Chapter II

Human Relationship

Literature is the most explicit record of the human spirit. It is a medium through which the essence of human living is made paramount by linking it to imaginative experience. A creative writer has the perception and analytical mind of a sociologist who provides an exact record of human life, society and social system. Ever since man started literary documentation, he has been drawing on the contemporary life and social history of his raw material. It reflects the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationships and their perception of the socio-cultural reality. Francine Prose in “Life in the global village” says “mystifying human complexities are ultimately far more interesting than readily-grasped social problems” (20).

The post-colonial writers had to re-interpret and re-write various issues from a post-colonial perspective. The post-colonial world was a new world–not firm and the ground seemed to be moving. The continued imposition of alien political, economic and social philosophies could not resolve all the problems of young India. If the order of Western historicism is disturbed in the colonial state of emergency, even more deeply disturbed is the social and psychic representation of the human subject. In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Williams remarks, “For the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition and from that ‘naked declivity’ it emerges, not as an assertion of will nor as an evocation of freedom, but as an enigmatic questioning” (114). Hence the writers focused on humanity and human relationships.

Human Relationships have always been a prime focus of interest in all genres, especially novels. Relationships are like thin threads that bind one human being with
another. Much of the interaction that transpires in life happens to involve one relationship or another. These relationships that act as a binding factor for some become a stifling sentence for others. These relationships when viewed under moments of stress bring forth an altogether new picture of how people react to and interact with others at the societal level, thus opening up new avenues of study for the novelists.

The Latin word ‘familia’ means the total number of slaves belonging to a man. There is only one thing for women – they have to stay married to one man and stay faithful like a slave, no matter what their husbands do. Fiction today is seriously concerned with the changing perceptions of man–woman relationship. Indian novelists have dealt with various facets of human relationships most intensely because the traditional heritage of India gives great importance to the family unit, which again is a wonderful subject in diasporic novels.

The changing perception of man–woman relationship has brought about a significant change in the structure and other relationships in the family unit. There is a conspicuous change in the spheres of roles and values. From the sociological point of view, the role of a husband or a wife is the principal component in a family context that has undergone a vital change due to the growing enlightenment and movement for women’s emancipation. Literature provides a glimpse into the female psyche and health with the full range of female experience. It portrays, without inhibitions, the new woman who refuses to play a second fiddle to her husband. Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* points out how, “Man and Society” are “fundamentally undermined in the colonial situation. Everyday life exhibits a ‘constellation of delirium’ that mediates the normal social relations of its subjects” (62).

Analysis and portrayal of human relationships have been of perennial interest
to all who have contributed towards the growth and development of different genres of literature. The study of human relationships is not just a peripheral but of central interest to Chitra Banerjee. The innermost psyche of her protagonists is revealed through their interaction with those who are emotionally related to them on the basis of kinship. Changes in the socio-economic conditions have changed the patriarchal attitudes and this contemporary change is reflected in her novels. The primary ties within the family fold are of utmost importance to her. The structure of family comprises of three fundamental bonds: the marital, parental and sibling.

This chapter is an attempt to analyse the nature of the two basic familial bonds – the bond that exists between man and woman and the ties between parents and children in the selected novels of Chitra Banerjee. The contribution of the psychological attributes of the individuals involved and of the external factors related to the social, economic and political forces in the maintenance or disruption of these relationships is evaluated.

The institution of marriage is an important central part of the society. Marriage, supposed to be the holy union of two souls and bodies is the foundation of family. Sociologists define marriage as a cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring: “No doubt marriage can afford certain material and sexual conveniences: it frees the individual from loneliness, it establishes him securely in space and time by giving him a home and children; it is a definitive fulfilment of his existence” (SS 421). Amongst Hindus, the wife is known as ‘Ardhangini’ or ‘Sahadharmini’ – terms which emphasise her equality and oneness with the husband; in marriage companionship and mutuality are stressed.
Chitra Banerjee’s novels have great relevance in the present age. Today’s modern man has lost his intuitive self in the materialistic and mechanical society. Humankind is oblivious of the fact that woman is the creator of life upon this earth and womanhood and motherhood ought to be respected and revered deeply and sincerely. Chitra Banerjee’s novels teach the humane lesson of equality, liberty and fraternity to the egotistic, self-centered, shallow, ignorant, narrow minded and uncultured man. As Judith Butler in her article “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex” says, “‘man’ and ‘woman’ are already ways of being, modalities of corporeal existence, and only emerge as substantial entities to a mystified perspective” (48).

Marriage can be a curse if the partners are mis-matched. In the short stories “Doors,” “Meeting Mrinal,” “Affair” and “Silver Pavements and Golden Roofs” the married women struggle to keep their identity intact while seeking equal opportunities within and without the familial threshold. These stories are about their incompatible marriage and the resultant frustrations: “women no doubt struggle with social and familial definitions and expectations, and experience conflict and dilemmas as they struggle to redefine and shape their identities in different contexts and situations” (Thapan 38).

Family is an integral part of any society in the world. It is the family members who support each other during times of distress and disappointment. Even in a new land, an individual can have a blissful life if the family is with him. Tilo in The Mistress of Spices doesn’t have a family of her own in Oakland as she was sent as a spice mistress to America. She longs for a family and forms an emotional bond with customers. Lalita, Geeta and Daksha are some of the immigrant women who come to her shop.
Feminism paves way for the concept of womanhood. The traditional role of the woman in the patriarchal society is always understood in connection with the male. She has no identity of her own but is venerated as a mother in relation to the father, as a sister in relation to her brother, as a wife in relation to her husband and as a daughter in relation to her father. Susan S. Wadley’s views expressed in “Women and the Hindu Tradition” are worth notice here:

Classical Hindu laws focus almost exclusively on women as wives. Role models and norms for mothers, daughters, sisters, are more apt to appear in folklore and vernacular traditions. Furthermore, most written traditions emphasize women’s behavior in relationship to men: wife/husband; mother/son; daughter/father; sister/brother. Role models for female behavior concerning other females (mother/daughter; sister/sister; mother-in-law/daughter-in-law; husband’s sister/wife) are common themes in folklore and oral traditions but not in the more authoritative religious literature. (117)

The emotion of love plays a vital role in human life. It binds human beings. The nature and value of human relationships and the possibilities for human happiness depends on this bond that one has with the other. In several stories such as “The Bats,” “The Maid Servant’s Story,” “The Disappearance,” “Doors” and “The Ultrasound” the Indian male characters, play a hegemonic role in a patriarchal society constructing, entrapping, cheating and brutalizing women.

Chitra Banerjee has probed the theme of human relationships more minutely and skilfully in Sister of My Heart where she focuses on alienation and communication in married life. In The Vine of Desire, she explores the intricacies of human relationships that are turning sour in the light of modern awakening. The
novels focus on the relationship of Anju and Sunil, Sudha and her daughter, Dayita. It is an excellent study of human relationships and also of relationship crises between individuals of a family.

The scenario of Chitra Banerjee’s novel, *The Mistress of Spices* is analogous to her earlier novel *Arranged Marriage*. It is an authentic perusal of human relationships bedevilled by cultural encounters. Tilo and Raven have a perfect accord with each other. Their relationship is marked by mutual understanding, loving concern and temperamental compatibility. Chitra Banerjee’s real concern is the depiction of personal relationships, as it cuts right to the heart of family life in two different cultures – the East and the West.

In *Queen of Dreams* Chitra Banerjee presents a beautiful blend of the East and the West revealing intricate family bonds degenerating into bondages. She distinctly reveals her views about inadequate human relationships. Mr. and Mrs. Gupta and their daughter Rakhi find themselves starving of real care and affection that would have helped them to grow in their relationships to acquire their identity and selfhood. They are trapped in their family bondages and culture. The differences between the lives of the East and the West are used together in a masterly manner to stress on the fact that both approaches need to be redefined as said in *The Location of Culture*: “the image of post-Enlightenment man tethered to, not confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being” (62).

The woman in the story “The Bats” is a victim of a man who frequently comes home drunk. The woman is a housewife and comes from a village background while the husband works as a foreman in a printing press. He batters his wife so much that
she has marks and scars on her face: “high up on her cheek, a yellow blotch with its edges turning purple” (AM 2). It is the story of personal journey; the heroine learns her lessons as she undergoes torture and suffering at the hands of her husband. The stifling of women’s aspirations by men and the treatment they get are often talked about but what is never talked about is who are responsible for the disrespect and blights they are often subjected to. Moreover, wavering flirting, transient affairs, callous treatment are also associated with men.

For a middle class woman a husband is like a shading tree, providing a barrier between her and other men. The status of a woman separated from her husband is dubious in Indian society. To have failed in marriage is considered to be a woman’s worst failure. She is eyed with suspicion by all – even her own kith and kin. Society expects her to remain faithful even though the husband is a depraved man. Like the bats, the wife, in the midst of escapades from the humiliation, returns to her husband again and again. Such peculiar but very common marital relationships are not unusual in many places, especially in villages, “women can use their power to destroy if they are ill-treated. But, the best wife (Sita) will still worship her husband even when she is abused” (Wadley 119).

Ahuja’s wife, Lalita is an attractive but downtrodden creature bound to the home through an arranged marriage to a much older, traditional and dominating Indian husband living in America. She turns to Tilo when she is disappointed with her male counterpart. Veena Selvam in “Mistress and Sisters: Creating a Female Universe” in The Commonwealth Review remarks, “When once she [Tilo] lands in America in her spice store, she is able to empathise with her women customers better than with her male customers” (15).
Mrs. Ahuja’s is a story of dispossession. She does not want to get married. It was only before three days to the wedding that she has seen her husband. He comes from America. He is totally different from the photo shown to her. Surprisingly, Lalita’s parents instead of objecting, show only their interest in pushing their daughter into a hurried marriage with Ahuja. She does not like him but she could not explain her desires to her parents. She leaves the settled and comfortable life at her father’s house to get married to a violent man, an alcoholic who abuses her: “the worst are the kisses after it is over, kisses that leave their wetness on her mouth, and his slaked repentant voice in her ear, lingering” (MS 101). It continues in America too.

Unhappy in her domestic life, Lalita wants to start tailoring again in America. She likes to continue to have her bank balance and freedom in life which she has enjoyed in her parents’ house in India and curses her husband’s domination. He is, “the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in the view of society” (SS 418). She loves to do needle work but she is not allowed to do so by her husband. Instead he expects her to obey in bed, whenever he is in need: “In bed especially I could not forget those nights in India. Even when he tried to be gentle I was stiff and not willing. Then he would lose patience and shout” (MS 103). But she could not neglect the voice from her inside heart, which lays out the condition that outlines womanly duties for her. She is a human-being sandwiched between the cynical indifference of her husband and viciousness of his family. Her privacy, her desires, dreams and future are snatched away ruthlessly from her and her life is painted with black, “What do I have to live for? Once, more than anything in the world I wanted a baby. But is this any kind of home to bring a new life into?” (MS 103). Lalita is like a caged bird, who fluttered to soar into the sky and live a free life but is incarcerated within the four walls of a house.
In the case of Ahuja, his relationship with his wife Lalita is power-oriented. Instead of being based on love between two equal beings, one which suits the purposes of just one of the two: “Recently, the rules. No going out. No talking on the phone. Every penny I spend to be accounted for. He should read my letters before he mails them” (MS 103). Thus she is subjected to an absolute enclosure including the interdiction to go to work, and to Ahuja’s fits of jealousy when his obsessive phone calls are occasionally non-responded, which results in physical and sexual violence: “And the calls. All day. Sometimes every twenty minutes. To check on what I’m doing. To make sure I’m there. I pick up the phone and say hello and there is his breathing on the end of the line” (MS 103). Lalita scorns the word love and refuses to believe that such a thing can ever exist between man and woman. She starts hating the man–woman relationship which is based not on love but on attraction and need: “the wife is ashamed to find herself given to someone who is exercising a right over her” (SS 432).

