

Predicament of Women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

Abinaya Sidhes¹, Afrin Begam²
^{1,2} PERI College of Arts and Science

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays the women in the novel *Sister of My Heart* in different dimensions. She uses the myths of the patriarchal society where it was designed to women. The women are regarded as the secondary being in the society. The author tries to degrade this thought and she brings out women as the supreme characters where all the men in this novel are given less importance. The women characters in the novel are Anju, Sudha, Gouri Ma, Aunt Nalini, Pishi, Mrs.Sanyal and Mrs.MAnjumdar. There is also a little girl named Dayita. Divakaruni, has shown in this novel about the transition but not the complete transformation. Women are dependent on each other and they try to be independent. This chapter deals with the reflection of women in the family and society. It also highlights the myths of India and the women's friendship.

The status of women has changed but not completely even in the eighteenth century. Meena Shirwadkar in the *Image of Women in the Indo-Anglian Novel* says, "The view about the Indian women is biased by racial and imperialistic prejudices. Very few writers have been able to shed them and an unbiased portrayed" (Shirwadkar 8). Chitra Banerjee is an example for it. The novel begins with the story narrated by Pishi to the girls Anju and Sudha. She says about the Bidhata Purush, the god of fate decides their future and she tells about the demons. Anju says " 'There are no demons' "(SMH 8). Sudha believes in her old stories but Anju is mere opposite. As the novelists portray two women in their works the author has shown Anju as the rebellious women and Sudha, follower of the Indian conceptions. Both of them are grown up in the Chatterjee's family according to the rules and protections said by the ancestors.

The author did not portray women merely as the member of the family but as an individual. She depicts women as traditional being who endures all the

troubles and sufferings does the sacrifice. Anju, the daughter Mrs.Gouri Ma hates the old tradition and strives to be a modern women. Sudha, the daughter of Aunt Nalini is the one, who sticks to the customs she behaves like a girl of the past. Both of them are attached to each other and has a pure understanding. They continue their bonding well throughout their life. The girls are not only the reason for it because they always follow their mothers as Shirwadkar says, "... the mother's misery is reflected on the daughter, more so because the girls in the middle-class families cannot go out" (Shirwadkar 30). Gouri Ma is the one who runs the family of the Chatterjee. After the death of Anju's father it is she who takes the responsibility of the family and runs the book store. Anju adopts her and wants to be bold like her mother and she is interested in her education. Sudha describes Gouri Ma, Lines of hardship are etched around her mouth and on her forehead, for she was the one who shouldered the burden of keeping the family safe on that thunderclap day eight years ago when she received news of our father's deaths. But her eyes, dark and endless-deep . . . I want to be noble and brave, just like her. (SMH 5) Thus the author tries to reflect her as a man. All the three of them are widows and there are only servants in their family who are men.

The women feels secured and united when they are together and they believe the friendship within themselves is better than with the other gender. Divakaruni traces their friendship and the bond between the girls and their mothers in this novel. C.Bharati and S.Kalaimani in the literary article quotes "Divakaruni's women quickly realize that they love their women friends more than their men, a love that surpasses all other relationships. It is in her *Sister of My Heart* that Divakaruni most obviously explores this theme"(Muse India Sep.-Oct. 2013) Anju and Sudha were brought up together in the family. They

are friends more than the cousin through they are not blood related. The women in the family too maintain their friendship in bringing up the children and they share the responsibilities.

Indian cultural heritage and myths are brought out by the character Pishi. She is a widow who lost her husband at the age of eighteen and lives in her brother's home taking care of the two daughters Anju and Sudha. She tells about Bidhata Purush and also describes the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. She says the story of the princess in the palace of snakes where Sudha and Anju are happy when they try to enact it. She is completely dependent on her brother's house-hold. She does not attend any functions but only pujas. Sudha says, "Dressed in austere white, her graying 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, . . ." (*SMH* 4) about Pishi. She is a prey to tradition.

