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## Women in Distress in the Novel, 'Sister of My Heart' and the Resultant Relationship between Two Sisters: An Interchange of the Male and Female Archetypes

V. Vasanthi, Ph.D.

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### Introduction

Chitra Banerjee, an original and exotic Indian writer, is fundamentally a feminist and most of her works deal with the sufferings of women like yearning for a perfect love, their security, nightmares, disappointments, stoicism, struggle for recognition, female infanticide, agonies of abortion and fear of social stigma. Though Indian English literature can boast of many brilliant feminists, Chitra Banerjee can be considered unique among them as she weaves mythology, exoticism, suspense and intrigue in her stories and novels with a fascinating narrative, making them appealing enough for her readers. Most of these are enchanting yet these never fail to create an impact on the readers and nag them with some fundamental questions that the society will have to be asked repeatedly regarding the sufferings of women.

Chitra Banerjee has been obsessed with these problems and admits to this fact in one of her personal essays, titled 'What Women Share' which she wrote in 1998, a year before she published 'Sister of My Heart'. In the essay she speaks about her grandfather's stories to her and her absorption of the same in a different manner.

"Even more than the men, I loved the great women of the epics," she says and thus it is evident that she was more obsessed and concerned with the issues of women. She further says,

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Interestingly, unlike the male heroes, the main relationships these women had were with the opposite sex--with their husbands, sons, lovers, or opponents. They never had any important women friends. The loneliness of the epic heroines seemed strange to me even as a child. I could see that this was not how women around me lived.

It is thus obvious that all she could grasp from those stories were that women need to be looked at more closely and the epic heroines need to be treated as women and not stereo types. This she accomplishes in her work, 'Palace of Illusions' speaking about Draupadi, by reducing her to an ordinary woman, battling with a patriarchal society, fiercely and relentlessly, who had been until then regarded in the literature as an unsolved mystery.

### **Hypothesis of the Study**

Concerned about women, thus in a world highly unfavourable for them, Chitra Banerjee created the novel, 'A Sister of My Heart' to explore man-woman relationship and the woman-woman relationship. From her essay 'What women Share', we can recall the following lines to understand the motive of the novel:

But when I did read the epics and other classic texts of Indian culture, I was surprised to find few portrayals of friendships among women. In the rare cases where such relationships appeared--the stories of Shakuntala or Radha, for example--the heroine soon fell in love and left her friends behind to follow her beloved. It was as though the tellers of these tales (who were, coincidentally, male) felt that women's relationships with each other were only of significance until they found a man to claim their attention and devotion.

Having thus been awakened by the thought that women have not been paid the attention that is worthy of them by other story tellers, Chitra Banerjee set to paint the inner most recesses of a woman's psyche, the nature of relationship that she shares with men and women in the novel 'Sister of my Heart' and the novel speaks about these and more.

In the novel, one can find that the relationship between two women could be overpowering and that there could be a reversal in the role of a man and a woman and that a woman could substitute a man in a better way. The symbols of the masculine and the feminine keep changing, and this article will explore the same in a detailed manner by corroborating some evidences from the novel.

### **The Analysis**

The author has created the two women of the novel 'Sister of my heart' in such a way that the male and female roles are interchanged leading to a different treatment of the man-woman relationship and the woman-woman relationship. The two parts of the book, 'The princess in the palace of Snakes' and the 'Queen of swords' appropriately speaks about two stages, the first one marked with confusion and the second one, marked with certain clarity. In the first

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part, the women are strongly found to be in love with each other, though confused with their love towards men in between. After they have suffered due to deception in the hands of snakes (symbolising men) and beguiled by them, return to each other and fight the battle of life together.

The plot of the story is simple and complex, simple due to the coherent narration, without travelling back and forth in time and complex in the sense that the characters take some extraordinary decisions and can be understood only by throwing an insight into their psyche. Anju and Sudha are distant cousins who are brought up in the same Bengali household by three women, namely, a widowed aunt, Anju's mother Gowri ma and sudha's mother, Nalini. Men are kept away from this world for a considerable time and Anju only explains the absence of her father saying, 'I hate my father. I hate the fact that he could go off so casually in search of adventure, without a single thought for what would happen to the rest of us.'(24). Sudha is a strikingly beautiful woman who is very close to Anju's heart and suffers more than her sister in all ways. The narrative is in first person singular, from the protagonists Anju and Sudha, each talking about their life, from their birth till their stage of reunion only after a brief physical separation from each other, due to their marriage.

