

QUEST FOR SELF AND SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S SISTER OF MY HEART AND THE VINE OF DESIRE

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Abstract:

A woman's search for self-identity is closely connected to her religious, social, ethnic, and public environment. Her circumstances are often unpredictable and vary in different parts of world. This makes gender roles complex and challenging. While both men and women struggle with identity, women face additional difficulties in being recognized as individuals. As they explore their strengths and weaknesses, their journey becomes even more complicated. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's female characters come from different backgrounds, and her novels are set in both India and America. Her Indian women find themselves caught between these two countries, struggling with social changes that affect their sense of self. They face challenges in understanding who they are and where they belong. This article explores the identity crisis in Divakaruni's novels "Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire".

Keywords: *quest for self, quest for identity, identity crisis, women's identity, feminism.*

Introduction

The search for identity is what shapes human existence. After World War II, the sense of human greatness and nobility declined, making this search even more urgent. In modern women's novels, the struggle to define and improve oneself has become a central theme. This journey of self-discovery involves different stages: a crisis of identity, finding oneself, and then gaining new insights. It is influenced by both external (social and cultural) and internal (psychological) factors. For women, this journey is even more complex because they seek identity both as individuals and as women. As women become aware of the social and cultural roles imposed on them, they begin to question and reshape their lives. This realization is influenced by feminist awareness, acts as a turning point in their journey toward self-identity.

Women novelists have a unique way of creating female characters. They observe women closely, revealing deep and hidden emotions. These writers are influenced by their own experiences, and their books often explore the complicated relationships and unpredictable experiences of women. The female characters in their stories challenge the male-dominated society, striving to discover their potential and live life on their own terms, no matter the consequences. Postcolonial Indian women writers not only question the male-centered beliefs and

their oppressive attitudes toward women's growth but also explore ways to change these mindsets. Veena Noble Dass says, "The Indian women caught in the flux of tradition and modernity bearing the burden of the past and the aspiration of the future is the crux of feminism in India. The search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self have become prime features of literature under the influence of feminism." (Dass, 11)

Many women writers focus on women's issues and express a female perspective on the world. Their fiction plays a major role in modern Indian writing in English. It provides knowledge, deep understanding, meaningful insights, and a basis for discussion. Through their eyes, we see a different world. A strong sense of identity is a key driving force for women writers. However, their work is not just about searching for identity; it also explores the journey of self-awareness and the awakening of female protagonist.

Divakaruni says in an article, "We draw from dual culture, with two sets of the world view and paradigm juxtaposing each other... Expatriate have powerful and poignant experience when they live away from their original culture-and this becomes home, but never quiet, and then you can't go back and quiet at home there either" (Rediff Chat).

Divakaruni explores the complex issues of identity in her novels through her female characters. This paper examines the quest for self and the search for identity in her twin novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*.

The study of the twin novels

The main characters in the twin novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* are Anju(Anjali) and Sudha(Vashudha). Anju and Sudha are cousins, but their bond is even stronger than that of sisters, which is why they are called "sister of the heart". They are born on the same day, raised in the same house by their mothers and aunt, and share a deep emotional and almost spiritual connection. Despite their close bond, the two girls are very different in many ways, such as appearance, desire, attitude towards life, personality, and experiences. Anju is practical and rational, while Sudha is beautiful and romantic. From a young age, they are constantly reminded that as women, they must follow a predetermined fate that does not allow them independence. These restrictions make Sudha stay within the boundaries of their home, while Anju dreams big but within certain limits. Anju is determined not to follow in the footsteps of the Chatterjee women. Sudha almost understand that "most sixteen years old girls in Calcutta didn't live like we did." (*Sister of My Heart*, 51)

Anju constantly questions the values of her culture and becomes a passionate admirer of English Literature from an early age. She treasures a copy of Virginia Woolf's Book, "A Room of One's Own", which reflects her mindset and aspirations. Anju is progressive, while Sudha is more traditional and accepting of societal norms. Anju decides to watch a film after skipping class, and although Sudha disagrees, she feels compelled to go along with her. However, Sudha worries about the consequences if their plan fails "as I walk forward, feeling the prick of a hundred eyes on my face, the smirk that says, A home of the Chatterjee girls gets what she deserves". (*Sister of My Heart*, 55)

Sudha is obedient, but when her mother, Nalini, finds a suitable match for her, she gathers the courage to write to Ashok. She even thinks about running away and secretly marrying him. However, she realizes that eloping could negatively affect Anju's marriage, so she decides not to do it.

