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## SUFFERINGS OF SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "SISTER OF MY HEART"

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### Abstract

*This research paper focuses on the sufferings of South Asian immigrant women's in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Sister Of My Heart." Divakaruni is a South Asian diasporic poet, short story writer, novelist, and essayist. Divakaruni's works express her own country, legends folktale, her birth land with all its shades of caste and class segregation, the eye-catching of rich Bengali cuisine, customs, marriage and family and in a way how an insider's and outsider's viewed with the truth. Divakaruni's works relate two different types of worlds, particularly about Indo-American struggling for peace in America. Her nostalgia for birth land mingled with fear in the freakish land makes her difficult to adjust to the new environment. She longs for the shaping of diaspora existence by implicating themselves in ethnic-culture problems. This paper explores the South Asian immigrants' women's experiences and looking back at tradition and society in the novel Divakaruni's "Sister Of My Heart" (1999).*

**Keywords:** *Immigrants, Diaspora, Segregation, Ultrasound.*

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### Introduction

The word diaspora synonymously used for exile, but the word exile is different from the diaspora. Exile means forceful migration whereas diaspora emerges due to voluntary movements. The term diaspora refers to the people who scattered from their ancestral land and settled in the freakish land. Diaspora is the place of great significance between countries and cultures. Diaspora is a fancy word in literature. Diaspora writers convey their vague position in the world and their fluctuating condition between the birth land and new land. Divakaruni's "Sister of My Heart" is an absolute example of diasporic novel wherein she is recollecting one's own country and thereby recreated a tradition which has got separated physically but mentally reminds one's identity. The first person narration described a reality which is poignant and challenging. This novel delves about social scenario and relationship giving a peep into the mythical urban India. At the same instant, creation of the new woman's who geared themselves up for the challenge of an age-old customs.

"*Sister of My Heart*" is an expanded version of her earlier short story '*Ultrasound*' in the *Arranged Marriage*. This novel spins around two Indian girls Anju and Sudha who are grown up by three widowed women: Aunt Pishi, Gouri and Nalini and the how their life changed after marriage and the past secret.

### Discussion

In the *Sister of My Heart*, cousin Anju and Sudha born on the same day were brought up together by their widow mothers. Anju and Sudha get married on the same day, Sudha remains in India whereas Anju flies to America with her husband Sunil, a computer scientist. Anju is happy in her marriage, and she is eager to go to America when Sunil describes America. It seems almost amazing like the fairy kingdom. "You can be anything in America, Angel" – that is special for Anju he says excitedly. It is not only the thought or the expectation of Anju but all who are non-immigrants. "You can be what you want"(16). Marriage has changed Anju in unexpected ways, where she feels everyone as an intruder.

America in Anju's life has not satisfied her as she expected. Anju' life in America was a hectic one since the morning she has to take Sunil to the station, has to go to classes, then the library, then the grocery, the dry cleaners and at last cooking which she hates. "Of the many realizations I've had since I came to America the foremost thing is that I hate cooking. Its not what I imagined my American life would be like" (186). It is the result of many of the expectations. The novel *The Vine of Desire* is a sequel to the *Sister of My Heart* consists full of American life where the two protagonists face challenges. As Sudha comes out of the marriage life, Anju invites her to America so that she find a job for herself to lead a comfortable life. Anju uses to think how she immigrated America before she came. She read all types of books especially Anna Karenina and Sons and Lovers, *The Great Gatsby* and *A Rooms of One's Own*, which aroused interest in her for distant places and that's how she felt of America before coming: They filled me with dissatisfaction with my own life, and a longing for places. I believed that, If I could only get out of Culcatta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn't easy is it?(4)

