



## **The Hermeneutics of Symbol and the Subtext of a Dilapidated Marriage: A Close Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Short Story "The Bats"**

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**Abstract:** Marriage is an elusive term with its legal, social, and religious connotations topped with the multifarious experiences of people who are in it. Surprisingly, the holy nuptial bond between two people, in many cases, has become a subversive ordeal of fettered freedom from the perspectives of gender and sexuality. In a heterosexual marriage, the patriarchal society has determined that for a woman, her sole aim in life should be to bear children and serve her husband. Even with an abusive husband, the wife has to adjust lest she be accused of being a 'bad wife'. This paper aims to decipher the subtext of a broken and harrowed marital bond between a husband and a wife from the innocent narrative of their small girl child in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "The Bats" which appeared in her short story anthology *Arranged Marriage* in 1997. With remarkably relevant symbols which this paper will decode and discuss, the author has woven the silent acceptance of the wife, the protagonist's mother, in an abusive marriage, providing a glimpse of the contorted definition of marriage in Indian society. The theoretical rendition of semiotics especially Ferdinand de Saussure's "signifier" and "signified" with I.A Richard's famous concepts of "vehicle" and "tenor" will be used to determine the symbols and metaphors and decrypt them to analyse the subtext hidden in the pallor of the metanarrative. Further Foucauldian concepts of disciplining and punishment will be applied to bring out the position of the wife and the child in the fettered institution of marital bond.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Symbol, Subtext

The societal institution of marriage adheres to certain rules and regulations which are usually determined by law, religion and people's perception because of which the dynamism of the regulations is commendable. Different communities have variegated purviews on marriage. Stringent laws due to orthodox mindsets and interference of disputable religious beliefs have made the nuptial union more of a societal necessity than a personal endeavour. Rather than being a union in love, marriage has become, in majority of the cases, a unification of sacrificed dreams, relentless regretted adjustments, imposed responsibilities and in many cases physical and emotional abuse. Unhappy marriages that involve the coexistence of two unwilling individuals, give rise to domestic violence. When it comes to homosexual marital relationships, the stringency holds no bound. From typecasting the partners as 'diseased' to unleashing the violences of homophobia to the extent of lynching and murder, Indian society makes sure to intrude and devastate the physical, emotional and mental well-being of two queer individuals. By polarising marriage as a binary-gendered union and by refusing to acknowledge gender-neutrality in it, society witnesses frequent incidents where the partners in a same-sex marriage have been murdered. When it comes to unhappy heterosexual



marriage, surprisingly societal ideology refuses to take into consideration separation or divorce. Rather it is considered that adjustment is the key to a happy marriage. Chauvinistic Indian society has effectively made marriage a weapon of patriarchy to be specifically hurled upon women. The concept of marriage has become very gendered in the larger context as it has become mostly the wife's responsibility to maintain the happiness in the nuptial relationship. In most of the cases, if a marriage fails, society has the tendency to blatantly point a finger at the woman- if the husband is abusive, it ultimately becomes the woman's fault. If a woman decides to end an unhappy marriage, she is considered abominable and is cornered. A woman in a marriage is expected to adjust with everything from physical violence to lack of independence in order to be accepted by society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-), renowned Indian writer and a feminist at heart, has always addressed in her works various social issues and advocated for the emancipation of women. Besides some of her strong feminist novels like *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The Forest of Enchantment* (2019) and the recent publication *The Last Queen* (2021), her genius is witnessed in her short story anthologies also. Her anthology entitled *Arranged Marriage* (1997) has taken up the social issue of marriage as its theme, and the author has particularly focused on the Indian system of heterosexually arranged marriage where the bride and the groom are brought together based on the negotiation between the two families. The negotiations however incline on the patriarchal needs of a woman for her reproductive capabilities and her ability to work perfectly in the household thereby proving Beauvoir's vexed remark, "Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her" (41).

