

SEEKING SHADOWS: ANONYMITY AND CULTURAL SUBJUGATION IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S SISTER OF MY HEART

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American author known for her novels and poetry that often explore themes of culture, identity, and the experiences of Indian women. The novel *Sister of My Heart* is set against the backdrop of India's rich cultural heritage and traditional family structures. It portrays the struggles of female characters navigating societal expectations, gender roles, and family responsibilities. This article examines the theme of anonymity as a consequence of cultural subjugation of women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart*. The article highlights how cultural norms and traditions lead to the subjugation of upper class women, forcing them to suppress their desires, dreams, and identities to maintain family reputation. Through the experiences of the Chatterjee women and their daughters, Anju and Sudha, the novel illustrates the profound impact of cultural values on women's lives, from the womb to adulthood. The article underscores the quest for anonymity as a psychological need for independence and liberty from societal pressures, ultimately emphasizing the need for societal education to challenge and transform these deeply ingrained cultural dynamics.

Keywords: Anonymity, Cultural subjugation, Women's struggles, Gender roles, Family reputation, Tradition, Societal expectations.

Anonymity is a psychological need for independence and liberty from the negative influences imposed by societal pressures. Individuals who are physically, mentally, and emotionally drained often seek anonymity as a means of escape. India's rich cultural heritage is deeply rooted in its family structure. From the young age, Indians are socialized to prioritize family responsibilities. Those who successfully manage their family duties without bringing disrepute are esteemed as responsible individuals. Notably, females are often entrusted with more family-oriented training, as they are perceived as the pillars that hold the family together.

Divakaruni presents a poignant portrayal of cultural subjugation of female gender across various stages of life. Notably cultural subjugation begins as early as the foetal stage and persists relentlessly throughout a woman's life ultimately shaping her experiences identity and destiny. Through meticulous story telling, the novel captures the struggles and hardships faced by women from foetal development, to adulthood highlighting the profound impact of cultural values and traditions on the female gender in India. Women struggle to fit themselves into the locks of regulations and discipline to fulfil the cultural expectations. It leads to domestic violence, mentally torture and hostility. This paper examines how the upper class female gender undergoes cultural subjugation in the name of family reputation to become ideal wives and their experiences within marriage, and their quest for anonymity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel '*Sister of My Heart*'.

The novel "*Sister of My Heart*" portrays the Chatterjee family as a highly reputed and esteemed upper-class family adhering to strict cultural discipline in all aspects of their lives showcases the intricate dynamics of traditional Indian values and social hierarchy. The ancestral house in the novel is a pivotal element that encapsulates the Chatterjee family's history, values, traditions, and socio-cultural norms, serving as a testament to their Bengali heritage. Despite their dire financial situation, the Chatterjee women are resolute in their refusal to sell the house, as it embodies the family's tradition, identity, and legacy. To them, parting with the house would be a betrayal of the traditions that have been passed down through generations, tarnishing their family's reputation. This underscores the conflict between tradition and modernity, as the characters grapple with their own desires and aspirations, navigating the complexities of their cultural heritage. **The Chatterjees still live in the crumbling marble castle that was their ancestor's house. The most important part of *Sister of My Heart* is how Divakaruni uses everyday people from inside and outside of society to show us a slice of India's current social and cultural climate. (Rajalaxmi 134)**

The Chatterjee women - Pishi, Gowri, and Nalini - who were raised in a traditional and orthodox environment. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the lives of these women are marked by a deep sense of duty, sacrifice and loyalty to their families. However, this loyalty comes at a great personal cost, as they are forced to suppress their own desires, dreams and identity. As the novel delves deeper into the lives of the Chatterjee women, it becomes clear that their experiences are shaped by the complex interplay of societal expectations, family dynamics and personal desires.

The perpetuation of these power dynamics has had far-reaching consequences, affecting an individual's social standing, economic status, authority, individuality, personality, and desire. Tragically, their daughters, Anjali and Basudha, are born into this restrictive environment, where their mothers' sole focus is on raising them to hold on the reputation of the Chaterjee family. This leads the girls to get entangled in complex web of relationships, societal expectations and personal sacrifices. In Indian society, reputation is paramount, and people often prioritize how others perceive them. This pressure is particularly burdensome for women, who are deemed responsible for upholding family honour.

The novel begins in Kolkata, India, a city known for its vibrant culture and deep-rooted traditions. Anju and Sudha grow up in a conservative, patriarchal society where family honor, duty, and adherence to traditional roles are paramount. Their lives are heavily influenced by cultural norms and expectations, particularly regarding marriage, gender roles, and family responsibilities. (B. Suganya 216-217)

Sudha faces oppression and hardship, particularly in her in-laws' house, where she is expected to produce a male heir. She is being asked to abort her female child, highlighting the deep-seated preference for boys in Indian society. Sudha accepts the cultural code of being passive and silent as it is considered good and well-behaved. Sudha says: **Perhaps he writes goodness, for though I am not as obedient as my mother would like, I try hard to be good. (SMH 21-22)** On the other hand, Anju resents Nalini's lectures on what constitutes a "good girl" and feels hostile. Anju emerges as a rebel against the widows' conservative approach to raising girls. When Sunil says **"You can be anything in America" (16)**, Anju got fascinated and longs for the autonomy which makes her insist Sudha to long for the same when she was abandoned by her husband and relatives.

