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Reweaving Womanhood, Claiming Dignity: Sudha's Ambivalent Emancipation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart

Jennifer Flora Garrett
Assistant Professor
PG & Research Department of English
Holy Cross College, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. India

ABSTRACT

Modern Indian fiction in English has explored the inner lives, struggles, and aspirations of women, highlighting their quest for recognition and dignity within family and society. This paper examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel Sister of My Heart, focusing on Sudha's journey toward autonomy and selfhood. Divakaruni portrays women negotiating tradition, familial obligations, and personal freedom, within both Indian and diasporic contexts. Sudha's experiences emphasise resilience, self-assertion, and the pursuit of a meaningful existence. The study also examines how Divakaruni integrates cultural nostalgia, folklore, and Bengali linguistic markers, while questioning whether these cultural anchors suffice for women negotiating transnational and patriarchal spaces.

Keywords: PostColonial Feminism, Diaspora Literature, Gender and Autonomy, Cultural Memory, Reproductive Politics, Indian English Fiction, Transnational Womanhood, Representational Authority

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1. Introduction

1.1 Indian English Literature and the Politics of Representation

Indian English literature represents a complex site of cultural negotiation, particularly in its relationship to colonialism and its aftermath. Srivastava & Dwivedi, (2025). Rather than merely evolving from colonial influences within a medium of expression, Indian English literature must be understood as a contested terrain in which writers navigate the legacies of linguistic colonisation, cultural

subordination, and the demands of both metropolitan centres and postcolonial homelands. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as an expatriate Indian writer settled in the United States, occupies a particularly fraught position within this landscape. Her work simultaneously engages with Western feminist frameworks while claiming authority over Indian cultural and domestic spaces, a tension that requires critical interrogation rather than celebratory consolidation. Nisha, A (2016).

Diaspora, within postcolonial theory, cannot be reduced to mere alienation, rootlessness, and displacement. Instead, diaspora represents a space of contradictions simultaneously marked by loss and opportunity, complicity and resistance, institutional marginalisation and cultural authority. The expatriate Indian writer, particularly the woman writer, occupies a privileged position in global publishing markets precisely because she can commodify Indian cultural authenticity and feminine suffering for Western consumption. Agnihotri, (2014). This critical awareness must inform any analysis of Divakaruni's portrayal of Sudha's journey, lest we naturalise narratives that are fundamentally constructed about Indian womanhood and diaspora.

1.2 Divakaruni as Author, Immigrant and Cultural Translator

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent postmodern Indian writer in English whose works primarily focus on the experiences of immigrant women. Anitha, Jhansy LA; Saravanan, K. (2024). Her fiction reflects a deep concern for the struggles of contemporary women navigating cultural displacement and identity crises. Divakaruni portrays the transformation of women from traditional roles to independent individuals striving for selfhood and dignity. Her novels consistently explore themes of identity, freedom, and autonomy. Divakaruni's authority to speak about South Asian family life, her claim to write what she knows and feels, and her international recognition all depend upon particular conditions: her educational and class privilege, her strategic positioning as an authentic voice on Indian matters while residing in the US academy, and her ability to make Indian women's suffering legible and aesthetically compelling to Western metropolitan readers.

The statement that she "is at her best exploring themes of love, friendship, assimilation, self-analysis and discovery" Singh, Field, & Najmi, (2018) and that she finds in them a mode of feminist expression naturalises the category of feminist expression without interrogating what forms of feminism are legible within Western literary institutions and what forms remain occluded, unspeakable, or unmarketable.

2. Background

2.1 The Construction of the Suffering Indian Woman

Sister of My Heart centres on the intimate lives of two cousins. Yet, its narrative energy repeatedly returns to scenes that foreground female suffering—marital coercion, reputational vulnerability, and reproductive control. Nisha, A (2016). The novel's emphasis on Sudha's victimisation by patriarchal expectations, followed by her eventual departure for the United States, risks reproducing a familiar orientalist template in which Indian women appear primarily as oppressed

subjects who must be “rescued” through modern, often Western, paradigms of autonomy.

