

Exhilarating Emotional Intelligence in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Woman has no equation to balance her suffering bestowed on her through Patriarchal ties and her role in fulfilling the societal expectations. From a low this silent suffering and inexpressible agony, she has to reign through make her stand at the cross roads of life, disillusioned confused and bewildered. Though she refurbishes her disparate spirit by frowning her happiness, health, and slaves herself for the development of her family . . . the immediate thought that surface in the mind is a debatable question. Women, who own's you. It is the family, society or the self. (Prasanna Sree)

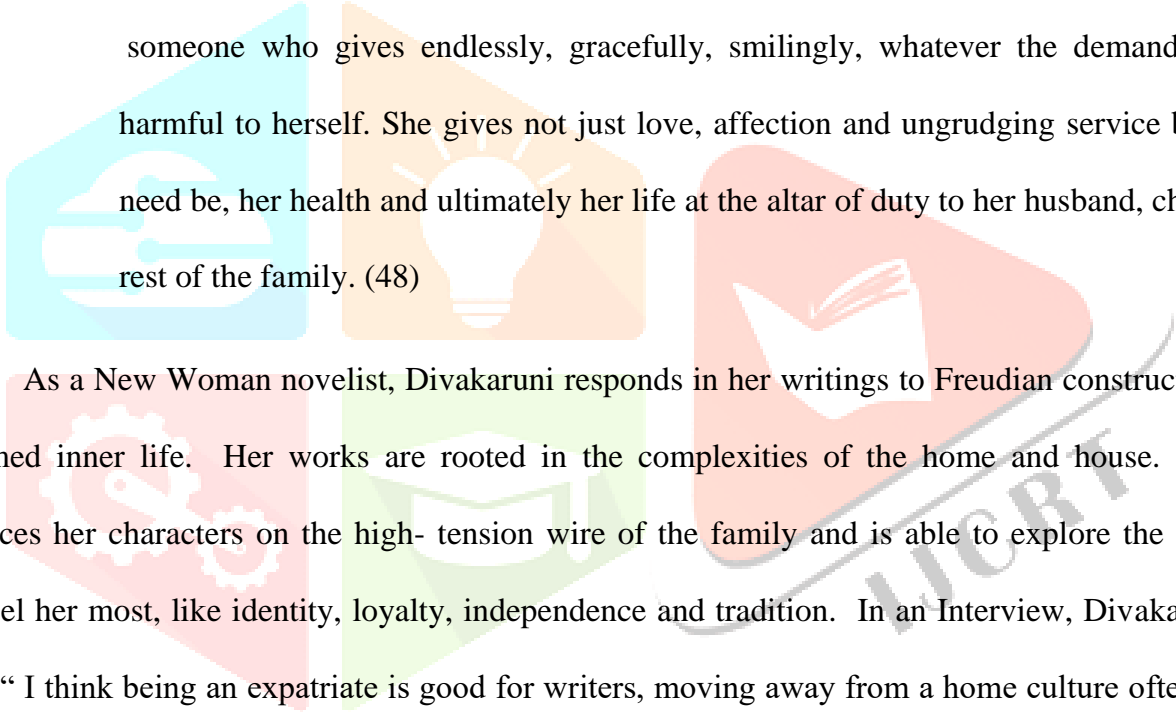
Women find comfort and solace in the bond with other women, mostly childhood friends and sisters. Yet, crucial differences among them are revealed. The writings in recent Indian English literature bother much about the bond with women having various emotional shades. They are aware of each other's needs, understandings and support. They care their inmates during critical times, and try to come together against male domination and tyranny.

Women support and enhance themselves up to the condition and the process through which they travel and reflect how the social situation determines a woman's thinking. Life is not a bed of roses, particularly for women. It is embedded with problems of their lives, which reflect the difference in the manner in which women of different generations respond to the dissatisfied desire. The gratitude of the bond of womanhood was socially accepted due to the rigid male-female compartmentalization. Bond between women emerges because of the growth of repeated relationship that traditionally carries on the inheritance of taking care and giving to others. Narula in her book, *South Asian Diaspora* suggests, "the dilemmas and the struggles of the South Asian Diaspora . . . as well as a need for the emotional security

provided by their own kind, induces them to stay in close clusters and effectively create islands within society, where they try to establish small replicas of their homeland” (14-15).

The present paper portrays the emotional crisis and conflicts which make the victims to cry and confide their inner strength. It also pictures the flowering of a new women in a conducive environment.

