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An Exploration Of Relationship And Patriarchal Resistance In *Sister Of My Heart*

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Abstract: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known Indian American author who explores the trajectory of the lives of women. She tries to project the problems of oppressed women. Her works mostly deal with the themes like cultural identity, immigration sensibility, i.e. the sense of being caught between two worlds, sense of alienation, belongingness, complexity in relationships, and so on. Her works are usually women centric where she explores the world and emotions of women particularly their struggles, empowerment and resilience in the patriarchal society. The protagonists in her novels are usually women who narrate the story through their own perspectives. This is apparent in her novels like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Palace of Illusions* and so on. Divakaruni has projected the world of women in the novel, *Sister of My Heart*, through the two women characters, Sudha and Anju. The two sisters share a deep emotional bond and stand for each other during their adverse times by overlooking their personal problems. These sisters navigate the tension between societal expectations and self-realization. Both the protagonists are bound by traditional gender roles with respect to their relationships to family, marriage and social duty. However, with the passage of time, as their personal experiences unfold that are marked by love, betrayal, loss, sacrifice; they gradually subvert these roles and embark their journey towards selfhood. Sudha is projected as a submissive character who later becomes self-assertive. On the other hand, Anju is projected as an empowered character within restrictive social structures who struggles for her identity in the foreign land. Through their resilience and emotional growth, the novelist highlights the transformative potential of women as they resist against the patriarchal norms and break free from such constraints. The novel, *Sister of My Heart*, projects the complexities of female identity formation by focusing on the interplay between societal expectations and personal independence. The novel's narrative leads us to a discourse on gender discrimination, empowerment of women, challenges of a multicultural world within restrictive social constructs.

Index Terms- Patriarchy, empowerment, self-identity, relationship, resilience

Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni is a well-known leading figure in the field of Indian English fiction. A Professor of Creative Writing at Houston University, Texas, Divakaruni is an Indian born American author and poet who tries to focus on the pain and plight of oppressed women. She also presents the problems faced by immigrants in the foreign land and explores the themes of female empowerment and resilience, cultural identity, quest for self-identity, tradition versus modernity and so on. She is a diasporic writer who had written many novels, poems, short stories, young adult fiction and had received various accolades and awards such as PEN Josephine Award Miles Literary Award in 1996, Pushcart Prize in 1997 and 2003,

Distinguished Writer Award from the South Asian Literary Association in 2007 and so on. Divakaruni's first collection of stories, *Arranged Marriage* won an American Book Award. Some of her important novels are *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *The Palace of Illusions*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, *Independence*. Her novel, *The Mistress of Spices* that won the Crawford Award in 2005 has also been adapted into a film in the same year. A television series was made on the novel, *Sister of My Heart* by Suhasini Maniratnam, that was aired in Tamil. The author's books are mostly women centric. She had always wanted to present the life of women in her works through their own perspective. Divakaruni makes sure in her works that it is the female character who narrates the story through her own perspective in the male dominated society. For example, in her novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, she has presented the story through the perspective of Draupadi. In the novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, the story is presented through the perspective of the protagonist, Tilo. In the novel, *Sister of My Heart*, the story is presented through the perspectives of the two sisters, Anju and Sudha who give the audience an understanding of their thoughts, emotions and their personal journeys. In this novel, the novelist tries to project women's resilience, their empowerment through various traditional gender roles they try to fit into. This novel portrays how the two Indian girls Anju and Sudha, share a strong emotional bond and resist against the traditional patriarchal norms and expectations. The story of this novel reminds us of the pioneer writers of feminism who had written about various forms of women's oppression such as Mary Wollstonecraft in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and so on.