The families have strict restrictions for girls. As the two girls were brought up in the Chatterjee's family they were not left out and lived a protected life. Sudha and Anju admired the girls who went for shopping with their mothers and their costumes which is a modernized one. Shirwadkar explores, "For, in the middle-class families, there are strict restrictions on the girls. They are not allowed to move out, and as they need not work, they remained confined to the house. Naturally the family atmosphere, if oppressive, makes the girls suffer" (Shirwadkar 29). Anju and Sudha wishes to go for their friend's birthday party and when their mothers restrict them to go Anju gets angry and she shouts, 'You'd think we were living in the Dark Ages instead of in the eighties. I let there isn't another girl my age in Calcutta- expect poor Sudha, of course- who's forced to dress like this' (*SMH* 52). Divakaruni's thought is shown through the character Anju. When Aunt Nalini says, "Never in all my years did I hear a child in my parent's home speak so rudely" (*SMH* 52) the tradition of women who kept silence and obedience is shown through it. As Shirwadkar says, "Their ideal of girlhood is to obey the elders and follow the traditions" (Shirwadkar 31). The duty of girl during the eighties is reciprocated through the words of Nalini. It is also the myth of India.

The women in the family too maintain their friendship in bringing up the children and they share the responsibilities. The mother of Anju supports the family in the financial status, the mother of Sudha is

strict that she helps the girls to follow the respect and customs of the family. Pishi takes care of the two girls in saying information about their mothers and also the stories. She is responsible for giving them food and to be dressed. The author through the family of Chatterjee vividly shows that the women can live without the support of the men.

Anju and Sudha are not blood related but they are always together. Anju hates everyone for at least one aspect but she loves Sudha always. She exclaims, ". . . I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The *Sister of My Heart*" (*SMH* 11). Anju and Sudha steps out of the class when they are left in separate classes. Anju argues with everyone for her friend Sudha. Dr.D.B.Gavani says:

Characteristic of much writing on India and on women, the way in which Divakaruni focuses on what she calls "the particular nature of women's friendships, what makes them special and different," it is very much in the tradition of pre-feminist Bengali woman's fiction. (N.pag.)

in her article quest for identity in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. It is due to the struggle within their family where they wished to come out of that seclusion. This is their first step where they wished to be with freedom. They are clutched together and their love transcends even the love between the husband and wife. Anju moves to America after her marriage where she suffers from the separation of her sister. Sudha leaves the family of her in-laws and she goes there for her cousin. The novel to be a novel of friendship as R.Lalitha says in the Commonwealth Review,

. . . There may be separated by fate and marriage once they reach adulthood, but let nothing stand in their love for each other, even jeopardizing the love of the men in their lives for each other. It is perhaps this that make Divakaruni call sister a novel of women's friendship, not of sisterly bonding (Lalitha 21)

Both of them devoted to each other. The emotional bond between the two is manifested from their childhood. Divakaruni sticks to the importance of women's friendship in the family and also in the society, "If a woman loses courage, cries or trembles, another consoles her in familiar words which both understand . . . It is a revelation to the women that they can help and save one another if they are united" (Shirwadkar 121).

Chitra Banerjee through this novel reflects the present state of women and the treatment of the women. Divakaruni took the characters from the normal life and dealt with the sufferings faced by them due to cultural changes, current issues which made her as a successful writer. Though the two characters Anju and Sudha wishes to be modern they are stuck up with the old traditions. The girls are not allowed to mingle with the boys outside. "It was no common for girls in middle-class families to express their love or make their decisions, . . ." (Shirwadkar 31) the same happens in Sudha where she meets Ashok in secret and converses with him. Singhji the trusted servant in their house and her dear Anju are the two pupils who know about her. Once the girls reached the adulthood stage they are intended to be married. The girls are always accused everything, so the mothers start to arrange marriage for both of them. Anju's dream is going to college shatters due to her mother's illness. Gavani in her article of quest for identity pronounces, "Divakaruni focuses on self centered attitudes which are nevertheless be crossed the limitations, where no one can feel absolute freedom, for which they feel and act – no woman is desired to love and get married, as if it is a great deal of breaking religious and traditional bonds in Indian phenomenon" (Gavani 7 Dec 2011). Divakaruni has also dealt with the important issue of arranged marriages. Caste, class and dowry are the predominant ones, and they did not give importance to the brides. Gouri Ma is forced to sell the bookstore because of the expenses for the arranged marriage. Mr.Manjumdar did not get the dowry because of Sunil, groom of Anju but he is interested in it. Caste is also significant one. Ashok's proposal had been rejected because he belongs to a lower caste. The another reason is Chatterjee's family is considered as the most reputed family in the society so they does not Ashok's proposal. Ritu R.Agarwal has explained it in the *Journal of English Language Teaching and Literary Studies (JELTS)*, ". . . Divakaruni has hinted at the social stigma of dowry plaguing the Indian society . . . Divakaruni has also satirized the Indian patriarchal systems which demands dowry but has no concern for the bride" (N.pag).

