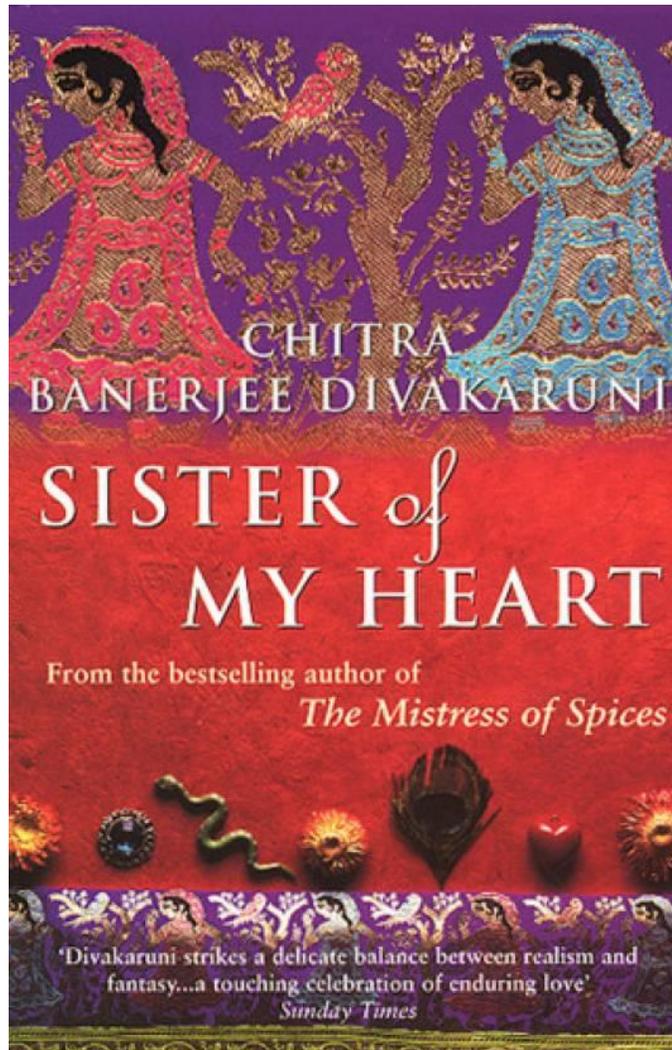


**Women's Dilemma and Confrontation in
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart***

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Abstract

The present paper entitled *Sister of My Heart as a Diasporic Novel* analyses the Diasporic issues which the central characters encounter in the novel *Sister of My Heart*. The aim of this paper is to show Divakaruni's Women dilemma and confrontation in the novel *Sister of My Heart*. In the age of globalization, immigration has become an important stage in human evolution. As the

immigrants are able to absorb the best of both native and alien, they grow into international citizens. Such people make negotiations with the acquired new culture and tradition. This could be viewed as a sign of growth, independence and adventure in an individual. In them a gradual replacement of their ethnic culture by the host culture takes place. The Diasporic people who originate from Asia but live in western countries provide an interesting example of the new hybrid cultures. Thus, it emerges as an Immigrant Literature as part of migration.

The common concern of diasporic literature is acculturation of immigrants. The immigrants plunge into the present and are able to accept changes. This is evident in Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart*. One can see the conflict in terms of culture, identity and existence as soon as they leave their lands. In Divakaruni's novel, Anju and Sudha immigrate to USA. It is Anju's dream to migrate to America in order to have better prospects, freedom and marriage. But Sudha is driven to USA by the burning traumatic homeland realities, which she faces in India. The author highlights that the pressures on the Indian female make them move out of India, seeking better life and freedom.

The novelist and short story writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for her portrayals of immigrant Indian women. When Divakaruni, who was born in India, immigrated to the U.S. in 1976, she re-evaluated the role of Indian women. She draws on her own experiences and those of other immigrant Indian women. *The Mistress of Spices* revolves around an Indian girl with magical powers. Divakaruni's second novel, *Sister of My Heart*, is a realistic treatment of the relationship between two cousins, Sudha and Anju who narrate alternating chapters of this modern drama that develops over decades.

