

## RECONSTRUCTING THE ‘OTHER’: REVISIONARY MYTHMAKING IN DIVAKARUNI’S *SISTER OF MY HEART*

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### Abstract

In *The Resisting Reader : A Feminist approach to American Literature* , Judith Fetterley emphasizes the need to resist the male bias and othering tendencies in the American male literary canon . She implores women to “be a resisting reader rather than an assenting reader” . She advocates a revisionary re-reading of texts to expose the androcentric ideology embedded in the works of male writers. Hence many women writers across the globe have undertaken to re-read and re-write myths and fairy tales which (according to feminists) serve to perpetuate and promote an asymmetrical relationship between men and women. The strategy of re-ideologizing has been successfully employed by a host of post-modern and post-colonial writers including Margaret Atwood , Marina Warner , Ann Sexton and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni .

This paper seeks to examine how the revisionary framework in Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart* helps to foreground a reality so far ignored by male hegemony. Divakaruni’s ardent attempt at re-defining the female identity and correcting the constructed “images of what women have collectively and historically suffered” can be deciphered in the narrative. The paper intends to study the means employed by the author to subvert the various patriarchal myths in order to centralize the female experiences and sensibilities.

**Keywords** : revisionary , re-ideologizing , hegemony .

The term ‘myth’ had its origin in the Greek word ‘muthos’ signifying a story or plot, either real or invented. However, in course of time the meaning of the Greek term has undergone several changes due to various reasons. Defining a myth M. H. Abrams says , “In its central modern significance , however , a myth is one story in a mythology - a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group , and which served to explain ( in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do , to provide a rationale for social customs and observances , and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (170) . Mythologies of the ancient world have continued to have a great impact on

human psyche and human societies across the globe as also on the literature produced by these societies. From the Renaissance to the Modern Age literature has continually drawn upon myths and mythologies. Robert Graves, a prominent myth critic, while elucidating the functions of myths states: “Myth has two main functions. The first is to answer the sort of awkward questions that children ask: Who made the world? How will it end? . . . The second function of myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs” (12) . Therefore, this accounts for the role of myths in shaping human actions and thoughts and its literary significance . In spite of the advancement in science and technology myths continue to be an essential ingredient in a culture, setting models for human conduct. The relevance of myths in today’s world can be explained by the fact that they “satisfy some psychological need” ( Pinsent , 12) of mankind .

Regarding the origin of myths, C. G. Jung , the noted psychologist , explains that myths are the projections of the collective unconscious of the human race . To quote Jung , “ The study of myths reveals about the mind and character of a people . . . And just as dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of an individual , so myths are a symbolic projection of a people’s hopes , values , fears and aspirations” ( qtd. in Guerin , 83). The collective unconscious, as explained by Jung , is a part of the human psyche which consists of primordial images or archetypes that find expression in dreams , fantasies , instincts and mythologies. The noted Canadian critic Northrop Frye , however , differs from Jung in his views on archetypes. In defining archetypes he focuses on the literary rather than on the psychological aspect . According to him , an archetype is a recurring pattern in literature which he defines as “ a symbol , usually an image , which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (365) . Myth critics acknowledge the fact that myths have been and continues to be an undeniable source of expressing the values and norms , and moulding behavioural patterns in societies . However, feminist critics and theorists hold that myths are powerful tools devised by patriarchy to marginalize women; myth is actually the language of patriarchy to subjugate women.. They argue that it is the Law of the Father that actually operates within the realm of myths. The noted feminist, Kate Millett, in her work *Sexual Politics* recognizes mythology as one of the causes of male indifference and the inferior status of women in patriarchal societies .She observes : “Patriarchy has God on its side” ( ch. 2) . Referring to the story of Fall in Christian Mythology she states : “This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering , knowledge and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes” ( ch. 2). Therefore in Millett’s view mythology reinforces the superiority of man over woman. Apart from myths, fairy tales also reflect the binary oppositions and hierarchies produced by an androcentric culture. Popular fairy tales like *Cinderella* , *Rapunzel* , *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* , *The Sleeping Beauty* , *Beauty and the Beast* etc. portray beautiful virtuous women in distress and brave charming princes as the saviors . Both mythology and fairy tales are informed by male ideology and continue to shape our patterns of thought and worldview. This ideology has been internalized by male and female alike.

