

WOMEN'S SUFFERING AND SELF IDENTITY: 'SISTER OF MY HEART'

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to explore the trials and tribulations faced by the female characters in the novel *Sister of My Heart*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart* is based on the sufferings of typical Indian women. The adversities faced by the women, existing across Asia where women are given less priority than men are dealt with in the novel. Women are treated like toys in the hands of men and the society. Men play with the emotions and feelings of women. In this novel, one of the female characters is in search of her identity amidst her sufferings. Rules and regulations created by the society are only for women. Men enjoy their freedom. This paper analyses how the female characters suffer and how they search for their identities. This article uses gender inequality as a tool to analyse the novel. Women are passive sufferers as they are not given chance to express their sufferings. In this paper analysis has been done on the trials and tribulations faced by Sudha and Anju in the novel *Sister of My Heart*.

Keyword: Gender Inequality, Heart, Identity, Less Priority, Adversities, Trials, Tribulation etc.

Introduction

Man and woman are two forms of divine energy. They are created to complete each other there are biological and psychological differences in man and woman. Generally, men are considered as physically stronger than the women. Women are generally passive. Men and women are destined to play different roles which are created by our own society. The universe is a mixture of animate and inanimate things. Man is endowed with some abilities which other living beings do not possess. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prolific writer, has carved a niche for herself. She was born in India. She has contributed more than twenty books which are fiction, poetry, children literature and anthologies. She has proclaimed the significance of women's role in her family to lead a perfect life through her novels. In a broad sense, gender inequality is a complex issue. When we utter the word "Gender Inequality" it is only as associated with women not men. When we go through various data about gender inequality and discrimination, we can find that women are far behind men in various fields. On the other hand, women are exploited, degraded and discriminated in their homes and as well as in the society. This type of discrimination can be easily seen in the Indian society. The root cause of gender inequality is the patriarchal system that is deeply rooted in the Indian society. Our religious beliefs have made this system a legal and valid one.

Caste and Class

Caste and class define the Indian Hindu society even in urban India and the shackles of it grip the families in unwanted ways. Novel peeks into the lives of characters and the way in which caste becomes a determining factor affecting their relationship and ultimately their destinies. Anju and Sudha are shown to be Brahmins (upper-middle class) brought up in a Chatterjee family and therefore they are forced to marry into respectable Majumdar and Sanyal families. Sudha's mother, Nalini, does not even consider Ashok's proposal because he does not belong to a Brahmin family.¹ However later when Anju is divorced and separated from her husband, she can now accept the hand of a lower-caste man as it is ironically stated, "My mother is absolutely against me turning Ashok down"². The dichotomous situation and the double standards of the society have been exposed through the situation of Sudha. Mothers sacrifice their daughter's personal happiness in the name of caste and class.

The negative side of this caste-based system also has been portrayed through Abha Pishi whose traditional mind set does not allow her to enjoy. She always dresses in 'austere white' and her hair is 'cut close to her scalping the orthodox style' but her love towards the girls is indescribable. Abha Pishi" puts on her patient smile...not participating, because widows mustn't.". She only attends kirtan because she "considers suitable for widows and thus allows herself."³ Similarly, Gouri ma, mother of Anju, though provides financial support to the family, still is unable to give up her caste-based ideology. As Pishi says, Gouri is "the clear-eyed one, fooled by little"⁴.

Divakaruni has also portrayed Mrs. Sanyal and Nalini as 'symbols of extreme Indian conservatism'. For instance Nalini does not even believe in letting Anju and Sudha have a look at the proposals from prospective grooms. Mrs Sanyal conservatism infect leads to a marital discord between Sudha and Ramesh. She cannot think of her son having any medical problem. Her insistence on having a male child as a legitimate heir to the family ruins the marriage of Sudha and Ramesh. Sudha feels the pinch of this unfathomed desire for a male heir but succumbs to her mothers-in-law wishes, "Pray, Natun Bau," says my mother-in-law. 'Pray to the goddess for arson. She is still holding onto my wrist. Her nails bite my flesh, and her lips move feverishly all the way to the shrine of the goddess of childbirth"⁵

Literature Review

Women's suffering was one among the major themes in Indian literature works. Indian Literature is the written works written by Indian writers. Indian literature is famous for the tradition and culture of India depicted in the literary works.

