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## **An Unconventional Characters in *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

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### **Abstract:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned figure in contemporary Indian literature, known for her realistic portrayal of characters that leave a lasting impact on readers. This paper analyzes the unconventional characters in *The Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who defy societal norms and challenge traditional gender roles. Some male characters she portrays are not typical in their behavior and perspective of gender discrimination. The paper analyses the unconventional traits of human characters who go against the traditional roles and help each other to make life happy and easier. Unconventional characters suggest their thoughts, feelings, psychic presence, longings, dreams and desires. Through descriptive analysis, the paper explores how these characters navigate their struggles and support each other, transcending conventional boundaries to pursue happiness and fulfillment

**Keywords:** Unconventional, Patriarchy, Identity, psychic, desires, gender.

### **Introduction:**

The identities of human beings in modern times are seen changing constantly. New ways of defining identities and perceiving them have come into establishment. The identities of men and women has been shifted from marginalized to the center. Breaking of boundaries has become important for the destabilization of societal foundations incorporating patriarchy. Rejecting the conventional and traditional values and replacing them with new ones is a needful task. The drawn borders of society have been broken and rejected. The emergence of new women and men has

contributed in resisting the imposed identities and societal norms. The dependency of women as well as men on other human beings for survival and growth is lessening its effect. Women who were considered backward and inferior to men were shouldering the responsibilities.

Patriarchy has been the dominant force in establishing discriminatory social systems. It played a major role in shaping the consciousness of every woman living on earth as inferior and unequal to men. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, many women writers started speaking against patriarchy through their writings. The breaking of paths has enabled human beings to walk on the paths created with their own desires. The dominant society created gender roles to play and perform within the given constraints.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been an influential voice in feminist literature in India. She has criticized the evils of Indian patriarchy. She has spoken about the harsh conditions of women in Indian society. Her characters are seen breaking the stereotypes irrespective of their gender. Her male characters have been supportive of feminine sensibility and are seen challenging barbarity imposed by patriarchy on human beings in general. Chitra Banerjee's work discusses the plight of women in Indian patriarchy. Through her writing she provides multiple identities the modern world has to offer to a woman and how she can assume and play multiple roles in modern times.

“Unconventional characters are that they do not behave in the same way as most other people in their society. Unconventional protagonists had a mirror to our preconceived notions, and they resonate with readers because they reflect the complexities of gasp! - real life.” This paper attempts to study and analyze the portrayal of unconventional characters in the novel Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* deals with the difficulties faced by women and how they tackle their problems and difficulties. The novel is dominated by female characters of three mothers Gauri Ma, Nalini, Pishi Ma and two young cousin sisters Anju and Sudha. Gauri Ma and Nalini support one another in bringing up their daughters without their fathers in poor financial condition.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni painted an unconventional character who act against the patriarchal dominance mainly prevalent in society breaking away from the traditional roles. “Unconventional characters can shatter stereotypes and inspire empathy, show us that heroism isn't limited to physical strength, that imperfection is beautiful, and that courage can emerge from



vulnerability. In a world that still boxes us all into categories, unconventional protagonists remind us that people are multifaceted”.

This paper attempts to study and analyze the portrayal of some unconventional characters in *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which depicts the men's and women's roles unconventional. Generally, men are dominant in patriarchal society, they are the breadwinners for their family. Women have to depend for everything on men. Even all main decisions are taken by men while women are expected to follow them. Sunil is a young and charming character who is portrayed in a way by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which is far away from the stereotypical image in society. He is a talented computer scientist who gets a job in America and marries Anju. He is not following any traditions when he comes to see Anju for the first time. He directly meets her in a bookstore without telling his real identity. Sunil is a compassionate son and a caring and empathetic husband. When Anju wants to be with her mother yet she joins Sunil in America, he agrees immediately with a polite request that she could visit his mother occasionally. “May be that would be best” he says, “I had hoped... But will you come and see my mother once in a while? She has taken a liking to you, and as you have seen, there aren't too many pleasures in her life” (SMH 185).

