Chapter - III

The Conquest of Women

“There are many reasons why novelists write but they all have one thing common—a need to create an alternative world” - John Fowlers.

Indian writing in English remained as men's forte for many years. During the independence struggle a few women tried their hand in writing. After India became free, many women entered this arena and started contributing equally to the growth of Indian writing in English. The post-colonial women writers of India want to create a new world free from patriarchy. They are moving forward with strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world. They bring originality, versatility and indigenous flavour of the soil in their works. The women writers have blossomed spreading their individual fragrances. The first and most prominent women writers are Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who wrote poetry. But there was scarcity for prose and novel writing for a long time.

After the Second World War, there emerged a new track of woman fiction writers with a new vision. The
major earlier women novelists were Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Ruth Prawer Jhabwala. Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabwala present the realistic picture of India. The confrontation between the occidental and the oriental attitudes is shown in their works. Anita Desai's works mainly deal with the inner workings of the mind. She is noted for her psychological portrayal of her characters. At present, many Indian women novelists in English have made their permanent mark in the field of English fiction. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundathi Roy, Shobha De, Manju Kapoor, Mahasweta Devi, Gita Mehta, Dina Mehta, Anita Nair and Kiran Desai have climbed the ladder of success as Indian woman writers. Their works of art now belong not only to India, but also to the whole world. These writers have lost their “geographies of identity” (12). As a result, they feel a sense of loss and have an urge to look back. Salman Rushdie points out, “physical alienation from India, creates fiction.... imaginary homelands, India of the mind” (10). So there is a significant difference between Indian writers and immigrant writers.

The post-colonial women writers are the products of two cultures. As they are addressed as outsiders,
they have a longing for their homeland. Their works mostly aim at carving out their identities. Among the leading diasporic women writers are Uma Parameswaran, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, Meena Abdullah and Bharti Kirchner. There are many more writers to follow the streamline like Anjana Appachana, Kiran Desai, Sujata Massey, Indira Ganesan and Jhumpa Lahiri. All these writers strive to establish an identity in the foreign land.

Bharati Mukherjee can be aptly called the grand dame of post-colonial Indian literature. Mukherjee says that women writers adapt to their new culture with greater ease than men. As M.K.Nayak says, “Women are trained to please, been trained to be adaptable wives and that adaptability is working to women's advantage when we come over as immigrants” (35). By and large, most of the women writers focus their attention on the domestic spheres. They highlight the women's issues, some of them taking the feminist stance. A very few have taken up social themes for analysis. Though many have excelled in the subject they have taken, their range was initially limited. Their horizon expanded during the Post-colonial period. They mainly deal with
the sense of alienation, the question of identity, the
problem of adjustment and compromise and their status
as the doubly colonized women.

Divakaruni’s writings have been published over
fifty magazines which include “The Atlantic Monthly”
and “The New Yorker” and her works have been included
in over thirty anthologies. Her works have been
translated into eleven languages, including Dutch,
Hebrew and Japanese. Apart from her literary career,
she is a coordinator of ‘Maitri’, a free help-line that
is against domestic abuses faced by South Asian women.

She started her career as a poet and later she
switched over to fiction writing. According to her, a
poet or a writer should first be a good human being.
She says in an interview in March 1993, “I think that
if you're a good human being you have a better chance
of being a good artist because I think good art is made
of compassion. Compassion and empathy” (89). Divakaruni’s
works are partially autobiographical. She captures her
cultural dilemma in a magazine piece when she wrote
with a title “Born in the USA; Yet the Question ‘Where
Are You From?’.” In the article, she describes her
five-year old son, Abhay, returning home from school
one day and takes a bath, frantically trying, to wash
“the dirt colour” out of his skin. Divakaruni writes the complication of that action thus:

I began to realize what a challenge it would be to bring up my children in a country where all their lives their appearance would proclaim them "foreigners" where though they were born in America ... they would have to continually answer the question Where are you from? (90)

The Indian experience in America and the conflict between the tradition of her homeland and the culture of her adopted country is the focus of much of Divakaruni's writings. Her writings are diasporic in nature, which portrays the sufferings and insecurity of the immigrants. She tries to break the boundaries through her writings. Many minority writers like Cathy Song, Garret Hongo, Ai Young, Li Young Lee and Rita Dove influence her works. She is very much affected by Anna Akmatova's poem 'Requiem', in which the poet gives voice to the suffering women. She feels that apart from all these issues, magic is very important in a work of art. She is inspired by the magical universe created by Grabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabella Allende or other mainstream magical realists. Her organization 'Maitri' has now grown into one of the most established
helplines for Asian American women in the country. Her works here have influenced her writings a lot. She has personally dealt with many issues of the immigrants.

Divakaruni's success came at a time when Asian-American writing was being praised for its originality and the lyricism of writer’s writings in their second language. Divakaruni feels that there are both plus and minuses in belonging to the huge influx of Asian-American writers. The positive side of it is that many young South-Asians could understand their people and culture. But on the other side, the author is expected to be the spokesperson for his community.