Sister of My Heart

Sister of My Heart is based on her short story 'The Ultrasound' (Arranged Marriage 1995). It portrays the emotional journey of love and friendship between Sudha and Anju who were born on the same day, the day their fathers Gopal and Bijioy died on a ruby hunting expedition. The story narrated by Sudha and Anju ends when they reunite in America after a separation of a few years. The story thus narrates the beginning of their existence in India, their homeland, and ends with another beginning-that of their diasporic experience. *Sister of My Heart* differs from all other novels in that it throws light on homeland realities rather than on diasporic realities-social, cultural, familial, economic-that more or less lead to the exile of her female principals to an alien land.

All the major characters in the novel are females. Male characters are not prominent, and they appear as and when the situations warrant. The female characters in the novel form a mosaic of Indian character types-the young heroines representing early childhood, to maturity and marriage, the matriarchal figures represented by Gaury and Nalini, the vindictive mother-in-law by Ramesh's mother and Aunt Pishi in her old age is one who has suffered the stigma and discriminations of a widow from very young age. By telling these interrelated stories, Divakaruni uncovers the social and familial position of the Indian female, their dreams and aspirations, their precarious position in the scheme of things, the social forces, the mores that keep them under subjugation and the need and the final urge to break those fetters to freedom and to America.

Chatterjee Household

The story revolves around the Chatterjee household. The male members of the elite family had perished in a gold hunting expedition, and how the family is run by Gaury and supported by two other elders—Aunt Pishi and Nalini. In the delineation of these matriarchal figures, Divakaruni throws light on the tradition of an aristocratic family in Calcutta of the 70s and 80s.

At the Chatterjee's Anju and Sudha are surrounded by a host of people who are hardcore traditionalists living in a world full of mystical tales and magical occurrences. Gaury Ma, Aunt Pishi, Nalini, Ramur Ma Singhji, and the servants live in a crumbling old mansion. Everything about their lives and situations is traditional and conventional. All these characters endure tremendous pressures of their own—either personal or related to other family members—and transform to different personae at a later stage.

To top the order there is Gaury Ma who has become the matriarchal head of the Chatterjee's after the unfortunate and untimely death of Bijoy during ruby hunt. She represents the protective mother; she is also an archetypal mother to all the children in the family, a mother equally to Anju and Sudha. Even before Bijoy's death, Gaury acted with great responsibility and commitment. She was clear visioned and was very concerned about the recklessness in Bijoy's thoughts and actions. She was very apprehensive of Gopal, his cousin's vaulting ideas and ambitious in life. She was worried that Bijoy had fallen victim to Gopal's whims and fancies. She refused to believe when Gopal promised her big things: "This time it will work. I know it Biju-da. I will return you double money within two months". She would point out to Bijoy how their bookstore had been running at a loss and warn him about the failure in collecting proper revenues from their manager Harihar. She said, "You've got to go and check on him. He is stealing from us with both hands". Gaury, according to Aunt Pishi, is a perfect Wife, and her perfection lies in the goodness deep in her heart. She was magnanimous enough to accept her sister-in-law Pishi when she returned to the Chatterjee's after her husband's generous beard.

Even Bijoy knew that Gaury was right that "the fortune of the Chatterjee family was like a moon spinning towards eclipse". She was vehemently opposed to Bijoy taking to the expedition for rubies. She disbelieved the stories of Gopal about the rubies and caves. Gaury cries, "Are you mad? It's some kind of a trick, can't you see? And even if it weren't it sound terribly dangerous". She told Bijoy and Gopal that they could not leave them when there was hardly a month for their babies to come. Gaury is very practical not to believe the fairy-tale stories and princes on a magic quest.

The parting words of Bijoy indicate the kind of trust and faith he has in Gaury. In the event of them not returning from the ruby hunt, he says, "Then I expect you to bring up my child as befits a descendent of the Chatterjees. Will you promise me that?" And she never forgets that promise. After the funeral she would not allow herself to break down as Nalini did. When others trying to get her to weep, to let her sorrow out of heart, she said, "I don't have the luxury. I made a promise and I must use all my energies to keep it". It is scandalous for a Chatterjee wife to run the bookshop. When family members made comments like that she looked at them with hard eyes and replied that she would do whatever was necessary to ensure her daughter's future as she had promised to her husband.

