

Portrayal of Women's Relationship in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Writing about strong (but complex and sometimes flawed) women has always been important to me. I hope my female protagonists inspire my readers and break some stereotypes. (Mehta)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays women as the central characters in her novels and short stories. Divakaruni's firm assertion is that women could do a lot in listening to each other's past and present and could arrive at a common consensus in combating the problems of the family. The novel has analysed the role of friendship and marriage. The post marital reality is pointed out through its principal characters Anju and Sudha.

Divakaruni writes about a Calcutta family run by three women strong and determined in nature in her novel "Sister of My Heart". She also recollects the rich tradition and culture in which she grew in the novel. It is a social commentary which delves into relationships giving a peek into the mythical urban India. The novel is set in Calcutta in the late 1980s in an old marble mansion. She has chosen ordinary characters in a traditional Brahmin set up. An attempt is made in this paper to enunciate the way Divakaruni has portrayed the strong relationship among women in the traditional Indian household.

The sisterly affection between Sudha and Anju, the cousins, is the central theme of the novel. The family is headed by Pishi – the widow aunt of Anju, Bijoy's elder sister, Gouri – Anju's Mother and Nalini – Sudha's Mother, wife of Gopal – the cousin of Bijoy. Anju and Sudha share unconditional love towards each and other. They are born on the same day and they are inseparable like twins. There is a mystery that surrounds the family which Sudha later knows from Pishi. How the women in the family bear the mystery and still manage to stay as a family is the true essence of the novel. The strength of familial relationship and the beauty of women relationship modestly unveil as the novel unfolds itself.

Love between Women in the Family: Sudha

Basudha the daughter of Nalini is portrayed as Sudha in the novel. She is beautiful 'just like the princesses in the fairy tales' (Chitra 30). Sudha holds traditional values high but in front of others, she strongly supports Anju's modern beliefs. She also believes in magic, fairy tales, demons and falling stars. She admires Gouri Ma, as she calls Gouri, and aspires to

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be a lead like her. She is very eager to know about the mystery that surrounds their family. Through Pishi she knows about the mystery that surrounds their family, and she suffers guilt. This guilt persuades her to stay loyal to Anju, leave Ashok to save Anju's marriage with Sunil and suffer a failure marriage with Ramesh.

Anju

Anjali the daughter of Gouri is known as Anju in the novel. It is Anju who called Sudha into this world. So, she calls Sudha 'my other half, The sister of my heart' (Chitra 24). They share their happiness and sorrow and are always the eye catchers for the household. She is completely in contrast with Sudha in her looks and in her believes. She understands that Sudha is after a quest and she prevents her whenever Sudha tries to isolate her saying that it will affect her physical and mental stability.

Pishi

Pishi is the old widow aunt of Anju and Sudha and the elder sister of Bijoy, Anju's father. Having lost her husband in the childhood, she has dedicated herself to the well being of Bijoy's family. She celebrates Anju and Sudha as her own daughters. She tells stories that are secret, delicious and forbidden. She takes care of the daughters more than their mothers. She knows the false motifs of Gopal in tempting Bijoy and promising him rubies and wealthy life. She never seems to rebut Nalini's pretence with her tea time friends. She gives the impression of a typical grandmother in our home.

Gouri

Gouri is a widow as Bijoy dies in the hunt for rubies. After the death of her husband, she boldly takes up the responsibility of the family on her shoulders. She is strong willed and even sacrifices her comfort for the betterment of her family. She runs a bookstore which the relatives depreciate saying that no woman in a Chatterjee family would ever dare to do. She does not show any indifference between Anju and Sudha. She later suffers heart attack and restrains the girls from convent. She arranges for their marriages. She also warns Anju to have limits with Sudha which she declines.

