Chapter-4

CHITRA BANERJEE

DIVAKARUNI'S

SISTER OF MY HEART AND

VINE OF DESIRE: BREAKING AWAY

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The previous chapter has demonstrated that within the Indian context, women protest differently. In spite of development, advancement and emancipation, women in India are oppressed and religion is perhaps one of the oppressive systems. Yet within this oppressive system, women protest to liberate themselves. Grandmother and Gudiya Rani are ample testimony to this. Taking this protest ahead is Sudha, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart*. She struggles through adversity to establish her identity and to safeguard her daughter.

*Sister of My Heart* tells a moving story of two cousins Sudha and Anju. Born twelve hours apart in the same house, the women consider themselves as twins, and from a very early age, they exact everything needed from life- love, respect, council and friendship-from each other. Together they experience the joys, pains, mystical tales and tiresome tasks that accompany growing up in a traditional Indian house in Calcutta. Their exceptional bond remains the core of the novel. Throughout the work, we are acutely aware of how strongly their affection for each other shapes their lives. The disturbing truth about the circumstances under which Sudha and Anju were born secretly tortures Sudha, and weaves a menacing thread through the friendship. And, when the cousins fall in love and are physically separated by arranged
marriages their bond faces its hardest test. As the novel evolves we follow the women through their lives, experiencing their jealousy, loss, depression, surprise and prolonged separation and find that these battles and triumphs hold a universal thread with which women of many cultures can easily identify with.

This part of the thesis, attempts to focus on the characters of Sudha and Anju, and also concentrate on the underlying tension between the desires of mothers such as Gourima, Nalini, and Pishi who embrace traditional Indian culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wants to show through the characters of Sudha and Anju, that considerable importance is attached to the way a girl is brought up. There are several restrictions on a girl child. A proper training is also given to her. A girl child should walk with soft steps, so soft that they are barely audible to others. Taking long strides denotes masculinity. Girls are often rebuked for jumping, running and hopping. They are unbecoming to a female. A girl has to be careful about her posture. She should not sit cross-legged. Keeping one’s knees close together, while sitting, standing or sleeping is ‘decent’. ‘Don’t stand like a man’ is a common rebuke to make a girl aware of the demands of femininity. She must demonstrate her capacity for self restraint; a girl should not be argumentative. Nalini, Sudha’s mother, constantly tells
Sudha and Anju about how good girls should behave. She makes little rhymes,

   Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother’s name; Wicked daughters are fire brands, scorching their family’s fame. (Sister of my Heart 23)

One is reminded of Sudhir Kakar who observes in his book, The Inner World,

   The late childhood marks the beginning of an Indian girl’s deliberate training in how to be a good woman and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designed female role.  

But in the process of training for proper behaviour, certain assumptions and indications can seriously offend the sensibilities of growing girls. Sudha accepts Nalini’s words reluctantly, but Anju never stops fighting. She says,

   Why must Ramurma go with us every time we leave the house, even to get books from the neighbourhood library? (Sister of my Heart 23)

She did ask,

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Why can’t we go to Sushmita’s birthday party when all the other girls in class are going instead of sending a gift with Singhji? No wonder everyone thinks stuck up... I am tired of these old-woman saris you make us wear. You would think we were living in the Dark Ages instead of in the Eighties. I bet there isn’t another girl my age in all of Calcutta, except poor Sudha, of course— who is forced to dress like this. Why can’t I wear trousers, or a maxi, or at least some Kurtas once in a while... I bet if I were a boy you wouldn’t be saying no to me all the time like this. (Ibid.67)

When Nalini pronounced that Sudha must stay at home while Anju goes to College, Sudha felt that she was in a dark twisting tunnel that pressed in on her. She protested, but in vain. She says,

My body is pierced by needles of fire, rage against my mother and my powerlessness in her hands. What gives her the right to control my life, to wall me up in the name of her mother-duty? Wrong, wrong, this society that says just because I was born to her, she can be my goaler. (Ibid.84)
The girl does not get any training to pursue any career. They are made to believe that marriage in the only means of support and the sole justification of their existence. Their only purpose in life is to get married. The first lesson taught to a girl is to be desirable, charming and attractive. She grows narcissistic and she has to please others with her dress and jewellery, since she is transformed into an object, who ought to display her husband’s wealth, status and position. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni describes this bridal preparation in this novel.

