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CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVELS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINIST THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

The research paper discusses feminism with reference to *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the famous diasporic novelist who depicts feminism with aplomb. Her feminist characters face problems in the patriarchal society for going against the tide or doing what seems right to them, but come out with flying colours because all the females are united in their strife and find solutions being in the set boundaries of the society and yet breaking the retrograde and traditional rules that stand in the way of progressive thinking and plunging ahead in the new century. The paper analyses all the female characters in the perspective of their problems, their upbringing and how do they come up with the solutions. The paper also discusses how the characters are reformist from the point of feminist theories.

Keywords: feminism, reformist, patriarchal, feminist theories, Indian culture

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INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the skillful and passionate voices of the diasporic writers. In most of her novels Psychology, Mythology and Folklore are interrelated which reflect her rootedness to the culture and traditions of her native 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 and tradition. She entwines diaspora and feminist experiences that are narrow in focus and broad in scope. In an interview, she states:

“I think being an expatriate is good for writers. Moving away from a home culture often allows a kind of disjunctive perspective that is very important— a slight

sense of being the outsider, being out of place”.

She even quotes Gertrude Stein who said, “What good are the roots if you can't take them with you? She never thought of being a writer and that too in America. The foreign land has offered her a number of experiences that she really wouldn't have had in India. America, in a way, gave her the opportunity to explore herself”.

The novel, *Sister of My Heart* frames 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 expedition. The story narrated by Sudha and Anju focuses on the relationship between two cousins who share their experiences of their childhood, youth and marriage. It also reconnoitres the tension between the 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 narrated by both the women protagonists, sun burnt in emotions and marinated in dollops of cultural contrasts that provides the much interesting angle to the work.

The novel opens with a tragic beginning of Chatterjee family already disposed of its financial and patriarchal head and its former monetary 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 memorable from the unique feminine and diasporic perspective of the author.

The journey from riches to a lower middle class family takes the reader to the labyrinth 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. According to Nilanjana Roy: "Sister of My Heart occupies the same fictional ground as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*...followers of *Waiting to Exhale* will find in this novel an Indian answer to Terry Mc Millan".

The novel *Sister of My Heart* portrays a woman's world of middle-class urban women, confined to houses in which their domain is strictly demarcated 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.

SISTERHOOD IN SISTER OF MY HEART

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" (Divakaruni 1999: 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 themselves, 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 armours in the story.

BREAKING OF CONVENTIONAL MYTHS

In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni rejects conventional myths and creates new ones. In the first part of the novel titled *The Princess in the Palace of Snakes* both the protagonists attempt to conform to the traditional feminine roles allocated by the male hegemonic society. This is symbolised by the traditional fairy tale of the princess in the palace of snakes waiting for her Prince Charming to rescue her. The first part has all the bearings of what can be called an attitude of being suppressed by the males that flows in our blood silently and over takes all the emotions, makes every Indian woman bow down to this with pleasure, waiting for the young, handsome and brave prince to make way into their hearts and lives, without knowing that this attitude would bend them later on and would be the cause of all the perils in their lives. The extent of the woman's oppression within the marriage is also obvious. After her marriage, Sudha is not allowed to pursue her financial independence. In many ways, she is the prototypical victim of an arranged marriage. She puts up with the ill-treatment there for a long time, still the conventional princess of the fairy tale, waiting for her husband, the prince, to rescue her.

NEW FEMININE WORLD

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 jewellery, possibly "gifted" by her parents during the marriage, to set up her own economic unit within which she can reformulate 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).

The same streak of financial independence is seen in Anju when she decides to deposit the money to bring Sudha to California. "What I really love is earning my own money. What a power it gives me to take my own cheque to the bank and put into my own account! [...] I held the pile of money in my hands for a whole minute, breathing in that green scent of freedom...." (287)

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. Pishi mourns for the tyrannical rules of the society for a widow at the age of eighteen 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 of what society might think? I spit on 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".

(Divakaruni 1999: 268)

"Tomorrow I'll think of all the prickly details: how to get them here, the visas, how much it'll all cost. I can get a job and save for their tickets. That way I won't have to ask Sunil for a single penny. Tomorrow itself I'll go to my college library - I know they're looking for an assistant. I won't even tell Sunil about it. It'll be my secret, mine and my baby's. (276) "Did I push Sudha into making the wrong decision, misled by my American – feminist notions of right and wrong? Have I condemned her to a life of loneliness"? (Divakaruni 1999: 272).

