



## Feminism, marriage and role of women in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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### Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific author who has written many essays, poems, short stories and novels. In her works she has given voice to immigrant Indian women. In this paper I will try to analyse different problems women face and attitude of Divakaruni as a postcolonial feminist writer. Her novels and short stories that illustrate educated, adamant, mentally strong and rebellious female characters who don't hesitate to liberate themselves from male chauvinism. The enigmatic Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and rebellious Anju and Sudha in *Sister of my Heart* (1999) and *The Vine of Desire* (2002) and beautiful Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) many strong women in the series of stories of *Arranged Marriage* are all delicately presented, credible characters. Many scholars, critics, writers, newspapers and magazines recognised Divakaruni's female protagonists as most compelling part of her work and thus it gives me wider scope to work on them.

**Keywords:** feminism, marriage, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

### Introduction

Feminism is the name given to a political movement in 1960s which calls 'liberation' of women from gender-based discriminations that deprived women from being equal to men. The realisation that the status of woman was inferior to man can be traced much earlier. However, it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminist activists realised the nuance of patriarchal society. They actively participated in spreading awareness amongst women on their rights and interest. Feminist theory which emerged from feminist movements no longer considered women as weaker gender whose role was confined to the household chores. They demanded women to be treated rationally by giving them equal rights.

Historically feminism has developed from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes. Feminist movements campaigned for women's right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn equal wage, to own property, to receive education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage and to have maternity leave. They also worked to promote protection of women and girls from rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence. Feminism is a movement that speaks for equality of male, female and transgender people in society. Power over another person based on gender is unreasonable. All should live in peace without fear and be themselves. Great feminist writers Toril Moi, Elaine Showalter, M. Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir were quite disheartened that women were considered inferior to men. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is one of the earliest attempts to explore gender imbalance. Elaine Showalter in her *Women in Literature*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of their Own*, M. Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of woman* and Toril Moi in her famous work *Sexual/Textual Politics* strongly advocated for women's rights.

Marxism is an economic, social- political world view that contains political ideology to change and manage society by implementing socialism. The Marxist believes that capitalism leads to the oppression of the common working people of the society who are working for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. They believe in public ownership to improve the economic condition of the proletariat. Marxist feminism emphasized on finding and explaining the ways in which women are oppressed through systems of capitalism and private property. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) focused on the relationship between capitalism and oppression. Engels argues in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) that a woman's subordination is not a result of her biological disposition but of social relations.

Marxist feminists associate themselves with the philosophical and economic theories of Karl Marx in his master piece *Das Kapital*. In *Das Kapital* Marx argues about oppressed group who are compelled to work for less. Women workers are exploited at higher level than male workers. Women of colour suffer the highest degree of exploitation because of gender and race discrimination. Women are also a source of unpaid domestic labour. Marx and Engels viewed women's entry into the paid labour force as the first step toward liberating women from stifling dependence on men, though it does not free them from the class oppression they share with male workers. Gender oppression between men and women in society is similar to the relations between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Feminism has been classified into various types according to the ideology it portrays. Liberal feminism states the equality of man and women through political and legal reform. Socialist feminism connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation of proletariats. Radical

feminism considers the male dominated society responsible for women's oppression. Cultural feminism asserts that the difference between men and women is psychological and culturally constructed rather than biologically inherent. Black feminism pointed out that black woman faced greater oppression than white women. They argued that other forms of feminism ignored discrimination based on race. Postcolonial feminism takes inspiration from post colonialism and discusses issues experienced during colonialism including migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, race etc.

Third-World feminism has been developed by feminists of third-world countries who criticized the western feminism on the ground that it is ethnocentric. New Age feminism emerged in 21<sup>st</sup> century. It does not demand equality of men and women but want the differences between men and women be recognised and understood and these differences be treated with equity. Post-structural feminism also referred as French feminism involves various movements including psychoanalysis, linguistics, Marxist and post-Marxist theory, race theory, literary theory and other intellectual theories for feminist concerns. Postmodern feminism in its feminist theory incorporates postmodern and post-structural theory.

