



FROM SUPPRESSION TO ASSERTION – A STUDY OF WOMEN PROTAGONISTS IN CHITRA BANERJEE’S ‘SISTER OF MY HEART’ AND ‘THE VINE OF DESIRE’

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ABSTRACT:

Migration has been a universal phenomenon of the human civilization from times immemorial. When it comes to diasporic women writers they focus more upon not only rootlessness, alienation, suppression, oppression and struggle for existence but also on psychoanalytic study of the women characters. Divakaruni writes chiefly about Indian immigrant women and their lives. She narrates her immigrant experiences which become the immigrant’s voice in the diaspora world which is rarely heard in present world. This predicament of Indian women who struggles to come out of all exploitation and leads towards achieving social, economic, political and spiritual freedom of themselves to attain their self-hood, identity confidence, rights and empower in their lives. The characters of Divakaruni face racial problems for being minority in foreign country. For their livelihood in new land, they have to do inferior jobs. An immigrant Indian woman suffers doubly at the hands of male member in the family and at the hands of foreigners.

Key Words: Migration, suppression, exploitation, identity, assertion.

INTRODUCTION:

Migration has been a universal phenomenon of the human civilization from times immemorial. People have given way to their expression mostly through writing. In the colonial and post-colonial periods, a good number of Indians have settled in various parts of the world whose writings called as Diasporic literature. They use their writings as a platform to share their experiences to the world audience. When it comes to diasporic women writers, the levels of issues expand. Rootlessness, alienation, suppression, oppression and struggle for existence are some of the concerns, but beneath these is a greater scope for psychoanalytic study of the women characters.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such writer who has been active in extending a helping hand to the women Indian immigrants in the U. S. in her writings, she presents her woman characters who are capable of fighting against the social set-up to find their power and create a space for themselves and find their identity in the male dominated society.. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings reveal the anxiety at the level of self, local, national and international.

Though Indians migrate to the west for better prospects in business, education and research their love for the motherland is not diminished in any way. Indians are nostalgic about their source country though they are comfortably settled abroad. The immigrants cannot do away with the influence of Indian life whether it is cultural, philosophical, or religious. They cannot forget their civilization, their past, their food habits, their clothing and their life style. The writers of Indian Diaspora express the problems faced by these people. Among the major themes of these writers is alienation, rootlessness, expression of past with present and discrimination of all sorts. Diaspora is nothing but a feeling of continuous restlessness and severe nostalgia. It is not a comfortable rosy way of life; but multiple thorns are scattered in their journey from their motherland to the foreign land.

A migrant in the new land is haunted by numerous doubts such as his life, his identity and his roots. Under this dilemma a diaspora carries a burden of his homeland. He carries his own culture with him. He cannot come to terms with his new burdensome life. Living in the past creates restlessness to stop something that is slipping off their hands, lives, and nation remains in the mind as a baggage of home culture. The guilt, restlessness, cultural heritage haunt migrant community settled in foreign land more. They are dwindling between two cultures, but do not expect to wipe out India from their minds.

Divakaruni writes chiefly about Indian immigrant women and their lives. She narrates her immigrant experiences which become the immigrant's voice in the diaspora world which is rarely heard in present world. She also wrote several articles dealing with women problems. She tried her hand at almost all genres of literature but she left her indelible mark on fiction. Through her writings she destroys myths and stereotypes to unite people by dissolving numerous boundaries including color, nation, race, economic disparity, slavery, gender, tradition and modernity in assertion of identity of her women characters. For the study of A woman's power in creating a space for herself a study of her novels **Vine of Desire** and **Sister of My Heart** - two novels written in a sequel are taken up.

Vine of Desire is the sequel of **Sister of My Heart** in which the disillusioned conditions of Anju and Sudha not only in India but also in America. Western freedom and it's happy-go-lucky philosophy affect the mind of Sudha. However, she firmly sticks to her Indian values. She accepts life as an exile to plunge into dark sea of America as a part of punishment. Her repentance exhibits her Indian way of life and feeling of guilty. Sudha on account of economic disparity, guilt, shame and tragedy signifies continuous displacement to get both a job and shelter. As an immigrant she accepts the job to serve a mentally and physically sick octogenarian but in her heart, she longs to reach her homeland. Chitra's protagonists are trapped between two cultures, two ideologies and hence explore all relative issues such as racial discrimination, lack of coherence, cultural assimilation,

cultural hybridity, hegemony, internal dilemma and so on. They break from past and adopt new cultural scenario for perfect footing in the new home. Divakaruni prescribes freedom for women, especially immigrant women, liberty from the clutches of patriarchy, psychological suppression of age-old culture, tradition, motherhood, divorce, abortion and otherness in order to support migrated women in America.

