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PAIN OF IMPERFECT LIVES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* presents the pain and pangs of Indian women at all levels. Even the migrated women to advanced countries like UK and US are not free from the clutches of Indian cultural barriers. The immigrant women are always piqued by the string of isolation. This article deals with such situations in her first collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage*.

Key Words: Cultural encounter, dislocation, marginalization, hegemonic structure, issues of race and unbelonging

Introduction

Divakaruni is a celebrated Indian woman writer in English settled in USA. She represents a group of writers who are concerned with crossing-over from one culture to another without compromising either, negotiating new boundaries and remaining themselves.

Discussion

The literature of the South Asian diaspora is a minority discourse that is surfacing with urgency in the field of cultural studies in the United States. Despite being the fourth largest Asian American community, South Asian diasporics, as a group, have largely been overlooked by historians, and social scientists in the United States. This forced invisibility is being contested by contemporary South Asian writers, many of whom have made their homes in North America in the post 1965 immigration era. Although on the peripheries of mainstream culture, the diaspora can provide on the empowered space that produce subversive narratives which complicate questions of American and South Asian identity. In his essay, "Dissemination" Homi Bhabha writes:

The boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the Western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious *internal* liminality providing a place from which to speak, both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent. (149)

It is this location that is being turned into an advantage and new waves of writings, articulating the concerns of the minority, are coming out of the South Asian diaspora. Several anthologies representing new and familiar voices are trying to define the contours of the imagined communities of the South Asians which given their diversity in language, class, customs, sexuality, is a challenging task, contemporary writing from the South Asian diaspora bears the marks of a cultural encounter that combines the re-writing of history with nuanced responses to dislocation and marginalization by hegemonic structures. The raw energy of first generation politics is substituted by a more complex response to issues of race and unbelonging.

The new writers retort to their attempted marginalization, not by dissolving into the mainstream, but rendering their distinctive voices. Writing in two territorial extremes of the United States, Meena Alexander in New York and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in San Francisco, represent the current crop of writers, who are concerned with crossing over from one culture to another without comprising either, negotiating new boundaries and remaining themselves. In their writings, the diaspora with its shifting boundaries and conflictual encounters between different cultures is an important locus where nationalism and literatures need to re-define themselves and seek their own margins.

The de-stabilization of identities that occurs in the daily confrontation with the hegemonic discourses of United States, compels re-conceptualization of identities that occurs in the daily confrontation with the hegemonic discourses of United States, compels re-conceptualization of identities and their re-presentation in the corpus of literary works. Alexander and Divakaruni locate their texts at the troubled intersection of female subjectivity and national identities. Although they capture different aspects of the cultural encounter, the ways in which identities are ordered forms a common matrix in their writings.

Questions of subject formation have been integral to the issues of diasporic literature. Alexander and Divakaruni reconstruct personal and national histories as a historical intervention into master narratives imposed upon them by the dominant culture. But histories and memories are not sufficient. One must remake oneself in the new land and in order to re-make one in writing new forms have to be forged. The dominant strains of tension in the literary works of the diaspora arise from a perceived conflict between the old and the new country. The diaspora dramatizes discontinuous links between India and America between the Indian national/cultural identity and the western nation space.

Reactionary confirmation of traditional attitudes to culture and knowledge and hierarchical claims to the purity of cultures are pitted against encounters with newness as acts of cultural translation. In the diaspora, the nation of origin incarnates itself as traditional identity and implicated the individual in an ostensibly natural relationship with "Indianness". A fossilized national identity becomes a substitute for a lived relationship with the culture. While the patriarchal structures try to validate an essential national identity, the female protagonists in the works of Divakaruni attempt to fracture these identifications that are plotted along the axes of nation, family and the gendered subject.

Arranged Marriage the title of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's collection of short stories reflects a major area of anxiety for first generation immigrant from South Asia. The tradition of arranged marriages that ostensibly underpin "Indian Culture" implicate individuals in gender hierarchies and naturalize these inequities through stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Deemed as superior to other kinds of marriages where the individuals assert their choice, the institution is notorious for its commodification of women within a patriarchal capitalist nexus. Stories in *Arranged Marriage* are less concerned with marriages, arranged or otherwise, than about women's relationships with one another, as friends, as daughters and mothers.

This ironical contrast is perhaps the loudest critique in an otherwise subdued tonal structure, where differential patterns of representation open up original and unique ways of locating the diasporic cultural and textual space. While the protagonists of the stories play out their conflicts in the theatre of the family, America is omnipresent but never at the centre of the stage. It is the internal logic of the characters that work through and re-imagine identity in the new spatial parameter's of the diasporic world.

Chitra Divakaruni's stories provide a spectrum of feminist resistances in the diaspora. They are part of a complex effort at creating a space for a female subject where she can articulate her desires. This space is necessarily located outside of competing paradigms of traditional identity and modern identity. *Arranged Marriage* contains eleven stories. Most of these stories are first-person narratives and this is what gives them the quality of immediacy and interaction with the reader. The readers are bound to become involved in the lives of these women. The prose in Divakaruni's prize-winning volume is lucid and penetrating and it takes the readers effortlessly into the heart of the matter.

"The Bats" is the first story in Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*. In the story "The Bats" the main character is vexed with the domestic violence in the hands of her husband and runs away to her distant uncle in a village.

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. This time when I asked her about it she didn't say anything, just turned the other way and started peeling in the shape of a drooping mouth.

Then she asked me how I would like to visit my grandpa for a few days. (3)

Social norms play a key role in this story as she is unable to listen to the words, which women often say. She is optimistic about her family life even after repeated blows she faces from her husband.

"It's from him" she said in answer to the question in our eyes". He wants us to come back. He promises it won't happen again" "I wrote to him". And then defensively, "I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women down in the market place. The loneliness of being without him. (11-12)

This clearly shows the demarcation between the cultures of America and India. Living together, dating and staying as unwed mothers are common things in a liberated society like America, but in India at least some section of people still value social norms, customs and traditions. So even, if they have an unhappy marriage they cannot take a decision of breaking it. "The Bats" is told by a single narrator and the whole episode is written in the form of self revelation. It has been accepted by Divakaruni as a mechanism for the construction of the past.

The vision of the narrator is divided into two – a child's anguish at the unknown secrets of the life of his parents and secondly the world of the fantasy, adventures and excitement embodied in child's innocence. Beena Agarwal in her article, "Arranged Marriage: Exploration of New Idiom of man and woman Relations" in *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A New Voice in Indian English Fiction* observes that

The narrator reflects on the secret sufferings of her mother who used to cry and sob in a state of loneliness. However the mystery of these cries was beyond the comprehensive range of the child.

