

Impact of Claustrophobia in *The Bats and Disappearance*

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Abstract:

There is a substantial contribution from women novelists to Indian Writing in English. They have taken keen interest in the revelation of different aspects of our life and have superbly dealt with different problems that any common woman has been facing today. Plight of women in the society has been the staple diet of Indian English literature. Many women authors have estimated the real happenings against women in the society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni too has a peculiar skill in depiction of women discriminations in the society. Her panache handles several aspects of discrimination against women and their sufferings in the traditional society. Her stories sound plausible and deal with the women related with sub-urban families and brought up in a stereotyped environment and are struggling to liberate them from the claustrophobia of family life. The objective of this paper is to expose the fear of family life and why sometimes women desire to escape from it to find comfort zone.

Key Words: Happenings, discrimination, claustrophobia, suffering.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the well-known Indo-American Diasporic writers, settled in America for studies. She is an award-winning and best-selling author, poet, activist and teacher. She is the co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline for the South Asian Immigrant Women to assist them lift from their domestic violence. She is presently engaged in many non-profit organizations in the areas around Houston.

Discovering the different issues in her writings she has carved credible position among the writers of contemporary literature. Her classy collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995), focuses on family, arranged matches, a centuries-old tradition in India and human relationship. It is all about immigrants, particularly women from India trapped between two worlds. This remarkable collection comprises eleven short stories, focuses on racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. Her concentration is mainly on women caught between two worlds, their dejection and disillusionment and adaption to such conditions. This collection is one of her most beautiful and meaningful collections which delineates powerful women who fight against to be led by others.

We find the different faces of women problems through presentation of various themes in her fiction. "The Bats", is the maiden story of *Arranged Marriage*, which highlights the doleful state of a woman who becomes a prisoner in an institution of marriage. In this story Divakaruni presents the face of deprived womanhood through the character of Ma whose name is not known. She is pushed into an incompatible marriage by elders and she cannot free herself from the shadow of submission. The author talks about the physical and emotional sufferings and courage of an Indian woman who leaves her torturer husband and returns home with her child.

This plausible story shows the power struggle between man and woman in a distinctive traditional way, which results into an estrangement of their married life. It reveals the story of an eight-year-old girl, daughter of abusive father and reluctant mother. Their role is fixed which is concerned on their gender. The Indian women have been accepting their partners with their faults and trying to live up to their desires and demands by transforming and molding themselves. They absorb the trends set by them which dictate the feminine qualities to be performed by women. Although these feminine qualities are imposed on them yet they find it difficult to free themselves from its bondage. Her husband beats mother of a young girl on each night, which seems she has formed an interminable alliance with sobs, tears and sighs. She bears with the inhuman reality as she has no one to go back to except an old uncle in the countryside.

The pathetic condition of stoical mother is like other women in many homes in India who are imperiled to worst forms of physical cruelty. The daughter continues to describe the predicament of her mother as: "I heard him, though, shouts that shook the walls of my bedroom like they were paper, the sounds of falling dishes. Things fell a lot when father was around, maybe because he

was so large” (AM 2). Such incident teaches her that the world is made up of two types of people-powerful and weak and the powerful always ruled over the weak. She has rejected the masculine dialect and the masculine perception of virtue, relationships, content and one day she silently escapes with her daughter, from the horror of her husband, to an uncle living in a remote village where she tries to have some ease to forget her sorrows. Some women have the daring to escape and some do don’t. Majority of women agree to take life the way it is.

After some times she feels lonely without her husband and writes a letter to him, which shows the hoary tradition of arranged marriage. The husband writes back and promises it will not happen again and she agrees to rejoin him. The story ends with a positive note with the hope of a new dawn. The writer paves the way out of the life of exploitation, struggle, confusion and this way is full of hope, the hope of living further only for the sake of her daughter. Finally she returns to her husband and we realize that nothing is changed and past cannot be obliterated in the life of women. The relationship between mother and daughter is simply complex as the young daughter wonders at her mother’s simple belief that her father will change. Simon De Beauvoir has also contested this kind of oppression in the following terms:

