



## Revitalizing the Psyche : A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

### KEYWORDS

feminism, culture, patriarchy, survival

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### ABSTRACT

*The image of women in Indian novels has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing woman toward conflicted female characters searching for identity and survival. They are no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has a memorable place in Indian literature. She is able to divert the reader's focus from the clichés through the beauty of her writing. The heroines in the works of Divakaruni reflect the conflict and tensions arising out of the attempt to negotiate between traditions and the desire to lead a new life. The analysis focuses on concepts such as silence, violence, cultural conflicts and also examines the complex issue of identity and its importance in women's lives.*

Literature has always reflected the realism, dealt with the social predicaments and thus treated the aridity of lives. Women are an integral part of human civilization, but they are regarded subordinate to men. Traditionally, a good woman is always synonymous with good wife and a good wife must be faithful and virtuous. Indian woman whose symbol has been that of silent-sufferer and who is an upholder of Indian culture has been one of the major themes of Indian English writers. However, one such important dimension that needs contemplation is the issue of women marginality and their status in the contemporary society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has distinguished herself as the ground-breaking novelists in the genre of the South Asian diasporic literature. The questioning tone and the challenging note found in the works of Divakaruni are more assertive about women's identity and freedom. She is truly outstanding among few writers who excel in portraying the Indian culture and the lives of Indian women. She has recognized the strength of mind and potential of the twenty first century women who gain independence and autonomy leading the assertion of the self. Her works present the psychological aspects of the inner conflicts experienced by women in the patriarchal society. Viewed from a perspective, her novels provide vital insights into the nature of gender, women and patriarchy. Her novels outline the lives of women engaged in a quest for values.

Divakaruni's fundamental preoccupation in her novel *Sister of My Heart* is to create a female universe out of the conventional male world. She verifies the fact that women as writers of fiction and as characters in fiction have acquired a new phase. In this novel, one witnesses how the two mothers cope up with widowhood and sacrifice their own needs and desires for the sake of their daughters. Anju and Sudha in turn experience upheavals in their lives which make them more like the post feminist women who are powerful and not influenced by emotional judgments alone. They derive strength from their inner resources. In the words of Pandey, "women remains the still centre like a centre in a potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration (26). The female protagonists in this novel realize their own identity as new women.

The new woman is new in the sense that she tries to shake off the irrational and traditional ties. She is represented by the novelist as a comparatively more rational creature, with a better balance between reason and emotion. She is no more a blind follower of traditional beliefs. She questions her surrounding as well as her existence. When Anju sees her aunt Abha Pishi not participating on feast days, she questions her aunt, and says, "I tell her that's rubbish" (10). Thus Anju questions the pathetic

condition of her widow aunt and she could not accept the traditional rules and regulations. This questioning is the result of her eagerness to know more about herself which leads to the emergence of a new woman. As the woman could not avail herself of any respectable position even in a long period, she thinks of a change, betterment in her lot, something remarkable to achieve.

The new woman is also the new mother. She knows about the emotional, psychological, mental and physical needs of a child. When Sudha's mother-in-law comes to know that the unborn baby is female, she forces Sudha to abort the baby. But Sudha does not want to kill her unborn daughter, instead, she runs away from her married home. Her husband also does not protest his mother. After some days a peon delivers divorce papers to Sudha's house. She becomes brave and courageous. She says, "He knows where I am, I say finally. If he wants us, he can get in touch with us easily enough. And if he doesn't want her - I touch my stomach- then I'm not for him either" (247). Thus Sudha becomes mentally strong and ready to face all the impediments. According to Sudha, her unborn daughter would help her get an identity.

When Sudha gets the divorce paper her mother feels sad and there is no one to comfort Sudha. But Pishi, the aunt, comes to rescue her. When Sudha's mother Nalini says "What shameful name will they call your child?" (247), Pishi opposes the words of Nalini and says, "Why should she care anymore what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole lifetime of being afraid what society might think? I spit of this society which says it's fine to kill a baby girl in her mother's womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child" (247). Thus, Pishi becomes mentally strong and does not want Sudha to suffer like her.

Hesitation and submissiveness regarded as female virtues are not more to be found in the new women. The struggle of the women is directed at denouncing the age old gender difference entrenched in patriarchy, for her privilege and rights as a human being and seek herself definition. Drabble, when asked about the limitation and freedom of woman points out that "that whole human species is confronted with problems of limitations, not only the women" (138). She believes that women folk long for spiritual satisfaction and fulfillment and the gap between what they are seeking and what they find is great. No doubt, Divakaruni's female characters seek female self-definition but the search for itself does not rely much on their gender, as on a life that is absurd and chaotic, contradictory as well as shifting. This realization comes to them through life which contains gaps between what one gets and what one really wants. The protagonists of Divakaruni discover their selves at various situations.

From the beginning there are hints about how the protagonist's future will diverge. The girls speak the chapters alternately, so that one can see life through the eyes of each of them at eight years old, then at twelve, then as convent school girls, and finally as married women. In this phase, one braves the new world and the other in the house of husband for whom she learns to have affection but not love. The key story is that of courageous Rani of Jhansi, whom Sudha makes as her model. Sudha feels, "Bless me that I have the courage to go into battle when necessary, no matter how bleak the situation" (249). Sudha takes Rani of Jhansi as her role model and decides to lead a life of valiant.

The modern woman appears to be freer. The traditional woman is uneducated and easily ruled by her father, husband, brother or son. But the modern woman is not so. She is educated and has the ability to understand things. When the transformed woman revolt against the existing patriarchal system, men cannot resist it. Sometimes the woman thinks in terms of separation. Gardiner remarks, "The post independent period witnesses a welcome change in the growth of woman from being a docile, domestic, passive species to a reasonable, analyzing, educated individual who can take independent decisions not only for herself, but also for others" (42). The modern woman is different from her traditional counter-part because she is aware of herself and also economically independent.

