

THE CONCEPT OF NEW WOMAN IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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ABSTRACT

The rise of 'New Woman' can be traced back to late nineteenth century, which had a profound influence on feminism in twentieth century. The 'New Woman' is not bound in cultural fetters and is vociferous about her rights. She is adequately educated, self-reliant and financially independent. She has the moral courage to defy social conventions in order to create a better world for all. She is moving from the 'margins' to the 'centre' with a new found confidence in self. According to Usha Bande and Atma Ram:

...the 'New Woman' is one who, shown of her 'feminine mystique', is aware of herself as an individual, she is free from her traditional, social and moral constrictions and is able to live with a heightened sense of dignity, and individuality. The 'New Woman', then, is the product of a new economic order in which woman casts aside her 'invisibility', comes out of the metaphorical purdah and avails of the opportunities provided by education, enfranchisement and employment. She, with her professional and economic spheres, and deconstructs the image of a submissive, repressed and self-effacing being. The picture that emerges is of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited intelligent, confident and assertive. (14)

KEYWORDS: New Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's

INTRODUCTION

The ideation of 'New Woman' considers the marginal and oppressed position of the woman as unjustified. It further refutes the construction of 'woman- as- other'. The concept of 'New Woman' does not focus on individual woman's struggle but emphasizes the need of a change in the sexist and patriarchal attitude of the society. Recent studies have shown a paradigm shift in literary perspectives of women novelists. A new class of novelists has come to the fore, who do not present woman as subjugated and passive individual. They have presented womanhood from a new perspective. Among the path breaking women writers, who have carved a niche for themselves, is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

This paper proposes to examine the issue of woman's quest for identity, the woman's transformation in the new world order and emergence of 'New Woman' with particular reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*. The paper will glance through the experiences of women of two generations in the novel. She draws an extraordinary portrait of Indian women, who flout conventions and live life on their own terms. Women in *Sister of My Heart* are not stereotypes of wife-mother-housewife. Though steeped in Indian culture and moral values, they stand up for their rights and don't remain shackled in the fetters of social norms.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni examines the ways in which woman is economically, socially or politically oppressed in the society and how she breaks away from the constraints of the society and emerges as 'New Woman'. Divakaruni is able to present the essential female qualities. She portrays the position of woman in society and also the ambitions, fears and anxieties of the modern woman. Novelist shows her excellent narrative ability and understanding of human emotions. Sudha strives to remain sane in this world governed by sexist values and thinks, "Desperately I try to remember that there is a saner world where women study and work and go shopping and visit the cinema with their girlfriends, where it is permissible for them to live normal lives even if they cannot be mothers. I repeat to myself the names of classmates who I've heard have become doctors and teachers and famous dancers, but they are too far away" (*SOMH* 215). It is a painful cry of a thoughtful and intelligent woman who aspires to assert her individuality.

Anita Myles writes, "The Novel of Dissent comes into existence when these women characters react against the social discrimination meted out to them. The awakening of the woman's consciousness and her resultant protests may not always resolve her problems but they certainly provide her with inner enrichment and a sense of satisfaction that at least she has successfully battled against the harsh verities of life" (9). All these characteristics can be traced in the characters of *Sister of My Heart*. Gouri, Nalini, Pishi, Anju and Sudha are representative Indian women, who are expected to fulfill a pre-defined role. Pishi, in her widowed life, mourns for herself and gets the strength out of her despair. She openly supports Sudha's decision of leaving her husband and his family. She says, "Why should she care anymore what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done to any of us, a whole life 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 the mother to run away to save her child" (*SOMH* 247). It is a bold statement by a widow, who has faced the torture and humiliation at the hands of society. Novelist vividly describes the position of a widowed woman in following words, "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 priests 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? But though he was kind –and you too, Gouri-I knew it was charity. I had no right in the house-or anywhere else. My life was over because I was a woman without a husband" (*SOMH* 248).

Pishi proves to be a strong woman who helps Sudha, who has been rendered homeless due to the norms of a patriarchal society. She revolts against the social norms and refuses to be a martyr for the sake of family honour. She acts as a truly emancipated woman and declares, "The true Chatterjee spirit, if there is such a thing, must live on in us. Us, the women-and the little one who's coming, whom we must be ready to welcome. For heaven's sake, Nalini, don't look so tragic. You won't be out on the street" (*SOMH* 248). Her spirit is infectious. Sudha feels that her future is possible even without the 'security' of marriage.

