

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

## The Portrayal of Sisterhood Relationship between Anju and Sudha in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.1.16](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.1.16)



### Article info

Article Received: 21/12/2024  
Article Accepted: 17/01/2025  
Published online: 22/01/2025

### Abstract

*Sister of My Heart* (1999) presents a heartfelt narrative style that incorporates Indian myths, folktales, and fairy tales, showcasing a sincere portrayal. The novel delves into the emotional struggles and anguish faced by its characters as they navigate the intricate interplay between traditional values and the modern world. Throughout their journey, the characters undergo significant personal growth, as they endeavour to reconcile their deeply held traditional beliefs with unforeseen desires. This research paper seeks to examine the intricate dimensions of identity crisis, hegemony, patriarchy, and other pertinent themes, within both Eastern and Western contexts.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Hegemony, sisterhood, Patriarchy, Transcultural, Metaphors.

### Introduction

Migration has been a prevalent occurrence throughout human history, spanning across different civilizations. Writing has served as a primary means for individuals to express themselves during this process. During the colonial and post-colonial eras, a significant number of Indians migrated and settled in various regions around the world, resulting in the emergence of Diasporic literature. Through their writings, these individuals aim to share their experiences with

a global audience. However, when examining the works of diasporic women writers, the range of issues expands further. In addition to rootlessness, alienation, suppression, oppression, and the struggle for survival, there exists a profound opportunity for psychoanalytic exploration of the female characters. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an exemplary writer who actively supports women in this context.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary works showcase her female protagonists who exhibit resilience in challenging societal norms,

striving to establish their agency and carve out a distinct identity within a predominantly male-dominated society. Moreover, Divakaruni's writings also shed light on the various levels of anxiety experienced by individuals, ranging from personal introspection to concerns at the local, national, and even international levels. Despite the Indian diaspora's migration to the West in pursuit of better opportunities in business, education, and research, their deep-rooted affection for their homeland remains unwavering. This sentiment of nostalgia towards their country of origin persists even as they settle comfortably in foreign lands. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their book *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* define 'diaspora' as "The voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions". (2)

#### **The Portrayal of Sisterhood Relationship between Anju and Sudha:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* holds a unique place among her novels. This novel brings the tense and fanatical emotions emerging from the relationship between man and woman, daughter and mother. This novel is a rich and composite description of a distressed family. It is a tale of two girls with a best friendship whose lives take a new turn soon after their marriage; Anju goes to America after marriage whereas Sudha, an effortless but tremendously beautiful and munificent girl, remains in India. The novel is divided into two parts. Book one is named "*The Princess in the Palace of Snakes*" while Book two is named "*The Queen of Swords*". In Book One, there are twenty chapters while in Book Two there are twenty-two chapters. Sarkar critically appreciates the writer, her novels, and the purpose of her writing by saying: Writers like Divakaruni are acutely aware of their already exiled or marginalized state in the male-dominated Indian society. For them, the physical act of relocation, a deliberate move to a foreign country, becomes an act of self-determination and rebellion against traditional

norms of behaviour. (39)

The novel starts with an old belief that on the first night after a child is born, Bidhata Purush decides the fate of the child by himself. The family members bathe babies in sandalwood water and leave sweet meats by the cradle. 'If the child is particularly lucky, in the morning it will all be gone'. (3) Sudha and Anju speak throughout the forty-two chapters alternatively. The first chapter opens with Sudha's feelings towards Anju, Pishi, her widow aunt, Anju's mother, Gouri ma, her mother Nalini, and Singhji, the driver. The chapter ends with this sentence: "Years later I will wonder, that first word he wrote, was it sorrow". (9)

Sudha's life is full of sadness, unhappiness, and anxiety. In their childhood days they spoke about their friendliness in many ways: All through childhood we bathed together and ate together, often from the same plate, feeding each after our favored items: the crispy brown triangles of parathas, fried eggplant, soft sweet rasgulla balls. Our favourite game was to perform the fairy tales Pishi told us, where Sudha was always the princess and I was the prince who consoled her. At night we lie in twin beds in my room, though formally Sudha had a room of her own next to her mother's, a dark unattractive mausoleum filled with old oil paintings and heavy mahogany furniture. We played and giggled until Pishi came and narrated our stories. And when we had nightmares, as an alternative way of going to our mothers for comfort, we squeezed into one bed and held each other. (12).

