

Pedagogical Strategies in Discussing Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

By Pallavi Rastogi

In the fall of 2004, I taught Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) in a course on Indian short fiction. Although my class was passionately involved with the text, the students were divided into two groups: those who disliked Divakaruni's politics but admired her craft and those who thought highly of both her thematics and her aesthetics. A third subset of students, who believed her tropes relied on stereotypes and her prose to be trite, emerged later. Having wrapped up one discussion after another on our contradictory characterization of Divakaruni as melodramatic, feminist, Orientalist, radical, complex, simple, realistic, over-wrought, deft (amongst many other descriptives), I now believe that this heated debate is exactly what a classroom text should inspire. However, certain pedagogical strategies need to be implemented while teaching Divakaruni in general and *Arranged Marriage* in particular so that students can approach the text with greater knowledge of the political, social, and literary issues underpinning Divakaruni's work.

One of the best-known South Asian American women writers today, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific author who has written many essays, poems, and short stories.¹ Divakaruni's work has often sought to give voice to immigrant Indian women. I caution teachers to pause at this sentence, think about what it means to endeavor to "give voice" to other constituencies, and engage with the issue in the classroom. Divakaruni has also been closely involved with various immigrant women's organizations such as Maitri in San Francisco. The lives of these women, and their hidden histories, emerge in Divakaruni's writing in direct ways.

Divakaruni's female protagonists are easily the most compelling aspect of her work: the mystic Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), the rebellious Anju in *Sister of My Heart* (1999), as well as the many, sometimes nameless, women in *Arranged Marriage* are all delicately portrayed, credible characters. Divakaruni narrates the concerns of migrant women, depicting the harsh realities they face in leaving "traditional" India for a supposedly better life in the "liberal" West. She questions the meaning of notions such as the "American Dream," "success," and "prosperity" for those whose Otherness may exclude them from mainstream America.

Divakaruni's work also provides us with a vibrant perspective on South Asian and South Asian American culture, often weaving the elaborate tapestry of Indian cultural life and its rich body of myth and legend into its narrative framework.² *Arranged Marriage*, for example, contains detailed references to Indian clothing, food, festivals, and religious practices. Her characters bring these customs to the United States, asking American society to recognize the traditions of diasporic communities and so enrich itself. Teachers of Divakaruni's fiction should place her work in context of American immigrant literature and women's writing in general and more specifically within the parameters of Asian and South Asian American literature. Because South Asian American literature is an evolving category, students should consider how Divakaruni's writing contributes to the formation of this genre. Rajini Srikanth's

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excellent book entitled *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (2005) is a useful introduction to South Asian American writing. While discussing some of the problematic aspects of Divakaruni's work, *The World Next Door* also includes an assessment of the thematic shifts and ideological preoccupations of South Asian American writing that will be helpful in placing Divakaruni within a wider literary tradition.

Major Themes in Arranged Marriage:

Arranged Marriage establishes the theme of female itinerancy that *Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* will later gather as well as foregrounds related issues of racism and assimilation into new societies. Another major thread that connects many of the stories in this collection is the theme of arranged marriage and its impact on women who usually have very little say in their matrimonial destiny. The text can be taught at various scholastic levels and in courses organized around different themes. For example, *Arranged Marriage* may be included in classes on American literature, Asian-American literature, Indian literature, South Asian diaspora literature, women's literature, and ethnic literature. It can also be classified according to genre and taught in a class on short fiction. Regardless of what course *Arranged Marriage* is taught in, teachers may want to keep a few pedagogical strategies in mind while discussing the text.

Teachers should carefully explain the concept of arranged marriage to their students. While arranged marriages can victimize women, often these are happy unions too, as revealed by the relationship between Sumita and Somesh in the story "Clothes." I screened Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) for my class. The film depicts the theme of arranged marriage with richness, freshness, and nuance. It also gives the students a visual hook into Indian matrimonial culture, an important way to generate their interest in the text, especially because Indian weddings are so different from Western ones. Teachers could also screen the "Bollywood" blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1997). While the film is ideologically conservative, it depicts Hindu wedding rituals in lavish detail. Texts that will help contextualize the institution of arranged marriage in a South Asian American setting include Robbie Clipper Sethi's *The Bride Wore Red* (1997), Bali Rai's *(Un)Arranged Marriage* (2001), Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* (2003), Kavita Daswani's *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003), and Anne Cherian's *A Good Indian Wife* (2008).

