

The Concept of Marriage in Different Cultures: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the concept of marriage in the works of three authors, Charlotte Bronte, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Vikram Seth. The study focuses on the role of female characters towards and within marriage, and the influence of marriage on their lives. The attempt is to depict how women in different times and parts of the world confront inappropriate social conventions. In other words, some women in different parts of the world have no right to choose their partners in patriarchal societies. Jane Eyre is the protagonist of Bronte's novel, Lata the protagonist of Vikram Seth's novel, and the two protagonists in Divakaruni's short stories; "The Bats" and "Clothes" are introduced. Marriage for the protagonists of these three literary works is like a one-way journey, a point with no return. It alters their lives and brings them either happiness or misery. Throughout the current paper, the different attitudes towards marriage will be viewed to show the positive and negative aspects of marriage. A feminist perspective will be employed in analyzing the three literary works.

1. Introduction

Finding a suitable spouse is a critical stage in everyone's life, especially for women. Some women are denied the right to choose their life partners. In many parts of the world, societies are largely patriarchal due to the possessive nature of men and several other reasons. Yet, some women are firm in mind and work hard to find partners who would treat them as equals. This study highlights how women of different places and centuries look at this institution and this can be done by comparing the lives and attitudes of the protagonists of the three current works towards marriage.

Marriage is a physical and economic union that not necessarily based upon equality. Feminist theorists stressed this point and built their debates on the fact that women were not considered equals to men. Firstly, feminism is a literary theory that aims to examine, fathom, and address the issues of gender equality. Elaine Showalter, the American feminist theorist, identified three historical phases that female writing has gone through: the feminine phase (1840-1880), the feminist phase (1880-1920), and the female phase (1920-present). In the first phase, authors like George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Emile Bronte, and others published their literary works under pseudonyms, accepting the dominant social construct that characterized women. During the second phase, female writers depicted the marginalization and oppression of the female characters that were abused by their male counterparts. In the third phase, the writers rejected the marginality or the secondary position of female characters which prevailed the second phase. Moreover, this phase revealed misogyny; male aversion of women, in literary and scientific works (Bressler, 2011, 152). Misogyny is evident in the words of Italian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas who states "woman is really an imperfect man ... an incidental being ... a batched male" and Plato who "thanks the god for two blessings: that he had not been born a slave and that he had not been born a woman" (as cited in Bressler, 2011, 145). Through such patriarchal statements, the Western literary canon asserted men's superiority over women, abetting gender inequality. The first literary work that rejected misogyny and inferiority of women was *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames* (1405) by Christine de Pizan, the Italian-French author, who announced that man and women are equal beings. In the following centuries, female voices arose and resisted the dominant patriarchal beliefs such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Simon De Beauvoir. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft criticized the societal norms that relegated women's role in community and encouraged women to

articulate their role in community. The institution of marriage has been criticized by many theorists such as Simon De Beauvoir whose conceptualization will be used in analyzing *Jane Eyre*, *Arranged Marriage*, and *A Suitable Boy*.

Jane Eyre takes place during the Victorian period when society was dominated and controlled by men. It is unsurprising, then, that female writers used their works to demonstrate the injustice of the patriarchy and the oppression of women. In other words, female writers used their pens to write about the oppression of women at that period. Bronte believes that a woman should have the right to choose her own husband. She asserts that match-makers are reckless and irresponsible people because marriage is not just about finding a suitor (Nestor, 1985, 99). According to Lane (1962), the factors of convenience, social position, and fortune that control marriage lead Bronte to assume that her poverty and unattractiveness are impediments to her own marriage (104). This can be seen in her words to Ellen in 1843: "it is an imbecility, which I reject with contempt, for women, who have neither fortune nor beauty, to make marriage the principal object of their wishes" (Gerin, 1968, 149-150).

