

## ***ARRANGED MARRIAGE: AS AN EPITOME OF SOCIAL ISSUES***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American literary figure, has been constantly presenting innumerable themes such as immigration, Indian experience, contemporary America, alienation, women issues and their empowerment, history, myth, and the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world through her short-stories collections, poetry and novels. Her writings reveal an exclusive blend of the two essentially distinct cultures and in this way she entertains her readers globally. In her award winning short-stories collection entitled *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni narrates eleven convincing stories which are though distinct in background, pattern and detail from each other but tied up in a single string of marriage. The present study tries to erect the conventional image of the women projected in some of the stories of this collection and this kind of depiction can be said to have its origins from the Indian traditional atmosphere which had been the habitat of the author and influenced her mental faculty to a great extent.

**KEYWORDS:** Abortion, Domestic Violence, Gender Disparity, Immigration, Racism Etc

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an enthusiastic author of the acclaimed short-stories collection entitled *Arranged Marriage*, an intellectual writer of a number of novels, children's books, and a radical poet marks her indelible impact in the realm of the Indian-American Literature. Divakaruni, born in July, 1956, was brought up in a traditional middle class Indian family with the girlhood ambition of becoming a teacher. Her immigration to the United States divided her persona into two parts; in one part, there was her encounter with different experiences in an alien country and in the other, there were the memories of her native homeland, but this resulted into her emergence as a writer, as in an interview by Sujata Shekar, she asserts that, "Moving to a very different culture and learning to live on my own made me see the world much more clearly.... I thought about India more than I had ever before. I realized what I appreciated about it; the warmth, the closeness of extended family, the way spirituality pervades the culture. But I also recognized problems [with regard to] how women are often treated" (Shekar n. p.). Continuing the discourse with Sujata Shekar, Divakaruni reveals that:

At Berkeley, I started volunteering at the Women's Center, and became aware of  
Women's issues, including violence against women When I graduated, I volunteered with  
Support Network, a mainstream organization. . . . I realized we needed an organization  
That was culturally sensitive to these women, where they'd feel comfortable sharing their

Stories. Even if they had to go into a shelter, they'd know we'd be there holding their Hands through the process, doing simple things like making sure there was culture-specific or religion-specific food so we started Maitri—small, grassroots, about five or Six of us I put in an extra phone line in my home, and it took off. There was a need in the Community. . . . This was a chance for them to start a new life. Now that I'm living in Houston, I'm on the advisory board of a similar organization called Daya. (Shekar n.p)

The objective of the present research study is to project one of her short stories collection entitled *Arranged Marriage* as an epitome of social issues, therefore the selected stories entitled “The Bats”, “Silver Pavements Golden Roofs”, “The Maid Servant’s Story”, and “Ultrasound” have been taken to fulfill the desired aspect. Generally the phrase “social problem”, “is one of those much used popular expressions which turn out to be incapable of exact definition” (Case 268), however social problems can be defined with the usage of the words inscribed in Stanley D. Eitzen and Maxine Baca Zinn’s conflicted-oriented text as, “Societally induced conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for any segment of the population, and acts and conditions that violate the norms and values found in society. The distribution of power in society is the key to understanding these social problems. The powerless, because they are dominated by the powerful, are likely to be thwarted in achieving their basic needs . . . in contrast, the interests of the powerful are served” (11). These selected stories exhibit the problems of domestic violence, poverty, racism, sexual harassment, gender disparity, and abortion etc., resulting from the factors which are beyond the control of individual, local and geographical conditions. After the consideration of the situations and lives of women in society, the feminists’ perception defines gender and sometimes race or social class as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. For feminists, the patriarchal society is the basis of social problems, and generally the societal conditions and conventional practices establish that the woman’s identity is included under that of the male and thus the patriarchal supremacy continues to suppress the woman.

