

Psychological Predicament of Indian Women-A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee is one of the most popular women writers who is originated in India and settled in America. As an immigrant, Chitra has the first hand experience of the predicaments of the people who migrated from their homeland to an alien country. Divakaruni strongly believes that it is the responsibility of the writers to expose the saga of the sufferings. This paper aims at an analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's most popular novel, *Sister of My Heart* so as, to bring out her treatment of the dilemma faced by the protagonists of the novel, Anju and Sudha.

Key words: *Diasporic, Immigrant, Predicament, Discrimination*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta on 29th July 1956. She studied at Loreta House, a Convent School run by the Irish nun. She earned her Bachelor's degree in English from the Presidency College, University of Calcutta. At the age of 19, Divakaruni migrated to the United States where she received her Master's degree from Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio and Ph.D in English Renaissance Literature from the university of California at Berkeley, in 1984. Divakaruni's novels are set in India and also in America. She gives innate insight in narrating story, Plot and lyrical description to give readers a many layered look at her characters and their respective worlds which are filled with fear, hope and discovery. Most of her works are partially autobiographical and based on the lives of Indian immigrants.

The word 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek word *Speiro*, which means 'to show' and the prefix *diya* means 'over' and together it means a scattering or depression. Diaspora includes the terms, 'immigrant', 'exile', 'expatriate', 'refugee', 'guest worker'

and so on. The Indians who migrated to the developed nations experienced problems of dislocation, relocation, uprootedness, alienation, loneliness and discrimination resulting in a sense of dejection, depression and disillusionment. The diasporic writers reflect all these things in their writings. The people who migrated to the Western countries are professionals, students and accompanying spouse. They experience a kind of *Trishanku* existence. This is a term taken from Hindu mythology. The immigrants who live in foreign countries feel difficult to forget their homeland. They can neither assimilate nor retain their pure Indianness. This search for identity differentiates the diasporic community from the native community.

Most of the diasporic literature is therefore marked by the issues of identity, home and nation in relation to the migrant. The diasporic home is the centre of debate as it leads to the question of diasporic identity and a feelings of the homelessness, alienation, desire for assimilation and acceptance, etc. Analyzed in the light of the above theoretical position, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels offer interesting and genuine insights into the Indian diasporic life in the West. She does not stop with the depiction of the emotions of the first generation immigrants but also the attitudes of the second generation immigrants. She makes culture the crux of the immigrants' lives. Her women re-define and establish their prowess her status as a Non-Resident Indian makes her successful writer of diaspora. This is evident in Chitra Banerjee's novel, *Sister of My Heart*. This paper evidently analyses the psychological dilemma of the central characters in *Sister of My Heart*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for her portrayals on her own experiences and those of her other immigrant Indian women in her novels. Her second novel *Sister of My Heart* is a realistic treatment of the relationship between the two sisters, Sudha and Anju who narrate the alternating chapters of this novel that develops over decades.

The novel, which is based on Divakaruni's short story, *The Ultrasound (Arranged Marriage 1995)*, portrays the emotional journey of love and friendship between Sudha and Anju who were born on the same day, the day their fathers Gopal and Bijoy died on a ruby hunting expedition. The story narrated by Sudha and Anju ends when they reunite in America after separation of few years. The story thus narrates the beginning of their existence in India, their homeland and ends with another beginning-that of their diasporic

experience. The novel *Sister of My Heart* differs from all other novels in that it throws light on homeland realities-rather than on diasporic realities-social, cultural, familial and economic-that more or less lead to the exile of her female principals to an alien land.

All the major characters in the novel are women. Male characters are not prominent. They appear as and when the situations warrant. The female characters in the novel form a mosaic of Indian character types-the young heroines representing early childhood to maturity and marriage the matriarchal figures represented by Gouri and Nalini, the vindictive mother-in-law by Ramesh's mother and Aunt Pishi in her old age is the one who has suffered the stigma and discriminations of a widow from a very young age. By telling these interrelated stories, Divakaruni uncovers the social and familial position of the Indian female, their dreams and aspirations, their precarious position in the scheme of things, the social forces that keep them under subjugation and the need and the final urge to break those fetters to freedom and to America.

The heroines of the novel Anju and Sudha are brought up in a traditional joint family in Calcutta. Since their fathers have already passed away, their mothers have to take care of them. So the joint family system is very supportive to the girls. Anju's mother is Gouri Ma, Sudha's mother is Nalini and Pishi is their aunt who treats them as their own children. The traditional Hindu religious system gives more importance to the patriarchal society. Basically, Indian family system is based on patriarchal norms, rarely one could find the matriarchal family system where the female would play a vital role in inheriting the property than the male. Gouri Ma takes in charge of the bookshop after her husband's death. Though the bookshop does not run profitably, it becomes the responsibility of Gouri Ma to run it efficiently to escape from the clutches of poverty. Aunt Pishi plays an important role in the lives of two young girls by showing them her love and affection. She takes care of their things, she used to narrate her experiences to them thereby she indirectly inculcates in them the values and the virtues of women besides the reputation traditionally upheld by their family.