One afternoon, they skip the school and go to see a movie. A young man occupies the seat next to Sudha. Sudha can't stop herself from looking at the young man. She loses track of the story and the movie ends. The young man introduces himself as Ashok, the one who expels sorrow.

Sudha also discloses her identity; "I'm Bahudha Chatterjee".

Anju tries to convince Sudha and warns her of the consequences if anyone happens to see the girl talking to an eccentric person. Anju smells of the awful trouble at home. Unexpectedly, Sarita's aunty arrives from nowhere holds their arms, and takes her away from the girl's home.

The exchange of looks in the cinema hall makes Sudha restless throughout the night. As an adolescent she thinks: "They heard in the old tales that when a man and woman switch over looks the way we did, their state of mind mingles. Their look is a rope of gold required each to the other. Even if they never meet again, they always think a little of each other with them. They cannot remember, and they can never be wholly happy again". (59) It may be love at first sight but Sudha thinks all the time how she is luckier as she got a possibility to sit near the young man. She thinks that it was the wheeling of the planets, which brought them together. She is still in the charming world of fairy tales. A proposal comes to Sudha from a family that resides in Bardhaman. The groom of Ramesh is an employee of Indian Railways. But Sudha thinks of Ashok; 'Ashok, where are you? Have you forgotten me?' (102).

At Kalighat she meets Ashok, who tells her to wait for two more weeks. They have their first kiss at the back side of Shiva Lingam. His loving kiss is remembered for the rest of her life. His fingertips linger in her throat. After two weeks, she will be an adult, but the question haunts her: 'How can I live for two entire weeks without him?' (111) In a magic dream, she thinks; "If only Anju and I like the wives of the heroes in the old tales, could marry the same man, our Arjun, our Krishna, who would love and hold us both and keep us both together". (115)

Sudha knows that it is an eccentric and dishonest wish which can never be satisfied.

Sudha's marriage is set and now it is Anju's turn she meets Sunil in her bookshop. Sunil arrives at the bookstore. He is well-

dressed in a traditional kurta with buttons. He asks Anju if they have any books by Virginia Woolf. Anju is taken aback as she is a lover of literature.

I look intently at him. Disbelief makes my heart leap. But not, couldn't be that lucky". It's Sunil. Yes, Mr. America himself! No, don't be uncomfortable. "He gestures at his clothes". Forgive me for the dishonesty - I had to see you for myself- you as you are, not at some abnormal brideviewing ritual, swathed in silks and jewels, sitting silently with your head lowered". (120) Anju is so cheerful with this meeting and Sunil's admiration that she says. "Love happens and so do miracles". (121) It is love that binds Anju and Sudha. The girls grew up as soul mates in Chatterjee's house. Though they are far-away cousins who are born in the same household at the same time, the social position of both is not the same at the beginning. After marriage Sudha moves to Bardhaman and Anju goes to America. Everything goes easy at the beginning. Sudha says; "I know I am needed. I know I am liked. And so I am not unhappy". (179)

Through letters, they are in contact with each other. Letters are much more interesting than an electronic medium of message for Sudha. Anju feels that Sudha's letters are more truthful than her letters. Sudha's husband, Ramesh, is a kind man but before his mother 'he is like a leaf in a gale'. (197) Sudha makes a call from the main post office and tells Anju; "My mother-in-law needs me to have an abortion". (237) She further adds: "When the test shows that it was a girl. 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 appropriate, it'll bring the family shame and ill luck". (23738)

