

Influence of Milieu on Personality in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Doors*

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Abstract

*The social environment in which a child is raised undoubtedly plays a crucial role in shaping its personality. The social milieu instils certain qualities into a person that, during the passage of time, become his/her innate characteristics. As this is the case, when two persons from different cultural settings are united by nuptial bond, they are bound for certain disharmonies. It is quite natural to see discord happening in arranged marriages that although they belong to same cultural group, there might be differences in their domestic practices. But even in love marriages, in which the couple certainly knows about their dissimilarities and are prepared to make adjustments for the sake of preserving love, conflicts occur occasionally, affecting the affinity between the couple. The short story *Doors*, from the collection *Arranged Marriage* authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, stands as an exemplification for this prevailing condition. This story discusses the personal issues in the marital life of two Indian Americans Preeti and Deepak. Though they seem to belong to the same category, they differ in one way. The protagonist Preeti has been brought up in America since she is twelve years old, whereas her life-partner Deepak lived in India for long and came to America for his higher education and so retains the Indian essence within. Even though both of them love each other, they experience cultural clashes due to their varied social milieus.*

Keywords: *marriage, culture, milieus, dissimilarities*

Introduction

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About the Writer

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer that she was born in India and lives currently in the United States of America. She is a well known versatile writer who has

penned a number of poems, novels, and short stories. Two of her novels and one of her short stories have been adapted into films. Her works focus mainly on the experiences of South Asian immigrants.

Arranged Marriage

Her famous book *Arrange Marriage* is a collection of short stories that deals with the subject of traditional arranged marriage which is a crucial aspect of Indian societal system, and discusses different issues of arranged marriages. For this work, Divakaruni received certain awards such as American Book Award, PEN Josephine Miles Literary Award, and Bay Area Book Reviewer' Award.

Doors

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Preeti, the Private Person

Preeti is a smart and intelligent girl with high aspirations who is doing her Ph.D. in an esteemed university in the USA. As she has been living in America for quite a long period, she has imbibed the American cultural aspects naturally. Americans give importance to the space for oneself and they maintain privacy even from family members. This American facet is reflected in Preeti's habit of closing door behind her at all times. She has the tendency to shut the door before, going to bed, taking bath, and settling to study. Even while weeding the garden, she will make sure the gate is locked.

Deepak, her husband, finds it funny in the beginning of their marital life. When she closes their bedroom door, he would tease her, "Are the pots and pans from the kitchen going to come and watch us making love?" And while she locks the bathroom door before taking bath, he would ask, "Do you think I'm going to come in and attack you?" (188)

Preeti has no specific reason for doing so. She tells Deepak her presumption: "I guess I'm just a private person. It's not like I'm shutting you out. I've just always done it this way. Maybe it has something to do with being an only child" (189). More than being the single child to her parents, the impact of the society in which she lives is the root cause for her having this disposition.

Deepak, the Sociable Person

Deepak is of course a good-natured man as acknowledged by his wife Preeti. Contrary to the surmises of Preeti's mother and friends, he is not infected by the Indian age-old patriarchal ideologies, despite he was born and lived there for many years. Preeti's mother was ominous about her marrying Deepak. She argued with Preeti before her marriage: "What do you *really* know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?" (184) But Preeti assured her that Deepak is totally different from the typical Indian men.

Her faith in Deepak was validated in the occasion when Deepak invited his friends for their wedding. His Indian friends had misgivings about Deepak marrying Preeti, a westernised girl. One of his friends warned Deepak, "you

know how these 'American' women are, always bossing you, always thinking about themselves". Another friend, who was steeped in Indian patriarchal principles, asserts, "I'd go for an arranged marriage from back home any day, a pretty young girl from my parents' village, not too educated, brought up to treat a man right and not talk back." (185)

Deepak was angry listening to this statement. He retorted, "I can't believe you said that! ... Women aren't dolls or slaves. I *want* Preeti to make her own decisions. I'm proud that she's able to" (185). This standpoint of him proves that he and the conservative Indian men are poles apart.

After marriage, the couple prove all the premonitions wrong by preserving mutual love. During their house warming party, the friends of both agreed that they were made for each other. Preeti's close friend Cathy expresses her approval:

I must admit I had my doubts in the beginning, though I didn't want to say anything - your mother was already being so negative. Just like her I thought he'd turn out to be terribly chauvinistic, like other men I've seen from the old countries. And of course I know how stubborn and closemouthed *you* are! But I think you've both adjusted wonderfully. At the risk of sounding clichéd, I'd say you're a perfectly matched couple! (187)

Raj, the Intruder from India

Things are going nicely with them for three years until the entry of Raj who is an intimate friend of Deepak. Raj comes from India to America for the sake of his studies. He is a jovial type of person whose unpretentious disposition is apparent when he kisses Deepak loudly on both cheeks at the airport, unmindful of the snobbish American stares.

