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## Female Solidarity and Empowerment in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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**Abstract:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* intricately weaves a narrative of female solidarity and empowerment within the confines of traditional Indian society. Through the intertwined lives of cousins Anju and Sudha, the novel delves into the complexities of gender roles, societal expectations, and the transformative power of sisterhood. This paper examines how Divakaruni portrays the journey of these women as they navigate patriarchal structures, highlighting their resilience and the strength derived from their bond. By analyzing the characters' experiences and relationships, the study underscores the significance of female solidarity in challenging and redefining empowerment in a patriarchal context.

**Keywords:** Female Solidarity, Gender Roles, Patriarchal structures, Sisterhood, Social Expectations.

### Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent voice in contemporary diasporic literature, often explores themes of identity, gender, migration, and tradition through her narratives. *Sister of My Heart* (1999), one of her most acclaimed novels, centers on the lives of two cousins, Anju and Sudha, who are raised as sisters in a traditional Bengali household. Although the novel begins in the cloistered environment of their ancestral home in Kolkata, it later expands into a cross-continental narrative when one of the protagonists migrates to the United States. Despite physical and emotional distances, their bond persists—reflecting the enduring power of female relationships in the face of adversity. At its core, *Sister of My Heart* is a celebration of womanhood—not in isolation, but in companionship. The narrative illustrates how solidarity among women can serve as a source of emotional strength, resistance, and transformation. The protagonists confront various forms of patriarchal

control, including familial expectations, forced marriage, and gendered silencing. However, they also demonstrate that solidarity—through shared experiences, emotional intimacy, and mutual support—can be a powerful counterforce to these societal constraints.

Divakaruni subverts the traditional representation of women in Indian literature by crafting characters who, while rooted in cultural values, challenge the roles imposed upon them. Anju is outspoken, ambitious, and academically inclined, while Sudha is gentle, imaginative, and socially conforming—yet both evolve in response to the challenges they face. Importantly, their empowerment is not achieved in isolation, but through their unbreakable bond—a sisterhood that transcends blood ties and becomes a means of survival and self-definition.

This paper argues that *Sister of My Heart* is not only a story of two women navigating their personal journeys but also a broader commentary on how female solidarity can act as a mechanism for empowerment in a patriarchal society. By analyzing the characters' relationships, the influence of cultural norms, and their acts of resistance, this study highlights how Divakaruni positions female companionship as both a refuge and a revolution.

### **Literature Review**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, particularly within the fields of postcolonial, diasporic, and feminist literary studies. Critics and scholars have consistently emphasized the novel's thematic concerns with female identity, resilience, and interpersonal bonding in the face of restrictive cultural and patriarchal forces. This section reviews relevant scholarly perspectives to contextualize the analysis of female solidarity and empowerment in the novel.

#### **1. Gender and Patriarchal Structures**

Many scholars have examined Divakaruni's critique of patriarchy and its impact on female agency. Bhusal (2022) explores the assignment of gender roles in *Sister of My Heart*, noting how the characters are socially conditioned to fulfill traditional expectations from an early age. His work highlights the subtle ways in which patriarchal control is internalized by women, yet also points to moments of subversion and rebellion, particularly through Anju and Sudha's decisions regarding marriage and motherhood.

Similarly, Haq (2017) analyzes the ways in which Divakaruni constructs complex female characters who resist patriarchal norms. Haq argues that the empowerment of Anju and Sudha does not arise from overt defiance but from everyday acts of courage, compromise, and mutual support. This gradual resistance, often enabled by their emotional connection, illustrates a realistic model of female empowerment within oppressive systems.

#### **2. Sisterhood and Female Bonding**

Several studies underscore the novel's depiction of sisterhood as a vital source of strength. In their analysis, Sivakala and Kavidha (2018) emphasize the role of family and shared female heritage in shaping the protagonists' identities. The researchers suggest that the novel represents a female-centered narrative tradition, where storytelling, oral history,

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and emotional exchange serve as tools of empowerment across generations.