The feminist movements of the twentieth century have given an impetus to feminist writers and critics to interrogate the representation of women in various literary genres as ‘inferior’ or ‘lack’. A major emphasis of feminist critics lies in altering the way in which a woman reads literature. In this regard it is apt to quote Judith Fetterley’s observation :

The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting reader than an assenting reader and , by this refusal to assent to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us . ( xxii).

Obviously Fetterley underscores the need to apply the feminist critique to evaluate myths which victimize women. Encouraged by these movements many women writers have attempted a revisionary re-reading of texts including myths . Women re-read myths for manifold reasons . Feminist revisionist mythmaking provides women writers a context to rectify the male construction of female identity as natural . It aims at defying gender assumptions and promoting gender consciousness. It seeks to reveal the misogyny embedded in mythological tales . Alicia Ostriker remarks in *Stealing the Language*: “the motivating force behind women writers’ revisionist myths is the subversion of the dominant ideology’s hidden male bias” (214) . Both Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood share the view that re-visioning is an act of survival. Adrienne Rich observes:

Re-vision , - the act of looking back , seeing with fresh eyes , of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history . It is an act of survival (18).

Therefore, revision, according to Rich, is the act of looking back to an already existing text from a different perspective. Alicia Ostriker suggests revisionist mythmaking as an effective strategy to re-define female identity, and to make “corrections” to constructed “images of what women have collectively and historically suffered” (73). Revisionist mythmaking involves a re-reading of old texts. A revisionary text works at three levels : re-visioning , re-imagining and re-interpretation . The subversion of the male author’s intentions and ideology by changing the narrative perspective is re-visioning. It is, in fact, a re-reading of myths through a feminist lens , thereby displacing the male elements from the centre to the margin in favour of the female elements . Feminist revisionist mythmakers include Angela Carter , Margaret Atwood , Marina Warner and Ann Sexton . Angela Carter’s revisionist version of fairy tales foregrounds the female voice. In her collection *The Bloody Chamber* Carter overturns the sexual mythology in stories like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Snow White*. Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* is the re- telling of the story of Ulysses from the point of view of Penelope, the wife of Ulysses and the mother of Telemachus. Re-visioning inevitably requires a re-imagining of male –defined characters and a re-interpretation of the androcentric myths from a feminist angle. Re- imaging involves the subversion of gender specific qualities, i.e , a re-defining of the female identity . It may lead to the creation of a new character, quite contrary to the patriarchal stereotype of a ‘demon’ or an ‘angel’ . Re-imagining makes it possible to create covetable and exemplary images of women. Re – interpretation of the mythic content as part of re-visioning is done by deciphering a completely different meaning in the already existing tale. For example, Ann Sexton in her re-interpretation of Grimms’ tale ‘ Rapulzel’ seeks to dismantle the patriarchal myth of female passivity and subservience by focusing on the different facets of women’s relationship with one another . The focus is deliberately shifted from the world of romance to the lesbian world. Warner has also attempted to create new myths in her novels *Indigo* , *Mapping the Waters* (a rewriting of the Prospero myth employed in *The Tempest* ) and *The Leto Bundle* . In the process of voicing the female experience these writers have created new stereotypes to replace the existing ones.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a postcolonial writer of Indian origin repeatedly reverts to myths, fairy tales and folk tales in her works. She is an acclaimed and prolific writer who has been widely published. Though settled in the USA for almost twenty years, her imaginative and cultural roots are still in India . As a child she had been nourished by myths , legends and folk tales for she says in her essay “What Women Share” in *Bold Type* , “ when I was a child in India my grandfather would tell me stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata , the ancient Indian epics” (n.p.) . She even confesses that she found the portrayal of women characters in the

epics quite unsatisfactory. So she says, “If I ever wrote a book . . . I would place the woman in the forefront of the action” (*The Palace of Illusions* xv). An analysis of her fictional world reveals the subtle re-working of popular patriarchal myths, thereby, placing her in the tradition of the feminist revisionist mythmakers. This paper seeks to examine the revisioning of myths in Divakaruni’s *Sister of my Heart*, and the textual strategy adopted by her to subvert the phallogocentric and phallogocentric patterns of thought informing the myths. It will explore how gender stereotypes established in Hindu mythology influence the Indian culture and its belief system.

