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Depiction Of Indian Cultural Heritage In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister Of My Heart*
And *The Vine Of Desire*

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a leading writer of the Indian Diaspora marches forward with courage and with firm matches the pace of the world. She is a stalwart builder in connecting between East and West, conventions and changes and ethics and freedom in her works. Her novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* deal with cultural alienation, patriarchal structures and traditional Indian society. Her novel *Sister of My Heart* is depicted with a different perception where a woman becomes a heart of the other woman. *The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. This article has attempted to delineate the cultural nuggets and the wretched conditions of women in patriarchal society.

Keywords: Diaspora, stalwart, conventions, alienation, patriarchal, perception.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the remarkable contemporary Indian women novelists in English, who explores the cultural dilemma of the immigrant women, patriarchal attitude on individual lives and the conflict between tradition and modernity. She encapsulates remarks on her native land, folklore, religion, proverbs and Bengali words in her novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. The novels exhibit the strain of the mothers who encompass traditional Indian culture but the cousins embrace the new western philosophies. Divakaruni recollects her homeland and reveals the traditional Indian society.

Anju and Sudha the protagonists of the novel are cared by three mothers Gowri, Nalini and Pishi as their fathers died on a ruby hunting expedition. They live in a traditional joint family system which is helpful for these girls to continue their relationship until the end of the novel. Divakaruni portrays the Bengal orthodox family ties by practicing customs, rituals and communal buildings. The first book of the novel *Sister of My Heart* is titled “The Princess in the Palace of Snakes”. This part of the book describes the traditional way in which the protagonists are brought up in the Chatterjee’s traditional home without male control.

The patriarchal norms of Indian family system illustrate that after the father’s death, the mother should take care of the responsibility of the family. Gouri, the wife of Bijoy Chatterjee and mother of Anju “shoulders the burden of keeping the family safe” (SMH 17). She resolves to manage the bookshop without neglecting the traditional values. Simon de Beauvoir opines about the female in *The Second Sex*, “The situation of woman is that she is free and autonomous being like all human creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world when men compel her to assume the status of the other.” (301). Gouri is efficient and intelligent in handling the store “still, the store never seems to make a profit, and each week

she has to go over our household expenses in her careful, frowning way, trying, to cut costs.”. (*Sister of My Heart* 25).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reveals that in a traditional Indian society, the bride viewing ceremony takes place at the girl's house with the presence of all the elders. Anju feels that women are treated as animals in the bride viewing function. C. Bharathi States, Chitra Banerjee's characters, especially women, feel trapped in arranged marriages, because they have not married following the choice of their hearts but that of tradition. Hence they long for freedom. The Indian woman can apparently be called 'a mistress of spices' as she is in control of the preparation of food in the kitchen, a space intimately attributed to her. Her kitchen, nevertheless as space of enclosure, is a representation and symbol of her submission. (79)

Sudha undergoes bride viewing before the Sanyal family. Ramesh the bridegroom keeps quiet while his mother questions her. Sudha serves the tea to the guest, and “she answers Mrs.Sanyal's questions without a trace of the irritation” (*SMH* 122).

Sudha is an attractive, subtle girl and gives importance to motherhood based on Hindu fables and legends. Divakaruni presents Sudha as a conventional image of Indian women with endurance. Anju pictures her dream of married life, “They showed a stick figure woman in a traditional red-bordered sari with a big bunch of keys tied to her anchal” (*SMH* 89). She accepts demons, fairy tales, magic worlds as truth and has faith in superstition. She marries Ramesh an engineer who is under the control of his mother Mrs.Sanyal. Divakaruni represents through the image of Sudha the condition of women in Indian traditional society. She is ruled by her tyrannical mother-in-law and forced to do all the household works and serve her husband's brothers.

Widows are treated in a bad manner in Indian society as it is considered as the biggest curse for the women. They are prohibited to participate in the auspicious function by the

conservative family members. Chitra Banerjee pictures the character of Pishi, Nalini, Gourima and Mrs.Sanyal as widows in the novel *Sister of My Heart*. Pishi's husband dies at the age of eighteen and decides to live in her younger brother's house. Her father slaps her when she wishes to study as they belong to the conservative family. She says, "My life was over because I was a woman without a husband"(269). She is very affectionate to Anju and Sudha and implants in them traditional values and cultures of the orthodox family. She moves friendly with the girls and they share many things to her than their mother. Divakaruni projects the worst treatment of widows in the conservative society. Anju says, "I hate Pishi when she puts on her patient smile and sits in the back of the hall on feast days, not participating, because widows mustn't" (23).Pishi comments about the female subordination "the unlucky man's cow dies, the lucky man's wife dies"! (269).

