

Juxtaposing the East and the West in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart.

Ms. N. Subashini

Ph.D Scholar, Asst. Professor in English, Vellalar College For Women, Erode.

Abstract: *This paper proposes to analyze the complex interface between the East and West, tradition and modernity in the two characters called Sudha and Anju in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel Sister of My Heart. Both characters have their own perceptions towards culture. Sudha considers herself to be traditional and follows Indian tradition while Anju adapts to the modern culture of the Western society. Through these characters, Divakaruni picturises the conflict between Indian identity and transnational location, the conflict between individual desire and social norms. Although she captures different aspects of the cultural encounter, the ways in which identities are codified forms a common matrix in her writings.*

I. Introduction

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is the story of two girls, Anju and Sudha, raised as close as sisters in a household of women. Anju and Sudha are opposites. Where Anju is practical, challenges tradition, enjoys reading, and hopes to travel, Sudha is beautiful, romantic, and conventional and likes clothes and storytelling. The girls are raised in what is nearly purdah for 1980s Calcutta society: they attend an all-girls convent school, and during their few social outings, they sit among the women. Their mothers also intend to marry them off in the traditional way, despite Anju's desire to attend college. Unfortunately, Sudha is already in love with a young man she met in an unapproved outing to the movie theater. Her plans to elope are foiled when Anju falls in love with the Indian-American man, Sunil, whom her mother has chosen; if Sudha were to elope, the scandal might ruin Anju's anticipated marriage. Instead, Sudha marries her mother's choice, Ramesh. Again misfortune courts them, as during the double ceremony, Sunil reveals his infatuation with the beautiful Sudha.

Neither marriage results in happiness. When Sudha finally becomes pregnant with a girl, her mother-in-law insists to have an abortion and her husband will not oppose his mother. Sudha, flouting convention, takes refuge with her family and is divorced for desertion. Amidst the different settings and ideologies, the writer brings home the similarities of the tradition and modernity through psychological and physiological changes accompanied with the experience of pregnancy of the two cousins. Sudha, who was patiently bearing everything, now wants to boldly stand up to defend the life of the child inside her. She is forced to run away from her husband's house but she knows that nobody will entertain her and bear the stigma she carries. Even her mother will not understand her predicament as she has more to worry about her society than her daughter's plight. Moreover, she can never come out of the belief that a married woman should always live under the shelter of her husband.

Nalini, the mother of the more beautiful Sudha, primarily comes across as a woman doubly handicapped in attitude, first by a patriarchal tradition, and second, by the modern need for reinforcing identities. She does not hesitate to sacrifice her own daughter's happiness, or even her first granddaughter's life, when it comes to saving face in her honour-conscious, prestige - and scandal -obsessed society. The upholder of family tradition, Pishi comes to the rescue of Sudha. She renders support and says Sudha is old enough to make her own decision. She can no longer be the sleeping princess trusting a prince to kiss her awake. The women in the Chatterjee family don't allow Sudha to kill the girl baby to save the family's face in the society, instead they bless her to be like the Rani of Jhansi, the Queen of Swords. In spite of her mother's lamentations, she wipes off the sindur powder and wedding bracelets and accepts the divorce proceedings sent by the Sanyals. Pishi mourns for the tyrannical rules of the society for a widow at the age of eighteen and says:

Why should she care any more what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole lifetime of being afraid of what society might think? I spit on this society which says it's fine to kill a baby girl in her mother's womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child. (Divakaruni 1999: 247)

Divakaruni rejects conventional myths and creates new ones. The first book in the novel is titled as "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes". In this part both the protagonists attempt to conform to the traditional feminine roles allocated by the male hegemonic society. This is symbolised by the traditional fairytale of the

princess in the palace of snakes waiting for her Prince Charming to rescue her. The second book is titled as "The Queen of Swords", is not a traditional fairytale.

