

UNDERSTANDING PROMINENT CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI – SISTER OF MY HEART

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Abstract

Sister of My Heart is a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. First published in 1999, this novel was followed in 2002 by a sequel *The Vine of Desire*. The story centers on two Indian girls, Anju and Sudha. The girls narrate their life stories in alternating chapters. The book follows Sudha and Anju through childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Although some of the characters immigrate to the United States, most of the story is set in India.

Keywords: Love, respect, narrative characters, novels, writing skills

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (born **Chitrlekha Banerjee**, July 29, 1956) is an Indian-American author, poet, and the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program.

Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage* won an American Book Award in 1996, and two of her novels (*The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*), as well as a short story *The Word Love* were adapted into films. *Mistress of Spices* was short-listed for the Orange Prize. Currently, *Sister of My Heart*, *Oleander Girl*, *Palace of Illusions*, and *One Amazing Thing* have all been optioned to be made into movies or TV series.

With each of my novels, I try to set myself a new challenge. While writing my newest, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, I set myself two: I would write a novel-in-stories, and I would use multiple voices to tell the three-generational tale of Sabitri, Bela, and Tara. Additionally, some of these voices would be male. (So maybe that's three challenges!)

The male voices were difficult. I won't pretend they weren't. Women's voices just come more naturally to me. I understand how they think. How they look at the world. Men – not so much.

Themes – sister of my heart

- Fairy tales – The book is divided into two halves named after stories the girls tell each other. Often the events of the book parallel the happenings in these stories. Also mixed in with these stories, are Bengali myths and stories of the gods in the Hindu tradition.
- Marriage – Marriage is very important in *Sister of My Heart*. It is expected that all girls will marry. Divorce is looked down on and widows are pitied. The house the girls grow up in is very unusual in that it is run by three women. The dynamics of joint families is explored, as it is traditional for women to join their husband's families.
- Tradition / Change – Many of the expectations the Anju and Sudha face as far as education and marriage are traditional. There are set roles they must either accept or risk gaining a reputation. Dress, celebrations, and religious beliefs in the novel are very much a part of Indian culture and described in detail. By the end of the novel, however, there are changes. Both Anju and Sudha become more independent, as do their three mothers.

- Women's friendships - Anju and Sudha's friendship is a deep one and strongly developed in the novel. The three mothers - Gouri, Nalini and Pishi - are also a unique group of women running a household together.

Characters influencing in the novles

- Anjali / Anju – from a higher caste than her sister Sudha, she loves books, and is known for speaking her mind and being stubborn
- Ashok Ghosh – devoted to Sudha, he proposes several times, he is rejected by the mothers as a potential husband because of his lower caste status and money made in trade
- Basudha / Sudha – loyal to her family, Sudha is a storyteller and dreamer, and is known for her beauty.
- Bijoy Chatterjee – Anju's father and Gouri's husband, Pishi's brother, welcomes Gopal into his family like a brother.
- Gopal – Sudha's father and Nalini's husband, he persuades Bijoy to go on the doomed hunt for rubies, his past is not what it seems
- Gouri – Anju's mother, she holds the Chatterjee family together by running the family bookstore despite struggles with her health
- Nalini – Sudha's mother, she means well but can have an abrasive personality
- Pishi – widowed at a young age she joins her brother Bijoy's household and helps raise Anju and Sudha, she is a source of information and support for the girls
- Ramesh Sanyal – Sudha's husband, often travels with his job building railroads and bridges, a kind man, but unable to protect Sudha from his mother
- Ramur Ma – loyal servant and chaperone to the young girls
- Singhji – becomes the household chauffeur when the girls are five years old, a trusted but somewhat mysterious figure, in the end we find out that he is Sudha's father and Nalini's husband
- Sunil Majumdar – Anju's husband, born in India, he is a computer scientist from the United States.

Critical study

Sister of My Heart. Anju and Sudha reunite after a year of living separate lives. At first, the women are overjoyed to see one another and their bond seem strong enough to suggest that each woman's unselfish goal is possible. Anju's startling realization of her husband Sunil's passionate obsession with Sudha shatters any illusion and causes a seemingly irreparable rift between them. Tormented respectively by guilt and bitter jealousy, Sudha and Anju individually grapple with both their inner pain and the outside pressures of frenetic, impersonal city life in America as they journey towards independence. Thus, the creator and her creation face up to standards laid down, boldly and create new spaces and voices for themselves.

Chita Banerjee Divakaruni's Works – Friendship with Women and Sisterly Bonding

Chita Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author and poet. She is an award winning author. She has got the nationality of India as well as of the United States. She made an indelible impression on the literary world with her first novel, The Mistress of

Spices, a magical tale of love and herbs. Her novels portray the forbidden aspects of women's habited world and their creative imagination through earthly desires. Woman is the centre of her fictional world – her efforts, desires, and failures in the traditional Indian society and western society are the main focus in her novels. Her illustration of women's world is realistic, credible, and authentic. She deals with the inner world of the Indian women as well as the immigrant women in her novels. The sisterly relationship between Anju and Sudha in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and the complications that cause conflicts in Anju and Sudha's sisterly bonding in *The Vine of Desire* are scrutinized in this paper.

Structural Characteristics of Divakaruni's

Novel The chapters in Divakaruni's novel are named after the central characters. In *Sister of My Heart* the chapters are alternatively named after Anju and Sudha. This is a very exclusive pattern of writing which evidently brings out the internal feelings of the protagonists. This narrative technique itself underlines their twinning as much as the events of their lives and endows them with not only the capacity to tell their own stories but also invest them with the power to interpret and shape their reality

Conclusion

Both Sudha and Anju grapple with their life after marriage and are caught in the frenzy of traditional values . However Chitra Banerjee has not just commented on the social structure , traditions but even under the weight of cultural legacy has tried to portray the rise of the New Woman. Sudha though ponders on her sense of self but ultimately takes a step of moving to America, the land which could at least offer her an opportunity to be independent. On the other side is Anju who grapples and questions the orthodoxy at every stage and tries to assimilate and adjust in a new environment.

Chitra Banerjee in her attempt to analyse the relationship of women has become a spokesperson of the universal problems of discrimination, displacement, disturbance and disorder thereby creating a canvas filled with colours and shades of India which reflect the past as well as the contemporariness of India. The end of the novel is open ended and it leaves an 'optimistic note of possibilities'.

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