The day mother decides to leave for grand uncle's house. The possibilities of new joys and excitement in the family of grandparents stirs the imagination of the child. (158)

He gets the fascination of buffaloes and goats and bamboo forests surrounded by lovely natural sights. His excitement reflects:

I had never seen real live chickens up close before and immediately loved how they squacked and flapped their wings and how fast they could run when chased. (6)

In this ecstasy of fishing and enjoyment, the child forgets the anguish of her mother. In this story, Divakaruni focuses on the uncertainty haunting the consciousness of children against the fractions existing in the life of parents. Her efforts to capture the pure joy of a child against the hardships of the life of mother, prepares a rare delicacy and emotional touch in the story.

The second short story in *Arranged Marriage* is "Clothes". "Clothes" depicts an arranged marriage that works well until external calamity strikes. In this story, Sumita marries Somesh, an Indian immigrant who owns a 24-hour convenience store in California. For Sumita, too America is made of desire and promise:

For the first time it occurred to me that if things worked out the way everyone was hoping. I'd be going halfway around the world to live with a man I hadn't ever met. (18)

After Sumita comes to America, her husband buys her American clothes' through which she discovers more of the sexuality and exuberance of her body than she ever did when wearing a sari. Though she cannot wear these clothes while she and her husband live with his parents, she models them for him in the privacy of their bedroom and dreams of wearing them when they move from their joint-family situation to an American-style nuclear family life without his parents. When, in an unfortunate turn of events, her husband gets shot by a gunman, Sumita, the docile wife who mostly stayed at home with her in-laws, makes this resolution:

I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are baring their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws Dares with cut-off wings. I am standing in front of the mirror how, gathering up the Sari. I straighten a deep breath. In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive get steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds. (33)

The clothes in this story are symbolic. The Indian sari is symbol of entrapment whereas the supposedly American skirt and blaise are symbols of Sumita's liberation. Sumita seems to be pained to liberate herself only by giving up such Indian customs as wearing saris and caring for elderly in-laws. Interestingly, in Sumita's

judgement, serving tea-to in-laws in India is worse than getting shot by a gunman in a country that she terms as “new” and “dangerous”. Debjani Banerjee makes a thoughtful observation in this regard.

In my encounter involving the ‘east’ and the “west” selfhood and nationhood are problematized. Defined against the external threat of ‘westernization’ the woman’s body, in a foreign land, becomes inflated as the metaphoric co-release of the nation. (15)

“Clothes” is the story of one arranged marriage, between Mita and Somesh who live in California. The story opens as a magical note:

The water of the women’s lake laps against my breasts, cool, calming. I can feel it beginning to wash the not nervousness away from my body... I close my eyes and smell the sweet brown odour of the *ritha* pulp my friend Deepali and Radha are working into my hair so it will glisten with little lights this evening. It is the day of my bride-viewing. (17)

But after the death of Somesh, Mita takes an usual path of rebelling against the tradition and make her own choice a to her future path in life. She takes her fate into her own hands by wearing a blouse and skirt. Chitra Divakaruni’s stories provide a spectrum of feminist resistance in the diaspora. They are part of a complex effort at creating a space for a female subject where she can articulate her desires. This space is necessarily located outside of competing paradigms of traditional identity and modern identity.

The third short story in this collection of *Arranged Marriage* is “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”. In this story, a young girl called Jayanthi in order to pursue her studies reaches America and stays with her aunt and uncle. Divakaruni writes about how it is not that easy to settle down in an alien land. “Things here aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think. We’d thought we’d become millionaires. But it is not so easy”. (43) Divakaruni speaks about racial discrimination:

The American hate us. They’re always putting us down because we’ve dark-skinned foreigners, *Kala admi*. (43)

Crime which is at a higher rate and the risks that are included in running a business are presented in a very lucid manner.

This damn country, like a dain, a witch-it pretends to give and then snatches everything back. (54)

The protagonist of “Clothes” Mita beautifully describes the predicament in the “land of freedom” thus:

Caught in a world where everything is frozen like a scene inside a glass paper weight. I know I cannot go back. It is a world so small. I stand inside this glass world, watching helplessly - wanting to scream. (26)

These lines depict the entangled web of the Asian immigrant women that involves the twin processes of “migration” and “relocation” and it ultimately ends up in a “Trishanku” existence. In this story, Divakaruni makes an attempt to look at the complexity of America rather than presenting a simplified and glorified land of freedom and fulfilled dreams. The protagonist Jayanti Ganguli appears to stand up for a post colonial way of thinking in response to her encounter with racism. Her thoughts and words are imbued with colonialist binaries. She carries within her prejudices that make her judge people according to hierarchies of caste, color and class.

She and her aunt come from an upper-class, upper-caste Bengali family and both are described as fair-skinned, while her uncle, who is drawn as an unsavory character, is described as dark-skinned and lower class. He is also said to be ugly, rude, uncultural and rough, yet vulnerable. The uncle is seen from the perspective of her uncle is inscribed with European colonialist notions of equating dark skin-colour with a lower breed of humans characterized by the traits of brutality, vulnerability and a lack of sophistication. In contrast, the fictive white professor Jayanti fantasizes about is drawn as the uncle’s polar opposite.

He is handsome, refined and romantic. He is the one Jayanti imagines as a husband, the man with whom she will fall in love when she breaks away from the Indian tradition of arranged marriage as she declares, “No arranged marriage like Aunt’s for me!” When the neighbourhood white boys’ racial slurs of “nigger, nigger” remind her of British Colonialism and American slavery. Jayanti’s American experience is problematized, but only briefly. She thinks that the slurs may have been suitable.

In the mouth of a red-faced gin-and-tonic drinking British official, perhaps, in his colonial bungalow, or a steering overseer out of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as he plies his whip in the cotton fields. (51)

But Jayanti did not imagine that they could come from the mouths of boys who are young, poor, and no figures of authority. So in Jayanti's experience of the US, racism is not an issue of exploitative policies and power struggles, but only a street prank of young boys in a poor neighbourhood. At the end of the story, while Jayanti thinks of all the many, colored hands she encountered in America and the complexities of race and class, white snow falls to soften "forgivingly", the rough noisy edges of things" (55). Jayanti concludes her story with this pacifying statement:

I notice that the snow has covered my own hands so they are no longer brown but white, white, white. And now it makes sense that the beauty and the pain should be part of each other. I continue holding them out in front of me, gazing at them, until they're completely covered. Until they do not hurt at all. (56)

The snow becomes an anesthetizing agent, a symbol of the kind of erasure that Jayanti is about to embrace in order to survive in America. However, in this story, the author does not simplify Jayanti's entire experience as much as she does with the characters of the other stories, many of which unabashedly simplify the opposition between the Indian and the American ways of life in terms of oppressed and backward versus free and full of promise.