On the other hand, *Arranged Marriage* presents marital relationships as they are seen in South Asian communities where marriage is arranged by parents. Marriage has become an institution in all communities of the world despite its differences. Women usually have very little to say in their matrimonial destiny. In that society, women are given less priority in choosing their partners. Women are viewed as a weak gender that is in need of men's protection. Thus, weakness is embedded in women's minds. Even when they are abused or tortured, they could not come out of the marriage system. In Divakaruni's stories, the protagonist is usually a woman whose marriage is an arranged one and who suffers because of the expectations she is obliged to have and the ones she should meet. It is the society who plays a great role in making one believe that marriage is for social security, financial benefits, and recognition. Young (1999) illustrates that the fate and identity of those women are controlled by men and they are also taken care of by men at all stages of their life; i.e. in childhood by their fathers and after marriage by their husbands (35).

The theme of arranged marriage dominates Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*. In this novel, Seth portrays the common attitude towards marriage and reveals the detest of Asian communities for love marriages. Set in India in the 1950s, the novel revolves around the story of a widowed woman called Rupa Mehra who tries to find a suitable Hindu boy for her youngest daughter, Lata. Unlike Bronte and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Vikram Seth supports arranged marriages and views matchmaking as a logical process based on the commonality of spouses that have a key role in persisting marriage.

What is the purpose of marriage? Do we have to fall in love in order to get married? Is it love or lust that determines whether someone should get married? The ideas surrounding love and marriage differ in many ways throughout centuries, but they also have stayed the same in a few ways. Throughout this study, we try to investigate how the concept of marriage and the expectations of the protagonists differ from one person to another and also from one culture to another.

Methodology

As it has been noted earlier, marriage has been discussed by numerous feminist critics who stressed its fundamental role in oppressing and subjecting women as it erases individual liberty and equality between the two sexes and marks the biological differences through assigning the role of childbearing and caregiving to women and the role of breadwinning to men (Pateman, 2018, 45). Women's role confined them within the borders of the domestic chores, restricting their ability to pursue a profession and attain financial gains. In other words, women are forced to be economically dependent on men and in need of them (Staz, 2004, 9).

The feminist theorist Simone De Beauvoir (1952) states that women are placed in an inferior status because "humanity is male, and man define woman not in herself, but as relative to him" (xvi). Since the woman is not a man, she becomes the other, an inferior being whose existence is determined by the dominant male. Men and women are united through marriage. According to Beauvoir (1952), "marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (425). It is a contract that deprives women of their free will and turns them into a property owned by men. It obliterates women's identity since they relinquish their names and adopt the husband's name. Thus, Beauvoir (1952) views marriage as a corrupted institution that serves men's interests. She writes that marriage unites man and woman "who, may not have chosen each other, are in duty bound to satisfy each other in every way throughout their lives is a monstrosity that necessarily gives rise to hypocrisy, lying, hostility, and unhappiness" (479). This means that marriage could lead women to a life of misery and subjection.

As Beauvoir (1952) articulates, the purpose of marriage is "to make the economic and sexual union of men and women serve the interests of society" (434). To emancipate women from men control, there must be economic equality. Women must have the opportunity to be educated and then attain a job that enables them to fend

themselves. Through education and economic equality, women will have the freedom to choose to marry or not (Beauvoir, 1952, 425). Beauvoir conception of marriage will be employed in analyzing the literary texts.

Discussion

In presenting the marriage theme, Bronte tackles important issues such as the need for love, in addition to an awareness of the difficulties faced by women (Lerner, 1972, 187). The result of espousing these two concerns is a general ambivalence because the conventionality that overshadows the love theme contradicts her pursuit of emotional and mental equality of the sexes. Marriage, for Bronte, should be founded on virtuous, constant, and mutual love with intellectual and emotional affinities. This is not accepted by Victorian society in that some reviewers and critics describe romantic relationships as immoral.

Marriage is the only fulfillment and happiness for women. Part of Bronte's disenchantment with marriage is due to her belief that to marry in that male-centered world, a woman would inevitably be subjugated and dominated by her husband who considers her a slave or inferior being. The most important thing for her is to defy the Victorian differential thinking, to make male superiority melts into complete parity between the sexes, but she doubts the consequence of attacking the traditional and dominant ideologies of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, Bronte's concept of marriage is social. As mentioned by Miller (1986), a good marriage for Bronte should start with a man's concessions, his acknowledgment of his own dependence, in addition to his brotherly admission of equality (147).

