

Intersecting Identities and Women’s Agency: An Intersectional Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart* (1999) explores the intimate relationship between cousins Anju and Sudha, whose lives are shaped by family, marriage, tradition, social expectations, and geographical displacement. Both women experience the restrictions imposed on women in a patriarchal society, but their experiences differ. Their lives are shaped by family status, caste location, economic circumstances, physical appearance, education, marriage, motherhood, and migration. This paper uses Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality to examine how multiple social identities and power structures operate simultaneously in Anju’s and Sudha’s lives. An intersectional reading shows that gender alone cannot fully explain their experiences. Sudha’s position as a daughter from a socially complicated branch of the family, a wife, and a potential mother creates particular vulnerabilities. By contrast, Anju’s relatively privileged family position, educational aspirations, marriage, and migration to the United States create a different set of constraints. The novel thus complicates any single understanding of Indian womanhood. At the same time, Divakaruni presents female friendship and sisterhood as sources of emotional survival and agency.

Keywords / திறவுச் சொற்கள்: Intersectionality; gender; caste; marriage; female agency; sisterhood

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Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart*, first published in 1999, centers on Anju and Sudha, cousins who grow up together and regard each other as sisters. The novel follows them from childhood through adolescence, arranged marriage, separation, motherhood, migration, and personal crisis. Divakaruni describes Anju as the daughter of a distinguished upper-caste Calcutta family and Sudha as the daughter of its socially disfavored branch. From the outset, their different positions within the same extended family matter.

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality in her influential 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” She critiqued approaches that treated race and gender as separate, mutually exclusive categories. In her later essay “Mapping the Margins,” she developed the concept further, showing how overlapping structures of power can create experiences that no single category adequately explains. Applied to Divakaruni’s novel, intersectionality moves us beyond the claim that Anju and Sudha suffer simply because they are women. Their experiences are shaped by the interplay of gender with family status, caste, class, education, marriage, sexuality, motherhood, economic dependence, and geographic location. As a result, the two women experience the same social system differently.

An intersectional reading of *Sister of My Heart* therefore does more than identifies patriarchal oppression. It examines how patriarchal expectations interact with Anju and Sudha's particular circumstances. Both are women, but they occupy different positions within their family and society. Both marry, yet marriage shapes their lives differently. Both face restrictions, but education and migration change the forms those restrictions take. This approach also avoids reducing the novel to a simple opposition between "traditional India" and "modern America." Anju's migration does not automatically liberate her, just as Sudha's continued residence in India does not render her entirely powerless. Instead, each woman

Education and Gendered Expectations

Education is another important intersection in the novel. Both Anju and Sudha have aspirations that extend beyond conventional expectations for women. However, education holds different significance for each of them. Anju is strongly committed to continuing her education and imagines a life beyond conventional domesticity. Although Sudha is also intelligent and curious, she is more closely associated with expectations of marriage and domestic life. The circumstances of their adolescence eventually make marriage a greater priority than their educational aspirations. This is significant because gender does not operate independently of family expectations and social position. A young woman's educational future depends not only on her intelligence or ambition but also on her family's perception of respectability, the household's economic circumstances, and expectations surrounding marriage. A recent scholarly study by Reshmi Roy examines education, marriage, and hegemony in *Sister of My Heart*, underscoring the importance of these boundaries in understanding the novel. From an intersectional perspective, education becomes a site where individual aspiration confronts family authority. Anju's desire for education represents one form of resistance, while Sudha's more complex response illustrates how resistance is shaped by emotional loyalty and family responsibility.

Caste, Class, and Marriage

Marriage in *Sister of My Heart* is not merely a private relationship between two individuals. It is a social institution through which family status, caste, gender, economic security, and respectability are negotiated. Sudha's attraction to Ashok provides an important example. Her feelings cannot be understood simply as a conflict between love and arranged marriage; social hierarchy also constrains her romantic possibilities. Ashok's lower-caste position makes the relationship unacceptable within the family's social framework. Sudha's experience therefore demonstrates the intersection of gender and caste. This issue is significant because a purely gender-based reading might characterize Sudha as a woman whose romantic freedom is restricted by patriarchy. An intersectional reading adds another dimension: her choices are also regulated by the family's caste consciousness and concern for social status. The family thus controls female sexuality in part because women's relationships are linked to family honour. Sudha's body, marriage, and romantic choices become matters of collective concern. Her individual desires are subordinated to a social system in which caste and gender reinforce one another. The novel demonstrates how oppression can operate through several structures simultaneously. Sudha is restricted not only because she is female but also because her choices are shaped by her family's social position and its concern with preserving status.

