



THE WISH, THE WILL AND THE WAY-ANJU AND SUDHA: A STUDY OF THE CHARACTER OF THE PROTAGONISTS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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ABSTRACT

Any work of art narrates the mind's inner happenings of the characters created. Again any work of art has immense scope to be analyzed, critiqued and to be interpreted in various ways. Modern day writers excel in the variegated nature of the themes they handle. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a writer who has established herself as a writer who has immense thought content and literary style. The novel Sister of My Heart portrays the post modern trend a woman fashions for herself. Here, two close cousins consider each other as sisters and enjoy, encounter and eliminate circumstances that are conducive as a coercive in nature. Though many women don't react to the immediate happenings of their lives, there is also a streak of feministic aspect inherent in them. This article attempts to find out the outcome of the struggle the two cousins face and also would attempt to find out how they fared in their encounters.

Key words: Post-modern, feminism, love, bonding, suffering

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's much celebrated and admired work of art, a fiction, *Sister of My Heart*, is about the life and times of two Indian girls, Anju and Sudha. It is a story about family, friendship, and the loving link between the two sisters. The untimely demise of both the fathers during their thoughtless hunt for rubies sends Anju and Sudha's mothers into premature labour, and the two girls are born twelve hours apart. And this demarcation of time itself is symbolic that the two cousins are like two sides of a coin. They are the ante meridian and post meridian of thoughts, actions and emotions. They stand as a paradigm and a prototype for unity in diversity. Commenting on the nature of this story, Hafiza Nilofar Khan writes:



And in spite of the mild allegorical overtones concerning the inscrutability of the human heart, this modern bildungsroman is in fact a scathing critique of the patriarchal and religious institutions of Bengali Brahmins and the sociocultural traditions of postcolonial India. (Flight to America, 103)

Anju is the daughter of an upper-caste Calcutta family of distinction. Sudha is the daughter of a man who is a considerable troublemaker and an embarrassment of that same family. Sudha is astonishingly beautiful; Anju is not. From a young age the girls become best friends, sisters, and each other's constant companion. Anju and Sudha grow up in a household run by their three mothers: Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini.

The two girls are the best of friends and sisters in companion always. The novel draws a chronological picture of the three time periods of the central characters. Also, the author neatly distinguishes the characteristics of the two females- Sudha is beautiful, charming and serene always; she is a storyteller and dreams of crafting clothes and craving to be a family girl. Anju, on the other hand, possesses an aggressive spirit and wishes to study Literature in college.

This work of art is a neat narration of the coming of age of the girls after delving into their early stages. The household where the two girls live is dominated by women folk. Anju's husband works in the United States, and she plans to join him after getting a visa. The novel, as its beginning, has a moving description of the death of Anju's still born son Prem. The distress, the disturbance and the anguish that Anju and her husband Sunil go through form the fulcrums of the novel. When Anju is distressed by the miscarriage she suffers, Sudha keeps her morale up by telling a story.

Once there was a princess who spent her girlhood in a crumbling marble palace set around with guards. They told her what was proper and what was not, and held up their poison spears before her face if she attempted to stray outside the boundaries they had drawn for her. (SoMH, 308-09)

At the same time, the author has depicted in alternating chapters the live of Sudha. In addition to that, the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood of both the girls are also dealt. Unable to withstand her tragedy alone, Anju invites Sudha to the US, to be with her as a solace. For Sudha this is a kind of a piquant situation as she herself has her own tragedy, the divorce she had with her husband and the uncertain future of her child Dayita. But she thinks that she can utilize the situation to get rid of her own disillusionment and depression. A trip to America, she feels, can redeem both. In his review of this novel Peter Nazareth feels:

In Divakaruni's work, despite sex, class, and caste oppression, women need not end up as victims. America chips away at ossified Indian tradition, for people to see, as

Krishna shows, that the imperative of life is deeper than arranged marriage. America and India are twinned. (819)