The bridal preparations are in full swing. Aunt’s created an entire regimen for us. Each morning we start by eating almonds that have been soaked overnight in milk. This, aunt has declared, will cool our systems, calm our minds, and improve both our dispositions and our complexions. Then we have to do half an hour of yoga and calisthenics, to give us endurance, which we are sure to need as wives and to be prevent the sagging of various body parts, which might be offensive to our future husbands. Then we must apply turmeric paste to our faces – more complexion improvement and keep the pungent, itchy mask on for half an your while Ramurma rubs warm coconut oil into our hair, long well oiled obedient hair symbolizes virtue in women. (Ibid.108)
The parents are eager to get rid of their daughter as getting them married gives them a sense of achievement. But there are objections to the choice of the daughter. Anju thinks,

My poor Sudha, does she really believe Aunt Nalini will allow her to marry a boy from a lower caste, from a family that has made its money in trade? Someone whom Sudha herself decided on, challenging Aunt’s authority? (Ibid.98)

Marriage is a religious sacrament, where the woman has to live along with the husband, or else die with him, as she has no other choice left. She loses her home, her name, and her identity, when she migrates from her natal home to her conjugal home. In her new home, she is silenced, her emotions suppressed, and ultimately her very personality is stifled by the notion of femininity. She has to bear the heavy burden of domesticity, uncomplainingly surpass all her desires and aspirations, and face all the events with patience and tolerance. She has to compromise at all levels. She becomes a victim of hypocrisy that pervades the institutions of our society. Simone De Beauvoir in the 50’s had said,

Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. For men it is sexual pleasure, a means to comfort
woman and recruit them into their service. For woman, it is associated with romantic love and self sacrifice.\(^2\)

holds true in the case of Sudha and Anju. Added to this, in India, Dowry and the laws of inheritance belittle a woman. She is reduced to the subordinate status and to an object to exchange in marriage. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni transgresses and makes an effort to dismantle the age-old patriarchal codes of conduct.

Anju thinks,

_Dowries are a slippery issue. A good bridegroom’s family never demands a particular amount of money or a certain list of items that would be too gauche. And so the bride’s party has to anticipate their wishes and to beyond them, because of they don’t, it might affect their daughter’s future._(Sister of my Heart 110)

The concept of Dowry has really worsened the life of a woman. Madhu Kishwar makes a practical statement when she sees, dowry as,

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far from being a deep rooted Indian tradition, is the fastest way
to make quick money in India, while also claiming social
sanction and legitimacy.\(^3\)

Since the parents of a girl child have to pay a huge sum to marry off their daughter, they do not want to have a daughter. It is assumed that marriage is an outcome of physical attraction and mutual love and is regarded as an avenue for mutual betterment. But in reality, this is not true. Man is the decision maker. He occupies the authoritative position in the family while woman is pushed down to a subordinate position.

Sunil’s father says,

I said I wouldn’t ask for dowry and so I won’t. No doubt Mrs. Chatterjee, who comes from a fine background, already knows what is fitting in this respect. Anyway, a good reputation has always meant more to me than all the money in the world. That is why I broke off talks with the Bhaduris. We found out there was some old scandal in the family, an unmarried aunt who committed suicide- you can guess why? I wasn’t going to be associated with any of that. Better a penniless, ugly girl, I said

to my wife, that one whose family is stained with immorality. And there are far too many such families. You would be amazed. Mrs. Chatterjee at what we’ve discovered; secret relationships, pregnancies, run away girls brought back by force. (Sister of my Heart 140)

