



## **A Journey From Suppression To Self-Realization In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister Of My Heart And The Vine Of Desire**

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### **Abstract**

It is said that marriage diminishes man, but it annihilates women's life'- Simon de Beauvoir

In *The Second Sex*, the French Feminist writer Simon de Beauvoir discusses that women hold the second position in the patriarchal society. The second position shows their pathetic situation inside the family. It is not only in a patriarchal society but also in a matriarchal culture. It is not about their inabilities but they are taught to act according to the orders of the men and elder women of their family. This subordination and slavery drag young women into psychological issues. The weak position shows the predicaments of women all over the world. Tolerance, bonding, sacrifice, etc are the major causes of women's problems. All such causes are not naturally established in society. They are implemented cultural norms in which women live for a long time. Women constantly suffer against the cultural system, and the ancient codes of society. Moreover they are mistreated, deserted, abandoned, suppressed, etc even by the same race. The elder women never lose the rope in which the young women (daughters-in-law) are firmly tied. Pressures, restrictions, misunderstandings, misinterpretation, lack of interaction, inattention, disapproval, loveless life, financial dependence, biased mind, etc. force women to feel humiliated and frustrated. Through the hard obstacles, women learn to mould themselves as bold and strong. Education plays a vital role in women's life. The awareness of rights, economic sovereignty, and independent thinking makes women mentally strong.

**Keywords:** disapproval, intolerance, biased, etc.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The power and control of elder women in a family turn as a curse towards the same race. Under matriarchal culture young women are not permitted to do things as they wish. Young women have many restrictions in their life. All the restrictions are established by the same race. Limitations in everything upset women. It, unfortunately, brings some mishaps to their life. Their innovative thoughts, talents, abilities, etc are turned into unspoken anxieties. In the name of protection, women are forced to quit their studies and asked to get married. Mothers' presence in the family, their extra

care towards children, and the achievements of and the greatness of girl children are not discussed by many writers. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni delineates the predicaments of a young woman in the hands of her mother, husband, and mother-in-law.

Marriage is socially necessary for Indian society. It brings many transformations to everyone's life. No one can escape from it. After marriage young women suffer from patriarchal and matriarchal domination. They are instructed to act according to the wishes of their mother-in-law. Without the permission of the elders, newly wedded women do not do anything. Their dreams about marriage turn into nightmares. They are expected to carry out duties perfectly. Their ambitions and desires fade away when they step into a new life. Since, the movement feminism demands equal rights, opportunities, etc. for women, it is denied to them by the same race. The domination by the same race drags them into neurotic.

Outstanding Indian-born feminist novelists such as Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni hold a prominent position in Indian English fiction. Through their novels, the authors raise their voices against the atrocities imposed on women not only by patriarchal culture but also by matriarchal society. They depict the actions and reactions of young women in various situations. Identity crises, consequences of marriage, the impact of immigration, domestic violence, economic dependence, and disparity in education are some of the recurring themes discussed by contemporary Indian women writers. Apart from these things, many Indian women fiction writers portray that female protagonists are suppressed, neglected, and tortured in a matriarchal cultured society too.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a Bengal-born woman is a post-independent writer in English. She lives outside India. Many of her works deal with the experiences of immigrants from the feminine point of view. Divakaruni is the founder of the organization Maitri and constantly supports women. The foundation aids South Asian abandoned women in an alien land, who face psychological issues, isolation, etc. The attachment with Maitri is the prime source of her writings about the sufferings of women. She observes: "It is their hidden stories that I try to tell in many of my talks...It is their courage and humanity that I celebrate and honour." She also serves in Daya, a non-profit organization. It works to protect women against cruelties and tortures. She renders her service for Pratha. This is also an organization that takes efforts to eradicate illiteracy in India.

Obedience, faithfulness, love, tolerance, etc. are the major qualities of women. The concern and anxiety about the sufferings of women make Chitra Divakaruni write about women. Divakaruni focuses on innocent women who suffer from marital life in her twin novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. In these two novels, Divakaruni depicts women both as passive and interrogative. The realism in these two novels portrays the poor status of women in India. The multifaceted relationship of the two sisters Anju and Sudha in a matriarchal dominating family complicates their lives. The two sisters have many roles as obedient daughters, passive listeners, submissive daughters-in-law, etc. The sisters Anju and Sudha love each other and share everything. They lead a life as twin sisters born to one mother. Marriage complicates their lives.

