

Transformation of Culture and Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Identity is a product of culture. When culture changes, identity will automatically change. Also when the old is giving way to the new, culture has to change. When culture changes, some individuals who are brought up in traditional cultural norms start questioning by realising that something is better or more convenient and accepts it. The minute the acceptance of a new culture is complete, the outcome is nothing less than total transformation of the identity.

The cultural representations of the women characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* undergo visible transformations. Sudha's mother feels that without a husband her daughter cannot survive. But the daughter feels different. The relationship that the girls Sudha and Anju give each other, a bonding of sisterhood, also becomes a part of their identity. This makes a culture uncomfortable that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal norms. The entire society looks at this family, of three widows raising two girls in the absence of male figures, in a different angle. Both the girls complement each other as alter ego. In the absence of the other person the identity of the girls is sliced. They re-form a culture for themselves thereby making an identity for them. They choose to be happy in their homo-social relationship. And that is probably this identity that gives strength to these girls to question the accepted societal cultural norms later in lives. On the other hand, bonding of sisterhood and the understanding between the women pose difficult questions for the society. These women have very strong identities. Within their own family, they have a sub culture which is essentially women-centric. Absence of a male has given a sense of identity for these women. They don't have a male figure or a patriarchal figure dominating them. May be not overtly, but covertly, they are questioning the culturally accepted norms of living by choosing to exist independently in a society by re-framing their own identities. Probably they are not even aware that they are doing it. But circumstances had led them to re-write their identities and culture, which make their transformation less forced and more natural.

This paper is an attempt to explore such transitions in identity and culture as visible in Banerjee's novel, *Sister of My Heart*.

KEYWORDS: identity, culture, homo social association, bonding of sisterhood, re inventing the self.

Culture and identity are two terms that are frequently used together. The relationship between individual and society can be understood by understanding a culture. The role of culture in social life is very crucial as it contributes to the formation of identity. To be brief, identity is culture bound. Culture is a male construct, and so is identity. Culture and identity are proportional to each other: even a small interruption in one will be reflected in the other.

Identity is one of the central concepts recurring in contemporary fiction. The identity of a woman is predetermined by the male centred society and hence at many a times she is forced to reinvent herself due to excessive patriarchal pressure. Being a woman is a challenge. She's bound to the customs and beliefs practised by man. She is never given an opportunity to speak her mind even inside the home. Educating a girl child is rarely a concern for the family. All decisions, in spite of their importance, are made by the men and the women have no choice other than to follow them. The grip on the females never allows them to move away from the traditional patriarchal norms. All rules and laws are created and manipulated in favour of the man.

The Indian society is a complexly woven structure with a lot of pluralities. Here the politics of gender determine the position of the female. She is always seen as the other and this otherness is innate in her. She has to bear this burden with great ease accepting the life designed for her by the patriarchal society. As long as she chooses not to disturb the existing male hegemony, the society and its norms built by him, has no issues with her. But when she chooses to question the male dictated authority, when she chooses to design her own space, when she chooses to break the shell of silence, when she chooses not to be the other... the hegemony of a patriarchal society comes under question.

However, the women characters in *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni display a strong moral courage to question and criticise the prevailing patriarchal chaos. Anju and Sudha along with their three widow mothers stand distinct in their ways of exploring identities and restructuring their cultures. They face life with great courage and rewrite their destinies through their relationship with each other.

Sister of My Heart is a story of three widows bringing up two girls. The life of a widow in Indian society is dehumanising. A widower's life is never thus. The experience becomes horrifying and traumatising especially for a young widowed mother. The mothers of Sudha and Anju along with Aunt Pishi struggle a lot for survival which the society is unmindful of. They lose their husbands at a very young age and are left to fate. The entire responsibility of running the family falls on the shoulder of Gouri Ma after the death of Bijoy and Gopal. They don't have a regular income to pacify the grumble of the five stomachs. The society is not sympathetic or liberal enough to consider them as fellow beings, to consider their needs, or to consider their existence. The widows in the novel but succeed in establishing autonomy. They become the heads of the house and enjoy their associations in life. Liberated from the constraints of marriage, the widows manage to meet both the ends. The experiences of the widows who are mothers mould them into strong liberal characters.

Women cannot inherit the paternal or ancestral property because the patriarchal society has laid norms thus. She is an other in her own home since inheritance is projected as the birth right of the male. Aunt Pishi experiences the same otherness when she suddenly becomes a widow and stays in her brother's house without even getting an opportunity to continue with her studies. "I had no right in the house-or anywhere else. My life was over because I was a woman without a husband" (SOMH 248). But she transforms from a meek immature widow to a bold decision making woman helping Sudha to take very crucial decision regarding divorce.

The absence of male members or rather fathers in the family forces the women characters to evolve themselves as strong individuals. The female-female bond among the widows, between the mothers and daughters and between the cousins is well established throughout the novel. These women motivate each other under the joint family circumstances thereby creating a space for themselves. They find it at ease in the woman-woman relationship helping each other with great compassion. Right from their childhood Anju and Sudha feel that they are complete in each other's company. And this bonding upsets the society which mistakes this working of alter ego as homosexual relationship. The society has not advanced enough to understand the homo social associations. It raises its brows on seeing the emotional and psychological unison of the girls. "We've formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined 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. Madonnas with child . . . for now the three of us stand unhurried, feeling the way we fit, skin on skin on skin, into each other's lives." (SOMH 347).

