

The Encounters of Sudha, As a Protagonist, Between the Worlds of Fancy and Harsh Reality with Reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Sister Of My Heart".

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Abstract

"Women are the wealth of India and they have contributed in almost every field and made country feel proud at every occasion. However, another reality of Indian society is that there is systematic discrimination and neglect of women in India". Are women able to achieve fulfillment and actualize and experience wider horizons? Women once again asks herself the question "Is this my life forever? She confronts the reality that youth and womanhood have started to recede into the realm of what once was, what could have been, and she is left with nostalgia, with a past which is largely fantasy and a present which is harsh reality. Her life appears to have been one of engaging in multiple activities without feeling productive; of being many roles without being herself; of putting on many masks and of being at the beck and call of all and of performing given roles. This paper is a modest attempt to bring to light the struggle faced by Sudha a protagonist of "Sister of My Heart" who desires to live a real life.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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Notions 2017, Vol. VIII,
No.4, pp. 22-30
Article No. 4 (N623)

Online available at :
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=34](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=34)

Struggle to fit into the new world

“In being many things to many people she has not been sure of being true to herself”. The woman wonders whether she is made out of clay or wax; whether her life is her own or belongs to others; and whether she had lived a life as she wished to or has been made to change shape according to the wishes of others. “It seems to her that she has become a stranger to herself”. From the words of Sudha “*Perhaps I could learn to think of this woman as a mother, and this place as a home*”. pg no188-189. These lines clearly say that all women after their marriage should think their mother-in-law as her mother and as her home. Here in this paper (Basudha) Sudha one of the protagonist discovers herself alone and she also finds hard to realize the reality of the world and struggles to fit in the new world along with her daughter Dayati.

For many of the women in my country, marriage could easily be their death warrant as well. Weddings are strictly arranged by the families and not the individuals concerned. Here Sudha was not given a choice to express her wish on her marriage. She has been involved in a charade in which she is a late entrant, having waited in the wings for too long. In the midst of all this both reality and unreality prevail. Here in this paper Sudha (Basudha) stands along with her daughter Dayita in the airport to move to America where her sister of her sister Anju is expecting her to once again live together as they were school students. She stands at this new threshold and recalls the one where she had once stood young and breathless, with spirits soaring with a dream of building a heaven on earth and a meaningful existence.

Confronted with the traumatic reality of marriage Sudha like most women initially find that they have no other alternate but to surrender and cope to give and not demand, to withhold and discover themselves and not compromise the family's status. Sudha married Ramesh a wealthy man from Calcutta but with her lover boy Ashok in her mind. she wished to become a designer and hoped that once she had crossed the threshold she would be able to claim a space for herself and fashion a life of her own. Sudha

The living process turned her dreams into a nightmare. The living reality of Sudha in her husband's house and the torture of her mother-in-law forced her to search for security.

“She lived with people who were her own yet she could not call them hers”.

Sudha had experienced a life of fight back which is related to her struggle to

locate the anchors of her existence in her own being and to create a space to be together with her loved ones. Sudha often recalls how her attempts to advice this were invariably shattered by the perspective modes of social relationship.

Sudha, when she was asked to go for abortion or get divorce from her husband, the whole family turned back against her. She felt helpless and fragile that the fetus was a girl. Sudhas dream turned dreadful when she got divorced and the space of her life gradually faced into a dark emptiness.

Sudha, she is not the women she had anticipated in her dreams. She had been a daughter-in-law, wife and a mother but not herself. Sudhas life of being a women and being a wife was totally fragmented. The expectations surrounding the daughter-in-law role were all pervasive. Sudhas life of being a wife was largely barren, as it failed to compensate for the traumas of being a daughter-in-law. Her mother-in-law saw her only as a woman to raise the kids of her son Ramesh.

Ramesh who is a normal Indian male couldn't be effective neither in his role of being a son nor a husband. His mothers anxiety and possessiveness on one hand and, on the other how to handle the anxieties, insecurities and meaninglessness of his wife's existence in the new family. Invariably, he is unable to provide the love and tender care that his wife needs.

Sudha after her marriage gets an opportunity to see Ashok and thinks to run away, from her words.....*live for yourself this one time, my heart sings. And the child I long for so much, who is to say I cannot have a child with Ashok? Then it would be a doubly loved child, doubly precious, because it would belong to both me and him.* pg no.232 these lines of sudha shows how she feels on motherhood and real love.

From her words.....*I repeat to myself the names of classmates who have become doctors and teachers and famous dancers, but they are too far away. Reality is this bloodied'*....pg.no.235-236 here she says that her dream of becoming someone has vanished in the hands of her husband's family.

The Indian women in Indian culture believes that marriage and the baby are God given and what miracle could she do to change what God had given to her. Her mother-in-law blames sudha for not having a baby but after the compelled test by the doctor, the doctor says the problem might be with her son ramesh and requested to go for attest which will give an end to their confusion.

from the words of the doctor.....