The woman in the mirror is none other than she herself, but in a novel manifestation. She is that woman who has emerged victorious over all dilemmas, all oppositions, all crushing sensibilities, and is as bright and radiant as a bird, ready to fly into the exotic skies. Sudha, refuses to go back to a tormenting past, she is ignorant of what the future holds for her, yet her eyes look forward, and the spirit of fire burning within her convinces everyone that none can now dare to stop her in her upward and onward journey. Sudha indeed, emerges as a triumphant woman. She transforms herself, from the *Princess in the palace of Snakes* to the *Queen of Swords*. She refuses to return to Ramesh and later on chooses Anju's proposal of joining her in the U.S in place of getting married to her lover. Ashok.

Despite, the innumerable headaches that an American lifestyle entails, Divakaruni's characters seem convinced about its ultimate superiority. This is well expressed in these words of Sudha, who is planning to leave for America with her fatherless, new born daughter in search of a respectable life for both: "Best of all, no - one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man" (Divakaruni 1999: 274).

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 ROLE OF MOTHERS

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. "Perhaps, ironically, I helped it happen. For now that I have come back neither wife nor widow, now that I have let go of all that society considers valuable, what is left for them to fear? Away from those ancient halls echoing with patriarchal voices which insisted that foremost of all they must be widows of the Chatterjee family, for the first time they can learn to live their lives with a girlish lightness". (Divakaruni 1999: 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 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. (Divakaruni 1999: 296)

WOMEN AS FRIENDS

Chitra Banerjee focuses her writing on friendship with women and tries to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to women as daughters, wives, lovers and mothers. She believes that friendship with women is a unique one because of life-changing experiences that they share-menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. In an interview she states that the force behind her writing "is the desire to put women in the centre of stories, to have their voices be the voices of interpretation, their eyes the ones that we see through. There just hasn't been enough of that in the world, if you look back at literary history" (qtd.in Lalitha 2009: 23).

Chitra Banerjee's women in the novel are the common women we see in our daily life around us. They cry, rejoice and lament like any ordinary Indian women but they also have the grit and determination that makes us feel like making them stand on a pedestal and salute them. Pishi ma, Nalini, Gauri, Anju and Sudha seem so real and venerable as they live a\without any male support, which is so unheard of the traditional Calcutta. They face all the problems with aplomb with each other's mental and psychological support.

Through the character of Pishi ma, Divakaruni depicts that while widowhood is a temporary phenomenon in the West, it is an everlasting curse in the Indian society. Pishi takes her widowhood in her stride. Though she bears the societal norms and follows the rituals of widowhood laid by the society instead of opposing them she teaches both the girls to be mellowed and accept whatever is given by the men. From their childhood Pishi tells Anju and Sudha that when babies are born the mythical Bidhata Purush visits but, "does not come for girl babies" (18). Though Pishi enjoys hearing Kirtans she foregoes it as she cannot entrust drying mangoes to the servant maids, "...for everyone knows that if the slices, are touched by a woman who hasn't bathed, or has lain with a man that day, or is menstruating, they will turn furry with fungus"(32).

GENDER NORMS

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.

"One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Simone De Beauvoir, 457). 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 in spite of the adversity. She is the one who decides to get the girls get best of education despite her meagre 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 as according to her

'I told her not to, hisses my mother. 'I told her to grit her teeth and put up with it, and try for another pregnancy. A woman can have many children, after all, but a husband is for ever. But no madam had to do her own way. Now what will we tell our relatives? Uff she has smeared kali for ever on the Chatterjee family, to say nothing of my ancestors.(Divakaruni, Sister of My Heart, (266)

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 docile and meek 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. She analyses gender attitudes as part of attitudes common to all dominant and subordinate groups:

"Subordinates are described in terms of, and encourage to develop, personal psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the dominant group. These characteristics form a certain familiar luster: submissiveness, passivity, docility, lack of initiative, inability to act, to decide, to think and to the like...If subordinates adopt these characteristics they are considered well-adjusted". (Miller 6,7).

