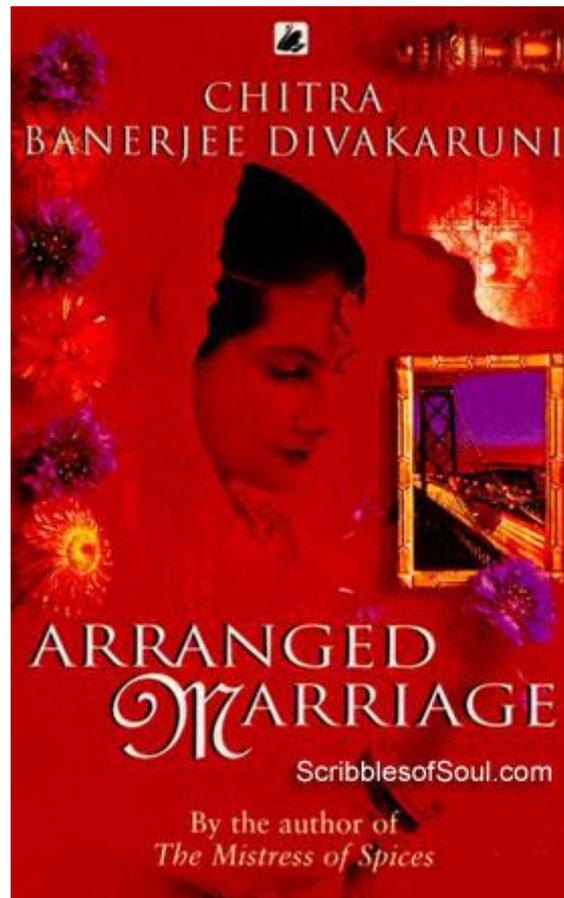


**Immigration or Liberation:
A Comparative Study of Indian and Immigrant Indian Women in the
Select Stories from *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

G. Rajeswari, Research Scholar

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Short Stories

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American author, poet, and the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage* won an American Book Award in 1995, and two of her novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* as well as a short story *The Word Love* were adapted into films. *Mistress of Spices* was short-listed for the Orange Prize. Currently, *Sister of My*

Heart, Oleander Girl, Palace of Illusions, and One Amazing Thing are being produced as movies or TV serials.

Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and in the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. She writes for children as well as adults and has published novels in multiple genres, including realistic fiction, historical fiction, fiction, dealing with magical realism, myth and fantasy.

The present study is intended to compare and contrast the women characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from her collection of short stories and prove that women in India are crippled in the name of tradition and culture, whereas immigrant women of Indian origin are free to liberate themselves from the clutches of these beliefs and customs simply because they are away from India. In India women are denied the opportunities and resources that are normally accessible to members of a society in other countries in the name of culture and tradition. This blocks their access to various rights which are essential to social integration within a particular society.

Arranged Marriage

In the short story collection *Arranged Marriage* Divakaruni has tried to expose the incongruity or absurdity of received tradition and suggests immigration as the only solution to such irrationality. The West, besides offering material comforts, also gives women equal rights on par with men and the pitiable situation of mastery of one sex over the other is quite unknown or unheard of there. In modern times, women's writings question and chafe at the relevance of traditional values and structures, which merely cause and perpetuate women's oppression.

Focus of This Study

The present study focuses on the women characters of select short stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The stories *The Bats* and *The Maid Servant's Story* which are set against the background of India are a foil to the stories *The Disappearance* and *A Perfect Life* set against the background of America. In these two pairs of stories Divakaruni has tried to juxtapose the lives of women in India and the lives of Indian women in the US. The women in the short story *The Bats* and *The Maid Servant's Story* are depicted as victims in the male dominated society. Though each one of them belongs to two extremely different strata of the society their problem is the same - the husband. In *The*

Bats the husband is a crude and unsophisticated foreman who inflicts physical wounds on his wife whereas the husband in *The Maid Servant's Story* is a highly sophisticated bank manager, but a pervert who seeks pleasure in extramarital relationship with the maid servant. Both the women put up with their husbands in order to escape from social stigma.

The Bats

The first story *The Bats* is narrated in the first-person narrative by the small daughter. Her description of how her mother suffers every night because of her father and how her father comes drunk almost every day and beats up her mother which leaves marks on her face really talks about the plight of Indian women in India.