The negotiation between the families also ensures that the woman should be indefatigable in accepting and adjusting to her husband's idiosyncrasies. In this collection, Divakaruni has shown the different types of marriage-mostly resulting in an unhappy ending as there is a formidable clash between the perspectives, interests and personalities of the arranged couples. Owing to globalisation's interference, although people are exploring new perspectives on marriage and family, still the looming presence of an arranged marriage, the juxtaposition of cultural heterogeneity, the forceful acceptance, the abuse and its consequent failure are all observed in the short story 'The Bats' in the same anthology. The story is a mirror to the manipulative phenomenon of adjustment in an abusive marriage and how miserable a woman's life becomes in an atmosphere of domestic violence, presented through the character of Ma in the story. Divakaruni has utilised symbols efficiently to unravel her theme in the story. What haunts the reader starkly is the fact that the story has been narrated by her child, an eight-year-old girl, who becomes the passive receiver of the domestic abuse initially and later directly. Her developing consciousness relates domestic violence to every inconsequential object in their small room, thereby, moulding her psyche to accept it as mundane. The menacing presence of the abusive father and a reluctant mother has created a dichotomy in her psychology thereby forever ruining her conception of domestic peace and happiness. Being told from the perspective of a child, the story becomes very disturbing as the unveiled and innocent expressions become juxtaposed with the macabre of the torture that the wife faces. Moreover, the various objects referred to in the story, act as strong metaphors of the failed marriage. These metaphors, thus, consolidate the presence of the sub narrative in the story, decoding which, the plot of the story gains a special momentum.



The first thing in the story that ought to catch the readers' attention is the fact that the characters are named according to their social responsibilities thereby indicating that in this marital relationship, there is no space for personal identity or choice for the husband and the wife except to enact the identities imposed upon them. Throughout the story they are referred to as "Ma" and "Baba" (Mother and Father) while the child herself remains unnamed, as a being, with just a voice and a timid presence. Both "Ma" and "Baba" have socio-linguistic connotations acting as strong "signifiers" (Saussure 67) which signify the performative gender roles of the individuals. These symbolic terms have been deliberately chosen to indicate that in an institution of forced arranged marriages, mostly the couple lose their own identities in the journey of saving it. A child is usually thought to be the fruit of procreation and paves the ground for emotional connectivity between the two individuals in a marriage. However, in this story, the lack of name of the child narrator perhaps indicates her failure to construct the commonality between her parents. She has proved herself to be the voice of truth about the dismantled marriage that can never be reconstructed. Thus, the voice begins the story without any aberration, "That year Mother cried a lot, nights. Or maybe she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice (Divakaruni 1).

The nonchalance in the narrator's way of enunciation despite being an eight-year-old girl witnessing her mother's tears, is highly symbolic. It symbolises the regularity and the mundaneness of the tears that have perhaps conditioned her psychology to perceive it as an insignificant and regular act. The way the narrator reacts to her mother's tears is equally disturbing. She ignores by "plugging" (Divakaruni 1) her ears so that the sound of the sob does not reach her. This deliberate disregard points to the development of the psychosocial withdrawal that is seen in children with domestic violence. They tend to detach themselves from both the parents and start creating their own fictional world, refusing to conform to reality. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has effectively given the term "avoidance" (2) for this kind of phenomenon where the child simply negates the situation and does not talk about it. Throughout the story the readers find intermittent association to the violence shrouded through symbols of mundane domestic life. In Divakaruni's "The Bats", the mention of the "narrow child's bed" (1) where her mother fit herself to sleep with her every night parallels the claustrophobic image of the failed marriage to which both the mother and the daughter are enmeshed but which they are relentlessly trying to adjust with. The daughter's embodiment of her mother through materialistic entities like the "the damp smell of talcum powder" (1) and the stiffness of "sari starch" (1) are indicative of her emotional detachment from the latter- a void created due to the persistent physical violence that her mother goes through in the hands of her abusive father. The "talcum powder" (1) and the "sari starch" (1) metaphorically indicate the consistent efforts given by Ma to adjust and accept the marriage. These are feminine entities that usually symbolise an affluent lifestyle however the contradiction has been brought about by the narrator when she uses juxtaposing words like "damp" (1) and "stiff" (1)- which create an oxymoronic effect. The narrator's choice of words when she describes how the smell and the "sari starch" (1) felt to her is yet another conscious symbolism used by the author. The narrator uses the word "choke" (1) to express the suffocating atmosphere at home and also as a criticism for such failed marriages which are simply the fruit of Indian society's forceful intervention in two individual's lives. The word "choke" (1) is suggestive of how societal pressure slowly murders not only two individuals but also the offspring in a dilapidated arranged marriage. The depiction of the physical abuse is also



portrayed in a childish indifferent manner probably to convey the normalcy of the incident. The narrator's comparison of the "yellow blotch with its edges turning purple" (2) on her mother's face with that of her scrapped knee symbolises that the marriage is like the "chipped mahogany dresser" (2) which is only capable of inflicting pain and sufferings. The readers also cannot miss the indifferent mention of the omnipresent dark circles under her mother's eyes manifesting her miserableness in the marriage. All these objects act as cognitive metaphors that catalyse effectively the readers' perception about the failed marriage between the two individuals in the story. These mundane objects act as "signifiers" (Saussure 67) that are apparently dismissed as a child's prattle but are very significant to formulate the subtext and the theme of the story.

