

Incorporating Folklore into the Framework of Contemporary Life in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a celebrated and prolific postcolonial, diasporic woman writer of Indian origin and settled in America, repeatedly returns to folklore of her native Bengali culture in her works. The purpose of this research paper is to highlight and examine the incorporation of Bengali folklore in the writer's second novel, Sister of My Heart. She interweaves into the fabric of the novel various Bengali folk tales, myths, rituals, customs, folk gods and goddesses, proverbs, superstitions, etc. These devices help Divakaruni in fulfilling her objective of reclaiming her native traditions as an act of resistance and self-affirmation against the colonial past. Divakaruni's objective in incorporating aspects of the native culture of those separated from their homes due to one reason or the other is to recover and re-create their lost home and culture, to re-establish their identity. Most importantly, this act of looking back also serves the writer's aim of depicting the genuine exuberance and power of her native culture against the dominant western culture. Moreover, it also becomes a strategy to expose the patriarchal agenda of the society by revealing the gender stereotypes and deconstructing the myths circulated through the community's folklore.

Keywords: *folklore, folk tales, rituals, proverbs, stereotypes, tradition.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known postcolonial, diasporic woman writer who was born in Kolkata, Bengal, in India but migrated to America at the age of nineteen. This shift turned out to be the most challenging experience of her life and made her into one of the most prolific writers. Divakaruni repeatedly harks back to her past, to the folklore of her indigenous Bengali culture in all her works. This retrospection is best depicted in her

second novel, *Sister of My Heart*. The novel incorporates several aspects of Bengali folklore — its myths, folk and fairy tales, rituals, customs, folk gods and goddesses, proverbs, superstitions, etc. These elements, an integral part of the writer's childhood and early youth, significantly shaped her consciousness. In all her works too, it can be observed how these aspects of the native culture shape the psyche of the characters. Therefore, they are not merely for the aesthetic enhancement of the text but play a crucial role in the plot.

As a postcolonial writer, Divakaruni's reason for returning to her past is to reclaim those national as well as local traditions of her Indian, Bengali heritage that had been debased and marginalized under the British colonization. Her works highlight the experiences of the marginalized so as to revive a collective communal memory among the Indian community. This radical act indicates resistance and affirmation of the 'self' against the colonizers and is a means to dissolve boundaries between 'them' and 'others.' As a diasporic writer, Divakaruni's objective in incorporating aspects of the native culture of those separated from their homes due to one reason or the other is to re-create their lost home and culture and to re-establish their identity. It also serves the writer's intention of depicting the genuine exuberance and power of her native culture. PatitPaban Mishra rightly states that the writings of Indian diasporic writers "address Asian Indian Americans' place of birth and country of residence and often describe life in the folkloric tradition of India" (53). As a woman writer, however, Divakaruni's aim in alluding to her Indian Bengali heritage is to investigate and interrogate the patriarchal attitude of her culture. Sam Naidu is of the view that South Asian Diaspora writers often allude to "deities, local legend, ancient myths, Hindu or Islamic scriptures or musical traditions" of their native culture. These elements in her opinion have an "etiological or ethnographic value, and they reveal the tentacles that tie South Asian women to their cultural origins" (382).

The aim of this paper is to highlight several aspects of Bengali folklore as illustrated in *Sister of My Heart* and to reveal the richness of Bengali culture. At the same time, the paper will bring to the forefront, from feminist perspective, the covert patriarchal intentions of Bengali community and the stereotypes circulated through its folklore.

Folklore includes conventional knowledge and beliefs that are disseminated mainly orally among generations. These aspects shape the identity of the folk group that shares them. Folklore comprises of things, ideas, beliefs, manners and ways that people inherit and continue to believe in, do, know, make, and say. Myths, folktales, rituals, proverbs, poems, songs, humorous anecdotes, jokes, etc. shared by a community make the folklore of that community. Roger D. Abrahams, an American folklorist has given a detailed meaning of the term in his paper "Folklore." He says:

The term folklore commonly refers to ways of talking, interacting, and

performing, including traditional types of everyday expressions such as proverbs, prayers, curses, jokes, riddles, superstitions (or to use the more neutral term, statements of belief), tales and songs. The term also embraces numerous types of story – anecdotes, testimonies, reminiscences – that emerge on both casual and ceremonial occasions. Folklore forms thus range from the short and economical devices employed in everyday interactions to the larger expressive genres, like songs and sermons, which are commonly called forth on special occasions. However, folklore also refers to games, rituals, festivals, foods, health practices and beliefs, traditional crafts, and occupations. It encompasses work forms, serious as well as recreational, and draws from material as well as expressive culture. (370-71)

