

Coming to Terms with Change:

A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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Abstract

Marriage is the most crucial issue in the Indian socio-cultural setup; an arranged marriage being an institution where the parents fix the matters for their wards with an expectation of a secured and stable future for them. But what happens when the protagonists- the married couple find themselves in alien lands and culture and a changed milieu. What happens when the marriage that had been 'arranged' back at the native places of the protagonists faces challenges in the foreign culture. The principles and beliefs that the characters have always held need to be reinvented as per the changes in the milieu and as a consequence the protagonists find themselves in a dilemma. The paper analyses the short story collection entitled *Arranged Marriage* (1995) by Divakaruni to study how the characters, particularly women, come to terms with the enormous changes in their lives and in dealing with the changes they emerge not only as transformed but also as matured beings.

Key Words:- Arranged Marriage, Change, Immigration, Isolation, Women's Writings

"Change is a good thing, so long as we are aware of the direction in which we are changing" believes Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (in an interview with Sujata Shekhar). Divakaruni has been the author of many renowned works as *Palace of Illusions*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my Heart*, *Oleander Girl* and *Before We Visit the Goddess* among others. The paper analyses her short story collection entitled *Arranged Marriage* (1995) to study how the characters, particularly women, come to terms with the enormous changes in their lives, including their milieu and consequently their worldview (as a result of immigration to US) despite their intimidating loneliness due to their separation and distance from their near and dear ones back in India and consequently emerge as transformed and matured beings. Migration to alien lands and cultures requires a great deal of reshuffling- from lifestyle to traditional ethos and patterns.

Sociologists and Anthropologists have termed this phenomenon as Attitudinal Modernity. As Browning and Clairmont opine:

Migration transforms family relations, threatens plausibility structure, and brings freedom from traditional patters, which are also changing, which are also changing in India. Attitudinal modernity is the concept used to refer to Westernisation of attitudes in such diverse areas as gender roles, politics, authority, the family and the religious beliefs. (205)

It is this conflict between the traditional attitudinal patterns and the attitudinal modernity that forms the crux of the socio-cultural lives of the Indian Americans in the current times. It can be read as an inevitable feature in the familial and social lives in almost all the Asian American immigrants as:

In many societies outside the West a struggle occurs between traditional values and attitudes and those characterized as attitudinal modernization. The wealth and prosperity of the West are often portrayed as the lure for immigrant families, and some religious leaders and social critics describe the West as offering dangerous temptations with its decadent attitudes and behaviour... The struggle between tradition and attitudinal modernity now taking place in other parts of the world is also a reality in the lives of individual immigrants and within their families in the United States. (Browning and Clairmont 206)

In the light of the above scenario, women emerge as the individuals who find themselves placed in the most difficult of situations where belonging to a strictly traditional setup that is typical of the Indian household they are supposed to be the keeper of traditions and customs yet in the strange far-off lands amidst unfamiliar culture and society, they need to adapt to the changing phenomena so as to keep up to the pace of the changing times:

The Encyclopaedia of Sociology defines a modern individual as someone 'who is open to new experiences... [has shifted]... allegiances from traditional figures of authority (parents, priests), ... abandon[ed] passivity and fatalism in the face of life's difficulties... [and is]... ambitious for themselves and their children to achieve high educational and occupational roles.' These definitions act as a window into the lives of Asian-Indian immigrant women who are not firmly and completely entrenched in either camp. (Gupta 126)

In this sense, women can be seen as the individuals who are the ones to be

influenced the most by this phenomenon of migration of the Indian families to the US. Their dilemma stems from the fact that their upbringing and conditioning has taught them, more unconsciously rather than deliberately, a total surrender of their personalities for the sake of the families where the new and changed milieu demands of them to think, feel and express for themselves and not merely be the walking shadow of their husbands and families.

The phrase 'we have the best of both worlds' echoes a sentiment that is common in the Asian immigrant culture. . . Asian-Indian immigrant women, like other Asian women, are combining traditional and contemporary values to create a way of being which facilitates their individual growth and aspirations within the basic family structure. This is a Herculean task as the traditional Asian- Indian woman is not encouraged to develop herself as a separate individual. Rather, she is praised when her self-identity is connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of a patriarchal familial structure. (Gupta 126)

