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CHITRA BANERJEE :
THE MODERNIST WITH A CLASSIC TOUCH



N. V. Siva Kumari

INTRODUCTION

One of Chitra Banerjee's strengths as a novelist is her ability to create strong characters with varied degrees of complexity and intensity, the themes in her novels as such certainly have less prominence. In an e-mail interview about "Oleander Girl " she was asked whether there are man - women conflicts in her novels and she answers that there are conflicts between characters. This is a very honest and interesting reply as nowhere in her fiction we come across direct gender war as any subtle innuendoes regarding masculine perfidy. Her fiction gains enormously because of this absence of an element which was driven into a state of frenzy by some voices of irate women writers and where it lacks the energy it ends up being a cliché. Chitra Banerjee's work thankfully does not run into this mode and she depicts the conflicts between characters with a depth of concentration that is seen in classic novelists like Dickens and Hardy. On her novel "Sister of My Heart" and its sequel "The Vine of Desire" Chitra Banerjee creates such conflicts between two cousins Sudha and Anju. The space she has over

ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee has carved out a niche for herself among women novelists dealing with the Indian diaspora. Particularly impressive is her special ability to deal with the exotica of the New World without losing the nostalgic aura of her native land. This article attempts to trace the nuances of her characterization and her ability to make dramatic juxtaposition of conflicting personalities.

KEYWORDS : niche diaspora exotica aura juxtaposition conflicting .

Short Profile

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the two novels – and the passage of time from childhood ideally suits her purpose and gives her ample scope to develop the characters.

The two main characters are Anjali and Basudha, the two sisters whose bond proves to be the strongest and most enduring of all the relationships they have. The names Anjali and Basudha have symbolic significance. Anjali means submissiveness and

offering while Sudha stands for love, patience and eternal sweetness. The characters themselves present a contrast to what the names suggest. Anjali is an emotional, strong willed person who is not afraid of going against the conventional norms of the family or the society. Sudha appears to be a more gentle and soft tempered girl and who enjoys the confidence and acceptance of her peers as well as family members. She is considered the Ideal Indian woman exemplifying all the virtues a traditional house wife should possess. She lives under this façade most of the time and even lives her attitudes, actions and desires to suit

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this image. While her inaction is misconstrued by the world as a virtue, she opts to continue to be secure in that assumption. Thus at one level Anju is sincere as all her feelings are translated into actions. She suffers more as she aspires, experiences and endures a lot more than her sister. Desire for her is an aspiration, a dream, - and then a fulfillment or a disappointment. With her propensity to commit herself and get involved she offers fate a number of opportunities to disturb her applecart. (Nadia)(1)

The two novels can be viewed as two phases in the lives of the sisters, how their tender relationships go through the sterner tests of life, how they come through an excruciating circumstance that shatters their hopes and beliefs. They learn that life does not conform, sometimes it transforms but never deforms. *Sister of My Heart* projects the adolescent sisters dominated by love and affection and the gradual changes that occur with the advent of youth and its aspirations. The strong bond of friendship between the two sisters is lit by a barrage of self-love, vanity and ambition. This leads to envy and results in actions dominated by hidden or open selfish motives. Behind the façade of their beautiful relationship are a number of instincts and passions that can rip their relationship to tatters. But the two sisters never open up and time and again they face a crisis on a personal level or refrain from revealing it to the extent it might cause an open breach in their relationship. Chitra Banerjee's work appears to uphold that after all the experiences are lived through-it's always 'character' that emerges as the lasting quintessence of life.