Another prominent American folklorist, Alun Dundes uses the term ‘folk’ to refer to any group (theoretically consisting of more than two people) of people that share at least one common factor like occupation, ethnicity, religion, etc. By the term ‘lore’ he means the body of knowledge that is traditional in nature. American Professors, Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens have expressed the impossibility of describing folklore in brief. They opine:

Yes, folklore is folk songs and legends. It’s also quilts, Boy Scout badges, high school marching band initiations, jokes . . . nicknames, holiday food . . . and many other things you might or might not expect. Folklore is present in many kinds of informal communication, whether verbal (oral and written texts), customary (behavior, rituals) or material (physical objects). It involves traditions, ways of thinking and behaving. It’s about art. It’s about people and the way people learn. It helps us learn who we are and how to make meaning in the world around us. (1-2)

Folklore of a culture performs a pivotal role of releasing people’s frustrations, anxieties and fears imbued by the rigid attitude of the society. Traditional activities like storytelling provide an escape from the difficult reality by transporting the listener to the world of fantasy. It helps both children and adults in facing challenging tasks in their lives, is a means of entertainment, comfort and a source of immense knowledge. However, at the same time, some forms of folklore also play a role in reinforcing patriarchal structure by spreading stereotypical beliefs based on gender and images about female behaviour and roles.

Sister of My Heart is a story about two distant cousins Anjali (Anju) and Basudha (Sudha) and the unique bond that they share. The cousins are born and brought up in a conventional Bengali family of the Chatterjees and lead a restricted but considerably happy life under the loving yet strict protection of their three mothers, Gouri (Anju’s mother), Nalini (Sudha’s mother) and Abha Pishi (Anju’s paternal aunt). The novel follows the life journey of

the sisters from young girls who have been schooled by gender stereotypes and representations of women promoted through folklore, to women who begin to understand their true selves, thus acquiring freedom from the shackles of patriarchy and attaining personal happiness by drawing strength from the same folk aspects of their native Bengali culture. After straddling the traditional Indian value system adhered to by their mothers and the more contemporary western lifestyle, the girls eventually find a balance between the two lifestyles. C. Bharathi and S. Kalamani state about the novel:

Sister of My Heart opens with the Chatterjee family already deprived of its male figures and its former economic status. As the three widows (Pishi Ma, the cousin's paternal aunt, and their mothers) and two young girls (Anju and Sudha) of this family meander their way through the drama of life, facing marriage, motherhood, divorce, widowhood, etc., each stage brings into focus a certain aspect of the upper-class Bengali culture and tradition, which is cherished or criticized from the uniquely feminine and diasporic perspective of the author.

One of the most important parts of folklore of any culture is its folk and fairy tales. Folk and fairy tales occupy a special place in Indian folklore and the traditional activity of storytelling has played an intrinsic role in shaping the Indian consciousness by inculcating beliefs, values and ethics among children. K. D. Upadhyaya in his article, "A General Survey of Indian Folk Tales" is right in saying that:

India occupies an important place in the history of world folklore. Especially in the field of folktales and fables she has played the part of the mother country. Indian fables have influenced the entire folktale literature of the western world. (181)

The impact of stories on the psyche of the characters can be observed throughout the novel. The fact that *Sister of My Heart* is divided into two books that are named after the two stories that dominate the text is a proof of their power. The first part entitled, "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" is a fairy tale about a princess leading a happy yet restricted life in an underwater palace with her serpent friends until a prince comes by and informs her about the enticing outside world. He frees her from "sameness, from too much safety" and makes her recognize her own beauty (SMH 102). The second book entitled "The Queen of Swords" is named after and inspired from the famous legend of the queen of Jhansi, Rani Laxmibai. This tale is about a queen who bravely fights to protect her unborn daughter from fierce and cruel guards who are bent on killing her because they cannot accept a woman as their next ruler.

This extraordinary narrative technique shows the dominance of folk and fairy tales in India and thus exhibits the richness and exuberance of Indian culture (Bengali culture in particular here). At the same time, it enables the writer to interrogate fixed gender roles and images ingrained in the minds of the people, especially women, through such tales.