THE WESTERN THINKING

Pishi, Gouri and Nalini are quite different in their thinking and ways, but all three are fiercely independent and are able to live alone happily bringing up their daughters in a city like Calcutta and even give them a good education and going through the phases of marriage, children and widowhood in their own stride. Initially, the entire household though governed by women is run according to the patriarchal rules where they live in fear and give oodles of lecture on what is good and not good for women in the society. But, towards the last chapter there is a sea change in the Chatterjee household when they bring in a new fresh energy in the household by giving up the patriarchal home and taking a flat and allowing Sudha to breathe in the fresh air free of any shackles.

The courage that comes to Anju for supporting her cousin is from the Western thinking

where she has settled after marriage. Divakaruni brings the contrast between the Eastern and the Western continents, where she delineates the Eastern world by showing it as still stuck in the yester years and treating women like the objects without any desires and say in the matters as is portrayed in Mrs Sanyal's, Nalini's and the father of Sunil. Whereas the Western world a place where women live freely and are not blamed and ostracized for giving birth to baby girls. The journey of the new stronger Sudha comes a full circle with her decision to shun the stereotypical male society by rejecting Ashok's proposal and welcoming the new free world where she is ready to go to give solace and psychological support to Anju. She is ready to embrace the western world where her cousin believes

"Best of all, no - one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man" (Divakaruni 1999: 274).

"C. B. Divakaruni's account of family life in Bengal is warm and rich by detail. Hers is one of most strikingly lyrical voices writing about the lives of Indian woman today"(Amitav Ghosh)

Sister of My Heart spans many years and zigzags between India and America as the cousins first grow apart and then eventually reunite. Divakaruni invests this domestic drama with poetry, as she traces her heroine's lives from infancy to motherhood, but it is Sudha and Anju which is backbone of the story. Anju might spell for both when she says,

"In spite of all my insecurities, in spite of the oceans that'll be between us soon and the men that are between us already, I can never stop loving Sudha. It's my habit, and it's my fate".

Divakaruni sketches the Indian odd cultures which hurts the feeling of inner most sense on humanity grounds. *Sister of My Heart* is an emotional journey of love, jealousy, frustration, fear, and anger of Anju and Sudha the family sentiments, reputation, clash of superiority and inferiority all which faces by Indian girls, Anju and Sudha. Divakaruni expertly juxtaposes the challenges, freedoms and crossness

of modern - day America with the issues, both personal and cultural, each woman faces i.e. Indo - American relationships.

As Rani Dharker explains: "The woman learns to adopt certain strategies in order to survive within marriage. These strategies conceal her true self to survive much like a purdah hides the line of the body"(54). Sudha ruminates how her life has become monotonous, "hypnotic placidity," without any ups and downs, "I know I am needed; I know I am liked. And so I am not unhappy. Even sex with Ramesh...is only a minor inconvenience" (199). Female sexuality has been the taboo with strict codes of conduct in the Indian society. It is empowered with religiously dictatorial views. The society raises women to the position of the goddesses and thereby enforces spirituality. The society deliberately forgets that women also have the desires of flesh and blood.

Sister of My Heart is a kind of female bildungsroman. It is a genre which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. The novel tells 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 impeded by opposition of their desires by other characters. Chitra Banerjee tries to take her readers into the mind of the protagonist who put some light on her condition and all loose strings are tied at the end.

Divakaruni adeptly presents the dilemmas of woman who are sacred to give up the norms of the society and go through the rigmarole of do or not to do and at last find a way out and embrace the new ways of life and support each other in such way where man can. She also proves her mettle in depicting and understanding women and their strengths and weaknesses.

We've formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have travelled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonnas with child . . . for now the three of us stand unhurried, feeling the way we fit, skin on skin on

skin, into each other's lives. (Divakaruni 1999: 347)

As Kate Millett asserts, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society a patriarchal unit within patriarchal whole"(33).

Looking at the above analysis it becomes quite evident that 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 recognize the spirit of their country and try to respect it in all their accomplishments and endeavours. 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.

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 suspended animation and wait for the right time to bring about the change in the role of the women and are successful in relaxing the rigidity of some customs. They subtly change their immediate environment and the people concerned. They are both conformist and nonconformist. They conform to the modern values of education and marriage. But they appear non-conformist to the age long retrograde traditions.

"Feminism' is an ideological position which emphasizes the equality of gender and advocates maximization of potential of women, so that institutionally and culturally created constraints do not hinder the process and pattern of development 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 women characters take the denouement of the plot to an ending which is good and the best for everyone.

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