

## CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART* – A WOMAN'S CULTURAL TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

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## **Abstract**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer whose novels depict not just the cross-cultural conflicts but also the emergence of a new class of women who stand apart in fighting against the oppressive Indian tradition and social dogmas humiliating women. The latter theme is the premise of the novel *Sister of My Heart*. Her meticulous efforts spread before the readers the acute sufferings of women in a male chauvinistic and socially regressive society. In an era with its strong revolutionary ideas uplifting the status of women, the novelist attempts to showcase how women disentangle themselves from the clutches of the constricting norms. This paper envisages to project a dimensional approach in exposing the two generations of women who, in their ground-breaking conduct, dislodge the misguided and belittling familial and social life. In the process, two significant aspects stand out prominently. The elder women as mothers and the younger ones as sisters bond so resourcefully that their lives metamorphose into a rationally different one for the better.

Key Words: Diaspora, Cultural Conflicts, Male chauvinistic, Psyche of women, Social and Cultural Ethos, Identity and Revolution.

Sister of My Heart, is on the travails of the multicultural environment. Its material is drawn from the personal experiences of the novelist, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni is a woman diasporic writer who delves deep into the psyche of women. Though women are looked down as weaker sex and inequitable to men in facing the traumas or challenges, they have their own of establishing their strength. Simply said, men yield themselves for a thorough breakdown or analysis whereas women just merely remain to be admired. As a matter of fact, a woman's mind endures multiple impacts in her multiple roles at multiple levels in multiple societies. The complex and enigmatic interchanges and matches and mismatches of ideas dislodge the hitherto strongly held concepts and expose the reality of sorts in public domain. In order to understand this stand, the imports of the 'psyche' of a human being are to be perceived in its diverse levels – psychic, mental and emotional. As Iris Ramnani identifies in her study, "many literary writings focus on the assessment of Indian women's psyche and reveal that women are tormented by their thoughts and circumstances and hence their oppression is rather a psychological phenomenon". (43) But certain women stubbornly disentangle themselves from their constricting situations and carve a

path of their own much better than their earlier dismal conditions. Tandon observes that the writers in the Indian English literary scenario tend to "study female psyche as an effort to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them; it is also an attempt to reinterpret their status in the world...A woman's experience of life as a mewoman mber of the gender biased society formulating her psyche".(172)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's diasporic sense and sensibility are rather perfectly sophisticated and contemporary. This is because, as a diasporic writer, she sees the world around her with a distinct and exceptional perception. In a way, her enquiry becomes unique altogether dissimilar in kind and intensity. The women characters of her novel, Sister of My Heart, are taken up to analyse her projection of women's psyche. This demands a look into the different perspectives of her women including their complex and composite functions and responsibilities. To begin with, their role as mothers is taken up for scrutiny. The story revolves around two women, Anjali and Basudha. In patterning their lives, Divakaruni does not merely rest with the biological or psychological bond between the two individual identities but goes far beyond in unravelling the mysteries of the psychic stances of the inner recesses of women in general in their actions and interactions in a tradition bound society. The society is patriarchal in pattern which puts shackles on women in the form of dictates of men, which in most cases seem illogical, arrogant, adamant and impractical, restricting even their thoughts and wishes. Secondly, they have to submit themselves to the mad social standards and customs which are out of tune with the swift changing realities of the global standards of living. These impact their free thinking and spontaneous adaptations to the emerging trends and put them as servile and subservient to men's whims and fancies. "In her precise and scholarly description of the contemporary Indian social scenario, Chitra has given expression to the most recent problems as feminism, isolation, alienation, female infanticide, identity crisis or an individual struggling to be oneself". (44)

Three women as mothers stand out conspicuously in this novel – Nalini, Gouri and Pishi. Of course, this inventory includes two cousins also, Anju and Sudha, who need the scrutiny since they are the children brought up by these mothers and on whom they shower their influences. Incidentally their counterparts, fathers, are nowhere to be found.