The fourth short story in *Arranged Marriage* is "The Word Love". The protagonist-narrator of "The Word Love" has her own deep problems with her widowed mother back in Kolkatta. The nameless protagonist, a Ph.D. student at Berkeley has fallen in love with an American and is living with him, but she loves her mother fiercely too. She is terrified of her finding that she is living in sin and living for love and her mother would never understand and would never forgive. To forestall any event of her mother even finding out she has given strict instruction to her lover never to answer the phone.

We only have each other she often told you. 'She' lives in a different world. Can't you see that? She's never traveled more than a hundred miles from the village where she was born; she's never touched a cigarette or alcohol; even though she lives in Calcutta, she's never watched a movie ... I love her, Rex. (58)

The inevitable happens. The phone is one day answered by Rex and the relationship between mother and daughter is torn asunder. The mother willfully changes her phone number and moves to a new location and all of the daughter's letters are returned to her unopened address unknown. The mother is righteous in her anger and cruelly disowns the daughter for her act of sacrifice. The daughter, on the other hand, cannot accept this separation. This yawning gulf, this denunciation and her guilt in turn destroys her relationship with Rex. But she does not give up altogether. She vows to make a new life for herself and to make it on her own.

You will pack your belongings. A few clothes, some music, a favourite book ... And a world comes to you out of the opening sky. The word love you see that you had never understood it before. It is like rain and when you lift your face to it, like rain it washes away in essentials, leaving you hollow, clean ready to begin. (71)

In this short story, Divakaruni makes the readers realize that all human relationships are in fact a gamble, a throw of the dice, a matter of chance and destiny. Arranged marriages are no more or less so than the ones made out of love and choice. All marriages are made in heaven, but one cannot begin to realize what powerful urges and inchoate emotions. Love is a magical and mysterious word which cannot be defined easily. Americanization has been accepted in totality when the young woman decides to live with her boy-friend outside the institution of marriage. She cannot bear the thought of losing total correspondence with her mother. This made him say: "It was never me, was it? Never love. It was always you and her, her and you" (90)

Thus parental love makes her take a decision to live alone. Even though one lives thousands of kilometers away from their native lands, their native cultures and traditions make them nostalgic. Divakaruni with her exceptional sensibility and the dexterity of narrative vision within the microscopic framework of the story, has successfully sought the conversion of the consciousness of the characters. The binary of East and West is the binary of glamour and reality. Immigrants seek shelter to reconstruct their identity in the comfortable zones beyond the heat and dust of India. Commenting on this dimension of the psyche of immigrants Mitali, R. Pati reflects:

The conflict in the social and cultural codes of East and West, the old and the new shows the hopeless binary nature of all human desire. For the diasporic Indian love symbolizes the anarchy of the self. (198)

The fifth short story in *Arranged Marriage* is "A Perfect Life". In "A Perfect Life", Meera, an Indian – American professional woman describes her concept of desirable men 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 Peck and Warren Beatty and Clint Eastwood. 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)

The images from Hollywood movies projected on the screen of the "Empire" cinema dictate notions of desirability, good looks, and true Americanness. Meera's idols are peak, Eastwood and Beatty of Hollywood, not Dilip Kumar, Uttam Kumar or Amitabh Bachchan of 'Indian Cinema. Richard's distinguishing qualities are tallness, leanness and sophistication. To become a "true American" the woman of Indian origin must associate herself with a man who looks like an archetypal Hollywood hero. All the other, kinds of Americans avoided or marginalized by Hollywood are not seen to be qualified as a so-called "true American".

"A Perfect Life" is a different and difficult story. It deals with the protagonist's strange relationship with her boy friend Richard. She wants to marry him and at the same time does not want to bear children from him.

Richard and I are back together, and last month when I finally wrote to my mother about him, she surprised me by being for less upset than I'd feared. May be she figured that even a foreign husband – a *firings!* – is better than no husband at all. At any rate, she's planning to attend our wedding. I haven't told her that I agreed to the marriage only on condition that we don't have children (107).

The feeling of motherhood upsurges Meera when she suddenly discovers a six-year old boy one morning in a rose garden. She names the child as Krishna which brings in the image of the mythical Krishna in the Brindavan.

Mother love, that tidal wave, swept everything else away Friendship. Romantic fulfillment even the need for sex. (98)

With the disappearance of the child which once appeared "Civilised, as much in control, as perfect" (77) suddenly turns imbalanced. Thus she settles to marry Richard as an antidote to the child's disappearance, on the condition that she is never burdened with biological maternity. Divakaruni in 'A Perfect Life' not only shows how contemporary society makes an individual but also portrays how man's greed has wreaked havoc and horror in the world. Divakaruni enlarges the enormity of consequences. She recognizes the social, economical and psychological forces behind colonialism and strives to show how they dehumanize both the colonizer and colonized. These words are also imbued with a moral vision that emphasizes social interaction, growth and carrying out of responsibilities.

Divakaruni expresses her own idiosyncrasy, one that is composed of facts and fancy where a vision of life and love is revalued. She has forged a new identity in the process of cultural variation, in which the translated self has lost much more than it has gained. Most of her stories shuttle back and forth between Bengal mostly Kolkatta and the U.S. because those are the places and cultures in which she is most at home and can write about with great confidence. In her works, Divakaruni continues to explore such contentious social issues as abortion, the failure of family life, single parenthood, childlessness, loneliness, illness, age and death.

Divakaruni's stories are full of isolated and eccentric people, a little unhinged but with deep human sensitivity. If they appear to inhabit a crazy world, than it is the world and she draws them with compassion and artistry. The sixth story in *Arranged Marriage* is "The maid servant's story". The story is another narrative account of the inter dependence of cultural dynamics and gender dynamics. The plot of the story is set in the two cultural backgrounds of Kolkotta and California. She retains her aversion for the silence of her mother. Manisha develops her relations with Bijoy, a professor at the University of California but her mother does not care for her sentiments. Manisha complains:

Mashi! I've just started seeing Bijoy! No one said anything about a wedding yet. (110)

She pours out her contempt for her mother:

My resentment is all for my mother – it is she who should be asking these questions ... not my much as I love her" (111).