Lalita’s tragic condition worsens with the continuous beating. She is subjected to humiliation and sexual torture by her husband: “I need to get home. He must have called one dozen times. When he comes home tonight—” (MS 104). Whenever Lalita says no to physical union, Ahuja can be patient only for a couple of days. When she refuses the third time he becomes violent. Her attempts to claw and bite receive a slap on the head: “Not hard, but the shock of it makes her go limp so he can do what he wants” (MS 101). He shows no trace of compassion for her. Insulting and beating her becomes a matter of daily routine: “fear rises from her, shimmering, like heat from a cracked summer pavement. Fear and hate and disappointment” (MS 104). She consults Tilo regarding her problem and understands that, “No man, husband or not,
has the right to beat you [me], to force you [me]. . . I tell myself, I deserve dignity, I deserve happiness” (*MS* 105-272).

In the end, Tilo got the letter from Lalita through the mail. Lalita writes that she has an organization’s help to come out of her house. She also explains the traditional expectations of Indian women in their native culture as a daughter and a wife. If Lalita continues to play her role as a daughter and a wife, she has to give up her wishes. So she decides to manage her life to suit her heart and pursue happiness in her own sweet way.

In “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” Pratima is Bikram’s wife only for namesake. The fundamental qualities of a man–woman relationship – intimacy, love, and affection – are missing in their marriage. So she is always scared of him and she often says: “Your uncle does not like me to go out. He is telling me it is dangerous” (*AM* 46). The sense of desolation makes her desperate and she devotes her attention to things other than her marriage and husband. Her spirit is destroyed completely. The need for communication and understanding comes to clash with the man’s world of money and ambition. The denial of freedom is too suffocating for the woman to tolerate. Though they continue to be together their life is too mechanical and devoid of any spark of life. Her world becomes lonely, helpless and indifferent. She never expects her husband to apologize for his mistake instead she consoles him: “O Ram, I am having all I need” (*AM* 54). Even if some of these married women are fortunate enough to escape to America, they have to tolerate their husbands’ abuse.

The gulf between expectations and reality throttles women. Mrs. Majumdar is ill-treated by her husband. He says to his wife, “Haven’t I told you never to make that unhealthy stuff? . . . Haven’t I told you I can’t stand the smell? Who pays for the food
you eat in this house? Answer me” (SMH 182). She appears to be a passive and docile woman, who accepts her husband’s restrictions without any complaint.

Majumdar always dominates his wife and treats her as a ‘slave.’ The man always demands respect and commands her: “She bends her head and speaks in a watery whisper, or hunches her shoulders apologetically as she rushes to fetch what he’s shouting for. He shouts a lot, Sunil’s father. I think he enjoys it” (SMH 180). This unequal relationship makes even ordinary conversation difficult at times. Not viewing the woman as a person makes it easy for a man to condone. The husband expects his wife to be a subservient wife: “he enjoys quoting derogatory passages about women from the Hindu scriptures . . . Women and gold are the root of all evil” (SMH 181). As a true wife of Mr. Majumdar she takes up the funeral service all alone: “she undertook it bravely, but broke down soon after and has been confined to bed” (VD 268).

In both stories “Affair” and “The Disappearance,” the brutality and exploitation within marriage are brought out. The violence in the lives of the women protagonists is understated, their subjugation is depicted as more subtle and hence more complete. The husband in “The Disappearance” reflects on his conjugal life after his wife has left: “He was a good husband. No one could deny it. He let her have her way, indulged her, even” (AM 172).

A woman seeks companionship as a wife and the man is after self-gratification. The togetherness and warmth that she expects is denied to her. The husband who is oblivious of the wife’s physical and sensual needs is responsible for her anomic behaviour. The indifferent behaviour of the husband, leading to emotional and sexual desperation makes her neurotic. The husband is mostly narrow-minded, ruthless and careless. The wife experiences an acute sense of loneliness, emptiness and boredom due to her sensitiveness. What Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture
says about “the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of self-reflection in
the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human
identity as located in the division of Nature/Culture” (66) can be considered here.
There is a lack of communication and the wife goes back her shell like an oyster.

The man in “The Disappearance” has pacified his wife as shown in the
following words: “when she wanted to get a job or go back to school or buy American
clothes . . . he always softened his no’s with a remark like, what for, I’m here to take
care of you, or, You look so much prettier in your Indian clothes, so much more
feminine” (AM 172). Hence the woman never has a chance to carry out her own
decisions or to experiment with anything new. Her deep needs and desires are never
understood as being genuine or urgent. Her husband suppresses her in many subtle
ways.

That last night before she disappears, the wife has been unwilling to submit to
her husband’s advances as usual, but he compels her and after some time she stops
struggling: “He would pull her onto his lap and give her a kiss and a cuddle which
usually ended with him taking her to the bedroom. That was another area where he’d
had to be firm. Sex. She was always saying, Please, not tonight, I don’t feel up to it.
He didn’t mind that” (AM 172).

Patriarchy which is the ruling social system almost all over the world ordains
that woman’s place is the home and her role as a wife and mother. Jaina C. Sanga
writes: “Moved by the dual forces of the pre immigration and post immigration
conditions, touched by the pains of women in male-dominated societies, and inspired
by the desire to preserve memory” (85). Women started acting. Completely
constructed by patriarchy, the husband cannot even understand the individual desires
of his wife. For him, his wife is a symbol of his domestic and sexual power.
Chitra Banerjee makes it very clear that all human relationships are in fact a gamble, a throw of the dice, a matter of chance and destiny. Arranged marriages are not more or less so than the ones made out of love and choice. All marriages, it is said, are made in heaven, but one cannot realize what powerful urges and inchoate emotions make the wife in “The Disappearance” turn her back upon her own arranged marriage and quietly disappear in the urban jungles of the cities of America with a self-made exile. She even leaves her son behind. It is a complete renunciation of her alliance with her husband. She is never found, even though her husband puts up a reward of $100,000 for any information leading to her whereabouts. He is badly affected by the absence of his wife as the crime rate is high in that area. She has not been quarrelsome and never appeared as if she is dissatisfied. As the years pass on, the husband stops thinking about his wife:

It wasn’t that he loved her any less, or that the shock of her disappearance was less acute. It was just that it wasn’t on his mind all the time . . . when he would forget that his wife was gone, that he had had a wife at all. And even when he remembered that he had forgotten, he would experience only a slight twinge, similar to what he felt in his teeth when he drank something too cold too fast. (AM 175)

In “Affair” divorce is the most defiant act that takes place a few years after Abha’s marriage, constituting the most crucial stage of her life. Here it is essential to understand the nature of her marital relationship with Ashok - the propelling force behind her longing for freedom. Abha spends most of her time cooking and has no real relationship with her husband. What the woman wants the most is understanding, sharing, participation and above all recognition – the recognition of her as an
individual – that is denied to her: “‘conjugal duties’ may often seem boring and repugnant to the wife” (SS 431).

Ashok is portrayed as an elegant gentleman who dominates his wife Abha. She feels irritated and frustrated as well as betrayed every time he mocks at her, regarding Meena’s lover: “I bet you’re dying to know who he is” (AM 232). Ashok’s voice sparked with malicious mischief: “I’ll tell you if you ask me very nicely” (AM 232).

Love has to be a noble feeling shared by the husband and wife. For the husbands here it is only physical love [trap of lust]; but for the wife it is deep and platonic. The woman is disgusted with the treatment she gets from the husband. Their marriage is behest with frustration and turmoil since there is no love or mutual sharing or forgiveness. A relationship can grow when one begins to look at the partner in a positive and appreciative light and is ready to accept the other with all his/ her strengths and weaknesses. Unless both the partners work together, a marriage cannot be a success. It has become a soul searching analysis: “But what kind of man would be worth giving up your principles for? What kind of man would be more important than being a good wife? . . . We’re spiraling toward hate. And hopelessness. That’s not what I want for the rest of my life. Or yours” (AM 237-71).

Abha is always a shadow of her husband: “Her relations are not based on her individual feeling” (SS 424). The longing to be a person in her own right and not as a possession of a man ends in dissatisfaction. The wife wants equality, involvement and continuity within marriage. The sacrifice which she makes for him seems meaningless. The story describes how Abha decides to leave her husband, as shown in the following lines: “I feel your resentment growing around me, thick and red and suffocating, Like mine is suffocating you” (AM 270).
In Indian society, a man can do as he pleases but it is a taboo for a woman to have extra-marital relationship. In the framed narrative of “The Maid Servant’s Story” an aunt unfolds to the young protagonist, dark family secrets; she reveals the father’s cold, callous, and even cruel nature. Mashi tells her the story of a young educated wife, who was occupied with household work and who was a proud possession of her husband, an assistant manager of a British bank. Her husband was a modern, city-bred man while she was a traditional, rural girl. Being married to him, the mistress was suspended between the two worlds.

The wife used to read the books which the husband brought from the library for her on his way back from the office. She practiced singing also. But when she got pregnant for the second time, she started realizing that she was living the life which she once abhorred. The husband thought that the very fact of having provided respectability, security and wealth to the mistress should have given her a feeling of complete satisfaction. The constrained, contrite and precariously maintained relationship between the husband and the mistress and their familial relationship emphasises the gravity with which wifehood is viewed: “South Asian women as an exploited and oppressed category serve to build the ‘free and independent American woman.’ Within this comparison, rooted in European colonial discourses, South Asia is a uniformly oppressive place for women” (Badruddoja 42).

The servant Sarala had to tolerate the sexual advances of the master of the house. When the mistress of the house returned home after the delivery of her child, she was devastated to learn of her husband’s behaviour but could not leave her husband as she felt that her daughter would: “. . . lose all chances for a good marriage if the scandal of a broken home stained her life” (AM 156). Hence her fear made her keep silent. But the real complexity of this story derives from the structure
in which the lives of three women telescope into one another: the maid molested and
victimized by the husband (father), the wife (mother) traumatized by the discovery of
it, and finally, the daughter (protagonist) shocked by the creeping realization that
“Perhaps it is like this for all daughters, doomed to choose for ourselves, over and
over, the men who have destroyed our mothers” (AM 167).

“Meeting Mrinal” is a well–crafted story about Asha, once a devoted wife
but now a recent divorcee and mother of a rebellious teenager, who is embarrassed at
having to meet her old friend Mrinal, a successful, glamorous, single, career woman.
Asha and Mahesh exemplify the oddest couple yoked together unnaturally, having
nothing in common which they may share together. Their marriage life is built on the
sands of time and therefore, there is likelihood that it would break. Indians believe
that marriages are made in heaven and a bride and bridegroom meet, not by accident
or design, but by the decree of fate, inspite of the fact that marriages are arranged.
Being a typical Indian male, Mahesh wants a subservient faithful wife who would be
efficient in his office work also. So he applies for a divorce and goes out to marry
Jessica, an assistant in his own office. Thus most often the marital relationship ends
up in disappointments.