Anju and Sudha accepts for marriage not due to the interest but out of obedience to the family as other girls. Sudha sacrifices her love for her cousin Anju because her marriage depends on families status. She is afraid that it will be stopped due to her elopement.

Anju is to marry Suni, a computer scientist who lives in America and Sudha is to marry Ramesh, an officer of Indian railways. Divakaruni, has shown Anju and Sudha as the women who wishes to lead a modern life but they could not change. There is always a struggle going within the mind of them. This is stated by S.Vasigaran,

Oscillating between the attractions of the hot land and the hot land, her Prince women immigrant characters feel a constant psychic battle whether to break whether to break the barriers of the old order and get adapted the new one or to remain in the ghetto of old values. (Domic236)

Divakaruni has reflected her own thought where the people who intend to lead a modern life could not change immediately because the practices and traditions is deeply rooted inside the women from the childhood.

The duty of wife, and the chaos and confusions and the demands in a typical India family and the state of women as a wife is clearly portrayed by author. Sudha is the one who suffers much under the cruel treatment of Mrs.Sanyal the mother-in-law of Sudha. Mrs.Sanyal is a woman who gives the responsibilities instructs her, "Natun Bau . . . this is your home now. You must learn to take charge of it" (*SMH* 168). She takes care of the whole family where her husband comes to her home occasionally. Sudha's brother-in-laws always disturbs her to search for their lost books. Sudha has lost her identity and also her dream to design the clothes. Due to the values of the Indian society she faces a struggle and the only one which comforts her is the letter of Anju:

. . . women in general, according to Divakaruni, face different types of oppressive condition by the Indian traditional codes of conduct and value systems. They are destined to lead the lives of imperfections as victims to the shackles of conventions until the realization dawns on them that they can liberate themselves from the prevailing restraints and controls and stand up for themselves.(Domnic 240)

Divakaruni her shown their life as a womanhood. They are not able to change and each one is dependent on the other.

Dominance in Indian families is dealt in the novel. Mr.Majumdar the father-in-law is a man who expects respect from the family of Chatterjee. He always wants a recognition his domination is shown when he throws the bowl against Sunil's mother as she prepared

tamarind chutney. Mrs.Majumdar does not react but patiently accepts the tortures of her husband. Mr.Sanyal is another character who dominates her daughter-in-law. Sudha is reflected in the following manner, “She is perplexed at first but soon she becomes an embodiment of the adjusting, hard-working, sacrificing Indian wife a modest daughter-in-law and mother fulfilling the many duties in the joint family and keeping it together” (Shirwadkar 69).

The patriarchal society is shown throughout the novel. Sudha is completely a woman who suffers under the patriarchal society. “In the traditional Indian family and society, a wife gains full acceptance only when she becomes the mother of a son. Unfortunate is the woman who remains childless” (Shirwadkar 64) similarly Sudha is the one who goes to the hospital where Mrs.sanyal does not accept the fact that her son is the one to be checked. Divakaruni has pictured Mrs.Sanyal as the women of expectations. Sudha is asked to abort the child when it is found to be a daughter. The reason is the people believed that the first child of a family must be son where girls are always considered as an oppressed sex in the earlier days. The superstitious belief of the women and the blind customs they followed during the early period is reflected in the novel. The various stages of women and their portrayal is also added by Divakaruni.

Women come out of the family once they realize their position in the life. Similarly Sudha comes out from the Sanyal's family as the modern woman. The transformations in Sudha is reflected when she confidently steps out and decides to make a good future to her child she was the struggling princess in the palace of snakes and she excels as the Queen of Swords. C.Bharathi and Dr.S.Kalamani aptly remarks, 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 entotic skies... Sudha indeed, emerges as a triumphant woman (*Muse India* Sep.-Oct. 2013)

The traditions have made the women to be the most patient. The confident lacks in her. In the novel when Pishi tell the story of the Palace of snakes Anju is the Prince and Sudha is the Princess. Anju rescues her from the palace. There is a thought that only a prince can save them and not a woman. Anju takes the correct decision to ask her cousin to go to their family again

but a confusion arises when her husband Sunil says that she is wrong. As a modern woman in America she must be independent but she is confused because the tradition is there in her mind though she does not follow it Shirwadkar says it in *Image of woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*,

The reason for the woman's submissive rote, as Dr.Radhakrishnan points out, is that “centuries of tradition have made the Indian women the most patient women in the world, whose pride is suffering”. . . she does not feel confident of her ability to combine the roles of two woman. . . (Shirwadkar 127)

