

Emergence of the New Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning and best-selling author, poet, activist and teacher. She was born in Kolkata in 1956. She received B. A. From Calcutta University in 1976, M. A., from Wright State University of U.S.A. and PhD on Christopher Marlowe in 1985 from the University of California, Berkeley. She is the co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline for the South Asian Women to assist them lift from their domestic violence. She is presently engaged in many non-profit organisations in the areas around Houston. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Houston. She writes for both adults and children. She has to her credit seven novels- *The Mistress of Spices*(1998), *Sister of My Heart*(1999), *The Vine of Desire*(2002), *Queen of Dreams*(2004), *The Palace of Illusions*(2008), *One Amazing Thing*, and *Oleander Girl*(2013)-two short story collections-*Arranged Marriage*(1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*(2001)-two important poetry volumes-*Black Candle*(1991) and *Leaving Yuba City*(1997) and *Brotherhood and Conch* series and many more volumes of writings. She has received many awards some of which are The American Book Award, PEN Oakland/Joshephine Miles Literary Award, Allen Ginsberg and Pushcart Prize. She features in the “twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women” list issued in 2015 by The Economic Times. The themes of her writings ranges from Indian experience, history, myth to migration, Indian women, and the joys and challenges for living in a multicultural world. Her works revolve around the distressing situations of Indian Immigrant women in America. Her women protagonists herald jihad against the domination of the patriarchy. They are educated, adamant, mentally strong and rebellious, and unhesitatingly liberate themselves from the bullying male chauvinism. Actually her works attain the form of activism.

Arranged Marriage contains exquisitely written eleven short stories. The Falgu-like undercurrent of feminist cry runs through the nucleus of the stories. All the stories have women at their foci and lays bare their burning problems, their psychological conflict, their identity crisis, their search for identity, their demythologizing of the womanhood, their rebellious angst against the patriarchal domination, their self-independent and self-actualisation in their lives. *Arranged Marriage* is Divakaruni's testament for women's liberation, women's right to self-expression and their way-out to individualization. Some of her heroines take control of their destinies single-handedly and some with the assistance of other woman.

The New Woman was a feminist ideal that came into vogue from the late nineteenth century and had a profound influence on feminism into the twentieth. After the coinage of the term 'New Woman' by Sarah Grand in her article *The New aspect of the Woman Question*, it was further popularly utilised by Henry James and Henrik Ibsen to describe the educated, independent career woman. According to a joke by Max Beerbohm (1872-1956), "The New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen's brain." In the world of globalised capitalism and industrialism, education and wide opportunities for lucrative jobs have remoulded the woman a complete super creature. They have shattered the glass ceiling and wants equality and respectable status to choose a life they want, travel the world as per their will and satisfy their desire. The 'New Woman' today challenges the traditional notions of 'Angel in the house', 'sexually voracious image' and sita syndrome. She is aware of exploitation and her inferior position in the family and society. She is contemplative about her predicament and chooses to protest and fight against the general accepted norms and currents of a male dominated traditional society. She is smarter, tougher, educated, courageous, more intelligent and even more aggressive in spirit and attitude. She is prepared to face the consequences of her choices. She is more ambitious to find a career to be financially independent. In a word, she is out to explore her potential and carve a niche for herself in almost every area.

The Indian women, as appropriately depicted in the modern and postmodern English fictions of Indian women novelists, cannot be fully grouped with their western counterpart in "their evolution from the 'feminine' to the 'female'" (Neeru, 127). They are progressive and aware of their educational and property rights in family and society and yearn complete liberation like the western women but they believe unlike the western ones that they will possess all those lying within the family-unit with her male counterpart, and must sustain and protect themselves and not neglect familial duties due to the false notion of being liberated. Simon de Beauvoir said in her *The Second Sex*:

"It is not regard for the opinion of others alone that leads her to give time and care to her appearance and her housekeeping. She wants her womanliness for her own satisfaction...She has no intention of discarding them (it) when she has found liberty by other roads." (694-95)

The voice of new woman, as Neeru Tandon says in her text, *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*, is voiced by Shange Ntozana:

"I am space and winds
like a 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
 alla this is mine
 so long as i breathe
”

Bats, the first story of the volume, exposes the little protagonist's bitter spiteful anger against the bestial torture of her father on her mother and herself, and her hating for the docile nature of her own mother. Her father would beat her mother every night. When she was very little, her father used to pick her up suddenly and throw all the way up to the ceiling to her breathless screaming. Once they had been compelled to leave the house at the night with no bag and baggage with them. This male domination gave birth to a 'New Woman' in the little protagonist. They fled to the house of her maternal uncle not to tolerate such bullying any longer. When her mother readied herself to return home being lenient with the letter of promise from her father, she regurgitated her severe lividity against her mother's return. She kicked the packing done by her mother and shouted "I hate you! I hate you!" (AM p. 12)

Clothes brings out the metamorphosis of Sumita Sen, a 20th century Indian immigrant in America, from gorgeous sari-clad docile daughter and wife into almond blouse and skirt-clad rigid woman. She hatefully turns down the white sari of widowhood and its associating paraphernalia and decides to stay single in the dangerous alien land America after her husband's fatal demise for racial violence. She perceives "...widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings" (AM p. 33). She gathers her mettle, "straighten her shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath" (AM p. 33) and out for the work at the store where she rarely went, instead of returning to India with her husband's family.