Meantime, the writer realizes that marriage becomes a bond of slavery for women because of their inferior status compared to men. Bronte herself is forced to work as a governess despite her abhorrence to the idea of governess-ship (Lane, 1962, 105). Opportunities for social progress are extremely limited for the working and middle-class Victorian women. Women are not free to choose a profession because womanhood is considered a profession in itself (Showalter, 1977, 21).

In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte offers an unusual kind of marriage which is uncommon at that time: it is a marriage of two self-proclaimed, parallel and intellectual persons who love each other. Both Bronte and Jane Eyre have the same perspective towards women, for them any woman should have self-respect and marry the person who deems their equals. So she leaves Rochester to demonstrate her belief that an equal and romantic marriage is possible in Victorian society. In this way, both of them can further discover themselves, and in turn become equal to each other, in both economic and emotional terms.

The novelist debases women who live in the hope of finding a materially beneficial marriage. Moreover, Lerner (1972) considered Bronte as a proto-feminist writer in that the meaning of her feminism encourages women to succeed (187). Dependence is Bronte's heroine's suffering. It could be said that a woman's fear of the dreary existence of lonely spinsterhood, submission to an oppressive patriarch or becoming enmeshed in a miserable marriage is subject to her reliance on a man as a protector, a breadwinner, and a master. To attain full and healthy womanhood, Jane Eyre has to pass through certain tests in her life. Each phase in Jane's life develops her intellectual, moral, and social maturity as well as her knowledge of her own abilities and needs.

In the early 19th century, consanguineous marriage has been acceptable. For example, in *Jane Eyre*, St. John Rivers and Jane Eyre are relatives but St. John proposes to marry her:

God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife. It is not personal but mental endowments they have given you; you are formed for labor, not love. A missionary's wife you must—shall be. You shall be mine; I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service. (Bronte, 1999, 483)

Rivers interprets Jane's rejection of his loveless marriage as violent, unfeminine, and untrue. He tempts Jane with the existence she desires, the existence of exercise and activity as a missionary's wife and teacher in India. Miller (1986) states that what Rivers offers to her is a cold relationship between a master and his servant (147). Work is important for Jane but not as an end, so she does not accept his proposal. He represents an exacting master who, unlike Rochester, restricts Jane's liberty of mind. Jane scorns his despotism and feels that he coerces her to abandon her right to live as a natural human being. According to Eagleton (1975), another reason for Jane's rejection is that she does not want herself to perish in that horrible life of homelessness and subjugation (18). The heroine has nothing to support her success except her inner worth. She is a strong-minded woman, an ideal woman for the former and heroic for the latter. She defies male tyranny and oppression with her bluntness, frankness, and combativeness.

Notably, Bronte's treatment of marital equality is ambiguous, because she realizes that equality between the sexes at her time could not be fulfilled easily. For example, Jane's service to Rochester in the end as a guide suggests at once subservience and leadership. As mentioned by Eagleton (1975), subservience perpetuates their previous relationship

and leadership referred to her control and independence of him (19). However, her submission to him is that of a loving woman to her husband and lover. She opposes his belief that her happiness with him springs from her delight in sacrifice.

In the authoress's imagination, mutual concession in marriage can be gained when man is stripped of most of his strength and mastery. Women can feel of their value in Victorian society only in man's crippled state since no other social betterment for women can be achieved. It is noteworthy that the woman in this novel does not ascend to a higher position; it is the man who passes to a lower state. Equality here is done from the Victorian woman's position of weakness as it can only be achieved by a radical change in the economic and social forces.

The novelist's personal opinion overshadows the concept of marriage. However, Bronte is after the emblem of mutual happiness, security, and affection incarnated in the family hearth. Love in her novel means the sacrifice and reciprocity of give and take; therefore, she does not search for a substitute for marriage for her heroine. Education and financial self-sufficiency are the only means by which Jane Eyre could gain security before man and to be independent of his support, protection, control and mastery. Such a woman would be valued and respected by man and feel no more degraded in submitting to him. Marriage in *Jane Eyre* is based on the concession of man to the independent woman and the willing, not coerced, submission of woman to him. The result, as the writer plans, is an intimate and enduring marital relationship.