There is painful efforts towards adjustment. Sudha adjust the ill-treatment of her mother-in-law to an extent because of her mental ability but she could not tolerate her child being killed in her womb. She is praised by the author through the characters such as Gowri Ma and Anju. Dr.D.B.Gavani praises Sudha, “Divakaruni speaks of Dayita, daughter of Sudha, who is orphanage with losing her father shows the new will of womanhood, fighting for the right cause to hold on matriarchal grounds, Sudha is praised for breaking traditional bonds, by taking care of her own child on her shoulders” (N.pag.) in her article Quest for Identity in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. Anju too had the problem of adjustment in America. Anju completely believed in Sunil and dreamt about him as an Indian husband who are out-spoken. When she encounters that he did not read looks and he said Virginia Wolf is his favourite just to attract her realizes that she has been cheated. He always sits before the computer doing the projects. Anju felt completely alienated and faced the struggle to adjust with the new environment. The American way of life is completely contradictory to India. In India the culture and virtues are the predominant ones. The personality of Sunil is a shock to Anju.

Aunt Nalini and Mrs.Sanyal are the two women characters of conservatism. The author has figured out how the women are stuck up with tradition and is not able to change themselves. This can be vividly seen when Aunt Nalini scolds her daughter for the silly things. Anju and Sudha go for a movie and she hates their behaviour she shouts , “Look at them sauntering in hand in hand, the shameless hussies. Do they care that all of Calcutta is talking about their escapade? Of course not. Do they care that they've smeared blackest kali on our faces? Of course not. Do they care that in

this one afternoon they've undone everything we've been trying to build up for years" (*SMH* 64).

The myth plays an important role in the image of woman. Divakaruni has shown sufferings of a girl brought up in the traditional family with the blind belief of customs. The girl reaches adulthood and then her responsibility is pictured and when a woman reaches old age she induces the tradition to the next generation. The suffering of a widow through Pishi's character is shown clearly. Dr.D.B.Gavani says it in her article quest for identity in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, "Indian cultural Herirage in immensely picurised in Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart* – which she narrates mythical aspects"(Gavani 7 wed 2011). The rebellious woman Sudha is said as "Rani of Jhansi" and also the Queen of swords. Pishi narrates the mythical stories which is the reason for Sudha to grow up as a traditional woman. The lost son of Anju is compared with Krishna and when it is dead it is said that it appeared blue in colour. "The classical ideals of Hindu womanhood were more severely imposed on women" (Dinesh36) say Kanwar Dinesh singh in the *Feminism and Post Feminism*. Mythological characters such as Jataya, Goddees Lakshmi. Rani of Jhansi are all given in the work. The falling stars is mentioned and the Hindu Mythology that the people will become once they are dead are reflected in it.

Women are dependent on each other. Though there are certain rebellious actions introduced by Divakaruni. The women are still traditional in their mind. There isn't a sudden transformation by them. Divakaruni has represented the psychological struggle in the bond between the two characters Anju and Sudha. Anju and Sudha are deeply attached to each other. Western women are brave and Independent. Divakaruni is aware of the India traditions and the suffering of woman faced by it. She brings out the remedies through her American experiences. Similarly in the novel, *Sister of My Heart* Divakaruni shows the suffering of Anju due to her miscarriage and the separation of her cousin.

Domnic in critical studies on contemporary Indian English Women Writers quotes, "Divakaruni's always places her women in the center of her stories and allows them to make their voices heard loudly. Their problems are very common but the approaches are western and the remedies are practical" (Domnic 241). Anju decides to make her cousin to come to America.

She does not want Sudha to hear the curses of the society. Indian wife is meant to be silent, beautiful, sensitive and adjusting. As Sudha had broken it and came out she will be accused by everyone. Anju does not seek help from her husband Sunil and earns money by working "Though educated, she does not feel at home in the westernized way of life, . . ." (Shirwadkar 56) Anju feels alone and makes Sudha to come and accompany with her.

Sudha too once she moves to America she realizes that she has come not for Dayita but for herself. Both Anju and Sudha are intimated and their relationship is brought out very effectively by the author. The extreme relationship is shown when Anju loses her son for her cousin and when Sudha sacrifices her love for Anju Women adjust between themselves but not with patriarchal society. The separation of Sudha makes Anju as mentally affected person when Sunil is not able to cure her. Only when Sudha speaks she regains her strength and talks with her. The women characters of Divakaruni give importance to their women relationships than the other including other relations. Anju-Sudha can be said as friends, cousins and sisters though they are not blood related. This shows Anju as an Indian though she lives in America. It is said in the journal of *Literary Endeavour*, "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses her writings on the relationships of women. Their beliefs, aspirations and upbringing in male oriented society"(Ramesh 3 July 2013).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has shown the problem of the women and how they bear the burden and keep the family safe from hardships. Gowri Ma after the sudden death of the her husband in the family she worked hard to keep her daughter and the family in a good and happy state of life. She worked late and tried to keep the bookstore safe which was the only income for the family.