Anju and Sudha are highly enamoured and influenced by the tales about princes, princesses, evil kings and demons and also the stories about their family's past narrated mostly by Abha Pishi. Pishi understands more than anyone else "the power stories hold at their centre, like a mango holds its seed. It is a power that dissipates with questioning . . ." (SMH 312). In fact, Sudha has acquired the art of storytelling from Pishi. The various characters narrate stories at challenging junctures in their lives to articulate their deepest thoughts and emotions or to describe a particular situation. These stories make them mentally and emotionally strong in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation courageously. They are cathartic and provide an escape into imagination. Whenever reality becomes too troublesome and monotonous, Sudha, the dreamer, gets carried away into this other world: "I float among the stars, those tiny bright pores on the sky's skin . . . beyond the worries of this mundane world" (SMH 130).

These oral narratives however also play a key role in the construction and circulation of masculine and feminine roles in a society. And these roles and images are highly asymmetrical promoting the interests of the male dominated society. Women in particular accept these stereotypes as natural. This makes them accept their inferiority to men without questioning. Andrea Dworkin in her illustrious work, *Woman Hating*, notes that fairy tales clearly demarcate roles for men and women in a society and exhibit the two as completely opposite. They present powerful women as bad and dangerous and weak and passive ones as good. Men however are always projected as good, irrespective of their action or inaction. Rosan A. Jordan and F. A. de Caro in their article, "Women and the Study of Folklore" hold similar views in this regard:

Several writers have suggested that folklore is used to condition women to accept certain attitudes and sex roles . . . but the genre that has received the most attention in this regard is the fairy tale, no doubt because in our own society fairy tales are seen as being for children and are encountered by people in their early and formative years. (507)

In *Sister of My Heart*, the story of "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" makes Anju and Sudha internalize certain gender representations of women (passive, submissive, dutiful, etc.) and men (powerful, courageous, guardian). However, at some crucial moments of marriage, divorce, miscarriage, etc., they are forced to re-visit and reinterpret these representations. They finally reject the stereotypes of prince charming and female passivity

promoted by this tale and take responsibility for their lives. The events in their lives, particularly till their marriage, follow the same storyline as this fairy tale. Anju and Sudha are similar to that princess in the palace of snakes, leading a controlled but considerably happy life under the loving yet stern watch of the mothers. When Sudha meets Ashok for the first time in a cinema hall, she begins to compare her situation with the princess in the story. Sudha narrates this story to Anju to make her understand the immensity of love she has developed for Ashok in just a few meetings. She firmly believes that Ashok, her prince, will free her from the restricted existence in the Chatterjee mansion. Famous French feminist, Simone De Beauvoir's, comments in her path-breaking work, *The Second Sex*, are appropriate in this regard:

Children's literature, mythology, tales, and stories reflect the myths created by men's pride and desires: the little girl discovers the world and reads her destiny through the eyes of men. (350)

Sudha is however shaken out of this love spell after her arranged marriage to Ramesh. When her mother-in-law forces her to abort her foetus because it is a girl, she finally comes out of her passive state and takes action to save her unborn daughter's life. Here, by deviating from the original story, Divakaruni interrogates the stereotypes of female passivity and that of man as a woman's saviour. Sudha realizes that neither Ramesh nor Ashok has the power to rescue her. She comes to understand that Ashok is not any prince but as human as she is. Sudha is inspired by the bravery and courage of legendary women like Rani Laxmibai and Goddess Durga in taking this bold step.

The second dominant story, "The Queen of Swords", is an original creation by Sudha, narrated to Anju to bring her out of depression that she has fallen into due to her miscarriage. This story is based on Sudha's life, particularly after her marriage, and shows how Sudha finally lets go of the stereotypes that had led her to believe that she is helpless and made her life completely dependent on the arrival of her prince charming. She moves on to become a stronger woman who does not need a man to save her or her unborn child. She metamorphoses from the princess in the palace of snakes to a bold queen as she decides to leave the security of her husband's house and make her own life in spite of being aware of the problems her daughter would face in a patriarchal society like India without a father's name. Sudha decides to begin afresh independently by migrating to America with her daughter Dayita. Even Anju is encouraged by this story and is able to come out of her depression. She looks forward to having Sudha with her in America and is excited about their prospects for a joint business venture. In fact, all the main women characters in the novel transform by discarding old gender stereotypes and redefine themselves and their culture.