Gowri and Nalini, as mothers, are expected to embody traditional feminine virtues, teaching their daughters to be passive, obedient, and self-sacrificing. By modeling these behaviors themselves, they reinforce societal expectations and prepare their daughters for roles defined by submission and silence. Nalini strives to be an ideal mother by prioritizes societal norms over her daughter's needs, feelings, and education, focusing solely on arranging a timely marriage to avoid any potential scandal. Nalini exercises rigid control over her daughter Basudha, enforcing her for submission. Vishwanath comments about Nalini in the following lines:

She pushes Sudha to get married as soon as she completes school. She has no aspiration to send her daughter to college. She is reluctant to receive her own daughter after knowing the fact her mother -in-law and husband is forcing her to abort the baby. Thus, she is not an ideal mother like Gauri of Pishi. (Vishwanath 47)

Anju and Sudha suffer disproportionately under the strict supervision of their mothers, who are hyper-vigilant about safeguarding their children's reputations. Sudha poignantly confesses that having a father might have softened her mother's strict demeanor towards her. The suffocating denial of liberty drives Anju and Sudha to secretly pursue their desires without their mothers' knowledge. The consequences are severe: their allowance is revoked, and their movements are heavily restricted, with even tighter supervision. Sudha says, **My body is pierced by needles of fire, rage against my mother, and my powerlessness in her hands. What gives her the right to control my life, to wall me up in the name of her mother duty. Wrong, wrong, this society that says just because I was born to her, she can be my jailer. (SMH 69)**

The novel highlights the insidious nature of patriarchal oppression, where women themselves become instruments of control and subjugation, perpetuating a cycle of violence and domination. Sudha's mother-in-law, initially perceived as a kind and nurturing figure, gradually reveals her authoritarian nature, exerting control over her son and daughter-in-law. By handing over the household keys to Sudha, she symbolically transfers all domestic responsibilities onto the young bride, effectively reducing her to a domestic servant. Sudha's life becomes a relentless cycle of household chores, childcare, and domestic duties, as she is expected to care for her husband's younger brothers, packing their lunches, assisting with their studies, and even mending their socks. This marital abuse, masquerading as cultural tradition, strips Sudha of her autonomy and agency, forcing her to live in a state of subservience.

Anju's husband, Sunil, genuinely cares for her but is simultaneously obsessed with Sudha's beauty. After relocating to America, Anju experiences newfound freedom in her lifestyle, education, and fashion choices, but her life is marred by Sunil's erratic behavior, including late-night returns home. This leads to feelings of loneliness and frequent arguments with Sunil. The discovery of Sunil's secret handkerchief, taken from Sudha on her wedding day, reveals his deep-seated infatuation with Sudha. This revelation profoundly affects Anju's mental health, culminating in a miscarriage that pushes her to the brink of mental collapse.

Divakaruni integrates an unabridged array of issues interrelated with women and their life. These include arranged marriage, unhappy relationships, divorce, female foeticide, the skirmish between old values and new, self-transformation and new female experiences of repressiveness and expressiveness. Both the sisters endure a catharsis of emotions, individually work out strategies of survival and finally emerge as stronger women. (Deepthi 181)

The narrative takes a significant turn when the family decides to sell their ancestral home, a symbol of the Chatterjee family's legacy and prestige. This act can be seen as a metaphor for shedding traditional and orthodox ways of living, which often hinder personal growth and happiness. **"The mothers, like the creaky old building, seem to have abandoned a lot of tradition," the author writes (SMH 296).** As the Chatterjee family realizes that societal expectations can be suffocating and that they are largely on their own in navigating these challenges, they undergo a transformation. By changing their physical environment and adopting new perspectives, they find a sense of liberation and mental peace. This transformation allows them to redefine their lives on their own terms, even if it means embracing anonymity and moving away from the life they once knew.

As women, all three mothers join that club. This is represented by their decision to sell the family house and replace it with a more modern dwelling. The difference in how they look and feel since they moved into their new house is remarkable. They continue to maintain Sudha in their lives, and in doing so, they are free to enjoy music and walks without fear of the stigma that once followed a divorcee. Dayita, her kid, receives loving attention from them. Divakaruni is able to make her female protagonists more than just stereotypes. (Ms. Rajalaxmi 136)

For Sudha, the protagonist, escaping the constraints of her cultural upbringing becomes essential. She yearns for freedom from the societal norms and expectations that have governed her life. Her desire to start a new in a place where she can remain anonymous drives her to consider a life in America, a place she believes will offer her the liberty to forge her own path and raise her daughter without the weight of societal judgment. In this new setting, Sudha hopes to create a life where her daughter can grow up without the burdens of family history and societal expectations, allowing her to forge her own identity.

CONCLUSION

The lives of upper-class women are often vulnerable to cultural, religious, and moral expectations, as well as the pressure to uphold family reputation. These societal demands can lead to self-restriction, forcing women to sacrifice their personal aspirations, desires, and even their sense of self. The need to maintain a pristine family image can be suffocating, leading to mental health issues, and in extreme cases, even suicidal tendencies. The constant fear of societal judgment and the pressure to conform to patriarchal norms can be overwhelming. In this context, the quest for anonymity becomes a means of escape for some women, allowing them to break free from the constraints of their cultural and social environment. However, this desire for anonymity also highlights the disintegration of traditional family structures and cultural values that fail to prioritize women's well-being and agency.

Ultimately, there is a pressing need for societal education and awareness to recognize and respect women's desires, aspirations, and individuality. By promoting equality, love, and respect, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment that values women's contributions and empowers them to live fulfilling lives.

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