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**THE SILENT RETALIATION OF A WOUNDED FEMALE HEART IN CHITRA
BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S SHORT STORY "THE DISAPPEARANCE"-
A CRITICAL STUDY ON SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA ISSUES**

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COUNTRY: India****ABSTRACT**

Woman, one of the potential physical, emotional and spiritual factors that have shaped the human civilization, is deprived of the judicious honour in the male centred social set up. Apparently, the social progress was made possible with the relentless efforts of women who have exercised their merciful hearts, sensible minds and indomitable spirits for human wellbeing. The transformation of matriarchal societies into patriarchal system has generated various gender issues and social maladies. Both human history and natural history shows the evidence that *change* as a permanent characteristic in the evolution of men and material. Obviously, men tend to move from place to place in search of better livelihood which resulted in industrialization, urbanization and globalisation. Subsequently, it has caused the unstoppable exodus of people across the globe to dwell and acclimatise themselves in advanced societies. Such factors naturally compel a traditional woman who is confined to the social customs to join her husband's journey to a new job environment. And unsurprisingly, a feeble woman's heart aspires to live in a better haven which is free from economic worries and social constraints and can also satisfy her emotional needs. The foremost dilemma of an orthodox woman who leaves her motherland is the issue of acculturation. Such woman finds it difficult to face the culture-shock in the modern society. For instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Asian immigrant in the USA has seemingly encountered various cross cultural concerns. She has expressed her experiences of the new cultural context in her short stories and novels. *The Disappearance*, a moving short story, is one such appropriate example which presents the concerns of traditional woman in the expatriate environment. This paper delves deep into the feelings of a diaspora woman and also analyzes the feminine sensibilities of a submissive wife. Further, the paper also tries to put forward the viable ways to alleviate the distress of such agonised woman and shows the clearer paths toward harmony and happiness.

Key words: Diaspora, expatriate, social malady, acculturation, emancipation

THE MUTE MUSINGS OF WOMEN

Woman is believed to be a phenomenal power in world social progress but ironically, she is deprived of her natural right of equal status even in modern civilizations. Most Literature portrays woman as striving to gain a dignified identity for herself. Unable to bear the humiliations she is mostly subjected to, woman has been taking part in feminist movements and struggling to elevate herself from the low stratum of being an inferior being in patriarchal societies to becoming a dignified member of civilized nations that can guarantee democratic ideals such as liberty, equality and fraternity. This paper makes an honest attempt to present the hypothesis that a woman's life is a conflict between what she wants and what she is. Hence, the conceptual framework of this research paper is to explicate the predicament of woman in general and the anguish of expatriate woman in particular. Elucidating the secondary position of woman in the traditional Indian culture, Shanta Krishnaswamy rightly commented on woman:

...as a child, is sold off to strangers for a bridal price or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family or who, as a widow.....immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre (Shanta Krishnaswamy 2).

In spite of many organized feminist and woman-suffrage movements, there is no improvement in the status and living conditions of woman. The survival or prosperity of woman depends on man's mercy. The Indian woman, who is subjugated to social ideals, struggles to free herself from the noose of cruel customs. Usually, woman is oppressed under the pressures of domestic duties, loyalty to husband and her consciousness of being woman. As a result she mostly lives in despair and in a state of hopelessness. In contrast, woman in western societies is free enough to protest against the illegitimate social order and can make her independent choices for happy living.

In order to bring out the plight of such women, writers like Jane Austen (1775-1817), Emily Dickinson (1832-1886), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Elaine Showalter (b.1941), Anne Sexton (1928-1974), and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) in the West and Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Kamal Das (1934-2009), Anita Desai (b.1937), Shashi Deshpande (b.1938-), and Arundhati Roy (b.1961-) in the East have succeeded in understanding woman's emotions and sentiments and have through their writings expressed concern for woman with their feminine sensibilities. They also expressed through their writings that woman must be endowed with equal privileges as man. Woman today demand economic independence, equal status and undisturbed privacy in personal life. One can understand the predicament of contemporary woman through the literature of the period, etched with feminine sensibilities, through the works of internationally renowned woman writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, India, US., Suvimalee Karunaratna, Sri Lanka., Jhumpa Lahiri, India, US., Kamala Markandaya, India, UK., Bharati Mukherjee, India, Canada, US., Nayantara Sahgal, India., Anita Desai, Germany, India, US., Shashi Deshpande, India., Sorayya Khan, Pakistan, US., Arundhati Roy, India.

