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“WOMEN MAKE THEIR OWN DESTINY” - A READING OF DIVAKARUNI’S *SISTER OF MY HEART*
AND *THE VINE OF DESIRE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze the journey of two women protagonists towards their self assertion and liberation in the two novels *Sister of My Heart* and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* authored by an Indo American, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. These two novels narrate the emotional bond between two lifelong friends. Once married their life travels in two different directions. Their married life brings troubles and sufferings. They become victims of gender hierarchy. They want to get out of the iron web from which, they are caught in. Though immigrated to America by their strength and courage they accommodate to the new culture. They strive hard to strike a balance between the old believes, and the new desires. Anju and Sudha though betrayed by their husbands, quickly learn to make peace with difficult circumstances. They don't want to go back to the old ways of living for others. They want to design a future, and their destiny out of their own ideas, and out of their own hands.,

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The situation of women is that she is free and autonomous being like all creatures - nevertheless finds living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of others- *Simon de Beauvoir*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born and brought up in a very conservative family in Calcutta, where women's right is considered as an anathema. Only when she came to America at the age of nineteen, She encountered an entirely new contrasting culture and outlook between selflessness and selfishness. She herself was torn between the new and the old values. The ancient Indian tradition, with its emphasis on the subordinate role of the Indian women contrasts greatly with the American feminism with its emphasis on women's independence and equality. Initially as an individual and as an author she faced the dilemma whether to remain as an Indian or to be an American. Most of the south Asian women who migrated to America, undergo the same dilemma and also became the victim of male domination, sexual abuse, and domestic violence .Her personal encounter

with the affected women she met in MAITRI, a help line Co- founded by her, influenced her to choose the issue of empowerment and emancipation of women as the main theme of her works.

Anita Myles make the following observation about the modern Indian women writers:

Interestingly, the women novelists have surpassed their male counterparts out numbering them quantitatively as well as by maintaining a high standard of literary writing, equally applauded in India and abroad, experimenting boldly with not only technique but also by incorporating tabooed subject matters in their novels and short stories, the result being that Indian women of all categories- rural or urban, rich or poor, aristocrat or bourgeois, high caste or Dalit have been studied with an intensity and concern never attempted earlier. (8)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a product of post modern spirit, has written novels with a social consciousness and social responsibility. Her writings portray women characters who struggle with cultural shackles to carve out an identity of their own in their home land and in the land they immigrate. The struggle and the hardships, the author underwent, when she came to America is vividly recreated in her novels.

The American feminism, which greatly emphasis women's independence, equality and personal freedom contrast very much with the selfless and subservient women of India. American women have fundamental rights to enjoy their freedom, but Indian women have only fundamental duties to do for their family. The two novels *Sister of My Heart* and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* deal with the lives of two distant cousins Anju and Sudha, it shows how they adapt themselves to the culture of a foreign land. Born on the same day Anju and Sudha consider each other as *Sister of my Hearts*. They grow as twins in the same house and wish to marry the same man like the heroes of Mahabaratha ,Krishna and Arjun. These fatherless girls live in an old crumbling mansion. They are brought up under the constant vigil of the three widowed women, who force them to follow the strict patriarchal rules, so that they can grow as good daughters. According to their mothers, "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching the family's fame" (SMH-10). Even in the absence of male members in the house, they are conditioned by the traditional Indian upbringing.

Among the sisters, Anju is very sensible, and practical, she shows her nature of defiance, when she was asked by her mother to wear a sari she retorts saying,

I am tired of these old women saris you make us to wear. You think we were living in the Dark Ages instead of in the eighties. I bet there isn't another girl my age in all of Calcutta - except poor Sudha, of course - who's is forced to dress like this. Why can't I wear pants, or a maxi, or at least some kurthas once in a while? (SMH- 52)

But Sudha, calm and cool, not interested in going to college, was ready to marry, and lead a traditional subservient life, like her mother. Anju herself tells about Sudha's character by the picture she used to draw when she was a child,

As children each week we'd draw pictures of our family life. Mine were different every time - a jungle explorer swinging from vines, a pilot in goggles flying a snub-nosed plane, a scientist pouring smoking liquids from one test tube to another. But Sudha's were always the same. They showed a stick figure women in a traditional red-bordered sari with a big bunch of keys tied to her anchal. She wore a red marriage bindi in the centre of her forehead and stood next to a mustached man carrying a briefcase. Around them were gathered several stick figure children, their sex indicated by boxy shorts or triangular skirts. (SMH-74)

Anju after her marriage with Sunil, who is a computer scientist flies to America. Sudha marries Ramesh, who works in Indian Railways, and she happily settles down in a small town in Bengal. Though Sudha is happy to be a dutiful and obedient wife in a house ruled by her tyrannical mother in law. Her happiness does not last long because her mother in law forces Sudha to abort her baby, because it is a female child. Her spineless husband's support to her mother's decision totally shatters Sudha. She takes a bold decision of leaving her house even though everybody, including her mother fearing about the social stigma, was against it. Her mother warns her that whatever happens, she should not leave her house, because her place is only with her

in - laws. Shudha reconciles herself with the tragedy and gains enough strength not to retract from her decision. She considers it is her duty to save her daughter's life. Her strong determination can be inferred when she ask her mother,

Bless me that I might be like the Rani of Jhansi, the queen of swords. I say "Bless me that I have courage to go into battle when necessary, no matter how bleak the situation. Bless me that I may be able to fight for myself and my child, no matter where I am." (SMH-249)

