



CULTURAL CONFLICT IN CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S *ARRANGED MARRIAGE*

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ABSTRACT

Arranged Marriage is an anthology of short stories published in 1995 by Chitra Banerjee Divakarun, and it contains ten stories. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an immigrant writer whose stories deal with the life of Indian immigrants in America, especially women immigrants in America. As orthodox Indian women, they are unable to adapt themselves to the American culture, which they think has no value. Free society, sexual freedom, cohabitation, neglect of parents and elders are unheard of in India, and when an Indian immigrant woman makes an encounter with such factors in America, she is shaken mentally and cultural conflict crops up in her resulting in a quandary in which she remains indecisive. Some women refuse to adapt and they suffer, and return to India or accept their destiny

INTRODUCTION

The researcher attempts to analyze Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* so as to highlight how the female protagonists in the stories are compelled to develop a positive attitude in life and how they surmount trans-cultural conflicts in the alien land. In the anthology, *Arranged Marriage*, all stories deal with the cultural conflict which the Indian characters suffer in their life in America. Majority of the characters are new settlers in the alien land, and at the beginning of their lives in America. They find extremely difficult the American way of life; American culture, conjugal life, and personal morals. In fact, it is a cultural shock to them but slowly they understand the realities of life and it is a question of survival for them. Women suffer more than men, and as dependents on men, especially extramarital sexual relationship. Even in the midst of sufferings and pains, they develop a positive attitude in life, lest they should end up in conjugal bankruptcy.



It is this diasporic problem which constitutes the basic fictional material of the novels and short stories of Chitra Divakaruni. "A Perfect Life" is a representative short story of Chitra published in the anthology entitled Arranged marriage. In this short story "A Perfect Life" Meera, an Indian-American professional woman, a bachelorette, describes her concept of a desirable man in terms of Hollywood hero charms:

Richard was exactly the kind of man I'd dreamed about during my teenage years in Calcutta, all those moist, sticky evenings that I spent at the empire Cinema house under a rickety ceiling fan that revolved tiredly, eating melted mango-Pista ice-cream and watching Gregory pick and Warren Bratty and client east wood. Tall and lean and sophisticated, he was very different from the Indian men I'd known back home . . . When I was with Richard I felt like a true American. (73)

Early from her girlhood days, Meera has a fancy for white Americans, and when grownup, the white Americans' handsomeness and complexion make her think that she should marry not an Indian but a young American. The images from Hollywood movies projected on the screen of the cinema-house, "Empire" have further developed Meera's interest in Americans since her girlhood days. Cinema has developed the notions of desirability, good looks, and true Americanness in her. Meera's idols are Peck, Eastwood, and Beatty of Hollywood, not Dilip Kumar, Uttam Kumar or Amitabh Bachchan of Indian cinema. She has fallen in love with Richard. According to Meera, the distinguishing qualities in Richard are tallness, leanness, and sophistication, and she describes him as "very different" from Indian men. The latter are void of such qualities by implication. Indian men are, thus, culturally, ideologically, mentally, and physically diminished in comparison to their American counterparts. To become a "true American," the woman of Indian origin must associate herself with a man who looks like an archetypal Hollywood hero. Even then cannot be seen as "true Americans," according to Meera.

The protagonist, Meera is an affluent woman working in a bank in America and leads a perfect life. The fancy she has about white Americans in her girlhood days continues in her even in her bachelorette days, and as an Indian girl, she fails to conform to morals of Indian standards and personal honour on the part of a girl. She lives in a free society, and no controlling force of her parents restrains her from falling on evil ways in an alien land. She leads an independent life and cohabits with a young white American by name Richard, and this kind of life which is unheard of in India even in these days of advancement, she does not consider a taboo. From the Indian point of view, she is a "fallen" girl having no morals, but such an imperfection of character does not afflict her in any sense, and indeed, she thinks that she leads a perfect life which is not true.



Meera seems to be a freak, and for a sensible Indian girl, dating and cohabiting are greatest sins on earth, and the free society in America changes her. She earns the friendship of Richard and lives with him without the bonds of wedlock, and even resolves not to have children. For sure, she is not married to Richard, and therefore, the question of tearing does not arise at all, and Richard also accepts Meera's proposition. Meera has uprooted herself from the Indian soil and has settled in America, and initially she rejects Indian culture but this mindset of hers does not last long. At certain point of time, cohabitation turns revolutive for her, and her visit to the hospital to see the new-born baby of her friends, Sharmila, brings about a change in her mind.

