

Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage: Quest for a New Beginning

Dr.K.Lalitha Bai

Lalitha817@yahoo.com

Corresponding Author: Dr.K.Lalitha Bai

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I. Introduction

She stands apart from the other writers of the class in bringing universal themes like domestic violence and self-identity of women that are common all over the world. As against the usual tradition of viewing the protagonist as an embodiment of beauty and love she makes her heroines lead imperfect lives in order to mark their identity in domestic and public spaces. They are united by the motifs of exclusion loneliness and the search for fulfilment. Divakaruni does not restrict herself only to the experiences of migrant and displaced individuals communicating the fact that exile and exclusion are not the privilege of any one group of society alone. "It's quite mysterious the way art is created," she explains "we talk about it a lot, but it's mysterious and intuitive" (Ismat 2004: 2). She portrays the specific situations of all individuals as symptomatic of the ubiquity of loneliness and alienation. Her writings stretch the canvas of Indian writing in English. More importantly it gives an insider's peek at a society by someone who has always been considered an outsider.

Some of her female characters are well fed, fairly well educated and have the freedom to think and occasionally react. Of course, within this limited range, the novelists explore a wide variety of predicaments. Her female characters include young girls, house wives, career girls, widows and divorcees. Evidently the conflicts in the fictional lives of these characters result from their confrontation with an environment that is hostile. The husbands always represent an indifferent, uncommunicative aspect of the system. Almost all the women presented in her novels fail to establish a bond of communication with their husbands. They interpret this failure as the result of the insensitivity of the men. This later causes their withdrawal and self-exploration.

But the novels that were written during a later stage of the novelist's career, when she had already attained a greater maturity as both an artist and an individual, present female protagonists who have apparently liberated themselves from the reach of a dominating patriarchy. Hence an oppressive environment does not feature prominently in these novels. Instead, they venture to analyze the finer details of the inner conflicts that arise, as the apparently liberated woman attempts to redefine their identity.

Debjani Banerjee in her essay "*Home and US*": Re-Defining Identity in the South Asian Diaspora through the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Meena Alexander" suggests that for the female protagonists in Divakaruni's short stories, clothes, education, thinking about their own rights and pleasures become a signifier of modernity. The identity of modern women is often associated with an elite "westernization," and a repudiation of the ancient and the supposedly timeless traditions (Banerjee 14).

In the collection of stories *Arranged Marriage* Divakaruni writes about the transformed lives of the women both liberated and trapped by cultural changes. The female protagonists are in a quest for psychic and transcendental unity, a quest for a more meaningful life for themselves and humanity as a whole. The novels provide the women readers with a point of identification and make them aware that they are not to settle for mere existence since it is absurdity, nausea or nothingness. She also discovers in a radical protest against the fundamentally coercive nature of systems like arranged marriage and joint family. The debunking of the myth of motherhood also runs as a continuous thread.

Social norms play a key role in the story "The Bats". The protagonist is vexed with the domestic violence in the hands of her husband and runs away to her distant uncle in a village. The psychological state of being and not being at her own place makes her to move to her uncle's place. She is optimistic about her family life even after repeated blows she faces from her husband. This clearly shows the demarcation between the cultures of America and India. Living together, dating staying as unwed mothers these are common things in a liberated society like America, but in India at least some sections of people still fear about social norms, customs and traditions. So, even if they have an unhappy marriage the decision of breaking it is not instantaneous. The child watches her mother's face intently to catch every nuance of expression. Staying with her distant uncle never calms her troubled soul. She is a non-native at her uncle's place. In the same way she

doesn't feel at home even at her own home, but she attaches herself with her husband. She finds temporary solace by moving to her uncle's place but her mind wavers back to her husband. She writes to him as she is unable to listen to the words, which women often say. "I wrote to him." (11) "I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the market place. The loneliness of being without him." (11,12)

The miserable plight of women tortured by her husband is highlighted in this story. The value judgement of the world that is essentially male-oriented shows that if a woman is abandoned by her husband it is all but natural, but if the woman does the same, it is a sheer instance of profligacy. She dares not to live away from her husband for fear of public censure. Emancipation, self-analysis and self-evaluation never strike to her as she is unable to rise above the restrictions imposed by the society.

