

The Making of the Mangalyasutra: Glimpses from Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract - The article entitled 'The Making of the Mangalyasutra: Glimpses from Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*' attempts a feministic reading of the work on the light of the way in which the protagonists of the novel are objectified for the purpose of marriage. Two high spirited girls get entrapped in the stifling sphere of marriage that ends up destructive for both. The kind of hopes envisioned by these girls and their destiny designed for them by their respective mothers stand as contrary to each other. Insights from major feminist critics like Betty Frieden, Simone de Beauvoir etc would offer critical support for the same.

Through this article I am trying to bring out elements to show that the woman characters in this novel are portrayed as objects for marriage. Objectification of women for marriage and the effect this has later in their lives would be the main concern of my article. The nurturing of the girl child with a heightened objective that works towards the institution of marriage is an irrefutable element in the above novel.

Keywords: Marriage, Institution, Objectification, women, dreams, constraints

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni is a writer who, through her works has stamped her presence in the field of English Literature. She is an Indian American novelist, short story writer, activist and teacher. Her works explore the immigrant experiences mainly of South Asian women. Translated into over twenty nine languages, her works have been adapted into films. She is currently pursuing her career as a teacher of Creative Writing in the University of Houston. Her major works include *Arranged Marriage* (1994), *Sister of my Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Mistress of Spices* (2005), *Oleander Girl* (2013) etc. She has won many awards and honours including the C. V. Lee Creative Writing Award, PEN Syndicated Fiction Awards, South Asian Literary Association's Distinguished Author Award and many more.

The novel under study *Sister of My Heart* is one of the bestselling novels of Divakaruni. Set in a traditional Indian family, the novel deals with the life and experiences of two jovial, broad-minded, Chattarjee girls, Anjali and Basudha. The novel proceeds through a recounting of the personal experiences and incidents in the life of these two girls.

Anju and Sudha grew up in a traditional household run by their three mothers: Gouri, Nalini and Pishima. From their very birth onwards, these two girls were inseparable. They stood for one another in times of crisis and loved each other more than themselves. However, Sudha later realized from Pishima's words that she was not in reality Anju's sister. She was the daughter of the black sheep of that family, Gopal, who came into live with the Chatterjees one day with his wife, Nalini, claiming relationship. However, later

it was realised that he was in no way related to them. This brings a gap in the relationship of Anju and Sudha, although it did not last for long.

The novel proceeds to show how marriage starts to bring up incongruities in the life of these two Chattarjee girls. Nalini, Sudha's mother, decided to get Sudha married soon after her schooling at the convent was over. Such a decision was the consequence of Sudha's secret venture to go for movie alone along with Anju wherein she met a guy named Ashok and fell in love with him. Anju and her mother Gouri, however, had decided to proceed with her college education when suddenly Gouri fell ill. Then Anju also was decided to get married. Sudha dropped her plans of eloping with Ashok fearing the fact that this action of hers might bring up some problems in Anju's married life. Sudha was married to a man named Ramesh and Anju to Sunil. After marriage the life of these two girls changed. Sudha was leading her life as the mistress of the Sanayal's family, while Anju was having a college education and a carefree life with Sunil, her husband. On their wedding day, Anju had discovered the secret liaison that Sunil had for Sudha. Anju, thereafter, tried to avoid Sudha and keep her out of her life. However things seemed to regain their place when both Anju and Sudha received the news of pregnancy at, more or less, the same time.

Mrs. Sanayal on knowing that Sudha was conceiving a girl child demands her to abort it. Sudha was not ready for the same and she escaped from her husband's family to her own home. There she again met Ashok. But when Ashok demanded that Sudha should leave her child behind and start a new life with him, she retrieved. Meanwhile, Anju

lost her child and was going through a deep sense of sorrow. Sudha therefore made her way to America and after a long time the two sisters re-united. The novel ends on the note that the pent up trouble between the two sisters has not come to an end.

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Over the years, the traditional values and customs in Indian society have constrained women's yearnings and aspirations. Society and traditions together form a web into which women get entrapped. The institution of marriage with its detailed codes of conduct is one such trap devised by society. A woman who gets into the stifling sphere of this institution is found to have restrained her very spirit. In her article 'A Tempting Trap: Manju Kapur's: "A Married Women"', critic Alka Singh argues that:

In marriage, a woman barter her time, interests, and energies to the needs of the family group, husband and offspring, commits her life in return for emotional dependence, financial security, protection, and of course the status of being happily married.(166)

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni in her novel *Sister of My Heart* artistically portrays how marriage has put a halt to the dreams and aspirations of two high-spirited girls, Anjali and Basudha. Anju and Sudha considered themselves twins, although in reality, they were not related by blood ties. Their relationship and love for each other was one which even their mothers could not comprehend.