Mashi tries to convince her but at this stage, she is not ready to modify the conditions of her life according to the choices of her mother. "I wouldn't offer my life for her inspections and approval" (111). She also reveals that her mother was not much excited on her decision for leaving for American and only made a cool response, "you know I want the best for you" (111). In this story, Divakaruni investigates the traditional hostility existing in mother and daughter relationship Manisha remains occupied with the inner spaces of her mother. Private spaces of the life of mother becomes an enigma and despair for Manisha. She confesses.

I never knew. It was although she'd built a wall of ice around her, thin and invisible and unbreakable.

No matter how often I flung myself against it. I refused entry. (113)

The love of Deepa Mashi becomes a substitute of the absence of maternal love in the life of Manisha. She consoles Manisha. Manisha is a girl of refined manners and in the company of Bijay she finds the image of perfect gentleman untainted by filthy American traditions. She looks forward to liberated relationship. Manisha's conscious shifts to the past to recall the life of her mother. As a young and unfortunate wife she used to live in an old and posh locality of Kolkatta. In the absence of her husband, she used to keep herself engaged in the household duties. Besides of the management of household, she used to take care of her daughter, bathing and feeding her with her own hands instead of depending on the maids.

On her second marriage, she had requested her younger sister to take care of her. The wife was in need of a maid and therefore after a casual quarry about a beggar woman, the wife permits the stranger woman to work as a maid. However, the sister is not in favour of this maid and she discourages her sister with the advice that such women are either thieves or prostitutes. In this story the maid, the sister, and the wife survive in their own private and mysterious world. In "Maid Servant's Story" the sister's innocence and husband's treachery stand in sharp contrast and presents the two sides of male and female sensibility. The sister, as a spectator of the whole phenomenon stands in between the maid and the wife and comes to the conclusion that in a man's world a woman has no will of her own either be the wife or be the mistress.

In this story, Divakaruni explores a more complex pattern of man and woman relationship that subsequently becomes the basis of the narrative art of her full length novels. In this story with the presence of an indifferent observer, she constructs almost a dramatic structure to settle the conflicts of personal relationship. From the feminist point of view Manisha, the wife, the sister and the maid work within the periphery of a central motif that woman can't escape the traps of male oriented value system. Such an intense realization of man and woman relationship is not a mere by-product of cultural displacement only but the celebration of human passions that are beyond the domains of culture, geography and family traditions.

However, Divakaruni exposes the irony that man possesses the right to claim his power on female mind and body while as women is always treated as wrong. The identical notion is subscribed by Shashi Deshpande in her novel *Roots and Shadows*. To quote:

Man considers it as a normal behaviour to satisfy his desires both at the emotional and physical levels outside marriage, while it ruthlessly condemned as adultery in case a woman indulges as it is even though accidentally the slightest hint at any deviation on her part which may not even involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts prosecuting her. (84)

The seventh story in *Arranged Marriage* is "The Disappearance". In the collection of stories *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni writes about the transformed lives of the women both liberated and trapped by cultural changes. The female protagonists in almost all the stories lead imperfect lives. The dissatisfaction of women is the major theme in most of the stories. If they live in a liberated society like America, they break the marriage easily, but if they stay in a close knitted society like India where every act of women is watched with a microscopic view they suffer in silent agony. Divakaruni makes her readers realize that all human relationships are in fact a gamble, a throw of the dice, a matter of chance and destiny.

Arranged Marriages are no more or less so than the ones made out of love and choice. All marriages, it is said, are made in heaven, but one cannot understand what powerful urges and inchoate emotions makes

the wife in "The Disappearance" turn her back upon her own arranged marriage. She quietly disappears in the urban jungles of the cities of America into a self made exile. She even leaves her son behind and takes only her wedding jewelry, only the pieces given to her by her own parents. It is a complete renunciation of her alliance with her husband and total disavowal of her parenthood.

No one knows whether she is so unhappy, trapped in a loveless marriage or she is mentally unstable. She is never found even though her husband puts up a reward of \$100,000 for any information leading to her whereabouts. The man's widowed mother shuts up her small flat back in India and is delighted to come and keep house for son and grandson in the new country:

As the year went on the husband stopped thinking as much about the wife. It wasn't that he loved her any less, or that the shock of her disappearance was less acute. It was just that it wasn't on his mind all the time. There would be stretches of time when he was on the phone with an important client, or when he was watching after – dinner TV or driving his son to Kiddie gym class – when he would forget that his wife was gone, that he had had a wife at all. And even when he remembered that he had forgotten, he would experience only a slight twinge, similar to what he felt in his teeth when he drank something too cold too fast. The boy, too, didn't ask as often about his mother. He was sleeping through the nights again, he had put on a few pounds and he had started calling her "Ma" just like his father did. (175)

As against the regular themes of woman's sufferings in the earlier stories "The Disappearance" tells something about a man's feelings. Divakaruni highlights the relationship between husband and wife that should run smoothly like two wheels of a cart. He was badly affected with the absence of his wife as the crime rate is high in that area. She was not a quarrelsome one and it never appeared that she was dissatisfied. Later he realized that she intentionally eloped by taking the jewellery with her. He was very much surprised on knowing this and couldn't target her even after remarriage.

He was a good husband. No one could deny it. He let her way, indulged her, even... she was after all, a well-bred Indian girl. He didn't expect her to behave like those American women ... He was always careful not to hurt her, he prided himself on that. Not even a little slap, not like some of the men he'd known growing up, or even some of his friends now. (172)

The immigrant woman in a bad marriage exercises greater freedom of will than the women who are non-immigrants. While Divakaruni sees the failures of Indian patriarchy and Indian men, she mostly fails to notice any flaws in American men and American patriarchal society. In fact, she creates clear binaries between men from "the old countries" and American or Indian American men. Completely constructed by patriarchy, the husband cannot even begin to understand individual desire. For him, his wife is a symbol of his financial and sexual power. Financial independence and American clothes are markers of individuation made synonymous with "Westernization".

Any transgression these issues are a perceived threat to national identity. Commenting on the thematic nuances of "The Disappearance" Debjani Banerjee observes that,

In many ways, she is the prototypical victim of an arranged marriage. In arranged marriages, attempts to schedule an expression of female sexuality to coincide with institutional structures of marriage renders impossible an articulation of women's desires. Her commodification is complete within the imbrication of patriarchal structures and economic systems. (17)

The disappearance of the female protagonist with her jewellery "gifted" by her parents during the marriage, to set up her own economic unit within which she can re-formulate her own identity.