The story revolves around the three major protagonists – Sudha, the introvert, Anju – the extrovert and Sunil – the materialist. In their attitude too we can discern a similar dichotomy. Anju is self – effacing and strains for the happiness of others, particularly her sister. Sudha appears to be an innocent, simple minded girl, but she has greater self – concern than Anju. She

enjoys the support of the three mothers and the men who are in love with her, and above all she has the unflinching trust of her sister, Anju. Despite all these people's support, Sudha feels a great insecurity. That sense of insecurity is the main component of all her experiences and she would sacrifice anyone on anything to ensure that she can get that feeling of security. However, her character seems more complex as she also enjoys the gratification of her desires – preferably secretly and only as long as they are kept secret. She likes to be unnoticed and the moment she faces or feels that she may face any disapproval from society, she would rather abandon that person, relationship or idea. Thus desire for her is subject to social security and community approval. This ubiquitous, underlying and often unnoticed streak in her character would actually translate into selfishness and a major motivation behind all her actions or inactions. It also shows her character in another light – that with all these attitudes and temperament. She also proves time and again that she is a great survivor. A woman bestowed with an average mind and temperament but extra ordinary beauty – and one who accepts and enjoys all the advantages that accompany the favorable views of the world. This is in sharp contrast to her sister Anju who lives and speaks what she likes and believes and often gets into trouble because the world would not approve of her views and actions. Love or desire for her have no meaning unless they uphold her beliefs and honor her feelings. Any violation is viewed very seriously and results in a break and rejection of the relationship.

At the end Anju may have a lot of self - esteem but she also gets the disapproval of the people around her and its painful consequences. As a result she gets isolated and has to spend a life full of struggles – a struggle against a hostile society and also a secret struggle to bear the disappointment of her warring aspirations. It is an irony that much is

made of Sudha's fortitude to live through the life of a divorce in the Indian society. But it is Anju who faces much greater challenge, as throughout her life she faces insults, rejections, deceptions and breaches of trust. The real tragedy of her life is that her best friend has an affair with her husband and in one cruel stroke of fate she is deprived of her marital bliss as well as her most cherished relationship in her life. It is this aspect of her work that suddenly raises Chitra Banerjee's work to classic dimensions. The plight of Anju is like that of Pip in "Great Expectations". The loneliness and anguish that rip her soul apart also make her learn the bitterness of suffering and the poignant manner in which one has to live through an experience moment by moment. For Anju love and desire are no more the conventional clichés. They are never defined in a way physical sensations can be accounted for. They have to do more with dreams and aspirations and the colossal sense of loss that the disillusionment results in. Here we meet a heart that dares and the acute loneliness to which it is condemned after the traumatic events.

In retrospect, Sudha's experience is of an altogether different dimension. Love and desire do not constitute the most important part in her life. This may be principally because they do not have any passionate or obsessive all-consuming nature as depicted in her life. The other important aspect in the case of Sudha is her character and attitude which point to a different personality. Desire, ambition and aspiration, for her do not constitute the motivational drive and force that defines the path of her life. Also she does not act or take the important decisions of her life on her own volition. It was the mothers or Anju who have been responsible for the major decisions of Sudha's life. She is in love with Ashok but sacrifices her love when mothers decide against it. There is no noticeable impact on her and she soon reconciles herself to the situation. In certain situations where she has a definite preference for a course of action, she still seeks the support of someone else to act. It is not clear

whether she lacks the confidence to act or she does not prefer to take responsibility for her actions. This vagueness always hovers around her character. Both love and desire then are not the dominant issues in her life and Sudha is the conventional Indian woman pushed into the U.S by circumstances. Finally when Anju recedes into a trauma Sudha feels morally responsible for her deplorable fate and takes a decision to stick by her. This is perhaps an of the very few occasions when Sudha acts decisively on her own. She partly exonerates herself with this move while most of her actions or silenced are hidden beneath a façade of vagueness. Sudha is one of those lucky persons who enjoy an eternal benefit of the doubt.

The main difference between them is their temperament. Anju is emotional, dominant, but has always considered what is best for Sudha. Her adoration for 'Sudha' thus always remains with her as a lasting emotion. Sudha a quieter and more docile person always acts according to what the society expects or demands of her. Anju has no permanent position in her heart – she is influenced by many people – never takes a decision on her own – lets things drift and accepts them mutely without protesting. Except in the case of Sanyals and Ashok – when she did act against their will – against is not entirely on her volition. There is the encouragement or instigation on the part of the mothers or Anju. Hence there is an 'enigmatic' side to Sudha's character – and there are not enough clues to understand her. Her attitude to all other characters displays certain indifference. She is not as badly affected as Anju. First the situation where she had to sacrifice her love for Ashok. It appears not to have noticeable impact on her then the marriage to Ramesh and the inhuman though common demand of the Sanyals regarding the female child. Though she decides to have the child – it is not clear to what extent it was her own decision. When Ashok wants her to leave the child with the mothers, she opposes it – and this is probably the only

occasion in her life when she appears decisive. Also if we examine closely these three important phases in her life, we notice an alarming lack of concern be it for others or for herself. She also impresses one as a girl who needs someone as a support who seeks to be 'Secure; rather than happy.

