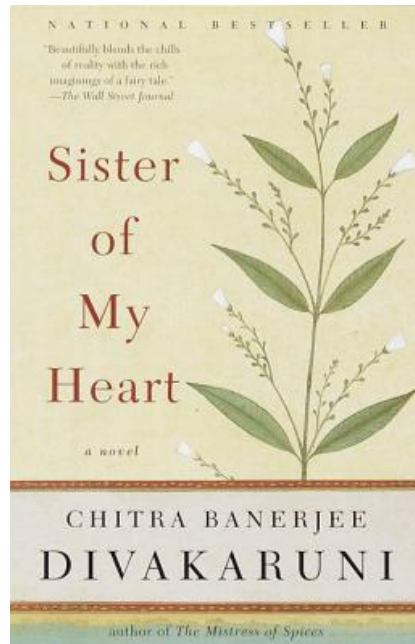


Desires and Conflicts in Female Bonding in Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni's Novels:
Sister of My Heart and Vine of Desire

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an avowedly feminist writer of the Indian diaspora in the US, excels in probing the unplumbed depths of women's sensibility. *Sister of My Heart* examines the emotional bond and the tension between the desires, which the women characters, Anju and Sudha go through in the process of their growth. Despite their closeness, they have different personalities and approaches to life. Sudha discovers a dark secret about her father's betrayal from her aunt Pishi and suffers from a guilt complex which tests her relationship with Anju. She even sacrifices her love for Ashok in order to prevent her cousin's match in a traditional family from breaking up and renounces herself to an arranged marriage. Marriage entails not only their first separation but also their first rivalry with each other, a rivalry not of material possessions but of heart. Cracks appear in their relationship as Anju goes to America

and Sudha enters a loveless partnership in India. The pregnancies of both women bring increased pain and a new relationship between them.

The Vine of Desire is a sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. Anju and Sudha reunite after a year of living separate lives. At first, the women are overjoyed to see one another and their bond seems strong enough to suggest that each woman's unselfish goal is possible. Anju's startling realization of her husband Sunil's passionate obsession with Sudha shatters any illusion and causes a seemingly irreparable rift between them. Tormented respectively by guilt and bitter jealousy, Sudha and Anju individually grapple with both their inner pain and the outside pressures of frenetic, impersonal city life in America as they journey towards independence. Thus, the creator and her creation face up to standards laid down, boldly and create new spaces and voices for themselves.

Key words: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*

Chita Banerjee Divakaruni's Works – Friendship with Women and Sisterly Bonding

Chita Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author and poet. She is an award winning author. She has got the nationality of India as well as of the United States. She made an indelible impression on the literary world with her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, a magical tale of love and herbs. Her novels portray the forbidden aspects of women's habited world and their creative imagination through earthly desires. Woman is the centre of her fictional world – her efforts, desires, and failures in the traditional Indian society and western society are the main focus in her novels. Her illustration of women's world is realistic, credible, and authentic. She deals with the inner world of the Indian women as well as the immigrant women in her novels. The sisterly relationship between Anju and Sudha in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and the complications that cause conflicts in Anju and Sudha's sisterly bonding in *The Vine of Desire* are scrutinized in this paper.

Chitra Banerjee focused her writing on friendships with women and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to women as daughters and lovers, wives and mothers. She believes that female bonding is unique because of life-changing experiences that they share-menstruation, childbirth, and menopause. In an interview she states that the force behind her writing

. . . is the desire to put women in the centre of stories, to have their voices be the voices of interpretation, their eyes the ones that we see through. There just hasn't been enough of that in the world, if you look back at literary history (qtd.in *Lalitha* 23).

Sisterhood

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The major theme in all her writings is sisterhood, that mysterious female bonding which goes far deeper than conventional familial ties and which insistently surfaces in women's relationships despite all patriarchal conditioning. *Sister of My Heart* explores the particular nature of sisterhood relationship in a traditional Bengali household. It is based on her short story "The Ultrasound" (*Arranged Marriage* 1995). The emotional portrayal of the two women at the heart of the *Sister of My Heart* is narrated in an artistic manner of the characters' inner and outer worlds that usher in rich emotional experiences to uplift the story about Anjali (Anju) and Basudha (Sudha), who learn to make peace with the difficult choices, and circumstances that have been forced upon them.

