



The Role of Women in Divakaruni's Sister of my Heart.

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ABSTRACT: *The paper focuses on the role of the women characters. Many a time we have seen that women are responsible for keeping the traditional value intact. Women had always been undervalued due to patriarchal superiority. In the Indian society especially, the experiences of women were not considered much compared to the perceptions and experiences of their male counterparts in the society. Women writers had mostly presented a narrow canvas of themes like domestic issues, experiences of in-law's place, and difficulties in adjustment in post and pre-marital status, sexual harassment, dejection to name a few. Sister of My Heart deals with different ranges of women experiences altogether and touches all aspect of a woman's life.*

Keywords: *women, female- bonding, feminist, orthodox, society*

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific writer and has carved a niche for herself. She born in India and later moved to the United States to attend college. She earned a M. A. at Wright State University and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. She has contributed more than 20 books which includes fiction, poetry, children literature and anthologies and is a recipient of various prestigious award like , The American Book Award for Arranged Marriage: Stories, and PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award for Arranged Marriage , 1955. The Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize and the Pushcart Prize for poems in Leaving Yuba City: New and Selected Poems, 1997 to name a few.

The novel Sister of My Heart was written in 1999. It was received well by the readers. The current paper focuses on the women in the novel apart from the prominent theme, the friendship between Sudha and Anju. With the beginning of feminism, women have strived hard to achieve their identity. New intellectual woman has emerged in their writings: talking like males, defying male dominance, discussing her life experiences, adjusting her personal and professional life in a far better way than her spouse and desire to explore one's own identity. The concept of feminism has moved far beyond then it initially started. The novel is the proof that it does not need a male chauvinistic figure to please the world. Anju and Sudha are equated to the roles of hero. Even 17 years later after its publication Sister of My Heart still appeal to its reader. Reader is glue to the novel and each chapter motivates the reader to finish in one sitting. The suspense of the novel is well kept. The novel presents different facet of women life.

Gauri Ma

Gauri is the thriving force that is making the household runs smoothly. She runs the age old bookstore to run the family. She commands respect and love from the family as well from the society. She is an ideal mother, a perfect woman. She is calm by nature and a perfect wife any man could ask for. She is the main reason for sustaining the age old tradition of Chatterjees. Anju believes that her mother is wise and thinks that ...“My mother is the most intelligent person I know, and the most efficient. Still, the store never seems to make a profit, and each week she has to go over our household expenses in her carefully, frowning way, trying to cut costs.” 25. Her decision in the family was taken as final decision. All the women in the family have a great respect for her.

Her Contribution

Gauri is the tower of strength and houseful of power. She is the keeper of tradition and culture. She educates both the daughters in the family. She is a strong force that unites the family from falling apart. After knowing the fact that her husband was killed because of Gopal, Sudha's father. She is able to treat Sudha like

her own daughter and Nalini as her own sister. She is also the reason behind Anju's marriage and not letting her to go for higher studies. Indirectly helping the girls to fall prey with domestic life and not giving them the chance to become independent. She had a mild stroke and she was worried she will not survive long so she forces Anju into marriage. But, surprising she survived till the end of the novel. So she is indeed the reason behind atrocities that Anju and Sudha faces later in their respective married lives since they were barely 18 years old.

Pishi

Pishi is the bold and beautiful among the three widows. She is close to the girls and she tells them stories which later the girls relate themselves to the characters of their own. She sustains the old mythology and believes in Bidhata Purush for one's fate in the girls' mind. She is constantly in touch with the girls more than their mothers. She became widow at the age of 18. She gave equal love to both the girls. Life was cruel to Pishi but she fought against the odds of life and tries to instill moral values to the girls. She has given support to Gauri Ma in running the house smoothly under her guidance.

Her Contribution

The main contribution of Pishi is the revelation of the secret of the family to Sudha. "I've always believed in the importance of telling you girls about your past, you know that. But this secret is so terrible that I've been reluctant to burden you with it. I am afraid it will take away your childhood and destroy the love that you hold dearest. I'm afraid it will make you hate me." (33). The revelation is an important plot for the novel; this incident brings out the conflict and tension between the girls and the best of human emotions of friendship, sacrifice and love. She bridges the gap between Nalini and Gauri at the times of conflict between them. She welcomes Sudha wholeheartedly when she came back leaving her marriage behind and love Sudha's baby too. She could feel Sudha's position as a lone wife betrayed by her husband. She has the motherly affection towards the girls and was grateful with what life was offering to her.

Nalini

She is the most beautiful woman among the three widows in the house and also the less compassionate and less brainy. She constantly nags about life, her daughter, her husband and to the rest of the family members. She is conscious about her beauty and tries to sustain it. She follows her beauty regime without fail every day. She loves being the center of attraction and chit chatting with her friends. "Her skin is still golden, for though she's a widow my mother is careful to apply turmeric paste to her face each day. Her perfect-shaped lips glisten red from paan, which she loves to chew- mostly for the colour it leaves on her mouth, I think." (17) These are the lines that Sudha describes about her mother.

