

**DIVAKARUN'S SISTER OF MY HEART AND THE VINE OF DESIRE :
A SENTIMENTAL SISTERHOODFRIENDSHIP IN LITERARY CONTEXT**

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Sentimental friends lead conventional lives in fiction. They must cry and confide a lot, protest and embrace, in short, exist so intensely that their friendship acquires many of the signs of love. Their relationship is close, even suffocating, prying, exacting, hortatory, and eulogistic (Janet, 1980:307).

The art of fiction writing was one of the most notable benediction of English education to India. The fashionable cousin of poetry, the novel, as we know is was an importation from the west. Many a voice of women in the arena of literature during the last few decades made their distinctive mark, with their introspective perception of life-be it 'feminine, or feminist or female.' They explored the new dimensions of reality and tried to probe the issue of self definition faced by women in the traditional patriarchal society. In doing so, they created the New Woman who tries to resolve the issues by redefining the positive aspects of womanhood. As Gilligan points out, "When the observer is a woman, the perspective may be of a different sort"(Gillian,1982:5).

Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story.

Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.

- Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

The genre of novel in literature, was diplomatically used by women writers to explore and share their experiences. The recognition of the bond of woman-woman friendly relationship was accepted socially due to the rigid male-female compartmentalization. Nancy Chodorow argues that friendly bond between women emerges as a result of the growth of a cyclical relationship that traditionally carries on the legacy of taking care of and giving to others. Factually speaking, it is the relationships that play a vital role in the lives of the human beings and in order to maintain the web of these relationships, they have to conform to the social set-up.

The impressive progress of the South Asian Diasporic writers left an indelible impact on literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the outstanding voices of the immigrant writers. In most of her novels, Psychology, Mythology and Folklore are interrelated which reflect that the writer did not get displaced from her Indian origin.

As a New Woman novelist, Divakaruni responded in her writings to Freudian constructions of an untamed inner life. Her novels are frequently rooted in the complexities of the home. She finely balances her characters on the high-tension wire of the family and is able to explore the issues that compel her most like identity, loyalty, independence and tradition. She dwells upon the subject of immigrant experiences for her writing style, both narrow in focus and broad in scope. In an interview, she states thus:

I think being an expatriate is good for writers. Moving away from a home culture often allows a kind of disjunctive perspective that is very important— a slight sense of being the outsider, being out of place.

She even quotes Gertrude Stein who said, “What good are the roots if you can’t take them with you?” She never thought of being a writer and that too in America. The foreign land has offered her a number of experiences that she really wouldn’t have had in India. America, in a way, gave her the opportunity to explore her self.

Divakaruni focuses on the sisterhood relationship in a traditional Bengali household. Padilla-Walker, in her study of how the sisters protect each other in a family published in

the *Journal of Family Psychology*, stated that, though the siblings in a family seem to fight endlessly with each other, once they get to adolescence, the sisters protect each other from feeling lonely, unloved, guilty, self-conscious and fearful and did not matter whether the sister was younger or older. This is where the Diasporic writer caught the ground breaking idea in women's psychology, an exploration of the intricacies, friction and love in the bonds between sisters.

Divakaruni feels that the sisterhood relationships are the longest relationships one experiences in one's lifetime. The emotional portrayal of the two women at the heart of *The Sister of My Heart*, is narrated in an artistic manner of the characters' inner and outer worlds that usher in rich emotional experiences to uplift the story about Anju and Sudha, who learn to make peace with the difficult choices, circumstances that have forced upon them. Anju and Sudha grew up and moved on, they got into other relationships such as marriage that separated them for a period of time. But that did not build any gap between them, but were distanced physically. Their relationship included helping, sharing, teaching, fighting, and playing. As adolescents they spent round the clock together at times doing constructive activities such as: art, music, sports, games, and religious activities. Their familiarity and intimacy of the relationship helped them typically to know each other very well, and this intimacy suggests that they could provide support for each other in their lifetime depending on the situation. In many situations they both came together and understood each other's problems and dilemmas better than their mothers can. Their relationship in adulthood was extremely close, psychologically close to each other that tended to be the way since their childhood.

