

Women's Solidarity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels

Dr. Rashmi Lohchab

Associate Professor, Department of English, M.K.J.K. Mahavidyalaya, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

E-mail: rashmilohchab@gmail.com

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<i>Received:</i> 25 Jan 2026; <i>Received in revised form:</i> 20 Feb 2026; <i>Accepted:</i> 25 Feb 2026; <i>Available online:</i> 28 Feb 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords – women's solidarity, women's empowerment, sisterhood, patriarchy, mythology, resilience.	<i>This paper examines the representation of women's solidarity, sisterhood, resilience, and empowerment in selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, particularly The Forest of Enchantments, The Palace of Illusions, Sister of My Heart, The Last Queen, and Independence. Divakaruni revisits history, mythology, and cultural narratives from a distinctly female perspective and foregrounds the experiences of women who have traditionally remained marginalised in patriarchal representations. Her female protagonists encounter oppression, social restrictions, violence, displacement, and emotional crises; nevertheless, they derive strength from their relationships with other women. The paper argues that women's relationships in Divakaruni's fiction are not merely based on affection but also function as sources of emotional support, resistance, survival, and empowerment. Characters such as Mandodari, Sarama, Trijata, Draupadi, Anju, Sudha, Rani Jindan, Guddan, Mangla, Mahi, and Priya demonstrate different forms of female solidarity. Through these relationships, Divakaruni challenges the patriarchal assumption that women are naturally antagonistic toward one another. Her fictional women instead create networks of care and mutual support that enable them to confront oppressive structures. The paper further explores how knowledge, courage, perseverance, and collective action become essential instruments of female empowerment. Divakaruni's reinterpretation of history and mythology thus contributes to a more inclusive understanding of women's role in human civilization.</i>

In all her novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni vividly portrays how her female protagonists struggle in their lives, confront various patriarchal setups, and eventually succeed in deriving a meaningful pattern of life. The prevalent hegemonic notion, especially in Indian society, that women are the worst enemies of one another seems to be an outcome of patriarchal attempts to subjugate women psychologically.

Through the depiction of her characters, Divakaruni points out that this assumption is not always true; rather, she presents an altogether different scenario in which women understand each other's dilemmas more adequately. This collective strength and cumulative energy enable them to absorb the shocks of life more stoically and develop life-sustaining mechanisms.

Not only through her literary works but also through her social engagement, Divakaruni has demonstrated the positive impact of women's solidarity. She has been associated with welfare initiatives such as Maitri and Daya, which provide support to women who have experienced abuse, domestic violence, and other forms of oppression. Such organisations work towards helping vulnerable women regain confidence and rejoin the mainstream of life. She has also been associated with Pratham, an organisation involved in providing education and training to underprivileged children and women. Her social engagement complements the concern for women's empowerment that is visible in her literary works.

The role played by women in the upliftment of society has not always been adequately highlighted in history because history has largely been written from a male perspective and has, therefore, resulted in a lopsided representation. In a conversation with Sharthak Kaushik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni describes her work as "women-centric" and as an attempt to analyse history and myth through a "woman's gaze." Her approach is inclusive in nature and highlights women's contribution to human civilisation, which has hitherto remained relatively unexplored. Through this reanalysis of history and mythology, the novelist depicts how women have also acted as protective shields for other women against the tyranny of patriarchal structures.

In her mythical novel *The Forest of Enchantments*, when Sita undergoes an agonising and dreadful phase in the Ashoka forest and Ravana threatens to behead her, it is his chief consort, Mandodari, who comes to her rescue:

Please, my lord," she pleaded, her breath coming in gasps, her pearl-encrusted sari in disarray; "you're a great warrior—it's unbecoming of you to kill a defenceless woman, no matter how much she's provoked you..." As your greatest well-wisher and mother of your first-born, I beg this boon of you. She knelt in front of him, hands joined in prayer. (Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*, 103)

Mandodari's intervention demonstrates that women can challenge patriarchal violence by extending protection and support to one another. Even

Vibhishana's wife, Sarama, and the rakshasi Trijata feel pity for Sita and try to console and support her in the best possible manner. Despite living in Ravana's kingdom, Sarama assists Sita and informs her about Vibhishana:

He's gone to join Ram; ... He told me that I needed to remain here so I could comfort you and support our Ram. (Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*, 216)

Thus, the women surrounding Sita become sources of emotional strength and companionship during her period of suffering.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, the Kauravas and Pandavas are staunch enemies of one another, but their mothers, Gandhari and Kunti, and their wives, Bhanumati and Draupadi, are connected through complex bonds of womanhood and shared experience. During the exile period in Virata's palace, when Queen Sulochana's brother Kichaka openly molests the maids, Draupadi develops a deeper understanding of the vulnerability of ordinary women. She reflects:

Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then? Women they considered their inferiors? A new sympathy for my maids rose in my mind. When I became queen again, I thought, I would make sure common women were treated differently. (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, 228)

Draupadi's reflection is significant because it indicates her growing consciousness of the shared oppression experienced by women across social classes. Her personal suffering enables her to understand the suffering of other women and strengthens her determination to challenge discriminatory practices.