The novel, *Sister of My Heart* was published in 1999 and was followed by its sequel, *The Vine of Desire*. The novel, *Sister of My Heart*, is divided into two books, *The Princess in the Palace of Snakes* having twenty chapters and *The Queen of Swords* with twenty-two chapters. Though the protagonists immigrate to America but mainly the setting of the novel is Kolkata, India, the native place of the novelist. The prominent themes that reflect in the novel are sisterhood, mother daughter relationship, resistance against patriarchal traditional norms, immigration, quest for self-identity in a foreign land and cultural change related to immigration, and so on. The novel revolves around two cousin sisters, Anju and Sudha who are born in the same house within a gap of twelve hours. The first part of the novel deals with the birth, upbringing and marriage of the two girls and the second part of the novel deals with their post marriage life. The novelist has beautifully and meticulously presented the relationships of the women in the family. The story is narrated by Anju and Sudha in the alternating chapters which gives us an insight into their thoughts, emotions and inner world. Anju and Sudha grew up in the same house by the three females, Pishi, Gouri and Nalini unlike other families where fathers also play a vital role in the upbringing of their children. So, these girls had three mothers, Gouri Ma, Nalini Ma and Pishi Ma. The fathers of these girls, Bijoy and Gopal did not care about the health of their wives and went on a ruby hunting expedition. The news of sudden death of their fathers while on a treasure hunt had caused the mothers of Anju and Sudha to suffer labour pain that gave birth to the two premature baby girls. Since beginning, the two sisters shared a deep emotional bond, became best friends and constantly cared for each other. They shared everything in their home including their driver, Singhji, whose face has been burnt beyond recognition but is very loyal towards the family. In this novel, the novelist explores the deep emotional bond between the two sisters and present their journey from childhood to marriage with various challenges. The novel vividly presents the plight of women in the patriarchal society and their resistance against the set patriarchal norms. The novel beautifully explores the complexities and bonding of various relationships like that of between sisters, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, husband and wife.

The story begins with the sisters' widowed aunt, Pishi Ma narrating the story of Bidhata Purush, a deity who surreptitiously enters into the rooms of the new born and write their destiny on their foreheads. Anju hardly pays any heed to this story but Sudha becomes inquisitive and speculates that the last word written by the deity for her might have been sorrow. While the two sisters are very close to each other, but they have different perspectives and personalities. Sudha is submissive and accepts traditional patriarchal norms and values whereas, Anju is bit aggressive and becomes skeptical when it comes to blind adherence to such norms and questions them. It is clear when Pishi Ma, mentioning about what Bidhata Purush might have written for Anju, said, "I know what he writes for Anju. *You will be brave and clever, you will fight injustice, you will not give in. You will marry a fine man and travel the world and have many sons. You will be happy*" (21). Through the contrasting personalities of Anju and Sudha, the novelist meticulously presents the clash

between tradition and modernity. Sudha with lot of efforts finally succeeds in eliciting information from Pishi Ma about her father's death. The revelation of this family secret where her father, Gopal, had lied about himself and falsely claimed the Chatterjee lineage and was somewhere responsible for the death of Anju's father, Bijoy Chatterjee, had devastates her internally and she decides to keep this secret back from her sister, Anju. Although this information had created some distance between the sisters for the first time but still, they loved and cared for each other. The novel explores how this deep emotional bond between the two sisters, Anju and Sudha, is tested as they grow up, get married and then separated as Anju moved to America with her husband Sunil and Sudha stayed back in India with her husband Ramesh and in laws.

As the girls enter into their teens, they intend to pursue university education but were made to accept that it would be their husband's decision after marriage. Sudha in contrast to Anju, made up her mind to get married and be a good wife, daughter in law and a mother. Sudha met Ashok while watching a movie at a cinema theatre with her sister and immediately got attracted towards him. She wanted to marry Ashok who sends a proposal to marry her but it was not accepted by her family as he belonged to a lower caste. This incident hastened groom search for Sudha by her mother, Nalini. On the other hand, Gouri Ma had a heart attack following which she decides Anju's marriage as well. Sudha wanted to elope with Ashok but she thinks about her sister's happiness over her own as her elopement would bring much disgrace to the family that might in turn break the matrimonial alliance that was being arranged for Anju with Sunil whose father was a conservative person. In Indian tradition system, a girl is trained and taught to get married and adjust in the new family. Since the girl child are born, their marriage becomes a tremendous concern for the parents. And now, when Sudha gets an opportunity to elope with Ashok, she gives it up for the sake of her sister's happy future. This sacrifice made by Sudha for her sister clearly shows love and concern for her. Earlier when Pishi Ma narrated them stories of demons and fairies, Anju did not believe them, "What nonsense, she says. There are no demons" (16). But Sudha believes in the existence of demons as is evident in the novel: "...but I have a feeling they exist. Haven't I sensed their breath, like slime-black fingers brushing my spine? Later, when we are alone, I will tell Anju this. But in front of others, I am always loyal to her. So I say, bravely, 'That's right. Those are just old stories'" (16). Thus, even if Sudha differs in her opinion, then also, she stands by her sister strongly. Anju is a bold and defiant girl who questions many things but loves Sudha unconditionally as is apparent in the following lines:

Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart. I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She'll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I'll know she understands me perfectly. Like no-one else in the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world will. (24)

Gouri Ma who works hard to run her family against the societal norms, starts gathering money for the weddings of Anju, her daughter, and Sudha, Nalini's daughter. Nalini wanted to arrange marriage for Sudha as she was not happy to see her with Ashok who belonged to a lower caste. While Gouri wanted her daughter to get married at the earliest because of her ill health. So, both the mothers were extremely concerned about the future of their daughters and wanted to secure it as they knew that their daughters did not have the protection of their fathers. Gouri Ma has lot of patience and is a strong lady. She takes the responsibility of her family and works hard to run her family. This is not liked by her relatives as they think that a widow woman should not go outside her house for work, though it is overlooked by Gouri Ma and she does whatever is possible for the betterment of her child and family. Sudha shares a beautiful relationship with Gouri Ma and has lot of respect for her as she puts it:

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 fathers' deaths. But her eyes, dark and endless-deep – they make me think of Kalodighi, the enormous lake behind the country mansion our family used to own before Anju and I were born. When Gouri Ma smiles at me with her eyes, I stand up straighter. I want to be noble and brave, just like her. (17)

Nalini Ma, on the other hand, lives her life in her own way without following the strict rules and norms of the widowhood in the patriarchal society. She is much concerned about her skin, beauty, looks and spends time with her friends. Sudha says in the novel, "...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). She further says about her mother, "Her perfect shaped lips glisten red from paan, which she loves to chew –

mostly for the colour it leaves on her mouth, I think” (17). Though Nalini depends on Gouri for financial necessities, but constantly teaches Sudha and Anju how good girls should behave. She often tells them rhymes with morals. The three mothers are also strongly connected to each other and are concerned about the well-being of both the girls in the family. The females in the house share a beautiful bond and assert their reluctance and resistance against the set traditional patriarchal norms in their own way. Gouri Ma works outside for her family while Nalini Ma cares about her beauty and enjoys with her friends and Pishi Ma had a desire to stand against it as is clear when she thinks what Bidhata Purush would have written on Anju’s forehead.

As the story moves on, the two sisters get married together on the same day. Sudha gets married to Ramesh and lives in India while Anju gets married to Sunil and moves to America. When Sunil visited the Chatterjee family for the first time, he got fascinated by the beauty of Sudha. Though Sudha never disclosed this to Anju and she also didn’t tell her why she didn’t elope with Ashok because she never wanted to hurt Anju. But, during their wedding procession, Sunil’s attraction towards Sudha was noticed by Anju. This is the second time when some distance was created between the two sisters due to the entry of husbands in their lives. The sisters moved away far from each other physically, but this geographical distance could not create distance in their hearts. Now they occasionally talked to each other, and mostly they communicated through letters. Anju was happy with Sunil as she believed that Sunil had the same choices and preferences as he shared his liking for the books by Virginia Woolf. Then she got engaged to make herself comfortable in the new land, with new culture and people. The novelist vividly presents the problems faced after immigration through the character, Anju. This novel has the diasporic elements as Anju struggles to adjust herself in the new cultural environment. On the other hand, Ramesh, husband of Sudha, is a nice man but has been brought up by a single parent, his mother, who took care of him as well as his siblings. After some time, both the sisters get pregnant and share this with each other. However, Sudha’s mother-in-law wanted the first child to be a male and so, on knowing that Sudha will probably give birth to a female child, she insisted her for abortion. This reminds us of Prof. Amartya Sen’s concept of missing women in the context of gender equality. Siuli Jana and Sanghamitra Lahiri aptly put it in their book, *Women’s Issues: Political and Economic Perspectives*, “‘Son preference’ leading to sex-selective abortion is the most important cause behind the phenomenon of missing women but there are other causes too. Preferential treatment of boys and neglect of girls in intra-household distribution of food, nutrition and medical care lead to much higher infant mortality and under-5 mortality rates for girls than for boys” (6). This instruction of her mother-in-law had broken Sudha, though Ramesh understands her plight, but could not go against his mother’s wishes and could not stand by her. Sudha finally reveals this situation of hers to Anju. Anju on knowing this, becomes extremely worried for her sister. The sisters’ love and concern for each other is very well projected here by the novelist.