A Perfect Life, the third story of the collection, chronicles the diacritical characteristics of 'New Woman' through the presentation of the life of the protagonist Meera Bose. Meera is true embodiment of liberty, autonomy, financial self-sufficiency, sexual freedom, motherhood and femaleness. She is depicted in exerting complete autonomy in her personal

spheres. She had love-relation with Richard. She pleasantly sucked the kernel of sexual satisfaction with her partner. As she says "... in bed we tried wild and wonderful things that would have left me speechless with shock in India had I been able to imagine them" (AM p. 64). But she never tolerated the domination of Richard over her. She defied Richard's warning to keep the orphan child named Krishna to her. As she wanted psychological motherhood. She was financially well-sufficient as she had an "interesting job at the bank" (AM p. 73). She was the worshipper of emancipation and freedom. She loved Richard, because he gave her 'space'. More because he was passionate without getting possessive and did not mind when she was out with other friends or out for huge pressure of work for long days. In case of marriage and motherhood Divakaruni was more like the Indian feminists than like the western feminists. Meera believed in taking marriage and motherhood care freely but not care wornly. As she said, "Not that I was against marriage-or even against having a child. I just wanted to make sure that when it happened, it would be on my own terms, because I *wanted* it" (AM p. 76-77). Meera tried to adopt the orphan boy Krishna legally. And to do so she even resorted to fabricating excuses on the identity of the boy. But when that was not possible and she lost her on legal ground, her psychological motherhood vehemently desired him return to her.

In *Silver Pavements Golden Roofs*, Divakaruni explicates the diaspora's bitter experience along with the search for freedom of the New Woman. Jayanti yearns to carry the chalice of her life in America despite its diasporic dangers. She deserted her family, homeland and its hydra-headed constraints and restrictions to fulfil her dream of marrying a prince of far-away land:

Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land

Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold? (AM p. 56)

Through *The Word Love*, Divakaruni shows that her 'New Woman' embraces solely self-controlled single lifewhich has permeating joy of happiness. She is ready to spurn the loveless conjugal life. The female immigrant protagonist suffers from both ends-her mother at home and her husband in America. Her mother cuts all relation with her for her treading 'Lakhan-Rekha' imposed by her mother. Her husband strips from her all rights of calling any of her friends or receiving the calls of her friends. But he has every right on the answering machine. He has total control on her. Her times pass on with the drops of her eyes. This distressing pent-up conditions cull intrepidity inside her. She bids adieu the loveless home to search for a new life full of self-control and self-choices.

The Maid Servant's Story exposes how Indian women suffer under the coercive social apparatus and how they try to survive from that coercion. Sarala fled her home for the torture of her mother to work as maid in the house of 'wife'. Manisha, the protagonist of the story, went to America not to be doomed in life under this suffocating ambience of the Indian male-centred society. She reveals:

"It's how we survive, we Indian women whose lives are half light and half darkness, stopping short of revelations that would otherwise crisp away our skins" (AM p.167).

The Disappearance unearths a breathless shocking tragedy of a housewife of bullying chauvinistic Indian husband. The wife was educated, modest and calibrated to maintain well her housewifery. She always tolerated her husband's physical and sexual torture. But she could not bear one night's bestial sexual torture of her husband. She left her husband's home to live singly on her own.

Affair deals with two unhappy married couples-Abha and Ashok, and Meera and Shrikant. Abha and Meera are the true embodiments of New Women. Initially they suffer under male chauvinism, but finally they emerge liberated crushing the nuptial bonds. Abha wanted to become a good wife by performing housewifery duties diligently and selflessly. Despite she could not acquire any respect or love from her husband except the taunting insult. To drive Abha mentally crazy Ashok would flip through the TV shows which she particularly dislikes. She regretfully said "Now look what you made me do. I really wish you wouldn't spring things on me like this" (AM p. 232). Her meeting with Suresh Gupta, the Editor of the Lifestyle Section of the "Indian Courier" the paper for which Abha would write recipes every week, u-turned her so far unhappy married life. She tried to find a new life in her job when she was offered to contribute a column on menu section of the paper. She dressed herself anew, which she previously disliked. She secretly permitted Suren Gupta to touch her going out of her previous taboos. Her housewifery seemed monotonous and meaningless. She soliloquised "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" (AM p. 69). She felt resentment for the traditional rules. She did not want hopelessness because "that's not what I want for the rest of my life..." (AM p. 71). Finally she collected renewed fervour for her life and left her unfruitful conjugal life with a parting 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 more, to live." (AM p. 271-272)

Like Abha, Meera, a good cook, hated spending time alone in the silent room. Her husband Shrikant spent more time with his computer while staying home. Moreover, she was torn apart with the news of her not holding any baby in future for the uterine problem. She suffered from insomnia. She was so terribly disgusted with her present life that she, to find solace in her life, began to wear the naked dress like choli or dace freely in the parties, which she previously flinched back from. "To be happy" (AM p. 267), she had fallen in love with another man who was less glamorous than her husband and took divorce from Shrikant.