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 cousin's paternal aunt, and their mothers) and two young girls of this family meander 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.

Structural Characteristics of Divakaruni's Novel

The chapters in Divakaruni's novel are named after the central characters. In *Sister of My Heart* the chapters are alternatively named after Anju and Sudha. This is a very exclusive pattern of writing which evidently brings out the internal feelings of the protagonists. This narrative technique itself underlines their twinning as much as the events of their lives and endows them with not only the capacity to tell their own stories but also invest them with the power to interpret and shape their reality.

Story of Two Cousins

The author tells the moving story of two cousins, Sudha and Anju Chatterjee who began their lives in close contact with a growing emotional bond for each other. The two women share an irrevocable bond, since they are "born stuck together" (SMH 39). It was Anju who called Sudha out into the world. When Nalini, Sudha's mother, tells the story of Sudha's birth, she remembers how she had trouble in labour. Then Anju's mother, Gouri who had delivered only a few hours before, walked across the hall and put Anju's face down on Nalini's stomach. Anju lay there for a moment and gave a loud cry, and right then, Nalini felt her contractions and soon the midwife handed Sudha to her saying, "It is another girl" (SMH 43). Hence, Sudha calls Anju her twin. "That's why Anju is my twin, don't you see" (SMH 43).

Sudha and Anju were born twelve hours apart in the same house, they considered themselves twins, and from a very early age were provided everything they needed from life – love, respect, council, and friendship – from each other. Together they experienced the joys, pains, mystical tales, and tiresome tasks that inevitably accompanied them while growing up in a

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traditional Indian Bengali family in Calcutta. This exceptional sister-knot remains the core of the novel and their affection for each other increasingly shapes the course of their lives.

Anju utters her feelings for Sudha thus:

Some days in my life I hate everyone. . . . But never Sudha. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half, the sister of my heart. I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. . . she understands me perfectly. Like no one else in the entire world does. Like no one else in the entire world will (SMH 31).

Sisterhood and Feminist Theory

Sisterhood to them is not just a matter of ties of blood but of love. Commenting on this relationship, Hudson Weems asserts,

This kind of friendship these women have goes beyond confiding in one another and sharing commonalities. Not only do they share, they share material things as well (Americana Womanism 97).

In *Feminist Theory* 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 understand its significance and the well-being it can provide them. 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 into their womanhood in spite of their mothers failing to comprehend it.

Simple Plot

The plot and structure of the novel are relatively simple. The book alternates the narration of Sudha and Anju, providing their different perspectives of events. The opening words of this novel are "They say in the old tales . . . (SMH 14)" and stories from Indian culture and mythology punctuate the narrative. Sudha and Anju are so much influenced by the stories narrated to them such as the "Princess in the Palace of Snakes", the tale of Bidhata Purush and stories from Hindu mythology. When they were children, their favourite game was acting out the fairy tales Pishi told them, where Sudha was always the princess and Anju the prince who rescued her. Together, their lives parallel many of the old tales they have heard and in turn tell one another and their babies.

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Differences in Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Their love for one another is on an equal plane but their socio-economic backgrounds are different. Anju has more social and economic advantages than Sudha, because Anju's family is wealthy and socially prominent. Anju's family's wealth and social position permit her to transcend the restrictive demands of traditional Hindu Indian female gender notions, which might eventually prevent her from fulfilling the roles of wife and mother. Anju gets the privilege of concentrating on her studies as well as her career, despite the calamities that she faced in her life. On contrast Sudha and her mother are not economically independent. They have to depend on the good graces of Anju's family for survival. As Sudha is socially and economically disadvantaged, she is more likely to succumb to the Hindu Indian gender norms.

Discovery of a Dark Secret

Sudha discovers a dark secret about her father's betrayal from her aunt Pishi and suffers from a guilt complex which tests her relationship with Anju: "Something has changed between us, some innocence faded like earliest light" (SMH 91). She is the one who learns of the destructive secret that could destroy the bonds between her and Anju. She is aware of the fact that they are distinct and separate individuals. She comes to realize that the past is not the firmly rooted banyan tree as she once believed. It is a secret that ultimately changes Sudha's life, as she vows to spend the rest of her life making for the way in which her father had deceived Anju's.

