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Reconstructing Meaningless Relationships and Rewriting Strategies of Survivals in *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract:

Women move from village to town, from one country to another for a variety reasons. Sometimes they join a husband who has gone ahead to look for prospects; sometime they go on their own to earn more; sometime they are forced to move because of war, famine, poverty, political or social persecution. Their move may be forceful or voluntary; it is not an easy one. The situation which they have to face after migration is beyond their control. Divakaruni, in her novels, explores the physical and psychological tensions and the tortures to which the immigrant women are subjected. She represents women as actively upholding and shaping class, cultural and gender structures within the community, home and marriage. She has put into words what millions of immigrants would find hard to articulate, especially the dilemma faced by women who move from the confines and traditions of home into the brave new universe outside. The present paper analyses how beneath the sensitive story about two cousin, Divakaruni's shows the exploration of immigrants' loneliness; cultural dislocation; the process of forging new selves and the complex ways in which the two women rewrite their strategies of survival.

Keywords: Desire, immigrants, location of culture, binary fixities, assimilation, inter-generational discord, cultural dislocation.

Sister of My Heart (1999), written in a realistic mode embellished by the myths, folktales and fairy tales about India and Hindu religion was followed in 2002 by a sequel, *The Vine of Desire*. Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* has been made into a television series in Tamil and has been aired in India as *Anbulla Snegithiye* (loving friend). Further, *Sister of My Heart* is an expanded version of her earlier short story, *The Ultrasound*, in her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*.

In an interview with Sarah Anne Johnson, Divakaruni has talked about the whole process of writing *Sister of My Heart*. When she had finished writing *The Ultrasound*, she says:

I wanted to go back and examine the beginning of these characters' lives. I become very interested in how they thought and under what 53 circumstances would they have grown up to lead them, that moment of story in *Arranged Marriage*. (19)

This is how *Sister of My Heart* was written. The protagonists in the novel are the two cousins, Anju and Sudha born on the same day opening their eyes to the ill-fated death of their fathers, also brothers of the same family, Gopal and Bijoy respectively, on a ruby exploration journey. The story revolves around the two women caught between hardcore family traditions and modern thoughts of the 1980s.

The novel explores the tension between the desires of mothers who embrace traditional Indian Culture and the two young girls who espouse the new western culture. The two girls Anju and Sudha are positioned against their mother figures that represent the diktat of normative patriarchal concepts. During postcolonial era, women experience double subjection due to race and gender. Their lives are affected by both patriarchal system as well as western hegemonic discourses. At this point of time, men who have been feminist under the empire have acquired assertive roles and aggressive masculinity which left women with no option except to be regarded as savior of national values and carrier of culture. They are restricted to being only mothers and have to follow the traditions of the family and can-not even question it.

In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni writing from post-colonial position challenges the imperial and patriarchal discourses simultaneously. Through Sudha who is introduced as being passive, rooted in tradition and unquestioningly accepting the stringent codes of conduct set by the family, Divakaruni Challenges male superiority and uses Anju, the more rebellious of the two girls, to demolish the western myth of superiority and validity. Deeply attached to each other the two women get separated only by their marriages; Anju migrates to America with her 54 husband Sunil and Sudha stays in India with Ramesh. Thus, the novel becomes the combination of two stories that take place in two different countries and cultures.

The first part of the novel, *The Princess in the Palace of Snakes*, follows the two cousins from birth until their wedding day. Born few hours apart from each other on the same day in a big old Calcutta house, Sudha and Anju are the distant cousins and are brought up together by their widowed mothers and aunt, Pishi. More than sisters do, they share clothes, worries, and dreams. They have been bonded in ways even their mothers cannot comprehend. It is apparent through Anju's reminiscences that Anju and Sudha are devoted to each other:

All through childhood we bathed together and ate together, often from the same plate, feeding each other our favourite items, the crunchy brown triangles of paronhas, fried egg plant, spongy sweet rasogollah balls. Our favourite game was acting out the fairy tales Pishi told us, where Sudha was always the princess and I the prince who rescued her ... And when we had nightmares, instead of going to our mothers for comfort, we squeezed into one bed and held each other. (SMH 25)