Women are kept in the dark for a long period and are made to believe in the ideologies of the male society. The birth of a male child is an occasion of celebration, whereas the birth of a female child is accepted with reluctance. The applying cruelty and overwhelming negligence shown to a girl child kills her mind and spirit. The girl child in the family is a gem to be protected. When she reaches the age of puberty, she becomes the center of attraction to the male society. She is an object of display as parents are eager to marry her off at the earliest; otherwise she goes astray. Anju portrays and voices her disgust when she says,

I just hate the way women are paraded in front of prospective grooms, like animals at the fair. How can you put up with all those stupid questions so calmly? (Ibid. 123)

It was a curse to be born as a woman. They lacked the sense of self, as they are reduced to the state of commodities, to be transported from
natal home to marital home. Women’s traditional role involves the rearing of children and care for home, husband and family. These roles have been associated with some important moral virtues, such as altruistic concern, responsiveness to the needs of others and a willingness to sacrifice one’s own interests for those of others. The life of a woman revolved round the axis of family and marriage. Women were expected to be dutiful to their parents, husbands and children and other members of the family. But they received no respect or consideration from them and nobody cared about their happiness. Violence within the family was also a threat. In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays this domestic violence and atrocities through the character of Sunil’s mother. Anju says,

*In one swift motion Sunil’s father flings the bowl across the table at Sunil’s mother, who has taken a longtime to prepare that tamarind chutney. What upsets me the most is the meekness with which she lowers her eyes and doesn’t even wipe her spattered arms. ‘Haven’t I told you never to make that unhealthy stuff?’ thunders Sunil’s father, ‘Haven’t I told you I can’t stand the smell? Who pays for the food you eat in this house? Answer me’, Sunil’s mother’s lower lip quivers. How*
humiliating it must be for her to be treated this way in front of her new daughter-in-law. (Ibid.182)

Women, in general, have to face domestic violence and sexual harassment in the patriarchal society. They are the victims of gross materialism and biased male institutions. Melancholy hangs over them, since they see themselves as powerless, helpless and insecure, which is not biologically determined but society conditioned. Many a time they end up in self-denial or blaming others or just resign themselves to their fate. They are taught from their infancy to suppress their feelings, to control their emotions and to withhold their real selves from the society in which they live. They are not choosers but are being chosen by the dominant forces. They lacked the sense of self. Their identities merge into that of the husband and their families. Women also accept their subjugation as natural. Age-long bondage makes them accept their own position as something ordained by heaven and decided at the time of birth. Sudha’s ruminations on,

Years later I will wonder, that final word Bidhata Purush wrote, was it ‘Sorrow’? (Ibid.22)

explains all too clearly the position of women in India. Women experience psychological oppression and physical violence from either
the in-laws or the husband, or from both, depending on each situation. The most important point is that, despite the social and educational background of the husband’s family, or their progressive outlook, the woman’s identity is expected to merge completely with that of her husband and his family; no differences are to be tolerated. In certain situations, the woman is seen as a slave, to cook, to wash, to clean the house, and also to earn a living, and sometimes, to sleep with. Simone de Beauvoir’s reference is timely here. She says,

The narcissist woman sees her body not as an instrument of transcendence, but as an object meant for another. She internalizes the age of the other and begins to view her body in the manner in which it is sought to be made desirable and perfect for the other. In other words, she becomes the other in relation to her body.⁴

In the case of Indian women, or here Sudha’s mother, they internalize patriarchy, and becomes mirrors to men. They never object or feel that it is injustice. As long as women go on tolerating injustice, the burden goes on increasing, women are sealed in silence and they become the victims of cruel customs and evil practices that are deeply embedded

in a tradition-oriented society. The women are well aware of the reality and try to free themselves from the clutches of the dominating structures of the family. They depict their silent struggles set against the paradigm of male hierarchy. Marriage provides economic security, social approval, and dignity to a girl. So, marriage has become a yardstick to measure woman's social success and parents find a sense of achievement in marrying off their daughters. The marital life, which should have survived on love and mutual trust, has turned sour because of hypocrisy, deceit and callousness that exist between them. They remain as a stranger as there is, no understanding or real concern between them. The social structure and economic constraints along with patriarchal regulations exploit women. Sudha's mother-in-law is a strong willed woman and is used to having her own way. About her, Sudha says,