The Dark Secret surrounding Sudha’s birth—her father’s fatal quest for rubies to restore family honour—symbolically links her origins to a history of economic desperation and masculine failure. Yet the narrative psychologizes this history as a tragic family burden rather than situating it within broader structures of colonial extraction, class decline, and postcolonial economic marginalisation. By translating structural violence into familial melodrama, the text displaces attention from the material determinants of crisis and encourages readers to read moral failure and redemption at the level of individual characters. A postcolonial feminist approach insists on resuturing these severed connections between the domestic plot and the political economy.

2.2 The Paradox of Patriarchal Negotiation: Sudha’s Choice to Marry

Sudha’s forced marriage to Ashok following the cinema scandal reveals the fundamental entanglement of patriarchal control with processes of social reputation management that are themselves indexical of caste and class positioning. The invocation of the stain on Sudha’s reputation requiring marriage as remediation cannot be understood as merely traditional Indian patriarchy in contrast to Western liberation. Instead, this mechanism of gendered discipline operates through postcolonial bourgeois Indian nationalism’s investment in particular forms of feminine propriety and respectability.

Critically, the novel presents Sudha’s marriage as both inevitable (determined by patriarchal necessity) and her own choice (acceptance of marriage as preferable to continued disgrace). This rhetorical move obscures the conditions of non-choice that structure Sudha’s decision. Postcolonial feminist analysis interrogates how the novel simultaneously demands that we read Sudha’s agency as capacious while denying her the material or social conditions through which genuine autonomy might be exercised. The marriage is framed as Sudha’s path to dignity. Yet, it is precisely this marriage that sets in motion the patriarchal subordination and reproductive coercion that will later necessitate her flight to America.

3. The Reproduction Crisis: Where Postcolonial and Feminist Politics Diverge

The mother-in-law’s demand for foetal sex-selective abortion represents a critical juncture where the novel’s feminist consciousness must be examined through postcolonial and class-inflected analysis. Within Indian discourse, sex-selective abortion is frequently mobilised by upper-caste, upper-class modernisers as evidence of traditional or backward Hindu patriarchy requiring intervention. Yet this framing obscures how post-colonial development, neoliberal capitalism, and modernisation have intensified dowry demands and sex ratios in particular regions and communities.

Divakaruni’s portrayal risks universalising the mother-in-law’s demand for male offspring as representative of Indian patriarchy writ large, rather than attending to the specific material conditions of caste, class, regional economics, and state

policy that structure reproductive coercion. Sudha's refusal to abort is presented as feminist heroism. Agnihotri, (2014). Yet the novel provides limited analysis of how Sudha's class position (as a Chatterjee woman from a declining aristocratic family) shapes her ability to refuse such demands in ways unavailable to poor, rural, or lower-caste women facing the same pressures.

The critical tension here is between Western liberal feminism (which emphasises individual reproductive choice and bodily autonomy as universal goods) and postcolonial feminism (which must attend to how Western reproductive rights discourse has been weaponised against poor women of colour, particularly through population control narratives). Sudha's westward movement to solve problems at home might be read not as an escape toward freedom, but as relocation to a context where her class position and national origin grant her the cultural capital to frame her reproductive choices as politically progressive rather than as collaboration with anti-natalist or population-control ideologies.

3.1 The Western Feminist Script and diasporic success

The novel's presentation of Sudha's responsiveness to the calls of liberalist Western feminism requires a critical examination of what postcolonial feminists have identified as the complicity between Western feminism and imperialism. When Sudha chooses to live as an individual, not as a subordinate, and declares her intention to fight and win the battle of life alone, the novel endorses a particular vision of feminist selfhood rooted in Western individualism and romantic autonomy.