The novel unfolds in the alternating voices of the beautiful story teller Sudha and the outspoken Anju, "the girl-babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die

even before they are born” (SMH 6). After the mysterious death of the breadwinners, the Chatterjee family’s fortunes are at a low ebb as the responsibility to run the family is left to the three widows- Gauri Ma, Anju’s strong, hardworking mother; the bitter, jealous Nalini, whose daughter Sudha is her last hope for a respectable life; and the widowed aunt Pishi, sister of Anju’s father 56 who plays a pivotal role in upholding the prestige of the Chatterjee house. In this all female household they strive hard to get on only with Ramur Ma, their old servant-woman and Singh Ji, their trusted, disfigured chauffeur.

Growing up among Champak flowers and night blooming gardenias in the rambling, iron gated Calcutta house of the once old and respected Chatterjee family, Anju and Sudha are connected by something much stronger than blood. They are the ‘sisters of the heart’ and they do not need anyone else. It is comprehensible when Anju remarks:

Some days in my life I hate everyone. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart. I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She’ll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I’ll know she understands me perfectly. Like no-one else in the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world will. (SMH 24)

The emotional bond between both the girls is manifested right from their childhood. They are bonded in ways even their mothers could not comprehend. When Aunt Sarita, Nalini’s friend, scoffs the two girls, “Goodness, don’t you girls ever do anything without each other? I swear, you’re like those twins, who do they call them? Born struck together” (SMH 28), Sudha immediately defends her ‘sister of heart’ by saying, “Didn’t you know, Aunt? We are twins ... Anju is my twin, don’t you see. Because she called me out into the world” (SMH 30).

Along with the difference in personalities, the girls also belong to different socio-economic backgrounds. Anju is a proud descendent of the wealthy Chatterjee family and thus, has more social and economic advantages than Sudha that permit her to transcend the restrictive demands of traditional Hindu Indian female gender notions, which might eventually prevent her from fulfilling the roles of wife and mother. Anju gets the privilege of concentrating on her studies as well as her career, despite the calamities that she has faced in her life. On the other hand, Sudha and her mother are socially and economically disadvantaged and come from the branch of the family tree that is shadowy and dark. They have to depend on the good graces of Gauri Ma and hence, Sudha is more likely to fall under the burden of the traditional Hindu-Indian gender norms. Being a beautiful girl the only way to prevent herself from falling prey to traditional Hindu-Indian gender norms is by securing a good husband. Sudha’s dream for the future is to have a happy and intact family, to become a wife and mother, steeped in the Indian culture.

After the death of the breadwinners, the Chatterjee family had to labour for security, because they lived in a patriarchal society where the birth of a son is considered of highest value,

but a daughter is expendable. Sudha acknowledges the stringent rules that go with upholding the Chatterjee reputation.

But Anju resists the mothers and wishes to step out of the Dark Ages into the modern world of 1980s: “Or is it because I am a daughter that my happiness doesn’t matter?” Anju’s voice wobbles and she is about to cry. This is her cry against all things traditional. She is determined not to follow the footsteps of the women of the Chatterjee household. She yearns to be modern in her thinking and attitude. She confronts her mother saying, “I bet if I were a boy you wouldn’t be saying no to me all the time like this” (SMH 53). Through Anju, Divakaruni explores the psyche of the middle class educated Indian women, focusing primarily on her dilemma at being caught between modernity which implies freedom, individuality and self-expression and the patriarchal and traditional values that continue to permeate contemporary Indian society.

Anju and Sudha find solace in the company of each other and become each other’s alter-ego. However, adult life has preferences and designs that rarely approve sisterly bonds. For Indian women, marriage is the norm even for those who aspire to attend college as Anju does, or for those who fall in love at first sight, as Sudha. Sudha is madly in love with Ashok but when it actually comes to standing against her mother’s wishes, she has an ‘unfocussed look in her eyes’. Sudha contrasts her life to the fairy tale dreams, where she is rescued from monsters by the prince “when in some place deep inside her impervious to logic, she turned Ashok into the prince who has to save her from the clutches of the wicked king” (SMH 100).