It is an undisputed fact that biological factors and economic dependency make woman dependent on man for the gratification of her sensual pleasures and the fulfilment of her economic needs respectively. The concern for emancipation of woman is one of the ancient human struggles for safe and decent living. Political philosophies, great revolutions and social movements have in the past contributed to the accomplishment of a rule of law granting equal status to all citizens. Social activists still argue that woman is not sanctioned complete socio-political equality on par with man. Great feminist writers like Virginia Woolf felt that an orthodox woman is haunted by *ghost like image* or the idea of *an angel in the*

house, to be more explicit, the consciousness of inherent womanhood restricts her to act in accordance with her self-interests and thereby act as impediments to her sensitivity. For all such reasons, she suggested the need of androgynous sensibilities among men and women who are equally important for the social progress of a society.

LITERATURE; AS A DEVICE FOR EXPRESSION OF EXPERIENCES

Short story, one of the literary genres, has become a convenient device for women writers in particular to express their experiences of the modern world. The development of short story as an independent literary form made self-expression more meaningful and less ambiguous to the modern readers. The tradition of short story writing gained popularity with the works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), Mark Twain (1835-1910), Guy De Maupassant (1850-1893), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), O' Henry (1862-1897), James Thurber (1894-1961), H.G. Wells (1866-1946), Stephen Leacock (1869-1944), H.H. Munro (Saki), Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973). They all have contributed to enhancing the art of short story writing to new levels of perfection.

Modern women writers like Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), Andrey Platonov (1899-1951), Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973), Doris Lessing (b.1919), Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), Margaret Atwood (b.1939), Angela Carter (1940-1992), also proved their creative writing skills and excelled on par with male writers. The South Asian expatriate writers describe their memories of their homeland and usually recall their past reminiscences. Distinguished South Asian women writers have written about their feelings of ethnicity, exile and new relationships in their Diaspora literature. The contemporary literature of South Asian Diaspora includes the writers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Their number continues to proliferate in recent times. For instance, V.S. Naipaul (b. 1932), Anita Desai (b.1937), Bapsi Sidhwa (b.1938), Bharati Mukherjee (b.1940), Gita Mehta (b.1944), Salman Rushdie (b.1947), Rohinton Mistry (b. 1952), Vikram Seth (b.1952), Romesh Gunsekera (b.1954), Amitav Ghosh (b.1956), Vikram Chandra (b.1961), have all indulged in writing impressive Diaspora literature.

Diaspora literature arises from a conflict between the homeland and the new land of habitation. Also known as expatriate literature, these writers have been producing profound literary works and their valuable contribution to world literature is commendable. In this way, impressive works written by eminent writers of Diaspora tradition catch the attention of global readers. The concept of expatriation is portrayed in works of popular writers like in *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh (1915), *Dying in a Strange Country* (2002) by Tahira Naqvi (1915 - 1991), *Arranged Marriage* (1995) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b.1956), *In an Antique Land* (1992) by Amitav Ghosh (b.1956), *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri (b.1967) which prove to be great literary treatises.

DOMESTIC MALADY VS. TRANSNATIONAL TRAGEDY

The idea of 'Diaspora' has evolved from various socio-economic conditions which suggest a global condition of mobility. Transnational resettlements of people have formed a new social organization or transnational community and today it has captured the imagination of many writers and social scientists. The search for lucrative jobs and the need for fulfilling psychological requirements are driving people from less developed countries to economically prosperous nations. Such human settlement, away from their original home lands is defined in simple terms in the following manner:

The word diaspora (from Greek *διασπορά*, "scattering, dispersion") [1] is "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established homeland" [2] or "people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location", [3] or "people settled far from their ancestral homelands". [2] (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora> 1).

