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**A Daughter's Dilemma in Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni's Short Story: *The Word Love*****Prof. Rashmi Varma**
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Although mothers cherish their daughters as treasures, they can also be the agency through which the age-old traditions of gender inequality continue to exist even in the modern era. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story *The Word Love* presents the stark reality of mother-daughter relationship in India. In a moving story about an Indian daughter who is in America to get her PhD, Divakaruni gives an insight into the psychological trauma that she goes through. The daughter finds herself in a live-in relationship with an American boy and could not muster the courage to talk to her mother about this new development in her personal life. The reason Divakaruni gives is that the mother is not just the nurturing, supportive force, as mothers are universally supposed to be. In the story, the protagonist finds the mother to be a representative of the cultural traditions enforcing the concepts of gender, established and preserved by a patriarchal society. The story is a portrayal of the daughter, torn between love/loyalty for the mother—who expects her to carry forward the legacy of societal tyranny—and her aspirations to be on her own. The fact that she lives abroad, gives the story a complicated and diasporic angle only to illustrate how the culturally restrictive norms can be detrimental to human relationships and to an individual's emotional well-being. This paper is an attempt to read the story as a portrayal of an Indian daughter's dilemma as she struggles to do justice to both, her love and duty towards a lonely widow mother and her commitment to an American boyfriend. Her failure, however leads her to realize the need to be on her own.

Key-words:

love, culture, society, mother-daughter relationship

Introduction:

In one of her interviews Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni declared, “my literary agenda is to write women protagonists” and “it's really important for us to hear women telling their own voices” (Punch). One of the prominent Indian writers writing in English, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's major focus has been conflicts, that women face as beings, conditioned into culturally constructed feminine gender and their existence as individual human beings.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1957 at Kolkata in India. She migrated to America to do her PhD. A prolific author, she is also a professor of Creative Writing Program at University of Houston. Honored with several prizes and awards, she has written in several

genres including poetry, short story, novels and essays. She has also written for children and young adults. Her work adopts multiple narrative forms like realistic, historical, magic realism, mythical and fantasy. Some of her famous works are *The Palace of Illusions*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, *Oleander Girl* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Her new novel titled *Independence* has won the 2024 American Book Award. Her collection of short stories, titled *Arranged Marriage* had also won the same award in year 1997. *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is another collection of short stories by her. Many of her writings have been adapted into film, TV series and stage plays. Inspired by her own experiences Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni draws insightful portrayal of South Asian women, especially of those who have migrated to other countries and juggle between their past lives in home country and present life in the host country. Going through the challenges of life, her heroines do not give up and aspire to achieve the freedom of choice. In an interview, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni said, “perhaps the thread that run through all my books is the importance of women making choices for themselves about their own lives, whether in India or in America, and how such choices can enable us to grow even if they lead to problems. So even if it leads to some complications in between, ultimately there are ways in which a woman grows through these experiences, that is of interest to me”(Punch). *The Word Love* is one such story by her where the protagonist struggles against the oppressive reality behind a mother- daughter relationship in India. The story was published in her first book, a collection of short stories titled *Arranged Marriage* published in year 1994. The book won the 1997 American Book Award and later the PEN Josephine Miles Award for Fiction. In a moving story about an Indian daughter who is in America to study for PhD the author gives us an insight into the psychological stress that she has to go through because of her live- in relationship with an American boy. The reason for stress is her inability to reveal the personal development in her life to her mother living in Kolkata.

Divakaruni shows how a mother is not just the nurturing, supportive force, as mothers are universally supposed to be. In the story the daughter finds the mother a representative of the cultural traditions, enforcing the concept of gender inequality established and preserved by the patriarchal society. The story is a portrayal of the daughter torn between her love and duty for the mother who expects the daughter to carry on the legacy of patriarchal tyranny-and her desire for independence. The fact that the daughter lives abroad, gives the story a complicated and diasporic angle, showing how the culturally restrictive expectations can be detrimental to both, human relationships and to an individual’s emotional well- being. This paper is an attempt to discuss Divakaruni’s story as a portrayal of an Indian daughter’s dilemma as she struggles to do justice to both, her love for a lonely widow mother and desire for her American boyfriend. The struggle however proves to be a blessing in disguise. After facing rejection by the mother and the lover, she realizes the need to be on her own.