The man–woman relationship can fall apart for many reasons, tangible like
marital infidelity or intangible like the oft-quoted “irreconcilable differences” of
American divorce cases. Chitra Banerjee presents the break-up of a marriage because
of a visitor from India. In “Doors,” the conjugal clash between Deepak and Preeti is a
confrontation between two cultures, literally symbolized by doors.

Deepak and Preeti, who have chosen to marry, are declared to be the perfectly
matched couple until a friend from India comes to stay with them. The lack of space
suffocates Preeti who has lived in America since she was twelve, and imbibed a set of
ideas about privacy denoted by closed doors. Preeti receives a giant cultural shock when Raj, Deepak’s friend comes to Berkeley to stay with them while he does his Master’s there. The men carry the buddy-buddy thing too far and encroach upon Preeti’s privacy. Raj especially is a lout and a boor as well as a bore, but Deepak is delighted to have him in the house and they relive their school days and look at endless videos of Kishore Kumar songs. Much to Preeti’s chagrin, her private space is violated one day when her bedroom door is thrown open by Raj who walks into share a piece of good news. She does not like any intruders into her privacy. There is no scope for any relationships in her absolutely planned life. The interplay of emotions between the opposing temperaments becomes a major ground for their marital conflict.

In the presence of the friend from India, Deepak’s traditional self emerges strongly and the myth of “the most enlightened man” (AM 184) crumbles. The conflictual boundaries cannot be resolved and the marriage disintegrates. Raj is simply bewildered by Preeti’s extreme reaction and decides to leave her house.

Preeti is essentially a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband, Deepak is a traditionalist rooted in age-old customs. The difference between their outlooks is so marked that they fail, time and again, to understand each other. It is an authentic perusal of human relationships bedevilled by cultural encounters: “Cultures come to be represented by virtue of the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to – through – an Other” (LC 83). The clash of culture is the reason for broken marriages. The incompatibility between the husband and wife gives the woman, a sense of alienation.

In The Mistress of Spices Daksha of The Mistress of Spices undergoes a lot of torture because of her marriage with a wrong person. She misses out all the joys of
sharing in her marriage. She loves her husband with all her heart and works like a machine. It is her ill-luck that he does not understand the depth of her love. She says “When I put the wedding garland around his neck, was I ever knowing that this is what is being a wife and mother, walking the edge of a knife with fear like a wolf waiting on both sides” (MS 61). Daksha has to sacrifice everything for her mother-in-law.

Sudha is a good wife to Ramesh. She hopes to get a lot of love from him by fulfilling the expectations of others in the family. She is looking forward to manage the household, breed, take care of the brother-in-law and also her own man’s needs. She is ready to do all the household work for getting the love of the husband who is always “quieter” and the in-law’s. Sudha’s marriage life runs with these sacrifices, but she knows very well, “I float on this pool. I know I am needed; I know I am liked. And so I am not unhappy” (SMH 199). She could not forget her love for Ashok. So she does not share a cordial relationship with her husband: “Even sex with Ramesh – for after a few months, one night he put his hand on my breast and I let him; it was his right after all, and he had been patient enough – is only a minor inconvenience. For I have discovered that if I try hard enough, I can shut down my mind while things are being done to my body” (SMH 199).

Sudha, the patient one starts to feel anguished when she fails to conceive a child. She becomes a prey to her mother-in-law’s insults and insists her to visit one doctor after another. She endures it without a single protest, lying on an examining table, with “awkward helplessness” (SMH 212). Sudha does not have the right to question her husband’s virility like Lalita. Yet, unlike Ahuja, her husband consents for a medical examination and undergoes treatment without his mother’s knowledge: “I had worked so hard at loving my in-laws, at being a good wife. I felt as though I
had spent years of my life pushing a rock uphill, and the moment I stopped, it rolled right back down to the bottom” (SMH 279). This kind of unromantic marriage disillusions the woman. The entrapment increases with the presence of the mother-in-law. The wife feels alienated from the world of her husband. The husband is always “mama’s boy” (VD 17).

Emotions, love and compatibility are very essential for a human–relationship to flower and these qualities are invariably absent in Sudha’s husband. In front of his mother he is “like a leaf in a gale” (SMH 217). Though he orders hundreds of men around, he shrinks when his mother looks at him with eyes that are expressionless.

The mother-in-law selects even Sudha’s dress and regrettably it is she who has to be imitated, “You can’t let her do this to me” (SMH 260). Whenever he disagrees, she just looks at him till he looks away. Sudha understands that he does not dare to defy his mother. As a traditional Indian woman she bears and tolerates everything. When there is a controversy between Sudha and her about the child, instead of supporting her he shuts himself up in the library: “he covered his ears with his hands and walked out” (SMH 259) and Sudha is left to her own contrivances to safeguard her unborn child. Such labels of distinction intensify the alienation and deepen the angst of her mind.

After having passed through a mental hell, tortured by hallucinatory visions of rodents and reptiles, Sudha moves to Chatterjee’s house: “All the things I had to leave behind, not only clothes and jewelry but my good name. The legitimacy of wifehood that I had worked so hard to earn” (VD 43). Her escape from her mother-in-law’s house and the artificial bond of relation with her husband was a step towards humanism to save her unborn child from exposure to the violence ridden world: “If he
wants us, he can get in touch with us easily enough. And if he doesn’t want her’ [the
daughter] – I touch my stomach – ‘then I’m not for him either” (SMH 268).

Society is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Here a female is considered to
be a peripheral member of the family. Sudha’s earlier paramour Ashok appears with
fresh promise of marriage and support. Gouri Ma, Nalini and even Aunt Pishi act as
moral forces for their union in marriage. Nalini says, “Go ahead and agree to
whatever he asks now . . . You can always change a husband’s mind, especially if
you’re giving him what he wants in bed” (SMH 292). Ashok might appear for some
time the worthy man to take Sudha’s hands. But he too miserably fails Sudha when he
insists that all he wants is a few years alone with her leaving her daughter Dayita with
the grandmother. Her daughter could come to them during holidays and festival time.
Sudha refuses his demands and looks forward for another option. So she accepts the
tickets and visas sent by Sunil. She hopes learnt to live without her husband. She has
to achieve a new identity in America. As Jasbir Jain points out,

. . . nationalist allegory makes woman’s body, her sexuality vs
asexuality and motherhood a central issue. Men are either attackers or
failed protectors, and when they succeed, the condition of their
survival is that they continue to adhere to the moral code for their
women. Struggle, sacrifice and self-denial are seen as a necessary part
of womanhood. (Jain 1654)

A very delicate conjugal love that exists between Sumita and Somesh is
portrayed in “Clothes.” Marriage opens the sesame of all enjoyment for Sumita. After
the first moments of apprehension, there is never any withholding in her: “he was a
good man, my husband, a kind, patient man” (AM 22). They are a lovable couple and
share their expectations at the beginning of their life. They are attached to each other
and like to mould themselves befitting the American culture. Though they are living as an extended family, he buys her American clothes and makes her wear them during their bed time. He showers his love on her and magnanimously stimulates her to continue her higher studies in America. In an instant, she becomes a physically aroused woman with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man she loves: “. . . becoming attached to her husband’s universe; she gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required” (SS 419). But unfortunately their happiness does not last long. The life of the woman becomes wretched after the death of her husband.

The story traces Sumita’s struggle for selfhood amidst social and cultural constraints. She emerges as a strong, hardworking individual who is able to chart a new destiny for herself. She recollects his words: “For when you begin working, he says. But first he wants me to start college. Get a degree, perhaps in teaching” (AM 27). Like Sumita, Anju is also encouraged by Sunil to attend college and to join the writers’ club.

The traditional Indian – wife image is cast off by the modern women and the taboos on Indian widows are shed. Gouri is a devoted Indian wife and is true to the meaning of her name, without confines. Even before Bijoy’s death, Gouri has acted with great responsibility and commitment. She is worried that Bijoy had fallen victim to Gopal’s whims and fancies. She refuses to believe when Gopal promises her big things. She would point out to Bijoy how their bookstore had been running at a loss: “You’ve got to go and check on him. He’s stealing from us with both hands” (SMH 40). Some women like Pishi, who are victims themselves, appreciate rebellion. About Gouri she says, “She was a perfect wife . . . and her perfection was beautiful because
it sprang from a source of goodness deep in her heart . . . But I later would wish it had not been that way” (SMH 41).

Even Bijoy knows that Gouri is right and “the fortune of the Chatterjee family was like a moon spinning towards eclipse” (SMH 41). She vehemently opposes Bijoy’s taking to the expedition for rubies: “Are you mad? It’s some kind of a trick, can’t you see? And even if it weren’t, it sounds terribly dangerous” (SMH 44). Gouri is very practical and does not believe the fairy-tale stories of princes on a magic quest. The parting words of Bijoy indicate the kind of trust and faith he has in Gouri. In the event of them not returning from the ruby hunt, he says, “Then I expect you to bring up my child as befits a descendant of the Chatterjees. Will you promise me that?” (SMH 48). And she never forgets that promise.

Nalini, the mother of Sudha is different from Gouri and Pishi. She is a prototype of the multitudes of Indian females who are captivated by the romantic, handsome, and adventurous young men. She has wild dreams about a life of splendors/comfort and aristocratic affluence. Nalini comes to the Chatterjee newly-wed, bare-necked and unjewelled.

Gopal meets Nalini as she washes clothes by the village river and promises her riches and honour. It makes her forget years’ worth of caution and she slips away from her parents’ home. They are married in the Kali temple. She makes complaints constantly about her poor husband who has failed to keep his promises of riches and honour. The discontented and selfish attitude of Nalini prompts Gopal to take on the misadventure and later the doom. She says, “Are you a man or a groundcrawling insect? How long are you going to beg your daily food from your brother just because he is kind? Running after no-good schemes like a dog chasing his shadow. Why can’t you get a job in an office like all other men?” (SMH 42). All her protests are only a
device to cover up her sense of inferiority: “The happiness or salvation of woman is a function of her faithful devotion to her husband” (Wadley 118). She always feels a sense of insecurity and humiliation of being a dependent on the Chatterjees.

Jasbir Jain in the article entitled “Daughters of Mother India in Search of a Nation: Women’s Narratives about the Nation” says “The living presence of the Sita myth is evident not only in the framing of woman as an ideal, virtuous ‘pativrata,’ an image acknowledged by men and women alike even during the prepartition period but also in the persisting image of ‘agnipriksha’ in our own times” (1654). Marriage, the promised end in traditional society in feminist fiction, becomes yet another enclosure that restricts the movement towards a perception of herself as an independent human being and not buffeted by the circumstances or social prescriptions. The nameless heroine in “The Word Love” is consumed by guilt on the one hand, and the pressure to conform to the demands of a relationship, on the other. Eventually she decides to live for herself outside of the stranglehold of traditional Indian ethos and western understandings of the word, love. Rex’s parting remarks underscore the emotional centre in the life of the woman protagonist: “It was never me, was it? Never love. It was always you and her, her and you” (AM 70). She arrives at an understanding of love as a physical instinct.

