

**‘Silence as Discourse’ in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's  
*Sister of My Heart***

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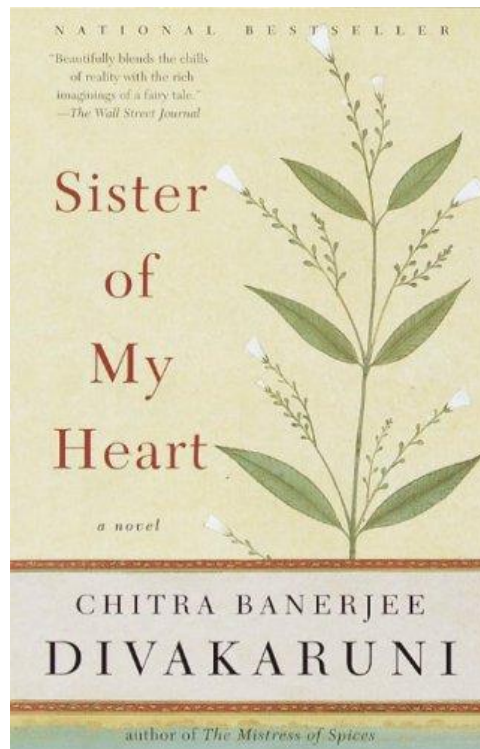
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Voice is not the ultimate source of empowerment. At times, silence speaks more than spoken words. Silence occurs when people go through physical tortures, verbal abuses, sexual harassments, or emotional blackmails. Speaking, articulating, screaming, moaning, shouting, discussing, arguing, etc. are the different forms of ‘voice’ while blinking, blabbering, stammering, muffling, gagging, tongue-tied, mute, etc. portray ‘silence’. Normally interests, issues, and identities of women are silenced by various factors like culture, family, children, financial burdens, etc. Their silences can be viewed as forms of

oppression and resistance. Every event of oppressive silence is a possibility of voice. This paper tries to analyse the power or powerlessness of silences, reasons behind silences, and meanings within silences in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is an intense, powerful book about the close relationships that women form with each other. (Handschuh, 2011) The novel deals with Indian traditions, parental expectations, adolescent love, chastity, women slavery, etc. According to Julie Rajan (2000), "Divakaruni has an uncanny way of rescuing the South Asian clichés from their superficiality. She is able to divert the reader's focus from the clichés through the beauty of her writing. Her poetic language, elaborate descriptions, and symbolism really do place the otherwise cliché themes on a higher level". The novel is highly appreciable for its poetic language. However, silence acts as discourse in many of the events.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*, Anju and Sudha are cousins. Sudha is admirably beautiful. Anju is bold but not as beautiful as Sudha. The friendship between them is really amazing. Sudha has the confidence of telling everything to Anju without having the need to explain. Anju's 'unblinking eyes' and 'tiny smile' reveals that she understands Sudha's words perfectly. Anju admires Sudha for her beauty, beliefs in magic, demons, gods, and falling stars, and art of storytelling. She knows that Sudha will hold her hands and stay with her even when she wants to kick the world for its stupidity. (*Sister of My Heart*, 30)

Women have the opinion that only they are suppressed and silenced. But there are men like Singhji in *Sister of My Heart* who are suppressed by situations and silenced by their implications. When Sudha describes Singhji, she says, "I like Singhji the best... Perhaps it is because he is a man of silences, speaking only when necessary – a quality I appreciate in a house filled with female gossip." (*Sister of My Heart*, 19) When Bijoy (Anju's father) hears the sad story of Sudha's father, he declares that he is 'his cousin, whatever the world might say'. (*Sister of My Heart*, 333) He doesn't say anything more. Sudha's father translates his silence into forgiveness.

Silence plays a vital role in the traditional Chatterjee family of Anju and Sudha. Sudha is eager to know the strange story of their fathers' mysterious deaths. Pishi who is an 'enthusiastic informant in the matters of the past' keeps silent in this regard, and this silence has a reason. She doesn't want the story to break the bond between Sudha and Anju. When Sudha compels her to tell the story, Pishi's voice breaks off. In the silence that surrounds them, Sudha observes 'how her voice has changed, grown dark, and deep-grained as it never was before'. (*Sister of My Heart*, 33) This sad silence is a betrayer of the secret truths in Pishi's mind.