Nalini

Nalini whom her daughter introduces 'with guilt' (Chitra 17) is a young widow of Gopal's false intention. She always tends to sing in the praise of her glorious past in her father's home. She portrays herself as 'the suffering heroine'. Though widowed, Nalini is conscious of her physical self. But she instructs the girls how to behave and be virtuous. She even makes up rhymes with morals:

Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name;
wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family's fame. (Chitra 23)

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The novel portrays the pre-marital and post marital experiences of women as mother and daughter and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. It depicts the complexities of human nature in general and women in particular. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni said in an interview:

...that an unfair burden is put on women to be something that they are not naturally. Of course, we hope that we are good people, but we are a mix. And as women we have many challenges, and sometimes we respond to them well and sometimes not, and that is okay. (Datta)

These lines aptly suit Sudha who is ready to sacrifice her love for the safe and happy life of Anju with Sunil.

Sudha's Love towards Anju

Sudha's love towards Anju is tested in various ways but she always remains loyal to her. Love, trust and respect are the key features of their love towards each other. But it is shaken when she learns the havoc her father had inflicted in the peaceful life of Bijoy's family. When Sunil expresses his sudden thought that he would marry her if he had seen her first, she is shocked. In her first meeting she falls in love with Ashok but later rejects his proposal to save Anju's life from the sharp-tongued father-in-law who promises to send Anju back to her mother if he senses any kind of misbehaviour. She even has to stand the false charges of Anju sometimes. She is happy that Anju will lead a happy life in America with Sunil as she always longs to go far away from the family. A cold relationship prevails among the girls after marriage.

Anju's Love towards Sudha

Anju on the other side is mystified at the strange behaviour of Sudha when the latter knows the family secret. She wonders about the mystic behaviour of Sudha in love. She speculates how Sudha as a believer of magic and fairy tales fancies her love with Ashok. Later when she falls in love with Sunil, she realises that love is magical. She is unable to decipher why Sudha declines Ashok's love. When she sees Sunil stealthily takes Sudha's handkerchief, she blames Sudha for deceiving her. Even when she leads a happy life with Sunil in America, she feels as if Sudha sits between them. She does not realise Sudha's sacrifice. But she pities Sudha's unfit life after marriage.

Love between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law

Sunil's mother and Anju exchange warmth in their relationship. Sunil's mother respects the freedom Sunil and Anju enjoys after marriage. She even complements them by preparing tea and sharing memories about this childhood days. But, whenever Sunil's father is around, she is bent and submissive. Chitra Banerjee presents domestic violence through the character of Sunil's mother. Anju as a new bride is terrified at the sight of Sunil's father ill-

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treating her mother-in-law. Anju has not experienced such atrocities in her home. She wishes to disapprove of his behaviour but Sunil's father hushes Anju too.

How humiliating it must be for her to be treated this way in front of her new daughter-in-law. I want to take her away, to wipe her wet cheeks and soiled arms and shake some anger into her so she will never allow that man to do this to her again. [182]

On the other side Sudha and Ramesh's mother doesn't share a healthy relationship. In the beginning, Sudha feels drawn towards her mother-in-law for 'this was a woman worth admiring' [188]. She promotes her as "the keeper of the household... except the double-locked steel Godrej safe" [189]. Sudha feels that a slow and steady agony mounts in her mother-in-law as the young couple doesn't seem to promise her a grandson. When late Mr Sanyal's sister Tarini visits the house, she tries to impress the guests with sumptuous meal. But on seeing Deepa, the pregnant daughter-in-law of Tarini, Mrs Sanyal breaks and looks down at Sudha with accusing eyes. Tarini even poisons her mind by telling her that if it had been her daughter-in-law, she would have taken her to the doctor and examined. This aggravates the pain in Mrs Sanyal's heart, and she takes Sudha to her daughter. She doesn't even stop when the doctor certifies Sudha is healthy. She takes her to another doctor to examine thoroughly. She later arranges second marriage for Ramesh.

In the novel, Divakaruni shows that love, kindness and service are the true signs of real life. Through her characters, she proves that living for others is always a pleasure and not a burden. The tendency to give, love and serve spontaneously flows from the inmost being of her characters. The authentic service is to help others live better and look for the welfare of others without expecting any reward.

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