Changes in Life

The incident that changes their normal course of life spurs from a fugitive and illicit trip to the cinema which leads to a chance meeting between Ashok and the beautiful Sudha. They fall instantly and irrevocably in love, but Sarita, one of the friends of Nalini is at hand to drag Anju and Sudha back home for retribution. She wants to spend her life with Ashok but being a fatherless child she cannot afford to take a radical step of getting married against her mother's desires. The girls are forced to enter into arranged marriages not out of desire but out of a sense of familial obligation. The plot thickens inexorably from here. More than that Gouri Ma's heart attack adds to the fire which hastens the marriage and also scupper's Anju's college plans. Sudha who is tormented by guilt for her father's actions and feels herself the recipient of her aunt's charity, sacrifices her love for Ashok in order to prevent her cousin's match in a traditional family from breaking up and renounces herself to an arranged marriage.

Separation through Marriage

Marriage entails not only their first separation but also their first rivalry with each other, a rivalry not of material possessions but of heart. Hitherto they have been cocooned in the matriarchal household, chafing a little at the restrictions on them, and troubled by the mysteries surrounding their father, but from their birth they have found happiness and total understanding

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in each other's company. From the beginning, there are hints about how their futures will diverge. As the girls speak or narrate the incidents alternatively, the readers can see life through the eyes of each of them separately at eight years, then at twelve, then as convent school girls escaping to the cinema unchaperoned and finally as married women, one believing in the new world and the other in the house of her husband for whom she learns to have affection but not love.

Anju on their wedding day itself has noted that her husband Sunil, a computer scientist has been attracted towards Sudha:

The wedding dinner is over. We rise. Ramesh and Sudha walk ahead. His arm under her reluctant elbow. She pulls out a handkerchief to wipe her face. She replaces it – but no, it falls behind the table. No-one notices Sunil bending to pick it up, to slip it into his pocket where he fists his hand around it. No one except me. (SMH 611)

The girls knew what it was to feel suspicion and distrust – Sudha, because she felt a shame that she could not share with Anju; and the latter, because she discovers the seductive power of her sister's beauty, a power Sudha herself is incapable of controlling. Circumstances created a little emotional distance between the sisters, resulting in giving extra importance to the mistakes. When Anju observes his love-lorn look, there is the initial pang of jealousy in her. Hence, she could never stop loving Sudha.

Migrating to the United States

Anju informs Sudha of the arrival of her visa, Sudha is upset by their physical separation. She reflects: "My dear cousin, how far she would be going from everything familiar from me" (SMH 353). Sudha wishes Anju to be satisfied with what she will find on the other side of the world, i.e., the United States of America. As girls they grow up negotiating their mothers' traditional Indian value systems and desires with the Westernized philosophies influencing their own generation, and afterwards compromise with their spouses. Anju follows her husband to America and grows stronger and more independent as she undergoes acculturation processes.

Life in America

Anju is not even clever enough to discern what Sunil thinks of Sudha. Sunil inquires about the welfare of the mothers, but he does not pronounce a word about Sudha, does not even pick up the mail, if there is one from Sudha in the stack. Anju could never forget the look on Sunil's face as he gazed after Sudha and picks up the handkerchief that had fallen from her waistband on the eve of their wedding. The fetish temperament of Sunil plagues Anju. She is aware of Sunil's disposition. Anju is not ignorant of Sunil's deception. The deceptive personality

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of Sunil is shocking to Anju, because she is only an immigrant. Anju discovers that marriage and her adopted land America belie her expectations.

Anju gets pregnant at that time and she feels her baby can batch up their marital disharmony. Sudha also gets delighted at the fact that both the sisters are pregnant at the same time. Things take on a different frame, when the tests establish that Sudha will deliver a girl baby. Mrs. Sanyal declares that, the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to be male and hence Mrs. Sanyal forces Sudha to undergo an abortion. In such a situation Sudha takes a firm decision to step out of the home. The conflict in every woman between the desire to please the people around as taught in childhood and the desire to fight for justice as a reaction to the existing situation has been pictured well through Sudha's life. This conflict within her explains her delay in taking a decision. The marital disharmony that is common in the modern age has been highlighted through Sudha- Ramesh relationship. The entire social system comprising religion, myth, education and other social norms focuses on women having to endeavour to come out of these shackles created and maintained carefully through generations.