The dramatization of the problem of domestic violence occurs in the very first story of this collection entitled “The Bats”, where the harassment of a woman by her husband, “a foreman in Rashbihari Printing Press” (*AM 2*), has been naturalized through its stereotypical representation of woman as feeble, defenseless, and an obstruction in man’s life. Herein the girl child, the narrator of the story, perceives her mother’s complicity in the cycle of violence from the father throughout the story and unravels the plight of her mother at the very opening of the story as, “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 . . . a yellow blotch with its edges turning purple” (*AM 2*). About this social concern Rudi Dallos and Eugene McLaughlin, also maintains that, “although there are many ways that men as a group maintain women in oppressed social positions, violence is the most overt and effective means of social control” (24). And in this case usually the “children are very much the silent victims of domestic violence. They may witness it or be subject to it, but often their voice is not heard” (qtd. in Sterne & Poole xi). The forces of the masculinity go on as the daughter depicts, “One morning when she was getting me ready for school . . . I noticed something funny about her face. Not the dark circles under her eyes. Those were always there. It was high up on her cheek, a yellow blotch with its edges turning purple” (*AM 2*). The ferocity recurs a few days later in a more subversive way as the narrator depicts that, “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” (*AM 3*). Thus the stress and the

subsequent violence can be said to be built from the pressures of daily life, financial problems and probably the unemployment of the woman and to escape from such an intensely fierce situation, the mother decides to visit her uncle who “lives way away in a village . . . We might be staying with him for a while. . . . Uncle says we can stay here as long as we want, that I never have to go back to . . .” “To what, Ma?” (AM 4) In these particular circumstances the children gets negatively affected by witnessing the fierceness and thus their relationship with the abuser also degrades as in the present story when the girl child is asked, “Will you miss your father?” she replies in a very definite tone, “No” . . . his loud-voiced presence was fading from my mind” (AM 5). After attaining its two stages i.e. stress building and violence the cycle of abuse reaches its third stage of reconciliation when the victim mother begins to feel pain, disrespect, humiliation and fear and writes a letter to her husband as she cries out, “I wrote to him” . . . I couldn’t stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the market place” (AM 12). But why the victims just don’t leave the abusive relationship, and this aspect has been analyzed by Willis C. Newman & Esmeralda Newman, who depicts that, “The victim cannot stay with friends or families the rest of their lives. Furthermore, the husband abuser will follow, find then, and more damage will occur. Perhaps she cannot find support from family or the legal system” (10). During this stage the perpetrator (father) claims to feel overwhelming remorse as the mother reveals to her uncle that, “He wants us to come back. He promises it won’t happen again” (AM 11). At this stage of reconciliation, “Abusers are frequently so convincing, and survivors so eager for the relationship to improve, that survivors who are often worn down and confused by long-standing abuse, stay in the relationship” (Walker n.p.). Further the ignorant mother along with the daughter leaves for Calcutta to live together happily with the father whereas the daughter was already aware of the impending danger waiting for them, as she says that, “She just didn’t *know* the way I did” (AM 14). The instinct proves right and the things get worse from time to time, and sometimes they had to, “. . . leave in the middle of the night . . . we hadn’t dared to switch on the light-holding the wadded end of her sari 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” (AM 16). Thus the cycle of abuse accomplishes and recurs also as it tends to. The story unravels another facet of abuse i.e. economic abuse which intensifies the plight of the mother and it can be presented in the words of daughter who asserts that, “Mother . . . never had much money and whenever she asked for any, Father flew into one of his rages” (AM 3). Jacqui True has stated 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” (5). Michael P. Johnson has also depicted that, “In fact, economic dependency and lack of economic resources are among the most common barriers to leaving reported by the battered woman” (38). In an interview entitled “The Power of Storytelling” by Metka Zupancic, Divakaruni explains that, “The theme of battered women, as you know, is important and comes back in a number of my books, partly because of the work I have done in the community with domestic violence. In my writing, domestic violence is explored from many different angles. In one of the early stories in *Arranged Marriage*, set completely in India, a battered woman makes a decision to go back to her abuser” (Zupancic n.p.).