Though he earns food and rent money for them he makes every day an ordeal for them. The poor girl recalls it:

THAT YEAR MOTHER CRIED A LOT, NIGHTS. OR MAYBE she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice. I would wake up in the hot Calcutta dark and the sound of her weeping would be all around me, pressing in, wave upon wave, until I could no longer tell where it was coming from. The first few times it happened, I sit up in the narrow child's bed that she had recently taken to sharing with me and whisper her name. But that would make her pull me close and hold me tight against her shaking body, where the damp smell of talcum powder and sari starch would choke me until I couldn't bear it any longer and would start to struggle away. Which only made her cry more. So after some time I learned to lie rigid and unmoving under the bed sheet, plugging my fingers into my ears to block out her sobs. And if I closed my eyes very tight and held them that way long enough, little dots of light would appear against my eyelids, and I could almost pretend I was among the stars. (AM 2)

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. This time when I asked her about it she didn't say anything, just turned the other way and stared at a spot on the wall where the plaster had cracked and started peeling in the shape of a drooping mouth. (AM 3)

Her father worked in a printing press as a foreman and comes home only after the small girl goes to bed. The girl hasn't seen him much but only heard him shouting, "shouts that shook the walls

of my bedroom like they were paper, the sounds of falling dishes” (AM 2). At one point unable to bear the tortures of her father her mother decides to leave home for her old uncle’s house in Gopalpur. Their uncle receives them warmly. Days pass by. The girl is very happy spending time in playing and fishing with her grandpa and she totally forgets her father and Calcutta, her father’s place. Her happiness knew no bounds and all she wished was that she could spend the rest of her life just like that. But things did not happen the way she wished for. One day when she returned home with her grandpa after picking the poisoned dead bats from the Zamindar’s orchard her mother held out a letter. She told that the letter came from her husband asking them to come to Calcutta. In that letter he had also promised that he would not beat her up again. Grandpa was shocked beyond words and the tin bucket fell from his hand and clattered noisily over the steps. When grandpa asked her how he came to know about their whereabouts she told that she wrote to him. Her words express the age-old sentiments of Indian wives who tolerate their husbands in spite of all the ill treatments. She says, “I couldn’t stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the marketplace. The loneliness of being without him”. These women are like the bats who to come back to the zamindar’s mango orchard knowing full well that they will only die if they keep coming back. But still they come back.

You would have thought that after the first week the bats would have figured it out and found another place to live. But no. Every morning there were just as many dead bodies. I asked Grandpa-uncle about this. He shook his head and said he didn’t understand either. “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. (AM 8)

Traditions and Male Oppression

That ‘something’ is the fear of society- the lack of boldness to break the age-old traditions. Whiling travelling in the train, the girl looks back at her grandpa uncle who is dwindling into a miniature, her mother comforts the girl saying, “We’ll come to see him – all three of us- next pooja vacation”. Here one can notice how the beliefs and customs of the land tie up the women to untold miseries in India. Though various glorious names are given to this slavery of women - *pathi bakthi* or *pathi vratha* - the main reason behind this suppression is women’s financial dependence on their husbands and their fear of the society. From small, girls have been trained to obey the male members of the family- father, brother, husband or son. Quoting women from the puranas and ithikas these women are conditioned to follow their footsteps and if they follow these rules they are glorified and

worshiped as chaste women otherwise they are condemned. Thus, the wives are forced to stay with their husbands whatever the situation may be. Financial insecurity and fear of the social stigma force them to fasten themselves to their husbands till the end. “The Bat” is a good example of this male suppression. In the book entitled Companion Reader on Violence Against Women, it is mentioned that the “Studies have consistently identified economic dependence as a critical obstacle for many women who are attempting to leave abusive partners” (qtd. in Renzetti, Dleson & Bergen 55)

This kind of male oppression over women has also been contested by Simon De Beauvoir in the following terms:

A woman is not born: she becomes, is made a woman. This is to say that the socialization of woman renders her a woman with certain apparently “inherent” qualities- weakness, feeble-mindedness, patience and so on. All these help patriarchal males to argue that women need to be confined to the home (they are not strong to “go out” into the world), be protected and controlled. Gendering is a practice of power, where masculinity is always associated with the authority. (qtd. in Nayar 83)