When Anju is upset over her miscarriage, Sudha tells her this tale and Anju recovers. Then she relates what happened to the three mothers. Then Pishi, the usual teller of tales, asks her about the story she told Anju. "I told her a story. . . . "The Queen of swords", I say. (Divakaruni 1999: 290). This new myth symbolises the new feminine world that Divakaruni envisages. It is a world where women rescue other women and do not wait helplessly for the entosavethem.

By identifying with this legendary Indian woman, Sudha is able to be brave, travelling alone in public in order to escape from her husband's house. "I swat his hand away furiously and kick at the ankles of a fat man blocking my path. ... Maybe this is how the Rani of Jhansi felt the first time she went to war"(Divakaruni 1999: 243). Sudha's courage, her love for her daughter, and her success in reaching her family's house safely reaffirm her choice to leave her husband. When Sudha speaks to Anju on the phone after Anju has lost her baby, Sudha retells the Rani of Jhansi story, blending it with Anju's, reaffirming Anju's power and encouraging her to heal herself.

Although Sudha's girlhood love proposes to her, he doesn't really want Sudha's child, so Sudha refuses him and eventually comes to Anju in America. Anju, too, has marital difficulties. She loves Sunil, but imagines he is having affairs and is disturbed to find he expects her to be grateful to him for marrying her. When Anju becomes pregnant and Sunil discovers she has been secretly working at the campus where she takes classes, they fight, which results in a miscarriage for which Sunil blames her. These marital difficulties are complicated, because of Sunil's infatuation with Sudha, by Sudha's arrival in America at the end of the novel. The novel leaves this complication unresolved.

This summarized progression from India to America might easily be understood as a stereotypical reification of cultural boundaries where India manifests all the traditional Indian patriarchal restrictions under which Anju and Sudha suffer and where America promises possibilities not only for Anju, who can work, take classes, and wear jeans, but especially for the divorced Sudha who would, along with her child, face discrimination in India. However, the novel doesn't treat this situation so simplistically. The allusions to Virginia Woolf demonstrate that it is dangerous for women to trust stereotypes of the dominant culture as means of self-empowerment. Rather than believing these myths, women must read culture critically in order to take an active role in choosing the most satisfying lifestyle.

As one might expect based on the stereotypical India-vs.-the-West dichotomy, Anju, the cousin who questions tradition and looks forward to a college education and international travel, is the one who values Virginia Woolf. Anju discovers Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in the family bookstore and describes the book as having "the smell of distance, of new thinking" (Divakaruni 1999: 118). Having been raised in the traditional way where "... a good woman is to offer up her life for others" (Divakaruni 1999: 8-9) and "the husband is the supreme lord" (Divakaruni 1999: 49), Anju is understandably inspired by Woolf's passion and , Woolf's anger at women's "hav[ing] served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Woolf 2001: 43).

Anju dreams of a healthy, happy relationship with Sunil according to a Western model of equality and respect, but the Western image has actually trapped her into a conventional bond with all the associated problems. Sunil's nickname "Mr. America" perhaps signifies, where the one with symbols of power expects the one who eagerly wants those symbols to be grateful upon receipt. Rather than having accomplished her dreams for herself, Anju must thank someone else for them. Everything she desired has tricked her into an inappropriate, unhappy marriage. Thus, the allusion demonstrates that Western culture cannot simply erase colonial women's problems. Rather, women must begin to read cultures critically in order to negotiate the webs of power embedded in them. By taking this active responsibility for their own happiness, women can avoid the kind of trick Anju has essentially played on herself.

