

The Dynamics of Female Friendship: A Reading of Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract:

Sisterhood, which is defined as an intimate and nurturing asexual relationship between women, is an emerging motif in the fiction of contemporary Asian American women writers. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a Post colonial diasporic writer of Indian origin also forms a part of this literary tradition as she herself confirms in an essay, “. . . 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.” Literary portrayals of female friendship show that friendship that extends to solidarity goes a long way in providing healing, security and empowerment to women. In fact sisterhood as a feminist strategy of going beyond patriarchy has already been widely explored in Afro-American women's writing.

*This paper intends to investigate the dynamics of female relationship and the profundity of the various female ties in Chitra Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*. It will further explore the nature of the psychological underpinnings that inform the various homosocial interactions in the novel. The findings of the paper will inevitably reveal that the unfathomable and enduring nature of sisterhood surpasses all other familial ties, and the key to survival (for women) in a man's world lies in the creation of a strong and endearing female network.*

Key words: Sisterhood, Patriarchy, Homosocial, Female network, Feminist, Asian American, Afro-American.

This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood. (65-6)

This is how Hudson –Weems defines female bonding in *Africana Womanism*, carefully exploring every aspect of the dynamics of female friendship.

Female bonding as a feminist strategy of survival has been explored more widely in the West than in the East, especially by Black women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and others who share a common experience of oppression and double marginalization of race and sex. In their attempts to explore the depths of female bonding, they have shown in their works how women bond with each other to fight back the impact of race, class and gender. These writers underscore the importance of female solidarity and endearment above all other familial ties as they go a long way to provide comfort, healing and security. While presenting her views on female homosocial bonds in her work *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf states that in most novels female interactions are “all half lights and profound shadows like those serpentine caves where one goes with a candle, peering up and down not knowing where one is stepping” (83). Clearly her emphasis is on the mysterious yet insightful and uncharted nature of women's relationship. An urge to explore the profundity of such bonds (which will further lead to a reimagining of the female stereotype) is evident in her writing. Literary portrayals of female friendships have evolved gradually over the years from Jane Austen and Sarah Orne Jewett to Joyce Carol Oates to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. And it was not until women writers realised that strong bonds between women

act as a mode of survival and a means to selfhood that they began to celebrate sisterhood, women's community and female difference instead of female antagonism. As early as 1915, Charlott Perkins Gilman in her utopian fiction *Herland* examined the depths of female bonding only to discover how it remained unaltered and undisrupted even at the face of the strongest challenge. When the lonely protagonists of Kate Chopin's *At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* (1899) arrive at the realization that friendships among women provide an alternative, positive and meaningful life-style, quite contrary to the male-female dynamics which is fraught with inadequacies, the value of female bonding is firmly affirmed. In this regard it may aptly be pointed out how Laura in May Sarton's *A Reckoning* (1978) admits that "one of the real connections , one of the deepest and most nourishing, in some ways more than my marriage, good as that was, had been a passionate friendship with a woman"(243). Again the relationship between Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) has remained one of the most celebrated relationships in the corpus of women's fiction. In the words of the author herself, "Friendship between women is special, different and has never been depicted as a major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody even talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*" (qtd. in Barat 53). In fact female friendship is central to the fiction of Afro-American women writers. Alice Walker in her Pulitzer prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) offers a classic example of the kindred spirit among women that enable them to overcome all hardships. The various female ties that develop in the course of the story eventually become the source of healing, protection, empowerment and emancipation. This is rendered through the image of the quilt which emerges as the most significant and recurring symbol of the female network. The weaving and gifting of quilts endorses the unifying power of female bonding. The participation of various characters in the weaving of the

quilt (which is made up of different patterns sewn together) embody a growing spirit of solidarity among women who otherwise share a common predicament. The possibility of a strong sisterhood among women is firmly established in the novel through the practice of sewing. All these writers have tried to illumine the psychological underpinnings in female friendships. Even British writers like Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen have explored female psychological processes in their works only to discover how emotional fulfillment is achieved through enduring female bonds.

Female bonding is viewed, by feminists, as a form of empowerment that helps women face various challenges. Louise Bernikow feels that it is a strong sense of 'oneness' that lies at the base of female friendship, and it is this very sense of unity that advocates empowerment :

“Female friends are more often eye to eye. It is the creation of ‘us’ that is more important, we ‘two’ – and in this very different arrangement lie the great depths and the great raptures of our friendship.” (119)

Distinguishing between female and male friendships Bernikow further asserts that while the former is an intimate ‘eye to eye’ relationship, the latter tends to be more instrumental where the eyes are ‘fixed not on each other but what is out there’. Their eyes are ‘like the eyes of men marching to war . . . they are shoulder to shoulder’ (119).

