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Exploring Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Arranged Marriage is an anthology of short stories published in 1995 by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and it contains ten stories. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an immigrant writer whose stories deal with the life of Indian immigrants in America, especially women immigrants in America. As orthodox Indian women, they are unable to adapt themselves to the American culture, which they think has no value. Her fundamental preoccupation revealed in her novel *Sister of My Heart* is to create a female universe out of not outside of the conventional male world, the male universe is not altogether shut out. There is the obvious effort to bridge the two. But there is a definite attempt at defining them as distinctive domains. The protagonists of the novel Sudha and Anju live in a female universe. This paper aims at show when an Indian immigrant woman faces a big dilemma that is to adapt to the new culture and life and remain attached to her own traditional roots. When she faces encounter in America, she is shaken mentally and cultural conflict crops up in her resulting in a quandary in which she remains indecisive. Some women refuse to adapt and they suffer, and return to India or accept their destiny.

Key Words- *Destiny, Immigrant, Postmodern, Homesickness.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author, poet and teacher. Her themes include women, immigration, the South Asian experience, history, myth, magical realism and diversity. Much of Divakaruni's work deals with the immigrant experience, an important

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theme in the mosaic of American society. Her book *Arranged Marriage*, winner of an American Book Award, is a collection of short stories about women from India caught between two worlds. In *The Mistress of Spices*, named one of the best books of the 20th Century by the San Francisco Chronicle, the heroine Tilo provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience. In *Sister of My Heart*, two cousins—one in America, the other in India, share details of their lives with each other and help each other solve problems that threaten their marriages. Divakaruni writes to unite people. She hopes through her writing to dissolve boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities and ages.

As Divakaruni's writing often centers around the lives of immigrant women, she says, "Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships." Her interest in women began after she left India, at which point she came to reevaluate the treatment of women there. At Berkeley, she volunteered at a women's center and became interested in helping battered women. In this paper the researcher aims at to highlight the novelist's critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle-class women and oppression faced by them in the patriarchal socialization. Light will be also thrown on how women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination first as daughter and later as wives and how they struggle to secure their self-respect and self-identity.

Chitra Bajerjee Divakarunis is a product of postmodern spirit. Her fundamental preoccupation revealed in her novel *Sister of My Heart* is to create a female universe out of not outside of the conventional male world, the male universe is not altogether shut out. There is the obvious effort to bridge the two. But there is a definite attempt at defining them as distinctive domains. The protagonists of the novel Sudha and Anju live in a female universe. In this novel the male and female world is more symbolic than real, "Yes, we have three mothers- perhaps to make up for the fact that we have no fathers."(16)

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The girls live in a matriarchal home in which there is absolutely no male control. The only male alive in the family is disguised as Singji, the driver and exerts no authority over the household. What was originally conceived of as a restrictive boundary for the women is recreated in to a female universe. But difference is that the rules that are in this world are those laid down by the patriarchal society. It is only later that the world of the Chatterjee women is completely transformed in to a feminine one.

The male world only creates trouble for the protagonists. Marriages tear them apart and Anju moves to America in terms of geography. Their lives are shattered when they attempt to conform to the rules of the masculine society. Anju almost loses her mental stability and Sudha her freedom. It is only when they decide to migrate to a female universe quite removed from male geographic definitions, albeit symbolic, that they begin to find solutions to their problems. When Anju is upset by her miscarriage Sudha calls her over the telephone and tells her a story, "Once there was a princess who spent her girlhood in a crumbling marble palace set around with guards." (308)

The crumbling marble palace is symbolic of the confined space which men have allocated to women in their universe. The princess (mythic representation of Sudha, the narrator of the story) tries to live by the rules of the male world. She marries the King chosen for her and conceives. But when it is known that the fetus is female, the men decide to destroy the baby. It is then that the queen rebels to protect her baby. She leaves the kingdom and reaches the ocean's edge.

It is only beyond the male world that the protagonists find safety. Although the female universe. The female world though cannot be made up of isolated women. They need to bond with one another in order to create a safe refuge for themselves. Divakaruni has expressed her ideas about female bonding in her article for Bold Type.

In the best friendships.... With women there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation, perhaps because of the life-changing experience we

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share-menstruation, childbirth, menopause. The same tragedies, physical or emotional threaten us. (Divakaruni)

Female bonding is definitely different from male bonding. Also women relate to each other in a manner quite unlike the way relates to men. In the novel the bond between the two characters, Anju and Sudha is examined. The title itself speaks of the emotional ties between the two women; Divakaruni's use of the word "sister" in the novel reflects her specific concern. "Sisters" here is used in the sense of a universal sisterhood, a female universe by itself. Sudha and Anju live in a world of their own removed from the others around them. Anju observes, "I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half."(65)

Their manner of relating to each other is through the myths, legends and fairytales of their childhood. Even in adulthood they continue to communicate through tales. Their own life has a mythic quality about it. Sudha and Anju are close because it was Anju who called Sudha out into the world. When Nalini, Sudha's mother tells the story of Sudha's birth she remembers how she had troubled in labour than Anju's mother, Gauri who had delivered only a few hours before.

In the novel, Divakaruni rejects conventional 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 attempt to conform to the traditional feminine roles allocated by the male hegemonic society. This is symbolized by the traditional fairytale 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*. This is not a traditional fairytale. When Anju is upset over her miscarriage Sudha tells her a tale and Anju recovers. Then she relates what happened to the three mothers. "I am sorry to disappoint her: 'it is a new story. One I made up, sort of, on the spot.'"(312)

This new myth symbolizes the new feminine world that Divakaruni envisages. It is a world across the rainbow 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 the attitude

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and her actions. During their childhood the girls 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 playacting Sudha would never reach out to the prince and help her. Later when she falls in love with Ashok and the mothers decide to get her married elsewhere, she waits for Ashok to make all the moves and rescue her. But after her marriage to Ramesh, she enters a household ruled by her tyrannical mother-in-law. She puts up with the ill treatment there for a long time, still the conventional princess of the fairytale, waiting for her husband, the prince to rescue her. When she conceives and it is established by tests that her baby is a girl, her mother in law tries to force her into an abortion. But now Sudha decides that she should do something to protect her baby. She leaves her husband's home and returns to her princess in the palace of snakes to the queen of swords. She then leaves to America and her journey to America is her journey to a new world of women.

Much of Divakaruni's writing is inspired by her experiences and encounters with sufferings of women in the organization MAITRI, which she has established to help battered women in America. It is Divakaruni's professed manifesto to celebrate the courage and humanity of suffering women who have rebelled against oppressive patriarchies and have joined a universal sisterhood.

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