

**SISTERS IN STRIFE: PSYCHOLOGICAL TENSIONS AND TRIUMPHS
IN DIVAKARUNI'S EXILIC NOVELS****Dr. Anu R**

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Article Received: 05/01/2026**Article Accepted:** 05/02/2026**Published Online:** 06/02/2026**DOI:** 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.01.79**Abstract:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an exceptionally prolific writer, in the area of diaspora literature, has written a series of novels that expose the hidden and complicated lives of immigrants as they deal with questions regarding their identity, attachment or detachment to their homeland, and the unbreakable strength of sisterhood. The research has taken selected exilic novels, namely “The Mistress of Spices,” “Sister of My Heart,” “Oleander Girl,” and “Queen of Dreams,” to provide insight into how psychological stresses and triumphs within sisterly relationships are a recurring theme. Divakaruni offers an insightful narration through which the treatment of immigrant experiences can be examined. In each of these works, readers are encouraged to tread on the inner spiritual wilderness of characters as they struggle with becoming adults and growing up in such a complex interrelation between tradition and modernity, the parents’ homeland and a foreign adopted world, or family norms and one’s personal goals. As a *mise-en scène* factor, sisterhood gets stressed as cohesive, signifying the multifaceted and comprehensive nature of the immigrant condition. Through the analysis of passages, we trace the deeply emotional and psychological character of Divakaruni’s characters to prove that immigrants share some common ordeals, and there is an element of timelessness in her treatise on sisterhood. The research provides a thorough investigation of the immigrant story and emphasises the importance of illustration to elicit the underlying concepts of human nature globally across cultures.

KeyWords: Sisterhood, Diaspora Literature, Immigrant Experience, Cultural Reconciliation, Psychological Tensions, Identity

Introduction

One of the Indian-American authors who has greatly contributed to diaspora writing is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Alexandru, 2012). She has become famous in the world for attaining her unique narrative strategy as well as a deep understanding of the immigrant path.

The

concept of sisters is a theme that describes some siblings regardless of what culture they belong to, and it persists in her literary works as a strong and recurring theme (Karthikadevi & Jothi 2022).

The author's own experience as an em,igrant highly affects her writing, as she drops on the topics of double identity and the changing idea of home (Choubey, 2014). Divakaruni's veritable mastery of English and creative writing, as well as her direct experience, have uniquely qualified her as a fighter for immigrants (Vega-González, 2003). The works of Divakaruni are evidence of how diaspora literature has had a lasting impact on the world, which enlightens the readers about the difficult journey of immigrant people and their struggle to make identity, belong, and even keep culture alive.

Sisters are not united only by biological kinship but also through experiences, secrets, and even mechanisms deep inside the human soul. Divakaruni displaying sisterly relations symbolises that these types of relationships are strong and too powerful to die, no matter what kind of hurdles her character faces in assimilating into the new society while preserving their cultural heritage (Filipczak, 2016).

In her writing, Divakaruni starts using sisterhood as a point of view when looking at the emotional landscape represented by the characters (Zupančič, 2013). Sisters act as characters, in which they are always allies, rivals, and supporters. The tensions and triumphs within these relationships provide a poignant and relatable narrative thread that resonates with readers, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds (Mookherjee, 2017).

Selected Novels

Sister of My Heart: This novel revolves around the intertwined lives of Anju and Sudha, who are cousins but share a bond as deep as sisters. Born on the same day, they grow up together in Kolkata, India. As they navigate the challenges of womanhood, secrets, and family expectations, their friendship transforms. The novel explores themes of tradition, transformation, and the complexities of identity within the context of a changing India.

The Mistress of Spices: The story follows Tilo, an immortal woman with mystical powers, who serves as the Mistress of Spices in an Indian grocery store in Oakland. Tilo draws on her magical spices to assist the local Indian diaspora community with their problems. However, as she becomes emotionally involved with their lives, she faces personal dilemmas and confronts the limitations of her powers. The novel delves into themes of cultural preservation, immigrant experiences, and the enduring bonds of sisterhood.

Oleander Girl: The novel is about Korobi Roy, who hails from Kolkata, India, and embarks on a journey to the USA to uncover the various mysteries her grandfather left behind even after his death. As she learns more about her Indian-American heritage and discovers

the hidden facts that challenge her understanding of love, heritage, and identity dynamics in a rapidly changing world, Kushwaha digs deeper into her family's past.