Nalini Ma, Sudha’s mother, finds a suitable match for Sudha within their own caste and a respectable one. Sudha and Ashok start making plans of getting married secretly. However, when Sudha discovers a dark secret about her father, her whole life changes. It tests her relationship with Anju: “Something has changed between us, some innocence faded like earliest light” (SMH 39) and she vows to “spend the rest of my life making up to her for the way in which my father had 60 deceived hers” (SMH 55). It is from Pishi that Sudha comes to know that her father was an imposter and had caused the death of Anju’s father. Assuming the moral responsibility for her father’s act, she develops maturity and independence that emboldens her to take major decisions in life without even consulting Anju with whom she once shared a symbiotic relationship.

Out of a sense of familial obligation, Sudha agrees to an arranged marriage and sacrifices her love for Ashok, since Anju’s marriage hinges on a spotless family reputation. Sunil’s father would never let him marry a girl whose cousin had eloped with a man she met in a movie house and that too of a lower caste. One of the differences between the eastern and western culture is their mode of social stratification:

In India, caste is still a fairly important point for marriage, especially among the first generation immigrants. On the other hand, in America, class inequality is based on economic criteria and culturally it is open to an individual to achieve

their own class position individual class mobility is possible in class system. (Raskar, Cultural Conflicts and the empowerment in Amulya Malladi's "The Mango Season" 2-3)

Eventually the two girls get married on the same day, Anju to Sunil, a computer scientist working in America and Sudha to Ramesh, an employee in Indian Railways. The string of the bond of both the sisters is somewhat stretched when Anju perceives her husband Sunil's infatuation for Sudha's beauty.

The first part of the novel ends with Anju moving to America and Sudha moving to her husband and in-law's home. In the second part of the novel, *The Queen of Swords*, amidst the different settings and ideologies, the writer brings home the similarities of situation between life in traditional India and modernized America through psychological and physiological changes accompanied with the experience of pregnancy of the two cousins. Being geographically apart, Anju and Sudha correspond only through letters. Sudha discovers letters to be much more pleasant and comforting. She is of the opinion that in the letters the world can be reduced "to an inch-wide window and can be idealized like a touched up photograph" (SMH 180). Sudha realizes her inability to adjust herself to a passionless marriage. She reflects thus:

My days have such sameness to them, a hypnotic placidity, like a pool into which nothing ever falls, leaf or stone or human life. I float on this pool. I know I am needed, I know I am liked. And so I am not unhappy. (SMH 179)

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Here begins a tale that is wrought with the dilemma of immigration and dislocation of enforced silence and concocted invisibility, the dialectic of what the author calls, "opposing desires" (SMH 119). Anju and Sudha get married and attempt to deal, respectively with the fluctuating undulations in the life of an immigrant woman in the US, and the placid life of conformity led by a married woman, back in India. "The house of marriage", turns out to be for both the women, like "many locked rooms" (SMH 166), as Sudha begins to wilt under the duress of 'ownership' that her husband claims on her, while Anju strives to ward off everyone who appears like 'an intruder' on her freedom, including her tyrannical father-in-law.

Ramesh's mother, Mrs. Sanyal, spreads her dominance through the whole household. A few days after the wedding, Sudha's stern mother-in-law, calls Sudha to her room and hands over a ring of keys to Sudha with the instruction, "Natun Bau ... this is your home now. You must learn to take charge of it" (SMH 168). As it is customary in the Indian family, the daughter-in-law shoulders the responsibility of the family into which she is married. Her home of birth fades away and she is expected to labor for the upliftment and the pride of her husband's family, which is supposed to be her home. Paramjit Kaur also avers in the following lines:

Tradition is deep-rooted in India and in the traditional system Indian society is organized around gender division giving more space to male for dominance. Right from the marriage, the bride's incorporation into the family begins. She is guided and trained into the life style of her husband's family. But despite her all efforts to devote herself sincerely to the well-being of the family she is considered as an outsider. (26)