Conceivably, it would not be out of sorts to look into the basic make up of these three mothers before their outstanding characteristics are analysed. Gauri Ma could be first in the line. She is rather the archetypal mother with the conventional trait, the 'aura of silence,' enveloping her, the characteristic emblem of a traditional Indian woman. This silence is so much a part of her that even the mortal blow of the death of her husband does not shake her equilibrium. She does not desert other women, Pishi and Nalini, who, by the way, are her husband's relatives and allows them to stay put with her. Despite her struggling existence, she has never shirked in her duties and responsibilities towards anyone in the household. Of course, her silence symbolizes her endurance. Her every move is strongly tinged with logic, reason and precision. It is really poignant that she confines the agony of her husband's death within and distressingly enough faces the cruelty of all the ordeals and misfortunes outside bravely. Although Sudha is not her daughter, she never discriminates between her and her own daughter, Anju. Her self-effacement and

earnestness do not reveal the inner turmoil and others fail to fathom the depth of her sorrow and suffering. The suppressed emotions and feelings have a telling effect on her health in course of time and she suffers a massive heart attack. But she refuses to undergo an operation since she has other urgent pending commitments – the performance of the marriage of her daughters. This is how her spirit is built. "A woman rarely talks of herself. In normal circumstances, she talks only of her role, her family and the traditions of society. She may talk of her reactions once in a while, but she keeps her real feelings hidden". (34)

Next comes Abha Pishi who is also a widow at a very tender age of eighteen and has taken refuge in her brother's house. "There's Pishi, our widow aunt who threw herself heart-first into her younger brother's household when she lost her husband at the age of eighteen. Dressed in austere white, her greying hair cut close to her scalp in the orthodox style so that the bristly ends tickle my palms when I run my hands over them, she's the one who makes sure we are suitably dressed for school in the one-inch-below-the-knee uniforms the nuns insist on" (17). There are two dimensions here. On the one hand, she has no sympathetic living in her husband's home. Secondly, she has to redefine her physical appearance curbing her own wishes and urges which is but natural at her age. For instance, she is to wear ever only pure white sarees. Imagine the plight of a young widow who is tortured to the extent of remaining in such a disfigured condition for the rest of her life. When she expresses her desire to pursue her studies by attending school, she encounters stiff resistance from her own father who goes to the extent of beating her every now and then. Such an awful condition drives her out of her father's family and lodges her in her brother's family who is a much better civilized individual. Toril Moi writes: "A woman defines herself through the way in which she lives her embodies situation in the world or in other words, through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her". (Moi, Toril, n.pg.) Pishi possesses atypical inner strength sustaining her momentum in testing times in her life. She showers her affection on Anju and Sudha, which is her solace. They grow up as virtuous individuals with their God-fearing mental makeup and also become competent to face the realities of life including a proper understanding of the working of fate in their lives.

And now the description is devoted to the real mother: "Lastly (I use this word with some guilt), there is my own mother, Nalini. Her skin is still golden, for though she's a widow, my mother is careful to apply turmeric paste to her face each day". (17) Nalini is beautiful and her undoing lies in her ambitious thoughts and behaviour. Her beauty is not in tandem with her intelligence and the lack of the latter mars her life. She is little aware that her extraordinary craving for amassing wealth and hankering after a prosperous living are the causes for the untimely demise of her husband. Sudha has an inherent dislike of her mother on two counts. She knows the bitter truth about her and also the realization that her father's unfortunate and untimely death has been triggered by her mother's avariciousness. It is true that the absence of the male as the head of the family and also the breadwinner has a constricting effect in financial matters. The overall picture presents a solid message. The three widows fulfil their roles as mothers in nurturing the two in the most secure manner without even a semblance of any discrimination or discord. Their dedication and devotion are near perfect. "The women in this novel are portrayed as the cultural

backbone of the family due to their capability providing physical, emotional and cultural vitality to their family even in the absence of their husbands". (45)

From mothers, the spotlight shifts to daughters and their contrasting styles of psychic framework. The familial and the societal environments are not dissimilar in either case. Their cocooned existence leaves nothing to be desired. The dictates of the society are binding and unassailable. They can never leave the precincts of the house without a proper escort. As a matter of fact, they are shepherded by Ramur Ma in their outings, even to school. They are disallowed from making any contact with any male member of the world, the only exception being Singhji, their chauffeur. Their world thus consists of only women. They can never even imagine travelling in a bus. Mothers never sanction them the liberty of wearing gorgeous or bright coloured dresses. The bond between them is so dense that each relies on the other in sharing the joy and the sorrow which makes even the mothers wonder how such a close-knit connection could blossom between the two. Anju's recalcitrant spirit emanates from her love of books and sensible real-world attitude to life but Sudha is an individual who spends her time in day dreams and her fairy tale imagination and spends her time in telling stories. Anju becomes a saviour for Sudha in shielding her from the indiscriminate and foul-mouthed mother of Sudha. As a reciprocal gesture, Sudha aspires that Anju remains happy always. "Although Chitra examines the complexities of the female psyche and the search for self-identity in many of her novels, this novel allows a detailed investigation of what it means to be an Indian mother and how it determines, constraints and enables the making of the female self. Growing up in an Indian society, she undergoes a flux of attitudes and perceptions, roles and locations of her identity". (46)