I also brought to class on-line matrimonial advertisements from various South Asian websites. The classified advertisements gave students a sociological window into the world of arranged marriages. Teachers can access these advertisements from websites such as www.matrimonialindias.com, www.indianmatrimonial.org, and www.shaadi.com. It would also be useful to start class discussion with an open-ended question on the idea of arranged marriage. When I asked my students to share their perceptions on arranged marriage, I thought the stereotypes would come tumbling out. Instead, my class provided me with sensitive answers such as: "it often allows you to meet people who share your interests" and "it is not for us to judge another culture's social practices, especially when our marital system is so flawed."

Questions for Class Discussion:

After providing a socio-cultural background on the institution of arranged marriage, teachers could begin discussions on the text by asking the class relatively simple questions about plot, theme, characterization, language and then build up to

more complicated questions of stereotype, representation, and Orientalism. The terms should be explained in detail before students begin to trace their presence in *Arranged Marriage*. Although “stereotype” is a common word, its connotations in literary criticism, especially post-colonial discourse, are somewhat different from the way we use the term in daily life.³ I asked my class to jot down three stereotypes they had of India. I then asked the students if they could find any of these associations in the short story collection. I initially offered my students a simple description of the term Orientalism: the depiction of the non-Western world through a range of stereotypes provided by the West.⁴ We then modified this definition as we read the text. One of the central questions I asked the students to keep in mind was how non-Western writers themselves can deploy Orientalist stereotypes. Again, Divakaruni can be approached through this problematic. Half the class thought that she reduced her protagonists to the stereotype of the repressed Indian woman with little agency or authority. Examples included the characters in “Bats,” “Disappearance,” and “The Maid Servant’s Story.” The other half claimed that she exploded the negative stereotype of Indian femininity, citing as examples the empowered women in stories such as “A Perfect Life” and “The Word Love.” A small group of students subscribed to both sides of the problematic, stating that Divakaruni demolished the stereotype of oppressed Third World women only to reconstitute a new one: that of Indian women finding themselves in the emancipatory spaces of the First World. Examples of this thematic typecasting included the stories “Affair” and “The Ultrasound.”

In the first few classes on *Arranged Marriage*, we studied individual short stories in detail, paying careful attention to themes, language, representation, and style. Only after we had read at least half the book, did we approach the text as something larger than just discrete short pieces. In what remains of this essay, I will follow the trajectory of my own classroom experience by providing discussion questions I used in the classroom on the stories individually. I will then offer some approaches to discussing the text as a whole after the students have finished reading a substantial portion of the collection.

Discussion Questions on Individual Short Stories:

We opened class discussion with a close reading of the first story “Bats.” Even though this story is not related to the immigrant experience, it sets the stage for many of the other stories that deal with women trapped in arranged marriages. One obvious, but also obviously important, question to ask while discussing this story is the symbolic significance of bats who represent the abused mother’s flight from, as well as constant return to, danger and violence.⁵

At this juncture, students could be asked to jot down recurring motifs and metaphors in the collection and discuss them collectively at the end. The second story “Clothes” raises important questions of representation and stereotype, particularly as they are manifested in the concepts of arranged marriage and female agency.⁶ While a number of my students found this story simplistic in the way that it set up the United States as liberating, many others found it to be a narrative of feminist emancipation. Again, teachers should touch on the symbolism of clothes. Is it significant that to be a “new woman” the narrator has to westernize herself physically too? Why can’t she be emancipated by wearing Indian clothes? Are the two mutually exclusive? In other words, is the metaphor of clothes troubling in what it celebrates: America as liberation, India as stifling tradition?

While these interrogatives may risk putting pre-conceived ideas into students' heads, many students were struggling to articulate these questions. My posing the problem in a lucid way helped them formulate their disquiet with this particular story. After the class had read a substantial portion of the book, I started clustering the stories together and going back and forth from one story to another, especially if its thematic and stylistic resonances invited a conversation with another piece. When we read the story "Meeting Mrinal" towards the end of the book, we looped back to "Clothes." In addition to contrasting the two marriages, one happy and one unhappy, a question this juxtaposition yielded was whether abandoning Indian food in this story fulfills the same emancipatory purpose that abandoning Indian dress does in "Clothes?"

