

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S 'THE BATS' AND 'THE DISAPPEARANCE': A STUDY IN CONTRAST

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the significant voices among the South Asian women writers of the present century. Her writings feature a deviation from the conventional portrayal of women. Her short story collection entitled 'Arranged Marriage' focusses on the complexities of multiple consciences of women characters. The paper intends to explore the impact of various factors, such as education, freedom of choice, financial independence and especially culture on women's lives. Culture plays a dominant role in Divakaruni's writings. To prove this, the researchers have taken two short stories from the collection. The short story 'The Bats' is set in India while the story 'The Disappearance' happens in America. Both the stories are a sharp contrast to each other. The impact of Indian culture is seen in the way the female protagonist in 'The Bats' reacts whereas the American culture influences the decisions of the wife in 'The Disappearance'. There is one important similarity in both the stories - the women protagonists do not have names. They are wives and mothers, yet they exclusively differ from each other in determining the course of their lives. The interest of the research lies in bringing out the contrast in both the women characters in the two short stories.

Key words: Culture, decisions, women etc.

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*Everything that has been written by men
about women should be viewed with suspicion,
because they are both judge and party.*

-POULAIN DE LA BARRE

(qtd. in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 5).

Culture plays an important role in shaping our lives. We tend to make changes in our approaches towards certain issues and in our attitudes in accordance with the culture(s) we are exposed to. We may be emboldened to take certain steps on account of the influence of a culture which we may not take otherwise. Women, especially, are more bound and influenced by the cultural codes. Simone de Beauvoir, in her magnum opus *The Second Sex*, rightly says, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,' (301). The dominant patriarchal code of conducts determines the way they live. The conservative social system defines women's living. It controls them through various cultural artifacts such as – clothes, food, education, socio-cultural status etc. Though the scenario has been changing gradually many women still find themselves entangled in it.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents the predicament of women, in India and America, in *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of short stories. The present study seeks to bring forth the contrast in the approaches of the female protagonists in the stories 'The Bats' and 'The Disappearance'. 'The Bats' presents the story of a woman whose cultural conditioning makes her come back to a husband who subjects her to violent physical abuse. 'The Disappearance' presents the story of a woman who disappears in search of individuality.

Both the stories depict the dominance of patriarchal culture which does not allow women irrespective of their living in India or in America, to find their own ways to be free from it. In India, we come across many women who are victims of domestic violence in India. Since most of these women are financially dependent on their husbands they find themselves left with very limited options.

'The Bats' portrays patriarchal culture influencing / affecting the protagonist's life in India. 'The Disappearance' presents a wife longing for space and individuality in America. The two short stories under discussion bring in, a sharp contrast between women's lives. In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni authentically and subtly portrays the contrast between two very opposite cultures and its impact on women. Both the stories focus on family arranged matches and how these marriages create problems for women in their native land and land of their settlement. Divakaruni focuses on women's traumatized experiences when they try to balance their old treasured beliefs and their dream for freedom and individuality in India and America.

Marriage as an institution plays a dominant role in Indian women's lives. Women are defined and described by their relation and responses in the culture they live in. Their relation with man determines their status in society. The writer focuses on women characters through their responses to their marriages. In this context it is right to discuss the concept of marriage in India. According to the conventional marital code, woman must follow and obey her husband and take care of his family. She is supposed to strive for their happiness. She is supposed to put up with the tortures inflicted on her by her husband and her in-laws. Her husband's home is her home. It brings tragic predicaments if she leaves her husband/his home. The society doesn't treat well a woman who leaves her husband's home and seeks to live life on her own terms. It reminds us of the ancient codification of Manu in his *Manusmriti*. According to him, 'Woman must always be protected by a man in her childhood, in youth and in old age' (qtd. in Pandurang, 203). In India, even today, women are identified as somebody's daughter, mother, sister, wife etc. Unfortunately, most women don't have an identity of their own.