Although Meera in “A Perfect Life” has financial and professional security, she cannot be happy unless she has the security of marriage as well. Chitra Banerjee shows that characters like Meera are willing to suppress their individual aspirations and give into male domination, because security is also essential to happiness.

The husband–wife relationship gains its importance with its reflection on the socio-culture of a country. Anju’s disillusionment starts on the day of their marriage, as she is perceptive enough to observe Sunil’s attraction towards Sudha. He even
falters when Sudha passes them during the wedding ceremony: “The loveliest of women—” he murmurs, very softly, then breaks off. He keeps gazing at Sudha, almost as if he isn’t capable of moving his eyes away. His face is naked and open, like a house with no curtains. And because I am so deeply in love myself, I recognize exactly what I’m seeing in there” (SMH 167).

Anju has no choice and she surrenders to the decision of her husband: As Simone De Beauvoir says about woman’s attachment towards her man “For she was fond of him; she loved and admired and respected him tremendously. Oh, better than anyone else in the world” (SS 448). She loves her husband and is very careful in observing his preferences: “Sunil is a most attentive husband. Almost every day he takes me somewhere where we can be alone, so that we’ll get to know each other” (SMH 179). Initially she faces some problems because her husband is a reserved person, not quick in expression. But with the passage of time, she comes to know his tastes, “. . . the anxiety felt by first-generation Asian Indians who strongly believe[s] in gender equality is easily understood” (Dasgupta 80).

Anju has changed herself according to the need of the time and is always admired by her husband for her intelligence, beauty and modernism, “What quicksilver moods he has! But I am equal to them . . . I am sweet wine, intoxicating us both. I am the luckiest woman in the world” (SMH 185-86). This mutual understanding and love made her marital life a heavenly bliss. However, her happiness is short lived because she is disturbed by the relationship between Sunil and Sudha. She expects a true bond from her husband. Inspite of all the material comforts awarded to a woman, there is an emotional void. The woman is always disillusioned, whenever she searches for communication.
It is Anju who responds sensitively to the problems caused in the world around her, “unaware of – or unconcerned by – my distress. It was obvious he didn’t think of his actions as deceptive” (SMH 208). Married to Anju who radiates health, vivacity and a bubbling gaiety he inadvertently gets involved in the private life of Sudha. Both the husband and the wife feel that there is something lacking in their relationship: “There are days when Sunil takes the car to work and doesn’t come home until midnight. By then I’m crazy with worry and anger. I know he’s not in the office – or at least he isn’t picking up the phone – and when he finally returns and I explode with accusations, he just shrugs and says I have to let him live his life too” (SMH 208).

Anju experiences emotional starvation in marriage. She feels lonely, insecure, unhappy and sometimes she even hates her husband. Her life is full of false pretensions, empty and meaningless. There is an emotional isolation and the woman is unnaturally subdued:

In spite of all the times we made love, all the sweet words Sunil whispered afterwards into my hair, all I had to do was close my eyes and I could see the look on his face as he stared after Sudha, as he picked up the handkerchief that had fallen from her waistband. I’d never seen that wide-pupiled, out-of-control look on him again, not even at the height of our lovemaking. (SMH 209)

The doubt in Anju’s heart about Sunil makes her physical union with Sunil an unpleasant one. She loses her peace, as she, “lay awake after lovemaking, wondering of whom Sunil had been thinking . . .” (SMH 322). This suspicion increases when she finds Sudha’s handkerchief carefully folded into the Kashmiri box, which is a proof of either the forgotten remnant of an old crush or ‘a continuing obsession’: “The fact is
that physical love can be treated neither as an end in itself nor as a mere means to an end; it cannot serve as a justification of existence; but neither can it be justified extraneously” (SS 434). She tries hard to adjust to Sunil’s wishes, and becomes a dutiful wife. For some time they have a happy married relationship but soon his behaviour changes: “gone without kissing me like he always does when he’s leaving, gone without saying he’ll be back” (SMH 213). The happiness of early married life vanishes soon. Anju is worried because she knows that happiness and grief, success and humiliation are inextricably linked together.

Sunil encourages Anju to go to college and appreciates her participation in writers club. But she knows him perfectly and while writing a letter to her unknown father she writes: “Sunil of earthquakes, flying insects, the sky at dusk, and the loss of control” (VD 64). Anju assumes that something will happen which is not totally in her control. So mentally she is ready to face any kind of trouble given by her own husband. All of a sudden when she comes back from college Sudha and Dayita have disappeared from home.

Anju understands what would have happened between Sunil and Sudha in her absence. He maintains silence when she accuses him for the disappearance of Sudha. She is not ready to forgive both of them. She has to take a bold step of leaving him at the same time does not like to return to India. He tolerates Anju’s anger towards him: “She kicked his shin as hard as she could with the point of her shoe. She wanted him to be hurt. To break apart like a tree trunk with a rotten core. You, you, you” (VD 231). He does not even try to control her or answer her question. He has used up a life time of emotion in the last twenty-four hours. He confesses and grows crazy with unexpected joy instead. Anju hardens her voice and says, “we don’t know how to talk to each other anymore” (VD 234).
Sunil admits that “we aren’t any good for each other anymore – you see that, don’t you?” (VD 238) Anju replies him that “For a long time now, we’ve just made each other unhappy” (VD 241). She already thinks that half of her life was gone and does not want to waste it any more. She slaps his fingers when he says, “The company is transferring me to Houston very soon. I want to start the divorce proceedings as quickly as possible” (VD 241). She understands that nothing would hurt her much because already she has experienced one in her life. She could not tolerate the self explanation of her husband, “I know you hate me for doing this, but one day you’ll see it was the right decision” (VD 242). She doesn’t even express her sorrow, instead gestures him to leave the house immediately. Thus she is able to recognize her own strength.

Anju is not able to understand Sunil after years of being married to him, as there is a communication gap between them. “… Sunil is the original man-with-a-hundred-faces. Even after all this time I can’t tell which is the real him, and which are masks pulled on for effect” (SMH 207). As Susan S.Wadley in “Women and the Hindu Tradition” remarks, “the longing for a husband’s return and the mutual love between man and wife dominate the traditions created and perpetuated by women alone” (119).

Mrs. Gupta of Queen of Dreams lacks the inclination to face the reality around her and is never able to delve deep into an issue or seriously analyse a relationship. The dream–tellers are restricted to have a normal life. They are not supposed to fall in love and search worldly pleasures. But the mother rebels against the elders and elopes with a young man (Rakhi’s father) whom she meets on a trip to Calcutta. To let the dream–spirit invade her, Mrs. Gupta is forbidden to squander her body in search of
physical pleasures: “he grew morose and would not speak. He wanted only what I
could not give him: my body, to which my soul was yoked” (QD 296).

The young dream–teller’s powers leave her almost completely in a new soil,
America. So she decides to “break off all ties with my [her] husband” (QD 283) and
return to the caves to regain her talent. Shortly after, however, the dream–teller
discovers that she is pregnant with Rakhi and cancels her plans. She tries to make up
for it with him by concentrating on household duties: “I took care of him in every
other way, cooking, cleaning, ironing, sitting beside him on the worn plush sofa at
night, ready to listen to whatever he might say” (QD 296).

As a wife she could not satisfy his pleasures and worries: “I wished to be a
good wife, but that was impossible. I did not dare to sleep with my husband again. I
was convinced that if he touched me in desire, I would lose the faint power I’d
regained. I could not explain this to him. Words had become a rare commodity, to be
hoarded. Besides, he would not have believed me” (QD 296). So he started
concentrating on cooking and singing Hindi songs. They converse without
communication; live together while remaining strangers: “Don’t let it be my husband,
whom I’ve failed in so many ways” (QD 2). The lack of communication and mutual
understanding gives her a sense of alienation: “their bonds are strengthened by their
daily struggle. Even if they cannot provide adequate care for each other, they remain
concerned” (Patel106).

As a result of communication gap, the couples suffer from the private torment
of broken marriages. They share the house, but there is no communication of spirits.
They live under the same roof yet experience emptiness, loneliness and alienation. An
ever-widening gap in communication between the husband and wife is felt throughout
the novel.
Tilo is tempted by Raven’s appearance. She feels something burning inside her. Through Raven, Chitra Banerjee shows the true love of Tilo. Tilo is not permitted to lead an ordinary woman’s life. The rules the old one has prescribed for the young mistress: “But remember: when Brahma made Tilottama to be chief dancer in Indra’s court, he warned her never to give her love to man – only to the dance” (MS 43-44). She knows that being a mistress of spices she should not feel like having him: “American I too am looking. I thought all my looking was done when I found the spices but then I saw you and now I no longer know” (MS 69).

The lonely American’s feet fascinate her. She could imagine holding them in her hands but the voice inside her wants to stop that desire in her: “Lonely American, though my body is a sudden soaring whenever I think of you, if you are to come to me, it will have to be by your own desire” (MS 84). Chitra Banerjee introduces him as Tilo’s principal counterpart because, though coming from a different culture, his own self-identification is also problematic as he too goes through several identities. She establishes a relationship with Raven, her male counterpart and partner, not a power-based relationship, but one between two equal beings who love each other.

It is quite natural for a human being to identify himself with others around him. An individual learns from others in the society. He has an identity of his own and gets his identity from others too. Tilo understands herself and her aspirations, through Geeta’s interracial love. Seeing the true love of Geeta, Tilo too wants to love Raven the same way. Tilo’s feelings at this are: “And suddenly, for no reason at all, I think of my American. Geeta, like you I too am learning how love like a rope of ground glass can snake around your heart and pull you, bleeding, away from all you should. And so I tell your grandfather, O very well, just this once, how much harm can it do” (MS 92). The lonely American is attracted towards Tilottama and comes to her shop.
quite often. Tilo keeps waiting for Raven to come to her. Once, when the lonely American touches the hand of Tilo, she gets excited but immediately feels her body aching as she is not supposed to touch human beings. With the touch of human beings, the magical woman loses her powers.

Tilo describes her feelings at this incident: “In the centre of my palm I feel his heart beating. It is strangely steady, drip of water on old stone. Nothing at all like the wild careening in my chest, horses dashing frantic into cave walls” (MS 113). Tilo faces a dilemma – whether to choose spices or love but aspires for both. Talking about the conflict in the mind of Tilo, Anita Roy says: “The theme of the book is that of divided loyalties: does Tilo choose the love of a mortal man and thereby lose her power? Or does she remain chaste, a kind of herbal brahmacharya, but never taste the true spice of a good man’s strong lips?” (82).

Tilo depends on Raven for emotional fulfilment. Inspite of being a magical woman, she aspires for the love of a man like every other woman. She feels she is going close to him in her thoughts but knows she is forbidden to do that. The First Mother warns her that: “Don’t let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don’t rouse the spices’ hate” (MS 140). Chitra Banerjee thus shows women’s aspiration for a happy life with a partner who can understand her well.

