

Gender discrimination unfolded in the plays of Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

Indian writing in English is fast growing in the hands of notable writers both from India and living outside India. Their major focus is on the issues connected with socio-political situations that take place in the contemporary world. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among them who has addressed most of such social issues and she is a specialist in portraying gender discrimination. Addressing gender discrimination is a must focus issue for, the Indian society is filled with such discriminations due to the impacts of religion and culture. By writing on gender discrimination Divakaruni is assembling much efforts to educate the society against such evils and she teaches women, through her strong willed women characters, on how to face them. This paper attempts to trace out the gender discrimination issues portrayed in the novels of Divakaruni.

Keywords: Socio-political situations, Gender discrimination, Religion, Culture, Evils, Portrayed, Educate

Introduction

Literature is a showcase of life, according to many scholars. It is the best medium to record human life and as a mirror it contributes the readers with the reliable chronological rudiments. The evolution of literature is determined on the standards of influence made by various writers. Indian writing in English, in particular, has been influenced by prominent writers and has been growing to huge heights recently. Though there are a number of Indian English writers, very few of them are recognized by the world reading community and Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni is one among them.

Her writings examine various issues like socio-cultural dimensions of patriarchy, multiculturalism, economic ramification, globalization, sexual diversity, gender roles, human relationships, magic realism, clash between tradition and modernity, expatriation, immigration and diasporic sensibility, independent struggle, partition, female quest for identity, eco-critical perspectives and socio-psycho-political-historical representations. Among all of these issues she is a specialist in portraying gender discrimination issues.

This paper attempts to unfold the gender discrimination issues portrayed in the novels of Chitra Banarjee and for which the novels *Sister of My Heart*, *Neela: Victory Song* and *The Palace of Illusions* have been taken in to consideration.

To start with, in *Sister of My Heart*, Sudha and Anju are the two young girls who can be considered as the protagonists. As the title of the novel represents, these girls cherish their sisterhood like relationship and consider themselves as twin sisters. They live in a patriarchal family where they respect the traditional values. There are no other men in the family; even then they follow all the traditional values since the system of the society made by men, which made up the women's mind that way. Later in the novel both Sudha and Anju gets married and enters into different families. Sudha is found to be conceived with a girl baby and that is not welcomed by her husband and the in-laws. She is forced to undergo an abortion for the reason; the society will look low at the families having girls as first born of the family and this is clearly evident from the words of Sudha as

“... My mother-in-law said the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to be male—that's how it's been in the last five generations. She said it's not fitting; it'll bring the family shame and ill luck.” (SMH 237-38)

Even small children cannot escape from the evil of gender discrimination and many girl children are killed either on their birth or inside their mothers' womb. This has an age-old history in India. The main reason for female infanticide is the dowry system of our social structure. The other reasons are patriarchy and religion. In this man made social conceptions, the females are considered inferior and weaker. Females who fill up half of the inhabitants are being victimized, harassed and oppressed regardless of the nation to which they fit in, neglectful of the religious conviction which they profess and unmindful of the period in which they exist. In every part of the world they are threatened by many provocations. Female infanticide is the biggest violence against them, which even repudiates their basic right to live in this world.

In India, for ages, women are discriminated more when compared to other parts of the world for the reasons; popular religions of India promote the supremacy of patriarchy and subjugation of women and the evil practice of dowry system. The combined effect of these two has molded the Indian society to look down on women and girl child. This issue has developed as a burning social problem a decade before. They murder a girl baby with different horrible techniques. In south India, especially in Tamilnadu it became the highest social issue at the end of the twentieth century.