Through *Doors*, Divakaruni projects the rebellious mindset of the New Women, which can give them surviving sap to their life. Preeti, born and brought up in America, married Deepak, a first generation Indian immigrant in America defying her mother's terse warning "What do you really know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?" (AM p. 184) and believing that their relation was based on mutual respect and admiration. But Deepak turned volte face when Raj arrived at their apartment to live with them. They disturbed her many ways like blaring loudly the songs from Hindi movies or knocking at the door to enter the room while she struggled with herself to sleep after the hard working on her Ph.D dissertation and performing familial duties. Eventually she cut a sorry figure in the semester. Her dissertation lacked originality and depth. When her advisor told her to take a semester away from school, she fumed her angry soliloquy "not from school-it's a semester away from home that I need" (AM p. 199)? She broke to Deepak her leaving home for her friend Cathy. But Deepak prevented her departure by sending Raj to a motel. It is seen that dual qualities- durga and sita syndrome-coexisted within the female protagonists of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

The Ultrasound, a miniature form of *The Sister of My Heart*, deals with the victimisation of two cousins Anjali and Anuradha on the gallows of patriarchal subservience and their subsequent resuscitation by boycotting that bullying social establishment. When Anjali, residing with her immigrant husband Sunil in America, drew scowl from her husband for calling her cousin, Runu, a daughter-in-law of a Brahmin family of Burdwan, for enquiring her health, she vehemently retorted back saying "Now don't be mean" (AM p. 205)! On the other hand, Runu always had to digest the insults or rude comments not only from her husband but also from her brother-in-laws for slightest messing up of things. When Anju watched those tortures inflicted on her cousin she felt pinpricks of anger inside her. When Runu's family decided to abort her girl foetus, she on Anju's advice forsook her husband's family to save the life of her unborn daughter and live independently on her own.

Meeting Mrinal puts two women on two conditions-Asha, a married woman and Mrinal, a single- to test who is more happy, independent and liberated. Asha tried her best to be a good wife and a passionate dutiful mother like “patient, faithful sita, selfless Kunti” (AM p. 298). She did never have fancy western clothes because her husband Mahesh never approved that. Even when they were out, she had to follow the diktats of her husband in choosing her outfits. Every time she as per her capacity or knowing “reasoned, pleaded, tried the silent treatment, cooked Mahesh’s favourite meals” (AM p 289). Despite that she had to suffer the ignominies of her husband’s leaving her and her son for another woman. She also tried to be a good mother by caring Dinesh well, cooking dishes which will “prevent him from failing grades, drugs, street gangs, AIDS” (AM p. 276). He too drifted away from her. She spent sleepless nights in her anguished lonely situation. On the other hand, Mrinal, childhood friend of Asha, confessed that she would remain single until “ I’d...finish college, get a job may be...I’d learn a bit more about the world and what I wanted out of it before I tied myself down...(AM p. 280-81). She became a top level executive of a company. She was financially self-independent. She travelled wherever she liked to. According to Asha, she was the true embodiment of New Woman because “she has the perfect existence-money, freedom, admiration” (AM p. 288). Asha secretly and enviously wanted those qualities. She drew solace in her wretched position in thinking of Mrinal’s position. She went out of socio-cultural taboos and freely indulged in heavy drink with Mrinal in a restaurant.

The emergence of ‘New Woman’ is a direct off-shoot of the Feminist Movement of 1960s. The ‘New Woman’ is stronger but not weak, industrious but not lazy, courageous but not timid, tolerant but to a bearable limit and hungry for power, money, career, respect, admiration and peace. Divakaruni graphically portrays a tapestry of ‘New Women’ in her prized short story volume. They exert extreme self-control over their destinies and are prepared to take what may come in their single life. They are powerful, adamant, liberated and ambitious. They are portrayed as feminist subjects-assertive, non-submissive, protesting against injustice meted to them. They perform dual roles-traditional and modern. They are ready to take unconditional breakage from the family bonds if that family curbs their freedom. They always choose the path which is self-dependent and find real happiness. Her women possess the compelling urge to live independently and to value to her own desire emanating from her own self. They have exercised their freedom of choices, never subjugating themselves to their male’s mercy. In totality the volume through its lay-out projects the strong qualities of a woman to fight and adapt to a brave New World. To conclude, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives a wake-up call to the future

female generations through the portraiture of her vivacious female characters.

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