The minacious presence of the Father figure in the narration is almost like the Foucauldian concept of "absolutist" power exercised by the monarch or the sovereign through somatic punishment in the form of corporal torture (Foucault 1-15). Although the narrator fails to witness her father given his late arrivals at night, his presence is exhibited through loud voices and signs of physical torture on her mother. He exercises the "absolutist" (Foucault 1) power where the punishment is displayed through physical marks of torture that indirectly warns the narrator to commit any crime against her father. The signs of physical torture on her mother's body act as the means of disciplining the mother-daughter duo against the father figure. The narrator employs dark images in order to describe her father and through her description his presence as a dominant holding the power position in the family is clearly understood. Rather than talking about his looks and his relationship with her, the narrator uses fragmented imagery like "large" (2), "hands were especially big with blackened, split nails and veins that stood up under the skin like blue snakes" (2) with "chemical smells" (2) and "shouts that shook the walls of my bedroom" (2) to describe her father. Her father's presence is cataclysmic in her life as when her father is around, she tells, "Things fell a lot" (2). Unfortunately, the abuse is not restricted to her mother only, she herself experienced physical torture in her father's hands as her only memory of her direct connection with her father involves one such incident, "...when I was little and he used to pick me up suddenly and throw me all the way up to the ceiling, up and down, up and down, while Mother pulled at his arms, begging him to stop, and I screamed and screamed with terror until I had no breath left" (Divakaruni 2).

These terrifying memories along with the abuse makes this marriage comparable to a 'Panopticon', a type of a control system as described by the socialist theorist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham in eighteenth century and later talked about by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 201). A 'Panopticon' is a building where there are inbuilt systems of control on the residents of the building. However, most of the time, the residents are unaware of the control system and the presence of vigilance on them. It was a design employed to watch the prisoners entrapped in the building. In the story 'The Bats' when Ma wants to leave her abusive husband behind, her way of secretive endeavours almost gives the impression of a prisoner escaping the 'panopticon' (Foucault 201). She packed everything in a hurried manner, she spoke in "whispers" (3) and treaded lightly. Her activities were done to ensure that they do not wake Father up lest they be imprisoned again in the futile marital and domestic life.





In the book entitled, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973), famous formalist Valentin Voloshinov has attributed cultural and socio-historical dynamism to the meanings of words. According to him the meanings of words change in different social and historical contexts (99). Words undertake different metaphorical meanings as the narrator describes the journey when they flee from the house in Kolkata. The words used to describe her train journey and her eventful life when she stayed with her Grandpa-uncle exude emancipation and pure freedom. Thus, words used in the second part of the story is in stark contrast to the “signifiers” (Saussure 67) used in the first part of the story. The author almost deliberately uses such liberative images and phrases just to show perhaps that rather than accepting and being in an unhappy marriage due to societal pressure, it is always better to walk out of it and lead a life of peace. As the narrator hints at the very beginning, her life with her Grandpa-uncle becomes “magical” (Divakaruni 11) and blissful. Her usage of words in the later part of the story changes and the readers come across words like “wonderful” (6), “exciting” (7), and how the lines of her mother’s face “wavered and turned smooth” (4), quite opposite to the depressing images used to describe her family in the first part of the story. The biggest symbol used in this part is the symbol of the “real live chickens” (6) which amused the narrator as she had not seen them before. The narrator was particularly surprised to see their wings flapping and the chickens themselves running very fast when they are chased. This imagery used is the resonance of the condition of the mother-daughter duo. When the violence became unbearable, they too have fled and chosen the life of peace. The dormant wings of the chicken are the symbol of the clipped wings of both the mother and the daughter. With time their wings will also grow strong enough to make them capable to fight and flee any unpleasant situation. It is the freedom of the birds that made the narrator relate to her imprisoned condition back at home in the city and thus made her surprised. The readers will get to see a lot of earthy imagery used by the author here like the Grandpa-uncle’s house made of “mud walls” (6) and straw, the big cool “Kalodighi” (9), the farm with the animals and the huge trees around the house. The earthiness of the rural life is symbolic of its simplicity that the author contrasts with the suffocating city life with its complications and tribulations. The journey of the mother and the daughter from the city life to the rural house is indicative of their leaving behind the stringency of the city life, the turmoil of the torturous married life and embracing of the simplicity of the country-life. It is almost like the journey back to innocence where every moment is joyful and pleasant.

