



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Depiction of Men in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

Ratna Rao

Asst. Professor

Calorx Teachers' University, Ahmedabad.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has penned beautiful female characters in almost all her novels. Her feminist characters are someone who stand apart in the milieu and carve a niche for themselves as someone who have grit and determination and strong enough to solve their problems by being united and helping other female characters. But the same cannot be said about the male characters of her novels. The male characters are portrayed as weak characters or those who are not protagonists and often do not receive any accolades. These characters like in most of the novels, in 'Sister of My Heart' also remain ones who are unsung and weak.

In this work, the different male characters in the work 'Sister of My Heart' have been analysed. It was tried to find why they are weak and puppets in the hands of fate and how they are different from their female counterparts.

Introduction:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni a feminist writer par excellence whose expertise lies in depicting strong feminist characters who stand tall amidst adversities. Her novels stand apart and are best examples of story-telling and provide a peep into the lives of people in India and people of Indian diaspora settled in American.

"For those of us who read to escape the banalities of daily life, Chitra Divakaruni's books are oxygen. She writes about India in a way that makes the rest of the world disappear around you." (Chicago Tribune, May 29, 2013)

Female Protagonists: The raising action in her novels is almost the same in a way that the female characters face problems: problems that they solve with grit and determination. The adversities might stem from the patriarchal society, diasporic society or some internal conflict. Her stories have strong, brave women who face the dilemmas of life with aplomb and in most cases get their strength from the other women characters. There is another shade to the women in her novels, where the women who are docile, weak, have grown under the tutelage of the family and parents but, faced with problems do not bend but develop elasticity and spring out to face the devils which may be either a situation or a character. Sisterhood and unity among the protagonists of the novels with other female characters gives the characters the strength to face the vicissitude to get ahead and face the problems head on. They become the change agents and show a way to the society and become exemplary. The women in Divakaruni's novels survive in men's world with dignity and confidence.

In the best friendships... with women, there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation,

perhaps because of the life-changing experiences we share-....We take joy in the same small, good things of life....we fight too....But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other.... We can be women and that, as women, we are understood. (Divakaruni in an interview)

This is true about the women characters in Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*. Be it Anju, Sudha or the senior brigade of ladies-Gauri, Nalini and Pishi ma. Each one of them with the strength of unity provided by each one of them faces the world and the patriarchal society without showing a string of weakness. Each one of them show never die attitude and bring about peace in their own lives and the lives of the people around them. Anju and Sudha, cousins and friends since birth are soul sisters who are there like a wall for each other. As Anju tells Sudha, "I would love you because you love me. I would love you because no-one else knows us like we know each other" (Divakaruni 1999: 61). Sudha, who faces the challenge from her mother-in-law, tries to stand up to it with the help of her dear cousin and friend Anju. She leaves her marital family to save the unborn girl child and joins her family back in Calcutta despite an unknown future and the fear of backlash from the society. When Anju faces crisis in her life Sudha gives her strength and will to live with the help of her stories over the phone. The other women Pishi ma, Nalini and Gauri support Sudha without caring for the society's rules and regulations, even deny the request of mother-in-law of Sudha to abort the child to ignore her mistake and take her back in her family fold. The women show great solidarity and unity, ignore each other's mistakes and move ahead hand in hand to a life full of promise. Even though Anju knows very well that her husband is smitten by Sudha's beauty she gives a helping hand to Sudha and invites her and her daughter to live with them in the U.S. not only this, she also puts her unborn child's life in jeopardy to earn money for the tickets for Sudha. Anju and Sudha are the mirror images of each other who understand each other even without meeting or sharing their feelings. Nalini and Gauri are different like cheese and cake but lend a helping hand whenever there is need. Nalini spits venom whenever Anju tries to be head strong and not follow the rules of the family. When the girls escape to watch a movie, she brings the house down and in spite of Gauri and others trying to make her see a reason she decides to get Sudha married instead of allowing her to study further as decided earlier. But when the plot takes a turn and Sudha comes back home, never to return to her marital home she forgets all her differences and supports her daughter and the whole family to resettle. Along with the old house, the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition. Perhaps, ironically, I helped it happen. For now that I have come back neither wife now widow, now that I have let go of all that society considers valuable, what is left for them to fear? Away from those ancient halls echoing with patriarchal voices which insisted that foremost of all they must be widows of the Chatterjee family, for the first time they can learn to live their lives with a girlish lightness. (Divakaruni 1999: 296) Gauri, in spite of knowing the dark secret that Nalini and her husband were in no way their relatives, takes care of her and her daughter, Sudha, never flinching an eyelid. She does not show any discretion in bringing up the two girls. On the other hand Pishi follows all the rituals of being a widow but takes the lead in nurturing the girls, narrating those stories of value, valour and religion. She brings them up with the concoction of stories which gives the girls power, confidence and morals.