Being alienated from homeland, a person goes away from his/her cultural milieu. The host governments of Diaspora communities compel the immigrants to assimilate and accept the prevailing socio-political norms for transforming them as citizens with a new identity. South Asian Diaspora is a significant development in recent times. Diaspora or Expatriate literature largely deals with the themes such as the sense of dislocation, the sense of displacement, pains of exile, feelings of homelessness and a profound sense of alienation. Both Indian women writers and South Asian Diaspora women writers have written much about the prevailing gender issues in homeland and the unfamiliar new country. The immigrants in a foreign land encounter many hardships as they are totally new to that cultural environment. It takes several decades for them to get themselves acclimatized with strange life styles in a land remote from their original domicile. The problems of acculturation, assimilation, women's struggle for liberation from familial attachments and social circumstances are the major factors which have contributed to the growth of South Asian Diaspora literature.

It is worthwhile mentioning the contribution of famous Indian women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Anjana Appachana, Manju Kapur, Kalpana Swaminathan, Geeta Hari Haran, Jai Nimbkar, Anita Nair, Kamala Das, and Lakshmi Kannan who have artistically exposed the crises of Indian women. In a similar fashion, the popular modern diaspora women writers in the United States namely Sujata Sankranti, Monika Ali, Persaud Lakshmi, Uma Parameswaran, Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri have expressed the woes of expatriate women in America.

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI: GLORIOUS WRITER OF INDIAN DIASPORA

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni migrated to the United States from her native land India at the age of 19. She has distinguished herself as one of the torch bearers of the new genre of South Asian Diaspora literature. Born in 1957 in Calcutta, India, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni contributed several anthologies of poetry and novels to Diaspora literature. She is the author of PEN-award winning collection of the short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1996), and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives – Stories* (2001). She is widely known for her portrayals of immigrant Indian women. Her short story collection *Arranged Marriage* consists of moving stories about the immigrant experiences of young Indian girls and women, who traversed the Atlantic Ocean to find a new life in America and who often had to swing between their hereditary cultural values and modern liberal ideas. The short stories describe the apprehensions of Indians in America who oscillate between the demands of two cultures. They are concerned with themes of womanhood, love, marriage, familial bonds, relationships, and freedom from human bonds. The themes generally revolve around immigrant experience, exile, alienation, and sense of disappointment in the new land.

One can observe that the stories in *Arranged Marriage* are written with poetic sensibility and the titles suggest symbolic connotations and so various shades of meaning can be derived from them. Chitra Divakaruni's stories provide feminist resistances in Diaspora and her women characters find freedom to select better choices in their marital lives. She narrates the stories of immigrant brides who are perplexed by cultural changes. Women characters in her stories are compressed between the pull of home and the allure of American dream. The changing role of women, their new awakening spirit, and struggle for social justice are well outlined. Her women characters are dynamic and rebellious and struggle to have an identity of their own. They also try to liberate themselves from cultural conventions and shackles of customary norms. The views of Somdatta Mandal justify substantiating this presumption:

Though the characters vary, the themes of the short stories are essentially the same- exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as the experience of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions (Mandal 117).

SCHOLARLY REFLECTIONS ON THE STORY ‘THE DISAPPEARANCE’

Among the stories in *Arranged Marriage*, ‘The Disappearance’ captures the attention of scholars and critics for the reason that it not only projects the problem but also suggests a meaningful solution to woman’s crisis. The story is concerned with the man-woman relationship and the crisis in marriage. The thought provoking tale ultimately indicates the female vengeance of a wife toward her husband. It opens with shocking news that a young woman, in an immigrant family, suddenly disappears from her evening walk without a conspicuous quarrel with her husband. The departure of his mother deeply pains the innocent son who is not in a position to understand the reason for his misfortune.

The man in the story marries her in Calcutta and brings her to the USA. The wife who is educated, well-bred, pretty but passive and shy by nature seems to be trapped in the dualism of convention and modernization. On the other hand, the husband is quite indifferent, insensitive and unaware of the true feelings and needs of his wife. Their marital life seems to be normal for some time. As the story progresses, we come to know that he is not always kind to her. The husband, who is possessed by the carnal hunger, is tempted to watch the X-rated videos and gets involved in love making with his shy wife who is not familiar to such erotic behaviour due to her Indian inhibited upbringing. The husband follows the American way of making love in bed whereas the wife, an Indian shy lady, does not like such a sensual torture and so cannot cooperate with him. He often forces sex upon her, even when she is not interested, “...for grabbing her by the elbow and pulling her to the bed, like he did that last night”.

