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DIVAKARUNI'S *THE BATS* AND *THE ULTRASOUND*: ISSUES OF GENDER, IDENTITY, CULTURE AND POLITICS

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Abstract:-Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a collection of eleven short stories, deals mostly with the lives of Indian or India-born American women. The present paper specifically takes for study two stories, *The Bats* and *The Ultrasound* to demonstrate how women characters in them are victims of patriarchal socio-cultural set up. The study of these characters reveals that their suffering arises mainly out of acute sense of gender discrimination. Their gender more or less defines their identity and existence, a tendency which is rooted in the socio-cultural politics that subtly and systematically functions to perpetuate male dominance and female subordination, male power and female powerlessness, helplessness, objectification, marginalization and subservience.

Keywords:gender, woman, identity, culture, politics, the wife, Runu, Anju.

INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995) is a collection of eleven short stories that deals mostly with the lives of Indian or India-born and India-reared American women. The lives of these women are rooted in their cultural moorings. The politics of perpetuating patriarchy plays significant role in breeding the culture of discrimination and injustice against Indian women leading to their helplessness, powerlessness, subordination and subservience. Their gender thus becomes not only a cause of their pathetic condition but also defines their identity and existence. The two stories from the book namely, *The Bats* and *The Ultrasound*, taken up here for consideration especially stand out in the way they focus on the issues of gender, identity, culture and politics. The study of lead female characters in the two stories, the wife, Runu and Anju, testifies to the remarks made above.

Development and Analysis: *The Bats* tells the story of miserable Indian wife who is compelled by circumstances to live with a violent husband. The mother is ill-treated and beaten frequently by her husband who works as a foreman in a printing press. It is a violent household where the traumatized little girl often wakes up in the middle of the night finding her mother sobbing and sometimes bleeding. Fed up with the oppressive husband the wife along with her little daughter escapes to her old uncle living in a village. Here in a pleasant countryside they are treated with all love and kindness by the old man whom the little girl calls Grandpa-uncle, a watchman in an orchard. The girl falls in love with the countryside surroundings and the lovely Grandpa-uncle. The wife too seems to feel relieved but finally gives in tormented by the accusing stares and whispers of neighbouring women and decides to go back to her husband, since cultural pressure demands a wife to be with her husband. As she says she "...couldn't stand it, the stares and whisper of the women, down in the market place. The loneliness of being without him." (Divakaruni, 1995: 11-12) The wife returns hoping against hope that everything will be all right which does not prove true. The traumatized girl too hopes the magical good-luck ring Grandpa-uncle had gifted her will bring good luck and peace in her house but in vain. The story refers to the orchard-spoiling bats that are killed with poison to keep away but who keep coming back to the orchard till they are finished off, suggesting the similarity of fate the wife and the bats meet, who may be out of habit, necessity or conditioning rush in to their easily avoidable disaster.

The husband receives the wife but never mends his violent ways and the wife meekly submits herself to her 'unavoidable' fate. The wife decides to submit herself to suffer silently because she can see no future without husband. An abandoned wife or a wife leaving her husband's place no matter for what reason is looked down upon, is looked with suspicion, is put to harsh scrutiny only to emerge guilty because socio-cultural norms of 'good' behaviour expect her to find her happiness

only with husband and live with him for better or worse. Woman is supposed to be a 'good' sister, daughter, daughter-in-law and wife. No wonder ill-treatment of wives is common in India, bride-burning is common in India, and honour killing of sister, daughter, daughter-in-law and wife too is common in India. The statistics of women related crime in India issued by National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, speaks volumes when it comes to treatment of woman in India. In the year 2012 alone the figure of recorded dowry deaths stood at a staggering 8233 and registered cases of cruelty against women by husband or his relatives were 106527. (Crime in India 2012 Statistics, page no.387) Legally, equality as a principle has been long accepted in India but the glaring contrast between the real and the ideal, the irony and contradiction in theory and practice has also been a part of Indian way of life. The principle of equality demands that there should be no discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, race or religion, and that all human beings are equal and deserve to be treated equally. But then gender discrimination is one of the most systematically perpetuated ways of discrimination in Indian society. Patriarchal mindsets are deeply entrenched in socio-cultural conditions, customs and traditions, faiths and beliefs that are hard to change leading to subordinate status of woman, her marginalization and the consequent injustice, and the stories *The Bats* and *The Ultrasound* amply demonstrate it.

