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Treatment of Female Oppression - An Insight into Selected Stories of Chitra Divakaruni

Rajesh Bojan, M.A., M.Phil.

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"I have always been scared of you"

- Sylvia Plath

Female Plight in All Cultures, Civilizations and Religions

Nothing could be as meaningful as the verse above. There could be no better line of expression than this. It is simple, yet strong in voicing the female plight. It is not just the summary of Sylvia Plath's life, it is the testimony and collective voice of every woman living and dead.

Throughout history, no matter to what age, to what region and to what religion one belongs to, there has always been a current of events happening around us all the time flashing how women are being treated and exploited. It is certainly not new to us, what was actually experienced by women of those times are just what our contemporary women encounter. There has been a change only in the lifestyle, but human condition remains unchanged. She is just what she has always been all through the ages. No doubt she will always be the same.

Successful Writers Who Deal with Female Plight

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Chitra Divakaruni

Among many, only a handful of writers have been very successful in expressing the plight of women. Towering among them are names like Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das who have lived a life of suffering, which became the predominant raw material for their compositions. What else could be better than expressing ourselves, indeed, the highest degree of writing, the noblest expression of thought, is what we write about ourselves.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Special Place

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the modern epitome of Indian writing in English deserves a place among the literary giants. For, she is herself the expression of what she writes. Her stories are filled with her own experiences as an immigrant.

Chitra Divakaruni in her works largely discusses about the cultural divisions, the diasporic experiences and mainly focuses on the effect of migration especially on her women characters, thereby depicting the transformation it brings into their lives. She brilliantly blends such experiences with personal and domestic matters, flavoring her stories with a wide variety of themes. Her characters beautifully represent the status, the feeling, the expectation, the need of every immigrant.

As an immigrant author, she pictures the position and identity of her immigrant characters in variety of ways to provide a clear account of their cultural transition and suffering. Divakaruni gifts her characters with a voice to articulate their suppressed feelings and naturally portrays through them their difficulties in being between two worlds.

Divakaruni has shown her capacity of integrating varied themes into her storyline, each one extremely unique in its own way. Among the themes, what she has presented peculiarly on women is of much importance. Divakaruni has dealt elaborately on how women are being handled by men. Her characters emerge from different contexts; develop a sort of resistance against giving up their deep-rooted native culture.

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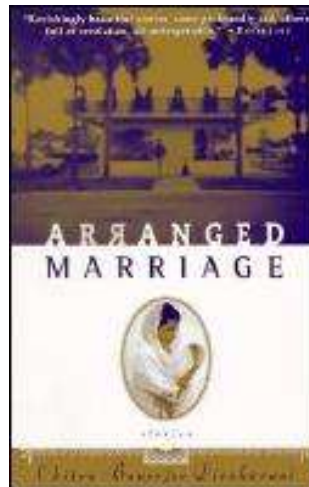
Deep-rooted Native Culture in Women's Plight

Sylvia Plath expresses her strong disapproval towards her father in her poem *Daddy*. She writes:

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.
It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.

How well Plath explains her misery. She treats her own father as a universal symbol of all men. What she has to say about her father is in fact an attack on male atrocities.

The Disappearance of Self-hood in Arranged Marriage



There is not much difference between Plath and what Divakaruni expresses in her story, “The Disappearance” appearing in her book *Arranged Marriage*. The specialty of this story lies in the way the author has constructed and exhibited her message on oppression. When most writers explode while handling themes as such, Divakaruni diverts from the usual violent expressions and makes use of the language of love to communicate her message. She is almost trying to present the same idea, but with a different perspective. Let us discuss how she achieves it.

In “The Disappearance” we are introduced to a young woman who is married and settled in U.S. The very first line of the story: “*At first when they heard about the disappearance, people didn't believe it.*” serves as a remarkable clue to what is to follow.

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We come to know about the disappearance of the wife. Before we could wonder what went wrong, the author photographs the cause thus: *“What a shame, they said, it’s getting so that you aren’t safe anywhere in this country nowadays...because that’s what everyone suspected, including the husband.”*

She has left her family but not for the reason what people believed it to be. Her disappearance has a lot more to say. This is where Divakaruni brilliantly and indirectly integrates the other side of the coin.

The Unseen Protagonist

Divakaruni writes a simple and striking sentence when explaining about the unseen protagonist. She writes, *“She never did wear American clothes.”* This line appearing at the very beginning is a sign from which we understand how her husband treated her. In fact, she was not allowed to wear dresses of American style though she had an intense desire for it.

Additionally, we comprehend from the following lines the strong message that the author wants to convey: *“She’d been out for her evening walk, she took one every day after he got back from the office. Yes, yes, always alone, she said that was her time for herself”*.

Divakaruni explains how much women are caught and made use of in the world of men. They are not allowed to do what they wanted to. Women are continuously struggling and searching for a couple of minutes to be released from the cuffs of men. The protagonist in the story finds a way of escape through her evening walk. She finds this particular exercise as a momentary solace to forget her burden. *“He didn’t quite understand that.”* this is how the author categorizes men. The woman preferred to go for a walk alone. As a husband, he had failed to understand why his wife wanted to be left alone. There was no quarrel between them, they loved each other, everything was normal, yet, she was not happy. In this story, oppression seems to occur smoothly. There is no quarrel, no fight, no violence, but oppression makes its way through her life very tenderly.