Divakaruni has mingled the famous parts of America as well as the Indian popularities like Kanchipuram silk, All India Radio, or Akasbani Kalikata, Tanjore paintings where Anju proudly says "There's nothing like our Indian fabrics"(114). The sad part of many immigrants is that they are not able to attend their relations funeral which Divakaruni exposes it through Sunil where he is not able to do the funeral rite to his father. When one who depends on money and pleasure throughout his life he has to remain helpless on them who rely on him. Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1994) states that it is an axiomatic truth that the migrant dreams are futile and it would be possible to return to the homeland. The longing for the birth land was countered by the desire to longing to the new home, so the migrant remains creatures of the edge,

and the peripheral man (222). Anju also comes out of the marriage life unwillingly when she comes to know that her husband is attracted towards Sudha though Sudha avoids him, these two protagonists find a job as a care-taker and a librarian respectively and lead their life successfully in an adopted land.

Due to physical and mental exhaustion, Anju suffers a miscarriage. Sudha and her daughter Dayita made her to forget the loss of baby. On the way to freedom, Sudha once again decline Ashok's proposal because she thinks that she would not be happy if she got man's whims again. She wants a world to be without a man. She finally prefers "A future built by women out of their own wits, their own hands." 7 while Anju and Sudha started to seek the ways of fulfilling their dreams of self-reliance in America, the new background creates major rifts in relationships. Sudha could sense the silence between Sunil and Anju. They both spoke only few sentences between them and that too about Dayita. Dayita's presence helps Anju to diminish the memories of her unborn child. Sunil avoids arguments with Sudha to control his hopeless passion for her since his marriage. Sudha after getting independence from Sunil, asks a girl Sara, whom she meets in a garden, to find a job for her. Sara was an Indian and she is highly self-centered person which inspire Sudha. Sudha startles with her plan of negation of her marriage only because she could not lose her peace. She frankly accepts in front of Sudha that, "In-laws, kids, servants, you know how it is in India.... So I bought myself a bus ticket to California". 8 Sara assured Sudha her appearance into true American life which would be a great help none-the-less attempt to escape from herself.

Few years in America Anju changed her usage of weird words and interests. Her shorten memories of India make Sudha perceive that even their retention are marooned on separate islands. The non-native land seems to create the need of absorptions and alter for the immigrants. But behavioral changes are hardly acceptable by the new culture. As Sunil, could not endure Lalit's closeness either with Sudha or with Anju. His rage, in turn targets a fight with a valet who comments over the Indians in the party, "Fucking Indians, showing off" (9).

The intense love of both the cousins increases a gap because of the one year separation in different lands or due to one man entered between them. Anju have a insecure feeling with Sudha's existence in her house and Sudha conceals dislike for the pointless hours she spends working in an Anju's house. The three persons suffers a hazardous situation when Sudha get out of Anju's home after hours of physical intimacy with Sunil. Her guilt compels her to move out of her friend's marriage life.

Sudha now identified that she cannot retrieve the old restricted ways of Indian life. She somehow finds that she was protected from the impersonal customs of American to begin a new life. She thinks to stand at the corner of a road, "I must be emanating some type of distress signal, because passerby stares at me strangely. If this where India at least half of them would know me full stop they'd ask me a thousand questions, offer to help, give advice, may be even escort me back home". 10 Not only Sudha but Anju

and Sunil also find new way for them after planing for a divorce. Anju start of self-searching journey keeping apart with all her close relations. She shares a room with one of her friends from writer's club, but both are from different land so they could not make comfortable friendship between them. She always wants Sudha to be with her to share her feelings and understand her fully. Anju feels like sting in fingertips like pins and needles when any of her American friends attack about the customs which loves more. Even their routine talks are so dissimilar that she feels solititude among them. She understands that "...large chunks of herself will always be unintelligible to them: the joint family she grew up in, her arranged marriage, the way she fell in love with her husband, the tension in her household, that a trios Indian style". 11

Sudha becomes a caretaker of an old Indian man who is living with his son and his American wife. He suffers mental sickness than physical. He wants to go back to his land (India). The foreign country has affected his health. Sudha realizes his pain and promises him to take him to India. She gears up Indian dishes for him, calls him Baba and allows Dayita to play with him. Subsequently, her activities improves the old man's health. She is excited with her bank account but vacating the old relation is the only regret.