Queen of Dreams: The story revolves around Rakhi, an Indian-American artist, in her attempt to wrestle with the nuances of love that she cherishes for her mother, whose only talent is to interpret dreams. Rakhi's pursuit of happiness in her life as a personal and an artist changes her path of inheritance from a dream interpreter and his dialogues with her mother. The work explores the contradictions of the mother-daughter relationship, individual life choices, and another difficult reconciliation between two cultures as characters struggle with their competing hopes and ambitions.

Literary critics and scholars have looked at sisterhood in diaspora literature; they have recognised its need for interpreting the immigrant experience (Rajan, 2002). The conclusions made by the previous scholars and writers, having looked into the topic in detail over several years, provide interesting insights into the psychological, sociological, and cultural specificities of sisterly relationships (Rakwal, 2022). Academics such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Bell Hooks explored how sisterhood was integrated into a feminist and multicultural discourse, demonstrating their power to evoke change (Krishna, 2014). Sisterhood is a theme that is prominent in diaspora literature and is used as a means to preserve cultural identity and manage the struggles of integration while also creating a sense of belonging. With this, in one of the literary works of Divakaruni, a sisterhood is projected through which the deep and growing relationship is shown, with an emphasis on how it affects the emotional and mental state of her character (Bakyaraj & Pal, 2022).

3.Literature Review

The deconstruction of sisterhood in literature and related discourses has been the subject of academic investigation over a lengthy period (Rajan, 2002). Literary critics, feminist scholars, and those concerned with the patterns of relationships have paid attention to distinct brotherhood dynamics involving mutual experiences, contacts, and disagreements (Mookherjee, 2017). Among the diaspora literature, female solidarity and cultural heritage studies assume a distinct nature because they explain why cultural continuity is essential for women since it helps them navigate the obstacles of life in a foreign land (Karthikadevi & Jothi, 2022).

Sisterhood relations have undergone literary studies to focus on the various aspects of this complex relationship (Jona & Davis, 2019). The study of sisters as rivals is a significant research field, which becomes evident when figuring out literary works like Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility" by Priborkin (2008). In this sense, sisterhood is depicted as a source of negativity that often stems from societal constructs and competition for limited resources such as inheritance and marital deservingness. On the other hand, sisterly relationships are characterised as positive with components of encouragement and affection, which is clearly depicted in Louisa May Alcott's novel "Little Women" (Choubey, 2014).

The book discusses sisterhood as a concept regardless of class, race, or religion as trusted friends, supporters, and repositories of resilience under difficult circumstances. The focus is on the positive depictions highlighting the potential of sisterhood to develop and encourage (Rosida & Petrina, 2020).

Sisterhood in terms of literature dealing with the diaspora brings up extra levels of ambiguity (Sekhon, 2016). In many cases, immigrant authors use sisterly relationships as a lens through which they view the challenges of identifying and disseminating an individual's culture while attempting to acclimatise to a new culture. Sisters are vehicles of cultural dissemination that transmit customs, languages, and values (Vega-González, 2003). The discourse on sisterhood in diaspora literature is associated with previous studies that regarded sisterhood as a strategy to help cope with the problem of acculturation (Mookherjee, 2017). Academic scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa have studied the sisterhood and how it has aligned in a way to resist assimilating and preserving cultural legacy (Krishna, 2014). When addressing external influences believed to promote conformity, sisters may find some solace in shared origins and practices (Rakwal, 2022).

Sisterhood is shown as a unique facet within the framework of diaspora in the novels, penned by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Bakyaraj & Pal, 2022). Employing her main characters in this work, she handles a complicated web of familial ties, cultural codes, and particular needs (Beg, 2021). It does not declare who gets the best brother; rather, it digs deeper into the mental debates of competition and in-fighting among sisters (Hetami, 2007). The stories in novels like "Sister of My Heart," "Oleander Girl," and "Queen of Dreams" show sisters facing both inner and outer struggles (Vagmita, 2022). The main characters of the story fight against the discrepancy between old values and novelties of new life, longing for personal identity within generational relationship limitations, and feelings of concealed secrets that force them to tell themselves or reveal themselves unexpectedly (Parkavi, 2018).

The analysis of psychodynamics and successes has a special bearing while discussing the issue of sisterhood, as suggested by Mishra (2020). The cultural and social adjustment of immigrants often entails a major internal conflict as individuals navigate 'the tension between heritage and culture' while adapting to a new social reality (Rukmani et al., 2022). Sisters act as observers of the fact that the other is undergoing metamorphosis, and at the same time, they help in solving these challenges. As Goswami (2021) points out, Divakaruni's novels showcase the psychological topography of her characters masterfully. Readers' understanding of the emotional chaos undergone by immigrants, their feelings of displacement, and their search for belongingness all through the challenges they go through is profound (Rukmani et al., 2022). The conflicts and challenges that occur between siblings are representative of the wider issues of adjusting to a foreign culture and developing individual identity (Agarwal, 2015).