Feminist Thinking Overtakes

Sudha's feminist thinking overtakes her and she realizes the meaninglessness of her mechanical life with Ramesh. Sudha's decision shows that a marriage bond has meaning only if there is mutual love and respect. She successfully wriggles herself out of the stifling influences of tradition and begins to think about living her life for herself and her daughter Dayita. She plans to soar up high into the heavens of fulfilment as a woman. Sudha emerges as a woman of authority and determination. She becomes empowered when she has to confront and tackle the problem of her pregnancy and abortion.

Pishi and Gouri Ma extend a warm welcome to Sudha. Gouri Ma adjudges Sudha to be old enough to make her own decisions and offers to support Sudha. Aunt Pishi instructs Gouri Ma to sell the traditional Chatterjee house to support Sudha and her child. Pishi consoles Sudha that the Sanyals have not realized the worth of Sudha. The Sanyals have lost out, and not Sudha. Sudha asserts that she has a whole life in front of her and her life will be a success and that will leave the Sanyals gaping. When Pishi pronounces it with such zest, Sudha's future offers scope for a happy life ahead. Sudha desires the women of the Chatterjee home to bless her to be like the Rani of Jhansi, the Queen of Swords.

Another Complication in the Life of Sudha

Abandoning the Sanyals, Sudha proceeds to Calcutta, only to tackle another complication. She confronts Ashok, her first love, who wants to marry her. But, he insists that he leaves a few years alone with her and wants Dayita her daughter to stay with the grandmothers. Sudha will not wrest herself from Dayita. Sudha abandoned the Sanyals because they planned to

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abort the child in the womb. Next, Ashok also refuses to take care of her child, so she turns down his wish.

Queen of Swords – Departure to the United States

Sudha's life in the second section of the novel, *Queen of Swords* is distinctive from the first part of the novel, "Palace of Snakes". Life is so secure in the Palace of Snakes. In the "Queen of Swords", life moves on a different perspective where Sudha is the architect of all her accomplishments. Sudha is overwhelmed to behold Dayita, who is the root cause of all the modifications in Sudha's life. To turn down Ashok's request for marriage, Sudha opts to depart for America with Dayita.

Anju and Sudha Coming Together Again

Anju is elated to welcome Sudha. Yet Anju is confronted with a confused state of mind. Anju speculates as to why Sudha has abandoned Ashok, the man whom Sudha loved zealously. She also toils extra hours to save money for Sudha's ticket. Sunil is not pleased about Anju's exertion. In spite of her pregnancy, Anju strains physically and that results in an abortion. Anju forfeits her son Prem for the sake of Sudha. On the other hand, Sudha is given a second chance of happiness that Ashok agrees to take into his custody Dayita also, after Ashok's marriage with Sudha. But Sudha is obstinate and she does not acquiesce to the marriage. Sudha is determined to fly to America to meet Anju, because in a sense, Sudha is responsible for Anju's miscarriage. Sudha is prepared to leave for America with Dayita.

Anju and Sudha come together again, sharing the joy of parenting a daughter who binds them together as they integrate their time-tested bond with the renewed hope for a fulfilling future. The novel closes with the image of a tableau, of two Madonnas with a child between them, who have come together, ironically, in a 'foreign' land that lies beyond the "vale of sorrow" (SMH 658) that circumscribed their lives on the 'home' ground.

***Sister of My Heart* – A Female Bildungsroman**

Sister of My Heart is a kind of female bildungsroman. It is a genre which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. The novel tells the readers about the coming of age; a story in which the protagonist undergoes growth throughout the entire narrative, generally starting off by being removed or chased from their home. Their growth is often impeded by opposition of their desires by other characters. Chitra Banerjee tries to take her readers into the mind of the protagonist who put some light on her condition and all loose strings are tied at the end.

