

From the pen of a poet who emerged on the literary scene in 1960 with his debut collection of poems, *The Splintered Mirror*, this well-integrated fictional work is a small wonder. It seeks not mere actuality but 'real reality'—*The rejection is not absolute but relative as the Zen teacher throws out a future teacher who is yet not ready, but does not rule out the coming of awareness.* It has the potential of setting a new trend in the Indian English literary world of today. During the 'turbulent decade', *Punjabiat* had been identified with terrorism, whereas in reality 'not to be terrorized' is the leitmotif of the Punjabi culture. This is

indeed the implied significance of this non-fictional novel.

Passage to Punjab emphasizes the narrator's personality and readability. The "first-person narrator-participant" is an actor in the development of the plot. This further narrows the perspective on events, because the narrator's own behaviour affects his interpretation of actions. On the contrary, "the third person voice" does not permit of any direct account of the inner states of the characters under observation, except in terms of surmise. Third-person narration, however, does not mean that the story is presented from a point of view

outside the fiction. Mitchell Leaska suggests that "perhaps the surest index to discovering the author's choice of vantage point is to consider the character on whom he focuses the reader's attention and on that character's relationship to the action of the story". In this novel Dr. Jog's voice is the narrative voice, besides its role in determining the point of view of the novelist. The narrative texture is further tightened as there is no gap between the duration of the events and the duration of the narrative.

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Rebirthing the Self Anew

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India. She lives in California and is a teacher of creative writing. *Sister of My Heart* is her third book, the previous two being the award winning collection of short stories, titled *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and the novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). As characteristic of many diasporic writers, Divakaruni continues to engage in her fictions with the country she has left behind. Yet, unlike those who shape their identity through a sense of exile and loss, Divakaruni's fictional reconstruction of typical Indian cultural realities offers valid alternative perspectives and the forging of a healing and liberating sense of self.

Sister of My Heart begins in India and ends in America, with the implication of another beginning. It has grown out of Divakaruni's short story entitled, *Ultrasound*. At the core of this conspicuously women centred novel is the author's deep feminist concern with Indian women whose lives are circumscribed by the prescriptions of traditional society. The plot revolves around its two narrators, Anjoo and Sudha who are cousins, born on the same day, in a conventional Indian, upper caste family in Calcutta. They are so close to each other that Anjoo calls Sudha her "other half. The sister of my

heart." Since their fathers were reportedly killed in an adventure "undertaken before their birth, they are brought up by their widowed mothers and aunt, whom they jointly consider as their "three mothers." The narrative technique of alternate chapters being devoted to Sudha and Anjoo's self-narration provides the intimate details of their emerging thoughts, emotions and desires during their childhood, adolescence and after marriage. The novel is divided into two parts. The first part ends with their marriages. The second part begins with Sudha in her marital home in rural Bengal and Anjoo moving shortly to America, to join her immigrant husband, Sunil. They keep in touch, with a close concern for each other, but their contrasting lifestyles begin to reflect the differences between the two cultures.

The first part of the novel introduces a questioning spotlight on certain aspects of Indian conventions, through an undercurrent of gentle sarcasm and humour. Among Sudha and Anjoo, Sudha is the beautiful and dutiful daughter whereas Anjoo is the intelligent one who wants a career in college. The ache for "something I wanted but didn't know a name for," had been with her from the start when she yearned to read books by Sylvia

● *Sister of My Heart*
● by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
● London: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 347.

● Plath and Kate Chopin with their "smell of distance, of new thinking." In her discussions with Sudha, she points out the absurdity of girls being brought up with so many restrictions, like "prize cows" for marriage. She laughs with Sudha about the prevalent notion of "Pati Param Guru" which means that "the husband is the supreme lord." She questions the relevance of the common blessing showered on brides, wishing for them "a hundred sons."

The novel explores the theme of survival through self-plot formation. We notice that as the plot unfolds, it gradually reveals the metaphoric rebirthing of "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" into the "Queen of Swords." Significantly, these are also the titles of the first and second parts of the novel and are derived from the stories connected to them. Divakaruni has meaningfully used the Indian tradition of storytelling by retelling these tales within the novel. Sudha finds a similarity between her own state of mind before marriage with that of the princess because of her innocent unawareness within a protected but restrictive environment. She likens her own falling in love with Ashok Ghosh, with the awakening of the princess by the prince. However, as the novel progresses, Sudha's life starts diverging

from that of the princess since various compulsions lead her to sacrifice her love and marry Ramesh Sanyal who is the suitable groom, selected for her by the "mothers". After marriage, Sudha would eventually change herself and be like the "Queen of Swords" but initially, she lives like an ordinary Indian wife who defines her sense of identity through her usefulness to her husband and in-laws. Meanwhile, in America, Anjoo is happily married to the man she loves but her life seems to her as a mixed package. She feels painfully cut off from her loved ones in India and at times, her hectic, lonely schedule makes her nostalgic for the cosy environment, back home. Yet, unlike Sudha, Anjoo has the freedom to control her own life, attend college and delay starting a family, according to convenience.

