

Struggle of Self- Actualisation and Representation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister of my Heart

M. Hima Bindu^{1,2}, Dr. N. Srinivasa Rao³

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, GITAM (Deemed to be University), Visakhapatnam

²Asst. Professor, Dept of BS&H, Vignan's Institute of Information Technology(A),
Visakhapatnam, himameduri@gmail.com

³Asst. Professor, Department of English and Other Languages, GITAM School of
Humanities and Social Sciences, Visakhapatnam, snalamar@gitam.edu

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the representation of women and their rights to be independent and empowered as portrayed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel "Sister of My Heart." This paper gives the reader an insight into the lives of two cousins namely Sudha and Anju and how they struggle against their cultures' male-dominated structures. Their friendship based on surrogate sisterhood and their relationships with their mothers provides insight into the female fraternity. Their experiences depict the effects of the rigid patriarchal and sexist culture of India on the women who are restricted and oppressed in their marriage. The male world is portrayed as troublesome and dangerous which drives Sudha to leave her marital home, something worth applauding is her courage and self-respect. Anju tries to assimilate into the American way of life but still maintains the bond with her family to show that the process of balancing American life and Indian values is difficult. Divakaruni draws a world of women as sensitive as they are strong, with Pishi as the sage who reminds the young women of the ways of life and the importance of their support. Sudha and Anju pursue their dreams and defy the patriarchal order by gaining control over their lives in the narrative.

Keywords: identity, independence, self-representation, patriarchy, sexist, feminine friendship.

1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a popular contemporary woman writer of Indian origin living in America and her works depict women's rights issues, cultural conflicts, and immigration. Her much-acclaimed novel 'Sister of My Heart' revolves around the characters of two cousins, Anju and Sudha who have a bond of sisterhood but the tragedy of death drives a wedge between them (Beauvoir, 1972).

One of the major themes in the book is that of human subject formation, with a focus on a sense of self, including a sexual one, along with the functions that culture plays in this process.

This is where Divakaruni paints the picture of how much more liberated Sudha and Anju are in America compared to how women in Indian society are bound to traditional norms. In India,

tradition requires women to remain domesticated slave-like wives and obedient daughters whose sole responsibility is to cater to the needs of their husbands and families respectively (Chitnis, 1988). Nonetheless, when the two cousins decide to leave this place and go to the new world, the country of America, they are allowed to make their own decisions freely and they are much more independent (Divakaruni, 1999).

This liberation plays out the changes in the cousins' youthful persona as they grow from teenagers (Ghadially, 1988). The bond that Sudha and Anju share is that of childhood friends, and although this confines them to the home and family earlier in the novel, the culture of America is a more liberal one, and this means that they can move out into the world, in pursuit of their dreams. But at the same time, they are close-knit family members they experience stress and distress when they part ways in the way people live their lives in the movie. According to Divakaruni, even though immigrant women can exercise so much freedom in America, they are not fully free from the impacts of their past and the relationships they left behind (Khan, 1999).

Finally, it depicts the struggles that the first and second-generation immigrants experience in dealing with clashes between the traditional cultural norms of their native lands and the democratic principles of their host nation. Sudha and Anju's decisions are a representation of young ladies' dreams and desires as well as a struggle between self-actualization and obligation, between being an individual and being a collective-cultural commonwealth that women from traditional societies face when they are given enhanced social liberties. It is one of freedom and fight that defines their existence as they traverse the divide between the old and the new worlds.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the themes of identity formation and reformation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart*. The research methodology is divided into several stages, including the selection of the text, data collection, data analysis, and theoretical framework application.

Text Selection

The primary text selected for this study is *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, first published in 1999. This novel was chosen due to its rich narrative on the experiences of women grappling with cultural and societal constraints, making it an ideal subject for exploring the formation and reformation of female identity.

Data Collection

Data collection involved an in-depth reading and textual analysis of *Sister of My Heart*. The analysis focused on key passages and chapters that highlight the protagonists' struggles and growth. Particular attention was paid to the first-person narratives of Anju and Sudha, as these provide direct insight into their psychological and emotional states. Supplementary data was collected from scholarly articles, reviews, and critiques of Divakaruni's work to provide context and support for the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved coding and thematic analysis. Key themes related to identity, cultural constraints, familial pressures, and personal aspirations were identified and categorized. The coding process was iterative, involving multiple readings of the text to ensure comprehensive identification of relevant themes. Thematic analysis was conducted to explore how these themes interact and contribute to the protagonists' identity formation and reformation.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes a feminist literary criticism framework to analyze the text. This theoretical approach is appropriate given the novel's focus on women's experiences and struggles within a patriarchal society. Feminist theory provides tools for examining how gender, power, and societal norms influence the characters' identities. Additionally, psychoanalytic theory, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, was employed to understand the psychological development of the characters, especially their family dynamics and cultural background.