Sudha's courage is shown twice through her actions. The first time is when she confidently answers questions after their trip from school to cinema, when her mother calls Pishi. Sudha "She doesn't flinch when Aunt lunges forward to grip her by the elbow and shake her shouting." (*Sister of My Heart*, 65) Even she censured her mom for her dead father, "He would have been alive... if you hadn't pushed him to desperation with your constant nagging." (*Sister of My Heart*, 65)

The second time, Sudha runs away from her mother-in-law's house to save her unborn child because her relatives want her to have an abortion. She takes a stand and shows courage in facing the situation. However, most of the time, she depends on others' decisions and does not stand up for herself. She loves Ashok but has an "unfocused look in her eyes" when it comes to going against her mother's wishes. She gives up on eloping because she values Anju's happiness more than her own.

Sudha's hesitation should not be seen as cowardice, as she sometimes thinks beyond her own situation and considers the bigger picture. After returns to her life and expresses his desire to marry her. However, Sudha refuses him. This may mark the beginning of her independence and empowerment.

Divakaruni's protagonists face many expectations but struggle to express themselves. The heroines of the novel become even quieter after marriage. As young girls, they try to balance their mother's traditional Indian values with modern Western ideas. In the end, they compromise with their in-laws and husbands. Sudha's mother-in-law controls her, making her even quieter than before. Before marriage, her mother, Nalini, chooses Ramesh as a suitable husband for her. Sudha does not go against her mother's wishes, even though it makes her unhappy, because she feels she should obey her mother's desires.

After marriage, Anju moves to America, while Sudha remains trapped in the traditional family life of India. Anju continues her study in the U.S., while Sudha works tirelessly day and night, with no one to support or understand her emotions.

Divakaruni once said this during a meeting with Penguin Random House, "I have given up with a lot of traditional notions about the place of women in home, and what is not okay for them to do. I really do believe in women making their own choices, standing up for their own beliefs, fighting for them when they have to and this has certainly influenced my writings"

Sudha runs away from her husband's home because she is being pressured to end her unborn child's life. She returns to her parents' house. Later, she receives divorce paper stating "desertion" as the reason. Gouri Ma and Pishi support her decision and welcomes.

Ashok ask Sudha to marry him but insists that her young daughter should live with her grandmother instead of with them. Sudha declines his proposal, deciding to be independent and not rely on any man. She considers Anju's plan to start a boutique together, "A future where I lean

on myself alone". (*Sister of My Heart*, 294) Sudha's journey to America is the beginning of her experience in a new world of women.

In *The Vine of Desire*, the story continues and moves from India to America. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays independent women who have crossed the ocean to achieve their goals. The novel highlights the experiences of immigrants in America, especially those who struggle to maintain their identity in a foreign culture. Divakaruni focuses on transitioning from traditional wives to modern, independent individuals. These women reject old expectations to create their own identities. Sudha, for example, breaks free from the restrictions of Indian marriage and security to protect her baby. After this, she decides to move to America, the "land of opportunity". Despite many challenges, she travels there to support her sister and start a new chapter in her life. The novel serves as a bridge between life in India and America. It explores traditional moral and social values set by society, especially for women, and how they evolve in a new environment.

In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights issues related to women, including female feticide and the status of women, especially in Indian culture. Anju goes through the painful loss of her child, while Sudha struggles as a single mother. To escape judgment and ensure a safe future for her daughter, Sudha moves to America and joins Anju. Heartbroken over her own loss, Anju welcomes Sudha with open arms. When Sudha arrives in California, she finds comfort in her new surroundings she remains hopeful about securing a better future for her daughter.