In their early childhood, three major characteristics of sentimental sisterhood relationship could be noticed, firstly, their interactions were emotionally charged defined by strong, uninhibited emotions of a positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent quality. Secondly, their togetherness was defined by such intimacy that they spent large amounts of time playing together, they knew each other very well. Finally, the kind of intimate knowledge get translated into opportunities for providing emotional and instrumental support for one another.

Anju and Sudha shared memories and a sense of family identity. In times of illness and crisis, they provided emotional and psychological support to each other. Though this exchange of support is common between siblings who live far away as well as those who live next door to each other, we feel happy to see them enjoy the bliss of sisterhood relationship. We can clearly understand that they may turn to one another for support when family circumstances would be difficult in future.

When questioned why sibling relationship is so important in one's life, the author revealed that while friendships come and go, sibling relationships are permanent.

She moreover says that the sentimental sister relationship lasts for long, of any human relationship in one's life. The sisters share a lifetime's worth of memories and nuances because one cannot choose one's siblings as we do our friends; that is what makes this relationship unique.

Factually speaking, once individuals reach adulthood, it is common for sisters and the other siblings in a family, to "go their separate ways" in order to establish their identity and independence, , and establish a family of their own. After a period of time they wish to "find each other" and establish close ties once again.

In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni tells the moving story of two cousins, Sudha and Anju Chatterjee who began their lives in close contact with a growing emotional bond ties for each other. Though Sudha and Anju were born twelve hours apart in the same house, the women considered themselves twins, and from a very early age were provided everything they needed from life- love, respect, council, and friendship--from each other. Together they experienced the joys, pains, mystical tales, and tiresome tasks that inevitably accompanied while growing up in a traditional Indian Bengali family in Calcutta.

Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother's name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family's fame. (p.23)

This exceptional sister-knot remains to be the core of the novel as their affection for each other increasingly shapes the course of their lives.

Anju utters her feelings for Sudha thus:

But never Sudha. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart.

I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She'll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I'll

know she understands me perfectly.

Like no-one else in the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world will. (p.24)

Sudha and Anju have been sisters of the heart. They were bonded in ways even their mothers could not comprehend, the two girls grew into womanhood as if their fates, as well as their hearts, were merged.

Anju emotionally walked into Sudha's shoes to solve her problems by dispensing her helpful wisdom. When Sudha's 'voice is heavy with unshed tears', after her return leaving her distorted marriage with her daughter, Dayita, Anju's heart throbs for her thus:

Instead I slip an arm around Sudha and support Dayita cautiously with the other. Sudha places her arm under mine, so we're both holding Dayita up.

If a passer-by who had the eyes to notice such things looked at us, she would see that we've formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have traveled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonnas with child. (p.347)

The novel is exceptionally moving, dramatic, and exquisitely rendered, *Sister of My Heart* is a passionate novel about the extraordinary bond between two women wherein their jealousies, loves, and family histories threaten to tear them apart. The disturbing truth about the circumstances under which Sudha and Anju were born was known by Sudha, and the secret tortured her in such a manner that it weaved a menacing thread through their childhood friendship and ultimately their sisterhood relationship. When Sudha learnt the secret for the first time in their lives, the girls knew what it was to feel suspicion and distrust—Sudha, because she felt a new shame that she could not share with Anju; and the later, because she discovers the seductive power of her sister's beauty, a power Sudha herself is incapable of controlling.

Circumstances created a little emotional distance between the sisters, resulting in giving extra importance to the mistake, but psychologists view that one should develop the habit of forgiving others, which in turn makes one strong personally and even in relationships.