Does Sudha reciprocate Anju's affection? If we search for instances, we may find very few, "Divakaruni's talent and originality lie in her ability to discover basic emotional motifs beneath the flashy 'exotica' of Indian and American life styles". The diaspora of her novels is not a mere superimposition or a thematic or conceptual appendage. It is a passage that points and leads to universal values it is a stage on which an emotional drama is played out – a drama that draws exclusively from the native experiences, beliefs and attitudes of the main characters, the two sisters Anju and Sudha. Chitra Banerje, the artist waves a rich and complex web of their pleasant experiences and their native beliefs and intuitions. They are torn apart by strong passions, love and desire and the lives of the two cousins are totally devastated. Their relationship is put to the sternest test by Sudha's dubious involvement with her sister's husband

That should be enough to destroy the magic relationship of the two cousins. Either of them could have taken a step that would have easily pushed them to a point of no return

A lot of readers did not like the sequel "The vine of Desire". In the words of Nautilus, one such reader: " I absolutely loved "Sister of My Heart"... so when the sequel "The vine of Desire" came out I had to get it SMH ended so abruptly.... I needed to know what happened to Anju and Sudha. But it was a huge disappointment! Now unfortunately, I find it hard to disassociate "sister of My Heart" with "The vine of Desire!!!" the same sentiment is shared by a majority of other readers too for Sister of My Heart is "exceptionally moving, dramatic and exquisitely rendered" and it is about the "extraordinary bond between two women". One may conclude from

this evidence that Chitra Banerjee could weave a Dickens like fictional world of sentiments and the readers would naturally love to see the two sisters live in harmony and continue their magic bond transforming it into an external bond. Hence it is disappointing to them to see the two cousins trapped in a maze of inescapable situations.

But Chitra Banerjee uses a great ploy, and The Vine of desire turns out to be a master piece in which all her skills as a novelist come to the fore. The two sisters do emerge out of the crisis and though they do not lap up a conventional happy ending. They do show a lot of poise in dealing with the situation. Love and desire cannot carry them to the end nor are they the only concerns in life it is here that Chitra Banerjee shows a lot of maturity and the sequel focuses on a different technique in "The vine of Desire" and there is a marked change in the pace of the novel. The two sisters, despite their drifting through testing circumstances, display great endurance and hold up their self – integrity by consistently doing "proper things rather than acting just for fun and frolic". Sudha shows admirable courage of conviction in saving her girl child even if it cost her marital relationship as well as a proposed reunion with her ex – suitor. Similarly, when she is faced with the plight of a completely broken and distraught Anju, she fights and overcomes her own temptations and weaknesses and the way she acts shows great wisdom and propriety and reflects the strength of her conscience. The two cousins are striking examples of Chitra Banerjee's most carefully etched characterization. She casts them as individuals who fight the circumstances and their desires and finally stand by what they believe.

While Anju seeks solutions through her firm decision – making, Sudha tries to do the same by delaying or withholding action – and confining her actions to damage prevention. Their unfailing affiliation to their bond of affection and empathy thus supersedes the earthly drives of passion and desire. The

understanding that the cousin's show is implicit, spontaneous and unfailing and never premeditated.