It is very difficult in a diverse community like India and one can look at it in one angle. She affirms the importance of being true to one’s cultural heritage. She gives importance to cultural heritage in all her writings. Neela Banerjee in an article ‘Mistress of Self’ quotes Divakaruni thus: “There is a definite, wonderful, vibrancy to our culture, within the language and just how people behave, and we don't want to lose that” (92).

Initially Divakaruni made a foray into the field of poetry. She was an acclaimed poet; her poetry collection includes “Dark like the River” (1987),
“The Reason for Nasturtiums” (1990), “Black Candle” (1991) and “Leaving Yuba City” (1997). Divakaruni joined a writer’s group named the ‘Berkeley poet’s Co-op’. This made her writings move away from the private sphere. She started writing more about living in a foreign country as a woman of colour. ‘The Berkeley poets Co-op Press’ published “The Reason for Nasturtiums” in 1990. She writes poems encompassing a wide variety of themes, and she once again directs much focus on the immigrant experience and on South-Asian women.

In an earlier collection of poetry called “Black Candle”, there are many beautiful prose poems. They chronicle significant moments in the lives of South Asian women. These poems show the condition of women, their grief, pain and joy. This book is a testament to the women it depicts. The poems move in a succession from past to present day immigrant experience. In this collection, there is a poem called “Two Women Outside a Circus” which has based Raghubir Singh on a photograph. It brings out the great spiritual strength of Indian women. According to Jane Hershfield, these poems are “rich with colours, sounds, scents, with flowers and spices and fabrics and waters and sorrows and smoke” (93).
Divakaruni strikes a ray of hope in the concluding line of the prose poem ‘Restroom’. The tone of the poems is horrific and powerful; it has a duality of tone. Black Candle got honorable mention in ‘Paterson Poetry Prize’ in the year 1992.

"Leaving Yuba City" is unique because it includes series of poems based on and inspired by various art forms, including painting by Francesco Clemente, photographs by Raghubir Singh and specific Indian films, such as “Salaam Bombay”. In these poems, she shows how boundaries can be destroyed. She also illustrates how different art forms are not independent entities, but they influence each other. These poems are strongly narrative and emotionally acute. They have pain and beauty on one side and grace on the other side. These poems won a ‘Pushcar Prize’, ‘Alien Ginsberg Prize’ and a ‘Gerbode Foundation Award’.

“Arranged Marriage” (1997), is her first collection of stories, which focuses on women from India who are caught between the two worlds. The title does not have any specific story in this book. The book focuses on women’s role in connection with the traditional concept of ‘arranged marriage’. Most of the stories are autobiographical in tone and she stars with the first
person narrative and this creates an intimacy with the readers. This book won ‘Bay Area Book Reviewers Award’, ‘Josephine Mile Award’, and ‘American Book Award’ in the year 1996. Divakaruni beautifully narrates the stories about immigrant brides who are “both liberated and trapped by cultural changes” (1) and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own.

Divakaruni came out with her first novel *The Mistress of Spices* in the year 1997. This novel is translated into twelve languages and is being filmed by a division of Walt Disney. It is written with a blend of prose and poetry. The book has magical realism and mystical quality in it, which tend to make it a modern fable. The novel is divided into short stories. Tilo, the protagonist provides spices for her customers to overcome their problems. She proudly calls herself the 'Mistress of Spices'. Pat Conroy compliments this work as, “a splendid novel, beautifully conceived and crafted” (95). Here the writer clearly breaks the patriarchal structures through Tilo.

Divakaruni wrote a collection of short stories titled “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives” (2001). It includes many tales that are set in India and America. These stories deal with family, culture and seduction
of memory. The stories include ‘Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter’, which is selected for best American short stories, 1999. Junot Diaz aptly praises thus, “Divakaruni is a brilliant storyteller; she illuminates the world with her artistry; and shakes the reader with her love” (84).

*The Vine of Desire* (2002) is a moving and satisfying sequel to the nation's best selling novel *Sister of My Heart*. In this novel, she reunites the sisters Anju and Sudha. They both rekindle their friendship in America. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support, both of them need. Divakaruni beautifully intertwines romance with trenchant insight into harsh realities of women's lives. It proves to be the author's excellent body of work.

Divakaruni's first children's book is *Neela: Victory Song* (2002). It is a part of *Girls of Many Lands* series, featuring books and dolls based on young girls from various historical periods. Her two children in writing this award-winning piece of literature helped Divakaruni. It educated the young readers about India's culture and past. It presents India's freedom struggle along with Indian traditions, family set up and gender roles. The main aim of the writer is to teach
the children in America about Indian culture and history. The novel is a satisfying piece of historical fiction for pre-teens.

**The Conch Bearer** (2003) is a literary fiction of the highest order. It has mythical and mystical qualities and it is impossible to put it down. Divakaruni confesses, “My sons wanted me to write a book they could read they wanted something magical” (55). This book proves to be the perfect tale full of magic and adventure. Divakaruni writes so elegantly that the readers could not only view but also smell things that are explained.