Profound Intricacies of the Bond between Sisters

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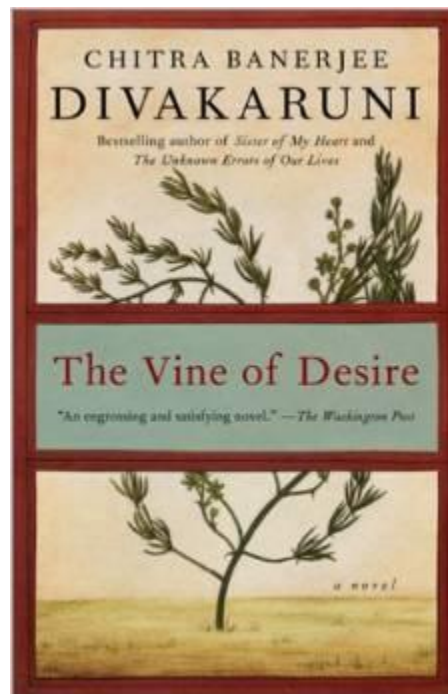
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The intricacies in the bond between the sisters become profound in *The Vine of Desire*, the sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. The novel picks up where *Sister of My Heart* left off, and continues the saga of the sisters and best friends from Calcutta, India. After their arranged marriages in Calcutta, the spirited and independent Anju had followed her husband, Sunil to San Francisco, while the beautiful Sudha remained behind in India with her husband. The two women followed individual paths after their married life. The novel is the reunion of the sisters in America. Chris Barsanti comments on love portrayed in the novel:

Love is a tangled thicket of thorns in Divakaruni's new novel of Indian immigrants who try to keep their lives together in San Francisco despite the distractions of family pressures and unspoken tensions. (qtd. in Ophilia 103)

The Vine of Desire



In *The Vine of Desire*, devastating events in the lives of both the cousins bring them together: Anju in America has had a miscarriage, and Sudha has walked out of her husband's house to avoid her mother-in-law's compulsion to abort the female foetus. She also tries to escape from the suffocating embrace of her first love with her former boyfriend, Ashok who insists on taking care of her and her daughter. Hurt and saddened by the events of their lives, they reach out to one another for comfort and affection only to cause further tension in their lives.

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At first, the sisters are overjoyed to see one another. They focus on Sudha's toddler Dayita whom they adore, especially Sunil who forms a special relationship with her. Anju tells Sudha:

“When he's with Dayita, Anju tells me later, all the bitterness falls away from him. He used to be like that when I was pregnant. Boyish and excited and tender. He'd make a world of plans – all the things he wanted to do for – ” she swallows – Prem. (VD 30)

Anju's Agony

Anju remembers Prem and tortures herself by thinking about the past. So Sudha scolds her: “There's no point in torturing yourself over what's happened already” (VD 30). Even as she tried to stitch up the chasm of a wound, it still runs jagged between their bodies. When Sudha enters the house, she feels once again the sisterly love and affection of Anju. Sunil feels thankfulness for the arrival of Dayita and Sudha because he could see happiness in Anju's face. Soon after Sudha arrives in America Anju resumes her work towards a college degree and begins to find her merit in writing classes. She is particularly inspired by an instructor who introduces her to the letters and journals of 18th and 19th century women writers. Anju embraces loneliness and seeks out a solitary space at the college where she can write. Anju's loneliness intensifies emotional rapture. She finds herself brooding, at the same time she adjusts and diverts her mind into the college assignments.

Sunil is Attracted to Sudha

Anju alienates Sunil and thereby diverts his attention to Sudha and this is evident when he outwardly showers his love on Dayita. When he sees Sudha in private, he cannot control himself and kisses her. Sudha remembers Pishi's words “A woman's beauty can be her wealth, but also her curse” (VD 69). She feels guilty for accepting Sunil's kiss. Sunil's desire has been fuelled with years of longing and the flame of passion was burning bright and it would readily engulf her. Sudha also realizes the fatal folly that she has committed in accepting Anju's offer, as Sunil is attracted towards her. The tension between the wife and husband mounts when a third person (Sudha) enters into their conjugal life.

Sudha Yearning for Sunil

Sudha having fled an unhappy marriage in Bengal, yearns for Anju's husband Sunil. Her mind cautions her by uttering the words, “The husband of my sister” (VD 80) whereas her flesh pronounces “I don't care” (VD 80). Sudha understands her weakness for Sunil and wants to stay away from Anju. She even reveals her desire to Anju in her mind, “I've done that which I shouldn't have” (VD 108) wishing Anju to hear: “I've kissed your husband and liked it” (VD

108). On the other hand, Anju confides in Sudha– “You’re the one closest to me, the one who understands me best. The one I trust most of all” (VD 108).

