

Assigning Gender Role in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*Damodar Bhusal¹¹Assistant professor of Tribhuvan University, Butwal Multiple Campus¹Corresponding Author: damodar7@gmail.com

Article History: Received: April 3, 2022

Revised: Jun 10, 2022

Received: July 16, 2022

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her novel *Sister of My Heart* unveils the position of women and their roles assigned in Indian patriarchal society and their effort to overthrow the biased attitude of male. As its theoretical tool it utilizes western version of liberal feminism and gender theory as stated by David Glover and Cora Kaplan. In doing so it aims at examining the reality of patriarchal ideology which considers women as second class citizen and maternal vessels. It reveals the pathetic condition of the protagonist, Anju and Sudha. They have not got the role of independent agents in the society but treated as play things. They are taught to be submissive from the very beginning of their life. The demarcation line has been drawn in the name of Bidhata Purush who also does not come to write their fortune. As a result, directly or indirectly they are engaged in their subservient lives. It is patriarchal ideology which makes them feminine and masculine, which assigns different roles, rights and responsibilities in order to make subservient. This paper concludes that the writer's, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work exposes the male domination upon women in the Indian society.

Keywords: Subordination, commodity, gender roles, emancipation, self-identity and patriarchal ideology

Introduction

This project explores the sufferings of women in an Indian patriarchal society as shown in the novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The story revolves around the lives of two women Anju and Sudha who were born few hours apart from each other on the same day. From the very beginning of their birth, the Indian patriarchal society is so cruel towards them in creating different types of social taboos in order to subordinate them. The society subordinates women in terms of goods and commodities. The society is quite conservative that believes in dowry system, preference to male child, women's beauty as the asset of getting husband and so on. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American writer, who advocates the end of all evil forms like inequality, injustice and domination upon women in her novel *Sister of My Heart*. It talks about the experience that women undergo from the beginning of their birth day as, "May be the Bidhata Purush does not come for the girl babies on the occasion of the birth of every child and she receives the offering of the blessed ones only" (Divakaruni, 1999, P. 18). But in the case of Anju and Sudha the offerings remained untouched. The novel on the one hand tries to show the women's position in Indian society and on the other hand, it shows the pathetic condition of women in Indian patriarchal society. In the novel, the

society has been depicted as male domination, as it is largely stereotypical, patriarchal and hypocritical. She brings up evils plaguing current India, issues like dowry system, prostitution, rape, motherhood, female feticide and domestic violence. Patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women's advancement and development. Despite differences in levels of domination, the broad principles remain the same, i.e. men keep control creating different social issues. So, it is necessary to understand patriarchal the system, which keeps women dominated and subordinate. In the novel too, Sudha and Anju try to go ahead by their merit, patriarchy there creates obstacles for them to go forward in society. Patriarchal institutions and social relations are responsible for the inferior or secondary status of women. Indian patriarchal society gives more importance to men and to some extent limits their human rights also. So, Sudha and Anju from their beginning face male domination both in public and private spheres.

The day comes they completely separated, Anju after her marriage and shifts to America with her husband Sunil, while Sudha is married to Ramesh and starts to live in provincial Bengal. After their marriage Anju and Sudha both get pregnant. Conflict arises between the old and new ways when Sudha is told to get an abortion by her mother-in-law because she is carrying a girl child whereas Anju suffers from miscarriage. Patriarchal mindset gives them unbearable trouble where as one suffers in the hand of Sunil as she could not give him child whereas Sudha due to gender discrimination. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni intentionally shows the subordination of women in her novel *Sister of My Heart* either they are in Indian continent or American landscape. Everywhere women appear as the man's privileged. The women throughout the world undergo the same problems. The situation varies with the availability of education and social equality. But the psychological, social and political issues bring them inferior to man. The question of their identity arises when they become aware into the patriarchal society.

In a patriarchal society, the standard of womanhood is settled the male where women are compelled to perceive such ideologies as a universal truth. Irrespective of being regarded as an individual in her own right, a woman is dictated by herself in such ideology. Mother-in-law of Sudha is dictated by patriarchal ideology, she being a woman her self-demands for male child as, "Pray, Natun Bau, says my mother-in-law. 'Pray to the goddess for a son.' She is still holding onto my wrist. Her nails bite my flesh, and her lips move feverishly all the way to the shrine of the goddess of childbirth" (P. 233). Mother-in-law prays with goddess for son from her. She takes her to the temple after their marriage and begs for male child. Generally in Indian Hindu society, women are taken as child giving machines.