The two sisters Anju and Sudha were born in India. Divakaruni focuses on the position of women in the Indian context. Anju and Sudha are brought by three widowed mothers, Aunt Pishi, Nalini, and Gauri Ma. The five women lived under an orthodox shelter. Aunt Pishi is a typical Indian woman, who always tells the sisters many interesting stories. As a widow, she always wears a white saree. She follows all the codes of typical Indian society. Gauri Ma is a strong woman who carries the entire burden of the family. Nalini, Sudha's biological mother is a casual woman who does not follow any ethics of conservative society. The two sisters are surrounded by many restrictions in a conventional family. They never blame the boundaries as their burden. In the beginning, the sisters

believe that the restrictions are their protecting walls. Sudha utters: "Our existing was restrictive, yes. But I found it curiously comforting too." (SMH 9)

Falling in love with someone is not a crime. But it fetches many problems for women. It is the root cause of women's downfall. It is lifelong trouble for them. Sudha's deep love for Ashok changes her life. It takes away her freedom. She is confined like a convict inside her own house. Her education is discontinued by her mother and she announces: "I have also decided on an early marriage for her. As soon as she is finished her convent, I will start looking for a suitable boy." (SMH 30) Nalini's reaction to her daughter's love for an unknown man Ashok is the first reason for Sudha's misfortunes. Sudha refuses Ashok's love for her mother. Keeping Anju's life in mind, Sudha sacrifices her happiness. She is the savior of her family's name. She never wants her mother to be in trouble. The traditional background does not allow Sudha to take a decision. As a fatherless girl, she could not go with her desires. Sudha's mother is a strict woman. She never allows her daughter to act according to her wishes. Though Nalini is a widow, she always likes to apply turmeric paste on her face and wears color sarees. When Nalini's friends come to visit, she takes them into her private room. Nalini does not allow Sudha to mingle with anyone and is very strict toward her daughter. Nalini is not interested to get her daughter married to other castes.

Simultaneously, Anju's marriage is also fixed. Suddenly, Anju's mother suffers from a sudden mild heart attack. Marriage is Anju's only destination. Simon de Beauvoir writes about the early marriage in her book *The Second Sex*:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to a woman by society. It is still true that most women are married, have been, plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. (SS 15)

Mrs. Sanyal, Sudha's mother-in-law raises many questions to Sudha. This is an age-old tradition of India. Nalini's strict nature and Mrs. Sanyal's expectations collapse Sudha's life. This much irritates Anju. Sudha is married to Ramesh whereas Anju marries an American scientist, Sunil. Anju screams internally on her wedding day. She could sense Sunil's infidelity. Sunil's attraction toward Sudha upsets Anju. The conventional traits push her to be silent. Women should maintain silence even if they witness atrocities directly. They are treated as scapegoats in a slaughterhouse. Sudha's in a loveless marriage. In this regard, Divakaruni avers: "This attitude to the loveless marriage was shared to a large extent by feminists. They too believed that marriage should be based on love and not on property, and deplored the pressures, economic and social, that not only forced women into such marriage but kept them in a husband's power after the marriage."

After marriage, Anju flies to America whereas Sudha settles in India. Sudha leads a routine life as other women do. The scan report unveils that Sudha is going to be a mother of a girl baby. Mrs. Sanyal expects the first child of her family to be male. She is forced to abort the baby. This threatens Sudha psychologically. Sudha murmurs: "They want to kill my baby.... my mother-in-law wants me to have an abortion... my mother-in-law said the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to be male. She said it's not fitting, it will bring the family shame and ill-luck." (SMH 117) Mrs. Sanyal is the second reason for Sudha's hardships.

Motherhood is a blessing in women's life. It gives them happiness, satisfaction, and courage. Sudha is portrayed as a loser in life. She reveals her mother-in-law's plan of abortion to her husband Ramesh with great hope. Instead of supporting Sudha, he advises aborting the child. Sudha is not ready to accept her mother-in-law's words. She believes that her baby will be the healing power of her misfortunes. Jasodhara Bagchi says in her book entitled *Indian Women. Myth and Reality*: "A woman justifies her existence only as a mother and as a mother of sons. A mother's status is privileged not in the sense of special rights but as an attribute without which a woman is useless." (15) Not even

Sudha's mother supports her. Her strict nature and thoughts about Sudha's future push her to talk like that. She also advises Sudha to follow the words of her mother-in-law. She advises Sudha that life without a man is like walking on a thorny path. She insists Sudha no woman can lead a life without the support of a man.

Sudha struggles to survive in her mother-in-law's house. She refuses to mingle with Ramesh's family where matriarchal culture dominates. As involved in Sudha's pregnancy, Ramesh fails to support her wife. So, she plans to leave the Sanyal house. Mrs. Sanyal's devilish nature depicts how a woman turns into a rival to the same race. In western countries, the position of women is not the same. They are treated equally in all aspects. Sudha plans to join Anju in America. Anju's situation also becomes worst day by day. She also slowly loses her life in an alien land. Sunil does not take care of Anju. Sunil opposes the plan for Sudha's arrival in America. He suggests that abortion is better than leaving a husband's house for a silly matter. He utters: "...but how she is going to live now? You have told me that mothers have money troubles of their own. Surely she wouldn't want to be a burden to---." (SMH 170)

