

# Exploring the Diasporic Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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## Abstract

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an acclaimed Indian American writer known for her dazzling investigation of South Asian immigrant experiences. Divakaruni is a famous diasporic writer with a refined and modern sensibility whose contribution to the diasporic fiction is great and unique. Divakaruni beautifully presents the matrix of diasporic consciousness like nostalgia, loneliness, rootlessness, alienation, cultural conflict, questioning, etc., in her novels. Her writing affirms that diaspora is not merely scattering or dispersion but a matrix of consciousness that encompasses various conflicting characteristics. Being an immigrant in USA, Divakaruni seems to capture the experiences of the Indian immigrants with all its colours. This article attempts to explore the diasporic consciousness in the work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*.*

**Keywords: Immigrant, Diaspora, Nostalgia, Rootlessness, Alienation, Dispersion**

## Introduction

Diaspora has been a recent and growing field in literature. The concept of diaspora has been derived from the Greek word, meaning 'to scatter' or 'to disperse'. Moreover the word is associated with the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel, but today the term has acquired a more expanded meaning and it refers to common inherited homeland, voluntary or involuntary migration and a sense of peculiarity in the country of residence. In other words, a space change with the possibilities of multiple challenges. This term cuts across various disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies and political studies, etc..

In the Colonial and Post-Colonial periods, a good number of Indians have settled in various parts of the world whose writings called as Diasporic Literature. They use their writings as a platform to share their experiences to the world. When it comes to diasporic women writers, the levels of issues expand. Rootlessness, alienation, oppression, suppression cultural shock, identity crisis, assimilation

and struggle for existence are some of the concerns, but beneath these serves as a greater scope for psycho-analytic study of the women characters.

Diasporic Literature is not based on any theory or philosophy but on the life experience of the immigrants. It creates an emotional haven to its diaspora by conversing their own physical and emotional conflicts. Diaspora writing in novels, short stories, poems, prose and travelogues are not new to post-colonial literature. The desire for 'homeland' or 'root', strange and unusual attachment to their religion, tradition and language gave birth to the so-called diasporic literature.

Diasporic fiction contains the maladies and experience of diasporas in various shades and explains them with the new potentials, directions and new approaches of idea. Diasporic fiction lingers over assertions, loneliness, homelessness, existential, rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, quest and identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation of cultures. Here lies the conflict between the past and the present, concern for root and rootlessness, native land and new land, single culture and multicultural etc., such trends continue to occur in all the diasporic writings. Some famous diasporic writers are Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meera Sayal who secured a credible place in this area of fiction. Their works are replete with the diasporic consciousness, which strongly witness social realities, feelings and longings in addition to the creativity of the writers.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has established her position as a distinct and well-established Asian American diasporic writer, who has constructed a hybrid identity of her own in the host land. Divakaruni's works relate two different types of worlds, particularly about Indo-American struggling for peace in America. She explores and highlights concern for racism, economic disparity, miscarriage, divorce, longingness, homesickness, disappointments, etc. Most of her literary writing's center on the women immigrants who suffer during their initial stay in the alien environment, where they are exposed to an entirely different socio-cultural milieu, Divakaruni's women characters represent the global cosmopolitan citizen, who travels between both eastern and western cultures and facing an identity crisis and trying to assimilate in a given space. Divakaruni has succeeded in presenting the lives of the Indian immigrants who are poised between two cultures—the inherited Indian culture and the alien culture, in her literary creations. This paper explores the diasporic consciousness in her novel, *Sister of My Heart*.

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* is an emotional tale about two cousins, Sudha and Anju, whose love transcended even in the bonds of blood Relations. The novel is written in the realistic mode and describes the complicated relationships of a family in Bengal. The story explores the tension between the desires of mothers who embrace traditional Indian culture and the daughter-cousins who embrace the new western philosophies. The chapters of the novel are set as a kind of lengthy conversation that is multi-tiered and over-layered. The chapters themselves are alternatively titled. The first book of the novel is titled as 'The Princess in the Palace of Snakes'. In this part both the protagonists attempt to conform to the traditional female roles fixed by the male dominant society. This is represented by the traditional folktale of the princess charming to rescue her. The second book is titled as 'The Queen of Sword' which doesn't exemplify any traditional fairytale.

*Sister of My Heart* is an expanded version of her earlier short story 'Ultrasound' in the 'Arranged Marriage'. This novel spins around two Indian girls Anju and Sudha who are grown up by three widowed women: Aunt Pishi, Gouri, and Nalini and how their life changed after marriage and past secret. Born twelve hours apart in the same house, Anju and Sudha consider themselves twins, and from a very early age they get everything easily that they need from life: love, advice, respect and friendship. Together they experience the joys, pains, mystical tales and tiresome works that accompany growing up in a traditional Indian house in Calcutta. Their extraordinary friendship remains the novel's central theme.

Sister of my Heart relates the story of two cousins, Anju who is a brave young girl, spontaneous and straight forward from a high rank in society and Sudha who is lovelier, calm, feminine and delicate young girl. They are very caring and accustomed with each other, until one day, when Sudha knows a big secret of her family from Aunt Pishi that she is not the real Chatterjee's family. And her father Gopal is the one who responsible for Anju's father, Bijoy's death. From then, Sudha feels ashamed and willing to sacrifice even more of her happiness.