The protagonist Sumita of "clothes" rather poetically sums up her predicament in the "land of freedom" thus: Caught in a world where everything is frozen [...] like a scene inside a glass paperweight. It is a world so small [...] I stand inside this glass world, watching helplessly [...] wanting to scream" (26). These lines depict the entangled web of the Asian immigrant women that involves the twin processes of "migration" and "relocation" and it ultimately ends up in a "*Trishanku*" existence (Parameswaran 292). It also signifies on the popular Indian traditions "Besides, wasn't it every woman's destiny, [...] to leave the known for the unknown?" (18)

Sumita feels sad and tears rolled from her eyes when she thought of "A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws" (19). After her marriage to Somesh she realises the reality in which she has to live. The tiny apartment in which she stays with her in-laws puts an end to her imagination of a romantic life in California. The different colours of the clothes significantly portray the various stages of Sumita's life. "pale pink [...] the colour of transition" (19) is the sari purchased for bridal viewing. Leaving her motherland and going abroad to the U.S. she wears a sari which is "blue with a red border" as blue is "the colour of transition" and also "the colour of the sky in which she travels." The red border is the colour of "*sindoor*" the sacred symbol of marriage. While in plane she recollects about the silk *sarees* that were lying in the brown case purple and golden yellow depicting the vicissitudes of life. Her Bengal cotton sari that is green is a sign of prosperity and "gray as the women's lake on a monsoon morning." *Benarsi*, flame orange sari with *palloo* of gold-embroidered dancing peacocks an indication of her excitement to reach a dream land and is symbolic. The pale blue jeans make her nostalgic as it is the colour of the *nayantara* flowers that grow in her parents' garden. The orange T-shirt which Somesh brings her is the colour of joy representing a new beginning of American life. Somesh gives a significant gift "cream blouse with long brown skirt" (26) to be worn once she starts working. The white sari after Somesh's death is a symbol of the Indian culture. Sumita recollects the image of a widow in India "doves with cut-off wings." (33) Though she is a non-native she finds her ways to acclimatize, as it's anyhow a new life for her, getting married and moving with her husband and moving to an alien land "... a kingdom beyond the seven seas." (18) She takes a decision to stay in America and to continue Somesh's business. Ecstasy is short lived and tragedy in the form of early widowhood makes Sumita's life a precarious affair. She prepares herself to face the remonstrations. After her husband's sad demise she works in the grocery. She is the only hope of her aged in-laws. The reflection of her image in the mirror shows the grit and determination that she had in standing firm in her decision.

In "Silver Pavements Golden Roofs" Divakaruni writes about how it is not that easy to settle down in an alien land. A young girl Jayanthi in order to pursue her studies reaches America and stays with her aunt Pratima and uncle Bikram. Her dream vision of the American house's gets shattered on seeing the tiny apartment in which her aunt lives. Jayanthi's excitement to see Chicago, lake Michigan and many more things is thwarted when her uncle broke her excitement and says, "Things here aren't as perfect as people at home like to think we'll thought we'd become millionaires. But it's not so easy" (43). Divakaruni speaks about racial discrimination. Through her characters she voices her views. Jayanthi's uncle faces the wrath of some furious mob who took everything away. He then tells her "The Americans hate us. They're always putting us down because we're dark skinned foreigners, *kala admi*. Blaming us for the damn economy, for taking away their jobs. You'll see it for yourself soon enough." (43) Crime, which is at a higher rate and the risks that are included in running a business, are presented to us in a very lucid manner. The indelible scar that is made on his body is not just external but is a deep chasm making him recollect that he is an outsider, non-native. His agony is explicitly seen when he says, "This damn country, like a dain, a witch- it pretends to give and then snatches everything back" (54). Jayanthi's melancholy is further evident when she recollects her home "*Home*, I whisper desperately, *homehomehome*, and suddenly, intensely, I want my room in Calcutta" (55) Though at every moment they feel they are outsiders, the protagonist wants to assimilate herself to become a part of the white land.