Although circumstances differ in America, the predicament remains the same for Anju as for Sudha. Anju discovers that marriage and her adopted land America belie her expectations. Her daily routine in America is to drive Sunil to the station; then attend her classes; write some assignments of the library; visit the grocery and the drycleaners. She had visualized America where she would be free to do whatever she desired. Anju does not wish to lead a mechanical life, which according to her is Indian. She dreams of a healthy, happy relationship with Sunil according to a western model of equality and respect, but the western image has actually trapped her into a conventional bond with all the associated problems. In Anju, Divakaruni presents the cultural bias of the colonized hybrid. She is an ardent admirer of western literature and constantly interrogates the validity of the native culture. Being an ardent admirer of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, she records her feelings for the book that serves as an interpretive lens to her mental attitude which still carries the colonial baggage.

Anju is not competent enough to fully understand the nature of Sunil. Once when Anju is sick, he sits up all night massaging her feet and holding a basin for her to throw up in. Yet another time when Anju runs out of writing paper and searches in his desk drawer for some paper, he shouts at her for not respecting his privacy. Sunil consistently encourages Anju to feel comfortable in America. He teaches her to drive and introduces her to his colleagues at work. He accompanies her to the malls, plays, dance clubs and ocean.

The deceptive personality of Sunil comes as a shock to Anju. She has been brought up in a traditional Indian home and deceptiveness is alien to the Indian way of life. Sunil's deception is the beginning of Anju's disillusionment with the western sophistication. She soon realizes, "It's not what I imagined my American life would be like" (SMH 186). Anu celly Narula comment on this position of Anju:

Anju's dream of uncompromised freedom in the land that they call America begins to be invaded by the rude realization of being an 'outsider' both at home and in society. As she attempts to come to terms with a mechanized, colourless existence, her sensibility revolts against being branded an 'illegitimate alien', even by a speeding stranger driving on the road ... the dichotomy inherent to the situation of the immigrant populace, as they straddle between the conflicting choices of conformity and rebellion, enhancement and degradation, loyalty and injured merit. (58)

Anju cannot cope with the challenges of the new world and starts falling into deep despair and disillusionment. It is only when Sudha tells a story based on Indian mythology to Anju over the phone her drooping spirit is revitalized. Right from her childhood, Sudha is gifted with the power to invent and interpret stories based on aunt Pishi's mythological tales. Pishi used to tell the story of a princess and also the story of a brave warrior queen who defends herself and her baby against an army who are trying to harm her. But Sudha reinterprets the myths and princess instead of waiting for her prince charming to rescue her, generates courage and flees from the dungeon of traditional world to attain freedom and self-assertion by seeking an asylum with women. Commenting on Anju's recovery from depression after listening to the tale told by Sudha, C. N. Eswari writes:

By rewriting Sudha favorite tale Divakaruni tacitly undermines the notion of men being the preserver of women. Simultaneously the folk lore acts as sustaining mechanism for Anju who is floundering in an alien environment and serves to encode the novels message that for a rootless immigrant the native tradition provides the much needed anchorage. (216)

Divakaruni has shown through her fiction that our tradition and myths have helped Indian immigrants to establish their roots in an alien land. Meanwhile, on the other part of the land, Sudha's life advances into complexity when she is not able to transform herself into a mother. Sudha has to put up with the wrath of her mother in law for the delay in giving her a grandchild. She escorts Sudha to the goddess Shasthi's shrine. Ramesh also supports his mother in this regard. Sudha is bewildered to envisage the number of weeping women there all praying for a child: "I want to weep too not for me but for us all ... for rich or poor educated or illiterate here we are finally reduced to sameness in this sisterhood of deprivation" (SMH 215). The thematic pattern strands together the fate of Anju and Sudha, exposing them both to the daunting determinism of familial expectations, as custodians of what constitutes an authentic notion of Indianness.