Sudha succumbs to the call of her flesh. Sunil’s showering of love on Dayita, could be one of the reasons of why Sudha succumbed to Sunil, because her first love Ashok denied her daughter, though he accepted to marry Sudha. When Sudha sleeps with Sunil, she not only hurts her sister of heart, Anju but also puts an end to their relationship. Their close bonding turns into an estranged relationship overnight. Sudha could not remain with Anju after the ultimate treachery that she has committed to Anju. Aftermath, she learns her mistake and laments that she has added to her friend’s sorrow. She is deeply ashamed that her jealousy has cast out her reverence. She decides to get separated from Anju and Sunil and finds a job as a caretaker. Thus the first part of the novel ‘Subterranean Truths’ ends with passion running high and the sisters entangled in a vine of desire, unable to separate from their wishful world i.e. from emotions to the reality.

Sunil, Anju and Sudha on a Different Plane – Changing Patterns

In Book Two, ‘Remembrance and Forgetting’, Divakaruni projects the characters of Sunil, Anju and Sudha on a different plane. Anju waits for her husband to be relieved from Sudha’s attraction, wherein the trust necessary for sisterly friendship gets destroyed. She is torn between her love and affection for Sudha and her suspicion that Sunil is still attracted to her. Anju feels sad and forlorn when their relationship comes to an end. There is an emotional break in their marriage because trust has been betrayed. She wants to save her dignity and so she allows him to go out of her life forever. She collects her will power to live alone in America and decides to go on a happy, lonely journey through life.

Anju transpires as a woman of independent strength as the story progresses. The author very convincingly portrays the changes in the thought process of Anju by making her letters bolder and closer to reality, lifting the veil of dependency that shrouded her from facing her real life. Anju’s assignments, letters, and other fragments, in conjunction with the comments and the feedback offered by her professors, the novel becomes a meta-fictional response to the creation of a narrative out of the dislocations of Anju’s immigrant life.

Anju overcomes the deep sense of betrayal by Sudha and turns to scholarly pursuits and creative outlets for self-determination. Sudha, in order to provide shelter and food for her daughter, Dayita, works for a bitter octogenarian Indian, Sen. He lives in America and pines for his homeland, India. Sudha’s work and her new formed connection with the octogenarian prove to be a way for her to come to terms with her feelings of estrangement with her cousin Anju. Sudha realizes at a young age that she and her mother lived on the charity of Anju’s mother since the last thirteen years. She feels that her self-respect has been shattered all these years. When she gets her first salary, she feels happy because for the first time in her life, she has her own money.

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Emboldened by her own strength, Sudha opts to lead a meaningful life of her own and for her daughter.

Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* 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 (289).

Attempt at Reconciliation

Sudha comes to know about Anju's divorce with Sunil and she tries her best to talk with Anju about her unwillingness to marry Sunil. Sudha is also depressed at Anju's resentment. So she sends Lalit as a messenger to Anju. Lalit tries to meet Anju and explains about Sudha's feelings and longing to meet Anju. But Anju does not want to know anything about Sudha. She feels that Sudha is responsible for her breakup with Sunil and bursts out:

I can't talk to her, or even write. Not yet. Not until I work out some things myself. The streetlamp, which has just come on, throws pools of blackness under her eyes. I, too, love her too much. I think I just rediscovered that. (VD 324)

Sudha's Bond with the Old Man

Sudha is successful in establishing a bond with the crabby old man, Trideep's father, and at the end of the novel, she decides to relieve the old man from his homesickness and secure a life for her daughter and herself. She becomes instrumental in fulfilling the old man's dream of returning home. Sudha's life in Trideep's family gives her a lot of chance to think about the disparities between the two cultures. She has mustered the courage that is essential for her to survive in the world. Nevertheless she is not going back to the old home but to a new abode, a new independence and a new life.

