

Socio-Cultural Issues in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores in her novels the life of Indian families as well as the migrated families, essentially a family of females marooned in a household. This paper focuses on Socio-cultural issues in India in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart. Her literary output treats all shades of identity crisis such as alienation, marginalization, despair, nostalgia, readjustment, assimilation, adaption and adoption. The most important fact regarding Sister of My Heart is that the novelist has chosen ordinary characters who generally live inside and outside the purview of Indian social set up and through them Divakaruni has given a glimpse into the socio-cultural condition prevalent in India. The mythic frame work of this novel contributes to the creation of a female universe. The world of the myth is essentially feminine in nature as opposed to the cerebral world which is masculine. Divakaruni has reflected the course of marriage and the unusual Indian cuisine also focuses on the tradition of India which is rich and varied.

Keywords: families, cultural issues, loneliness, dislocation, troubles, marginalization, nostalgia.

Sister of My Heart is an interesting novel, rich with family bonds and complexity of relations that each person in a family experiences that microcosm differently. Divakaruni skilfully analyses the typical Indian families and the complex relationships and their core role particularly in patriarchal family structure. Her attitude towards her native India is not bereft of optimism or hopefulness. Divakaruni's yearning for the land of her origin, her pride in its rich literature and folklore and her reverence for her religion are expressed through the numerous nostalgically coined lullabies, proverbs, stories and mythological allusions.

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writings focus on the families which have experienced socio-cultural psychological transplantation when they move from one culture to another and the problems faced by them like - fear of losing identity, loneliness, hostility, exile, dislocation, alienation, discrimination, acculturation, assimilation, language issues, troubles of nostalgia for the past etc. Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is a personal compassionate family saga that is personal, intimate, tender and revealing. Many of her critically acclaimed novels deal with the complexities of Indian family life and with the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the west. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that Divakaruni turns her displaced existence into an advantage and the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for her.

As a person who has moved away from her homeland to the United States, Divakaruni approaches the country of her birth as an outsider and she tries to brilliantly scan the inside with open-mindedness and neutrality. Her literary output treats all shades of identity crisis such as alienation, marginalization, despair, nostalgia, readjustment, assimilation, adaption and adoption. Her writings are essentially autobiographical and mostly her protagonists and the significant characters are women. Divakaruni explores the psyche of the migrated Indian abroad. *Sister of My Heart* deals with Anju and Sudha, two closely-bonded cousins growing up in a Hindu Zamindar family of West Bengal and eventually landing in America. As the three widows Pishi Ma, the paternal aunt of the cousins and their mothers Gouri Ma and Nalini Ma and two young girls of this family meander their way through the stages of life, childhood, youth, marriage, motherhood, divorce, widowhood, etc each stage throws light on a certain upper-class Bengali culture and tradition, which is critiqued by Divakaruni from the uniquely feminine and diasporic perspective.

The strong emotional bond between the girls is evident from the childhood. Although their love for each other is on an equal plane, their socio-economic backgrounds are not. As Anju's family is wealthy and socially prominent, she has more social and economic advantages than Sudha. Anju's family, wealth and social position allows her to transcend the restrictive demands of traditional Hindu Indian female gender notions, which might eventually restrict her to mainly fulfilling the roles of wife and mother. Eventually, Anju is privileged to be able to concentrate on her studies and to dream of a career. On the other hand, Sudha and her mother are not economically independent and instead, they have to depend on the favour of Anju's family for survival. She is more likely to succumb to restrictive traditional Hindu-Indian gender norms; in fact, Sudha's only advantage is her

physical beauty, which can only help her to survive within the frame work of traditional Hindu-Indian gender norms by securing a ‘good husband’.

The Chatterjee family stays in the old crumbling marble mansion, the heritage property they possess. The most important fact regarding *Sister of My Heart* is that the novelist has chosen ordinary characters who generally live inside and outside the purview of our social set up and through them Divakaruni has given a glimpse into the socio-cultural condition prevalent in India. The story moves with the narration of the birth of Anju and Sudha, their childhood stories, their escapades and their life after marriage. Divakaruni has looked back in all its neutrality the positive as well as the negative aspects of the society in which she was brought up, through her characters. Avtar Brah in his book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* has mentioned:

Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations. In other words, the varying experiences of pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentment, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture. (Brah 192)

From the beginning, there are hints about how the future of the sisters will evolve. The girls narrate the chapters alternately, so that one sees life through the eyes of each of them at eight years old, then at twelve, then as convent school girls escaping to the cinema unchaperoned and finally as married women, one braving the new world and the other in the house of a husband for whom she has affection but not love. All the men in the novel have fatal flaws, except for Singji, the Chatterjee’s faithful, deformed Chauffeur, who stays with the family as their fortunes fail.

The symmetry of the tale, echoing perhaps the duality of much Hindu mythology, is made acceptable by the twists in the plot. Coincidence is waiting behind every door, enabling the girls to expiate the wrongs of their fathers, but the key story is that of the courageous Rani of Jhansi whom Sudha must make her model. The mythic frame work of this novel contributes to the creation of a female universe. The world of the myth is essentially feminine in nature as opposed to the cerebral world which is masculine. And in *Sister of My Heart* there is an attempt to create fresh myths or at least give new interpretations to existing ones. At the same time, Divakaruni rejects conventional myths and creates new ones.