"men have a foolish pride about these things sometimes....." "and don't let anyone tell you it's your fault that you're not getting pregnant". pg no.218.

sudha conforms that the problem of getting pregnant is not with her but might be from her husband.

Realization of realities

After some years of marriage life, most women come to understand the realities of their social existence. Sudha having the thought of going back to ashok knows that the married life is a strong prison from which there may be escapades but no escape. Indian society leaves no scope for an individual to transcend the role boundaries. Sudha realizes that the entire network of relationships gets categorized in terms of superior and subordinate. Sudha realizes the world around her is different than what she expected would be, she lives out the pathos of the chains, the shackles and the prison, she wonders if there is a door through which she can pass and thus experience a different world. This world is often vaguely conceptualized as having freedom, no responsibilities and no demands or expectations. To most women such door opens occasionally by way of an unexpected encounter with another man who appears to be entirely different from the models they have so far come across. Inevitably such an encounter leads to an opening of all the floodgates. The women (sudha) here experiences a resurgence of anticipation, hope, joyousness a desire to offer her whole being. Life and its surroundings acquire a new meaning, after leaving his husbands family only for the sake of not giving birth to a boy, she starts a new journey like the arrival of spring.

Commitment and guilt, joyousness and shame, momentary fulfillment and persistent emptiness, toss and turn the women. sudha becomes restless and impatient. She now feels the painful realities of her married life. The need to throw it all and walk off becomes very intense. The real struggle starts here, sudha comes out of her domicile with the question: is this real or am I once again stepping into a world of somebody else's making and being used as an object? Do I really mean something as a person either to myself or to the other? Sudha who becomes reflective takes a serious and hard look at herself and tries to own up to a great deal. She accesses the reality of her interface with the environment and instead of accusing the world of having treated her badly she holds herself responsible for having for having invoked the violations, she takes the whole blame on herself and starts living only for her daughter dayita.

Cultural values

The Indian culture has its prominent cultural system that women could make love only with one man. From the words of a saint to sudha..... *"You must choose between your two loves, for only one love is allowed to a woman". pg no.236.*

Women will be respected and given a space in the new family and in the society only when she becomes a mother, from the words of sudha “*just one child, I think, that would be enough for me*” pg.no.238. These lines articulate the agony and anguish of sudha being a mother. A woman is gazed as a divine God only when she becomes a mother.

Geetha Ravindra *the Mediator for the International Monetary Fund* in her paper says that “although Indians can proudly declare that nearly 100 percent of their marriages are a success, recent urbanization and women’s growing financial independence are causing the divorce rate to rise. Gender equality is now giving rise to ego clashes between couples, especially where the wife is also well educated and employed. For centuries, marriage between Indians has been lifelong commitment and most sacred institution in India. Very important cultural factor for many Indians is saving face. An Indian’s reputation is a critical part of their identity and self-respect. Being divorced in Indian society carries a strong stigma. Couples often prefer to remain in an unhappy marriage in order to protect their image as an “ideal Indian family,” regardless of the pain and heartache the marriage may bring each day. The concept of divorce is still taboo to the vast majority of the Indian population. If a husband and wife are not getting along, the wife is expected to adjust and make things work. Women are educated by their own mothers, sisters, relatives, and elders to admit to their husband’s wishes and potential, with the hope that they will be gifted to win their husband’s heart and ultimately lead a happy life together. Some amount of flexibility is expected in any new relationship, yet in Indian society this burden falls primarily on the wife. The empowerment of women has stimulated the dissolution of many Indian marriages. In the U.S. Indian women are now more open to the option of ending their marital relationship, as opposed to silently bearing lifelong abuses, as generations of women did before them. In our increasingly multi-cultural world, those mediators who take the time to gain awareness and sensitivity to important cultural factors are far better able to effectively assist clients from diverse backgrounds but also we should broader cultural and unique social implications as well”.

Sudha’s mother even says her to go for induced miscarriage but not to get divorced from her husband as that is a social insult for a girl. Regardless of all the guilt, suspicion and doubts that they face, these women opt to review their lives and to create a choice for themselves. Sudha wished to start a design cloth business but women are not likely to enjoy the social freedom which is very much embedded in the frame work of religion. Sudha was never given a chance to dream a life of her own.

Here the struggle of women comes only from women around the society and she exploits the status of another women like Sudha's mother-in-law had done to her for not giving birth to a male child. Female Infanticide and Feticide is yet another challenge that women are facing in India and it is playing a significant role in slice sided sex ratio in India.

Here Chitra Banerjee brings out the problem faced by women after marriage and how they are culturally suppressed by the society around them. A large number of women, larger number of men and even larger portion of the society takes a much longer time to acknowledge and accept the reality of women's capabilities and competencies.

Struggle of women in all ages

During The Rig Vedic period Women in India enjoyed high status in society. Women were provided better opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. There were many women Rishis during this period. Though monogamy was mostly common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. There was no sati system or early marriage. Women were being discriminated in education and enjoying facilities. Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth and on her sob in old age.

