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**Reading Against the Grain: Unveiling Men in Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desires***

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Abstract

It may be startling, but this paper is intended to unearth the presence of men in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction world. Divakaruni is generally read with reference to women and their experiences but reading her works otherwise is equally interesting. In *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desires* (2003) the 'unapologetically feminist' writer has given some of the most compassionate male characters, in spite of herself. In this fiction duo there are six major male characters including typical male chauvinists Mr.Majumdar, enigmatic Sunil, intimidated Ramesh, remorseful Singhji, a real man Ashok and philanthropist Lalit. A "psychosocial" investigation is sure to win sympathy, forgiveness, love, admiration and respect for these male characters who may appear misogynists if viewed from feministic lens. This paper is also an inquiry into the fact that feminist writers are not essentially man-haters.

Key Words-Narcissistic Parents, Psychological Invalidation, Lack, Guilty Conscience, Rejection

“I wanted my women characters to be the centre of my novels and let the men revolve around them.”

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni *Hindustan Times* (Lucknow)- Live 19 Jan 2017

This quintessential statement by the famous South Asian feminist writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is literally true in case of her novel *The Sister of My Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desires* (2003). Two leading ladies Anju and Sudha are at the center of these novels whereas the men in their lives- Sunil, Ramesh, Ashok, Lalit, Singhji and Mr. Majumdar standing on the circumference exercise their pull and push mechanism. These novels primarily relate the story of two soul sisters Anju and Sudha who love each other to such an extent that no man can ever replace it. Overtly these men seem to bring crisis to their “sisterhood” but covertly they themselves are suffering from “psychosocial crisis”. Eric Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development takes into account two major factors namely psychological (mind, brain, personality, etc.) and social (external relationships and environment) and considers the impact of social factors on psychological development from childhood to adulthood. In order to grow every individual has to negotiate with eight stages of inner struggle or psychosocial crisis. In the light of this theory most of men in these novels appear to be struggling within.

In the gallery of male characters, the man who captures our attention at first is Singhji alias Gopal, Sudha’s father. He has been projected as a fraudulent who wrought the tragedy of Chatterjee women. Gopal fabricated a story to enter Chatterjee House and like Satan he tempted Anju’s father Bijoy Chatterjee for reckless ruby hunt expedition which took toll of their lives and fortune. Both Bijoy and Gopal were reported to be dead in this adventure, leaving behind their widows and fatherless daughters to fight with patriarchal forces on their own. Throughout the novel readers carry a villainous impression of Gopal. It is only by the end of *Sister of My Hearts* Sudha receives a letter from her father that unravels the mystery. It explains psychological grounds for Gopal’s fraudulence and reveals his penance.

The letter discloses that Gopal is actually an illegitimate child of Bijoy’s uncle who seduces a poor maid but never gives her the rightful position as a wife. Gopal remains a bastard in his own father’s house. This lack of legitimacy and feeling of shame gives way to anger and vengeance. He confesses:

The revenge I hadn't been able to wreak on my father I would exact on others. Somehow or other, the world would pay for what it owed me. That was the way I thought when I fooled your mother into marrying me and cheated my way into Bijoy's house, and his heart. (SMH333)

As far as Bijoy's murder is concerned, it is planned by Haldar their third partner in ruby hunt adventure. Haldar wants to kill both Bijoy and Gopal so that he may secure all the rubies alone. Gopal survives this attack but lacks the courage to face people in Chatterjee House. His sense of guilt keeps gnawing him and to right the wrong he comes back disguised as a chauffeur Singhji. He takes up the job in Chatterjee House because this is the only way he can pay back the generosity of his patrons and be around his family whom he lost because of his own wrong choice. Like an obedient servant he salaams the ladies of the house, opens door for them, follows their orders, keeps his eyes down and sits below them. Like a father he guides, protects, encourages and consoles Sudha within the confines of his position as a servant. Unaware of the fact that Singhji is her father, there is silent expression and understanding of filial affections between Sudha and Singhji. Sudha seeks Singhji's guidance whenever she feels chaotic. Without her uttering a single word, Singhji knows what she is going through and finds out a solution. Their bonding is described by Anju:

He always did have a special bond with Sudha, a conspiratorial friendship, right from the time he would stop the car so she could give away her lunch sweets. And he had taken some big risks to help her with Ashok. (SMH197)

