



## **The role of women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's sister of my heart**

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### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the role of the women characters. Many a time we have seen that women are responsible for keeping the traditional value intact. Women had always been undervalued due to patriarchal superiority. In the Indian society especially, the experiences of women were not considered much compared to the perceptions and experiences of their male counterparts in the society. Women writers had mostly presented a narrow canvas of themes like domestic issues, experiences of in-law's place, and difficulties in adjustment in post and pre-marital status, sexual harassment, dejection to name a few. Sister of My Heart deals with different ranges of women experiences altogether and touches all aspect of a woman's life.

**Keywords:** Women, female-bonding, feminist, orthodox, society

### **Introduction**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific writer and has carved a niche for herself. She born in India and later moved to the United States to attend college. She earned a M. A. at Wright State University and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. She has contributed more than 20 books which includes fiction, poetry, children literature and anthologies and is a recipient of various prestigious awards like, The American Book Award for Arranged Marriage: Stories and PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award for Arranged Marriage, 1955. The Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize and the Pushcart Prize for poems in Leaving Yuba City: New and Selected Poems, 1997 to name a few.

The novel Sister of My Heart was written in 1999. It was received well by the readers. The current paper focuses on the women in the novel apart from the prominent theme, the friendship between Sudha and Anjou. With the beginning of feminism, women have strived hard to achieve their identity. New intellectual woman has emerged in their writings: talking like males, defying male dominance, discussing her life experiences, adjusting her personal and professional life in a far better way than her spouse and desire to explore one's own identity. The concept of feminism has moved far beyond then it initially started. The novel is the proof that it does not need a male chauvinistic figure to please the world. Anju and Sudha are equated to the roles of hero. Even 17 years later after its publication Sister of My Heart still appeal to its reader. Reader is glue to the novel and each chapter motivates the reader to finish in

one sitting. The suspense of the novel is well kept. The novel presents different facet of women life.

Gauri Ma is the thriving force that is making the household runs smoothly. She runs the age old bookstore to run the family. She commands respect and love from the family as well from the society. She is an ideal mother, a perfect woman. She is calm by nature and a perfect wife any man could ask for. She is the main reason for sustaining the age old tradition of Chatterjees. Anju believes that her mother is wise and thinks that ...“My mother is the most intelligent person I know, and the most efficient. Still, the store never seems to make a profit, and each week she has to go over our household expenses in her carefully, frowning way, trying to cut costs.” 25. Her decision in the family was taken as final decision. All the women in the family have a great respect for her.

Gauri is the tower of strength and houseful of power. She is the keeper of tradition and culture. She educates both the daughters in the family. She is a strong force that unites the family from falling apart. After knowing the fact that her husband was killed because of Gopal, Sudha's father. She is able to treat Sudha like her own daughter and Nalini as her own sister. She is also the reason behind Anju's marriage and not letting her to go for higher studies. Indirectly helping the girls to fall prey with domestic life and not giving them the chance to become independent. She had a mild stroke and she was worried the she will not survive long so she forces Anju into marriage. But, surprising she survived till the end of the novel. So she is indeed the reason

behind to atrocities that Anju and Sudha faces later in their respective married life since they were barely 18 years old. Pishi is the bold and beautiful among the three widows. She is close to the girls and she tells them stories which later the girls relate themselves to the characters of their own. She sustains the old mythology and believes in Bidhata Purush for one's fate in the girls mind. She is constantly in touch with the girls more than their mothers. She became widow at the age of 18. She gave equal love to both the girls. Life was cruel to Pishi but she fought against the odds of life and tries to instill moral values to the girls. She has given support to Gauri Ma in running the house smoothly under her guidance.

The main contribution of Pishi is the revelation of the secret of the family to Sudha. "I've always believed in the importance of telling you girls about your past, you know that. But this secret is so terrible that I've been reluctant to burden you with it. I am afraid it will take away your childhood and destroy the love that you hold dearest. I'm afraid it will make you hate me." (33). The revelation is an important plot for the novel; this incident brings out the conflict and tension between the girls and the best of human emotions of friendship, sacrifice and love. She bridges the gap between Nalini and Gauri at the times of conflict between them. She welcomes Sudha wholeheartedly when she came back leaving her marriage behind and love Sudha's baby too. She could feel Sudha position as a lone wife betrayed by her husband. She has the motherly affection towards the girls and was grateful with what life was offering to her.