The Maid Servant’s Story

The story within the story in *The Maid Servant’s Story* has an interesting plot in which a respectable banker is depicted to have an illegal relationship with his wife’s maid servant. The protagonist who is a second-generation immigrant from America hears of the tragic episode in her mother’s life told indirectly by her aunt takes it as a cautionary tale. She says:

I wonder if the story (though not intended as such by my aunt) is a warning for me, a preview of my own life which I thought I had fashioned so cleverly, so differently from my mother’s, but which is only a repetition, in a different raga, of her tragic song. Perhaps it is like this for all daughters, doomed to choose for ourselves, over and over, the men who have destroyed our mothers. (AM 167)

Contractual Nature of Conjugal Relations

In this context it is apt quote some recent discussions of marriage: the conjugal relations are purely contractual- husbands and wives contractually acquire for their exclusive use their partner’s sexual properties” (qtd. in Pateman 154). Another interesting and famous definition worth quoting here occurs at the beginning of Shashi Deshpande’s *Roots and Shadows*, “Behind the façade of

romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue?" (qtd. in Singh 81). This definition represents a radically changed outlook to the institution of marriage. Both the stories entitled *The Bats* and *The Maid Servant's Story* are located in India, and the wives portrayed in them are conquered by the husbands in their lives, as they are unable to free themselves from their undesirable marriage.

The economic dependence of the mother in *The Bats* deepens her plight. Has she got an income of her own she might have left her husband. Financial insecurity is one criterion that compels a comeback for a woman. In this connection, Michael P. Johnson says, "In fact, economic dependency and lack of economic resources are among the most common barriers to leaving reported by the battered woman." (qtd. in Johnson n.p.) Social conditions and cultural traditions perceive that the woman's identity is never separate but is subsumed under that of the male and the social forces continue to stifle the mother. But the forces of the masculinity go on and the father shows his authority over her, which results into her leaving home after every fight. Jacqui True's book *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women* also argues that, "Though most violence against women is perpetuated by men, it is the gendered social and economic inequalities between women and men that make women most vulnerable to violence; it is women's impoverished situation relative to men that is at the root of violence" (True 5). At the end of the story, Divakaruni paves the way out of the life of exploitation, confusion and struggle, and this way is full of hope, the hope of living further only for the sake of her daughter. *The Bats* and *The Maid Servant's Story* the daughters are made to learn how to survive in the male dominated world despite its continual oppressing forces, as Manisha also says: "It's how we survive, we Indian women whose lives are half-light and half-darkness" (AM 167). The wives in *The Bats* and *The Maid Servant's Story* surrender to the exploitation of their husbands with little resistance. They stay in their abusive marriages to maintain the sham of social respectability while the cores of their lives are being eroded.

Migrant Indian Women in USA

But the stories of the Indian women who have immigrated to America are different. Unlike the wives in *The Bats* and *The Maid Servant's Story* these women are ultimately ready to embrace the western values as in *The Disappearance*. The wife is a Calcutta born woman who lives in America with her husband and manages to get out of a marriage that she dislikes, due to no apparent reason as

the husband sees it, other than the husband's exercising of his normal authority. So, the immigrant woman in an uninteresting marriage exercises greater freedom of will than the women who are non-immigrants and stuck in marriages that are far worse.

A Perfect Life

On the other hand, the protagonist of *A Perfect Life* opposes this kind of marriage where the conditions would be of the male only. She declares that:

Because in Indian marriages becoming a wife was only the prelude to that all-important, all-consuming event- becoming a mother. That wasn't why I'd fought so hard-with my mother to leave India; with my professors to make it through graduate school; with my bosses to establish my career". 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 77)

Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs

So, in her story entitled *Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs* Divakaruni tries to express the psyche of the victims of domestic abuse and the gripping forces that keep them locked in an abusive relationship. When Jayanti, the protagonist, boards the plane, she expresses her anxiety to go to a foreign land where the rules and regulations of her homeland are not in vogue: "I've looked forward to this day for so long that when I finally board the plane I can hardly breathe. . . . As a child in India, sometimes it is used to sing a song. Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?" (AM 35). In Carole Pateman's book entitled *The Sexual Contract* marriage is defined in the following way: "Marriage is called a contract but, feminists have argued, an institution in which one party, the husband, has exercised the power of a slave-owner over his wife and in the 1980s still remains some remnants of that power, is far removed from a contractual relationship" (qtd. in Pateman 154). Jayanti surprises over such wedlock that, ". . . spitefully I wonder how a marriage could take place between a man like Bikram-uncle and my aunt, who comes from an old and wealthy landowning family" (AM 39). In contrast, the fictive white professor Jayanti fantasizes about is drawn as the uncle's polar opposite; he is handsome, refined, and romantic. He is the one Jayanti imagines as a husband, the man with whom she will fall in love when she breaks away from the Indian traditions of arranged marriages as she declares, "No arranged marriage like Aunt's for me!" (AM 45)

Widows in India

In India the restrictions and conditions imposed on women especially widows are at times inhuman. That is why the daughter-in-law in the short story *Clothes* decides to stay back in America itself after her husband is killed in his shop. The reason she comes out with is that in India widows have to live like ‘does with cut –off wings’. Her desperate state is expressed when she decides against coming to India:

That’s when 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. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut of-ff wings. (AM 33)

The Ultrasound

In the short story *The Ultrasound*, which was later on developed into a full length novel titled *Sister of My Heart*, the protagonist Runu escapes to America in order protect her female fetus. Her in-laws insist on having a male child as their first grandchild and force her to abort the fetus. As she is not for abortion she leaves her husband and in-laws. The option of going back to her parents is also ruled out as they are not willing to take her in. She narrates her pathetic state to her friend Anju who is in America:

It is not possible...I called Mother just before I called you. She says it’s not right that I should leave my husband’s home. My place is with them, for better or worse. She’s afraid that they’ll never take me back if I move out, and then what would happen to me? People will think they threw me out because I did something bad. They’ll think my baby’s a bastard ... (AM 225)

At the same time, we cannot jump into such sweeping statements that only women fall victims to such traditions and beliefs. The husband, in *The Ultrasound*, is unable to come to his wife’s rescue as his submission to his country’s culture is more dominant than his love for his wife. It can otherwise be stated that his love and respect for his mother is more than the courage to fight against the tradition of the land.

To Conclude

To conclude, it can be said that the theme of marriage plays the role of a pervasive social institution which causes turbulence and misery in the lives of all the women characters by one way or

the other. Divakaruni's feminism causes her to speak against Indian men in various ways in these short stories. Divakaruni seems to delineate the queer compulsions of married life, its irredeemable and invariable monotony, its bondage and restrictions, power imbalances and double standards and the gradual cessation of female identity. Echoing Western feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer, some of the writers look at marriage as 'legalized reproduction' and apprehend the 'power politics' which according to Kate Millett operates in marriages in a subtle manner. And yet, marriage is the aim of a woman's life and therefore, the marriage plot continues to be the most appropriate subject matter for women writers even in recent times. Empowering the concept of women's individuality, Divakaruni illustrates in an essay entitled *What Women Share*, that: But ultimately, we can be ourselves with each other. Ourselves with all our imperfections. Ourselves uncomplicated by all the emotions that complicate our other relationships: duty, lust, romance, the need to impress or control. We can be women and know that, as women, we are understood. (Divakaruni)

Migration due to economic reasons is common as everyone wishes to better the prospects and improve their standards of living. For instance, there is Haroun, the driver, in *Mistress of Spices* who migrated to the US for better wages. However Haroun also symbolizes a person who migrates to escape the risk of terrorism plaguing Kashmir. So in his case on one side it is the push factor which works while in US he sees chances of improvement. There is Malathi who moves to US to pursue her dream of having her own parlour but ends up working in the Indian Embassy office as a clerk. Even Sunil, the husband of Anju, in *Sister of My Heart* had migrated to US for better prospects and also for personal reasons because he did not like the chauvinistic attitude of his father. Uma Sinha's parents also represent the dream of the professionals to work in the US for better career opportunities. The adopted land also to a certain extent comes across as a land of escape-an escape from the rigidity, conservatism, inner fears and the images of flight associated with escape seem to suggest a fight wherein the people trapped within their own fears flutter to escape.

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Mrs. G. Rajeswari, Research Scholar
Assistant Professor of English
Government College for Women (Autonomous)
Kumbakonam
Tamilnadu
India
rajig1968@gmail.com