From their very childhood onwards, these two girls were given lessons by their mothers on how a 'good girl' should behave. In chapter two of the novel, Anju who was sullenly rebellious by her very nature, remarks that she hates Aunt Nalini, Sudha's mother, whom she calls Aunt N, "for constantly telling Sudha and me about how good girls should behave." Aunt N's rhyming morals, "Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family's fame" irritated Anju further. Another group of women whom Anju hated for being so instructive were the neighbourhood aunties who were scandalmongers and who constantly kept nagging about the suspicious relationship between Anju and Sudha.

One of them was so blunt enough to say to Anju that instead of wasting her time with Sudha, who was a bit prettier than Anju, she should make friends with girls from other important families as this would help Anju to get acquainted with eligible older brothers of these girls and thus her mother could fix up a match for her.

Born in a traditional Indian family, Anjali and Basudha were not girls who had been allowed the freedom to come out of their cocoons and live as they wished. Even for the elders of the family, the society and its rules were so very part of their life as in the case of Pishi. Widowed at the age of eighteen Pishi took refuge in her brother's house after

her husband's death. Her in-laws were no longer ready to take responsibility of her. As a widow Pishi was not allowed to wear coloured sarees or a sindhur on her forehead. On feast days when the rest of the family was enjoying, Pishi was not allowed to take part in, as the society has condemned widows from doing so. The big kirtans in the neighbourhood temples were the only pleasure that Pishi thought was suitable for her as a widow.

Considering Pishi's case, she has never made an attempt to question her life as a widow. She has submissively laid her life before the society to decide it for her. The laws and customs taking hold of a widow has so bound her that she is unable to stand in defiance to these conventions and emerge with freedom unless she takes it to herself. Her life was colourless like the white saree she was supposed to wear. But throughout the novel Pishi is seen as living her life for the society and not for herself. She does not even repent her action of taking recourse in her brother's arms after her husband's death.

The money that both Anju and Sudha receives as their birthday gifts and their planning on how to spend it reveal for the first time how inspired these two girls are. Sudha living, in the world of silks and threads, wished to buy clothes that she had worn a hundred times in her dreams and that which was different from the "drab", "decorous" dresses she was forced to wear by her mother. Anju, on the other hand wanted to spend her money on books by Sylvia Plath and Kate Chopin, where women engage themselves in all sorts of daring acts. She wanted to read books that would give her a taste of London, Amsterdam and New York and all those places she will never get to visit, as her mothers won't let her. Living in a traditional Chattarjee family, Anju however feared the fact that she would end up getting married to some "stodgy old fellow", who would never step out of Calcutta.

Sudha received from her mother a bedspread as birthday gift when she was just fifteen and on which it was inscribed, 'Pati Param Guru', the husband is the supreme Lord'(63). This makes it evident that from their very girlhood onwards Anju and Sudha were made to believe that a woman was destined to be married and to be the obedient servant of her husband. Her life should hang on the mangalsutra tied around her neck during the wedding day. She was to regard her husband as the supreme lord and work for him so that he and the society would be pleased with her and give her the tag of 'virtuous woman'. The life of a girl after marriage should be dominated by her status of wifehood so that she could 'live happily ever after.' Any girl who wishes to move along a path deviant from this would be looked upon with contempt and suspicion.

Anju's and Sudha's first endeavour to go for a movie alone, without letting their mothers know was one such action which prove beyond doubt how much entangled these two girls were in the restricted circle created by their three

mothers. Sudha's falling in love with a guy named Ashok who sat next to her in the cinema hall further intensify the fact that these girls were not even allowed to get acquainted with any man because of which Sudha got so fascinated at their first meeting itself, not thinking about the consequences. Moreover, for Sudha, living in a world of folktales told by her Pishima even love seemed to be a matter of coincidence and she wholeheartedly fell into the myth of it. On being caught by one of the neighbourhood aunts, Anju and Sudha were rebuked chiefly for sitting next to a man by their mothers. Nalini reminded Sudha that men cannot be trusted. Without even asking for explanations, Nalini repeatedly taunts Sudha.

After ending her speech on how treacherous a man could be, the very next moment Nalini makes her command that she would get Sudha married soon after her schooling at the convent was over. Paradoxically, the same Nalini who went into tales about the betraying nature of men wants her daughter to be married to the same by a matrimonial thread. Disregarding, Gouri's reminder that Sudha would just be eighteen and that would be too young an age to get married, Nalini replies that if Sudha is old enough to fool around with men, she is old enough to look after her husband's family. Here again, it was decided to get Sudha married not to give her any security but to take care of an unknown man as her 'pati.'

