

Female Solidarity in *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Sugandha Kashyap

Research Scholar, Department of English

Patliputra University

Patna, Bihar, India

kashyap.sugandha@yahoo.com

Dr. Umesh Prasad Singh

Supervisor

Assistant Professor, Department of English

RKD College, Patliputra University

Patna, Bihar, India

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which female solidarity is represented in the short story collection *Arranged Marriage* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It argues that female bond function as powerful medium of survival and resistance. Patriarchy often tries to make women compete with each other and thus isolates them from one another but female solidarity helps women to find emotional solace and moral courage in each other. The article therefore argues that *Arranged Marriage* is a collection that depicts female solidarity as a significant feminist act of patriarchal resistance that redefines resilience as a collective rather than an individual process. It also highlights that female solidarity is not always perfect due to internalised patriarchy and the need for survival in the male-dominated world.

Keywords: Female Solidarity, Feminism, Patriarchy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arranged Marriage

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is among the writers who have significantly contributed to this literary tradition that gives space to the internal world of women. In her fiction we come across Indian women who are constantly negotiating the different aspects of womanhood. Banerjee's *Arranged Marriage* (1995) is one such short story collection that examines the emotional consequences of marriage and how female solidarity helps women to overcome the challenges of patriarchy. Women often become sources of comfort and strength for one another in the form of mothers, daughters, friends, neighbours and even strangers. Thus the bond between women highlights that there is a possibility of solidarity even within oppressive systems.

The relationships of mutual recognition, support and empathy that develops among women in response to the social and cultural structures affecting their lives can help them resist these structures. This female solidarity can provide them important spaces for surviving in the male dominated world. Many studies on the writing of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlight the significance of female bonding and interpersonal relationships that shape the experiences and identities of women. Scholar Chitra Susan Thampy points out that Divakaruni mostly explores the lives of “women who create a bond with women and this bond ultimately becomes a shelter for them from the various struggles” (218).

However, all female relationships should not automatically be understood as feminist solidarity. For instance, Bell hooks, in her influential essay “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women”, notes that it should not be assumed that women are naturally united simply because they all experience oppression due to their gender. Hooks further says that solidarity among women should not be based on “shared victimization” or directed towards a “common enemy” but rather genuine solidarity must be formed “on the basis of our political commitment to a feminist movement that aims to end sexist oppression.” (129).

Patriarchal societies often encourage women to compete with each other by assigning them worth and value based on their beauty, marital status and motherhood. As a result of this, women often become participants in systems that perpetuate inequality by internalising patriarchal values. However, the shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion can also lead to the feeling of empathy among women resulting in cooperation and collective resistance. Female solidarity does not necessarily mean that women must always agree with each other but it means that women can create supportive relationships with each other that can help them challenge patriarchal dominance and reclaim their rights.

Female solidarity can emerge in diverse forms as reflected through the stories of Arranged Marriage. For instance, in the story “Bats”, it is reflected through the nurturing relationship between a mother and daughter. It can also develop through friendship and mentorship as illustrated in the story “Meeting Mrinal” in which female bond enables women to question the expectations imposed upon them. Sometimes, it can transcend class as well as generations as reflected in the story “The Maid-Servant Story”. Female friendships can also help women inspire each other to overcome their abusive relationships as highlighted in the story “Affair” and it can also help women to resist patriarchal dominance as reflected in the story “Ultrasound”.

This article attempts to highlight that the collection Arranged Marriage demonstrates the bond and solidarity among women as a dynamic and transformative force that may enable them to negotiate challenged imposed by both the society and the family. The article further highlights that simple acts of care, motivation and understanding can lead to subtle yet powerful forms of feminist resistance. Divakaruni shifts attention away from individual heroism by foregrounding the relationships among women and emphasizing the collective dimensions of survival. The bond between women not only acts as a means of emotional support but is also helps in preserving dignity and rebuilding fractured identities. Female solidarity can help

women uplift each other and thus imagine lives beyond the limitations of patriarchy. Female solidarity can take place in many ways. For instance, intergenerational bond between women can lead to healing and protection as female family members often pass down their cultural and social wisdom and offer emotional support to help the younger generations. Similarly, female friendship can act as a safe space and protection against the patriarchal forces. When women form cross-cultural and inter-class connections, it can lead to female solidarity that transcends social barriers such as class or nationality and connects women through shared vulnerabilities.

