

Socio-cultural Issues and Feminine Identity in Chitra Banerjee's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels delve into the dynamics of traditional Indian families and migrant families, focusing mostly on the female members of each. This dissertation examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart with a particular emphasis on the novel's treatment of sociocultural issues in India. Her writing explores a wide range of identity-related themes, including estrangement, isolation, hopelessness, loss, nostalgia, reintegration, adoption, and assimilation. The most notable aspect of Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart is that she has choose to focus on seemingly ordinary people living both within and beyond the boundaries of the Indian social structure. This book's legendary structure aids in the development of a female-centric universe. As opposed to the more male, intellectual world, the mythical one is more naturally feminine. Divakaruni's novel follows a married couple through their ups and downs, and the novel's distinctive Indian food reflects India's diverse cultural heritage.

Keywords: socio-cultural issues, identity crisis, alienation, marginalization, nostalgia, assimilation, adaption, despair, women's identity etc.,

Intriguing and full of complex family relationships that are seen differently by each member of the family, *The Sister of My Heart* is a compelling read. Divakaruni does a masterful job of dissecting the typical Indian family, all of its complicated interconnections, and their vital position in Indian society, especially in patriarchal systems. She has a positive and hopeful outlook on her home country of India. Divakaruni's love for her homeland, admiration for her culture's literature and folklore, and devotion to her faith are all expressed via the numerous lullabies, proverbs, tales, and legendary allusions she has written with a nostalgic tone.

Throughout her writing career, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has chronicled the lives of Indian and migrant families, with a particular emphasis on the role of women in the household. Her works centre on families who have undergone a "socio-cultural psychological transplantation" due to international relocation, exploring issues such as identity loss, isolation,

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hostility, exile, dislocation, alienation, discrimination, acculturation, assimilation, language barriers, nostalgia, etc.

Divakaruni's *The Sister of My Heart* is an intimate and revealing family story told with sensitivity and discretion. The struggles of Indian families and the cultural chasm that opens up when Indians go west are central themes in many of her works, many of which have received critical praise. However, it must be stressed that Divakaruni makes the most of her new circumstances and finds inspiration in her new surroundings.

Since she now lives in the United States, Divakaruni is able to look at the land where she was born with fresh eyes and attempt a great, unbiased survey of its innards. Her corpus of work explores the full spectrum of identity crisis experiences, from isolation and rejection to despair and longing to integration and adoption. The majority of her books' protagonists and other notable characters are women, and they are all based on the author herself. Divakaruni delves into the psyche of an Indian immigrant. At the centre of *Sister of My Heart* are cousins Anju and Sudha, who were raised together in a Hindu Zamindar family in West Bengal but eventually decide to make the move to the United States. The three widows Pishi Ma, the paternal aunt of the cousins and their moms Gouri Ma and Nalini Ma, and the two young girls of this family accompany Pishi Ma as she goes through the various periods of life (childhood, adolescence, marriage, motherhood, divorce, widowhood, etc.).

Every act sheds light on a specific aspect of upper-class Bengali society and tradition that Divakaruni criticises from a uniquely female and diasporic vantage point. The deep emotional connection between the girls is evident from an early age. Despite the fact that their love is equal, they come from vastly different economic classes. Anju has more opportunities in life than Sudha has because of her family's wealth and status. Due to her family, financial stability, and social position, Anju is able to break free from the shackles of traditional Hindu Indian female gender concepts, which confine women to the home and the roles of wife and mother. Anju is afforded the opportunity to prioritise her education and pursue her professional aspirations. In contrast, Anju's family provides for Sudha and her mother so that they don't starve. To stay inside the bounds of traditional Hindu-Indian gender standards, Sudha's only advantage is her physical appearance, which can only allow her to acquire a "suitable marriage."

The Chatterjees still live in the crumbling marble castle that was their ancestor's house. The most important part of *Sister of My Heart* is how Divakaruni uses everyday people from inside and outside of society to show us a slice of India's current social and cultural climate. The narrative develops as it details Anju and Sudha's beginnings, childhoods, exploits, and married lives. Divakaruni has objectively commented on the good and bad of the society in which she was raised through her characters. The following are discussed in Avtar Brah's book "Cartographies of Diaspora: Identity Struggles: Its sights, sounds, heat, and dust, pleasant summer evenings, and dreary grey sky in the middle of the day are all filtered through the singularity of everyday social relations throughout history. In other words, the ups and downs, the scares and thrills, the sadness and contentment that make up the fabric of our lives. (Brah 192)

Throughout the story, the sisters encounter clues that foreshadow their eventual fate. The chapters are narrated by the girls in alternating fashion, taking the reader through their lives from the time they are eight years old until the time they are married, with one girl venturing out into the world and the other staying at home with a husband she likes but doesn't love. All the male characters in the story have fatal flaws except for Singji, the Chatterjees' loyal, disfigured chauffeur who stays with the family as their fortune declines.