Bindu and Rao (2024) extend this idea by interpreting the protagonists' bond as a form of emotional resistance. According to them, the solidarity between Anju and Sudha functions as a silent but effective counter-narrative to patriarchal domination. Despite being separated by geography and different life experiences, the cousins remain each other's primary source of emotional survival, guidance, and strength. This enduring relationship allows them to question and eventually redefine the meaning of fulfillment and agency in their own terms.

### **3. Feminist Retellings and Cultural Context**

Sarathapriya and Noushath (2024) focus on the cultural trauma embedded in Divakaruni's portrayal of Indian womanhood. They argue that the protagonist's struggles reflect the intersection of cultural tradition and gendered suffering. However, the authors also note that empowerment in the novel emerges not through assimilation into Western ideals of independence, but through the reclamation of agency within the Indian cultural framework. This aligns with a broader trend in feminist postcolonial literature that emphasizes "negotiated empowerment" over radical rupture.

### **4. Diasporic Experience and Empowerment**

Though *Sister of My Heart* is not overtly diasporic in its entirety, the latter part of the novel introduces elements of migration and cross-cultural conflict, especially in Anju's experience in America. Scholars such as Divakaruni herself (in various interviews and essays) have indicated that migration in her works often represents a liminal space—both a site of possibility and alienation. Anju's eventual assertion of her voice in a foreign land shows how solidarity and memory can help preserve identity amidst dislocation.

Together, these scholarly perspectives provide a rich foundation for analyzing *Sister of My Heart* as a feminist text rooted in both cultural specificity and universal themes of womanhood. The literature underscores that empowerment in Divakaruni's work is often relational rather than individualistic—achieved through emotional intimacy, shared history, and interdependence. This study seeks to build on these insights by closely examining how Anju and Sudha's relationship evolves as a form of resistance and renewal, demonstrating that female solidarity is not just a theme, but the novel's structural and emotional core. In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a poignant exploration of the lives of two young women, Anju and Sudha, who, despite their close familial ties, encounter the harsh realities of a patriarchal society. The novel, set against the backdrop of Indian culture, delves into themes of identity, societal expectations, and the transformative power of female relationships. Central to the narrative is the concept of female solidarity, which serves as a catalyst for the characters' empowerment and personal growth.

### **Female Solidarity as a Source of Empowerment**

In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents female solidarity not merely as a background element, but as a central driving force in the personal development and empowerment of her protagonists. The relationship between Anju and Sudha—though technically cousins—is that of soul-sisters, forged by a shared history of maternal absence,

emotional vulnerability, and societal expectation. Their bond functions as a sanctuary in a world dominated by patriarchal customs, and ultimately, as the foundation for their emotional strength and transformative decisions.

### **1. Shared Emotional Intimacy and Mutual Dependence**

From childhood, Anju and Sudha develop a deep emotional connection that transcends the expectations placed on women in their conservative Indian household. Their relationship is marked by a rare honesty and empathy. For instance, when Sudha learns a dark family secret about her father's involvement in the death of Anju's father, she bears the guilt in silence to protect Anju from pain. Similarly, when Sudha faces abuse and control in her marriage, Anju becomes her unwavering source of strength, encouraging her to think beyond submission and silence.

The emotional interdependence between the two characters is empowering because it validates their experiences in a society that often marginalizes women's voices. Through each other, they find someone who listens without judgment and supports without condition. In moments of isolation, it is the memory and strength of this bond that fuels their resilience. Their solidarity is not based on similarity of character, but on an unbreakable trust—demonstrating that empowerment can be nurtured through relationships that prioritize mutual respect and emotional safety.

### **2. Resistance Through Relational Empowerment**

The novel is replete with moments where Anju and Sudha resist the limitations imposed on them—not with open rebellion, but with strategic, relational empowerment. Sudha, often viewed as the more traditionally submissive of the two, makes a bold decision to leave her husband not out of individual assertion, but because of her love for her unborn daughter and the moral support of Anju. This decision reflects how solidarity with another woman can provide the courage necessary to break from oppressive circumstances. Similarly, Anju, who migrates to the U.S. and suffers a miscarriage, is sustained by her ongoing connection to Sudha. Even across continents, their letters, thoughts, and memories become a lifeline. This shows that female solidarity can transcend space and time, offering both women a continual sense of identity and self-worth when external forces seek to diminish them.