For the first time, Sudha who was very gentle at heart and who dared not to speak against anything in her life thinks to herself what right her mother has to wall her up in the name of "mother-duty". She for the first time thinks that this society is wrong which says that just because she was born to her mother she could be her "gaoler". Anju, who was sullenly rebellious by her very nature, thinks that it would be better for Sudha to hang a bucket round her neck and jump into a well or walk around like a bullock with blisters over their eyes, than to get married at an early age and that too without a college education.

After seeing Nalini's grief, Sudha however changed her mind to go according to her mother's wish. When Anju chides Sudha for agreeing to get married at this age of her life, Sudha replies that what she wants in her life is a happy family like the one in the pictures they used to draw in their childhood. And when Anju asks her whether that is her only aim, she replied that she wanted to design clothes, salwar kameezes, wedding ghagras, kurtas for men and baby frocks. She wished to have her own company with her own tailors and label, so that customers at all the best stores would ask for the Basudha brand. People in Bombay, Delhi and Madras should clamour for her works.

Although Sudha had dreams of all sorts just like Anju, she wanted to heed to her mother's wish at the first place, after seeing her mother's grief. Of course, her heart melted at the sight of her mother's tears, but behind this decision made by Sudha, there could be an indelible image of Ashok that

was stamped onto her mind. Sudha in her wildest dreams hoped that since her marriage was fixed, Ashok could somehow manage to bring up an alliance in front of her mother. This could also be the reason why Sudha so hastily agreed to her mother's decision. Like many other women Sudha was also caught in the myth of love and marriage and she has made it obvious that she would succumb to it.

Sudha very well knew that after accepting her mother's decree she would be far behind her dearest Anju who would be sitting at some college, reading her favourite books by Woolf, Plath, and Chopin. Moreover, Nalini's overburdened care, once Sudha nodded her yes, made her life even more fretful:

The lavish kindness my mother has started showering on me since I bowed to her decree is no comfort. They stifle me, all those evenings she spend teaching me how to tie my hair in the newest styles, shaping my eyebrows into perfect arches, taking me afternoon tea at the homes of her friends so I will know how to conduct myself in company. She has me to listen in on their conversations, because she says that will teach me the ways of the world. But I am sickened by their repetitive stories about the infidelities of husbands and the tricks wives must employ to hold on to them.(91-92)

All this preparations irritated Sudha just because she was not completely ready to get married. She silenced her fretfulness and kept herself submissive because she knew that all this would soon end when her marriage is fixed with Ashok. Whether Sudha would have made such a decision if she hadn't met Ashok needs to be questioned. Simone De Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* argues that "a great many adolescent girls...when asked about their plans for future, reply as formerly...'I want to get married'" (451). Beauvoir here brings economic dependence as the reason for this. Sudha however was not hoping for economic dependence through marriage but for love.

Many women accept marriage doing away with their dreams and hopes, because of their familial situations like in the case of Anju. Anju and her mother Gouri had almost set in motion her dreams of college education when suddenly Gouri fell ill. And as a consequence of this, Gouri decides to get Anju married as soon as possible as if that would secure her daughter more than a college education. According to the feminist critic Jabir Jain, "society has appointed marriage to be the destination of all women. Foul means are employed in its execution" (61). Here Anju was emotionally compelled by her mother to get married because of her illness.

And since both Anju and Sudha were decided to get married, the preparations to give both of them good marriage prospects gained momentum. They started off in the morning by eating almonds that was soaked overnight in milk. This it was said would cool their systems, calm their minds and improve both their dispositions and complexions. Half an hour of yoga and calisthenics would

follow this whereby they would get endurance, an indispensable part to be a wife. This would also prevent the sagging of various body parts, as that would be offensive to their future husbands, Then they were to apply turmeric paste on their faces, while their hair would be oiled by one of the maids-“long, well-oiled, obedient hair symbolizes virtue in women” (108). Then they were given classes on cooking and Sudha was given an additional class on sewing as she was interested in that, while Anju spent her time in the terrace reading books.

All these preparations sound extremely dangerous when read against the comment made by Mary Wollstonecraft in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that “before marriage it is their business to please men and after, with a few exceptions they follow the same scent with all the preserving pertinacity of instinct”(187).