The news of Sudha's pregnancy gladdens the household of Mrs. Sanyal. After the pregnancy, Sudha's mother-in-law relieves her from house hold work. Now that Sudha is pregnant, she enjoys certain liberties. Sudha can ask her brothers-in-law to run errands for her. She can sleep for late hours and can doze in the afternoons. Sudha is served her favourite dishes. The entire family is jubilant over the news. But things take on a different frame, when the test establishes that Sudha will deliver a baby girl. Mrs. Sanyal declares that, the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to be male and hence Sudha has to undergo an abortion. Sudha is shocked but her husband Ramesh fails to come to her rescue.

When the relationship between her and her daughter is challenged, she progresses from subordination to an emancipated mother. This emancipation is a deliverance from her Indian roots. As an Indian, she honors and admires all that is Indian, she feels subordinated in order to entertain and gratify the people around her and whom she encounters but becomes empowered

when she has to confront and tackle the problem of her pregnancy and abortion. Sudha finds it hard to put a lid over:

The dormant and conflictual sense of an aching emptiness and a chiaroscuro of anger, sorrow and anxiety aimed at the societal norm that perpetuates female foeticide, and which propagates a belief that a woman achieves her purpose only with bringing a male progeny into the world. (Narula 59)

Sudha's decision to get separated from Ramesh is not an Indian woman's way of life. Her behavior shows that a marriage bond will have meaning only if there is mutual love and respect. Otherwise it would be a mechanical existence. Sudha has successfully wriggled herself out of the stifling influences of tradition and has started to think about living her life for herself and her daughter. By identifying with this legendary Indian woman, Rani of Jhansi, Sudha is able to be brave, travelling alone in public in order to save her daughter. "I swat his hand away furiously and, kick at the ankles of a fat man blocking my path ... May be this is how the Rani of Jhansi felt the first time she went to war (SMH 243)". Sudha's courage, her love for her daughter, and her success in reaching her family's house safely reaffirms her choice to leave her husband.

When Anju comes to know about Sudha's prospects, she expresses her wish in a letter that Sudha and her daughter should visit America. In her view, America has its own problems like the clash of values and different life style, but at least it will give Sudha the advantage of anonymity. In such a situation, Sudha can carve out a new life, earn her own living and provide her daughter everything that is necessary. Sudha, eventually, decides to leave for America on Anju's invitation. Although Sudha's girlhood love proposes to her, he doesn't really want Sudha's child, so Sudha refuses him and eventually, decides to go to Anju in America. Anju, too, has marital difficulties. She loves Sunil, but imagines he is having affairs and is disturbed to find that he expects her to be grateful to him for marrying her. Moreover, in order to meet Sudha in America, Anju has paid a heavy price. Anju loses her son who was named Prem before birth in a miscarriage. Anju toils extra hours to save money for Sudha's ticket. Anju forfeits her son Prem for the sake of Sudha. In the hospital, Anju exclaims, "My baby, I killed him" (SMH 282).

When Sudha speaks to Anju on the phone after Anju's miscarriage, Sudha reveals the story of Lord Krishna who helped his sister Draupadi in times of need and compares the lost child of Anju to be Lord Krishna in the symbol of a star in the sky thus leading Dayita to a bright future. This helps in reaffirming Anju's power and encouraging her to heal herself. Despite all these bewilderments Anju is enthusiastic to welcome her sister of the heart, Sudha to the land of her choice.

This summarized progression from India to America might easily be understood as a stereotypical reification of cultural Boundaries where India manifests all the traditional Indian patriarchal restrictions under which Anju and Sudha suffer and where America promises possibilities not only for Anju, who can work, take classes, and wear jeans, but

especially for the divorced Sudha who would, along with her child, face discrimination in India. (Subhasini 56)

Nothing could dissuade Sudha or coerces her to feel apologetic or induce her to think over again about her resolution. Thus Sudha finds herself on her way to self-empowerment. Sudha's uninhibited rejoicing stance, betrayed in the shower, demonstrates a moment of rejuvenation in her redemption from the need for compulsive self-abnegation:

In the shower I scrub until the last vintage of red is washed down the drain. I am washing away unhappiness, I tell myself. I am washing away the stamp of duty. I am washing away the death sentence that was passed on my daughter. I am washing away everything that the Bidhata Purush wrote, for I have had enough of living a life decreed by someone else. (SMH 271)