When she falls in love with Raven all the magical powers she had from the spices and herbs begin to recede and hollow her bones, and the spice song becomes a receding song. Laura Merlin in a review in World Literature Today says, “Overcome by her attraction to Raven, Tilo yields to her own wishes rather than those of the spices. At this flouting of their rules, the spices themselves rise up against her, demanding that she choose between love and power” (207). Tilo’s destiny and her
paradise lies, not in the distant hills of nothingness but “in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug-dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power” (MS 315).

Tilo decides to choose her life with Raven. He is not able to believe the beautiful young woman’s appearance. She puts on the white dress that Raven had given her. Raven takes her to his room. There they have sexual congress. To purify herself for having shared love with Raven, Tilo wishes to enter the “shampati’s fire” (MS 297). She expresses her atonement: “Willingly I undergo it. Not because I have sinned, for I acted out of love, in which there is no sinning . . . I would make myself as ravishing as Tilottama, dancer of the gods, for Raven’s pleasure” (MS 298). She hears a voice from the spices saying: “Mistress who was, when you accepted our punishment in your heart without battling it, that was enough. Having readied your mind to suffer, you did not need to undergo that suffering in body also” (MS 305). Finally the spices allow Tilo to lead her life with Raven:

Tilo and Raven in *The Mistress of Spices* is marked by the choice Tilo has to make not between the rational and the spiritual world–Raven is also associated with the supernatural and the special powers passed down from his ancestors–but between the isolated microcosm of the spices, with its strict rules of obedience which preclude Tilo’s own complete freedom as a woman and, on the other end, the ordinary human life of an immigrant woman who can carve her own identity progressively and reinvent herself. (Vega-González)

Thus Raven asks her whether she would help him in reaching “The earthly paradise” (MS 199). Raven’s destination is Tilo and they both have some powers. They want to
experience the joys and beauties of this real world. Love calls for a greater sharing. It survives where there is understanding.

Tilo accepts his love and understands that the past life is over. The marriage symbolizes Tilo’s aspiration for freedom of the outer world which appears to assume the fulfilment of her latent artistic leanings and yearnings. She wants to have a new name. Tilo accepts the name Maya as it means many things – illusion, spell, enchantment and so on. She finds her identity by marrying Raven and abandons the practice of spices. According to Morton Marcus: “The novel is . . . a love story whose outcome keeps the reader in rapturous suspense from beginning to end, and a depiction of the harsh realities of inner-city life, mixed with a sense of a mythic world paralleling this one, is nothing less than enthralling.”

Sudha’s employers, Myra and Trideep in The Vine of Desire are portrayal of the new-age couple. The employer provides a lighter touch in a novel strewn with the gloom of broken relationships and nervous breakdowns. They plan how to avoid babies, not to have them. They think child rearing is time consuming and they long to have more time for themselves, “high-strung to be a good mother” (VD 218).

The concepts of “arranged marriages,” “love marriage,” “affairs” and other arenas of relationships between women and men are presented as existing not in isolation but within the context of the much larger network of relationships in any woman’s life. The dissatisfaction of women is the major theme in most of the stories. If they live in a liberated society like America, they break the marriage easily, but if they stay in a close knitted society like India where every act of women is watched with a microscopic view, they suffer in silence. Chitra Banerjee is mainly concerned about things that every individual longs for – the courage to live and the capacity to
love as well as beloved. It is their alienated state that propels them from crisis to crisis, sucking in its wake several other characters.

The portrayal of filial ties has its own fascination and its own intriguing charm in the works of Chitra Banerjee. She focuses upon the abiding nature and far reaching influences of these tenuous links between parents and children. The personality-pattern of the parents and children, the quality of their interaction and the disturbing home environment all combine together to exert a lasting influence on the tender psyche of a growing child.

Children are influenced by culture, class, country and most-definitely their mother. The values and attitudes that they carry throughout their lives are influenced by their mother to a certain extent. The long-term stability, security and peace are acquired by the first foundation of love given by the mother. As a mother, a woman is expected to have a strong character. As Wadley points out: “. . . there are no prime examples of the good mother. And yet goddesses [serve] as mothers, rather than wives” (119).

Another facet of motherhood, the mother–daughter relationship is brought out with more focus in Chitra Banerjee’s novels. Traditionally, the mother is directly responsible for curbing the daughter’s independence. She teaches her daughter to accept the patriarchal norms which she has internalized herself. She does this out of love or fear of her daughter’s future. The daughter in turn channelises all her resentment against patriarchy towards her mother.

Mother–daughter relationship, which is something special, can be seen at its best in “The Word Love.” This story confronts two opposing nevertheless complementary understanding of the concept of love. The nameless young woman protagonist of the story is wrought with guilt for not daring to tell her mother in
Calcutta that she is living with an American. She is conscious that her widowed mother has devoted her life to bringing her daughter up. So the mother would never understand her daughter’s apparent rejection of customs and traditions: “when women decide to engage in coupling practices outside of the endogamous circle, they creatively find devices to maintain their links . . . a third fundamental theme running through the women’s “herstories.” Some choose to hide their relationships from their parents” (Badruddoja 37).

The bond between mother and daughter is shattered when the phone is one day answered by Rex. The mother feels “Better no daughter than a disobedient one, a shame to the family” (AM 62). The mother stops communicating with her daughter and refuses to answer to the phone. The mother wilfully changes her phone number and moves to a new location, and all of the daughter’s letters are returned to her unopened. She wants to confess and finally faces the wrath of her mother when she rings up and an ayah answers the call:

All through the next month you try to reach her. You call. The ayah answers. She sounds frightened when she hears your voice. Memsaab has told her not to speak to you, or else she’ll lose her job. ‘She had the lawyer over yesterday to change her will. What did you do, Missybaba, that was so bad?’ You hear your mother in the background. “Who are you talking to, Ayah? What? How can it be my daughter? I don’t have a daughter. Hang up right now.” (AM 65)

The mother is righteous in her anger and cruelly disowns the daughter for her act of sacrifice. The daughter cannot bear the thought of losing the total correspondence with her mother. This denunciation and her guilt in turn destroy her relationship with Rex. This makes her say that she never loves him. But she does not
give him up altogether. She vows to make a new life for herself and to make it on her own: “... you will pack your belongings. A few clothes, some music, a favorite book... And a word comes to you out of the opening sky. The word love. You see that you had never understood it before. It is like rain, and when you lift your face to it, like rain it washes away inessentials, leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin” (AM 71). Thus parental love makes her take a decision to live alone and this is about the nameless heroine’s quest for selfhood in the context of the mother–daughter relationship.

“The Bats” is a touching and heart-rending tale of a young girl caught between an abusive and cruel father and a torn and helpless mother. The girl is yet on the verge of being initiated into the life of experience and the first thing which she notices as the initial stirrings of realizations dawn upon her is that her “mother cried a lot” (AM 1).

Amidst the incomprehensive darkness of a hot Calcutta night, the girl child wakes up startled, to watch her mother crying, “the sound of her weeping would be all around me, pressing in, wave upon wave, until I could no longer tell where it was coming from” (AM 1). The child initially fails to understand why her mother has started sharing her narrow child’s bed with her, and also the cause of her mother’s agony. The fear, the panic, the suffocation and the helplessness are all there in the story “The Bats.” The following lines from Shashi Desphande’s The Binding Vine represent the crux of a very crucial and closest relationship between mother and daughter: “To make myself in your image / was never the goal I sought” (124).

When the mother suggests that they go to grandpa’s house, the child becomes overtly thrilled. So they begin their escapade, their journey from a torturous and confined life to a life of newness, freedom, and liberty from bondage. Life in
grandpa’s house in the very heart of nature seems no less than a paradise. It is a life of unended bliss; all sorrows forgotten, all wounds healed.

It proves to be just a temporary shelter where one may be given enough time to lick one’s wounds, but is never allowed to be made a permanent refuge. She is not able to tolerate the stares and whispers of the women in the market place, so the wife decides to go back to her battering husband, once again to flee away from something which she now considers the greater of the two evils. The life of adventure and freedom which she had envisioned so broadly seems to betray her pathetically with its negative and darker aspects. So, she goes back to the life which she had left behind, even with its tortures, hassles, heartbreaks. Life once again becomes an internal experience and the mother and the child’s life get reduced to a never-ending cycle of escapes and returns, as they move out, and move in, always back to the world of batterings, thrashings, crashing agonies. Thus the daughter also suffers along with the mother.

“The Maidservant’s Story” also gives a vivid picture of the change in ideology of two generations, from mother to daughter. The protagonist, Manisha, grows up in America and enjoys the liberty of choosing her own life partner, a privilege which her mother and aunt were deprived of. But she remains attuned to her past, in spite of her changed outlook and ideology, and this is evident when she intermittently lingers around things like “Kadam trees,” and “strains of Rabindra Sangeet.” She explains that “Ami chini go chini tomare, I know you well, woman from a distant land beyond the ocean” (AM 110). She is able to express her views easily:

. . . It was a good time, I felt, to talk – if not as mother and daughter, at least as two intelligent, adult women. But when I’d spoken she just glanced up sharply with a look that could have been suspicion or
disapproval, or even relief that a prospect had appeared, at last, on my barren martial horizon. I never have been able to read my mother’s expressions. ‘That must be very nice, dear,’ she said. (AM 110)

Thus, Manisha’s mother has no objection to her newfound right and lifestyle. Even if she hardly praises her daughter for her achievements like winning debates, standing first in exams and drama competitions, it is an open truth that she has been an inspiration behind these feats: “You know I want the best for you” (AM 113).

Manisha is aware of the fact that her mother is watching her everytime, seeing to her needs and aspiration but never allowing her to explore the wounds that lie hidden in the deep ocean of her heart, “what made her cry out in her dreams” (AM 113).

Manisha wonders why her mother has built a thin, transparent wall around herself, not even letting her own daughter to break the silence. This makes her feel that her relation with her fiancée is far better and liberated than her relationship with her own mother. She dreams of a relation with no strings attached, sailing into uncharted and amazing areas of experience that someone like her mother couldn’t imagine. The girl longs for a relationship with her mother so much that she went to many extremes. She says:

For a while in college I’d tried the opposite, cutting classes and running around with a wild crowd, smoking cigarettes (an absolute taboo for an Indian girl of good family) and even ganja a couple of times, letting boys hold my hand in broad daylight in the Maidan park, where it was certain someone would see us and report the fact back to my mother. But all she did was look at me with a distant sadness, as one might regard a character in a book or movie, and say that she didn’t understand why I’d want to ruin my life this way. (AM 112)
As a child Manisha never has an intimate relationship with her mother and she says of her mother. The death of her husband and baby in a cholera epidemic had left Manisha’s mother shocked and it had probably killed a part of her too. At that time Manisha was five years old and had been relinquished to Deepa Mashi, who being childless, enthusiastically accepted this responsibility: “But what she thought, what she longed for . . . I never knew. It was as though she’d built a wall of ice around her, thin and invisible and unbreakable. No matter how often I flung myself against it, I was refused entry” (AM 113). These and other mother–daughter relationships provide the psychological underpinning for several of Chitra Banerjee’s novels.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Queen of Dreams explores the unusual relationship between an Indian–born mother and her American–born daughter. In Chapter six of the book entitled “Rakhi,” she confesses: “Let me not misrepresent facts. My mother wasn’t the one who wanted to teach me to interpret dreams. I was crazy for it myself . . . I hungered for all things Indian because my mother never spoke of the country she’d grown up in – just as she never spoke of her past” (QD 35). Rakhi’s complicated relationship with her mother shapes her communication patterns with the people around her. Characterized by secrecy and isolation from society, Mrs. Gupta’s lifestyle cannot serve as a constructive example for her daughter. A healthy mother–child bond is based on empathy, primary identification, and experiencing the infant as continuous with the self and not separate. The fluid ego boundaries between the mother and child would compromise the dream–teller’s need to maintain the individuality required for the practice of her skill. Therefore, she keeps rejecting her child’s attempts to establish such a relationship with her: “My mother always slept alone. Until I was about eight years old, I didn’t give it much thought. It was merely a part of my nightly routine, where she would tuck me in and
sit on the edge of my bed for a while, smoothing my hair with light fingers in the half dark, humming” (QD 4).