It was Divakaruni's work as the founder of *Maitri* (a non-profit organisation based in San Francisco Bay Area) that made her aware of the harrowing plight of different married women:

My work with *Maitri* has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I have heard of acts of reality beyond imagining. The lives of many women I have met through this organization have touched me deeply. It is their hidden story that I try to tell in

many of the tales in my short story collection, *ArrangedMarriage*. It is their courage and humanity that celebrate an honour. (Shelvam, 65)

The story 'The Bats' depicts the predicament of a married woman. It is narrated through the perspective of the innocent little daughter of the protagonist. The protagonist is a victim of domestic violence. He beats her regularly. He beats her almost every night. The daughter is too young to understand the crisis her mother faces. The narrator daughter informs us:

THAT YEAR MOTHER CRIED A LOT, NIGHT.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. (*Arranged Marriage* 1)

In India women are more vulnerable to domestic violence when they are cut off from family and kinship and social support, which increase their dependence on their male partners. When subjected to violence, their options for seeking help can be further limited by insecure economic position. Their husband's home becomes the prime site for the brutality frequently directed towards them. The same happens with the protagonist of the story. She belongs to a poor family. Her husband works as a foreman in a printing press. He always comes home drunk and regularly beats her. Being a financially dependent and timid housewife, she is imprisoned in domestic tortures. To add to her woes, she cannot confide her sufferings to others as she does not have parents. She suffers exploitation silently without any protest. There is no limit to her woes. She always tries to hide the beating marks and scars on her face from her daughter. However they don't remain unnoticed by her daughter. The daughter tells us, '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.' (*Arranged Marriage*, 3)

When the torture by her husband becomes unbearable, the wife escapes with her daughter to her distant old uncle's place at Gopalpur. The uncle's job was to take care of the Zamindar's orchards. The wife seeks shelter with him for few days. The uncle (Grandpa uncle for the narrator) takes the narrator with him on the farms every day. The narrator also starts enjoying her Grandpauncle's company. On his off days the old man would take the narrator for fishing. One evening, on reaching home from their fishing, the narrator finds her mother waiting on the porch with an envelope. It was a letter from the husband. He wanted them to come back. He promised that 'it won't happen again' (*Arranged Marriage*11). The narrator's mother announces that they would be going back to Calcutta.

We come to know that the wife had written to her husband informing him about their whereabouts. The uncle could not understand the reason for her going back to a man who assaults her physically. She tells her uncle, 'I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the market place. The loneliness of being without him' (*Arranged Marriage*11-12). On the way back to Calcutta, the narrator finds her mother's eyes 'all shiny and lit up' (*Arranged Marriage*13).

But, there is no change in the husband. The beatings continue. One day, in the middle of the night, the narrator has to leave their house with her mother without taking anything with them:

Mother stumbled behind me down the lightless passage – we hadn't dared to switch on the light – holding the waded end of the of her saree to her face, the blood seeping through its white like a dark, crumpled flower. I pulled at her hand to hurry her along, my own shoulder still throbbing from when Father had flung me against the wall as I tried to stop him. (*Arranged Marriage*16)

The story doesn't end here. The narrator tells us that they 'came back a few weeks later (this time even before our bruises had faded all the way)' (*Arranged Marriage*16).

Divakaruni here compares the wife to the bats who had descended on the mango orchards of the zamindar. The narrator's Grandpa-uncle had to use poison to control their menace. Every morning there would be dead bodies of the bats all over the place. But the bats continue to visit the orchard. The old man remarks: 'I guess they just don't realize what's happening. They don't realise 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)

Like the bats, the wife keeps coming back to her husband, knowing fully well that she would be beaten and harmed. It is her cultural conditioning that makes her take such a decision. She can fly and be safe but she continues to bear all the tortures. She cannot live without her husband. The stares of the women at Gopalpur made her feel that she had committed a sin by leaving her husband's house.

The wife in 'The Disappearance' takes a different and unique stand vis-à-vis her predicaments. She is a typical Indian girl living in America with her husband. They have a two year old son. The husband took pride in the fact that he was a good husband. He had married her despite his mother's protests. He let her have her way in trifle things but there were certain things where he would put his foot down, '...when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes' (*Arranged Marriage* 172). A typical Indian girl, when she comes to America after her marriage, dreams of a life free from the rigid world of

patriarchal dominance. But this girl is shocked when she is not allowed to work or wear American clothes. 'But he always softened his no's with a remark like, What for, I'm here to take care of you, or, You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes' (*Arranged Marriage 172*). The only time she had for herself was the evening walk that she took every evening after her husband had come back from office. She would go for the walk all alone. That was the time she had for herself.