Anju's dependent nature is shown through her American experience. Divakaruni has dealt to show the condition of the diasporic writers through this. In India everything would be kept for her. She did not do anything by herself. It happens even in her in-laws house. American life is contradictory to the native to the native homeland. She fetches her husband from the official, goes for shopping and when she enters everything falls where she thinks what her state in India, she did not even imagine that American would be exactly opposite to it. Divakaruni has experienced the same in the other. Country so she has introduced

in her works too. This moves Divakaruni to be a diasporic writer.

Divakaruni is not opposed to the traditions in India but against the blind myth that has been formed in the middle. In vedic period women were respected but only in the middle womern were suppressed. She had made here women to come out of the marriage and live an independent lives through the western medium. she wants the women characters to be brave and courageous. Janani Hariharan in the review of *Sister of My Heart* says,

It goes on to show the various faces that a woman can conceal behind a charming face, be it the iron-willed, breadwinning Gowri or the fiercely-loyal-to –her-clan, determined-to-have-a-male-heir Mrs.Sanyal (Hariharan 11June 2013).

Divakaruni did not forget to write the limitations of freedom for women. Women is restricted by the rules and regulations. Women is destined to be the only person who carry on with the culture. The men can enact in a modern manner following the western culture but woman is not supposed to come out. Sudha is not able to marry Ashok because he is of lower caste and the main thing is the culture. The girls go for a movie separately and Aunt Nalini takes it a serious issue and make a mess. Mrs. Sanyal does not leave privacy for Anju and Sudha when Anju visits her cousin. Anju expresses her invitation by the ill-treatment of Sudha's mother-in-law.

The author attempts to show the nostalgia of immigrant women in a foreign land. When Anju entered into her apartment in America with the grocery, her husband's jacket and eggs, letters from her mailbox fall down and scatter. Anju thinks about her hometown. In India everything was done for her but in America she has to do everything individually. She ruminate that she never thought American life would be miserable. It has been pointed out in *Literary Endeavour*:

Living in America since three years makes her prone to the luxuries of homeland. How milkmen, vegetable sellers used to come to their house. How her Mother used to shout at neighbours cat. . . Now in America she has to do everything by hand, even fetch her husband from the station and in the process by getting late and driving fast she has to listen to the yells of natives. (Parvathi 5)

Divakaruni is not opposed to the traditions in India but against the blind myth that has been formed in the

middle. In Vedic period women were respected but only in the middle women were suppressed. She has brought out the women characters to come out of the marriage and live their independent lives through the western medium. She wants the women characters to be brave and courageous. The different types of women is dealt in her novels. Sudha soft and beautiful; Anju brave and bold; GouriMa, courageous and responsible; Aunt Nalini, strict and sensitive; Pishi, caring and respective, Mrs.Sanyal, cruel and wild and Mrs.Majumdar, silent and patient. "They question the nature of their lives, and their roles as mothers, wives and professionals. This awareness leads them to rethink about their own lives as women, and instills in them confidence and strength to forge ahead" (Shaheen 45).

The author shows the desire of Mrs.Sanyal when she asks Sudha to pray for the kid to be a boy. As a mark of respect some of the sons even today touch their mother's feet Shirwadkar proves it in his book, "woman in India is mainly the mother; she finds fulfillment in becoming the mother of sons and is a creative, protective force in life, and is so reflected in literature" (Shirwadkar 79). Chitra Banerjee have brought it out in the novel. Ramesh cannot come against his mother. When he says he will be satisfied with a daughter she in furious and shouts at him where Ramesh could not help Sudha. Sunil gets angry when his father shows the dominance towards his mother. Divakaruni has shown the extreme. Relationship between a mother and the son. Though the mind and heart. The love of a mother and also the obedience of a son in India in dealt in this novel.

The society itself has a thought that women are inferior to the men. Divakaruni aims to erase the idea from the minds of the people. The relationship and all the others are portrayed in a way that woman is quite dominant than men. Divakaruni through this novel has brought out the various types of women sticking to cultures and overcomes all the problems of the patriarchal society.

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