

MARGINALIZATION THROUGH THE GENDERED IDENTITY OF SUDHA IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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ABSTRACT

Marginalized psyche is a pre-dominant culture prevailing in many parts of the world, particularly India. In India, therefore, renowned for its 'unity in diversity' but one can very well trace the diversity within the so called 'unity.' We have in India, marginalization of communities, minorities and others in the name of religion, location, occupation and so on besides marginalization in the name of class, caste, creed, clan, tribe and also gender along with the economic status of a person. Coming to the term, marginalization is a situation in which a person, a group or a community is marginalized by a dominant force or forces. Hence marginalization is said to be a procedure of domination and subordination. This hypothesis brings in the question as to who marginalizes whom? It is quite obvious belonging to the higher strata of the society on the people of the lower strata.

KEYWORDS: Alienation, Companionship, Humanism

INTRODUCTION

The male idea of rendering the image of woman as a Sita and Gandhari has shorn of existence to women except as a daughter, sister, a wife, daughter-in-law, and a mother or mother-in-law. This concept denies the existence of women as an appendage to her male counterpart. The Hindu Society has dispossessed woman of the opportunity of being a 'SHE,' a person capable of achieving individuation. She is a non-person and as described in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*: "Women should not be" (359). Man-woman relationship is not just a bond rather it is a forced union of the two where one is a master and the other – a slave. As said in *The Second Sex*, woman is treated as an object and she is indispensable to man because "it is in seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self-realization" (173). Man's way to liberation is through the righteousness of a woman that is the motive behind his acceptance of a woman. It is because of such a culture, in recent times, that voices of disagreement are heard.

The institution of marriage is an important central part of the society. Marriage, supposed to be the holy union of two souls and bodies is the foundation of family. Sociologists define marriage as a cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring: "No doubt marriage can afford certain material and sexual conveniences: it frees the individual from loneliness, it establishes him securely in space and time by giving him a home and children; it is a definitive fulfilment of his existence" (SS 421). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has probed the theme of marginalization more minutely and skilfully in *Sister of My Heart* where she focuses on alienation and communication in married life.

The protagonist, Sudha is a good wife to Ramesh. She hopes to get a lot of love from him by fulfilling the expectations of others in the family. She is looking forward to manage the household, breed, take care of the brother-in-law

and also her own man's needs. She is ready to do all the household work for getting the love of the husband who is always "quieter" and the in-law's. Sudha's marriage life runs with these sacrifices, but she knows very well, "I float on this pool. I know I am needed; I know I am liked. And so I am not unhappy" (*SMH* 199). She could not forget her love for Ashok. So she does not share a cordial relationship with her husband: "Even sex with Ramesh – for after a few months, one night he put his hand on my breast and I let him; it was his right after all, and he had been patient enough – is only a minor inconvenience. For I have discovered that if I try hard enough, I can shut down my mind while things are being done to my body" (*SMH* 199).

Sudha, the patient one starts to feel anguished when she fails to conceive a child. She becomes a prey to her mother-in-law's insults and insists her to visit one doctor after another. She endures it without a single protest, lying on an examining table, with "awkward helplessness" (*SMH* 212). Sudha does not have the right to question her husband's virility. Yet, her husband consents for a medical examination and undergoes treatment without his mother's knowledge: "I had worked so hard at loving my in-laws, at being a good wife. I felt as though I had spent years of my life pushing a rock uphill, and the moment I stopped, it rolled right back down to the bottom" (*SMH* 279). This kind of unromantic marriage disillusioned the woman. The entrapment increases with the presence of the mother-in-law. The wife feels alienated from the world of her husband. The husband is always "mama's boy."

Emotions, love and compatibility are very essential for a human-relationship to flower and these qualities are invariably absent in Sudha's husband. In front of his mother he is "like a leaf in a gale" (*SMH* 217). Though he orders hundreds of men around, he shrinks when his mother looks at him with eyes that are expressionless.