I had seen her reducing servant-maids to tears with a single glance. She must have steered her family through the rocky times that followed her husband's death with the same determination. (Sister of My Heart. 188)

Her son is not handsome. He has a long, lean body, dark skin, a plain face and a slightly receding chin. Sudha's mother-in-law admits frankly,
I will tell you right away; in spite of his name my son's no god of beauty. That's why I am looking for a beautiful bride. My motives are quite selfish, I will admit: I want good looking grandsons. (Ibid.117)

Certainly the desire for a grandchild has been central to Sudha's mother-in-law's life as well. Every month she asks Sudha eagerly if she has had her periods and when she nods guiltily, the silent disappointment in her eyes is worse than any reproach. It is always the woman who gets blamed for failing to procreate. But no stigma is ever attached to an impotent male. A girl is trained to be a good wife and a good mother, and is usually bestowed with the blessing of being a mother of sons. Marriage is primarily for the male child because sons are essential for the contribution of the family, and for the preservation and multiplication of wealth, safety and prosperity. When the wife has conceived, she goes through the rites of 'Pumsavana', a rite that is overtly directed towards the birth of a male child; all the prayers transparently aim at preventing the birth of daughters, so that only a son is born. Motherhood can be a pleasure when the woman chooses it, and gets ready for the sufferings of pregnancy. Sudha's mother-in-law takes her to a doctor for check-up. But when the doctor says that the fault lies with her husband, Sudha's mother-
in-law is not ready to accept this and leaves the place. But Sudha, understanding the ways of her mother-in-law, says that she needs to use the bathroom and there she memorizes the name and phone number of the doctor. Sudha says,

I am glad of that, because, as soon as we are out in the front office, my mother-in-law snatches the sheet from my hand and says she'll keep it safe in her bag. I nod meek agreement. I am learning my mother-in-law's lessons well, how to hide the plans whirring busily inside my head behind a face as empty and sweet as a mask made of sugar.(Ibid.219)

She wants to emphasize that lovemaking and domesticity are not the sole concerns of women but she has to restore dignity and honour to her soul. The concept of 'Mother' has grown larger than life through our cultural practices; is valorized as mother goddess, incarnation of love, patience and forgiveness. In Indian mythology, it is the mother-goddess who rules over the realm of wealth, knowledge and prosperity. We consider earth as mother earth, not only earth. We also consider nature and river as mother, which sustains and nourishes our life. Indian women are so overwhelmingly swayed off by the male-oriented culture that the glorified image of motherhood has grown into her very being. She finds
self-fulfillment only in motherhood as it is regarded as her greater achievement. Motherhood is forced upon women as it is regarded a woman’s inevitable destiny which is the only possible option that would give her happiness. For Sudha it is a do or die situation. She has to give birth to a male child; otherwise she has no place in the family. But when the test shows that it is a girl, they want to kill the baby.

Sudha says,

My mother-in-law said that the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to be male. That is how it’s been for the last two generations. She said it’s not fitting, it will bring the family shame and ill luck. (Ibid.259)

Even at that time Sudha cannot rely on her husband. She asks him,

I need you to help me to protect our daughter. But he plucked my fingers off his arm as though I was speaking a strange language he’d never heard before and walked out of the house. (Ibid.260)

Narrating her present condition to her cousin Anju, Sudha says,

I cannot depend on him, Anju; I know my mother-in-law has made the appointment for the abortion already. She’s not telling me when, if I don’t go of my own will, she will find some
other way of getting me there. May be she’ll drug me, who knows. She is capable of anything, once she makes up her mind. (Ibid.260)

The preference for a son when a child is to be born is as old as Indian society itself. Female foeticide is so much dominant in India that a study in one clinic in India showed that out of 8,000 aborted foetuses, 7,997 were female. In one year, 40,000 female foetuses were aborted in Mumbai. (Indira Jaising, Violence against women: The Indian Perspective. New York: Routledge, 1995) A girl child’s natal family frequently treats her as dispensable, seeing that she will leave anyhow and will not support parents in their old age. On the way to her inevitable departure, she will involve the family in the considerable expense of a dowry and wedding festivities.