The novel also cites several folk gods and goddesses worshipped by the Bengalis. It is

here worthwhile to discuss that women in particular carry out most of the rituals during festivals to honour their gods and goddesses. Susan S. Wadley notes that performing rituals collectively has “created possibilities for female solidarity and for alternative sources of religious power” (125). There are allusions to goddess Kali, ‘the protectress against evil’ and the courageous goddess Durga, the special favourite of the Bengalis. Durga Puja is one of the most important festivals celebrated all over Bengal. In the novel, Sudha’s beauty is compared with goddess Lakshmi’s. One important god referred to throughout the novel is the BidhataPurush, the god of destiny in Bengali folklore. In fact, the novel opens with a myth about the god: “They say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born, the BidhataPurush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be” (SMH 15). This myth passed on by the old tales states that human life is created and controlled by a force and thus human beings are mere puppets. This force for Bengali is the Bidhata Purush(god) who descends earth whenever a baby is born and writes her/his destiny on the forehead. All Hindu Bengalis firmly believe in this myth that has shaped the collective identity of the Bengalis and consoles and encourages them in difficult times. But at the same time dependence on such outside forces also makes them fatalists. The staunch faith of the Chatterjee women in the existence of the BidhataPurush makes them passive and submissive. Kate Millet’s remarks are appropriate here:

Patriarchy has God on its side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerful expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality. (51)

When the BidhataPurush does not come down at the birth of Anju and Sudha, people declare them unlucky because their premature birth takes place after the tragic news of the death of their fathers: “*For girl-babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born*” (SMH 18). AbhaPishihowever considers Sudha and Anju a blessing from the BidhataPurush as their birth gives her a chance to experience motherhood that she could not experience earlier because of her husband’s untimely death. Sudha gradually becomes a firm believer of the god and begins to believe that her destiny is filled with unhappiness. It makes her compliant and non-resisting as she accepts the events in her life as predestined. Even the usually pragmatic Gourikeeps postponing the crucial heart surgery as she begins to believe that her destiny has already been written by the Bidhata Purush. Gradually, however, as these women confront challenges of lives, they take charge of their lives and let go of their blind faith in the god.

Another most respected and influential folk goddess of Bengal is Shasti. Shasti is considered the goddess of childbirth. It is said that visiting this goddess’s shrine for her

blessings ensures a child for the childless women yearning to become mothers. Such blind faith in gods and goddesses reflects how a woman is treated in the society. Producing children is projected as a woman's primary role. In a patriarchal society like India, women who are able to bear a child, are accepted and respected by the society and the ones who are not able to have a child even if the problem might be with the husband, are rejected. When Sudha is not able to conceive after five years of marriage, her mother-in-law, Mrs. Sanyal gets anxious and forcefully takes her to visit goddess Shasti's shrine to seek her blessings. Later, however, when Sudha conceives, Mrs. Sanyal believes it to have happened because of goddess Shasti's blessings whereas in reality it has been possible because of the medical treatment that Ramesh undergoes as the problem was with him. The author here contrasts medical science with religious beliefs and shows how beliefs should not be followed blindly.

Sister of My Heart is replete with allusions to various Bengali rituals and customs (an important part of folklore) related to fortunate and unfortunate events like a wedding or the death in family. While these ceremonies depict the richness of Bengali culture, they also play the primary role in reinforcing the subordinate status of a woman. Jennifer Fox rightly says that tradition and authority "resonate with the Voice of the fathers while the voices of the mothers are suppressed" (569). During the rituals of the wedding, Anju and Sunil are prevented from seeing each other by holding a white silk sheet between them until the auspicious moment of seeing called the *shubhodrishti* in Bengali. The priest recites a thousand year old *mantra* from the Vedas. It "defines luck as cattle and horses and vassals – and the one hundred sons" that Anju is supposed to present to Sunil (SMH 166). During the fire ceremony, they walk seven times around the sacred fire and make promises like "'My heart is yours, as yours is mine', 'For seven lifetimes will I follow you to the ends of the earth'" (SMH 166), 'And I will protect you and treasure you and love you as my Lakshmi, my goddess of prosperity'" (SMH 168). At the end of the ceremony, Sunil puts *sindur* on Anju's forehead and Anju slips a ring onto his finger. The puffed-rice ceremony and the bridal flower-bed ceremony are some other rituals performed before the bride and the groom are left alone. After the marriage is sanctioned through its umpteen rituals, the bride is supposed to touch the feet of all the elderly relatives and finally her husband's to accept him as the head of the family. These rituals clearly establish the supremacy of the husband over the wife by showing how the husband is their wife's protector and provider and the wife has to devote her entire life in catering to her husband and his family's needs. The novel also brings to the forefront the stringent customs related to widowhood followed by the Hindu Bengali community. After losing her husband at a very young age, Abha Pishi fervently follows the restraining customary regime for a widow. She was supposed to wear white and had to discard all her good saris and wedding jewellery. Her grey hair is "cut close to her scalp in the

orthodox style” and she eats only one vegetarian meal a day as per the norms (SMH 16). Her only source of entertainment is attending *kirtans* as they are permissible for a widow. Pishilater reveals that she laments that she lost the opportunity of attaining education because the society does not consider it suitable for a widow to attend school. Young widows like her think of committing suicide but refrain from doing so because of the fear instilled by priests: “those who take their own lives end up in the deepest pit of hell”(SMH 269).

