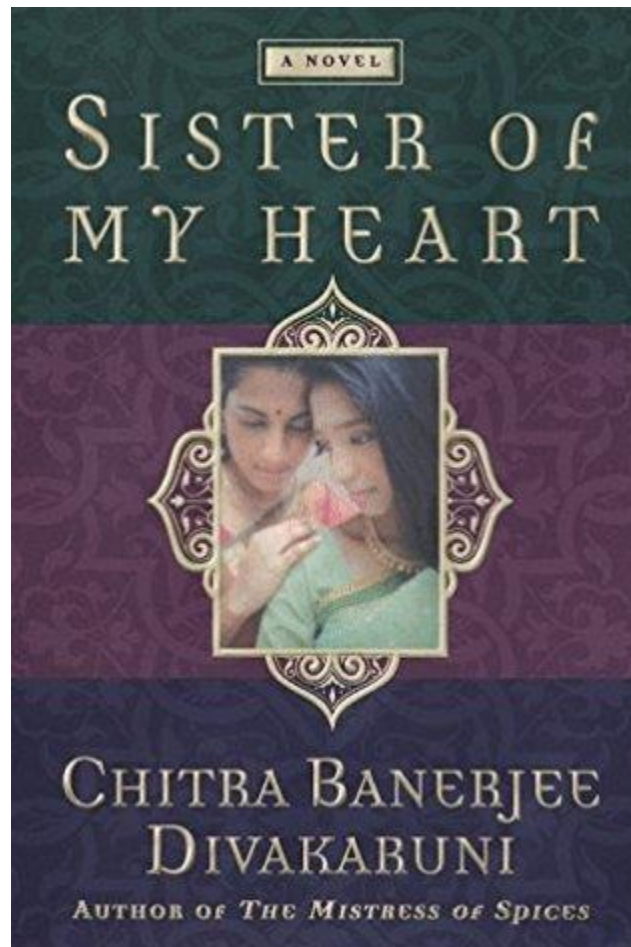

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Dr. R. Anuja, MBA, M.Phil., Ph.D., Editor

Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

**Inner Conflict Vs Inner Strength: A Study on Women in the Novel
Sister of My Heart by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

U. Nithyakumari, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar



Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prolific writer who proclaim the significance of women in the family and society through her novels. *Sister of My Heart* is one of the beautiful novels where Banerjee not only focus on the two protagonists Anju and Sudha to tell the reader about

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the love, caring and affection of the cousins. But more than that she tells us how all the women characters in the novel help each other; the women in the novel can be divided into two categories, one being the women who belong to the traditional past and the two young women Anju and Sudha who represent the present age.

Anju and Sudha were brought up by their aunt and mothers. Both had their own ups and downs in their life. But these sisters are strong enough to fight against their challenges and misfortune through their will power and determination. This essential strength is given to them through their aunt and mothers who stood for them as back bone to take bold decisions in their intolerable level of hardship. This paper focuses on how the women help each other to attain their individual success.

Keywords: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Women's challenges, oppression of women, traditional women, male-dominated society,

Sister of My Heart

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an eminent Indian Novelist has her major themes on women and their lives. *Sister of My Heart* is one of the remarkable novels of Banerjee in which she brings forth the power and strength of women throughout. The women in the novel not only played their role strongly in the male-dominated society, but in the old tradition and culture, Banerjee portrays the women as weapons not victims. Each one cares for the other in all walks of their lives. Banerjee like Alice Walker brought life of women in a peculiar way.

The women in *Sister of my Heart* remind us of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. In the words of Bhasker A Shukla "The novel charts Celie's resistance to the oppression surrounding her, and the liberation of her existence through positive and supportive relations with other women". (203) The mothers especially Pishi Gauri Ma and Nalini Ma are the embodiment of sacrifice and silent suffering. But their lives stand as living testimony for their daughters Anju and Sudha to become strong women.

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Pishi

Pishi a widow lost her husband at a very young age. She is a sister to Bijoy, who takes care of Anju and Sudha. The former is born to Bijoy and Gauri Ma, the latter to Gopal and Nalini Ma. Unfortunately fate takes the lives of both their fathers Bijoy and Gopal in their adventure in search of Rubies. But Pishi and Gauri Ma never hate Nalini and her daughter knowing that Gopal was the reason for the adventure and the death of Bijoy. Even Pishi conceals the secret that her brother Bijoy was murdered by Gopal, whereas later she comes to know that Gopal is innocent.

Pishi, even though a widow, doesn't sit in the corner of the house like other widows in Calcutta. But she becomes a back bone for the family and the women in the house. Pishi throughout the novel supports and encourages Sudha in all her ups and downs. She even welcomes her decision to come home with a daughter in the womb, for which reason the mother-in-law and her husband wanted to abort the child. Pishi says,

“Why should she care anymore what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole life time of being afraid of what society might think? I spit on this society which says it's fine to kill a baby girl in her mother's womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child”. (268)

In spite of what the society says about Sudha and her daughter, Pishi decides to sell the ancestral house for the future of Sudha. She encourages her to accept the offer of Ashok for the second marriage which proves her to be a Modern woman.