To say the least, all the women in Divakaruni's novel move forward shoulder to shoulder taking the challenges head on and carving a path ahead. The plot meanders through and gives the myriad twists and turns because of the female characters.

Male Characters: The men of Divakaruni's novels are weaklings as compared to their female counter parts. Either they meekly follow the herd or they become the cause of plight for the women associated with them. Some of them are so docile that they do not have nerve to fight against the situations or raise their voices to help those around them.

The story opens with the death of the two characters Bijoy and Gopal who went on a wild goose chase leaving the pregnant wives behind. They are not typical heroes of novels or real life heroes who come back with glory and pride but meek characters who surrender themselves to fate and die unsung and uncared for.

Gopal when alive spent his time day dreaming, charming his way through the rich house hold of his cousin brother, Bijoy and resting on his alms and mercy. He, unlike the women of the novel is not a go getter, a strong personality who could fulfil his dreams and make a living for his beautiful wife Nalini and his unborn child. He always spins a yarn and his cousin falls into it. Even his marriage with Nalini happens on the spur of the moment. His gift of the gab helps him here also and he is able to lure Nalini into marrying him, showing her dreams of richness and luxury. His weakness lies in just being indulged in dreams and not executing anything properly. Though in the later part of the story the reader becomes aware that the ugly Singhji, who is the driver and also the confidante of Anju and Sudha is none other than Gopal who is saved from the tragedy but turned ugly because of the mishap. His character takes a 360 degree turn from a pleasant looking young man to an ugly one in appearance but the contrast in his qualities. He becomes down to earth and takes care of the whole house hold without uttering a word to anyone. He is the one who helps Sudha talk to Ashok and tries his best to evade Sudha's marriage to Ramesh Sanyal. He tries in every way to help Sudha and passes the love notes of Sudha to Ashok. Towards the end through a letter he confides to Sudha that he is none other than her father Gopal.

On the other hand, Bijoy the rich cousin takes care of the whole house hold well but could not find out the treacherous nature of the so called cousin of him. Giving credence to blood relation and family ties, he often gives himself to the follies of Gopal so much so that goes on the expedition with him and dies leaving the entire family in lurch.

The other male portrayals, Ashok who is deeply and passionately falls in love with Sudha in first glance in the theatre and is ready to sacrifice his life for her. He waits for her initially when she leaves him and for the sake of her sister marries a man whom she does not love. But Ashok waits for her and decides to remain unmarried till she returns and again persuades her to marry him. He is a true lover, as he is chided and disapproved time and again but still continues to adore Sudha. He is ready to marry her though he does not want Sudha's daughter which clearly indicates the patriarchal traditions in him. He on one hand goes against the tide, is ready to marry a divorced and pregnant woman but on the other hand not ready to accept

her daughter. Towards the end his love for Sudha takes better of him and he changes his views and accepts Sudha's daughter and this goes to show his love for her.

Sunil who comes to see Anju at the book store is against the bride looking the traditional way, likes Anju at the first glance but later when he meets Sudha, he falls for her beauty. But he takes care of Anju and gives every support and love that she deserves. He never questions Anju for anything but keeps the attraction for Sudha intact which is evident from the way he preserves the handkerchief of Sudha. He is modern in his own way not the rigid patriarchal male who dominates the females. He goes against his father also and is able to give Anju the space she needs as a wife and supports her in every way. He is reluctant to when Anju seeks his permission to bring her friend and soul sister to the U.S. as he very clearly knows that his attraction for Sudha may cause problems in his own married life. But when forced by Anju he gives in.

Ashok and Sunil are two different characters who are strong in their own ways. Sudha's love makes Ashok wait for her endlessly and accept her in any way. This fact gives Ashok's character his strength, in a patriarchal society it needs a lot of courage to stand for and marry a woman who is pregnant and is divorced. In a male dominated society it is also difficult to accept a girl child which Ashok though initially hesitant does it later on because of love. Divakaruni's novels once again establish the known fact that the power of love is undaunted and its power can make people do things unexpected and unaccepted. Sunil treats Anju as his equal and takes care of her in every way. He bears with her tantrums and even allows her to invite Sudha to US. He does not show any chauvinist qualities. He keeps the attraction towards Sudha layered inside without giving even an iota of doubt in Anju's mind that he has totally come out of his attraction. He pardons Anju's misdemeanour when she without thinking of her pregnancy works to collect money for Sudha's arrival to the U.S.

Ramesh, Sudha's husband though well -educated and earning for his family lacks courage to stand against his mother and by not raising his voice or giving his opinions is equal culprit in the misdeeds of his mother. He is brought up in such a way by his mother that he remains a weakling throughout. He does not even try to consummate his marriage with Sudha and when his mother forces Sudha to abort the girl child he never takes her side and allows the situation go hay wire. He does not even goes against his second marriage. Divakaruni has depicted in him the weakest male character who unlike the common male in a patriarchal society bears the brunt of a dominating mother. He does not utter a single word in solace Sudha or argue with his mother against her deeds. This makes him the weakest male character of all in the novel.

