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ABSTRACT
This paper is an attempt to study the birth of New Woman, in the light of feminist analysis, in the Immigrant Indian women characters in the short stories of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “Arranged Marriage”. It deplores that being trapped between tradition and modernity, Chitra B. Divakaruni’s immigrant heroines are fully conscious of being victims of gender discrimination prevalent in the conservative male-dominated society. C. Divakaruni gives her pragmatic resolutions related to the modern Indian Immigrant women’s beleaguered existence. Repudiating the femininity, the housewifery and the duties to their coercive husbands, her protagonists transform themselves into the beings of self-assertive, self-independent and self-actualised spirit who have found for themselves their own space to work on their own, roam singly about and lead their lives happily on their own.

Key Words: Chauvinism, Feminist, New Woman and self-assertive.

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The ‘New Woman’ was a feminist ideal that came into vogue from the late nineteenth century and had a profound influence on feminism into the twentieth. After the coinage of the term ‘New Woman’ by Sarah Grand in her article The New aspect of the Woman Question, it was further popularly utilised by Henry James and Henrik Ibsen to describe the educated and independent career women. According to a joke by Max Beerbohm (1872-1956), “The New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen’s brain.” In the world of globalised capitalism and industrialism, education and wide opportunities for lucrative jobs have remoulded the woman into a complete super creature. She is smarter, tougher, educated, courageous, more intelligent and even more aggressive in spirit and attitude. She is more ambitious to find a career to be financially independent. The ‘New Woman’ has shattered the glass ceiling and wants equality and respectable status to choose a life she wants, travels the world as per her will and satisfies her desire. She today challenges the traditional notions of ‘Angel in the house’, ‘sexually voracious image’ and sita syndrome. She is aware of exploitation and her inferior position in the family and society. She is contemplative about her predicament and chooses to protest and fight against the traditionally accepted norms and currents of a male dominated traditional society. She is prepared to face the consequences of her choices. In a word, she is out to explore her potential and curve a niche for herself in almost every area.
The voice of new woman, as Neeru Tandon says in her text, *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*, is voiced by Shange Nt’ozana (1981):

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I am space and winds
like a soft rain or torrent of dust
i can move
be free in time
a movement is mine always
i am not like a flower at all
i can bloom and be a wisp of sunlight
i’m a rusting of dead leaves and so familiar with tears
alla this is mine
so long as i breathe
.......................” (p. 77)
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The most Indian women characters, as appropriately depicted in the modern and postmodern English fictions of Indian women novelists like Shashi Despande, Anita Desai, Kamala Das “cannot be fully grouped with their western counterpart in their evolution from the ‘feminine’ to the ‘female” (Tandon, 2012, p. 127). They are progressive and aware of their educational and property rights in family and society and yearn complete liberation like the western women but they believe unlike the western ones that they will possess all those lying within the family-unit with her male counterpart, and must sustain and protect themselves and not neglect familial duties. Simon de Beauvoir said (1997):

“...She wants her womanliness for her own satisfaction...She has no intention of discarding them (it) when she has found liberty by other roads.” (p. 694-95)

According to Anita Desai, “The Indian Woman is always is working towards an adjustment and compromise. Few Indian feminists really contemplate total change. Working towards and adjustment through the traditional role is much less drastic much more Indian. I think Indian feminism is more practical than theoretical. It is expedient rather than ideological.” (Desai, 1994, p. 168) When ‘compromise’ and ‘adjustment’ does not give the women respite from the pain, they come out of the familial bonds to live on their own. This happens in most of the female characters of the novelists like Manju Kapur, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning and best-selling author, poet, activist and teacher. She was born in Kolkata in 1956. She migrated to America for studies in 1976. She is the co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline for the South Asian Women to assist them liberate from their domestic violence. She is presently engaged in many non-profit organisations in the areas around Houston. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Houston. She has to her credit seven novels, two short story collections, two important poetry volumes and Brotherhood and Conch series and many more volumes of writings. She has received many literary awards like The American Book Award, PEN Oakland/ Joshephine Miles Literary Award, Allen Ginsberg and Pushcart Prize. Her works basically revolve around the distressing situations of Indian Immigrant women in America. Her woman protagonists like Paanchali, Sudha, Anjali, Tilo, Rakhi and Korobi herald jihad against the domination of the patriarchy. They are educated, adamant, mentally strong and rebellious, and unhesitatingly liberate themselves from the bullying male chauvinism. To attain selfhood they undergo a journey from restriction to freedom, both physical and emotional. Actually, her works attain a form of activism.