Rakhi observes her mother in a meditative trance. Perceiving her undecipherable mother as a total stranger, a mysterious other, the daughter also experiences herself as a “separate, lesser being” (QD 144). This incident opens up an unbridgeable gap between the mother and daughter, a gap that shapes their relationship throughout the novel. Rakhi’s assumptions about her mother’s intentions prove to be quite accurate. In one of the final sections of her journal, the dream–teller admits: “I was not a good mother to Rakhi. I loved her, but not fully. To love someone fully is to give up selfhood, and I could not risk that. She knew this. Perhaps that is why she constantly longed to understand who I am, to become who I am” (QD 297).

The dream–teller’s distance from her husband and daughter creates a malfunctioning family. The daughter, Rakhi vainly longs for her mother’s attention. The journals appear to be the mother’s last chance to reach her family by telling them the truth about her. Rakhi and her father’s initial responses are indeed resentful, yet later, they find the emotional strength to understand the mother’s motives and finally forgive her.

The title of the novel takes the image of India sealed up in the mind of Rakhi, along with many American-born Indians. Rakhi perceives her own ordinary human nature inferior and uninteresting. Yet her ability to make assumptions about her mother’s facial expressions, tones of voice, and other paralinguistic signals is anything but trivial: “Bonding with their mother does not rule out their desire for a similar relationship with their father, which they consider necessary, but cannot have due to both his preoccupation with work and a social and cultural socialisation that
does not encourage close or intimate relationships between fathers and daughters” (Thapan 37).

Right from her early childhood, Rakhi was drawn towards her mother. Mrs. Gupta wonders in one of her late *Dream Journals*: “Do all girls go through such a phase of mother worship? Having had no mother myself, I didn’t know” (*QD* 229). A girl’s maturation process usually involves a temporary oedipal rejection of her mother in favour of her father. This initial friction in the mother–daughter bond occurs as the girl’s defence against primary identification with the mother, as an attempt to establish boundaries between herself and her mother. Since Rakhi has never been with her mother ultimately, the mother–daughter relationship does not progress to the stage where the daughter can attempt to separate from her primary identification figure.

The mother admits her mistake of not revealing her past to Rakhi. In order to save Rakhi, she was hiding her secrets and mysteries from her: “All this time I thought I was doing it for you. But I’d only been protecting myself” (*QD* 90). She does not care about Rakhi’s welfare or her interest in Indian culture in an alien soil but failed to equip her daughter to find her own roots in America.

After her mother’s death, Rakhi gives the dream journals, written in Bengali by Mrs. Gupta to her father, to be translated into English. While reading the journals they could delve into the mysterious and unfathomable caverns of her inner being, to empathize with the constant trials and tribulations. Conscious and subterranean emotions evolve into a magical relationship between Mrs. Gupta, Rakhi and her daughter Jona. Unlike Mrs. Gupta she accepts Jona’s love as a mother: “I want you to lie down with me. Put your head on my pillow” (*QD* 203). While comparing the mother’s secretive and indirect communication through her dream journals to the father’s straightforward conversations and storytelling, it can be suggested that, as far
as cultural transmission is concerned, the father’s verbal storytelling is more effective than the mother’s written life story.

The traditional image of loving and protecting mother is found in the novels of Chitra Banerjee. The mothers find fulfilment in the relationship and serve as a creative, protective force in life. In Indian culture, a mother is a daughter’s best counsellor in the bewildering years of adolescence; the mother prepares them emotionally for marriage and subsequent motherhood. The parental concern is always there for Chatterjee girls. Gouri Ma, Nalini and Pishi Ma let their children decide about their future career. The issues are discussed, thrashed and then the children are given the last say. Sudha and Anju have the freedom, but parental protection is there if they need it.

Inspite of an educated background and a western lifestyle, Gouri chooses to control her daughter Anju. Neeru Sharma comments in her article “Mother–Daughter bonding in The Binding Vine”: “Mother-daughter bonding is a long affiliation that has the potential of influencing the development of child in a significant way. It is such a type of bonding which requires a language of feeling should flow between a mother and daughter.”

Through phone calls from India, Gouri helps Anju to overcome her sorrow of miscarriage. The fundamental benevolence of Gouri, helps the Chatterjee girls develop confidence and endurance against the onslaught of a hostile world. Anju says: “I loved my mother more than anyone I knew. I admired her completely. When she embraced me, or gave me a rare word of praise, I thought, Paradise must be like this. I learned everything I could from my mother” (VD 102).

There are mothers who lack love. This is proved through the character of Nalini in Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire. Sudha feels cheated and lines of
discontent take over her face with the look given by Nalini. When she returns from Sanyal’s house the fact that an unhappy mother is said to pass on her sorrow to the baby in her womb does not bother Nalini much. Sudha believes that this attitude of her mother is one reason for the sorrows and unhappiness in her life:

Her mother’s letter with its accusations, which she tore into the tiniest strips she could and threw in the backyard, it was too poisonous to keep in the house. Yet why should she expect anything different? Hasn’t her mother spent her whole life putting her down, thinking the worst? The mother who couldn’t bring herself to ever love her – who blamed her own bad luck on the daughter whose birth coincided with the news of her widowhood. (VD 296)

Sudha experiences alienation in all quarters of her life. Sudha is deprived of motherly affection. Her mother’s ambition for wealth and luxury are clearly evident from her words and actions. This creates a rift between the mother and daughter and forces Sudha to be a rebel. When Ashok offers to be a partner with a condition that Dayita must be with grandma for a while, Nalini accepts this easily, whereas Sudha is not for that. According to aunt Nalini, “Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mother’s name; wicked daughters are firebrands scorching their family’s fame” (SMH 23). Although the mother–daughter relationship is at loggerheads, the mother is the most important relation to Sudha. So she decides to settle in India by accepting the job of caretaker. She says to her daughter, “I’ll take care of you, I whispered. I won’t need anyone’s charity” (VD 244).

Aunt Pishi is childless. She plays an important role in the lives of two young girls by showing them her love and affection, she takes care of their things; she used to narrate her experiences to them whereby she indirectly inculcates in them the
values and the virtues of women besides the reputation of a traditional family. Gouri Ma treats them generously as they are part of the Chatterjee family. Their total dependency is on the extended family.

Chitra Banerjee’s novels present a picture of emotional interaction between mother and daughter. The filial ties are largely balanced and satisfying. The mothers are affectionate, self-sacrificing and devoted to the welfare and interests of their daughters. They bring them up and guide them to become independent and autonomous. Her novels show that the ambiguities in women’s relationships grow out of their patriarchal conditioning. The mother–daughter bond should be with sympathy, understanding and support as it is about love.

Thus the mother–daughter relationship has occupied a more important place in Chitra Banerjee’s fiction than the father–daughter relationship. She has not valorized the image of mother as goddess; instead she has rendered more human qualities to her. For her it has deep roots and far reaching consequences. The mothers provide an example of fulfilling relationships. It becomes a foundation for healthy interpersonal relationships and adjustments. The father–daughter relationship in India is lovable and caring but it’s a responsibility till the girl gets married. He takes care of the girls education, welfare, wealth and protection.

The child in “The Bats” grows up with an ever – increasing apprehension of the man whom she knows to be her father, but hardly gets any fatherly affection from him: “I didn’t see him much. I heard him, though, shouts that shook the walls of my bedroom like they were paper, the sounds of falling dishes” (AM 2). The child is presented with such a draconian image of the figure is called as father and she always dislikes her father. The father figure represents the oppressive and dictatorial attitude of the male: “when I was little and he used to pick me up suddenly and throw me all
the way up to the ceiling, up and down, up and down while Mother pulled at his arms, begging him to stop, and I screamed and screamed with terror until I had no breath left” (*AM* 2).

Within the aura of scintillating dreams and aspirations, Sumita in “Clothes” remembers the love and affection of her parents. She fears that the doors of her girlhood are closed behind her: “But already the activities of our girlhood seem to be far in my past, the colors leached out of them, like old sepia photographs” (*AM* 18).

Like Sumita, Lalita is petted and pampered by her parents. Though she is always reminded of her departure all the time, she is not taxed too much physically or emotionally. Yet she is not given opportunity to realize what she wants from life or whom she wishes to marry. Parents make all decisions and she ceases to be a person in her own right. She casts aside her dream of setting up her own tailor’s shop in India and follows her husband to an alien land where she has no support, or friend or job. Her life is devoid of any real pleasure after marriage.

From her childhood Rakhi’s relationship with her father is largely dysfunctional. After her mother’s death Rakhi realises that her father is easily accessible unlike her mysterious mother. Without knowing this truth she has preferred the company of her mother disregarding him. As she puts it her father, “was the tidy one in our household, the methodical one, always kind, the one with music. My mother – secretive, stubborn, unreliable – couldn’t hold a tune to save her life. I wanted to be just like her” (*QD* 8).

The mother’s presence and intervention deny the father and daughter both independent introspection and interpersonal communication. Preventing the power struggle between father and daughter, the mother also impedes their bonding, indirectly causing Rakhi to dismiss her father as an identification figure. Interestingly,
however, in spite of this artificial separation between the father and daughter, they seem to interpret the mother’s intentions identically. They both know what she is trying to tell them without her actually saying it. Thus, without being aware of it, the father’s and daughter’s minds form an interpretive entity that succeeds in understanding the mother, but fails in their relationship with each other.

Rakhi develops a genuine relationship with her father, who will tell her stories of India that her mother would not. He slogs in the kitchen and prepares many dishes to impress his daughter. Rakhi comes to know about her mother’s secrets through dreams journals and develops her relationship with her father whom “she always dismissed, although affectionately, thinking he knew nothing she’d have any use for” (QD 168). While the father translates the journals, Rakhi slowly rediscovers her father’s unique character and talents. Although Rakhi blames her father for her mother’s death at first, when the father and daughter start to work in the coffee shop, the daughter learns to trust her father and gradually relinquishes her anger. The father and daughter realise that it is the first time they have spoken to each other directly, without the mother’s mediation.

