secure, she joins a professional course in Library Science "I hardly cook anymore especially Indian food. I have decided that too much of life has already been wasted mincing and simmering and grinding spices. I am taking classes instead at local college not something fluffy like quilt making or fulfillment Through transpersonal communication but library science, which will (I hope) eventually get me a full-time job at sunny vale public library where I now work afternoons." [P.275].

Through Asha's character, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives voice to the concealed dreams of woman whose life revolves around the happiness of her husband and children. To serve their needs is her topmost duty and she keeps it on priority but sometimes, circumstances bring a drastic change in her life and she starts giving wings to her imagination. She stops taking care of what her own near and dear ones and even the society thinks about her. Now, she is ready to achieve whatever she really wants not what others expect from her. The heroine of *Affair*, Meena does the same as far as her extra marital affair is concerned. When she feels that her married life lacks understanding, companionship and even love, she decides to break it at once. "But I just couldn't keep on our marriage there was nothing left in it- if there had been anything I felt I was slowly drying up inside, my blood turning to dust." (P.266-267).

Following the dictums of 'New Woman' Meena takes refuge in the arms of her American colleague, Charles. Instead of keeping it secret, she reveals it to her friend, Abha in a frank manner, "And this

man- he made me feel so special. He understood all the things I wanted out of life he wanted the same all the things I wanted out of life- he wanted the same things with him. I didn't feel greedy or guilty or ashamed." (P.267). Her quest for love takes her away from her emotionless lover nor shares her feelings like a true friend. What she finds missing in her husband she suddenly gets is from her boy friend. To quote Subhash Chandra, "the picture of man as husband and is determined by the dictates of the feminist ideology. An important form of feminist rebellion against the patriarchal structure is the attack on family, which gets manifested, in sexual freedom, that is extramarital relationship." (Quoted in Jyoti Singh 124). Not only women like Meena show courage to expose the shortcomings of the patriarchy but also simple and typical Indian housewife like Runu refuses to accept the cruelties imposed upon her by her narrow-minded husband and his family. Being a submissive Indian woman, she silently becomes the mouthpiece of her husband and does what he tells her unquestionably. In other words, Runu is the "Sita" of modern times but she transforms as far as the welfare of her child is concerned. Her husband as well as his family longs for a male child and to get it conformed, they force her to go for an ultrasound when it is revealed that the foetus in Runu's womb is a female, they want to kill her at any cost. On the contrary, Runu loves her unborn child without taking care of her sex. She wants to give birth to that child and becomes a strong rock to protect her from her own family. Unlike a traditional Indian woman, she is ready to leave her husband house in order to save her baby. Talking to her friend on telephone, she firmly tells her about her intentions, "Just in case I decided not to go back." (P.255). Her feminine instincts changes as she comes to know about the bad intentions of her rigid husband and mother-in-law. As Sudhir Kakkar says, "The need for emotional closeness with her 'preoedipal' another and the wish to be loved can be transformed into the wish to love, the protection of her child from the environment the longing of her awakened sensuality can be temporarily sublimated given over to physical ministrations to her child." (Kakkar 67).

The journey of an Indian woman is not quite easy as it seems to be but it is replete with difficulties tribulations and problems at every stage of her life. Being a wife, she is expected to do what her husband orders her to do. But the woman of the 21st century breaks her silence and shows visible signs of defiance against the systems as well as the male dominated society. The heroine of *Doors* presents this point of view. Through Preeti, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni successfully reflects the yearning of a highly educated and sophisticated young wife for freedom from her husband's unjust domination.

Living in America, she is very well adapted in Western culture and tradition. She falls in love and gets married with a man of her choice. An Indian

by origin, Preeti knows the importance of mutual understanding for a successful marriage, but on the other hand, she loves her privacy. She has a world of her own in which no one is allowed to enter. Her husband, too, gives her that desired space and behaves accordingly. The arrival of his Indian cousin, Raj, takes a u turn in their life. Preeti does not like the over involvement of Raj in her personal life. She raises her voice and declares, "I can't live with Raj in the house anymore. He's driving me crazy He's..." (P197).

But when she fails to convince her husband in spite of her strong resentment, she at once decides to leave her house. Instead of remaining silent, she prefers to go away from that place where her individuality is lost. "I'm leaving, she said, her voice very calm. I am going to move in for a while with Cathy..." [P.200].

Like Preeti, the female protagonist of the story *The Bats* faces mental stress imposed by her worthless husband upon her. Moreover, she becomes a victim of domestic violence now and then. Living in Calcutta, she has to lead a miserable life along with her small daughter. She bears everything without speaking a single word because of her daughter. But when the circumstances goes against her in its worst form, she finally packs her bag and moves out of his life. She has nobody in her parents' house except one distant relative whom she can call her own. Therefore, she reaches there without having a second thought. Describing her tale of woe to her old uncle, she gives voice to her internal conflict, "Uncle says we can stay here as long as we want that I never have to go back." (P.6).

The exploitation of woman has many forms such as discrimination against girl child, sexual abuse,

domestic violence, molestation and rape. A sexual act done by man against the woman's desire is called rape. The purpose of a man in this brutal act is to satisfy his unsatiable lust for sex. Such is the case with Sarala in *Maid Servant's Story*. Here Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni unveils the hypocrisy of man. In the story, the man from an aristocratic Bengali family tries to molest his poor maid servant, Sarala in the absence of his wife. He assures her that he would keep it a secret and no one would come to know about it. She politely resists his temptation by saying, "Let me go, Dadababu. The maid was kicking at the man's shins now when the man didn't release her, she clawed at his face, her voice rising threateningly. Or else. I will scream loud enough to wake everyone in the house." (P.145-146).

To sum up, we can say that the female characters presented by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her magnum opus *Arranged Marriage* are rebellious, assertive and bold. Their refusal to accept the established norms made by the patriarchy to show their assertiveness. As Micheal Chris Weedon elaborates foucault's point of view in this context, "To speak is to assume a subject position within discourse and to become subjected to the power and regulation of the discourse. Foucault argues that for the west, the confessional mode, developed within Catholicism, is the form which this power most often takes. The confessional mode has become fundamental to 'scientific' investigation and knowledge. This mode of putting sex into discourse involved its particular constitution along specific lines to particular ends." (Weedon 119-120).

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