

Gender Equality: The Hardest Battle In Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart

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Abstract- *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indo-American writer and an admittedly feminist writer of Indian Diaspora in the US, outshines in probing the unplumbed depths of women's sensibility. Our feminist characters face problems in the patriarchal society for going against tide or doing what appears right to them, but come out with flying colors because all the females are united in their strife and find solutions being in the set boundaries of the society and yet penetrating the traditional rules that stand in the way of progressive thinking and moving fast in the new century. This paper intends to examine the dynamics of female relationship and the profundity of the various female draws in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart. Our findings of the paper will inevitably reveal of how the characters are agitator from the point of view of feminist's theories.*

Keywords- Patriarchy, Feminism, Reformist, Boundaries.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the expert and zealous voices of the diasporic writers. In most of her novels psychology, mythology and folklore are interconnected which reflects her rootedness to the culture and traditions of her inherent land. Her characters are simple next door women who balance family and through them she is able to explore the issues that are women centric like identity, fidelity, independence tradition. She entangles diaspora and feminist experiences that are narrow in focus and expansive in scope.

The novel, *Sister of My Heart* surrounds the story of love and friendship between Sudha and Anju who were born on the day their fathers, Gopal and Bijoy died on a ruby hunting journey. The story reported by Sudha and Anju emphasizes on the relationship between two cousins who share their desires of mothers who embrace traditional Indian culture and in contrast the young girls who try to adopt the Western philosophies of life. It is a story described by both the women protagonists, sun burnt in emotions and immersed in dollops of cultural dissimilarities that provides the much interesting angle to the work.

The novel opens with a tragic establishment of Chatterjee family already disposed of its financial and patriarchal head and its former financial status. As the three widows (Pishi Ma, the cousins' paternal aunt, and their mothers) and two young girls (Anju and Sudha) of this family ramble their way through the drama of life at different periods of life: childhood, teenage, marriage, motherhood, divorce and widowhood. Each phase brings into focus a certain remarkable aspect of the upper-class Bengali culture and tradition, which is unforgettable from the unique feminine and diasporic perception of the author.

The journey from riches to a lower middle class family takes the reader to the puzzle of emotions and a heart touching story of the women involved in it. In *Sister of my Heart* the Indian way of finding a solution to oppression is expressed. This novel also portrays a woman's world of middle-class urban women, confined to houses in which their domain is strictly determined but does not stop them to reach out to each other in sisterhood. Sisterhood helps them in achieving greater success than the men who roam the outside and bigger world. Rendered in sensual and poetic language, the story primarily weaves around the magnetic love that pulls these two women together.

II. DISCUSSION

Female bonding is viewed, by feminists, as a form of empowerment that helps women face various dares. Louise Bernikow senses that it is a strong sense of 'oneness' that lies at the base of female friendship, and it is this very sense of unity that advocates empowerment:

Distinguishing between female and male friendships Bernikow added asserts that while the former is an intimate 'eye to eye' relationship, the latter tends to be more influential where the eyes are 'fixed not on each other but what is out there'. Their eyes are 'like the eyes of men marching to war . . . they are shoulder to shoulder'. (119)

The reason why women bond with each other has been variously interpreted. Elizabeth Abel acknowledges the need for communality as opposed to complementarity that lies

at the core of such bonds. She notes that, “Serious novels that focus on the actual friendships of women, however, suggest that identification replaces complementarity...” (415)

Aabel shares Nancy Chodorov’s analysis that it is the desire for identification in the premedical period that automatically encourages female compliments in the oedipal chapter. This is an unconscious psychomatic progression that lures women together, and they seek unity rather than complementarity in their friends. Female intimacy ascends out of the desire to find one’s reflected self in the other. Anais Nin explains this phenomenon in her diary: ‘The love between women is a refuge and an escape into harmony and narcissism in place of conflict..... It is in a way, self-love. I love June because she is the woman I would like to be’.