Nalini the mother of Sudha gives physical support to the family. She desires her daughter to lead a prestigious life which she lacks in her life. Nalini declares "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are firebrands scorching their family's fame" (23). Gowri is meticulous in practising Indian culture and she guides the girls to follow it. She permits them with full freedom and never forces them to do according to her wish.

Mrs.Sanyal the mother-in-law of Sudha is a tradition bound lady and a widow. She has the control of her house and takes her to the shrine to conceive a male child. The traditional Indian households have love for children but they hate girl children. Women are sent to shrine to pray to powerful Goddess in the traditional society for bearing child. Divakaruni pictures the religious belief, superstitious and the actual image of India especially her home town Calcutta. Sudha in the shrine sees many women weeping and praying to God and they tie the golden ornaments as offerings in the tree such as, "neck chains, bracelets, toe-rings, armbands, a fortunes' worth" (234). Sudha expresses her pain in her words "I want

to weep too, not for me but for us all – for sick or poor, educated or illiterate here we are finally reduced to sameness in the sisterhood of deprivation” (235).

‘Infertility’ is considered as the important issue for women in Indian society. Women only face the problem created by biological discrimination. Neeru says,

In India, to study female psyche is an effort to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them; it is also an attempt to reinterpret their status in the world----- A woman’s experience of lie as a member of a gender biased society formulate her psyche”. (172)

Mrs. Sanyal is cruel to Sudha as she is unable to give birth to a child after five years of marriage. When Sudha prays in the temple the priest blesses her as “May you be the mother of a hundred son” (238) and sprinkles holy water on her head. Sudha conceives and her mother-in-law does many duties in the house. She compels Sudha to undergo amniocentesis test and it is proved to be a female baby. She forces her for abortion as it is girl child and Sudha is dejected. Her husband remains silent to her mother’s commands. Sudha tells “My husband is a kind man - I have known that for a while now - but in front of his mother he is like a leaf in a gale” (217). Divakaruni reveals the problem of infertility and bearing female child through the character Sudha.

Women are subordinated by men in Indian society. Male child is given importance than a female child VrindaNabar says,

.....there is no gain saying the fact that the typical Indian girl-child---- has to learn quite early on that she is a second-class citizen even in her mother’s home. If she has brothers, she has to play second fiddle to them ----- Her breaking – in is all the more rigorous if she happens to belong to an economically deprived class, for even in the best of world, the girl-child’s need aregenerally regarded as dispensable. (64)

Mrs.Sanyal expects her grandchild should be a boy baby. She compels Sudha to undergo abortion elsewhere she has to react against her married life. She informs to Gourima, “If not, she is afraid she will have to set the divorce proceedings in motion.” (267).

Traditionally, the woman plays the submissive role in the society. Divakaruni desires to share her experience about her motherland with the readers. She pays close attention to the prediction of women covered up by the Indian society. Anju’s father-in-law Mr.Manjumdar behaves as the ‘master of the house’ and his wife is meek, docile and passive. He reacts to the favorite food prepared by his wife for his son Sunil, “Haven’t I told you I can’t stand the smell? Who pays for the food you eat in this house? Answer me” (183). He cautions Chatterjee’s women before Sunil’s marriage that “Even after the wedding, I’m prepared to send the girl back to her parents if I find something ugly.” (140).

Sunil is brought up in the male chauvinistic society but behaves like a modern man. He is assimilated to the American culture but as he is deeply rooted in tradition he is unable to bear Lalit dancing either with Sudha or Anju. He fights in his anguish with the valet outside the restaurant who comments the Indians in the party. Kandelwal prescribes the importance of upholding tradition for Indian Diasporas;

Culture symbolizes both group identity and survival for Indian immigrants. The high priority placed on transplanting their cultural traditions to foreign soil is also connected to a deeply rooted belief in the indestructibility of Indian culture even removed from the home country in which it arose, it must and will have a life of its own.....Thus, Indians have made major efforts to celebrate their cultural traditions in the United States. (35)

Divakaruni focuses on the incredible powers of the society and the relationship between the family members in the novels. Sudha and Anju being brought up in the traditional Indian Bengali family are firmly fixed with the roots of the native land. They uphold each other when they undergo difficult situations in their life. Sudha loves Ashok but refuses to marry

him as Anju's father-in-law is unable to agree the wrong decision made by the Chatterjee family girls. Love marriages are not customary in the traditional society and Sudha is incapable to violate the traditional norms.