Aunt Nalini offers physical support to the family. During the time of crisis these three women sit together to subdue the problem. Though Nalini, Pishi and Sudha are not the blood relatives of Chatterjee's family, they are never treated as strangers and they are given equal share in the family. According to aunt Nalini, "Good daughters are bright

lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family family's" (SMH 23). Widowhood is the biggest curse bestowed upon any woman. These three women are widows. Nalini and Gouri Ma accept the challenge of life. But Pishi is forced to sit in the back of the hall on festival days because widows must not take part in the auspicious occasions according to the orthodoxy and traditional system of Indian family. But both Sudha and Anju being educated, oppose their Aunt Pishi for her orthodox and timid nature. Anju says: "I hate Pishi when she puts on her patient smile and sits in the back of the hall on feast days, not participating, because widows mustn't" (SMH 251).

Anju and Sudha complement each other well. They share their own views and ideas with each other. They cannot imagine their life without the 'other'. Their traditional family system helps them to continue their relationship until the end of the novel. Sudha's love with Ashok is an interesting part of the novel. Nalini rejects him as he is from lower caste. They have planned to elope but Sudha is forced to drop the idea, because Anju's father-in-law gives more importance to the respect and prestige of the family than the likes and dislikes of an individual. If the elopement happens, Anju will be sent back to her mother's home. So, Sudha dropped the plan of marrying Ashok.

Sudha and Anju are separated after their wedding. She is taken to Bardhaman and the way she is treated by her mother-in-law is shameful and disgusting. Her father-in-law dominates their family and treats his own wife as a 'slave'. Sudha's husband Ramesh acts according to his mother's wish. Before Anju moves to America, she visits Sudha's house where she is shocked to see the pathetic condition of Sudha and goes to America, half-heartedly. Anju's life in America starts in an unexpected way. Her husband Sunil wants to maintain a distance between them. He is addicted to American culture. When she comes to know about the personal character of Sunil, she is completely shocked and wants to come back to India. He comes late in the night and is addicted to alcohol. It is a great cultural shock to her and it is not the life she imagined, dreamt of and expected in America. She also finds that Sunil wants to hide something from her. She is very careful in her choice of words in front of her husband due to his criticism about women.

Being born in the patriarchal and male chauvinistic society, Sunil also tries to behave like other ordinary man. Mrs. Sanyal starts to ill treat her daughter-in-law Sudha,

for not giving birth to a baby. Impotency and sterility are the two main problems faced by women in our society. The society is ready to curse the women as 'sterile'. It is the greatest biological discrimination faced by all women. Sudha's pregnancy creates a big storm in her life. When it is identified as a female baby, she is forced for abortion by her mother-in-law. In order to protect her female baby, Sudha comes to her mother's house. Anju is deeply worried about Sudha who is also pregnant. The economic condition of the family becomes worse. To fulfill the needs of Sudha, Anju decides to do some work. She also invites Sudha to America to make her childhood dream, real. Without the knowledge of Sunil, she goes to work. Her hard work leads to miscarriage and the baby is identified 'breathless' in her womb. When she comes to know the death of her child, she becomes unconscious.

Sudha is ready to go to America to take care of Anju. She explains all those things that happened in their childhood days and talks over phone to Anju. Her lover Ashok again approaches Gouri Ma for his remarriage with Sudha on condition that Sudha should leave her daughter Dayita with her mother. Sudha does not accept the condition and decides to remain alone for the sake of her daughter. The post marital reality, the traumatic experiences at her in laws' house, the mental torture, the antipathy towards the girl child and being treated as an outcast are all reasons for Sudha's decision to immigrate to America. She knows that her life in America will not be easy so long Anju's husband Sunil keeps a passion for her which glows like a wedge between the two sisters. She breaks all these changes and offers to move on to America to meet trials and sufferings.

The characters Anju and Sudha are bound together. They easily overcome all the critical circumstances, because they are in good co-ordination and act with mutual understanding. Sudha's role is so strong and stubborn. She faces problems with her husband, her mother-in-law and her lover Ashok. But finally, she is correct in taking a courageous decision to live as a single mother with her daughter and her sister Anju in America. She lives as a role model to every woman in the society. *Sister of My Heart* is about displacement and alienations and it portrays the psychological problems and conflicts of a few Bengali women who are sensitive but intelligent enough to come out of all these sufferings. In short, they are caught between a feminist desire to be assertive and an Indian need to be submissive. As a woman writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni infuses

the women's perspective in the depiction of the lives of Indian immigrants. These pictures are authentic due to the first hand experience of the writer who herself is a part of Indian diaspora.

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