Sudha later determined to leave the house. Sudha's strong strength of mind not to bend over before the unwanted demand of her in-law makes her a lady skilled in championing the causes of feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for the modern is remarkable by the killing of the girl

child. The current era needs such a heroine that can prevent the girls from being vanished. Through the description of Sudha, the novelist would like to express a message to the so-called knowledgeable society that if a woman determines to take her course of action, no one can prevent her. And Sudja is a radical and an ideal example to be followed by society. In America, Anju loses her child. In the hospital, Anju asks her husband Sunil: "What did he look like?" "He was beautiful, with tiny hands like starfish ... he was blue like baby Krishna". (281)

The tragedy crushed both Sudha and Anju but very soon they recovered to normalcy and Anju invited Sudha to America. The novel ends with a letter written by Gopal. The letter is addressed to his daughter Sudha. Her father Gopal is living in the house in the camouflage of a driver 'Singhji'. In the end, Sudha goes to America, leaving her past and in-laws in India. She goes there with her daughter, Dayita. The novel is a story of 'two women who have migrated with the value of sorrow' (322).

The novel is a global bestseller that has been translated into over 20 languages. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni brilliantly blends the passionate feelings of love and jealousy. She portrays how the vanity and greediness of Sanyals force Sudha to depart the in-laws. The novel exposes the power of women and their skill to tolerate the tragedies in life. Both the girls are courageous and the relationship of love and friendship has become permanent despite misunderstandings and tragedies in their lives. Other than blood relation the relationship is confined by one's birth, but friendship is the most successful relationship of the entire relationship as Francis Bacon appropriately writes: "A principal fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart, in which passions of all kinds do cause and induce".

Anju reveals her care and love for Sudha, "I hate my father. I hate the truth that he could go off so carelessly in investigation or

exploration, without having a single attention for what would take place to the rest of us ... But never Sudha. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart". (11)

In her early days, Anju recognized that people were envious of these two girls. Anju thinks that 'what people think is how happy Sudha and I are when we're together. (12) As the girls grew older, the nuns who ran the convent school were worried about their closeness. The nuns said, 'It wasn't normal. They put them in diverse classes, but Sudha used to cry in distress. When Anju saw Sudha's swollen eyes. She wanted to kill someone. After some days, Anju overheard Aunt Nalini telling Pishi Ma 'that she was not concerned about us. Loving someone so extremely was dangerous, it made you too vulnerable. (13)

Their mothers are also not capable of realizing their bond of love and friendship. Anju thinks that Sudha is more beautiful than her. 'Her skin is the humid brown of almond milk, her hair is soft like heavy rain clouds down her back, and her eyes are the softest of all'. (17) Anju never desires to see her unhappy.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni sheds light on the friendship and the love between these two girls in a very distinctive way. They treat each other with admiration till the end of the novel. Anju admires Sudha's art of storytelling. She thinks that Sudha is the best storyteller, better than Pishi Ma. The novel systematically engages the readers till the hidden secret about Sudha's father is exposed. It deals with the true Indian idealistic thoughts of two women whose twin narratives draw the reader's curiosity to the last page. And the novelist admits the plot to expand from the viewpoint of Anju and Sudha. It is also an explanation of family life in Bengal, which is rich in every aspect as acknowledged by Chitra during her childhood. The novel is based on the short story, 'The Ultrasound' from her first book of short stories: *Arranged Marriage* (Anchor Books, 1995). The novel displays the strong touching bond between the

two girls in a very attractive style inspired by the novelist herself in the wake of the cultural background of the protagonists. *Sister of My Heart* is a unique combination of emotional demand and artistic structure wherein readers are suddenly trained to take a bath in the Ganges of poetic prose.

