

## **The Truncated Life of the Third World Woman: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Select Short Stories**

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**Abstract:** *The 'skilled cartographer of the Heart', Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the young, avant garde, provocative, award winning poet and novelist was very successful among the non-South Asian readers, reviewers and literary critics. Through her masterpieces the novelist over-emphasizes India as the site and source of women's oppression. The angst of a transplanted life as well as issues of gender, power and ethnicity is manifested in the works of Divakaruni. The novelists' masterpiece Arranged Marriage, collection of short stories, inspired by the lives of battered Indian women in the San Francisco Bay Area provides a literary representation of women's experience of displacement. This paper focuses on the tensions and constraints that women of Indian origin are subjected to in the diasporic context. This paper focuses on the way the novelist develops succinct images of women entangled by the old world and the new world values, how women cope up with the cross cultural relationships, and how women ultimately try to achieve self-esteem and autonomy denied to them within their own somewhat insular and bigoted community.*

**Key words:** *alienation, diasporic, gender, marginalized, self-esteem,*

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### **I. Introduction**

Truncated Life of the Third World Woman: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Select Short Stories "Life for women in diasporic situation can be doubly painful-struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies" (Clifford 314). Migration was, a liberation and improvement in status for the men while the women tended to regard the past with nostalgia and the present American experience as an alienating one.

The sense of exile that migration brings functions to a certain extent in a positive manner in the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novelist is acutely aware of their already exiled or marginalized state in the male dominated Indian society. For them, the physical act of relocation, a deliberate move to a foreign country becomes an act of self determination and rebellion against traditional norms of behavior. The writings of Indian diasporic women are therefore articulations of the silences that had permeated their stifled existence. The angst of a transplanted life as well as issues of gender, power and ethnicity can now find manifestations in her works. By giving voice to the women and making them perform acts of agency and resistance by defying and countering patriarchal authority, writers like Divakaruni are in fact redefining the notions of Indian femininity.

One of the Indian migrants was the writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who emigrated to the United States in 1976 at the age of nineteen. She has published three volumes of poetry, three novels, two books for children as well as two collections of short stories namely Arranged Marriage and The Unknown Errors of Our Lives. Arranged Marriage is a collection of eleven short stories which deal with conflicts arising out of love. The fiction of Divakaruni is located in Calcutta or the United States of America. Like the writers of this age namely Gita Hariharan, Anita Nair and Meena Alexander, Divakaruni appears to be preoccupied with analyzing the pressures and conflicts which women undergo in a social system which is still patriarchal to a large extent. When individuals cross the boundaries, from India to America, it can "alter one's belief and affect one's perspective" (Jaidka 15) but women are still restricted by male domination. They seem to be oscillating between the family set up and the social structure: between self-fulfillment and the demands for self-sacrifice. This is true of the women characters in the short stories of Divakaruni because she has chosen "to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood". (Showalter 405)

Chitra Banerjee's short stories Arranged Marriage has won critical acclaim and has received the 1996 American Book Award, the Josephine Miles Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award and the Pen Oakland Award. It provides a literary representation of women's experience of displacement. The stories deal with a number of issues relating

to the experience of South Asian female migrants. Divakaruni analyses the tensions and constraints that women of Indian origin are subjected to in the diasporic context. This average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life because of her gender and being third world i.e., tradition bound, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized etc. The Indian immigrant women arrive in the United States with mixed feelings. The mind

frame combines the experience of displacement spurred by physical migration. Along with this the woman remains the bearer of culture, the preserver of heritage and is psychologically programmed to enact pre-ordained roles that have been defined for her by traditional patriarchy. The female immigrant has to fulfill these ever submissive roles built upon the iconography of women's passivity. The women are also subjugated to insidious racial discrimination and they have to struggle against all this in all walks of life. As literature is a vehement vehicle for representing the reality, Divakaruni, through her women protagonists in *Arranged Marriage* has projected them as victims and how they are suppressed in various ways in the diasporic context.

