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Depiction of Sisterhood in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific and acclaimed writer who has written popular novels like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Vine of Desire*, *The Conch Bearer*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Palace of Illusions*, *One Amazing Thing* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Divakaruni is one such Indian-American author who writes out of her personal experience about the lives of migrant women. Her focus is mainly on South-Asian women who struggle amidst male-dominated society in search of their own true identity. Nevertheless, her female protagonists are not the silent sufferers. They are the ones who adapt themselves according to the needs and the requirements of the others but this should not be misinterpreted in thinking that they limit themselves only to the wishes and desires of others. When situation demands they mould them according to the circumstances and are brave enough to fight for their rights. In this context, Banerjee's *Sister of My Heart* highlights the Feminist approach and utopian ideology of two sisters Anju and Sudha who break down the standard conventions and principles of social set-up and move forward into their path of freedom where neither patriarchy nor matriarchy boundaries can bind them. One common theme that runs through all the novels of Chitra Banerjee is that Indian-born women living new lives in the United States find independence a mixed blessing that involves walking a tightrope between old beliefs and new bound desires. Though the characters vary, the themes of the novels are essentially the same-exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as the experience of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions. *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni's second novel is based on her short story *The Ultrasound* in the short story collection of *Arranged Marriages*. Runu from *The Ultrasound* re-emerges here as Sudha.

Key Words: Protagonists, Feministic approach, Patriarchy, Matriarchy, Social traditions

Divakaruni's second novel *Sister of My Heart* is written in the realist mode and describes the complicated relationship of a family in Bengal. *Sister of My Heart* opens with the Chatterjee family already deprived of its male figures and its former economic status. As the three widows (Pishi Ma, the cousins' paternal aunt and their mothers) and two young girls (Anju and Sudha) of this family shape their way through the drama of life, facing marriage, motherhood, divorce, widowhood etc, each stage brings into focus a certain aspect of the upper-class Bengali culture and tradition, which is cherished or criticized from the uniquely feminine and diasporic perspec-

tive of the author.

Research Objectives

- * To examine the concept of sisterhood in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*.
- * To analyse the relationship between Anju and Sudha from a feminist perspective.
- * To explore the impact of patriarchy on women's identity and relationships.
- * To evaluate the role of female bonding in empowering women.
- * To assess Divakaruni's contribution to contemporary feminist literature.

Research Questions

- * How is sisterhood portrayed in *Sister of My Heart*?
- * How do Anju and Sudha challenge patriarchal values?
- * What role does female bonding play in women's empowerment?
- * How does the novel represent women's identity and selfhood?
- * What is the significance of sisterhood in contemporary feminist literature?

Research Gap

Although several studies have explored feminism and diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels, limited research has specifically examined sisterhood as a feminist strategy for emotional resilience, identity formation, and women's empowerment. This study attempts to fill that gap by analysing *Sister of My Heart* through the perspective of feminist sisterhood.

Significance of the Study

This study highlights the importance of sisterhood as a source of emotional strength, mutual support, and women's empowerment. It contributes to feminist literary criticism by offering a deeper understanding of female relationships, identity, and resistance to patriarchal oppression in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on Feminist Literary Theory, particularly the concept of Sisterhood. It draws upon the feminist ideas of bell hooks

and Elaine Showalter to analyse women's relationships, identity, solidarity, and resistance against patriarchal structures.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach based on textual analysis. The primary source is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*, while secondary sources include books, journal articles, and research studies on feminism, sisterhood, and diaspora literature.

The Indian woman's treatment of sisterhood in fiction, interestingly enough, has not been followed a western pattern of development. Traditional Indian society, which has carefully segregated its men and women, has equally nurtured the social stereotypes that prevent female bonding; the mother-son relationship has been valorized, the brother-sister one privileged, but the mother-daughter one overlooked, and women's friendship marginalized. When Divakaruni declares, that she has made sisterhood her theme, she has clearly put herself squarely in the tradition of the West rather than of India. Certainly her fiction is part of the growing corpus of Asian American women's writing, whose major theme is the lonely outsider, the first of second-generation Asian Immigrant in an often hostile, uncomprehending and in comprehensible environment, struggling to assimilate and to keep her ethnic and gender even more than the African American, for whom the USA has always been the only home she has ever known. For Asian or African American women, sisterhood is a strength and succour, enabling them to discover themselves all persons and to nurture their community; friendship with other women becomes, therefore, central to the fiction of all American "women of colour".

In *Sister of My Heart*, Anju and Sudha are cousins belonging to the same patrilineal family, and in the Indian context would obviously be called "sisters" not "friends". Clearly Divakaruni has addressed her novel to a Western audience for whom this kind of bonding would be as foreign as this kind of family structure. *Sister of My Heart* exhibits, in fact, many of the features of novels dealing with the bonds between sisters, such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, ShobhaDe's *Sisters* and Alice Walker's

Color Purple. Most such novels depict sisters as being very different but as sharing nonetheless a deep, primal, nonverbal and inexpressible bond, a bond which makes each a kind of Dostoevsky an double of the other and which somehow survives the continual tension between them over their other relationships, especially if, as usually happens, one of them is prettier, cleverer, more talented, or more fortunate than the other.

