

# FORMING AND REFORMING IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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## **Abstract:**

Women oppression and suppression have been taking in so many variant forms and women have been reduced to mere objects or non-human beings in the later centuries. The position of women has not been changed palpably till the end of 1980s. The various forms of feminism though speak on women's liberty, empowerment and individuality, it is clear that even now the status of women remains the same with a little visible development found among the socially fortunate women. The need for women's liberation and development has been resulted in formulating the concept, 'Feminism'. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, being a postcolonial diasporic writer, focuses most of her writing on the problems faced by women immigrants. She also focuses her writing on gender issues, social inequalities, ideological structures and biases. Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is about the life of two protagonists namely Anju and Sudha and how they assert their individuality, overcoming the circumstances and situations they are placed in. The other women characters like Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini are also studied to see the position of Indian widows and how they manage their lives without male counterparts. Self-respect and independence are the two qualities both Anju and Sudha have been brought up with. They are strong and bold from the beginning but thwarted due to patriarchy and male domination. But they assert their individual 'self' after overthrowing the oppressive forces.

**Key words:** Feminism, oppression, suppression, mental turmoil, patriarchy, amniocentesis.

## **Discussion:**

Women enjoyed considerably an elated status in the Vedic and pre-Vedic periods. They were respected and placed on par with men or even above the status of them. They were given opportunities to participate in religious, political and social activities. This status of women has been changing from time to time. Women oppression and suppression have been taking in so many variant forms and women have been reduced to mere objects or non-human beings in the later centuries. Though Manu's *Manusmriti* talks about giving respect to women, it advocates a subservient position to them. It recommended a social set-up in which men would be the law-givers, heads of the families, rulers, professional and women must be the shadow of men helping their men, confining themselves within the four walls of the house.

Even during the freedom struggle, the position of women did not find any change though Raja Rammohan Roy, Gandhiji and so many other freedom fighters advocated the necessity of women's freedom and their participation in the freedom struggle. The position of women has not been changed palpably till the end of 1980s. The various forms of feminism though speak on women's liberty, empowerment and individuality, it is clear that even now the status of women remains the same with a little visible development found among the socially fortunate women. On the other hand, many other women still experience all sorts of humiliations and oppression in the hands of male chauvinistic society. Yet uplifting women in all arenas is the need of the hour for the society to bloom fully. Development of women's condition has been defined by the World Conference of the U.N. held at Copenhagen in July 1980 as:

Development is here interpreted to mean total development, including development in the political, economic, social, cultural, and other dimensions of human life as also the physical, moral, intellectual and cultural growth of the human person. Women's development should not only be viewed as an issue in social development but should be seen as an essential component in every dimensions of development. (Ghadially 14)

The need for women's liberation and development has been resulted in formulating the concept, 'Feminism' which mainly focuses on women's struggle to free themselves from male oppression. Literature which is in no way escape from the influence of social happenings, finds works produced by women writers with feminist ideals. The Feminist Movement has many waves that focuses on issues such as women's right in voting, male domination and the system of patriarchy, gender discrimination, and woman's inner freedom and awakening. For the postmodern writers the fourth wave of feminism that focuses on woman's inner freedom and their individuality is the thrust area and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who is a postmodern writer has no escape from such influence of the fourth wave feminism. The field of psychology and psychological criticism in studying literature help in understanding the inner working of human especially women's minds. According to Sushila Singh:

Feminism is a philosophy that fights against such definitions of masculine and feminine and aims at placing women in a just perspective. The word 'feminism', however, must be understood in its broadest sense a referring to an intense awareness of identity as woman, and interest in feminine problems. Its meaning should be restricted to the advocacy of women's rights. (21)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, being a postcolonial diasporic writer, focuses most of her writing on the problems faced by women immigrants. She also focuses her writing on gender issues, social inequalities, ideological structures and biases. There are many incidents which led her to opt for writing. Many critics have written about the writer's interests in their articles. Elizabeth Softky writes: "Leaving India caused Divakaruni to reevaluate her homeland's culture, and specifically its treatment of women. Most of India's 450 million women lives as their grandmother did – in rural areas, receiving little or no formal education and gaining status only through marriage and bearing sons" (2). Lavina Dhingra Shankar also talks about Divakaruni's inspiration for her writings: "Divakaruni's upbringing in a devout Hindu household has influenced her personal values and her writing style, and religious mythologies and stories of spiritual healing recur in her works. In her interviews, she talks openly about her belief in the teachings of the Vedanata and the philosophies of Swami Chinmayananda" (64). Sarkar critically appreciates the writer, her novels and the purpose of her writing by saying:

Writers like Divakaruni are acutely aware of their already exiled or marginalized state in the male dominated Indian society. For them, the physical act of relocation, a deliberate move to a foreign country, becomes an act of self-determination and rebellion against traditional norms of behaviour. (39)

The observations by these critics of Divakaruni's writing career certainly helps in understanding the themes of her novels. Divakaruni's second novel, *Sister of My Heart* which was published in 1999 is taken for the study in this article. The novel is about the life of two protagonists namely Anju and Sudha and how they assert their individuality, overcoming the circumstances and situations they are placed in. The other women characters like Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini are also studied to see the position of Indian widows and how they manage their lives without male counterparts. The two women protagonists, Anju and Sudha form and reform their identities during the course of their life due to various familial and social circumstances. In fact, Divakaruni has adapted alternative first-person narrative technique to put forth the feelings of the two protagonists in a clear and distinct way. It mostly centers on the love, compassion and understanding existing between the two sisters. In the journey of their lives, they encounter many obstacles. Overcoming the challenges of life, they finally become independent and assert their female 'selves'. Hafiza Nilofer Khan critically avers thus:

Rendered in an often sensual and poetic language, the story primarily weaves around the magnetic love that pulls these women together. Though with birth, marriage and pregnancy all occurring for the two Chatterjee sisters at about the same time....

Psychological healing and memory-mending are orchestrated by the characters in the novel through the device of story-telling. (103)

In understanding the creation of 'self', it is important to know the mindset of the two girls from their childhood onwards. These girls are brought up in a family where women are heads. These women who are the mothers of these two girls take the responsibility of maintaining the house due to the untimely death of their husbands. Girls born and brought up in Indian traditional families are aware of the condition of the values, morals and aspirations that the family members have towards their children. The girls, who are under the supervision of the mothers observe their

behaviour and idolize themselves as they grow up. According to psychoanalytical theory propounded by Sigmund Freud, it is understood that children learn from the environment surrounding them. There are different stages in the development of a child, the first stage being the oral stage and the second, the anal stage. The third stage is called social learning stage. Social-learning theory suggests that the adult shape children's acquisition of gender roles. With no men present in the family, a female universe is constructed in the novel by the ladies of house. Veena Selvam talks about this feminine world:

What was originally conceived of as a restrictive boundary for the women is recreated into a female universe just like Tilo's store. But the difference is that the rules upheld in this world are those laid by the patriarchal society. It is only later that the world of the Chatterjee women is completely transformed into a feminine one. (57)

The two women, Anju and Sudha are close to each other like biological sisters, though they are cousins. Sudha, the younger of the cousins, knows her place in the family. She is also aware of what is destined for her in life. Anju and Sudha were named 'Anjali' and 'Basudha.' Sudha knows the meaning of their names: "Anjali, which means offering, for a good woman is to offer up her life for others. And Basudha, so that I will be as patient as the earth goddess I am named after" (8). Knowing the qualities of Anju, Sudha comments about Anju's life, assuming what the Bidhata Purush has written for her: "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" (9).

Through the words of Pishi, she understands that her life is for 'beauty, goodness and sorrows' as written by the Bidhata Purush. She perceives that her life is filled only with sorrow since she is born as a dependent of Anju's family. Yet Sudha enjoys the same comforts like Anju in the house and both of them feel that they are biological sisters. Love, compassion and the heart-felt bond exist between them. However, both the girls are conditioned and controlled by the mothers which naturally lead them to trespass their mothers. Talking about mother-daughter relationship and how the mother conditions the daughter out of fear, Simone de Beauvoir says:

How complex the relations of mother to daughter are: the daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the mother is at once overweeningly affectionate and hostile towards her daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of proudly laying claim to her own femininity and also a way of revenging herself for it. (309)