Sudha accepts the mysterious Singhji driver as her father at the end of the novel Sister of My Heart. She is able to understand her father’s love and affection towards her daughter Dayita and his gift of a ruby; but Anju dislikes her father, and she says,

I hate my father. I hate the fact that he could go off so casually in search of adventure, without a single thought for what would happen to the rest of us. I blame him for the tired circles under mother’s eyes, the taunts of the children at school because I don’t have a father. None of
it would have happened if he hadn’t been so careless and got himself killed. *(SMH 24)*

The mother–son relationship appears entirely on a new note in the story “A Perfect Life.” The protagonist thinks she has a perfect life, till she finds an abandoned Hispanic boy under the stairwell of her house. The feeling of motherhood upsurges when she suddenly discovers a six-year old boy with “small huddled shape and the glint of terrified eyes,” *(AM 63)* the first apprehension of maternal instincts dawn on her: “I knew mother-love was real . . . lurking somewhere in the female genes – especially our ones” *(AM 75)*. She takes him in and showers him with love. She names the child as Krishna which brings in the image of the mythical Krishna in the Brindavan. The genetically and culturally inherited maternal instinct finds a sudden upsurge on discovering the child. It is indeed a moment of her self-discovery too.

Meera’s longing: “Mother-love, that tidal wave, swept everything else away. Friendship. Romantic fulfillment. Even the need for sex” *(AM 98-99)*. Meera runs into trouble when she wants to adopt the Hispanic boy. He is temporarily given to the care of Mrs. Ortiz, but he runs away. With the disappearance of the child, life which once appeared “civilized, as much in control, as perfect” *(AM 77)* suddenly turns imbalanced.

Meera turns neurotic in his absence: “Suddenly I felt very tired. Old . . . Unmarried, childless . . . banja, empty” *(AM 103)*. Her acceptance of patriarcho-cultural terms associated with demeaning notions of womanhood is an indication of her complete transformed personality. She marries Richard as an antidote to the child’s disappearance, on the condition that she is never burdened with biological maternity.

Contrary to all the fallacies of motherhood women like Myra in *The Vine of
Desire see mothering as a suffocating experience. Vimochana says in one of her articles, “there are couples with plum jobs in multinational companies earning hefty salaries who, on separation, will treat their responsibility for their children as a liability. These are very fickle human relationships, which have been sustained until then under the veneer of superficiality and with an eye on each other’s bank balances” (106).

Asha has often felt the urge to question Dinesh but fears that he would walk out on her just as her husband has done - with irritation, impatience and anger. But his silence freezes her more than his anger. He starts looking for an isolated place, a single room in some featureless housing block where no one knows him or tries to mingle with him. The genuine warmth, affection and interaction between mother and son is missing. He dislikes her and stops talking to her. When she tries to force him to talk: “Dinesh burst out even before I’d replaced the receiver. ‘And Toastmasters – Toastmasters, give me a break!’ . . .’ (AM 283)

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Raven’s is a story of his childhood and his attempt to grapple with the consequences of a past which had been firmly denied to him by his mother. Raven tells Tilo of his lovable mother: “I thought my mother the most beautiful woman in creation” (MS 156). She has abandoned a rich, aboriginal culture for the bland homogeneity of American society. He describes his parents: “My father was a quiet man, big and slow moving. The kind that when you’re with them you feel yourself slowing down too, calmness covering you like a cool blanket, even your heartbeat. Later I would wonder if that was why my mother married him” (MS 153).

The course of the parent–child relationship is not consistently smooth in Sunil’s case. The economic pressures affect these ties, but the change is inevitable. Under insurmountable external stresses, or temporary bonds the parent–child
relationship is neither easy nor desirable. In the traditional Indian social context, it is the male who acts as the head of the family, and conducts the affairs according to his own wishes. His father, Majumdar’s decisions are not questioned and his will unchallengeable. The position of the head of the family involves both exercises of power and discharge of responsibilities. In the process of discharge of family responsibilities, he decides what must be eaten by his own son. His son tells him: “Don’t worry, I’ll be happy to pay back every paisa and more . . . I don’t want to live indebted to you, being reminded of it every day of my life, like my poor mother. And let me tell you something, if I see you mistreating her one more time –” (SMH 183).

Majumdar dominates and his accusations against Sunil tear “open with their malevolent claws. Drinking and whoring” (SMH 184). But Sunil is a good and responsible son: “every month he sends him a sizeable money order . . . he was buying back his freedom” (SMH 207). As soon as he receives the death news of his father he goes to India. As a dutiful son he does all the post cremation ceremonies. As per the instruction given by the priest he completes all the ceremonies: “he is speaking not of his father, whom he has not so much forgiven as let drop from his mind, but of himself, the addiction that he has carried on his back so eagerly all these years” (VD 328).

The need for someone to talk to, someone to share with and the craving for an affectionate soul are very vital in human relationships which come alive touchingly in *The Vine of Desire*. There are no words to explain the vacuum in such relationships. Such situations do prevail both in India and America, where the displacement of the older generation into the household of their offspring occurs.

‘Sisterhood’ has emerged in the West as a dominant model for feminist intercommunity relations. A term of political solidarity, ‘sisterhood’ pronounces
women’s activism. Its originators see it carrying the meaning of shared oppression, common victimization, and community of interests, solidarity and collective activism. The term has been used to advocate interracial, international, transglobal and cross-cultural bonds among women. It has been employed to unite and assemble women of every class of society to fight against patriarchy and other related institutions.

Alice Walker has used “sisterhood” in her novels as well as in her expository writings. In her letter to the American President Bill Clinton, written on 13 March 1996, she has stated that painful circumstances can be negated and overcome by the collective effort of the people, “We are all substantially flawed, wounded, angry, hurt, here on Earth. But the human condition, so painful to us and in some ways shameful – because we feel we are weak when the reality of ourselves is exposed – is made much more bearable when it is shared, face to face, in words that have expressive human eyes behind them” (www.goodreads.com). Literature abounds in cases of strong emotional bonds between women. Generally, in these novels, ‘sisterhood’ is proposed as cure when the institutions of marriage, family, and patriarchy fail. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says about sisterhood in her article, “What Women Share”: “I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers.”

As a child Chitra Banerjee took a vow that when she gets older, she would search the epics for herself and find the female–female relationships. But when she read the epics and other classical texts of Indian culture, she was surprised to find few portrayals of friendships among women. It was this perspective which she highlighted in most of her works. In a conversation with Gowri Ramnarayan, she states: “I think literature is a wonderful way in which people can dissolve their differences and find
common ground.” For Asian or African American women, sisterhood is a strength and succour, enabling them to discover themselves as persons and to nurture their ties with their community.

Chitra Banerjee believes that the major theme in all her writing is sisterhood, that mysterious female bonding which goes far deeper than conventional familial ties and which insistently surfaces in women’s relationships despite all patriarchal conditioning. She admits in “What Women Share”:

Friendships are at the heart of stories such as “Affair,” where the protagonist suspects her best friend of having an affair, and is deeply hurt by the fact that her friend has chosen not to confide in her, and “Meeting Mrinal,” where the main character meets her best friend and competitor from childhood after many years and must decide whether or not to tell her about her broken marriage.

In “Affair” and “Meeting Mrinal” Abha and Meena on the one hand and Asha and Mrinalini on the other are certainly dear friends, and not relatives. The relationship between the maid and the mistress in “The Maid Servant’s Story” pictures their bond and the way in which Sara is exposed to learn life skills. Thus friendship between women will really be an authentic upliftment of women. Tilo’s concern towards Geeta, Lalita and Daksha in *The Mistress of Spices* is dealt with woman’s quest for selfhood through friendship.

In Chitra Banerjee’s fiction sisterhood is always a deeply rooted, instinctual relationship that brings people together. This is especially shown in “The Ultrasound” and its novelistic version, *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*. Anju and Sudha are cousins belonging to the same patrilineal family and in the Indian context would obviously be called “sisters,” and not “friends.” They are distant cousins who regard
one another as the sister of their hearts. They were born on the same day, were
brought up in the same house, and are linked by an almost mystical bond of love. In
her interview, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says to Luan Gaines, “In Sister of My
Heart, friendship between two cousins who thought of each other as sisters was the
most important bond.”

The title Sister of My Heart itself speaks of the emotional ties between the two
women. Chitra Banerjee’s use of the word “sister” in her novels reflects her specific
concern. Sister is here used in the sense of a universal sisterhood, a female universe
by itself. The lives of the two friends Anju and Runu provide a critique for each other.
Sudha and Anju are close because it was Anju who calls Sudha out into the world.
Anju and Sudha in Sister of My Heart are very different in appearance, temperament
and achievements, and grow up together under similar yet very different conditions.
The girls do everything together and love one another fiercely, demanding to be
known not just as sisters but as twins. The love and compassion that they share with
each other help them surmount all kinds of difficulties. Anju says, “I could never hate
Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart . . . Like no-one else in
the entire world does. Like no-one else in the entire world will. Early in my life I
realize something. People were jealous of Sudha and me” (SMH 24). The traditional
joint family system is much helpful to these girls, to continue their relationship until
the end of the novel. The differences in their outlook and attitude, instead of making
them apart, pull them together to help each other in their times of need.

Sudha and Anju live in a world of their own removed from the others around
them: “I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She’ll look
at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I’ll know she
understands me perfectly” (SMH 24). Sudha and Anju are not two unique identities;
they represent the dual aspects of Indian womanhood of the eighties; what they suffer and fight together are the sum total of the female experience kept under patriarchal/matriarchal control but giving out sparks of enlightened revolt. In this split of the female composite, Sudha is the submissive half of Anju’s revolting half.

The two girls—especially from their entry to girlhood—cherish a set of new values and concomitant dreams—their urge for freedom, their craving for adventurous experiences, and their eagerness to have a stronger experience of the world beyond the overprotected home all are typical of the young women of the time.

Marriage has brought not only physical separation but also emotional separation from Anju. There is more myth and mystery surrounding the girls’ fathers. Through Pishi Sudha comes to know the additional detail that the cousins, Bijoy and Gopal are not actually cousins at all. This helps Sudha to establish her deep love than the ties of blood. Sudha thinks that she must atone for her father’s sins. So she always gives priority to Anju. Therefore, she decides to sacrifice her love towards Ashok for Anju’s sake. It is certain that she does it out of love for a sister of the heart. The two sisters are separated after their wedding. If marriages destroy their faith in themselves, true friendship redeems them.

The two cousins are so much in love that they have even fixed the date of getting amniocentesis test results together. Anju, being an educated and sensible woman, knows much about Runu’s life, even if she hardly tells her anything about the situation in her in-law’s place. Anju had already sensed the disturbing and unusual aura that prevails at Sudha’s place when she visited them during her visit to India.

A close scrutiny of the relationship between Anju and her husband Sunil, belies the ostensible equality of the modern marriage. Sunil does not want Anju to encourage her friend to leave her family and try to have the baby alone. Even Anju is
temporarily confused: “Had I taken all of that [everything] away from her . . . ” (AM 227). But finally she is able to see the rightness of her own advice. The ominous undertones of Sunil’s arguments disturb Anju; his words seem to imply: “See how lucky you are to have a husband like me, to live in this free and easy American culture . . . You’d better start working harder at being a good wife. Or else” (AM 218). The problems in their relationships notwithstanding, the story celebrates the triumph of the friendship between the two women separated by geographical and cultural distance. Their mutual compassion strengthens the fabric of resistance and inspires the quest for identity.