Instead of bothering about the social stigma Sudha, decides to erase her sorrowful past memories and start a new life saying,

In the shower I scrub until the last vestige of red is washed down the drain. I am washing away unhappiness. I tell myself. I am washing away the stamp the stamp duty. I am washing away the death sentence that was passed on my daughter. I am washing away everything the Bidhata Purush wrote, for I've had enough of living a life decreed by someone else. How easy it seems! What power we women can have if we believe in ourselves! (SMH-249)

When Sudha's mother laments seeing her daughter wipe off her sindur powder from her forehead fearing about the social stigma her child has to carry, the author answers through Pishi the aunt of Anju :

Why should she care anymore what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole lifetime of being afraid of what society might think? In spite on this society which says it is fine to kill a baby girl in her mother's womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child. (SMH-247)

The author's utmost anger on the society that supports female infanticide and enslaves women in the name of social stigma and social taboo is to be seen here. The author shows a way to victimized women through Anju. She makes Anju to sign the divorce paper with a smile without any remorse "I signed my name at the bottom of the form with a flourish, and was surprised to find my mouth curving in a smile. We were starting anew, my daughter and I, and because there no roles charted out for us by society, we could become anything we wanted" (SMH-257). This can be taken the message Divakaruni wants to convey to each and every batted woman.

Anju knows about the calamity that has happened to her beloved sister invites Sudha to America, where she believes, they can start a new life. Anju as a practical woman believes that women's empowerment is possible only when they earns for themselves. When Anju gets the first salary from the part time job, which she undertakes to bring Sudha to America. she is highly elated and says,

What I really love is earning my own money. What a feeling of power it gives me to take my own check to the bank and put it into my own account! The first time I got my check. I made the teller cash the entire amount into one dollar bills. I held the pile of money in my hands for a whole minute, breathing in that green scent, the scent of freedom, and then I gave it all back to her to deposit into my account. (SMH-265)

Sudha also expresses the same feeling in a letter, she writes to her aunt Pishi "But think of this: for the first time in my life I'll have my own bank account. It makes me feel - finally like a grown up!" (VOD-350). The male counterparts of both the women betrayed them. They never recognize their wife as individuals; they never respect their genuine feelings and emotions. In the absence of genuine love and understanding between the husband and wife, their marriage becomes a mirage. Instead of simply existing as husband and wife, they take the extreme decision of separation.

The male oriented Indian society, in the name of Manu Smrithi exploits women. Dominic Savio observes that the law of Manu intends to maintain the family harmony and intends to save the Institution of marriage. According to him,

The idea of women's obedience to man arise out of necessity for respect for family and society. This is an extreme law which needs to be adopted as an inevitable necessity in the interest of family harmony. (114)

The patriarchal society is using the law for their convenience to suppress and oppress women and prove their dominance.

There is no genuine love between Sunil and Anju. Sunil is fascinated towards Sudha from the day he sees her. His strong fascination towards Sudha ends in seducing her. Her foolish acceptance creates a sense of guilt which compels her to leave her beloved sister. The betrayal of Sudha and Anil forces Anju to leave her husband broken hearted. Both the women stranded in the middle left to fend for themselves. Sudha after leaving Anju takes up the job of a care taker and Anju turns to continue her college education and her part time job. Both the women gain the strength to pick up pieces of life and trace a new path for themselves after accepting for divorce.

Their rational thinking enables them to reconcile themselves with the sad and unwanted events that had happened in their married life. Realization dawns in them that they are not victims and they have the right over their body and right over their mind to resist the dominance of patriarchy. They are happy that the job they do gives the necessary money, which makes them financially independent to stand on their own. They don't want to go back to the old ways of living for others they are fascinated by the America mantra which says, "Live for yourself."

Anju and Sudha are not against the Institution of marriage, when they find that the marriage robs their identity, self respect, independence and freedom and offers only a subordinate and secondary role with no option to exercise, in spite of being a dutiful wives to their husbands, force them to come out of it. They don't want to simply exist as husband and wife under one roof without love and kindness. They want to live with identity as a woman rather than with the identity as a wife. They don't need the protection of their husbands. They want to reinvent their life, without the help of their husbands. They echo the view of de Beauvoir who observes "once a women is self sufficient and ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles, between her and universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator" (289).

Like every women migrated to America Sudha and Anju are torn between the old traditional Indian values and the modern American values. When they find that following the old customs and accepting gender hierarchy, chains them and makes their married life hollow and meaningless, the women transform themselves into empowered and assertive women to take up new roles breaking the old myths and cultural shackles, rather than to remain as obedient wives to their husbands and suffer patiently.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni firmly believes that a radical transformation is necessary on the part of Indian women, and the change should come within them. The author has portrayed the transformation of her women characters very beautifully in all her novels. She likes to have strong and complicated women as her characters, and believes that her novels will change some traditional ideas about Indian women.

In the two novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* the author celebrates the acquired qualities of Anju and Sudha such as, the spirit to adapt to a new culture, the spirit to rebel against the gender hierarchy, their courage to come out of the suffocating marriage bond, their determination to find a job to be financially independent, the crave to find a new identity and the strength and boldness to design their own identity.

Anju and Sudha represent the author's ideal "New Women" who have the necessary strength and energy and assertiveness to face their calamities successfully and make their own destiny, The author in an interview has said about her own experience in America when she immigrated from India: "you lose your support system, your extended family, but you gain a new identity" confessing that she learnt to be independent from a culture that values and respects individuality.

This is the message the author wish to convey to every woman.

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