Sudha's disapproval to Ashoke friendship with Lalith, leaving Sunil and planning to go back to India with the old and with a deal of serving him in turn for a good school for her daughter are surely the characteristics of the changed 'self in America, a place where "in a minute you might be pulled up into it, released of gravity. One can take a new body here, shrug off old identities" (12).

In the novel *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni rejects the traditional myths and creates new ones. The first book in the novel is titled 'The Princess in the Palace of Snakes.' In this part, both the protagonists attempts to conform to the traditional feminine roles allocated by the male hegemonic society. It is a symbol of traditional fairy tale of the princess in the palace of snakes waiting for her Prince Charming to rescue her. The second book is titled 'The Queen of Swords.' is not at all traditional fairytale.

When Anju is feels for her abortion, Sudha tells her this story and Anju recovers. Then she connects what happened to the three mothers. Then Pishi, the usual teller of tales, asks her about the story he told Anju. 'I told her a story'..... 'The Queen of Swords,' I say (312). This new myth exemplifies the current feminine world that Divakaruni anticipates. It is a world across the rainbow (ironically a conventional symbol of hope) where women rescue other women and do not wait helplessly for the men.

This change is seen not only in the story that Sudha narrates but also in her attitude and her actions. During their childhood, the girl used to enact the fairytales that Pishi told them. Sudha always played the princess in danger and Anju the prince who rescued her. Even while they were play-acting, Sudha would never reach out to the prince and ask him to help her. She always said that it was the duty of the prince to do all the hard work and rescue her. Later when she falls in love with Ashok and the

mother decide to get her married elsewhere, she waits for Ashok to make all the moves and rescue her.

The extent of the women's oppression within the marriage is apparent. After marriage to Ramesh, Sudha enters a household ruled by her tyrannical mother-in-law. She is not allowed to spend her money on her own way. In many ways, she is the typical sufferer of an arranged marriage. She was treated badly there for a long time, still the traditional princess of the fairytale, waiting for her husbands, the prince, to protect her. When she conceives, and it is established by tests that her baby is a girl, her mother-in-law forced her into an abortion and treating her as a baby machine.

Sudha leaves her husband's home and returns to her parental home in Calcutta to guard her baby. She left with her jewelry, possibly "gifted" by parents for her marriage because he should not depend on others. "I have five hundred rupees. I took from Ramesh's desk drawer. And all my jewellery that wasn't in the safe. Just in case" (Sister of My Heart).

Amongst the different settings and dogma, the writer brings home for the similarities of the tradition and modernity through psychological and physiological changes accompanied with the experience of pregnancy of two cousins. At first Sudha, who was bearing everything, but now wants to stand up to protect the life of the child inside her. She is compelled to get away from her husband's house but she knows that nobody will entertain her and bear the stigma she carries. Even her mother will not understand her embarrassing situation because she cares for society than her daughter's plight. Moreover, she is more sticking to the belief that a married woman should always live with her husband, no matter what the condition is.

Nalini, the mother of the more beautiful Sudha, primarily comes across as a woman doubly handicapped in attitude, first by a patriarchal tradition, and second, by the modern need for reinforcing identities. She does not hesitate to sacrifice her own daughter's happiness, or even her first granddaughter's life, when it comes to saving face in her honor-conscious, prestige and scandal-obsessed society. The upholder of family tradition, Pishi comes to the rescue of Sudha. She renders patron and says Sudha is old enough to make her own decision. The women in the Chatterjee family don't allow Sudha to abort the girl baby to save the family's face in the society. Instead, they treat her like the Rani of Jhansi, the Queen of Swords. In spite of her mother's lamentations, she wipes off the sindur powder, and wedding bracelets and accepts the divorce proceedings sent by the Sanyals. Pishi mourns for the tyrannical rules of the society for a widow at the age of eighteen and says:

Why should she care anymore what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole lifetime of being afraid of what society might think? I spit on this society which says it's fine to kill a baby girl in her mother's womb, but wrong for mother to run away to save her child (268).

