

**PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AS A NEW ICON OF INDEPENDENCE IN CHITRA
BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART* AND *THE VINE OF DESIRE***

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Abstract

Women are portrayed as the most visible symbols of the perilous incongruity arising out of the cohabitation between cultures. Gone are the days when women played the role of puppets in the hands of male chauvinistic world. At the dawn of the 21st century, it has been observed that woman has come to lime-light by breaking away all the shackles of patriarchal set up. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has proved her mettle as one of the most prolific and vociferous voices of Asian American Immigrant women. She focuses on the diasporic Indian women caught between two opposing world. They find themselves in an in between state, struggling to carve out identities of their own. This paper seeks to delve into the incongruity, involved in the lives of women characters and forces and factors that bring about cataclysmic changes in their lives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has transformed, marginal women into new Icon of Independence in her novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* and proves that women are capable of restricting the community. The Indian women have been represented as powerful female subjects who seem to ask difficult questions about their identity, selfhood, and familial and social role even as they attempt to re-inscribe their selves in their community, history and society.

Key words: Feminism, multiculturalism, immigrant experiences, problems of assimilation.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, it has been observed that woman has come to limelight by breaking away all the shackles of patriarchal set up. Gone are the days when women played the role of puppets in the hands of male chauvinistic world. In the present-day scenario, she is no more the product of Ibsen's *Doll's House* where a woman merely, shifts her duties and responsibilities from one man to another that is from her father to her husband. Instead, she has started shedding all the illusions of male-dominated society by breaking all the social connections related to marriage. In the galaxy of women writers of Indian diaspora, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a distinguished Indian American writer of the South Asian diaspora who finds a rich voice through the portrayal of human relationships which are made 'new' in the diasporic location. The way Chitra Banerjee has transformed marginal women into new icons of independence in her novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, prove that women are capable of restricting the community. The Indian women have been represented as powerful female subjects who seem to ask difficult questions about their identity, selfhood, and familial and social role even as they attempt to re-inscribe their selves in their community, history and society.

Feminism, Divakaruni urges in her life and work, is primarily a philosophy of action and engagement. As a writer and activist, championing South Asian women's causes in the bay area of California, issues of different forms of gender subordination in the lives of diasporic women is something very close to Divakaruni's heart, and in her fiction, she deconstructs the stereotypical representation of Indian women as docile, passive and subordinate objects lacking agency and creates powerful female subjects. Divakaruni's writing often centres around the lives of immigrant women as she says, "Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to prejudice when they meet them in real life" (Divakaruni website)

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work we have women who either live abroad or happen to be visiting India. These women are no doubt conditioned by the Indian upbringing but have risen above the traditional constraints. They think more rationally, but they mentally retain some of the traditional beliefs. They are torn between old and new values. They question the nature of their lives, and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals. This awareness leads them to rethink about their own lives as women and instils in them the confidence and strength to go ahead. Chitra Banerjee focuses on the diasporic Indian women caught between two opposing world. They find themselves in an in-between state, struggling to carve out identities of their own. They try to discuss their own lives amidst joy and unhappiness.

This paper analyses the portrayal of female characters that have emerged out of the masterly pen of Divakaruni and how they have been delineated in the novels which they figure.

In her second novel, *Sister of my Heart*, Divakaruni, tells the moving story of two cousins, Anju and Sudha who grow up in a traditional Indian household in Calcutta. The story unfolds in the decadent Chatterjee mansion of Calcutta, Anju's house, in which both the girls live with their respective mothers and aunt Pishi, who had sought shelter, with her brother's family since her widowhood at the age of eighteen. After the tragic demise of the fathers, in a mysterious and reckless quest, for a cave of rubies. Sudha and her mother with no other family and no means of financial sustenance, permanently reside in the Chatterjee household. Despite the socio-economic difference in the girls background, a strong emotional bond develops between them, and though their lives are shaped by the three widows without any overt male domination, the spectre of imperialism and patriarchy seems to haunt their everyday existence. They did not have acquaintance with any youngman because of the vigilance of their mothers, Sudha reports:

We moved in a world of women, my cousin and I, at home and outside. It was a world of filtered, submarine light, languid movements, eyes looking out from behind a frieze. Small muted sounds: the tinkling of bangles, female laughter.