Divakaruni treats her characters to narrate stories in the novels. She describes the old tale in the beginning of the novel. "The old tales say this also! In the wake of Bidhata Purush come the demons, for that is the world's nature, good and evil mingled. That is why they leave an oil lamp burning." (15). There is a customary belief that when a child is born Bidhata Purush comes to the earth the same night and resolves the fortune of the child. Divakaruni through the character Pishi in *Sister of My Heart* exhibits the story-telling tradition in India. She tells the stories of demons, princes and queens to the girls Anju and Sudha. Sudha narrates the story 'Queen of Swords' to Dayita to make her courageous. She imagines herself to be Jansi Rani the Queen of swords and she struggles for the rights in her life. She describes, "How the unborn daughter gave her mother the courage to leave and the flaming swords made of light so that none dared prevent her from going" (340). Sudha considers the mythical stories of her native land enhance her boldness and courageousness to face the hurdles in her life. Pishi tells Sudha to narrate stories to Dayita from the epic Ramayana.

Divakaruni in the novel *The Vine of Desire* makes the characters to narrate the incidents in an unusual method as a story to Dayita. Sunil confides his childhood memories of his mother's affection and his father's strictness and his interest to become as an actor into a story to Dayita. Divakaruni connects the stories in her novels which projects the inner feelings and sensibilities of the characters. The old man Mr.Sen describes his married life as a story to Dayita, "Just before she died, she beckoned him close and said, with the same half-smile, wherever I am going, I'll wait for you" (364).

Divakaruni pays attention to Indian motherhood by portraying the character Anju. She is frustrated and feels insecure at the death of her son Prem. She acknowledges “Somehow I felt I’ll never get another chance to be a mother. This child, he came to me too easily, and I was too casual about him. I’m having to pay for this” (TVD 30). Beena Agarwal states,

Such a carving and confession in Divakaruni’s tribute to the sublimity to Indian womanhood. The Indian feminine psyche is conditioned in such a way that it remains integrated in the identity of her child. It is, therefore, in spite of the best resistance of Anju, her thwarted motherhood gets its mooring in the beauty and innocence of Dayita. It was a natural reaction of motherhood. (54)

Sudha’s motherhood is apparent when she determines to lead a life for her daughter. She says “I ‘m going to fight for my daughter and myself, and I’m going to win” (280). She expresses her love for her daughter, “When you put your arms around someone else and smile your new-toothed smile, my hair crackles with envy. I love you so much I could die for you” (189).

Divakaruni belongs to Bengal and her roots are firmly fixed in Indian culture. She depicts the immigrants preparing customary foods in her works. Divakaruni mentions the names of the Bengal foods in her novels which show her roots of her native land. Sudha undergoes a checkup by the gynecologist for her motherhood and when the result is normal the mothers prepare her favorite childhood foods, “fried brinjals, puffed-up golden luchis, sautéed red spinach, curries of shrimp and chicken and mustard fish, rice pudding with raisins and pistachio” (219). Indian heritage gives importance to food and Divakaruni haunts it to stir the consciousness of immigrants back to India. Sudha prepares the tea for the old man in Indian style, “the milk and water mixed together in a pan, the ground cloves and cardamom sprinkled in, lastly the tea bags.” (*The Vine of Desire* 218) .

Divakaruni puts forth her deepest cogitation in the cultural heritage of her native land to bring about changes in human consciousness. Her reinterpretation of old traditions projects women's oppression, Hindu myths, fables, superstitions, Indian life style and inner feelings of the human psyche. She lives in America with the origin of Bengal-Indian and depicts a picture of an ambiguous legendary homeland. Her own perception of India particularly in Calcutta is together weaved skillfully with her American experience in her novels. Her exploration of the traditional Chatterjee's family of Calcutta and the two girls being raised in old conventional family are emphasized in the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. She highlights the fervour for her cultural milieu in her novels.

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