*Arranged Marriage* of Chitra B. Divakaruni contains exquisitely written eleven short stories. The Falgu-like undercurrent of feminist cry runs through the nucleus of the stories. All the stories have women at their foci and lays bare their burning problems, their psychological conflict, their identity crisis, their demythologizing of the womanhood, their rebellious angst against the patriarchal domination, their search for identity, their self-independent and self-actualisation in their lives. *Arranged Marriage* is Divakaruni’s testament for women’s liberation, women’s right to self-expression and their way-out to individualization.
Some of her heroines take control of their destinies single-handedly and some with the assistance of other woman.

**Bats**, the first story of the volume, exposes the little protagonist’s bitter spiteful anger against her bullying father and her hate for the docility of her own mother. Her father would beat her mother every night. When she was very little, her father used to pick her up suddenly and throw all the way up to the ceiling to her breathless screaming. Once they had been compelled to leave the house at the night with no bag and baggage with them. This male domination gave birth to a ‘New Woman’ in the little protagonist. They fled to the house of her maternal uncle not tolerating such bullying any longer. When her mother readied herself to return home being lenient with the letter of promise from her father, she regurgitated her severe lividity against her mother’s return. She kicked the packing done by her mother and shouted “I hate you! I hate you!” (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 12)

**Clothes** brings out the metamorphosis of Sumita Sen, a 20th century Indian immigrant in America, from gorgeous sari-clad docile daughter and wife into almond blouse and skirt-clad rigid woman. She hatefully turns down the white sari of widowhood and its associating paraphernalia and decides to stay single in the dangerous alien land America after her husband’s fatal demise for racial violence. She perceives in India “…widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings” (ibid, p. 33). She gathers her mettle, “straighten her shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath” (ibid, p. 33) and is out for the work at the store where she rarely went before her husband’s death, instead of returning to India with her husband’s family.

In **Silver Pavements Golden Roofs**, Divakaruni explicates the diaspora’s bitter experience along with the search for freedom of the New Woman. Jayanti yearns to carry the chalice of her life in America despite its diasporic dangers. She deserted her family, homeland and its hydra-headed restrictions to fulfil her dream of marrying a prince from far-away land and enjoy complete liberation:

Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land  
Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold? (ibid, p. 56)

Through **The Word Love**, Divakaruni shows that her ‘New Woman’ embraces solely self-controlled single life which has permeating joy of happiness. She is ready to spurn the loveless conjugal life. The female immigrant protagonist suffers from both ends-her mother at home and her husband in America. Her mother cuts all relation with her for her treading ‘Lakhan-Rekha’ imposed by her mother. Her husband strips from her all rights of calling any of her friends or receiving the calls of her friends. But he has every right on the answering machine. He has total control on her at all levels. Her time passes on with shedding her tear drops. This distressing pent-up conditions cull intrepidity inside her. She bids adieu the loveless home to search for a new life full of self-control and self-choices.

**The Maid Servant’s Story** exposes how Indian women suffer under the coercive social apparatus and how they try to subvert that coercion. Sarala fled from her home for the torture of her mother and engaged to work as a maid in the house of ‘wife’. Manisha, the protagonist of the story, went to America not to be doomed in life under the suffocating ambience of the Indian male-centred society. She reveals: “It’s how we survive, we Indian women whose lives are half light and half darkness, stopping short of revelations that would otherwise crisp away our skins” (ibid, p.167).