One day Ashok, the former lover of Sudha comes to her house. She wonders at the fact that the mothers have allowed him into the house. He exposes his wish to marry her. Sudha also accepts to marry him. The mothers do not like Sudha to stay out late even though Sudha and Ashok's wedding is merely a matter of time. On their way home, Ashok talks about her unborn baby, "I don't think I can welcome your daughter as fully as she deserves" (263). By hearing this, Sudha decides not to marry Ashok. Her mother is absolutely against her in turning Ashok down and says they would take care of their granddaughter. Sudha does not accept it and says, "But can even three grandmothers take a mother's place? (270). She does not want to sacrifice her daughter for the sake of her life. She explains:

I want the man who is to be my husband to love my daughter unconditionally. Perhaps it is too much to ask. But having settled for too little once, I'm not willing to do it again. Dayita's my daughter. She needs me. How will I face her later when she asks me why I abandoned her for the sake of my own pleasure? "Listen to her" my mother protests. "Is it abandoning the child to leave her with three living grandmothers?" (271)

Sudha is not ready to give up her daughter and she finds happiness and a new life in her own daughter. So she rejects Ashok's proposal. This is the symbol of Sudha's new identity.

The conventional Indian hierarchization placed women in a subservient position. However, the process in reality has been a slow and painful one for women since they have had to overcome social opinion and orthodoxy on the one hand and personal hesitation and insecurities on the other. The process of self awareness, assertion and the search for identity lead an individual to realize their own identity. Marriage, an important social institution, is meant, in practice, to provide security to the couple especially the women. No doubt arranged marriage, which is the most accepted from in India, provides the sense of security to a women, but it is in no, an assurance of happiness. However, Anju feels happy that an arranged marriage has saved her from the clutches of traditional boundaries.

Despite the innumerable headaches that an American lifestyle entails, Divakaruni's characters seem convinced about its ultimate superiority. Anju decides to invite Sudha to America. Sudha wants to leave for America with her fatherless, newborn daughter in search of a respectable life for both because, "for America was full of mothers like me who have decided that living alone was better than living with wrong man" (272). By making Sudha leave India for America, instead of staying back

and struggling for change at home, the novelist makes an escapist of her and makes Indian society seem hopeless irredeemable. Sudha decides to go America for the sake of Anju's health and she thinks, in America, she can lead an independent life. Sudha says:

Perhaps I am distracted by the letter I received from Anju yesterday. In the letter Anju wrote she wants us to come to America. America had its own problems, she said, but at least it would give me advantage of anonymity. No one in America would care that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, give Dayita everything she needed... when she wrote she was working secretly, to save money for my ticket, I understood that too. Sunil did not want me in America. (272)

Sudha's westward move to solve problems generated at home also makes her more responsive to the calls of liberalist western, the agendas and needs of which may not necessarily be the same as those of Indian feminism.

This change is seen in Sudha's attitude and in her actions. During their childhood the girls used to enact the fairy tales that Pishi used to tell them. Sudha always plays the princess in danger and Anju the prince who rescues her. But now Sudha decides that she should do something to protect her baby. She transforms herself, from the princess in the place of snakes to the queen of swords. The rejection of male allotted stereotypical roles is complete. Khan points out, "Sudha's journey to America is really the beginning of her journey to a new world of women" (104). Divakaruni conceives that the Indian women's immigration to the US is a journey from oppressed and depressed conditions to freedom and discovery of the self with the inspiration of western influence.

The mothers also enter this new world of women. This is symbolically shown when they sell their dilapidated, ancestral house and move to a new flat. The change in them after they move to their new home is amazing. Along with the old house, "the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition" (296). The mothers begin to lead a fulfilling life with a social purpose. They listen to the music that they like and take walks where they please. They no longer worry about the social stigma attached to a divorce and keep Sudha with them. They lovingly take care of her daughter. The final gesture of the rejection of patriarchal norms and the acceptance of the rules of the new female universe is the gifting of the ruby left to them by Sudha's father to Dayita, Sudha's daughter.

Another characteristic feature of the new woman distinguishing her from her traditional counterpart is that she realizes the futility of her high status and position. The modern woman is more rational than emotional. Women in the past had a blind faith in the customs, traditions and superstitions but the new woman questions their rationality. Whatever the difficulties, economic independence does give some strength to the new woman. She is comparatively more rational creature with a better balance between reason and emotion. Pandey comments, "She does not want to be a blind imitator and believer. The questioning is the result of her eagerness to know more about herself (157). Indeed this is a very positive sign because if there is a question, its answer is sought out sooner or later. Divakaruni works focus on the same search for self expression and identity in the emerging class of the new woman. The only difference is that her heroines are mostly middle class women.

Sudha is a good storyteller. In her story, the queen holds her daughter with one hand and with the other she grasps the rainbow. Her sister pulls her across the ocean, over the gaping jaws of sea monsters to safety. This myth symbolizes the new feminine world that Divakaruni envisages. It is a world across the rainbow where women rescue other women. Here rainbow is a conventional symbol of hope. Sudha discovers her identity in the form of rainbow. Like the queen, Sudha also enters into a new life in a new land. She discovers her identity along with her

loving daughter Dayita.

In *Sister of my Heart*, Divakaruni's heroines belong to the new type of women and are different from the old one. They all give up the old values and enter into the new world of their own. The women characters realize their identity and decide to live a life of their own. These characters have undergone psychological transformation and they achieved things boldly. Divakaruni's novel presents women characters who are critically aware of their marginalized roles in conventions, social structures and want to attain selfhood by transcending them.

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