The widow mothers are not spared from the evils of dowry system. When it comes to the marriage of the girls, the society does not come for any assistance. Sudha like an ideal Indian girl settles for an arranged marriage. The groom's family demand dowry and the selling of the book store becomes an urgent necessity for the family. The two sisters are separated after their wedding. Soon she realizes the emptiness of life when she realizes that she is leading a life pre- designed by the patriarchal social structures.

The state and status of a woman after marriage completely depends on the betrothed family. She can no longer be herself and her identity undergoes a drastic transformation. She is forced to adapt to the culture of the new home. She has to make conscious efforts to make herself feel as a member in her in laws' residence. Even though Sudha tries to adapt, her life in her new family is worse. Her feeling as an alien in the house starts with the ill treatment of her mother in law and her husband Ramesh. She longs to belong to that family but is left with no option but to suffer.

Being childless in marriage is a curse. Motherhood in a patriarchal society brings in a superior position to women. It brings in respect and esteem to a married woman. At the same time the question of impotency of men is never raised in the conventional Indian society. The patriarchal society regards motherhood as a natural occurrence and all women as natural mothers. It cannot understand or rather tolerate infertility. If a woman fails to bear a child she is ill treated and harassed.

In the space and time where Divakaruni's women live, womanhood gains its completion only at the attainment of motherhood. But the most painful part of it is that the society expects the child to be a boy. Mothers who bring in girl children are less revered. The reaction of Sudha's mother in law on her inability to conceive shows how a female member of the house can be a carrier of patriarchal ideologies. She never knows the truth regarding her own son's inability. She represents the stereotypical mother in law who expects a grandson soon after her son's marriage. The news of her daughter in law's pregnancy with a girl child shakes her and forces Sudha for an abortion.

Migrating to a different land always invites issues of alienation, identity crisis and nostalgia. Anju experiences these when she tries to re invent herself. The cultural displacement affects her very badly when she realises the patriarchal self of her

husband Sunil. Being a product of male dominated society he cannot be expected to move away from the powers of controlling women.

Chitra Banerjee focuses her writing on friendships with women as she feels that this friendship is a unique one due to various similar experiences they share. These women in Divakaruni's novel, are not very keen about heterogeneous relationships. They find difficult to adapt to the male ways of life. A sympathetic ear and an empathetic heart which they yearn for, can never be obtained from their husbands. Hence, they are more comfortable with sharing their feelings and issues with their female family members than with their male life partners.

Transformation of the women characters in the novel in terms of their culture and identity is beautifully captured by the novelist through the relationship of Anju and Sudha. Against her mother in law's wishes, Sudha chooses to bring her daughter to the world. She had to take a bold and difficult decision of leaving her husband's house in order to save her unborn child and herself from the traumatic experiences. The societal norms upset her to such an extent that she decides to walk out leaving her husband. She chooses to refuse to be a male heir producing machine. And it is with thorough understanding of the dire consequences awaiting her and her child in future that she makes up her mind to say adieu to the nuptial house. She emerges triumphantly after debating with herself about her position in the male-centred society. She wishes to be bold 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).

At the same time, Anju suffers a miscarriage as she starts working to support Sudha financially without her husband's knowledge. This news is really a bad one for Sudha and she decides to help her sister at the time of need. They cannot but rush for each other's help and support as they are sisters of their hearts. Sudha expresses, "I am going for Anju, yes, and for Dayita, but most of all I am going for me" (SOMH 294).

The theme of sisterhood is well explored and established as a selfless relationship by the novelist. It is the subculture that prevails within their family that assist them in taking vital decisions in their lives. The absence of fathers leaves a void in the life of the girls. But they try to fill that vacuum through their associations with each other. When their mothers become helpless when things take unexpected twists and turns, the girls assure each other a sense of security and solace. They discover themselves in themselves.

All the women in the novel refuse to follow the dictated norms of the society. They live their lives without the intervention of the society. They are not scared of the keen eagle eyes of the outside world. They prefer to be individuals possessing distinct identities. They decide not to fall prey to the oppression and suppression. They refuse to accommodate themselves to the margins drawn by man and his discourse. They make choices for themselves amidst the chaotic pre determined societal norms.

Divakaruni's protagonists reject the conventional myths of culture and identity by questioning the allocated traditional female roles. They raise their voices to change their socially expected attitudes and actions thereby recreating a female world where women can rescue each other. They ensure that their unsanctioned actions make the present culture raise its brow of disapproval. They form a culture and an identity for themselves.

Divakaruni's protagonists dream of a brave new world where they do not have to hide their true selves. They long for a society devoid of patriarchal clutches without psychological clashes and conflicts. They dare to re generate a new culture that is devoid of any boundaries.

The women characters in the novel build a very strong identity by constructing a very strong bond of sisterhood. Even though the male centred society has numerous questions on them being homo social, they decide to be firm in their relationship to each other. Under the favourable circumstances of the absence of male figures, they form a sub culture within the family which serves as a fuel for propulsion towards identity. They become the master of their own lives, by co- existing independently.

Divakaruni's women are probably not aware of the transformation of culture and identity. For them the transition is a natural process and hence it becomes less forced and more unsurprising. This may be because of their ways of covertly questioning the culturally accepted norms of living.

The women characters in Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* share the same sensibilities of the female. They suffer not due to hamartia. They were born into a system which is incapable of accommodating the female in the main stream of any discourse. The male chauvinistic society was not able to understand and address their issues. And the fact remains that they were able to voice out their thoughts and have greatly contributed to enfranchise women in the modern times. The sufferings and the injustice of it all finally pushes this duo to question, rebel and retaliate. They finally choose to become mistresses of their lives.

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