French feminism is French thought from a group of feminists in France who are not necessarily French writers but those who have worked in France and French tradition. Eco feminism links ecology with feminism. They argue that women and environment are both exploited by men for their profit, success and pleasure as both are considered weak and helpless. Transfeminism generally applies to transgender and transsexual people but their thinking and theory is applicable to all women.

There are three waves of feminism. The first wave (1830's–early 1900's) emphasized on legal issues and gaining political power including the right to vote to bring gender equality. The second wave (1960's–1980's) stressed on broadening the discussions to a wider range. They focused on the work place, sexuality, family, reproductive rights, domestic violence and marital rape issues. The third wave (1900's–present) expands the topic of feminism to include women with varied identities and a response to the failures of movements by second wave feminism. Rebecca Walker coined the term 'third-wave feminism' in an essay *Becoming the Third Wave* (1992). In the introduction to idea of third-wave feminism in *Manifesta* authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards suggest that feminism can change with every generation and individual.

Feminists have long criticised the institution of marriage. They stated that marriage leads to oppression of women and their rights curtailed. The gender inequality is judged from the fact that mostly women take up domestic and caring work and they get paid less than men for outside work. Traditionally, all men give speech and the women surrender her name to take her husband's name. As a high profile couple, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir always expressed opposition to marriage. Brian Sawyer in his post published in November 2003 wrote 'Marriage, understood existentially, proposes to join two free selves into one heading, thus denying the freedom, the complete foundation, of each self.' High divorce rates are leading to uncertainty of the purpose of marriage. Some critics assert that marriage will always remain a symbolic institution signifying the subordination of women to

men.

Sheila Jeffrey in *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* argues that the very institution of marriage is based on the idea that heterosexual sex is the absolute right of the man and the absolute duty of the woman. Alix Kates Shulman controversial essay *A Marriage Agreement* proposes that partners share childcare and housework equally. Throughout her diverse work there is a staunch proposal of equal rights and social justice. John Stuart Mill too in his essay *The Subjection of Women* is in favour of equality between the sexes. Martha C. Nussbaum writes 'But to rule that marriage as such should be illegal on the grounds that it reinforces male dominance would be an excessive intrusion upon liberty.....' (*Sex and Social Justice* page 295)

However, despite the feminist criticism of the institution of marriage, the institution of marriage continues. William Galston insists that there are good reasons for a liberal state not only to recognise but also to promote marriage. He comments in *Q&A Jurisprudence* by David Brooke that the very survival of liberal democracy depends on 'the character of its citizens and leaders.' (Page 154)

There was a time especially in Indian Subcontinent in almost all religions 'Marriage' was a 'sacred' phenomenon in the lives of man and woman. The institution of marriage is socially, religiously, recognised and approved union between two individuals to become husband and wife. The sole aim of marriage was to establish a family, raise children, preserve and maintain morals. But, this so called modern culture mostly borrowed from West is on the verge of challenging this very institution.

At present, some other unrecognised and irreligious ways have started taking place like 'Live in relationship'. This is nothing but each sex thinks opposite one as object of fulfilling sexual desire without taking the responsibility of raising children and thereby making responsible future generation. This, in my opinion is a very selfish idea. The recognition of same sex marriages is against social ethics. A man engaging in sexual activity with another man or a women engaging in sexual activity with another woman has no potential for bringing a baby, a new life into this world. There is no family environment. They are simply shirking their responsibility to raise children. If all the people in the world engage in same-sex marriages, the world will come to an end.

Marriage is one word having several deeper meanings. It is only a narrow thought that marriage is only to fulfil sexual desire. In fact, men and women in marriage enter into a life-long commitment both for their own sakes, so that they can be in complete security and for the sake of children they might have. Not all married couple have children of course. This does not make their marriage less valuable. Marriage in general is intended among other things, to provide children with a safe, stable environment and one in which they can learn to understand and be loved by both men and women. Marriage is an only institution which is considered as selfless, social, religious and most legitimate way in life to establish relationships between opposite sex which cannot be broken by a few individual couples who prefer other obvious ways to replace marriage.