The Construction of Female Identity

Marriage is an important institution through which gendered expectations are represented in the novel. Anju and Sudha both enter arranged marriages, but their experiences differ significantly. Sudha marries Ramesh and joins his family. Her new position places her under her mother-in-law's authority and subjects her to expectations concerning fertility and motherhood. Her identity becomes increasingly associated with her ability to have a child, particularly a male child. The novel portrays her vulnerability not only in relation to gender, but also to her position

as a married woman whose status within her husband's family is linked to reproduction. Gender, marital status, and motherhood intersect in shaping her experience. Pressure surrounding Sudha's pregnancy illustrates the relationship between gender, marriage, motherhood, and family lineage. Her body is treated as subject to the reproductive expectations of her husband's family. Anju's marriage produces a different experience. She moves to the United States with Sunil and encounters a new cultural environment. Her geographical mobility gives her access to possibilities unavailable to Sudha in India, while also creating isolation. Her experience demonstrates that increased mobility does not necessarily remove gendered constraints. The novel moves between India and America, making geographical movement a significant part of the characters' identities. It contrasts Anju's move to America with Sudha's continued residence in India, while portraying marriage as transformative in both women's lives. Anju's position changes, but she continues to negotiate marriage, sexuality, emotional dependence, and cultural expectations.

Motherhood, Reproduction, and the Female Body

Motherhood is another site of intersectional tension. Sudha's pregnancy illustrates how women's bodies can become subject to family and social expectations. The desire for a male heir places Sudha in a difficult position. Her pregnancy is treated not only as a personal event but also as a matter related to the continuation of her husband's family line. Motherhood therefore becomes a means through which patriarchal power operates. Anju's pregnancy and subsequent loss also reveal the emotional complexity of reproductive expectations. Her experience differs from Sudha's, illustrating that women do not form a homogeneous group. The novel presents reproduction as both biological and social. Pregnancy is experienced by an individual woman, while its meaning is shaped by family structures, gender ideology, marriage, and cultural expectations. An intersectional reading distinguishes between biological experience and its social interpretation. The female body becomes a site where multiple systems of power converge.

Migration and the Intersection of Gender and Culture

Anju's move to America introduces another dimension: migration. Migration changes Anju's geographical location but does not erase her cultural identity. She occupies an intermediate position between the culture in which she was raised and her new social environment. Her experience can be understood through the intersection of gender and cultural displacement. Moving across national boundaries does not remove a woman's prior social identity. Anju's understanding of marriage, family, sexuality, and female respectability continues to be shaped by her upbringing. At the same time, her new environment exposes her to different possibilities. The contrast between India and America allows the novel to examine how cultural location affects women's choices. The novel does not present America as a space of unqualified liberation. Anju's marriage continues to involve emotional difficulties, and Sunil's attraction to Sudha creates further insecurity. Geographical mobility changes the form of Anju's difficulties but does not eliminate them. This portrayal supports an intersectional understanding of migration, in which gender interacts with nationality, cultural identity, marriage, and emotional isolation.

Sisterhood as Resistance

One of the most significant aspects of *Sister of My Heart* is its portrayal of female solidarity. Anju and Sudha are more than cousins; through their emotional commitment to one another, they create an alternative form of family. Their sisterhood is important from an intersectional perspective because it offers a space where their multiple identities can be recognized without being reduced to a single category. They can be daughters, students, wives, mothers, migrants, and individuals while still seeing one another as complete human beings. Their solidarity also challenges the belief that women must compete for male approval.

Although jealousy and insecurity arise in their relationship, their deeper bond withstands these tensions. The title itself highlights this alternative kinship. The two women are connected not only by blood but also through shared experience and emotional recognition. The novel's conclusion suggests that resistance does not always take the form of dramatic rebellion. Sometimes it emerges through women's ability to care for, share with, and protect one another, and to create alternative forms of belonging.

Intersectionality and Female Agency

An important contribution of an intersectional reading is that it avoids portraying Anju and Sudha as merely passive victims. Both women make choices within restrictive circumstances. Sudha initially accepts many of the expectations placed upon her, but her experiences gradually lead her toward greater self-awareness. Anju, too, negotiates personal ambition, family loyalty, marriage, and cultural expectations. Their agency is neither complete freedom nor complete submission; it exists within social constraints. This is one of intersectionality's most important insights. Individuals experience structures of power while also negotiating them. Agency may take the form of resistance, adaptation, compromise, emotional solidarity, or the creation of alternative relationships. Divakaruni's women therefore cannot be understood through a simple victim-versus-liberated binary. Their identities remain fluid as their circumstances change.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* offers a complex representation of women's lives, in which gender intersects with caste, class, family status, education, marriage, motherhood, beauty, sexuality, culture, and migration. An intersectional reading demonstrates that Anju and Sudha experience patriarchy differently because they occupy different social locations. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory is particularly useful because it challenges single-axis approaches to identity. In the novel, Sudha's experiences of marriage and motherhood are shaped by gender, family honor, caste, reproductive expectations, and economic dependence. Anju's experiences are influenced by her relatively privileged family position, educational aspirations, marriage, migration, and cultural displacement. Their differences demonstrate that there is no single experience of Indian womanhood. At the same time, Divakaruni's emphasis on sisterhood offers an alternative to these structures. Ultimately, *Sister of My Heart* suggests that women's identities are never formed through gender alone.

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