The cognitive metaphors used in the entire story also trace the development of child psychology. According to Melanie Klein’s object relations theory, a child’s association with the animate and inanimate objects surrounding it result in the comprehension of the “phantasies” (Klein 23) that further develop the consciousness. The “phantasies” (Klein 23) in Kleinian term are the mental projection of libidinal, aggressive as well as defensive impulses and substituting real person with object images. For the child narrator in the story ‘The Bats’, a propensity towards aggression and defensive mechanisms is shown by her. To describe her mother’s distorted facial features caused by her father’s physical tortures, she finds it easy to associate it casually with the “chipped mahogany dresser” (2) rather than directly talking about it. The cracked plaster of the wall reminds her of “drooping mouth” (3) which again is a subconscious association with her mother’s face. Her act of describing her mother with materialistic attributes like “stiff saree starch” (1) and “damp talcum powder” and especially “tears” deduces the fact that her psyche perceives her mother as a distant



pitiable entity. The dampness and the stiffness are “signifiers” (Saussure 67) of her problematic relationship with her mother where she finds no emotion of attachment. As for her father, mere synecdoche like “big” (2) hands and colossal presence reverberates her mother’s timidity and the child’s complete dissociation from him. Her portrayal of defence mechanisms finds expression in her nonchalance to her mother’s tears every time the latter cries, starting with obstructing her ears to obstructing her perceptive abilities altogether. Her intrapsychic conflict is catalysed by her parent’s problematic relationship because of which her defence found expressions in her disregard towards accepting the gravity of the situation. Her psyche found a healthy chance to flourish in the abundance of love bestowed on her by her Grandpa-Uncle. However, that also became restricted when her mother forcefully took her back to the same constricted environment. Ultimately, the daughter’s psychology mirrored that of her mother when she too accepted to be a part of the violence and in the end is shown to return again and again to the same torturous environment of the home. At the end, she exudes a doppelganger image with the bruises on her face like that of her mother and returning intentionally to the loop of the violence showing how her mind conditioned her to accept the emotional and somatic violence as something mundane.

The famous theorist I.A Richards in his critically acclaimed book *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936) had used two terms namely “vehicle” (120) and “tenor” (120) for the metaphorical word and the subject to which the metaphor applies respectively. He enunciated that the mechanism of a metaphor is simply to bring two disparate objects, especially the “vehicle” (Richards 120) and the “tenor” (120) and weave out of their interaction an effective meaning which otherwise could not have been replicated through simple literary assertion of the connection between the two objects (Richards 118-121). In Divakaruni’s story, “the bats” (Divakaruni 8) are the most significant “vehicle” (Richards 120) that holds the crux of the entire story. The incident related to the bats as shown in the story is quite commonplace. However, the symbolic meaning attached to it holds the real value. The bats have been shown to destroy the mango orchard by eating the mangoes. Even though poisons are spread, still they return to the orchard with an unexplained affinity, ignoring the fatality. For quite a few mornings there has been a repetition of the ordeal where the narrator along with her Grandpa-uncle collects the bat carcasses and throws them. Surprisingly the population of the carcasses has shown to not decline which indicates the fact that the bats plunged into the same fiasco despite knowing the ultimate outcome. If the bats are the “vehicle” (Richards 120) here, the “tenor” (120) is Ma. The incident related to the bats plunging into their own death is the premonition of the end of the story. Relativity is drawn between the bats and Ma as the latter descends into her unsuccessful marriage once again, leaving behind the blissful innocence of the rural life. Moreover, the bats are the creatures of the dark. They mostly go unnoticed and are usually avoided by people. The metaphor is suggestive enough as similarly like the bats, the wife here is an unnoticed and unrecognised woman, living her life in the darkness. Her inability to create her own identity makes her an insignificant person in the society, usually ignored by people. The author’s choice of titling her story with the same metaphor indicates that the essence of the entire story not only lay in the single incident but also in the parallelism drawn between the general attributes of the bats and the character of Ma. Ma’s psychology of going back to the same futile marriage, however, has been triggered by the market women stipulating the insinuation of society into the privy of the personal lives of people. Had it not been the manipulative stares or the smirks or the whispers, probably Ma would not have taken the



decision. What she does not realise is that along with her, she is about to ruin the life of her daughter similarly like the bat's clan. Moreover, her naivety is also indicated as she is blindly following other people without realising herself the outcome, again similar to the bats coming to light their own pyre. The narrator's statement regarding the foolishness of the bats resonates in a deep way the obtuseness of her mother's decision when she says, "I guess they just don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they'll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here" (Divakaruni 8).

