

Ecriture Feminine and Single Motherhood in Chitra Banerjee's Select Novels.

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian diasporic writer who creates nostalgia about Indian culture and the influence of female characters. An adolescent woman goes through several phases in connection with motherhood. The woman who feels affection for her children with joy or misery depends upon the patriarchal approach to her. Divakaruni's novels expose the exhausted projection of a woman as a mere object in an essentially patriarchal framework that denies the women's identity. The narrator observes how patriarchy promotes the oppression, discrimination and exploitation of women through the process of socialization.

Key Words: Ecriture, Feminism, Postcolonial, Motherhood, Patriarchy, feminism.

Ecriture feminine is its nature transgressive, rule transcending, intoxicated and it is put forward by Helen Cixous. She focuses on gaining a female voice, a loss that has made women learn to speak in a "borrowed language". Cixous used the rising consciousness within females to find their own voice and encouraged them to channel it by writing in an entirely new form which she called Ecriture Feminine. It refers to unique style of writing characterized by troubles in the text, such as gaps, puns, and new images. Ecriture feminine is eccentric, incomprehensible and inconsistent to understand the suppression of the female voice in a borrowed language of the writer. It has its source in the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male-cantered verbal language. Julia Kristeva in her essay "The System and the Speaking Subject" says that symbolic aspect is associated with authority, order, fathers, repression, and control. The speaking subject unsystematized signifying process, cantered on the mother.

Motherhood is central to women's lives in many countries; it also becomes an important theme in literature. In Buchi Emecheta's cult text, *The Joys of Motherhood*, criticizes the African idea that a woman's ability to bear children is an index of her virtue. Indian culture glorifies a woman as a mother, goddess, nature, the provider of life, tenderness and affection. Indian motherhood has been influenced by myths and religious fables. Postcolonial writers write about the literature produced by the native voices reflecting the contemporary reality of their nation. Even though Divakaruni resides in America, she used to write about the hardships of Women in her native India. Women's writings from the former colonies represent feminist concerns. This involves a critique of colonialism, the problems of the postcolonial nation-state, the crisis of development, the increasing fundamentalisms, the continuing patriarchal control over women, and others. Women's fiction in the postcolonial context foregrounds issues of female identity and its construction. Gender themes in postcolonial writing include issues such as identity, marriage, sexuality, desire, women and spirituality. The home, the community, and tradition become sites of identity.

Single motherhood has been common historically due to parental temporary progression due to maladies, battles, calamity, and ethical morals. Most single-parent households are headed by a mother. Single mothers are likely to have mental health issues, and financial hardships, live in a low-income area, and receive low levels of social support. Financial hardships affect the mental health of single mothers. Women, at young ages, are more likely to live in a low socio-economic area, have one child, and not have completed their senior year of high school. These women were reported to be in the two lowest-income areas, and their mental health was much poorer than those in higher-income areas. History proves that the

death of a partner was a common reason of single parenting. Diseases and pregnancy deaths have not frequently resulted in a widower or widow responsible for children. Improvements in sanitation and maternal care have decreased mortality for those of reproductive age, making death a less common cause of single parenting.

Chitra Banerjee explores the institution of marriage; she critically examines the institutions of a patriarchal society and reveals the double standards practised on women in her novels. In the novel *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni portrays single motherhood through the care and love of the protagonist Sita to her sons Lav and Kush. Marriage is a limiting experience for her, within cultural paradigms of gender inequality. Women undergo humiliation to achieve the blessed state of marriage and believe that it is the only way to their feminine identity. Marriage does not assure the safety of a home or a clear uniqueness for the women. It makes unreasonable demands on the woman and offers little in turn. In the Hindu context, notions of chastity, service to the husband, and motherhood work towards her children suppress the woman's needs, desires, and even identity.

The novels of Chitra Banerjee have exposed the projection of a woman as a mere object in an essentially patriarchal framework that denies women's identity. The narrator observes how patriarchy promotes the oppression, discrimination and exploitation of women through the process of socialization. The different treatment of the gender roles for their gender identities and perform the socially, culturally and historically determined parts without objections. Adrienne Rich in her brilliant analysis of motherhood writes, "To have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness" (37). Marriage and its rituals are often described as restrictive and oppressive, and never just or fair towards women.

Symbols of marital status become symbols of violence and oppression in many postcolonial writers. The woman's education, ambitions, and desires are far less important than her role as mother, daughter-in-law, and wife. Divakaruni reveals how, traditionally, women have deliberately spent their entire lives in service of the family. In the Indian context, women novelists address the stresses of motherhood. The emphasis on male heirs to the family in India produces a level of stress that is unimaginable. In the novel *Sister of My Heart*, Sudha is asked to abort her child because her mother-in-law does not wish for a daughter. Sudha says, "They want to kill my baby... My mother-in-law wants me to have an abortion" (237). Sudha wishes to save the life of her female child and get a divorce from her husband Ramesh. She lives independently but financially and mentally suffers to raise Dayita. Sudha works as a housemaid in the house of Mr Sen to take care of her daughter Dayita.