(SMH 66)

The few men servants in the house did not come up beyond the ground floor, when Sudha and Anju attended a family function, they would sit among their women relatives “webbed around with gossip and song and old tales”.

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.

Anju and Sudha compliment 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 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 else in the entire world will. Early in my life I realize something. People were Jealous of Sudha and me” (SMH 24)

The two sisters are separated after their wedding. Sudha’s condition 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 trip to America, she visits Sudha, 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 wanted to maintain a distance in the husband-wife relationship. He was addicted to American culture. When she came to know about Sunil’s

personal character, she wanted to come back to India. 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.

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.

Impotency and sterility are the two main problems in the Society. The society is ready to treat the woman as a 'sterile' woman. But it is shown partiality to treat man as impotent person. It is the greatest biological discrimination faced by all women. 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. (SMH 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 the family becomes worse. Anju has to work for Sudha. She wishes to invite Sudha to America to fulfil Sudha's Childhood dream. So, Anju earns money for Sudha without the knowledge of her husband Sunil, she goes to work, that 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.

Sudha is ready to go to America to take care of her beloved sister Anju. Ashok Ghosh again approaches Gouramma 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 situation. If they were joined together, no external force would come and attack them.

The characters 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. Sudha's role is expressed as the strong and stubborn woman. She has to face the problem with her husband, mother-in-law and lover Ashok. But eventually, she has taken a correct decision of joining with Anju in America, by doing this, She rejuvenates and energises all the women in the world. In *the Vine of Desire*, Divakaruni portrays immigrant experiences of expatriate men and women living in America, who struggle hard to maintain their self identity in variable alien culture. She particularly depicts the women, caught in multicultural challenges in alien culture, who represent transformation, in motion, from traditional wives to modern women to survive on their own to reject a home to sustain their identity.

Both Sudha and Anju in, *The Vine of Desire* are unprepared to adjust themselves because of emotional bonds and the love triangle that exists between Sunil, Anju and Sudha.

While Sunil continues to do his job, Anju and Sudha face problems. So it is clear that too often women bear the brunt of masculine frustrations and are the victims. It is a moving and satisfying sequel to the second novel titled *Sister of My Heart* which is about the lives of two women Sudha and Anju and how they are changed by marriage, as one woman comes to California, and the other stay behind in India. *The vine of Desire* stands on its own as a novel of extraordinary depth and sensitivity. The title expresses the story of two immigrant women, Sudha and Anju, enmeshed in the making of American lives.

Sudha saves her daughter by breaking all restraints bound with Indian marriages and security with all these burdens she visits to America to give emotional support to her sister and a new direction to her life. Even though she is well aware of the fact that her sister Anju's husband Sunil, has a secret passion for her. Sudha encounters all these challenges yet to take up a job in America as a profession of home nurse to an old man, who suffers extreme depression for his homeland, India. Sudha walks out of the security of her husband and starts a fresh new life in America with her daughter. In America Sudha does not face the restrictions, which are in India. Even though Ashok proposes her, she refuses him because she wants to lead her life independently. She comes to America to achieve freedom and independence. She begins to build a new community around her and to fit happily into her new life. She gets acquainted with the American way of life. She visits America with a hope to make life for herself and her daughter Dayita. Divakaruni follows the trend, shows America as the land of opportunities. However, it is significant that Anju refuses to come back India, through her mother and others insist her to come when she gets separated from Sunil, she refuses any help from Sunil. In this way Divakaruni shows the liberal American notion of feminism encourages Indian women to struggle for the freedom and independence. Anju and Sudha are well educated and economically independent women.

Sudha is aware of the long stares from Anju's husband Sunil and knows that she is blessed with beauty. Sudha deliberately avoids being alone with Sunil, she neither trust him, nor herself. The sin that Sudha does not want to commit is committed. But later she feels guilty for her behaviour. So, she decides to leave Sunil's house immediately. We can witness the predicament of women in a male dominated society, where woman is victimized either as wife or as the other woman. Sudha realizes that she is also a part of that tradition, which she so much wants to get rid of. In America Sudha becomes the victim of Sunil's lust, so she flees from her cousin's home, to work as a nursemaid to an old man to earn a livelihood.