Sudha finally makes up her mind for not going to abort her child at any cost. She decides to give birth to her baby girl even if she has to go against the societal norms and give divorce to her husband. On the other hand, her sister, Anju, when discussed this matter with Sunil, he, like any other domineering male, said that Sudha must listen to her in laws and go for abortion. Anju is taken aback to know the real mindset of Sunil and understands that she was till now living under false illusions of a happy married life. The novel reflects that women’s voices are not heard even if it is their decision to shape their lives. Anju now decides to support her sister and therefore, secretly joins a job against the permission of her husband. The novelist meticulously and vividly presents how Anju resists against the patriarchal societal norms to support her sister and on the other hand, Sudha raises her voice and breaks her marriage to give birth to her girl child whom she later addresses as ‘Dayita’. This decision of Sudha projects her as an empowered woman who takes her own decision for her future and her child. Let us see what the authors mention about the empowered women in their book, *Women’s Issues: Political and Economic Perspectives*, “Empowered women is expected to be self-reliant, internally strong and able to gain control over material as well as non-material resources including credit, property right and political equality. They should also be able to protect themselves by male violence” (Jana, Lahiri10)

Sudha comes back to her mothers where Ashok once again approaches her and proposes for marriage. Ashok says that he will accept her daughter as well and so Sudha agrees at this. Once again Sudha starts harbouring false hopes of a happy future until Ashok confesses that he wants her daughter to live with Sudha’s mothers so that he can start a new family with Sudha. On knowing this, Sudha’s hopes of a better

future are dashed to ground once again, but she is clear in her mind and is strong and determined to parent her daughter alone. Sudha now herself understands the hardships and challenges faced by her mother in her upbringing. She realizes the problems and plight of her mother when she herself becomes a mother. The personality of Sudha transforms completely and she emerges as the new Sudha. It is well presented in the novel how the two sisters tried their level best and gave lot of effort to build their family but could not overlook the voice of their inner conscience and so raised their voices to register their resistance against the injustice of the patriarchal society. Anju, on the other hand, gets involved into a heated argument with Sunil, when he discovers about her job during her pregnancy following which she developed some issues and immediately rushed to the hospital. While at hospital, Sunil could hold the body of that baby but Anju could not. After this incident, Anju slipped into deep depression and stopped doing anything and didn't even want to come out of her bed. The mothers tried to hide about this incident from Sudha till the time of her delivery. But, Sudha had a bad dream about Anju and she somehow managed to call her. Sunil picked up the phone and put it on speaker and Sudha started narrating her a story. It was the first time during her depression when Anju responded. Sudha decided to visit America to help her sister and drag her out of her depression. Anju wanted Sudha to visit America with her daughter. Anju finally feels excited to unite with her sister in America along with her daughter. So, the three females embrace each other and get prepared for their future journey. The novelist has beautifully presented the sublime concept of sisterhood in this novel.

The novel shows how the enduring power of sisterhood with love and affection help the protagonists to stand for them amidst societal pressures and challenges in their personal lives. Though the lives of the sisters changed after their marriage, but despite their personal challenges and physical distance, the deep emotional bond between them remained unaffected. It is in fact, this strength of their deep emotional bond that helped them to fight against their adverse situations. The novelist, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni has beautifully portrayed the feelings and emotions of women. The novelist tries to present the society's set of rules that create lot of hardships for women and make their life worse. She has focused on the problem of widowhood as well as the strength of sisterhood. Divakaruni in her works address the problem of women exploitation and diverts our attention to other social evils such as female foeticide and gender discrimination. She also projects in her works how the women learn to become self-assertive and independent with the passage of time, after going through a lot of difficulties and challenges in their lives. Her works usually focus on the feminist themes addressing the issues of cultural identity, challenges faced by immigrant women, relationships, gender discrimination and so on. The way she projects her protagonists, who, after struggling in their life gradually learn to assert their identity is indeed commendable. Though she sincerely presents the sufferings and challenges faced by women in the patriarchal society but her characters do not surrender against the adverse situations in their lives. Thus, we can say that the feminism as presented in her novels is not that rebellious, rather it projects her characters as the women who resist and raise their voice against their oppression that ultimately help them in their endeavors to dismantle the stereotypical thoughts of the patriarchal society. Well, the women characters in Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's novels reminds us of the concept of 'New Woman' that was used by Sarah Grand in 1893 and further in *Candida* by George Bernard Shaw and later popularized by writers like Henry James. The heroines in Divakaruni's novels get transformed into the New Woman by learning through their struggles and sufferings.

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