

**FROM PASSIVITY TO RESISTANCE: A CRITICAL STUDY ON CHITRA
BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART***

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the twenty most influential global Indian Women is an Indian American writer, an award-winning author, poet, activist and teacher. Her writings have various themes revolving around the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. *The sister of My Heart* is the story about the two characters named Anju and Sudha who belong to the Chatterjee family which is already deprived of its men and its former status. This paper focuses on the life of Sudha and the journey of the mothers from the patriarchal world to a new female universe. The social, cultural and economic Milieu ignores the basic human rights to the widows and divorced women. Divorce is hard and painful but that does not mean one has to sit back and accept the pain for the rest of the life. The widowed and divorced women go to the root of suffering; they realise, relearn self love and take responsibility for their own life.

KEY WORDS: Social, Cultural, Divorce, Widowhood, female universe, passivity, resistance.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the twenty most influential global Indian Women is an Indian American writer, an award-winning author, poet, activist and teacher. Her writings have various themes revolving around the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. Her works have been translated into 29 languages. Presently Divakaruni teaches Creative Writing at the University of Houston and writes for both adults and children. Her famous works include *Arranged Marriage: Stories* (1995) *The Mistress of Spices* (1997)

Sister of My Heart (1999) *The Unknown Errors of our Lives* (2001) *The Vine of Desire* (2002) *Queen of Dreams* (2004) *The Lives of Strangers* (2007) *The Palace of Illusions*. She has also written Young adult and children's books, Poems and Anthologies.

The sister of My Heart is the story about the two characters named Anju and Sudha who belong to the Chatterjee family which is already deprived of its men and its former status. This paper focuses on the life of Sudha and the journey of the mothers from the patriarchal world to a new female universe. Though Anju and Sudha are born for different parents they consider each other as the sister of their hearts and develop an unbreakable bond. They alternately narrate the events of their life. Both their fathers disappear mysteriously on a ruby hunting expedition. After the death of their fathers finance becomes the major problem for the Chatterjee family.

The girls live in a male-free home. Singhji, the chauffeur is the only man who is none but Sudha's father. He lives in the home disguised as a chauffeur since he wants to protect the family without his identity. His family members could not identify him because his face was burnt due to a fight during the ruby hunting expedition. The chatterjee family fortunes are at low ebb. The novel is a portrayal of the struggles, relationships, and overcomings of the three widows namely Sudha's mother, Nalini and Anju's mother Gouri Ma, and Abha Pishi, Gouri Ma's sister-in-law and how they allow their daughters to find their own identity after some denials. Pishi can be compared to Rodabai in Bapsi Sidwaha's *Ice Candy Man* who has a strong personality, unshakable mental stamina and courage to remould. She is victimized by the rules and customs of the patriarchal society. She is denied to make a new life after becoming a widow at a young age. She acts as a great moral strength to the chatterjee family in all its tough times.

Both the girls have different personalities and ambitions. The relationship of these two girls is inexplicable. They always give each other affection, comfort, and support. Anju and Sudha share everything with each other. They even demand to call them as twins. Though Anju is not good looking like Sudha, she never feels envious of her beauty instead she always adores her cousin. They support each other in all walks of life. The love and compassion for one another makes them strong and overcome the difficulties in their families. As Anju tells Sudha, "I would love you, ... because you love me. I would love you because no- one else knows us like we know each other". (61)

Though the Chatterjee's home is free of men, the man made rules are always present at the home. The mothers are too traditional and the fear that they live without any security of a male member make them even more cautious in the matters of the girls. Sujit Kumar Rath, Md.Sharifulla, Dr. Mantri Raghuram comment: "Divakaruni brings out the paradoxes involved in how as daughters Sudha and Anju were restricted not to be fashionable, not to watch movies, not allowed to use lip stick and salwar kameez in a bid to make them the acid test of finding a good suitor"(4).