Divakaruni is one of the outstanding voices of the immigrant writers echoes the voice of the displaced. They derive strength from their roots. Yet, they suffer silently with almost loyalty to the society. An ideal woman constructs the society with her tradition, faith and myth. As Kishwar while answering to “*Indian Women’s Voices from Manushi*” says:



someone who gives endlessly, gracefully, smilingly, whatever the demand, however harmful to herself. She gives not just love, affection and ungrudging service but also, if need be, her health and ultimately her life at the altar of duty to her husband, children and rest of the family. (48)

As a New Woman novelist, Divakaruni responds in her writings to Freudian constructions of an untamed inner life. Her works are rooted in the complexities of the home and house. She finely balances her characters on the high-tension wire of the family and is able to explore the issues that compel her most, like identity, loyalty, independence and tradition. In an Interview, Divakaruni states thus, “I think being an expatriate is good for writers, moving away from a home culture often allows a kind of disjunctive perspective that is very important a slight sense of being the outsider, being out of place” (Web).

Divakaruni pictures the turmoils faced by her women characters, which resulted from frustration, reaches height and gets released gradually. In Deshpande’s novels women are all domesticated characters who revolt against the dogma-ridden society to find solutions for their emotional turmoil. This may be taken to mean that, as Pandey retaliates, “Deshpande converts a muted woman into a “talking woman” and provides the cause, will strength and means to articulate the silence of women.” (82). They echoes exhilaration when they experience emotional encounter.

The cousins in *Sister of My Heart*, consider themselves twins from the very early age, they were provided everything they needed from life, love, respect, and friendship from each other. Together they experienced the joys, pains, tales, and tiresome tasks that inevitably accompanied while growing up in a traditional Indian Bengali family in Calcutta. “Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother’s name: wicked daughters are firebrands scorching their family’s fame” (SH 23).

Divakaruni feels that the bond of womanhood as sisters is the longest relationship in one’s lifetime. The emotional portrayal of the two women at the heart of *Sister of My Heart* is narrated in an artistic manner. The characters’ inner and outer worlds that steer in rich emotional experiences which strengthen the bond of Anju and Sudha, who had learnt to make peace with the difficult choices, circumstances that have forced upon them. Anju and Sudha grow up and move on; they get into other relationships such as marriage that separated them for a period. However, that did not build any gap between them, even though they were dwelling in different places. As adolescents they spent together at times doing constructive activities such as music, art, sports, games and religious activities. Their familiarity and intimacy of the relationship helped them typically to know each other very well. Anju being greatly attached to Sudha says:

I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart.

I can tell Sudha everthing I feel and not have to explain any of it. She’ll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I’ll know she understands me perfectly.

Like no-one else in the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world will”.(24)

In many situations, they both come together and understand each other’s problems and dilemmas better than their mothers. Their relationship in adulthood was extremely close, psychologically close to each other that tend to be the way since their childhood. As they grew older, the nuns who run schools, identifies their closeness and says, it was not normal, it may exploit their development and they decide to put them in different class. Sudha cries:

“the nuns . . . were concerned at our closeness. It wasn’t normal, they said. It would stunt our development . . . all it did was make me sulk. And it made Sudha cry. At recess I would rush to meet her in the playground, feeling as though the morning had been a pillow held down over my face. When I saw her swollen eyes, rage burned my skin as if it had been rubbed with chilli powder and I’d want to kill someone. That’s when we started planning our escapes”. (SH 25- 26)

In their early childhood, three dominant characteristics of sentimental sisterhood relationship could be noticed. Initially, their interactions are emotionally charged and defined by strong, uninhibited emotions of positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent qualities. Secondly, their togetherness has been defined by such intimacy that they spent large amounts of time playing together; they knew each other very well. Finally, their acquaintance of intimacy has been translated into opportunities for providing emotional and influential support for one another:

All through childhood we bathed together and ate together, often from the same plate, feeding each other our favourite items: the crunchy brown triangles of parothas, fried egg plant, spongy – sweet rasogollah balls. Our favourite game was acting out the fairy tales pishi fold us, where Sudha was always the princess and I the prince who rescued her. (SH 25)

Both Sudha and Anju in all circumstances shared their emotions. Though this exchange of support is common between siblings who live far away as well as those who live next door to each other, it is happy to see them enjoying the bliss of their relationship. One can clearly understand that they may turn to one another for support when family circumstances would be difficult in future.

