

## Depiction of Women in Chitra B. Divakaruni's Selected Short Stories

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### Abstract

*Arranged Marriage is a collection of eleven short stories put together by the Indian American author and poet. The common link that binds these eleven stories together is that though they have different issues, they are all related to and are a result of patriarchy. Though the stories may differ in plots, they all revolve around the same theme. The protagonist in all the stories is a woman who is, most of the times, married and settled in a particular arrangement. She is made to suffer because of the expectations her family has from her and, comfortable or not, the way she has to meet these expectations. The focus is on different aspects of marriage, dysfunctional and functional, as well as abusive and loving. The motive behind writing this stories was not to make a moral judgment on old traditions, rather was to present the lived experiences of the modern world. The collection of stories became very well known for going against the clichés about arranged marriages along with being a critique for them. The stories under discussion in this paper, The Bats, Clothes and Silver Pavements-Golden Roofs revolve around the same theme.*

**Keywords:** Depiction of Women, Short Stories

### Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born on 29th of July, 1956 in Calcutta, got her education at a convent school that was run by Irish nuns. She completed her graduation and received her degree from Calcutta University in the year 1976. Immediately after this she moves to

United States of America where she finished her Masters from Wright State University in Ohio. After finishing the masters, she went on to complete her doctorate from the University of California. She started to write soon after she completed her graduation. To meet her everyday expenses and the expenses of education, she received different kinds of jobs along with. She got married to Murli Divakaruni, an engineer, in the year 1979. She has two sons.

In the year 1991, she founded an organization in San Francisco which aimed at helping the women of South Asia who had become the victims of abusive situations. She also worked for the distressed immigrant women while doing this social work.

In her various works, Chitra Banerjee has generated own life experiences as well as the experiences of other Indian women. Her work includes poetry, short stories and novels. She has a collection of poetry to her credit which is titled as *Black Candle*. It consists of poetry composed by Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistan poetesses. She has also written a novel titled *My Heart* which was published in the year 1999. She has another collection of poetry to her credit titled *Leaving Yuba City* in the year 1997. In this collection also, Banerjee discusses the same issue of the Identity of women. She depicts the struggle women have to go through to search for their identity.

The collection of stories under discussion, *Arranged Marriage*, was published in the year 1995. She has been conferred with many awards for this collection of short stories. She received the Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Price Award and Bay Area Book Reviewer's award as a fiction writer. Her works have been translated into eleven languages and are read worldwide.

Unfortunately, arranged marriages, which were prevalent in most of the world once upon a time, still exist in most of the Asian countries. The purpose behind arranged marriages is to preserve the say of the elders in the family. In fact in many cases, the girl is not even consulted before fixing a match for her. Not following the customs of the family and trying to go another way without setting for an arranged marriage is considered to be an insult in many families. The elders of the family go to the extent of brainwashing the girl and the boy into an arranged marriage. The culture of arranged marriages is prevalent to an extent that it is the groom's family that dominates the entire scenario. Banerjee mentions the incident of 'bride viewing' in some of her stories. The groom and his family visit the girl's family

to see if she is suitable for the marriage. The girl is judged just on the basis of the colour of skin and her skills in handling household chores. Education, in many countries in Asia, is still not given enough importance in case of girls . In fact it is the other way round. A girl who is highly educated is not welcomed into the family . Such practices are responsible for the patriarchal domination in the society.

### **The Bats**

The first story in the collection is called The Bats. This story is narrated from the perspective of a 7 year old child whose sex is not disclosed. At this very young age, this child becomes aware of the domestic abuse her mother is suffering from. The child's father, who is working at a local printing press as a foreman, makes the abuse so secretive that the little child notices it not only through the change in behaviour of her mother. The narrator observes that the mother keeps on crying during the night and does not sleep properly. As the time passes, the child also notices his mother's wounds. Not wishing to disclose what was happening as a part of the domestic violence, the mother decides to hide her wounds under the garb of everyday mishaps.

There comes a time when and the mother thinks that she has had enough and decides to run away with the child to an uncle in Gopalpur. Uncle works on a particular mango farm. All of a sudden he starts coming across bats which constantly attack uncle's mangoes. He tries all possible ways to get rid of these bats but is unsuccessful. When they finally succeed, uncle decides to take this little child on a fishing trip. When they are on this trip they discover a ring which is very strange. The uncle claims that it belongs to a wizard. When they come back home, the child is surprised and horrified to realize that the mother wishes to go back to the father. In spite of not willing to leave the uncle and go back to the father, the child has to agree to go back along with his mother. They return and after a few days, since the cycle of the violence continues, run away once again, and this cycle is repeated several times. The child has kept the ring safely hidden through their wanderings. Towards the end of the story, when they come back and the child checks the ring, he realizes that he has lost it and they leave, possibly for the final time at the end of the story.

Ring is another metaphor used in the story. The uncle mentions that it belongs to a wizard and has the power to fulfill any wish. The narrator, being a small child, tries to hold onto the ring as a token of happy days with grandpa uncle and the happy days that would come in future. When the child automatically loses it, it's also signifies the loss of innocence of childhood.

