

## Partitioned Sisterhood: Gendered Independence in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of gendered independence and female solidarity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction, with primary attention to *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), and *The Vine of Desire* (2002). Drawing on feminist literary theory, postcolonial criticism, and diaspora studies, the paper argues that Divakaruni's narratives construct a complex, often contradictory 'partitioned sisterhood'—a form of female solidarity that is simultaneously enabling and limiting, forged in the crucible of patriarchal constraint but fractured by class, desire, geography, and cultural dislocation. The paper traces how Divakaruni's women protagonists negotiate independence not through straightforward liberation but through a series of painful, partial, and ongoing negotiations with tradition, community, and selfhood. The analysis also situates Divakaruni's project within the broader landscape of South Asian diaspora literature and its engagement with feminist politics.

**Keywords:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, feminist literary criticism, sisterhood, Indian diaspora, postcolonial feminism, gendered independence, South Asian women's fiction

### 1. Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies a unique place in South Asian diaspora literature. Born in Kolkata and educated in the United States, she writes from the intersection of India and America, tradition and modernity, and silence and speech. Her fiction centers on Indian and Indian-American women navigating the complexities of patriarchy, immigration, class aspiration, and selfhood. Divakaruni's work is distinguished by its focus on female relationships, especially the bonds between sisters, friends, and women across generations, which both support and limit her protagonists.

The concept of 'partitioned sisterhood' in this paper draws metaphorical significance from the Partition of India, which created borders through traumatic rupture and shaped communities by both shared experience and separation. In Divakaruni's fiction, women form solidarities that are themselves divided by desire, cultural loyalty, class mobility, and the tension between individual freedom and collective belonging. The independence her female characters seek is inherently gendered, shaped and constrained by their positions within patriarchal structures.

This paper examines three of Divakaruni's most acclaimed works—*The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), and *The Vine of Desire* (2002)—as interconnected explorations of this theme. Through close textual analysis and engagement with feminist and postcolonial theory, it argues that Divakaruni's fiction presents a nuanced and politically complex vision of female independence, rejecting both the triumphalism of liberal feminism and the fatalism of a purely victim-centered narrative. Her female characters are neither entirely free nor wholly constrained; instead, they inhabit a challenging and generative intermediary space.

### 2. Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1 Postcolonial Feminism and the Diaspora

Postcolonial feminist scholarship has examined the conditions faced by women positioned between colonial legacies and patriarchal nationalism (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism's portrayal of the 'Third World Woman' as a monolithic victim is especially relevant to analyses of Divakaruni, whose fiction has sometimes been criticized for reinforcing such representations for Western audiences. Spivak's question, 'Can the subaltern speak?', remains central to Divakaruni's work. While her protagonists are typically women of middle or aspiring class status rather than subalterns, their ability to express themselves is still limited by prevailing gender and cultural expectations.

Diaspora feminist scholarship adds further complexity to these issues. Avtar Brah (1996) argues that diaspora involves living in multiple worlds at once and experiencing a 'homing desire' that often conflicts with the realities of home. Divakaruni's female characters are frequently caught between memories or ideals of home—India, the joint family, a shared childhood—and the new homes they try, or struggle, to create in the diaspora. This duality shapes both their solidarity and the divisions that arise within their relationships.

## **2.2 Female Solidarity and Its Discontents**

The feminist concept of sisterhood possesses a complex and contested history. The pursuit of universal female solidarity during second-wave feminism was rigorously critiqued by women of color and postcolonial feminists, who demonstrated that sisterhood frequently reinforced existing racial and class hierarchies (hooks, 1984; Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Divakaruni's fiction responds to this critique by depicting portrayals of sisterhood that are authentic and supportive, yet consistently marked by complications. These relationships emerge from shared vulnerability and often fracture when individual trajectories diverge, for example, when one woman's liberation disrupts another's stability or when upward mobility generates distance.

Scholars have examined Divakaruni's representation of female relationships through multiple critical frameworks. Alpana Sharma Knippling (1996) analyzes her work in terms of the tension between community and individuation within South Asian immigrant literature. Brinda Bose (2000) explores the politics of desire and embodiment in Divakaruni's fiction, contending that female sexuality serves both as a site for patriarchal control and as a locus of women's resistance. Building on these perspectives, this analysis focuses on the concept of 'partitioned sisterhood' as a structuring tension across several of Divakaruni's texts.

## **3. Independence, Magic, and Constraint in *The Mistress of Spices***

*The Mistress of Spices* (1997) represents Divakaruni's most formally experimental novel, integrating elements of magical realism with a nuanced examination of feminine power and its constraints. The protagonist, Tilo, serves as a 'Mistress of Spices,' trained within an ancient tradition to heal members of the Indian immigrant community in Oakland, California. The narrative portrays feminine power as both ancient and communal, yet subject to significant limitations. Although Tilo's abilities are authentic, they are governed by strict prohibitions: she must not leave her store, use the spices for personal benefit, engage in physical contact, or permit herself to love.