Anju is married to Sunil Majoomdar, a man of her choice and liking. Regrettably, Sunil is enamoured of the beauty of Sudha and has reserved a place for her in his heart despite his realization that Anju is truly in love with him. Sudha is wedded to Ramesh Sanyal against her wishes. Her reluctance in accepting Ramesh Sanyal has a reason behind it. Sudha has had a love affair with Ashok in her pre-marital days. But she accepts Ramesh Sanyal and leads a life of a well-groomed Indian wife and daughter in law. The life after marriage is thus nothing praiseworthy in both cases. Anju is a witness to the meek and submissive mother-in-law entirely dominated by the aggressive and arrogant husband. His despotic and domineering attitude nauseates her. In the few days in which she has to stay back in her in laws' house, she stands a mute witness to the agonies and distresses of her mother-in-law in the hands of her husband. Her mother-in-law is basically a kind hearted lady but is a dumb victim of the torments of her husband. Anju's father - in- law's dominance is all pervasive. Once when her mother-in-law is unable to reach his level of expectations in the preparation of the side dish, chutney, he becomes furious and in a fit of rage, flings the bowl containing the dish at her: "In one swift motion, Sunil's father flings the bowl across the table at Sunil's mother. There's a fleshy thud, then a metal clatter, as the bowl falls to the floor...What upsets me most is the meekness with which she lowers her eyes and doesn't even wipe her spattered arms...Sunil's mother's lower lip quivers. How humiliating it must be for her to be treated in this way in front of her new daughter - in - law". (182) Myles traces the reason behind this subordination: "What was the reason of her unspoken submission? Is

this only economic dependence which renders her to remain silent? Since the woman is economically dependent on the man her psyche moves towards subservience...The psychic life of women plays a predominant role in their subordination or liberation". (Anita Myles, n.pg.) It remains a big mystery to every individual since her silence is rather a mindboggling trauma of sorts. Nothing can be said to support this stand of submitting to inhuman treatment. Is it the cruel cultural or social tradition most strongly prevalent in the society which binds the women to come out with a semblance of resistance in asserting their rights or their own conviction that they should never put up a struggle against their husbands. Simone de Beauvoir is candid in her expression of the submissive as well as the acquiescent conditions of such women: "They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology.

Throughout history, they have always been subordinated to men and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change – it was not something that occurred ...they have gained only what men been willing to grant, they have taken nothing, they have only received". (13-14) Divakaruni's talent has something to do with the strong representation of the Indian ethos and sensibility of her women in the most gripping manner. Her slant has a peculiar tendency in revealing the constant clashes between the psyche and the outside world. Her conviction is convincing in many ways. She wants that women should be respected, that they should be given choices and allowed the means so that they can follow their choices and dreams. In order to elucidate her point, she introduces a few trivial characters who represent the negative traits in the society and who go to the extent of making the lives of other women miserable. Sarita aunty, the modish friend of Nalini and Tarini and Ramesh's aunt, stand as stark contrast to the women protagonists of the novel in their intimidating and upsetting comments and actions. Divakaruni has a lengthy portrayal of their mean and irresponsible behaviour in the novel: "Ramesh has told me...about aunt Tarini...just a girl herself...had wrinkled her nose and said...Oh my, is this the jewellery your father gave you for your wedding? Why even our maidservants wear better things". (155) Their attitudinal misconduct and strong fixture to the disconcerting social practices nourish the evils of the social norms.