Contrarily complementarity entails a shared identity where two opposing selves merge to form a single whole. The phenomenon of female complementarity can be best explained by borrowing Cicero’s words: “as almost to create one person out of two” (111). Cicero’s description of friendship very accurately characterizes the dynamics of complementary female friendship. Some scholars have deciphered an underlying need for complementarity in homosocial bonds.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a postcolonial writer of Indian origin also chooses sisterhood and female bonding as one of her themes. She herself confirms it when she says in an essay for *Bold Type*, “. . . I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers.”(260). In doing so she identifies herself with the occidental rather than with the oriental. Her fiction relates to the tradition of the west, since Indian writers from Anita Desai to Arundhati Roy have ignored sisterhood in their focus on feminine issues. Moreover, her work with MAITRI, a helpline for abused South Asian women immigrants in the US, has provided the necessary impetus for her inevitable choice of the theme of sisterhood. *Sister of my Heart*, Chitra’s second novel is as much about Indian culture reflected through traditions, dress, food habits, beliefs and myths as about sisterhood in countering the phallogocentric aspects of the basics of Indian culture. The novelist explores female bonding both in its social and psychological context. She foregrounds a variety of relationships including mother-daughter bonding, sibling intimacy and the association between widowed mothers in the narrative.

The primary focus of the novel is on sisterhood between Anju and Sudha, who are actually distant cousins and who provide support and healing to each other in times of

crisis. *Sunday Times* (London) praises the novel as portraying a touching relationship of enduring love between two women. Divakaruni makes the narrative voice shift between Sudha and Anju alternatively giving us a glimpse of the conscious and unconscious workings of their mind. There is no denying the fact that this strategic use of the narrative perspective promotes a better understanding of the inseparable bond of the sisters. Sisterhood to them is not just a matter of ties of blood but of love. In *Feminist Theory* Bell Hooks remarks on female bonding: “We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood” (63).

Hooks encourages a woman to believe in female friendship and understand its significance and the well-being it can provide them. Anju and Sudha witness to hook’s philosophy since they share joys and sorrows, and they not only sympathize with each other, they also empathize. They carry this bonding well into their womanhood in spite of their mothers failing to comprehend it. In Divakaruni’s fiction sisterhood is always a deeply rooted, instinctual relationship that brings together women who are very different from one another in every way. Anju and Sudha Chatterjee are very different in appearance, temperament and achievements, and grow up together under similar, yet very different conditions. Their fathers, died together in the same accident. Anju’s father was the master of the house, and her mother from an equally aristocratic family, Sudha’s father was a poor relation, her mother’s background nondescript, lower middle-class. This living together brings about very interesting turns in the story, develops the characters, gives them inner strength and multiple hues and through myriad twists and turns slithers through the lanes of strong characterization and feminine strength to an end which leaves us craving for more as the after taste of the last scene lingers for a long time in our memories. The girls do everything together and love one another fiercely, demanding to be known not just as sisters but as twins, not just because they were born on the same day: Sisterhood to them is not just a matter of ties of blood but of love. As Anju tells Sudha, "I would love you because you love me. I would love you because no-one else knows us like we know each other" (61).

Sudha and Anju, live in a patriarchal home where there is absolutely no male control. The only male alive in the family is disguised as Singhji, the driver who is ugly, turbaned and rarely speaks. What was originally conceived of as a restrictive boundary for the women is recreated into a female universe. The rules that are upheld in this world are laid down by the patriarchal society. The women live alone but yet governed by the rules of the male dominated society. They are scared bringing up the two daughters and hence bind them with rules and laws, never allow the girls to move out except