Pramod K. Nayar asserted very rightfully that "gendering is a practice of power where masculinity is always associated with authority" (83). The praxis related to this statement is observed in the immediacy of the mother's behaviour when she received a threatening letter from her husband. She even lies to her uncle that her husband has asked her forgiveness. The narrator, despite being a child, however has posed in this regard to be the voice of truth. She has become the advocate of peaceful rural life and thus tries to prevent her mother from going back to the same hellish atmosphere. She holds up many reasons as to not to go back but all efforts ultimately become fruitless. The truth is that by enacting her gender role imposed on her by society, the character of Ma has forgotten the bifurcation between right and wrong. In order to evade the humiliation, she has chosen to return to her husband even though she knows that the brutal domination will never end. Her compulsion to escape the ignominy is the "something that keeps pulling [her] back" (11) to her abusive marriage. From the perspective of her husband also, it is not the affection that made him call her back but rather the same compulsion and his needs for sustenance. In this regard, Levi Strauss' statement becomes very relevant when he shared his perspective on marriage by commenting that, "The relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasions of this relationship" (116).

Levi Strauss' statement finds the accuracy in the story as shown in the mother's expectation of the imminent trepidation that will be offered to her once she goes back home but chooses to play the role of the perfect wife due to the gendered pressure imposed by the society. Her blatant utterance of feeling the "[t]he loneliness without him" (Divakaruni 12) is a lie to herself. She has neither been able to forgive him nor has she forgotten the abuse. It is simply the societal pressure that manipulated her to take a perilous decision like that will ultimately result in the ruin of her life as well as her daughter's life. This is the tale of most of the marriages in the Indian society that Divakaruni has woven so poignantly with metaphors. The metaphor of the bats again gets repeated in the narrator's perception of the sky as "crinkled" and "black" as the bat's wings (Divakaruni 8). In this regard, the bats have been associated with the imminent danger that the narrator and her mother are going to plunge themselves in. The story almost becomes a loop of repetitive imagery as it ends with the same incident of the physical violence that it starts with. Towards the later part of the story, the readers witness both the mother and the daughter becoming enmeshed in the violence where the bruised daughter is helping the mother with her blood-covered mouth to escape the house. However, the ending line suggests that both of them came back once again to the torturous co-existence reminding the readers of the fervour of the bats, returning again and again to the fated demise.



Simone de Beauvoir in her canonical work *The Second Sex* had made an elaborate statement regarding marriage which holds its truth even now, after almost a century. She stated,

And although marriage is considered an institution demanding mutual fidelity, it seems clear that the wife must be totally subordinate to the husband: through Saint Paul the fiercely antifeminist Jewish tradition is affirmed...he bases the principle of subordination of women to man on the Old and New Testaments. 'The man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man'; and 'Neither was man created for the woman; but the woman for the man'. And elsewhere: 'For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church (133).

Thus, from the above quotation, it is clearly understood that marriage has taken on a patriarchal discourse and society along with its various institutional constructions like religion has aided in the formulation of such a discourse. Cohesion or the mutual affinity, which is considered to be the essence of a happy marriage, in majority of the cases has subsided to conform to its societal norm of subjugation and domination of the partner. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's genius lies in the fact that she utilises various significant societal issues as the crux of her stories and novels. Her anthology *Arranged Marriage* has effectively taken up the issue of marriage and treated some of the darkest lanes of this institution. It has delved deep into the themes of failed marriage and the domestic violence that are some common issues in Indian society but that mostly go unreported due to the fear of embarrassment and humiliation. In the story 'The Bats' Divakaruni has painted the gendered oppression through the image of a weak and vulnerable woman acting as the hurdle in a man's life as is mostly perceived by the society. Thus, her character, Ma, has no personal identity. In this story, Mother is also the character who promotes patriarchy even though she is one of the sufferers in its hand. Her non-resilience, her mistaken choice of going back to the same marriage, her act of paying more importance to the societal convictions rather than her own sufferings indicate how she has become subconsciously insinuated by the patriarchal world around her. Even though the narrator protested, the mother paid no heed and brought her back to the same fatal loop of domestic violence. This story thus shows how generations get affected due to unsuccessful and turbulent marriage and the author has effectively, with her artistic contoured use of symbols, has given the readers a glimpse of the looming perturbations associated with a failed marriage. The author's publication of such a theme in the modern era thus portrays that feminism and women emancipation has a long way to reach the level of praxis from being just theories. In the era, where the incidents of marital rape are not declared as punishable offence, more such stories are required by the society to get enlightened that marriage is not only about being a couple in a relationship but rather about being a couple in a loving respectable coexistence.





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