

Agony of Women Protagonist in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract: *The primary objective of the present paper is to investigate the challenges and hardships confronted by the female characters in the book "Sister of My Heart." This study delves into the suffering experienced by these women and their quest for self-identity. It utilizes the lens of gender inequality as a framework for analyzing the novel. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Sister of My Heart" revolves around the struggles endured by typical Indian women. The novel addresses the adversities that women in various parts of Asia face, where they are often given lower priority than men. Women are frequently treated as objects controlled by men and societal norms. Men manipulate women's emotions and feelings. Within the narrative, one of the female characters embarks on a journey to discover her identity amidst her hardships. Society's rules and regulations seem to disproportionately affect women, while men enjoy greater freedom. Women, unfortunately, tend to endure their suffering silently, as they are seldom granted the opportunity to express their struggles. The present paper provides an analysis of the trials and tribulations faced by Sudha and Anju, the central female characters in "Sister of My Heart."*

Keywords: Trials, Hardship, Sacrifice, Gender Inequality, Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has established herself as a trailblazing novelist in the realm of South Asian diasporic literature. Her literary works stand out for their inquisitive and challenging tone, which boldly address issues related to women's identity and freedom. She is truly exceptional among a select group of writers who excel at portraying Indian culture and the experiences of Indian women.

Simone de Beauvoir, a renowned existentialist philosopher and feminist thinker asserts:

*"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine."*¹ (de Beauvoir)

Her writings delve into the psychological aspects of the inner conflicts that women grapple with in patriarchal societies. When viewed from a broader perspective, her novels offer valuable insights into the dynamics of gender, the role of women, and the influence of patriarchy in society. Her literary works provide a nuanced portrayal of women on a quest to discover their values and navigate the complexities of their lives. Through her writings and interviews, she has often expressed her views on the struggles of women in various contexts, including within the family, society, and abroad. She frequently explores the struggles within the family, the complexities of familial relationships and the challenges faced by women within the family structure. She emphasizes the traditional roles and expectations imposed on women in many cultures, particularly in the Indian context. Her works often delve into the emotional and psychological strains experienced by women as they navigate familial pressures, obligations, and conflicts. Divakaruni is known for her keen observations on societal expectations placed on women. She highlights how these expectations often limit women's choices, autonomy, and opportunities. Whether it's adhering to cultural norms, conforming to traditional gender roles, or facing societal judgments, her writings shed light on the external pressures women encounter.

As an immigrant herself, she offers unique insights into the struggles of women who move abroad, leaving behind their home countries and cultures. She explores the challenges of adapting to new environments, dealing with cultural clashes, and preserving one's cultural identity while assimilating into a foreign society. She pointed that the struggles of

women are often compounded by factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and immigration status. Her works reflect an understanding of the intersectionality of women's experiences, emphasizing that these struggles are not universal but are shaped by various intersecting identities. She portrays the difficulties women face, and also emphasizes their resilience and capacity for empowerment. Her characters often embark on journeys of self-discovery, finding their voices and asserting their independence in the face of adversity. She believes in the strength and potential of women to overcome challenges. Her perspective on women's struggles extends beyond geographical boundaries. She recognizes the universality of certain gender-based issues and aligns herself with the broader feminist movement that seeks to address these issues on a global scale. Education is a recurring theme in Divakaruni's work. She highlights the transformative power of education in the lives of women, providing them with the tools to challenge societal norms, make informed choices, and improve their circumstances. She has presented her views on the struggles of women reflect her commitment to portraying the multifaceted nature of these challenges, both within specific cultural contexts and in the broader context of global feminism. Her writings serve as a platform for exploring and understanding the complexities of women's experiences in various settings.

The central characters of the novel are Anju and Sudha, who share the same birthdate in the bustling city of Calcutta, India. They come from a family in a society where men hold most of the power and influence. Interestingly, both girls are raised as if they were twins by three important maternal figures in their lives: Gouri, Anju's mother; Nalini, Sudha's mother; and Pishi, who is Anju's father Bijoy's sister. Pishi plays a particularly enchanting role in their upbringing, weaving a tapestry of fairy tales and legends for the young girls.

In "Sister of My Heart," Divakaruni uses traditional gender roles to depict the challenges and limitations faced by Sudha and Anju. The novel explores how these roles impact their personal growth, relationships, and aspirations, ultimately highlighting the struggle of women to break free from these constraints and assert their own identities and desires in a society where traditional norms are deeply entrenched.

Expectations of Marriage: Divakaruni succinctly outlines the journey of an Indian marriage, highlighting the essential role played by an experienced astrologer's approval and predictions in ensuring the union proceeds. In Indian society, marriage is often seen as a central aspect of a woman's life.