Sudha takes possession of her life and steers it towards a new beginning, where she does not need a man's economic, physical or emotional support. She emerges as a pronouncedly individual woman, who is brave enough to carve her own niche in this patriarchal society. She rejects the marriage proposal of Ashok. She rejects "that old tempting dream which began at the movies-but no, its true beginning was in the fairy tales" (*SOMH* 293). Writer has not only made it clear that her protagonist is a woman of the new world order, but also makes it amply clear that the ideas of female subjugation are propagated through popular culture. Sudha realizes that she does not want to bind her life with the whims and fancies of a man. Her strength lies in the fact that she has the courage and will to lead her life on her own terms. Sudha knows, "I

am going for Anju, yes, and for Dayita, but most of all I am going for me. I am going with the knowledge that this will not be a fairy-tale journey, my winged steed leaping over all obstacles with unfailing ease, but I am going anyway. Do I want to return? And if I do return, will I be happy tying my life to a man's whims again, even if he is a good man?" (*SOMH* 294).

Vijaya Lakshmi Seshadri writes, "The new woman is assertive and self-willed searching to discover true self. In these years a class oriented fiction emerged: the woman, who still suffers, but not in silence as she used to be" (12). The search for identity is much pronounced in the character of Sudha. Sudha like a 'good' Indian girl settles for an arranged marriage. She agrees to make everyone happy by this negotiated marriage. Soon she realizes the emptiness of this kind of life. The pressure of her mother-in-law forces her to analyse her life. She realizes that she is leading a society-approved, self-effacing life. She is under constant pressure to give a heir to the family, a son. She has to go through the ordeal alone as her husband does not have the courage to contradict his mother. Even after getting pregnant, she cannot forget and forgive the indirect insults and meaningful glances hurled at her, "I cannot seem to forget that measuring look in my mother-in-law's eyes when I couldn't get pregnant. I am even suspicious of Ramesh. The most innocent of his questions-do I feel nauseous anymore, would I like him to rub my back- raises my hackles. If in bed he slips a hand, careful and cupped, over my belly, I shrug it away impatiently, though I know I'm hurting his feelings. All of this love and caring, I want to shout, is it for Sudha, or for the carrier of the new heir of the Sanyals?" (*SOMH* 226). This is a cry of a woman for her place in the society who refuses to be a 'heir-making machine'. She is a woman of new generation who is ready to fight her own battles.

Sudha leaves her husband's home. It is not an act of escape. She proves to be rather heroic as she is not ready to forego her right to be a protector of her child. She feels a kind of energy filling her. She is ready to take the world head-on, "I jab at his paunch with a determined elbow, and finally I'm in a taxi, mopping the sweat from my neck, trembling. Maybe this is how the Rani of Jhansi felt the first time she went to war" (*SOMH* 243). Sudha emerges victorious after her disillusionment about age old orthodox notions regarding her place in the society. She wants to be brave like Rani of Jhansi, "Bless me that I have the courage to go into battle when necessary, no matter how bleak the situation. Bless me that I may be able to fight for myself and my child, no matter where I am" (*SOMH* 249). Writer creates a new myth of Rani of Jhansi. *Sister of My Heart* presents Queen of Swords as a symbol of empowerment. Sudha's decision is not based on values of an andocentric society. She recognizes the gender bias in the patriarchal society as she challenges the stereotypical image of woman.

When Anju is depressed after losing her baby, Sudha is her pillar of strength. She encourages her to heal herself. A new myth emerges when she incorporates her life's experience into the tale of Queen of Swords and thus reaffirms the power of a woman, "I tell her how the Queen of Swords was born an ordinary girl, I tell of her marriage and pregnancy, of how the palace guards tried to destroy the girl baby in her womb. How the unborn daughter gave her mother the courage to leave, gave her the flaming swords made of light so that none dared prevent her from going" (*SOMH* 315). The character of Anju also highlights the emergence of 'New Woman'. Anju is ready to work hard even during her pregnancy, but does not want to be financially dependent on her husband. She is courageous and does not let her self-esteem to crumble.

All the women in Chatterjee household turn away from society-dictated norms. They protect each other. The male members of the family are absent. Pishi lost her husband at a young age. A ruby hunting expedition claimed the lives of

Bijoy and Gopal leaving Gouri and Nalini widowed to lead solitary and marginalized lives. They turn to each other in spite of differences of opinion and diverging tendencies. This association generates in them a confidence to face the world on their own terms. They challenge the pre-conceived notions of the society and prove successful in keeping the interfering male relatives at bay. Sudha muses:

Along with the old house, the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition. Perhaps, ironically, I helped it happen. For now that I have come back neither wife nor widow, now that I have let go of all that society considers valuable, what is left for them to fear? Away from those ancient halls echoing with patriarchal voices which insisted that foremost of all they must be widows of the Chatterjee family, for the first time they can learn to live their own lives with a girlish lightness. (SOMH 274)

It is a huge step in the direction of self- discovery. They are no longer burdened by society's expectations from illustrious Chatterjee family. Ancestral house is sold and with it they leave the age old notions of female subjugation and passivity. The subdued, marginalized, battered women seek self fulfillment. Thus *Sister of My Heart* is dominated by evolved women characters. The 'New Woman' emerges strong and confident.

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