The novelist writes the theme and ideology of 'motherhood' in her novel *The Mistress of Spices*. In this novel, the First Mother takes care of all the Mistresses without the help of males. Whenever the Mistresses need help from her, she is ready to come and give solutions to them. First Mother says, "Mistresses, I have taught you all I could. Some of you have learned much, and some little. And some have learned little but think you have learned much"(53). Mother's love is more powerful than any relationship in this world. Mother is ready to give her children whatever she has in her hand. The role of motherhood is different in different cultures. Simon de Beauvoir discusses motherhood in her book *the Second Sex*, "It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny; that is her 'natural' vocation, since her whole organism is directed towards the perpetuation of the species"(537). The narrator has seen childhood and adolescence woman goes through several phases in connection with motherhood.

Gilda Radner says that motherhood is the biggest gamble in the world. It is the glorious life force and huge and scary-it's an act of infinite optimism.

Luce Irigaray writes in *The Bodily Encounter with the Mother*, "The relationship between desire and madness comes into its own, for both man and woman, in the relationship with the mother. But all too often, man washes his hands of it and leaves it to woman-woman" (433). The relationship with the mother is a mad desire, it remains in the shadow of our culture; it is its night and its hell. Women celebrate the happy moments with their mother, sharing with the fruits of the earth both have blessed and delivered all hatred or ingratitude towards their maternal identity and female lineage. In the novel *The Forest of*

Enchantments, the protagonist Sita has deep love towards her mother earth and calls her mother for her timely help. As a devoted single mother, Sita desires happiness for her two sons, Lav and Kush. Sita relishes the memory of her sons,

“Most of all I loved my children because they were kind to all around them, humans as well as animals... They hugged me often, not caring who might be watching, and at night they lay on either side of me, with their arms around my neck, asking for stories (332). She is very happy about Lav and Kush, who are curious about everything but never ask a single question about their father. It's common for women to seek refuge in a world where they feel misunderstood by others, and it's understandable for them to want to be with their mothers.

Chitra Banerjee has written broadly about patriarchy in her novels as a primary reason for women's oppression. Patriarchy is about the social relations of power between men and women, women and women, and men and men. Patriarchal beliefs of male, and heterosexual dominance and the devaluation of girls and women lie at the root of gender-based violence. Patriarchy is a structural force that influences power relations, whether they are abusive or not. Culture is used to justify gender inequality and violence by evoking traditional cultural beliefs about how women should be treated. Patriarchy means “the rule of the father”, which comes from the Greek. The sociologist Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women”. In the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee shows Sita's character does not follow the patriarchal model of womanhood and brings out a strong and determined mind who wants to raise her voice against the patriarchal society. Sita says “And that is why, O King Ram, I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!” (357). Sita is not willing to follow the wishes of her husband to prove her chastity in front of everyone for the second time. Ram cares so much for the citizens of Ayodhya more than of his wife Sita.

Shulamith Firestone, a radical-libertarian feminist, defines patriarchy as a system of oppression of women. In the novel *The Mistress of Spices*, Gita's grandfather is worried about the habits of his granddaughter who even dislikes the makeup of Gita and says, “Good Indian girls are not ashamed of the face God is giving them” (86). He even scolds his son Ramu, who is the father of Geeta for his upbringing of Geeta. When Gita tries to tell her love affair with her parents, Grandfather interrupts and says “Chee Chee, no shame at all, making talk of love in front of her parents, in front of me, her grandfather” (89). The novelist shows patriarchal oppression through the character of Gita's grandfather.

Patriarchy and male dominance are related concepts reflected in the institution of marriage. Marriage in India is some kind of arrangement between the two families of bride and bridegroom. A kind of hierarchy is set based on male dominance which is evidenced in the form of bride-takers and bride-givers. Kinship structures form an important part of social organization. It decides and ensures the membership of people into various groups. In patrilineal kinship structure, a son remains a member of the family of orientation whereas the daughter has to leave her natal house and move to the family of her affinal kinship after marriage. Leela Dube rightly says in her *Women and Kinship: Perspectives of Gender In South and South East Asia*, “Residence is a material as well as an ideological expression of principles of kinship”. After marriage, the bride is to live with the bridegroom's family, which is followed in several parts of India.

Divakaruni writes in her novel mostly based on the theme of motherhood and patriarchal oppression faced by the protagonists. She chooses to narrate the life stories of ordinary female characters to mythological characters. The novelist shows several strong characters who are nurtured by the strength and influence of female bonding. Women in contact with other women are up to the loneliness and domination of the patriarchy. It is natural to maintain that a woman becomes a man's equal through motherhood. The woman preserves her freedom through her oppressive actions in the patriarchal society.

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