Sudha takes a bold decision. She deserts her husband and wants to save her child. Taking five hundred rupees and her jewellery she sets out to Howrah Station. When she reaches there, she is shocked by the enormous noisiness of the place. Sudha enters the real world of men. It is not a nice world, but the strength lies in going through it for her child. The station is full of men. She says,

They brush against me on purpose, they spit out wads of betel leaf, near my feet and bare their teeth in a grin when I jump
away, their bold, leering eyes travel over my body – a woman alone is fair game, after all as they wonder why I have no baggage, why on one has come to meet me. There is a sinking feeling inside me. (Ibid.263-264)

But Sudha becomes a woman who asserts herself by cleverly manipulating the existing situation, and employs different strategies to combat. No force or ideology can silence her forever, or kill her survival instinct. She can neither rest peacefully, nor make a clean escape from it. However, she attempts to go beyond the male world, though it is an uphill task to fight established paternal institutions. She overcomes her anguish and succeeds in her attempt to fight against the male dominated world, alone. This is the beginning. Sudha narrates,

Somehow I find my way through the press of the crowd to the taxi stand. I watch helplessly for about fifteen minutes, and then plunge into the fray in desperation, shouldering my way between strangers, no longer caring whose foot I step on. My hair comes loose, someone’s Kurta button scratches my cheek, someone else whose face I cannot see in the crowd takes advantage of the melee to grope at my breast. I swat his hand away furiously and kick at the ankles of a fat man blocking my path. He turns to say something nasty, but his mouth falls open
at the ferocious scowl on my face. I jab at his pouch with a
determined elbow, and finally I am in a taxi, mopping the
sweat from my neck, trembling. May be this is how the Rani of
Jhansi felt the first time she went to war. (Ibid.264)

The author focuses on the ‘awareness’ created in her protagonist as
she realizes the wrongs she has suffered after being trampled over by
phallocracy. She fights her ways through various strategies. Sudha now
knows that in real life Cinderella does not get her prince and that life is
never a rosy bed. She has to see the new dawn though her own eyes. She
declares,

\textit{If he doesn’t want her (child), then I am not for him either.}
(Ibid.268)

Sudha is afraid that her mother will never take her back and she
thinks,

\textit{What would happen to me? Everyone will think they threw me
out because I did something bad. They will think my baby is a
bastard.} (Ibid.261)
The fear of not being ‘accepted’ and ‘acceptable’ haunts her. Nevertheless she tries her luck. She informs her mother, that they are forcing her to have an abortion. Her mother’s response is standard. She asks her to return to her husband’s family. Her place is with her in-laws, for better or worse. Surprisingly it is Pishi who comes to the rescue of Sudha and says.

Why should she care any more what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole lifetime of being afraid of what society might think? I spit on this society which says it’s fine to kill a baby girl in her mother’s womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child. (Ibid.269)

A stunned silence follows her outburst. Everyone is shocked when Pishi, the upholder of family tradition says,

Sell this house, what is it but a heap of stone anyway? The true Chatterjee spirit, if there is such a thing, must live on in us. Us, the woman and the little one who’s coming, whom we must be ready to welcome… The money we get from the sale of the land alone will be enough to buy a nice little flat somewhere convenient, Gariahat may be and pay for Sudha’s delivery. We
must make sure she goes to a really good Doctor.... Sudha and our grand daughter will need all three of us through the hard times to come, you most of all because you know the most about surviving in the outside world. (Ibid.270)