The two sisters are inseparable and share a deep passion and commitment to each other and Sudha lives with a guilt that her father was responsible for the death of Anju's father. When they become young women, Sudha falls in love with Ashok, but decides not to elope with him in order to protect Anju's marriage and also to make amendment to the wrong deed that her father had apparently committed. Anju marries Sunil and moves to America and Sudha marries Ramesh, a timid son of an overpowering, tyrannical and widowed mother, who having put up a battle against all odds, is still found to be insensitive to the problems of women. Anju is comfortable except for the absence of Sudha in her life, whereas Sudha is caught into the clutches of a rigid and orthodox family of the Sanyals. . Both get pregnant at the same time and Sudha is threatened by the possibility of a forced abortion, as she is found to carry a female foetus. Having forsaken her love for Ashok and facing the evil of female infanticide, Sudha confides to Anju. Anju guides Sudha in this time of distress by giving her directions to return to their mother's place. Ashok comes back to Sudha and offers to marry her but wishes that the child may be brought up by its grandparents. But Sudha turns down the offer and decides to move to America to join Anju. Meanwhile, Anju discovers that her husband Sunil had been nursing a secret passion for Sudha . On the way to America Sudha discovers a secret about her father and is relieved of the guilt that she had been carrying so far about the harm meted out to Anju's family by her father. The novel ends with the reunion of the sisters.

Sudha begins the narration, with a meek and yielding tone about their birth and the misfortune that was wrought with it due to the news of the death of their fathers, a sign of curse of the gods. She accedes readily to the fact that women are not born with all those privileges that come readily to men in their birth. She believes in her Aunt Pishi's story of Bidhatha Purush, who in the Bengali mythology is believed to be the god of fortune, visiting the infants soon after they are born, accepting the sweets offered by the family and wishing good luck to the infant deciphering its fate. She also believes in the story of demons for which she is censured by Anju, who on the other hand is reckless and intellectual, possessing

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an honest and straightforward view to life resembling a male protagonist. She is a symbol of all that is masculine and adores Sudha for being all that is delicate, vulnerable and feminine.

Sudha and Anju complement each other like a male and female, the former being an emotional component and the later an intellectual one which is evident in the first chapter narrated by Sudha. Outwardly though this relationship seems to be one that is between two affectionate sisters, close reading will unveil the fact that Sudha almost acts like a female who is pious, emotional, vulnerable and tolerant like most Indian women submitting to the will of god and Anju, like a sensible, humorous and intellectual male companion. When Sudha confides her fear for demons, Anju scorns it and says, ‘What Nonsense...There are no demons.’ (16). To this Sudha does not retort but reflects within herself, thus- “I am not so sure. Perhaps they do not have the huge teeth, the curved, blood-dripping claws and bulging red eyes ..., but they exist. ... But in front of others I am always loyal to her. So I say, bravely, ‘That’s right. Those are just old stories’” (16).

### **Eluding Loyalty and Role Reversal**

The ‘loyalty’ that Sudha talks about in this is eluding and has significance throughout the novel. We understand this loyalty when she throws her conjugal bliss for the comfort of being with her sister. When a reader keeps reading, a few other evidences soon can be manifested to ascertain this role reversal of Anju into a masculine symbol. Sudha sees a brave and clever person in Anju who would often censure her cousin for her follies. When Sudha guesses on what the fortune god must have written during the birth of Anju, she says, “‘I think I know what he writes for Anju. You will be brave and clever, you will fight injustice, you will not give in’”. (21).

Thus the two sisters complement each other like a male and a female, two parts of a whole, where one would not exist without the other and constitute a world by themselves. This can be better understood, when Anju reacts to people who are sarcastic of their being together, thus- “They didn’t understand that Sudha and I never felt we were better than other people. It was just that we found everything we needed in each other”. (27). Further, Anju believes that she brought Sudha into the world and that she is solely responsible for her happiness and well being, much like a male companion who holds himself responsible for the protection and security of his better half. She says, “...I called her into the world and therefore must do all I can to make sure she is happy”(30).

This role reversal continues even when they become young ladies and only disappears for a short while when the sisters nurture a love towards the opposite sex, which lasts only for a shorter period. The two girls grow up into women in different ways, Anju nursing a passion for books and Sudha for fashion designing. When the young ladies get some money on their thirteenth birthday, Anju decides to spend it for books and Sudha for flowery and feminine salwar –khameez, which the latter reveals to shock the former. Anju senses that Sudha is different from her, growing more feminine and different from herself. When Anju is gifted a pair of diamond ear rings by her mother, she decides to give it to Sudha without any qualms as she never wished for jewellery or finery like Sudha. When Sudha expresses her wish to buy feminine outfits for herself, Anju is surprised at the fact that sudha had become a young

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woman and she remarks, “I am taken aback by the longing in her voice. ....What other surprises might my cousin have in store for me..”(62). Further, when Anju is sceptic about their mothers allowing them to wear attractive dresses, Sudha replies, “ I dont care. I’ll wear them in my own room. I ‘ll wear them for you”. (62)

When Sudha tries to move away from Anju, due to the guilt that had been tormenting her about her father’s role in the tragedy of Anju’s family, Anju can hardly bear it.

I need to see that smile. Because something is wrong with Sudha lately. She will hardly talk to me ....Whenever Sudha thinks she’s alone, she gazes into the distance with her great dark eyes, and sadness seeps over her face like a stain. I must have asked her hundred times, Sudha, what is it, what’s wrong? ....I want my Sudha back. (56).