### **3. Intergenerational Female Support**

Beyond Anju and Sudha's relationship, Divakaruni portrays a web of female solidarity that includes older women like Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini. These women, though often complicit in upholding traditional norms, also provide moments of insight, protection, and emotional care. For example, Pishi serves as a storyteller, transmitting cultural wisdom and moral resilience. Her stories and quiet strength become part of the girls' psychological foundation, showing how empowerment can be subtly inherited across generations.

This intergenerational support challenges the often-assumed dichotomy between tradition and resistance. Instead, Divakaruni presents cultural continuity and female empowerment as potentially harmonious, suggesting that strength can be drawn not just from rebellion but from reinterpretation of inherited wisdom.

**4. Solidarity as Emotional Liberation**

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Anju and Sudha's bond is that it allows for emotional liberation—something not often afforded to women in their environment. Their ability to share dreams, doubts, and desires offers a powerful contrast to the silence expected of them. This emotional outlet helps them maintain a sense of individuality and self-respect. Their solidarity also serves as a form of emotional justice in the novel. While male characters—like Sudha's controlling husband or Anju's indifferent in-laws—attempt to diminish them, the women create their own system of emotional reciprocity. This becomes a quiet but firm rejection of the systemic emotional neglect and abuse often normalized in patriarchal settings.

In *Sister of My Heart*, female solidarity is not presented as a luxury or mere thematic flourish—it is a necessity. For Anju and Sudha, empowerment is possible not because they are independently strong, but because they are interdependently resilient. Their relationship embodies a counter-narrative to the isolation, silence, and submission often forced upon women. By portraying female bonding as a source of empowerment, Divakaruni affirms the enduring power of women's relationships to create meaning, sustain hope, and foster transformation—even in the most constraining of social circumstances.

At the heart of the novel is the deep bond between Anju and Sudha, a relationship that transcends mere familial ties to embody a profound sisterhood. This solidarity becomes a sanctuary for the characters, offering emotional support and a sense of belonging in a world that often marginalizes them. Their shared experiences and mutual understanding enable them to navigate the challenges imposed by societal norms and expectations.

Moreover, the support extended by other female characters, such as their mothers and Pishi, further reinforces the theme of female empowerment. These women, despite their own struggles, provide guidance and strength to Anju and Sudha, demonstrating the importance of intergenerational solidarity in fostering resilience.

**Challenging Patriarchal Structures**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* offers a layered critique of patriarchal control embedded within Indian familial and societal frameworks. The novel does not rely on overt political rebellion to challenge patriarchy. Instead, it uses the personal—especially the lived experiences of women—as a lens through which the subtle and pervasive mechanisms of male dominance are exposed, resisted, and ultimately undermined. Through its female protagonists and their network of relationships, the novel reveals how patriarchy functions in both traditional and modern spaces, and how women carve out paths of autonomy within and beyond its boundaries.

**1. Patriarchy in the Domestic Sphere**

The home in *Sister of My Heart*—particularly the Chatterjee household—serves as a microcosm of patriarchal control. Despite the visible absence of male authority figures, male dominance persists through tradition, obligation, and inherited expectations. Women in the household, such as Gouri and Nalini, act as enforcers of these gendered norms, reinforcing rules around female behavior, sexuality, marriage, and obedience.

Sudha and Anju are raised with clear expectations: Sudha, the more conventionally beautiful and docile, is groomed for marriage, while Anju, more outspoken and academically driven, still faces pressure to conform to the role of an obedient daughter-in-law. Their lives are framed by decisions made without their consent—most notably, Sudha's arranged marriage and Anju's rushed wedding following family expectations. The novel highlights how patriarchal control often comes not just from men, but is sustained by cultural customs and internalized by women across generations.