Silence is very dangerous as it leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. On knowing the secret story from Pishi, Sudha breaks into pieces. She is unable to talk with Anju

normally. Anju who has no clue of what has happened begins to assume reasons for her silence. She doubts whether objects like jewels or costly gifts have come between them. Sudha decides to desert her lover Ashok for the welfare of Anju. When Anju questions whether her choice is right, safe, and happy for her, she nods. Anju has no chance of understanding the voice of her silence which says, "I will be happy in seeing you happy, dear Anju... I am righting my father's wrongs." (*Sister of My Heart*, 145)

After marriage, Anju goes to America with her husband Sunil while Sudha stays in India with her husband Ramesh and troublesome in-laws. During this period, Anju and Sudha communicate through letters. Anju's letters vibrate with her feelings and emotions. Sudha is happy that her ideas are restricted to the 'rectangular white silence of paper' without offending anyone. (*Sister of My Heart*, 200) Sudha is more comfortable with letters as they don't ask probing questions about her married life.

In the beginning, Anju is discontent with Sunil for being attracted towards her cousin Sudha for a few seconds during their marriages. Slowly she starts loving him and calls him 'the original man-with-a-hundred-faces'. Sunil drinks and comes late to home, but he does not want Anju to question his activities. Though she regrets, she convinces herself and allows him to 'live his own life'. Sunil is affectionate to Anju. But Anju hasn't forgotten the look on his face while seeing Sudha during their marriage ceremonies. She hasn't seen it again even at the height of their lovemaking. (*Sister of My Heart*, 209) Anju and Sunil never talk about Sudha. "Silence has its own insidious power. Because we wouldn't speak of her, Sudha sat between us on the sofa as we watched TV. Her hand brushed ours at the table as we reached for a jug of juice, a carafe of wine. Rear-view mirror – reach across her phantom body to touch each other." (*Sister of My Heart*, 209)

Sudha has a delay in pregnancy. Her mother-in-law compels her to see the doctor. On hearing this, Anju who lives in America feels disgust. She remembers the pains of childless women in Calcutta. She explains them to Sunil who does not respond. He is infuriatingly calm, and this makes Anju wild. She tries to interpret his silence and imagines him saying, "See how lucky you are to live in this free and easy American culture, to have a magnanimous husband like me." (*Sister of My Heart*, 213)

Because of solitude, disbelief, and discontent in life, Anju shouts at Sunil for almost all the reasons. Sunil says, 'Once in a while you should actually listen to what people are saying before attacking them. If you took a good look at your life, all the things you're allowed to do, maybe then you'd be a little more----'. (*Sister of My Heart*, 213) Before completing the sentence, he breaks off abruptly. Nobody except Sunil knows the last word. But the silent word is comprehended as 'grateful, grateful, and grateful' by the desperate Anju.

Sudha's mother-in-law takes her to a doctor for check-up. The doctor checks and tells her that she has no problems. He insists that her husband also needs to be checked. When her

mother-in-law interferes, the doctor says that only a wife can convince her husband to visit a doctor for fertility check-up. On hearing the doctor's comment, Sudha silently thinks in her mind: "Oh doctor-babu, you might know many things about women's bodies, but you need lessons in reading their circumstances better." (*Sister of My Heart*, 218) She memorises the telephone number of the doctor before her mother-in-law, who wants everything to be under her control, snatches the paper from her.

Sudha takes her husband Ramesh to her mother's home. She dresses in an unusually sexy manner to lure Ramesh towards her. Ramesh feels very happy to see Sudha with fresh enthusiasm and sheer happiness. At the end, Sudha talks about the doctor's suggestions. Ramesh readily tells that he will co-operate with her for any kind of check-up. At the same time, Sudha feels that his eyes have become dull and sad. She thinks that his lips show a small reproach. She tries to interpret his silence and imagines him saying, "You didn't have to pretend, didn't have to use your body like that." (*Sister of My Heart*, 221)