During the medieval period, the status of women started to decline. woman was given a position subordinate to man. Law and religion did not recognize the equality and equal rights of man and woman. The women's place was largely regarded as being in the home. In short, the role of women was conceived to be one of subservience to her husband, the master and ruler of the family. However, by the 15th century, the situation underwent a change. The Bhakti movement played a helpful role. The saints preached equality of the sexes and pleaded for equal opportunities for women. women in India were poor who were excluded from progression to property which led to the dependence on men. The joint family was a source of great strength to women. Though women were generally subject to the will of their masters, there were instances of active women participants in political affairs.

When the British came in to contact with the Indian people in the latter half of the 18th century, the position of Indian woman had deteriorated to the lowest level. Ideologically, women were considered a completely inferior species, having no significance, no personality. Socially they were kept in complete subjection, denied all rights and were suppressed and oppressed, on having been branded as "basically lacking an ethical fibre". A few woman overcame their social handicaps and achieved

positions of distinction. They included Toru Datta, Ramabai, Swarana Kumari Devi and Kamini Roy. Women brought about a profound change in the attitude of women and joined men in equal footing during the great struggle for Indian's Independence. Educated girls began to marry by choice and some of them took to the stage. Music and dancing were assiduously cultivated and some of the women achieved world fame in the arts.

The improvement in women's position and status became further evident when immediately after the independence, Indian women made their mark by becoming Governors, Cabinet ministers, and ambassadors. Quite a few procedures were taken by the Government of India to disperse identical standing to women in the economic, political and social fields. Indian women, like men, have the right to vote and the right to be elected. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the first women Prime Minister of India, is the pride of India's women folk. Today, a married woman has the right to divorce; a widow can remarry. The Constitution of India provides for equal rights for all, irrespective of caste, creed and sex. The Fundamental Rights guarantees equality of men and women in every walk of life.

UNICEF in one of its article says "The discrimination against the girl child begins from her birth. Boys are preferred over girls, hence female foeticide and selective abortions are common in the country. Despite the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies Act⁷, India tops the list of illegal abortions, 90% of which were targeted to eliminate the girl child. The misery that pregnant women go through are heart wrenching. Only 42% child births are monitored by qualified professionals in India. That results in the death of 300 mothers everyday in the country. The ordeal that an Indian girl faces at birth is only the beginning of a life long struggle to be seen and heard".

As Malladi Subbamma in women: tradition and culture says,

"the cultural atmosphere and the craze for male children has to be eliminated from the minds of both man and women". Malladi Subbamma even says that *"the fulfillment of womanhood persists in motherhood at large but she has no any sex discrimination as a mother"*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni here exhibits the existing cultural traits in the minds of the society which certainly harm the womanhood and motherhood.

Self transformation of Sudha

Thus the reality of the encounter seems to offer far less than it promised; the quality of being daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother needs to be redefined.

Sudha made up her mind to forget Ashok and live for Ramesh her husband and his family. Women not only confront these issues within themselves but often encounter protests, doubts, ridicule and occasional support from without. The social setting becomes a series of islands where each player performs his or her role without any feeling. Until now women are caught in up in the processes of cultural lore. women like sudha had followed the path of conformity and surrender, and had ended up feeling futile. From the words of sudha..

.... "the longing for a baby swept over my entire being until it became larger than love I had left behind. I do not know exactly how it happened. Perhaps it is because I feel motherhood is my final chance at happiness. perhaps I believe it will give me back what wifehood has taken away. Or perhaps it is just that desire lies at the heart of human existence. When we turn away from one desire, we must find another to cleave to with all our strength, or else we die"pg.no203.

Women bring their competence as well as intelligence to bear on the work situation and create a forte for themselves in their chosen profession. Sudha feeling helplessness, passivity and stress tries to create a space where there are no compulsions towards conformity or surrender.

Many women in India like sudha struggle to find a legitimate space in any system or family is the most heartrending aspect of their lives. They have to face the deeply embedded social system of Indian society. In the struggle with reality and the attempt to cross the threshold, Sudha understood the transaction in her life. Sudha had created a space which gave her value and affirmation in the eyes of society. Sudha lived a life of fantasy and was not given a chance to taste the sweetness of reality. She finally recognizes that holding the man, society, family and traditions as being completely responsible for the pain, torture and ruggedness of her life is only a reactive process. Her own calmness and defenselessness is also accountable for all the discrimination, grievance and ill-treatment she has faced. From all her experiences she socialized the values of self-reliance and dignity. She hopes that this would encourage her daughter Dayita to take new steps and a new future.

Acknowledgements

1. My Guide Dr.N.Vijayachamundeswari, Assistant Professor, Government Arts College Coimbatore, for her empowering guidance for this paper.
2. The Management and Principal of Sri Ramakrishna Institute of Technology Coimbatore, for their unvarying support and facility.

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