In “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”, the instances of domestic abuse, and racism seems to result from the main theme of immigration, where Divakaruni introduces the character of Jayanti who moves to the United States to study and where she has to stay with “Aunt Pratima . . . And her husband . . . Bikram uncle” (AM 36), for a while. The description of their apartment which was “. . . not at all what an American home should be like. This apartment smells of stale curry” (AM 40), revealed their depressed economic condition as uncle, “was not the owner of an automobile empire (as the

matchmaker had assured her family) but only a mechanic who had a dingy garage in an undesirable part of town” (AM 44). Bikram-uncle’s suppression of aunt Pratima due to his fear of being assaulted as an outsider or very fact of being a “kala admi” (AM 43), makes Jayanti to reflect over her dream of being married with an American “Prince” (AM 56). Jayanti observes how Bikram-uncle has set the particular norms for her aunt because when she asks her aunt to go outside, she refuses it saying that, “Your uncle does not like me to go out. He is telling me it is dangerous. “How can it be dangerous?” I say. It’s just a ploy of his to keep her shut up in the house and under his control” (AM 46). Finally aunt Pratima agrees to go for a walk and urges Jayanti that, “Do not be saying anything to Uncle. It will make him angry. . . . He worries too much since . . .” (AM 47). And further they encounter the racist slur by the neighborhood boys who call them “Nigger” (AM 50) repetitively and throw slush over aunt’s face, as was already gauged by aunt. This incident breeds resentment in Bikram uncle and yells out, “Haven’t I told you not to walk around this trashy neighborhood? Haven’t I told you it wasn’t safe? . . . He raises his arm. “No”, I shout. I run toward them. . . . When the back of his hand catches Aunt Pratima across the mouth, I flinch as if his knuckles had made that thwacking bone sound against my own flesh” (AM 53).

At such concerns Willis C. Newman & Esmeralda Newman, also states that, “The people get overwhelmed with problems, and cannot communicate well. . . Many times anger is used as an excuse and instrument to batter and beat” (11). Elaine P. Congress & Manny J. Gonzalez also depicts that, “Indian battered women face additional problems due to immigration status, level of acculturation, and culturally insensitive mainstream organizations that create barriers to obtaining needed assistance” (333). On the other hand, Jayanti’s dream of America finally gets shattered and she compels to ask herself, “Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land, where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?” (AM 56) Bikram-uncle repents for his behavior and says to aunt Pratima that, “I tried so hard, Pratima. I wanted to give you so many things- but even your jewelry is gone.” Grief scrapes at his voice. “This damn country, like a dain, a witch- it pretends to give and then snatches everything back” (AM 54). This kind of acceptance by Bikram uncle can be seen as a first step towards the minimization of his violent behavior the fear of being assaulted in an alien country makes Bikram uncle to be crude towards aunt Pratima. In an interview entitled “The Power of Storytelling” by Metka Zupancic, Divakaruni has also confirmed that:

My characters are mostly Indian women growing up in India in a very traditional family.

In Arranged Marriage, many come from a background similar to my own. I grew up with

Very definite notions of womanhood, of who is considered a good woman and how she is

To behave, especially within the family context Much of that was based on the notion that

A good woman makes sacrifices. As a result of immigration, when we find ourselves in

The West, there is quite a different notion of what a good woman is and what she is

Expected to do (Zupancic n. p)

In “The Maid Servant’s Story”, the story revolves around the husband, (an assistant manager at a very proper British bank that had stayed on in India after independence), his wife, sister-in-law, and a maid. The wife’s sister narrates the story to her niece (wife’s daughter) about the maid who was appointed by the wife, when she was expecting another child, without the consent of her husband, as he asks, “What d’you knows of this woman? She could be a thief or, worse still, the spy for a gang of dacoits. . . . Asking for trouble, you are. Half those women are prostitutes anyway” (AM 121).