Patriarchal society creates different types of discourses in order to maintain its chauvinism upon female civilization. A feminist thinker MacKinnon takes patriarchy as an organization that determines the codes and conducts to be under go according to gender. MacKinnon writes:

. . . it is not work, but the organization of sexuality that determines the most fundamental aspect of personal individuality. The economic class one belongs to

is not the most important factor in determining where one stands in society, but rather, it is one's sexuality, socially constructed and defined as the process which creates, organizes, expresses and directs desire; which makes up gender, and through which one's social position is determined in patriarchal societies. (P. 516)

It is not the organization of production that molds society into two different and opposing economic classes; instead, the organization of sexuality divides society into two sexes: men and women, a division that subsequently underlies the totality of all social relations. As insisted by MacKinnon, the Indian society depicted in the novel is also problematic for women. The society, social codes and conducts are divisive; the society clearly dissects the role of male and female according to their sexes. Women are given the role of subservient role such as child producing, household chores and helping hands to her husband whereas male as decisive, heavenly and high ranked. The supernatural elements in the book have been used in order to make women subservient.

Male members are taken as gods as if they create the fortune of all females. Bidhata Purush is quite extraordinary personnel wearing quite white cotton dress whom Sudha's mother generally visits in order to carve Sudha's fortune good. She says:

The Bidhata Purush is tall and has a long, spunk-silk beard like the astrologer my mother visits each month to find out what the planets have in store for her. He is dressed in a robe made of the finest white cotton, his finger drip light, and his feet do not touch the ground as he glides towards us. When he bends over our cradle, his face is so blinding-bright I cannot tell his expressions. (Divakaruni, 1999, P. 21)

Subordination of Sudha's mother towards Bidhata Purush for her daughter's good fortune clearly shows her subordination towards patriarchy. Bidhata Purush by his wearing and gesture seems to be from next planet. He is quite extraordinary that he makes the connection of human beings to god for their better future. Sudha's mother is highly hypnotized by patriarchal norms and values as MacKinnon theorizes in her article, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory." According to her, "patriarchy creates a kind of discourse and implements it on society. The female members take this discourse as if it is a god gifted" MacKinnon, 1982, p. 112). Consequently female starts to take male as a superior. In the novel too, Sudha's mother takes Bidhata Purush as her god and time again she makes visits to him. The representation of Bidhata Purush as a supernatural way is to maintain male domination.

In fact the female members of the society have been a puppet in this patriarchal society. Nalini, the mother of Sudha is maintaining the subordination of female. Whatever she does, she does for the male members for her family on the one hand, she has to be faithful towards Chatterjee's family and on the other hand she has to help her daughter Sudha to ascend patriarchal norms and values. She has internalized the patriarchal norms and values as she cannot cross the cultural boundaries of patriarchal society. In Lois Tyson's term she is a "patriarchal

woman" (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). Live in other Divakaruni novel *Sister of My Heart* is also has been the victim of traditional gender role and a means of preserve the patriarchal status.

As Tyson stresses, the woman does not have any access to the leadership and decision making process. The same submissive nature is also seen in the Nalini's situation too. Though she is a mother of Sudha, she can do nothing against the will of patriarchal society because she is taken as a weak, submissive and nurturing only. Here, Sudha maintains the patriarchal status quo. She deliberately teaches her daughter to be what patriarchal society imagines. Anju is not compromising towards her stories. She says, "I hate Aunt Nalini for constantly telling Sudha and me about how good girls should behave, which is exactly the opposite of whatever we're doing at the time" (Divakaruni, 1999, P. 23). Anju is quite dissatisfied the ways Nalini aunt narrates the story to be a good daughter. Nalini narrates the story as, "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family's fame" (Divakaruni, 1999, P. 23). In these lines Nalini seems maintaining the patriarchal status quo. She teaches the ways of being good daughters and lightening the name of their parents. Nalini means that Sudha and Anju are young girls and they once have to married off from their parental household. She indicates that after their marriage, they have to perform all the tasks that are assigned in Indian patriarchal society. If they did so, the name and fame will be flourished. Nalini is guided by patriarchal status quos as insist by Lois Tyson. Here Tyson's saying, "Women are not born feminine but rather conditioned to be feminine by patriarchy" (Tyson, 2006, p. 96). In fact Nalini, the mother of Sudha relentlessly urges to Sudha and Anju to be submissive towards patriarchal society. Nalini creates such condition that Anju and Sudha are compelled to perceive mothers saying.