The wedding dinner is over. We rise. Ramesh and Sudha walk ahead, his arm under her reluctant elbow. She pulls out a handkerchief to wipe her face. She replaces it- but no, it falls behind the table. No-one notices Sunil bending to pick it up, to slip it into his pocket where he fists his hand around it. No-one except me .(p.322)

Even after the most shocking revelations of incest, adultery and illegitimacy, home is kept intact and life is somehow continued. Sisterhood relationship appears to be an abiding shelter for the members even in the face of a threat to the peace of the family or home. Conflict is found between the social expectations attached to the roles of both the sisters who struggle to fulfill their childhood sentimental sisterhood associationship.

A judicious consideration of all these factors appears to have influenced the author to explore the intricacies of the sisterly bond which ultimately provides one with a confidant mate in life.

Divakaruni wanted to speak and write the language of women. She opens up a window into the multicultural world of her characters and entertains a passionate desire to tell an honest and moving story. She staunchly believes that good literature would inevitably connect the reader and the author in a more gratifying manner. Inorder to be a writer, she says that a writer should basically be a complete human being. She feels that in the present century, artists have become so isolated and so alienated that they resort to connect the Freudian aspects of the human psyche to their characters in the novels.

The diaspora has changed the lives of Indians immensely. Even till today, some people think of India back in medieval times but the media presents an entirely different picture of India. India in the popular media culture is barbaric, splendid and spiritual all at once. Although she thinks of India as unique and distinct in its nature, it is really just like America, she says. She proclaims that the life style of the Americans and the Indians is practically contrary to each

other, but the reasoning or the way they think of accomplishing the tasks in real life is one and the same. As a writer, she would like women of all backgrounds to pick up her books because women's experiences are much more similar than we normally think and moreover, women can learn so much from one another. The characters of Divakaruni's novels make the present day readers to analyse and introspect themselves to fathom the basic concepts of life.

The Vine of Desire, considered as the sequel to *Sister of My Heart* starts with the reverie of Anju and Sudha's childhood echoing in their hearts and Anju is drenched in the kind of the excitement, that she is going to meet Sudha. We can notice the kind of filial obedience between them in the expression ..

Why? Isn't this her dear, dear cousin, sister of her heart? They've protected, advised, cajoled, bullied, and stood up for each other all their lives. Each has been madly jealous of the other at some point. Each has enraged the other, or made her weep. Each has been willing to give up her happiness for her cousin. In short: they've loved each other the way they've never loved anyone else. Why then does Sudha's coming fill Anju with this unexpected dread? (p.11)

Anju and Sudha did never think of creating the other contexts in life, their bond becomes deliciously sentimental, combining the joys of friendship and sisterhood. Their sentimental friendship seems to mingle with the ideal and the real in an exemplary and at times flawed. Both the sisters try to act "benevolently in a malevolent world and to show in themselves those virtues of compassion, generosity, and kindness" (Janet,1980:11) towards each other."These virtues are socially expressed most fully in their friendship, which yet remains in great part a potential one."(Janet,1980:11)

Sunil in a way alienated Anju by changing his attention from her to Sudha and this is evident when he outwardly showers love on Dayita, Sudha's daughter. This could be one of the reasons of why Sudha succumbed to Sunil, because her first love Ashok denied her daughter, though he accepted to marry Sudha.

Sudha could not remain with Anju after the ultimate treachery that she has committed to Anju. Aftermath, she “learns her error, she laments that she has added to her friend’s sorrow, and she is deeply ashamed that her jealous love has cast out her reverence.” (Janet, 1980:57)

There comes a point of time in their lives that they entirely abandon their sisterly love –“a possibility always contained in patriarchal sisterhood, where women must compete through waiting for men.” Anju had to wait for her husband to get relieved from Sudha’s attraction, wherein the trust necessary for sisterly friendship got destroyed. So Sudha placed herself over Anju, and regarded her as a sister of her heart. She is torn between her love and affection for Sudha and her suspicion that Sunil is still attracted to her.