The eighth story in *Arranged Marriage* is "Doors". In "Doors" the conjugal clash between Deepak and Preeti is a confrontation between two cultures, literally symbolized by doors. Deepak and Preeti who had chosen to marry, are declared to be the perfectly matched couple until a friend from India comes to stay with them. The lack of space suffocates Preeti who has lived in America since she was twelve and imbibed a set of ideas about privacy denoted by closed doors. In the presence of the friend of from India, Deepak's traditional self emerges and the myth of "the enlightened man" crumbles. The conflictual boundaries cannot be resolved and the marriage disintegrates.

Deepak liked to leave them open. Preeti liked them closed. Deepak had laughed about it at first early in the marriage. "Are the pots and pans from the kitchen going to come and watch us making love?" he would joke when she meticulously shut the bedroom door at night although there were just the two of himself always bathed with the door open, song and steam pouring out of the bathroom with equal abandon. (188)

In this story, "door" has been used as metaphor of the private spaces. Raj being a man of easy-go-type style does not like the idea of door and wants to lead an informal life in the family. It becomes a shock to the sophistication of Preeti. She was already discouraged for her marriage with Deepak. Her mother had expressed her protest and apprehension in this regard.

"It'll never work, I tell you" she had declared gloomily. "Here you are, living in the U.S. since you were twelve. And Deepak-he's straight out of India. Just because you took a few classes together at the University, and you liked how he talks, doesn't mean that you can live with him". (183)

Preeti was confident that she would be able to modify Deepak's ways. She began her life with confidence. Similarly Deepak has also been discouraged by his friends on the plea that American girls are not considerate like Indian girls. With the arrival of Raji, there occurs a crisis in the relationship of Raj and Preeti. For Raj, the real pleasure consists in the informal company of Preeti and Deepak. The division of household in the form of drawing room and bed room was a burden to Raj. Being disgusted with the formalities of Deepak, he accuses, "Have you become an *amreekan* or what? Come along and help me carry the old clothes down". (191) Contrarily, Preeti finds it disguising to adjust with the easy going style of Raj who used to burnt into her closed study tell her of the latest events in his computer lab.

The concept of doors did not exist in Raj's universe, and he ignored their physical reality – so solid and reassuring to preeti – whenever he could. (193)

In the company of Raj, Deepak finds himself transported in the world of beauty and joy, watching old videos reviewing the memories of good old days. Deepak's Indian sensibility gets new vitality in the life of Raj. Such a change in the personality of Deepak becomes a challenge to Preeti. She even refuses to live with Deepak and makes an open declaration.

It can't be forever, he can't stay with us forever, I can't put up with it until he leaves and then everything will be perfect again". (198)

Chitra Banerjee in this story ensures that the formal garb of personal relationship can't yield desired modifications in the native sensibilities. The cross-cultural marriage have redefined the nature of personal relationship. It also justifies how the individual identity of two persons representing two sensibilities often clashes in the process of acculturation. Beena Agarwal in her essay, "*Arranged Marriage: Exploration of New Idiom of Man and Woman Relations*" in *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. A New Voice in Indian English Fiction* observes thus:

In the story "Doors" Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses her pen to expose the issue of marriage, personal adjustment in mantal relationship and the cross cultural conflicts. The focus of the writer remains on the dynamics of geographical shift that contributes to the dynamics of personal relationship. (168)

The ninth story in *Arranged Marriage* is "The Ultrasound". It provides the skeletal outlines for Divakaruni's most recent novel, *Sister of My Heart*. The lives of the two friends Anju and Runu provide a critique for each other. Their experiences during their first pregnancies at around the same time, forms the matrix of the story. Once Runu's ultrasound reveals the presence of a female foetus, her husband's family tries to force her to undergo an abortion. Anju, the immigrant Indian, whose husband is supposedly more liberal, manages to convince Runu to leave her family and come to America with her daughter. Divakaruni's self reflective commentary does not allow the story to propose a simple binary between orthodox practices in India and the more liberatory spaces in diasporic America.

A close scrutiny of the relationship between Anju and her husband, Sunil, belies the ostensible equality of the modern marriage. Sunil does not want Anju to encourage her friend to leave her family and try to have the baby alone. Even Anju is temporarily confused. But finally she is able to see the rightness of her own advice. The ominous undertones of Sunil's arguments disturbs Anju. His words seem to imply:

"See how lucky you are to have a husband like me, to live in this free and easy American culture... you'd better start working harder at being a good wife or else. (218)

The problems in their relationships notwithstanding, the story celebrates the triumph of the friendship between two women separated by geographical and cultural distance. Their mutual compassion strengthens the fabric of resistance and inspires the quest for identity. Runu leaves her husband in order to serve the life of her first child. These connections between women in Divakaruni's fiction are significant and subversive and must be read in the context of the failure of the women's movement in India to build energized connection between women.

The story "The Ultrasound" is again a narrative account of the obsessive burden of feminine functions how they do contribute to determine the psyche of women. Divakaruni investigates the psycho-biological complexity concerning the issues like pregnancy, abortion and the freedom of woman to select her own sexual life. The plot of the story is compact and the narrative follows a straight growth. The events move between past and present, the duality of maidenhood experiences and the compulsive burden of marital life. The story is set in two distinctive cultural surroundings – Kolkatta and California but these two geographical spaces have been used to one focal point that female identity is subordinated to male desires.

Even the motherhood that is a female prerogative is under the socio-cultural practices of patriarchy. The plot of "The Ultrasound" unfolds through the experience of a young perspective bride settled in California with her husband. Divakaruni like Margaret Atwood accepts that every stage for self preservation, a woman has to define her identity and her choices to resist the force of patriarchy. It predicts the horrors of a culture so frightened by normal sexuality that it codified and practiced all such procreation and credited hierarchies of life and death around it. It is a brutal and horrifying culture.