Through the above quoted line, the author creates Sunil as a compassionate son who keeps a balance between mother and wife.

After marriage, Anju joins Sunil in America. He helps Anju to adjust to the new culture and new lifestyle of America. He also encourages her to continue her education to get a degree in English Literature which she loves a lot. He treats her with great care. He teaches her to drive and introduces her to his colleagues at the workplace. Anju admires all these facets of Sunil, “Unlike some of the other Indian husbands I know, Sunil has always encouraged me to feel comfortable in America. He taught me to drive and introduced me to his colleagues at work... and finally, though money has been short, he has been enthusiastic about my going to college to get a degree in literature.” When Anju was pregnant and disturbed by Sudha's problem, he takes the greatest care of her. He doesn't expect her to cook and order the food from outside. Even when she undergoes her miscarriage due to her carelessness, he never blames her for the cause of her child's death. Instead, he tries to comfort and understand her.

The novel *Sister of My Heart* revolves around the two younger cousins and their relationship as a sister. Both girls contrast each other in many aspects like beauty, ambition, attitude towards life, nature and their background. Anju is revolutionary whereas Sudha is obedient and quiet. Sudha follows obediently the strict rules of Chatterjee's house, but Anju opposes the mother and encourages them to move ahead into the modern world. Anju revolutionarily makes plans for a movie after skipping the class, Sudha opposes yet she has to agree with her. Sudha says, "as I walk forward, feeling the prick of a hundred eyes on my face, the smirk that says, Ah one of the Chatterjee girls get what she deserves" (SMH 55).

Sudha is obedient, but when her mother Nalini brings the proposal of Ramesh for her, she courageously writes a letter to Ashok. She even makes plans to elope and get married to him secretly. But knowing the adverse effect of eloping on Anju's marriage changes her mind from doing so. Sudha is submissive but she makes decisions so courageously to leave her in-law's house to save her unborn daughter, Dayita. Here she takes a stand and shows her courage to face the situation. After getting divorced from her husband Ramesh, Ashok again wishes to marry her, but Sudha rejects his proposal. She wants to be independent, so decides not to depend on any man. This is the stage of being independent and empowering of Sudha. Sudha joins Anju in America to have a secure future for herself and her daughter Dayita. Sudha who was brought up traditionally leaves her husband's house which was completely unexpected for her. The decision Sudha takes in the novel proves her courage. Sudha comes to America to create her identity and achieve freedom and independence.

Identity suggests the thoughts and feelings of an individual, his psychic presence, longings dreams and desires. After marriage, Anju migrates to America with her husband Sunil. She adjusted herself very cleverly to the new culture of America and its lifestyle. She is firm to continue her education and joins college to complete her degree in literature. Anju advises Sudha to leave her in-law's house to save her daughter and come to America. She wants to fulfill her childhood dream of starting her boutique. Anju works hard secretly to earn money for tickets to bring Sudha to America without telling Sunil. She doesn't want to depend on Sunil economically. Due to over-exertion, she loses her son, Prem. Self-respect is a factor that makes a woman fight against injustice.

There is unexceptional love between Sudha and Anju, it is their love for each other, that they both are ready to sacrifice anything in their life. Anju says, "In spite of all my insecurities, in



spite of the oceans that will be between us soon and the men that are between us already. I can never stop loving Sudha. It's my habit, and it's my fate" (SMH 173). When Anju's husband, Sunil attracted to Sudha's beauty, she hates Sudha. But Anju is concerned and shows a sisterly bond when she knows Sudha's pathetic condition. Immediately she tells Sudha that she must walk out from her conjugal bond to save her unborn child. Divakaruni's keen insight into the lives of women makes her paint a vivid picture of how women can overcome obstacles in their path and put forward their individuality through the characters.

