

**PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AS
A CHAMPION OF LIBERTY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
SISTER OF MY HEART AND THE VINE OF DESIRE**

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Abstract

*Women play a very important role in developing half of the human race but they are not given the half part of their contribution in all the matters of equality. History shows that from the beginning of the world, power has been in male's hands and by using that power they formed a patriarchal society to keep women in a state of dependence and some laws were set up to govern them. But time has gone when women had to perform all the duties according to the male chauvinistic world. At the beginning of the 21st century, it has been noticed that women are not just puppets in the hands of male-dominated society but they have established their own identity by breaking all the boundaries of the patriarchal setup. In the field of literature, there are so many female authors who are making the leading voice of powerful and liberated women in their writings. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has come into the same sphere of female writings. She has raised these issues related to women in most of her novels but the present paper focuses on the two women-centric novels *Sister of MyHeart* and *The Vine Of Desire*. Through these novels, Divakaruni has raised the women from their marginal state to give them a new identity and prove them as a champion of liberty.*

Keywords

Women, Search for identity, immigrants, Male-dominated society.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 12.03.2022

Approved: 20.03.2022

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Article No.24

RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2022,

Vol. XLVII No. 1,

pp. 207-213

Online available at:

<https://anubooks.com/rjpss-2022-vol-xlvii-no-1/>

[https://doi.org/10.31995/](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2022.v47i01.024)

[rjpss.2022.v47i01.024](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2022.v47i01.024)

Women have to perform many roles throughout their lives as a daughter, as a mother and as a sister. In all the fields of their lives, they are constantly questioned in a society that is predominantly male-oriented. For centuries they have had to suffer a lot to find their exact position in the male-dominated society. In the present scenario, despite a lot of challenges in their lives, women have gained many opportunities in all the fields.

The literature presents a mirror of women in the form of fiction yet in realistic form in many ways. During a certain period of time literature worldwide has become the medium to express the suppressed feelings of women. In the world of fiction, there are so many Indian writers who are expressing their pent-up feelings and emotions on behalf of the Indian women. A survey of British literature up to the 19th century reveals that women's condition in the society and challenges faced by them, were portrayed from the point of view of male writers. The authenticity of which is untrue to their actual condition. Further, the actual condition of women was presented by the female writers. In this sense, Jane Austen comes on the front line.

She gave a great contribution to the development of women's literature and gave a new identity to women. In modern times women are not like in Ibsen's *Doll's House* in which a woman completely depends on her father before her marriage and after her marriage to her husband.

In the galaxy of diasporic women writers, there are so many writers who are tackling with immigrant feminine issues in their writings. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of them. She is an Indian American writer of diasporic literature. In the world of fiction, she has worked in various genres as she is a well-known novelist, poet, essayist and short-story writer. Her well-known works are *The Mistress Of Spices*, *Sister Of My Heart*, *The Palace Of Illusion*. Her works have been translated into the many languages of the world because of which she has become a distinguished writer of the South Asian diaspora. As a writer and activist, she has been a great supporter of feminism. For this, she has established a helpline center to overcome women's causes in the bay area of California.

Divakaruni tackles the different issues of gender subordination in the case of diasporic women. In her writings, she questions and reinterprets the male-created myths and stereotypes which are used by them as a tool to suppress the women in the male-dominated society. By redefining the stereotypical representation of women, she creates the most independent, bold and powerful women and gives them a new identity. The main concern of her writings is Indian Immigrant women as she writes,

“Women, in particular, respond to my work because I am writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate

to my characters to feel their joy and pain because it will be harder to prejudice when they meet them in real life.” (Divakaruni website)

Her writings deal with women living abroad or visiting India. They have an Indian upbringing but have come out of traditional boundaries.