However neither of the sisters idealizes life nor tries to replace reality with imaginary constructs. Love and Desire for them are passions at best – but never obsessions that override and obstruct their normal course of life. The most critical times they face are not fraught with any deeprooted feelings or convictions nor do they result in or lead to circumstances of great tragic magnitude. The circumstances they fond themselves in may be unfortunate but are common in a society which is not governed by romantic idealism or rigorous standards of social and personal ethics. Most of them are replaced by an economy -driven Darwinian society with different set of ideals of a success driven money-centered generation. The three characters are separated but the separation does not lead to such suffering that can devastate their lives. The frustrations, the humiliations or the anguish are individual – and the magnitude is determined and depends on their individual character and temperament. The bonds that exist between them are different from those that existed between a Pip and Estalla or a Joe. Nor are the bonds overweighed by an inseperable feeling of morbidly painful and self – destructive passions that existed between Jude and sue (Jude the obscure- Hardy). Thus in *The Vine of Desire* we recognize strong trends to reject conventional notions, but these do not lead to or result in establishing an alternate reality as in the case with the modernists. Neither Anju nor Sudha ever show either a desire or make a strong attempt to rebel against those unpleasant conditions. Chitra Banerjee's vision goes beyond that and we find *The Vine of Desire* incorporating simultaneously a contemporary and contradictory world. (MaCEwan *The State of fiction*, a symposium). Hence the aspirations of the childhood co exist with the poignant agony the adult world, never as fresh as earlier, but only as a hidden, subdued feeling that would survive and out last the rigors

of time. There is no overt celebration of this fact, no melodramatic Scenes where their friend ship is hailed. But the triumph of their feelings is conveyed through one of the most subtle under – statements in the novel.

It is a quiet but firm decision of Sudha to reject the insistent moves of Sunil, because a lot depended on that decision. Not in forms of consequences for the three chief characters, for the disappointment or the tragic outcome are not the main theme of *The Vine of Desire*. It is not as if she struggles to make up her mind and fight against her temptations. She has the Frankness to admit her own faults as far as their affair is concerned. It is this aspect of Sudha's character that stands out and shines through an otherwise down and dismal circumstances. If they had idealized their relationship as children or lapped up a venue of unquestioning make - believe. The realities of life do not perturb her as they do Anju who under goes a great disillusionment. Also her expectations are far greater than those of Sudha and hence her disappointments too outnumber those of Sudha. The novel does not end with the usual misunderstanding and were physical separation. A number of renders felt it was boring and nothing happens or nothing precipitates on the expected lines. Yet there is intense action of a different type at the mental plane.

Initially, Anju and Sudha have deluded themselves and were living in a land of dreams – Some their own, and some conjured with the active connivance of Phisti. But circumstance arising out of their marriages awakened them from the magic spell that lasted through their childhood. They hoped to revive that relationship once they come together in America but very soon they learn it is never the same – and the complexities of adult life present an altogether new reality. Their bond was tested to the core and neither their trust in their relationship, nor their love for each other could face up to the bitter realities they confronted

during this phase. They watch the imaginative glory fade into the defective reality. The imaginative glory of their relationship faded away and slowly a new world of 'defective realities' emerged making their agony two-fold, on the agony of what they had to endure, and the other the more painful agony of living with shattered dreams.

Sudha's rejection of Sunil and her desperate attempt to escape from the feeling of guilt towards The Sister of Her Heart, to make amends – are all attempts to exonerate herself, to escape the dreaded Feeling of being so treacherously unfaithful can only make a difference to the others. But to both the sisters the magical bond can now be revisited in nostalgia and is a thing of the past. Even the turbulent times they had in America – have also been relegated as past incidents – and the three characters have chosen to live apart. Sudha returns to India and would devote her time to bringing up her child. Sunil, the incorrigible Fortune-hunter would continue in his quest for the elusive lady of his taste. Anju, who had to undergo the toughest ordeal of the three is the one who is really freed from all the bonds. She is left all alone, having lost her best friend and her husband and more importantly the trust she has placed in human beings. Her state of mind is beautifully presented in the famous reunion scene where she 'suddenly cannot remember what Sudha looks like – and her cousin's hands resemble a lotus' – something that depends on the things external to it. No fragrance to attract, no exuberant petals to extend its beauty, no thorns to protect itself. The world of romance which has always allured her the most faded away leading them into a world of 'defective realities' and now that too has disappeared. So much so that even the presence of Sudha could not revive those times. Anju tells herself; its like a dream I had last night. What does it matter whether it was a good dream or bad dream? Neither kind is going to help me' This is one of the most emphatic rejections of the past faith, and through

out the meeting there is no relentment or aberration, no sentimental attempts to gulp in the bitterness of the experience, no self-deception or pretence, to say every thing is as before, no attempts to romanticize the glaring inconsistencies and the insipid ruts into which their relationship has driven them. The contradictions are there and they have come to stay – and whatever dreams they had in the earlier times are just not there since only Sudha and Anju believe these dreams. The effects of disillusionment too leave been exclusively borne by them.