Discussion & Analysis

The novel Sister of My Heart was published in the year 1999. The current paper mainly focuses on the women struggle and self- identity apart from the other themes of the novel. Women have strived hard throughout their lives to achieve their identities. The novel is the proof that it does not need a heroic figure to please the readers. The suspense of the novel is well maintained till the end.

Anju and Sudha complement each other well. They share their own views and ideas with each other. From the beginning till the end, they support each other and the love and compassion that they share with each other help them surmount all kinds of difficulties that they face in their families. Anju says, "I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart. Like no one else in the entire world does. Like no one else in the entire world will. Early in my life I realize something. People were jealous of Sudha and me".⁶

Sudha's love with Ashok Ghosh is an interesting part of the novel. When they have the plan to elope, Sudha is forced to drop the idea, because of Anju's father-in-law who upholds the respect and prestige of them as more important than individual's likes and dislikes in the family. He told Gourimma that he would not expect any wrong opinion about the Chatterjee family girls. If it would happen in the future, Anju would be sent back to her mother's home. So, Sudha had left the plan of marrying Ashok. Sudha has to come to her mother's home to save her female child. Anju is deeply worried about Sudha who is also pregnant. The economic condition of family becomes worse. Anju has to work for Sudha. She wishes to invite Sudha to America to fulfil Sudha's childhood dream, i.e. start the embroidery, design of sarees. So, Anju earns money for Sudha. Without the knowledge to her husband Sunil she goes to work. Hard work leads to miscarriage and the baby is identified in her womb as 'breathless. Motherhood is the greatest pleasure and promotion to a woman in the world. Her health condition becomes bad, when she comes to know the death of her child and she becomes unconscious.

Sudha and Anju are the main protagonists of the novel. Both are born on the same day at Calcutta in India. Their family is one among the families of the male-dominated society. They were brought up like twins by three mothers namely Gouri, mother of Anju, Nalini, mother of Sudha and Pishi, sister of Anju's father Bijoy. Pishi told them fairy tales. She once told them that when a baby was born the Bidhata Purush, the goddesses, would come down to the earth to bless the child that night. People, would place sweets and lamp near the baby. If the child is lucky, sweets will be gone in the morning. 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."⁷

This tale made Sudha believe that goddesses too are partial to the girl babies. "For girl-babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born. If the father died after the birth of a child, that child is considered as one born with bad luck. People cursed Sudha and Anju for their birth because they too lost their fathers in the same way. Pishi became a widow at her young age and so she returned to Chatterjee's house. Anju's father Bijoy accepted Pishi whole heartedly. As a widow, the woman had to suffer a lot, had to wear white dress and cut her hair close to her scalp. Widows were not allowed to participate in any functions and were not given any respectable position in the rituals. Now Pishi was destined to follow those rules.

In those days, there was a cruel act like Sati but that was stopped because many people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy stood against that cruel act. Females have been the suffering souls

in both the ages. Widows are ill-treated by the society and are treated without humanity. Pishi said Sudha that, Men whose wives died could marry as soon as a year had passed. They didn't stop their work or their schooling. No one talked about their bad luck. We even have a saying, don't we, 'Abhagargoru more, Bhagya banner beau, the unlucky man's cow dies, the lucky man's wife dies!' But when after three years of being a widow I begged my father to get me a private tutor so I'd at least have my studies to occupy me, he slapped me across the face. I considered suicide, oh yes, many times in those early years, but I was too young and too afraid of what the priest said-those who take their own lives end up in the deepest pit of hell. So I lived on in my brother's household. What else could I do?