However, Divakaruni does not present sisterhood as an ideal bond but she also highlights the ways in which internalized patriarchy can fracture the relationships among women. Divakaruni depicts that the relationship among women are neither perfect nor free from any conflict. As Anu R and P. Deepa point out, “In her novels, family bonds, specifically the relationship between sisters, are characterized as compound and beneficial, competitive and painful”(19493). Divakaruni highlights that female bonds evolve through shared experiences of emotional and social abuse. In the collection, *Arranged Marriage*, female bond extends beyond emotional companionship and becomes a medium of survival as well as a tool of resistance against patriarchal oppression. The collection illustrates that women help each other by providing emotional validation moral courage. Thus, Divakaruni presents female solidarity as a feminist practice that helps women to resist the patriarchal forces while also acknowledging the complexities of class, generation and personal differences. Female solidarity is an important tool against patriarchy not because all women have the same experiences but because they acknowledge the humanity of each other despite their differences.

The simple everyday acts of listening, comforting, protecting and mentoring each other becomes forms of resistance for women. For instance, when a mother attempts to shield her daughter from violence or an older woman encourages a younger woman to pursue independence or when a friend provides emotional reassurance to another, they are challenging

the patriarchal structures that make women compete with each other for male validation. Thus, through these relationships women turn survival into a collective struggle rather than an individual endeavour.

The story “The Bats” from *Arranged Marriage* we come across a very poignant explorations of female solidarity through the intimate relationship between a mother and her daughter. They act as each other’s sole refuge while navigating the cycle of domestic abuse. The story is a critique of domestic violence and it demonstrates how emotional bonds between women can become a tool of survival. The abusive husband is relegated into the background while narrative focuses on highlighting the mother and her attempts to protect her daughter from the domestic chaos. The daughter gradually becomes more aware of the emotional suffering of her mother. Thus, the mother–daughter relationship is transformed into a site of resistance, empathy and resilience.

The story is narrated through the perspective of the young daughter who cannot properly comprehend the complexities of her parents’ marital life. The daughter notices the bruises and tears of her mother but is unable to understand the causes. She notices, “A couple of days later Mother had another mark on her face, even bigger and reddish-blue” (Divakaruni 3).

Thus, the readers become aware of the violence through fragmented observations of the child rather than explicit descriptions in the story. This limited perspective heightens the emotional impact of the narrative and reflects how domestic violence affects children, who become the silent observers of the familial trauma. The mother then decides to leave her abusive husband and seeks refuge with her relative in a village. However, this temporary refuge does not eliminate the mother’s emotional conflict as she remains emotionally attached to her husband and continues to hope that one day he will transform into a better person. This choice is a result of not only the mother’s emotional attachment to her husband but also other factors

like economic dependence, cultural expectations regarding marriage and concern for her daughter's future. She explains, "I could stand it, the stares and whispers of women, down in the marketplace. The loneliness of being without him" (Divakaruni 12).

The mother's relative whom the daughter addresses as grandpa-uncle, takes care of an orchard which is often visited by bats. He tries to poison them but they keep returning. Just like the bats keeps returning to the orchard, the mother keeps returning to her husband's place.

In this story, the bond and understanding between the mother and the daughter highlights how wisdom as well as trauma is transmitted across generations of women in a family. The mother does not educate her daughter through any kind of formal instructions but the daughter learns from her by observing the everyday acts of endurance and sacrifice by her mother. It is these observations that gradually shape the understanding of marriage, gender and power dynamics of the younger generations. Divakaruni thus highlights how both internalised patriarchal values as well as the strength to resist them are transmitted from one generation of women to another. The younger generation learns from the experiences and wisdom of the older generation and challenges the older notions.

However, Divakaruni avoids portraying female solidarity as something perfect or uncomplicated. When the mother takes shelter in her relative's house, the women in the village whisper about her. This highlights how internalized patriarchy can hamper women solidarity as women try to enforce patriarchal expectations on each other rather than offering support to each other.

