

**COMPLEXITIES OF FEMALE BONDING IN
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *SISTER OF MY HEART***

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Abstract: *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has carved a niche for herself among the diasporic Indian women writers. She is not only an award-winning novelist but also an emerging poet. Her works are widely known, as she has been published in over fifty magazines, including the 'Atlantic Monthly' and 'The New Yorker'. Her writing has been included in over fifty anthologies and her works have been translated into 29 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, and Japanese. Most of her works are autobiographical. Her childhood, family, the stories told to her by others all influenced her writing. She noticed in the tales of Ramayana and Mahabharata that, unlike the male heroes, the main relationships which women focused on was with the opposite sex- with their husbands, sons, lovers. For example, in the stories of Shakunthala or Radha, we find as soon as the heroine falls in love, she leaves her friends to follow her beloved. It appeared as though the tellers felt that women's relationships with each other were only of significance until they found men to claim their attention and devotion.*

Key Words: *Love, relationships, bonding, harmonious, diaspora.*

Chitra Banerjee depicts a harmonious relationship among her women protagonists, who seems to be loyal to their mothers and the culture they present. The works of Chitra Banerjee and Sashi Deshpande reflect strong emotional bonds between women. Following her immigrant biography, her major themes are centered around her desire to investigate the identity of Indian American Women and the multiplicity of experiences-geographically, culturally, psychologically, emotionally, that continue to shape and reshape it.

The book *Sister of my heart* shows the strong relationship among the different women characters in the novel. Books that are set in both India and America feature Indian-born women caught between old and new world values. Her novels indicate the arrival of the new Indian women, eager to defy rebelliously against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system, eager to find their identity in their way. Her female characters break all shackles of customs and traditions that tie them in the predicaments and reign in their freedoms and rights.

We find the changing face of feminism in Divakaruni's novels. Besides that, she profoundly exhibits themes such as Indianness, immigrant experiences, sisterhood, mysticism, and fantasies. She highlights the cultural conflicts in the Indian diaspora. She is keenly interested in debating the issues of cultural conflicts, differences, identity, assimilation, negation, oppression, sex discrimination, and gender inequality in their works. The feel of motherland i.e., India and Indianness is dealt with great detail in her works, where she depicts Indian customs, traditions, and even the food and setting of her birthplace.

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* stands for Indian Hindu life and tradition. She describes Indian food, dal, porotta, and pickles, highlights Indian costumes like saree, kurta, pyjamma. She brings to life the custom of wearing jasmine flowers, bangles, bindi, and sindoor, the traditional significance of religious symbols that are an integral part of the immigrant experience and not found in American cultures. She promotes Indian films to a foreign audience through a depiction of Anju, her character in the book *Sister of*

my heart.

The first book in the novel *Sister of my heart* is titled *The princess in the palace of snakes*. In this part both the protagonists attempt to conform to traditional feminine roles allocated by the male hegemonic society. In the second part *The Queen of Swords*, here the major women characters recognize the strength of their self and are not able to surmount all kinds of difficulties that they face in their lives. The book *Sister of My Heart* thus vividly demonstrates the lives of two emotionally bound sisters Basudha and Anjali. Through her writings, she is trying to break the long silence of Indian women. She rejects stereotypes and challenges the myths which have shaped the image of women. She describes an emotional deprivation, the women deprived of love, understanding, companionship, and portrays an in-depth the meaning of being a woman. The present dissertation attempts to analyze the complexities of female bonding in the novel and how the different woman characters keep intact their relationships which help them fight against all odds and come out triumphant.

The women characters portrayed in the novels *Sister of My Heart* symbolize the trials and tribulations undergone by women under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. The writer explores the theme of womanhood, the limits of female social and economic freedom as a wife in and outside India. The consciousness of Sudha and Anju reveal the problems facing the Indian women as a girl, wife, and widow.

The story centers on two girls brought up in a traditional household where they constitute a contrastive belief and behavior. Their love for each other is very special and they are bonded so strongly from birth that they grow up sharing their innermost thoughts. The favorite game in their childhood was acting out fairy tales, where Sudha was always the princess and Anju, the prince who rescued her. Their sister relationship and need for each other is intense which is evident from Anju's words in book one, "When we have nightmares instead of going to our mothers, for comfort, we squeezed into one bed and held each other" (12). Even during the moments of fear and distress, they ran to each other for comfort and not to their mothers. They keep their relationship strong by devising methods to maintain an emotional connection. The relationship seems to be inseparable that the people around them are jealous because of their strong intimacy. "What people hate how happy I and Sudha are when we are together, how we don't need anyone else. (12). Even before they could walk as Anju says, "I would crawl down the maze of corridors looking for Sudha, both of us striking with baby laughter when I finally found her" (12). They would amuse themselves for hours at a time, playing with each other's toes and fingers and hair.

School life had its share of adventurous moments for the girls. Once they decided to escape from school. At first, the girls complained of stomach aches or headaches, so they could stay at home together. As Anju says, when their plan did not work with their aunt, "We sneaked out of the school compound at noon, along with the girls who went home for lunch, and spent the afternoon somewhere, anywhere, just so we could be together" (39). It was just like they found everything they needed in each other. Even the girls were 'born stuck together in the eyes of the public and the people who saw them. They considered themselves twins and from a very early age were provided with everything they wanted from life-love, respect, friendship from each other. Together they experienced the joys, pains, mystical tales, and tiresome tasks that inevitably accompanied them while growing up in a traditional Indian Bengali family in Calcutta.

Bell Hooks remarks on female bonding: "We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood . . ." (63). Hooks encourages a woman to believe in female friendship and understands its significance and the wellbeing it can provide. Anju and Sudha adhere to Hook's philosophy since they share joys and sorrows and they not only sympathize with each other they also empathize. They carry this bonding well in their womanhood despite their mothers failing to

comprehend it. Their exceptional bond remains at the core of the novel, as their affection for each other increasingly shapes the course of their lives.