Nalini Ma and Gauri Ma

Nalini Ma and Gauri Ma are also other fascinating characters setting examples for Anju and Sudha. Nalini Ma even though she is not very patient like Gauri Ma, is able to stand up for her daughter Sudha, strengthening herself for the sake of Sudha in all decision making, and accepting the daughter who left her husband and in-laws. And she also supports her to go America.

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Gauri Ma is another mother for Sudha. She is very generous to sacrifice everything for both Anju and Sudha. Like Pishi, Gauri Ma consoles Sudha when she decides to return home permanently. Gauri Ma's sacrifice can be seen even in her postponing her heart operation for the sake of the daughters, during their marriages, in selling the ancestral house and the book shop. Towards the end of the novel Gauri Ma presents Sudha the rubies which are considered to be more valuable not for their material value, but as the only memorabilia of their fathers.

These Mothers remind us of Toni Morrison's mothers in *Sula* who brought up their children as single mothers. Likewise in the novel, the mothers help each other in building their daughters without any male companion. The mothers however do not teach the daughters how to fight against the world of superstitious tradition and old culture. But set themselves as example through their lives, showing them how to care and help each other. Sudha substantiates this fact with the statement below:

“Role of a mother is another vital gender role performed by women in all societies irrespective of the levels of economic development and modernization. Like other roles, the role of a mother has its own duties and responsibilities towards her children which primarily include feeding, socializing, giving them company, helping them in studies and teaching them good habits” (156).

Anju

The present age is reflected through two young protagonists Anju and Sudha. Anju along with Sudha is brought up together in the same house. Anju's love and care for her cousin can be seen throughout in the novel. Both share all their secrets. Anju remind faithful to Sudha even in concealing the secret love affair with Ashok before her marriage. The marriage might be separate the sister in different corner of the world but they could not be separated by heart and soul. Anju married an NRI Sunil and settled in America. Sudha married Ramesh and settled in Calcutta .The conversation between the sisters bind them more than face to face interaction.

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Anju being a bold girl encourages Sudha in her mother-in-law's house during her childless times and threatened by in-laws to abort the baby in the womb knowing it is a girl baby. "Well then, that solves our immediate problem. Take the next train to Howrah station, and then take a cab home. The mothers will take care of you". (261) She also goes to the extent of buying air tickets for Sudha when she is left abandoned by her husband. This however ends in catastrophe since the baby Anju conceived died after her restless work in the library to earn money for Sudha's air tickets. But at the end Anju receives Sudha and her daughter in America, hoping Sudha would get a better future in the new land.

Sudha

Sudha, "The queen of the Sword" (270), battles in her life like The Rani of Jhansi in all aspects. Sudha is also brought like Anju but fate however, makes a difference between the cousins. Unlike Anju, Sudha has played her role differently even from her childhood days. The guilt she had that her father was the murderer of Anju's father haunts her all her life. She conceals this guilt within herself till she learns at the end of the novel that he is innocent. This earlier guilty conscience allow her to show more affection and love for Anju and at same time she fears what would happen if the truth came to light. It was a question whether she would be so loved by Anju as before. Apart from this inner conflict Sudha loves Anju dearly.

Marriage

Both are about to complete their school studies. Now the mothers have decided to arrange marriages for their daughters. But Sudha shows no interest, the reason being she loves a boy named Ashok from a rich background and he promises her that they would elope. But Sudha does not allow herself to go and sacrifices her love for the sake of Anju whose marriage is arranged to Sunil a NRI. This sacrifice is not only the love she has for Anju, but she is very cautious that she should not spoil the name of the family which was already spoiled by her father.

Sudha marries Ramesh. Both cousins they start the next phase of their lives. The marriage begins smoothly until the mother-in-law urges them to have a child. After some treatment she conceives and becomes pregnant with a girl child. As soon as the mother-in-law hears this, she

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wants the child to be aborted. The reason she gives: “my mother –in-law said the eldest child of the Sanyal family has to male – that is how it’s been for the last five generations. She said it’s not fitting, it will bring the family shame and ill luck”. (259)

Sudha makes a bold decision to step out of the family and reaches her mother’s home. Thus C. Bharathi and Dr. S. Kalamani observe:

In traditional relationships women are not expected to have the power to leave home, in fact, to have such ideas is to transgress beyond normative feminine behavior. But now Sudha decides that she should do something to protect her baby. (Internet sources)

Ashok’s re-entering her life again seems to give her some hope after his parents accept Sudha. But the joy never lasts for many minutes when she learns from him that the daughter must be given to her parents. “The mothers will be happy to keep our daughter and make sure she never lacks for love. I promise I will give her every opportunity that money can bring. You can visit her whenever you want”. (285) This is a total disappointment for her. Sudha in the hope of seeing a better future acknowledges her desire saying:

“I am going for Anju, yes, and for Dayita, but most of all I am going for me. I am going with a knowledge that this will not be a fairy tale journey, my winged steed leaping over all obstacles with unfailing ease, but I am going any way. Do I want to return? And if I do return, will I be happy tying my life to a man’s whims again, even if he is a good man? I do not know.....It is so different in its nature from the craving pull, gut and sinew and womb, that I feel for my sister and my daughter”. (316)

Sudha finally goes to America and unites with her cousin. Her hope in a new land gives a new life. This is made possible only through the women around her who help her to continue to live and see life beyond the present situation.

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