

Female Bonding in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the trials and tribulations of women characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*. It picturises the story of love and friendship between Sudha and Anju who were born on the same day, the day their fathers Gopal and Bijoy died on a ruby hunting expedition. The story narrated by Sudha and Anju focuses on the relationship between the two young girls, from the shared experiences of their youth to the varied experiences of their married life. It also explores the tension between the desires of mothers who embrace traditional Indian culture, and the cousins, who embrace the new Western philosophies.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing often revolves around the lives of immigrant women. She says "Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life." Her interest in women began after she left India, at which point she came to reevaluate the treatment of women there. She draws her materials for her writing from her own experiences and also from the vast canvass of the other Indian woman.

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is a realistic portrayal of the relationship between two sisters Anju and Sudha. The novel deals with the difficulties faced by women and the manners in which they overcome their problems. All the major characters in the novel are females. Male characters are not prominent and they appear as and when the situations warrant. The heroines of the novel Anju and Sudha are brought up in the traditional joint family system in Calcutta. Since their fathers have already passed away, the three mothers have to take care of them. So, the joint

family system is very supportive to the girls. Anju's mother is Gourimma, Sudha's mother is Nalini and Pishi is their aunts, who treat them as their own children.

After the father's death, in the typical family setup, the responsibility of running the family lies with the mother. The woman has to support the family economically, emotionally, psychologically and physically. The same situation prevailed in the two sisters' home. Sudha's father Gopal and Anju's father Bijoy has gone for the fearful experiment of finding out the 'rubycave'. They have lost their lives in the adventure. In the absence of male in the family, there is no one to take care of the Chatterjee family. So, Anju's mother Gourimma accepts the burden. The three adult women try to support each other to bring up the two girls Anju and Sudha.

Gourimma takes in charge of the bookshop, after her husband's death. Though the bookshop is not run profitably, it becomes the responsibility of Gourimma to run it efficiently to escape from the clutches of poverty.

Aunt Pishi plays an important role in the lives of two young girls by showing them, her love and affection, she takes care of their things; she used to narrate her experiences to them thereby she indirectly inculcates in them the values and the virtues of woman besides the reputation traditionally upheld by their family.

Nalini and Sudha are not the blood relatives of Chatterjee's family, they are never treated as strangers and they are given equal shareholding in the family. Gourimma treats them generously as they are the part of the Chatterjee family.

Widowhood is the biggest curse bestowed upon any Indian woman. These three women are widows. Nalini and Gourimma accept the challenge fully. But Pishi is forced to sit in the back of the hall on feast days, because widows must not take part in the auspicious occasion, according to the orthodoxy and traditional system of Indian family. Both Sudha and Anju, being educated, oppose their aunt Pishi for orthodox and timid nature. Anju dislikes her father, and she says,

I hate my father. I hate the fact that he could go off so casually in search of adventure, without a single thought for what would happen to the rest of us. I blame him for the tired circles under mother's eyes, the taunts of the children at school

because I don't have a father. None of it would have happened if he hadn't been so careless and got himself killed.(24)

Anju and Sudha complement each other well. They share their own views and ideas with each other. From the beginning till the end, they support each other and the love and compassion that they share with each other help them surmount all kinds of difficulties that they face in their families. Anju says, "I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart. Like no one else in the entire world does. Like no one else in the entire world will. Early in my life I realize something. People were jealous of Sudha and me" (24).

Being born as the fatherless children, the two sisters Anju and Sudha are bound closely with each other emotionally and psychologically; they cannot imagine their life without the 'other'. The traditional joint family system is much helpful to these girls, to continue their relationship until the end of the novel.

Sudha's love with Ashok Ghosh is an interesting part of the novel. When they have the plan to elope, Sudha is forced to drop the idea, because of Anju's father-in-law who upholds the respect and prestige of them as more important than individual's likes and dislikes in the family. He told Gourimma that he would not expect any wrong opinion about the Chatterjee family girls. If it would happen in the future, Anju would be sent back to her mother's home. So, Sudha had left the plan of marrying Ashok.

