

# **Female Psyche and Search for Identity as Reflected in Sisters of My Heart by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

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## **Abstract**

*This research paper aims to critically analyze the novel of South Asian writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni namely Sisters of My Heart with the foremost focus on the theme of female psyche and search for self identity faced by the female characters. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the most prominent Indian American writer. In most of her novels she deals with the theme of Indian immigrants coping up with the cultural conflict in a foreign land. She explores how the women struggle in their day to day lives. She focuses on the lives of women protagonists and reveals how they are struggling with the harsh and humiliating experience in their native land as well as in the new surroundings of the foreign land. As an Indian immigrant while trying to comprehend in a new country with an alien culture, goes through turmoil, rootlessness, identity crisis and so on. These problems are best described by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her novels. Her novels reveal her special interest in the lives of immigrants who are facing diasporic displacement and cultural crisis in a new homeland.*

**Keywords:-** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Identity, Immigrants, Cultural Conflict, Gender discrimination, Diaspora

## **Introduction**

Author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is of Indian descent. In 1956, she was born in Calcutta. Chitralekha is her real name. Her first nineteen years of life were spent in India. She then made the decision to relocate to the United States from India. In the US, she continued her academic education. For her studies and job, she relocated from her motherland to a foreign country. In Dayton, Ohio, at Wright State University, she earned her master's degree. The University of California, Berkeley, awarded her a PhD. She earned two master's degrees, both in English. She has been interested in women's issues and created an organization for women who had significant hardship fighting for their rights in the new world. She began her writing

career as a poet and published her first poetry collection *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990). *Arranged Marriage* is her first short story collection that won her American Book Award, PEN Josephine Miles Award and Bay Area Book Review Award and made her a high-prolific writer in English literature. One of the bestselling novels of Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Species* has been adapted into a movie with the same title. Her famous novels are *The Mistress of Species* (1995), *Sisters of my Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), and *One Amazing Thing* (2010) and many more. All these novels are based on the theme of immigrants in an alien land facing many problems like alienation, discrimination, multiculturalism, identity crisis and so on.

The present study focuses on the survival of women in a native and foreign land as depicted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Sisters of My Heart*. In most of her novels she attempted to present the experience of immigrant people with special focus on women, their hardship and suffering, cultural clashes, and their search for identity. She says, “*Women in particular respond to my work because I am writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel the joy and pain because it will be harder to (be) prejudiced when they meet them in real life.*” Both the novel *Sisters of my Heart* and *Vine of Desire* traces the social realities of women concerning love, marriage, divorce, abortion, gender discrimination, domestic violence and widowhood.

*Sisters of My Heart* was first published in 1999. This novel narrates the story of two Sisters, Anju and Sudha. This novel is the great example of patriarchal society where women are viewed as inferior to men. In fact in some parts of the world the position of women are very low as compared to men. They face so many problems in their male dominating society. Women have to face violence and prejudice is everyday due to their religious and cultural norms. They do not have the right to speak about their likes and dislikes. In this research paper an attempt has been made to study Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Sisters of my Heart* from the feminine perspective. Both the novels are based on the suffering of typical Indian women.

*Sister of my Heart* deals with the difficulties faced by women through the character of Anju and Sudha. It deals with the varied aspect of the identity crisis for women in the patriarchal system in the eastern and western context. The protagonists of the novel are two cousins Anju and Sudha who were born on the same day in a Hindu Zamindar family at Calcutta in India. The novel focuses on their relationship from their shared experience of their youth to their married life in both India and America. Their fathers have passed away just before their birth that's why they both considered as born with bad luck. “*For girl babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born.*” People cursed both the girls because they too lost their fathers just before they are born. Both the girls were brought up like twins by three mothers namely Gauri Ma, mothers of Anju, Nalini Ma, mothers of Sudha and Pishi, widowed sister of Anju's father Bijoy. Being with no male member in the family, the responsibility of running the family lies upon the three women. They have to support the family economically, emotionally, psychologically and physically. Gauri Ma takes up the charge of the bookshop to escape from the clutches of poverty. Nalini also accepts the

challenges fully. But Pishi can't do anything because she is the widow. Widowhood is the biggest curse in Indian society. A widow can't participate in any auspicious occasion because of the traditional system of the family.

Being born in the same family Sudha and Anju shares the strong bonds. They both are bound closely with each other emotionally as well as psychologically. Anju says, *"I could never hate Sudha because she is my other half. The sister of my half. Like no one else in the entire world does. Like known as in the entire world will."* Both the sisters have to separate after their marriage. Being in love with Ashok, Sudha have to marry Ramesh Sanyal, the choice of a family and Anju get married to Sunil, whom she loved. This shows that women have to sacrifice everything for the sake of others. But even after marriage their lives are not running smoothly. Sudha's in-laws treat her badly. She do not have children. Sudha's mother-in-law and other relatives ask to go for a checkup in the hospital. Accordingly she go to the hospital but she was normal. The doctor prescribes to check the husband also but Sudha's mother-in-law considers medical check up to her son as an insult to their family. This shows the pathetic condition of women in our society. Divakaruni realistically presents that if a woman fails to give birth to a child, she is considered as a barren land. Through the portrayal of Sudha, Divakaruni presents the dark side of the patriarchal system of our nation.

Whereas on the other side, Anju is happy with her husband Sunil. But her father in law don't like her. Anju and Sunil go to America for some or the other reason. But in America Anju's life starts in an unexpected way. Her husband Sunil is addicted to American culture. He used to come late in the night as he was addicted to alcohol. Being born in a patriarchal and male dominated society, Sunil also starts misbehaving with Anju. On the other hand both the sisters got pregnant at the same time. When Sudha's in-laws comes to know that it is a baby girl in her womb, they starts forcing Sudha to go for abortion. But Sudha comes to her mother's home to save her child. Sudha give birth to a baby girl and named her Dayita. Whereas in America Anju is deeply worried about Sudha. The economic condition of the family becomes worse. Therefore, Anju decides to work for Sudha. Hard work leads to miscarriage and the baby is identified in Anju's womb as "died". Anju invites Sudha and her daughter to America. Meanwhile Ashok, whom Sudha likes before her marriage, appears. He wants to marry Sudha but is not ready to accept her daughter. Sudha do not accept the condition and she chooses to remain alone for the sake of her daughter. In the end Sudha goes to America with her daughter and two beloved sisters are reunited again.

Therefore, through this novel it can be observed that a woman suffers a lot in the male dominated society. She sacrifices their whole life for the sake of others. Gender discrimination results in poor education, early marriage, domestic violence, abortion and so on. In this novel Sudha and Anju struggle a lot for their identity but they got nothing. Throughout the various interactions of Sudha and Anju with their husband and in-laws Divakaruni often brings out the negative aspects of the traditional and orthodox Indian society. Judith Handschuh remarks about this novel, *"Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has written an intense, powerful book about the close relationships that women form with each other. The story is absolutely*

*unforgettable, and it will keep you thinking about your own relationships with your friends and relatives, and just how far you would go to protect them.”*

## Conclusion

Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is an accurate depiction of the patriarchal system of Indian society in which women suffer a lot and they are always in search of their identity and freedom. They always give up against the traditional value system of their society. Both the protagonist Sudha and Anju struggle for their identity and both surrender their likes for the sake of their loved ones. At the end of the novel, both women come together and help each other and start a new life. C. N. Eshwari writes about the ending of the novel, “*By synthesizing these two contradictory yet complementary characters, Divakaruni succeeds in presenting the new identity of the immigrant who validates the cultural part to reconstruct a meaning full present in the new world?*”

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