Pishi is Sudha’s widow aunt, who has lost her husband at the age of eighteen. The death of her husband represents the cessation of her social existence and the end of her personhood. Soon after the death of husband, the appearance of the widow is distinctly marked off from the other woman as she had to give up all forms of adornments as well as those customs and symbols that were associated with the marriage of a woman. Uses of Kumkuma, Sindoora and turmeric powder (Arisina) are banned. Breaking of glass bangles and the breaking of the ‘Mangala sutra’ are acts performed with a degree of violence which add to the humiliation the widow must undergo for the rest of her life and which she begins to experience immediately after the death of her husband. The most dramatic and ‘visible’ ritual for the woman was the tonsure or the shaving of the head. This act requires some analysis of the notion of widowhood in brahmanical patriarchy so that we may unfold the cultural meanings of this highly symbolic act. To enforce permanent widowhood upon women the community needs to continuously reiterate its authority upon the widow and the tonsuring head is a way of doing that. It is
reiteration by the community of their power to control the widow’s sexuality.

... abundant hair is a symbol of life power, the way one handles it is a marker of what one does with this life power. Shorn head is conversely symbolic of the loss of power, freedom and even of castration was at the same time a visible marker of the widow’s entry into a state of social death.

Widowhood in India among the upper castes is a state of social death. The widow’s social death stems from her alienation from sexuality, following the loss of her husband and her exclusion from the functioning social unit of the family. In the place of Kumkuma banned for widows, it is customary for them to use ‘Vibhuti’ or ash to mark their foreheads. The white colour, which symbolizes purity, also symbolizes the colour of death. The Vibhuti is associated with the funeral pyre. Widowhood was perceived as a disrupter of special order and a potential violation of the moral order. The death of a woman’s husband marked the transition from

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wife to widow, taking the woman from a central place in the family to its margins. Pishi says,

When I came back to my parent’s home as a widow, how many of society’s tyrannical rules I followed! How old was I then, Gouri? No more that eighteen. I packed away my good saris, my wedding jewellery, ate only one meal a day, no fish or meat, fasted and prayed for what? Every night I soaked my pillow with guilty tears because I was told it was my bad luck, which had caused my husband’s death. Men whose wives died could marry as soon as a year had passed. They didn’t stop their work or their schooling. No one talked about their bad luck. We even have a saying, don’t we, “Abhagar goru more, Bhagya baner bau- the unlucky man’s cow dies, the lucky man’s wife dies!” But when, after three years of being a widow, I begged my father to get me a private tutor so I would at least have my studies to occupy me, he slapped me across the face. I considered suicide, oh yes, many times I those early years, but I was too young and too afraid of what the priests said: those who take their own lives end up in the deepest pit of hell. So I lived on in my brother’s household. What else could I do? But though he was kind and you too, Gouri, I know it was charity, I
had no rights in this house, or anywhere else. My life was over because I was a woman without a husband. I refuse to have our Sudha live like that. (Sister of my Heart 269)

We realize, that these women as wives, mothers and widows, fight against the male dominated, tradition-oriented society and learn to live against domestic injustice and institutionalized tyranny. Sudha says,

Bless me that I might be like the Rani of Jhansi, the Queen of Swords, Bless me that I might have the courage to go into the battle when necessary, no matter how bleak the situation. Bless me that I may be able to fight for myself and my child, no matter where I am. (Ibid. 270)

In spite of all the differences, Sudha faces her confrontation with reality. Her vigor and vitality remain undimmed. She says,

I am washing away the stamp of duty. I am washing away the death sentence that was passed on my daughter. I am washing away everything the Bidhata Purush wrote, for I have had enough of living a life decreed by someone else. How easy it
seems! What power we women can have, If we believe in ourselves! (Ibid.271)

In her struggle for a new attitude towards reality, Sudha has shown herself to be so persistent, vital, and vehement that, whenever and wherever she appears, she virtually stamps the unmistakable imprint of her own desperate confrontation as a fighter, victim, heroine and mother against what she refuses to accept as an immutable ordering of reality. Sudha faces the crisis with confidence and courage. Her struggle through adversity, her self-knowledge, re-affirmation, death or suicide seems to be the only destiny offered by patriarchy to a deserted woman, but the agony does not cripple her. She shows an extraordinary moral courage. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlights Sudha’s endurance, her tenacity and her refusal to be beaten by the miseries and frustrations. The story of Sudha continues in Vine of Desire, which is a sequel to Sister of My Heart, Sudha finds more space to grow with self-confidence, self reliance and self dependence.