In this story, Divakaruni constructs the diverse patterns of man and woman relationship in two geographical backgrounds with a common assumption that every stage women has to fight against relentless forces of "brutal horrifying culture". This consistent work is a threat to the foundation of civil society. Divakaruni's vision echoes the thesis of J.B. Bousan who admits:

... female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother role can pose a serious threat to the very survival of self. (Bousan: 293)

The tenth story in *Arranged Marriage* is "Affair". The majority of the stories in the collection are concerned with changed perspectives on women's identities. In "Affair" Abha, the perfect wife and homemaker realizes that the concept of duty gradually loses its hold in the new country. She leaves the security of her loveless marriage and the beauty and calmness of her kitchen for the vagaries of a life of struggle. When she ventures out on her own, she decides to use her culinary skills to earn financial independence. She contents with her parents' anger, family, dishonour, gossip and yet she must leave because

The old rules aren't always right. Not here, not even in India... I feel your resentment growing around me, thick and real and suffocating. Like mine is suffocating you ... we're spiraling toward hate. And hopelessness. That's not what I want for the rest of my life. Or yours ... It's better this way, each of us freeing the other before it's too late... (271)

In an interview published in *Iowa Review*, Bharati Mukherjee speaks of the kind of resistances that inspire the fabric of her fiction:

The kinds of women I write about, and I'm not generalizing about women in South Asian community here, but the kinds of women who attract me, who intrigue me, are those who are adaptable... and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we came over here as immigrants. The males function very well as engineers, or doctors or whatever, and they earn good money, but they have locked their hearts against mainstream culture... For an Indian woman to learn to drive, to put on pants, cash checks, is a big leap. They are exhilarated by that change. They no longer having to do what mothers-in-law tyrannically forced them to do. (18)

Mukherjee's statement politicizes the process of using inculcated internalized ideologies as resistance and the same view is played out in much of Divakaruni's fictions. Mukherjee has argued that for the individual completely formed by patriarchal structures, national identity is an available privilege. However, the woman who is looking to define her subjectivity outside of the traditional paradigms of family and national identity –

the women like Abha in "Affair" have never had any discourse of nationalism made available to them in equivalent ways to men. The diaspora where the rhetoric of nationhood of the "nation of origin" and other traditional moves become distanced and precarious functions as the strategic terrain as which to re-formulate diasporic female subjectivity as a contingent rather than an essential identity.

In the story "Affairs" Chitra Divakaruni concentrates on the issues of identity awareness, East-West encounter, enigma of female psyche and the complexity of man and woman relationship. The narrative in the story moves at multiple level of internal and external action and it helps to construct a dramatic structure expressing the clash of motives. It is a narrative account of two intimate friends who move to the progressive society of America with their native values. However with the over involvement of each other, there starts a fraction in their marital relationship.

Abha and Ashok is an intimate couple leading their life within the framework of typical Indian tradition. With the arrival of Meena, a triangle takes place and it provides spaces to both of them to contextualize their position. In this story, Divakaruni weaves the plot of the story with the shift of memory. Commenting on the conclusion of the story "Affair", Beena Agarwal notes that

Asha finds a conclusion for her own life. "The old rules aren't always right. Not here, not even in India" (270). She weaves a new fabric of life that can bring better happiness and security in her life. In this story, Divakaruni in the background of the complexity of personal relationship presents a fine scanning of the women's inner world torn between the shackles of conventions and the quest for personal choices. (174)

The eleventh and the last story in *Arranged Marriage* is "Meeting Mrinal". The ways in which Divakaruni's characters grapple with and refute an essential identity is linked to the cultural roots. In "Meeting Mrinal", the protagonist Asha is unable to live up to the stress of being the perfect wife and mother.

And then I was so ashamed that I did feel sick. I went into the bathroom and tried to throw up, but nothing happened and I felt worse. I sat on the toilet seat for a while, trying to figure out how my life, which had seemed perfect a year ago, had turned into such a mess. When I came out, the smell reminded me of the pizza in the oven, by now a charred black mass. I threw it into the garbage and went to bed. (214)

As a manufacturer stories that reflect an ordered perfection that her life, in reality, lacks. At the end of the story she realizes that this perfection she desired is co-related with her efforts at adhering to traditional values:

I think of how hard I always tried to be the perfect wife and mother, like the heroines of mythology I grew up on – patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti. (298)

Homi K. Bhabha in his famous critical work: *Nation and Narration* writes thus:

The creation of a "historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the original past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people" is an attempt at imposing a unitary national identity using cultural signs as a rubric of generalization. (37)

Such an understanding of national identity belies its multiplicity and blocks the perfection of cultural practices as living processes that can be challenged, modified and transformed. The strategies of national identification that function in the name of the people hinge on an artificial binary of tradition and modernity. Tradition is good, essentially indigenous and uninterpreted by western influence while modernity is evil, degraded and a western ethos. Indian women are also characterized by many limitations in Divakaruni's short stories unless they already are, or in the process of being, westernized.

In many of these stories, among other things, women readily accept being cheated, dominated, and sexually manipulated. The wives in the "The Bats" and "The Maid Servant's Story" surrender to the manipulations of their husbands with little resistance. In "Affair" Abha spends most of her time cooking and has no real relationship with her husband. In "Meeting Mrinal" Asha, a divorced wife carries around the shame of her husband's abandonment of her. Both Abha and Asha are oblivious of their own true needs for half of their lives, until they can liberate themselves from their allegedly worn-out Indian values.

In most of the stories of *Arranged Marriage*, the United States of America stands for freedom enlightenment, and promises of fairytale fulfillment. America itself is seen not only as the country that holds many opportunities, but also as a mythical “promised land” along with England. In “Meeting Mrinal” both the old colonial center and the new center of the so-called first world make up the landscape of this “Promised land”. The character of James Bond, the English spy with global reach becomes an apt symbol for a world where neo-colonial control is exercised through methods even subtler than those of colonial times as international political, cultural and commercial power struggles continue in newer manifestations. Bond’s capacity to reduce the world is felt through the admiration of Asha and Mrinal in “Meeting Mrinal”.

We’d been avid James Bond fans all through high school, fascinated by his violent, magical world – so different from ours – of golden guns and intricate machines and bikini – clad beauties. If we ever escaped our conservative, teetotaler parents. We had vowed, if we ever made it to the promised land. England may be, or America, we would celebrate by drinking Bond’s special drink. (295)

The end of “Meeting Mrinal” explains the very crux of the matters of all short stories listed in *Arranged Marriage* namely the pain of imperfect lives.

The glasses glitter like hope. We raise them to each other solemnly, my son and I, and drink to our precious, imperfect lives. (300)

The worldwide dispersion of South Asian people from countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh is now a sociologically acknowledged phenomenon known as the South Asian Diaspora. Multiple migrations from South Asia to Europe, and from Africa to Europe and the United States and multiculturalism are essential facts of dispersion of such magnitude and dimension. Voices of the women of the South Asian Diaspora, hitherto silenced by the reconfiguration of patriarchal systems in the new land are heard loud and clear in the 1990s.

With the arrival of hi-spirited women voices of writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Githu Kamami, Uma Parameswaran and Sunetra Gupta, the problems of women immigrants began to be heard. Divakaruni’s collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* provides a platform not only for students of literature but also for anthropologists and ethnographers who can use the narratives and the narrative voice as the basis for the study of life as it really exists. All the stories in *Arranged Marriage* are vividly narrated and palpitate with the rhythm of fresh lived experience.