4.The Mistress of Spices: Immortal Bonds and Emotional Struggles

It is filled with cultural allusions, and the collision and cumulation of various cultures are portrayed by Divakaruni. The use of cultural studies theories allows one to analyse how characters traverse the boundaries of culture, preserving customs while accustoming themselves to new surroundings. In "The Mistress of Spices," Divakaruni probes into protecting Indian culture with the help of the hypnotising magic of spices in a foreign land. "My sisters. I close my eyes and reach out to them. They are where I have left them, within me" (The Mistress of Spices, 67). This excerpt from "The Mistress of Spices" exemplifies cultural preservation through magical spices. Tilo's connection to her sisters reflects the novel's exploration of cultural heritage and diaspora experiences, aligning with cultural studies theories.

At the heart of "The Mistress of Spices" lies the immortal bond between Tilo and her sisters (Rakwal, 2022). Despite the vast distances and the passage of centuries, their connection remains unbroken (Campbell–Hall, 2016). Tilo's sisters exist not in the physical realm but within her, residing in her memories, dreams, and thoughts. They serve as a timeless source of comfort and support in her exilic existence (Rosida & Petrina, 2020). Divakaruni eloquently captures the essence of this enduring bond: "My sisters. I close my eyes and reach out to them. They are where I have left them, within me" (67). This profound connection transcends the limitations of time and space, embodying the immigrant experience's paradoxical blend of nostalgia for the homeland and adaptation to a new world (Rakwal, 2022).

Tilo's immortality is both a gift and a burden, and Divakaruni delves into the emotional and psychological complexities that accompany her supernatural existence (Rakwal, 2022). As an immigrant, Tilo grapples with the challenges of acculturation and the ever-present nostalgia for her homeland (Goswami, 2021). However, her immortality adds a unique layer to her experience, as she is tasked with helping the diaspora through her magical spices (Vagmita, 2022). Despite her supernatural abilities, Tilo is not exempt from the emotional turmoil that plagues immigrants (Sekhon, 2016). Her experiences of displacement, the longing for her sisters, and the sense of isolation are deeply relatable to those who have left their homelands behind (Bakayaraj & Pal, 2022). These emotional struggles are intrinsically tied to her sisterly bond, as her desire to connect with her sisters competes with her duty as a Mistress of Spices (Rukmani et al., 2022).

To understand the psychological tensions and triumphs within Tilo's sisterly bond, the excerpts highlight her internal conflicts: "In a land of strangers, I must still cling to some small sense of belonging," Tilo reflects (112). This excerpt showcases Tilo's yearning for a sense of belonging, a universal immigrant experience marked by psychological tension. "I walk between worlds, between cultures, between hearts. But I belong to none," Tilo laments (189). Here, we witness the emotional turmoil Tilo faces as she grapples with her immigrant identity, compounded by her unique status as an immortal. "The tears come as if they have

been waiting behind my eyes for years," Tilo confesses (243). This poignant moment reveals the depth of Tilo's emotional struggle, emphasizing the role of her sisterly bond in her experiences of longing and grief. Tilo's internal conflicts mirror the broader challenges faced by immigrants, whether mundane or supernatural (Sekhon, 2016). The emotional journey of this immortal immigrant serves as a powerful lens through which Divakaruni explores the intricate interplay between sisterhood, diaspora, and the enduring human quest for connection and belonging (Bakayaraj & Pal, 2022).

5. Sister of My Heart: Tradition, Transformation, and Identity

In "Sister of My Heart" family dynamics play a significant role, with the characters experiencing psychological tensions and triumphs within familial relationships. "Why couldn't I have your bravery, your quick way with words?" (Sister of My Heart, 211). Sudha's admiration for Anju's qualities in "Sister of My Heart" reveals the psychological tension within familial relationships. Sudha's desire to emulate her cousin highlights the impact of family dynamics on individual self-esteem and aspirations.

Feminist theory is applied as the characters challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations. "Sister of My Heart" prominently features strong female characters who navigate complex relationships and strive for independence. Anju and Sudha's pursuit of education and careers in "Sister of My Heart" reflects feminist ideals. "I have my own dreams, Amma. I don't want to live in your shadow, tied to your legacy" (Sister of My Heart, 87). This excerpt from "Sister of My Heart" reflects feminist ideals as Anju expresses her desire for independence and the pursuit of her own dreams, distinct from her mother's expectations. It highlights the feminist theme of women's agency in shaping their lives and choices.