In the first story "The Bats" the husband figure represents the oppressive and dictatorial attitude of the male. He comes home intoxicated and pummel his wife so that she has marks and scar on her face as revealed by her daughter as "a couple of days later mother had another mark on her face, even bigger and reddish blue. It was on the side of her forehead and made her face look lopsided" (3). Both the mother and the daughter are victimized and they become mute sufferers of male oppression. They flee from home like bats, often during the middle of the nights, to escape at least for few days, to her mother's

uncle's house in the country because of her blustering, abusive father. But in the end they return even before their "bruises had faded away" (16). The women are projected as weak characters, both physically and economically. The problem of survival and the scandal of the society haunt them and so they dare not raise their voice for freedom. There seems to be no permanent escape from this cycle of violence because this is India, where a divorced woman has no future. Thus the life of these two women become miserable and their life become truncated.

In "The Maid Servant's Story" the same theme is being repeated. An English Professor at a University in California goes back home to Calcutta to learn how, when she was a child, her father tried to compel the maid servant when her mother was hospitalized for the delivery of their son. When the mother comes to know about this she does not have the courage to leave her husband because in the Indian society there was no future for the divorced woman and since she felt that her daughter would "lose all chances for a good marriage if the scandal of a broken home stained her life"(156). Her fear makes her a mute sufferer. The servant also had to tolerate the sexual advances of the master of the house. Hence both the women had become victims of male domination.

The story "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" is set in Chicago and it depicts the life of an Indian man who came to America dreaming of becoming a millionaire. But as he ends up as a garage mechanic, this bitter man shows his frustration on his wife, Pratima, who, tolerates the abuses and frustrations of her husband in a patient manner. Jayanti, who comes from the United States stays with her aunt and uncle and one day she persuades her aunt to accompany her for a walk. To their dismay some boys follow them and throw slush on their face. Luckily they escape from the boy and when they reach home her uncle gets wild as they had left the home without his permission. The woman tolerates all this, without protesting or even saying a word, because she is a traditional Indian wife. Jayanti is unable to comprehend her uncle's suppressed anger about the country until she becomes the victim of a violent racist assault in the streets of Calcutta. A similar attack had destroyed her uncle's business and had led him to major financial crisis. Her experience of powerlessness provides her with the prism with which she can view race and class relations and understand what it means to be south Asian in North America. In all these stories Divakaruni breathes life into South Asian characters who struggle to discover freedom in a world that would restrict them to certain social conditions. Guerin has aptly commented that Divakaruni is "concerned with the marginalization of all women, that is with their being relegated to a secondary position" (95).

Divakaruni's characters endeavor to find freedom not only for themselves but also for others, as in "The Ultrasound". Anju and Runu are cousins. Anju gets married to Sunil who is dwelling in California whereas Runu marries Ramesh, who works in Calcutta. When Runu's in-laws come to know that she is going to give birth to a female child they compel her to abort the child. When her husband Sunil returns home that night she fumes at Sunil as "Why is it always taken to be the woman's fault?"(218). She moreover expected him to get shocked and angry but coolly he reveals "It's a man's world in India"(218). So she seeks the advice of her cousin Anju who believes that she can offer Runu a new life in the United States with her daughter. Anju believes that her counsel to Runu to leave the Bhattacharya household and wrestle for the infant is the only way out that her cousin can take if she is to preserve her self-respect and integrity. One hopes that the Indian community that she will try to join will not ostracize her for failing to conform to the rules. Moreover this story reflects the subjugation of woman by patriarchal desire and lineage

Divakaruni is much concerned with the marginalization of women and so in the story "The Disappearance" she highlights as to why the main female characters disappear without giving any reasons for such an act. The heroine of the story had been a well bred Indian girl and her husband didn't wish her to behave like those American women. Instead when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes her husband pacifies her with a remark like "what for, I'm here to take care of you or you look so much prettier in your Indian Clothes, so much more feminine"(172). Hence the women had no opportunity to carry out her

own decisions or to experiment with anything new. Her deep needs and desires were never understood as being genuine or urgent. Her husband suppressed her in many subtle ways. In fact he monopolized her and did not grant her permission to act independently. The last night before she disappeared, she had to succumb to the wishes of her husband though she was unwilling. As usual he had compelled her and after sometime she stops struggling. Through this story the novelist pictures the pathetic situation of the third world woman who disappears in order to escape from her husband because she has failed to preserve or assert her individuality.