The Enduring capacity of women as mothers is praised by all. As the title of the novel indicates, *Sister of My Heart* is a story of two cousins Anjali and Basudha whose love outstrips even the bonds of blood relations. Born twelve hours gape in the same house, the women believe themselves twins, and from the beginning age, they get everything that they need from love, respect, council, and friendship from each other. They closely grew up under the blameless statement that they are cousins. Beyond the theme of love and friendship, the novel provides a deep understanding of the internal depths of the females. Society is an undeveloped one where women are always measured secondary to men and hence they have to live within the sphere of social norms making themselves adapt in one circumstance to the other. In her actual and scholarly explanation of the contemporary Indian social scenario, Chitra has agreed to give expression to the most current problems such as feminism, loneliness, segregation, female infanticide, identity crisis, or depression. To look at the hegemony of the maternal, and to examine how Indian mothers presume power within various, similar oppressive contexts. Interestingly, the novelist focuses on the three mothers (Nalini, Gauri, and Pishi) and then their two daughters Anju and Sudha who are the protagonists of the novel. In the opening, we are told that Anju and Sudha are brought up by three mothers. Yes, we have three mothers perhaps to make up for the fact that we have no fathers

... There's Anju's mother, whom I call Gouri Ma, her fine cheekbones and majestic forehead hinting at generations of breeding, for she comes from a family as old and appreciated as that of the Chatterjees, in which she was

married into. (Divakaruni 1999; 16-17)

Numerous conflicts occur after marriage; though, the girls find strength in one another to resolve these conflicts. Anju was married to Sunil Majoomdar - a man of her choice and Sudha was married to Ramesh Sanyal - a man not of her choice. Anju loved Sunil but she was conscious of the truth that Sunil was extremely enamoured by Sudha's beauty and fostered a seed of love somewhere in his heart. Before her marriage, Sudha loved another man named Ashok but running off with him would mean a devastating of the family's reputation which would affect Anju's marriage. At the altar of her sisterhood, friendship, and family, sacrifices her love for Ashok and marries Ramesh. Being a well-bred Indian woman, Sudha put aside her hidden feelings for Ashok, devoted herself totally to her husband's household, and lived as a good wife as well as a good daughter-in-law.

The submissive role of women is critically examined in this novel: Both of them witnessed a different face of a woman in their mothers-in-law. Anju's mother-in-law was obedient to her husband, whereas Sudha's mother-in-law was dominating and demanding. Anju has to go on a journey abroad with Sunil but before getting the visa, she stayed with her in-laws and witnessed the deprived situation of her mother-in-law. She was affectionate and loving towards Sunil and Anju but she was extremely dominated by her husband, who kept on claiming to follow his orders about food planning and almost all the family matters. At one event, Anju was shocked to see her mother-in-law's tormented state when she prepared chutney on Sunil's claim which, according to her husband, was 'unhealthy stuff'. Very brutally and obstinately, he threw the bowl of chutney at her; in one quick movement, Sunil's father flings the bowl across the table at Sunil's mother.

There's a noisy thump, then a metal clatter as the bowl falls to the floor' ... what upsets me the most is the humbleness with

which she lowers her eyes and doesn't even wipe her spattered chutney .... Sunil's mother's lower lip quivers. How embarrassing it must be for her to be treated in this way in front of her new daughter-in-law. (Divakaruni, 82)

Critic Meena Shirwadkar, in her book "Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian" Novel, comments that "the ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood-that marvellous, selfless, courageous, sensitive and ever-forgiving mother. The wife walks behind the shadow. So in the

Indian tradition, the wife led a quiet, shadowy survival till she became the mother of a son". (Shirwadkar 1979; 79)

*Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel that gives a deep understanding of female bonding. This abstract comes up as female characters such as Anju, Sudha, Gouri Ma, Pishi, and Nalini support each other in their lives. However, the strongest bond shown in the novel is between Anju and Suda. Female bonding is a required quality as one branch of the feminist survival strategy that is very important in women's lives.