One Such Unconventional character, Pishi Ma proves to be a strong woman, even when she leads an orthodox life of widowhood, "Dressed in austere white, her graying hair cut close to her scalp in the orthodox style" (SMH 4) Pishi Ma revolts against the social norms and gives her views about the solutions to Sudha's life. When Sudha comes to Chatterjee's house, leaving her in-law's house, she supports Sudha strongly and welcomes her. She gives strength and hope to Gauri Ma, Nalini and Sudha. She courageously says, "The true Chatterjee spirit, if there is such a thing, must live on in us. Us the women and the little on who's coming, whom we must be ready to welcome. For heaven's sake, Nalini, don't look so tragic you won't be out on the street" (SMH 248).

Pishi Ma seems an unconventional character who no longer cares for the age-old traditions and customs. Pishi Ma loves and cares both cousin girls equally, tells them stories, prepares their favorite dishes and always makes sure that the girls are well dressed.

Anju and Sudha were brought up in a family where women are heads. These women Gauri Ma and Nalini who are the mothers of these two girls take the responsibility of maintaining the house of Chatterjee due to the death of their husbands. Gauri Ma, Anju's mother who is a strong, brave, hardworking and practical woman comes from an old respectable family in Calcutta. She runs her family business, a bookstore to maintain the house. She is the one who supports Sudha when she comes to her maternal home, leaving her husband's house to save her unborn child. Moreover, she decides to sell out their old big house for Sudha and her daughter Dayitas's better future. Gauri Ma is the epitome of the superior emotional and psychological capacity of women. Traditionally rooted in the Indian culture, she compensates for the difficulties of their lot and gradually by her effort moves from fragility to strength.

Ramur Ma and Singhji are part of Chatterjee's house. Ramur Ma is a loyal servant and Singhji is a chauffeur who drives both Anju and Sudha to school. Sudha likes Singhji the best, trusts him and speaks only the necessary. Singhji is a soft-hearted person, who does not expect anything from the Chatterjee family. He takes care of both girls as his child, when Sudha comes to his house for help, he is shocked and says, "Sudha missy baba, you shouldn't be here, especially now that your marriage is being fixed" (SMH 103). He consoles Sudha and says, "Don't cry beti, crying does no good. I learned that when I lost my family" (SMH 103). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni creates this character, unlike other characters.

Through the letter to Sudha, Singhji reveals his real identity that he is her father. She understands that her father (Singhji) is not responsible for the murder of Anju's father. Singhji always has had a special bond with Sudha from the beginning. He helps Sudha in developing her love with Ashok. He is worried about Sudha and ardently asks Anju about Sudha. When Anju asks him whether they are going to be happy in their in-law's house, Singhji wisely says, "You must make your own happiness. You must be wise enough to recognize it when it comes and if it does not come in spite of all your efforts, you must do something about as well" (SMH 177-178).

In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni introduces readers to a cast of characters who defy societal norms and forge their paths in pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment. Anju and Sudha, the central protagonists, embody contrasting yet complementary qualities that drive the narrative forward. While Anju rebels against tradition with her fiery spirit and determination, Sudha displays quiet resilience and courage in the face of adversity. Central to the novel are also male characters like Sunil, whose compassionate and supportive nature challenges traditional notions of masculinity. Sunil's unwavering support for Anju and Sudha underscores the importance of equality and mutual respect in relationships, offering a refreshing departure from patriarchal expectations. As the narrative unfolds, Divakaruni paints a vivid portrait of a society in transition, where old traditions collide with the aspirations of a new generation.

### **Conclusion:**

In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni invites readers on a transformative journey, where unconventional characters challenge societal norms and redefine the boundaries of gender roles. Through descriptive analysis, we have explored the intricacies of Divakaruni's narrative, uncovering the motivations, struggles, and triumphs of her characters. As readers



immerse themselves in the vivid world of the novel, they are reminded of the transformative power of courage, solidarity, and the enduring quest for freedom. The characters create an impact in the reader's mind with their unconventional identity, breaking the norms of patriarchy and social constraints. Divakaruni creates characters and situations in her novel to let women decide their best course of action. She challenges traditional notions about the place of women in the home and believes in women making their own choices as per their own beliefs.

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