Feminism in India can be divided into three phases. First

phase (1850-1915) was initiated to uproot social evils of *sati*, to allow widow remarriage, to forbid child marriage, to reduce illiteracy and to ensure property rights. Second phase (1915-1947) in 1920's feminism created women's associations which stressed on women's education, maternal health and child care facility, equal pay for equal work etc. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi mass mobilization of women took place in Indian nationalism. They actively participated in various nationalist and anti-colonial activities including the civil disobedience movements in the 1930's. Third phase (post-1947) Post-independence feminists drew attention towards menace of dowry system. Arranged marriage is preferred and love marriage, unwed mothers, separated, single and unfaithful women were socially looked down. Woman living with partner outside marriage is a taboo. Woman not married is a burden for parents and once married they become property of her in-laws. Feminist activists continuously try to improve the status of women in Indian society by taking up all these issues.

Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning and bestselling author, poet, activist and teacher. She was born in Kolkata (India) in 1956. Her work has been published in over 50 magazines including the Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker and her writing has been included in over 50 anthologies including The Best American Short Stories, the O' Henry Prize Stories and the Pushcart Prize Anthology. Her books have been translated into 29 languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian, Bengali, Turkish and Japanese. Several of her novels and stories have been made into films and plays. She was chosen by the Economic Times for their list 'Twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women'.

She has received number of awards, including the American Book Award, Light of India Award, Distinguished Writer Award from the South Asian Literary Association, Pushcart Prize and Cultural Jewel Award from the Indian Culture Centre, Houston. She has herself judged several prestigious awards, such as the National Book Award and the PEN Faulkner Award. She is a regular guest of literary festivals and conferences, mostly in the United States and in her home country.

Divakaruni teaches Creative Writing at the University of Houston and writes for both adult and children. She is known for her portrayals of immigrant Indian women. She elicits inspiration from her own experiences and those of other immigrant Indian women to write novels and verse. Most of her stories are set in the Bay Area of California. Before she began her career in fiction-writing, Divakaruni was an acclaimed poet. *Dark like the River* is her first volume of works published in Kolkata in 1987. Her subsequent volumes of poetry, *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle* (1991) and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) present unique images of India, the Indian-American experience and the condition of children and women in a patriarchal society. Her poetries and novels depict the experiences and struggles of women trying to find identities for themselves.

Divakaruni's collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) have developed from her poem 'Arranged Marriage' in *Black Candle* focus on the two contradictory cultures of India and America. Both the poem and stories portray the emotions

of women whose lives are affected by the Indian tradition of arranged marriages. The stories also explore issues like divorce, abortion, racism and economic inequality. *The Unknown Errors of our Lives* (2001) is another collection of short stories which evoke strong emotional response in the minds of the readers about family and culture.

She has published novels in multiple genres including realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism and fantasy. Her cross-cultural traditional themes can be vouched in her fictions beginning with *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of my Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002). The Diaspora life can be traced further in her work *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *Oleander Girl* (2013). Another novel *One Amazing Thing* (2010) like the Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* each character of the group tell story about their lives when they were stranded in the building due to earthquake. Mysticism and magic is explored in her series for children *The Brotherhood of the Conch – The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) and *Shadowland* (2009). *Neela: Victory Song* (2002) is another work by her for young readers. The theme of history, myth and magic is affirmed in one of her bestsellers *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

*The Mistress of Spices* is a tale of joy and sorrow and Tilo's magical powers. The protagonist Tilo's magic lies in the knowledge of spices. She opens a spice shop in Oakland, California and provides spices not only for cooking but also to cure and heal the immigrants suffering from homesickness who visit her store. Tilo find herself in dilemma when she falls in love with a non Indian. She is in conflict whether to serve the people or follow her own happiness. The immigrant tale of dreams, desires, pain, struggle and hope form the main feature of the novel. There is realistic element in the portrayal of the Indian community members in Oakland. There is magical realism that focuses on food which has magical power and can speak to Tilo about how to treat her customers.

