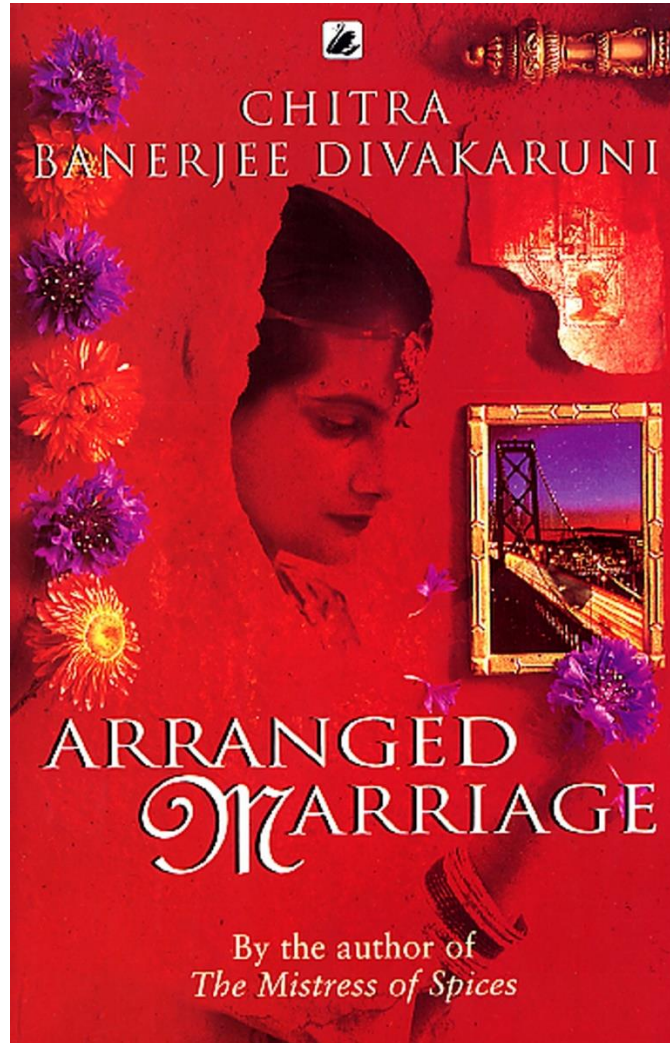


**Feministic Concerns of Independent Life in  
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage***

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**Abstract**

Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an eminent author, poet, activist and teacher. She was born in Kolkata, graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1976 and received Masters and Ph.D. in English from the University of California. Her books have been translated into thirty languages. Her works have been made into films and plays. She has won several awards,

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including American Book Award and Light of India Prize. In 1996, she published *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of short stories, which won the American Book Award.

### **Questions of Identity**

The present paper is an attempt to discuss about the feministic concerns of independent life in the stories collected in the volume *Arranged Marriage*. *Arranged Marriage* raises serious questions of identity, diasporic dilemma and cultural transformation and is fine reflection upon the predicament of women facing the challenges of assimilation in the new worlds and leaving the old ones behind. Her stories depict the silencing of women, their conscious struggle to get rid of patriarchal discourse that makes them subordinate to men and liberate them to change the existing social order. The stories look at women's struggle to create a sense of independent self and the resistance they face in their endeavors. The women in their efforts to speak up for themselves or their sisters face different forms of violence. Women have no separate space within the limits of its domain.

### **Abusive Marriage**

In the story *Bats*, the lower middle-class woman is imprisoned within an abusive marriage where she suffers physical battering almost every night. The violence and its debilitating impact on her are witnessed by her young daughter. The child is both a witness and a fellow sufferer. She observes her mother crying every night and understands her need to be comforted. However, she is unable to extend that solace to her. The narrative opens with her daughter's account of her mother weeping and her attempts to understand it. "That year Mother cried a lot, nights. Or maybe she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice" (1). If the mother is portrayed as a victim the child is doubly oppressed due to her gender and age. She feels suffocated and smothered within the small cramped space of their city house and the demands of her mother for love, understanding and comfort. The father beats and scars her into silence. The house symbolizes the limitations these women face with patriarchy.

### **Father's Frustration**

On the other side of the spectrum is the father. The girl has no attachment toward her father; she is relieved when her mother runs away from him. The man is himself depicted as a victim of the city; he has a low paying job as a foreman in a printing press and finds it difficult to make both ends meet. The man is frustrated and drinks to alleviate the pain and probably a sense of failure. He comes home drunk and vents his anger on the hapless wife and child every night. There is no break in the pattern of repeated violence and abuse the woman suffers. The story explores the potential damage gender dynamics have on inter-personal relations and ultimately the family. The violence ridden unequal marriage creates a dysfunctional family. The man communicates with the wife and daughter through violence. The earliest memory of the young girl is of being thrown up and down by the father and being scared. She does not share a very warm bond with the mother who remains trapped in her own world of pain and fear to share a happy space with the girl child.