Methods and Analytical Tools

As its theoretical tool it utilizes western version of liberal feminism and gender theory as stated by David Glover and Cora Kaplan. In doing so it aims at examining the reality of patriarchal ideology which considers women as second class citizen and maternal vessels.

In Indian patriarchal society women usually indulges themselves on household chores. The patriarchal society attributed them as household's care taker. From the beginning of their morning, they are quite busy performing household chores. Kamal Bhasin takes patriarchy as a dominating institution that gives "sufferings to women since their birth" (15). As Bhasin insist Nalini is quite busy, she even could give any time to her daughter whether she is doing her study good or not. Bhasin writes, "to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (Bhasin, 2006, P. 3). Bhasin opinions that the word patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the patriarch, and originally it was used to describe a specific type of male-dominated family (Bhasin, 2006, P. 12). It means the patriarchy which included women as junior to men and domestic servants where women are under the rule of this dominant male society. As Bhasin opinions, Anjali's mother is quite busy in her daily workings. Anjali says:

Mother's usually so busy managing the household and the bookstore that I hardly ever get her to myself. I love those rare times when I get to sit next to her in the big double armchair in her room while she asks me what I learned at school. She's not so stern at those moments, nor so worried, and when she cups my face in her hands and tells me how proud she is of my achievements. (Bhasin, 2006, P. 55)

As Bhasin says, Nalini from her early dawn to evening is quite busy on managing the household chores. Nalini's over working makes her so physically as well as mentally tired thence she could not share her feelings and emotions to her. It is an essential duty of each and every parent to provide good care taking to their children, but as Nalini conquers within the codes and conducts of patriarchy, she even could not talk to her daughter Anju. Nalini's subordination is manifested here as a bitter truth that imagined by Kamala Bhasin.

Indian society expects women as second class citizen. They have to perform such work that gives pleasure to male member of the society. Anju and Sudha are those ill-fated characters whose name is quite symbolically given by the patriarchal society. "Anjali and Basudha . . . Anjali, which means offering, for a good woman, should offer up her life for others. And Basudha, so that I will be as patient as the earth goddess I am named after" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 21). In these lines, it is clear that by name too Anjali has to offer herself up for the happiness of others whereas Basudha has to tolerate each and every heart rendering actions committing by patriarchy. From the very beginning of their life, they are taught to be submissive. The inferior position of Anju and Basudha, their lack of access to resources and decision making is clearly seen in their situation. So, their subordination can be seen clearly. The feeling of powerlessness, discrimination and experience of limited self-esteem and self-confidence jointly contribute to the subordination of Anju and Basudha. Thus, their subordination is a situation, where a power relationship exists, consequently Anjali and Basudha are treated unequally in the society as depicted in the novel.

Patriarchal society takes advantages of female biology. As any child born in an Indian society, its fate determines according to its biological affinity. If Sudha and Anju were given birth to a male child, they would not suffer a lot in the hand of patriarchy because male child always goes father lineage and a responsible candidate to promote his ancestry. Anju and Sudha are born as female child and the main cause of their suffering is their biology. Simon de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, shows the woman's image and definition in a patriarchal society which is based on her biology. She asserts:

Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb. An ovary; she is female. This word is sufficient to define her . . . The term female is derogatory not because it emphasized woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex. (Beauvoir, 1952, p. 33)

Analysis

Beauvoir portrays women as two-leg wombs, an ovary, and the female. In the patriarchal society, the state controls and manipulates women's biological and reproductive capacities.