Anju also advises Sudha to accept Ashok’s offer and explains that to Sunil: “I told her she should accept him. I told her that I’m better now, that I can manage here without her” (VD 22). But Sudha chooses Anju: “They’ve protected, advised, cajoled, bullied, and stood up for each other all their lives. Each has been madly jealous of the other at some point. Each has enraged the other, or made her weep. Each has been willing to give up her happiness for her cousin. In short: they’ve loved each other the way they’ve never loved anyone else” (VD 11).

Anju is ready 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. It is appropriate, then, that, a novel of sisterhood should end with Anju’s thoughts:

We’ve formed a tableau, two women, their arms intertwined 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. Madonnas with child . . . for now the three of us stand unhurried, feeling the way we fit, skin on skin on skin, into each other’s lives. (SMH 347)
The characters Anju and Sudha are bound together. They easily overcome all the critical and difficult circumstances, because they are in co-ordination, co-operation and mutual understanding. Sudha is the face of the new Indian woman; assertive, independent and ready to lead her life according to her own terms. The relationship of the two cousins has become complicated in time and they have lost their earlier innocence due to innumerable reasons. Tragically, their dreams do not come to fruition and they are transformed to darker characters. Having realized that innocence is irretrievable they prepare themselves to deal with life’s tragedies and betrayals. In the process they come to terms with the fact that one can still love someone, even when one has been betrayed, though with a reduced intensity:

“‘Don’t worry,’ Anju says with a dry laugh. ‘I’m not going to kill us. Though I must confess there were days when I fantasized about it, the two of us in this car, going off the hillside together—’. . . ‘You won’t believe it, Sudha,’ she says. ‘I’ve learned to fly’” (VD 368).

In the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, connection between women consolidates the platform from which women struggle to find their identity. “Affair” is about two marriages heading towards divorce; the events actually unfold through the portrait of an uneasy friendship between two very different women. The relationship between Abha and Meena builds the space of intervention that enables both women to extricate themselves from meaningless relationships and re-write their strategies of survival.

“The Maid Servant’s Story” portrays the emotional bonds between women, the mistress of the house and the maid servant Sarala challenge the divisive practices of patriarchy. A maid servant, who is good looking enough in a primitive adivasi way, comes looking for work: “If you show me how to, I’ll learn. I’m a good worker
– I won’t be any trouble to you” (AM 120). The wife takes pity on her and employ her as a servant in the house. She is very obedient and dutiful and becomes attached to the mistress of the house. The wife too loves her and wants to teach her because it is the only way to liberate the likes of her. But the mistress’ sister has her own apprehension: “Where will this lead?” (AM 125) The wife even dares to gift the maidservant a saffron saree from her own almirah. She defies her husband and her husband’s aunt while helping the servant, “I don’t think this girl’s like that” (AM 121).

The affectionate relationship between the mistress and the maid is ruptured when the master of the house tries to rape the maid. She is forced to leave and return to her husband who has tried to use her as a prostitute in the first place. The mistress’ attempts to educate the maid have not helped.

Friendship overcomes all rivalry and jealousy; it nourishes and nurtures the self as much as it does the other. This is something Asha in Chitra Banerjee’s “Meeting Mrinal” understands in good time. After a long time, Asha meets Mrinalini Ghose, her classmate and best friend, confidante and competitor all through her growing-up years. When they meet again they share their experiences. At first they are impressed by each other and are even envious of each other. After some time Mrinal confesses that some mornings she does not feel happy thinking that Asha has a family which she does not have.

Mrinal has got everything she wants for herself – freedom, power, masculine admiration – but she envies the love and the warmth of a family life; and in front of Mrinal’s grief and loneliness Asha cannot confess her own. Back home, however, she weeps for them both, for their lost dreams and for their realization that ‘perfection was only a mirage’: “Somehow believing in Mrinal’s happiness, thinking that
unregretful lives like hers were possible, had made it easier to bear my individual sorrows” (AM 296). Those tears she has shed now are therapeutic; they help her to reconcile with her son, to liberate herself from the dead weight of the past, to accept the truth that life is and should be inevitably flawed, but nonetheless beautiful and precious.

Tilo helps all who come to her store irrespective of their sex; she can feel the pain of the women like Lalita, Daksha and Geeta as her own. Her understanding of the women is expressed through the typical feminine metaphor of spices. Although she does reach out to male characters like Raven, Haroun, Geeta’s grandfather and Jagjit, she cannot relate to them in the same way. When, Tilo talks about the lessons she has learnt on the island she says: “Most of all we learned to feel without words the sorrows of our sisters, and without words to console them. In this way our lives were not so different from those of the girls we had left behind in our home villages” (MS 52).

Tilo helps Mrs. Ahuja become Lalita by overthrowing the tyrannical structures that have weighed her down. They learn the lesson of bonding with other women by doing ordinary everyday chores like sweeping and stitching. When she says that their life on the island of spices was no different from that of the village girls, the implication is that women for generations have learnt to bond with one another while learning household chores. Female bonding, therefore, has always been indirect and Tilo learns in the same indirect way as women all over the world.

While Rakhi is resigned to her arid marital life, her friend Belle makes a pitiful attempt to help her: “She loves Belle and always has, ever since they were roommates during their freshman year at Berkeley. They’ve nursed each other
through romantic troubles, failing grades, bouts of flu and the pressures that only Indian parents know to apply to their offspring” (<i>QD</i> 15).

Rakhi wants to enjoy pleasure, gain, and victory but wants to run away from pain, loss and defeat. In order to justify her actions she takes the help of her friend Belle: “Without Belle, Rakhi doesn’t think she could have survived her divorce. Belle knows her weak points, her stubbornness, her suspicions, her passion for her art, and her fear that she’ll never be good enough at it. How hard it is for her to change her mind once it’s made up” (<i>QD</i> 15).

Chitra Banerjee’s treatment of women is different. They love their men, or believe they do, and they suffer agonies of jealousy and misery when they feel they have been betrayed by their husbands. But they quickly realise that they love their women friends and trust their friendship for ever. It is in <i>Arranged Marriage, Sister of My Heart, The Vine of Desire, Queen of Dreams</i> and <i>The Mistress of Spice</i> that Chitra Banerjee most obviously explores this theme.

The novels celebrate the courage and humanity of suffering women who have rebelled against oppressive patriarchy and have joined a universal sisterhood. The novels are concerned not with growing up but growing up with family ties. This helps one discover a pattern of human relationship emerging under the weight of multi-dimensional pressures and tensions.

It may be observed that family and communal relations have great influence on the psyche of the individual. <i>Queen of Dreams</i> relates to the difficulties faced by Indian–born mothers and their American–born daughters. This multidimensional methodology allows the examination of the novel’s familial relationships from various perspectives in order to draw a comprehensive picture of the family’s influences on the construction of the daughter’s ethnic identity.
The narrative brilliantly underscores the possibility of salvaging relationships, if one chooses to forgive and move on – as indeed Rakhi does with Mr. Gupta, her father and Sonny, her ex-husband. All her wanderings and reflections finally bring her into new vistas of understanding, which she had formerly ignored or rejected. She projects the concept of the value of human personality and human relationship very prominently with the meticulous touch of her skill. Whenever there is some snag or an un-oiled cog anywhere in the network of these relationships, uncertainty, suspicion and disintegration surround the protagonists. However, a smooth transition from one relationship to another is required to make one’s life a journey towards self-realization.

The success of any interpersonal relationship depends on the autonomy and strength of each participant. Chitra Banerjee has portrayed the inner turmoil of a woman, fighting within herself, between her own knowledge and the thrust on her by the surroundings especially the mother. But the heroines Sudha, Lalita, Meera, Abha and Geeta and the nameless heroine of “The Word Love” realise that the home and parents are not the refuge but they are their own refuge. Although the family is the chief matrix and the woman’s life revolves around it, yet many of the women in Chitra Banerjee seem to be able to reconcile to it. She reveals her ability to create subtle images of women’s anguish when trapped in terrible relationships and when forced to live within rigid codes. The sensitivity, the strength and even the beautifully shattering imagery with which she is able to portray the sorrows and the frustrations of the women have always been apparent in her novels.

Conventional lives have no appeal and the protagonists crave for freedom and for change. Happiness eludes them. Chitra Banerjee challenges the prevalent stereotype of a woman whose aim in life is to find security through a husband and
satisfaction through child-rearing. Marriage and motherhood prove the least satisfying. Each of the women protagonists is struggling with loss, grief and betrayal at one point or other. They seek to become a subject in their own right. A life of intrinsic worth is what they are looking for, and in the process of acquiring personhood, they not only cope with unjust and unequal social structures but also acknowledge the presence of individual needs and aspirations. Incidentally, the feminine sensibility and the inexplicable and inevitable loneliness of the single woman either because of widowhood or abandonment of the husband have been projected well by Chitra Banerjee.

Chitra Banerjee’s treatment of man–woman relationship is based on her entrenched faith in ‘new humanism’ according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere sex object but as man’s equal and honoured partner. Her women seek to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their true selves, where there is no need for hypocrisy and where character is judged by the purity of heart and not chastity of the body. Husband–wife alienation and consequent break seem to be inevitable when women and men fail to build up a relationship based on mutual love, communication, companionship and equality.

Almost all the couples in Chitra Banerjee’s novels suffer from loneliness and unrequited love in marriage largely because of haste or wrong choices. Sudha and Ramesh, Anju and Sunil, Rakhí and Sonny, Lalita and Ahuja, Daksha and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Gupta, Mr. and Mrs. Majumdar, Asha and Mahesh, Abha and Ashok, Preeti and Deepak, Pratima and Bikram – all these couples have strained relations with each other. The novels vividly portray the hearts broken by compulsions of matrimony and lack of understanding in human relationships.
Chitra Banerjee’s novels look at social history from the perspective of the family. While exploring the man–woman relationship in Indian society, the novels offer an intimate and domestic chronicle of the subtle tyrannies suffered by women and the pain of coming to self-knowledge. These are the stories of individual’s personal journey. Thus she analyses this problem of changing human relationships in the modern times.

The woman or man is somebody’s mother, father, daughter, son, husband and wife only on a surface, but on the deeper level they all are alone and lonely. They can hardly find words to communicate with their loved ones. This lack of communication and mournful silence has piloted them to a strange place, where they are surrounded by strange people, whose language and dialect they cannot understand. Chitra Banerjee has very beautifully explored this strangeness in her novels and opened a whole new world. Her novels truly present the decaying face of human relationships as evidenced in this modern world where men and women are living a dead life. Here one is reminded of T.S. Eliot’s words in *The Wasteland*: “we are in a rats’ alley . . .” (75).

For Chitra Banerjee, over pampering as well as emotional deprivation create psychological blocks in the way to maturity and the ability to establish and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships in adult life and these relationships are important in the social context, as they provide one with the sense of security, respectability and identity.

Chitra Banerjee’s novels are profound meditations on solitude as the ultimate human destiny and the logical consequence of the author’s that human relationships are essentially unsatisfying. The characters are replicas of the realistic situations faced by people in life. Alienation is caused because of migration to another country with its
different culture. Due to the force of fate, human relationships get damaged in subtle ways. But these are vital for someone without which life becomes insipid. They should be decided before the damage caused by their break becomes irreparable.