*"They say in the old tales that when a man and woman exchange looks the way we did, their spirits mingle. Their gaze is a rope of gold binding each to the other. Even if they never meet again, they carry a little of the other with them always. They can never forget, and they can never be wholly happy again."*²

Sudha and Anju are expected to marry and fulfill their roles as wives and daughters-in-law. Both experience immense familial and societal pressure to comply with the arranged marriages. Arranged marriages are deeply rooted in Indian culture and society. Deviating from this tradition can result in social stigma and family disapproval. Sudha and Anju feel the weight of these cultural and social expectations, which further limits their agency in deciding their own destinies. They are expected to put the wishes and expectations of their families above their own desires and aspirations. This pressure can be emotionally and psychologically taxing, as they must navigate conflicting feelings of duty to their families and the desire for personal happiness.

Domestic Responsibilities: Women in traditional Indian families are typically burdened with domestic responsibilities, including cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the household. Sudha and Anju, like many Indian women, are expected to excel in these roles and prioritize the needs of their families above their own desires and aspirations.

Limited Educational and Career Opportunities: Traditional gender roles often limit women's access to education and career opportunities. While both Sudha and Anju are intelligent and capable, their families prioritize their marriages over their education and career prospects. This restricts their ability to pursue their own ambitions and interests.

Societal Expectations of Modesty: Indian society places a strong emphasis on female modesty and virtue. Sudha and Anju are expected to adhere to strict codes of conduct and modesty, which can stifle their ability to express themselves freely and make choices that go against societal norms.

Arranged Marriages: Arranged marriages are a common practice in Indian culture, and both Sudha and Anju are pushed into such marriages. These arranged marriages are often based on family alliances and societal expectations rather than personal choice, highlighting the limited agency women have in choosing their life partners.

Lack of Autonomy: Traditional gender roles diminish women's autonomy and decision-making power. Sudha and Anju must often seek permission and approval from male family members, such as fathers and husbands, before making significant life choices.

Pressure to Conform: There is immense pressure on Sudha and Anju to conform to the expectations of their families and society. Deviating from these norms can lead to social ostracism and family disapproval, which creates a sense of obligation to conform.

Another theme societal expectations play a significant role in shaping the lives of the female characters, particularly Sudha and Anju. These expectations place a heavy burden on them and create various challenges. One of the most prominent societal expectations is the preservation of family honor. In the context of the novel, this means that the women, especially Sudha and Anju, are expected to conduct themselves in ways that reflect positively on their families. Any behaviour that deviates from the established norms can be perceived as a threat to the family's honor. This expectation places immense pressure on the women to conform to certain codes of conduct and maintain an impeccable reputation. Indian society has deeply entrenched traditional gender roles, which dictate the behavior and responsibilities of men and women. Women are expected to fulfill specific roles as wives, daughters-in-law, and caretakers of the household. Sudha and Anju are no exception to these roles, and the weight of these expectations limits their freedom and opportunities.

Indian culture is steeped in traditions and rituals. Sudha and Anju are expected to participate actively in these traditions and follow them diligently. Non-compliance can lead to criticism and judgment from the community. This conformity to tradition often restricts their choices and individuality. The societal expectation of prioritizing family needs and traditions over personal desires is a recurring theme in the story. Sudha and Anju must often sacrifice their own aspirations, dreams, and desires to meet the expectations placed upon them. This can lead to a sense of frustration and a feeling of being trapped in roles they did not choose. Society can be unforgiving when it comes to deviations from established norms. Sudha and Anju are acutely aware of the potential consequences of not conforming to societal expectations, including the fear of being ostracized or criticized. This fear exerts significant psychological pressure on them.

The conflict between tradition and modernity is another central theme and it deeply affects the lives of Sudha and Anju. This internal struggle creates a constant source of tension and challenges for them

Traditional Upbringing: Sudha and Anju are raised in a traditional Indian family with deeply ingrained customs, values, and expectations. They are taught to respect and adhere to age-old traditions, including arranged marriages, familial duties, and gender-specific roles. Their upbringing instills in them a sense of duty and loyalty to their cultural heritage.

Desire for Independence: Despite their traditional upbringing, Sudha and Anju harbor a desire for independence and autonomy. They yearn for the freedom to make their own choices, pursue their education, and follow their personal aspirations. This longing for modernity is driven by exposure to new ideas, education, and the changing world around them.