Divakaruni expressed deep interest over the theory of ‘dream interpretation’ in her *Sister of Heart* and its repercussion in its sequel in *The Vine of Desire* which renders a rich understanding of her theme of the novel and a “causal model for the effects of childhood trauma in the formation of adult personality and neurosis – the so-called “seduction theory”- and toward psychoanalysis as an interpretive discipline in which the subjective meaning of experience – whether real or fanciful – is the basis for understanding.” (Eisendrath and Dawson, 2008: 43)

In his 1899 paper, “Screen Memories”, Freud shows that apparent recall, “of early experiences may be determined by unconscious links between the memory and repressed wishes, rather than by actual events. Freud demonstrates that one of the most poignant and persistent memories of his own childhood was a memory of a fantasied scene.” (Eisendrath and Dawson, 2008:43)

A woman on the ground opens her arms for the woman who was in the sky.

This is what we do with grief. The dead are droplets of seawater and ash,
riding the air. Are they rising? Are they falling? Look, there’s no difference.

The earth’s curvature is like a smile. (p.373)

At times, we notice that Anju’s thoughts about Sudha that she was the nearest perfection of any being that she ever knew is nothing but going for sentimental extremes that overwhelms the conflict in their house in the end of the novel. For her, never did a woman love a woman as they loved one another. When she felt single after the loss of her baby, she lived more for Sudha and offered the support that she could give without any inhibitions.

What the sisters believe ardently in the sisterly function was that “a sister should be a friend by blood, a person who shares, comforts, and supports. It is the only relationship that is potentially equal within the rigidly hierarchical family; when this is marred by conflict, the family becomes indeed a place of warfare.” (Eisendrath and Dawson, 2008: 33)

Friendship...is too fervent a flame for female minds to manage: as light, that but in few of their hands burns steady, and often hurries the Sex into flight and absurdity. Like other extremes it is hardly ever durable. Marriage, which is the highest state of friendship, generally absorbs the most vehement friendships of female to female; and that whether the wedlock be happy, or not.

What female mind is capable of two fervent friendships at the same time ?

This I mention as a *general observation*: But the friendship that subsisted between these two Ladies affords a remarkable exception to it: Which I account for from those qualities and attainments in *both*, Which, were they more common, would furnish more exceptions still in favour of the Sex. (Janet, 1980,66)

Sister of My Heart and *The Vine of Desire* together unravel that,

It provides a relationship into which two women can enter with passion and propriety, and it supplies a code of behavior that eases them toward each other. (Janet .319)

A sister figure is instrumental in kindling our interest in the world of visual perceptions. The lives of both the sisters revolve around each other who cherish a powerful, influential and a dominating impact on each other. The passionate exploration on sisterhood relations makes us revisit the avenues of yesteryears, and strengthens our insights in such a way that we find it more

exciting to manifest our own relationships in life. The lives blur between fact and fiction as one recognizes this and so many other aspects one has read of in the novels.

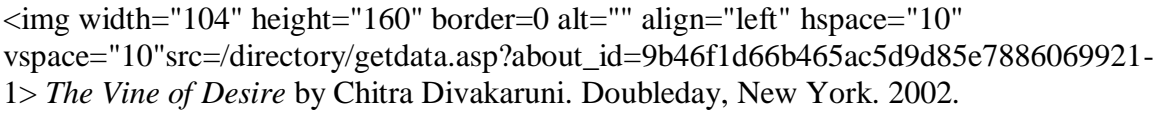
The title of the novel *Sister of My Heart* emerges out from the sentimental love and feeling of Anju towards Sudha, “*The Vine of Desire* is a paraphrase of the twelfth verse of Shankaracharya’s *Bhaja Govindam*”(Mani,2010: 4)

Anju and Sudha are comforted and supported by each other and tried to unite and rebuild their lives together. Their friendship continues to provide emotional fulfillment until Sudha and Sunil’s attraction came to the fore. The aching raptures emerged out from Anju’s heart who gave all her heart and considered that Sudha was the sister of her heart. *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* together reveal the truth that though friendship reaches new heights in sisterly love,

In the normal sense, it is a general phenomenon that, “women cannot simultaneously sustain two fervent relationships. Unequal marriage and equal friendship remain contradictory and opposing”.(Janet,1980:68)

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