The wife in *The Bats* has to suffer, succumb to violent ways of her husband simply because she is a woman and being a woman she is expected to accept whatever and whichever way her man treats her. She is expected to be a 'good' wife and woman, and on that depend her chances of success. If she succeeds, fine, if she does not, she is doomed. Her very identity in a prevalent socio-cultural set up is defined in this way. She has no independent existence of her own. Her existence assumes meaning only in relation to the man she is tied to. For this reason all talk of equality, justice and fairness towards woman remains hollow and a distant dream, a situation and a concern appropriately voiced by leading contemporary feminist and literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who defines the word 'woman' not in terms of its “putative essence” but the way what it practically means and it means something that “...rests on the word 'man.'” (Spivak, 2007: 495) Spivak's definition is simple but it is enough to pinpoint the centrality of man and peripheral, secondary existence of woman in practical life. Woman is at most a prefix to be added to the root word 'man' in order to exist. Significantly the responsibility of success or failure of marriage rests on woman. Man is absolved of any blame. Society has devised norms that leave no breathing space for woman. She either has to fulfill the role expected of her and succumb, or face consequences, risk her reputation and even life. There is no other option, a situation that leaves her at the mercy of man who cares little. It is the curious case of victim who is blamed for her own victimization, made to prove her own innocence, made to pay for the guilt of the persecutor while the culprit is not aware of what wrong he has done, leave aside made to mend his wayward ways or pay for it. The husband in the story does not mend his violent ways, nor feels the need to do so and was again at it when the wife returned to him. If she is seen leaving the house for the second time when it became unbearable she inevitably has to return to him and “...this time even before our bruises had faded all the way” (Divakaruni, 1995: 16), says her little daughter. Even the little daughter's hope of peace in the household remained a distant dream. The magic ring believed to grant wishes and gifted to the wife's little daughter by the Grandpa uncle fails to bring solace, making the girl conclude in frustration “...so perhaps it was not a magic ring at all.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 15) It is this helplessness born out of her pathetic situation that defines the wife's existence which rests on the negation of her separate existence and identity. She is culturally conditioned to accept the highly biased norms of cultural politics meant to perpetuate her subordination, subjugation, and marginalization and thus sustain patriarchy. Significantly the accusing “stares and whispers” (Divakaruni, 1995: 11-12) that compel the wife to return to her oppressive husband are also women but here they are not essentially women but agents of patriarchy subtly made to work to protect and promote patriarchy's interests. The metaphor of bats may indicate similarity of fate between the wife and the bats but the story goes beyond that to pinpoint the callousness associated with social system. Bats are animals and their rushing in to their misfortune is understandable because they are not evolved beings like humans. But when the system works in such a way so as to deaden the human sensibleness and freeze human capacity to act rationally, it is effectively turning them into animals. The situation of the wife in the story is akin to this. The little daughter who is the mute spectator of her mother's suffering and also a co-suffer will thus imbibe and will be conditioned to accept things as they are and thus help perpetuate the patriarchal system. The so-called modernity, material advancement and technological innovations hardly change the entrenched value system thus evolved which is forcefully demonstrated in another story *The Ultrasound*.

The *Ultrasound* shows two cousins Arundhati (Runu) and Anjali (Anju) brought up together in Calcutta, Bengal. They grow up together sharing dreams and aspirations of future. But highly different fates await them as they enter youth. Anju proves luckier of the two as she gets married to an NRI and goes to live with her husband in California to experience better sense of individual liberty and gender equality. Runu too gets married into a rich but provincial family in Burdwan serving the in-laws and three unmarried brothers-in-law with a smiling face. Both become pregnant almost at the same time. Both keep in touch sharing the excitement of prospective motherhood. Both are pampered in their respective households. But the situation suddenly turns worse for Runu whose mother in-law decides to abort her foetus because the amnio has revealed the gender of the foetus which is female. Runu is shattered. She is not bothered about the gender of the foetus and does not want to abort her baby. But her in-laws don't consider it “...fitting that the eldest child of the Bhattacharjee household should be a female.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 224) Her husband is 'cultured' enough to obey his parents and respect their wishes in this regard. Her parents too find themselves too weak to oppose Runu's in-laws for fear of social stigma, fearing their daughter would be abandoned by her husband and then blamed as characterless woman and her baby would perhaps be considered “a bastard.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 225) Hence Runu's parents advise her to stay with her husband and in-laws “...for better or worse.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 225) Anju is the only one who is sympathetic to Runu's predicament but she is too far. Runu's in-laws leave