It was Catherine Pulsifer, the American author who famously said ,‘a mother’s treasure is her daughter.’ Divakaruni’s heroine, an unnamed one, bears the burden of being a treasure in a bitter way. The loving, caring mother has also ingrained the traditional concept of virtue in her. Therefore, when she finds herself living with an American boy, she is deeply scared of her conventional mother’s reaction to it. She practices the exact words and precise tone of speech to reveal the fact to her mother on the weekly phone calls but fails to do so. The story is narrated by the protagonist, so should be in the first-person narration, the author, however uses the second person narrative. The narrator is protagonist’s inner voice addressing her as ‘you’. Rocio G Davis in her study of the story, rightly observes, “the unnamed protagonist is

insecure and passive, which makes the second person narration more urgent; as the main character cannot seem to speak for herself, a voice must be found to speak to her”(Davis 9). Although she is inarticulate the voice ‘ you’ exposes the reader to her inner turmoil. The protagonist’s mother, as she informs Rex, the man in her life, has adopted widowhood after her husband’s death and devoted herself in bringing up the two-year-old daughter. Although she lived in a city like Kolkata, she does not know about cigarette, alcohol or movies. She followed all the dictates of patriarchy which expect women to live a life of restrictions and prohibitions, a life of denial, sacrifice and selflessness. The protagonist therefore finds it difficult to talk to the mother about her own pleasure of being in love with a foreigner. Although she enjoys the pleasures of love making with Rex, her own voice rebukes her, filling her with a sense of guilt and shame. She describes her rehearsed speech for mother as ‘confessions and repentance’. Her upbringing makes her conscience work as a moral police. Tragically, her conscience is a reflection of what her mother stands for so she says, “you try to shut out the whispery voice that lives behind the ache in your eyes, the one that started when you said yes and kissed hard. Mistake, says the voice, whispering in your mother’s tone” (Divakaruni 59). The protagonist finds herself caught between love for mother and love for Rex. She knows that the mother will judge her as ‘living in sin’ and is afraid of her disapproval. She keeps remembering the beautiful soft face of her mother and her own resemblance to her. Rex who had a childhood “years of being shunted between his divorced parents till he was old enough to move out” (Divakaruni 59), fails to grasp her anxiety over mother. He refuses to see her need to share things with the mother and the consequent sense of guilt. But she justifies his rude behavior as jealousy. She enjoys the passionate intense love making with him but asks herself, “how did you get yourself into the mess” (Divakaruni 59). She feels cherished and protective with him but is not sure whether her body reacts with love or with fear. The ‘you’ in her, immediately questions, “what will you remember of him when it is all over” (Divakaruni 63). She keeps dithering over informing the mother about Rex because she herself has an inkling of doing something wrong. The author shows how the memory of mother acts as reminders of patriarchal values inculcated by the mother. By falling in love, living with a man without marriage, moreover with a man of different cast, creed, and nationality - she is breaking the moral, societal and cultural norms of patriarchy. The protagonist recalls how in her college days the mother had turned her out of home for secretly watching a movie with friends. She had locked the daughter out of home till midnight, with a suitcase of clothes and a note, “better no daughter than a disobedient one, a shame to the family (Divakaruni 62). Again, she recalls a cautionary moral tale that the mother had narrated to her, giving her a lesson in the dreadful consequences of not being an obedient, tamed and subservient girl. The tale is about a father who had allowed his motherless daughter to go to school and be free and independent. The daughter becomes pregnant with a man and drowned herself on the day of her wedding. The father was heartbroken, not for the loss of child but for his good name ruined and loss of his ancestral home because of the ruined name. The protagonist remembers being haunted by the drowned girl in dreams, sometimes with her own face on the dead girl’s body. Later she chides herself for focusing only on the sad memories. She confesses wondering, “is it some flow in yourself, some cross- connection in the silver filaments of your brain” (Divakaruni 62). She does remember the beautiful experiences of bonding with mother over bathing in Ganga, having puris and potatoes and getting a coin to buy peanuts. She remembers her mother’s pride on her school graduation and often telling her, ‘we only have each other’. Her experience of Rex, her other love too is mingled with his intense passion for her and his utter refusal to understand her dilemma and crippling sense of guilt. Lately he had started getting busy with