In **Queen of Dreams** (2004) Divakaruni spins a fresh, enchanting story of transformation that is lyrical as it is dramatic. It is about a dream interpreter who is an Indian but living in America. It deals with the relationship between the divorced mother and her daughter, Rakhi. Rakhi's mother is a dream-teller, born with the ability to share and interpret the dream of others, to foresee and guide them through their fates. This fascinates Rakhi but also isolates her from her mother. Rakhi gets solace after her mother's death when she discovers her dream journals, which reveal her past. Divakaruni's main inspiration behind this work is her own mother, who is an amateur dream-teller. The writer
has crafted a vivid and enduring dream about the world we live in, and from which readers will be reluctant to awake.

Another famous novel written by Divakaruni is *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005), which is a sequel to the novel *The Conch Bearer*. It deals with life in Himalayan Silver Valley, where the hero, Anand is trained to become a healer in the brotherhood. The readers are imported to the Moghul world. The story is full of magic, mystery and adventure. This novel has been aptly described as a “Feast for the Senses.”

Divakaruni's children books can be compared to Harry Potter's books. Both *Conch Bearer* and *Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* are delightful adventures with the right blend of fantasy and reality.

Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) deals with the lives of two women from Calcutta. The two cousins Anju and Sudha are changed by marriage, as one comes to California and the other stays back in India. In this novel, the author changes her usual immigrant theme to sisterhood; the relationship between the two sisters is stressed. Divakaruni tries to carve out identities for these women characters. She deals with the bond between the sisters and highlights the female
friendship. She feels that this mysterious female bonding goes far deeper than the usual family ties. Divakaruni’s main aim is to show how woman can be successful if they cooperate with one another. They can draw strength and power from their own sex if they can believe in themselves. In other words, women can be the architects of their own destiny.

The two women are not related by ties of blood but by ties of love. Overcome by tempests and hurricanes they ultimately reunite to lead a life together. This is a fine example to prove that real relationships can withstand the test of time. This is a realistic novel portraying true to life characters and incidents.

The two closely-bonded cousins, Anjali (Anju) and Basudha (Sudha), growing up together in a Hindu Zamindar family of West Bengal eventually end up in America. Rendered in a poetic language, the story primarily revolves around the two girls connected together by birth, marriage and pregnancy all occurring for the two sisters at the same time. Unfortunately, they also lose their fathers at the same time.

One of the female protagonists of this novel, Anju is the daughter of an upper caste Calcutta family of
distinction. She was the rebellious of the two who questions conventions. Sudha, the daughter of the black sheep of the family is startlingly beautiful. She is very docile and imaginative. She believes in magic, demons and gods, and falling stars to wish on. Despite these differences, since the day on which the two girls were born - Sudha and Anju have been the sisters of the heart. Since then, the girls have been bonded and twinned in all possible ways even their mothers cannot comprehend.

The concept of woman can be clearly inferred from this novel where most of the characters depicted are women. Each one of them seems to be independent, self-reliant and supportive for the other women, especially in a house filled with women and void of men. Being a novel set in the 1980's, the women here lead a different lifestyle. They are considered to be domestic, submissive and dependent on men. Here we see Divakaruni portraying women taking an active part in all the affairs of the family including the monetary aspects. Anju and Sudha grow up in an all-woman household as soul mates.

A stronger and independent woman can be seen in Gowri Ma, Anju's mother. Her fine cheek bones and regal forehead hints at generations of breeding, for she
comes from a family as old and respected as that of the Chatterjees which she gets married into. Her face replenished with frown marks indicates that she is the sole earning member of the family.

Nalini, the mother of the more beautiful Sudha primarily comes across as a woman doubly handicapped in attitude, first by a patriarchal tradition, and second, by the modern need for reinforcing identities. She is more scared of the honour-conscious, prestigious, and scandal-obsessed society. She is the dominating type constantly trying to find fault with the girls. She used to advise Anju and Sudha as to how girls should behave. She also makes up little rhymes with moral tagged into them:

“Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother’s name, wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching their family’s fame” (11).

Among all their servants, Singhji is the most sincere. He is a man of silence, speaking only when necessary- a quality to be appreciated in a house filled with female gossipers. Or perhaps it is the veil of mystery which hangs on him. He must have been caught in a terrible fire years ago, for the skin of the
entire upper half of his face, all the way up to his turban is burnt.

It is said that when children are born ‘Bidhata Purush’ would visit them during the night and bless the children. It is believed that when he marks their forehead, they think that he writes, “You will be brave and clever, you will fight injustice, you will not give in. You will marry a fine man and travel the world and have many sons, you will be happy” (10).