Singhji who himself could never be a good husband, wants his daughter Sudha to marry the right man. That's why he does every possible effort to make Sudha marry Ashok and convinces her: "He is the kind of young man who can be trusted- a true pearl" (SMH143). Sudha is also madly in love with Ashok still she discards the idea of marrying him as it can adversely affect Anju's marriage. Singhji does a vain effort to steer his daughter toward happiness. He sends her a secret gift containing his hard earned money so that she may elope with Ashok and spend the rest of her life with a man who loves her truly and deeply. The parcel bears his blessings: "To Sudha, May your life be as full of joy as mine has been of sorrow. Your Father" (SMH158). Sudha is shocked to find her father alive but she doesn't accept this gift. How painful it might have been for Singhji to see his hard earned money being distributed among beggars as "ill-gotten gains of a murderer". Sudha's humiliation in Sanyal house and her consequent divorce from Ramesh

Sanyal fills him with remorse. Singhji thinks if he had had the authority of a father to compel Sudha in marrying Ashok, she wouldn't have suffered like this. He feels helpless "like the viewer of a movie who weeps for the characters on the screen but cannot help them" (SMH338). Sudha comes back to Chatterjee House and gives birth to Dayita. Singhji gets a chance to relive Sudha's childhood through Dayita and gives her the love and care that he couldn't give to Sudha. He keeps serving Chatterjee women even when they are unable to pay him. He does everything that he can do within the limits of a servant to support these widows in the twilight of their lives. His sense of guilt is so overpowering that he reveals his true identity only to his daughter Sudha and that too at the time when she is leaving for America never to see him again. Such a heart melting sacrifice redeems him of his guilt. Gopal's complete transformation as Singhji should secure forgiveness as well as respect for him.

The second accused is Ramesh, Sudha's husband. He is accused for breach of trust. He betrays her when it is most unexpected. Otherwise a considerate man Ramesh is "like a leaf in a gale" in front of his mother. Mere a glance from her can shake his body and mind. Sometimes Sudha is afraid to think: "If there ever comes a time when she turns against me...what support could I count on from him?" (SMH217). Her fear becomes real when it comes to her abortion. Although Ramesh doesn't mind having a girl child, yet he is unable to oppose his mother. Sudha begs him to protect their unborn daughter but Ramesh walks out of the house without any reaction. He silently surrenders to his mother's decree. A feminist reading of the novel can easily label him as "spineless jelly fish", "mama's boy", "a puppet" or "a monkey with a pearl necklace" but his essential goodness shouldn't be eclipsed by these tags. He is a kind man who gives Sudha her time and space to accept their marriage saying: "I understand completely. I don't believe in forcing such things. I would be happy to give you - us - time to get to know each other" (SMH177). This Platonic arrangement remains a secret between the two. Unlike Indian males he has no problem in visiting an andrologist to improve his potency. He takes the counseling and medication so that they can have a baby. His silence over Sudha's abortion is rooted in his own psychological invalidation in the hands of a narcissistic mother. Ramesh lost his father at an early age since then his mother has been taking all the decisions for him. Even when he grows up his mother decides his marriage, baby planning, divorce and remarriage. She rebukes him even at the slightest excuse: "Am I dead that you think you can arrange whatever you want, do whatever people insist on without even asking my permission?" (SMH216). Dr.

Linda Martinez-Lewi's study of relationship between narcissistic mother and son can better explain Ramesh's position. According to Dr. Linda narcissist mothers hinder their child's psychological independence, the fulfillment of his masculinity and appreciation of his individuality. The son of such a mother spends lifetime in pleasing this impossible creature. Men psychologically possessed by their narcissistic mothers have difficulty in emotional intimacies. Unconsciously, they belong to mother. How can they give themselves to their partner when they cannot be separate from her? Such men are torn between deep feeling of obligation and frustration that they are still umbilically tied to their mother. This is what happens with Ramesh. His mother has iron hold over him. He is unable to assert himself confidently because every time he extends his views they are brushed aside by his mother and he has to give in. Sudha also sympathizes with his position: "At times we have been comrades pitted against a stronger, more ruthless force" (SMH284). How can one expect Ramesh to control the things in his life when he himself is emotionally and psychologically controlled by his mother. In the light of his circumstances Ramesh deserves sympathy, if not forgiveness.

