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17. The Image of Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Short Stories 'Clothes' and 'The Bats'

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents the issues of Indian immigrant married life through her short stories *Clothes and The Bat* in the debut collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995). We are going to focus on the image of the woman in some select short stories of the first collection that has the immigrant edge. These stories exhibit the issues of Indian Brides in America who had arranged marriage. At the same time, it also depicts the effect of the changing times on Indian Institution of arranged marriage in the host land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also brings to light more positive aspects of freedom and self expression on many levels due to migration of the married life.

Key words: Indian woman, married life, migration, immigrant, arranged marriage, culture-clash etc.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents the image of Indian immigrant married life through her short stories *Clothes and The Bats* in the debut collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995). We are going to depict the issues of the Indian woman in some select short stories of the first collection that has the immigrant edge. These stories exhibit the issues of Indian Brides in America who had arranged marriage. At the same time, it also depicts the effect of the changing times on Indian Institution of arranged marriage in the host land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also brings to light more positive aspects of freedom and self-expression on many levels due to migration unlike Bharati Mukherjee, who is keen to show the 'bleak' sides of the immigrant lives in her short story collections – *Darkness and The Middleman and Other Stories*.

Divakaruni exposes the ground breaking reality of arranged marriage in the present collection. Her diasporic experiences not only provide the readers the insight into the lives

various immigrant brides from young, newly bride to the old but one can understand the process and various aspects of culture-clash faced by these women protagonists. It also depicts the constant and contradictory oscillation of race, culture, time and geography. The result of that

culture-clash which is the inevitable fate of immigrants. In American surrounding, the Indian women develop an altered consciousness in order to relate them to Indian culture. Women of Divakaruni's texts are caught between the traditional customs of India from which they have migrated and their present experience with the more westernized culture of America. While facing the culture-clash, these protagonists experience the uncertain nature of 'alien' land and as a result, they move towards more complex condition. The complex condition is the plight of these characters and at the same, their search for identity. They don't know that they will fit in American society. This stress leads them to culture-clash which these protagonists face in an alien land.

Divakaruni speaks through these stories the same vicissitude of Indian married woman. It suggests marital relationship as they are seen in India is the practice or liberty to take decision of a suitable match of their father in arranged marriage. The daughter or woman is only scapegoat of this tradition. This practice or tradition is questioned by Divakaruni in the present short stories. On the other hand in the 'alien' land, women face the contradictory situation like decision making; independence and working outside the home make them to respond differently to the marital situation.

Women protagonists of this collection struggle between the culture of India and America. Their struggle can be seen in various ways such as struggle between traditional world which symbolizes their home land, while, modern world represents 'host' land. The traditional culture requires specific duties of woman and strict norms of morality, while the modern world demands from them frankness and individual liberty. This struggle creates a chaotic condition of culture-clash for them in the present collection. Neelam Mulchandani in her essay, "*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni : Multiple Consciousness and South Asian Diasporic Identity Formation*" points out

"The home is the locus of tradition for South Asian Diasporic families and within this home traditional gender roles often endure while outside the home, there is a dramatic shift in the nature of cultural expectations." (P.4)

This 'dramatic shift' of cultural expectations leads women towards the conflict of identities. In the story "*Clothes*" we find the same aspect where Divakaruni questions the man-woman relations based on Indian society in an alien land. Finding a match for daughter or son for an arranged marriage is the sole concern of many parents in Indian society. In the present story, the marriage of daughter Sumita is arranged by her father with Somesh from California. He comes for the 'viewing' ceremony at Calcutta. He prefers Sumita as wife. In this, Sumita's role is passive as the Indian traditions demand. When her marriage is arranged with Somesh, she reacts,

"I'd be going halfway around the world to live with a man I hadn't even met, would I ever see my parents again? Don't send me so far away, I wanted to cry but I didn't. Father had worked to find this match. Besides, wasn't it every woman's destiny? (P.18)

There is frequent confrontation between American and the culture of Sumita. Drinking alcohol is strictly prohibited and immoral in Indian Culture. When Sumita marries with Somesh, she comes to America. In America, drinking is not wrong or immoral. Somesh forces her to drink sweet white wine. A traditional desi girl like Sumita even thinks to respect her husband's demand of drinking. He says,

"A lot of Americans drink, you know. It's a part of their culture, not considered immoral, like it is here..... I'll get you some sweet white wine and you'll see how good it makes you feel.....Now his fingers were stroking my cheeks.....after all it was my wifely duty."