*Sister of My Heart* is the second novel by Divakaruni. It is an absorbing tale of the bond between two distant cousins, Anju and Sudha who consider each other as the sister of their hearts. Set in the 1980’s Calcutta, the novel delineates the middle-class Bengali culture steeped in superstitions and myths. The book is divided into two parts – Book One entitled ‘The Princess in the Palace of Snakes’, and Book Two entitled ‘The Queen of Swords’. These titles refer to the stories that the two sisters, Anju and Sudha tell each other. The former is a fairy tale and the latter is the legend of the Queen of Jhansi, Rani Laxmibai. This unique narrative strategy enables the author to interrogate the validity of myths and fairy tales in real life situation where a timid princess is transformed into a valiant queen. *Toronto Globe and Mail* eulogizes this novel as, “An absorbing tale, underlined by Indian myth and fable . . . A lush display of the Indian romantic imagination, in which the twin narratives encompass both fantasy and fatalism” (n.p.). The stories informing the titles in Book One and Two are significant as they parallel the incidents in the lives of the siblings up to a certain point of time. Anju and Sudha grow up in a traditional household, trying their best to conform to the patriarchal dictum like the princess in the palace of snakes. The Chatterjee household is an accurate image of the waning aristocracy where family name and honour is of the greatest importance. The girls, Anju and Sudha, are required to imbibe certain ethos as is peculiar to their class, religion and culture, for Bijoy expresses his desire to bring up his daughter, Anju, “as befits a descendent of the Chatterjees” (34). After the death of Bijoy and Gopal the household is run by the three widowed women – Mrs. Gouri Chatterjee, Nalini and Aunt Pishi.

Divakaruni introduces contrasted characters which unmistakably serve to subvert certain phallogocentric ideas. This can be perceived as her attempt to re-image the female stereotype. The first pair includes Aunt Pishi and Nalini, both of whom are widows. Whereas Pishi, widowed at an early age and superstitious by nature, strictly follows a life of abstinence and penance, Nalini, on the other hand, challenges the myth of widowhood by her love for gossips and her regular beauty regime. Keeping away from all entertainments and auspicious occasions Aunt Pishi “puts on her patient smile and sits on the back of the hall on feast days, not participating because widows musn’t” (10). She would often narrate mythological stories, fairy tales and family secrets to the siblings. Always “dressed in austere white” with her grey hair “cut close to her scalp in the orthodox style” (4), she epitomizes perfect widowhood. All these can be perceived as the reflection of the patriarchal rules she has internalized. The beautiful Nalini, on the other hand, never believes in sacrifice and penance. Conscious of her beauty she “is careful to apply turmeric paste on her face everyday. Her perfect-shaped lips glisten red from paan, which she loves to chew – mostly for the colour it leaves on her mouth . . .” (5), which is the least the society expects of a widow. She has a golden skin and her cheeks are “as soft as the lotus flower” (5). She laughs and gossips with her tea-time friends. To the Hindus red and yellow are auspicious, and the author’s deliberate use of those in relation to Nalini offers a critique to the myth of widowhood. In Anju and Sudha we get another pair of contrasted

characters. Sudha who “believes in magic , demons and gods and falling stars to wish on” (17) epitomizes the princess with a traditional conservative mindset living in the dark confining spaces , while the defiance , ambition and questioning spirit of Anju effectively serve to nullify the myth of passivity and the inferior positioning of women . Again, Mrs.Gouri Chatterjee , the head of the Chatterjee household is contrasted with Sunil’s (Anju’s husband ) father , who is the patriarch of the Majumdar household . In the portrayal of ‘Gouri ma’ Divakaruni subverts traditional assumptions concerning the head of the family. With her extra-ordinary personality which combines intelligence, efficiency, thoughtfulness and selflessness, she emerges as the symbol of love and respect as is evident in Sudha’s words : “When Gouri Ma smiles at me with her eyes , I stand up straighter . I want to be noble and brave just like her” (5). On the other hand Sunil’s father is a typical bully and a male chauvinist who can only invite repulsion and hatred from his wife and son . Here Divakaruni seems to interrogate the very notion of a patriarchal family engendered by hierarchial societies . Clearly the portrayal of Anju and her mother , Gouri Chaterjee , is an act of re-imaging of the eternal feminine ; a subversion of the values attached to the binary oppositions which is constructed as natural .