Nalini is the most beautiful women among the three widows in the house and also the less compassionate and less brainy. She constantly nags about life, her daughter, her husband and to the rest of the family members. She is conscious about her beauty and tries to sustain it. She follows her beauty regime without fail every day. She loves being the center of attraction and chit chatting with her friends. "Her skin is still golden, for though she's a widow my mother is careful to apply turmeric paste to her face each day. Her perfect-shaped lips glisten red from paan, which she loves to chew- mostly for the colour it leaves on her mouth, I think." (17) These are the lines that Sudha describes about her mother.

Indeed the reasons behind the girls are left without their father is because of her. She constantly nags her husband to earn more money, "Are you ever going to make any money, when are we going to move into our own home, where are all your fine promises now, hai Mother Kali, this is my punishment for following this man, for smearing black on my ancestors' faces." (39). She had dream of living a good life with the man she elopes but when it was not happening, she constantly nags her husband. The outcome is that the men in the family went for ruby hunt when both the women were pregnant and them never returned back. She pushes Sudha to get married as soon as she completes school. She has no aspiration to send her daughter to college. She is

reluctant to receive her own daughter after knowing the fact her mother-in-law and husband is forcing her to abort the baby. Thus, she is not an ideal mother like Gauri of Pishi.

Anju and Sudha, their relation is what the novel enjoys to portray. It is a wonderful relationship pure and radiant. They are not blood related but they are truly sister in all senses. They fight, laugh, cried, and did all the mischievous together and always stood up for each other. Anju is from upper class and Sudha comes from the lower caste but class conflict does not occur between them. Both complement each other, Anju the brainy and witty and Sudha the beauty and modest. One can bring the concept of Alter Ego in these two characters.

Wikipedia defines alter ego as second self, which is believed to be distinct from a person's normal or original personality. Cicero first coined the term as part of his philosophical construct in 1st century Rome, but he described it as "a second self, a trusted friend"... alter ego can be found in literary analysis, wherein it describes characters in different works that are psychologically similar, or a fictional character ... It's also used to designate the best friend of another character in a story. In the case of Anju and Sudha, Anju alter ego is Sudha and the same is vice versa of Sudha. Both of them know what the other one wants without even telling: But never Sudha. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart.

Mrs Sanyal She is a bold widow, looks after her children single handedly and gave them good education. She runs the rigid household efficiently and is able to maintain a status for herself in the society. Situation had made her a strong and hard hearted woman with less of emotions to display. She is the boss of the house and everybody follow her instruction without an argument. After Sudha's marriage, she is not ready to give up the command over her son. Her word is taken as the final verdict. When Sudha was not having trouble conceiving, she mistreated her. She took her every possible way to have a grandson but never ever thought that fault could be from her son. She is the typical cruel mother-in-law in Indian soap serial. She forces Sudha to abort the baby after knowing the gender of the baby in order to keep the prestige of her Sanyal family.

Mrs Majumdar She is a humble woman and completely opposite to Mrs. Sanyal. She has no saying in the family, „a sweet, ineffectual woman, who gesture a lot with her hands, is extremely apologetic“ (138). She adores her son and gives equal love to Anju. She never complains or demands anything and strictly follows her husband's instruction, „She bends her head and speaks in a watery whisper, or hunches her shoulders apologetically as she rushes to fetch what he's shouting for“(180). She gives in to every whim and fancy of her husband. Unlike Mrs. Sanyal, she did not interfere in Sunil and Anju's lives.

## Conclusion

The status of woman has constantly been changing, yet 100% equal treatment is not attain. We have come a long

way but few steps are still needed. The image of women is continually changing, often to suit the changing needs of man or society in general. These women in the novel exist within us especially women. At many given situations according to me it is women who are responsible for the atrocities of another woman as we have also noticed in the novel. The three widows in the Chatterjee's family are worth the praise, they stood against all odds in lives together and they in togetherness emerge as a stronger individual.

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