The underlying social critique in the novel surfaces more prominently while portraying a typical situation in Sudha's marriage. When she's unable to conceive for some years, the 'fault' is ascribed to her alone and she's dragged by her mother-in-law to various doctors as well as to the temple of Goddess Shashti who blesses childless women. It brings Sudha face to face with the harsh reality of the undervaluing of women in a large segment of traditional Indian society, unless they can produce children, particularly sons. When Sudha gets pregnant after her dexterous handling in persuading her husband to visit a doctor, there is a sea-change in her mother-in-law who starts pampering her. By now, Sudha has begun to feel the pinpricks of questioning about the hypocrisy of such caring. Interestingly, the story that starts fascinating Sudha at this stage is about the historical Indian queen of Jhansi, who valiantly protected her kingdom, in spite of tremendous odds and was called the "Queen of Swords." To Sudha, the queen becomes an inspiring symbol of bravery and courage and she retells the story in appropriate contexts so that it becomes a motif that enriches the feminist theme.

In recreating Indian social realities in this novel, the most important feminist issue that Divakaruni has brought up is

about the prevalent practice of the abortion of girl babies in the womb. When Sudha discovers after an amniocentesis test that she's expecting a healthy girl, her mother-in-law gives her the ultimatum that she must abort the child and try again for a boy. Sudha is horrified. She gets no support from her husband or even her own mother who mirrors a common response by expecting her to acquiesce rather than invite the social stigma of being a single mother. Then, Sudha phones Anjoo who helps her to see with clarity what she must do. The crisis situation in her life transforms Sudha who earlier used to just wait for things to happen to her. She takes her life into her own hands, leaves the deceptive security of wifedom and goes to her parental home. Her firm resolve to save her daughter moves the "mothers" to accept her.

In this novel, Divakaruni has illustrated how women can liberate themselves by reconsidering their conditioned attitudes and by supporting each other. Sudha's daring inspired by the threat to her unborn daughter compels the "mothers" to rethink and see clearly the anomalies in "society's tyrannical rules" which imply that '... its fine to kill a baby girl in her mother's womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child.' The "mothers" symbolically sell their old house and move into a more practical one with Sudha. Her daughter is born and is christened by Anjoo as Dayita, meaning Beloved. Although Sudha had been brought up believing that divorce is "the final disgrace for a woman, the final failure," when a divorce is forced upon her by her in-laws, she now views it differently, as a chance to start her life anew, without societally pre-ordained roles.

The novel celebrates the redeeming power of love and the sustaining bond of affection between women. All this time, Anjoo who is herself pregnant has been working at a job to earn the money for Sudha and Dayita's ticket to America. Anjoo's offer attracts Sudha because she realises that although America would have its own problems, it would give her the advantage of

anonymity where no one would look down on her, or her daughter. She would earn her living by collaborating with Anjoo to open a boutique for which she would design and stitch the clothes whereas Anjoo would handle the business end. It would be

A future built by women out of their own wits, their own hands.

A future where I lean on myself alone.

Sudha turns down two marriage offers from Ashok since she has begun to redefine her priorities. She realises that the attraction of tying her life to a man's whims again, is not so strong in her as the deep attachment she feels for her daughter and her sister. The novel ends on a note of hope with Sudha's arrival in America and the intimate and meaningful embrace between the two 'sisters' and the baby girl they would bring up together.

The protagonists are reunited in America but Divakaruni has shown how they draw their strength from the Indian heritage. Before leaving, Sudha had asked the "mothers" for blessings so that she may emulate the "Queen of Swords" and be able to "fight for myself and my child, no matter where I am." Earlier, when Anjoo was heartbroken due to losing her expected baby boy, through overworking herself, Sudha had been successful in bringing her out of her long apathy by narrating a spontaneous adaptation of the story of the queen, on the long-distance call to America. She tells another version of the same to her daughter, while on the plane to America, since 'it would be a tale to make her heart strong, to graft her life onto. For of all things in this world it seems to me that that is what women most need.

The novel is cleverly structured and both engagingly and powerfully recounted. It is the author's 'look back' at her own country in search of personal and cultural wholeness. She has raised pertinent feminist issues and suggested the possibility of a rebirthing of self and society through reappraisal.

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