Yet, the binary opposition between "Western freedom" and "Eastern oppression" is not as simple as it may appear to be. The third story in the collection, "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs," deprives the United States of any liberatory status it might have accrued in the previous stories. Once again we turned to symbolism. What does snow represent in this story? How does Divakaruni challenge our associations of snow, particularly those of whiteness and purity? Does her depiction of the United States as a space of intolerance and bigotry undermine the dichotomy she sets up in the previous story where America represents freedom and India control?

"A Perfect Life" and "The Word Love" similarly eschew the whole-hearted embracing of America seen in some of the other stories. Both these stories show Indian women rejecting white lovers. Some students pointed out that the rejection of the white lover could be interpreted as a rejection of white America and its integrationist demands. Teachers could use this comment as a way of thinking through issues of assimilation and resistance. Many students had a problem with the ending of these two stories and complained that they followed what had become a predictable arc in the collection: the South Asian woman alone in America learning to live and love for herself. Other stories cited to support this assertion included "The Disappearance," "Clothes," and "Doors." Even if students do not raise this point themselves, given that so many stories end on the note of woman alone/woman triumphant, the issue should be discussed in class.

General Questions on *Arranged Marriage*:

The following questions should be approached once the class has read the collection in its entirety. Remember that these are "big" questions dealing with issues of theme and style as well as the politics of representation. Teachers could build up to these questions by obliquely raising these ideas while discussing the individual stories.

Divakaruni's work deals with Indian women and their often-difficult lives as immigrants. Yet the portrayal of men in *Arranged Marriage* is almost consistently negative. Does the depiction of males in *Arranged Marriage* reinforce already existing opinions of South Asian men as chauvinistic wife-abusers or does Divakaruni provide us with a realistic picture of emotionally battered women? Is there ever any accuracy or totality in representation? Should texts that may be viewed as speaking for entire communities, as Divakaruni's do, strive towards accurate representation? Given that the collection is not just about South Asians but particularly about South Asian women, is Divakaruni able to represent the complexities of these women's life struggles? Despite attempting to give us a nuanced representation of women, does she still relegate women to the realm of stereotype?

While discussing the representation of South Asian men and women, teachers should also consider the representation of America and American identity in this

collection. Does America connote liberation from the shackles of tradition? Does this result in a problematic, even simplistic, binary in which the East/India is represented as the Great Uncivilized, forcing helpless women into awful arranged marriages and America as the agent of salvation? In this context what is liberation? The adoption of Western values and the living out of the American dream? When does liberation become assimilation?

Arranged Marriage should, therefore, also be considered an American book. How is this collection shaped and inhabited by the United States? For example, the character Jayanti in the story “Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs” confronts American racism time and time again. The story also comments on the deprofessionalization of Indian immigrants.⁷ What is the psychic cost of this dislocation? How does *Arranged Marriage* shed light on economic, social and public life in the United States? How are Indian notions of community, marriage, and the role of women challenged by the geographic setting of America? Similarly, how do these immigrants and their claims to their culture change America? How does *Arranged Marriage*, or Divakaruni’s work in general, change *our perception* of America? Does it decenter notions of “Americanness” with whiteness or does it further alienate Indians from “Americanness” by projecting them as exotic, strange, and sometimes even barbarous? In that context, does Divakaruni advocate an assimilationist agenda? In what way do the stories in this collection confirm or challenge this charge? The teacher could generate a debate on assimilation, and its relevance for groups like South Asian Americans whose difference is marked by appearance, food, clothing, and religion. How do these communities assert their presence in white/Christian America?

