

**URBAN FEARS AND SUBCONSCIOUS SURRENDER TO
PATRIARCHAL CODES: A STUDY OF
CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL SISTER OF MY HEART**

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I discuss the fears of women-only families* living in urban spaces and their subconscious surrender to patriarchal codes to defend themselves from both potential and imaginary urban fears. Chitra Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart* deals with the fears of the women-only family of the Chatterjees in the big city Calcutta** and its study provides us important material for the discussion. It is believed that urban spaces with well-built civil security systems liberate women from the clutches of patriarchy, offering liberal living conditions and numerous economic opportunities. But this is not entirely true; women in urban spaces suffer a lot of security problems and face a lot of personal safety issues every day. They frequently undergo humiliations, sexist remarks, threats to violate honor, rape, and other kinds of physical and mental violence in public spaces. This kind of insecure position of women makes their life fearful in urban spaces, and they become helpless many times when civil security systems and other law and order enforcing authorities do not offer effective solutions to the issues. So, women take refuge in patriarchal ways to defend themselves from fears and threats of urban spaces, and these things are not desired by women, but they are helpless and they surrender to patriarchal social codes subconsciously.

KEYWORDS:

Cities, Insecurity, Patriarchy, Subconscious, Urban fears, Urban space, Women only families.

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Introduction

“Women experience a historic difficulty in their relationship with the city and with public spaces” (Carrera and Marina, 2023, pl). Cities, historically, have been built and developed by men (Spain, 2014, p 581) to suit their needs; this makes women face a lot of challenges in urban spaces. “Some of the challenges facing urban women are: lack of safety and adequate mobility in cities; gender-based violence in public spaces” (UN Habitat, 2020, p 9). Women can build independent and sustainable lives in cities using socio-economic opportunities (Das, M et al, 2023, p397) openly available in urban spaces and they can be free from regressive patriarchal social codes accessing institutional civil security systems. On the other side, lack of proper civil security systems and poor urban design make women’s life in urban spaces fearful. UNDP Cities Alive: Designing Cities That Work for Women points out; “Without a gender-responsive approach to urban planning, cities often compound gender inequalities that restrict women’s social and economic opportunities, health and wellbeing, sense of safety and security, and access to justice and equity” (Candiracci & Power 2022).

In such cities, women experience fears and threats while living and working; insecure and improper civil security systems make women frequently think about potential and possible attacks on them. According to Carrera and Marina, the reasons for fear of women in urban spaces are “socio-urbanistic factors, the persistence of male models in the design and management of the spaces and times of the city and of the physical quality of public spaces that often do not guarantee an adequate level of perceived safety” (Carrera and Marina, 2023, pl).

The fear of public space is widespread among women, as there are increasing incidents of attacks on women every year. For example, in India data on crimes against women shows “With a staggering 4,45,256 cases registered in 2022 alone, equivalent to nearly 51 FIRs*** every hour, the data exposes a grim escalation from

2021 and 2020” (frontline.thehindu.com, 2022). The nature of attacks on women may be sexually motivated or non-sexual and attackers may be known or strange persons. According to UN Women: Safe Cities Global Initiative attacks on women take place “on streets, public transport and parks, in and around schools and workplaces, in public sanitation facilities and water and food distribution sites, or in their own neighborhoods” (unwomen.org 2013).

Moreno et al (2022) quotes Barrau Fuentes to express the relationship between women and the city as “one that is based on fear” (p NP4161). Women experience attacks like physical assaults, molestation, unwanted comments, gestures and touches, rape which make women suffer both physically and mentally. Many women fear losing personal honor, social reputation and family name and also economic opportunities, when they become the victims of such attacks. Women, to defend themselves from social disgrace and loss of economic opportunities in life, resort to protective or defensive measures by changing the way of their life which includes sacrifice of liberty, mobility, education, economic and other developmental opportunities. “This [public space] fear is a very important factor limiting women’s activities” (Valentine, 1990, p 288). Many times these protective measures are nothing but subconscious surrender to patriarchal social codes. As defensive measures taken against urban fears are not willfully taken or intentionally adopted, and following some precautionary measures while going outside becomes normative or automatic to women, so they become subconscious measures.

Except for a few, largely women surrender to codes of patriarchy in the face of urban fears and threats; it distracts them from progressive life and retracts them to social and economic dependency. According to Sultana (2010) “Patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development” (p1). Patriarchy wants women to serve men and remain subservient throughout their lives. It denies women education, jobs or any other economic

opportunities which improves social condition and it controls mobility of women, by restricting them to the four walls of the house. It dictates women to wear body-covering traditional dresses and to put on symbols and ornaments which indicate religious or marital status. Women living in urban spaces surrender to these patriarchal codes when they face threats to personal honor and social reputation.