While "The Bats" explores the solidarity among women through the intimate bond between a mother and daughter, the story "Meeting Mrinal" expands the idea female solidarity by highlighting how women can form solidarity through friendship, mentorship as well as shared intellectual awakening. In this story, Divakaruni illustrates how women often discover their strength through their encounters with other women. Female solidarity thus acts as an

empowering process that enables women to question the patriarchal norms of the society and imagine alternative ways of thriving in the society. Asha is an Indian immigrant woman living in the United States who has migrated there after an arranged marriage. The story opens at a point when the protagonist Asha is coming to terms with her feelings and emotions after her husband leaves her for a younger white woman. During this time she receives a call from her childhood friend Mrinal who is now a successful business woman and is unmarried. When they finally meet, Mrinal who is unaware of Asha's divorce shares about her own unhappy and lonely life without a partner. So, meeting Mrinal encourages Asha to think critically about her own desires and capacities and unintentionally Mrinal functions as a mentor to Asha without instructing her. Thus, Divakaruni highlights that women should possess the freedom to define happiness according to their own circumstances rather than according to the rigid societal norms.

A very important aspect of the story is its exploration of loneliness and it is the common thread that binds Asha and Mrinal together and that makes Asha realise that she should be content with her own life. While Asha's loneliness exists within marriage, where routine has replaced emotional intimacy resulting in betrayal and separation, the loneliness of Mrinal arises from her separation from conventional family structures due to not being married. Thus, the story highlights the possibility that the choices of one woman can inspire another woman to recognise her own potential and find her own happiness. Thus, "Meeting Mrinal" portrays female solidarity as a catalyst for feminist consciousness. Another story, "The Maid Servant's Story" is one of the most nuanced explorations of female solidarity in the collection *Arranged Marriage*. This story examines the possibility of solidarity across different generations and classes. Divakaruni demonstrates that women from different generations and class divisions can remain connected by shared experiences of patriarchal violence. However, she avoids romanticising these relationships and acknowledges that class privilege can often complicate

genuine sisterhood. Thus, the story offers a sophisticated understanding of female solidarity that can also be imperfect at times but still helpful.

The protagonist of the story is Manisha who lives in the US for the purpose higher education. In the US, she develops a relationship with an Indian professor. When she comes back to her home in Calcutta, her aunt and mother insist that she gets married to her partner. While discussing their marriage, Manisha expresses the desire to wear a saffron sari at her wedding. But her aunt Deepa Mashi reacts with dismay and says, “Saffron is such a sorrowful color” (Divakaruni 115).

When Manisha asks for a reason, Deepa Mashi reveals that years ago, her mother had hired a young girl Saraswati as her maid. When Saraswati was brought into the household, a quiet and empathetic bond was formed between the mistress (Manisha's mother) and the maid. The mother gifted the maid her own clothes including her saffron saris. Their bond highlights the female warmth across strict class divides. While Manisha's mother was in the hospital giving birth, Manisha's father tried to sexually assault their young maid, Saraswati. When the mother returns, she instinctively realises what had happened. However, she is trapped by both economic and social constraints and as a result chooses silence over confrontation. Thus, the possibility of true interclass female solidarity collapses under the pressures of patriarchy as the mother gives priority to her own survival over the dignity of her maid.

Years later, the mother unexpectedly sees Saraswati again on a crowded street. When she extends her hand towards her, Saraswati spits on her palm. The story highlights that female solidarity is often hard to sustain when women are forced to compete for survival and respectability in a male-dominated structure. The mother's silence is not lack of feeling, but a product of structural powerlessness. The story highlights that female solidarity is often hard to sustain in a male-dominated world where women are forced to compete with each other for

survival and respectability. The silence of the mother is not due to lack of feelings but it is a product of structural powerlessness.

The trauma that the mother faces in her life results in the strained relationship with her daughter. She becomes cold and forms a wall around her that her daughter is unable to break. As Brati Biswas observed, “The violence thus creates a ripple effect” (171). However, when Manisha becomes aware of the story of the mid servant, she becomes more understanding of her mother.

Another story “Affair” explores female solidarity by examining the complexities of emotional intimacy and trust among women. “Affair” highlights that female solidarity is not always free from complications and relationships among women may include suspicion, misunderstanding and jealousy but empathy can overcome these negative emotions.