her with only two choices, either to abort the foetus or leave husband's house. Caught between a cliff and deep valley Runu finally decides to leave her husband's house to save her baby facing uncertain future. The story thus ends on a highly romantic note which may serve artistic purpose but is far removed from reality as women in such situations are most likely to do the opposite—surrender and abort girl-child in order to save marriage and security of sustenance.

The story shows shameless and blatant display of gender discrimination and scant respect of woman or womanhood. Cultural politics of patriarchy thrives best on negating and crushing the separate identity of woman as an individual. As long as a woman adheres and conforms to the unwritten code of conduct to serve patriarchal interests she could be honoured, humoured and even pampered but the moment she resists this game of perpetuating male superiority she is cornered and forced to submit. If Runu was pampered while pregnant it was only with the anticipation that she might be bearing a boy-baby that would further the family tree. The moment it is proved wrong Runu is in trouble. The sequence of events clearly shows the subordination and objectification of woman in a “...man's world in India.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 218) It is the acceptance of such status by woman that defines her identity. As long as Runu meekly accepted this she was 'happy' and even 'pampered'. An object is for use, the moment it turns useless it loses its value and relevance. Runu's fault is that her refusal to abort her female foetus threatens to expose the politics of gender discrimination that patriarchy thrives on. Another of her fault is that she has breached and resisted the “unspoken wedding contract” (Divakaruni, 1995: 217) to produce male child to further family tree. Her existence and identity assumes any meaning only if she fulfills that role to the best of her ability. In the process her own wishes or aspirations are neither important nor relevant to the patriarchal scheme of things. Such a tendency to treat woman as an object is not only highly atrocious, cruel, inhuman but also highly uncivilized for it refuses to treat woman as living, breathing, thinking human being, for it sanctions a murder of a harmless foetus because of its gender in the choice of which it has no control.

Curiously enough the patriarchal culture that otherwise pretends rigidity and traditionalism shows extraordinary eagerness and flexibility to embrace modernity and technological innovation but alas only to further patriarchal interests as the use of ultrasound technology in the story shows. Anju feels relieved that because of her education and marriage with Indian American she got an opportunity to get away from India. She feels additionally relieved for her husband is not like Runu's. He turns out a good husband, very helpful, caring and friendly not bothered about the gender of their baby. But then Anju also wonders had it been the same had she been in India. A disturbing tone in her husband's voice as if suggesting “See how lucky you are to have a husband like me, to live in this free and easy American culture...start working harder at being a good wife. Or else” (Divakaruni, 1995: 218) depresses her leading her to shed hot tears “...at the unfairness of a world which insisted not only that women had to have husbands but that they had to be grateful to them.” (Divakaruni, 1995: 218-19) The story in its final effect comes as a strong indictment of patriarchy that aims to perpetuate the culture of male primacy and female subordination, and its dehumanizing norms for womanhood. At the same time it also suggests the power of education and financial independence not only to challenge patriarchy but also redefine woman's identity.

CONCLUSION:

The study of the two stories shows deep influence of patriarchal value system on Indian society leading to female subordination, objectification and marginalization. Woman in such set up is culturally conditioned to accept her ill treatment at the hands of her husband as her wifely duty. *The Bats* shows that such submissiveness defines her identity and existence. Norms like, it is wife's duty to be with husband for better or worse, she has no future without husband, her leaving husband's house is a matter of disgrace for her sanction a culture of woman's ill treatment and real time data authenticate it. *The Ultrasound* also shows woman's strict adherence to patriarchal norms, total submission and negation of her separate existence are the tenets on which thrives the politics of discrimination and woman's identity assumes meaning only if she fulfills these conditions. Both the stories highlight woman's objectification in a man's world. In the wife's case it leads to freezing of human capacity to act rationally. In Runu's case her desperation threatens to expose the politics of gender discrimination that patriarchy thrives on.

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