Moreover, Divakaruni presents the fact that the sentimental relationship will last for long, than any of human relationship in one’s life. The sister’s share a lifetime’s worth memories and gradation which is unique in her presentation. This exceptional knot remains to be the core of the novel as their affection for each other increasingly shapes the course of their lives. Anju who is strongly attached with Sudha feels deprived without her, so says:

But never Sudha. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart. I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She'll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I'll know she understands me perfectly.

Like on – one else in the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world does.

Like no – one else in the entire world will. (24)

Sudha and Anju have been sisters of the heart. They are bonded in ways even their mothers could not comprehend; the two girls grow into womanhood as if their fates, as well as their hearts are merged. When Anju sat for her wedding pooja, she feels suffocating being off from the sight of Sudha. She tries to search Sudha among the crowd:

I crane my neck to look for Sudha . . .

If I could just see Sudha's face, I would feel better . . .

it's as though a fog has drifted between our hearts. . . I told myself she was purposely distancing herself so that it wouldn't hurt her so much when we had to say goodbye.

(165-66)

Anju emotionally interfered into Sudha's problems by utilizing her wisdom. When Sudha's 'voice is heavy with unshed tears', after her return leaving her distorted marriage along with her daughter, Dayita, Anju's heart throbs for her. Thus:

Instead I slip an arm around Sudha and support Dayita cautiously with the other. Sudha places her arm under mine, so we're both holding Dayita up. If a passer-by who had the eyes to notice such things, looked at us, she would see that we've formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have travelled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonnas with child. (347)

The novel is emotionally painted about the extraordinary bond between two women in their jealousies, love and family histories. At a juncture, a threatening truth happens to tear them apart. Sudha knows the disturbing truth about the circumstances under which Sudha and Anju are born. It creates disturbance in her and tortures her with frightened thread through their childhood friendship and ultimately their sisterhood relationship. Sudha after learning the surprising truth, laments: “I don’t love myself. Now that I am, I see things differently. It will be safer for you this way, but will you be happy?”(145). When Sudha learnt the secret for the first time in their lives, the girls felt suspicion and distrust. Sudha feels agitated to share it with Anju.

In addition to it, the letter she received from Ashok adds her sorrow. She is severely sad by reading the letter. She has almost memorized the letter. This shows her innate love for Ashok. However, being more prosaic, she refuses his proposal and gets prepared to marry Ramesh, a boy of her family member’s choice. Then she hardens her heart of romance for Ashok. Her passion withers off and she reads the letter for the last time, and tears it off. Her emotion touches the peak of depression. The letter:

Sudha,

Did you believe I was going to be magnanimous, like the lovers in the old myths? Did you expect me to forgive you and wish you happiness with your new husband? Well, you are wrong. This is what I am going to wish for you: that you too will be let down by the one you love most. You too will be rejected for another. Your heart too will feel as though someone ground his boot heel into it. (146)

Sudha is madly in love with Ashok, but considering Anju’s life and future, she decides to avoid him. Assembling deep pain in her heart, she tears the letter into tiny pieces. She replies in sorrow, “Ashok, do you think my heart does not already know what that feels like?” (146).

She cries, “*Ashok, Ashok*, cries a receding echo in my heart” (131). She frantically wishes that as if wives of the heroes in the old tales, it would be nice if both can marry the same man. Yet, she feels happy that she gave up her wish for the sake of Anju. Sudha says:

Still, I am glad that I gave my wish to Anju.

On the breath-end of that wish, just as the star burns out, comes a startling thought. If only Anju and I, like the wives of the heroes in the old tales, could marry the same man, our Arjun, our Krishna, who would love and treasure us both, and keep us both together.

It is a ridiculous wish, maybe even immoral. (131)

Divakaruni's women characters encounter emotional torture. She has painted the story very cleverly without disturbing the love lace created by the sisters. Circumstances created a little emotional distance between the sisters, resulting in giving extra importance to the mistakes. Psychologists are of the view that one should develop the habit of forgiving others, which in turn makes one strong in relationship.

