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The Word Love

The story of, “The Word Love” by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a third-person narrative about a young Indian woman dealing with the tear between the love of the life she wants to live and the love of her intolerant abusing mother towards such a lifestyle. After having been subjected to such an atrocious relationship for so long, she has developed several methods indicative of mental instability to cope with the trauma, which is only truly solved by the water washing away that life. The narrator in “The Word Love” is cleansed by the rain of their cognitively unstable after having suffered from an abusive, captive, parental relationship with their mother as demonstrated by; The narrator stressing out over otherwise normal behavior, the narrator’s mother wanting them close and is unwilling to let them have their own life, the mother not tolerating the narrator’s independence, and the narrator being prepared to end their life in response to rejection from their mother.

Chitra Divakaruni has a history of empowering writing, and she has close associations with activist organizations. Chitra has been an activist against domestic violence, especially since she helped found Maitri which assists said survivors, which shows her understanding problematic relationships. Her works of writing about such subject have received critical acclaim, including “The Word Love” which was of such high regard in her understanding of the topic that it was made into an award-winning movie. As stated, “She serves on the Advisory Board of Maitri in the San Francisco Bay Area and of Daya in Houston, both organizations that help survivors of domestic abuse and trafficking” proving Chitra’s intimate knowledge with Indian culture allows her to describe the details of someone not fitting into that culture and the conflicts that can arise (CHITRA par12).

The narrator stresses over normal behavior. The narrator tries to immediately convince their lover of their mother’s good intentions rather than accept the criticism. When Rex states, “You’re acting like I was some kind of criminal” the treatment of Rex indicates that they feel guilty themselves for what is normal behavior (LOVE pg58 par1). The narrator ponders, “…they seemed to be telling you something. If only you could decipher it.” meaning the book titles they read are trying to tell them about their lack of control, stress boiling over, and the shock their mother will feel (LOVE pg58 para2). Her stress is obvious to me, and on a subconscious level it is to herself as well and the reasoning behind this stress is her mother’s overbearing nature.

The narrator’s mother wants them close and is unwilling to let them have their own life. The mother speaks of arranging the marriage for cousin Leela, showing the controlling life back home. The mother queries, “How long before the Ph.D and you come home for good?” the mother has already made the presumption that the narrator wishes to return home after college, demonstrating the way the mother believe that decisions should be made (LOVE pg60 par2). The narrator muses, “You listen, holding on to the rounded *o*’s, the long liquid *e*’s, the *s*’s that brush against your face as soft as night kisses” this articulates narrator’s inner voice is attempting to convince them of their mother’s good intentions with pathos, despite the information that is the demanding nature they are trying to get away from with their new life (LOVE pg60 par2). The narrator’s anguish is shown by the way they act around their mother, but the history of misdeeds will show her true colors even with the narrator’s inner monologue attempting to dissuade.

The mother will not tolerate the narrator’s independence. Her will is shown to be absolute, as the narrator is harshly punished as a child for the simplest infractions, which demonstrates the abusive relationship and its consequences. “Better no daughter than a disobedient one, a shame to the family” (LOVE pg62 par1). The mother was ready to banish their daughter for seeing a movie, as the mother deemed such things as frivolous and dictates other’s lives by her views, even to allow her to suffer injury from exposure to the cold. I find it ironic that she uses the word ‘Family’ when it is only her will that is being defied here. This is the nature of the abuser in a relationship, in that they are the one that is believed to really have suffered despite whatever actions they take. The past actions of the mother have shown their brutality, and it is now that the narrator will show what damage results from such trauma.

The narrator is prepared to end their life in response to rejection from their mother. This is erratic and unstable behavior on the narrator’s part at the admitted fault of the narrator’s mother and the relationship they held. The narrator grimly thinks, “…which ones were the sleeping pills. No matter. You can take them all, if that’s what you decide to do.” emanating delusions from their inner monologue showing just how far they have fallen mentally in the wake of the mother’s complete rejection of their daughter (LOVE pg70 par1). I note the way her first thought is to use the sleeping pills, as if what has happened to her is a nightmare that she is attempting to escape from into a better dream. This shows the mental scarring that the mother has done to the narrator and the potential outcome if they never overcome it. This consideration, and furthermore any consideration of suicide, is indicative of someone that is mentally unwell, and the perpetrator is obvious to me, though there are holes in this analysis.

Some might criticize that it was the lack of support from the narrator’s significant other that led them down this road and that it is he who she is symbolically washing away. When Rex claims, “It was never me, was it? Never love. It was always you and her, her and you.” potentially showing his misunderstanding of the relationship that she holds with her mother, or his outright refusal to acknowledge her mother’s importance. He says that it wasn’t ‘me’, presumably that he wasn’t the focus of her love, which itself could be Rex showing a selfish undercurrent that would coincide with the narrator’s frequent mentions of his obtuse behavior towards her mother. While he is dismissive of the importance of the narrator’s mother, his demeanor and consistent support of the narrator isn’t that of a self-absorbed person trying to get what they want, where they would naturally leave at any sign of adversity. Rex even speaks at length of his intentions to help her with what is afflicting her, and that the only thing stopping him is his lack of knowledge at how to help her (LOVE pg69 par2). This cannot be from recent relational stress with a lover, but from deep-seeded trauma from someone the narrator was close to, someone that abandoned them and brought them such mental anguish.

In conclusion, the narrator is clearly scarred by the trauma they suffered at the hands of the only person in their early life, which has only resulted in deeper problems later in their adult life, something that happens all too often in the world as many of us already know that the narrator is thankfully able to resolve during their cleansing walk. This interpretation does rely on knowledge of abuse victims, something that does have patterns to support it factually, but can differ wildly from case to case. If you’ve heard of abuse stories, or know of someone who has suffered such tragedies, it can be asserted that you might see the similar actions and reactions here.

Works Cited

CHITRA. <https://www.chitradivakaruni.com> *SquareSpace*

LOVE. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. 1st Ed. Anchor Books 1995, Random House Inc. New York.