The title of the novel *Sister of My Heart* reflects the intense bonds of love and affection between two women who share a relationship comparable to sisterhood. The two cousins, Anju and Sudha, are not only intimate friends but also extend all kinds of support to each other in times of crisis. When Anju comes to know about Sudha's miserable condition in India, where she is living with her infant daughter after her divorce, she plans to provide her with a new and comfortable life in America. Without informing her husband, Anju works overtime, and the exertion during the advanced stage of her pregnancy results in the loss of her child. After the abortion, when Anju

undergoes an acute stage of depression, Sudha does her best to bring her out of this trauma. Sudha narrates a story to Anju that symbolises their genuine concern for each other:

The queen held her daughter with one hand and with the other she grasped the Rainbow. And her sister pulled her across the ocean, over the gaping jaws of sea monsters, to safety. (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, 310)

The image of one sister rescuing another across the ocean becomes a metaphor for the emotional and psychological support that Anju and Sudha provide to each other. Despite knowing that Sudha's father killed Anju's father, Sudha's feelings towards Anju do not change. She asserts:

And this is what I discovered: my feelings towards Anju have not changed. If anything, they are purer, more intense because they are no longer dictated by necessity. I love her because I love her. (Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart*, 339)

The relationship between Anju and Sudha therefore challenges the idea that women are naturally competitive or hostile toward one another. Their relationship instead becomes a source of survival and emotional strength.

In *The Last Queen*, Rani Jindan develops a strong bond of affection and adoration for Rani Guddan, another wife of Ranjit Singh. Guddan assists Jindan in every possible way to make her life comfortable and secure in the royal household. When Jindan learns that Guddan is planning to become sati after Ranjit Singh's demise, she does her best to stop her:

I must stop Guddan from committing this awful act. I can't lose both my husband and my dearest friend on the same day. (Divakaruni, *The Last Queen*, 167)

Despite Jindan's implorations, Guddan becomes sati, and Jindan becomes so distressed that she also decides to follow her path. At this stage, her loyal and far-sighted maid, Mangla, acts as a saviour and reminds Jindan that her first duty is to protect the infant Prince Dalip from conspiracies and treacheries:

You're a Sikh, not a Hindu like Guddan. Why should you do this terrible thing? You don't see Mai Nakkain planning to kill herself, do

you? Think of what will happen to Dalip if you die. (Divakaruni, *The Last Queen*, 169)

Mangla's intervention illustrates another dimension of women's solidarity. She does not merely comfort Jindan but encourages her to recognise her responsibilities and continue living for her son. In this sense, female solidarity becomes a means of resistance against despair.

Another maid, Mahi, assists Jindan in escaping from Chunar Fort at the risk of her own life. When Jindan is in Kathmandu, she reduces her expenses and indirectly contributes to the mission of other freedom fighters, including Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh, by sending money:

And the magnificent women! Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh, who fought not only for their people but also for their dispossessed sons. How I wished I could have joined them! I prayed for them deep into the night (Divakaruni, *The Last Queen*, 294)

The reference to these women creates a larger network of female resistance in which individual struggles become connected with the broader struggle against oppression and colonial domination.

This women's camaraderie reaches its culmination in *Independence*. The novel demonstrates how women, through perseverance, endurance, creativity, and mutual support, can sustain their families under extremely difficult circumstances. The acquisition of skills and knowledge further assists them in moments of crisis. During the Bengal riots of Partition, when Nabakumar is murdered, the daughters of the household sustain their family by selling Kantha quilts. Priya, the daughter of Nabakumar, not only manages the household but also protects the family from various forms of victimisation. Owing to her sharp acumen and strength of spirit, she grasps opportunities in life and attempts to fulfil her long-cherished dream of becoming a doctor.

The title of the novel symbolises independence not only of the nation but also of women from the shackles of conservative and male-chauvinistic tendencies. Sarojini's recommendation to Priya becomes an appeal to women to create a new horizon of hope and success:

You are a daughter of Independence, the country's future. Women like you are the ones for whom we fought and died, the ones who will transform India. You must carry the flag forward. You may fall from time to time. We all did. What is important is to get up again. (Divakaruni, *Independence*, 228)

Sarojini's words emphasise resilience and the responsibility of the younger generation of women to continue the process of social transformation. Priya's journey from vulnerability to self-reliance further reinforces the idea that education, courage, and determination are important instruments of female empowerment.

The journey of these protagonists demonstrates how women negotiate existing power structures through solidarity, resilience, and mutual support. Divakaruni's reinterpretation of history and mythology through women's perspectives attempts to fill the gaps in traditional narratives and to present the experiences of human civilization from a more holistic perspective. Her novels challenge the patriarchal assumption that women are naturally antagonistic toward one another and instead foreground relationships based on empathy, care, protection, and collective strength. The novelist thus exhorts women to show solidarity, extend support to one another, and attain knowledge, since Foucault suggests that "knowledge constantly induces effects of power." Through her female protagonists, Divakaruni demonstrates that knowledge and solidarity can become significant means of resisting marginalisation and constructing a more empowering pattern of life.

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