



## Analysis of female bonding in works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the bonding and relationship between women in various works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her short stories and novels have women's bond, sisterhood and strong friendship as its central theme. These various types of bonds between women are employed to create a woman's world, devoid of male control, in which the life of one woman depends so much on the other such that the interdependence help overcome their various struggles in life. The lives of women characters in her novels have a balanced play of Yin and Yang which adds on to say that without one the other is incapable of existing. She creates a female universe in her novels such that just like the disruptions in the text, gaps, silences etc in ecriture feminine; we find the lives of women characters going through a disjointed, unmanned pathway but ultimately finding a meaning to everything. The objective of this paper is to advance the idea that the bond shared between women is required to sustain them through the various struggles in life and in contrary to fairy tales in which women wait for their prince to rescue them, these women strive and find a way out of problems in their woman-centric universe and thereby help each other to convert their lives from Yin to Yang.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Oedipal Theory, Ecriture Feminine

### Introduction

Once a woman is self-sufficient and ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator (Beauvoir 689).

The process of breaking out of the cocoon of responsibilities, created by society, requires a lot of courage on the part of women- having to undergo a lot of turmoil in life. It is only when women go through the discriminations and injustices meted out on them in life that they stand up for themselves. Women find the various sacrifices that they have done in life, in order to fit into the cocoon of responsibilities expected from a woman, as a futile commitment. They emerge as one who cares the least about what society thinks about them and their choices in life.

The works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portray the lives of Indian women who are at this juncture in life. It shows a plethora of emotional turmoil and sufferings that women face in their hometowns and their continued sufferings abroad, when they try to weave their dreams in an unknown land. A ray of hope arrives when the woman finds a companion in another woman and this bond shared between them ultimately helps them overcome the various struggles in life. Her novels like *Sister of my Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, *The Oleander Girl* have women's bond, sisterhood and strong friendship as its central theme. These various types of bonds between women are employed in the novels to create a woman's world, devoid of male control, in which the life of one woman depends so much on the other such that the interdependence between them help overcome their various struggles in life and thereby pave a way in finding meaning in the patriarchal society and social stigmas. In her novels a common thread is found in which the women characters love their women friends more than the men in their lives, a

love that surpasses all other relationships only because they are women who happen to understand each other better. Divakaruni states the reason behind displaying women bonding in her works. She says that she had found, especially in epics, the relationships between women ceasing as soon as they become involved with a man. "... perhaps in rebellion against such thinking, I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers (Huang 71)."

In *Sister of my Heart*, the household is recreated into a female universe as there are no male characters to impose their control on the household. As a result, just like the disruptions in the text, gaps, silences etc in ecriture feminine; we find the lives of these girls also going through a disjointed, unmanned pathway but ultimately finding a meaning to everything. "Ecriture Feminine is believed to have originated from mother in a stage of mother-child relation before child acquires the male centered verbal language (Abrams 128)." Anju and Sudha's fathers had disappeared before they were born, so a mother's influence in everything they do and say can be vividly seen. This is evident when Anju prefers to read works by Virginia Woolf as compared to male centered literature;

Woolf has been a favourite of mine since the time I stumbled upon one of her books at the store...I persuaded mother to order all of Woolf's novels, and whenever she allowed me to accompany her to the store, I would go into a corner and devour them...But they were never popular with our Indian literati, who much preferred Dickens and Hardy and E.M. Forster (134-135).

There are also mother-daughter relationships in the above mentioned novels of Divakaruni. This bond is strained but not severed. In the mother-daughter relationship in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the mother figure is

not glorified -at times mothers expect their daughters to conform to social norms. To understand the psyche of the mother, Simone de Beauvoir in the chapter on mother writes that

Some women feel their femininity as an absolute curse; such a woman wishes for or accepts a daughter with a bitter pleasure of self-recognition in another victim, and at the same time she feels guilty for having brought her into the world...Vexed at having produced woman, the mother greets her with this ambiguous curse: 'You shall be a woman.' She hopes to compensate for her inferiority by making a superior creature out of one whom she regards as her double; and she also tends to inflict upon her the disadvantages from which she has suffered (Beauvoir 533).

This tension between mother and daughter is found in *Sister of my Heart* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*, where the mother blames their daughter for straying away from their expected duties. Nalini, Sudha's mother, has an abrasive personality though she means good for her daughter. She blames Sudha for fighting against abortion and leaving her husband; because, according to Nalini she could get another chance in pregnancy but not in finding a suitable husband. At first, though their relationship appears to be strained, over a period of time Nalini stands by her daughter in her decisions in life.