Divakaruni also breaks the age old customs observed by women. Here she depicts women gathering in their female counterpart’s houses every afternoon to gossip and to exhibit their jewellery and to knit sweaters. This proves the freedom from the age-old traditions. They may be called the ‘Liberated Women’ of the century. According to Barat,

Divakaruni makes Anju and Sudha speak alternatively in their own voices, constantly shifting perspective, the narrative technique itself underlining their twinning as much as the events of their lives (the fates of their fathers, the circumstances of their birth—it is always Anju who has to bring Sudha out
into the world—the double marriage, the dual pregnancy), and Anju's voice is always clear and unambiguous. (58)

Through this alternation Divakaruni gives importance to women’s ideas which are against the stereotyped depiction of women in the works of yester years. As Curtis points out,

The girls speak the chapters alternately, so that we see life through the eyes of them at eight years old, then at twelve, then as convent school girls escaping to the cinema unchaperoned, and finally as married women, one braving the new world and the other in the house of a husband for whom she learns to have affection but no love. (21)

The chapters named after the two sisters depict psychological healing and memory mending through the device of story telling. The twinning is duplicated in the form of the novel too, as Sudha and Anju take on each other's characteristics, like Margaret and Dikeledi in Bessie Head's Maru.

Although the setting is Calcutta of the 1980’s, the alternate narrations of the two main protagonists
often evoke the psychological and social worlds fabricated by the giants of Bengali Literature and films Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, to name a few. As Khan observes,

Jane Austen's world, with its obsession with marriage, men and money, and its turn of the century Victorian concerns with mannerisms and decency resonate through Divakaruni’s pages. (103/104)

*Sister of My Heart* opens with the Chatterjee family already deprived of its male figures and its former economic status. As the three widows and two young girls of this family meander their way through the drama of life, facing marriage, motherhood, divorce, widowhood, etc. each stage brings into focus a certain aspect of the upper-class Bengali culture and tradition, which is cherished or criticized from the uniquely feminine and diasporic perspective of the author.

Gowri ma, or Rani ma, as the servants and battalion of lower-caste workers love to call her, is the main bread winner of the family. In the words of Khan,

With her bunch of household keys tied to her cream coloured, toshar silk saree, her pearl
broach on the shoulder, and her generous, calm, and calculating personality, she reminds one of the pomp and splendour, the grace and intelligence often attached to the ‘bouthakurans’ or the leading ladies of the zamindar households. (104)

A widow at eighteen, Pishi Ma finds a home with her brother and his equally kind-hearted wife, Gowri. Although the family has been kind to this woman, her upright Brahman culture, does not allow her a ‘normal’ life. Not only is she blamed for the ill fate that had befallen her husband, though she has nothing to do with it, she is also robbed of her right to good food and clothing and even the chance to educate herself at home, with the help of a private tutor. She is the one who insists on traditional values and customs. According to Khan, “Through her stoically austere character Divakaruni depicts the hardship and alienation faced by a widow in upper-class Hindu Bengali society” (105).

The bondage of love between Anju and Sudha is so deep and it is told by Pishi that even before Anju could walk, she would crawl down the corridors looking for Sudha, both shrieking with baby laughter when they found each other. They would amuse themselves for hours
at a time, playing with each other's toes and fingers and hair, and when Aunt Nalini, came to take Sudha away they would throw such tantrums that she'd retreat. Complaining bitterly to Pishi that she didn't know why she had gone through all the trouble of labour and birthing, because it was as though she didn't have a daughter at all.

Anju and Sudha were inseparable. Anju says: "I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half" (12). As Barat says,

The girls do everything together and love one another freely, demanding to known not just as sisters but as twins, and not just because they were born on the same day: sisterhood to them is not just a matter of ties of blood but of love. (52)

As they grow older, the nuns who run their convent school are concerned at their closeness. They say that it is not normal, it will stunt their development. When they are put up in separate classes, Anju will sulk and Sudha cry. When they are separated from the classrooms, they then start planning their escape.
At first they used to complain of stomach aches or headaches, so that they can stay at home. When they do not work with Pishi, they used to sneak out of the school compound at noon, along with the girls who go home for lunch, and spend the afternoon somewhere, anywhere, so that they can be together. They used to eat peanuts by the lake, walk through the animal market admiring the baby chickens, and ride the tram to the end of the line and back again just in time to meet Singhji at the school gate with their most guileless smiles. In the words of Barat,

Sudha's father Gopal came into Anju's household many years ago claiming that he is a distant relative of Anju's father, the only son of their youngest uncle. He has lost everything and come to their house to take refuge. The moment Sudha's father enters their household, Bijoy's (Anju's father) fortune has changed and he feels that Gopal is lucky for them. And both have met with their death on the fateful night of their birth when both go on an adventure seeking fortune. But Sudha and her mother continue to live in the family mansion not out of
ancestral right but because Indian family ties will not have it otherwise. (52)

From then on the three widows have had their way of life trying to keep up their family’s name and honour. It is then that Gauri ma has continued her husband’s business i.e., bookstore to sustain the economic status of the family. And they have also been very cautious in not making the girls feel the absence of their fathers.

On Anju’s and Sudha’s thirteenth birthday, Gowri ma, presents Anju with a pair of bird-shaped earrings of filigreed gold as delicate as a web and studded with tiny diamonds. She insists her not to show them to Sudha because she will get upset, since her mother can not afford to get her one. But defying her mother's instructions, Anju gifts them to Sudha. They are inseparable, self-sufficient, and twinned in every possible way.

As Anju tells Sudha, “I would love you because you love me. I would love you because no-one else knows us like we know each other” (51).

