

A Study of Multiple Narrative Devices in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire*

Sujatha Girish¹, Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury²

¹Research Scholar, School of Arts & Humanities, REVA University, Bengaluru, India

²Professor & Director, School of Arts & Humanities, REVA University, Bengaluru, India

*Corresponding Author:

Sujatha Girish

Email: sujathagirish19@gmail.com

Abstract: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian diasporic writer who wears many caps as a writer of multiple genres. Her literary works have brought many laurels to her credit. She is a gifted postcolonial writer with great insight into human psychology. Most of works reflect her connect with Indian roots, culture and traditions which are portrayed in her books in an effective and a convincing manner. Her narrative techniques make her a distinguished story-teller. Readers all over the world have acknowledged her abilities as a powerful writer who enthrals the audience with varied themes, creativity and vivid imagery. She uses a combination of back story, analeptic reference or flash back, prolepsis or flash forward to set the plots. Various narrative techniques like, the First-Person narration, Magical Realism, Multi-Perspectivity, analogy, Second-Person narration, Stream of Consciousness and Third-Person Narration are used deftly by Divakaruni. This paper seeks to explore the multiple narrative techniques employed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novels *Sister of My Heart* and its Sequel *The Vine of My Desire*.

Keywords: narrative techniques, analeptic reference, prolepsis, First Person narration, Magical realism, Multi-Perspectivity, analogy, Second Person narration, Stream of Consciousness, Third Person Narration.

INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's popularity as a writer owes a great deal to her expertise in juxtaposing various narrative techniques, both conventional and unconventional, which lend great authenticity to her stories. *Sister of My Heart* [1] is a soul touching novel which celebrates sisterhood and family bonding. It is a story of two cousins, Sudha and Anju who are born on the same day, under similar circumstances and grow up in the same Chatterjee household. They are brought up by their mothers and aunt whom they fondly call as, Gauri ma, aunt Nalini and Pishi ma. All these factors make them grow so fond of each other that they call each other 'Sister of My Heart'. Divakaruni narrates the story in two parts. The first part of the book is titled 'The Princess in the Palace of Snakes' and the second part is called 'The Queen of Swords.' The titles are relevant to the changing circumstances in the life of the cousins. Dividing the book into two parts serves as an effective narrative style which enables the readers to connect with the changing lives of the protagonists as there is an evident shift in the lives of Sudha and Anju.

The first part describes the girlhood days of Sudha and Anju's lives, their teenage stages and their marriages. Sudha decides to sacrifice her love for Ashok and gives up her plans of eloping with him, to

save the marriage of her dearest cousin Anju when she overhears Anju's father-in-law pronouncing that if the girl's family has any incident which will cause dishonour to the family, he would disown his daughter-in-law. The marriage separates the otherwise inseparable cousins physically as well as emotionally. Sudha gets married to Ramesh and moves to a small town in West Bengal from the Chatterjee mansion in Kolkata while Anju marries Sunil and moves to California. The second part tells about their marital lives, the challenges they face, their pregnancies and the changing equations between the cousins. When Sudha decides to walk out of her marriage to save her unborn girl child, Anju supports her. She thinks America is a better place for Sudha to bring up her daughter as a single parent. Anju feels that in the patriarchal Indian society, Sudha will have to face too many hurdles. When Sunil does not support the idea and quotes financial commitments as the reason, Anju who is also pregnant takes a drastic decision of taking up a job along with her studies to earn and save so that she can send tickets to Sudha and her daughter Dayita to come to America so as to support the sister of her heart. She does so at the cost of her health which leads to her miscarriage. She is so devastated that she goes into depression. Ashok is willing to marry Sudha and accept her daughter Dayita. But Sudha feels her cousin needs her the most and she also dreams of giving a better

lifestyle to her daughter at America. So Sudha decides to fly to America to help her cousin overcome the worst sorrow of her life, though she is aware of the bitter truth that Anju's husband Sunil is attracted to her.

