



Domestic violence: Inflicting physical & emotional injury in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story 'The Bats'

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Abstract

Since time immemorial women have been subjected to domestic violence irrespective of financial or educational credibility of the family. It has been seen that this unnatural, repeated or habitual pattern of behaviour by one household member on another is one of the worst kind of barbarous or rather sadistic approach towards weaker member of the family. It becomes more barbaric as the assaulted one is too meek to raise their voice against the atrocities meted to them. In most of the cases it is women or more precisely wives who are subjected to high-handedness by the patriarch or the husband. Divakaruni has been very vocal against this practice. She is active participant of several organisations that help these battered women and help them restore self respect and also to stand on their own feet. She has also protested against domestic violence through her writings.

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Introduction

'The Bats' in the series of stories in *Arranged Marriage* is an emblem of feminist sensitivity as it exhibits the issue of domestic-violence. Divakaruni used kid's innocence to enrich the contrast with her parents' tumultuous marriage. The story proceeds through a young girl as protagonist who is not able to comprehend her father's brutality towards her mother and the silence of her mother towards her bullying father. She hated her mother for being so timid and rarely saw her father who slept till late in the mornings and every night came home late from work. She often woke from her sleep by the sobs of her mother who hugged her so tightly that she almost choked. Initially, she failed to understand all this but later she understood it as a regular affair. She observed dark circles under her mother's eyes and the deep cuts on her face made her wonder if it was caused by her father. She herself had bad memories of her father as a kid when he threw her up to the ceiling and she screamed in terror. One day fed up of the miseries and agonies caused by the beatings of her husband she decided to fled to her maternal uncle's house. The little girl's excitement knew no bounds when her mother announced that they were going to her grandpa to a village by train. The readers too are sorrowful as they embark on their journey with literally nothing just few clothes in two bags to save herself from endless beatings of her husband and lead a peaceful life with her daughter.

However the conventional society doesn't let women live in peace. The meaningful glance of the society puts women in the same position as before albeit in a different way. A woman once married has to remain always married and appear to be happy, though the situation may be pathetic for her in her matrimonial home. There is no coming back for her and if she does then the society will never empathise with her. On the contrary they will always make her realise that she had done

wrong by crossing the limits of her matrimonial home even if the life there is not conducive for her. The little girl's experience in her grandfather's house was amazing and heart-warming who unlike her own father spent time with her. She would hop around excitedly with him on his trips to the *zamindar's* orchards where he worked as a caretaker. She was amused to learn about different fruit trees and loved to eat its first ripe fruit which he gave her to eat. Then she also watched hares and squirrels and lizards and went for fishing with her grandpa during his off days. She totally enjoyed the country life and saw her mother crying comparatively lesser times now.

The mother who saved herself from beatings and torture by her escape to uncle's house with her daughter couldn't stand to live away from her husband. She perhaps live in hallucination as she immediately forgives her husband when he writes to her that he won't behave badly again. To reaffirm her decision of going back she says to her uncle, "I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the marketplace. The loneliness of being without him." (*Arranged Marriage*, p.11) Her condition becomes akin to the bats. The bats had become nuisance for the mango orchard as it destroyed the fruits. Grandpa used all means like drums, sticks, magical powers but nothing worked, so finally he used poison. The next day many bats died, yet another day same number of bats died. They kept coming and then dying and both the little girl and grandfather was confused. He said, "I guess they just don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they'll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here." (*Arranged Marriage*, p. 8)

Divakaruni used dead bats as a symbol of misplaced trust. As the bats return to orchard despite poison, similarly, the mother trust her abusive husband again and again only to be opposed

and defied again and again. She insists to go back to him from the safer haven perhaps to save herself from the jibe and taunts of the society. Maybe she has inkling that it won't be same again as he has learnt his lessons during her absence. She thinks it's honourable to live with one's husband. All this reasoning pulls her back to her abusive husband but she is again exposed to his anger, thrashings, beatings and torments. She had moved out many times with her daughter sometimes with little belongings or sometimes hurriedly and once both of them went in the middle of the night. She keeps returning back to him hoping that he will now be better behaved; as the bats despite knowing it was dangerous to go back to the orchard kept returning back and losing their life. The little girl had better sense of judgement who insisted her mother not to return back and stay with grandpa. She could make a connection with the analogy of the bats and her mother's condition about which the elders were oblivion. She protested and kicked the packed bags saying, "I want Grandpa-uncle!" "I hate you! I hate you!" (*Arranged Marriage*, p. 12)

Strangely enough Divakaruni didn't use any name till the end of the story 'The Bats'. This form of technique of not naming the protagonists has been used by other writers too. Novels or stories with nameless protagonists are often dystopian. However, leaving a character unnamed is also a way to show that the character is experiencing personal crisis. We readers then can focus how the character is affected by a different world, culture, job or relationship. By using a nameless character an author can even prevent readers from unconsciously attaching the identity of another person, ethnic group or social background. The novel *Road* by Cormac Mc Carthy and Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Tell-Tale Heart' has effectively used the technique of having nameless characters in it.

Thus we can see the menace of domestic violence which exposes a family to the brutalities and not let a family progress. Not only the wife bears the burnt of this savageness but even the little girl lost her childhood as she remained elusive to fatherly love. It has been seen that it's not only the poor section of society due to financial constrain may become brutes even in fairly educated and financially competent household this kind of behaviour is prevalent. What I feel is that lack of legal laws and its proper enforcement accompanied with callous law enforcement officers promotes violence against women. Abusive partners on the basis of the male superiority, religion, custom, economic situation, family pressure, their behavioural pattern justify their actions not caring the physical and emotional condition of the person abused. Due to socio-economic challenges and fast pace of life some men find it difficult to cope with this frustration and emotional stress, take it out on their wives and even vulnerable children.

According to me the physical, sociological and psychological effect of violence against women is immense and to maintain a balanced society, women should be treated fairly and they should be valued, respected and supported and not subjected to abuse by beatings or spoken words. There is need to implement proper and stringent laws against these perpetrators of crime. Women too need to take tough stance and not become merely a victim. They rarely report the violence for fear of being ostracised by the society. Even the religions

preach endurance and forgiveness for salvation and sure path to heaven. But women here need to understand their rights and to speak for their well being. Instead of accepting it as their fate they should learn to be strong. Education imparts wisdom, confidence and ability to make right decisions. So it is imperative for a girl child to attain knowledge and education to become a strong woman of future. The well known saying, 'If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)' is attributed to the Ghanaian scholar Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey. It does give a message to all the people who take pride and importance in educating their sons and not their daughters.

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