



A DIASPORIC VIEW OF GENDER BIAS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S SISTER OF MY HEART

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ABSTRACT

Gender bias and female foeticide are the bane of the Indian society. There are many cases where would-be mothers are forced to abort their unborn daughters due to familial pressure. Boys are supposed to continue the lineage and therefore they are preferred to girls. And even more disgusting is the fact that educated Indians also indulge in gender bias. They do not mind aborting a female foetus if they can get a male child in the near future. This is because of the patriarchal system prevailing in the Indian society. But things are changing now. People have now begun to welcome the girl child too. It is this aspect of Indian society that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights in her novel "Sister of my Heart". At the same time she also shows how a single woman and a divorcee is not looked upon kindly in an Indian society through the character of Sudha. The novelist also seems to suggest that migration could be a means of overcoming gender bias. The present paper seeks to throw more light on these two aspects of Indian society as depicted in the novel "Sister of My Heart"

Key words, Male Child, Divorcee, Migrate, -Dox, Gender Bias Ortho.

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Female foeticide or killing of the girl child has been the bane of Indian society, despite the fact that there are stringent laws prohibiting sex-determination tests by hospitals. This is partly due to the bias against the girl child that is prevalent in the Indian society. India has a patriarchal society and because of this preference is given to the male child. The gender bias has entered into almost all aspects of Indian life and this bias begins from birth itself. If the birth of a male child is celebrated with the distribution of costly "pedhas", the birth of the girl child is celebrated with the distribution of "jelebis" which is comparatively a cheaper sweet.

In some families, boys are given more nutritious diet than girls, for, boys are supposed to continue the family line while girls are the property of someone else. However, it is gratifying to note that now voices are raised against female foeticide and gender bias by the progressive people of this country. This fact has been highlighted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel "Sister of My Heart" through two cousins Anju and Sudha.

Anju and Sudha are cousins. Anju is the daughter of Bijoy and Gouri Chatterji while Sudha is the daughter of Gopal and Nalini. Gopal is the illegitimate son of Bijoy's youngest uncle but this fact is known only to

Sudha. She learns about this fact towards the end of the novel. Gopal was supposed to be a relative of the family and was treated as one. Because of the fact that her father was the cause of Bijoy's death, Sudha was rather insecure. However, the girls are brought up with a lot of affection by the three mothers Pishi Ma, Gauri Ma and Nalini. Theirs is a conservative family and whenever the girls go out they are either escorted by the car driver Singhji who is really Gopal in incognito, or chaperoned by one or all of the older ladies. The girls are not allowed to socialise and they are Soverally punished when they dare to bunk school and watch a film. There was no freedom for them in this sense. They were not truant girls. They were quite obedient. But yet, they were punished for watching a film for it was not becoming of girls of decent families to watch films. Perhaps if they were two boys instead of girls, then the matters would have been rather linent.

This misadventure on the part of Anju and Sudha brings a premature end to Sudha's education and she is asked by her mother Nalini to learn household chores while Anju enters the portals of the college. Soon, time flies and the girls are married off. Anju is married to Sunil while Sudha is married to Ramesh Sanyal. Soon after her marriage Anju leaves, or rather migrates to America to join her husband Sunil who is working there. Sudha moves to Bardhamanpur the abode of her husband Ramesh Sanyal. Ramesh is the eldest of the three sons of Mrs Sanyal and is a mamma's boy. Mrs.Sanyal is rather strict and looks after the whole business.

The issue of gender bias comes to the fore when both Sudha and Anju get pregnant after a long wait. Mrs.Sanyal badly wanted Sudha to conceive because she felt slighted when a daughter-in-law of her relative that is her late husband's sister got pregnant rather early. She gets Sudha and Ramesh examined by a doctor and even asks them to visit the shrine of their family deity to get divine intervention. Sudha on her part wanted to be a mother and her mother-in-law was happy when she comes to know that her daughter-in-law is expecting. In the initial stages of her pregnancy, Mrs Sanyal treats Sudha with a lot of care. She instructs the servants to bring 'cha' or tea for her daughter-in-law. But as the pregnancy advances, Mrs Sanyal gets a sonography done and it is revealed that Sudha is carrying a female foetus in her womb, She is devastated because, according to her, the first child in the Sanyal family has to be a boy and not a girl. The Sanyal family has a long history of male progeny and she does not want Sudha to give birth to a girl. Sudha is happy that the child she is carrying is a female child and Anju has thought of a name also for her. She wants Sudha's daughter to be named as Dayita while she calls her son Prem Mrs. Sanyal fixes up an appointment with the doctor to get the child aborted without the knowledge of Sudha. Mrs.Sanyal wants Sudha to abort the child. Sudha is horrified and she turns to her husband Ramesh for help. Left to himself, Ramesh would have been happy with a girl. When his mother reminds him of all the hardships that she had gone through while bringing him up, he turns his back on Sudha. Knowing that she cannot depend on her husband for support, Sudha gets out of her husband's house with some money and jewelry and calls up Anju to discuss the issue. Anju is horrified at the idea of abortion and advises Sudha to go the mothers. She is sure that they will take care of Sudha. The mothers negotiate with Mrs Sanyal who is ready to accept Sudha an condition that she abort her child.

Sudha is unwilling and Ramesh divorces her. But the mothers support her. They decide to sell the old house and buy a flat in the city. They take care of Sudha and staying in the heart of the city makes them social. They go to the library and do charitable deeds. When Sudha finally delivers Dayita, they take care of the child. Thus, through the characters of the brave Sudha and the resourceful Anju, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shows how women can join hands and save the girl child. These women are progressive and they see no difference in the gender of the child. They are happy with the child, no matter what it is a girl or a boy. The mothers too, though orthodox realise the value of a human life and support Sudha. They even want her to marry Ashok, her previous lover who is willing to accept Sudha but without her daughter. He would want Dayita only to be a visitor in his house-a loving niece as he put it. Sudha wants nothing of it. She does not want to leave her daughter even though the mothers are more than willing to take care of Sudha's daughter.

The novelist, at this point brings out another aspect of gender bias in India. Even as a girlchild is not always welcome in India, the conservative society in India does not look kindly on a single woman-be it a spinster, a deserted woman or even a divorcee. This aspect is brought out again through the character of Sudha who is single and a divorcee. The Indian society accepts a single male. He can live alone. No one questions him. But a single woman is not allowed to live in peace. Society keeps pointing fingers at her even though it is not her fault. This painful experience is common for women in India, But in America, which is an open society, nobody looks down upon a single woman or a divorcee. She is given all the respect she deserves. Therefore, Anju suggests to Sudha that she migrate to America and set up her own boutique of her dreams and stand on her own legs and bring up her daughter Dayita. Initially, she could begin by stitching clothes for the Indian women and later on set up her own boutique and thus, she could lead a life of peace and dignity, to conclude, through. Thus, through the character of Anju, the novelist suggests that migration from a conservative society could be a means to overcome gender bias. When Anju writes about this to Sudha in a letter, Sudha initially does not take it seriously. But when she finds the vibes of Sarita Aunty too much to bear, she decides to migrate to America in search of a better future for herself and her daughter Dayita. Even otherwise, Sudha is forward looking and she is bold too. She does not think twice to reject her husband Ramesh and her former lover Ashok who do not want her daughter Dayita but want Sadba her. Hence, it is easy for her to think of migration for her peace of mind as well as a better future.

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