Validation and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing the textual analysis with existing scholarly interpretations of Divakaruni's work. This method helps to corroborate the themes and insights derived from the primary text. Peer debriefing was also conducted, where the analysis was reviewed by colleagues with expertise in feminist literary criticism and postcolonial literature.

Ethical Considerations

This study involves textual analysis and does not require ethical approval or involve human subjects. However, it adheres to academic standards of integrity and proper citation practices to respect intellectual property rights.

By employing these methodologies, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* portrays the complex processes of identity formation and reformation among its female protagonists.

3. Discussion

The Status of Women in Vedic and Pre-Vedic Periods

Women enjoyed a considerably elated status in the Vedic and pre-Vedic periods. They were respected and placed on par with men or even above the status of them. They were given opportunities to participate in religious, political, and social activities.

Changing Status of Women Over Time

This status of women has been changing from time to time. Women's oppression and suppression have taken on many variant forms, and women have been reduced to mere objects or non-human beings in the later centuries.

The Impact of Manusmriti

Though Manu's Manusmriti talks about giving respect to women, it advocates a subservient position for them. It recommended a social setup in which men would be the law-givers, heads of the families, rulers, and professionals, and women must be the shadow of men, helping their men and confining themselves within the four walls of the house.

Women's Status During the Freedom Struggle

Even during the freedom struggle, the position of women did not change. Although Raja Rammohan Roy, Gandhiji, and many other freedom fighters advocated the necessity of women's freedom and their participation in the freedom struggle, the position of women did not change palpably till the end of the 1980s (Sarkar, 2007).

Feminism and Women's Liberation

The various forms of feminism speak about women's liberty, empowerment, and individuality. However, it is clear that even now, the status of women remains the same with little visible development found among the socially fortunate women. On the other hand, many other women still experience all sorts of humiliations and oppression at the hands of a male chauvinistic society.

The Need for Women's Upliftment

Uplifting women in all arenas is the need of the hour for society to bloom fully. The development of women's condition has been defined by the World Conference of the U.N. held at Copenhagen in July 1980 as total development, including political, economic, social, cultural, and other dimensions of human life, as well as the physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural growth of the human person (Selvam, 2005).

The Concept of Feminism

The need for women's liberation and development has resulted in the formulation of the concept of 'Feminism', which mainly focuses on women's struggle to free themselves from male oppression. Literature, influenced by social happenings, finds works produced by women writers with feminist ideals.

Waves of the Feminist Movement

The Feminist Movement has many waves that focus on issues such as women's rights to vote, male domination and the system of patriarchy, gender discrimination, and women's inner freedom and awakening. For postmodern writers, the fourth wave of feminism, which focuses on women's inner freedom and individuality, is the thrust area (Shankar, 2003).

Feminism in Literature and Psychology

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a postmodern writer, has been influenced by fourth-wave feminism. The field of psychology and psychological criticism in studying literature helps in understanding the inner workings of humans, especially women's minds.

Understanding Feminism Broadly

According to Sushila Singh, feminism is a philosophy that fights against restrictive definitions

of masculine and feminine and aims at placing women in a just perspective. The word 'feminism' must be understood in its broadest sense, referring to an intense awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. Its meaning should be restricted to the advocacy of women's rights.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, being a postcolonial diasporic writer, focuses most of her writing on the problems faced by women immigrants. She also addresses gender issues, social inequalities, and ideological structures and biases.

Influences on Divakaruni's Writing

Many incidents led her to opt for writing. Many critics have written about the writer's interests in their articles. Elizabeth Softky notes that "leaving India caused Divakaruni to reevaluate her homeland's culture, and specifically its treatment of women". Lavina Dhingra Shankar highlights Divakaruni's inspiration, noting that "Divakaruni's upbringing in a devout Hindu household has influenced her values and her writing style" (Singh, 1977).

Critical Appreciation of Divakaruni's Works

Sarkar appreciates Divakaruni's novels and their purpose, stating: "Writers like Divakaruni are acutely aware of their already exiled or marginalized state in the male-dominated Indian society. For them, the physical act of relocation, a deliberate move to a foreign country, becomes an act of self-determination and rebellion against traditional norms of behavior".

Themes in "Sister of My Heart"

Divakaruni's second novel, "Sister of My Heart," published in 1999, is the focus of this study. The novel is about the lives of two protagonists, Anju and Sudha, and their assertion of individuality. It explores the positions of Indian widows through characters like Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini.