Patriarchy creates a society in which women's biology and their function to procreate is as the main cause for their oppression. Sudha in the house of Sunil on the very beginning of their honeymoon night trembles as Ramesh escorting "to the bedroom. The sound of the bolt is like a bullet. As he walks towards me I cannot stop myself from trembling" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 176). The situation of Sudha is no more than scapegoat terrifying in the hand of butcher, but she neither rejects nor accepts without fear. Patriarchy reduces her to slavery status. She is here as taken as sex dolly and reproductive machines and is defined based on her biology and her capacity for reproduction, as Atwood states:

We are all for breeding purposes. We aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category there is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us . . . we are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (Atwood, 1985. p. 13)

Atwood's dissatisfaction towards patriarchal codes and conducts that are perpetuated in order to make women subservient and maternity vessels. The identity of women is removed from this earth, nothing has been left in this world for women's pleasure. Sudha, after her marriage gets pregnant. Her husband takes her to make judgment whether the fetus is male or female. As doctor finds out the fetus is female child, it is strongly recommend to abort this child because Ramesh seems in favor of male child. Although doctor shows the dangerous situation of Sudha's life. The doctor says, ". . . dragging this poor girl uselessly all over the place, have you considered the fact that the fault might lie in your own genes?" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 218). The operation in Sudha's life may occurred the high chance of her life too. The patriarchal social pressure befall on Sudha and her family member are creating pressure to abort the baby but they are no concern about the life of Sudha as patriarchy takes women as maternity vessels.

After sex determination, it reveals that Sudha is going to give birth to a female child, they pressure to abort it. Unequal treatment on male and female is the root cause of their pressure on abortion as Beauvoir believes that woman's body imprisons her. In maternity, a woman is bound to her body, and a woman is the prisoner of her female functions as Sudha is maltreated in the hand of Ramesh. She asserts that in the patriarchal societies woman's capacity to give birth to a child's gender defines her. For Beauvoir sexuality is another aspect of women's suppression, and in her idea, it is impossible to legalize sexuality. In this novel too Sudha is considered as other, she is controlled by male centric ideology. She is oppressed based on her biology and sexuality, which is regulated and manipulated by the contemporary Indian patriarchal society. Sudha as she is well educated rejects to abort her baby and tries to revolt against patriarchal codes and conducts. In such critical situation, her mother-in-law does not support her because she is also guided by the patriarchal ideology as Lois Tyson says "patriarchal women" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 85). Mother-in-law seems as if she is a real savior of Sanyal dynasty she says: When the test showed that it was a girl, Sudha's voice is a hollow echo, 'my mother-in-law said the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to be male- that is how it's been for the last five generations. She said it's not fitting; it will bring the family shame and ill luck (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 259). In this

extract, Sudha's mother-in-law seems to be maintaining patriarchal codes and conducts as she is highly imposed and subordinate towards it. In the novel, society oppresses women according to their biology and they are defined based on their reproductive capacities; the society manipulates women's biological capacities. In this patriarchal society women are reduced to slavery status and being mere a means for reproduction and man's use as Sudha bears.

The traumatic situation comes in the life of Sudha, when her family declares to kill her unborn daughter. Sudha as a traumatic figure, calls Anjali, "Then she says, 'they want to kill my baby . . . my mother-in-law wants me to have an abortion'" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 258). Sudha could not tolerate her psychic wound and calls her friend about the situation she under goes. The situation seems very chaotic. The abnormal situation from where Sudha passes due to the patriarchal ideology that takes women as child producing machines, it has no any connection with her maternal feelings. As Sudha being suffered in the hand of her own mother-in-law, mother -in-law is also the victim of patriarchal society. She follows the roadmap that patriarchy designs. She is unknowingly supporting patriarchy because since many decades patriarchal society has taught them son is superior and daughter is inferior entity. Hence, mother-in-law is also living her subordinate life as Walby writes as, "In this system women's labour power, women's reproduction, women's sexuality, women's mobility and property and other economic resources — are under patriarchal control" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 20). The situation of Sudha is no more than the situation described by Walby. Her own abdomen is not under control of her. Whom to give birth, when to give birth and how to live her life and many more are strictly determined by patriarchal society, which is her complete subordination towards it.