The tragedy that encompasses the two women does not stop with that. Sudha, who reaches California, has to contend with the fact that Anju's husband is slowly attracted towards her. On the night of their double wedding, Anju becomes aware of her husband's attraction to Sudha. The reckless desire that Sunil has for Sudha has been fueled for long. Sudha tries her level best to keep herself away from the eyes of Sunil. She even forges a relationship with another man, Lalit, which she believes would make Sunil understand the situation and not pester her. It ends in the divorce of Anju and Sunil even though Sudha tries to get away from the situation by running away from Anju's house. But Anju understands Sudha. She says:

I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart. I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She'll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I know she understands me perfectly. (SoMH 24)

Not willing to embarrass Anju and thus make her uncomfortable, Sudha even readies her to the job of a house maid. All these actions happen in the first part which the author titles *Princess in the Palace of Snakes*. Here Chitra Banerjee talks about the entangling of the characters in a web of emotions and attractions.

Even though Anju and Sudha call each other sisters, they are technically cousins. Pishi is the girls' aunt. Pishi's youngest brother, Bijoy Chatterjee, married Gouri. Anju is their daughter. So in addition to Pishi and Gouri, there is Nalini, Sudha's mother. The family relationships may seem complicated, but they play an important role in the novel.

Anju and Sudha are always together, but dissimilar in nature, special and singular in thought and action. Beautiful and calm, Sudha is a storyteller and dreams of designing clothes and having a family. Anju has a fierce spirit and longs to study Literature in college. Sudha comes to know of a dark secret about their family's past. Shame and guilt over keeping this secret causes Sudha to pull away from Anju. But her love for her sister does not falter, and she even refuses to elope for fear it would damage Anju's reputation.

The second book of the novel *The Queen of Swords* deals with the relationship between Sudha and her mother-in-law who is tough and scheming. After five long years of barren marriage, Sudha is ecstatic and delighted when she realizes that she is pregnant. On the contrary, Anju's life in the United States has not entirely turned out as she wanted. Anju and Sudha exchange regular letters and short phone calls, but the truth is that their usual true bonding is missing. The friends discover they are pregnant at the same time and both seem finally happy.

Sudha's calculating mother-in-law finds out that Sudha's child is a girl. She insists that Sudha should abort the baby. Behaving in a silly way, she feels that the first child should be a male one. Sudha has nowhere to go to vent her disappointment. With a genuine understanding that Anju needs her, Sudha and her daughter decide to go to the United States. After many years, the sisters are reunited, but future obstacles still loom.

The title *Sister of my Heart* is a double edged one. Bonded in ways even their mothers cannot comprehend, the two girls grow into womanhood as if their fates, as well as their hearts, are merged. When Sudha comes to know of a murky family secret, for the first time in their lives, the girls become suspicious of each other. A sense of doubt and mistrust steadily creep in. Anju discerns the seductive power of her sister's beauty, which Sudha cannot control. But as true sisters at heart, they turn towards each other when misfortune smacks them both. This again makes them realize that they despite distance and marriage must turn to each other once again. The sisters' American stay keeps in anonymity. Divakaruni photographs their minds and says:

America has its own problems, she said, but at least it would give me the advantage of anonymity. No-one in America would care that I was the daughter of the Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, giving Dayita everything she needed. (SoMH, 294)

The story of the disintegration of the marble palace anecdote shows the male chauvinistic elements in the psyche of any male. The marriage between Ashok and Sudha take place but he is not ready to accept the child she carries. This is because the foetus is a female one. But Sudha, being a woman of strong will refuses to accede to the demands of Ashok.

Through this novel, Chitra Banerjee brings out the problems, faced by women in the society. Again, through the characters of Anju and Sudha, Banerjee brings out the essential fact that if there is a will there is a way. Though sufferings are encountered, Sudha keeps herself abreast and makes Anju also confident and love living.

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