Gaury

Gaury remains unusually brave at the death of her husband and later at her acceptance of every tragedy that has come her way and in the way of the Chatterjee family. Her potential as the head of a joint family, her resolve to run the bookshop without forgoing traditional values, her plan for Anju and Sudha, her heart attack she does not give into, her resolve to marry off the girls are all indicative of her motherly protectiveness. These are all typically Indian concepts of matriarchy, elevating her to the mythical grandeur of the protective *Druga*.

The story of the elder females is not complete with that of the protective mother, Gaury. Aunt Pishi, the sister of Bijoy, represents the victimized female of a bygone era a victim of the rigid patriarchy that denies a young widow another chance to build up a life of her own. Perpetual widowhood is imposed on her say from fifteen to sixteen years of age by society. But she grows as a person. It is she who stood by the Chatterjee family in all its hard times, and acted as a moral force to come out of sinister experiences and tragedies. She also supports the idea of selling the ancestral home; she grows from the fire and heat, even the cold of her experiences.

Nalini

Nalini, the mother of Sudha, is the third character in the elder trio. However, she is different from Gaury and Pishi. She is a prototype of the multitudes of Indian females who are captivated by the romantic, handsome, adventurous young men. She has wild dreams about a life of splendors/comfort and aristocratic affluence. Readers get a glimpse of her secret life from the narration of Pishi to Sudha. Nalini came to the Chatterjee's newly-wed, bare-necked and un-jeweled. Gopal met Nalini as she washed clothes by the village river and promised her riches and honour. It made her forget years' worth of cautions and she slipped away from her parents' home. Sudha often suspected how that runaway adventuress could become her mother. She was built of sighs and complaints. They were married at the Kali temple, which was popular with lovers who eloped. She made complaints constantly about her poor husband who failed to keep his promises of riches and honour. She thought that she could not even claim the food she ate regularly.

She is at the Chatterjee's on charity, a poor cousin by marriage. The truth of her situation gnaws at her endlessly. She feels cheated and lines of discontent take over her face. The face that an unhappy more is said to pass on her sorrow to the body in her womb did not bother Nalini much. Sudha believes that this attitude of her mother is one reason for the sorrows and unhappiness in her life.

The discontented and selfish attitude of Nalini prompts Gopal to take on the misadventure and later the doom. She says, "Are you a man or a ground crawling insect? How long are you going to beg your daily food from your brother just because he is kind? Running after no good schemes like a dog chasing his shadow. Why can't you get a job in an office like all other men?" All her protests are only a device to cover up her sense of inferiority. She always feels a sense of insecurity and humiliation for being a dependent on the Chatterjees.

Anju and Sudha

It is in such an adult world that the two aspiring sisters of heart. Anju and Sudha are destined to grow up. Naturally, the two girls-especially from their entry to girlhood cherish a set

of new values and concomitant dreams-their urge for freedom, their craving for adventurous experiences, and their eagerness to have a stronger experience of the world beyond the overprotected home all are typical of the young women of the time. Despite the traditional ambience of the household, there is a speck of revolution in the young women, conflicts in their thoughts and deeds. Sudha says, "I'm tired of these old women saris you make us wear. You would think we were living in the Dark Ages, instead of in a while?".

Their protest against the old ways of living is manifest when, as convent schoolgirls, they escape to the cinema un chaperoned. They express their anger at being cocooned in the patriarchal household and criticize the restrictions on them. Anju, their rebellious bookworm, is angry at the world. She always questions the society that dictates how women should behave, dress and act. She rages that deny Pishi the right to be an active participant in festive celebrations because she is a widow. She says, "I hate Pishi when she puts on her patient smile and sits in the back of the hall on feasts days, not participating, because windows mustn't."

Twin Aspects of the Composite Young Female of the Times

The two girls together represent the twin aspects of the composite young female of the times. Sudha and Anju are not two unique identities; they represent the dual aspects of Indian woman hood of the 80s. What they suffer and fight together are the sum total of the female experience kept under patriarchal/matriarchal control but giving out sparks of enlightened revolt. In this split of the female composite, Sudha is the submissive half of Anju's revolting half. (This is reverted after Sudha's arrival in America where she becomes assertive and follows her individuating self-concept of herself). Their premarital existence offers the varied experiences of growing up in the Indian society of the 70s and 80s. Despite being rebellious and protesting, both of them agree to an arranged marriage at a time when Sudha has an affair with Ashok. But Sudha bound by duty to the sister of her heart must make a decision that will haunt her for years. Anju marries Sunil and moves away to America to lead life of her dreams. She is off to a world of cherished freedom and liberation. The novel then turns on to the lie of Sudha and focuses more on the fortunes of Sudha's homeland experiences.