Postcolonial feminist critics have long interrogated how Western feminism's emphasis on individual liberation, bodily autonomy, and rejection of family structures may not adequately address or may actively undermine the strategies through which postcolonial women have historically negotiated agency within and through collective, kinship-based, or communal structures. Moreover, the invocation of Sudha as a woman like a tigress challenging society, while politically resonant, mobilises a confident orientalist femininity that may reinscribe rather than destabilise gendered hierarchies. Sudha's independence is achieved through migration to the United States, marriage dissolution, and economic self-sufficiency in a First World context, a trajectory unavailable to the vast majority of Indian women who lack her class resources, educational credentials, and national mobility.

4. Cultural Memory, Nostalgia and Postcolonial Displacement

Divakaruni's deployment of cultural nostalgia, like lullabies, folklore, and Bengali expressions and the novel's acknowledgement that "cultural memory is insufficient as an anchor" Singh, Field, & Najmi, (2018), gestures toward important postcolonial critique. Yet the analysis risks reproducing a dichotomy between cultural tradition (inadequate for feminist emancipation) and Western modernity (enabling autonomy and dignity). This binary obscures how postcolonial women might locate feminist possibilities within cultural and linguistic inheritances, or how such inheritances might be strategically reimagined rather than abandoned.

The untranslated Bengali words that sparkle within her text like uncut gems function as markers of literary prestige and authenticity for Western metropolitan readers, translating Indian cultural particularity into aesthetic value within white literary institutions. B. SUGANYA, A.J. MANJU, (2025).

5. Rethinking Dignity and Selfhood

The novel's central claim that genuine autonomy and dignity require conscious self-assertion and courage, rather than reliance on cultural heritage, presents a troubling hierarchy. This formulation suggests that cultural inheritance and feminist agency are oppositional rather than potentially mutually constitutive. It also risks implying that women who derive dignity from family, community, or religious belonging are less authentically autonomous than those who assert individual will against collective structures.

Postcolonial feminism, by contrast, seeks to understand how women navigate, negotiate, and, at times, deliberately work within collective structures to secure dignity, recognition, and meaningful lives. Sudha's journey, narratively framed as a triumphant movement from constraint to freedom, might alternatively be read as the painful dissolution of kinship and community bonds, without the guarantee that Western-style individualism will provide equivalent forms of belonging, recognition, or security. Srivastava & Dwivedi, (2025).

6. Tensions Between Indian and Western Feminisms

The most productive tension in this text lies precisely in its unresolved ambivalence about whether Sudha's emancipation represents a feminist triumph or a postcolonial tragedy of displacement. Agnihotri (2014). The novel simultaneously celebrates Sudha's migration to America as a source of independence while nostalgically mourning the loss of her connection to her homeland, family, and cultural belonging. This structural ambivalence might be read as the novel's honest grappling with the contradictions facing postcolonial women, or alternatively as a failure to coherently theorise the relationship between postcolonial and feminist liberation.

A sharper postcolonial feminist analysis would interrogate whether Sudha's victory represents genuine emancipation or successful integration into Western capitalist patriarchy, wherein she achieves economic independence and reproductive autonomy while potentially reinforcing Western women's class privilege and global hierarchies. Her ability to claim dignity through individual achievement depends upon her participation in systems of global inequality that position her as a model minority. This good immigrant woman successfully integrates and rejects her native traditions.

7. Key Insights

Unresolved Tensions:

The novel positions Western individualism and Indian cultural tradition as oppositional rather than investigating how they might be negotiated, resisted, or

reimagined together. Sudha's choice to refuse foetal abortion and later to divorce and migrate are presented as autonomous acts while the constrained conditions enabling or preventing such choices remain unexamined. The celebration of Sudha's independence through westward migration risks obscuring her continued complicity with global systems of inequality. Nisha, A (2016).

7.1 The Politics of Representation

Divakaruni's authority to narrate Indian women's experiences and suffering depends upon her positioning within Western literary institutions, raising questions about the relationship between representational authority and complicity. The aesthetic commodification of Indian cultural authenticity serves both literary and ideological functions, making it difficult to distinguish between recuperation and critique.