The reason why women bond with each other has been variously interpreted. Elizabeth Abel acknowledges the need for commonality as opposed to complementarity that lies at the core of such bonds. She notes that, “Serious novels that focus on the actual friendships of women, however, suggest that identification replaces complementarity . . .” (415). Abel shares Nancy Chodorov’s interpretation that it is the desire for identification in the preoedipal period that unconsciously promotes female endearments in the oedipal phase. This is an unconscious psychomatic process that draws women together,

and they seek commonality rather than complementarity in their friends. Female intimacy arises out of the desire to find one's reflected self in the other. Anais Nin explains this phenomenon in her diary:

“The love between women is a refuge and an escape into harmony and narcissism in place of conflict . . . It is in a way, self-love. I love June because she is the woman I would like to be” (41).

Contrarily complementarity entails a shared identity where two opposing selves merge to form a single whole. The phenomenon of female complementarity can be best explained by borrowing Cicero's words: “as almost to create one person out of two” (111). Cicero's description of friendship very accurately characterizes the dynamics of complementary female friendship. Some scholars have deciphered an underlying need for complementarity in homosocial bonds. In a typical reading of female bonds Catherine Sanger notes that: “Like Woolf, then, Morrison emphasizes the importance of friendships forged out of female complementarity, or the unification of opposing characteristics to form a joint identity” (2).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a postcolonial writer of Indian origin also chooses sisterhood and female bonding as one of her themes. She herself confirms it when she says in an essay for *Bold Type*, “. . . 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.” (n.p.). In doing so she identifies herself with the occidental rather than with the oriental. Her fiction relates to the tradition of the West, since Indian writers from Anita Desai to Arundhati Roy have ignored sisterhood in their focus on feminine issues. Moreover, her work with MAITRI, a helpline for abused South Asian women immigrants in the US , has provided the necessary impetus for her inevitable choice of the theme of sisterhood .

Sister of my Heart, Chitra's second novel is as much about Indian culture reflected through traditions, dress, food habits, beliefs and myths as about sisterhood in countering the phallogocentric aspects of the basics of Indian culture. The novelist explores female bonding both in its social and psychological context. She foregrounds a variety of relationships including mother-daughter bonding, sibling intimacy and the association between widowed mothers in the narrative. The primary focus of the novel is on sisterhood between Anju and Sudha, who are actually distant cousins and who provide support and healing to each other in times of crisis. *Sunday Times* (London) eulogises the novel as portraying a touching relationship of enduring love between two women. Divakaruni makes the narrative voice shift between Sudha and Anju alternately giving us a glimpse of the conscious and unconscious workings of their mind. There is no denying the fact that this strategic use of the narrative perspective promotes a better understanding of the inseparable bond of the sisters. This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of female friendships in *Sister of My Heart*, and how far it is effective in resisting the patriarchal structures of oppression, and engendering female empowerment and identity formation. This reading of female bonding is also oriented towards a better understanding of the nature of the psychological underpinnings –the need for commonality or complementarity or both – that inform the various homosocial interactions in the text.

The empathy that the siblings, Anju and Sudha, have for each other springs from this invisible bond formed at the time of their birth. Since the cousins were born within hours of each other, and Anju being the elder of the two is convinced that it was she who called Sudha “into the world” (17) and, therefore, takes it as her duty to do everything “to make sure she is happy” (17). Indeed Anju never abandons her sister to seek her own happiness. The profound and unfaltering attachment is

characterized by an understanding, care and nurturing that is reciprocal:

“But 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 . . . 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 will” (11).

The relation between Anju and Sudha has its antecedent in Morrison's Nel and Sula. Morrison's idea that friendship between women is fundamental to all other relationships has been borne out in *Sister of my Heart*. All through their childhood they “bathed together and ate together , often from the same plate , feeding each other our favourite items . . .” and “lay in twin beds” (12) at night giggling and whispering till they slept , and when they had nightmares they “squeezed into one bed and held each other” (12) . This endearment between the two girls soon became a matter of grave concern for the neighbours as well as the teachers at their convent school who considering it to be not ‘normal’ (12) changed their sections. But soon the consequences of their prudent decision forced them to re-consider it. This separation was too much for Anju and Sudha to bear. It made them sick, sulky and angry and prompted them to bunk school so as to remain together. Such is the strong bond of friendship and sisterhood that Divakaruni projects in the early chapters of the narrative. The two of them form a world, complete in itself, as Anju says: “It was just that we found everything we needed in each other”(14) . Clearly their interactions develop into an intimacy that is emotionally fulfilling. They find healing and security in each other's company. Laura Padilla –Walker explains this connectedness in her study of sibling relationships in *Journal of the Family Psychology*. She notes that sisters are uniquely powerful and “protect each other from feeling lonely, unloved, guilty, self-conscious and fearful” (Sundari n.pag.). Divakaruni insists on