Sudha as Daughter-in-law

Sudha's dire experiences as daughter-in-law bring about a lot of transformation in her character. Sudha, the rebellious girl in her teens, is confined to a traditional household in Ramesh's family. She acts as keeper of cupboard, pantries, and storerooms; she serves food, supervises servants, and is at the helm of all traditional affairs at the in-laws. While being confined to the strict traditional role as wife there is commotion with her because marriage has not only brought physical separation but also emotional separation from Anju. Communication between them is nil.

The conflict within her whether to accept the role of a traditional orthodox wife or modernist remains an enigma until she becomes pregnant with her daughter. Her mother-in-law asks her to have an abortion and tries for a son. She reacts evidently hard to the infringement upon her being and existence. She bails out from marriage and drags herself to single motherhood, dishonor and poverty. The sacrifice and suffering she made for Anju has not paid. The post marital reality, the traumatic experiences at her-in-laws, the exploitation, the mental torture, the antipathy towards the girl-child, the female feticides, the stigma of sterility when she delayed getting

pregnant, and finally her been treated as an outcast are all reasons for Sudha's decision to emigrate to America.

These were serious social problems that generally affected Indian womanhood even in the last quarter of the twentieth century. However, she knows that life in America will not be easy so long as Anju's husband Sunil keeps a passion for her, which glows like a wedge between the two sisters. She breaks all these challenges and offers to move on to America to graver situations of trials and suffering.

Agents of Persecution

The agents of persecution in the homeland are the mother-in-law and her spineless husband who is better called the mother's boy. Sudha's mother-in-law is the typical mother-in-law in any traditional Indian family; Ramesh is the typical spineless husband at the beck and call of his mother who cannot stand up to his mother. Divakaruni might have decided against featuring a living father to Ramesh because a father-in-law usually is not a party to persecuting the daughter-in-law. Sudha decides to return to mother-home and protection. A girl brought up under the strict discipline of a traditional family, takes a decision singlehandedly to return home. She thus breaks all marriage fetters considered sacred by society. In this single act she metamorphoses from the timid Calcutta household girl/bride to the rebellious woman. Now she plans her final strategies towards staying in the homeland.

At this juncture her earlier paramour Ashok appears with fresh promise of marriage and support. Gaury Ma, Nalini and even Aunt Pishi act as moral forces for their union in marriage. Nalini says, "Go ahead and agree to whatever he asks now. You can always change a husband's mind, especially if you're giving him what he wants in bed." Ashok might appear for some time the worthy man to take Sudha's hands. But he too miserably fails Sudha when he insists that all he wants in few years alone with her and wants Dayatia her daughter to stay with the grandmothers. Ashok here represents the conventional Indian made-even the ideal male still holds certain narrow male interests. He is for practicality in emotional life, which is not practical with Sudha. With Ashok's failure in rescuing Sudha in life, she has no options left in Indian. Not only that she has bailed out form the marriage, but the situation now warrants her to bail out of the homeland. The experiences in the homeland are so traumatic, painful that stay in India becomes impossible despite her protective mothers. All these homeland pressures lead to exit to America. And Anju becomes a facilitator. She represents one case study. She immigrated to America because it was her one time dream for better prospects, freedom, and marriage. On the contrary, Sudha is driven by the burning traumatic homeland realities a female confronts in India, and the homeland even reminds her of terrible fire, heat, and trauma.

About Displacement and Alienation

Sister of My Heart is about displacement and alienation, and it portrays the psychological claustrophobia and the emerging and conflicting tendencies in that conditions of a few Bengali women who are sensitive to feel the pain, and all of them are intelligent enough to make seems out of family situation's and break out. Anju and Sudha are first caught between their orthodox of a Hindu elite family and the modernist feminist thoughts of freedom that set the tone of youth in the 70s and 80s in Bengal. Later they are between the American culture, society and the native

constraints surrounding Indian women. To be precise they are caught between a feminist desire to be assertive and an Indian need to be submissive.

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