Sunil, Anju's husband is another enigmatic character. He marries Anju but cherishes Sudha in his heart thus ruining lives of all the three. In Anju's words: "Sunil is the original man-with-a-hundred-faces. Even after all this time I can't tell which is the real him, and which are masks pulled on for effect" (SMH207). He is a pleasant and open minded fellow living in America. He is confident and takes decisions on his own. On their first meeting at book store, Sunil and Anju are pulled towards each other. Sunil likes her vivacity and Anju loves the trustworthiness in his eyes. At formal bride viewing he helps Anju serving tea cups around to everyone. He assures her mother that she would get as much education as she likes. The match is fixed. The very next moment Sunil notices Sudha and is enslaved by her bewitching beauty. He gives her an ambiguous compliment: "I have never seen anyone like you, either in India or America. If only I'd met you before I met your cousin" (SMH141). This episode is soon forgotten by all and Sunil marries Anju. He proves to be a caring husband who gives her freedom to do everything that can make her happy- driving, wearing western clothes, going to discos or joining college for further studies. He pampers her by cooking her favorite food, massaging her feet and giving her presents. In spite of his best efforts Sudha remains a virtual wall between two of them. They have small fights over trivial things. Financial crunches worsen the matter. Every month Sunil sends a significant amount to his father. Anju can't understand this obligation as his

parents are well off while he himself runs short of money. Anju secretly takes up a job which increases Sunil's resentment. The coldness of their relation keeps growing until one day Sunil gets the news of Anju's pregnancy. The anticipation of fatherhood transforms Sunil and things turn better. Sunil who always starved for his father's love is eager to shower it on his own child be it a boy or girl. The wall created by Sudha seems turning into a bridge by the upcoming child. Anju cannot decipher his excitement "but the urgency with which he speaks makes me wonder what gaps in his own childhood he's trying to fill" (SMH242) Anju's miscarriage thwarts his hope of inner fulfillment. Anju wants Sudha to come to America but Sunil is unhappy at the proposition as he is afraid of his latent feelings for her. Sudha comes to look after Anju. Once again there is silence and tension in relationships. Despite his emotional control Sunil proposes Sudha saying "But loving you was like breathing. How could I stop myself?" (VD194). He acknowledges his admiration, responsibility and concern for Anju but confesses his inability to love her the way he loves Sudha. In the fit of passion they both make love. After this incident Sudha leaves the house and Sunil leaves Anju. Three of them drift apart. Once again Sunil becomes the culprit to create a rift in sisterhood. On a dispassionate reading Sunil's emotional inadequacy can be accounted to his troubled childhood and dysfunctional family. Like Ramesh, Sunil has also suffered in the hands of a narcissistic parent- his father Mr. Majumdar. Anju can also sense it: "He harmed Sunil in ways that I've been paying for ever since I became his wife" (VD 269). He is 'cold', 'cruel' and 'tyrant' who takes it as a right to humiliate Sunil and his mother because they live on his food, clothing and shelter. This is the reason Sunil wants to pay him back every penny that he had spent in bringing him up. It is a way for Sunil to buy back his freedom. His memories of childhood are limited to pleadings of his mother and ranting of his father. Sunil's only hope to relive his childhood is lost due to Anju's carelessness. It is evident that Anju excessively exerts herself in job to arrange funds for Sudha. Sudha's arrival in their house makes Sunil a "rubber band stretched to breaking" since he withholds his love, fear and emptiness within himself. One day there is an outburst of his emotions in front of Sudha which is very natural for any human being. He admits that his childhood experiences with his father conditioned him to keep his thoughts to himself. He thought of telling Anju about his liking for Sudha before marriage but her lit up face and suspected humiliation for Anju at broken match stopped him. His thoughtfulness is perceived by Sudha and she wishes to befriend him in next

life: “In his loyalty and kindness, his attempts to hold on to honor, Sunil would have made a good friend” (VD196).