The two sisters are separated after their wedding. Mrs. Sanyal's family take Sudha to Bardhaman. Sudha's condition in Mrs. Sanyal's family is worse, the way she is treated by her mother-in-law is shameful and disgusting. She is forced to do all the domestic works. The groom Ramesh reacts, according to his mother's wish. Before Anju's America trip, she visits Mrs. Sanyal's home. After seeing the poor condition and status of her sister Sudha, she was shocked and half-heartedly she went to America. Anju's life in America started in an unexpected way. Sunil was addicted to American culture. He came late in the night and was addicted to alcohol. It was a great cultural shock to her; it was not her imagined, dreamt and expected life in America. She had to be very careful in using words in front of Sunil, due to his criticism about the woman. Anju says,

Shit!’ of all American term I’ve avidly gleaned in the three years I’ve been here, it’s my favourite.... But I am careful to use it only when Sunil isn’t around because he thinks it isn’t ladylike. I point out that I hear far worse from him when he’s driving. He claims that’s different. (205)

Being born in the patriarchal, male chauvinistic and male dominated society, Sunil also tries to show all the manners like the ordinary men. Mrs. Sanyal starts to ill-treat her daughter-in-law Sudha, for not giving birth to a baby. Mrs. Sanyal sends Sudha for the test. The test report explains Sudha is normal and she can give birth to many number of children and the problem lies only with her husband. Sudha’s pregnancy creates a big storm in her life. When it is identified as the female baby, she is forced to go for abortion by her mother-in-law. Ramesh is passive and not prepared to support his wife. Sudha says,

My mother-in-law is gracious, with the graciousness of someone who knows. She cannot be persuaded. If I return at once and go through with the scheduled abortion, she will consider my foolish act of rebellion forgotten. If not, she is afraid she will have to set the divorce proceedings in motion. (267)

Sudha has to come to her mother’s home to save her female child. Anju is deeply worried about Sudha who is also pregnant. The economic condition of family becomes worse. Anju has to work for Sudha. She wishes to invite Sudha to America to fulfill Sudha’s childhood dream, i.e. to start the embroidery, design of sarees. So, Anju earns money for Sudha. Without the knowledge to her husband Sunil she goes to work. Hardwork leads to miscarriage and the baby is identified in her womb as ‘breathless’. Motherhood is the greatest pleasure and promotion to a woman in the world. Her health condition becomes bad, when she comes to know the death of her child and she becomes unconscious.

Sudha is ready to go to America to take care of her beloved sister Anju. She explains all the childhood happenings and talks through phone to Anju. Ashok Ghosh again approaches Gourimma for the remarriage with Sudha on condition, i.e. Sudha should leave her daughter with her mother. Her daughter would be permitted to his home during the time of holidays and festival

time. Sudha does not accept the condition and she chooses to remain alone for the sake of her daughter.

Ashok demands only Sudha and her love, not her child. Sunil has sent the tickets and visas for Sudha and her daughter Dayita. She goes to America and the two beloved sisters are reunited again. Through this novel, Chitra Banerjee brings out all the problems, faced by women generally in the society. Women have to support, unite and co-ordinate each other to overcome these situations. If they were joined together, no external force would come and attack them. The characters of Anju and Sudha are bound together. They easily overcome all the critical and difficult circumstances, because they are in co-ordination, co-operation and mutual understanding.

Much of Divakaruni's writing is inspired by her experiences and encounters with suffering women in the organization of MAITRI, which she has established to help battered women in America.

My work with Maitri has been at once valuable and harrowing, I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I have heard of acts of cruelty beyond imagining. The lives of many of the women I have met through this organization have touched me deeply.

It is Divakaruni's professed manifesto to celebrate the courage and humanity of suffering women who have rebelled against oppressive patriarchy and have joined a universal sisterhood. Both MAITRI and her writings are efforts in the direction of creating a world of women.

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