Divakaruni's women protagonists experience the same trajectory of growth where growing up in the typical conservative household they inherit the explicit and dogmatic ideals of being a perfect woman, wife, daughter and mother submerging their own personalities somewhere deep down in the abyss of this perfection. But their marriages that lead them to sudden change and an unexpected milieu leave a great deal of influence on their selves and in trying to get over the conflict between their traditional upbringing and the changed scenario, these women reach a destination where they resolve to begin afresh amidst all the possibilities

regarding their respective futures. What seems most remarkable is the fact that such resolutions of the protagonists in the latter parts of the stories are no longer dependent on the constrictive ideals that their former selves held as precious and clung to. Divakaruni expresses the same in one of her interviews with Metka Zupančič :

Indeed, starting from *Arranged Marriage*, this has been a really important topic. It is related to the frequent theme of immigration in my stories and how it changes us, particularly women. My characters are mostly Indian women growing up in India in a very traditional family. In *Arranged Marriage*, many come from a background similar to my own. I grew up with very definite notions of womanhood, of who is considered a good woman and how she is to behave, especially within the family context. Much of that was based on the notion that a good woman makes sacrifices. As a result of immigration, when we find ourselves in the West, there is quite a different notion of what a good woman is and what she is expected to do.

Many characters in *Arranged Marriage* are dealing with this sudden change in worldview, at once exhilarating and also terrifying. They have to make sense of the new situation, which begins to transform them as women. It begins to change their relationships with the people in their family – their husbands, who are with them in the new country, and their parents, who usually are back in India.

The paper focuses on two major stories of the collection, namely *Clothes* and *The Ultrasound* as the ones that delineate married women who immigrate to the US due to the respective professions of their husbands and who find themselves trapped

between the dilemma of being the dutiful and all submissive wives and that of being an individual with one's own persona as well as likes and dislikes. How these characters overcome their dilemma and arrive at their own solutions is what the stories showcase.

Clothes is the story of how Sumita loses her husband and is trapped between which path to choose from the one that compels her to return to India with her kind hearted in-laws and the other that enchants her even when she imagines of it. *The Ultrasound* on the other hand is about two loving cousins Anju and Arundhati who are in the US and India respectively and who are shocked at the consequences of the ultrasound reports of the pregnancy of one of them. It takes a lot of courage for both of them to come to terms with the circumstances in which one of them is placed.

Being the first person narratives that the stories are, the characters ponder and recall for themselves how their lives have been in the past before their marriage and it is through these recollections that the readers come to know about the upbringing of the protagonists and their milieu which is in sharp contrast to the one in which they are placed at the beginning of the narrations.

Sumita in *Clothes* recollects passing her pre-marriage days with a lot of anticipation and scepticism about her upcoming life, would-be husband and in-laws as well as the consequent loneliness away from her family. She feels a sense of dislocation when her friends tease her for "...already dreaming about her husband, and she hasn't even seen him yet!"(AM 17). Belonging to a traditional household, Sumita is made to believe that she would be chosen only if she is lucky enough and the naïve and innocent

girl believes what she has been told, “His name is Somesh Sen, the man who is coming to our house with his parents today and who will be my husband ‘if I am lucky enough to be chosen,’ as my aunt says. He is coming all the way from California”(AM 18).

As her father shows her the sari in which she is to get ready for the bride-viewing she feels emotional but her obligations did not permit her to express her sorrow:

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 even met. Would I ever see my parents again? *Don’t send me so far away*, I wanted to cry, but of course I didn’t. It would be ungrateful. Father had worked so hard to find this match for me. Besides, wasn’t it every woman’s destiny, as mother was always telling me, to leave the known for the unknown? She had done it, and her mother before her. *A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws*. Hot seeds of tears pricked my eyelids at the unfairness of it. (AM 18-19)

The sari that she is supposed to wear for her bride-viewing is pink in colour which is suggestive of how her life ahead is going to change as “Pink is the color of transition. . . . a sari that could change one’s life” (AM 19-20).

As is typical of an arranged marriage, everything in Sumita’s marriage has been lovingly and deftly planned by her parents including the saris and their colours. Besides the colour of transition that was chosen for the bride-viewing, even the colour of possibility and good luck was chosen for Sumita’s journey from India to US:

I wanted a blue one for the journey, because blue is the color of possibility, the color of the sky through which I would be travelling. But mother said there must be red in it because red is the color luck for married women. Finally, father found one to satisfy us both: midnight-blue with a thin red border the same color as the marriage mark I’m wearing on my forehead. (AM 20)

The name of the store in which Somesh worked seems strange to Sumita. As the store is named ‘7-Eleven’ (AM 21), Sumita wonders at the subtle differences between both the cultures as back in India the stores were named after gods and goddesses and were supposed to bring good luck to the owners. She is surprised to know that the store sold wine and other alcoholic drinks along with all the daily household stuff, something considered immoral in the Indian culture but not in the Western. Her shock at being introduced to these subtle differences between both the cultures lead to her unease and scepticism about her life at the US. She dreams to have her own home some time later and feels that her life would be as blissful as she imagines it to be.