The twin novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine Of Desire* are about two cousins sisters Anju and Sudha who were born on the same day in the decadent Chatterjee family of Calcutta. They have an emotional bond with each other. In this way, they seem to be more than sisters to each other and can be portrayed as sisters of the heart. Both the sisters were nurtured by their respected mothers and Aunt Pishi who were a widow living in her brother’s house since her widowhood. Despite having the same origin and same upbringing in the same house, both the girls are different from each other in many ways such as taste, temperament and their perception of life. Anju thinks practically and rationally and Sudha is attractive but has a traditional outlook on her thinking and views. Their lives are traditionally constructed. They remain under this perception that they are girls and being girls, they have to remain within some traditional boundaries made for females in a patriarchal society. These restrictions force Sudha to remain within the four walls of the house whereas Anju living within these boundaries has liberal ideas. She is not ready to submit herself to the predestined fate like other women of the Chatterjee family. At one point Sudha also feels that

“most sixteen years old girls in Calcutta didn’t live as we did.” (SMH 51)

Sudha thinks that these societal codes are necessary to be followed to maintain the reputation of the Chatterjee family but Anju has revolutionary attitude towards these rules. She thinks that these traditional boundaries for women create a hindrance to the actual growth of women.

Anju gains self-consciousness when she reads Virginia Woolf’s *A Room Of One’s Own* from an early age. After reading this book, she becomes aware as a women of her identity. It gives a new dimension to her thinking and she comes to know various faults of her native culture which create many obstacles to the growth of women. She becomes revolutionary against these rules and opposes her mothers trapped in traditional boundaries and forces them to move forward in the modern world.

Anju’s changing outlook on the females can be seen from the beginning up to the end of the novel. During her school days, she plans to watch a movie skipping the class. Sudha also supports her plan but she is worried about revealing the plans if it fails. Sudha thinks,

“as a walk forward, feeling the prick of a hundred eyes on my face, the smirk that says, Ah one of the Chatterjee girls gets what she deserves.” (SMH 55)

On this occasion, she comes into the contact with Ashok for the first time and she falls in love with him. Sudha has a traditional outlook and she is more concerned about the reputation of her family. But when the question arises of her personal freedom, she becomes untraditional. When her marriage is fixed according to the choice of her mother, she goes one step ahead of the traditional boundaries. She writes a letter to Ashok and even makes a plan for her to get married after elopement but she deserts her idea for the sake of her sister's happiness because her decision can make an adverse impact on her marriage.

The journey of both sisters starts after their marriage and both the sisters are separated from each other. Sudha lives at home and Anju goes abroad. After their separation, their lives became worse. They have a sense of loneliness for each other after their separation. Sudha's married life with Ramesh is not a happy one. She has to suffer a lot due to the ill-treatment of her mother-in-law. Even Ramesh does not care about her feelings and takes every decision under the guidance of her mother. Sudha's life is limited to the domestic work and carrying on the lineage after giving birth to a male child is her responsibility. Anju's dreams were shattered in America because her life in America was contrary to her expectations. She was not happy in her relationship. Her husband Anil was heavily influenced by American culture. This influence can be seen in his married life. He wants to keep a distance in his relationship and comes late in the night and was addicted to alcohol. When Anju comes to know about his real character, she is not ready to tolerate this cultural shock and decides to come back to India.

In this patriarchal and male-dominated society, impotency and sterility both are justified in the case of Sudha. She is mistreated by her mother-in-law because of not giving birth. She is forced to medical checkups by her mother-in-law Mrs. Sanyal. When she passes through a medical checkup, her all the reports are normal and she can give birth to not only one child but also a number of children. The problem of impotency lies with her husband Ramesh who is not accepted. It is the greatest biological discrimination in society. Sudha is the representation of all the women of society who are the victim of biological discrimination.

The news of Sudha's pregnancy brings a havoc in her life because the baby in her womb is identified as a female child. Her mother-in-law like other in-laws in the society who see the baby boy as a progress of the family and the baby girl as a burden, forces Sudha to abort the child. Even Ramesh does not support Sudha in this situation, he welcomes his mother's decision. Sudha says,

“My mother-in-law is gracious, with the graciousness of someone who knows she can not be persuaded. If I return at once and go through with the scheduled abortion, she will consider my foolish act of rebellion forgotten. If not, she is afraid she will have to set the divorce proceedings in motion.” (SMH 267)

Sudha finds herself in a trapped condition, she takes a stand to save her unborn child. She comes back to her mother’s home and gives birth to her baby. At this point, she shows her courage and faces the situation boldly. Financially, Sudha is not dependent and the economic condition of the family is not so supportive to give her and her daughter a bright future. At this point, Anju raises her helping hand for Sudha. She works hard for earning money hiding from her husband Sunil. Due to the workload, she passes through a miscarriage and the baby in her womb was breathless. It was a big mental shock for Anju in her life because the feeling of motherhood is the greatest bliss for a woman on this earth.