The author uses an appropriate technique of narration by giving voices to both her protagonists, Sudha and Anju, who tell the story alternatively. The story unfolds through their voices. This '**First Person narrative**' technique used by Divakaruni lends authenticity to the plot as the readers get to know the story from the perspective of both Sudha and Anju. It is through their words that readers get to understand their bonding. The title of the book too lays emphasis on a relationship which is beyond any blood ties. The First Person narration of Sudha and Anju highlights the "strong bond of sisterhood that enables the author to undermine the myth of the Prince Charming, as Sudha seeks fulfilment in being courageous and indomitable as the Queen of Swords. Clearly Divakaruni advocates female bonding as a means of resisting the patriarchal structures [2]. Reflecting on her attachment for Sudha, Anju says, "I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart" [1]. Sudha's words too echo similar sentiments - "Dear Anju, for whom love means that we must want the same thing, always. That we must be the same [1].

Other than the prominent use of First Person narration, the author also employs the '**Multi-Perspectivity**' which refers to a tale told from the point of view of multiple characters that project various perspectives, views and emotions used in the novel and is highly effective to make the readers understand the mindset of Anju and Sudha and their reactions towards the same circumstances of their lives. Throughout the novel, we come across many such examples deftly conveying the emotions and the feelings of the cousins towards each other.

'**Analyptic reference**' or '**flash back**' is also used in abundance by the author creating an everlasting impact on the minds of the readers. Both the protagonists recall their childhood memories with great fondness. In Anju's narrative, she describes how aunt Nalini would share the story of her difficult labour during Sudha's delivery with her tea-time friends. When Anju's mother Gouri hears about Nalini's labour pain, though she also has delivered Anju the same day, she walks up to Nalini with her baby in her arms and places it on Nalini's stomach.

The death of the girls' fathers is never discussed in the house. Pishi tells Sudha that they should know about their past. Sudha persuades her to tell the secret. Pishi ma unfolds the dark secret before Sudha which haunts Sudha for years to come in her life. Pishi ma narrates the past incidents of Gopal and Nalini,

Sudha's parents and their entry into Chatterjee mansion, gaining the trust of Bijoy, Anju's father, Gopal's instigation to go on an expedition to find a precious stone hidden in a cave in the deep jungles of Sundarban, an adventure which made the young men to leave behind their pregnant wives at a crucial stage with no other man to take care of the household in their absence and never to return. This truth shakes up Sudha. She understands that in no way she is actually related to Chatterjee house and Anju. It was due to a series of lies told by her parents that they could make place for themselves in the Chatterjee house. Sudha is troubled by a deep sense of guilt - "The shame of their lies floods my head with thick crimson. Shame and more shame because others had watched them masquerade, first with suspicion and then with knowledge. Pishi and surely if Pishi, Gouri Ma too. Watching them and me, knowing us for who we were long before I did [1]. As the story progresses, the author goes back to the past incidents to give the readers an insight into her protagonists' mind. With this realization of her real status in the Chatterjee household, Sudha is able to view her bonding with Anju in a better way. It was truly a relationship of the heart which "sustains them when Sudha is divorced for refusing to abort her girl child and Anju has a devastating miscarriage. Their bonding as a succour against the troubles in a woman's life – pregnancy, threat of divorce, marriage etc is significant from the feminist point of view [3].

Divakaruni uses '**Magical Realism**' extensively in *Sister of My Heart*. It is a narrative technique which describes the events in a real world setting with magical trappings using fairy tales, myths, the local customs and beliefs. Anju and Sudha grow up listening to lots of fairy tales, myths and beliefs. This aspect influences their personality, more so in case of Sudha. The novel begins with the story of Bidhata Purush, the God of Destiny, who decides the fortune of a child - "They say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born, the Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be [1]. When Anju realises that Sudha has fallen in love with Ashok, she wonders about the power of love and asks Sudha for an explanation. Sudha tells the story about the 'Princess in the Palace of Snakes', a fairy tale which they both have heard from Pishi ma, to make Anju understand her irresistible love for Ramesh. She compares herself to the princess who lived in an underwater palace filled with snakes which were beautiful. She also compares Ashok to the prince who meets the princess by chance. She is so charmed by him that the snakes fail to please her anymore - "When he spoke, she knew she would never be satisfied with the wordless songs of her serpent companions again [1]. The painting of dragons on the tea cups used to serve tea also has a reference to myth about the dragons. Pishi ma is a treasure chest of fairy tales and myths. She