The returns and escapes of the wife are also symbolic of the kind of treatment given to the women by the society. She gathers the courage to leave after repeated episodes of violence, but is unable to tolerate the disapproval she would get from the society and decides to return to her husband, every single time. It becomes a cyclic movement as he changes just for a few days but soon the violence returns. Every time she leaves it is only to come back. She tries to have the faith in him and thinks that that particular time might be different. But unfortunately for her, every time she suffers. Every time he breaks her trust and becomes violent.

### **CLOTHES**

The protagonist of the story is a young girl called Sumita. As the story begins, we see her being prepared for bride viewing. Just as in a case of a regular arranged marriage in India, the custom was that the prospective groom would come along with his family and pass the judgement if the girl was worthy of being his bride. Sumita was exceptionally worried as her friends had been rejected on the basis of their complexion and looks multiple times. She was also scared about the entire situation as the boy who was coming to see her was from California. He was also under pressure to choose an Indian girl and get married. The only good part that she found about the entire arrangement was the beautiful embellished and expensive bridal trousseau.

Ultimately, the match is fixed, she gets married to this boy called Sumesh and discovers that he is a very caring and patient man, opposite of what she had expected. After moving with him to California, she realizes that he works at a store which is not doing very well at that point in time. He is concerned about her happiness and starts to save to have their own apartment. He also encourages her to study and pursue a teaching course. He even does not force her for sex ever. He waits till she gets comfortable with the idea of having an intercourse and then proceeds swiftly.

She wants to work at the store but unfortunately has to limit her desire as her in laws would not be appreciative of this step. Sumesh often purchases Western clothes for Sumita but she cannot wear them in front of her in laws. This shows that though they are living in United States, the mentality remains backward. During one of his night shifts, on a particular day, he is shot at the store in an attempted robbery and dies on the spot. Just like an Indian widow is expected to be, she had to wear colourless clothes to signify her widowhood. Also, it was considered obvious that she will have to return to India along with her in laws and would have to stay with them for the rest of her life as a dutiful daughter in law. This is the time she shows her courage and decides to stay in America. She decides to run the store as she had dreamt of when husband was alive.

Along with finally highlighting the courage that is portrayed by this woman towards the end of the story, it also highlights that how clothes are intertwined with once character. Women are expected to be dressed in their Indian attire in front of their in laws even when they are abroad. A woman who would wear Western clothes would be looked down upon by the elders of the family. It would be considered a shame for the family if the woman would go out wearing Western clothes. Such rules, however, have never been applied to men.

### **SILVER PAVEMENTS, GOLDEN ROOFS**

Jayanti Ganguly, the protagonist of the story, is the daughter of a rich aristocrat. She is very excited to go to America to study. It is decided that she is going to stay with her maternal aunt, Pratima , who everyone knows has been married to an NRI businessman. Though Jayanti has walked in with a lot of hope to her aunt house she is terribly disappointed to see the condition of the house and neighborhood. She also does not like uncle Vikram much because of his attitude towards the country and his habit of trying to brainwash aunt Pratima's ideas.

Observing the nature, behaviour and circumstances of an Pratima, Jayanti concludes that at aunt is not happy in her marriage, as is also visible by the loss of her jewellery , her endless work in the kitchen and the worrisome look on her face. Observing her aunt's family for a day, Jayanti requests her to join her for a walk in the neighborhood the next day. She is very happy to explore the streets

which were all covered with snow but unfortunately, after a while, they get lost. As they were trying to make their way back home and were searching through the streets, they happened to meet a gang of children who made racist remarks and attacked them with slush, which also resulted in the aunt getting some minor wounds.

It is a terrible experience for both the women. After this incident, they are finally able to locate the way to aunt Pratima's house but she gets very irritated when she is unable to locate the keys of the house. Uncle Bikram arrives and is very angry at the aunt leaving the house as he did not want her to go out. His anger reaches to the point of slapping her in agitation.

Jayanti is surprised and extremely taken aback by this behaviour of the uncle and wonders what she could possibly do to save her aunt. At this point in time, she sees uncle crying like a baby about the loss of his fortune in the country. What is more surprising is that aunt Pratima is being very understanding at this point and is trying to console uncle Bikram.

Jayanti now wonders if it is the same place about which she was so excited. She wonders that her dream of living a life in the US which would be beyond the restrictions of the society, capable of coming true, ever. She is totally confused as she had never imagined this perspective of aunt Pratima's abusive marriage.

But, along with all of this, their relationship is much more complex than what meets the eye. Initially aunt Pratima comes across as a woman who is completely devoted to her husband and has sacrificed all her jewellery to keep his business going. It is uncle Bikram who seems to be the one dominating the family and dictating the terms all the while. But soon enough we realize that his wife is the one who is his backbone. Though he has hit her, he ends up crying. It is ofcourse a very poor excuse for showing violence to his wife but aunt Pratima accepts his apology and shares her concern about their financial status. Interdependence between both of them, which is very complex, is clearly visible through the story. Jayanti compares the complex situation of the marriage between her uncle and aunt to the "knotted shawls of bride and groom at an Indian wedding". This knot signifies the intertwined lives of the couple that is married to each other. Her illusion about the happy married life of her aunt in the US is completely shattered and she no longer looks at the opportunity to move to US as an escape from patriarchy.

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