Divakaruni's women quickly realize that they love their women friends more than their men, a love that surpasses all other relationships. It is in her *Sister of My Heart* that Divakaruni most obviously explores this theme. Even after marriage, Sudha is the most wanted person in Anju's life, not Sunil. When, therefore, she learns that Sudha's in-laws forced to abort her baby because the prenatal sex-determination test has shown it is female, in spite of Sunil's disapproval she urges her to leave her husband and go to her (Anju's) mother in Calcutta, apparently Sudha's mother is not sufficiently supportive to start a new life there, promising herself that she would somehow bring her cousin over to America no matter what the cost to her, financially.

Tomorrow I'll think of all the prickly details: how to get them here, the visas, how much it'll all cost. I can get a job and save for their tickets. That way I won't have to ask Sunil for a single penny. Tomorrow itself I'll go to my college library – I know they're looking for an assistant. I won't even tell Sunil about it. It'll be my secret, mine and my baby's. (Divakaruni, 276)

Western influence and the westernization of Indian society, the upper classes people are most contrast to the traditionalism of the middle and lower classes. However, if the Eastern world is delineated at times in a negative light in this book, then the western world is presented not without its evils and shortcomings. Freedom and riches in the west are often bought, particularly any immigrant, at the cost of the love and patron given by the extended family and or the community. This is proved while Anju doubts on herself that "did I push into making the wrong decision, misled by my American – feminist notions of right and wrong? Have I condemned her to a life of loneliness?" (272)

The woman in the mirror is none other than herself but in a novel is manifestation. She is that woman who have appear champion over all puzzles, all objections, all crushing sensibilities and is as glowing and radiant as a bird, ready to fly into the exotic skies. Sudha opposes to return to a tormenting the past, she is ignorant of what the future contains for her, yet her eyes look forward, and the spirit of fire burning inside her consoles everyone that none can have dare to stop her in her upward and outward journey. Sudha indeed emerges as a victorious woman. She alters herself, from the princess in the palace of snakes to the queen of swords. She refuses to return to Ramesh. When Sudha was given a second chance of happiness, when Ashok reappears in her life and wishes to marry her, she is once again faced with the choice between her happiness and Anju's and chooses Anju's. She also cancelled the forceful offers of Ashok to marry her. The rejection of male-allotted stereotypical roles is complete. Anju wants her in California, and so she will go to California. But she doubts that this would have been a real friend's decision. Both she and Anju know that Sunil was really in love with Sudha and had never been able to forget her; indeed, their friendship had almost broken up when Anju had discovered her husband's feelings for her cousin. She is not only a financial burden for Anju, as she and her parents have

always depends on Anju's family- a fact that she cannot forget and feels she must be grateful for – in a sense, in fact, Sudha is responsible for Anju's miscarriage, for Anju feels require to pay for Sudha's fare to the USA, since Sunil cannot afford it, and so she went to job, overworks, and loses her baby. It was not as if she would not have been able to make a fresh life in Calcutta; indeed, she had already begun to do so. Above all, she knows that her presence in Anju's marriage will cause problems and sadness, something that Sudha had anticipated long before in an old dream: "if only Anju and I, like the wives of the heroes in the old tales, could marry the same man, our Arjun, our Krishna, who would love and treasure us both, and keep us both together". (Divakaruni 1999: 131) Sudha's journey to America is really the beginning of her journey to a new world of women.