The plot twists justify the story's symmetry, which is similar to the dualism seen in most Hindu mythology. The girls can redeem their fathers' sins through a series of fortuitous events, but Sudha must look to the courageous Rani of Jhansi for her own motivation. The legendary framework of this tale gives rise to a cosmos dominated by women. When compared to the largely male cerebral world, the preponderance of women in the mythical realm is striking. *Sister of My Heart* also makes an effort to create new myths or, at the very least, reinterpret existing ones. By challenging established myths while creating her own, Divakaruni challenges and expands the human imagination.

Both main characters in "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" have a hard time adjusting to the gender roles that are expected of them in the dominant, male culture. This is symbolised by the classic tale of the princess trapped in the palace of snakes until her prince comes to save her. There are no typical fairy tale elements in "The Queen of Swords." When Anju is feeling down after a miscarriage, her friend Sudha tells her this story. And then she

goes on to detail the conversation between the three moms. The usual storyteller Pishi wants to know more about the narrative she just told Anju.

Not only does Sudha's tale, but also her demeanour and actions, reflect this change. When they were little, the sisters loved to put on plays based on the stories Pishi told them. The role of Princess Sudha was a recurring one, with Anju playing the role of the Prince who saved her from harm. Sudha waits for Ashok to come to her rescue and make all the marriage arrangements after she falls in love with him and her parents want to arrange her marriage to someone else. After marrying Ramesh, she moves into a home ruled by her ruthless mother-in-law. She stays there and takes abuse for quite some time, like any good princess should, until her Prince Charming comes to save her.

In order to highlight the life of the experiences her characters go through, Divakaruni makes use of legendary themes. When Anju is feeling down after having a miscarriage, she tells her, in the character of Sudha, the heroic stories of Rani of Jhansi. In a new twist, Sudha tells her daughter Dayita the tale on the plane ride to the United States. She even tells Dayita the story of how Krishna saved his sister Draupadi from certain death, and she explains that the star she saw when she was lost was actually Krishna in the guise of the child of Anju.

In an article titled "Mushy Sister Act," Nilanjana S. Roy states:

"If you're a disciple of Gurumayi, as Divakaruni is, and a fan of the kind of New Age literature that believes in "twin souls," and a believer in woman's lib so long as it includes a handsome, faithful, sensitive prince, then this novel is the perfect gift for you." Followers of feminism, both the Indian and imported varieties, will find Divakaruni's ideas as simple and harmless as regurgitated mush. (Roy 28)

The results of Sudha's pregnancy reveal that she is carrying a girl, and her mother-in-law immediately begins pressuring her to have an abortion. But Sudha wants to keep her child safe, so she and her husband move back live with her parents in Calcutta. She goes from being a princess in a palace full of snakes to ruling over an army with a sword. Both of Sudha and Ashok's conditional marriage proposals have been turned down. For Sudha, coming to the United States was the first step towards discovering a whole new community of women.

As women, all three mothers join that club. This is represented by their decision to sell the family house and replace it with a more modern dwelling. The difference in how they look and feel since they moved into their new house is remarkable. "The mothers, like the creaky old building, seem to have abandoned a lot of tradition," the author writes (SMH 296). They continue to maintain Sudha in their lives, and in doing so, they are free to enjoy music and walks without fear of the stigma that once followed a divorcee. Dayita, her kid, receives loving attention from them. Divakaruni is able to make her female protagonists more than just stereotypes. Widow Abha Pishi bears the brunt of an unfair social framework for years, but she is finally given the opportunity to have a final outburst that is both cliched and humanising. Nalini's flaws make her more human, whereas Gouri Ma's intransigence makes her less so. The lives of these young women are as interesting as that of any hapless servants in a Mills and Boon romance, thanks to Divakaruni.

The position of the stars, which is connected with good fortune in Indian tradition, has also been emphasised by Divakaruni. Incredulous at her aunt's astrological fixation, Anju sarcastically remarked, "Our stars must be exactly aligned this month, Aunt Nalini says." My friend Sudha just got married, I got engaged, and now someone wants to buy my bookstore (SMH 124).

Pishi believes in her own brand of superstition and is well-versed in ancient wisdom. Her outlook mirrors the complexities present in the Hindu social and cultural milieu. In her article "Poetic Echoes from the Indian Diaspora in North America," Rupinder Kaur outlines how Divakaruni sees cultural exchanges as valuable, difficult, and challenging. She continues by saying that cultural exchange can improve both Indian and American morality and etiquette. Some of her Indian heritage's values and customs are still important to her. Using horoscopes as a last option, Divakaruni has documented a significant facet of the practise of arranged marriage. Both Anju and Sudha have advanced degrees, but no one has a real influence in their decision to get married. Gouri Ma promises Anju that she would marry her off to a man who will support her desire to finish her education. She has questioned the validity of the extensive Hindu wedding rituals. Readers could question the value of such elaborate wedding ceremonies after learning how much time, money, and effort are invested in them.

It was not a myth that ancient wedding ceremonies took days or weeks to complete. The unique flavours of Indian cuisine are a reflection of India's diverse culture, just as

Divakaruni's depiction of a marriage's development does. The author pokes fun at the patriarchal Indian system that values the groom more than the bride by requiring a dowry. Divakaruni alludes to the societal stigma of dowry in Indian society even as she celebrates cultural diversity.

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