The present novels **Sister of My Heart** and its sequel **The Vine of Desire** narrate the story of immigrant sisters, Anju and Sudha. It is the story of Bengali middle-class family. Their smooth and happy life becomes complicated after the migration of Sudha and Anju to the US. Anju and Sudha were distant cousins. On the day of their birth their fathers had disappeared mysteriously. They belong to the Chatterjee family and they love and confide in each other like own siblings.

Anju moves to America with her NRI computer engineer husband Sunil to California who promises her of her further education in America. Sudha remains in India. She is married off in a traditional Bengali family. Though the two sisters get separate physically and geographically from each other their familial tragedies bring them together again in the US. They try to heal each other's sorrow.

After the disappearance of the male members from the family, mothers become the heads of the respective families. They take all familial responsibilities on their shoulders. Both the girls share joys and sorrows together. When the girls turn to womanhood, they are trained as perfect daughters and ideal wives. When Gouri Ma gets a minor attack, the girls accept the decision of arranged marriage. They sacrifice their education and career to satisfy their womenfolk. Sudha sacrifices her love for Ashok as she harbors guilt in her mind that her father is the main cause of family disgrace and their tragic situations. Anju moves with her NRI computer engineer husband Sunil to California who promises her further education in America. Sudha remains in India. She is married off in a traditional Bengali family. Though the two sisters get separate physically and geographically from each other their familial tragedies bring them together again. They try to heal each other's sorrow.

In America Anju leads lonely life experiencing physical, mental and psychological strain in her present life. The result is the loss of her child in her womb. Anju thought that Sudha's arrival in America may heal her sorrow of miscarriage. But her trouble is doubled with Anju's arrival in America as she comes to know that her husband is physically attracted to Sudha. American life style brings sea change in Sudha. she chooses self-pleasure before her moral duty. Sudha becomes conscious of her guilt in Anju's flat. She tries to find a job in unknown America. She leads difficult life after her separation from Anju. It is difficult for her to raise Dayita and lead smooth and comfortable life. While walking with Dayita in a park, she meets with immigrant young girl Sara who assures her a job. She gets a job and starts respecting herself. She has to serve an old man who suffers both physically and mentally. His alienation from India makes him restless. Both are the victims of the pangs of migration and long to return home. Sudha returns to India with the old man on the condition to complete education of Dayita. She never returns to her old home; rather she starts a new life with self-confidence.

Anju despite freedom, education and job feels dissatisfied. She finds her life as hollow and meaningless in America. Her husband in the beginning seems trustworthy but later one finds a change in his behaviour. Though they are united by marriage, in all the other aspects they are miles apart. She loses faith in life and relationship

because of the betrayal of her husband and her sister. After living in America for many years, she cuts off all her family ties. Her bitter experiences of both the native and foreign lands turn her into a creative writer.

Divakaruni's novels hang around the theme of tradition and modernity. The journey of characters including Anju, Sunil and Sudha to new nation is filled with mixed emotions like joy, liberation and rejuvenation on one side and fear, suppression and suffocation on the other side. Marriage and motherhood become torturous for her. Tradition tells her to worship her husband and in laws and work non-stop for the well-being of the family, though they ask her to kill her child in the womb itself. And a reformist in her asks to break the fetters of tyrannical and dominant hegemonic male tendency. She thinks killing of the child in womb is a great sin and a mother in her doesn't bear it at any cost. She ponders over these problems and comes to conclusion that there is no alternative for her but to leave her in laws house. Prawin, D. Suryanwanshi remarks: “

Anju's protest against injustice has been done to her cousin and sudha's refusal to accept any favour from Anju or Gouri Ma, her decision of not using her father's money for the marriage though they need it badly shows the independent nature of these girls which is hard for an Indian immigrant woman to leave her husband, his name and the fine protection of family. Sudha comes to America in order to create her own identity and to achieve freedom and independence Sudha starts a fresh new life in America with her daughter for whose survival she walked out of the security of wife hood” (28, 29).

