



Immigration Proves A Boon: A Study Of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage

Dr. Gunjan Agarwal¹ & Gunjan Kapil²

¹Associate Professor (Department of Humanities & Mathematics) Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Ambala, Haryana, India

²Research Scholar (Department of Humanities & Mathematics) Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Ambala, Haryana, India

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ABSTRACT: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a literary voice for Indian immigrants and Americans of South Asian descent, has also established her recognition as a poet, a creator of novels, short stories, children's books, an essayist and a community activist. The formative influence of Indian culture and literature which provided her a system to know the meaning of life is rich in her because she grew up in a traditional middle class Eastern Hindu family. In *Arranged Marriage*, her short stories, while continuing these themes, probe more deeply into related issues of women's survival, relationships (including mother-daughter relationships), role in the family and in society, and the consequences of immigration. These stories celebrate Indian women's immigration to the United States as a journey from oppressed or miserable conditions to freedom and discovery of self with the inspiration of western influences. This promised land of America seems to unfold abundant possibilities which help in realizing the dreams of all the estranged women characters who wish to achieve their lost status and freedom in a society where male plays a hegemonic role.

Keywords:- Marriage, Immigration, Estrangement, Optimism, Opportunities and Independence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prolific personality in the realm of Indo-American literature, contributes a number of books which are set in both India and America and extensively feature Indian-born women torn between Old and New World values. Although Divakaruni's scholarly research, entitled "For Danger is in words: Changing Attitudes to Language in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe", focused on the role of language in Christopher Marlowe's plays, her creative writing does not reverberate her academic interest in the Renaissance period but rather raises topics more strongly associated with her own life and contemporary circumstances. Her novels and short stories cover the entire range of the theme of immigration i.e. ethnicity, racism, women rights, and democracy. While conversing with Patricia Gras, Divakaruni confesses that, "Immigration is such a major fact of life here in the United States. You could come from different parts of the world but that whole experience of being in a whole different environment almost a new world where you have to learn the rules over again that is something a lot of people here share" ("Divakaruni"). Further she also shares how she became involved in the prevention of domestic violence:

I started by volunteering at the women's centre at the university and found out more about domestic violence and then I started volunteering with main stream women's shelters and then I realized that there was a real need in the South Asian community as in all communities there was domestic violence but no place for those women to turn so with a group of friends I started "Maitri" which has now grown into a huge and very successful in domestic violence prevention and really taking care of women who are in that situation and empowering them. It has grown into a great organization and I am still in touch with them, I am on their advisory board. I do similar things here in Houston with "Daya" which is a great organization helping South Asian women. ("Divakaruni")

In her interview with *Thoughtfulindia*, Divakaruni affirms that her success lies only in touching the hearts of the readers as she states that, "On some level to say as long as the books are reaching readers and

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Gunjan Agarwal

¹Associate Professor (Department of Humanities & Mathematics) Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Ambala, Haryana, India

touching their hearts that's the real success, everything else is finance" ("Divakaruni"). In *The Connection Special*, she further reveals that, "Immigration, in my case, made me into a writer, it gave me a subject to write about it gave me a whole different focus for looking back at my home culture but also for looking at this new world in which I found myself, everything was so different" ("Divakaruni"). She declares about all her writings 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. ("Divakaruni")

San Francisco Chronicle appreciates the collection of stories in *Arranged Marriage* saying that these exquisite stories entice us with the Author's gift of storytelling and her characters' originality, independence and insight. The book was acclaimed widely and variously as it addresses issues such as racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. 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. Moreover, Indian women, and South Asian women, more generally have been portrayed to be the preserver and holder of Indian culture. In *Arranged Marriage* the stories reflect her abiding concern with the situation of Indian Immigrants in America, particularly Indian women split between the values of India and those of the America. The present study revolves around the immigrant women's lives depicted in the selected stories entitled "A Perfect Life", "Clothes", "The Ultrasound" and "The Word Love", wherein the country, America, has been portrayed as a land full of opportunities for the immigrant women distressed and shattered by their marriages arranged somehow in India. The concern of this study can also be summed up in the words of Divakaruni, as she states that:

One of the things I wanted to focus on in this book is the women who come here: how their lives have changed. And you can't say for the better or for the worse; they gain certain things, and they lose certain things. It's a very poignant and often painful process but also a very exhilarating, energetic process, and for many women it is an opportunity for new empowerment and freedom.

So I was concerned about how the community would react to that. But so far they have been very positive. (Cheung 149)

Indian women are also characterized by many limitations in Divakaruni's short stories unless they already are, or in the process of being, westernized. The present study discusses the stories as they focuses on the condition of all those women characters that have moved from their native place to America after their marriage, due to which their condition gets dreadful in an alien country. The gist of the study lies in the presentation of their optimism for their future 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. (Huang 69)