mentions that the cups were handed over to Anju's grandfather by a travelling Chinese prince who said that the dragons have special powers. They would grant a wish to the person who pleases them. In one of Anju's narrations, she recalls the incidents of their childhood. As children, Anju and Sudha acted out fairy tales. Sudha was always the captured princess and Anju, her prince, who would run into trouble to rescue her. Incidentally in real life too it is Anju who comes to Sudha's rescue when she faces challenge of aborting her child by advising her to follow her heart. When Sudha meets Ramesh at Kalighat on the pretext of visiting the Goddess, she feels guilty for using the Goddess as an excuse. But she justifies herself by referring to the mythological story in which Goddess Parvathy left home against the wishes of her parents to follow Lord Shiva, her beloved, and seeks forgiveness of Goddess Kali. Sudha waits for falling stars at nights as she believes if a wish is made by looking at a falling star, it comes true - "The death of a star, the birth of a new joy in your life. Isn't that how the Universe balance things?" [1]. There is an instance in the novel where Sudha sees only one falling star and decides to make a wish for Anju's happy married life and at the same time thinks if Anju and she could marry the same man like the heroes in the old tales, like Arjuna and Krishna so that they could be together forever. As a strange and unfortunate coincidence this wish comes true in the sequel, *The Vine of Desire*, [4] in which Sunil, Anju's husband falls in love with Sudha.

The narrative style of '**Analogy**' employed by the novelist uses various comparisons to beautify and make her narrative style more impactful. Analogy is used to depict not only the situations but also the characters. Singhji's ugly face is compared to a mountain peak that has withstood a great ice storm. Sudha's stay at home without going to college as her mother insists is compared to a state of suspended coma. She wonders if she will ever be out of her prison and says, "Will I have the strength? Or will I be like a too-tame house bird who prefers her cage to the vast frightening blue of the sky?" [1]. Her mental state truly reflects being in a stage of suspended coma. Another example of analogy can be seen when Anju considers Sudha's love as the dangerous current that is sweeping her away from the shore. The movement of the white clouds is compared to the glide of carefree swans. When Anju gets marriage proposal from Sunil's family, she thinks, "Oh, why can't I just remain single? Why must I be yoked to a man like a cart to a buffalo?" [1]. But when she meets him at her mother's book store, she is impressed by his charming ways and agrees to marry him. She describes her post married life in America in an intriguing way - "It is like floating on a giant bed of cotton candy, incredibly light and pink and sweet, but with sudden hollows into which you can tumble any

minute [1]. The analogy tells volumes about her adjustment problems in America.

In the first part of the novel, Sudha is compared to the princess in the palace of snakes which is symbolic of a timid Sudha who compromises and sacrifices due to the rules, regulations and expectations of a patriarchal society. In the second part of the novel, she is brave enough to walk out of her marriage with Anju's consultation to save her unborn daughter, a flame flickering in the centre of her body. She compares herself to the 'Queen of Swords', the Rani of Jhansi, who is a courageous queen. To bring Anju out of her melancholic mood after her miscarriage, Sudha tells a tale to Anju in America over the phone: "Looking down, she saw it was a sword, a flaming sword made of light, and then another, one for each hand. Whirling the swords around her head like the Goddess Durga, like the Rani of Jhansi, the queen left the palace, and none dared to prevent her [1]. This kind of analogies serves the purpose of giving motivation to Anju.