That’s our dream (mine more than his, I suspect) – moving out of this two room apartment where it seems to me if we all breathed in at once, there would be no air left. Where I must cover my head with the edge of my Japan nylon sari (my expensive Indian ones are to be saved for special occasions- trips to the temple, Bengali new year) and serve tea to the old women that come to visit Mother Sen, where I like a good Indian wife must never address my husband by his name. . . . Sometimes I laugh to myself, thinking how ironic it is that after all my fears about America, my life has

turned out to be no different from Deepali's or Radha's. (AM 26)

Her husband also motivates her to get a degree in teaching and wants her to begin working after that. But Sumita on the other hand wants to work at the store and prefers to keep it a secret to reveal it later to Somesh. But destiny had different plans for Sumita. One dreadful night her fears come true and unlike what Somesh had always reassured about the safety of the store at night, intruders broke into the store, took away all the cash and murdered Somesh before they left. The entire world and all the vivid colours are taken over by the all encapsulating white of her sari - the widows' dress; white being "the color of endings" (AM 29). The white seems to her to be seductive and drawing her into its folds. Although she observes many instances of the sympathy and kindness of her in-laws, she decides not to allow herself to be caught in the depth of the sorrow and allow them to take her back to India as, "That's when 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 bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings" (AM 33).

Anju in *The Ultrasound* recalls the childhood and college days with her cousin and her confidante Runu (Arundhati) when they have been partners in petty crimes as eating *panipuris*, meeting each other secretly on the terrace of their houses to spot shooting stars at midnight to make wishes and playing truant and going to watch the movies, but all through their lives none of them has been a rebel as "... because after graduation, like good Indian girls, we both

allowed our mothers to arrange traditional marriages for us" (AM 206). Although both of them were different due to the familial circumstances yet both of them were really close to each other. As Anju recalls:

... I went on to win spelling bees and debate contests, and later in college to grapple with Chaucer and Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats in my English honors classes. I browsed through our bookstore and the USIS library reading Hemingway and Kerouac and Willa Cather and longing to visit the places they wrote of. Runu took up Home Science, which everyone admitted was the major that the dullest girls chose. She seemed to enjoy it, though, all the knitting and crocheting and cooking that would have driven me crazy. She would turn out elaborate dishes like *biryani* and *patisapta* that took days to prepare. When I carelessly tore my sari borders, she would mend them with stitches so tiny that were almost invisible. And she made the best mango chutney I ever tasted. (AM 207)

Owing to these differences it seemed perfect to Anju that after marriage she settled with her husband in San Francisco and Runu got married to a renowned and traditional joint family in Burdwan. But she observes the treatment that Runu receives at her husband's home and this makes her sceptical of Runu's happiness with her in-laws as she observes:

... the little things that disturbed me, things I would have ordinarily told Runu about. The way her mother-in-law would sometimes appear in the middle of our conversations so that I'd look up to find her watching me and Runu from the door. The way one of Runu's brothers-in-law had made a rude comment when she'd burnt the rice pudding. The way, Ramesh, who'd

returned from his business tour a couple of days before I left, had scolded her, his voice rising in irritation. *Arundhati, how many times have I told you not to mess up the newspaper before I've read it.* (AM 213)

But her upbringing and the traditional mindset made her resort to believing that Runu is happy as her husband is dependable and takes good care of her which “in Indian culture” is “the same as love”(AM 213). Contrarily, Anju feels herself to be more fortunate as in Sunil, her husband, she has found a friend, sympathetic and understanding in allowing her to get a degree in education. It is only when they fight that Anju feels disappointed as:

Oh we've had our quarrels – mostly about money, ... Sometimes, when I bought something I shouldn't have, he shouted that I was a spendthrift, letting money flow through my fingers like water. *Your mother should have married you to a maharajah, not a mere working man like myself.* Sometimes he stormed out of the house and didn't come back till late at night. I cried on those nights, sitting in the kitchen, keeping his dinner warm in the oven, waiting. (AM 214)