## **2. Control Over Female Bodies and Choices**

One of the most striking examples of patriarchal oppression is the control exerted over women's bodies and reproductive rights. When Sudha becomes pregnant with a girl, her in-laws pressure her to abort the fetus—revealing the deep-rooted gender bias and valuing of male heirs. Her refusal to comply, and her ultimate decision to leave her husband and raise the child on her own, marks a pivotal moment of resistance. This act, quiet yet radical, directly challenges a system that devalues female life and demands female submission.

Likewise, Anju's miscarriage and the lack of empathy she receives in her marital home highlight how women's emotional and physical suffering is minimized in patriarchal environments. Her eventual pursuit of education and independence in the United States becomes a form of defiance against these oppressive expectations, even as she continues to grapple with internalized guilt and societal pressure.

## **3. Silence as a Tool of Control—and Resistance**

Patriarchy thrives on the silencing of women—emotionally, sexually, intellectually. In the novel, both Anju and Sudha are taught to suppress their voices: Sudha hides her father's dark secret to protect the family, and Anju suppresses her grief after her miscarriage to maintain the image of a "strong" wife. Silence is presented as both enforced and chosen—an expected part of womanhood in their world.

However, Divakaruni also shows how silence can be reappropriated as a form of quiet resistance. When Sudha chooses not to reveal the identity of her child's father, she withholds the narrative from a society that seeks to shame her. Her silence, in this context, becomes an assertion of control over her own story. Similarly, Anju's inner monologue and letters to Sudha allow her to preserve her sense of self in an otherwise alienating world.

## **4. The Rewriting of Womanhood**

Perhaps the most revolutionary challenge to patriarchy in the novel is the redefinition of womanhood not as sacrifice or submission, but as self-realization and support. Through Sudha's rejection of her husband's demands, and Anju's intellectual and emotional journey, the characters reclaim the right to define their identities outside of the male gaze. Their decisions are not framed as anti-family or anti-tradition, but as efforts to reclaim agency within those very constructs.

In doing so, Divakaruni rejects both the passive stereotype of the suffering Indian woman and the Western ideal of radical individualism. Instead, she presents a third path—

rooted in cultural belonging but resistant to its limitations. The protagonists' strength lies in their ability to navigate oppressive systems while retaining their values, dreams, and connection to each other.

In *Sister of My Heart*, patriarchal structures are not overturned by revolution, but slowly dismantled through everyday acts of defiance, emotional honesty, and moral courage. By portraying the protagonists as neither victims nor rebels in the traditional sense, Divakaruni adds nuance to the feminist narrative. Her characters challenge patriarchy not through dramatic confrontation, but through choices grounded in love, solidarity, and self-respect. These subtle challenges collectively chip away at the systems of control, offering a vision of empowerment rooted in cultural complexity and human connection.

Divakaruni uses the narrative to critique the patriarchal structures that dictate the lives of women. The characters' experiences highlight the limitations imposed by societal norms, such as arranged marriages and rigid gender roles. However, through their solidarity, Anju and Sudha challenge these constraints, seeking autonomy and self-actualization. Their journeys reflect a resistance to the traditional roles assigned to them, advocating for a redefined sense of empowerment that is not contingent upon male approval or societal validation.

### **The Role of Education and Migration**

In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents education and migration not merely as plot devices, but as critical pathways to self-realization and empowerment for women navigating traditional and patriarchal constraints. For Anju and, indirectly, for Sudha, education and migration function as tools to expand their worldviews, question inherited roles, and forge identities beyond the limitations of their cultural upbringing. These two elements—education and physical/geographical mobility—intersect with themes of female autonomy, resistance, and transformation.

#### **1. Education as Intellectual and Emotional Liberation**

Among the two protagonists, Anju is more overtly associated with the pursuit of formal education. She is encouraged by her aunt to attend college, and she takes pride in her academic achievements. This education gives her not only knowledge but also a framework for critical thinking and a language to articulate her thoughts, hopes, and discontent. While education does not shield her from societal expectations—she still enters an arranged marriage—it becomes the seed for later empowerment, especially when she migrates to the United States.