The novel, *The Vine of Desire* [4], the sequel of *Sister of My Heart* tells us about the lives of the protagonists Sudha and Anju, the changing equations between them, its effects on Sunil and Dayita, their aspirations and disappointments, the cultural clashes and feelings of alienation. Anju, who was depressed after her miscarriage, feels better after the arrival of Sudha and baby Dayita. Sudha motivates Anju to continue her studies and takes care of her household chores entirely. Anju gets too involved in her college and studies while Sunil's attraction and desire for Sudha grows immensely. Dayita becomes his baby, the child he was longing for. The bonding between Dayita and Sunil amazes Anju and Sudha alike. Sudha feels disillusioned about her life in America as she spends all the time cleaning Anju's home and cooking other than taking care of her daughter. Sudha's interaction with Sara in the park makes her think of a job for herself so that she can be independent. She meets Lalit, a second generation NRI, at a party. The growing intimacy between Sudha and Lalit worries Sunil. He confides in Sudha about his dissatisfaction with his marriage and asks if Sudha will marry him after his separation with Anju which startles Sudha. In a weak moment, Sudha gives in to Sunil's physical desire. But afterwards she is unable to digest the fact that she got into physical relationship with her sister's husband and leaves Anju's home to be a caretaker of an ailing old man, Mr. Sen. She refuses to marry Ashok, declines Lalit's proposal as well, as she is determined to take care of her life all by herself. She decides to return to India with the recovered old man as his caretaker so that she can provide a secured and stabilised life to Dayita. Before her departure, she makes it a point to meet Anju who has separated from Sunil and reconcile with her. She

tries to mend her relationship which had got soured due to unfortunate incidents.

We see a wide spectrum of varied narrative styles and techniques used in this novel too. Like its prequel, this novel too is divided into two parts. The first part, 'Subterranean Truths' tells us about the life of the two cousins in America after Sudha's arrival. The second part 'Remembrance and Forgetting' unfolds Sudha's new journey as a caretaker of an elderly ailing Bengali old man, Mr. Sen in Berkeley and her decision to return to Bengal with him to a small place, Jalpaiguri in Bengal.

The author uses a harmonious blend of '**Third Person narrative**' and '**First Person narrative**' techniques in the book. The novel begins with Third Person narration where the author reveals Anju's irreversible sense of loss due to miscarriage. As the story progresses we see that the author gives voices to many characters and we hear the story from their perspectives. This adds to the dimension of '**Multi-perspectivity**' too. When Sudha gets completely engaged with cooking and cleaning of Anju's apartment, she whispers her discontent to her daughter, "Oh Dayita, now we're in America - but what shall we do now?" [4]. The author gives voice to Sunil too in this book. He finds his lost baby Prem in Dayita. He grows so fond of her that she becomes his best companion. He shares all his experiences, opinions and feelings with her. At one instance he says to Dayita, "Between you and me, kid, it's always going to be the truth. And if there is a time when I can't give you that, I'll say nothing at all [4]. Lalit is another male character who gets a voice in the story. He is deeply fascinated by Sudha. Though Sudha is aware of the fact, she tells him in a crystal clear manner that she treats him as her good friend. The author presents his monologue in a distinguished way by using the headings... 'what I said' and 'what I didn't say'. When Lalit meets Sudha after a long time since her sudden disappearance from Anju's home, he recalls his conversation with her -

What I said

"How about some coffee before I drop you home? Does the Café Monaco sound good to you?"

What I didn't say

"All right, since you won't tell me what happened, you leave me no choice but to imagine my own scenarios" [4].

This narration creates an authentic feeling of the character's turmoil presented from his own perspective.

The use of '**Stream of Consciousness**' narrative technique is evident in the monologue and introspection of the major characters. As Anju thinks about the loss of her child, she says to herself "If only I'd listened to the doctor and not overworked myself..." [4]. As Anju tries to analyse Sudha's

decision of declining Ashok's proposal, again we see her introspecting - "If she weighed a man's devotion against a cousin's need, the security he offered against uncertainty, which is all she has to give Sudha, which way would the scales tip?" [4]. When Sunil sees Sudha and Dayita sleeping in his bed, unable to resist his desire, he kisses her. Recollecting the incident Sudha says to herself -

"I fear my body. I fear his. Because bodies can pull at us, whispering

Why not.

I deserve more.

I am young, and life is passing.

What will our bodies do next time when we are alone?" [4].

The author treats the characters as bodies sans souls and gives a natural outlook for human desire without attaching moral fear. These examples of Stream of Consciousness techniques make us aware of the author's intention to create the sense of authentic portrayal through interior monologues.