In this novel, the author wants to show the complexities of relationship between Sudha, Anju and Sunil, Anju’s husband. Sunil’s obsession towards Sudha, Sudha’s passive acceptance and Anju’s
turmoil, both as a wife and as a sister, portrayed beautifully in the novel. Sudha is invited to America. She knows that,

America has its own problems, but at least it would give me the advantage of anonymity. No one in America would care that I was a daughter of Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, and give Dayita everything she needed. Best of all, no one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like me, who had decided that living alone was better than with the wrong man. (Vine of Desire.294).

Anju, due to long hours of working in the University library, loses her baby. This brings Sudha to America, to take care of her sister. Anju emerges more dynamic, positive, not buckling at the worst of blows. Not only that, she sustains her husband when his body, will and spirit start giving way. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses gliders as a symbol of liberation, of freedom and of self-confidence. Anju says,

I did like to be up there. It must be special, to feel the wind going right through you. All your problems slipping away, only
you and the sky and the waves so far below they look painted.

To may be keep going into the light .... (Ibid.41).

She leaves the sentence unfinished, languid with possibility. Anju points her words toward people like arrows, that is the only way she knows to use them. She does not wish to be branded as ‘true woman’, who ought to be emotional, passionate or irrational. She wants to lead a different kind of life, which should be unique, free and individualistic. Anju yearns to explore her inner self, which is less conscious of social modes and more concerned with her own existential consciousness in her longing to mould her life actively through self fulfillment. She does not want to be either a submissive wife or a shadow of her husband. On the other hand, she likes to enter into a meaningful relationship with her sister Sudha. Anju expresses a note of protest, in all her actions with an intense tone and emerges as a strong willed woman. With a grin her face

Anju says,

You won’t believe it, Sudha, I have learned to fly. (Ibid.368).

Sudha meets Sara, a woman, wearing cut off jeans. She becomes a symbol of adventurous and free life yearned by Sudha. Sara says,
I came here as an exchange student. It was only going to be for a year. I was all set to go back and get married to a guy I’d met in college in Bombay, then, about a month before my return, it hit me that for the rest of my life I’d never have another chance to be alone. In-laws, kids, servants, you know how it is in India, scary. So I bought myself a bus ticket to California. It isn’t hard. I love the freedom, the risk. It’s like being in a play.

(Ibid.83).

Sudha is jealous about Sara’s selfishness, her arrogant confidence that she’ll be loved, always. Sara let her face grows dark in the sun. She let her hair coil into dread locks for a while, and then cut it all off; she pierced her nose, her eyebrow, but let the holes close up after a while. When her visa expired, she took all the money she had left and bought a second hand car. Sometimes, that’s where she sleeps. Sudha wonders where this girl from India learned such recklessness. Who taught her to care so little for what people might think? Sara is strong, dresses up herself fashionably and asserts herself with confidence. She is looking for Sara of the cut off jeans, Sara the adventurous, who has promised her entry into the real American life and more importantly escape from herself. Sara becomes the figment of Sudha’s wanting. She fights aggressively against the harsh realities and vicious practices of the male
world. She challenges patriarchy’s eternal authority over her. Her perseverence and resolution term her as unfeminine. She does not have a home to call her own. She becomes a symbol of what Sudha wishes for.