The mother-in-law selects even Sudha's dress and regrettably it is she who has to be imitated, "You can't let her do this to me" (*SMH* 260). Whenever he disagrees, she just looks at him till he looks away. Sudha understands that he does not dare to defy his mother. As a traditional Indian woman she bears and tolerates everything. When there is a controversy between Sudha and her about the child, instead of supporting her he shuts himself up in the library: "he covered his ears with his hands and walked out" (*SMH* 259) and Sudha is left to her own contrivances to safeguard her unborn child. Such labels of distinction intensify the alienation and deepen the angst of her mind.

A woman seeks companionship as a wife and the man is after self-gratification. The togetherness and warmth that she expects is denied to her. The husband who is oblivious of the wife's physical and sensual needs is responsible for her anomic behaviour. The indifferent behaviour of the husband, leading to emotional and sexual desperation makes her neurotic. The husband is mostly narrow-minded, ruthless and careless. The wife experiences an acute sense of loneliness, emptiness and boredom due to her sensitiveness. What Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* says about "the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of self-reflection in the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of Nature/Culture" (66) can be considered here. There is a lack of communication and the wife goes back her shell like an oyster.

After having passed through a mental hell, tortured by hallucinatory visions of rodents and reptiles, Sudha moves to Chatterjee's house. Her escape from her mother-in-law's house and the artificial bond of relation with her husband was a step towards humanism to save her unborn child from exposure to the violence ridden world: "If he wants us, he can get in touch with us easily enough. And if he doesn't want her' [the daughter] – I touch my stomach – 'then I'm not for him either" (*SMH* 268).

Society is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Here a female is considered to be a peripheral member of the family. Sudha's earlier paramour Ashok appears with fresh promise of marriage and support. Gouri Ma, Nalini and even Aunt Pishi act as moral forces for their union in marriage. Nalini says, "Go ahead and agree to whatever he asks now . . . You can always change a husband's mind, especially if you're giving him what he wants in bed" (*SMH* 292). Ashok might appear for some time the worthy man to take Sudha's hands. But he too miserably fails Sudha when he insists that all he wants is a few years alone with her leaving her daughter Dayita with the grandmother. Her daughter could come to them during holidays and festival time. Sudha refuses his demands and looks forward for another option. So she accepts the tickets and visas sent by Sunil. She hopes learnt to live without her husband. She has to achieve a new identity in America. As Jasbir Jain points out,

. . . nationalist allegory makes woman's body, her sexuality vs asexuality and motherhood a central issue. Men are either attackers or failed protectors, and when they succeed, the condition of their survival is that they continue to adhere to the moral code for their women. Struggle, sacrifice and self-denial are seen as a necessary part of womanhood. (Jain 1654)

Sudha experiences alienation in all quarters of her life. Sudha is deprived of motherly affection. Her mother's ambition for wealth and luxury are clearly evident from her words and actions. This creates a rift between the mother and daughter and forces Sudha to be a rebel. When Ashok offers to be a partner with a condition that Dayita must be with grandma for a while, Nalini accepts this easily, whereas Sudha is not for that. According to aunt Nalini, "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family's fame" (*SMH* 23).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is concerned with a woman's search for self; an exploration into the female consciousness and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. In whole, it is the sensibility that women develop in the course of finding her identity and selfhood. At the same time, men, though pushed towards periphery also reflect their share of sensibility to their gender. Their upholding the age old customs, their beliefs in the doctrine of subordination despite their want of modern working female counterpart are all associated with the conviction of their gender supremacy.

In this way, feminism is also a kind of gender sensibility. When any individual is marginalized for her gender, she becomes sensible towards it and thus the gendered identity comes to the surface level. One of the primordial and determining concerns of feminism is to declare that a woman is a being. The struggle begins with the establishment of identity in such a society where she is treated as an object and not as a person. She has her individual self, she can feel, understand, express and respond just like men do. She does not just have to be, standing by the side of her male counterpart looking up upon him waiting to perform an act for the sole purpose of satisfying him. She has been marginalized since years and her long awaited identity crisis carves a way for her gendered self.

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