Men in the Matters of Women

Men always try to involve in women’s matters. They are eager to know each and every inch of their move. Hardly have they left any space for them to act independently. In the name of love, in the name of power, in the name of a family head, in every way possible, it is not surprising to know how men are governing women. Women appear to be liberated in the society, but every household has a tale of domination. Divakaruni brings to light the type of oppression that most women face in the contemporary society. She writes about the bridal expectation of the husband, *“If you can find me a quiet, pretty girl, someone who would be relieved to have her husband make the major decisions.”*

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Men are very cautious about what they want. They need every item to be arranged in the way they wanted it to be. Most men are ready to treat women well provided they are dependent. There are rarely men out there who could let their wives have their way.

Divakaruni beautifully brings out the nature of men thus,

He was a good husband. No one could deny it. He let her have her way, indulged her, even. When the kitchen was remodeled, for example, and she wanted pink and gray tiles even though he preferred white. Or when she wanted to go to Yosemite Park instead of Reno, although he knew he would be dreadfully bored among all those bearshit-filled trails and dried-up waterfalls. Once in a while, of course, he had to put his foot down, like when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes. But he always softened his no's with a remark like, What for, I'm here to take care of you, or, You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more feminine. He would pull her onto his lap and give her a kiss and a cuddle which usually ended with him taking her to the bedroom.

It does not end with this.

The Bedroom

We move on to another important area. It's the bedroom. A woman not only expects sex, she wants her husband to provide her with comforts beyond sex. Most women are very sensitive about what they actually need. What Kamala Das had expected from her husband is just what I believe every woman strive for. Kamala Das expresses her wish thus, "I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from thoughts."

When Divakaruni speaks of sex in the story, she writes,

He was always careful not to hurt her, he prided himself on that. And he always told himself he'd stop if she really begged him, if she cried. After some time, though, she would quit struggling and let him do what he wanted. But that was nothing new. That could have nothing to do with the disappearance.

It is quite clear that sex was not a problem. The woman had learnt to resist. She had always known what her husband needed and accordingly cooperated as much as she could. She knew well that her excuses will never be considered when it comes to sex. "*She was always saying, Please, not tonight, I don't feel up to it. He didn't mind that.*" It is a clear indication of how women are being subjugated and their feelings are being ignored.

Though the protagonist in the story suffers sexual torment, it is certainly not a cause for her disinterest towards her husband and disappearance. What actually makes this character more

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noticeable is that she all of a sudden disappears without leaving a single clue. Her husband is not the only one to be left, she even leaves her only son. But for her husband her disappearance is only a momentary loss. He did not let this incident to stop his progress. He kept moving, forgetting what had happened. He was prepared for a new life, a remarriage of course.

The Bats

In the story, “The Bats” we are introduced to a woman who is incapable to endure the tortures of her husband. There seems to be no love in their union. The child appearing in the story becomes the narrator and shows us the condition of her mother who is leading a loveless life. The child expresses the state of her mother, *“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.”*

This story makes it clear how most women have been tolerating and adjusting with their husbands. Though it is not right or appropriate to accuse everyone, it is true such conditions are existing. When her child enquires her mother about the wound marks on her face, she is left with no answer, instead she tries to divert those questions.

Disillusion and Disappointment after Marriage

This is typically a story of a woman who as most others realize only after the marriage that there seems to be nothing what she had expected her husband to be. Her whole life is left unfulfilled. She is caught in a strong dilemma that does not let her to either accept or ignore her condition. She indeed needs him not for what he is, but for the sake of the society in which there is no place for a woman to survive independently. Her life out in the society without the protection of a man is more miserable and complicated than the life she is at present living. Even if there is no fault on her side, in the eye of the society she becomes the culprit. It is she who is ultimately stamped upon. The Indian society and culture, in its typical form and way has its own model of the woman who whether good or bad has to clay herself to marriage life.

At one point in the story, when her struggle and suffering becomes unbearable, she leaves with her child to “grandpa-uncle’s” house where she tries to have some comfort forgetting her sorrows. The following line as it flows out of the mouth of the child, beautifully expresses for how long she had had the idea of leaving her husband *“She never had much money, and whenever she asked for any, father flew into one of his rages. But maybe she’d been saving up for this trip for a long time.”* Some women have the courage to quit and some don’t. Majority of women accept life the way it is.

Understanding of Life at the End

This short story, quite contradictory from “The Disappearance”, takes an unexpected and reasonable shift towards the end enabling the character to have a broad understanding of life. The woman becomes sensible and emotionally matured thereby ready to deal with the same life

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which she had once rejected. The following sentences about the fate of bats serving as an association to the story are wonderful representation of her actual condition. *“I guess they just don’t realise what’s happening. They don’t realise that by flying somewhere else they’ll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there’s something that keeps pulling them back here.”*

She reconsiders her decision and accepts her husband for the sake of their relationship and child. She realises that a bit of adjustment could bring them back together and finally she gives way for it. It is not that she has forgiven him, it is not even that his domination has vanished, but, it is that she has no other option she chooses to return to the same life.

Fine Specimens of the Damage and Disaster

Both the stories are fine specimens of the damage and disaster caused to women through oppression. The women characters become disinterested, behave abnormal and develop a deep alienation towards their marriage life as a consequence of their continuous subjugation and are eventually left to a loveless, pitiable state. Though so many years have rolled by, so many advancements have elevated and civilised us, it is true we still remain domestically unchanged. Unless oppression could be completely ruled out, it is certainly impossible for any women to attain prosperity in both personal and professional life.

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