Among other things Pishi believed in the myth of Bidhata Purush . It is a dominant myth in the novel . In fact the novel begins with an allusion to Bidhata Purush : “They say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born , Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be . . . That is why they leave sweetmeats by the cradle. Silver-leafed sandesh , dark pantuas floating in golden syrup , jilipis orange as the heart of a fire , glazed with honey- sugar. If the child is especially lucky , in the morning it will all be gone”(3). In Hindu mythology Bidhata Purush is the god of Fate , who writes the child’s future on its forehead on the sixth day after its birth . But Anju always scoffed at such ideas , dismissing them as nonsense. She firmly believes that it were the servants who sneaked in at night to eat up the sweets . On the contrary Aunt Pishi believes that as Anju and Sudha were unlucky siblings born on the ill-fated day of their father’s death , Bidhata Purush did not care to come at all . The aunt believes that human life is pre-destined and humans are helpless creatures . Sudha who conforms to the patriarchal stereotype of being passive and submissive sees in her imagination the god of Fate foretelling ‘happiness’ for Anju and ‘sorrow’ for Sudha . It is only later in the novel that the belief in the myth is shattered as both Sudha and Aunt Pishi transform into new beings .

One of the stories often narrated by the Aunt was about a princess who lived in an underwater palace of snakes , far away from the real world. She lived in confinement until she was rescued by a charming prince . It was he who showed her the real world , “the magical world of men” and “ without him she’d never have known who she was” (86). The underlying implication of this fairytale is that it is a man who actually helps a woman to grow into a complete person ; a woman finds fulfillment only in her union with a man . The patriarchal assumptions informing other similar and popular stories have a great impact on Indian culture as it encourage girls to be physically and mentally passive . So is the case with Sudha , who loves to imagine herself as the princess in the palace of snakes , waiting for the right man to take her away. Even when the sisters would act out the story in their childhood Anju would play the prince and Sudha the princess in distress . She would wait for Anju to come and rescue her . The values of the hierarchical society firmly ingrained in her psyche would prevent her to act otherwise . Interestingly , her life moves on the same track as that of the fairytale princess. Possessing a typical patriarchally conditioned mindset she is unable to act on her own. This is further consolidated in her adolescent years when she falls in love with Ashok . The love sick Sudha repeats the story of the fairytale princess in her own innovative way to Anju saying that she

could easily identify herself with the princess whom Ashok would come to rescue . She waits for Ashok in the hope that he would do something to perpetuate their love . But he fails her , or rather she fails him by abiding by the wishes of her family to marry Ramesh . Even after her marriage she keeps hoping that her husband would protect and rescue her from the clutches of her tyrannical mother- in- law . Divakaruni skilfully captures the andocentric nature of the society which almost maims a woman . Sudha suffers mutely for her unrequited love as well as the injustices of her mother-in- law. She continues to be the princess in distress till she is confronted by a crisis . It is not until she encounters a dilemma that she rethinks her role as a submissive and obedient wife and daughter- in- law . Surprisingly no prince charming from the fairy land comes to alleviate her sufferings . Neither Ramesh nor Ashok could live up to her expectations . Faced with a tough choice of opting between her husband ( implying social respectability) , and her single status with her unborn girl- child ( implying social stigma) , she stands alone with none to support her . Divakaruni takes the opportunity to critique the myth that a man is a woman’s complementary . By focusing on the other side of the constructed reality , and giving an alternative ending to the popular fairy tale she attempts a re-visioning of the myth of the princess in the palace of snakes . The dependence and passivity myth is turned upside down as the princess Sudha gradually moves towards transcendence . In an interesting turn of events the author brings in Anju , the true sister of her (Sudha) heart who actually helps her out . She is the real Prince Saviour with whose love , support and counsel Sudha is able to come out of the palace of snakes ( symbolizing hierarchical patriarchal societies) . With her radical feminist notions Anju encourages Sudha to raise her daughter as a single parent . Divakaruni subverts the myth of the fairytale princess as Sudha gradually metamorphoses into the Queen of Swords . It is the strong bond of sisterhood that enables the author to undermine the myth of the Prince Charming , as Sudha seeks fulfillment in being courageous and indomitable as the Queen of Swords . Clearly Divakaruni advocates female bonding as a means of resisting the patriarchal structures . The depths of female bonding has been further explored in the second part of the novel and the idea reinforced as the most effective means to counter phallogocentrism . The second part entitled “The Queen of Swords” is an allusion to the queen of Jhansi , who refusing to be subdued steered her way straight through obstacles to accomplish her mission. She becomes the role model for the two sisters who draw inspiration from the legend to fight out their sorrows and problems . Back in their Calcutta home when Aunt Pishi wants to bless Sudha , she says , “ Bless me that I might be like the Rani of Jhansi , The Queen of Swords . . . Bless me that I have the courage to go into 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” (249) . Sudha’s asking for blessings from Aunt Pishi to be like the Queen of Swords and washing away the last trace of vermilion from her head is significant enough . It symbolizes the end of her days of sorrow as she emerges as an emancipated and unorthodox woman to live life on her own terms . This is again a re-imaging of the male representation of femininity . The orthodox Aunt Pishi , the perpetrator of androcentric values also rejects the phallogocentric assumptions (which she had believed all her life ) when she says , “ Why should she care anymore what people say ? What good has it done her ? What good has it done any of us , a whole lifetime of being afraid 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 . . . When I came back to my parents’ home as a widow , how many of society’s tyrannical rules I followed! . . . I was told that it was my bad luck that caused my husband’s death . . . I had no right in this house . . . I refuse to have our Sudha live like that” (247-248) . Here again is an attempt to interrogate the