All the efforts of Meera's mother in search of a groom for her daughter have ended in futility, and never does Meera say yes to her mother's choice of an Indian boy nor does she disclose her cohabitation with Richard to her. It is a cultured conflict within her, and she cannot break the shackles. Any girl, for that matter an Indian girl, cannot practice celibacy throughout her life, and Meera is no exception to it. On seeing Sharmila's baby, her mind starts changing and the change culminates in her developing a strong affection for an orphan boy of Hispanic origin found under the stairs of her house. She keeps the boy under her custody and rears him, and Richard resents to it, and this results in a temporary separation of them. Legal constraints do not allow for an easy adaptation of the boy, and on request, Mrs. Ortiz, a friend of Meera, takes care of Krishna, Meera Christens the orphan boy so. But it is a misfortune that Krishna, one day, disappears from Mrs. Ortiz's custody, and never does he return to Meera.

Meera is not married but her cohabitation makes her feel tired and like a married woman who is childless, she craves for a child, and Krishna came in her life but now he is gone forever. She wants someone else to fall back upon, and Richard is the only recourse for her. Meera lives in America, and in every sense, she is Americanised, that is, in her manners, life style, attitude, English speech and so on. Even though advanced and independent, she wants a good companion, and understands that she cannot remain a celibate. Though westernized, Meera, as a woman, desires security in life, and therefore resolves to marry Richard. Meera's decision is right, for she is basically an Indian, and it is the Hindu culture that a woman should marry and beget children lest her life should be incomplete. It is a cultural conflict which is well resolved, and Meera is satisfied in life. Her choice of a husband may not be an Indian, but Richard is a man who could show her warmth, love, and affection, and it is enough for her. Meera cannot come out of the bounds of Hindu culture, and Chitra has made a realistic portrayal of the cultural conflict in a young Indian woman.



Meeting Mrinal by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the last story in the collection *Arranged Marriage*. When Meeting Mrinal opens, Asha, the Indianborn protagonist, who now lives in California, is somewhat guiltily preparing a ready-made pizza for her teenage son, Dinesh. Asha's husband, Mahesh, with whom she had an arranged marriage in India, has left her for a younger white woman. Though Asha used to spend hours preparing complex Indian meals from fresh ingredients for the family, she has almost given up cooking since Mahesh left. She now spends her time studying library science in order to get a full-time job and getting fit in an exercise class. Since Mahesh left Asha, Dinesh no longer talks much. He shuts himself in his room, listening to or playing music.

One day, Asha gets a telephone call from Mrinal, a childhood friend from India whom she has not seen for nearly twenty years. Mrinal is now a successful businesswoman living in Bombay. She is coming to San Francisco for a conference and wants to meet Asha and her family. Asha's delight at hearing from her friend soon gives way to fear and shame at the thought of admitting that her husband has left her. Asha talks to Mrinal as if her marriage is still intact but makes up excuses to get out of meeting her, saying that Mahesh is out of town, that she is busy, and that Dinesh has pressing engagements. Finally, she realizes that she cannot disappoint her friend and sets up a meeting. Dinesh is angry with his mother for lying to Mrinal. He asks why she could not tell the truth: Mahesh got tired of her and left her for another.

The story shows women who find themselves caught between two cultures, the restricted but comforting Indian culture of their birth and the freer but ruthless Western culture. The protagonist Asha, an Indian-born woman who immigrates to the United States to join her Indian husband (acquired through an arranged marriage). In her new home, she leads the life expected of a traditional Indian wife until an event occurs that forces her to move beyond her accustomed role: Her husband leaves her for a younger white woman. The story opens at this point, recounting Asha's attempts to come to terms with her feelings of failure and her need to carve out an independent life in an alien culture. This process reaches a crisis during a meeting with Mrinal, a childhood friend from India who is now a successful businesswoman. Divakaruni explores the immigrant search for identity and coherence in the adopted culture, in which the traditional assumptions do not work and the new ways require unexpected and sometimes painful growth.

The story shows the predicament of Asha, a woman who grew up in India, had an arranged marriage according to Indian tradition, and then had to adapt to a new lifestyle and culture as a divorced woman. The first change, taking place before the story opens, comes when she immigrates to the United States, a harsher culture full of "failing grades, drugs, street gangs,



AIDS." However, the cultural shock is cushioned by the fact that she is able to sustain the traditional Indian role of wife and mother, albeit with a part-time job.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of short stories that explore the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective. At once pessimistic and filled with hope, Divakaruni creates contradictory as well as connected fictional worlds through the nine short stories that make up this collection. Though the characters vary, the themes of the short stories are essentially the same—exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as the experiences of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions.

WORK CITED

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