Although their personalities and ambitions are totally different, they are intensely close friends and soul mates. Sudha, the beautiful young woman dreams of a romantic love marriage and motherhood based on Hindu fables and legends. On the other hand, Anju is not so attractive, a rebel and a booklover who dreams of higher education. Even though they differ in such things, they have an intimate and close bond with each other. They always seek for each other comforts, and even when having an argument, they cannot upset at each other. Both of them lost their fathers on a ruby-hunting mission, planned by Sudha's father. Sudha feels guilty of her father's deeds. In turn, she compromises her love for Ashok. She drops the plan of her elopement with Ashok thinking that it might spoil Anju's marriage.

Sudha falls in love with a stranger Ashok Gosh, a lower-caste man. The three women decline proposal of marriage for Sudha. She surrenders herself to an arranged marriage with a spineless man, who is dominated by his widow mother. The Sanyal whose son named Ramesh works as an engineer in Indian Railways. Sudha is so distress about her arranged marriage and her burning feelings towards Ashok. Anju is betrothed to Sunil who belongs to a well-being family is working as a Computer Scientist in the United States of America. Earlier in the work, Sunil informally visits to Anju's bookshop to see her for the purpose of a proposed marriage. He is well dressed in traditional kurta. Instantly, Anju is falling for Sunil who takes interest on her collection of Virginia Woolf's books. Anju is so happy with his meeting.

Both the cousins are married on the same day. Anju is married to Sunil Majoodmar, a software engineer and Sudha married Ramesh, a railway employee at Calcutta. The marriage brought them the physical distance in the landscape. And no matter how far they travel from each other, their hearts will always be inseparable. Both of them face the same loneliness in their marriage. After mending their bond, they are faced with new challenges. A sharp contrast is seen between the lives of two cousins. Anju's life in America is balancing between the responsibilities as a wife and a college student. She gets what she has been dreamt of, since she was a child. As an Indian woman, she gets the privilege to be allowed to study in college, wearing jeans, boots and even cut her hair short. She completely engages herself and often she thinks Sunil as a mysterious man. Sunil always seeks for his privacy and does not tell her about his whereabouts. Being an Indian woman, Sudha lay aside her dormant feelings for Ashok, obeying her husband and mother-in-law and spends her entire day in doing household duties. Sudha's husband Ramesh is a kind man but before his mother, he cannot voice of his own and dare not protect his wife from his mother's accusation towards her.

Life brings both of them to the same stage of life when they both become pregnant. Their letters get more frequent and both are very excited for their pregnancies. Here the novelist focuses on the theme of female infanticide and gender discrimination. As Sudha's mother-in-law learnt from the medical report that it was a female child, she compels her to abort the female foetus and take another chance of pregnancy for a son. The situation is getting worse, when her husband has no voice of his own. He cannot protect Sudha as supposed to be. Ramesh is detached and not ready to help his better half. Such devastating turning point in her life awakens her denunciation. Sudha needs to come to her mother's home to save her female child.

The three widowed women give whole support for Sudha and infant in her womb. They decided to sell off their ancestral home to buy a flat somewhere and afford Sudha's delivery and their

coming grand-daughter. Meanwhile in America, Anju is rapidly thinking of ideas for her cousin. She feels responsible for she thought that she is the one who forced Sudha to meet the despair. So Anju decides to work for Sudha and her child. She wishes to bring them to America to fulfil Sudha's childhood dream as a boutique owner. Without the knowledge of Sunil, Anju secretly starts gathering money through a job for Sudha's air ticket. Her pay will also be used for sudha and her baby Dayita to settle in America. This job makes Anju to feel the power of economic independence. Anju works her body and mind restlessly resulting her worsen the health condition of her and has lost baby boy in her womb. It is such a really devastating and the most heart-wrenching tragedy that ever happen to her. The parenthood is the world's most significant delight and advancement for a woman. Sudha and her daughter Dayita are the only hope that would give Anju energy to forget the loss of her baby. Sudha decides to go to America for Anju and Dayita, but most of all she goes for herself. Finally Sudha entered into a new world in search of a respectable life. It shows how the protagonists want to survive and to build a future by themselves of their own wits and confidence. This extraordinary bonding of two sisters remains the central theme of the novel.

Having gone through the story of two sisters, it can be clearly understood that diasporic community faces the problem of displacement, rootlessness, discrimination and marginalisation in the migrated country. The migrated women feel the displacement intensely more than the men, but also they use migration as a step towards their freedom and individuality. Though it is troublesome for them to detach from the native country and customs but still they adapt the new culture and try to create harmony with the new surroundings. Divakaruni's novels deal with many issues such as domestic violence, racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, crime, divorce, etc., are inspired by her imagination and the experiences of others.

Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* portrays women of all ages, clothed in many different personalities but always as a person coming to terms with some aspect of her life. Her writings insist that diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience fabricated of collectives and multiple journeys. In this way, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni thus analyses the relationship of women with universal problems of discrimination, disorder and displacement thus articulating the diasporic consciousness in this work.

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