Sudha's struggle for her own identity and independence is very firm as she doesn't depend on anybody. She doesn't accept any help either from Anju or her own father. Her rejection to all shows a determined and independent woman in her. She decides to support her daughter by her own. She faces many problems single handed. She undergoes betrayal at every nook and the corner at the hands of her own people. Her in-laws exploit her for everything she thinks right and deserving. She gives birth to her child and works for her future. Sara is the only character that renders her some kind of help. Struggle of immigrant at many levels such as individual, social, cultural and transnational and multicultural that has been focused by the novelist. American freedom brings a breach in her belief of Indian tradition. She consciously starts viewing tradition with its efficacy. She grows suspicious towards those Indian traditions that suppress and exploit women folk.

Divakaruni wishes to make women free from the cocoon of exploitation and suppression. Sudha's journey in finding her identity starts with treating herself as human being equal to men. There were number of problems before her and displacement added few more Indian society is predominately patriarchal and Indian women are bound to four walls. In such condition she doesn't get to know about the world properly. And when such a woman migrates to other country, the situation gets even worse. The clash between tradition and modernity continues in all their lives. This can be seen in the lives of two sisters Sudha and Anju Divakaruni presents the fact of Indian women who are migrated and not independent one, but caught by various conflicts in their minds. This predicament of Indian women who struggles to come out of all exploitation and leads towards achieving social, economic, political and spiritual freedom of themselves to attain their self-hood, identity confidence, rights and empower in their lives. It is the need of the present world to boost and encourage women to set their own targets, fight for 83 equal rights and make conducive atmosphere for them. They must come out of their

inferiority complex, societal stereotyping, economic and spiritual dependency all of which weaken them in their journey of success.

From the reading of the two novels, one can understand that Divakaruni's writings depict realistic experiences of immigrant people. Life outside one's country teaches these characters how to face struggles in life rather poignantly than in motherland. Life in motherland is less problematic and there are number of helping people nearby. Neeraj Agnirihotri in his article, "Diaspora consciousness in Sister of My Heart," communicates that "Banerjee's writing affirms that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersions but an experience made up of collectivities and multiple journeys expatriates who emigrated from India to America face the clash of opposing cultures, a feel owed by attempts to adjust, to adopt and to accept. Only the degree of that adaptation differs according to the generations. Divakaruni observes her culture and homeland objectively it retreats reminder of her identity thus analyses the relationship of women with universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance, and disorder thus articulating the diasporic consciousness in this work" (1, 4) But in foreign problems is more and no helping hand. It is not easy for migrant to settle in the new land as there are tremendous basic changes in root land and foreign land. The life, society, culture, and ways of living are all different from the mother land. Divakaruni's writings presents many diaspora issues relating to home, marriage, society, cultural, conflict, east- west conflict, racial violence, feelings of otherness, nostalgia and alienation it was so sensitive that her characters, events, symbols and revelation of emotions capture diaspora view and there in core of time characters try to adjust with the new atmosphere to establish their identity in alien migration land. Anju and Sudha's choice for perfection is the result of realization, selfconfidence assertion to identity formation, powerful, intense and painful feelings and authority over circumstances, male tyranny and exploitation. They actively rebel against wrong notions imposed on them by society. Ophelia Anthony in her paper, An Exposition of the Cultural Problems of diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's **The Vine of Desire** further comments: "The Tormenting emotions that result when the characters chose to throw the baggage of their culture and create a new identity, the choices they make and interaction they have with immigrant community in America and through contact their family, forces them to quest their existence and morality and find answers" (105). Physical displacement is not bedrock but Divakaruni asserts whenever women face difficulties they accept female friend to tackle the problems. The characters of Divakaruni face racial problems for being minority in foreign country. For their livelihood in new land they have to do inferior jobs. An immigrant Indian woman suffers doubly at the hands of male member in the family and at the hands of foreigners. Sudha prefers home nation and returns to India to pursue to serve and assert her identity. Anju's inclination towards becoming a writer is infact a source of venting out the anger and frustration faced by immigrant people in America. Migration of Divakaruni's characters is out of career opportunities, attraction to the West or familial tragedy.

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