Anju is a perfect sister of the heart for Sudha. Divakaruni makes Anju and Sudha speak alternately in their voices, shifting perspective, the narrative technique itself underlining their twinning as much as the events of their lives and Anju's voice is always clear and unambiguous. The richer, the cleverer and the more talented of the two, but she is less imaginative and sensitive, she has always supports for Sudha, doing what she thinks is best for her, willing to sacrifice her relationship with Sunil in her obsessed belief that she must have Sudha by her side if her sister-friend is to thrive. It is appropriate, then, that, a novel of sisterhood should end with Anju's thoughts:

We've formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined like lotus staks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have travelled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonnas with child... for the three of us stand unhurried, feeling the way we fit, skin on skin, into each other's lives. (347).

Despite the innumerable of headaches that an American lifestyle entails, Divakaruni's characters seem consoled about its ultimate superiority. This was well expressed in these words of Sudha, who is decided to go to America with her fatherless, newborn daughter in search of respectable life for both: "Best of all, no-one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man." (274) The solace faced by Sudha in the novel is reminiscence of postmodern woman faced by all souls suffered because of the crossroads of tradition and modernity. When a certain aspect of the conventional pattern of life become morbid and tormenting, one wishes to tear apart all boundaries and escape into a world where everything is replete with novelty, glory, and adventure.

The mother also entered into different world of women. It is symbolically shown when they sell their tumble-down, patrimonial house and move to a new flat. The change in them after they move to their new home is awesome. After discussing about the story of two sisters it can be said that whatever may be the cause of immigration; diasporic groups faces the issues of displacement, rootlessness, discrimination, and

marginalization in the shifted country. The women, who are migrated, feel the displacement intensely more compared to men, still they think migration as a step towards their freedom and individuality. Though it is hard for them to separate themselves from the native country and culture but still they adapted and adjusted with the new culture and try to create a harmony with the new surroundings. America gives privacy but at the price of losing a stable, perhaps privileged identity.

Banerjee's writing assures that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion, but an experience made up of collectivities and many different journeys. It's an determination of travelers experience that gives idea of where, how and under what circumstances they travelled. Almost all the expatriates who emigrated from India to America face the clash of opposing cultures, a feeling of alienation which was followed by the attempts to adjust, to adopt and to accept. Only the degree of this adaptation differs according to the generations. Banerjee had moved away from her location, through this work she recollects her homeland, and as an outsider observes details with objectivity. It reflects as a reminder of her identity. Chitra Banerjee thus, analyses the relationship of women with worldly issues of segregation, displacement, disturbance, and disorder thus, articulating the diasporic consciousness in this work.

### Conclusion

In the novels, *Sister of My Heart and Vine of Desire*, is the life of the protagonist face failures and struggle hard to survive in the new country. But Chitra had cleverly bought Sudha and Anju out of the non-success and made them fly independently. There seems to be no solution for the problems faced by the immigrants. Some of their struggles are painful, but that is the part of the immigrant experience. The immigrant after settled in the new land, they always haunted by the past, and the immigrant issues arise between culturing and capturing. In this context, Bharathi Mukherjee asserts:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued civil and religious conflicts. We have experienced rapid changes in the history of the Nations in which we lived when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb two hundred years of American history and learn to adapt American society.. Our lives are remarkable often heroic.

Divakaruni's protagonists attach to their newfound world. Even though the female characters are firmly developed in tradition, find it difficult to break the bounds set by patriarchy, they wanted to experience what are prohibited in their life, and resolve the psychological conflict that is accompanied with the new situation. She expressed very obviously the dilemmas of Indian women in conventional society. Her woman characters represent the sentiments of women within traditional bounds and outside traditional bounds.



Chitra Banerjee writings will be focused on friendships with women and trying to balance them with the fighting for passions and demands that come to women as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers. She believed that friendship with women is a unique one because of life-changing experiences that they share-menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. In an interview she states that the force behind her writings "is the desire to put women in the center of stories, to have their voices be the voices of interpretation, their eyes the ones that we see through. There just hasn't been enough of that in the world, if you look back at literary history" (Ltd.in Lalitha 2009: 23).

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