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## **A Study of Women in Indian Family System in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart***

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### **Abstract**

Divakaruni explores an updated analysis of the migrated Indian families in India and abroad with each new novel. Her writings focus on the complexities, the extraordinary range of possibilities, situations present in Indian family life. Most important factor regarding *Sister of My Heart* is the fact that the novelist has chosen ordinary characters which generally live inside and outside the purview of Indian social set up and through them Divakaruni has given a glimpse into the socio-cultural condition prevalent in India.

### **Keywords**

Dislocation; Alienation; Acculturation; Assimilation; *Sister of My Heart*; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the life of Indian families as well as the migrated families, essentially a family of females marooned in a household in her novels. Her writings revolve around as how families undergo socio-cultural and psychological transplantation when they move from one culture to another and the problems faced by them like - fear of losing identity, loneliness, hostility, exile, dislocation, alienation, discrimination, acculturation, assimilation, language issues, nostalgia for the past etc. Her novels are personal compassionate family saga that is personal, intimate, tender and revealing. Her critically acclaimed novels deal with the complexities of Indian family life and with the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the West. Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a particular but a potent point to note is that Divakaruni in her displaced existence generally tend to excel in her work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for her.

As a person who moved away from her homeland to United States, Divakaruni's writings seem to be a way of recollecting the country of her birth and as an outsider she tries to peek into the inside details with open-mindedness and neutrality. Her literary output treats all shades of identity crisis such as alienation, marginalization, despair, nostalgia, readjustment, assimilation, adaption and adoption. As a woman writer her writings are autobiographical and mostly her protagonists and the significant characters in her novels are women. Divakaruni with each new novel explores an updated analysis of the migrated Indian families in India and abroad. Her writings focus on the complexities, the extraordinary range of possibilities, situations present in Indian family life. Her themes, however, remain universal - love, loss, separation, heroism, despair and happiness.

Family is derived from Latin word 'familia' which means an exclusive group of people who share a close relationship, traditionally composed of a mated couple and their dependent children or procreation in co-residence. The

basic unit of socialization key to the structure of the society is the family. Families create generations, extended from the human family unit. Family is an exclusive group of people by similar affinity, economy, culture, tradition, honour, and friendship that grow inclusive extended to nationhood and humanism. The concept of family that breaks with tradition within particular societies is those that are transplanted via migration. In science, genealogy is a field which aims to trace family lineages through history. The term family has come to be used as a means to classify groups of objects closely and exclusively related. Thus the concept of family is metaphorical which differ.

Marriage is a threshold to a life of togetherness between two individuals of the opposite gender. There are happy marriages, bitter marriages, contented marriages, contented couples, estranged ones, mismatches, tragedy meted out to happy couples and so on. The truth is that there is no room for the notion of – the couples lived happily ever after. The general hallmarks of marriage are compatibility, sharing, caring, mutual commitment, integrity and love. Simon Beauvoir in her article, “Introduction: Woman as Other,” asserts:

The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness – there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness – but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition as routine. (Beauvoir 502)

The course of Indian marriage largely depends on the horoscope compatibility. Instead of the girls’ and boys’ personal wishes and opinions, it is their horoscopes that are analyzed to unimaginable heights. The mismatch between the said astrological charts is blown out of proportion and the alliance is drawn to a naught. This is to show that astrological predictions can make or break a matrimonial alliance in a conservative Indian set-up. Unless a seasoned astrologer gives a green signal and augurs well about the proposed alliance, an Indian wedding cannot take place. The subsequent course of an Indian Marriage is succinctly presented by Divakaruni in *Sister of My Heart*.

The novel *Sister of My Heart* deals with two closely-bonded cousins Anju and Sudha, growing up in a Hindu Zamindar family of West Bengal and eventually ending up in America. As the three widows – Pishi Ma, the cousins’ paternal aunt, and their mothers Gouri Ma and Nalini Ma and two young girls of this family meander their way through the drama of life, facing marriage, motherhood, divorce, widowhood, etc.

Each stage brings to focus a certain upper-class Bengali culture and tradition, which is cherished or criticized from the uniquely feminine and diasporic perspective of Divakaruni. Within the all-female family in which the girls grew up there is much love but also lots of strictness. The mothers are always to be obeyed. The family is more important than individuals and the mothers could be tyrannical. The men that Anju and Sudha love and marry are never evil, just not as strong and competent as the women.

The strong emotional bond between both girls is evident from childhood. Although their love for one another is on an equal plane, their socio-economic backgrounds are not. Because their family is wealthy and socially prominent, Anju has more social and economic advantages than Sudha. Anju’s family wealth and social position allow her to transcend the restrictive demands of traditional Hindu Indian female gender notions, which might eventually restrict her from mainly fulfilling the roles of wife and mother. Hence, Anju is privileged to study and pursue a career.