phone calls from his girl-friends which made her doubtful and jealous. The connection between them crumbles after she gets more and more distraught with her assumptions of the mother's reaction. The mother, through a phone call mistakenly picked up by Rex had come to know about him. She had called to inform the daughter about her cousin Leela's arranged marriage with a well employed Brahmin boy. She had booked the daughter's ticket to fly to Delhi for the wedding but after knowing the secret about Rex, with a death like finality she orders, "but now of course you need not come" (Divakaruni 64). The protagonist remembers how her voice had been 'a spear of ice.' Suddenly the mother's soft kisses like voice turns into icy cold indictment implying that she had disowned the daughter.

The daughter keeps calling the mother with teary eyes, shaking fingers and weak knees, only to be answered by the ayah who informs her that the mother had called a lawyer to get her will changed. Broken hearted she hears the mother's angry voice, "how can it be my daughter? I don't have a daughter" (Divakaruni 65). The mother changes her phone number and refuses to receive the daughter's letter. The protagonist frantically waits for a reply only to find the letter returned undelivered. Nothing seems to go well for her. She is unable to pay attention to Rex as well as to her studies. He had tried to persuade her, without feeling the depth of her emotions for the mother. She too fails to reciprocate to his affection and sympathy. Finally getting impatient with her depressive behavior he decides to break off, telling her, "it was never me. Was it? Never love. It was always you and her, her and you" (Divakaruni 70). Similarly, she gets summoned by her teacher for not focusing on studies. Her relationship with Rex and her study for PhD both gets sidelined as she tries to overcome the grief caused by the mother's extreme reaction. The mother had taken the daughter's decision- to live with a foreigner without marriage and keeping it a secret- as a challenge to the values she had ingrained in her. For her, the daughter stood for family honor perpetuating the patriarchal norm of obedience to socio-cultural restrictions. Although highly educated and living abroad the daughter too suffers from an irredeemable sense of guilt. She feels guilty towards both the mother and Rex. Rex had been sympathetic trying to help her but she could not make herself follow his American way of thinking which was to walk out on parents to live independently. Similarly, the mother had made sacrifices in bringing her up. In not behaving according to their expectations, in a way, she had betrayed their trust in her. In a bout of confusion and depression she gets suicidal, thinking of swallowing the boyfriend's sleeping pills. She even imagines herself as a dead body wondering whether Rex or the mother would bother to come and repent for her. Gradually, the reality of word 'love' dawns on her. She had observed that Rex expressed his love on his own terms. He would indulge in love making when she wanted desperately to share her worries with him. Although trying to be helpful and caring, he loses his temper, calling her irrational and shouts "You are driving yourself crazy. You need a shrink" (Divakaruni 68). She had been charmed by his voice and enjoyed the warmth of the relationship but the joy had disappeared due to the anxiety over mother. She could sense that though sympathetic, for Rex, fulfillment of his own wish was more important than his love for her. She too could not accept the relationship and feels guilty about it. Instead of being happy or proud about it she sees it as a 'mistake' and is even filled with sense of fear. As Rocio G. Davis says, "In Berkeley, living with a man seems more a result of her passive acceptance of his needs than a decision based on her own convictions" (Davis 9). Ironically two of the study books of Rex are titled *Control Systems Engineering and Handbook of Shock and Vibration*. The protagonist's love for the mother is an appreciation of what she had done for the daughter. Motherly love which is nurture, care and support had been a part of her being. Her dilemma was caused firstly because