While they are at school a movie has taken Calcutta by storm. Anju and Sudha decide to go for the
movie skipping their afternoon classes. A fugitive and illicit trip to the cinema leads to a chance between a young man Ashok and the beauteous Sudha. As Roy says, “they fall instantly and irrevocably in love, but one of the “waistless woman” is at hand to drag Anju and Sudha back home for retribution” (28).

A decision is taken by Gowri ma that they should stay in their classrooms till their classes are over and not even venture out during breaks. Aunt Nalini orders that Ramur ma will accompany them in their car to school and back home and Sudha should discontinue her studies once her schooling is over. Sudha agrees to her mother’s wishes when she realises that her mother was very upset because of her and she has been crying violently thinking only of her. All thoughts of Anju trying to convince Sudha falls into deaf ears and Anju is surprised when Sudha tells her that she wants to learn embroidery and stitching, On the other hand Anju wishes to run her mother's book store. As Barat observes that,

when Sudha decides to sacrifice her own happiness for Anju's sake, it is uncertain whether she does it out of filial duty or out of love for a sister of a heart. Indeed, when
one has to choose between her mother and her
cousin when it comes to consenting to an early
marriage instead of going to college with
Anju, she chooses her mother, although, of
course, it is a painful decision for her. (57)

By chance, Sudha gets an opportunity to speak to
Ashok, when he promises her that he will convince his
parents so that they will agree for an early marriage
with Sudha and also going up to Sudha's house to ask
for her mother's permission. Surprisingly, Ashok gifts
her, his diamond ring.

As fate would have it, Gowri ma falls sick. She
has a mild heart attack and she wishes to get Anju
married early. The doctor insists that Gowri ma
undergoes a bypass surgery, but she delays the process
till the girls are married. She decides to sell the
bookstore because they are in need of money to get the
girls married off. Anju is very upset because of that
reason, for it has been her dream to run the bookstore.
Sudha too on the other hand is very upset for she has
intended getting married to Ashok.

A very good proposal has come up for Sudha from a
family of Sanyal's. Since the son is not very handsome,
they are looking for a beautiful bride. As the boy is in the Railways they make no demands. The idea of a beautiful bride is put forth by the groom's mother. She with her pleasing mannerisms and tactics tries to impress the bride's family to such an extent that it turns out to be sour during the course of the novel.

Sudha is trying to reconcile to the idea of trying to meet Ashok so that she can make her intentions clear. Her idea of getting help from someone regarding this matter is from Singhji who is willing to help her.

When Sanyals come home to see Sudha, she sports a sleepy smile on her face, something which worries Anju. Sudha is cool all along the bride viewing schedule and once it is over the Sanyals announces that they can fix an auspicious day the very next month for the wedding. Sudha then surprises Anju by saying that she has just received a letter from Ashok and they are going to meet the next day.

When Sudha meets Ashok at the temple, he assures her that they can get married once she attains eighteen years which is two weeks from then. Sudha happily goes home and then when they are alone she confides in Anju about their plan to elope.
Fortunately Anju receives a very good proposal from a computer literate in America by name Sunil. There is a bidder to buy their bookstore and Anju wishes that she be allowed to go to the bookstore so that she can see all what is left of the bookshop she once loved to take charge of. Everybody there pays due respects to her and each one praises her mother and how she takes charge of everything and how is a very good employer to each one of them. Then there is a strange visitor to the bookstore, a young man who wishes to buy Virginia Woolf’s books. Anju is very much impressed with him and only after completing the formalities of billing and taking the book does Anju realize that the stranger is Sunil who wishes to see her differently from the traditional bride viewing function.

During the scheduled bride viewing function, Sunil's family comes down to see her. There is not much of a thrill in the event since the two have already met. Sunil's father is a very dominant character who wishes to take control of the entire proceedings. He is a very strict man and he has told them that he has cancelled two earlier proposals, since there is a slander about the family. Sudha on hearing this conversation gets upset because once she elopes with Ashok the whole
family's reputation will be tarnished. Anju is impressed with Sunil and she loves showing him Virginia Woolf’s books. But Sunil on seeing Sudha is taken aback and spontaneously expresses a liking for her.

Sudha then takes a final plunge: “If I run away, I will break Anju’s heart. If not, I will break Ashok’s” (63). Besides, she is always a very passive girl, as contrasted to Anju’s energy and initiative, and her reluctance.

As Barat correctly says,

to elope with Ashok, the man she loves, seems as much due to her fear of action and her preference for going with the tide rather than her love for Anju, which makes her worry that this elopement may break up Anju’s engagement to Sunil. (57)

She then writes a letter to Ashok that she will not be able to elope with him or marry him even after Anju’s wedding. Gowri ma shows the girls, the ruby that their fathers had gone in search of and which has brought a tragic end to their lives. There is an argument as to who should possess the ruby. Aunt Nalini says: “I think Sudha should have the ruby, seeing as
Anju has so much more. Besides, it was her father who brought it to us in the first place” (144).