All women protagonists of Divakaruni are caught between the old world and the new world values and the stories present how women cope with cross-cultural sexual relationships and how women ultimately try to achieve self-esteem and autonomy denied to them within their own somewhat insular and bigoted community. The attempt to find and fuse a viable self-image within the mainstream United States culture is a crucial factor in the short stories. *Arranged Marriage* contains eleven stories out of which five deal with women who have traveled to the U.S. either to live as the spouses of men already living there or as students flying off from India to study in the various American colleges and Universities.

Most of these stories are first-person narratives and this is what gives them the quality of immediacy and interaction with the readers. Readers are bound to become involved in the lives of these women. The prose in *Arranged Marriage* is lucid and penetrating and it takes the readers effortlessly into the heart of the matter. *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni’s collection of short stories, reflects a major area of anxiety for first generation immigrants from South Asia. The tradition of arranged marriage that ostensibly underpin “Indian Culture” implicate individuals in gender hierarchies and naturalize these inequities through stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Deemed as superior to other kinds of marriages where the individuals assert their choice, the institution is notorious for its commodification of women within a patriarchal capitalist. The stories are very much concerned with women’s relation with one another as friends, as daughters and mothers. The stories further open up original and unique ways of locating the diasporic cultural and textual space. While the female protagonists of the stories play out their conflicts in the theatre of the family America is omnipresent but never at the centre of the stage. It is the internal logic of the characters that work through and re-imagine identity in the new spatial parameters of the diasporic world.

While commenting on the basic ingredients in the writings of the major diasporic women writers of the new Indian diaspora, M.S.Pandey has an interesting observation in the article titled "Female Self in the Diasporic Enclave: Reflections on the Writings of Meena Alexander" observe that

Negotiating multiplicity of affiliations – as women, as minority, as women of colour, as wives and mothers – the women writers of Indian origin, articulated a variety of diasporic experiences through their emerging new consciousness... they attempt to balance precariously between honoring and breaking traditions while building expatriate lives... (Kavita *Interpreting*, 168).

People of diaspora consciously choose to migrate to alien country of their choice severing their roots from their native community as well as from their nation state with a hope to live a happy life there. Diasporic writers document the experiences of such people to make sensitive and insightful readers rethink the issues of race, nationalism and culture in international perspective. Given the fact that East is east and West is west, many "Indians" who went westwards became victims of cultural disorientation and identity crisis, leading sometimes to a state of schizophrenia. Perhaps a sense of insecurity in a new land is a common lot. Divakaruni's diasporic writings enable one to comprehend and interpret the emerging global culture in its multifaceted form.

The anxieties and impossibilities of assimilation is a common thematic pattern in diasporic literature. "Silver Pavements Golden Roofs", one of the earlier stories in the collection, reads the diasporic experience in terms of race, thereby exploding many myths that texture immigrant life. The majority of the stories in the collection are concerned with changed perspective on women's identities. In "Affair" Abha, the perfect wife and homemaker, realizes that the concept of duty gradually loses its strength in the new country. She leaves the security of her loveless marriage and the beauty and calmness of her kitchen for the vagaries of a life of struggle.

When she ventures out on her own, she decides to use her culinary skills to earn financial independence. She contends with her parent's anger, family, dishonour, gossip and yet she must leave because "the old rules aren't always right. Not here, not even in India" (270). For the female protagonists in Divakaruni's short stories, clothes, education, thinking about their own rights and pleasures become a signifier of modernity. The identity of modern women is associated with an elite "Westernization" and a repudiation of ancient and ostensibly timeless traditions, the force of the rhetoric of nationalism conceals the fact that these traditions are selectively resurrected.

Posited as trans-historical and woven into a coherent narrative of religion. In the stories in *Arranged Marriage*, the challenge to normative narratives of nationhood is launched through the exploration of female subjectivity. The diasporic community valorizes an unquestioned perpetuation of traditions through even the most banal signifiers in the name of combating the colonizing influences of the dominant culture on the one hand and the contaminating influences of other minority groups on the other. When confronted with the threat of co-operation and assimilation by discourses regarded as "western" or "other" South Asian communities use women as historic signifying objects who are made to be the bearers of culture.

Women, on whose bodies cultures are mapped and re-mapped become the targets of protection. They continue to function as stable signifiers of womanhood for a community which is anxious about preserving its identity in a foreign soil. Circumscribed by such markers of traditional identity, women find themselves living their lives as symbols of a national / communal identity, symbols that are often easily challenged in the home country but acquire a particular change in the diaspora. But the attempt on the part of patriarchal powers to retain the homogeneity of their discourse is continually undermined by the female protagonists in *Arranged Marriage*.

Divakaruni's stories provide a spectrum of feminist resistances in the diaspora. They are part of a complex effort at creating a space for a female subject where she can articulate her desires. This space is necessarily located outside of competing paradigms of traditional identity and modern identity. Abha and Asha the protagonists of "Aflair" and "Meeting Mrinal" respectively rebel against functioning as the repository of national/cultural identity. Divakaruni's protagonists often interrogate their own westernization, but they do not want to be pushed back into playing crusaders for their community.

As in "Affair" in Divakaruni's stories the women frequently leave, their marriages or relationships in order to re-conceptualize their notions of self and home "The Disappearance" is a complex portrayal of a woman's quest for identity written from the perspective of her husband, neither of whom have been named in the story. The man is completely confounded when his wife "disappears". He announces a hefty reward and cherishes her memories because it never occurs to him that she may have deserted him. In traditional relationship women are not expected to have the power to leave. In fact, to have active agency is to transgress beyond normative feminist behaviour.

In both "Affair" and "The Disappearance" the brutality and exploitation within marriage is not stridently expressed. The violence in the lives of the women protagonists is understated. Their subjugation is depicted as more subtle and hence more complete. The tension that arises in the works of immigrant writers came not just from simple longing and loyalties divided between the original and adopted homelands but also from immigrations link to colonialism and neo-imperialism. Colonial powers exerted the influence of their culture and language on colonized people through both forceful and artful transmission.

They also initiated migration of large populations from one colonized place to another in the interests of their vast transcontinental economic ventures. Neo-colonial or imperial powers continue these legacies through the global dissemination of their politics, culture, language and business enterprises. In the process, they also attract immigrants from various parts of the world to the center of imperialistic power, with promises of better opportunities and rights, in comparison to their less developed homelands.