Western influence and the Westernization of Indian society, especially in the upper classes stand in sharp contrast to the traditionalism of the middle and lower classes. However, if the Eastern world is delineated at times in a rather negative light in this book, then the Western world is presented not without its own evils and shortcomings. Freedom and riches in the West are often bought, particularly by the immigrant, at the expense of the love and support provided by the extended family or the community. This is proved while Anju doubts on herself that "Did I make the wrong decision for Sudha, misled by my American - feminist notions of right and wrong? Have I condemned her to a life of loneliness?" (Divakaruni 1999: 250). Divakaruni's protagonists aspire to adapt to their newfound world. Though the female characters are firmly rooted in tradition, find it hard to break the bounds set by patriarchy, to experience what has so far been restricted in their life, and resolve the psychological conflict that is accompanied with the new situation. She presents very vividly the dilemmas of Indian women in traditional society. Her women characters represent the

sentiments of women within traditional bounds and outside traditional bounds. Rather, all women must learn to build empowerment actively from the positive aspects of the cultures they encounter, including their own.

Indian woman at the turn of the century is in a transitional phase vis-a-vis the interface of tradition and modernity. Indian literature shows that the situation of woman is not free from the influence of family, history and social modernism which causes the conflict between her desire for self-fulfillment and the necessity of doing her duties and the two are often opposed. Divakaruni constantly observes herself as an immigrant in between Indian and American cultures, and she observes how other women in her community, both Indian and Indian American, face the issues of culture shock, old world and new world values, and acculturation. She illustrates the same through her protagonists, who in the course of becoming self-determined are emotionally shattered.

The intense pressure to conform to American ideals, and to retain ethnic backgrounds pull immigrant children in two conflicting directions, resulting in mixed and complex emotions. Anju and Sudha both feel that they had greater opportunities for education, choice of studies in the U.S. but they realize that the freedom available to women does not necessarily solve all their problems.

Empowerment points out to woman the need to fight for her rights and privileges in order to lead a comfortable life. It means something that can enable her to create a new atmosphere and to face challenges as a woman. It means to give women the power, ability and resources to move beyond cultural, economic, social, religious and political restrictions, so that they can be more assertive. Rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal, they push the paradigm towards the comprehensive expression of each woman's potential.

As an Indian, Sudha honours and admires all that is Indian. She feels subordinated in order to entertain and gratify the people around her and whom she encounters but becomes empowered when she has to confront and tackle the problem of her pregnancy and abortion. Sudha has emerged as an independent woman. She is able to confess to others and convince every one of all her actions. She has drawn a line of separation between her past and her present. She does not sentimentalise as ordinary women do. She has learnt to outlive the situation in which she is placed. She acts neither as a daughter of the Chatterjee family nor as the daughter-in-law of the Sanyals. She has mustered the courage that is essential for her to survive in the world.

The novelist draws a compelling contrast between the selflessness required of women in India and sometimes bewildering freedom offered in their adopted land, through the cousins. They discover that they cannot allow being dependent on men and so they search for a life of independence. The choices that the characters of Divakaruni make and the interaction they maintain with the immigrant community force them to question their existence and morality. Both try to find answers - from dependence they move to independence. The novelist portrays her women through their lives, experiencing their jealousy, loss, depression, surprise and prolonged separation and find that these battles and triumphs hold a universal thread with which women of many cultures can easily identify. Whether set in India or America, her plots feature Indian born women torn between old and new world values.

In the novel *Sister of My Heart*, the writer has artistically portrayed the physical and psychological tensions and tortures to which women are subjected. She has created a new empowering image for women. The diversity of women and the diversity within each woman is portrayed through Anju and Sudha. Divakaruni poignantly explores the struggle of Indian women as they seek new pastures in a world that would have them remain submissive. Her characters struggle to release themselves from a tradition bound society in order to gain an independent identity. There is a shift from being controlled through tradition to asserting.

II. Conclusion

Independence, whether it is in California, Chicago or Calcutta, women should learn to adapt and as a result, they have to discover their own sense of self amidst joy and sorrow. Divakaruni, as a proficient storyteller, weaves elements of everyday life and dreams into engaging, seamless tapestries. They are as truth-filled as they are complex, wonderful, captivating and beautiful.

Works Cited:

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