Though the wife retains the girl against his wishes, but before it the husband asks his wife to let him, “take a look at her” (AM 121), and the husband’s distorted psyche is revealed when, “The husband’s eyes slid over the dark glow of her new-washed face . . . The slim, straight body, the taut belly, the sinuous curve of breast and hip” (AM 121). After some time the wife is hospitalized, and thus the husband gets a chance and tiptoes in the privacy of night to seek a sexual liaison with the wife’s maid, as it has been depicted in the story:

And then more loudly, as the man tried to push her back into the storeroom, “No, I beg  
 You, no, stop it, let me go, please. How can you be like this with Didi sick in the  
 Hospital?” “Don’t act so virtuous,” the man hissed. “Once a whore, always a whore. .  
 . . “Don’t worry, no one will know. I’ll make it worth your while,” he said with a laugh  
 That struck the sister like a shard of ice. “And it’ll be a lot more fun with me than it was  
 With those stinking peasants at the bustee Let me go, Dadababu.” The maid was  
 Kicking at the man’s shins now (AM 145)

When the gender bias mentality, usually inserted in men by the society, is expressed in the form of the sexual harassment, and in these times a woman, complaining against this behavior, is termed as, “over reacting”, “poor sport” and the “troublemaker” (Mathur 52). As defined by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), “It is unlawful to harass a person (an applicant or employee) because of that person’s sex” (qtd. in Hanne 80). After a hubbub from the maid’s mother and “bustee” (AM 154) people who intrude into the bungalow and want to take her back in “bustee”, the maid goes to seek support from the sister and the husband but he dramatically affirms that, “My first responsibility is the welfare of my family. That woman has caused nothing but trouble since the day she came” (AM 154). Thus the victims, “are often labeled troublemakers” (Hanne 83), and the maid compels to leave the home with these words to the wife’s sister, “Tell Didi . . .” the maid started, then broke off, so that the sister would wonder what she had wanted the wife to know. About the husband’s actions? About her own fidelity to the woman who had taken her in? About injustice and ill-chance” (AM 156). In an interview entitled “Sister and Spices”, Divakaruni reveals how she deals with such circumstances in the plot of the story, “As an activist, I’m clear about what needs to be done. But as a writer, I want to investigate situations that won’t easily break down into: these are the good people, these are the bad people, these are the oppressors, and these are the oppressed. It’s complex. But I want to write about it and make people aware of it because awareness is an early step toward change” (Shekar n.p.). The most complex tale from the narrative point “The Maid Servant’s Story” becomes an instructive tale, as the protagonist hears of the tragic episode in her mother’s life that allows her to understand her mother’s distress and moves to think about the plight of women generally, “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).

Divakaruni’s “The Ultrasound” revolves around the social problem of abortion and the ill-treatment of the women by her husbands and in-laws or more peculiarly by the crucial family system. The story makes us acquaint with two cousins pregnant at the same time, “My cousin Arundhati and I are pregnant with our first babies, a fact which gives me

great pleasure. Although she's in India and I here in California, we've kept close track of each other's progress" (*AM* 201). Being the narrator of the story Anjali states that, ". . . Like good Indian girls, we both allowed our mothers to arrange traditional marriages for us. . . . Prajapati, the winged and capricious god of marriage, set us down in such different places- me here in San Jose with Sunil, and her in provincial Burdwan (*AM* 206-07). On one hand, Anjali gets confrontation with her husband mostly on the economic issues as Anjali informs that, "Sometimes when I bought something I shouldn't have, he shouted that I was a spendthrift, letting money flow through my fingers like water. Your mother should have married you to a maharajah, not a mere working man like myself" (*AM* 214), and on the other the predicament of Arundhati comprises of disrespect by her family members and husband as well as the immense burden of household work which has been depicted as:

There is always so much to be done! Early in the morning I have to supervise the maid as she milks  
The cows. . . . After that there are vegetables to cut, and breakfast and lunch and dinner to cook. . . .  
The way one of Runu's brothers-in-law had made a rude comment when she'd burnt the rice  
Pudding. The way Ramesh, who'd returned from his business tour a couple of days before I left,  
Had scolded her, his voice rising in irritation, Arundhati, how many times have I told you not to  
Mess up the newspaper before I've read it. (*AM* 210-13)

The concrete plight begins when the two pregnant cousins, undergo ultrasound and amniocentesis tests during their pregnancies and when it is revealed that Arundhati (Runu) is pregnant with a girl; her husband and mother-in-law pressurize her to have an abortion, because they would only accept a male child as the family's firstborn. In this concern, Divakaruni discloses to Sujata Shekar that:

How some women can be unsympathetic to women's issues, especially as they grow older and  
Attain positions of power over other women? That relationship between women, and the power  
Struggle that ensues is interesting. I want to explore the fact that things are not as simple as saying,  
Okay, men are the bad guys, and they're the only villains. The women who grow older and more  
Powerful and who begin to suppress other women do it out of all kinds of sad complexities in their  
Own lives (Shekar n.p)

Studies have shown that female children are not only at risk at the time of birth, but are also at risk during infancy, and there is a significant decrease in the sex ratio between birth, and up to the age of four. It has been depicted that between 1978 and 1983 "of the twelve million girls born each year, only nine million will live to be fifteen" (Bhatnagar & Dube 3). Runu opposes and leaves her husband's home with the guidance of Anju (Anjali), who thinks that Runu's immigration to America will be the only solution for all her problems. She herself says, "Tomorrow I'll ask Sunil about sponsoring Runu, maybe getting her a student visa. I know he will fight it at first, give me a hundred reasons why we can't do it. Why we shouldn't. But I'll fight back. . . . It's worth it- for Runu and, yes, I. I'll get my way" (*AM* 230). Herein the most prevailing social problem of the abortion of the female fetus has been depicted in a way as to bring out clear binaries between the United States and India, with the United States being endowed with most of the positive and redeeming

qualities and India being portrayed as the backward and the evil in need of redemption. Humanist feminists emphasize in their politics that women are ordinary human beings just as men are. Jean Grimshaw, also points out that, “human nature itself is then seen as something that is the same in men and women” (118). Modern humanist feminists indicate this same idea with the difference between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, for instance, Ann Oakley argues that “sex differences may be ‘natural’ but gender differences have their source in culture, not nature” (137). In her essay entitled “What Women Share” (1999), Divakaruni unravels her emotional union with the female friends:

In the best friendships I have had with women, there is a closeness that is unique,  
 A sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need  
 Explanation, perhaps because of the life-changing experiences we share— menstruation, childbirth,  
 And menopause the same tragedies, physical or emotional, threaten us: the infidelity of a spouse  
 Or boyfriend, rape, breast cancer, the death of a child who had grown inside our body whether any  
 Of these strike us personally or not, if we hear of it happening to a woman we love, we feel its  
 Reality like an electric shock along our own spine (Divakaruni n.p)

## CONCLUSIONS

In an interview by Sujata Shekar, Divakaruni affirms that, “writing is definitely activism, especially if one’s passions outside of writing intersect with one’s interests within writing (Shekar n.p.), and through her writing and social work, she attempts to reveal and reform the distressed situations encountered by women universally. Finally it can be said that after confronting all these social problems like abortion, gender disparity, violence and racism etc. caused by geographical or psychological conditions, Divakaruni’s women probably choose not to leave at first but they do eventually and resign themselves to their fate. In “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”, aunt Pratima continues to be engaged with unsophisticated and vulnerable Bikram-uncle because of love and, “threading her long elegant fingers (the fingers, still, of a Bengali aristocrat’s daughter) through his graying hair to pull him to her” (*AM* 56), and thus forgives him and gives one more chance. But there are a number of organizations in the USA, which provide protection and safety to the victims of domestic violence, as: National Domestic Violence Hotline ([www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)), National Sexual Assault Hotline of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) ([www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)), The National Center for Victims of Crime ([www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)), and the laws like Violence Against Women Act etc. The protagonist of “The Bats”, suffers due to her husband’s cruelty, but is convinced that nothing will be done, thus she believes what the abuser say and resigns herself to the fate. The wife in “The Maid Servant’s Story”, suffers her husband’s infidelity but with her eroded heart, decides to continue her married life for the sake of her children (though later the husband and the son dies of epidemic), and thus she is left with her daughter. The only solution to such fierceness towards women, is that the harmful thoughts should be replaced with better thoughts and as the Bible says, “whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (qtd. in Littauer, 1997). But sometimes, the ferocity grows to the extremity and needs to get eliminated, for this purpose the Parliament of India has enacted many acts which are as follows: Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, PCPNDT ACT, 2003, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013, and these acts provide reparation to women to a satisfactory level.

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