When the wife disappears, the husband does not know how to handle it and restore his past life. He makes futile efforts like lodging a police complaint and announcing a reward of \$ 100,000 to find the lost wife. His mother comes from India to take care of the household chores and help her son. There is no solace to the child who wakes up at midnight to see his mother and therefore he curses his father and grandmother. In order to erase the memories of his wife, he removes her photos and dresses from the house. Honouring his mother’s advice, he wishes to perform a yearly ceremony in the name of the departed wife and marry again. He also observes that his wife left an empty tin in the kitchen in which she kept the jewellery and also taken away the ornaments from the bank locker.

Consequently, he loses his mental peace thinking that he knew nothing about his wife. “Where was she now? And with whom? Because surely she couldn’t manage on her own.” “Sometimes he would wonder about her. Was she alive? Was she happy?” The disturbed husband tries to calm his nerves by consuming brandy and presumes that his wife must have been killed by a stranger or a jealous lover. He finds himself between the shades of momentary pleasure and the perennial torment. Unable to bear the torture and vacuum created by the sudden vanishing of his wife, he tears her photographs into pieces like a maniac to dispel the agonizing reminiscences of her.

Gradually, he forgets the past and marries an uneducated Indian girl. Subsequently, he begets two daughters; grows older; the second wife dies; the daughters leave him and the son still hates him. His ill-fate takes him to find refuge in a home meant for senior citizens where after a hot water shower he gets into a dreamless sleep. Apparently, he fails to comprehend the reason why his first wife had deserted him. As the husband is unmindful of the personal needs of his traditional wife, she leaves him to teach a befitting lesson to him at the expense of losing her son. Apparently, he was unable to gauge the role required of him as a husband.

REVELATION AND REALISATION

In the Indian patriarchal system, the sole concern of parents is to find a suitable match for their daughters. It is believed that the girl's life begins and ends with marriage. The wife surrenders to the husband only for the reason that she feels that it is her wifely duty. Same is the fact in the present story, where the wife's priority is her husband and son and as a result her individuality is completely lost. She sacrifices her individual goals, time and space in order to establish peace in the family. In contrast, the husband, who is the dominant member of the patriarchal system, takes the wife for granted. He takes the major decisions and would not let her have her say. She becomes a puppet in his hands and is compelled to lead a mechanical life. For instance, when the wife wants to get a job or go back to school or buy American clothes, he lends a deaf ear to her. These aspects of her life are very unimportant to him. She goes for evening walks and spends inordinate time in reading just to have happiness in solitude which seems to be a premonition to her final judgement.

The story also depicts the pathos of the Indian woman who is caught in the web of modern socio-cultural scenario and the oppressed patriarchal heritage. Similar to any lead character of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the female character in the story emerges as a strong self-reliant woman who tries to overcome the trauma caused by this cross cultural transformation. Her disappearance shows that she wants to be an independent modern woman who likes to attain liberty from her undesirable traditional role which is symbolic of the American emblem that stands for liberty. The caged birds naturally look for an escape from the bars of captivation and so is the case with sensitive humans who are enslaved by the cruel attitudes of their fellow beings. Conscious efforts must be made by sociologists, psychologists and theologians to dispel the ignorance from human minds and the weakness from the hearts of ill-fated humans.

Women, who are trapped in familial relationships and cultural constitution, naturally aspire for freedom of thought and action. Expatriate women, who are enslaved by cultural dilemma and suffocated in the new cultural environment of an alien land, constantly experience personal trauma and anguish. It is a universal social phenomenon that in any society women primarily aspire for pure love, sacred relationships in life and marriage but when such aspirations become mirages in their marriages; paradoxically they want to free themselves from such baffling relationships. As a final word it can be understood that the female characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's stories encounter common human struggles and finally emerge as hopeful, strong and successful persons. Hence, it may be concluded that man or woman, who find similar circumstances in their personal lives need to be wise enough to avert the possibility of disintegration in family with one single virtue of *humanism*.

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