From the Nobel prize winning V.S.Naipaul, whose career as a writer began in the middle of the 20th century to the Pulitzer Prize winning writer Jhumpa Lahiri who emerged on the English literary scene at the end of the 20th century, migration or immigration has directly or indirectly affected several generations of contemporary writers writing in English. These writers engendered hybridity and cultural complexity within them and urging them to grapple with multiple cultures and countries and the tension between them.

Commenting on the impact of the process of immigration on Chitra Divakaruni, Husne Jahan in her article, "Colonial Woes in Post-Colonial Writing: Chitra Divakaruni's Immigrant Narratives" states that

Chitra Divakaruni is among those writers affected by immigration as well as by its corollaries: colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-imperialism. However, Divakaruni's immigrant narratives focus on celebrating immigration as a liberating agent at the expense of overshadowing the influence of any other agency. While they rarely get openly into issues pertaining to colonial or post-colonial politics, they do reveal striking parallels to orientalist perceptions of many aspects of Indian culture and society. (150)

Bharathi Mukherjee and Meena Alexander are immigrant writers with Indian ties like Divakaruni and both have grappled with the premises and the problems embedded in immigration. Mukherjee interweaves the forces of immigration, transformation, violence and regeneration in the multiple reinvesting of its immigrant woman subject. Meena Alexander clearly identifies traumas inherent in immigration. Chitra Divakaruni's materials stride multiple cultures and nations as Bharati Mukherjee's and Meera Alexander's narratives do. But unlike the works of Mukherjee and Alexander's the problems, pains and erasures brought about by immigration are downplayed in Divakaruni's work.

While the celebrations of the premises of immigration are emphasized to the point where some aspects of her work strongly promote neo-orientalist and neo-imperialist projects. In the collection of short stories titled *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni's East/West, Indian/American, negative/positive binaries become more obvious. As its name implies, the stories in this book are all about marital relationships. Many of these relationships are arranged and almost all of them involve some oppositional encounter of Indian and American values and customs.

One obvious premise of the book is that arranged marriages do not work because they are based on an invalid and unfair custom. The other premise is that in an encounter of Indian and American values and customs, the latter would be sure to prevail by virtue of an inherent superiority and progressiveness. The story "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" is one rare example in which the author makes an attempt to look at the complexity of America rather than presenting a simplified and glorified land of freedom and fulfilled dreams.

However, in this story, the author does not simplify Jayanti's entire experience as much as she does with the characters of the other stories. Many of them simplify the opposition between the Indian and the American ways of life in terms of oppressed and backward versus free and full of promise. The story "clothes" depicts an arranged marriage and the pain and problems of immigrant women. The marriage works well until external calamity strikes. In this story, Sumita marries Somesh, an Indian immigrant. For Sumita, America is made of desires and promises "a kingdom of beyond the seven seas". (18)

After she comes to America, her husband buys her American clothes through which she discovers more of sexuality and exuberance of her body than she ever did when wearing a sari. When, in an unfortunate turn of events, her husband gets shot by a gunman, Sumita, the docile wife who mostly stayed at home with her in-laws, makes this resolution:

I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India at this very moment, widows in white sari's are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws... she wears a blouse and skirt the colour of almonds. (33)

The clothes in this story are symbolic. The Indian sari is a symbol of entrapment whereas the supposedly American skirt and blouse are symbols of Sumita's liberation. Sumita seems to be poised to liberate herself only by giving up such Indian customs as wearing saris. Through the numerous male and female characters in the book, the author criticizes and qualifies that she sees as typically Indian and glorifies those that she sees as European – American. Divakaruni's feminism causes her to speak against Indian men in various ways in her stories. In several stories such as "The Bats", "The Maid Servant's Story", "The Disappearance", "Doors" and "The Ultrasound" the Indian male characters who often play a hegemonic role in a patriarchal society, are seen as responsible for constricting, entrapping, cheating, brutalizing and failing to understand women.

In "The Bats", an abusive husband repeatedly gets his wife to return to him, exerting on her a power analogous to the poisonous traps in a mango orchard that lure bats to their deaths. In "The Maid Servant's Story", a respectable banker seems to have a loving relationship with his wife, until it is revealed that he tiptoes in the privacy of night to seek a sexual liaison with the wife's maid. Both of these stories are set in India and the wives in these stories are overpowered by the males in their lives, as they are unable to free themselves from their undesirable marriages.

On the other hand, the wife in "The Disappearance" is a Bengali woman who lives in America with her husband and manages to get out of a marriage that she dislikes, due to no apparent reason as the husband sees it, other than the husband's exercising of his normal authority. The immigrant woman in a bad marriage exercises greater freedom of will than the women who are non-immigrants. While Divakaruni sees the failings of Indian patriarchy and Indian men, she mostly fails to notice any flaws in American men and American patriarchal society. In fact, she creates clear binaries between men from "the old countries" and American or Indian-American men.

Indian women are also characterized by many limitations in Divakaruni's short stories unless they already are, or in the process of being westernized. In many of these stories among other things, women readily accept being cheated, dominated and sexually manipulated. The wives in the "The Bats" and "The Maid Servant's Story" surrender to the manipulations of their husbands with little resistance. America itself is seen not only as the country that holds many opportunities, but also as a mythical "Promised Land" along with England. In most of the stories of *Arranged Marriage*, the United States of America stands for freedom, enlightenment and promises of fairytale fulfillment.

Divakaruni's own idealization of America makes her ignore the possibility that when migration pulls people away from their known environment and culture and places them in a culture that puts a tremendous emphasis on homogeneity and assimilation, they could be socially outcast even if they are technically accepted in their new home. All the complexities of American's past and present race and class relations are also brushed aside with nothing more than a few passing references in Divakaruni's writing. America becomes this unique exceptional, magical country which offers a safe refuge to the female characters of Divakaruni's fiction, mostly middle-class Indian women oppressed by Indian traditions and having the means of passage to European-style advancement in the "exceptional" promised land of the United States.

Divakaruni's Western critics repeatedly reiterate the notion of America being the rejuvenator of her Indian female characters and endorse the binaries the writer creates between India and America. Rose Kernochan makes the following comment about the characters of the short stories in *Arranged Marriage*.

Recently arrived from Calcutta, unsettled in Chicago and San Francisco, Ms.Divakaruni's heroines are still-submerged in the dream world of Indian femininity in an innocence as still and dark as lake water. As America revives them, they rise to its challenges; the new freedoms of their chosen country act on them like extra oxygen. (20)

In *Arranged Marriage* these spaces located in the interstices of the overlapping sets of dominant culture-indigenous patriarchy and the assimilative projects of white, western hegemony – is the space that enables the female protagonist to rewrite her identity.

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