she was scared of hurting her by informing her about Rex and secondly, she was obsessed with the guilt for keeping it a secret from her. A daughter is very often a reflection of what her mother is. She had been passive in the relationship with Rex, had behaved respectfully with the teacher and obeyed the moral norms by remaining uncomfortable in the live-in arrangement with Rex. The psychological trauma and the despair that she goes through is however due to the realization that the mother's love is not just motherly love for the daughter. The patriarchal dictates and the social customs were more important than the happiness and the well-being of the daughter.

The unforgiving mother mercilessly disowns the daughter refusing any communication. It is not love for the daughter but what she stood for -modesty, honor and status of the family- that was of more value than the daughter as a child or an individual being. In a moment of clarity the protagonist realizes, "surely there is another choice" rather than being subservient to deadly customs and embrace death. Throughout the story Divakaruni has emphasized the protagonist's inability to articulate her feelings and opinions. Daughters are not trained to be assertive, to be decision makers or to be independent thinkers, having their own opinions. Divakaruni has meaningfully kept the protagonist unnamed since the story is a narration of universal experience of being a daughter. As Rocio G. Davis comments, "the protagonist's position in her own story is difficult to map as she has been manipulated to serve the interests of other players: her mother, her lover, societal expectations, invitations and demands" (Davis 9). The protagonist once again fails to give words to the disillusionment with the word love with reference to Rex and mother's love for her and her own love for them.

Giving in to Rex's wishes had been obeying the male power and giving in to the mother's influence was as Edith Wharton explains, "mothers and daughters are part of each other's consciousness in different degrees and in a different way, but still with the mutual sense of something which has always been there." However, in an enlightening moment when she is walking on the road in rain the protagonist observes a young woman trying to protect herself under an umbrella. But when the stormy weather snaps the umbrella, she tosses it away in a garbage can. The woman starts laughing and enjoys the rain with open arms. The scene reminds the protagonist of her childhood monsoon but "there are no people in this memory only the sky rippling with exhilarating light" (Divakaruni 71). She too had been living seeking validity in form of dependence on mother and Rex. The experience brings a clarity of the word 'love.' Love not as dependence on others but for independent self. Both, Rex the man and Mother the woman represented patriarchy, practicing suppression and subservience. Standing in the rain she receives the word love out of the opening sky with a realization of one's own individual self. Like 'rain it cleans the inessentials' inside her making her ready for a new self. For her the concept of love had been limited to parental expectations and obligations to a lover. Enlightened with a new understanding of the word love she arrives at a resolution to take control of life and head towards self-determination. She decides to move out from Rex's house and to leave behind the batik hanging, the mother's gift- a talisman. The voice 'you' tells her, "You will not need it in your new life, the one you are going to live for yourself" (Divakaruni 71). By the end of the story, she has resolved her dilemma by shedding the burden of past memories. A critic rightly observes that she understands love as a liberating force which allows one to live for oneself on one's own terms (Kaur 181). In one of her blogs write up Divakaruni discusses her characters and states, "when we are afraid to make mistakes, it means that the little voice in our head is in control. This is the voice that tells us, this is no good or better do something that's tried and tested that you know works... It's really important to get past this

voice and sometimes do that we have to consciously push against what we think our limitations are..." (blog, Divakaruni.com). This is what her heroine in the story *The Word Love* finally attempts to do. Appreciating her art of characterization the First Post comments, "the psychological equity with which she presents her character's motivation and leaps of faith is remarkable" (blog, Divakaruni.com). The story *The Word Love* with its nameless protagonist is a supreme example of Divakaruni's art.

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