portraying a complementary sorority between the cousins till they reach adolescence when complementarity gives way to commonality. The element of complementarity in their childhood bonding is quite evident because they are described as temperamentally different. In Anju's words, Sudha: ". . . believes in magic, demons and gods and falling stars to wish on, the way I never could." (17) and "I never could learn to be as careful as my cousin" (43). In spite of the divergences between them they are drawn to each other like the poles of a magnet. Anju herself confesses that Sudha is ". . . my other half . The sister of my heart" (11), and this goes on to attest the fact that they have a shared identity and one is incomplete without the other. The tableau that they form at the end of the novel with the two of them, "their arms intertwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them" (322) is emblematic of this joint identity. Again, the lotus analogy is significant enough from the perspective of the Indian cultural ethos. The Sanskrit words 'satadal padma' and 'sahasradal padma' refer to lotus flowers with one hundred petals and one thousand petals respectively. And in the Hindu philosophy the numbers 1000 or 100 signify fulfillment. Hence Divakaruni's appropriate use of the symbol to embody a fulfilling and an enriching relationship between Anju and Sudha cannot be overlooked. Secondly, the lotus is a kind of flower which eventually grows out of the mire in which it is born. Here again one finds a correlation between the lotus and the sisters, as the latter though born within patriarchy ultimately outgrow all hierarchical influences to achieve emancipation and selfhood. Finally, like the lotus which has the ability to remain dry in spite of remaining afloat on water and holding water droplets, the cousins remain indomitable and unbeaten despite being in the ambit of male relationship.

The world of the siblings parallels the literal world of the mothers. The illustrious Chatterjee family has unfortunately lost its male members in an accident – a ruby

hunting adventure that claimed the lives of both Bijoy (the legal heir) and his distant cousin, Gopal. The family is now run by the three women, Bijoy's wife, his widowed sister and Gopal's wife. The three of them come together to form a triumvirate in spite of differences and diverging tendencies. This teaming up of the three widows (who would have otherwise led a solitary, marginalized life as a non-entity) generates in them a certain confidence and strength to challenge male assumptions and literally keep their inquisitive and interfering male relatives at bay. While Gouri Chatterjee, Bijoy's wife, takes up the responsibility of running the family book store to ensure a stable income for the family, Nalini and Aunt Pishi take care of the other aspects of the household. This type of sisterhood can be best described as a mentoring relationship. Such bonding arises not so much out of the need for emotional cravings (as is the case with the siblings) as for social security and an urge for dignified survival. Here again the existence of a complementary female relationship is hinted at. Neither of them can live a meaningful life without the other two. While representing alternative female attitudes, the three of them form a complete whole. They remain at each other's side through thick and thin. Their experiences and environment urge them towards female solidarity. This goes a long way to enable them to survive and carve out a niche for themselves in a man's world. The support system that is built up by their interaction inevitably empowers them. Subsequently they depart from the old ways and embrace a different world view which is metaphorically rendered through their (Gouri ma, Aunt Nalini and Aunt Pishi) decision to sell off their ancestral house and furniture to move into a smaller apartment to help Sudha bring up her child. They begin to live a life in defiance of the social standards prescribed for Hindu widows. As Sudha says, "Along with the old house the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition . . . The mothers have joined book societies and knitting classes. They

go for walks around Victoria Memorial. They volunteer for Mother Teresa's Shishu Bhavan . . . attend all night classical music concerts . . . On rainy evenings they order crispy lentil-stuffed dalpuris from Ganguram" (274). The rejection of tradition symbolized by the ancestral house in order to live a meaningful life is the ultimate achievement of female bonding. Throughout the narrative runs an underlying voice that interrogates the male notions of female passivity and dependence.