to the school under the supervision of Ramur Ma, the old devoted but sharp tongued maid. The first act of their disobedience is nipped in the bud by Sudha's mother to marry her off without any delay. Anju's mother is a man of the house, as she financially and mentally supports the family, but yet is weak when it comes to go against the rules of the society and becomes a mute spectator when Sudha's mother decides against her liking to get her married off. Here, the women though liberated in them, yet bound themselves in pretext of bondages set by the male dominated society. Sudha, after marriage is never questioned by her husband and even is given space of her own to take time to nod to consummate the marriage, is yet not liberated. Her mother-in-law rules her household and keeps strict vigil under the pretext of traditions and culture and also goes to the length of daring to ask her daughter-in-law to go for an abortion as the unborn child is detected to be a girl. This wish to have a male grandchild gives the whole story a new unpredictable turn, as Sudha takes cudgels against this and starts a complete three sixty degree turn for the Chatterjee family. It is only when she dares to take a step and leave behind her marital bliss (?) that the women characters of Divakaruni become shining shields in the story.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a feminist to the core who addresses women's issues and their lives with razor sharp preciseness. Her feminism is reformist in nature. Her female characters diagnose the spirit of their country and try to respect it in all their accomplishments and endeavors. The characters are accommodating, loving, supportive and protective while at the same time assertive of their rights whenever the situation demands for it. Sudha who tried to accommodate in her marital home till she could take it and perform all the rituals and traditions according to her mother-in-law's wishes to the extent of undergoing puja in a remote temple and also taking a test to establish her capacity to bear children. Anju, on the other hand tried to help her cousin by working long hours without her husband's consent but later on regrets this and takes his consent for inviting Sudha to California. The accommodating nature of Anju is yet again emphasized when she shifts to California, an unknown country, but she adjusts to the new culture and environment and not only this she finds positive points in the cultural heritage of the new country. "No one in America would care that I was divorced. I could I design a new life, earn my own living, give Dayita everything she needed."(294)

Sudha though runs away from her family but tries her best to adjust with Ashok and only decides to leave him when he demands to keep her daughter away from her. Among other things Pishi believed in the myth of Bidhata Purush. It is a dominant myth in the novel

In Hindu mythology Bidhata Purush is the god of Fate, who writes the child's future on its forehead on the sixth day after its birth. But Anju always scoffed at such ideas, dismissing them as nonsense. She firmly believes that it were the servants who sneaked in at night to eat up the sweets. On the contrary Aunt Pishi believes that as Anju and Sudha were unlucky siblings born on the ill-fated day of their father's death, Bidhata Purush did not care to come at all. The aunt believes that human life is pre-destined and humans are helpless creatures. Sudha who conforms to the patriarchal stereotype of being passive and submissive sees in her imagination the god of Fate foretelling 'happiness' for Anju and 'sorrow' for Sudha. It is only later in the novel that the belief in the myth is shattered as both Sudha and Aunt Pishi transform into new beings.

Second book titled *The Queen of Swords*, is not a traditional fairy tale. In this book, Sudha and Anju though in different ways draw their sword to face the society, their mothers and other relations. This new myth symbolises the new feminine world that Divakaruni envisages. It is a world across the rainbow (ironically a conventional symbol of hope) where women rescue other women and do not wait helplessly for the men and it transcends boundaries, as Anju also decides to work without depending on the financial dependence of her husband to arrange for the tickets of her soul sister Sudha. This change is seen not only in the story that Sudha narrates but also in her attitude and her actions. But, in *Queen of Swords* there is a transition-transition of princess to queen, the transition of innocent girlhood to maturity of a woman, transition of fates, transition from silently bearing everything to standing up for what is right, transition from financial dependence to financial independence. Sudha, leaves her husband's home and returns to her parental home in Calcutta to protect her baby. She leaves with her jewelers, possibly "gifted" by her parents during the marriage, to set up her own economic unit within which she can re-formulate her own identity. "I have five hundred rupees. I took them from Ramesh's desk drawer. And all my jewellery that wasn't in the safe. Just in case" (261).

Divakaruni succeeds in bringing her characters from the womb of despair and dependence to standing on their own feet. Nalini, the mother of the more beautiful Sudha, primarily comes across as a woman doubly handicapped in attitude, first by a patriarchal tradition, and second, by the modern need for reinforcing identities. She does not hesitate to sacrifice her own daughter's happiness, or even her first granddaughter's life, when it comes to saving face in her honour-conscious, prestige - and scandal -obsessed society. In spite of her mother's lamentations, she wipes off the sindur powder and

wedding bracelets and accepts the divorce proceedings sent by the Sanyals.