In the story "The Word Love" the protagonist clings to the apron strings of her mother. Her decision to live with Rex pains her every moment, as she feels she is deceiving her mother. Torn between two cultures, the trauma of the protagonist to accept the new culture and not to pay attention to her own is lucidly presented. The

influence of western culture even though is large the psychological distress that she undergoes makes her an alien in that place. Finally she takes a decision to leave Rex and start every thing new.

For the expatriate Hindu writer from India, its epics, legends and deities function both as resource and stimulants for clarifying to himself the ethos and culture that he left far behind [...] the repertoire of our myths and legends is an *Akshayapatra* (the legendary vessel of Draupadi, that never empties) all writers of all times, that facilitates the revisioning of our ethos and culture. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been decisive forces in the formation of the Indian mind. In moments of dilemmas and crisis of dharma the characters and messages from the myths in these mammoth literary sources emerge in the expatriate Indian mind as mighty sources of reference and clarification. In some writers, this urge for reference and clarification assumes overt representations, bringing in characters and contents from the epic sources, though in most writers, such referentiality is heavily encoded and hence needs deciphering and deconstruction (James 199-200).

Divakaruni never uses her myths overtly but subtly teases the memory of her readers and uses them ironically to fit into her story. In "Bats" she brings the picture of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. In "Perfect Life" she builds the myth of Krishna, Meera and Yashoda and gives a contemporary perspective to it. Meera had a live-in relationship with Richard in "A Perfect Life". Richard had made her feel comfortable and gave her the space without being possessive. "When I was with Richard I felt like a true American." (73) Life was smooth until she came across a young boy of seven years near her door. Her westernized outlook was not as complete in every aspect as she takes a decision to keep this boy with her and give him all the parental love. She was not sure that whether "that treacherous Indian side that believed in the workings of karma, feel that the universe had brought him to my door for a special reason?"(80) Even in enjoying the freedom of the western culture some part of her pulls her back to recollect her Indian side. Displacement is not detachment but attachment with new cultures is strongly sensed from this story.

"The maid servant's story reprimands Manisha of the impending dangers for a young bride by her Deepa Mash. The epidemic that broke out in Calcutta that took away the life of her husband and baby left Manisha's mother resentful and lifeless. Manisha is utterly delighted with the kind of life that she leads in America "A liberated relationship, no strings attached." (114) Divakaruni thus slowly makes the characters in her stories feel at home in a non-native place by making them enjoy the freedom in many ways.

Divakaruni's "The Disappearance" tells about a man's feelings. The disappearance of his wife disturbs him a lot. He lodges a complaint with the police as every one feels that "... you aren't safe anywhere in this country nowadays." (169) The huge reward that he advertises doesn't give any fruitful result. To his utter dismay after many months of her disappearance he comes to know of the truth that his wife had eloped in a planned way. Divakaruni brings to the forefront the lives of the Indians trapped in western culture.

When Preeti and Deepak settles to marry in the story "Doors", Preeti's mother and Deepak's friends were equally concerned about their marriage prospects as they may face an east-west culture conflict. "And you know how these 'American' women are always bossing you, always thinking about themselves.... It's no wonder we call them ABCDs- American-Born-Confused-Desis," (185) these remarks from his friends irked Deepak. Differences start creeping in with the entry of Raju, Deepak's friend. Preeti feels as a stranger in her own home but realises later how narrow-minded she was. "The Ultrasound", portrays the helplessness of Arundhati when her mother-in-law takes a decision to abort her baby. To fight against foeticide she has to leave her husband's family on consulting her friend and cousin Anjali. Anjali who lives in a liberated society America, thinks independently and shows a confidence in taking a quick decision to invite her friend to live with them in America. Divakaruni shows the advantages that one can have in living in a western country. Especially one need not fear about the society which has nothing to bother about the personal life of an individual.