Culture plays an important role in determining the lives of women all over the world, in general and India, in particular. But women do not understand that the very culture is created by men for his own benefit of supremacy over women. When women get the role of mother or mother-in-law, they adhere to the culture strictly unknowing that the cultural traits contain patriarchal norms. Thus, the grown-up women become the proxy of the patriarchy which in turn help men to subjugate women. Sudha is the direct and Anju is the indirect victims of patriarchy. When they get married at their marriageable age, Sudha marries Ramesh and goes to live in the rural district of West Bengal. Anju marries Sunil and goes to America to live with him. Marriage is the destiny of women, especially the Indian women. When both Sudha and Anju are given in marriage, their mothers relax themselves thinking that their duty to the daughters is over. That is why when Sudha comes back to Kolkata breaking away the marital-tie from her husband, Nalini, Sudha's mother advises her to reconcile with her husband, bearing all his male-chauvinistic attitudes.

Though women work for a happy married life, sometimes it is shattered by others around her. In Sudha's case, it is her mother-in-law who does not accept Sudha to carry a girl child, forces her to abort the child. This kind of injustice, gender bias and discrimination even when the foetus is in the womb is seen in more traditional and conservative societies like India. Male

child preference is, of course, one of the tenets of patriarchy. Sudha's mother-in-law is a traditionally bound woman and she thinks that the first-born male is a luck to the family but a female-child is a bane. Therefore, she forces Sudha to abort the female-child found in Sidha's womb. When Sudha is adamant, she insists this through Sudha's husband, Ramesh. Suma Chitnis views that female infanticide is one of the means of attributing inferior status to women: Even more painful evidence of their inferior status is that female infanticide, sati, and child marriage which nineteenth century reformers had fought hard to abolish by law, linger, particularly in rural India. Practices such as denial of remarriage to upper cast Hindu widows, polygamy, and dowry, similarly made illegal, continue. Worse yet, some of these practices have gained strength in new forms. For instance, the use of amniocentesis to determine the sex of the foetus is, in a sense, a return to female infanticide. (89)

Sudha's mother-in-law resorts to this kind of activity as she gives a lot of weightage to Indian culture. The Oedipus complex is visible in Ramesh when he gives value to his mother's words. He listens to his mother and remains silent when his mother asks Sudha to get aborted. Ramesh remains a mute spectator in the drama of Sudha's mother-in-law's insistence of aborting Sudha's female child. Unable to seek support from anyone especially from her husband, Sudha leaves the house. A woman who has complete confidence in her husband, cannot believe man turning to mother for decision making. In Sudha's case, it is Ramesh who creates trouble for her. According to Veena Selvam:

The male world only creates trouble for the protagonists. Marriage tears them apart and Anju moves to America while Sudha to rural Bengal. Men separate them in terms of geography. Their lives are shattered when they attempt to conform to the rules of the masculine society. (57)

Sudha as advised by Anju goes to Kolkata to seek refuge from her mother. But the mother who is also traditionally built, reprimands Sudha for her audacity. She is afraid that the society may talk ill about the family and the reputation of the family may go astray. But advised by Pishi Ma, Nalini, Sudha's mother, some-how understands Sudha's tortured married life. Sudha, in this novel, is seen as a strong independent woman who can live on her own claiming her own space in the world. If Lalita in *The Mistress of Spices* walks out of the marriage due to ill-treatment and oppression, Sudha come out due to pressure on her to kill her unborn daughter for whom she had developed immense love. Thus, Divakaruni's women are bold enough to assert their female selves and create an identity of their own.

Self-respect is another factor that makes a woman fight injustice against her. Leaving her marital family is quite a wrenching aspect for any woman. But, if a woman is not treated well, she need not suffer humiliation. Causing psychological block, evoking mental torture, and suffering are also unbearable. Though Sudha does not undergo any physical abuse, it is the exploitation of her interests for motherhood by her mother-in-law and husband that makes her take a daring decision of seeking self-fulfillment and individuality. When a woman experiences prolonged humiliation and oppression in the name of tradition or male domination, she tries to render advice and support to other women who are in such subjected condition, to overcome adverse situations. One such a person in this novel is Pishi. She gives her own views about the solution to Sudha's life: "Sell the house and the money we get from the sale of the land alone will be enough to buy a nice little flat somewhere convenient, Gariahat maybe, and pay for Sudha's delivery" (248). It is Pishi who gives strength and hope to Gouri, Nalini and Sudha. Pishi seems to have emerged as new woman who no longer cares for the age-old traditions and customs. Such female-bond is necessary for women to overcome and overthrow the oppressive patriarchal and traditional mechanisms.