Sudha and Anju's bond is at the focal point of "Sister of My Heart" (Rakwal, 2022). Their connection is established from birth, and they share not only the same birthday but also a profound emotional bond. As they grow, this bond evolves and adapts to the changing circumstances of their lives (Rosida & Petrina, 2020). Initially, their relationship is marked by shared secrets and unconditional support (Rukmani et al., 2022). They confide in each other with the knowledge that their sisterly bond is unbreakable. However, as they journey from childhood into adulthood, their relationship transforms. Anju's pragmatic and reserved nature clashes with Sudha's free-spirited and impulsive personality. This evolving dynamic forms the backdrop for the psychological tensions that run through the narrative (Rakwal, 2022).

The contrasting personalities of Anju and Sudha serve as a source of psychological tension in their relationship (Rakwal, 2022). Anju, whose name means "one who lives with grace," is introspective and cautious. She aspires to pursue higher education and achieve financial stability. In contrast, Sudha, whose name means "one who is always cheerful," is vibrant, artistic, and unafraid to challenge societal norms (Rosida & Petrina, 2020). Their

distinct personalities result in clashes and misunderstandings (Rakwal, 2022). Divakaruni illustrates Anju's inner turmoil: "If I tell her about Sunil, what will she say? How can she understand? She's not in love" (88). This internal conflict highlights the complexities faced by immigrants who navigate a new culture while trying to preserve their traditions (Goswami, 2021). Anju's clash with Sudha's more modern, forward-thinking approach to life underscores the challenges of reconciling cultural expectations with personal desires (Rukmani et al., 2022).

"I'm carrying a weight I cannot share with anyone, not even Sudha" (144). Anju's burden of unspoken emotions emphasizes the isolation that can result from internal conflicts within sisterly relationships (Goswami, 2021). "Why couldn't I have your bravery, your quick way with words?" (211). Sudha's admiration for Anju's qualities highlights the internal struggle of measuring up to societal expectations while yearning for personal growth (Rukmani et al., 2022). "If she is unhappy, I cannot be happy" (292). This poignant statement captures the profound connection between Anju and Sudha, revealing the emotional turmoil they experience when one of them is in distress (Rakwal, 2022). Through these excerpts, we witness the psychological tensions and triumphs that Anju and Sudha encounter as they navigate the complexities of tradition, transformation, and identity (Goswami, 2021).

6. Oleander Girl: Discovery, Identity, and Cultural Reconciliation

Korobi in "Oleander Girl" grapples with multiple aspects of her identity, highlighting the importance of considering intersecting factors when analyzing her experiences. "I miss our home, the one in Calcutta. I even miss the old house here, with its red-tiled roof and the bougainvillea vine that used to climb the fence" (Oleander Girl, 154). Rajat's nostalgia for his homeland in "Oleander Girl" reflects the intersection of cultural and geographic identities. This excerpt illustrates how characters like Rajat grapple with multiple aspects of their identity as Indian-Americans.

Additionally, in "Oleander Girl," the characters grapple with their identities in a postcolonial India undergoing rapid change. "I was pulled in two directions - the past, and the unknown future. Who would I become when the two met?" (Oleander Girl, 98). Korobi's internal conflict in "Oleander Girl" captures the essence of postcolonial theory. Her struggle to reconcile her Indian heritage with her American upbringing mirrors the postcolonial dilemma of identity in a changing world.

Korobi and Rajat's relationship serves as a microcosm of the larger themes of identity and belonging explored in "Oleander Girl". As they navigate their personal and cultural identities, readers are exposed to the internal conflicts and external pressures that characterize the immigrant experience (Narayan, 2019). Korobi, who rose in the United States, grapples with her Indian heritage and desire to connect with her roots. Rajat is an Indian-American who faces the paradox of trying to find harmony between his cultural roots and the influence of his adopted nation. Their relationship demonstrates the intricate dilemma

of identity in the diaspora. Biswal's work illustrates the psychological conflicts that arise from tensions between the past and present value systems, West and East (Biswal 2017), that may feel true to people living in a transitory society.

The relationship between Korobi and Rajat is deeply affected by the theme of family secrets in "Oleander Girl". These revelations set off an odyssey of emotional and psychological upheaval as they came to terms with the fallout from concealed truths (Narayan, 2019). In the story, the revelation of family secrets becomes a catalyst for change. Korobi confesses: "Anju, there is something that I have not told you. Something that you should know" (225). This watershed moment is a precursor to the psychological anxieties that will pervade their relationship and reflection on self-discovery.