A very impressive technique used by Divakaruni is blending the element of '**myth**' in her stories. When Sudha experiences Sunil's irresistible desire for her, she is reminded of the story she had heard from Pishi. It is the story of the beautiful queen Damayanti who faced lot of hardships in her life because of her unparalleled beauty. She recollects - "Be careful", Pishi had ended. "A woman's beauty can be her wealth, but also her curse." [4]. Sudha tells the story of *Ramayana* to Dayita, about the dangers Sita faced by crossing over the 'Lakshman Rekha', the magic circle drawn by Lakshmana around her. She tries to analyse her own life and feels that by leaving Ramesh, she has already stepped out of her 'Lakshman Rekha'.

'**Analeptic reference**' or flashback technique also features in the story. In fact, the novel begins with flash back narrative technique where Anju speaks to Prem, her dead son. Use of '**Backstory**' narrative technique in the novel is quite effective. The author tells the story that precedes events in the story being told, at times, past events or background that adds meaning to the current situations. Anju and Sudha display a common tendency - 'telling stories to their children'. Anju talks to her unborn child, Prem, about her childhood and her bonding with Sudha. Sudha tells Dayita many stories about her life. Sunil too tells Dayita his stories and past incidents. This technique of narrating story through subplots or small stories enables the readers to know the characters better. Back story is also used in the disguise of analeptic reference or the flashback technique many a times. In fact, the second part of the book titled 'Remembrance and Forgetting' is about the characters recollecting their past and trying to move on forgetting the bitter part of the past. Sudha

remembers how unfair life has been to her - "So many violences done to me. My mother pounding my life into the shape of her desires. My mother-in-law wanting to cut from it whatever she considered unseemly. My husband backing away, with his narrow, apologetic shoulders. Sunil plunging into the centre of my body, corrosive with need. Each time, I made myself plaint. I gave a bearable name to what they did. Duty..." [4]. This kind of narrative in the form of back story and flash back where the characters take the readers to the past to connect them with the present gives an incandescent touch to the story.

Another narrative technique used frequently by Divakaruni in the novel is, '**Flash forward** or **Prolepsis**', in which the narrative temporarily jumps forward in time representing the events expected. Once Anju resumes her studies and gets busy with her college and Sudha takes in charge of Anju's entire house hold chores, though she is very comfortable somewhere Anju feels insecure as well. To let out her feelings she starts writing letters to her father who is no more. In one such letter, she mentions, "Here is a fact. I am of no use to my household. If I disappeared tomorrow, Sudha would grieve, Dayita would look for me behind curtains and doors wondering if this were some long game of hide-and-seek. Sunil would call the police. But soon, they would draw together, the way flesh pulls itself close to heal a wound. Not even a scar would remain." [4]. This highlights the fact that Anju gets so preoccupied with her college studies that her role at home front starts diminishing leading to such a severe insecurity that her mind thinks of a situation in her absence. Similarly, When Sudha proposes the idea of relocating to Bengal to Mr. Sen and convinces him, he starts imagining his life with Sudha as his caretaker and Dayita in Bengal. He says, "We'll take a boat to where the Karala River meets the Tista, to watch the sunset. There are so many rivers, each one different. We can go fishing on the Angrabhasa. On the Dudua. We'll rent a jeep and go up to Assam road to the tea gardens, to see the mist coming over the Bhutan hills. Do you think you will like that?" [4]. The narration helps readers to locate Mr. Sen's hopes and dreams of returning to his motherland.

Divakaruni's texts deftly engross the readers with their varied narrative styles bringing out the dilemma, the hidden emotions and the secret desires of her characters while taking the readers into confidence. Other than the conventional narrative devices, Divakaruni also uses **dreams**, **letters** and **assignments** as means of expressions. Once Sudha lands in America, the anxious mothers from Calcutta write letters to Anju and Sudha to keep them informed about the happenings back home and to communicate their apprehensions, feeling of loneliness, concern for the growing Dayita, etc. The reader gets to understand the progression of the narrative through these letters. The letters also give an

insight into the nature of the characters, the bonding and mutual relationship between the people who exchange the letters. Anju takes to writing letters to her dead father to let out her frustrations, dilemmas and insecurities. Taking the example of one such letter, we understand what Anju was going through:

"Dear unknown father -

It's a bit awkward, as you might imagine, writing to a person who died before I was born. A man I hated all my growing-up years because he destroyed his family." [4].

This letter of Anju ends with a soul-stirring question, "Father, what was it you loved so much that you had to leave us for it?" [4].