The ideal notion of a father is presented in the figure of the grandfather who is gentle, supportive and protective toward the mother and daughter. The complexities of the man- woman relationship are explored within the matrix of patriarchal assumptions and demands through the image of the woman who runs away from an abusive husband only to return to him. It is not that she has no other option, the uncle had given her unconditional shelter and there was no pressure on her to leave him. The young daughter too does not want to go back to the father. Nevertheless the woman chooses to return to her abusive husband. The woman is like the Bats in the story.

### **Missing the Husband**

The woman tells her uncle that she needs to go back because she misses her husband and other women whisper about her. Her need is both sexual and social. She keeps shifting between conformity and rebellion; the need for social acceptance and the desire for an individual space. Her need can't be understood by the young doctor who feels betrayed by the mother and the adult world. The complex web of adult emotions is not decipherable by the young girl. Her narration has gaps that suggest not just her inadequacy but her lack of vocabulary to express the violence that pervades her life. This violence is both physical and mental. Her young world is ruptured by both father and mother in the respective waves. She epitomized the loss faces by the marginal in any given power play.

## **Place of Women Within Patriarchy**

The place of women within patriarchy is always a fraught and contested space. ‘The maid servant’s story explores this through the prism of class. The worlds of the upper caste and upper class women are apparently different from those of their less privileged underclass sisters. Manisha, the bright young scholar returns to India for a break after a teaching assignment at the University of California. She is confronted with questions of marriage by her aunt and feels irritated and hemmed in by the need to maintain a conservative façade for the genteel folk. She understands that back home things are in a time warp and the two women in her life would strongly object to her relationship without marriage with the young Bengali professor in the United States of America. Manisha feels she is liberated from the protocols of womanly behavior deemed fit for young Indian women after her western sojourn and exposed. She nevertheless maintains her silence on her love life and participates in the discussions surrounding her marriage. Thinking about her relationship she realize that she too was initially burdened with absence of guilt and shame for having given in to the demands of Bijoy wants her without the promise of marriage. the nagging doubt that you do not treat a women you respect as a mere body remains in the background of her mind and the text despite the trope of sexual liberation and a women’s control over her body.

## **Manisha’s Relationship**

Manisha’s relationship with her mother is a strained one; there is an invisible wall that distance them. She feels there is a lack of parental warmth in her bond with her mother. The distance between her mother and Manisha makes her rebel in order to get her attention. The reason behind the mother’s aloof behavior remains a mystery to the girl. She watched over my life carefully, vigilantly, if from afar. All through my childhood, everything I wanted everything material, that is was proved for me often before I needed to ask. But what she thought what she longed for what made her cry out in her dreams (for I’d heard her once or twice), I never knew. It was as though she’d built a wall around her, thin and invisible and unbreakable. No matter how often I flung myself against it. I was refused entry. Maybe she no longer knew how to let me.

Maybe people were right when they said that the death of her husband and baby in a cholera epidemic that had struck Calcutta overnight when I was about five had killed a part of her too. why had that explanation always seemed too facile for me?) at any rate, she'd relinquished me to Deepa Mashi who, herself childless, enthusiastically took on the role of second mother. (64)

The wife is sent to hospital and in the gap the maid is thrown out of the house on the pretext of the security of its inmates. The mother of the maid comes and creates a scene in the house and this opportunity is seized by the husband to chuck her out. His fully aware of what awaits her outside yet he is remorseless in his vengeance towards the maid the narrative then moves on to talk about the pampering the wife gets after she delivers a boy, the young sisters marriage fixed and everybody seems to have conveniently forgotten the maid. The wife's question about her remain unanswered and she too gradually stops asking about her. It is a coincidence that the paths of the two women cross again. The woman and the children get caught in a traffic jam and the husband orders the driver to take a route that passes through the red light area. She observes the young maid garishly made up soliciting customers on the road. The woman rolls down the car window, calls out to the girl and extends her arm out of the car. The girl spits on her extended palm with a look of hatred. The woman's hand becomes stained with the blood red paan juice which she tries to erase. The husband scolds her but from that day a part of her dies.

### **Violence Caused by Patriarchy**

Violence perpetrated by patriarchy on these women scars them and mars the psychological growth of those around them. The mothers in both the stories are so traumatized and scarred by the violence that they fail to perceive its impact on their daughters. In Bats' daughter has no connect with the mother, similarly in 'the maidservant's story' Manisha is not able to penetrate the wall of the ice the mother has built around her. The violence thus creates a ripple effect. It cascades from one generation of women to another and also impacts man-woman relationship. The narratives are also stories of betrayal where in the men betray the wives and the woman as victims are so benumbed by the violence that they are unable to give emotional solace

and sustenance to their daughters. The violence thus creates a vicious cycle which is difficult to break.

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### Reference

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