These prohibitions simultaneously enable Tilo's magical abilities and reflect patriarchal restrictions imposed on women, such as confinement to domestic spaces, prioritization of communal service over personal fulfillment, and constraints on autonomy and sexuality. Divakaruni underscores this parallel through Tilo's recollections of her training with the 'Old One,' a female authority figure who exercises power by imposing limitations. In this context, women's mTilo's choice to pursue a relationship with Raven, an American man, and to leave her store signifies an ambivalent form of independence. While she attains personal freedom, she forfeits her magical abilities and her position as a community healer. Divakaruni intentionally leaves this tension unresolved; the novel concludes with Tilo entering ordinary life, characterized by hopefulness and uncertainty, yet devoid of the power that previously defined her. This act of self-determination dissolves the sisterhood she established, implying that individual independence may be achieved at the cost of communal solidarity. he built, suggesting that independence comes at the expense of solidarity.

## **4. Partitioned Sisterhood in *Sister of My Heart***

### **4.1 The Structure of the Bond**

While *The Mistress of Spices* explores female independence through magical power, *Sister of My Heart* (1999) examines this theme through the close relationship between two cousins, Anju and Sudha. Raised together in a declining Calcutta household, they are deeply affected by a shared secret: their fathers died together under mysterious circumstances. The novel uses alternating first-person narration to highlight both the intimacy and the distinct experiences of each protagonist. The relationship between Anju and Sudha serves as the emotional and ethical centre of the novel. They complete each other's sentences, share dreams, and construct an identity grounded in mutual devotion. Divakaruni depicts this bond with considerable tenderness, framing it as a distinctive form of female intimacy. Contemporary feminist theory identifies this dynamic as aligning with what Adrienne Rich (1980) termed the 'lesbian continuum,' encompassing woman-identified experiences ranging from friendship to erotic love.

### **4.2 The Partitioning of Their Lives**

The novel's central conflict focuses on the division of intimacy between the protagonists. Both women are married, Anju to an Indian-American man in California and Sudha to a man in rural Bengal. Their separation is portrayed as a form of violence, illustrating how marriage, serving patriarchal family interests, ruptures a fundamental bond. Divakaruni presents arranged marriage as both a tool of female subjugation and a means of undermining female solidarity.

Anju's life in America offers educational and professional opportunities, reflecting feminist modernity, but also brings isolation and the pain of miscarriage. In contrast, Sudha's life in Bengal maintains cultural continuity but enforces the subordination expected of a daughter-in-law. Neither path offers true liberation; both reveal different, gendered constraints.

The novel intentionally refrains from presenting migration as freedom or tradition as a secure foundation.

When Sudha, pregnant and pressured to abort her daughter, chooses to leave her husband and return to Calcutta, the novel depicts a moment of female independence that is both courageous and fraught. She prioritizes her child and herself over marriage, yet acts without support from a feminist movement, financial independence, or a clear plan for the future. This independence is real but precarious, sustained by the fragile support of women's networks, including her mother, her mother-in-law's unexpected sympathy, and Anju.

### **5. Desire, Fracture, and Reconstitution in *The Vine of Desire***

*The Vine of Desire* (2002), the sequel to *Sister of My Heart*, follows Sudha's move to America to live with Anju and her husband Sunil. The novel offers Divakaruni's most in-depth examination of how female solidarity is tested by adult desire, sexual jealousy, and conflicting needs for self-realisation. The childhood ideal of sisterhood is disrupted by Sunil's attraction to Sudha and the surfacing of both women's repressed desires. Anju and Sudha's relationship becomes newly complex and painful. Anju copes with grief, depression, and a sense of failure. She alternates between affection for Sudha and resentment of her beauty and confidence. Sudha, meanwhile, feels a dangerous attraction to Sunil. She cannot fully admit this attraction because it would impact her bond with Anju. The division in their sisterhood does not result from marriage. It emerges from internal pressures of desire, disappointment, and the demands of individual identity.

Divakaruni introduces Trisha, a young feminist activist Sudha meets, as a contrast to the protagonists' more limited independence. Trisha embodies a direct, confrontational, and sexually autonomous model of second-wave feminism. This model is portrayed sympathetically but with some irony. For Anju and Sudha, whose lives are shaped by distinct cultural backgrounds and emotional ties, Trisha's approach is not accessible to them. Instead, they must find independence within their own cultural and relational contexts. Their relationship is not destroyed but transformed. It becomes less a union than a set of lasting commitments, now spatially and emotionally separated. The 'vine of desire' of the title suggests both the generative, climbing quality of women's aspiration and its potential to intertwine and strangle. Independence, in Divakaruni's vision, is ultimately solitary. This is not because solidarity is false, but because each woman's fullest self-realisation cannot be achieved through or with the other.

## **6. Cross-Cutting Themes in Divakaruni's Feminist Vision**

### **6.1 The Body as Contested Territory**

Across all three novels, women's bodies are the primary sites where gendered independence is negotiated. Tilo's body is defined by the prohibition of touch. Sudha's beauty acts as currency in the marriage market, granting both power and vulnerability. Anju's body becomes associated with grief and inadequacy after miscarriage. Divakaruni's emphasis on embodied female experience aligns with feminist phenomenological traditions (Bordo, 1993; Young, 1990). These traditions view the body as central to women's social existence, not as a vessel for disembodied subjectivity.