In the first book “The Princess in the Palace of Snakes,” both the protagonists attempt to conform to the traditional feminine roles as designed by the male hegemonic society. This

is symbolized by the traditional fairy tale of the princess in the palace of snakes waiting for her Prince charming to rescue her. The second book, “The Queen of Swords” is not a traditional fairy tale. When Anju is upset over her miscarriage, Sudha tells her that interesting tale and soon Anju recovers. Then she relates what happened to the three mothers. Pishi, the usual storyteller, asks her about the story she has told Anju.

This change is seen not only in the story that Sudha narrates but also in her attitude and her actions. During their childhood the girls used to enact the fairy tales that Pishi told them. Sudha always played the role of Princess in danger and Anju the Prince who rescued her. When Sudha falls in love with Ashok and the mothers decide to get her married elsewhere, she waits for him to make all the moves and rescue her. But after her marriage to Ramesh, she enters a household ruled by her tyrannical mother-in-law. She puts up with the ill-treatment there for a long time, being still the conventional Princess of the fairy tale, waiting for her husband, the Prince to rescue her.

Divakaruni makes use of mythological metaphors to accentuate the liveliness of experiences that her characters undergo. She reveals the glorious stories of Rani of Jhansi through the voice of Sudha to Anju at the time when she is depressed because of her miscarriage and helps her to regain her strength. Sudha narrates it also to her daughter Dayita, on their way to America, in a different way. She even reveals the story of Lord Krishna who helped his sister Draupadi in times of need and considers the lost child of Anju to be Lord Krishna in the symbol of a star in the sky - thus leading Dayita to a bright future. Nilanjana S. Roy in an article entitled “Mushy Sister Act” comments:

If you're a disciple of Gurumayi, as Divakaruni is and a fan of the kind of New Age literature that believes in “twin souls” and a believer of woman's lib so long as it includes a handsome, faithful, sensitive prince in the storyline, this novel is the perfect present to yourself. Followers of feminism, both the Indian version and the imported kind, will find Divakaruni's arguments as easy to digest and harmless as regurgitated pap. (Roy 28)

When Sudha is confirmed by tests of carrying a female baby, her mother-in-law tries to force her into an abortion. But to protect her baby, Sudha leaves her husband's home for her parental home in Calcutta. She transforms herself from the Princess in the palace of the snakes to the Queen of swords. Sudha refuses to return to Ramesh; she also turns down the conditional offers of Ashok to marry her. Sudha's journey to America is really the beginning of her journey to a new world of women.

All the three mothers enter this new world of women. This is symbolically shown when they sell their dilapidated, ancestral house and move to a new flat. The change in them after moving to their new home is amazing. “Along with the old house, the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition” (SMH 296). They listen to the music that they like and take walks where they please and they no longer worry about the social stigma attached to a divorcee and keep Sudha with them. They lovingly take care of Dayita, her daughter. Divakaruni succeeds in making her women characters something more than cardboard cut-outs. Abha Pishi, the selfless widow who is shouldered on in an unfair social system for years, is allowed an outburst towards the end that is, indeed, clichéd but is also humanizing. Nalini’s flaws make her believable, though Gouri Ma absolutely refuses to come into relief. Divakaruni makes the lives of these young women as mesmerizing as those of any hapless maids in a Mills and Boon story.

Divakaruni has also brought out the importance of the position of stars for good fortune and this is associated with good luck in Indian tradition. Observing her aunt’s obsession with all astrological matters, Anju ironically comments: “Our stars must be really well aligned this month, Aunt Nalini keeps saying. First Sudha’s marriage is all set, then I get a proposal and now someone wants to buy the bookstore” (SMH 124).

Pishi has her own superstitious beliefs and she is enwrapped in the consciousness of the past. Her belief reflects ironic contradictions inherent within the Hindu socio-cultural situation. Rupinder Kaur in the article, “Poetic Echoes from the Indian Diaspora in North America” examines:

Divakaruni thinks of the cultural encounters as an enriching though complicated and difficult experience. She emphasizes that an interaction between cultures can help to tone down and modify the negative elements of both the Indian and American manners and morals. She still upholds certain values and virtues of her Indian way of life. (12)

Divakaruni has documented an important issue of arranged marriage and the way matrimony is associated with horoscopes as a final resort. Though Anju and Sudha are educated, no one really has a say in terms of marriage. Gouri Ma promises Anju that she will marry her off to a man who will let her study further and then consults astrologers to match horoscopes. She has tried to question the long ceremonies associated with marriage which characterize Hindu customs. The time, money and energy spent on the ceremonies of marriage force the readers to question the need of such ostentatious arrangements. Complication and length of the ancient wedding rituals are existed in all its genuine

prosperity. Divakaruni has reflected the course of marriage and the unusual Indian cuisine also focuses on the tradition of India which is rich and varied. The novelist has satirized the Indian patriarchal system which demands dowry but has no concern for the bride. Even while expressing the richness of the culture, Divakaruni has hinted at the social stigma of dowry plaguing the Indian society.

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