Sudha, by contrast, is discouraged from pursuing further education, reflecting the gendered expectations placed upon women whose beauty and submissiveness are valued more than intellect. Her lack of higher education symbolizes the societal limitations imposed on women considered ideal for domestic roles. However, her eventual assertion of independence—particularly her decision to leave her husband and raise her daughter alone—demonstrates that empowerment can manifest even in the absence of formal education, especially when inspired and supported by emotionally nurturing relationships like the one

she shares with Anju. Education in the novel is not limited to schooling—it includes emotional literacy, storytelling, and moral learning passed down through female relationships. The stories told by Pishi, and the lessons learned through letters, motherhood, and shared pain, constitute a broader and culturally grounded understanding of "women's education" in the novel.

## **2. Migration as a Site of Transformation**

Migration plays a central role in Anju's journey. Moving to the United States with her husband marks a shift not only in geography but also in cultural context, expectations, and identity. The diaspora experience offers Anju both new freedoms and new struggles. While she encounters alienation, particularly after her miscarriage, she also begins to recognize her individuality outside the roles of wife and daughter-in-law.

The physical distance from her homeland allows Anju to reflect more critically on her upbringing and to question the gender roles that were once normalized. Her exposure to Western feminist ideals, combined with her ongoing emotional connection to Sudha, leads her to gradually assert her voice. In this sense, migration becomes a metaphor for mental and emotional expansion, even as it brings new forms of isolation.

For Sudha, migration is less immediate but no less symbolic. Her decision to eventually move to the United States with her daughter represents a break from the restrictive environment of her in-laws' home. It is a journey toward freedom, not just from an abusive relationship, but from a cultural system that stifled her choices. Her migration also reunites her with Anju, completing the emotional arc of solidarity and reclaiming her agency.

## **3. Cultural Ambiguity and the Re-definition of Identity**

Through the interplay of education and migration, Divakaruni explores the ambivalence that many women experience when caught between tradition and change. Neither Anju nor Sudha fully assimilate into Western culture, nor do they entirely reject their Indian roots. Instead, they inhabit a space of cultural hybridity—learning to blend, negotiate, and redefine what it means to be a woman, a mother, and a survivor.

This nuanced portrayal resists the binary framing of East vs. West, or tradition vs. modernity. It suggests that real empowerment lies not in abandoning one's heritage, but in selectively reinterpreting it through new experiences and knowledge gained via education and migration. In doing so, Divakaruni aligns her narrative with the broader themes of diasporic literature—particularly the negotiation of multiple identities.

In *Sister of My Heart*, education and migration emerge as key forces that enable personal growth and empowerment for Anju and Sudha. These forces help the characters to move beyond the limitations of gendered expectations, offering them tools—intellectual, emotional, and spatial—to reconstruct their identities. By integrating these elements into her feminist narrative, Divakaruni highlights how education and migration are not just external opportunities, but deeply internal processes of awakening, self-definition, and liberation. In their own distinct ways, both women break free from inherited constraints and move toward lives shaped by choice, resilience, and solidarity.



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Education and migration emerge as significant themes in the novel, representing avenues for personal growth and liberation. Anju's pursuit of education and her subsequent move to America symbolize the breaking of traditional boundaries and the quest for independence. Similarly, Sudha's eventual migration reflects a search for a life beyond the confines of societal expectations. These elements underscore the transformative potential of education and mobility in empowering women to redefine their identities and roles in society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* offers a compelling portrayal of female solidarity as a powerful force for empowerment. Through the intertwined lives of Anju and

Sudha, the novel illustrates how solidarity among women can serve as a foundation for challenging patriarchal structures and fostering personal growth. By emphasizing the significance of sisterhood, the narrative advocates for a reimagined empowerment that is rooted in mutual support and collective strength.

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