Like the sisters in all these novels, Anju and Sudha Chatterjee in *Sisters of My Heart* are very different in appearance, temperament and achievements, and grow up together under similar yet very different conditions; their fathers, cousins themselves, died together in the accident, but where Anju's father was the master of the house, and her mother from an equally aristocratic family, Sudha's father was a poor relation, her mother's background nondescript, lower middle class. Sudha and her mother continue to live in the family mansion not out of ancestral right but because Indian family ties would not have it otherwise. The girls do everything together and love one another fiercely, demanding to be known not just as sisters but as twins, and not just because they were born on the same day; sisterhood to them is not just a matter of ties of blood but of love. As Anju tells Sudha, "I would love you because you love me. I would love you because no-one else knows us like we know each other." (SOMH 51) They may be separated by fate and marriage once they reach adulthood, but they let nothing stand in the way of their love for each other, even jeopardizing the love of the men in their lives for each other. It is perhaps this that makes Divakaruni call *Sister*, 'a novel of women's friendship', not of sisterly bonding, similarly, *Affair* and *Meeting Mrinal* are as much about the woman's quest for selfhood as about friendship, but Divakaruni perceives the latter to be their main theme. In Alice Walker's *Color Purple*, there is no conflict between sisterhood and other relationships; but Divakaruni's women however, face a different situation. They love their men, or believe they do, and they suffer agonies of jealousy and misery when they feel they have been betrayed by friend with husband; but they quickly realize that they love their women friends more than their men, a love that surpasses all other relationships. It is

in her short stories and in *Sister of My heart* that Divakaruni most obviously explores this theme, sisterhood is not central to *The Mistress of Spices*, though love and caring are.

In Divakaruni's fiction sisterhood is always a deeply rooted, instinctual relationship that brings together women who are very different from one another in every way. This is especially so in *The Ultrasound* and its novelistic version, *Sister of My Heart*. In the short story Anju and Runu are cousins and neighbours who have always done everything together from their childhood days, so that even after they are both married and living as far apart as Bardhwanand California, Runu is "still the most important person in Anju's life," (206) not Sunil, her husband. When, therefore, she learns that Runu's in-laws want her to abort her baby because the parental sex-determination test has shown it is female, in spite of Sunil's evident disapproval she urges her to leave her husband and go to Anju's mother in Calcutta apparently Runu's mother is not sufficiently supportive to start a new life there, promising herself that she would somehow bring her cousin over to America no matter what the cost to her, financially and emotionally.

In *Sister of My Heart* Divakaruni expands and complicates this story with additional details to emphasise the depth of their bonding, but the end-result does not perhaps always have the effect she had intended. For instance, she suggests that the cousins may not actually have been cousins at all, that Bijoy's father had been deceived by Gopal, Sudha's father, about their relationship. This should have helped to establish the fact that their love is far deeper than the ties of blood. Anju, who knows nothing of the tenuousness of their kinship or of what Sudha's father had done, his treachery and complicity in Anju's father's death, is clear that much of her certainly is due to her ignorance. Besides, as the social superior and the more intellectually gifted of the two, it is easy for her to be generous. But Sudha remains consumed by guilt for what her father has done and by her conviction that she must atone for his sins by always putting Anju's sake, it is uncertain whether she does it out of a sense of filial duty or out of love for a sister of the heart. Indeed, when she has to

consenting to an early marriage instead of going to college with Anju, she chooses her mother, although, of course, it is a painful decision for her. Besides, she is always a very passive person, as contrasted to Anju's energy and initiative, and her reluctance to elope with Ashok, the man she loves, seems as much due to her fear of action and her preference for going with the tide rather than her love for Anju, which makes her worry that this elopement might break up Anju's engagement to Sunil.

Slowly the dark secrets of the past are unveiled and test the cousins' mutual loyalty. A family crisis forces Anju and Sudha's mothers to start the serious business of arranging the girls' marriages, and the pair is torn apart. Sudha moves to her new family's home in rural Bengal, while Anju joins her immigrant husband in California. Although they have both been for the pain, as well as the joy, that each will have to face in their new life. In the novel Indian discrimination against women stands exposed; the cousins consider themselves inferior beings because they are female. Feminist view—both overt and covert—are present in many passages of the novel. The story line, however, becomes predictable. Anju saves Sudha from the intrigues of her husband and in-laws, who want to kill the girl child that she has conceived, and brings her to the United States.

Sister of My Heart was overwhelmingly positive. The novel provides a new look at female bonding. Divakaruni's impetus is to write about a female centric theme in a South Asian setting. The novel is her perception of an utter lack of emphasis on women's independence in South Asian literary genres. She identifies the novel as ultimately about storytelling. Influenced by her grandfather, who told stories from South Asian epics, she has woven those childhood folktales into her novel. She explains that the "aloneness" of epic heroines seemed strange to her even as a child. She declares that in South Asian mythological stories, the main relationships the heroines had were with the opposite sex: husbands, sons, lovers, or opponents. They never had any important friends. Divakaruni finds herself focusing her writing on friendship with women, trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as

daughters and wives, lovers and mothers. Divakaruni shares her protagonists and finds in them a mode of feminist expression. In the best friendships that have had with women, there is closeness that is unique, sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation, perhaps because of the life-changing experiences that she shares in the novel.

Sudha and Anju must individually grapple with both their inner pain and the outside pressures of fast and impersonal city life in America as they journey toward independence. Ultimately, the women are forced to look beyond the destructive circle of love, passion, and hurt and form a new relationship as the antidote to their suffering. Only then they are able to find a way to reconcile their ties to the past and to resolve their sisterhood.

Divakaruni employs a rich and original narrative style. She often switches the first-person narration between the voices of Sudha, Anju, and Sunil. She employs different devices to advance the plot and convey the inner thoughts of her character. The novelist has not realized that her underlying theme is not merely sisterhood but female bonding in all its forms, which constantly makes its presence felt through the lyricism and the romantic fantasy that breathe through her fiction.

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