8. Suggested Directions for Future Research

Future work might extend this analysis by situating Divakaruni alongside other South Asian women writers in diaspora, tracing how different class locations, genres, and linguistic choices open or foreclose possibilities for imagining dignity, autonomy, and belonging beyond the binaries of "tradition" and "modernity".

8.1 Comparative Analysis with Other South Asian Women Writers in the Diaspora

A comparative study of Divakaruni's work with that of authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie, or Meena Alexander could illuminate how class, regional identity, linguistic heritage, and migratory trajectory shape divergent representations of autonomy, kinship, and cultural memory. Such comparisons might reveal whether the tension between tradition and modernity is a shared narrative template or whether alternative feminist imaginaries emerge in different diasporic contexts. Srivastava & Dwivedi, (2025).

8.2 Intersectional Class and Caste Analysis in Reproductive Narratives

The novel's treatment of sex-selective abortion and reproductive autonomy demands deeper engagement with intersectional frameworks that account for caste, class, and regional disparities in India. Future research could examine how upper-caste narratives of feminist resistance—as seen in Sudha's refusal to abort—contrast with the reproductive vulnerabilities faced by Dalit, Adivasi, or working-class women, whose agency is often constrained not only by patriarchy but by structural violence and state neglect. Anitha, Jhansi LA; Saravanan, K. (2024).

8.3 Re-evaluating "Cultural Memory" as a Site of Feminist Praxis

Rather than framing cultural memory (folklore, lullabies, language) merely as nostalgic or insufficient, scholars might explore how these elements can be reclaimed or reinterpreted as tools of feminist resistance. Research could investigate whether—and how—postcolonial women writers creatively rework myth, ritual, and oral tradition to articulate non-Western forms of subjectivity and solidarity.

8.4 The Politics of Aesthetic Authenticity in Global Publishing

Further inquiry is needed into how Western literary markets commodify "authenticity".

ntic" Indian womanhood. This includes analyzing editorial practices, marketing strategies, and reader expectations that shape the reception of diasporic fiction. Such research could assess whether texts like *Sister of My Heart* are primarily interpreted as cultural artefacts rather than as literary or political interventions.

8.5 Transnational Feminist Solidarities Beyond the Individualist Paradigm

Future work might explore narrative models that move beyond the binary of "oppressed Indian woman" versus "liberated Western self." This could involve identifying texts—diasporic or not—that envision collective, community-based, or translocal forms of feminist agency that do not require migration, economic privilege, or the disavowal of cultural belonging as prerequisites for dignity.

8.6 Queer and Non-Heteronormative Readings of Kinship and Care

Although *Sister of My Heart* centers heteronormative marital and maternal structures, future studies could apply queer theoretical lenses to interrogate alternative intimacies—such as the intense bond between Sudha and Anju—as potential sites of resistance to both patriarchal and nationalist logics of family and reproduction.

By pursuing these avenues, scholars can move beyond celebratory or reductive readings of diasporic feminist fiction and instead engage critically with the layered contradictions that define postcolonial women's lives across borders.

9. Conclusion

Sister of My Heart offers a compelling narrative of diasporic womanhood that has understandably attracted critical attention for its representation of Indian women's struggles and desires. This article has argued, however, that the novel's most important contribution lies not in its endorsement of Sudha's journey as a straightforward feminist triumph but in the unresolved tension it stages between postcolonial belonging and Western liberal models of emancipation. Sudha's ability to "reweave" her womanhood and claim dignity is inseparable from her class privilege, linguistic capital, and access to diasporic mobility, even as it gestures toward the ongoing constraints faced by those who cannot leave. The text thus occupies an ambivalent position: it exposes the violences of patriarchal kinship and reproductive control, while simultaneously channelling its heroine into a familiar script of individual liberation that risks obscuring global inequalities and alternative genealogies of feminist agency.

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