Anju, the cousin of Sudha, is another protagonist who also asserts her individuality in this novel, but keeping herself in the marital bond. If the problems of Sudha are related to the killing of her unborn baby, Anju's problems pertain to the psychological vacuum created in her by her husband, Sunil. After understanding Sunil's secret passions for her cousin, Sudha, there is a change in the attitude of Anju towards Sudha. Though like Sudha, she does not come out of marriage, she faces emotional trauma in silence. Divakaruni puts forth the inner working of the mind of Anju at every stage of her discovery of her husband's passions and perversions. There are factors that shape and reshape Anju's individuality and her liberty. Anju develops contempt for Sudha when her husband, Sunil has attraction for her beauty. But Anju shows her humanistic concern and sisterly-bond when she understands Sudha's pathetic condition. Immediately she offers solution to Sudha by saying that she must walk out her marital bond in order to save the unborn child.

Anju is shocked to understand Sunil's inner mind in Sudha's matter. The change of circumstance and the adapted dressing style and life-habit do not alter the inner minds of many Indians who are living in America. Though Anju starts wearing the dresses like any other American women and speaking like them in American accent, she is what she is. The English literature and the ideals of Virginia Woolf have already shaped the psyche of Anju and so she is careful in adapting the American life-style. But Sunil who is an engineer easily assimilates himself to the melting-pot culture of America and starts drinking and behaves differently. Differences of opinion crop up between Anju and Sunil. Yet she does not break-up from him since she loves him very much. The rift between the two develops more when Anju tells Sunil about Sudha's destiny. Anju discusses the issue with Sunil to know what opinion he has about Sudha. But Sunil, to her dismay, supports the same old tradition and beliefs of people saying that it was the way in which things are done. Above all he says that Anju is fortunate enough to live in America where she is free from all such things.

In due time, Anju develops a guilty conscience for she is responsible for Sudha to walk out of her marital-life in order to overcome the burden of forced abortion of female child. Had her husband supported Anju for the steps they have taken in Sudha's life, Anju would have been more confident. Anju's perception of the world is totally different but Sunil increases the guilt in Anju. In order to make her cousin's life better, she thinks of bringing Sudha to America so that she can eke out a life independently by setting up a boutique. Anju seems to liberate herself from Sunil's attitudes, after she knows his secret passion for Sudha. She too wants to be economically independent, without depending on Sunil. Above all, to support her cousin, Anju decides to work and to get a visa for Sudha to come to America. Many diasporic critics and sociologists opine that America is a place where good opportunities are available to women who wish to be independent. Self-respect and independence are the two qualities both Anju and Sudha have been brought up with. They are strong and bold from the beginning but thwarted due to patriarchy and male domination. They have to face new challenges in their lives. Divakaruni's keen insight into the lives of women makes her paint a vivid picture of how women can overcome obstacles in their path and assert their individuality through the characters Anju and Sudha. Anju wishes to start a clothes business for Sudha in America. She feels this would give a sense of self and independence. The childhood aspirations of Sudha about establishing a boutique may come true. In fact, Sudha and Anju are the second-generation women in the household of Sanyals. Already their three mothers namely Gouri, Nalini and Pishi have lived a life challenging the obstacles put forth before them in the name of tradition and patriarchy, after becoming young widows. When men do not support women emotionally and economically, it is women who support one another to overcome the burden of life. Thus, the women characters like Sudha, Anju, Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini support one another, empathize with other's predicaments and stand as examples of empowered women. They show their individual 'self' breaking the norms of patriarchy or social constrains. Divakaruni shifts the focus from traditional portrayal of women who succumb to pressures from all sides. Her characters instead, become bold, courageous and independent fighting all oddities of life. They are new women who assert their 'self' after overthrowing the oppressive forces and face life with hope after sensing the new energy in them which is created through education and female-bonding.

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