

Diasporic Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's “Arranged Marriage”

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Abstract- Diasporic writing in novels, short stories, travelogues, poems, and essays has not been new to post colonial literature. The sense of yearning for the ‘homeland’ or ‘root’, a strange and unusual attachment to its traditions, religions, and languages gave birth to the so-called diasporic literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the foremost writers of the diasporic literature, in her American Book Award winning first collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, beautifully presents inter alia the matrix of diasporic consciousness like alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, cultural conflict, etc. The present paper delves into these elements and highlights Divakaruni’s concerns for racism, economic disparity, miscarriage, divorce, etc in her acclaimed collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomena of diaspora range from global diasporas such as Jewish, British, Chinese, African, Russians, Turkish, Greeks, Lebanese, Koreans, and Iranians on the one hand, and South Asian diaspora on the other. Diasporic literature which comes under the broader realm of post colonial literature – the works produced from previously colonised countries such as India. Bharti Mukherjee, Jumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Meera Sayal, Sunetra Gupta, Anjana Appanchana, Padma Hejmadi, Meena Alexander – only to name a few female writers of Indian origin who have influenced the realm of Diasporic literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such writer who has secured a credible place in the genre of South Asian Diasporic Literature. People in Diaspora are caught physically between the two worlds, which negate their belongings to the either location.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American award winning author and poet who migrated to America in 1976 at the age of 19, witnessed the

troubles faced by the so-called “black” in a country of the so-called “white”. She is conscious about her own identity and hence her works reflect the sense of rootlessness and alienation, which are mostly relevant to the Indian Diaspora. *Arranged Marriage*, a work of art to narrate the tale of abuses and bravery of immigrant women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni possesses a high rank in the contemporary circle of Indian Diaspora. Through the characters of her stories in *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni explores the problems of identity crisis, emotional isolation and non-communication, the experience of migration, etc. Her main area of focus is once again immigrant experience as Divakaruni says, Expatriates have powerful and poignant experiences when they live away from their original culture – and this becomes home, and never quite, and then you can’t really go back and be quite at home there either. (Divakaruni Profile by Arthur J. Pais)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the author of several award-winning volumes of poetry and novels, in her debut collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) which has also won a PEN Josephine Miles Award and a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, deals with the immigrant experiences, especially of women in general. Divakaruni, with her remarkable workmanships portrays Diasporic women protagonists, living in two cultures, struggling the insecurities of exile, and questioning their identities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to the first generation of Indian immigrants in the United States who has spent a part of her life in India and has carried the baggage of her native land offshore. She has keenly observed the postcolonial society of India as well the challenges of Diaspora abroad. *Arranged Marriage* is the problem of adjustment arising from cultural variation experienced by an Indian woman when she moves toward the west, which is in

important theme in the mosaic of American Indian culture. When she moves from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to California just a week after her marriage, she understands more about the place and its culture mostly from her husband, Somesh, who works with his partner in a store called 7-Eleven, selling all kinds of amazing things- apple juice, American bread, potato chips, beer, and wine:

It stayed open twenty-four hours, yes, all night, every night, not like the Indian stores, which closed at dinnertime and sometimes in the hottest part of the afternoon. That is why his partner needed him back....A lot of Americans drink, you know. It's a part of their culture, not considered immoral, like it is here. And really, there's nothing wrong with it. (20-21)

People migrate to foreign lands with the expectations of liberty, gratification, and existence which clashes with the traditional values of their homelands. Caught in between two different worlds, they struggle to maintain their cultural values and adapt themselves in the new environment. Sumita, an Indian bride, living in America, has constantly been fed on traditional ideas that it is her moral duty to act like a good Indian wife...serving tea to her in-laws's friends...covering her head with her sari...not addressing her husband by his name, etc. The traditions Sumita follows are all signs of respect in India and are strictly maintained in her home in California. Such situations make her impatient and remind her of her homeland, India.

Sumita's life in America is not different from the life led by other daughter-in-laws in Indian society yet, she doesn't want to go back to India, her motherland, even when her husband is murdered at his shop as now it would be much difficult for her to adapt herself to her roots than to live in a "dangerous land". The conflict of consciousness and sense of assimilation are quite evident.

Similarly, Jayanti in "Silver pavements, Golden Roofs" faces the dilemma of being an immigrant when she migrates from Calcutta to Chicago to live with her aunt Pratima and uncle Bikram. Jayanti, being the first generation Indian-American, cherishes her past and its memories as an indispensable, integral part of her root and being. The apartment, in which she has to live with her aunt and uncle, is no better than to the house Jayanti came from. Jayanti

within the confines of home feels disoriented and caught in the same world:

My monogrammed leather cases are an embarrassment in this household. I push them under the bed in the tiny room I am to occupy – it is the same size as my bathroom at home. (41)

Like other diasporic writers, Divakaruni writes about "human predicament" and the crisis of identity in the alienated land of America though she has made it her homeland. Identity crisis, alienation, and nostalgia are the chief characteristics of her writings. It is the painful anguish of diasporic identity and the sense of alienation that Divakaruni focuses on in her collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*. In the story "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" Jayanti who came to America with bright dreams, expresses her bitter experience of being immigrant, recalls an incidence when a group of boys shouted at her and her Pratima aunt with racist slurs and attacked them with the "fistful of slush". Jayanti, who was proud to be an upper class Indian, questions her relation to American race categorization and her entire perception of her own race is thrown into question after this incidence.