Conflict of Identity: The clash between tradition and modernity creates an internal conflict of identity for Sudha and Anju. They are torn between the values and expectations of their families and the pull of the more liberal and progressive ideals they encounter outside their traditional upbringing. This conflict leads to a sense of ambivalence and confusion about who they truly are and what they want from life.

Rebellion and Resentment: As they become more aware of the constraints of tradition, Sudha and Anju experience moments of rebellion and resentment. They question the roles assigned to them as women and the expectations placed upon them. This rebellion leads to friction within their families and communities.

Seeking a Middle Ground: Sudha and Anju attempt to find a middle ground between tradition and modernity. They strive to honor their cultural roots while also asserting their individuality and independence. This balancing act is challenging and often leads to inner turmoil.

Supportive Friendship: One of the strengths of the story is the strong bond between Sudha and Anju. Their friendship becomes a source of emotional support and encouragement as they navigate the complexities of their internal conflict. They provide each other with the strength to confront tradition and pursue their desires.

Traditional Gender Roles: Indian society has deeply entrenched traditional gender roles, which dictate the behavior and responsibilities of men and women. Women are expected to fulfill specific roles as wives, daughters-in-law, and caretakers of the household. Sudha and Anju are no exception to these roles, and the weight of these expectations limits their freedom and opportunities. When Sudha asked Pishi if the sweets had disappeared for them, she shook her head in regret and said "*Maybe the Bidhata Purush doesn't come for girl babies.*" (6) This statement highlights a potential disparity in the way society perceives and values the birth of boys compared to girls. It underscores the deep-rooted gender norms and expectations that can shape the lives and experiences of individuals like Sudha and Anju. Anju was content in her marriage with Sunil, but her father-in-law proved to be a difficult and unpleasant person. He made derogatory remarks like "*Women and gold are the root of all evil*" (162) and questioned her about who paid for her food, displaying a lack of respect and consideration. This situation highlights the unfortunate predicament often faced by married women when dealing with their in-laws, who expect them to work hard for the family while facing such challenges.

The theme of motherhood and the expectations placed on women as mothers is a significant aspect of the story. This theme is explored through the experiences of Sudha and Anju. In the traditional Indian society depicted in the novel, there is a strong cultural pressure on women to become mothers. Motherhood is often seen as a woman's primary role and a source of fulfillment. Sudha and Anju, like many women, face these societal expectations, which add to the complexity of their lives beyond simply becoming mothers, there is often an expectation that women should be fertile and produce offspring.

The pressure to conceive and bear children can be intense, and it can lead to feelings of inadequacy or failure when women face difficulties in achieving pregnancy. Both grapple with the physical and emotional challenges of pregnancy and childbirth. These experiences are portrayed realistically in the novel, highlighting the pain, uncertainty, and transformations that come with bringing new life into the world. Motherhood often requires significant sacrifices from women. Sudha and Anju must balance their own aspirations, dreams, and desires with the responsibilities of caring for their children. This can include sacrificing their careers, personal time, and independence. The novel explores the deep emotional bonds between mothers and their children, as well as the conflicts and dilemmas that can arise in these relationships. Sudha and Anju experience profound love for their children but also face challenges in meeting their children's needs while pursuing their own happiness.

There is an expectation of selflessness associated with motherhood. Women are often expected to put their children's well-being above all else, sometimes at the cost of their own happiness. Sudha and Anju grapple with the tension between their roles as mothers and their own desires for personal fulfillment. The novel also touches on the societal tendency to compare and compete when it comes to motherhood. Women are often judged based on their ability to be ideal mothers, which can create feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. The multifaceted nature of motherhood, depicting the joys and challenges, sacrifices and expectations, and the emotional complexity that women experience as they navigate this crucial aspect of their lives. The novel sheds light on how motherhood is not a one-dimensional concept but rather a deeply layered and complex part of a woman's identity.

II. CONCLUSION

In a society heavily dominated by men, women often endure significant suffering and make countless sacrifices throughout their lives for the sake of others. The prevailing rules and regulations in this society are typically crafted without taking into account that women also possess their own unique identities and aspirations. Sadly, women's emotions and feelings are frequently overlooked and trivialized leading to their objectification and the manipulation of their emotions as if they were mere toys. This critical analysis delves into the societal role of women, shedding light on the hardships they face within this male-dominated framework. It underscores how women are often marginalized,

denied the opportunity to express their individuality, and compelled to prioritize the needs and desires of others above their own. This imbalance in the treatment of women not only deprives them of their autonomy but also perpetuates a system that objectifies and exploits their emotional well-being. The paper seeks to examine these issues in-depth, aiming to provoke thoughtful reflection on the gender disparities and biases that persist in society.

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