Pishi interrupts and says that it should go to Anju. But Sudha says decisively, “Pishi's right. I want Anju to have the ruby” (145).

There is confusion in the family and finally Gowrima says that the stone should go back to the locker, where it belongs.

Another subtle reproach to Bengali complicity in the colonial enterprise is fleetingly but surely meted out by Divakaruni in the novel where grooms are screened for the Chatterjee girls. According to Khan, when amongst the numerous candidates for their daughter's hands they choose only the two one because he is from Zamindar family like their own, and the other because his family has received a title fifty years ago from the British. One cannot help seeing through their foolishly pompous nostalgia for the colonial regime. (106)

The day before the wedding, the house is fully alive; the wedding preparations are in full swing.
There is a pile of letters for the family, and one letter addressed to Sudha that Singhji brings without the senders address. Sudha opens them and bunch of rupee notes is thrust open to her and a letter from her father advising her to go and stay with Ashok and an advice saying that the money gifted to her will be enough to make them live happily. Singhji then pleads with her to follow her father’s advice, but in vain.

Pishi, the woman who all along has been calm bursts out assuming that her father can have killed Gopal. Sudha then goes to the Kalighat temple to give the beggars the money away. The wedding ceremony is in full swing, Sudha and Ramesh are married and Anju and Sunil too. Sunil is in full admiration of Sudha and even slips Sudha’s kerchief into his pocket, which Anju notices. This arouses a pang of jealousy in Anju. She yells in front of Sudha. “Yes, for the first time in my life, I am consumed by jealousy of Sudha, Sister of My Heart” (161) and Anju questions: “Sudha, how could you do this to me?” (162)

Sunil will be off to America and Sunil may not see Sudha again. With that consolation Anju is content. Though Anju knows that Sudha is not at fault, she can only question the woman because, as Kumar makes a
pointed observation, “the women are harsher on other woman because in our social set-up it is easier for the weak to condemn the weak than to fight the strong” (36-37).

Anju's married life is completely different when compared to Sudha's. Her mother-in-law is very fond of her, speaking to her in loud exclamatory tones when her husband is not around. She wishes to go back to her mother's house when he is away and she wants to be there till her visa arrives.

Sudha's life is entirely different. She is in a household that she does not like. Ramesh's mother gives her the household keys so that she is in control of the house. The two teenaged brothers of Ramesh are in constant need of her attention, always rushing up to her for tea time snacks, to fasten a button that has come off the shirt. Anju is at their mother's place, never willing to speak to Sudha wholeheartedly whenever she has called her up, because jealousy has taken the prominent place. One day Anju calls her up and informs her that she will be going to America in three weeks time, for her visa has arrived. When Sudha invites her to her house, she reluctantly accepts it. The moment
she sees Sudha at the station she is too happy that she
forgets everything and she throws her arms around her.

In spite of all my insecurities, in spite of
the oceans that will soon be between us and
the men that are between us already, I can
never stop loving Sudha, it’s my habit and
it’s my fate. (183)

Anju sees the change in Sudha’s life. She has lot
of responsibilities shouldered on her and she is taking
each task with happiness. Her mother-in-law is a typical
Indian mother-in-law who is in constant control of all
her doings. Anju has a feeling that there is something
wrong with Sudha but she brushes aside everything and
thinks,

Marriage has complicated our lives, divided
our loyalties, set us on our different wifely
orbits. Revealed things we must keep from
each other. Never again could we live
together the way we did in our girlhood. It
would be too dangerous. But no matter how far
we travel from each other, our hearts will
always be inseparable. (186/187)
Singhji is more interested in Sudha's affairs and enquires if Sudha is happy. Anju assures him and also adds "Everyone in her new home likes her" (188).

Though it has been three years since they are married, Sudha’s life is no different. Sudha learns from Anju's letters that she is leading a different life. She feels that letters are so much more comfortable, so much less complicated than people. In them the world can be reduced to an inch-wide window, can be idealized like a touched-up photograph. When the day’s mail is passed out at dinner, Sudha quickly goes through half the letter, because by then her mother-in-law will question her about Anju. At night when everybody has slept, she will rush inside the bathroom and then read the letters.

As it is the customary habit of any woman, Sudha's mother-in-law complains about her being childless after three years and suggests going to see a doctor. But disappointed and anger is writ on her mother-in-law’s face when the doctors say that something is wrong with her son and not with Sudha. Sudha is very happy and makes Ramesh accept the proposal.
Sudha comes to know through Singhji that Ashok knows everything about her and he is still waiting to receive her. Sudha is in a state of uncertainty as to whether she should go back to Ashok or stay with Ramesh. There at the temple she sees a girl crying uncontrollably and when questioned by Sudha, she says that she is not very happy at her in-laws house and they have even arranged for a second marriage for her husband because she is childless. They are constantly harassing her for want of more dowry and her parents have even driven her away because they are not in a position to give her any money from her house. She sees her own self in that woman and immediately gives her, her two bangles that Gowri ma had gifted to her and sends back the girl so that she can go back to her in-law’s house to lead a normal life. This brings out the humane nature in a woman.