The novel *Sister of my Heart* is expansion of the short story 'Ultrasound' in *Arranged Marriage*. Narrated by Anju and Sudha in alternate chapters, it is the tale of their relationship over the years. They are sisters of the heart, bond by deep love. They describe their struggle with outdated Indian customs, their memories of their fathers, arranged marriages, separation, in-laws, pregnancy, miscarriage and abortion. Marriage separates them as one goes to live in San Francisco and the other lives in India. However, towards the end of the novel their friendship is almost destroyed by jealousy and family secrets.

*The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to *Sister of my Heart*. Anju and Sudha born on the same day in Calcutta lived like sisters in the same house. They lived separately in America and India after marriage. In the sequel, unusual events in their lives brought them together. Sudha arrives in California to live with Anju and seek solace in the company of each other. But the real complication arises when Anju's husband is still attracted towards Sudha whom he met on his wedding night to Anju. In *Oleander Girl* Divakaruni exposes the complexity of social class and the power of money, status, education and the choices one makes to reach the pinnacle of success. She also addresses other issues --- religion, politics, immigration, ancestry and race. *The Palace of Illusions* is an interpretation of the world famous Indian epic *The Mahabharata* from

Draupadi's viewpoint, depicts of woman living in a patriarchal world.

Devakaruni is a feminist writer of 21<sup>st</sup> century; she has tried to include her experiences as a female writer. The heroines of her work reflect the struggle and tension arising out of the attempt to negotiate between tradition and the desire to lead a new life that education has provided them to imbibe. The women characters are away from their home land; they think more rationally but they mentally retain some of the traditional beliefs. They are all trying to discover their own 'selves' through joy and heartbreak. She excels at depicting the cultural dialectics of immigrant experience like many other contemporary writers. Divakaruni also volunteered herself for many philanthropic works. She became especially interested in helping battered women. She then started 'Maitri' with her friends which led her to write *Arranged Marriage*. She is also associated with number of social organisations --- Daya, Indo-American Charity Foundation, Akshaya Patra, Saheli etc.

'Ms. Divakaruni, emphasizes the cathartic force of storytelling with sumptuous prose...she defies categorization, beautifully blending the chills of reality with rich imaginings.' (Wall Street Journal). Beloved of critics and readers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been hailed by Junot Diaz, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author as 'a brilliant storyteller; She illuminates the world with her artistry.' (Maryville University Auditorium, November 1, 2012 for *One Amazing Thing*) and by *People* magazine as a 'skilled cartographer of the heart.' Gita Rajan in her article *Chitra Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices: Deploying Mystical Realism* stated 'Divakaruni uses mysticism to achieve her goal of making the common place wondrous and the real extraordinary.'

Many researchers and editors have given their review on the contemporary literary figure, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. U.S.A. Today and The Hindu Business Line respectively wrote 'Her literary voice is a sensual bridge between worlds. India and America. Children and parents. Men and women. Passion and pragmatism.' 'The author has a wonderful writing style that delves deep into the character of her protagonist.' Divakaruni says in her biography *Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee* 'Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life.' She said the one word which would describe her is 'enthusiastic' and that has motivated to be excellent in her field and to create literary art of lasting value. She sees herself as 'a listener, a facilitator, a connector to people,' and, 'to me, the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about.'

Divakaruni's writing revolves around the lives of immigrant women. Her immigrant heroines are fully conscious of being victims of gender discrimination prevalent in the conservative male-dominated society. Her women protagonists herald *jihad* against the domination of the patriarchy. They undergo journey from restriction to freedom, both physical and emotional. The notion that feminism is destroying the institution of marriage needs to be interpreted with right attitude. Some reports claim that women go ahead for divorce as they are influenced by second wave feminist thinking that 'marriage is inherently hostile to women.' I would like to set

right this misconception with reference to Divakaruni's fictions and short stories. She presents the impulses and emotions of immigrant and their attitude towards institution of marriage and relationships in the diasporic space. Her novels are great to read and her heroines are truly phenomenal as they inspire the readers too.

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