Anju feels that everything in their respective families has been worth cherishing and now that the babies are about to arrive their lives would turn out to be better than what they have been previously, and to her satisfaction her ultrasound report discloses her child to be a boy, perfect in health and growth. It is when Runu's ultrasound reports are disclosed that the events take a U-turn and Runu is forced to have an abortion as the results show that it's a girl. When she shares the shocking news with Anju, she feels a shattering blow to all her imaginations and anticipations. Runu had to run away from

her home to call Anju and share the news with her. As her mother-in-law does not consider it appropriate for the family that the eldest child should be a girl, everyone in the family including her husband has been forcing her to have an abortion and all her pleas and even suicide threats have been in vain as the family is adamant. Runu decides to leave the home and calls her mother before calling Anju. Surprisingly enough, Runu's mother disapproves her act of leaving her home even and rather approves of the abortion and tries to convince her abortion is “lesser of the two evils” (AM 225). It is at this disappointing time that Anju offers a solution to Runu by telling her that she could go to her mother and stay with her. She calls up her mother too and tells her that Runu would be arriving to stay with her. The argument that follows between Sunil and Anju makes her feel that even Sunil is no different from the men back in India as he too approves of abortion being the lesser evil when compared to absconding from one's in-laws' home.

“That's easy for you to say from here. Runu's the one who'll have to face it every day. . . what kind of life will it be for her? She certainly won't have a chance to remarry. She'll be alone with her daughter the rest of her life, a social pariah, someone the neighbours point a finger at every time she walks down the street.” (AM 227)

She notices the difference between Sunil-as he is and Sunil-as she had “naively, romantically believed” (AM 228). Sunil's argument about Runu's bleak and hopeless future alone with her daughter raises doubts in Anju's mind too and she at once feels distraught at having snatched the life of an ideal wifedom from Runu:

“I’m remembering the pictures we used to draw when we were little, Runu and I, about what we wanted to be when we grew up. Mine would change from week to week – a jungle explorer, a scientist, a parachute jumper – but hers were always the same. They showed a stick-figure woman in a traditional red bordered sari with a big bunch of keys tied to the palloo. She wore a red marriage bindi and a big smile and stood next to a moustachioed man dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase. Several stick figure children (their sex indicated by boxy short pants of triangular skirts) would be gathered around them, arms linked, dancing. Had I taken all of that from her by my misplaced American notions of feminism and justice? (AM 226)

But when she reconsiders Runu’s position and compares her feelings about her unborn daughter with her own feelings about her unborn son, she realizes that she hasn’t been wrong in trying to help her. She feels hopeful for Runu and her daughter and further hopes to convince Sunil to sponsor Runu and her daughter so that they can move to US and live with them as a close-knit family.

As a result of their immigration to a foreign land with their respective husbands, the women protagonists, Sumita and Anju at once feel a sense of loneliness and isolation as they are distanced from the regular touch of their families. Such isolation can have an intimidating influence on any human being and the protagonists, being women had to deal with this scenario all alone by themselves as in none of the stories do the male characters seem to empathise with the loneliness of their respective wives. Besides they are to fulfil the needs of their husbands and please them at any cost as this, they

have been taught is the duty of an ideal wife. Divakaruni states in her interview with Sujata Shekhar:

When I wrote *Arranged Marriage*, many of the women in that book were isolated. They came as spouses, moved wherever their husbands’ jobs took them. They felt they had left behind their entire world. They couldn’t FaceTime or Skype, it was expensive to call, they were cut off from near and dear ones. That larger support network they would have had back home was removed all of a sudden.

Besides, it is the contrast between native and the new cultures that becomes the source of conflict for the women. The opposing worldviews and milieus which the women observe leave them wondering about the relevance of both of them. The conflict is better manifested in the dilemma of the protagonists in choosing between being the dedicated wife or an individual in her own right. The traditional conditioning that they have been given at their homes compels them to be the former but their dissatisfaction and their needs and desires compel them to move ahead of the age old dogmatic dictums and be the individuals that they could be able to cherish and appreciate.

The change amidst which the protagonists find themselves does not negatively influence them. Rather than being completely absorbed by the new values and culture these women characters prefer to maintain a healthy equilibrium between tradition and attitudinal modernity. Neither do they give up under the pressure of the traditional ethos as is the case with Sumita (who decides to stay in the US, preferring the difficult and unstable life to the life back in India), nor do they break all the ties with their culture by refusing its authority as is

the case with Anju (who decides to convince her husband to sponsor Runu and her daughter to US so that they can lead a life of comfort away from the pinching attitudes of the typical conservative society to which they belong). Hence it could be concluded that the change that these women witness leaves them transformed but in no way

deteriorated as humans. Rather, the change functions to bring about a positive modification in their personalities and they emerge out to be the characters that can be looked up and admired as the women with courage and stoicism that is indeed worth appreciating.

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