Now comes Ashok, the most endearing man of these novels. He is not a complex character like Sunil, Ramesh and Singhji. He is very clear in his thoughts and actions. He is a decent boy from a rich who eventually meets Sudha in a movie theatre and it's a kind of love at first sight. There is a magnetic pull between them. It seems as if they know each other for years. In their second meeting they decide to marry. Ashok's marriage proposal is turned down by Sudha's family due to his lower class background and his idea of elopement is discarded by Sudha herself. Sudha is married off to Ramesh Sanyal, still Ashok keeps loving her and waiting for her. When he comes to know about Sudha's divorce he again proposes for marriage regardless of her divorce and baby. As it is something unheard of in orthodox Bengali society, Sudha apprehensively asks: “Will you be able to live with the fact that when I came to you I was no longer a virgin?” (SMH284). At this he makes Sudha realize that it was her body not her love that she gave to Ramesh. In that sense she is still pure and innocent. In him Sudha can see a conscientious and affectionate father for Dayita. They are about to reunite when Sudha has to go to America to help Anju overcome her miscarriage. Once again Ashok is left in the lurch. He is ready to wait till Sudha returns to India. He gives her his credit card so that she may not run out of money or feel dependent in a foreign land. He keeps writing to her and making sketches in her memory. When everybody around Sudha, including her own mother accuses her for destroying Anju's marriage Ashok stands by her: “No matter what she implies. I cannot believe you would do anything that is truly immoral” (VD273) Despite her silence he comes to America to take Sudha and Dayita back to India. Sudha does every effort to avert him. She ignores him, hurts him and shocks him by revealing her sexual encounter with Sunil, still Ashok remains steadfast. He consoles her saying: “I have my own faults, too, my acts of weakness” (VD337). Seeing no response from Sudha he doesn't persuade her further. He leaves giving Sudha the sketches that he had drawn in her memory. “I'll go because I can see that you have indeed, detached yourself from your past completely....” (VD337) Such fidelity and empathy wins admiration for Ashok. In fact, in his case Sudha seems to be heartless for not responding to his unconditional love.

Last but not the least comes Lalit, the philanthropist. A surgeon by profession, this jovial guy is the only friend that Sudha has in an alien country America. Certain reliance in him

enables Sudha to be herself in front of him. She opens up her heart to him with its dilemmas, pangs, hurts, survivals, guilt and desires. He patiently listens to her and guides her well through difficult situations. His sense of humour is marvelous. Even in the gravest of situations he is able to crack a joke and make Sudha smile. He is a very practical man and advises Sudha to be so. He makes Sudha see things differently especially in American context. He teaches her to draw strength from miseries by giving his own example. Lalit's family never had enough money. When he was a child, his birthday gifts were also sold for refund. He would feel a rage inside him but he channelized his energies in other directions. He started spending more and more time at library or in sports. He used to work late shifts to save money for his studies and secured partial scholarship in medical college. To cope up with his own lack he started helping others in their emotional and financial crisis. Listening to his experience Sudha feels inspired. Lalit develops a secret liking for her and wants to take care of her for the rest of life. But Sudha rejects his silent proposal by saying:

You are the only one I can turn to as a friend. All my life, men have wanted me. It's always been the wrong man, or the wrong time, or the wrong r reason. And then I never wanted to see them again. Please don't let that happen between us. Please? (VD289)

In a way, Lalit is the man who neither pulls her, nor pushes her. He gives her the confidence to hold on the centre of her life and not to run away from it. He helps her in getting rid of self accusations and self-abnegation. Lalit's cordiality wins heart.

The above analyses strengthens the idea that Divakaruni's writings have multiple levels and dimensions that can't be ignored in the dazzle of feminism. In spite of her feminist ardour Divakaruni has portrayed her male characters in a way that they leave indelible impression on readers. This study also goes on to prove that deprivation is not the lot of women only, men also suffer from lack. Gopal lacked legitimacy, Ramesh lacked validation, Sunil lacked filial love, Lalit lacked money and Ashok who has all these lacks Sudha. Like women, men have also been victims of sex role paradigms and strive to retain their typical image of 'protector and bread earner'. They too feel constant pressure 'to achieve and to prove'. The ruby hunt crusade of Gopal and Bijoy is also an attempt to prove their worth as man. Sudha justifies it saying: "They went because, like all men, they wanted to win something amazing, something everyone would admire them for" (SMH151). Studying male characters in these novels affirms that sufferings,

heartbreaks and rejections are human conditions; they are not gender-specific. It is not Sudha and Anju only who suffer heart break. Sunil, Ashok and Lalit equally feel its thud when they are rejected by Sudha. All the three are ready to lay down their lives for Sudha who rejects them all because “she wanted more in life than a man to take care of her” (VD129). Herein lies the triumph of Divakaruni’s feminist fervour. She has created warm hearted men only to be politely shunned by her heroine Sudha “Too late, too late. All my life, the timing of things has been off. ‘I’m sorry-” (SMH316).

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