Whenever Anju calls her home in India, she talks with her mother Gouri, aunt Nalini, and Pishi. She knows that Sunil is bothered about the telephone bills. He is very keen about saving money and settling the dues with his father. But Anju doesn't want to talk less for the sake of Sunil. Sunil does not scold her. But she can hear him counting the minutes inside his head. Anju thinks: "He won't say anything about it openly, he's too proud for that. And I'm too stubborn. Why should I give up speaking to my mother just because he needs to prove something to his father?" (*Sister of My Heart*, 223) They both don't discuss the telephone bills openly. But silence has never been a solution with them. A few days after she has called India, they find a pretext to fight with each other. (*Sister of My Heart*, 223)

Sudha is badly in need of a child to fill the gap created by her unrequited love and conditional marriage. But Anju's case is different. Her husband Sunil wants to postpone pregnancy due to financial pressures. Unexpectedly, Anju becomes pregnant. She informs it to Sunil and waits for his answer. She faces another silence here. She fears whether Sunil will compel her to go for abortion. Fear, terror, and horror haunt her even in dreams. She considers abortion 'an impossible, monstrous word'. (*Sister of My Heart*, 240)

When Sunil agrees to support Anju's pregnancy, she feels very happy and relieved. He asks her to inform her family about it. Anju wants Sudha to be the first to know. But she is afraid of 'the silence that's bound to be there at the other end when she tells the good news to Sudha'. (*Sister of My Heart*, 242) In spite of the fear, Anju calls Sudha and informs her about the pregnancy. There is silence on the other end. It is 'awful like a vacuum sucking her into the small black holes of the mouthpiece'. She tells 'sorry' to Sudha. But Sudha says, 'Dear, silly Anju'. (*Sister of My Heart*, 242) She can feel a tremble in her voice, not because of tears but hearty laughter. Sudha conveys that she too is pregnant. The silence which Anju fears turns out to be happy.

Sudha's mother Nalini calls her mother-in-law and asks her to take Sudha for checking the baby for a particular hereditary disease. Sudha wonders why Gouri Ma hasn't written about it in her letter. Sudha assumes an explanation for her silence. "She knew – as Pishi had suspected she did – that my father was an imposter, unrelated to her husband. She knew my baby and I were at no risk, for we did not share the Chatterjee blood." (*Sister of My Heart*, 250)

During the check-up, the baby is found to have no hereditary disease, but it's a girl child. This shocks Sudha's mother-in-law who wants her to abort it. Sudha is very submissive in her household. But she wants to revolt against abortion. She calls Anju and asks for her opinion. Alone she takes a train and goes to her mother's home. Gouri Ma, Nalini, and Pishi are shocked to see the pregnant Sudha coming alone from her in-law's house. When they hear the story, they are ready to help Sudha in all the possible ways. Sudha looks at Gouri Ma's eyes. Her silence seems to say, "No matter who your father was, you are you, and you belong here. As will your daughter. Because ultimately blood is not as important as love." (*Sister of My Heart*, 267)

Anju appreciates Sudha's bold decision. But Sunil scolds her for misdirecting Sudha. He says, "That's easy for you to say. You're safe here in America. Sudha is the one who'll have to face it every day. A social pariah... Maybe the abortion would have been the lesser of the two evils." (*Sister of My Heart*, 274) She finds an odd harshness in Sunil's voice and feels a 'raw, grating note' under his unkind words for which Anju is unable to find the meaning.

After the broken marriage, Sudha is very sad. Most of her words stay silent in her mind. Gowri Ma, Nalini, and Pishi convince Sudha to marry Ashok as he is ready to marry her after divorce. At that time, Sudha thinks that if they have agreed to Ashok's proposal earlier, she wouldn't be in this state. (*Sister of My Heart*, 292) Ashok wants Dayita to stay with the mothers for some time. When Pishi tells that they three will take care of Dayita, Sudha thinks, "Pishi, I know you will. But can even three grandmothers take a mother's place?" She pleads 'silently' to Gouri Ma not to tempt her as she is very weak already and is badly in need of clasping the hand of Ashok's love. (*Sister of My Heart*, 292)