The character of Gaurima, Anju's mother not only takes the responsibility of Anju, but also takes the responsibility of her husband's cousin's family on her shoulders, after her husband's death. Sudha in few words brings out Gaurima's character:

Lines of hardship are etched around her mouth and on her forehead, for she was the one who shouldered the burden of keeping the family safe on that thunderclap day eight years ago when she received the news of our father's death. But her eyes, dark and endless – deep - they make me think of Kaldighi, the enormous lake behind the country mansion our family used to own before Anju and I were born. (SH 5)

The basic nature of woman is that she is emotional which is an essential element of her femininity. She experiences emotional disturbances due to various reasons. In the process of life, it is the selflessness of woman that emulates societal and family pressures that give rise to emotional turmoil. This chapter discusses the emotional upheavals and sentimental bond of Divakaruni's protagonists. The writers of today bring out the bond of their protagonists and try to resolve it in a best manner. According to Narula:

The themes and the concerns, the struggle of adjustments to a new ambience and a new world, the feeling of loneliness, of alienation, and of hostility are all experienced by any group of immigrants trying to establish their diaspora in a new place. If the expressions and the concerns of different minority groups differ, they do so in the cultural context of the individual diaspora with its own individual battles to fight, its own personal history to narrate, and with its own immediate needs to project. (30)

However, in Indian context, families help in bonding relationships. The new woman in Indian literature does not ever want to break the family but dreams of how to make it “Home sweet Home” (Web). If woman is absent, there is ultimately no life in this world. Yet, she is still walking on a tight rope to achieve her right and social justice.

Anju and Sudha’s mothers are living together with Pishi in the same house and the task of bringing up the two daughters is not an easy one. Nalini, Sudha’s mother is the typical traditional woman who allows herself to drift along in life, but Anju’s mother is not one to be cowed down by circumstances. She runs the bookstore and tries to provide the best kind of upbringing to the two girls born after their fathers had gone away from home. Bad health does not prevent her from doing her best for the girls. She wants them to be settled before she dies. She takes things on her own and unlike the rest of the society, she does not condemn the two daughters for the fact that they are born on the day of their father’s death.

Motherhood is difficult, but it is also satisfying. Sudha runs away from her in – law’s home because her motherhood is threatened when her mother-in-law wants her to abort her female foetus. For her child, she is ready to bear any amount of emotional stress, because motherhood compensates for all other issues in her life. Sudha having tried for a baby is disappointed and is desperate and says:

I felt motherhood was my final chance at happiness. Perhaps I believed it would give me back what wifehood had taken away or perhaps it is just that desire lies at the heart of human existence. When we turn away from one desire, we must find another to cleave to with all our strength- or else we die. (*SH* 183)

Echoes from the past cause emotional stress in the life of Anju and Sudha, the heroines who fight with their emotions as young girls because they both are born on the day of their father's death. Sudha could not forget the whispers she had heard umpteen times and her mind goes over the words she has overheard that Bidhata Purush doesnot come for "girls babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their father's to die even before they are born" (6). Sudha couldnot even tolerate the mocking they have to face in school from their classmates. The act of hiding the mystery of her father distracts her a lot. So, Sudha being unable to share with her cousin Anju, the family secret, carry the weight of it all through her life.

Sudha and Anju are more intimate than sisters are, and they share clothes, worries and dreams. Love is a major cause of emotional stress in women's lives. Sudha undergoes pressures and courtships, her loyalty towards her mother prevent her from succumbing to the temptations offered by love. She yields to get married to Ramesh rather than Ashok whom she loved. Sudha is unhappy with her condition, but she does not take any drastic step in life, lest it should have an evil effect on her family. She does not leave her home and come away because this could also put Anju's marriage at stake. This is very evident that she possesses a strong sentiment towards Anju and her family.

At every stage, love poses a problem for Sudha. Her falling in love during the school days deprives her of her freedom. She is not allowed to leave the house, not even for school. And when she is of marriageable age, she is of the belief that if Ashok really loves her, if he really wants to marry her, "he's got to make the first move" (SH 99). Anju finds it difficult to comprehend Sudha's stubbornness. Sudha who is madly in love with Ashok has an 'unfocussed look in her eyes', when it actually comes to standing against her mother's wishes. Sudha contrasts her life to the fairly tale dreams, where she is reused from monsters by the prince and "When in some place impervious to logic, she turned Ashok into the prince who has to save her from the cluthes of the wicked king" (100). It is very difficult to understand her psyche. She wants to spend her life with Ashok but being a fatherless child she cannot afford to take a sweeping step of getting married against her mother's desires. This is a major cause of

emotional distress for Sudha. She is bound by her own psyche and the Sita Savitri syndrome which tells her that it is wrong to go against her mother's wishes and make her unhappy.