Sudha's unfaltering resolve, in this instance, matches Anju's ordinate will power, enabling her to nurture both her new-found independence and her baby girl from the wake of a divorce from her husband, and a denial for her ex-lover's attempt to come back into her life. Sudha's deft artistry in stitching a quilt with multiple colors, symbolizes her desire to weave the pattern of a new lease of life, which beckons her through Anju's offer to help her migrate to the US. Grandmother Gouri-Ma, gifts Dayita with a necklace made of rubies. In the airplane, Sudha unwraps the letter delivered to her by Singh Ji. From that letter Sudha comprehends the whole story about the Chatterjee men. Sudha understands that Singh Ji is none but her own father. In the letter Singh Ji expresses his regret for what had happened in the Chatterjee household.

Sudha now feels relieved that her father is not a murderer. At the time of their journey, Sudha discloses the story of the 'Queen of Swords' in Dayita's ears. Sudha cannot ensure Dayita of a happy life ever after, because Sudha is unaware of the kind of life in America. Despite the clouded fear of being an "alien" who can be a burden for her host family. Sudha feels invigorated with the prospect of anonymity and solidarity that life in America would bring to her. She affirms:

I am going for Anju, yes, and for Dayita, but most of all I am going or me. I am going with the knowledge that this will not be a fairytale journey, my winged steed leaping over all obstacles with unflinching ease, but I am going anyway. Do I want to return? And if I do return, will I be happy tying myself to a man's whim again, even if he is a good man? (SMH 316)

Through the various interactions of Sudha and Anju with their lovers, husbands and in-laws, Divakaruni often brings out the negative aspects of the traditional Indian society. As Anju grudgingly points out, this society wants its women to be nothing more than "good breeding stock" (SMH 98), while men are spineless jelly fish even as their yet to be born female infants face death at the hands of a cruel, uncompromising society that prefers boys.

However, Divakaruni has delineated both the western and eastern culture in the novel with its own evils and shortcomings. Freedom and riches in the west are often bought, particularly by the immigrant at the expense of the love and support provided by the extended family or the community. Indeed America provides “the advantage of anonymity”. But it also adds the burden of responsibility and loneliness. No doubt America adds to the self confidence of the Indian male, endowing him with a certain light- heartedness and ease that allow him to trust his partner’s vivacity and enterprise which comes in place of domesticity and docility. But America may also turn him into a reckless philanderer, as seen in the character of Sunil, Anju’s Americanized husband.

Finally, Sudha arrives in America with her daughter, Dayita. Coming together, however, does not resolve the individual problems of Anju and Sudha. Sudha is aware of the fact that her presence in Anju’s marriage will cause problems and unhappiness, something Sudha anticipated long ago in an old dream: “If only Anju and I like the wives of 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” (SMH 123). Though Anju is clever, but she is less imaginative and is ready to sacrifice her relationship with Sunil to help Sudha find her own space in America. Thus, Anju and Sudha are reunited, sharing the joy of parenting Dayita who binds them together as they integrate their time tested bond with the renewed hope for a fulfilled future. The novel closes with Anju’s thought:

We have formed a tableau, two women, their arms entwined, like lotus stalks 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. Madonna’s with child ... for now the three of us stand unhurried, feeling the way we fit, skin on skin, into each other’s lives. A rain-dampened sun struggles from the clouds to frame us in its hesitant holy light? (SMH 349)

Thus, the novel ends not with the celebration of assimilation but with the creation of a new identity and a new home. Sudha’s and Anju’s coming together, helps in recharging their energy to face life anew. Commenting on the ending of the novel, C.N. Eswari writes: By synthesizing these two contradictory yet complementary characters, Divakaruni succeeds in presenting the new identity of the immigrant who validates the cultural part to reconstruct a meaning full present in the new world? (217) Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *Sister of My Heart*, celebrates the tenuous bonds between women, tried and tested against the citadel of convention, the strife of being torn between two worlds, the traditional India and modernized west.

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