**A Perfect Life** chronicles the diacritical characteristics of the ‘New Woman’ through the character portrayal of Meera Bose. Meera is the true embodiment of liberty, autonomy, financial self-sufficiency, sexual freedom, motherhood and femaleness. Her character is depicted in such way as exerting complete autonomy in her personal spheres. She loved Richard, an American. She pleasantly sucked the kernel of sexual satisfaction with her partner. As she says “... in bed we tried wild and wonderful things that would have left me speechless with shock in India had I been able to imagine them” (ibid, p. 64). But she never tolerated the domination of Richard over her. Defying Richard’s warning she kept the orphan child named Krishna to her. Because she wanted psychological motherhood. She was financially well-sufficient as she had an “interesting job at the bank” (ibid, p. 73). She was the worshipper of emancipation and freedom. She loved Richard, because he gave her ‘space’and More because he was passionate without getting possessive and did not mind
when she was out with other friends or out for huge pressure of work for long days. In case of marriage and motherhood Divakaruni was more like the Indian feminists than like the western feminists. Meera believed in taking marriage and motherhood care freely but not care wornly. As she said, “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” (ibid, p. 76-77). Meera tried to adopt the orphan boy Krishna legally. And to do so she even resorted to fabricating excuses on the identity of the boy. But when she lost him on legal ground, her psychological motherhood vehemently desired his return to her.

The Disappearance unearths a breathless shocking tragedy of a housewife bullied by her chauvinistic Indian husband. The wife was educated, modest and calibrated to maintain well her housewifery. She always tolerated her husband’s physical and sexual torture. But she could not bear one night’s bestial sexual torture of her husband. She left her husband’s home to live singly on her own.

Affair deals with two unhappy married couples-Abha and Ashok, and Meera and Shrikant. Abha and Meera are the true embodiments of New Women. Initially they suffer under male chauvinism, but finally they emerge liberated crushing the cursed nuptial bonds. Abha wanted to become a good wife by performing housewifery duties diligently and selflessly. Despite that, she could not acquire any respect or love from her husband except the taunting insult. To drive Abha mentally crazy Ashok would flip through the TV shows which she particularly dislikes. She regretfully said “Now look what you made me do. I really wish you wouldn’t spring things on me like this” (ibid, p. 232). Her meeting with Suren Gupta, the Editor of the Lifestyle Section of the “Indian Courier” the paper for which Abha would write recipes every week, u-turned her so far unhappy married life. She tried to find a new life in her job when she was offered to contribute a column on menu section of the paper. She dressed herself anew, which she previously disliked. She secretly permitted Suren Gupta to touch her going out of her previous taboos. Her housewifery seemed monotonous and meaningless. She soliloquised “Had I really been myself? I didn’t think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter. A good friend. And of course a good wife” (ibid, p. 69). She felt resentment for the traditional rules. She did not want hopelessness because “that’s not what I want for the rest of my life...” (ibid, p. 71). Finally she collected courage and bade goodbye her unfruitful conjugal life with a parting letter for Ashok, which reads

“It’s better this way, each of us freeing the other before it’s too late...
...so we can start learning, once more, to live.” (ibid, p. 271-272)

Like Abha, Meera, a good cook, hated spending time alone in the silent room. Her husband Shrikant spent more time with his computer while staying home. Moreover, she was torn apart with the news she could not hold any baby in future for the uterious-related problem. She suffered from insomnumbulism. She was so terribly disgusted with her present life that she, to find solace in her life, began to wear the naked dress like choli or dance freely in the parties, which she previously flinched back from. “To be happy” (ibid, p. 267), she had fallen in love with another man who was less glamorous than her husband and took divorce from Shrikant.