The body is also the site of female pleasure and desire. Divakaruni explores this with notable frankness. Her female characters experience sexual desire, longing, and erotic agency, all central to their identities. However, desire in her fiction is rarely entirely liberating. It is closely linked to risk, prohibition, and the possibility of betrayal. In her narratives, female desire is both a powerful expression of independence and a force vulnerable to exploitation.

### **6.2 Narrating the Self: Voice and Silence**

Divakaruni's formal choices consistently foreground the relationship between female voice and female agency. The alternating first-person narration in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* grants both protagonists the power of self-narration, which constitutes a form of independence and a rejection of being spoken for. However, both narrators exhibit specific forms of unreliability: each withholds information from the other, misinterprets the other's inner life, and presents a narrative that is partial and perspectival.

This formal strategy enacts a feminist epistemological claim: there is no neutral perspective, and no narrative of women's experience can transcend the specific, embodied, and relationally embedded positions from which women speak. In Divakaruni's fiction, women's independence is not achieved by escaping their positions but by asserting the authority of their partial, situated knowledge, a concept Donna Haraway (1988) influentially termed 'situated knowledge.' The novels therefore model, through their formal structure, the epistemological foundation of the feminist politics explored in their content.

### **6.3 Community, Culture, and the Ambivalence of Tradition**

Divakaruni's engagement with Indian cultural tradition is multifaceted and resists straightforward categorization. Rather than simply celebrating or criticizing tradition, she exposes patriarchal violence while simultaneously honoring the

sustaining power of women's cultural practices, including cooking, storytelling, ritual, and female friendship, which endure within and alongside such violence. This nuanced approach has generated debate among critics. Some contend that Divakaruni aestheticizes the exotic for a Western audience (Bahri, 1998), whereas others argue that her work provides a more critical engagement with the contradictions inherent in South Asian women's lives (Bose, 2000).

This paper contends that such ambivalence constitutes a strength rather than a flaw. It reflects the genuine complexity of feminist practice in postcolonial contexts, where the outright rejection of cultural tradition risks forfeiting essential resources, such as female community, that underpin women's resistance. Divakaruni's fiction investigates the difficult middle ground in which culture functions both as a source of oppression and as a foundation for women's survival.

### **7. Critical Reception and Political Positioning**

Divakaruni's fiction has generated considerable critical attention and debate. Scholars including Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva (1996) contend that her work perpetuates Orientalist tropes by offering Western readers an exoticized portrayal of Indian womanhood, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging prevailing assumptions. This critique is particularly pertinent to *The Mistress of Spices*, in which the deployment of magical realism may serve to aestheticize the immigrant experience and obscure its material conditions.

Recent scholarship advocates for a more nuanced interpretation. Alpana Sharma (2010) asserts that Divakaruni's incorporation of magic and myth is not escapist; rather, it strategically utilizes imagination as a domain for feminine possibility. In this context, the limitations imposed by social reality are both recognized and symbolically transcended. From this vantage point, the magical elements in Divakaruni's fiction parallel what Patricia Yaeger (1988) characterizes as the 'honey-mad woman,' wherein the female literary imagination surpasses and subverts normative boundaries through verbal and formal excess.

Consideration of audience is also essential. Divakaruni primarily addresses a diasporic South Asian readership as well as the North American literary market. Her work engages with the double bind articulated by Gayatri Spivak (1993): postcolonial writers employing English for Western audiences risk functioning as native informants, thereby translating non-Western experiences into cultural commodities. Significantly, Divakaruni's female protagonists frequently serve as cultural translators, rendering themselves intelligible to American interlocutors while preserving an inner life that resists complete translation. This narrative strategy demonstrates a self-reflexive engagement with the politics of literary representation.

### **8. Conclusion**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction offers a sustained and nuanced analysis of gendered independence within the contemporary South Asian diaspora. This study demonstrates that, through the concept of 'partitioned sisterhood,' her novels portray female solidarity and self-determination as ongoing and courageous processes. These are not depicted as unequivocal victories or failures. Her protagonists attain independence by negotiating cultural, relational, and embodied realities with clarity and resilience. They do this frequently at personal cost, without the guarantee of a definitive resolution. The partitioning of sisterhoods in Divakaruni's work, brought about by marriage, migration, desire, and competition, is not depicted as a straightforward tragedy. Instead, this division is framed as a necessary stage in women's individuation—a complex process through which women assert their autonomy, rather than remaining within a protective yet restrictive community. Notably, sisterhood is not dissolved but transformed, evolving from fusion to federation and from symbiosis to solidarity among distinct individuals. This analysis has aimed to honour the specificity of Divakaruni's cultural and political project. Consequently, her fiction makes a significant contribution to feminist literary politics by rejecting the universalism that has historically undermined feminist claims, instead grounding feminist vision in the particular, the situated, the embodied, and the relational. For scholars of literature, feminist theory, and South Asian cultural studies, Divakaruni's partitioned sisterhoods represent a rich and still underexplored field of inquiry.

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