Urban fears of crime have negative impacts on well-being (Newman & Franck, 1982, p 205). Women have to bear negative impacts of urban fears every day and that forces them to alter the course of life and to adopt counter measures to protect or defend themselves. These alterations and counter measures are not always in the purview of police or legal framework, as these authoritative ways of resolving urban fears of women may not always be useful or effective. When women could not find effective solutions from the urban authorities, they adopt their own defensive measures that are invariably subconscious surrender to patriarchal ways of life. These measures may not always be willfully adopted but become necessary and take away some liberty and economic opportunities. Women value honor, social reputation and family prestige more than liberty and economic opportunities, so they wear clothes which cover their bodies, wear religious or married signs or marks, sacrifice late working hours or return to home early, take a male family member while moving out, avoid streets, places or institutions where they feel insecure (Koskela, 1999, p111).

Urban fears trouble women-only families or women-headed families more. These families worry more about possible attacks or dangers living in urban spaces which are largely controlled and administered by men. Irrespective of the social position of these families, in which an adult male member is not present, they are socially considered as vulnerable. Especially in the Indian male-dominated social setup, an adult male member is considered as the guardian of the family (Stuart, 2013, p36), women-only families or women-headed families are considered as easy targets and this

creates social insecurity. Fear of losing honor and reputation makes these families more protective or defensive; this fear compels them to adopt regressive patriarchal ways of life which curtail freedom, mobility and economic opportunities. And all this imposition of patriarchal codes on living happens subconsciously and unwillingly as women fear strange and male-dominated urban space and time (Valentine, 1989, pp388–389).

Urban Fears in the Novel Sister of My Heart

In the novel *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Divakaruni presents the story of two daughters of the Chatterjee family, Anju and Sudha. Even before birth, the girls lose their fathers in an unfortunate adventure of finding precious stones and they were raised by their mothers Gouri Ma and Nalini. The unfortunate and untimely death of adult male members left only women in the family with huge responsibilities of taking care of newborn daughters and managing the reputed house of Chatterjees with meager income. The mothers were in deep anguish for many days; the anguish was not only for the loss of male members of the family but also for the difficult course of life they had to lead without male guardians to protect the family. Gouri Ma took the responsibility of managing the house and the bookstore business. In the male-dominated urban space of Calcutta, lack of a male guardian and the constant fear of losing honor and family name compelled mothers to adopt several defensive or protective measures in life. Urban fears put them under pressure of losing social reputation and they went on enforcing patriarchal codes of life on them. They surrendered to patriarchal codes subconsciously, even though there was no male member in the family to enforce them. The strict patriarchal ways of living were not desired or intended, but the urban fears made them surrender to patriarchal ways of life subconsciously.

Urban fears compelled the women-only family to live in a defensive mindset and this was the cause of dissatisfaction among young members of the family. In the beginning of the novel, Sudha

expressed her dissatisfaction over the overprotective ways of three mothers including Abha Pishi, widowed daughter of the Chatterjees. She and Anju were made to spend most of their time behind the huge wrought-iron gates of the Chatterjee mansion, which were installed by the great grandfather, who was conscious, even a hundred years before, about dangers of male gaze in the city. She mentions Pishi's words about the gates "our great grandfather had them planted 100 years ago to keep the women of his house safe from the gaze of strangers" (Divakaruni, 1999, p.16). Both the girls were unhappy over the restricted life, but the mothers were worried about the girls venturing into urban space, that might expose them to male gaze and attack, and that would bring dishonor to the family. So the girls were always made to go to school in the family car under the surveillance of chaperone Ramur Ma.

Gouri Ma and Nalini adopted more patriarchal ways to bring the girls up as they grew young with the only intention of making them fit as brides. Their only aim was to raise the daughters respectfully and to marry them off without a stain to the family name. The fear of venturing out into public places and anticipation of losing family name in the public gaze or sexually charged attack made the Chatterjee women live most of the time behind the wrought-iron gates of the Chatterjee mansion, which had become their protective fortress. It took away liberty and mobility of the women. As another step to protect the girls from evils of urban spaces the mothers appointed Ramur Ma as the chaperone to wait on the girls, but the real intention was to have vigilant eyes on the girls. Anju, free-willed of the two girls, questioned Gouri Ma about the strict ways of bringing up, "why must Ramur Ma go with us every time we leave the house, even to get books from the neighborhood library?" (Divakaruni, 1999, p.67).