(p.21)

Sumita's life in America is not different from the other Indian daughter-in-laws. She fears about America. She doesn't feel her life is different from her Indian friends like Radha or Deepali. She is fed up by traditional ideas like serving tea to her mother- in law's friends, covering her head with her sari and not addressing her husband by his name etc. she feels something different in host land. In the words of Sumita,

"But at other times I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paper weight. It is a world so small..... I stand inside this glass world". (P.26)

Still she feels that America rushes her. She wants to enjoy American life, American liberty and individual freedom which American girls enjoy.

" sunrise, orange, the color..... of joy of my new American life. Across its middle in large black letters, is written Great America." (P.25)

Like her, Somesh is also suffering the same. He is caught between the traditional Indian world of obedient son and American boys' who don't want the interference of their parents in their own life. He wants to enjoy American freedom with his better half. He is very much conscious about the American way of life of impartiality and emancipation. On the other hand he does not have the courage to disagree with his parents. He doesn't want to break the SravanBal image which is ideal for traditional Indian male. It means that he is caught between the two worlds – traditional Indian world where the parents are son's responsibility in their of age and American world where the individual freedom is important. According to Somesh,

"They've always been there when I needed them I could never abandon them at some o people's home." (P.26)

The story reaches at climax when Somesh unwillingly accepts "graveyard shifts" as his father refuses to do so. These graveyard shifts become responsible for his murder for money by some miscreants. Sumita is forced to stand in the middle of the room, to wear white sari and break the bangles traditionally. Besides, this bitter reality of immigration, she finds that turning back to India will not mitigate her suffering as a widow. She also realizes that she can survive with her own will and with her own choice of life conditions in this strange land. It will help her save her identity and self respect. She confesses,

"That's when I know, cannot go back, I don't know yet how I'll manage here in this new dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white sarees are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut off wings."

We find that sumita is sandwiched between Indian traditions and American bitter reality of immigration. As a widow, she knows in India, she will suffer more. So she accepts the host world of modern world where she is sure that she will get the individual freedom. Beena Agarwal in her book, "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A New Voice in Indian English Fiction" observes,

"Sumita's acceptance of immigration as her destiny, is her affirmation of an identity that reflects the accepted mirror images constructed within the order of patriarchy; Sumita's persona reflects the dilemma of immigration in which a woman suffers more. In absence of cultural background and the strength of relations, she feels herself lonely isolated and sometimes betrayed." (P.161)

The very first story of this collection is 'The Bats'. A single narrator depicts the bitter reality of arranged marriage. Domestic violence in family comes out from the husband's dominance in the family where woman suffers. The child observes his mother's suffering. The child narrates this story innocently. The child is mouthpiece of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She depicts the inhuman violence of the husband and the victim is obviously woman. Divakaruni attempts to light the inhumanity of men in Indian society where the woman is subsidiary. The narrator says,

"A couple of days later mother had another mark on face, even bigger and reddish blue. It was on the side of her forehead and make her face look lopsided." (P.3)

Out of anguish, his mother decides to leave her husband's house and goes to grandfather's house due to violent attacks of her husband. When she reaches at grandfather's house the child enjoys the company of grandpa. He gets the fascination of buffaloes, goats, and chickens in the forests. His excitement reflects,

"I had never seen real live chickens up close before and immediately loved how they looked and flapped their wings." (P.6)

After spending a lot of days at grandfather's house, one day, the child's mother gets a letter from her husband to return. She decides to return to her husband's house because she observes that people in the village start whispering about her long stay without husband at grandfather's house. Consequently, she returns to her husband and she hopes that life will change. But she proves wrong; she is in hell like situation.

Though this story takes place in Calcutta, the fate of Indian woman is same everywhere whether the woman is immigrant or not. We observe that Divakaruni with American lens points out the inhuman practice of Indian traditional male dominated society where the woman is forced to bear a lot of pains. She also compares the worst practices of Indian society and the freedom of Americans.

We find the opposite ideas of cultures between East and West in the story. The binary of glamour and reality is the gist of the present story. Indian people like Jayanti think that America is a land of fortune, satisfaction, and luxury but the reality is different as Jayanti experiences. Reflecting on this aspect of the story, Mitali Pati comments,

"The conflict in the social and cultural codes of East and West, the old and the new shows the hopeless binary nature of all human desire.....symbolizes the anarchy of self."(Mitali :P.198)

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