Sudha writes two separate letters for Anju and Sunil before she leaves their home to communicate about her decision. She writes:

"Dear Anju,

I'm sorry to leave like this. I don't know what else to do. I came here to help you put your life together - but all I've done is disrupt it. I'm leaving before I make things worse. With me gone, hopefully the tension between you and Sunil will die down." [4].

And then to Sunil -

"Sunil,

I can't give what you want. For me, you'll always be my sister's husband. And I'll always be your wife's sister. We can't forget it, no matter what we convince ourselves of right now." [4].

The author tells us about the incidents and progress of the story effectively through these letters. The well-being of the three mothers, Sudha's disappearance from her home, the death of Sunil's father, the death of Singhji, the second marriage of Ramesh - all these incidents are exposed to the readers through the letters written by the characters.

Another unique narrative technique employed by Divakaruni is the use of **assignments** submitted by Anju as a college student to get an insight into her state of mind. These assignments speak Anju's heart out. Anju in her assignment on 'Loss' writes, "The loss of my son, which has already occurred. And the loss of my husband, which has began to occur, and which I cannot stanch." [4]. The readers empathise with Anju's feelings of loss and despair. Anju puts herself in the shoes of Sunil when she writes the assignment 'My Name is Sunil' - "Then she came back into my life. Flew all the way from India with her melted bronze eyes. A dislocated gear slammed back into place in my head, and I, Sunil, kicked off morality and obligation like a pair of worn-out shoes." [4]. This assignment indicates to the readers that Anju was well aware of Sunil's attraction and desire for her sister of heart, her cousin, Sudha. Anju assignments bring to light the changes in the relationship between Anju and Sudha primarily because of "the unlikely relationships they

form with men and women in the world outside the immigrant Indian community as well as with their families in India” which “profoundly transform them, forcing them to question the central assumptions of their lives.” [5]. Anju’s assignment on ‘Draupadi’s Garden’ takes us to the mythical world. She gives a different perspective to Draupadi’s character by empowering her as the queen of Hastinapur after the great war of Kurukshetra - “What would Draupadi plant in her garden? Would it be the agnirekha, flame-flower, flower of virtuous courage, flower of the heroes her husbands have become? Is it asha-lata, the mythical desire vine which gives you whatever you wish for? No, none of these.” [4]. This assignment portrays the confusions, the dilemmas Anju had in her mind. It also expresses her secret desire to be an independent and empowered woman.

Divakaruni uses **dreams** as an effective means of narrative. After a series of interconnected dreams, Sudha finds a solution to all her problems, a decision which helps her to reach back to her homeland without financial burden on her, before her visa expires. Sudha in her dreams hears a male voice calling out ‘Dayitaa, Sudha...’, a woman packing up an apartment and a life, her hands stained with pomegranate juice the colour of blood. Through her dreams, Sudha revisits her past and decides about her future too - “In my dream, I say to the old man, I will give you what you want the most in the world, but you must do as I say.” [4]. She convinces Mr. Sen to agree to take her as his caretaker along with Dayita to Bengal. Thus, an ordinary phenomenon like dream is powerfully used by the author to connect it to the structure of the plot.

An analysis of Divakaruni’s novels, particularly *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* reveals the expert use of various narrative techniques. This paper attempts to explore Divakaruni’s unique narrative techniques while highlighting that she uses many unconventional styles to make her plot more authentic. This paper seconds the opinion of many literary critics that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a brilliant author with gifted writing skills. She leaves the readers entranced through the employment of multiple and unique narrative techniques which have an everlasting impression on the minds of the readers.

REFERENCES

1. Divakaruni, Banerjee C. *Sister of My Heart*. London: Black Swan, 1999.
2. Aparupa M. “Reconstructing the ‘other’: Revisionary Mythmaking in Divakaruni’s *Sister of my Heart*” in *Research Scholar*. 2014; 2(4).
3. Mishra, Samita, Das S. “Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart* and the Feminist Project of Sisterhood. *IJELLH*. 2015; 3(9).

4. Divakaruni, Banerjee C. *The Vine of Desire*. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.
5. Shaheen H. *Women’s Voices in the Select Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Shashi Deshpande*. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 2017; 3(13).