Divakaruni portrays a unique form of motherhood which is not based on biological considerations. Anju and Sudha are brought up under the love and care of the three maternal figures – Aunt Pishi , Gouri ma and Aunt Nalini . Sudha admits this: "Yes, we have three mothers – perhaps to make up for the fact that we have no fathers" (4). The childless widow , Pishi ma , seems to satisfy her mothering instinct by her constant care and nurturing of them since their birth : " . . . she is the one who makes sure we are suitably dressed for school . . .she finds for us , miraculously , stray pens and inkpots and missing pages of homework . She makes us our favourite dishes . . .On holidays she plaits jasmine into our hair . But most of all Pishi is our fount of information, the one who tells us the stories our mothers will not . . ." (4). The mother-daughter bond as delineated in the novel is an enriching one . Gouri ma and Aunt Pishi are shown to understand the girls' emotional and social needs perfectly well. This bond provides an excellent support system, thereby, enabling them to face challenges and fight back the impact of various patriarchal constraints. Motherhood as depicted in this novel is quite an unconventional one, not the caring and submissive stereotype. Anju and Sudha have strong feelings for their mothers. Sudha finds it difficult to hurt her mother's sentiments, and Anju is reluctant to indulge in activities that will make her mother upset .When Sudha and her unborn girl-child face social discrimination it is Anju, Gouri ma and Aunt Pishi who provide emotional support coupled with

social security to enable her to face the challenges of a divorced single mother. Here the mother-daughter relationship assumes a new dimension as they (mothers) reject all oppressive traditions as baseless and encourage Sudha to live a better life:

“Why should she care anymore what people say? What good has it done her? What good has it done any of us, a whole lifetime of being afraid of what society might think? I spit on this society which says it’s fine to kill a baby in her mother’s womb , but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child”(247).

When Sudha is forced to break away from her marriage which she feels stultifying it is Pishi who supports her openly. Aunt Pishi’s reluctance to see Sudha the victim that she herself had been all her life rings loud when she says, “go take a nice bath and shampoo the last of that red from the forehead. The Sanyals are the ones who have lost out, not you. You’ve got a whole life in front of you, and it’s going to be such a dazzling success that it’ll leave them gaping” (249). This boldness is enough to boost up the drooping morale of a girl who faces the social stigma of a failed marriage. Consequently Sudha’s decision to give birth to Dayita signals her liberation from all patriarchal shackles. With the love and support of the mothers Sudha is ultimately able to find her ‘subjectivity’. Explaining ‘subjectivity’ Donald Hall says that it is “a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity” (3) . Sudha develops a sense of self and identity following her separation and her decision of single parenthood.

Speaking on this invisible support system, i.e. , female bonding, Divakaruni says in her essay ‘What Women Share’ in *Bold Type*, “In the best friendships . . . with women, there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need any explanation, perhaps because of the life-changing experiences we share – menstruation, childbirth and menopause. The same tragedies, physical or emotional,

threaten usOh , we fight tooBut ultimately we can be ourselves with each otherourselves with all our imperfections We can be women and that , as women we can be understood” (n.p).

Divakaruni's purpose is not to completely shut out men from the world of her protagonists. A realistic portrayal of the Indian society and its culture remains incomplete without presenting the male –female dynamics in a society based on androcentric views. The novel explores the effects of heterosexual bonding on female relationships, and examines whether such relationships disrupt or strengthen the homosocial bonds. During her adolescence Sudha falls in love with Ashok and soon develops an emotional bond with him. Though the dynamics of their relationship remain beyond the comprehension of Anju, she soon realizes the power of the spell that binds the two souls as she herself experiences the magic of being in love on meeting Sunil (the groom chosen by her mother). As they have imbibed the values of a culture and society, that is largely androcentric, they fail to make independent choices regarding marriage. They inevitably enter into a marital relationship arranged through negotiation between the parents. Sudha's love for Ashok remains unrequited as her mother would not marry her off to someone coming from a lower caste. Though the love sick Sudha even plans to elope with Ashok, this is prevented not so much by her guilt of transgression as by her sense of love and duty for Anju. She cannot bear to see her cousin unhappy and scandalized for she says, “*I'll be happy in seeing you happy , dear Anju*” (129) Dropping the plan of elopement she settles down for an arranged marriage with Ramesh. This sacrifice which she willingly undertakes for the sake of Anju stems from a matured mind, not to be mistaken for a childhood whim. It is the sacrifice of a true soul for her soulmate; a reflection of an unconditional love between the women. Again on another occasion it is Anju who overworks herself during her pregnancy