“In the nearly 300 poor hamlets of the Usilampatti area of Tamilnadu [state], as many as 196 girls died under suspicious circumstances [in 1993] ... some were fed dry, unhulled rice that punctured their windpipes, or were made to swallow poisonous powdered fertilizer. Others were smothered with a wet towel, strangled or allowed to starve to death.” (qtd. in Jones 2)

After some years the government realized the seriousness of this issue and brought out set of laws to save female children

and to increase the female sex ratio. The act termed Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994: with the following objectives came into force,

- i) Prohibition of the misuse of pre-natal diagnostic techniques for determination of sex fetus, leading to female feticide.
- ii) Prohibition of advertisement of the techniques only for detection or determination of sex.
- iii) Regulations of the use of techniques only for the specific purpose of detecting genetic abnormalities or disorders.
- iv) Permission to use such techniques only under certain conditions by the registered institution.
- v) Punishment for violation of the provisions of the Act; and
- vi) To provide deterrent punishment to stop such inhuman acts of female feticide. (G.B. Reddy 127)

Her novel *Neela: Victory Song* is about a young girl Neela, who lives at the time of Indian freedom struggle. The character Neela is the representation of Chitra Banerjee's feminist quest. Though Neela is not subjugated directly in the novel, through this character she has portrayed the contemporary realities of women subjugation as

“Why does everyone want to control girls even after their marriage? Why do they want women to sit quietly and silently, embroidering and making pickles, while men get to make all the important decisions and go to all the exciting places? Why can't a girl be a freedom fighter?” (VS 30).

Whenever Neela comes home with a scraped knee from climbing a tree or with her muddy dress from having given a bath to Budhi, her favourite cow, her mother would advise her to be like her elder sister to sit calmly at home with a piece of embroidery and accuses her husband that only because of him she gets. But Neela's father Hari Charan always supports her that he has grown her up as a smart girl and the Pandit says that she reads better than any girl at her age even better than her sister. As a traditional Indian woman Neela's mother would not appreciate her for reading better, but would accuse that it would only fill her mind with strange ideas. Once when she read some books while taking rest her great-aunt Mangala insisted her that,

“Resting does not mean straining your eyes reading all that small print, young lady” (VS 12).

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* is an extract from the ancient epic poem *The Mahabharat*. The ancient epic always suppresses women and does not give any importance to them. The concept of the *Mahabharat* is to consider women as a movable property. In those days, if women were ill-treated by men they should not raise against men since they were treated like slaves and as voiceless victims. Through Draupadi's character, Divakaruni shows the status of women in the contemporary world. There are three types of women in the universe; women who follow the traditional values, women who know what they need but could not implement them and finally independent women.

Draupadi is a kind of woman who falls under the category of following the traditional values as well as an independent woman. She even achieves the privilege of selecting her own life partner. She feels so happy to select her life partner in *Suyamwara*. But the truth shatters her dreams into pieces that

her *Swayamwara* is a trick to make Arjuna friendly to lead a war. Draupadi painfully says,

“Why even call it a swayamvar then? ... “Why make it a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry” (PI 56).

This is only a beginning and one can see, all through the novel Draupadi is subjugated and she is not even treated as a human being, having her own wishes and expectations. The eldest of Pandavas gambles using her like a property and Draupadi reacts to this as,

I am a Queen, Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyuma, mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like dancing. But then I remembered what I'd read a long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me. The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave. (PI 190)

This was the state of women then and it continues till date. Even history remembers her, till date, as the sole reason for the great war of *Gurukshetra*. Divakaruni brings out the attitude of the people who treat women so low in Indian society and clarifies the status of Indian female children through her narration. Today's India offers a considerable measure of chances to women, with women having a voice in ordinary life, the business world and also in political life. In any case India is still a male overwhelmed society, where females are frequently seen as subordinates and sub-par compared to men. “You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its Women” (Jawaharlal Nehru). But in India women's position is still a big question mark. They do not have a valuable status in the society. The problems of women in the patriarchal society have been brought out by Divakaruni through her novels. Unlike other writers she not only points out the gender discriminations prevailing in our society but also tries her best to offer solutions to come out of such evils by producing some strong females who encounter difficulties between tradition and modernity. She, who is fond of creating the strongest women characters in her fictions, makes an attempt on creating a female world in most of her novels.

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