The gap between reality and Anju's perception of the same widens – and she begins to replace one with the other she begins to live with 'alternate reality' and all those surrounding her reiterate it so much so that the 'romantic idea' gathers momentum and overshadows the actual reality. Hence the 'magical bond' between the cousins has a powerful presence in their lives and influences each of them in a distinctly different way. In Sister of My Heart we come across a three-layered reality with the main characters living through all of them. Their reactions to each other and to the circumstances together produce a rich interlaced narrative texture which attracts critical attention from multiple points of view. The major events of the two novels fall into four phases – the childhood days of the girls where the myth of the magic bond is strong, the youthful phase where their relationship encounters some contradictions, their sojourn in the U.S where they go through a traumatic experience that changes the course of their lives. It is her life and all her dreams crumble. Sudha too despite her best efforts, falls a prey to Sunil's seduction and more shockingly learns that she was equally to blame for it. Here they encounter more contradictions as the whole world of myth the cousins have built around their relationship slowly crumbles. Then in the final phase the principal characters set foot on a new reality and ironically they choose a path

that reflects their character. Sudha decided to spend the rest of her life in India looking after her child Daitya. Anju lives a totally independent life as she is the only character, which is freed from all the bonds and has severed her links with them. Sunil may still try to impress Sudha to change her mind and that way though he is physically separated from the two cousins they still have an important part to play in his life. Anju refuses to accept any assistance from Sunil. Her hatred and rejection of Sunil were so complete that she cannot stand his presence any more. She takes interest in sky-gliding which is an open invitation to the future and cut off all her bonds with the past. The final meeting between the two cousins perfectly reflects their apprehensions. Sudha is hesitant as she wishes and hopes Anju will forgive her, that fluttering ray of faint hope and longing that everything would be as they ever were. But from Anju's side there is no mistake – the past is cut off and Sudha is now left with only a scar which would never remind her of the wound. She had made up her mind – and now she recognizes everyone for what they are – no more delusions – hence the sky gliding – moving into empty space and leaving behind no shadows or no traces. This is also reflected in her words to Sudha : “I tell myself that it's like a dream I had last night. What does it matter whether it is a good dream or a bad dream? Neither kind is going to help me” Coming from Anju, this is so different and significant. She who had always put the interests of others ahead of her own, for once thinks very clearly and the few words she speaks to Sudha from the thematic essence of the novel “The Vine of Desire”. Anju's words about the future and very significant too. They show a clear transformation in her – and a well – tempered mature, and battle-hardened Anju welcomes life and accepts her fate on a heroic note. “It would be a fine and to keep going like this, into the light!”. A very confident and clear-sighted thought to begin a new journey. It is immensely gratifying that Chitra Banerjee does not settle for a conventional ending. By portraying Anju as a person moving with the

times she has added a new dimension to “The Vine of Desire” from a romantic view in *The Sister of My Heart*. She has moved on to a post modern view in the second novel. Anju recognizes and accepts the contradictions that life and society have on offer she does not revolt against them – as we were made to believe in the first part; nor does she break down under the stress of life like some characters in late - Victorian fiction. She withstands all the disappointments and emerges victorious after prolonged struggles. She learns that there is no happy end to life nor is there a tragic end – it goes on. Life is an experience without an end – and the best way to live would be to experience and welcome every second of it. And as Anju puts it aptly one should keep going. It is very heartening to see Anju come through all the ordeals and finally make a bold statement like that. Now Anju is ready to experience and accept the world that lay beyond love and desire.

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