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SACRIFICES OF A WOMAN IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY AS PORTRAYED IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART* – A STUDY

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *Sister of my Heart* presents the story of Sudha, one of the five women of a family without a man. The novel accounts how Sudha struggles to live a life of a human being in a patriarchal society. She is forced, and sometimes willingly makes a series of sacrifices to uphold her individual values and the values of a mother. The novel documents how Indian women continue to aid the patriarchal establishment in perpetuating woman oppression to such an extent that they are ready to annihilate the female gender of the species by their irrational preference to male children. Women are enslaved mentally to a greater extent. Invisible to the naked eye, the scars that such oppression leaves on the minds of the Indian women remains within the experiences of the female psyche. This paper aims at studying the life decisions taken by the main character, Sudha in upholding her values and in preserving her identity. The paper also discusses how she struggles to uphold her values and instincts as a mother. Divakaruni portrays a strong woman in Sudha who escapes the bonds of a patriarchal married life in order to save her child.

Keywords: Patriarchal Society, Woman Oppression, Female Psyche, Identity

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American novelist, short story writer, and a poet who has made significant contribution to Indian Writing in English. One of her major works, *Sister of my Heart* is a novel that had brought acclaim to her from international quarters. The novel has also been adapted into a movie. Divakaruni's works are mostly set in India and the United States, and often document the experiences of Indian women who struggle to withstand patriarchal oppression. Realistic fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, myth and fantasy are some of the genres in which the author has penned works. The novel, *Sister of my Heart*, is one of the realistic novels that account the life of two cousins, Anju and Sudha, especially of that of Sudha, girls who grow up, marry, and make a living in West Bengal, a province of India.

Anju and Sudha are cousins living in a family of five women who had lost their economic prosperity due to the death of the earning male members of the family. They live in their ancestral home in Kolkata. While Anju is the daughter of Gouri Ma, Sudha is the daughter of Nalini. Their paternal aunt Pishi M becomes a guide to them in finding their place in the patriarchal society. Anju and Sudha have a different upbringing from that of the traditional Indian family. Their family is fatherless and as such they grow in a male-free environment. They are not exposed to the nature and conduct of a patriarchal establishment and are not controlled by men in the family. They have freedom in an all-woman setup. Unlike other daughters who learn to obey their fathers and brothers at an early age, Anju and Sudha are not familiar with male domination.

This creates problems in their adapting to obeying a man after marriage. Their aunt becomes a valuable source of knowledge and training in making the two girls suitable for their married lives in a male-dominated Indian family setup. Growing up as fatherless daughters in an all-woman family can also be considered as a reason for the certain degree of strength and independence both Anju and Sudha possess in them.

Anju and Sudha are different in appearance and character. As the only daughters of the house, they are together all the time, but they love each other in spite of their differences. Anju is socially refined and intellectually the more blessed one. On the other hand, Sudha is beautiful. In spite of the differences, the two sisters do not harbour any thought of conscious complex towards each other. They are always together as loving and inseparable sisters of each other's heart and do everything together for their sake and that of their family. They were born on the same day. They lost their fathers on the same day. They love each other beyond the blood relationship. They both consider themselves as two parts of a single entity. Anju speaks openly about her regard for Sudha:

Sudha is my other half. The sister of my heart. I can tell Sudha everything that I feel and I need not explain any of it. She will look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I know from her smile that she understands me perfectly. Like no one else in the entire world does. Like no one else in the entire world will do (*Sister of my Heart* 24).

Sudha expresses her love towards Anju with such sincerity that she wishes to marry the same person who marries Anju in order to be together as the wives of the man, much like it happens in old stories. "If only Anju and I, like the wives of the heroes in the old tales, fortunately happened to marry the same man, treating him as our Arjun, our Krishna, as our husband, he would love and treasure us both, and keep us both together happy sisters of heart" (*Sister of my Heart* 131).

Sudha as a girl and later a woman makes a series of sacrifices in her life. The patriarchal society demands more and more of sacrifices from her as a

woman. It epitomises woman as an embodiment of sacrifice and expects her to live up to the benchmark. Sudha is forced to sacrifice her love for a man. She is forced to marry another man without any choice. She is made to relinquish her sister of heart, Anju. She is made to abandon her freedom and thought in her in-law's family. Finally, she is forced to abort her child because of it being a girl. This becomes the final straw on the back of the camel, and instead of breaking, she breaks the shackles of oppression and comes out of it.

As a Young girl, Sudha falls in love with a boy named Ashok. Both of them love each other dearly. Sudha longs to marry Ashok and build a life for herself. Ashok is also sincerely dedicated to Sudha and the lovers are strong in their feelings towards each other. However, Sudha is denied the right to choose her life partner in a patriarchal social establishment like India. "Love is the major cause of emotional stress in woman's life. At every stage of life, it could trouble them. Sudha's strange courtship with Ashok causes misfortunes for her. Her falling in love with him deprives her from her freedom" (Dadaji 195). The only solution parents find to destroy the love affair is to arrange for a marriage swiftly without looking at the good and bad of both the boy whom the girl loves, as well as the boy they are about to find. Nalini says, "I've also decided on an early marriage for her. As soon as she's finished at the convent, I'll start looking for a suitable boy." (*Sister of my Heart* 67)