Gouri Ma sells the old, traditional Chatterjee house and buys a new apartment. Gouri Ma, Aunt Nalini, and Pishi shrug off the burdens of traditions and feel refreshed by the new change. They celebrate the presence of Sudha and Dayita in their home. Though they are least bothered about the society, people like Sarita Aunty interfere now and then disturbing the peace of Sudha. Sudha who is confused already tries to interpret the hidden meanings in Sarita Aunty's words - "It isn't right that you should have so much fun when Sudha has disgraced you all by leaving her husband. Instead of making sure she regrets what she has done, you're acting as though you are pleased about it. And that baby – you can plan to treat her like a little princess all you want, but we know what she really is. A girl without a father. A girl whom no-one wanted, except her wilful mother. (297)

Sudha receives her ex-husband Ramesh's marriage invitation card. She could hear the proud voice and horrible laugh of her mother-in-law between the 'beautifully looped gold characters' on the card. She seems to say, "See how easily you can be replaced, see what a catch my son is, see what an enormous mistake you made, leaving him." (326) Sudha feels sad and bad about her boastful mother-in-law and fearful ex-husband. With regard to remarriage, she is caught between the feelings for her lover and child. Ashok is ready to marry her. But he wants time to accept Dayita as his daughter. In the meanwhile, he wants Dayita to be with the mothers. Sudha wants a man who can love her daughter unconditionally. She knows that it is not practical, but she does not want to settle down for too small things again in her life.

When Anju calls her to America, she accepts the offer as she thinks America will give her the advantage of anonymity. She knows that no one will look down on her as America is full of mothers like her, who have decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man. (*Sister of My Heart*, 294) While speaking on the phone, Anju does not mention anything about Sunil. Though she does not talk, he is 'in the gap between every word'. When Anju declares that 'a man could never appreciate what she is going through', Sudha can understand the hidden meaning of it. She intersects the silence and realises that Sunil doesn't want her in America. (*Sister of My Heart*, 294)

Words spoken or unspoken have their desired effects on people. Anju works hard to save money for Sudha's tickets. Her boy baby dies inside her stomach. She feels guilty that she has killed him. After a pause, Sunil says, "Don't be silly, Anju". Anju is unable to tolerate the accusing weight of that pause. (*Sister of My Heart*, 304) Sunil thanks Sudha for agreeing to come to America for consoling the deceased Anju, deserting Ashok again. He says, "Please tell Sudha she's a miracle... I must find a way to thank her properly once she gets here." (*Sister of My Heart*, 313) The mothers appreciate his courteousness, but the last sentence troubles Sudha to a greater extent.

Anju is very eager to welcome 'the sister of her heart' into the new world of America. In the meanwhile, she has forgotten the Sunil's love and lust for Sudha. She finds him sleepless during the nights. She imagines him saying, "Sorry, sweetheart, you don't have a choice anymore. Maybe having to deal with it would be good for you." (*Sister of My Heart*, 320) She wonders whether his earlier selfish, stingy actions against her decision to bring Sudha to America are just to save her.

Anju and Sunil go to the airport to receive Sudha. After refreshment, she comes near Sunil who waits in the line to receive the guest. Sunil does not notice Anju's arrival. He eagerly looks at the beautiful Sudha who is coming with her daughter. A moustached man asks Sunil whether Sudha is his wife. He smiles at the stranger's comment which meant he is a lucky chap to have an elegant wife like Sudha. Anju expects Sunil to tell the truth, but he

says nothing. His 'silence is a block of ice in which Anju is trapped'. (*Sister of My Heart*, 345) She moves backwards in shame, anger, and helplessness. She is unable to tolerate Sunil's brief, silent deception.

*Sister of My Heart* revolves around a traditional Chatterjee family in Calcutta. The simple routines of their lives are described fondly, though still with the hot-tropical-lush-pomegranates-pujas-pickles theme that is typical of Divakaruni's style. (Chacko, n.d) Words convey the feelings and emotions of all the characters. In addition, silence acts as the discourse and conveys a lot of hidden meanings which are imagined, assumed, or inferred by the observers. Gowri Ma uses silence as a powerful tool. Singhji uses it as a safety option. Anju remains silent about her husband Sunil's attraction towards her cousin Sudha. Sudha becomes silent with everybody, including Anju, after knowing the secrets of their fathers' deaths. She remains silent in her in-laws' house and continues to be silent even after her divorce. She does not convey her inner feelings to Anju, Gowri Ma, Nalini, or Pishi. Silence proves to be more powerful than voice in Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*.

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