The second part of the current paper deals with *Arranged Marriage*, short stories written by Divakaruni. In those stories, the author focuses the light on Indian women's lives after marriage in an attempt to reveal the unspoken things that face most women after their marriage. Two short stories are dealt with in the current paper, "The Bats" and "Clothes".

Generally, in that society, women marry for economic necessity even if they are treated like slaves (Rajeshwar & Kuortti, 2007, 85). The women in *Arranged Marriage* are enthusiastic to change their life, but unfortunately the myth of being wives, mothers, and daughters make them sometimes feel trapped. Divakaruni herself acknowledges that "Not in such depth, but I still have to understand my characters and their central conflict and what they want" (Dill, 2010, n.p.). The author's female characters are seen to be sympathetic, whereas her male characters are stereotyped and flat.

The idea of *Arranged Marriage* arouses images of those loveless unions in which a woman is forced into marriage. Notwithstanding, arranged marriage is still the norm in some countries, such as India which is often regarded as the leader of arranged marriages. Roberts and Arnett (2014) mentioned that about 95% of Indian marriages are still arranged despite the current Western influences (35).

The present study portrays the institution of marriage by presenting it as a relation that works in systematically blocking women from any opportunity to be active members of society. Moreover, the current two stories try to fulfill the desired aspect of revealing Indian arranged marriage as a marginalized relation. Starting with "The Bats", it shows the power struggle that occurs between man and woman in a traditional manner, which results in arranging their married life. The story is narrated by a child who describes through using innocent terms how her mother is abused by her father, representing a woman as powerless, helpless, and a hitch in man's life.

Moreover, the protagonist and her daughter travel frequently from their house to their grandfather's house and return back again to their house. This frequent movement refers to the usual Indian traditional society where women are not courageous enough to leave their husbands completely; instead, they are humiliated with no objection. This story compares the bat's life to that of the mother. To put it another way, bats move from one tree to another in a way to safeguard their lives. This movement is done without any realization as they do not know where it is safe. Similarly, the mother of our story does not realize what is happening and she does not know that moving to another place may be safer for her and her daughter. Typically, Divakaruni sheds light on Indian society and tries to criticize that woman who is forced to return back to her miserable life. For this woman, her husband is the center of her life. This protagonist is timid and voiceless. Marriage is an obstacle in front of her and makes her life dark and gloomy.

The second short story titled "Clothes" and its protagonist is called Sumita. She travels to America to marry there, but unfortunately, her husband dies and she becomes a widow. Moreover, she decides to stay in America and works in a store instead of returning to India. She wants to run from the terrible situations in India where society imposes certain restrictions on widows. The current protagonist makes a wise decision by deciding to live in that liberal society on her own terms. Sumita was raised in a village with folk tales, fables and stories about a girl who marries a handsome prince. Marriage is considered one of the happiest and important occasions in every woman's life. But for Sumitha, loneliness is what is waiting for her. She travels to a far place crossing seas for nothing but to be a widow.

It is the traditions that obliged her to follow her family in-laws, but our protagonist has the courage and dares to stand against traditions, and asserts her individuality by not returning back to India.

Marriage here has a positive influence in creating that strong woman. It is Somesh who gives Sumitha a new life at the end of his own life. Losing her husband is considered a big shock to her as she realizes that her life has also ended with Somesh. However, the change happens and she recognizes herself when she stands in front of the mirror with the white sari. She undergoes a problem in that she finds herself trapped between the web of dualism of convention and modernization. She has to decide either to break away or to adapt to changing social scenario. She cannot think of the humiliation that is waiting for her as a widow. At this moment her American Sumitha wakes up and calls her. America is a symbol of liberty, gratification and existence for her. She decides not to be a dove with cut-off wings (Divakaruni, 1995, 30-31). The idea of being bound by borders annoys her, so she cuts off the expatriate sensibility and becomes ready to have a job in the unknown land and for the upcoming arguments. She states, "I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must" (Divakaruni, 1995, 33). To that end, Sumitha prepares herself as an emancipated woman. Divakaruni shows her heroine as an empowered woman exploring alternate vocations.