Under the Indian establishment, a daughter has no rights to choose her life partner. It is the right and the responsibility of the parents, especially the father, in deciding the groom for the daughter. The family being a family of women without any father figure Sudha thinks that her likes and dislikes would be taken into account, but in spite of the absence of a man, the family continues to be traditional in their Outlook. All the elder women in the family reject Ashok as a suitable groom for Sudha. Instead, they decide to marry Sudha to a man named Ramesh. Sudha is forced to make the sacrifice in order to uphold the status and dignity of the family. For the sake of her sister, Anju, and for the sake of the dignity of her family, Sudha sacrifices her love and decides to marry a stranger, Ramesh. A woman is to

marry whether she is in love or not. It is thrust upon her by the patriarchal society. "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to woman by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution" (Beauvoir 145)

"Sudha's arranged marriage also places her in predicament because she is in love with Ashok. She is not like Juliet of Shakespeare's Roman play *Romeo and Juliet* to decide her own course of marital life but she has to fall in line with the decision of her traditional mother" (Dadaji 131). However, she debates with herself whether she should lose her independent identity by marrying Ramesh or assert her individual identity by marrying her lover Ashok. In either way, she has to stand on the losing side. If she accepts her mother's choice, she has to forget Ashok. If she concedes to her mother's arrangement, she will spoil the marital chance of her Anju to Sunil and stand to lose her sister of her heart. She is ready to sacrifice her personal desires for the sake of Anju and her prosperous marital life. Only a woman knows the predicament of other woman and Sudha is no exception. Hence, she never hesitates to lose everything that goes against the welfare of Anju.

Sudha is forced to give up her love for Anju. Both the sisters are ruthlessly separated because of marriage. The Indian establishment requires the wife to follow the husband wherever he goes. It is customary for the wife to live in the house of the husband. Both Anju and Sudha are separated because of this practice. Anju marries Sunil and goes to America. Sudha marries Ramesh and goes and lives with Ramesh's family. This separates the two sisters. This appears to be the reality of the Indian setup: every daughter is expected to forget her birth place, forget her parents and home in order to go and live with her husband and family. She is expected to consider her husband's family as her family, adapting their ways of life. Sudha's second and a great sacrifice is the separation from her sister, Anju.

Sudha suffers oppression and indifference in the hands of her husband and his family. She is particularly tortured by her mother-in-law. In spite of being a woman herself, Sudha's mother-in-law continues to torture her. Women suffer in a loveless marriage surrounded by vanity and all that is extraneous to love and life, bordering around submission and obedience on the part of the wife. "This attitude to the loveless marriage was shared to a large extent by feminists. They too believed that marriage should be based on love and not on property, and deplored the pressures, economic and social, that not only forced women into such marriage but kept them in a husband's power after the marriage" (Banks 54). Sudha is expected to subdue all her feelings and emotions to serve the family like a servant. The mother-in-law dominates her in all aspects of her domestic life and suffocates Sudha's spirit. Sudha becomes a representative of Indian women who suffers similar fate in the hands of their mothers-in-law. This clearly shows the predicament of Indian women. There is the blatant atrocity of a woman oppressing women. Sudha makes another sacrifice of herself, her emotions and her feelings in order to serve the large family of her husband, Ramesh.

She is expected to make the final and her greatest sacrifice concerning her child. Sudha becomes pregnant and it is known that she is carrying a girl child. As the patriarchal Indian society prefers male child to female child, the mother-in-law forces Sudha to abort the child and tortures her to give up the child because it is a girl child. Sudha refuses and a struggle ensues. Sudha is unable to make the sacrifice of her child, a sacrifice of a mother that is impossible, and therefore, she decides to break the shackles of her domestic life. Motherhood is given undue importance in the Indian society. When a woman in a family refuses to become a mother, she is treated not as a woman. However, even in such special connotation, motherhood is preferred to be special only when the woman carries a male child. In Indian context wifehood is considered as auspicious for woman, whereas widowhood and spinsterhood are regarded as inauspicious. Undue importance is given to motherhood, which is considered as the foremost

duty for woman. "In India, despite feminist protest and struggle, femininity is maternity" (Ramanathan 18). Sudha leaves the family of her husband and comes to stay with her mother. As a wife living without her husband, Sudha is looked upon as an unsuitable woman in the society, but her aunt supports her in spite of her mother's disapproval. Motherhood forces Sudha to break the traditional shackles. She continues to keep her child, and finally gives birth to her. She chooses to give up her domestic life as a wife of her husband which would have given her the respect in the society, and decides to live in her mother's house as a single woman for the sake of her daughter. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes a hero out of Sudha by allowing her to boldly decide in leaving her marriage.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays Sudha as a typical Indian woman who possesses a degree of assertiveness. Her upbringing without a father figure had preserved the streak of independence in her. She suffers because of it. Banerjee makes Sudha sacrifice numerous things for the sake of herself, her family and her sister. She is made to suffer to a great extent, but Sudha comes out as a woman with her identity. She is assertive and she breaks the shackles of patriarchy boldly when her very core values are threatened. By creating Sudha, Banerjee has given a glimpse of the inner strength that lays dormant in every Indian woman who is capable of withstanding all and any onslaught of oppression in the hands of the patriarchal Indian society.

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