The strongest representative of the patriarchal norms is the father of Sunil, Mr Majumdar. He loses his cool over smaller things at his wife and even others time to time. "In one shift motion Sunil's father flings the bowl across the table at Sunil's mother. There's a fleshy thud, then a metal clatter as the bowl falls to the floor." (p.182) These kinds of scenes are quite common at Sunil's home. He is taken aback when his son retaliates.

All these male characters Ashok, Sunil, Gopal, Vijay and Mr Majumdaar are portrayed quite differently than the female characters. The females are strong, dynamic and take the plot forward through solving the problems and in doing act as social antidotes. The women stand together help each other during turbulence and this helps them coming out of the problems with a smile. Anju, Sudha, Pishi, Nalini, Gauri all are examples of this. When problems strike them they create a bonding between them and slither through them effortlessly by the confidence and power bestowed on them by their bonding. Though Nalini is always busy with her kitty party and is against Gauri all the time but when the situation demands she takes cudgels along with Pishi and Gauri and all of them together stand united in supporting Sudha who has left her marital home and is pregnant. They all fight it together even

But the men in the novel 'Sister of My Heart' are flat characters, puppets in the hands of the fate. Ashok who is deeply in love with Sudha waits for her endlessly. He is ready to marry her when she returns to her home after severing all the ties from her marital home. He accepts even her daughter when he realises that Sudha won't be his till he accepts her daughter. He is forced to act by the way shown by Sudha, when she refuses to marry him and instead marries Ramesh he just accepts that, later when she again decides to leave him and go to the U.S. he is still not able to stop her or change her decision. He meekly accepts and let her move to the U.S. as a mute spectator.

Ramesh is also a mere doll in the hands of his mother and is not able to say anything even when he knows that she is wrong. He even marries again, after Sudha leaves the home. He is depicted as a spine less character who could not stand strong and help his wife fight with his mother and save his daughter. He could not even give words of encouragement to her just says, 'Let's hope it is, or else she'll surely blow a gasket,' says my engineer husband.(p. 248). In literature there are many examples of mother-son relations which have a negative effect on the sons, right from Gertrude and Hamlet in the Shakespearean drama Hamlet to Sons and Lovers authored by D.H. Lawrence. Though they both do not have any parallel to this relation of Ramesh and his mother, it is clear that mothers have a strong hold on their sons and do not want to weaken that hold after the marriage of the son which leads to all the problems in the married life of the son. His relation with his wife Sudha, is not of a typical husband wife relation. Though at one level he feels love for her but his mother's over bearing nature stops him from being there for Sudha emotionally and psychologically. He becomes just a spectator who watches everything from a distance and let things happen. Like In Voices in the City by Anita Desai, where Jiban is totally untouched by the emotional needs of his wife Monisha and believes like any male patriarch that a woman's role is to take care of the household jobs under the careful eye of his mother.

Mr Majumdaar huffs and puffs all the while, keeps shouting and abusing his wife and others around them. He is in true sense a patriarch who does not like to give women their place and treat them like a door mat. Every now and then he throws things and tries to establish his rule and say at home. As is said abusing and shouting is a way of intimidating others and is a sign of weakness, he becomes quiet and is shocked when Sunil retaliates. He is also mean when he says to Sunil that he has spent a lot on his education. 'So this is what you have learned in America, how to defy your father? Who was it who sent you there, I'd like to know? Who

bought your ticket? Who paid all your expenses so that you could-(p.183). There is a shade of Willy Loman of Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Sales Man' in Mr Majumdaar. He too has many aspirations from his son like Willy has from his sons Biff and Happy but when they are not fulfilled, he becomes irritated, frustrated and takes his frustration by shouting at his children.

The men in Divakaruni's 'Sister of My Heart' fail to attract the readers as the novel's protagonists are females. The plot is able to move ahead and give interesting twists and turns because of the female characters. The males remain a shadow of the females. Though Ashok and Sunil are depicted as modern men who try to shun the patriarchal culture and go against the tide. Ashok fights the traditions and is ready to marry Sudha who is divorced and mother of a daughter which itself is a mark of New man who sets himself according to the times and follows what is right for that time. The same way Sunil also raises his voice against his father and is not able to take any more his abuses against his mother. He remains a mute spectator for a long time but at last is ready to fight for the sake of his mother. His attitude towards his wife Anju is also very accommodating and tries and adjusts with her wishes, even going to the length of agreeing to invite Sudha, his secret love to USA knowing very well that it would cause problems in his marital life.

Works Cited:

Divakaruni, Chitra. *Sister of My Heart*. Black Swan. 1999.Print.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. General Publishing Group, 1949. Print.

Desai, Anita. *Voice in the City*. Delhi: Orient Paper Back,1980.Print.