Sudha’s mother-in-law showers all her love towards her when she knows that she is going to have a baby but everything turns upside down when once it is learnt she is going to have a baby girl by means of an Ultrasound test. The other side of the woman is brought out here when she asks Sudha to go in for an abortion. Being a woman herself: little does she realize that it is cruel
on her part to kill another girl. This upsets Sudha because after all the hardships that she has undergone, she is not willing to give away her child. Sudha with all her money in her hand musters all courage to call up her mother and inform that she will be coming back because she cannot go in for an abortion. But her mother refuses to comply with saying that her place is with her in-laws and that is where she belongs.

She calls up Anju immediately who insists that she goes back to Calcutta with all the money she has, promising to call up once she reaches there. Once she is at home, the whole house is brewing with activity and her mother bursts out at her:

I told her to grit her teeth and put up with it, and try for another pregnancy. A woman can have many children, after all, but a husband is forever. But no, Madam had to do it her own way. Now what will we tell our relatives? Uff, she’s smeared Kali for ever on the Chaterjee family, to say nothing of my ancestors. (258)

But Gowri ma kindly tells her that she is their daughter bonded to them by not only blood but by also
by all the years of her life. “No matter who your father was, you are you, and you belong here. As will your daughter. Because ultimately blood is not as important as love” (259).

“This is similar to, as M.K.Nayak says, Sheila Kumar’s article, “My Mother’s Daughter and Me” which is as much about sympathy, understanding and support as it is about love” (90).

The mother insists that they call up her mother-in-law who agrees to pardon her and accepts her into her household only if she goes in for an abortion. But they refuse and then after a week the divorce paper arrives from them. Then they plan to sell the house and move out to a smaller place. After they enter their new apartment a visitor comes to meet Sudha. Sudha is very much surprised when she sees Ashok. After everything is cleared between them they decide to get married sooner. Ashok’s parents come and see her and are very happy to note that they will be getting married at last. Things do not turn out in the manner they have wished for. Ashok insists that once her daughter is born, she is to leave her with her mother assuring her that he will be providing her with everything but Sudha is so upset that she does not give him any proper reply.
Anju carefully plans her strategy promising to bring Sudha and her child to America. She intends working overtime so that she can afford for her airline tickets to America without taking a penny from Sunil and not letting him know about her plans till the tickets arrive and in the end she loses her child.

Nancy Friday in *My Mother/ My Self* asks,

> What human relationship contained as much ambiguity and ambivalence as women with women? We have so much to offer one another, but our history is much of mutual inhibition. It is one of the inexorable tragedies of human nature. (85)

Sudha is given a second chance of happiness, when Ashok reappears in her life and wishes to marry her. She is once again faced with the choice between her own happiness and Anju's, and chooses Anju's; Anju wants her in California, and she will go to California. But is her decision really one that a real friend will have made? Both she and Anju know that Sunil is really in love with Sudha and has never been able to forget her; indeed, their friendship has almost broken up when Anju has discovered her husband's feelings for her cousin. Not only will she be a financial burden on Anju, as she
and her parents have always been on Anju’s family—a fact that she cannot forget and feels she must be grateful. For, in a sense, Sudha is responsible for Anju’s miscarriage. Anju feels obliged to pay for Sudha’s fare to the USA, since Sunil cannot afford it and takes up a job, overworks, and loses her baby. It is not as if she will not have been able to make a fresh start in life in Calcutta; indeed, she has already begun to do so. Above all, she knows that her presence in Anju’s marriage will inevitably cause problems and unhappiness, something that Sudha has anticipated long before in an old dream:

If only Anju and I, like the wives of the heroes in the old tales, could marry the same man, our Arjun, our Krishna, who would love and treasure us both, and keep us both together. (123)

Despite the innumerable problems that an American lifestyle entails, Divakaruni’s characters seem convinced about its ultimate superiority. This is well expressed in the words of Sudha, who is planning to leave for America with her fatherless, newborn daughter in search of a respectable life for both: “Best of all, no one would look down on her. for America was full of mothers
like me who have decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man” (272).

When Sudha is in the flight, she opens one of the packets which is a gift from Gauri ma to her granddaughter, the ruby thrust in her neck. And another is a letter from her father. Startlingly and happily, torn between emotions she comes to know that Singhji is her father and in that letter, he explains to her that he is not to be blamed at all. She also realizes the fact and justifies that she need not pay Anju back with her life. Sudha like any other woman at this moment is overcome by happiness. She realizes that her father, whom everybody had suspected has been their guardian all along. He has not broken out the truth at any point of time. She feels elated. Moreover her happy woman inside has been portrayed here.

On seeing Sudha at the airport, Anju reluctantly holds the baby when it is given to her. Anju becomes one with the baby.

There’ll be enough trouble later, like an animal I sense it prickling the nape of my neck. I’ll deal with it when it comes. But for now the three of us stand unhurried,
feeling the way we fit, skin on skin, into each other’s lives. A rain dampened sun struggles from the clouds to frame them in its hesitant holy light. (340)

By making Sudha leave India for America, instead of staying back and struggling for a change at home, the novel makes an escapist of her and makes Indian society seem hopelessly irredeemable.