As Anju feels alienated in the US, invites Sudha to America. She explains to Sudha that life in America is easy. She has a plan to start a new business for Sudha. Anju utters: "I will bring Sudha and her daughter to America. Why not! She can sew clothes for all the Indian ladies here and maybe - finally-open that boutique she dreamed of." (SMH 171) This shows the self-confidence of Anju, though she lives in an alien land. The intimacy between Anju and Sunil decreases day by day. The feeling of negligence makes Anju scream internally inside the house. Though she lives with her life partner in the same shelter she feels abandoned. The loss of her unborn child and the fear of alienation threaten her. She has no one in an alien land to share her feelings with. Anju leads a miserable life in America. In this regard, Ipshita Chanda says in *Conceptualizing the 'Popular' and the 'Feminist'*: "Women through their negotiations of the social structures in the course of everyday life are agents of change." (02) Moreover, Anju expects someone's emotional support. Searching for identity plays a vital role in many young women's life. The sisters constantly search for their own identities.

Sudha boldly rejects the second proposal of Ashok for her daughter Dayita. Sudha insists that she wants to establish herself without the help of others. It shows her confidence. She announces that no man can give her happiness. She states that she can grow her daughter alone. She tells: "I am not ready to give up either. I am going to fight for my daughter and myself, and I am going to win". (VD 157) The transformation shows a rebellious attitude of Sudha. Sudha's boldness shows the image of a Modern Woman. Western Civilization helps Sudha to transform herself into a modern woman. In the article *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* Rita Fleski accurately writes about modern women: "Epitomize a new spirit, refusing the dead weight of the past and tyranny of the present in a quest for a more liberating and emancipated future" (158). Sudha hopefully anticipates a better future. "The women's movements activity hinges upon this fact, and its rationale is the process of giving direction to this change in keeping with feminist ideology." (10)

Sudha feels alienated in America. To overcome the loneliness Sudha often talks to Dayita and does all the work alone in her house. Sunil tries to exploit Sudha sexually. It irritates Sudha. She could not forget her worst behavior of Sunil. Anju is highly irritated by seeing Sunil's atrocities. The powerlessness and economic dependence of Indian women persuade men like Sunil to abuse them. It forces women to accept all the atrocities mutely. She plans to leave him to lead an independent life. Sunil regrets his disloyalty and tries to mend his relationship with Anju again. Anju refuses Sunil. She wants to go with her own decisions. Both the sisters, leave their husbands and start a new life. The controversies and ill-treatments between husband and wife make many women lead a life alone.

Through these two novels, the author discusses the boldness and the transformation of women. The main theme of these two novels is the empowerment of women. Both the novels give a clear picture of the predicaments of women's problems associated with mothers-in-law's power over

their newly daughters-in-law, familial responsibilities, female infanticide, migration, alienation, disharmonies, infidelity, dominance of elders, etc. Anju and Sudha migrate to an alien land for various reasons. Their position and status are different in the homeland as well as in the host land. They suffer psychologically after marriage. Marriage and its impacts are the root cause of Anju's problems. Sudha is a victim of marital life. Mrs. Sanyal's cruel nature brings a huge change in her life. The two sisters undergo many crises after marriage.

Sister of My Heart delineates the conventional concept of marriage in the dominating society in which women endlessly suffer psychologically. The sisters also suffer from matriarchal hegemony. Both Sudha's mother and mother-in-law are victors of Sudha's life. The concept of traditionalism and helplessness makes the protagonist voiceless. In *The Vine of Desire*, the two protagonists are portrayed as rebellious and adopt all sorts of new styles. They want to be independent and do not want to accompany any man. Anju does not want to be a puppet in the hands of Sunil and Sudha hates the imprisoned life.

The typical patriarchal as well as the matriarchal cultured family relationship of Indian society, complicates the sisters' life. The traditional thoughts of the elder women might come from their ancestors. It is not their mistake. It passes from one generation to another. Whatever the first generation is received, delivered the same to another generation. Through the character Mrs. Sanyal, Chitra Divakaruni portrays the devilish nature of elder women in a family. Nalini's harsh nature and Mrs. Sanyal's foolish idea fetch many drastic changes in Sudha's life. Mrs. Sanyal also changes her daughter-in-law's name to "Natun Bau" (SMH 99). The two sisters Anju and Sudha are delineated as victims in the beginning. Though they are not suffered physically, life under many restrictions and matriarchal and patriarchal domination bring many misfortunes to their life.

Ramesh's silence and Sunil's disloyalty force Anju and Sudha to think about their own path. Apart from societal pressures, cultural clashes, emotional stress, and domination, the two women establish themselves in an alien society. Sudha's arrival in India portrays her transformations in her. She transforms herself into a decision-maker in her own life. Through the two novels, *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* Divakaruni attempts to revitalize and change the archetypal images of women. To get an independent life, women have to struggle and face all sorts of evils established in society.

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