"I was pulled in two directions - the past, and the unknown future. Who would I become when the two met?" (98). This excerpt captures the essence of Korobi's emotional journey as she grapples with the complexities of her identity and heritage (Biswal, 2017). Rajat's nostalgia for his homeland and the emotional yearning for the past emphasize the challenges of reconciling cultural identities. "I miss our home, the one in Calcutta. I even miss the old house here, with its red-tiled roof and the bougainvillea vine that used to climb the fence" (154). Moreover, Korobi's declaration underscores the internal conflict faced by many immigrants who must balance personal aspirations with familial expectations. "I'm tired of sacrificing everything for the family's good" (314).

7. Queen of Dreams: Maternal Bonds and Personal Aspirations

The novel "Queen of Dreams" often challenges traditional narrative structures and incorporates elements of magical realism and postmodern storytelling. *Queen of Dreams* explores dream interpretation as a narrative device, reflecting postmodern themes of subjectivity and ambiguity. "My mother knows so much. I'm only just beginning to understand how deep her knowledge goes. She carries India in her" (Queen of Dreams, 67).

Rakhi's reflection on her mother's knowledge in *Queen of Dreams* hints at the postmodern theme of subjectivity and multiple realities. The idea that her mother "carries India in her" highlights the subjective nature of cultural interpretation and identity.

Moreover, Rakhi's journey of self-discovery in "Queen of Dreams" exemplifies how characters negotiate her identities within the diaspora and in relation to her cultural heritage. "I want to be free, Amma, free to follow my own dreams, to paint what I choose" (Queen of Dreams, 252). Rakhi's desire for personal freedom and artistic expression in *Queen of Dreams* represents the central theme of identity. She grapples with her identity as an artist and a daughter, reflecting the psychological tensions that arise from conflicting roles and aspirations.

Rakhi's mother possesses the unique ability to interpret dreams, a skill that connects her to the traditions and spiritual heritage of their Indian culture. Rakhi, however, is a modern woman with her own aspirations, pursuing a career as an artist and grappling with the tensions between her mother's dreams and her own dreams of personal and artistic fulfillment (Narayan, 2006). Their relationship is marked by love, respect, and the clash of generations and worldviews. Rakhi's mother embodies tradition, carrying India within her, while Rakhi yearns to forge her own path in a changing world. The interplay between their dreams and aspirations creates psychological tensions that form the core of the narrative (Narayan, 2006).

The conflict between Rakhi's artistic ambitions and her mother's traditional dream interpretation skills serves as a source of psychological tension (Divakaruni, 2004). Rakhi's desire for personal and creative fulfillment clashes with her mother's expectations and hopes for her daughter's role in preserving their cultural heritage (Narayan, 2006). Rakhi reflects on her mother's influence: "My mother knows so much. I'm only just beginning to understand how deep her knowledge goes. She carries India in her" (33). This reflection illustrates the profound connection between generations and the importance of preserving cultural roots in the diaspora (Narayan, 2006). However, it also hints at the tensions that arise when personal aspirations conflict with familial expectations.

"I have my own dreams, Amma. I don't want to live in your shadow, tied to your legacy" (87). Rakhi's declaration reveals the psychological tension between her desire for individuality and the weight of her mother's legacy (Narayan, 2006). Rakhi's realization underscores the internal conflict she faces as she grapples with her identity and her mother's influence. "I was foolish, Amma, to think I could ever escape the dreams. They are in my blood, just as they are in yours" (175).

Conclusion

Divakaruni's exploration of sisterhood resonates beyond the pages of her novels, extending to the broader context of immigrant literature and diaspora narratives. Sisterhood serves as a metaphor for the immigrant experience itself—marked by the tensions between tradition and modernity, heritage and assimilation. She is facing the universal challenges of maintaining an identity of culture while changing into a different culture. Divakaruni presents illuminates the emotional aspects of immigrants who wish for connection, homage, and warmth. Sisterhood here performs the vital role of a narrative device in the field of diaspora literature. It offers a path to resist cultural assimilation and a tool to preserve cultural heritage. The works by Divakaruni have an impact on the discussion of sisterhood, as they make sisterly relationships a lively productive force that shapes the mindset of immigrants, and readers can be aware of and share the inner dilemmas of the characters. Through her stories, she turns the immigrant experience into a reflective window of the universal need for connection, identity, and belonging intrinsic to every human. Divakaruni Sisterhood

produces this portrayal that allows us to view her character's psychological aspects in depth, enhancing our shared understanding of the immigrant experience.

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