Anju and Sudha: Formation of Identities

The two protagonists, Anju and Sudha, form and reform their identities due to various familial and social circumstances. Divakaruni uses an alternative first-person narrative technique to convey the feelings of the protagonists.

Psychological Healing Through Storytelling

Hafiza Nilofer Khan critically observes that "psychological healing and memory-mending are orchestrated by the characters in the novel through the device of storytelling".

Female Universe in "Sister of My Heart"

The novel constructs a female universe, particularly influenced by the absence of men in the family. Veena Selvam comments on this feminine world: "What was originally conceived of as a restrictive boundary for the women is recreated into a female universe".

The Close Bond Between Anju and Sudha

Anju and Sudha, though cousins, share a bond as close as biological sisters. Sudha understands her place in the family and the meaning of their names, reflecting their destined roles and qualities.

Mother-Daughter Relationships

The relationship between the mothers and daughters is complex. Simone de Beauvoir discusses how mothers condition their daughters out of fear, creating intricate dynamics of affection and hostility (309).

The Role of Culture in Women's Lives

Culture plays a significant role in determining the lives of women, particularly in India. However, many women unknowingly adhere to cultural norms that contain patriarchal traits, becoming proxies of patriarchy.

Marriage and Patriarchy

Sudha and Anju's marriages reflect the patriarchal society's expectations. Sudha's mother advises her to reconcile with her husband, reflecting traditional views on marriage.

Gender Bias and Female Infanticide

Sudha faces gender bias and discrimination when her mother-in-law forces her to abort a female child. Suma Chitnis views female infanticide as a means of attributing inferior status to women, highlighting the ongoing challenges women face in traditional societies.

Ramesh and the Influence of Patriarchal Culture

Sudha's mother-in-law resorts to such activities as she gives significant weight to Indian culture. The Oedipus complex is visible in Ramesh when he values his mother's words over his wife's well-being, remaining silent during the insistence on Sudha's abortion.

The Male World's Impact on Women

Unable to seek support, especially from her husband, Sudha leaves the house. Veena Selvam notes that "the male world only creates trouble for the protagonists", highlighting the geographical and emotional separation caused by men.

Sudha's Independence and Strength

Sudha, advised by Anju, seeks refuge in Kolkata with her mother. Despite traditional reprimands, Sudha's mother eventually understands her daughter's plight. Divakaruni portrays Sudha as a strong, independent woman, asserting her identity and rejecting oppressive norms.

Self-Respect and Women's Rights

Self-respect drives Sudha to leave her marital home. Though she does not face physical abuse, the psychological and emotional exploitation by her husband and mother-in-law forces her to seek self-fulfillment. Pishi's advice and support exemplify the necessary female bonding to overcome patriarchal oppression.

Anju's Journey of Individuality

Anju, the other protagonist, asserts her individuality within her marital bond. She faces emotional trauma upon discovering her husband Sunil's attraction to Sudha but shows humanistic concern and sisterly love by advising Sudha to leave her marriage.

Cultural and Psychological Challenges

Anju's adaptation to American culture contrasts with Sunil's traditional views. Despite their differences, Anju remains in the marriage due to her love for Sunil. She struggles with guilt and responsibility for Sudha's situation, seeking to support her cousin's independence.

The Role of Female Bonding

Anju's plan to bring Sudha to America and start a boutique reflects her desire to empower Sudha. The support among women characters like Sudha, Anju, Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini showcases the strength of female bonding in overcoming patriarchal constraints.

Empowered Women in Divakaruni's Narrative

Divakaruni's characters challenge traditional portrayals of women. They become bold, courageous, and independent, breaking norms and asserting their 'self' through education and mutual support. The novel highlights the importance of female empowerment and resilience in the face of societal pressures.

4. Conclusion

Divakaruni's novel titled "Sister of My Heart" brings to question patriarchal injustice through the portrayal of strong women characters who embrace their individuality and defy the oppressive tradition. The Indian women, the mothers, the daughters, the sisters and other women in Divakaruni's creations like Sudha, Anju, Pishi and so on are depicted as a source of strength for each other in the darkness of the tyrant world. Still the actual testimonies of the heroines' suffering and their long way to self-fulfillment and freedom. It shows that despite hardships, women can stand strong and advocate for change to traditional norms of culture through courage and education. In the end, Divakaruni unapologetically celebrates female agency and sisterhood as the way to freedom from patriarchy's oppressive grip. Its message is one of the most prominent ones in the context of the struggle for women's rights and female autonomy, as the heroine of the novel refuses to be a victim and explores her own "self." The themes make this novel a modern story of emancipation, which is still highly actual in societies which are still suffering from patriarchal domination.

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