The previously mentioned stories illustrate the realities of life of most Indian women after marriage. Those women are dislocated geographically and emotionally and this leads them to be practically institutions of passive suffering. Marriage is projected by Divakaruni as an institution that typically marginalizes women and makes them victims of that patriarchal society in India. On the other hand, Vikram Seth defends the social norms of his society and presents arranged marriage as a means to bond young men and women in a legitimate relationship. Vikram stresses the importance of parents' approval because marriage is considered to be a union between two families. In *A Suitable Boy*, he presents a rebellious educated girl called Lata. Lata challenges all the social norms and decides to marry a man from a different cult called Kabir. Rupa Mehra, Lata's mother, refuses her daughter's romantic relationship and views Kabir as an unsuitable match. Therefore, Lata decides to elope with Kabir who rejects her reckless idea.

After her breakup with Kabir, Rupa Mehra sets her mind to find a suitable match for her youngest daughter. She tells her daughter, "you too will marry a boy I choose" (Seth, 1993, 6). In this line, Seth conveys common attitude of South Asian communities towards marriage. Just like all the Indian women, Lata is obliged to follow the rules of her community and accept her mother's choice for Haresh Khanna to be her future husband. The two develop beautiful sentiments towards each other and held their wedding ceremony. The novel ends with the indication that the young couple will live happily ever after. Through this end, Seth shows that not all arranged marriages debase women. Young couples might find love even if it is an arranged marriage.

As a feminist writer, Divakaruni sympathizes with her protagonists in every single detail of their life. It is universally noticeable that even if those women want to run away from the institution of marriage, they have no other choice but to stay as passive sufferers. Comparing Divakaruni's protagonists with Jane, it could be said that both writers encourage women to marry men whom they love not the one that is imposed on them for any purpose even if it is for monetary issues. Jane does not want to be a slave to her passion by staying with Rochester and becoming his mistress. She leaves him to prove to herself firstly that she can live without him and finds ownership of herself. As illustrated by Mohammed (2016), marrying out of love makes the couple available to each other at times of difficulty (61-62). No one can deny the fact that this type of marriage fosters compassion between the couple and comprises the equality of souls and the rise of individuality. However, Vikram Seth shows that love could occur even if it is an arranged marriage. According to Seth, choosing is the key because it is the choice that determines the motivation and personal view of marriage. In other words, for Jane love does not merely represent romance but a sense of being valued. Whereas, the protagonist in "The Pat" is a negative character who accepts her fate and does not take any steps to free herself from those traditions and patriarchal norms. Marriage represents an obstacle in her life. On the other hand, Sumitha in "Clothes" represents a strong woman who tries to stand against the traditions and be independent. Despite starting as a follower of her parent's decisions and then her husband's; however, she rejects this idea in the end and decides to be free faraway from all the humiliations that are waiting for her as a widow. This decision will determine her whole future. Jane Eyre and Sumitha emancipate themselves from the shackles of patriarchy by being economically independent.

Conclusion

The article addressed the concept of marriage as depicted in *Jane Eyre*, *Arranged Marriage*, and *Suitable Boy* novels. It provided a feminist approach that showed how women are treated within the institution of marriage. As Beauvoir explains, marriage is a perverted institution that oppresses women and puts them under men's control. The analysis reveals that despite the passage of time marriage is still a more ceremonially conventional practice firmly in a patriarchal grip. Through this marriage, the couple would be able to add a new responsibility, a very important one,

to their other responsibilities. But it is an end for many of the Victorian women or even today's women. Bronte, Divakaruni, and Seth realize that marriage is the only socially and morally acceptable existence for most women.

Bronte, Divakaruni, and Seth warn that viewing marriage as a means for social or economic stability for woman will never ameliorate woman's situation; counterwise, it will be more demeaning like Bertha Mason's, the mother in "The Bats," and Sumita's marriages. Bronte and Divakaruni directly criticize the institution of marriage and prove that education and economic equality is the only way to empower women and liberate her from the patriarchal grip. Seth views marriage as one of compromise, of complementaries, of mutual moral and mental improvement, of mutual affection. It should not deprive the woman of her individuality. As it has been shown, the meaning of marriage differs in accordance with each authoress due to the differences of their personalities, thinking, and environment. Those three authors proved that women of any century or continent want self-respect, equality, dignity and freedom.

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