just to gather money enough to pay for the plane fare for Sudha, who is to relocate to America to escape the stigma of a failed marriage . After Sudha's separation from Ramesh, Anju takes it as her bounden duty to do everything to make Sudha happy and secure. The extent to which they can make sacrifices for one another is simply unimaginable. These actions are prompted by the desire for identification which now replaces the need for complementarity. According to Nancy Chodorov a girl always defines herself relationally. Since a girl "does not give up her preoedipal bond with her mother" (Abel 417) and "maintains her earliest relational mode of primary identification" (Abel 417) with the mother, there is an inability establishing definite ego boundaries. Her preoedipal sense of attachment to the mother determines "her sense of identity and her experience of the oedipal phase" (Abel 417). It is actually self love that prevents Anju and Sudha from hurting each other. Chodorov further asserts that in order to fulfill the preoedipal desire for identification, women bond with each other. The hardwork takes a toll on her (Anju) baby, and she loses the child. Always putting the other first and crushing their own happiness, they set an example of an extra-ordinary friendship. Divakaruni forcefully underscores the fact that strong bonds of friendship remain invulnerable to male intrusions. Marriage does not sever their bond, nor does dark family secrets. Their friendship persists through all adversities. During the period of their greatest crisis, the siblings inevitably turn to each other for help, while their husbands remain indifferent. Here Divakaruni seems to affirm that the inadequacies of heterosexual bonding actually and indirectly engender female endearments. Using the object- relation theory Chodorov tries to explain this emotional incompatibility in man-woman relationship. A boy's preoedipal attachment to his mother is neither prolonged nor intimate, and subsequently the urge for masculine development results in a denial of the relation with the mother. So men are "particularly ill-prepared

to satisfy the deep and complex relational needs of women” (Abel 417). This explains why Ramesh, the henpecked husband of Sudha could provide neither emotional nor social support . A person with a weak temperament and practically no voice of his own, Ramesh backs out at a time when Sudha needs him the most. Realising that the only way for her survival lies in the abandonment of and escape from the house of her in-laws, she leaves Ramesh forever. Even Sunil is reluctant to help Anju in her cause to make things better for Sudha. He even fails to understand her desperation for Sudha, the depth of her passion and love for Sudha. Far away in America Anju spends anxious sleepless nights devising ways to help Sudha. She suffers disillusionment on finding the truth about Sunil, whose confession (that he is attracted towards Sudha) leads to further disappointments. Soon differences of opinion crop up between the two and an emotional hiatus is created. Later, when Anju finds it impossible to recover from the trauma of her miscarriage, it is Sudha and not Sunil who brings her out of the delirium. She begins to tell her a story which brings hope in her life. Slowly she comes to terms with her loss with Sudha’s help. This is how the two sisters help each other out in times of crisis. Sudha’s decision to travel to America with her daughter to restore the lost equilibrium in the life of her dear cousin, ignoring the risks involved, reaffirms the bond of sisterhood. She even rejects Ashok’s proposal of marriage and prioritises her sister who needs her more than anyone else. As it is quite evident that the men in the lives of the protagonists cannot be counted on in times of crisis, the women are quick to realise that the clue to their survival lies only in their bonding with one another. It is the solidarity between the mothers and the sisters that enable them to face challenges.

Man-woman relationship as delineated in the narrative is devoid of emotional ties. It is again “women’s centrality to each other’s psychic wholeness” (Abel 418) that they tend to find men emotionally secondary. Gouri and Nalini have been

paired with men who are indeed callous, irresponsible and pleasure seeking. On the other hand Sunil and Ramesh may not be callous, but not passionate and responsible enough to form everlasting ties with their spouses. The fact that man – woman dynamics is inadequate for the development of the soul as well as the self is unambiguously foregrounded. It is only after all ties with men get severed that the women are able to live meaningful lives. Lured by the spirit of adventure Bijoy, the father of Anju and Gopal , the father of Sudha, forsake their expecting wives to fend for themselves and go away for an unknown destination never to return again. Widowed and burdened with responsibilities the only persons Gouri could count on were her widowed sister-in-law and the maids in her household, with whose silent support she could eventually set things in order and restore the equilibrium. The women in Divakaruni's fiction ultimately realise that husbands can never be friends and the emotional wavelength between a man and a woman can never match. In fact all the women in this fiction find the male-female equation inadequate and insufficient.

Turning away from the men Divakaruni's women find comfort in their bonds with each other. The solidarity and endearment that they have for each other provide an invisible support system and enable them to share their joys and sorrows with each other.

After a detailed analysis of the various relationships in the novel it can safely be concluded that Divakaruni's men cannot provide complementarity to the women. So, in order to survive the women develop strong homosocial bonds urged by the need for both complementarity and commonality. The term 'friendship' assumes new dimensions in the context of the enduring and endearing relationship between women as portrayed in the narrative. The novel forcefully underscores the idea that it is the women only who can help each other to survive in a man's world. One can easily perceive the author's consistent effort at subverting male assumptions through the

secret power of female bonding. Ironically without any male intrusion, the sisters and the mothers are able to carve out a niche for themselves. To quote Urbashi Barat , “Shut in by men , women in turn shut out men , and form lasting female bonds within a women’s community that are sometimes shaken but are never entirely ruptured by male intrusions . . .” (50).

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