Her Contribution

Indeed the reasons behind the girls are left without their father is because of her. She constantly nags her husband to earn more money, "Are you ever going to make any money, when are we going to move into our own home, where are all your fine promises now, hai Mother Kali, this is my punishment for following this man, for smearing black on my ancestors' faces." (39). She had dream of living a good life with the man she elopes but when it was not happening, she constantly nags her husband. The outcome is that the men in the family went for ruby hunt when both the women were pregnant and they never returned back. She pushes Sudha to get married as soon as she completes school. She has no aspiration to send her daughter to college. She is reluctant to receive her own daughter after knowing the fact her mother-in-law and husband is forcing her to abort the baby. Thus, she is not an ideal mother like Gauri of Pishi.

Anju and Sudha

Their relation is what the novel enjoys to portray. It is a wonderful relationship pure and radiant. They are not blood related but they are truly sister in all senses. They fight, laugh, cried, and did all the mischievous together and always stood up for each other. Anju is from upper class and Sudha comes from the lower caste but class conflict does not occur between them. Both complement each other, Anju the brainy and witty and Sudha the beauty and modest. One can bring the concept of Alter Ego in these two characters.

Wikipedia defines alter ego as second self, which is believed to be distinct from a person's normal or original personality. Cicero first coined the term as part of his philosophical construct in 1st century Rome, but he described it as "a second self, a trusted friend"... alter ego can be found in literary analysis, wherein it describes characters in different works that are psychologically similar, or a fictional character ... It's also used to designate the best friend of another character in a story. In the case of Anju and Sudha, Anju's alter ego is Sudha and the same is vice versa of Sudha. Both of them know what the other one wants without even telling: But never Sudha. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart.

I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She'll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I'll know she understands me perfectly.

Like no-one else in the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world will. (24)

There is perfect harmony with both of them. They are not bother by the outside world. The closeness is a topic of criticism among the neighbor and society, 'don't you girls ever do anything without each other? I swear, you're like those twins, what do they call them? Born stuck together.' (28) India is still a conservative society and everybody minds everybody business. Homosexuality is still a taboo in our society. It is not consider ideal for a woman to be close to another woman.

In another article entitled "Concept and What is: Alter ego | Psychology", it gives another perspective of 'alter ego as the existence of a friend so close, loyal and intimate, it's impossible to get away from him or her. In it the individual trusts and see oneself reflected in the other person. Which means that it is able to elect him/her their representative at all, really believing that he/she will act as he/she would do in certain situations?.....Everyone should, therefore, every moment, try to build again, to unite its various faces, and build a whole. Where is then the alter ego, between these various divisions of the psyche? Precisely in the deepest being, usually the face in which other people really trust.'

Anju and Sudha complement each other, both of their personalities joined together define ideal modern woman. Beauty, brain, witty, compassion, dutiful, knowledge of tradition and household chores, intellect, humble, enormous love for each other and people, free spirit, exploring new ideas and world outside are few of the qualities both the girls' poses which stood as ideal example of modern Indian woman. Anju and Sudha trusted each other and were not bother about what the neighbor said about them. Anju defies the social norms and Sudha gives in to all the norms and tradition of the society but stood for each other and are dedicated to each other and their unspoken promise to continue as sisters of the heart, each finds comfort in the company of the other and become the alter ego.

Their Sacrifices

In terms of sacrifice, Sudha's stand not to reveal the family dark secret and remain royal to Anju in spite of knowing the fact that they are not related as Anju and silently suffer the guilty that her father is responsible to bring ruin to Anju's family is outstanding. Sudha vows to make up the loss her father has done to the family by marrying Ramesh instead of running away with Ashok, the man she loved. Anju after knowing that Sudha's mother-in-law and her husband is forcing her to abort the baby was agitated and she undertake to help her. Without her husband knowledge she started doing part time job in order to save money so that she can buy ticket for Sudha, which ultimately resulted in losing her own baby due to stress. Thus, both at any given situation are ready to do anything for their friendship and love for each other is worth admiring.

Their outlook towards marriage

Anju is modern in her thinking and has damn care attitude. Anju thinks that Sudha must maintain the same old intimacy like sisters throughout their life. Sudha after discovering the dark secret about her was tormented and impels her to be away from Anju. She succumbs to the Hindu Indian gender norms of dutiful daughter. Sudha's physical beauty helps by securing a husband. Sudha's dream for the future is to become a wife and mother. Anju does not wish to lead a mechanical life and thinks that marriage will liberate her. Her husband Sunil is an immigrant consistently encourages Anju to feel comfortable in America. He teaches her to drive and introduces her to his colleagues at work. The American way of life is totally contradictory to the Indian standards of living. In America, life moves on without bothering about others feeling and in India the feelings and emotions play a vital role in the day-to-day life.