Sudha can’t go back to India, to the way she is, helpless and dependent. She says,

**I can’t love like that. I can’t bring my daughter to think that is how a woman needs to live.** (Ibid.104).

This does not mean that Sudha needs to be protected. Sudha grows gracefully from a girl into an old woman. In her long life as a woman, she meets with a whole gamut of experiences. As a girl she grew up with longing always for the impossible, always needing to be protected from reality. But she survived her youth in a society that dismissed her as the poor cousin. She is the woman who cut through her mother–in-law’s plots to control her womb. She stepped from the security of wifehood on to the strong part of being a mother, alone, in a country where such things meant shame. She braved the new rules of a new continent because she wanted more in life than a man to take care of her. Sudha says to Lalit, who wants to marry her,
You wanted to know how I grew up, well, all my life I lived with the concept of duty how a woman should behave towards her parents, her husband, her in-laws, her children. Don’t mistake me – I didn’t think of it as a burden. It gave me the boundaries I needed, a wall of moral safety, behind which to live. Duty took the place of love- it was love. Without it, I believed, society would fall apart. But what happens when others don’t fulfill their duty toward you? That’s when I walked out of my marriage. I don’t think you can even imagine what that means in an orthodox family in India. My own mother kept telling me I should go back to him, go through with abortion. The first few months, I felt so guilty and frightened and ashamed, I thought I would die, but I survived, but you know what happened? I let go of one duty, one relationship and found that all the others were attached to it like the knotted hand kerchief a magician pulls from his hat. I felt them rush through my fingers until I was left holding nothing. Nothing - and no one to stop me from doing whatever I wanted, whether it was good or evil. (Ibid.175-176).

Things with Sudha have not gone the way she hoped when Anju invited Sudha to America. Anju had wanted something else for her
cousin. Something grand, like the arch of a spread out sky, the one they watched together months back, peopled with those winged women, soaring.

Live for yourself” Sudha continues to think, “I am not sure what it means. I am not sure I know how to do it and still be a good person. And I want to, you know. I still want to be a good person, even if I have failed at being a good wife. There’s is a terrible pull to the idea of living for myself, and a terrible emptiness, I feel like a flyway helium balloon – all the people I know are on the ground somewhere, but so far away and small, they hardly matter. Yet I know I can’t go back to the old way, living for others. (Ibid.177)

Sudha experiences a kind of paralysis of consciousness. Sudha’s adjustment to western society and civilization, and the consequent difficulties and pain in adjustments, whatever she is, is manipulated by the author as a symbol of sensibility amidst simultaneous idealization and cruelty or an agent in the author’s quest for psychological insight and awareness. With the help of Lupe, an agent who provides jobs, Sudha has a job, and a beautiful house to live in, and an employer who seems heartingly malleable. Most important of all for the first time in her life,
she has her own money. She’s finally starting her new life in America. She gets a job of looking after an old man from India. The old man is very stubborn and arrogant and decides not to co-operate with Sudha. Sudha gradually takes the old man into her confidence. She says to the old man,

Once you are strong enough, they will let you go back. I’ll go with you, like a nurse, you know. Take care of you the way I am doing here... America isn’t the same country for everyone, you know. Things here didn’t work out the way I’d hoped. Going back with you would be a way for me to start over in a culture I understand the way I’ll never understand America. In a new part of India, where no one knows me. Without the weight of old memories, the whispers that say, ‘we knew she’d fail, or serves her right ...’ it’s got to be a good business proposition for me. They’ll have to pay me well enough to bring Dayita up properly she’ll be coming with me, of course. I take it that’s okay with you? I want to be able to send her to a really good school. And put away enough in savings so I never have to depend on any one again. (Ibid.320)
The novel records how Sudha, although a hesitant and fumbling woman begins to overcome her inhibitions gradually. We find a self-assertion born out of her own consciousness, conviction and experience. For Sudha and Anju, romantic love does not play a big role in what they have to say about their marriages. And what two women say about caring shows, in fact, that they have internalized an extensive repertory of normal social beliefs. We see a wide variation among cultures in the way they construct gender differences in the area of love and care. We must use the contrasting cases of Sudha and Anju to exemplify part of the range that exists, even within a single nation. Anju revels in her feisty, independent and extremely combative personality, whereas Sudha has learned a gentler and soft set of norms. She seems to think it good to depend on someone tougher than she is, whether male or female, for support. To some extent such differences may be personal, but they also reflect the influence of cultural norms.

If Sudha succeeds by breaking away from conventions, Nila in French Lover goes another step forward, which is what the next chapter is all about.