Indians have the habit of socialising with people by addressing them with terms of certain relationships even though there is no kinship between them. Raj follows this Indian custom by calling Preeti 'bhaviji', that means sister-in-law. And many Indian families have the habit of sleeping together in the living room which is unimaginable for the sophisticated Americans. Raj too tries to follow this custom in the American home of Deepak and Preeti that he insists on sleeping in the living room. "For Raj, the real pleasure consists in the informal company of Preeti and Deepak. The

division of household in the form of drawing room and bed room was a burden to Raj.” (Murugesan 329)

Preeti's Hatred towards Raj

Preeti, right from the beginning, dislikes the arrival of Raj, an outsider. Being a private person, and having personal academic works, she is upset to admit Raj even as a guest for a few days, as he comes to her house at short notice. So, when she is informed by Deepak that he is going to stay with them for nearly one and half years, she is enraged.

Further, Raj is totally oblivious to the existence and utility of doors, whereas doors hold a significant place in Preeti's life. He keeps all the doors open which are consciously closed by Preeti, and also annoys her with his snores because of letting his bedroom unclosed during nighttime. Further, he has the habit of intruding into the privacy of Preeti.

Indian Essence in Deepak

Contrary to Preeti, Deepak is immensely pleased by the coming of Raj. Preeti observes Deepak's loud laughter with Raj which she has never seen before. Deepak asserts the importance he extends to Raj by taking two days off from work to show Raj around the city; and that makes Preeti feel jealous of Raj. Deepak reminisces about the good olden days he spent in his mother country in the company of Raj.

The inherent Indianness of Deepak emerges to the surface in the presence of another person who was brought up in India as well. The impression of Raj on Deepak is profound that even his accent sounds Indianised which is well noticed by Preeti. Deepak prefers to spend his leisure time with his mate Raj fun-filled. They both sit together and watch Hindi movies with full of enjoyment and laughter. “Deepak proves the mother's warnings “true” by falling into such Indian ways as inviting an old friend from India to live in their house, enjoying Indian snacks and movies, and neglecting the value of privacy and closed doors as much as his Americanized wife.” (Agarwal 78)

Disharmony between Couple

As Preeti is not happy with Raj staying with them for long, she conveys it to Deepak. Obviously Deepak reacts angrily, since he has an opposite disposition. And this temperamental difference leads to the first serious quarrel

between them. Preeti, who is disinclined to spoil their congenial relationship, decides to put up with the unpleasant atmosphere of her household as it is going to last only for a certain duration.

Even though she tries to make compromises for the sake of maintaining amiability with Deepak, her desolate appearance reflects her inner feelings. On seeing the state of Preeti, her friend Cathy expresses her concern. “I haven't ever seen you so depressed. There are craters, literally, under your eyes, and you look like you've lost weight. Surely if he knew how strongly Raj's habits bothered you, he'd do something about them.” (194)

As per the advice of Cathy, Preeti makes up her mind to discuss her feelings with Deepak. But unfortunately it leads to another dispute.

“I can't live with Raj in the house anymore. He's driving me crazy. He's ...”

“What d'you mean, he's driving you crazy?” Deepak's voice was suddenly testy. “He's only trying to be friendly, poor chap.” (197)

And their breach further widened due to an unexpected happening. When Preeti is extremely upset about being criticised by her supervisor for her mediocre work in research, Raj provokes her that for conveying his pleasure about getting high grades in his class and to give medicine for her headache, he enters her bedroom, opening the closed door.

When he crosses the boundary line, that is her bedroom door, and invades into the place which she regards as her last sanctuary, she loses her temper and shouts at him to get out. Subsequently she decides to walk out of the house in order to avoid any more such offensive incidents. This stand of her forces Deepak to send Raj out, though unwilling. Deepak's hard feelings towards Preeti is signified by his separation, i.e. moving to the guest room and closing the door shut. This act of him induces a sharp pang in the heart of Preeti.

Conclusion

The cause for the rift between the couple is neither Preeti nor Deepak nor Raj. The disharmony is the consequence of the impact of their different social milieus. Preeti, though hails from India, requires a personal space due to the environmental impact of American culture. Deepak, until the

entry of Raj, seems to have adapted to the American way of living. But his actual disposition, which is originated from the Indian milieu, is revealed only in the proximity of another person who is also from his background. Similarly, Raj also cannot be blamed as causer of clashes between couple, because he, a new arrival to America, is under the total influence of sociable Indian culture, and so behaves accordingly. Hence, this story clearly exhibits the impact of milieu on personality and subsequent clashes of cultural differences.

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