In the fiction of Divakaruni, rapport between women consolidates the problem from which women struggle to find their identity. In *Sister of My Heart*, the relationship between Sudha and Anju builds up the space of interventions that enable both women to extricate themselves from meaningless relationships and rewrite their strategies of survival. Hence *Sister of My Heart* is the microcosmic representation of the lives lived by women who are caught in the crossroads of a cultural shift as they try to balance Eastern culture with Western thoughts.

*Sister of My Heart* narrates the emotional and pathetic story of two young Calcutta girls who struggle to get everything in life such as love care, respect, and the company of their people. Anju and Sudha experience difficulties with their identity and cultural barriers in India

and America, resulting in feelings of loss and psychological strain. Divakaruni's writings depict the realistic experiences of immigrant people. Life outside one's country teaches these characters how to face struggles in life rather poignantly than in a motherland. Life in the motherland is less problematic and there are several helping people nearby.

Neeraj Agnihotri in his article, "Diaspora consciousness in *Sister of My Heart*," communicates that "Banerjee's writing affirms that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersions but an experience made up of *collectivizes* and multiple journeys .... Expatriates who emigrated from India to America face the clash of opposing cultures, a feel owed by attempts to adjust, to adopt and to accept. Only the degree of that adaptation differs according to the generations. Divakaruni observes her culture and homeland objectively it retreats reminder of her identity .... Thus, she analyses the relationship of women with universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance, and disorder thus articulating the diasporic consciousness in this work" (1, 4) But in foreign land problems are more and no helping hand. It is not easy for migrants to settle in the new land as there are tremendous basic changes in root land and foreign land. The life, society, culture, and ways of living are all different from the motherland.

### Conclusion

Divakaruni's writings present many diaspora issues relating to home, marriage, society, cultural conflict, east-west conflict, racial violence, feelings of otherness, nostalgia, and alienation. It was so sensitive that her characters, events, symbols, and revelation of emotions capture the diaspora view and there in the core of time characters try to adjust to the new atmosphere to establish their identity in alien migration land. Anju and Sudha's choice for perfection is the result of realization, self-confidence assertion to identity formation, powerful, intense, and painful feelings,

authority over circumstances, male tyranny, and exploitation.

Divakaruni asserts whenever women face difficulties, they seek female friends to tackle the problems. The characters of Divakaruni face racial problems for being a minority in a foreign country. For their livelihood in a new land, they have to do inferior jobs. An immigrant Indian woman suffers doubly at the hands of a male member of the family and the hands of foreigners.

Sudha prefers her home nation and returns to India to pursue serve and assert her identity. Anju's inclination towards becoming a writer is a source of venting out the anger and frustration faced by immigrant people in America.

Divakaruni's journey from a young graduate student in Calcutta to a mature writer of repute in the United States seems to have come a full circle. Whatever may be the reason for migration, the diaspora community faces the problems of dislocation and footlessness; the degree of this adaptation differs according to the generations. Thus, each house is encased in different sets of vividly evoked specification verandahs, terraces, the courtyards essentially female spaces in the Indian culture that contribute to the upbringing of the characters inhabiting them. Lavina Dhingra

Shankar also talks about Divakaruni's inspiration for her writings: "Divakaruni's upbringing in a devout Hindu household has influenced her values and her writing style, and religious mythologies and stories of spiritual healing recur in her works. In her interviews, she talks openly about her belief in the teachings of the Vedanta and the philosophies of Swami Chinmayananda" (64).

In Divakaruni's novel, *Sister of My Heart*, the heroines are portrayed as belonging to a new breed of women, distinct from their predecessors. They courageously abandon their traditional values and venture into a realm of

their creation. These female characters undergo a profound psychological metamorphosis and boldly strive to achieve their aspirations. Divakaruni's work showcases women who possess a keen awareness of their marginalized positions within societal norms and structures, and who yearn to transcend these limitations to attain a sense of selfhood.

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