The solace faced by Sudha in the novel is similar to the postmodern woman faced by all souls stuck between the crossroads of tradition and modernity. When certain aspect of conventional pattern of life become morbid and tormenting, one wishes to tear apart all boundaries and escape into a world where everything is replete with novelty, glory and adventure.

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. 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 divorcee and keep Sudha with them. They lovingly take care of her daughter. The final gesture of the breaking 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. The mothers have joined book societies and knitting classes. They go for walks around Victoria Memorial. They volunteer at Mother Teresa's Shishu Bhavan and - chaperoned by an insistent Singhji-attend all-night classical music concerts from which they return, cheeks flushed with the early morning cold, humming a song in the bhairav raga. They take day trips to Dakshineswar and bathe in the Ganges - - Already they are talking of a trip to Darjeeling in the summer. (296)

Divakaruni establishes the gender norms of an Indian (Bengali) patriarchal society where gender discrimination is deep rooted and has not changed much in this technologically driven century.

Gauri, the financial head of the family and the mother of Anjali is a docile but yet firm in her ways. She stands brave and firm inspite of the adversity. She is the one who decides to get the girls get best of education despite her meager income. Gauri never shows her anguish over different circumstances and is in under total control of any and every situation.

Nalini, the wife of Gopal who also dies in a wild goose chase is complete opposite to Gauri. She cries and brings the house down at any given chance. Though she knows very well that she has no claim in the house behaves like the owner of the house. She is in vain and keeps herself busy with the ladies gossiping and other mundane things. Traditions are more important to her as is seen when Nalini

runs away from the clutches of her marriage instead of supporting her. She scolds her and asks her to get back to her marital home and get an abortion done.

Sudha and Anju's mother in-law's though are minor character have a great effect on the whole story. Sudha's mother-in-law introduced as Mrs.Sanyal, is a strict lady, who has her way in her household and runs the whole show, all others are mere puppets in her hand. She has very orthodox beliefs of what should be done. She is always in competition with the other ladies in her relatives and wants to go ahead of them. On the other hand Sunil's mother as she is called is very quiet and humble before her husband who is tyrannical and has an upper hand with everything. He is the one who even decides what should be cooked and what should not. She is not even allowed to take even the minor decisions of the household. Sunil's mother becomes timid in the presence of Sunil's father. This phenomenon is well explained by psycho analyst Jean Baker Miller

Sister of My Heart is a kind of female saga. It is a genre which emphasizes on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. The novel expresses the readers about the coming of age; a story in which the protagonist undergoes growth throughout the entire narrative, generally starting off by being removed or chased from their home. Their growth is often inhibited by obstruction of their desires by other characters. Chitra Banerjee attempts to take her readers into the mind of the protagonist who put some light on her condition and all unattached strings are tangled at the end.

III. CONCLUSION

The female characters at a deeper level show a conflict between tradition and modernity. The trials and tribulations and the struggle to maintain the modern values and to carve out an identity of their own in the new and ostensibly stifling environment of her protagonists makes them a feminist. Their protagonists seek to synthesize traditions with the modern values which are the needs of the hour. They know how difficult it is to bring in new ideas in this patriarchal set up where the authority emanates from the eldest male in the family. To an extent they reconcile themselves to the rigidity of traditions but with reservations and carve out their own identity as 'new women' living within the ambit of tradition. They neither shatter the ancestral dignity nor give up essentials of modernity. They keep some of them in postponed animation and delay for the right time to bring about the change in the role of the women and are successful in relaxing the firmness of some duties. They delicately change their instant environment and the people

concerned. They are both conformist and nonconformist. They adapt to the modern values of education and marriage. But they appear non-conformist to the age long declining traditions. 'Feminism' is an ideological locus which emphasizes the equality of gender and advocates extension of potential of women, so that institutionally and culturally produced limitations do not obstruct the process and pattern of enhancement of women. Thus, to become a feminist means to be prepared for a profound personal transformation. (Tandon28) Pishi ma, Nalini, Gauri transform themselves from matriarch to those who support Sudha unconditionally and give her all the support needed in all forms. These personal transformations of womenfolk's characters take the conclusion of the plot to an ending which is good and the best for everybody.

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