Abha is the protagonist of the story. She is married to Ashoke and lives in California. One day her husband tells her that her friend Meena is having an extramarital affair. Abha is shocked and even suspects that Meena might be having an affair with Ashoke. However, Meena assures her that it’s not Ashoke but an American colleague with whom she has fallen in love with as her marriage was falling apart due to lack of communication and compatibility. Abha is deeply affected by this and finally gains the courage to break her own marriage which has stopped being harmonious.

Here, female solidarity is reflected when Abha tries to interpret Meena’s behaviour through compassion and avoids judging her for her choices. This also helps Abha to reflect upon her own choices and make a decision that can help her leave her toxic present and hope for a better future. Abha tries to acknowledge another woman’s pain without reducing her to stereotypes and this itself becomes an act of resistance against patriarchal dominance that often dismiss the feelings and emotions of women. The story highlights that genuine solidarity

requires listening rather than immediate judgement and thus, solidarity becomes a therapeutic process through which women reconstruct identities damaged by patriarchal dominance.

Another story from the collection that highlights female solidarity is “Ultrasound”. It is the story of two cousins Anju and Runu. They share an unbreakable bond since childhood even though they both have very different personalities. Anju is more career-oriented while Runu is more traditional in this context. When they grow up, Anju gets married to an NRI and settles in California while Runu is married in a joint family in India. Eventually, they both become pregnant at the same time. While Anju’s pregnancy is celebrated, Runu’s in-laws force her to get an abortion after they come to know that she is carrying a female child in her womb. Terrified by this, Runu seeks shelter at Anju’s mother’s house while Anju is planning to bring her to California where she can not only safely give birth to her baby but also get a job and stand on her own feet. Thus, in this story, female solidarity is depicted as a force that can help women resist the challenges of patriarchy. It highlights how patriarchal systems often reduce the worth of a woman based on the gender of her child and that women face discrimination even before they have taken birth. However, the fierce and unconditional bond between women can act as a powerful tool of resistance and support.

Conclusion

Thus, Chitra Banerjee explores both the powers and limitations of female solidarity. She highlights that female solidarity not only helps women to offer each other support and understanding but it also helps them to resist rigid social structures like patriarchy. However, internalised patriarchy and the need for survival can often prevent women from forming strong and unbreakable bonds with each other and they often start competing with each other for male validation. Divakaruni highlights that female bonds are transformative yet fragile. The collection *Arranged Marriage*, ultimately reveals that while patriarchal structures often test

female bonds, empathy and understanding among women remains their most useful tool for survival in the male-dominated world.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Copyright: © 2026 Ms. Mary Cecilia, Dr. Babi Duli authors retain the copyright of their original work while granting the journal the right of first publication.

License: This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License. This license permits others to copy, distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the work, including for commercial purposes, provided appropriate credit is given to the original authors. The authors are also free to archive and share the published work in institutional repositories, personal websites, academic social networking platforms, and other non-commercial or commercial platforms in accordance with the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License.

Works Cited

- Biswas, Brati. "Gendered Violence in Chitra Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage." *Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Critical Response*, edited by Suman Bala, Delta Book World, 2016, p.p. 162-171.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Arranged Marriage*, Anchor Books, 1996.
- Hooks, Bell. "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women", *Feminist Review*, no.23, 1986, pp. 125-138.<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1394725>
- R, Anu and P Deepa. "A Critical Analysis of the Psychological Nuances of Sisterly Bonds and Immigrant Experiences in Divakaruni's diaspora literature". *AMA, Agricultural Mechanization in Asia, Africa & Latin America*. Vol- 55, no-11, 2024. Page- 19491-19509.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386540685_A_Critical_Analysis_Of_The_Psychological_Nuances_Of_Sisterly_Bonds_And_Immigrant_Experiences_In_Divakaruni's_Diaspora_Literature
- Thampy, Chitra Susan. "Analysis of Female Bonding in Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni", *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, vol.6, no.10, 2019, pp. 217-219.
<https://allsubjectjournal.com/assets/archives/2019/vol6issue10/6-10-41-747.pdf>