Through Doors, Divakaruni projects the rebellious mindset of the New Woman, which can give them surviving sap to their life. Preeti, born and brought up in America, married Deepak, a first generation Indian immigrant in America defying her mother’s terse warning, “What do you really know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?” (ibid, p. 184). She believed their relation was based on mutual respect and admiration. But Deepak turned volte face when Raj arrived at their apartment to live with them. They disturbed her many ways like blaring loudly the songs from Hindi movies or knocking at the door to enter the room while she struggled with herself to sleep after the hard working on her Ph.D dissertation and performing familial duties. Eventually she cut a sorry figure in the semester. Her dissertation lacked originality and depth. When her advisor told her to take a semester away from school, she fumed her angry soliloquy “not from school-it’s a semester away from home that I need” (ibid, p. 199)? She decided to leave home. But Deepak prevented her departure by sending Raj to a motel. It is seen that dual qualities- durga and sita syndrome-coexisted within the female protagonists of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

The Ultrasound deals with the victimisation of two cousins Anjali and Anuradha on the gallows of patriarchal subservience and their subsequent resuscitation by boycotting that bullying social establishment. When Anjali, residing with her immigrant husband Sunil in America, drew scowl from her husband for calling
her cousin, Runu, a daughter-in-law of a Brahmin family of Burdwan, to enquire about her health, she vehemently retorted back saying “Now don’t be mean” (ibid, p. 205)! On the other hand, Runu always had to digest the insults or rude comments not only from her husband but also from her brother-in-laws for slightest messing up of things. When Anju eye witnessed those tortures inflicted on her cousin she felt pinpricks of anger inside her. When Runu’s family decided to abort her foetus as the foetus was of a girl, she on Anju’s advice forsook her husband’s family to save the life of her unborn daughter and live independently on her own.

Meeting Mrinal puts two women on two conditions-Asha, a married woman and Mrinal, a single-to-test who is more happy, independent and liberated. Asha tried her best to be a good wife and a passionate dutiful mother like “patient, faithful sita, selfless Kunti” (ibid, p. 298). She did never have fancy western clothes because her husband Mahesh never approved that. Even when they were out, she had to follow the diktats of her husband in choosing her outfits. Every time she as per her capacity or knowing “reasoned, pleaded, tried the silent treatment, cooked Mahesh’s favourite meals” (ibid, p 289). Despite that she had to suffer the ignominious shame of her husband’s leaving her and her son for another woman. She also tried to be a good mother by caring Dinesh well. For him she cooked dishes which would “prevent him from failing grades, drugs, street gangs, AIDS” (ibid, p. 276). Notwithstanding, he too drifted away from her. She spent sleepless nights in her anguished lonely situation. On the other hand, Mrinal, childhood friend of Asha, confessed that she would remain single until “ I’d...finish college, get a job may be...I’d learn a bit more about the world and what I wanted out of it before I tied myself down...(ibid, p. 280-81). She became a top level executive of a company. She was financially self-independent. She travelled wherever she liked to. According to Asha, she was the true embodiment of New Woman because “she has the perfect existence-money, freedom, admiration” (ibid, p. 288). On knowing the present standing of her friend Mrinal, Asha secretly and enviously wanted those qualities. She drew solace in her wretched position in thinking of Mrinal’s position. She went out of socio-cultural taboos and freely indulged in heavy drinking with Mrinal in a restaurant.

The emergence of ‘New Woman’ is a direct off-shoot of the Feminist Movement of 1960s. The ‘New Woman’ is stronger but not weak, more industrious but not lazy, more courageous but not timid, more tolerant but to a bearable limit and hungry for power, money, career, respect, admiration and peace. Divakaruni graphically portrays a tapestry of ‘New Women’ in her prized short story volume. They exert extreme self-control over their destinies and are prepared to take what may come in their single life. They are powerful, adamant, liberated and ambitious. They are portrayed as feminist subjects-assertive, non-submissive, protesting against injustice meted to them. They perform dual roles-traditional and modern. They are ready to take unconditional breakage from the family bondings if that family curbs their freedom. They always choose the path which is self-dependent and find real happiness. Her women possess the compelling urge to live independently and to value her own desire emanating from her own self. They have exercised their freedom of choices, never subjugating themselves to their male’s mercy. In totality, the volume through its layout projects the strong qualities of a woman to fight and adapt to a brave New World. To conclude, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives a wake-up call to the future female generations through the portraiture of her vivacious female characters. And she makes it known to all and sundry that women are now determined to fight for their rights to live happily with equal status and due respect.

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