### **Pursuing an Adventure**

The two young women set out on an adventure due to the reckless nature of Anju and have their day out. When they are summoned into the room of the elders, Anju marches forward, bravely and protective as she can be towards Sudha. She says, “I stand outside the office room, gathering the courage to knock. Then I hear Sudha’s soft step behind me. Her hand clasps mine, clammy but firm, telling me we are in this together” (79).

Later when Sudha is in love with Ramesh, Anju is pained about it and calls him a usurper expressing her jealousy. She says, “I fight back a pang of jealousy. All our lives Sudha has looked to me to plan things for her. Now that usurper in a white shirt has taken my place. But mostly I feel sad” (124).

Soon after, Anju too discovers herself in love, but does not share a romantic relationship with Sunil. She says, “I am struck by the ridiculous desire to grab the sleeve of his kurta and say, Don’t go’. Or even, shamelessly, ‘Marry me’. For surely a man like this one would allow me to continue my studies. I could go to one of the all-women’s colleges. That would be proper enough, even if I were married. May be we could even read Woolf together. (136).

Sudha turns down her lover Ashok for the well being of her sister which is also strange. Ashok remarks, “I never thought Sudha’s cousin would become my rival for her love. I never thought that if that happened, she would win” (145).

### **Inseparable**

Even though the women get married, they are only briefly separated and their love for their each other overpowers their conjugal bond with their husbands. When Sudha is in distress, facing an impending abortion, Anju quickly guides her to come out of the marriage, to which Sudha readily agrees and leaves her in-laws’ house. Even when Sudha is desolate, Anju thinks that it’s her responsibility to support her cousin in this time. She is more than ready to plan for her cousin:

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Tomorrow I'll think of all the prickly details: how to get them here, the visas, how much it'll all cost. I can get a job and save for their tickets. That way I won't have to ask Sunil for a single penny. (276).

The names chosen for the babies, Prem, the god of love, and Dayitha the beloved, revoke the symbols of Anju as the one that loves the other and Sudha, the beloved. Sudha also evinces keen interest in being together with Anju after this separation. She surprises the readers by turning down the offer of Ashok, for the second time, thereby happy to be taken care of by her cousin. All the three men who have supposedly loved the sisters in this novel are found to be imperfect, hypocritical, swearing love which never, according to the author existed and prove futile at some point of time. Ashok fails to live up to the expectations of the readers when he turns down Sudha's child. Ramesh fails to protect his wife and child, a male falling short of a protector, when compared to Anju who saves money for Sudha's tickets.

### **Let the Boundaries Dissolve**

The moment Anju discovers her husband's weakness for Sudha, the crashing of her marriage with Sunil begins and Anju, though shattered after the discovery, does not stop Sudha from coming and living with them. The novel ends with the reunion which is very significant, interchanging the male and female archetypes. The following words by Anju, testify this idea thus- "I press my face against Sudha's face and hold her, not wanting to let go. For one illogical moment I wish with all my might that the boundaries of our bodies could dissolve, that our skin and bone and blood could melt and become one".

This reunion is the highlight of the novel and at this juncture, Anju forgets that her relationship with Sunil is in jeopardy and welcomes Sudha as warm as she could, reviving the protector inside. Sudha on the other hand, having forsaken her life with Ashok, desolate and vulnerable, embrace her cousin in this time of distress. The following concluding words of the author are noteworthy:

Instead I slip an arm around Sudha and support Dayitha cautiously with the other. Sudha places her arm under mine, so we're both holding Dayitha up. If a passer-by who had eyes to notice such things looked at us, she would see that we've formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined like lotus stalks, smiling at the baby between them. Two women who have travelled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonnas with child (347).

### **Conclusion**

Thus it can be inferred from this study that the feministic stand of the author paves way for the reversal of the male and female symbols in this novel, due to the unrequited love of these women and the disappointment they suffered in exacting the same from men. Throughout the novel, it could be traced that the woman acts like a man and sometimes, a man acts like a woman. The perfect love could only be achieved through the reunion of the sisters, Anju and Sudha and the relationship between them prove to be more meaningful than the other

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relationships in the novel, that between Sudha and Ashok; Sudha and Ramesh; Anju and Sunil. Even though the relationship between Anju and Sudha suffers many times in the novel, it proves at the end to be more static and strong. In this connection, Chitra Banerjee's words in her essay 'What Women Share' can be remembered.

I think I believe it too. In the best friendships I have had with women, there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation, perhaps because of the life-changing experiences we share-..... We're sometimes furiously competitive and bitchy and exasperated. But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other. Ourselves with all our imperfections. Ourselves uncomplicated by all the emotions that complicate our other relationships: duty, lust, romance, the need to impress or control. We can be women and know that, as women, we are understood.

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V. Vasanthi, Ph.D.

[drvasanthiravi@gmail.com](mailto:drvasanthiravi@gmail.com)

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