Though this incidence made her to long for her home in Calcutta desperately, she can't stop thinking of the pink-tipped blond hand of the air-hostess "who offered her a warm towelette" and all American hands that she knew will keep coming back in her dreams. Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold? The sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and at the same time being an "outsider" to it creates an inner tension in the characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. An immigrant like Jayanti is compelled to live between two worlds: the imaginary and the real, the past and the present, and the virtual and the material. While standing on the balcony of her aunt's apartment in a snowy weather, Jayanti realises that the "excruciating pain" of chilly snow falling on her hands fades away when she dreams of her life in America and makes sense.

The clash between cultures and the conflict between family and career, which affects immigrant women largely, are interwoven with the other Diasporic consciousness in *Arranged Marriage*. Women in Diasporic situations struggle with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile on the one hand, and the demands of family and work with the claims of old

and new patriarchies on the other. They experience the spatial, cultural, and emotional vacuum in their efforts to settle and adapt themselves in a new land. In “Perfect life”, Meera, an Indian girl, rejects the traditional roles of a wife and a mother in favour of her career and education in America.

However, after meeting a six-year old orphan boy, Krishna, she begins to contemplate motherhood and even to adopt the child and raise him by herself. She envisages the child’s first day of school, trip to Disneyland and baseball games, and could see herself as the actual mother of the orphan. Now she understands motherly love quite well. Caught up in her new role as a mother, Meera after the disappearance of Krishna from the Foster Homes office, considered quitting her job and started distancing herself from her boyfriend, Richard, and even thought to inform her mother in India to consider her an arranged marriage with a widower. But she never posted the letter. Even though she was crazy with anger, sorrow and guilt, she knew that would have been a bigger mistake than the ones she’d made already.

Loneliness and disillusionment are the burning problems of the expatriate community in the nation of their choice. In the story “Affair”, Abha recalls how Meena, her close friend, failed to adjust because she found herself lonely and isolated in the over-involvement of professional commitments of her husband, Srikant. Abha used to reveal her friend’s loneliness:

“I hated being alone in the house. It was so deathly quiet, not like India, where somethings always going on – Street vendors, servants, people dropping into gossip...” (239).

Meena’s loneliness intensifies after her first miscarriage. This loneliness brings her closer to Ashok, “that was another bond that held us close, unspoken sorrow of being childless” (ibid). Under the sway of emotions, now Meena had no fear to share her most intimate joys and fears even with Ashok, Abha’s husband. Keeping aside the consequences and ignoring Abha’s isolation and anguish unconsciously, Meena enjoys the company of Ashok just to overcome the frustration of her isolated life. Abha, on the other hand, suffers from uncompromising insecurity.

In “Meeting Mrinal”, the last story of Arranged Marriage, Asha is envious to see her childhood

friend, Mrinal enjoying freedom of movement, power, and economic security in England but soon is disillusioned of her „perfect life“ when Mrinal admits: “I was going to pretend everything was fine”. The disillusionment about „perfect life“ of Mrinal and the pang of loneliness and dejection in her own life made Asha cry who has been divorced by her husband, Mahesh and who is not getting along too well with her teenage son, Dinesh.

Asha laments on the disillusionment and the imperfection in the psyche of Indian mythology: I think of how hard I always tried to be the perfect wife and mother, like the heroines of mythology I grew up on – patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti. For the first time it strikes me that perhaps Mahesh had a similar image in his head. Perhaps he fled from us because he wanted a last chance to be the virile Arjun, the mighty Bhim. And for a moment I feel a sadness for him, because he’s going to realize it too, soon enough...that the perfect life is only an illusion. (298-99)

The women of these short stories experience a conflict of consciousness and struggle to define themselves like those of several South Asians and Americans. In the private realm, the traditional Indian culture women have to perform some specific duties and follow strict norms of morality and are transgressed only by those considered daring and depraved. Sandra Ponzanesi in her essay “In My Mother’s House” states:

As far as the condition of migration and diaspora is concerned, women are often called to preserve their nation through the restoration of a traditional home in the new country. The idea of home entails the preservation of traditions, heritage continuity; there is even an intense emotive politics of dress for some communities. (245)

Divakaruni’s Arranged Marriage is set in both India and America and it presents Indian-born women who are torn between the values of Old and New World and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own. Besides, the stories of the collection Arranged Marriage, address the issues such as racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. In fact, Divakaruni’s Arranged Marriage is stories about women – women in love, women in relationships, and women in difficulties. The stories elicit pathos of each woman’s struggle while trying to adapt to alien culture. Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni's writing affirms that diaspora is not merely scattering or dispersion but diasporic consciousness that encompasses various conflicting characteristics. Being an immigrant in USA, Divakaruni through the stories of this collection, seems to capture the experiences of the Indian immigrants with all its colours. Thus, Arranged Marriage is not only an assortment of short stories but also an assortment of immigrant experiences, especially those of Indian women.

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