"In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow finds that women have more fluid ego boundaries than men...a result of asymmetrical child-rearing, which fosters a girl's close identification with her mother. As a result, Chodorow claims that girls, unlike boys, come to define their personality in relation to others, and that during adolescence they do not completely relinquish their strong maternal bond (Kowaleski 9)." In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, a persuasive tale of four generations of Bengali women, the mother-daughter relationships portrayed by the characters initially soars and eventually sours but leaves enough room for Divakaruni to build the strong Sabitri who displays fighting qualities of Durga, her mother. Influence of French feminism is evident here too as it proposes that women would remain linked with their mothers both in sex and in having the possibility of returning to the pre-Oedipal closeness they shared with their mothers from the parental side. Though there occurs a rift between the daughter and mother at first, their relationship remains strong such that mothers, later on, stand by their daughter's decisions whether it is divorce, search for truth, denial of abortion etc. This is exemplified in the reconciliatory words of Bela to her daughter Tara in *Before We Visit the Goddess*, "When you told me you were dropping out of college, Tara, I didn't know what to do. I'd dropped out of college myself- so many of my problems stemmed from that. I didn't want the same thing to happen to you...I didn't know then that mothers can't necessarily save their children, no matter how much they want to (206)."

The essence of mothering can be seen even in the "sisterly bond" shared between Anju and Sudha in *Sister of My Heart* and its sequel *The Vine of Desire*. French Feminist Theory upholds that, "...child rearing, if not bearing must be shared by men and women. The role of mothering is one of nurturing and of caretaking and almost anyone can mother (Tandon 131)." Anju and Sudha throughout their lives are so interdependent that a loss or a problem in one of their lives is considered to be of utmost importance to the other such that each dons the role of a mother to come to the

rescue of the other in dire situations. Their lives have a balanced play of Yin and Yang which adds on to say that without one, the other is incapable of existing. In doing so, Divakaruni strives to create a world of its own in which binaries would be females themselves who in one way or the other complement each other and thereby help the other on emotional levels to survive losses, grievances etc.

Divakaruni mostly writes on the lives of immigrant women who create a bond with women and this bond ultimately becomes a shelter for them from the various struggles. She says "Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life (Gale)."

Isadora James in "My Sister, My Friend" says, "A sister is a gift to the heart, a friend to the spirit, a golden thread to the meaning of life." This sort of a sister bond is seen in her novel *Sister of my Heart* and its sequel *The Vine of Desire*. Here, Sudha and Anju are cousins born on the same day-the day when both their fathers went missing on their hunt for treasure. The novel narrates how each of them sacrifices their love, happiness and comforts in life for the happiness of the other. It also shows how the companion of one helps the other overcome problems in life. After marriage, Sudha takes the extreme step of divorcing her husband and leaving to US with her baby Dayita- to give emotional support to Anju who was under depression due to her miscarriage. The reason behind Anju having a miscarriage was because she worked very hard and took up extra shifts to collect money enough to get tickets for both Sudha and her daughter. This was done in order to rescue Sudha from the mistreatments meted out on her by her in-laws for carrying a baby girl and for pressurizing her to undergo abortion.

The search for self-esteem as well as trying to balance conflicting passions and demands that come to lives of women as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers has triggered Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to create such a deeply rooted and strong bond between women characters in her works that brings together women who are very different from one another in every way. Divakaruni in her article "Do South Asian Women Need Separate Shelter Homes?" says that she does not like the idea of separate shelter homes for battered South Asian women. Though adjustment does not come easy, she is of the opinion that by living among battered women of other cultures and backgrounds, women will learn a few lessons which will eventually help deepen their understanding of the world. "The proponents of such homes believe that many South Asian women are uncomfortable living with other battered women from other cultures... It is not an easy thing, this kind of adjustment. But we should not further isolate our women. They will learn a few lessons in a hard way but by living among battered women of other cultures and backgrounds. South Asian women will deepen their understanding of the world." This accomplishes the venture to identify the different forms of woman bonding like sisterly bonding, familial bonding etc. in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This advances the idea that the bond shared between women is required to sustain them through the various struggles in life and in contrary to fairy tales in which women wait for their prince to rescue them, these women strive and find a way out of problems in their woman-centric universe and thereby help each other to convert their lives from Yin to Yang.

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