"Clothes" one of the loveliest and most haunting of the stories in this collection, is an example of Divakaruni's portrait of a twentieth century woman from India, Sumita, who is a replica of a heroine from classical India, Savitri. Though Sumita was living in America with her husband and his family, she was a traditional, virtuous wife and a lovable daughter-in-law. But after the demise of her husband, like Savitri, she refuses to give up. Instead of submissively accepting her fate as a widow, instead of returning to India with her in-laws, she decides to follow the dream she and her husband had worked towards. They had planned a life in America, which included Sumita going to College, selecting a career and becoming a teacher. Looking at the mirror she decides not to wear the white sari of widow-hood, not to become one of the widows who live their lives submissively. She describes these widows as "doves with cut off wings"(33). Sumita has been transformed from a glowing bride into a mourning widow but she rebels against the tradition and makes her own choice as to her future path in life. She takes the fate in her own hands and so she reveals "I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must" (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. In Sumita's judgment serving tea to in-laws in India is worse than getting shot by a gunman in a country. Sumita has become a victim of fate and therefore she alone struggles to assert herself.

The woman protagonists in the selected short stories strive to make the best of what they have. They find themselves in the position of victims. The third world women like Sumita in 'Clothes' and the unnamed heroine in 'The Disappearance' rise to the occasion to assert their individuality whereas Runu in 'Ultrasound', Pratipa in 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' and the women protagonists of 'The Maids Servant Story', 'Bats' succumb to the situation. The novelist highlights that the women have the capacity to be strong and make their choices. Amin has aptly revealed "they are groping for their identities and their status both in the family set up and the larger social structure" (150). They make the best of what they can from their life. When they have a chance they struggle and discover happiness and at other times they get satisfied with whatever they were able to achieve.

To a greater or lesser extent, Divakaruni's female protagonists have to overcome all the problems in the patriarchal society. Despite their education, acquired independence, and increasing self-confidence, they are not completely free from nagging doubts of cultural transgression. The novelist transmits a particular message to her readers. She uses her stories as a means to empower women, to encourage them to be themselves. She shows how personal choice is the birth right of all humans, men and women, Indians or Americans and that tradition can frequently hamper more than inspire. Patriarchy definitely bears a large share of responsibility for the low status that women have in India. Middle class women are to be blamed for their lack of group worth and constant deference to male approval. Real female consciousness can only start working if women themselves begin to take the responsibility of their own fate and demand for their rightful position in the family.

All the stories selected for discussion have grounding in social realism. The novelist has revealed her ability to create subtle images of women's anguish when trapped in terrible relationships, when forced to live within rigid codes. Aggressive, assertive or manipulative as their actions are, the women in Arranged marriages remind the reader of the widely different forms of action taken by either the famous or the mythological, legendary, historical women of India.

From an in-depth analysis of the select stories it is evident that Divakaruni has realistically turned the every day events into masterful stories that evoke subtlety in the depiction of socio-cultural realities of India and America. A replica of Tolstoy's Anna, Flaubert's Emma and Ibsen's Nora could be seen in her characters, all desiring to break the traditions and its values. Sometimes they have achieved it to a certain extent but sometimes they have ended in a failure. But the stories are beyond all these superficialities. Therefore Divakaruni's stories have become more than mere voices and has entered into the realm of classical literature. The characters conditioned by Indian culture are chauvinistic, oppressive and inconsiderate. The ones conditioned by the American culture are shallow, superficial and self-centered. They seem to possess almost everything that is bad about Indian and American culture. They long for a perfect life, but perfect life eludes them. According to Divakaruni there is no perfect life for them and hence they ought to make the best use of what they have.

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