Mrs Sanyal

She is a bold widow, looks after her children single handedly and gave them good education. She runs the rigid household efficiently and is able to maintain a status for herself in the society. Situation had made her a strong and hard hearted woman with less of emotions to display. She is the boss of the house and everybody follow her instruction without an argument. After Sudha's marriage, she is not ready to give up the command over her son. Her word is taken as the final verdict. When Sudha was not having trouble conceiving, she mistreated her. She took her every possible way to have a grandson but never ever thought that fault could be from her son. She is the typical cruel mother-in-law in Indian soap serial. She forces Sudha to abort the baby after knowing the gender of the baby in order to keep the prestige of her Sanyal family.

Mrs Majumdar

She is a humble woman and completely opposite to Mrs. Sanyal. She has no saying in the family, 'a sweet, ineffectual woman who gesture a lot with her hands, is extremely apologetic' (138). She adores her son and gives equal love to Anju. She never complains or demands anything and strictly follows her husband's

instruction, 'She bends her head and speaks in a watery whisper, or hunches her shoulders apologetically as she rushes to fetch what he's shouting for'(180). She gives in to every whim and fancy of her husband. Unlike Mrs. Sanyal, she did not interfere in Sunil and Anju's lives.

The Convent Nuns

They were not happy with the closeness of Anju and Sudha. They even put them in separate classes. Anju and Sudha were happy in their own world and they don't mingle with other girls in the school and it became talk of the town, 'Oh those Chatterjee girls, 'people said, 'forever acting like they're too good for our daughters. And Anju's mother, what was she thinking, indulging them in this way? ... (27). The nuns fails not see the innocent in their friendship but saw something as immoral to be close to another women due to their religious believe forgetting that each individual is same in God's eyes and friendship is a wonderful gift of God.

Sarita Aunty

She is one of Nalini's tea party friends. She also disapprove of Anju and Sudha's closeness. She is a minor character in the novel but important since she represent the outside world of the Chatterjee family. There are many Sarita in our society who loves to poke their nose in other people business. They are least bother with their own lives but very keen to know what is happening in others life. These types of characters are dangerous and we need to avoid listening to them for they become the reason of many broken families.

II. CONCLUSION

The status of woman has constantly been changing, yet 100% equal treatment is not attain. We have come a long way but few steps are still needed. The image of women is continually changing, often to suit the changing needs of man or society in general. These women in the novel exists within us especially women. At many given situation according to me it is women who are responsible for the atrocities of another women as we have also notice in the novel. The three widows in the Chatterjee's family are worth the praise, they stood against all odds in lives together and they in togetherness emerge as a stronger individual.

Pishi believed in the myth of Bidhata Purush is a dominant myth in the novel .The first night after a child is born, Bidhata Purush comes down to earth to decide what its fortune is to be and the destiny of the child is decided. She believes that human life is pre-destined and humans are helpless creatures. This ideology of Pishi is later defy by accepting Sudha's unborn baby and her divorce and ultimately not bothering for once what the society thinks about it. Chatterjee widows learn to reject the old values and imbibe a set of new values.

The various women in Divakaruni's novels are caught between the traditional customs of India and westernized culture of modern India. The self-perceptions of these women are dramatically altered, for the manner in which they see themselves change due to the uncertain nature of their environment. Divakaruni's characters move beyond individualistic approach to a better world of understanding.

Sudha emerges as a woman of authority and determination. When the relationship between her and her daughter is challenged, she progresses from subordination to a liberated mother. Sudha's mother Nalini is not pleased about her daughter's arrival. Pishi and Gouri Ma extend a warm welcome to Sudha. Gouri Ma adjudges Sudha to be old enough to make her own decisions and offers to support Sudha. Aunt Pishi instructs Gouri Ma to sell the traditional Chatterjee house to support Sudha and her child. She gradually moves towards a bolder woman making her own decision in life. She decided to keep the baby and divorce her husband. It was Anju's love and support as a true sister who actually helps her out and encourages Sudha to raise her daughter as a single parent. Anju on the other hand started going college and acquiring the knowledge that she crave for and trying to assimilate the new found culture, the American way of life.

The women begin to reject the rigid rules and regulation which are limited for women in the society. Ironically without any male intrusion, the sisters and the mothers are able to carve out a position for themselves in the society. The protagonists, Anju and Sudha, and their mothers are able to re-discover themselves through the various trials and tribulations, and thereby assert their identity. The power of sisterhood is the tower of strength for all the women in the novel. The kaleidoscopic layer of woman personalities is beautifully projected by Divakaruni. There is little bit of Gauri Ma, Pishi, Nalini, Sudha, Anju, Sarita, Mrs. Sanyal and Mrs. Majumder in each individual but we need to bring out the better side of each individual in order to have a beautiful place and fight for the equal at par with the male counterpart

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