Another dimension which Divakaruni takes in analysing the psyche of women is the gender bias. In point of fact, the novelist brushes aside even the few male characters to one corner without assigning any importance to their potential roles in the course of narration. The case of the fathers of Anju and Sudha, Gopal and Bijoy, stands as a pointer. The other male members of some consequence in the narration are Ashok, Sudha's lover and Sunil and Ramesh, husbands of Anju and Sudha respectively. None of these demands any serious attention. Divakaruni appears to sketch the character of Sudha as the most pathetic individual of the lot. She seems to feel the hollowness of her life very acutely. All her thoughts of a dreamy existence vaporize. When it is found that the child that she bears in her womb is a girl, her mother-in-law makes so many tantrums that the happiness of the motherhood is lost. Divakaruni has a dig at the female foeticide and a strong condemnation of the bias against birth of a female child. Sangeeta Dutta elaborates this attitude in a detailed analysis: "In India, a long history of mother-goddess worship legitimizes woman's glorification/deification as the divine mother, the source of energy, power and fertility

while the same motherhood is an institutionalized form of oppression and subjugation of women. In a patriarchal kinship structure, a woman's status in the household is determined by her ability to produce male issue for her husband's lineage. Her identity revolves around the wife/mother roles beyond which no individuality needs to be established or recognized". (25-43)

Mrs. Sanyal is a single mother "blessed" with three sons but she is blind to the trauma of Sudha in terminating her pregnancy. She worships female deities as harbingers of wealth and progeny, she does not expect the first child in the family to be a female. No convincing answer is available to this mad hankering after a male child as a familial norm and societal expectations. Meena Shirwadkar slams this idea in her own inimitable style: "The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood – that marvellous, unselfish, all suffering and ever forgiving mother. The wife walks behind the shadow. So, in the Indian tradition, the wife led a silent, shadowy existence till she became the mother of a son". (79) Sudha is no longer a part of the traditional clan with complete subservience either to her husband as an obedient wife or to her mother-in-law as a submissive and unquestioning daughter - in - law. Her feelings and emotions overtake the hitherto oppressed womanhood within her: "Perhaps it is because I feel motherhood is my final chance at happiness. Perhaps I believe it will give me back what womanhood had taken away. Or perhaps it is just that lies at the heart of human existence. When we turn away from one desire, we must find another to cleave to with all our strength or else we die". (203) Sudha gets the right counsel in the matter from Anju. She is ready to disorient herself from the antagonistic, forbidding, pitiless and vicious circle of her family and face the world at large alone. She would create a world of her own where she can live in the company of her daughter away from the sticky and monstrous customs and traditions of an oppressive culture. Her husband neither prevents her exit from the family nor advocates the cause of his mother. Perhaps he may have drifted into imagining about his next marriage after securing the divorce from Sudha and begetting a male child to continue the progeny of the family as per the wish of his mother and safeguard the custom of the family and society. It is to be remembered that it is Sudha who becomes the butt of ridicule in the hands of the society rather than Ramesh or his mother and the humiliation envelops only Sudha and not the other two.

Divakaruni questions this through Pishi: "Men whose wives have died could marry as soon as a year had passed. They didn't stop their work or their schooling. No one talked about their bad luck". (269) She even cites a saying supporting this view: "Abhgar goru more, Bhagya baner bau – the unlucky man's cow dies, the lucky man's wife dies". (269) As a widow, she has to undergo humiliation at the hands of her own father which borders on committing suicide: "But when after three years of being a widow, I begged my father to get me a private tutor so I would at least have my studies to occupy me, he slapped me across the face. I considered suicide, oh, yes, many times in those early days". (269) She desists from such a move since the religious dictum states that people committing suicide would be condemned to the abysmal depths of hell". She has no choice in her death also. She enters her brother's house as a last resort: "So I lived in my brother's household. What else I could do? But though he was kind and you too Gauri – I knew it was

charity. I had no rights in this house or anywhere else. My life was over because I was a woman without a husband. I refuse to have our Sudha live like that". (269)

Perhaps it can be construed that Sudha's decision is the ultimate leading to cultural transformation. Divakaruni does not stop with the young Sudha to defy the odds. Even the three elder widows shed their inhibitions and throw caution to the winds by coming out of their cocooned existence. They choose a way of life which is highly improbable in those times and circumstances. Sudha has taken a stand which disregards the curbing traditional Indian culture. She, for instance, enjoys the free will in the raising of her own child. It is rather a beginning that this turnabout in terms of revolutionary thoughts and actions would develop in future in relation to her association with the tradition and culture of the land to which she has a close bond so far. Perhaps she must erase the unpleasant past as irrelevant and turn a new leaf in shaping a new and promising life of her own. Only then, she could sustain her convictions. It is to be reiterated at this juncture that both generations of women, older as well as younger, the three mothers, who are the adamant sticklers of the worn-out traditions, norms, customs and culture and Anju and Sudha, who are modern and revolutionary, settle on the path which suits them through autonomy and self-governance although it may be altogether at variance with the prevalent and outmoded social practices.

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