Sudha's situation corresponds to Beauvoir's assertion about the definition of woman by man that is a woman is not an "autonomous being" but merely "relative to him" (16). In her work, she asserts, "humanity is male and man defined woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 16); this condition can be touched clearly regarding with Sudha. Sudha's name is just a device, which shows to whom she belongs; total male ownership as one of the basis of patriarchal ideology. Sudha seems merely a sex slave and fertility machine who is controlled by the society. Sudha, as she rejects her husband house, the mother including her paternal family members raise the question, "A pregnant woman without sindur on her forehead! What shameful names will they call your child" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 268). These lines clearly show the relative existence of female. In an Indian society, a married woman is not allowed to give her child birth. The paternal family members anxiety clearly expose that the society will raise the question regarding her new born baby. Hence, as suggested by Beauvoir, patriarchal society does not provide self-respect and identity to women in order to live their lives independently.

Indian patriarchal society has created a kind of propaganda which is a successful weapon in order to subordinate women within its confinements. Cluster of people are divided in different caste and ethnicity which is a good deal to torment females in order to make them slaves. The novel moves within the Brahmin (Chatterjee) family of Calcutta, Sudha and Anju are from high

ranked Brahmin family. In this family, from its period of evolution, women are taught as if the Chatterjee clan is pure and high ranked where female are not allowed to go beyond the demarcation line confined by its ancestors. Sudha and Anju are taught as, "the way a daughter of the Chatterjee family should be. You know that" (Divakaruni, 1999, p. 68).

Discrimination constitutes a subordinate position of Sudha and a violation of her basic human rights and is an obstacle to the achievements of the objectives her equality, development and peace. As her dream she had usually seen while at college time broken into pieces when she rejects her husband house. Anju manages her to go America in order to better future endeavors. Sudha comes to America thinking that she will be able to bring up her daughter Dayita in a better manner in a liberal society like America, as a single parent. Sudha knowingly or unknowingly emulates the ideal woman because her traditional upbringings. She thinks positively about America as:

America has its own problems, she said, but at least it would give me the advantage of anonymity. No-one in America would care that I was a daughter of the Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, give Dayita everything she needed. Best of all, no one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man. (Divakaruni, 1999). p. 294)

Lifelong huddles and unequal treatment creates a kind of wound in the mind of Sudha, and she decides to leave India, her own birth place including her nearest and dearest. Severe treatment on the hand of patriarchy makes victim of Sudha. Although in America too, there are number of hardships and troubles in the lives of women, but fundamentally women are not subjugated. Hence, she decides to leave India rather to live a subordinate life.

Patriarchy is as cruel towards female as it does not hesitate to establish its norms and values. In this process it has taken many lives of female child before their birth. Anjali and Sudha are from the same community where their happiness and prosperity is snatched in the hand of patriarchal ideology. A women's happiness after her marriage relies in her motherhood, when her right tries to snatch, there comes a unbearable situation in her life.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that in the depicted Indian patriarchal society, women are victims of subordination, exploitation and oppression. The issues of son preference, discrimination against girls in terms of household work, education, freedom, mobility, dowry, discriminatory personal laws, the use of religion to oppress women, the negative portrayal of women, all of these patriarchal practices exist.

Women in India are apparently guaranteed gender equality by the constitution of India and the general law. But patriarchal interpretation of the law continues the dominance of

patriarchal attitudes. Legally women are not to be discriminated against any sphere such as familial, social, political, economic and cultural life. Specific legal provisions are to be in place to deal with any violation of the equal rights of women, but Sudha's mother-in-law sends her Ramesh Sanyal's marriage card as they are no legally divorced. It is also argued that the dominant patriarchal structures, with the interlinked forces of religion and tradition are sustained in every sphere of life. As Sudha leaves her husband's house, all the family members of paternal house, insist her to go back and join Sanyal house, because she is a commodity of Ramesh Sanyal, her husband. The main cause of women's subordination are the negative impact of tradition, religion, patriarchy and paternalistic attitudes in the Socio-economic and legal spheres that taught female members to maintain patriarchal status quo. But among these factors patriarchy is the prime cause and other causes are the by-product of patriarchy. As because the main problem of subordination is not really religion or tradition, but patriarchal influence and authority, it is men who have interpreted religion, molding it perpetuate the patriarchal domination which has strong links with the issue of gender inequality.

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