Chitra Divakaruni makes a fine portrayal of an Indian immigrant Sudha, who decides to accept the job as a nurse to look after an old man. Now, she starts earning by herself that gives her a feeling of empowerment. She starts evaluating the American culture in her lonely fight to carry on her life in the immigrant land. She also compares the social and cultural system in America and India when she arrives in the house of Mr.Sen. She now concludes that there can be a prosperous life in her homeland, if he returns there to get settle down in the different part of her homeland. Her immigrants experience in America gives her new insights in her life that can take her back to India as an enriched person.

Anju is not like Sudha, she doesn't like certain aspects of her home culture but her view is quite balance about both Indian and American culture. She is realistic in her judgements and knows the fact very well that she idealizes India after Sunil's adultery when she longs to be back in the place where she grew up. She deliberately decides to stay in America appreciating the changes that have occurred in her life, some of them having thrown her into deep grief but others have given her hope to relocate herself. Her stay in America makes her more alter that helps her to adopt a more westernized way of thinking that she starts believing that she owes something to herself.

Divakaruni incorporates a whole range of issues related to the lives of the women. These include arranged marriage, unhappy relationships, divorce, female foeticide, the conflict between old values, self-transformation and new female experiences that are both repressive and expressive; the two sisters undergo a catharsis of a range of emotions, individually work out strategies of survival and finally emerge as stronger women. Unlike other immigrant narratives, Chitra Banerjee conceives the Indian women's immigration to the US as a journey from oppressed and depressed condition to freedom and discovery of the self with the inspiration of western influence.

Nostalgia or homesickness is a phenomenon most of the immigrants face in their stay in foreign land. As they live in a new land, it is inevitable that they think about their culture, the familiar environment in their homelands. They find themselves unable to adjust in a new culture. Because of this alienation from the mainstream American society, most of them lose their hope. Sudha feels that the old man is not leading his life happily because he stays in an alien land; "In this bed, in this house, in this country, all of which is alien to him". (VOD 278) She senses that he may get peace in his homeland. So she assumes that he would get recovered, if he is taken to his native land. For the first generation immigrants, migration creates alienation, nostalgia of the past and rootlessness, due to firmly clinging to the cultural beliefs, practices, and norms of the homeland, of which Makarand Paranjape makes observation. As he says, "there is a clinging to the old identity and a resistance to making a transition" (61).

American society offers opportunities as well as pain to both sisters and this shakes the foundation of which their extraordinary love and friendship stands. Their experience is complex and affects both in different ways. Anju finds a space to live and grow in the United States of America, She starts going to college, to join the writers club. She tries to assimilate cultural diversity to explore and discover her creative talent. This is certainly true in the case

of immigrants to America but the same society and its opportunities seem far away from Sudha. Sudha tells Dayita when she decides to leave Anju and Sunil's house, "Dayita none of the choices ahead of me are good ones. This one just seems a little less bad than the others" (VOD 202). Finally Sudha decides to return India with Mr. Sen, an old man who is keenly waiting to return his homeland, India. Sudha's return is a symbolic victory for all the women victimized by the doctrines of the patriarchal system in her country. She denies the offers of the men in her life. Her life seeks new meaning; her diasporic experience becomes useful in empowering her to be self-sufficient, to live life independently just as Anju dares. Both women succeed in breaking traditional notions, of womanhood defined by men. The two disappointed women finally begin to talk in 'different voices'. It makes them the symbols of hope, signs that the world is changing and that women are creating their own world. The women characters like Sudha, Anju, Nalini and Gouri support each other emphasize with each others' predicaments and stands as examples of empowered women. Divakaruni probably wishes that women need to be bold and active even in difficult situations; and they can create a life of their own, a destiny of their own; It is not an end to a woman's life if she is deprived of man's love. It is the acceptance of the situation that makes Anju bold and independent. She changes and grows, taking up the opportunities held out to her in America. Sudha too is able to change her life by taking up a job, and to be independent, things that may not have been possible in India. Divakaruni writes to unite people and she does it by destroying myths and stereo types. She identifies the strength of mind and potentiality of the twenty-first century women who desires to get freedom and autonomy in leading their lives.

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