On the other hand, Sudha and her mother are not economically independent. Instead, they must depend on the good graces of Anju’s family for survival because Sudha is socially and economically disadvantaged. She is more likely to succumb to restrictive traditional Hindu-Indian gender norms; in fact, Sudha’s only advantage is her physical beauty, which can only help her to survive within the framework of traditional Hindu-Indian gender norms by securing a ‘good husband’.

The Chatterjee family stays in the 'old crumbling marble mansion' and that is the heritage property which they possess. Most important aspect regarding *Sister of My Heart* is the fact that the novelist has chosen ordinary characters which generally live inside and outside the purview of Indian social set-up and through them Divakaruni has given a glimpse into the socio-cultural condition prevalent in India. The story moves with the narration of the birth of Anju and Sudha, their childhood stories, their escapades and their life after marriage. Divakaruni has looked back in all its neutrality the goodness as well as the negative aspects of the society in which she was brought up through her characters. Avtar Brah in his book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, has mentioned:

On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day ... all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations. In other words, the varying experiences of pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture. (Brah 192)

Divakaruni has exemplified this idea of 'home' and penning experiences which reflect not just the locale but also the inherent tradition and culture. Divakaruni makes use of mythological metaphors to accentuate the liveliness of experiences her characters undergo. She reveals the glorious stories of the queen of Jhansi through the voice of Sudha to Anju at the time when she was depressed because of her miscarriage and helps her to regain her strength. Sudha narrates it also to her daughter Dayita, on their way to America, in a different way. She even reveals the story of Lord Krishna who helped Draupadi in times of need and compares the lost child of Anju to be Lord Krishna in the

symbol of a star in the sky - thus leading Dayita to a bright future. Nilanjana S. Roy remarks:

If you're a disciple of Gurumayi, as Divakaruni is, and a fan of the kind of New Age literature that believes in "twin souls", and a believer of woman's lib so long as it includes a handsome, faithful, sensitive prince in the storyline, this novel is the perfect present to yourself. Followers of feminism, both the Indian version, and the imported kind, will find Divakaruni's arguments as easy to digest and harmless as regurgitated pap. (Roy 28)

When Sudha conceives and it is established by tests that her baby is a girl, her mother-in-law tries to force her to abort. But Sudha decides that she should do something to protect her baby. She leaves her husband's home and returns to her parental home in Calcutta. She transforms herself, from the princess in the palace of the snakes to the queen of swords. She refuses to return to Ramesh; she also turns down the conditional offers of Ashok to marry her. The rejection of male allotted stereotypical roles is complete. Sudha's journey to America is really the beginning of her journey to a new world of women. In an interview by Arthur J. Pais in *Emory* Divakaruni confesses:

I have been watching how Indian women were forced to do certain things - as the stories of sacrifice and devotion in the mythology demand from them. And then there are inspiring stories about women like the Rani of Jhansi that offer women refreshing role models - and the strength to fulfill their own destinies. (qtd. in *Emory*)

All the three mothers Abha Pishi, Nalini, Gouri Ma also enter this new world of women. This is symbolically shown when they sell their dilapidated, ancestral house and move to a new flat. The change in them after they move to their new home is amazing. "Along with the old house, the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition" (SMH 296). The mothers begin to lead

a fulfilling life with a social purpose. They listen to the music that they like and take walks where they please. They no longer worry about the social stigma attached to a divorcee and keep Sudha with them. They lovingly take care of her daughter, Dayita.

Divakaruni has satirized the Indian patriarchal system which demands dowry but has no concern for the bride. When Sudha escapes from Ramesh's family to save her unborn child, she is served divorce papers, sent the wedding-card for her husband's second marriage but her jewellery, clothes or any other possessions are not returned. The words of Sudha's mother hints at the diplomacy of the society, "You'd think she'd at least have had the decency to return Sudha's wedding jewellery now that she's getting a whole new dowry with a new daughter-in-law" (SMH 319).

However, even while expressing the richness of the culture, Divakaruni has hinted at the social stigma of dowry plaguing the Indian society. The issue of gender discrimination is universal and Divakaruni has penned the open hostility meted out to the girl-child. Societal pressure to ensure family lineage through a male heir is the reason behind the hostility. Sudha's decision to leave her husband's home to protect her daughter comments on the ways the society behaves with girls. Even her mother does not support her, she feels "Oh Goddess Durga! What will people say?' she cries, 'A pregnant woman without sindur on her forehead! What shameful names will they call your child'" (SMH 260)?

Where Divakaruni scores, is in making her women characters something more than cardboard cut-outs. *Sister of My Heart* is a delectable novel, rich with family bonds and complexity of relations that each person in a family experiences that microcosm differently. Thus Divakaruni skillfully analyses the typical Indian families and the complex relationships and its core role particularly in patriarchal family structure.

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