The news of Anju’s miscarriage fills Sudha’s heart with the feeling of compassion and she decides to go to America as a guardian for Anju. Before going to America, she finds the marriage proposal of Ashok who wants to get married to her only on one demand i.e. if she deserts her daughter, he will marry her. At this point, Sudha presents herself as an independent lady and rejects his marriage proposal for the sake of her daughter. She takes the responsibility of her daughter on her shoulders without any support.

At the invitation of Anju, Sudha comes to America with her daughter Dayita. The union of both sisters brings them excessive support for each other. Their mutual understanding inspires them to overcome all the hindrances and difficulties of their life. Through this novel, Divakaruni tries to portray all women’s problems in the society and shows that no outer event and external force can harm them if they are united together. Sudha in her life faces a lot of challenges because of her lover, her husband and her mother-in-law and overcomes all the problems with the support of her mothers and her dear sister Anju. Thus she presents herself as a bold and powerful woman.

In *The Vine Of Desire*, Divakaruni shows both the sister’s journey of transformation from a traditional woman to a modern woman who has their own identity. America which is the land of dreams provides a lot of opportunities to fulfill their desires and to give a new direction to their lives. Sudha’s decision of coming to America give her and her daughter’s life a new meaning and emotional support for her sister Anju. Both the sisters face a lot of challenges in adjusting themselves to an alien land. Sudha is attractive when she comes to know about Sunil’s wrong intention to her, She knowingly avoids his presence because she has

no control over his and her own emotion. In spite of having control over her emotions, she commits a mistake. Suddenly she realizes her mistake and decides to leave her sister's home. It shows women's condition in a male-constructed society where a woman has to suffer due to a wife or other women. Sudha has become so conscious about her identity that again she doesn't want to be a part of that society due to which she has already suffered a lot. In America, Sudha has to face the same discrimination being a part of that culture. She wants liberty from those traditional boundaries which have suppressed her life. In America, she does not want to be the part of Sunil's lust. She leaves his home and finds a job as a nurse to look after an old man to earn the money. The sense of earning money gives her a feeling of freedom and independence.

Due to the cultural clash, the old man was suffering from homesickness because he was unable to adjust himself to this new environment and alien land. Everything was alien to him which creates a sense of loneliness in him. As Sudha says,

"In this bed, in this house, in this country, all of which is alien to him."
(VOD 278)

Sudha feels that she can find mental peace and can feel connected to himself in his homeland that is India. Through the portrayal of Mr. Sen, Divakaruni shows that most of the first-generation immigrants suffer from homesickness because they are deeply rooted in the cultural practices and beliefs of their homeland. In this context Makarand Paranjape makes remarks,

"There is the clinging to the old identity and resistance to making a transition." (61).

Sudha has deep sympathy for the old man and realizes that he can lead a happy and prosperous life in his homeland. Her immigrant experience helps her in searching for her own identity and in developing her as an independent lady. After self-realization and developing herself, she feels that a happy and prosperous life can be led in her homeland and decides to come back to her homeland. On the other hand, when Anju comes to know about the adultery of her husband Sunil. She decides to leave her husband and does not want any support from her husband. She chooses to lead an independent life. Her immigrant experience works as a powerful force in developing her where a woman can lead her life on her behalf.

After studying , it can be concluded that both the sisters' journey from east to west is the journey from marginalized conditions to freedom and self-discovery. After breaking those traditional boundaries and societal chains which create obstacles to their growth, both the women prove themselves as a champion of liberty and establish their own identities.

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