Denise Riley has called way of life as "double edged weapon which is not easily predicted or controlled". (qtd. In Greenberg) This perspective relates to the female heroines in Divakaruni's novels. In traditional Indian society, women are expected to stay in their husband's home and follow societal rules. Sudha, who was raised with these values, makes the unexpected decision to leave her husband's home. Her choices in both novels show her courage. She moves to America to create her own identity and gain independence. Sudha starts a new life there with her daughter, leaving behind the security of being a wife to ensure her child's survival.

Sudha tries to start an independent life while Anju begins her studies. During this time, she realizes that Sunil has feelings for her, and she starts thinking again about leaving the apartment. Soon, Sudha meets Lalit, an Indian doctor who admires her without any hidden motives. However, she is more focused on Anju's struggles and her own problems. She has always been a dutiful daughter, but she has no job skill and no money. Meanwhile, Sunil tries to tempt her, making her realize that she must leave. Then, Sudha hears about Lupe's offer to work as a live-in caregiver for an Indian family.

Anju and Sudha experience American culture in different ways. Sudha holds on to her traditional values, past experiences, and familiar ways of thinking. In contrast, Anju represents independence, ambition, progress, and the drive to achieve new ideas and success.

Divakaruni's women do not see responsibilities and duties as a burden; they learn to live with these limitations. Sudha does not feel trapped by her role as a dutiful daughter and wife; instead, she finds it natural as she says to Lalit, "well all my life I lived with the concept of duty

how a woman should behave towards her parents, her husband, her in-laws, her children. It gave me the boundaries I needed; a wall of moral safety concurs with the American ways of thinking". (The Vine of Desire, 176)

In California, Sudha feels free from restrictions and undergoes significant change as she experiences a life of freedom she never had in Indian culture. Her meeting with Sara, a modern and independent woman, influences her to transform. Sara encourages Sudha to change, helping her break free from the traditional role of a submissive woman. Sudha defies the limitations of Indian marriage and security, facing challenges head-on. She takes a job as a caregiver for an elderly man who deeply misses India. By comforting him and easing his nostalgia, she also secures a future for her daughter. In the end, Sudha decides to return to India. Her journey is a statement of her independence. Her choice to return to a different place in her homeland shows that, while she has embraced some aspects of change, she has not completely abandoned her roots. She says at one place, "at least I know what I don't want". (The Vine of Desire, 202)

Anju changes and takes advantage of the opportunities she gets in America. She finally finds her voice there. She gets a chance to join a writer's group when her work is read publicly and she gets uncommon remarks: "This new woman thinks it is one of the best in the class! She writes on the paper that I have Originality and Voice"! (The Vine of Desire, 106) When Anju and Sudha meet before Sudha's flight to India, Anju shares some news with her, "you won't believe it, Sudha. I have learnt to fly." (The Vine of Desire, 368)

Anju discovers her own writing voice as she tries to shape the chaotic events of her life in her creative writing assignments, which push her to the brink of self-destruction. On the other hand, Sudha leaves America with elderly man to explore new possibilities in her life.

Conclusion

The novelist portrays her female characters through their experiences of envy, sadness, shock, and separation, highlighting the struggles and triumphs that connect women across cultures and nations. Divakaruni presents her women as constantly evolving, changing identities multiple times before discovering a lasting sense of self. By setting her stories in both India and America, she places her female characters in a similar predicament. She also creates a striking contrast between the selflessness expected of women in India and the freedom available in their adopted land. Sudha and Anju, in particular, refuse to depend on men and seek independent lives instead. Their choices force them to question their existence, pushing them to transition from dependence to self-sufficiency. The characters struggle to break free from a tradition-bound society to establish their own identities. This journey represents a shift from convention to independence, as they learn to adapt and search for their true selves amid both positive and negative experiences.

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