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Feminine Sensibility in Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage

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ABSTRACT: The main aim of this paper is to explore the role of women in “Arranged Marriage”. With growing awareness about women’s subjugation and the impact of education, many literary works focus on themes such as social hierarchy, social values, dowry system, domestic violence, and women’s oppression. Several contemporary Indian writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapur, alongside Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, inspire readers to become courageous and independent women. Divakaruni’s characters stand out as they challenge societal norms and traditional beliefs. They navigate through different cultural values and belief systems, breaking away from male-dominated societies. These women are portrayed individuals who do not hesitate to seek freedom from the constraints of traditional roles. Through her novels, Divakaruni empowers women to rise above subjugation and embrace their individuality, promoting mental and physical liberation.

KEYWORDS: role, woman, marriage, societal, independence, patriarchy, identity

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most prominent and successful writes in India. She is known for her works as an activist, poet, and best-selling author. Born in Calcutta in 1965, she migrated to America in 1976 to pursue her higher education. Deeply concerned about the struggles faced by South Asian women, she co-founded Maitri, a helpline aimed at supporting women facing domestic violence. Divakaruni also served as the former President of Maitri. In addition to her social work, she is actively involved with various non-profit organizations Around Houston. As a prolific writer, Divakaruni has contributed significantly to literature with seven novels, two short story collections, two volumes of poetry, The Brotherhood and Conch series, and several other literary works. Her remarkable contributions have earned her prestigious award such as The American Book Award, PEN Oakland/ Josephine Miles Literary Award, Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award, and Pushcart Prize. Much of Divakaruni’s writing focuses on the experiences of immigrant women in America, capturing their struggles, hardships, and search for identity. Through her works, she gives voice to women caught between traditional values and the challenges of a new culture, inspiring them to embrace strength and independence.

Divakaruni’s Arranged Marriage is a powerful collection of eleven short stories that delve into the emotional and psychological landscapes of immigrant Indian women. The stories unravel the intricate struggles of these women as they navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, individual desires and societal expectations, as well as personal freedom and familial duty. The “falgulike undercurrent of feminist image” you mention is indeed central to the collection, as Divakaruni presents her female protagonists grappling with identity crises, patriarchal oppression, and cultural displacement. Through their narratives, we witness their pain, resilience, and eventual self-actualization. Whether it’s woman trapped in an abusive marriage, a girl caught between Indian values and western independence, or a character redefining love and duty, each story highlights the complexities of womanhood. The themes of rebellion, self-reliance, and self-discovery echo throughout, making Arranged Marriage a deeply feminist and thought-provoking read.

Tendon says:

“ The most Indian women characters, as appropriately depicted in the modern and postmodern English fictions of Indian women novelist like Shashi Sespande, Anita Desai, Kamala Das cannot be carefully grouped with their western counterpart in their evolution from the ‘feminine’ to the ‘female’”. (Tandon, 127)

Divakaruni’s “Arranged Marriage” is a testament to struggles women seeking liberation, self-expression, and individuality within a patriarchal society. Her female protagonists navigate oppression, often striving to reclaim their



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autonomy. In “The Bats”, the mother embodies the Indian stereotype of a submissive woman, trapped between social prejudice and male chauvinism. She is a victim of societal norms that expect women to remain silent and obedient, even in the face of suffering. Her inability to break free stems from fear and societal conditioning. She lacks the courage to embrace change and is haunted by the past, making it difficult for her to move forward. This highlights a key theme in Divakaruni’s work—the internal and external struggles of women who wish to escape oppression but are bound by deep-rooted traditions and fears.

In the story, the daughter feels caught between loving her mother and seeing her father’s violence. Even though she sees the bruises on her mother’s face, she doesn’t fully understand her mother’s pain or the abuse she suffers again and again. The mother and daughter leave their home and go to the mother’s grandfather’s house. But when they receive a letter from the father, they decide to return to him. The scene where many bats are killed symbolizes the mother’s return to her husband, knowing that she will face abuse again.

According to Anita Desai:

“The Indian woman is always is working towards an adjustment and compromise. Few Indian feminists really contemplate total change. Working towards and adjustment through the traditional role is much less drastic much more Indian. I think Indian feminism is more practical than theoretical. It is expedient rather than ideological.” (Desai, 168)
In this story, the reader can see a similarity between the lives of bats and lives of women. Bats move from tree to tree to protect themselves, just like women facing domestic violence often go to their parents’ house for safety. However, just like the bats, these women eventually return to their husbands, hoping theta things will change and a better day will come.

Like bats, these women do not know where they will truly be safe or if any place will give them lasting protection. The mother says, “I guess they just don’t realize what’s happening. They don’t realize that by flying somewhere else they’ll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there’s something that keeps pulling them back here.” (Arranged Marriage, 8) During the day, bats cannot see, but at night, they get their vision. Similarly, the wife sees and suffers her husband’s abuse, yet she ignores her own self-respect because she fears what society will say. She endures all the pain and torture without speaking up or making decisions for her own life.