Lalit wants Sudha to stay in America and continue to pursue her studies. She does not have enough money and her visa will run out in less than a month. So she cannot live in America. Even though Lalit likes to take care of her, she refuses. Sudha receives a letter from Ashok in which he tells about his visit to America. She refuses to acknowledge Ashok's invitation. When he meets her after a long time, Ashok understands that something has shaken her up more than leaving her husband, Ramesh. She is surprised to hear his words. He also feels sorry for not being there with her in difficult times. Sudha tells heatedly that it's not his job to take care of her.

Sudha even tells him that he should not have come to America and asks him to forget her. Yet Ashok loves "the real" Sudha that is pure, innocent and loving woman and does not care

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about her past. She left Sunil not because of her guilt but because “Sunil frightens me. There was such a need inside him, need like a black bottomless pit. Even I poured my entire self into it, I couldn’t fill it” (VD 337). Ashok is surprised to view the changes in Sudha’s attitude. He is unable to believe her words and says “I’ll go because I can see that you have, indeed, detached yourself from your past completely– I hadn’t quite believed someone could do that . . .” (VD 337) Ashok feels pain and understands that he has lost her love. He gives his notepad as the last gift with pages filled with the picture of Sudha.

Sudha, Lalit and Ashok

Sudha is pursued by Lalit, Sunil and her Indian boyfriend Ashok. She feels that none of them are right for her. Sudha’s flight from the three men who want to marry her and seeking financial independence and self-reliance brings the readers back to the fundamental concept of feminism by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*. Sudha is happy to know that Ashok has returned to India and she also waits for Anju’s letter.

Reconciliation between Anju and Sudha

Anju and Sudha come together after a period of long separation. When Sudha apologizes to Anju for whatever has happened, Anju says “No, . . . I don’t want to hear it. . . . It took me a long time to close that door. Don’t start opening it again.” (VD 361-362) Anju further states that whatever has happened to her was like a dream. She doesn’t care whether it is a good or a bad dream because neither kind will help her to lead her life in the present. In a letter dispatched by Sunil to Anju, he has expressed his desire to meet Anju in San Francisco. He does not expect anything except forgiveness: “forgiveness itself is a large thing to hope for.” (VD 365) “This is what you do with grief; you lean into it and open your fingers”(VD 372) As her name Anjali means ‘a good woman who offers up her life for others’, Anju forgives her husband Sunil and her cousin Sudha who betrayed and cheated on her. Forgiveness is a harder punishment and requires a greater state of mind. Divakaruni writes that forgiveness brings peace and tranquility in one’s lives.

No Journey is a Commonplace

At the end of the novel, before Sudha’s departure to India, Anju has news for her: “You won’t believe it Sudha,” Anju says, “I’ve learned to fly.” (VD 368) Anju masters the art of living, shows resilience in her attitude and finds home in the ‘world’; the home of solitude in the alien land. Divakaruni says “No journey is commonplace. Each person’s journey is unique and changes that person in a special way. I hope I am able to show that through my different characters.” Divakaruni portrays remarkable characters, every characters yearn a hope in an alien country, where the immigrants venture to set an identity amidst suffering and overcoming tormenting emotions, discard the cultural differences exhibit resilience.

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Anju and Sudha learn to make peace with the events life seems to thrust on them. They try to correct their mistakes. Realization dawns on them that if they have to progress for the better and march towards freedom. They have to wrest from men what they do not want to give: control, power and privilege. They are no more passive agents; they have become activists who have taken steps to remove many of the misconceptions imposed on them in the family as well as in the society and grow as they hope for progress and peace. Sonia Chopra observes:

The tormenting emotions that result when the characters choose to throw the baggage of their culture and create a new identity . . . the choices they make and the interaction they have with the immigrant community in America and through contact with their family . . . forces them to question their existence and mortality and find answers.(qtd. in Ophilia 105)

The sisters Anju and Sudha both emerge as best sisters and best supporting system during the time of need. They learn to make peace with the difficult choices and circumstances that are forced upon them. Anju and Sudha grew up and moved on; they got separated on their marriages on the same day. The physical displacements do not bring change in the relationship the sisters' share from their childhood. Divakaruni uses the female bonding in her novels to assert not only the possibility of building and maintaining such bonding, but also to demonstrate how vital these relationships are to immigrant women in America.

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