Widower in the society got remarried and started their new life, but widows were suffering throughout their whole life without undergoing any respect and happiness. Widows considered themselves as ominous, in the meantime, widowers were not considered as ominous. When Pishi approached her father for her further studies, he did not allow her. These incidents of this novel clearly described that widows were not allowed to continue to study and were not treated like a human being. Widows were not allowed to eat rich food. These were the tribulations faced by the widows throughout their lives, even though being a widow was not their fault.

When Sudha came to know the reason for her father's death from Pishi, Pishi told her that her father was the reason for the death of Anju's father. Sudha felt guilty and she struggled a lot within herself and so she sacrificed her love for Anju. Singhji was their driver. Sudha was very fond of him. Singhji supported her very well. Anju's mother suffered from heart attack and so they decided to arrange marriage for their daughters. Gouri Ma decided to sell their bookstore because they did not have enough money for the dowry. A good family never demands a particular amount of money, or a certain list of items. That would be too gauche. And so the bride's party has to anticipate their wishes and go beyond them, because if they don't, it might affect their daughter's future. Dowry was one of the main root causes for spoiling the lives of many poor girls. Anju and Sudha sacrificed their dreams for their families. Sudha married Ramesh, for the sake of her family. Anju got married with Sunil whom she loved. This shows that women are born for sacrificing everything for the benefit of others.⁹

After their marriage they lost their identities as Chatterjee girls and became the daughters-in-law of some other families. Sudha tried to forget her lover Ashok and started her life with Ramesh, Sudha did not have any children. Sudha's mother-in-law and other relatives recommended treatments in the hospital. Sudha went to the hospital with her mother-in-law and her husband. Sudha was normal. Doctor prescribed to check Ramesh also. Sudha's mother-in-law could not tolerate. Sudha's mother-in-law considered medical check-up for the men as an insult to their family but she was ready to check her daughter-in-law. This shows the gender inequality in the society. The society blamed women for everything. She was sent to the temple in Belapur where she saw so many women suffer like her. They all did not have any children. Sudha saw a woman there, neglected by her family, for not having a child enough money for her treatment. Sudha felt pathetic and gave her own gold bangles to

support her treatment. If women cannot give birth to a child, people considered them as a barren land. This shows how women suffered in the society.

Anju was happy with her husband Sunil. Anju's father-in-law was a rude man. Anju's father-in-law told that "Women and gold are the root of all evil" "Haven't I told you i can't stand the smell? Who pays for you eat in this house? Answer me."⁸ One day Anju's mother-in-law prepared a special food for Sunil and gave him, which was not given to Sunil's father. Sunil's father got angry and threw that on her face and scolded her as to who would pay for her food. This shows the pathetic situation of married women in her husband's house. Women work hard for their family and are forced to consider their in-laws' house as their own. Anju's husband Sunil started to fight with his father. Anju and Sunil went to America. Anju and Sudha were pregnant at the same time. Sudha's mother-in-law forced her to abort her child because that was a girl child. This shows the society's fondness for a boy child. Sudha wanted to save her girl child and so she ran away from the hospital and went to her mother's house. Ramesh did not support Sudha. Within a month Ramesh married another girl. Sudha and her three others supported her and were with her in every situation. Sudha gave birth to a girl baby. Sudha named her Dayita. Anju work hard to help Sudha because of the stress of losing her boy baby. Anju invited Sudha and her daughter to America. Ashok was willing to marry Sudha but he was not ready to accept her child. This described the sufferings of the divorced women. Sudha was not ready to leave her daughter. Sudha came to know that Singhji was her father and that he was not the reason for death of Anju's father. Sudha and her daughter were ready to face the society.

Conclusion

Women suffer in the male dominated society and sacrifice their whole life for others. Rules and regulations are made by the society. This society did not consider that women too have their own identities. Women's feelings are not at all given importance. They treat them like toys and play with their emotions. In this way this paper critically analyses the role of women in the society. Chitra Banerjee in her attempt to analyse the relationship of women has become a spokesperson of the universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance and disorder thereby creating a canvas filled with colours and shades of India which reflect the past as well as the contemporariness of India. The end of the novel is open ended and it leaves an 'optimistic note of possibilities.

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