Naline Ma, Sudha's mother finds suitable matches for Sudha in their own caste. When Sudha realizes this, it is too late for her to inform Ashok. They even make plans of secretly getting married, but her realization that eloping would have an adverse effect on Anju's lately fixed marriage to Sunil, prevents her from doing so. Sunil's father would never let him marry a girl whose cousin eloped with a man she met in a movie house. Considering all these consequences, she sentimentally avoids marrying Ashok, "Oh, why can't I just remain single? Why must I be yoked to a man like a cart to a buffalo?". . . *Ashok, Ashok*, cries a receding echo in my heart" (130-31).

Divakaruni's heroines face sentimental constraints, for they are unable to express themselves because of emotions. Sudha becomes strangely silent, particularly after marriage about her mother-in-laws behavior towards her. The letters she would write to Anju were as cheerful as ever, without any mention of her mother-in-law's accusations, for not being able to give her a grandson. Anju in whom Sudha always confided, wonders, "I could understand her not wanting to bad – mouth her mother –in – law, but why couldn't she have written to me of how she felt about not becoming pregnant? Together we would have grieved and raged and thought up a way of coping, as we used to do as girls" (191).

The protagonists of Divakaruni become even more silent after they are married. Anju follows her husband to America and grows stronger and more independent as she undergoes acculturation process, while Sudha whose marriage is unhappy stays in India but leaves her husband to raise her child on her own, thereby drawing cultural disapproval upon herself. Anju least bothers about her health and goes to work even in her last stage of her pregnancy. She stresses; "I *will* bring Sudha to America, whether you want it or not . . . 'Don't treat me like a child.' . . . I won't let you control me like your father controls your mother" (302). She grows more excited to welcome Sudha to the new world. She shouts in joy saying;" Sudha's coming, Sudha's coming! She'll be here in a week! I'm buffeted between joy and panic" (318).

Anju and Sudha are not carried away by emotions as the ancient women were. Later on, when Anju feels cheated by her husband she leaves him to lead an independent life; he regrets his infidelity and makes efforts to patch up with her. However, Anju remains unremitting. She does not return to seek refuge in her mother's home, nor is she carried away by her husband's desperate and persuasive efforts. She decides to seek out some independent path of survival and not break down.

Sudha too shows strength of character right from the beginning. She represses many of her desires for the sake of Anju, her mother and later for her child. She renders a selfless sacrifice. In the words of Sen, "Giving in charity is easy, practising *tapas* is easy but sacrificing life for others is very difficult" (105). She is married to Ramesh and is forced to strangle a large number of her wishes. When she comes to America and realizes that, she cannot fulfil her secret desires she goes away from Anju's home. And finally, she decides to return to India with her daughter. She also refuses to marry the men who are now ready to accept her along with her daughter so that she can bring up Dayita in a convent as freely as she wishes. She thinks, she will be able to escape the constraints of a life lived among family and community. Distancing them from the influence of the homeland, enables both Anju and Sudha to take a difficult decision of leading an independent life.

As women, the protagonists face emotional constraints, but they prefer to remain silent about their condition. In the case of Divakaruni, the silence leads to separation. Sudha, who is silent, makes compromise after compromise, and when she should have spoken, remained silent and asserted herself. Sudha is emotionally distressed because of lapsed communication, inarticulate love and redemptive memories. Sudha remains silent for her love towards Ashok because she is aware that it would affect Anju's marriage. She remains mute before her mother-in-law's inscrutable actions. She carries out her duties of running the household without questioning anything the way her mother-in-law wants. She is even voiceless when she is asked to undergo various tests because she could not get pregnant in three years of her marriage. However, she and her mother-in-law know that the problem lies in her husband and not in her.

To recognize Sudha's character clearly, it would be indeed fascinating to watch the unveiling faces of woman in Indian literature. Ancient Indian literature has an aesthetic vision and it goes beyond the hard reality of socio-economic facts. In ancient literature, Sita the heroine of the great epic *Ramayana*, and wife of Rama was the embodied form of love, devotion and purity. Thereby, Sudha is a pure embodiment of true love and affection. Self-awareness and self-regulation motivates them to control their emotions at times.

Divakaruni expectantly record and reflect a very broad spectrum of life. It is very interesting to note that as she explore her women expatriates personality they recreate and reconstruct a new world of their own. The changing time and world scenario consider women as an ideologist. Divakaruni hopefully visualizes the dawn of the new era for women. As a new womanist, she has allowed a conducive environment for the flowering of a new woman with a difference.

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