Boys are given a lot of freedom in the Indian context. It is believed in Indian society that the fame and virtue of the family depend on the girl child. As Gillman has pointed out in "*Women and Economics: We have trained and bred one kind of quality into half of the species, and another kind into the other half. For instance, we have done all we could in addition to natural forces, to make men break. We have done all we could, in addition to natural forces, to make women cowards*" (163)

As Simon De Beauvoir remarked in "*The Second Sex*", "The girl is required to stay at home, the coming and goings are watched: She is not encouraged to take charge of her amusements and pleasures" (358). The restricted worlds of traditions and customs upset the girls so deeply that they became strangers to the society around them. They were trapped in a world of females, they could not enjoy the carefree world of childhood, Anju and Sudha were sad that most sixteen years old girls in Calcutta did not live as they did. As Anju says to her mother, "I bet if I were a boy you wouldn't be saying not to me all the time like this" (69).

Chitra Banerjee constructs the hardships of womanhood through the different female characters- Gouri, Nalini, Pishi, who suffered hard to bring their two girls Anju and Sudha, without the presence and support of men in the family. The unexpected death of men gives a clear picture of the crisis of existence and the responsibility of running the family lying with the mothers who have to support the family, economically, emotionally, psychologically, and physically. Widowhood is the biggest curse that befalls any Indian woman, here Pishi was widowed at the age of eighteen and her appearance reveals the harsh realities and humiliation a widow faces. A widow has no position in society and she is held responsible for her husband's death.

Divakaruni depicts how the Indian woman seeks to conform to the old patriarchal convention without even questioning their tormenting rules. Pishi is the leading example of a widow who silently accepts the constraints of widowhood. There is a perceptible shift in the next generation that of Gouri and Nalini, where Gouri has confidently taken up the running of the family shop to make both ends meet, she refuses to live a life like her sister-in-law Pishi. Nalini too is ready to help Gouri to run the shop, having no male members to earn for them. The three elderly women remain a support to each other to bring up the two girls.

Divakaruni's protagonists aspire to adapt to their newfound world. The final gesture of the rejection of patriarchal norms and the acceptance of the new female universe free from suffering shows how they become successful in their resistance. Anju and Sudha show the real strength and power of women in life after their marriage. Though they have had situations of bitter sufferings, they come out as willful women and emerge even more powerful than their husbands. Sudha's husband Ramesh did not support her when her mother-in-law insisted, she aborts the child. Sudha doesn't give up on her child, rather finds her way to survive along with her child. She no longer adorns the pictures of her husband or lover with an impressive halo: What she wants is to confront her life as a woman. She fears that if she devotes herself completely to some undertaking, she will miss her womanly destiny. The conflict faced by Sudha is similar to that of any woman caught at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. When certain aspects of the conventional pattern of life become morbid and tormenting, one wishes to tear apart all boundaries and escape into a world where everything is replete with novelty, glory, and adventure. If a woman wants to produce literature or wants to be individually independent, financial security and the power of taking decisions are the necessities for her. What Virginia Woolf pointed out in *A Room Of One's Own*, "a woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction" (13) rings true even today.

The characters Anju and Sudha work hard to be good wives, but all their attempts fail and they decide to live life independently. Sudha finds a new self-reflected in the looking glass. The woman in the

mirror is none other than she but in a new and different manifestation. She is that woman who has emerged victorious overall dilemmas, all oppositions, and is as bright and radiant as a bird into the exotic skies. Sudha refuses to go back to a tormenting past. She is ignorant of what the future holds for her, yet her eyes look forward, and the spirit of fire burning within her convinces everyone that none can now dare to stop her in her onward journey. With the weapon of resistance, Sudha indeed emerges as a triumphant woman. She transforms herself, from the princess in the place of snakes to the queen of swords. Her journey to America is the beginning of her journey to a new world of unlimited freedom and infinite possibilities as Sudha's condition awakes Anju from her long passiveness after marriage. She thinks independently and loves to earn money for Sudha and her daughter. When tragedy strikes, they fall back on one another, to heal their fractured lives. It is a revelation to revolt against the strict norms of conventional Indian womanhood and to find their destiny and break from the bond of self-pity.

Divakaruni's theme of sisterhood is well exemplified in the relation of Anju and Sudha. The girls do everything together and love each other fiercely; sisterhood to them is not just a matter of ties of blood but love. The intense love between the girls is revealed through the acts of sacrifice in their lives. When Sudha is given a second chance of happiness, when Ashok reappears in her life to marry her, she is once again faced with the choice between her happiness and chooses Anju's. Anju wants her in California, and Sudha joins her. Both the characters become financially self-reliant by accepting different jobs. They portray that woman can live independent lives.

Bonds between women suggest a dominant model for feminist intercommunity relations. Its originators see it carrying the meaning of shared oppression, common victimization, and solidarity. It has been used to unite women of every class and society to fight against patriarchy. As Simon de Beauvoir in *The secondsex* writes, 'Once a woman is self-sufficient and ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator.' The term 'Sisterhood' which promotes understanding, equality, and solidarity among women has faced considerable criticism especially from feminists of the developing countries.

Through this novel, the writer brings out the idea that if women work in unison, they can easily overcome all crises in their lives. The female characters in the novel undergo a metamorphosis and come out with a strategy for survival. The female characters overcome all the critical and difficult circumstances, because of the cooperation and mutual understanding between them. Divakaruni works out the complexities of female bonding through the different woman characters in the novel to reinforce her idea that the salvation of women lies in leading a life of self-affirmation.

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