When Patricia Gras, in *The Connection Special*, asked Divakaruni, "what was most challenging for you when you came here as far as culture (is concerned)?" She replied in a way which exhibited not only the characteristics of both the cultures but her inclination towards the western one also, "I think one of the things that was difficult is that I missed my family I'd always been around a lot of family and here I was on my own and I really had to look after myself and take care of myself and become a private individual in a way that I've never been in India. What ironic is, after I lived here for a while I really grew to love that, that freedom, that individuality and then it was gonna hard to go back" ("Divakaruni"). She further reveals that, "*Arranged Marriage* is very much a book that is set in this country. The stories go back and forth, but the present of the stories, all except one. So it's very much an immigrant book; I'm more and more involved with the reality of people right here at this time" (Cheung 148). The effect of American individualism overcome the traditional Indian vision of marriage and this 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, attractiveness, 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 viewed to be qualified as a so-called "true American" (AM 73). Thus the idealized notions about marriage have been rejected by the immigrated Meera who chooses to marry according to her own liking. Immigration in her case provides her the individuality and freedom of choice which could never be given to her in world permeated by familial and social outdated notions. 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" (Kuortti & Tajeshwar 93). Divakaruni goes on to refute the accusations of writing only about the white people and declares that:

I live in America; America is a part of my life; should I not write for white people also? It's a defeatist and hypocritical attitude to say that I will live in America and write only for other Indians. I don't think writers anywhere think, "I will write only for this community, and nobody else should have access to my work". That goes against the whole impulse of what makes us write, which is to reach out and communicate across barriers and to create and improve understanding between people. Why else are we writing? (Cheung 147)

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).

Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (1974) argues that, "the systematic exchange of women is definitional of human society" (372). 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's 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 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). In an interview with Dharini Rasiah, she reveals that:

One of the big concerns in *Arranged Marriage* is the importance of financial independence of women. I have felt this in my own life as well as in my observations of society. The characters in *Arranged Marriage* often realize that, unless they are economically independent, they can't push for psychological independence. And so many of the women in those stories will try various ways of achieving this, some within the ethnic enclosure, so to speak, but some venturing out into mainstream America. . . . There's a real sense of breaking out of the Indian community is important for us, it's really important for us, it's really important also to relate across the barriers. (Cheung 150)

"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" (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 shaped only to project the ideal 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. 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" (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). Through her female characters in *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni criticizes qualities that she usually sees as older or Indian and exalts those that she views as new or American. "If you say something critical of the community that means you hate India or Indian values, and that's not true at all. One criticizes because one loves, because one cares. People lose sight of that very important point. If I didn't care about the community, why would I write about it at all?" (Cheung 149). When the interviewer Patricia Gras asks, "You work really hard in your books to break down stereotypes, why do you think that's important? I think that's really really important because we have so many of these stereotypes, I mean, all of us do, a lot of times we don't realize that we have them, and they make us simplify the other person and they make us alienate ourselves from the other person and really they make us in some ways suspect and fear the other person, which is not healthy especially in a multi-cultural society like we have right here in Houston, like we have in America.

We need to embrace each other's differences, we need to appreciate and learn from each other and I think a book is a wonderful, friendly, embracing, non-threatening way in which you can enter another culture. Going back to what you said earlier, I think as an American that is what I bring to my books, this whole understanding up, the immigration process, how that changes us, how that changes the new country in which we find ourselves and all of that, it's important for me to share that with readers so that we can see how we can appreciate and celebrate our differences but also what we have in common, what's deep in human in all of us. ("Divakaruni")

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 (Anjali) describes her cousin (Arundhati) 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 detail. 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's 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). Juliet Mitchell says that, "The controlled exchange of women that defines human culture is reproduced in the patriarchal ideology of every form of society. The patriarchal law speaks to and through each person in his unconscious; the reproduction of the ideology is assured in the acquisition of the

law by each individual" (413). 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 Arundhati's traditional Indian womanly qualities by her own "misplaced American notions of feminism and justice" (AM 227). Runu (Arundhati) opposes and leaves her husband's home with the guidance of Anju (Anjali), who thinks that Arundhati'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" (722). 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. Joel Kuortti and Mittapalli Rajeshwar also support the subject matter when they depict that:

Chitra Divakaruni's materials stride multiple cultures and nations as Bharti Mukherjee's and Meena Alexander's narratives do. But, unlike the works of Mukherjee and Alexander, the problems, pains, and erasures brought about by immigration are downplayed in Divakaruni's work, while the celebrations of the promises of immigration are emphasized to the point where some aspects of her work strongly promote neo-Orientalist and neo-Imperialists projects" (Kuortti & Rajeshwar 79).

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. "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 female protagonist 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)

The following statement about the characteristics of these short stories can also be summed up: "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" (Kuortti & Tajeshwar 91). When Dharini Rasiah asks Divakaruni, "Are you ever put in the position of a spokesperson, or do you ever feel that you are speaking for the community?" (Cheung 148).

Divakaruni replies that: When I give readings, people are always asking me questions about the Indian culture, and I always say that this is just one person's impression, that this is my understanding. I hope I have a good understanding, but there are many realities; there are many indias, and each person carries one inside her head. That's the real bind about being a writer from a particular ethnic background living in a culture that is not of that ethnic background. There's kind of subconscious assumption that, "If I read this book, I will find out all about that culture." And that of course is not true. One hopes people will find out something, though. (Cheung 148)

II. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it has been derived that the stories entitled "Clothes", "The Ultrasound", "The Word Love", can be read as a stereotyping of the polarized concept of independence for a woman in India. Divakaruni's glorification of United States 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 great emphasis on homogeneity and integration, they could be socially outcast even if they are theoretically 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 distinctive, extraordinary, magical country which offers a safe haven 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 endorse the binaries the writer creates between India and America and reiterate the notion of America being the Rejuvenator of her Indian female characters. The women in these stories are in transition, caught in the border between a traditional patriarchal society and a world of promises and choices. 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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