The fear of urban spaces which may make the girls lose their respectable ways of the Chatterjees had limited the liberty and mobility of the girls. They were not even allowed to wear dresses of their choice. Anju would get angry and say to her mother,

“I am tired of these old women sarees you make us wear. You would think we were living in the Dark Ages instead of the Eighties. I bet there isn’t another girl of 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?” (Divakaruni, 1999, p.67).

In addition to the chaperone, the mothers took a driver, even though the family income and finances were weak. But it was necessary for the women-only family to have a male face even in the form of a driver to project him as a symbol of defense. They thought that having a driver would serve the dual purposes of both chauffeur and guard. He was always kept away from women quarters and at the visitor’s room near the main gate. The mothers had all women servants in the house and no male servants were allowed beyond the front yard.

The family legacy was another thing the mothers had to guard and they took it as an invaluable asset. Both Gouri Ma and Nalini were young when they became widows and they could have considered remarriage. But they sacrificed personal happiness for the family honor and lived a rigorous widow life as it was prescribed in patriarchy. All this was done to keep the Chatterjee family name as they were known in the locality as a dignified and cultured family and also for the fear of public censure. This fear of public censure and fear of losing reputation in public places made the women vulnerable and submissive to patriarchy. Gouri Ma was managing the bookstore and she had to go to the shop every day. In the same fear of public censure, she never dressed for work like other women. She lived an astute life sacrificing luxuries like wearing good sarees or using cosmetics.

Urban fears of the women-only families force them to take extreme steps over small mistakes. Once Anju and Sudha had bunked the classes and watched a movie in the theatre sitting beside a stranger. When the mothers knew about this adventure of the girls,

Sudha's mother stopped her trips to school which halted her education. In the fear of losing social reputation, she started preparations to marry off Sudha as early as possible. While Anju's education came to an end as her mother Gouri Ma fell ill and there was a fear that untimely death of her mother would spoil Anju's marriage prospects. Both the girls had to sacrifice their education and goals in life for the sake of marriage. The urban fears of the mothers forced them to conduct marriages of the girls very early. The institution of marriage is the old weapon of patriarchy to bind women from fulfillment of personal goals in life.

When Anju wished to visit Sudha in her in-laws' house for the first time after marriage in Bardhaman and she wanted to travel alone in the public train. But the mothers were against this idea, even after the marriage of Anju, they were not ready to send her alone anywhere. The mothers had the fear of urban spaces and always considered that some problematic incidents in public space would spoil the family name. Gouri Ma told Anju "I am concerned because you have never travelled anywhere alone" (Divakaruni, 1999, p.193). Both Anju and Sudha were unaware of the real nature of public spaces since their early childhood years and later in life they found it hard to deal in the public spaces independently.

The fear of urban spaces bothered Sudha when she left her in-laws' house alone to avoid forceful abortion of her baby girl. From Bardhaman she travelled alone in the public train to Howrah without any luggage and while standing in the station men behaved weirdly with her. She narrates the experience as:

"And the men – the station is full of men. 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 no one has come to me" (Divakaruni, 1999, p.263).

Women fear this kind of uncivilized and sexually charged

behavior of men in public spaces and try to avoid living and travelling alone in such urban spaces. This kind of easy victimization of women compels them to subconsciously surrender to patriarchy in the absence of proper civil security systems in place. Urban spaces pose these kinds of threats to women every day and they helplessly alter their ways of life. Many times women sacrifice liberty, mobility and economic opportunities to keep themselves away from public disgrace.

Conclusion

In the absence of women-friendly urban spaces and lack of proper law enforcement systems, women become easy targets of male lust in urban spaces. Attacks on women may be sexual or nonsexual in nature but it takes away honor and reputation of women in public spaces and in a patriarchal society like India women have to pay a heavy price for it throughout their life. So most of the women alter their lifestyle, sacrifice liberty, avoid moving out and sacrifice economic opportunities in the face of fears of public assault. Many times women value their personal honor more than economic opportunities and liberty rather than exposing themselves to public place fears. Women-only families suffer mentally and economically in anticipation of possible or potential dangers in urban space. In order to avoid dangers of public place attacks women-only families adopt more defensive lifestyles that are unintentionally similar to patriarchal codes.

* Families consist of women members only.

** The old British name for the present-day Kolkata.

*** First Information Report of crime filed to Police.

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