Anju is seen to be lover of books. She likes Virginia Woolf's writings and she wants to go abroad for her studies. By listening to all the mythical stories told by her aunt Pishi Sudha becomes a dreamer of romantic marriage and motherhood based on Hindu legends. The two girls go to a film where Sudha meets Ashok for the first time. Unfortunately a neighbour of the girls' family takes them to their mothers and start saying all ill things about the girls. This infuriates Nalini. Sudha is not even eighteen, but her mother Nalini decides to arrange for the marriage in order to save the family's name and reputation more than her daughter's education. Nalini who has eloped with Gopal and her present status in the Chaterjee family does not allow her to consider her daughter's wishes. She does not want her daughter to spoil her life as she did. Ashok Sudha's childhood love comes with a proposal for marriage and is rejected by the Chatterjee family because of his a low caste status.

Though Gouri Ma use to enlighten Anju that she should go to college and execute her father's covets. But illness forces her to arrange a marriage for Anju. Anju and Sudha get the drift of the situation and approbate the idea of marriage. The mothers think that the girls are too young to select their partners on their own and Gouri Ma assures, "'Trust us Anju', said mother. 'We want your happiness even more than you do'"(112). Sudha marries Ramesh from the sanyals family in Bardhaman who is not a god of beauty, but has a high-ranking job with Indian railways that seeks a lot of traveling.

One can understand the mentality of Mrs.Sanyal that she wants her daughter- in- law to look after the household. She does not want a wife for her son but a daughter-in-law to shoulder the responsibility of her family. Mrs.Sanyal orders Sudha to abort once she comes to know that Sudha is conceived with a girl baby. She tells her that a first girl baby is not a good luck for the family. Ramesh cannot do anything against his mother and the marriage results in divorce.

In the novel the women characters are the stereotypical representation when the novel begins but the course of bitter events makes them to break the stereotyped image and become new, strong and determined women. The novel is divided into two books, the first book deals with the early life of Sudha and Anju, the second book brings out how both the naive girls change themselves into strong women. Pishi who has been an epitome of tradition throughout the novel is seen to break the norms after seeing the result of Sudha's life. Even though she does all the heavy works given by her mother in law and takes a great care of her husband's brothers she is sent out of the home when she refuses to abort her girl baby.

All the three Mothers start protesting against the social stigma. Though there is no domestic violence shown in the novel there is a lot of emotional abuse given to the women both by men and the society. The social, cultural and economic Milieu ignores the basic human rights to the widows and divorced women. Divorce is hard and painful but that does not mean one has to sit back and accept the pain for the rest of the life. The widowed and divorced women go to the root of suffering; they realise, relearn self love and take responsibility for their own life. They learn use their past to make their future much better.

The tradition bound mothers support their daughter and Pishi says, " I spit on this society which says it's fine to kill a baby girl in her mother's womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child"(268). Sudha asks the three mothers to bless her to be like the Rani of Jhansi, the queen of swords to face the odds of life. The mothers stop caring about the society which does no good to them. They no longer worry about the social stigma attached to a divorcee and keep Sudha with them. They make a new female universe and their moving away from the ancestral home to a new apartment symbolizes it. Through this novel Divakaruni has exposed the limitations that women of India face due to the societal norms. The rules and customs should enhance and empower human relationships. It should show a path for a harmonious development of both the genders. The hardships faced by the widows in the novels will make every woman to get a feeling to stand up for themselves. Choosing to be a divorcee does not mean that women are stepping on the culture and tradition. Sudha tries to convince her mother-in-law and her husband but in vain. Ramesh though an educated man affirms with his mother's idea of abortion. He also accepts to divorce and marry another woman. He is a complete coward and he leaves his own wife and the unborn girl child. Sudha though acted as a dutiful wife and a responsible

daughter-in-law is not respected and thrown away by the family. What would one expect a woman to do except throwing away the societal rules and follow her instincts. Thus the women move from passivity to resistance.

Reference:

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