"Affair" tells about the extra-marital relationship that Meena has which makes her to break her marriage with Srikanth. She tells to her friend Abha, "Our marriage- there was nothing left in it- if there had ever been anything. I felt I was slowly drying up inside, my blood turning to dust." (266-267) This decision of Meena makes Abha to think of her own life. The wide avenues that are open make Abha to feel that "The old rules aren't always right. Not here, not even in India. (270) Abha thinks of writing a letter to Ashok she frames the words "We're spiralling toward hate, And hopelessness. That's not what I want for the rest of my life. Or yours." "It's better this way, each of us freeing the other before it's too late..." (271) The idea of reliving their lives with more vitality comes in the process of self-introspection after living in a much liberated society. Abha learns to accept some uncomfortable truths about her and comes out of her comfortable but stagnant marriage to live life on her own terms and Meena does the same, leaving behind the comfort of the known, for the unknown and uncertain pursuit of self-fulfillment and self-empowerment. It is the story of the painfulness of new beginnings and realization.

"Meeting Mrinal," is a story of the psychological trauma of two women Asha and Mrinalini. Asha, a married woman with a grown up son Dinesh, is unable to confess to her friend Mrinal that she has been divorced. Mrinal on the other hand is unwed and feels that Asha is lucky enough to have such a handsome

husband and son. Asha's husband Mahesh moves away to live with Jessica. Both the women feel that the other was happy. Ironically both are almost sailing in the same boat. Asha's life as a divorced woman is equally similar to Mrinal's unwed life. Asha feels that she is leading an imperfect life but she also has a strong conviction "that perfect life is only an illusion." (299) Being and belonging, feeling at home or feeling a non-native and leading a perfect life are all thus the mental state of mind of an individual.

A clear transition and maturity can be seen in the writer from the first story to the last story in the collection of stories *Arranged Marriage*. From the domestic violence that the protagonist faces in the first story "Bats" to the protagonist Asha in "Meeting Mrinal" a metamorphosis from innocence to experience, from submission to assertion, from feeble to strong-willed, from fickle to determined, from an alien in her own home to making her own home is explicit. The silent suffering, is often more eloquent than violent action.

In Water Bridge review she states that she would like to have a special quality, "In our Hindu scriptures, a quality that can be roughly translated as loving the world, all of it, without exception from a place deep within you. That's what I'd like to have."

While the deeper insights in this short story collection are about the immigrant experiences, the folly and futility of the average human desire for "love" is overtly underlined again and again.

Divakaruni's creative writing about the lives and concerns of the women and immigrants signal the existing problems of our society. The different situations of the protagonists projected from the first story to the last offer a scope for individual and independent measures that a woman takes in order to get along in this world irrespective of the odds. The fiction that is altogether a mirror view of the society is realistic and entertaining bringing a hope for an effective change in the world.

If we pay heed to the centuries old anguish of a woman for proper understanding, it is quite evident that it extends all frontiers and uplifts the human face, marching towards a new world.

Arranged Marriage also highlights the conflict between the inner and outer world of a woman. Divakaruni talks of a woman's heart that knows and experiences pain. Pain caused when the intimate relationship is upset, pain caused by the culture, pain caused through betrayal and anger. This book thus subsists on a mixture of experiences of women from different cultural, racial and class backgrounds.

Divakaruni stresses the idea that a psychological transformation is the need of the hour, which results in changing the mindset. She has an extraordinary clarity of insight into women's experiences. The details of real-life are arranged so that the readers are able to envision the inside and outside of a woman's life. Divakaruni presents the quest for a new home from a woman's voice and explores the fate of those women who must make a new home in a strange unfamiliar place.

II. Displacement

Divakaruni is known for her feministic approach, apart from raising the voice on the plight of immigrant women who have a tough time in settling down in an alien culture she also highlights on the major transition which changes the life of women that is marriage. As a diasporic writer she thus exposes the dual dilemma faced by women

- 1 Moving to a different country which is free, women has to settle themselves to this changed culture
- 2 Their magical wedding dollar dreams are shattered and disillusioned.

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