myth of Bidhata Purush ( which encourages human beings to be fatalists) in delineating the transformation of Sudha and the widowed aunt . Even Aunt Pishi begins to have misgivings about the role of Bidhata Purush in controlling human lives . Through their trials and tribulations the women in the Chatterjee household learn to reject the old values and imbibe a set of new values . By her bold decision and the support from the mothers Sudha is able to ensure a better future both for herself and her unborn child , thereby challenging the prediction of the god of Fate . Later , when Anju finds it impossible to recover from the trauma of her miscarriage , it is Sudha who brings her out of the delirium . She begins to tell her the story of a princess in distress turning into the Queen of Swords to save her unborn child . It works like magic on her and Anju herself completes the story saying that the poor mother in a desperate attempt holds her sister’s hands and reaches the world across the rainbow. Slowly she comes to terms with her loss with Sudha’s help , who travels to America with her new- born daughter to enable her sister restore the balance in her life . This s how the two sisters help each other out in times of crisis. Speaking on this invisible support system , i.e. , female bonding , Divakaruni says in her essay “What Women Share” in *Bold Type* , “In the best friendships . . . with women , there is a closeness that is unique , a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need any explanation , perhaps because of the life-changing experiences we share – menstruation , childbirth and menopause. The same tragedies , physical or emotional , threaten us . . . .Oh , we fight too . . . .But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other . . . ourselves with all our imperfections . . . . We can be women and that , as women we can be understood” (n.p).

Finally the novelist sets out to revise the myth of widowhood as she posits an alternative worldview reflected through the different life that the three mothers begin to live . The crumbling of the old order and emergence of the new can be perceived in their (Gouri ma , Aunt Nalini and Aunt Pishi) decision to sell off their ancestral house and furniture to move into a smaller apartment . They begin to live a life quite unlike the one prescribed for Hindu widows . Rejecting tradition and old values they live a fulfilling life upholding a set of new values as Sudha says , “ Along with the old house the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition . . . . The mothers have joined book societies and knitting classes. They go for walks around Victoria Memorial . They volunteer for Mother Teresa’s Shishu Bhavan . . . . attend all night classical music concerts . . . . On rainy evenings they order crispy lentil-stuffed dalpuris from Ganguram” (274). The rejection of tradition to live a meaningful life is an endeavour to create a new myth . It is again the strong bond of sisterhood that enables them to act in defiance of the established order . The novel forcefully underscores the idea that it is the women only who can help each other to survive in a man’s world . Ironically without any male intrusion , the sisters and the mothers are able to carve out a niche for themselves . To quote Urbashi Barat, “ Shut in by men , women in turn shut out men , and form lasting female bonds within a women’s community that are sometimes shaken but are never entirely ruptured by male intrusions . . . .” (50) . Thus throughout the story there is a persistent effort at replacing the dominant male ideology with the marginalized feminine voice .

In this novel one can easily perceive how a revisionary framework has been deliberately employed as a means for self – exploration and self – projection . The twin protagonists , Anju and Sudha , and their mothers are able to re-discover themselves through the various trials and tribulations , and thereby assert their identity . It is an ardent endeavour to revise the oppressive patriarchal images and replace them with more realistic ones . The narrative strategy effectively destabilizes the androcentric values informing the old texts and myths by introducing new

viewpoints and values . Divakaruni has wonderfully accomplished the task of undoing the male hegemony and paradigms through the act of revision.

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