She is supposed to do all the things that a dutiful Indian wife should do. There was another area where the husband was firm about - sex. The wife had no interest in it. She would always keep saying - '...Please, not tonight, I don't feel up to it' (*Arranged Marriage 172*). To avoid sex, '...she would start on the most elaborate household projects, soaping down the floors, changing the liners in cabinets' (*Arranged Marriage 172*). The husband felt that her 'reluctance went beyond modesty' (*Arranged Marriage 172*). He would grab her by the elbow and pull her out of the bed. But, 'he was always careful not to hurt her' (*Arranged Marriage 172*). The wife would quit struggling after sometime and let him do what he wanted. The wife looked for what Simone de Beauviour says 'independence within dependence' (*The Second Sex 37*). She finds herself imprisoned in the patriarchal dominant chain. She looks for her space but she can't find it. She sees the liberal American culture and wants to be a part of it. She realises that she has no individuality. Going for education or a job would have allowed her to grow. But her husband's attitude disappoints her. She finds her body being used without her approval.

One day, the wife simply disappears. She disappears, as her husband later finds out, with all her jewellery. But she doesn't take any other valuables. She takes only her jewellery.

The outside liberal American world inspires her to determine to be free from the husband by leaving him. She wishes to control her own life, to live her life on her own terms. The American way of life inspires and conditions her to take such a decision. She disappears to fulfil her dreams and aspirations.

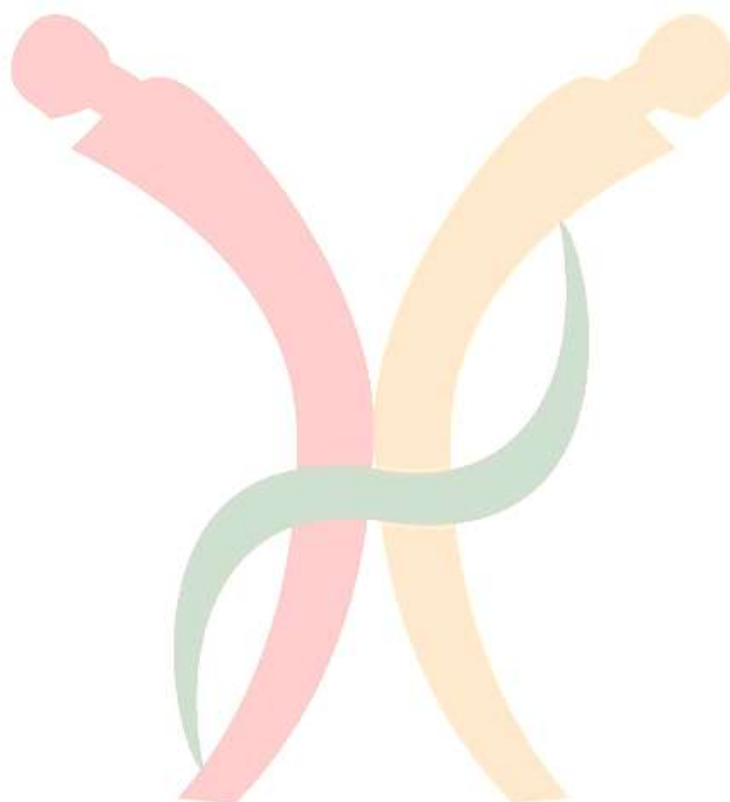
There are some similarities in the situations of both the characters. They do not have names. Their marriages are arranged to their husbands. Both suffer on account of their husbands. Their homes become the locus of their suppression and control rather than a space for affection and warmth. The wife in 'The Bats' completely surrenders to the patriarchy by returning to her husband again and again. She feels that an abandoned wife has no respect, no social standing. Whereas, the wife in 'The Disappearance' hardly had any societal pressure in America. It is in fact the American culture which motivates her to dream of being free from the shackles of patriarchy.

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