In the story “Clothes”, the main character, Sumita, decides to stay in America and work in a store after her husband dies, instead of going back to India. She is afraid of the judgments and restrictions that Indian society would place on her. This fear stops her from returning to India. Sumita is an independent woman who wants to live in a free and open society where she can make her own choices. All her childhood Sumita listened to the values of fables, folk tales and stories of a girl who marries a handsome prince: “And she married the handsome prince who took her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas.” (Arranged Marriage, 18)

After her husband’s death, Sumita becomes a new woman, full of hope and determination. It is only after his passing that she rediscovers herself. In the story “Clothes”, Sumita changes outfits at different stages of her life. These changes in clothing symbolize her evolving personality, showing the struggle between her emotions and societal expectations. This struggle leads different influences. In the end, just as she and her husband had dreamed, she decides to stay in America and build her own life.

The voice of new women, as Neeru Tandon says in her text, *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*, is voices by Shange Ntozana (1981):

I am space and winds
Like s soft rain or torrent of dust
I can move
Be free in time
A movement is mine always
I am not like a flower at all
I can bloom and be a wisp of sunlight
I’m a rusting of dead leaves and so familiar with tears



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Alla this is mine

So long as I breathe. (77)

Runu, in “Ultrasound”, cannot be having a child after marriage. In traditional Indian society, women like her, are often seen as bad. Indian society follows many old customs, beliefs, and superstitions. Woman like them are humiliated, “chastised, beaten” (Arranged Marriage, 217). Even though Indian cultural is rich, treating women this way is a bas and unfair part of society. Runu was taken to the “Shasthi’s shrine” (Arranged Marriage, 217) to receive the felicity from Goddess in order to be fertile and conceive.

Soon after that, Runu and Anju become pregnant at the same time. Anju says, “And now, to make everything perfect the babies are coming” (Arranged Marriage, 215). The sad part of the story is that Runu’s in-laws ask her to abort her baby when they find out she is having a girl. Her sister Anju tells her to save the baby. She advises Runu to leave her family, move to America, and live independently with her child, promising to support her. But later, Anju feels guilty for suggesting this and starts questioning herself, “Had I taken all of that away from her by my misplaced American notions of Feminism and justice?” (Arranged Marriage, 227). Here Anju insists on taking a new path just like the quote by Simon de Beauvoir: “She wants her womanliness for her own satisfaction... She has no intention of discarding them (It) when she has found liberty by other Roads” (Beauvoir, 694-95)

In the story “Affair”, Abha is the main character. She is a very traditional housewife who spends most of her time cooking and taking care of the house. She has no interest in her husband, Ashok. Her friend Meena is in a relationship with Charles, even though she is married. Abha wishes her life could be like Meena’s. She longs for the love that is missing in her marriage. She thinks about having an affair, but the thought disappears quickly because she knows it is wrong for a married woman. She keeps this thought to herself. Her life as a housewife, without love, feels dull and meaningless. She soliloquized, “had I really been myself? I didn’t think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter. A good friend, and of course a good wife”. (Arranged Marriage, 69) She felt resentment towards traditional rules that served no real purpose. She did not want hopelessness because “that’s not what I want for the rest of my life” (Arranged Marriage, 71). Finally, she gathered all her courage and said goodbye to her unhappy married life, leaving a farewell letter for Ashok, which reads “It’s better this way, each of us freeing the other before it’s too late... so we can start learning, once, to live.” (Arranged Marriage, 271-272)

In “Silver Pavements Golden Roofs, Divakaruni describes the harsh experiences of immigrants. The story also encourages women to be free in a country that values freedom. The main theme is the search for independence. Jayanti dreams of living her life in America, even though being an immigrant comes with challenges. To follow her dream, she leaves her country, family, and its many restrictions. She hopes to marry a prince from a distant land and enjoys complete freedom. She says: “Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold? (Arranged Marriage, 56)

Society has experienced many things, and literature has recorded them. But as time passes, literature also creates bold storied that inspire woman to be strong and courageous.

Das in his article says:

“The image of women is depicted in the literature has undergone slow evaluation and in spite of only dwelling around the theme of self sacrificing, submissive women and their predicament the writes of current time have attempted the conflicts and hurdles which women has to face while performing duties inside and outside the house and family.” (Das, 21)

Women make different choices based on deep-rooted societal stereotypes and conservative family backgrounds. Their decisions are shaped by their experiences. Some take risks and successfully change their lives, as shown in the story “Disappearance”, while others, like the mother in “Bats”, return to their difficult circumstances. In a way, “The Arranged Marriage” highlights the struggles of women under patriarchy and social conditioning. Divakaruni portrays the conflict between seeking freedom and accepting oppression, between tradition and modernity, and between being submissive and being vulnerable.



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Divakaruni says,

“Strong women, when respected, make the whole society stronger. One must be careful with such rapid changes, though, and make an effort to preserve, at the same time, the positive traditions of Indian culture. (Web)

There are challenges in adjusting, whether it is adapting to married life or settling into a new culture as an immigrant. Some characters accept their circumstances and surrender to fate, while others take bold actions to follow their own choices and standards, helping them shape their own identity.

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