A woman is not born: she becomes, is made a woman. This is to say that the socialization of woman renders her a woman with certain apparently “inherent” qualities- weakness, feeble mindedness, patience and so on. All these help patriarchal males to argue that women need to be confined to the home (they are not strong to “go out” into the world), be protected and controlled. Her sexuality and desires are made and treated as subservient to that of the male’s. ...Gendering is a practice of power, where masculinity is always associated with the authority. (Nayar 83)

Here the story adopts the oppression of woman through its stereotypical image of woman as weak, vulnerable, and an obstacle in man’s life. But after return the physical attacks on her do not stop, each night leaves its own scars on her face, she escapes again from the barbarities of the marriage but like a dog who returns to his own vomit, the Ma too returns to the prison-house of marriage which provides her neither any relief nor any sense of respectability.

“Like the bats which throng the field knowing, pretty well, their fate to be destroyed, the wife in the midst of escapades from the humiliation, returns to her husband again and again. Such peculiar but very common marital relationships are not unusual in many places, especially in

villages.” (209 Sandhya)

It does not mean that she has forgiven him; it is not even that his domination has vanished, but it is clear that she has no other choice but to return to the same. This is the story in most of the traditional Indian society that Banerjee has aptly portrayed.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her work shows the deepest fear and trauma faced by women and sometimes show them emerging as stronger and self-reliant women. “The Disappearance” is another story in anthology, which discovers the cross-cultural experiences of a woman through a feminist perspective. The author investigates why the protagonist disappears without giving any clue for the act. Her disappearance has a lot more to say. Divakaruni has proficiently portrayed the extent of the woman’s oppression within the marriage in which the wife is not allowed to pursue her financial independence; rather she is subject to marital rape. When many authors explode while handling such themes, Divakaruni diverts from the usual violent expressions, appearance of self-hood in the story. The wife in the story maintains a distance in spite of their marriage and their two and half year old son.

Divakaruni explains how modern women are detached from the family they are in if they are unable to accept the spouse. They are not allowed to do what they wanted to do. Such types of women are continuously struggling and searching for a couple of minutes to be released from the cuffs of men and she feels that she has to escape from claustrophobia of family life. The difficulty is that they have to consent the selected spouse by their parents, forgoing their love or they have to quit the home. Then they are haunted by their love throughout and when they are not comfortable with their husbands, they take the extreme step of leaving the family. They are ruled by husbands even though they are educated and live in America.

In the story the protagonist is gradually turned into step ford-wife and considered as a sex object. The long list of expectations must have suffocated the wife even though she might have struggled to replace her husband for her lover. Carrying the patriarchal baggage the husband cannot even begin to understand individual desire for some space and autonomy. The protagonist in the story discovers the way of escape through her evening walk. She catches this routine as a transitory relief to forget her liability. After his wife’s disappearance, the husband reflects on his conjugal life. He contemplates of the wife’s elopement after he finds the jewelry in the bank vault missing. He insists that he never wanted a college-going girl for his second

marriage. The Indian male is cultural obsessions vis-à-vis the wife, are revealed through his reflection: “what for I’m here to take care of you.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..... that was another area where he had to be firm, sex. She was always saying, please not tonight, I don’t feel up to it” (AM 171-172).

In a veiled manner the writer asserts that in arranged marriages, attempts to schedule an expression of female sexuality to coincide with institutional structures of marriage renders impossible an articulation of women’s desires. Divakaruni writes that though he plans to lead a happy life, he would be haunted with the thoughts of his first wife and her happiness with another man. Through this tale, Divakaruni create the image of Indian woman who have no understanding or equality in their marriage and it becomes a kind of cage from which an act of flying can save.

The thirst for happiness and harmony is what the characters in the above stories are trying to achieve. They are also asking the importance of women in the family and seeking to accomplish something additional and different. Thus in both stories the women characters react differently to escape from their claustrophobic married lives and compromise with the realities of life. The lives of these women are a narrative of peripheral existence caught between pressures of the past and hopes and ambitions of the new, the present and the future. At times they are seen making brave and impudent choices to shape new identities and at other times seen surrendering to the seemingly overpowering odds. They are trapped between two ideologies and are searching the way to run out.

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