Apart from the above-mentioned rituals and customs, Divakaruni also cites many superstitions — illogical and irrational beliefs held by a community and passed on among generations— followed by Hindu Bengalis in the novel. For instance, at the beginning of the novel it is mentioned that a baby is wrapped in a red *mulmul* cloth immediately after the birth because red is the colour of good luck and prosperity. Sudha’s mother, Nalini is the most superstitious of all the mothers. She believes in astrologers and soothsayers and visits them every month to know what the planets have in store for her. She thinks that a childbirth amulet given by a soothsayer was her lucky charm that saved her life during labour. The mothers consider the month of Durga Puja (the most important festival for Bengalis) inauspicious for marriage of the girls. Even the date for Anju and Sudha’s weddings is fixed after asking a *pandit* for an appropriate day according to their horoscopes. Moreover, the sisters are prohibited from seeing or touching their wedding garlands before the wedding rituals as it is considered inauspicious.

The novel is also interspersed with some popular Bengali proverbs and nursery rhymes. Proverbs are an integral part of a community’s folklore and depict facts about human nature and demonstrate societal standards in the form of advice or warnings. They are also useful in teaching family values, morals and ethics to children. However, proverbs are also a strategy of patriarchy to circulate and justify gender stereotypes. Nalini often invents small rhymes with morals like “*Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother’s name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family’s fame*” (SMH 23). This is to make Sudha and Anju compliantly follow the societal norms so as to preserve the honour of the respectable Chatterjees. Such sayings ingrain binaries of good and bad among young girls. The proverb, ‘PatiParam Guru’ (the husband is the supreme lord) inscribed on the bedcover that Nalini gifts Sudha on her birthday is a perfect example of how young girls are conditioned by such proverbs to commit their lives in serving their future husbands, their supreme lords. AbhaPishi states a proverb from Bengali folklore to illustrate the double standards of a society that allows a man to remarry a year after his wife’s death and never blames his ill luck for the death: “*Abhagargorumoré, Bhagyabanerbau* – the unlucky man’s cowdies, the lucky man’s wife dies!” (SMH 269). Nursery rhymes, also a part of every community’s folklore, are an essential part of every child’s bringing up. Bengali community

has its own set of such rhymes that are a source of solace and a reminder of childhood days. Some Bengali rhymes and songs are cited at different moments in the novel. When furious Sudha sees her mother Nalinicrying silently, she is reminded an old nursery rhyme that her mother used to sing to her when she was a baby:

‘*Chander Pane cheyecheyeraatketehekato.*’

I have spent so many nights gazing at the moon. That must be why you came to me, my moon-faced child. Let us go into the forest, the two of us, you and I, So I can sit silent and enjoy your beauty. (SMH 85)

The memory reminds Sudha of her mother’s love and lessens her anger. She decides not to oppose her mother’s decision of discontinuing education and preparing for marriage. Another reference to a nursery rhyme comes later in the novel when Sudha is worried about her fatherless daughter’s future in the narrow-minded society. To cheer her up, the mothers put on the gramophone playing her childhood rhymes:

Ata gachetotapakhi, and Dol, dol, dol.

The parrot flies to the custard-apple tree

The bees are in the pomegranates

I call and call you, little bride

Why do you not speak. (SMH 298)

Thus, Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart* succeeds in bringing to the forefront the rich Bengali culture through its folklore. At the same time, Divakaruni also succeeds in re-visiting the culture’s folklore and myths and subverting the images of women and men that have been reinforcing biased gender roles. She shows how folklore of a community can reinforce and at the same time loosen the patriarchal order. If women are confined by their culture, they are also sustained by it. Divakaruni redefines female identity by deconstructing various patriarchal myths to highlight the female experience. At the beginning of the novel, Sudha and other women characters are shown to be utterly conditioned by the folklore of their culture. This makes them passive and submissive. However, as they confront challenging situations in their lives, they redefine themselves and their culture. The writer’s main message to her world readers is to retain the progressive and constructive ideas and values of their tradition and to give up the regressive and orthodox ones that promote gender stereotypes. That is how cultures evolve. In the modern era, women particularly need to investigate and question representations that have been reinforcing their subordination to men and embrace a lifestyle that combines tradition and modernity.

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