According to Khan,

Sudha’s Westward move to solve problems generated at home also makes her more responsive to the calls of liberalist, western feminism, the agendas and needs of which may not necessarily be the same as those of Indian feminism. (107)

While the lure of America is understandable, the unwillingness of the characters to work for a better life in their native land is puzzling.

In the novel, almost every character in the Chaterjee household voluntarily offers up her deepest desire in order to ensure another’s happiness and well-being. A newly wedded husband hides the fact that he
has fallen in love with his bride’s cousin so that he can keep the promise he made earlier; a young girl turns her back on the man she loves and enters into an arranged marriage to assuage the guilt she feels at her father’s betrayal of the Chatterjee family: - a mother-to-be does not tell her husband she is jeopardizing her baby’s health by taking on a part-time job to pay for her cousin to come to the United States. According to Hema Nair,

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her utopian *Herland* projected a women's land, perfect and complete without men: even when three men force their way into it and try to disrupt relationships by marriage what changes is not the feeling of sisterhood but male perceptions about gender. (71)

The effects of the Victorian straitjacketing of women in their British society is evident here from the way these Bengali women are constantly made aware of their gender limits and bound in the shackles of propriety and honour. Sudha and Anju, through various interactions with their lovers, husbands, and in-laws, often bring out the negative aspects of the Indian male.
However, if the Eastern world is delineated at times in a rather negative light in this novel, the Western world is also presented not without its own evils and shortcomings. Freedom and riches of the West are often bought, particularly at the expense of the love and support provided by the extended family or the community. Hence the same Anju, who used to complain about the noise and lack of privacy in her mother’s home back in India, because of the host of servants and gossiping aunts, yelling neighbours, and shouting road vendors, now misses the din and bustle in her desolate in America.

Indeed, America provides “the advantage of anonymity”, but it also adds the burden of responsibility and loneliness. We also come to know that Anju has been tricked into marriage by Sunil. She blindly believes that Sunil has a wide knowledge of Virginia Woolf. This is the main reason that has attracted Anju to him. But only later Sunil tells her that he knows only the name of the author and nothing about her novels. On understanding the real truth, she feels cheated.

The novel captures the dilemma and opportunities confronting women with one foot in traditional Indian
society and the other in the modern world. The women compete with each other, like Sula and Nel in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. Sarita aunty in *Sister of My Heart* says, “I swear, you’re like those twins, what do they call them, born stuck together” (78).

Anju says that Sudha, “surprised me by saying, Didn’t you know aunty? We are twins” (79).

Friendship between women is special, different and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there was no homosexuality in *Sula*. According to Tate, “relationships between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they’re playing” (118). Sula Peace and Nel Wright grow up together in a small black neighbourhood in Medallion, Ohio. They have so much in common and although they are very different, their very differences complementing each other.

Morrison shows in *Sula*, then, that sisterhood is deeper, more permanent, than a woman's relationship with a man, but Sula must die before Nel can realize the meaning of her loss and rise above her jealousy over her best friend’s relationship with Jude. The
strong focus on black community, female relationships, and the search for identity and values in the midst of racism and poverty characterize the novel. In *Maru*, Margaret becomes a symbol of motherhood though she bears no children.

The richer, the cleverer and the more talented of the two, but perhaps the less imaginative and sensitive, Anju has always stood by Sudha, doing what she thinks is the best for her, being willing even to sacrifice her relationship with Sunil in her obsessed belief that she must have Sudha by her side if her sister friend is to thrive. Thus, according to Barat, “Anju is the real woman or true sister of the heart” (58).

Women’s friendships in Western fiction have undoubtedly suffered when women have weighed them against feminine duties and responsibilities towards parents, lovers and husbands, and children. Thus, in *Jane Eyre* the protagonist must outgrow her friendship with Helen Burns before she can enter the world of adulthood; and Helen must die, and Mr. Rochester’s other women, Bertha Mason, Celine Varens and Blanche Ingram be silenced, marginalized, and defeated in order that Jane can triumphantly take her position as his wife and the mother of his children.
Divakaruni’s novel exhibits, in fact, many of the features of novels dealing with the bonds between sisters, just as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Woman and Good wives*, Shoba De’s *Sisters*, Marilyn French’s *Her Mother’s Daughter* and Alice Walker’s *Color Purple*. Anju and Sudha Chatterjee in *Sister of My Heart* are very different in appearance, temperament and achievements. They grow up together under similar yet very different conditions. They may be separated by fate and marriage once they reach adulthood. But they let nothing stand in the way of their love for each other, even jeopardizing the love of the men they have married.

It is perhaps this that makes Divakaruni call this novel a novel of women’s friendship, not of sisterly bonding. It is appropriate, then, that a novel of sisterhood should end with Anju’s thoughts:

We’ve informed a tableau, two women, their arms entwined like lotus stalks, smiling down at the baby between them. Two women who have travelled the vale of sorrow, and the baby who will save them, who has saved them already. Madonna with child. (340)