Obviously a purely thematic discussion does not do justice to the complexity of the text. Some focus on style as well as genre will also be useful. I taught *Arranged Marriage* in a class on the Indian short story. Our discussion of style, therefore, was heavily oriented towards form: how Divakaruni’s style of story-telling differed from other Indian short story writers we had discussed in class with comparative examples including Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, and Salman Rushdie. We also talked about which stories were effective stylistically, the various techniques they employed, and the distinctiveness of Divakaruni’s voice in this collection. For example, one of the questions we raised was why so many of the stories were narrated in the first or even the second person. How does that enhance the effectiveness of the tale? Language too should be an important aspect of class-room discussion. How does Divakaruni, like so many other writers from post-colonial countries, take the English language and fashion it to suit her own agenda? Some knowledge of Divakaruni’s poetry may also enrich the discussion of her prose. Teachers could circulate some poems from the collection, *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) and compare Divakaruni’s poetic and fictional style.⁸ Does the richness of her prose and its poetic qualities undermine or enhance her political intent? One of my students, who had criticized Divakaruni’s alleged “melodrama” consistently, observed that her prose was far more suited to poetry than to fiction. Teachers can explore the questions of language and the appropriateness of genre using *Arranged Marriage* as an archetype.

Research and Paper Topics:

After reading this collection of short stories, students could be asked to do a small piece on how they perceive Indian women and compare the representation of Indian women in this collection with the public image of Asian women in general. A question they might consider is one that teachers should have foregrounded in class

discussion: are Divakaruni's representations of Indian women empowering or stereotypical? Students could also research other cultures in which arranged marriages are practiced. The teacher could ask the class to think about the role of arranged marriages in American society.

While researching the institution of arranged marriage, students could consider how the concept has evolved over time? Should American society be fully accepting of its immigrant communities' traditions and customs, especially those considered retrograde and regressive? How can such customs be adapted to an American context? Why are some Americans so disturbed by the idea of arranged marriages? Given the proliferation of Internet dating today, is the concept really so far removed from mainstream American thinking? The research project, especially if it becomes a paper that only the teacher will read, could be a valuable forum for students to confront their own prejudices and beliefs without the discomfort of sharing those in a larger class.

Students who are interested in a comparative analysis of Divakaruni, both thematically and stylistically, could turn to Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Both texts are by South Asian American women, deal with similar themes, and use the same genre. I taught *Interpreter of Maladies* right after we finished *Arranged Marriage*. We found ourselves constantly shuttling between two collections that simply begged to be juxtaposed. Divakaruni could also be discussed alongside other South Asian American women writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, especially focusing on her short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1996). In writing their research papers, students could analyze how South Asian American women writers, such as Divakaruni, Lahiri, and Mukherjee, engage with similar issues of immigration, gender, sexuality, and assimilation differently.

Arranged Marriage, as I learnt from my own classroom experience, is a beautifully finessed text that lends itself to intense scrutiny and debate. Rather than shying away from its problematic aspects as well as the contentious issues it raises, teachers can confront these polemics early on in order to initiate a discussion that does justice to the many layers of the collection.

Bibliography

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Notes

¹ For an assessment of scholarship helpful in teaching *Arranged Marriage* see the bibliographic essay accompanying this one.

² For example, Divakaruni's latest novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is based on the character of Draupadi from the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*

³ For pedagogically useful definitions of terms such as Orientalism, stereotype, representation etc, teachers can consult the following texts: John Thieme's *Post-colonial Studies: The Essential Glossary* (2003), John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000), and John Hawley ed. *The Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies* (2001).

⁴ See Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) for a detailed explanation of the term "Orientalism."

⁵ Grand-pa Uncle, with whom the narrator and her abused mother have sought sanctuary, says: "They [the bats] don't realize that by flying somewhere else they will be safe. Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here" (8). This is a reference to the narrator's mother and her constant return to her abusive spouse.

⁶ Srikanth also provides a nuanced analysis of "Clothes." Although she critiques the short story for establishing the "inevitable dichotomy of oppressive East and liberating West," Srikanth goes on to establish an "alternate reading of the ending of the 'Clothes'" (131-32).

⁷ The deprofessionalization of immigrants refers to the phenomena of educated men and women, who held highly skilled jobs in their home countries, having to perform blue-collar jobs in the United States.

⁸ Excerpts from, as well as the full text of, many poems in this collection are available on the internet. See, for example, Divakaruni's website: http://www.chitradivakaruni.com/books/leaving_yuba_city and the Random House website: <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0997/divakaruni/poem.html>.