On planting it into a greater context the comment made by Betty Freidan in her work *The Feminine Mystique*, reminds us of a similar situation elsewhere:

Home Economists suggested more realistic preparation for house wives, such as high school workshops in home appliances. College educators suggested more discussion groups on home management and the family, to prepare women for the adjustment to domestic life. A spate of articles appeared in the news magazines offering ‘Fifty-eight Way to Make Your Marriage More Exciting’. (23)

When Sudha’s suitor Ramesh came for bride-viewing, his mother openly said that she is looking for a good looking girl as her “son’s no god of beauty” and that she wanted good looking grandsons. She wanted a girl who would become the daughter she never had and on whom she could hand over the domestic duty. In traditional Indian households marriage was not in the right sense meant to give emotional dependence to both the parties and a shoulder to hang on in times of grief and happiness. The questions Mrs. Sanayal, Sudha’s future mother-in law asks her prove this beyond doubt:

What was her favourite subject in school (embroidery), what is the proportion of sugar to water in rasogollah syrup (one to two), what does she think should be a women’s most important duty (taking care of those she loves).(122)

Considering Anju’s case, she who had never been afraid of anything in her life was frightened at the thought of her suitor who would be soon arriving from America. Anju forgets all her feministic mind-set when Sunil showed an interest in the books by Woolf during their bride-viewing. However Sunil himself admitted later that he was lying to please Anju. Still Anju had no other option but to hang on that marriage. The most painful part of the novel is when Anju develops a sense of hatred towards Sudha when she comes to know that Sunil had a not so natural affection towards Sudha.

Sudha had dropped all her plans of eloping with Ashok when she heard Anju’s father-in-law saying that he would not proceed with the marriage if a scandal of any sort was heard about the family. Despite this sacrifice, what Sudha receives from Anju is a cold attitude when she comes to live with her in America after having divorced Ramesh to save her daughter from getting aborted.

We can see how the institution of marriage has brought in a knot that cannot be loosened between the two sisters. The system of marriage has destroyed the lives of two ambitious girls. The security of a man that their mothers wanted for both the girls did not accomplish itself in either case. Although Anju had a man to support her, she was never happy and Sudha now will have to live under the care of a man who had a perfidious attitude towards her. Thus, like in the case of many other women, not only in India but across the world, Anju and Sudha were to bear the burden of marriage all through their lives.

Unlike Sudha and Anju, the chief heroine of *Daughter of Fortune*, Eliza Sommers, proves as a foil in certain respects. Banarjee has adroitly portrayed the stifling domestic set-up of a Bengali household, which she was familiar with to bring out the ways in which tradition and conventions vie to nurture a girl child with the sole purpose of a suitable alliance in the near future.

III. CONCLUSION

A traditional patriarchal marriage refuses to accept women’s worth and dignity. Any woman when gets trapped in such a situation and never being able to seek an outlet, naturally has to subside herself into the roles of wife and mother. She accepts her position passively with the passage of time and naturally becomes a being devoid of independence. She has to seek out help from her husband emotionally and economically. Her existence acquires no meaning when she is taken out of her entrusted roles. With the passage of time, she will consider it inevitable to instigate the notion in herself that her place is to be at the home. Her life will fade away into nothingness and she will be shackled in the chains of oppression.

According to Betty Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystique*, for over fifteen years in all the columns, books and articles by experts, women were told that their role was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers. They could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity.

On analysing the novel, *Sister of My Heart*, it becomes evident that the women characters in this novel especially Anjali, Basudha and Eliza are objectified for the sole purpose of marriage. Marriage is imposed upon these characters by their family as well as by the society. It is ironical that, this imposing of marriage is mostly done by the other women characters in the novel.

The protagonists of both these novels are girls of a highly aspiring nature. They hoped not to make a good wife or

mother out of their life but a good future. This desire of theirs however did not accomplish itself in its finality. Instances of how two ambitious girls are Anju and Sudha are clearly given in the novel. However, they were not able to surpass the stumbling block of marriage. Anju, to an extent, had tried to go after her dreams. That was the only aspect that added to her life a dint of happiness. The news that her life son would not be coming alive out of her womb was unbearable for her. What saved her from this inexplicable pain were her plans to go further in her studies as well as the presence of Sudha.

Sudha had also decided to start a boutique of her own in America and she had now with her, her daughter. However, the gift that their mothers had given them kept casting gloomy shadows over their lives. Sudha had struggled long because of her impotency and then when she got pregnant her mother-in-law wanted her to abort the child just because it was a girl. Even Ramesh, whom she thought had loved her, supported or rather kept submissive to his mother's wish. After escaping from her husband's home, Sudha tried to re-join with Ashok but she failed even in that. For Anju, Sudha was an added burden for two reasons. One, Sunil had an unnatural affection towards Sudha. Two, Sudha had her own child with her while Anju has still not completely escaped from the sorrow of her aborted child. These two factors, although seemingly simple, was enough to turn the lives of both of them miserable. Marriage has disastrously ruined the lives of both Anju and Sudha.

The failure that both Anju and Sudha had in their marital lives can be attributed to a weakness of mind when read against the comment made by Betty Freidan:

... the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off. (31)

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