

**SORORITY DISRUPTED : READING DIVAKARUI'S
*THE VINE OF DESIRE***

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Abstract

One of the central ideas in Afro-American women's writing is 'sisterhood'. This is gradually emerging as a significant motif in contemporary Asian American women's fiction as well. Writers with a diasporic identity like Amy Tan and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni form a part of this literary tradition which seeks to celebrate sisterhood, thereby foregrounding certain aspects of womanhood so long ignored by the patriarchal society. Divakaruni herself confirms it when she says, ". . . 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."

Though 'sorority' is perpetual and powerful, it is not invulnerable. There are several factors that threaten female homosocial bonds. In fact bonding and betrayal are two aspects of friendship. This paper seeks to analyse the causes that shake the very foundation of the unfaltering solidarity among the women in Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*. It also seeks to explore if love and empathy that underlie the bonds can rejuvenate the endearment among Anju and Sudha. The findings of the paper will inevitably reveal the enigma of female bonding, which may be temporarily disrupted, but is never completely ruptured.

Keywords : Sisterhood, Womanhood, Sorority, Homosocial, Afro-American, Asian American, Patriarchy, Female Bonding.

The dynamics of women's relationship with each other is an issue of common concern among feminist critics and practitioners. Female friendships, according to Lilian Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg, are significant enough as they provide a framework for an analysis of intimacy and affection between women. Such friendships or 'sisterhood' draw the attention of theorists like Bell Hooks, Clenora Hudson-Weems and Elizabeth Abel who study the impact of female ties in the community. Defining 'sisterhood' Hudson-Weems explains that it is "an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding and supporting

each other , women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other . With such love , trust and security , it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood” (65) .

Female bonding as a feminist strategy of survival has been explored more widely in the West than in the East , especially by Black women writers like Toni Morrison , Alice Walker and others who share a common experience of oppression and double marginalization of race and sex. These writers underscore the importance of female solidarity and endearment above all other familial ties as it goes a long way to provide comfort , healing and security . While presenting her views on female homosocial bonds in her work *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf states that in most novels female interactions are “all half lights and profound shadows like those serpentine caves where one goes with a candle , peering up and down not knowing where one is stepping” (83) . Clearly her emphasis is on the mysterious yet insightful and uncharted nature of women’s relationship . Literary portrayals of female friendships have evolved gradually over the years from Jane Austen and Sarah Orne Jewett to Joyce Carol Oates to Toni Morrison . And it was not until women writers realised that strong bonds between women act as a mode of survival and a means to selfhood that they began to celebrate sisterhood , women’s community and female difference instead of female antagonism . As early as 1915 , Charlott Perkins Gilman in her utopian fiction *Herland* examined the depths of female bonding only to discover how it remained unaltered and undisrupted even at the face of the strongest challenge . In this regard it may aptly be pointed out how Laura in May Sarton’s *A Reckoning* admits that “one of the real connections , one of the deepest and most nourishing , in some ways more than my marriage , good as that was , had been a passionate friendship with a woman” (243) . Again the relationship between Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* has remained one of the most celebrated relationships in the corpus of women’s fiction . In the words of the author herself , “Friendship between women is special , different and has never been depicted as a major focus of a novel before *Sula* . Nobody even talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual , and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*” (qtd.in Barat, 53) . In fact female friendship is central to the fiction of Afro-American women writers . Alice Walker in her Pulitzer prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) offers a classic example of the kindred spirit among women that enable them to overcome all hardships . The various female ties that develop in the course of the story eventually become the source of healing , protection , empowerment and emancipation . This is rendered through the image of the quilt which emerges as the most significant and recurring symbol of the female network . All these writers have tried to illumine the psychological underpinnings in female friendships . Even British writers like Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen have explored female psychological processes in their works only to discover how emotional fulfillment is achieved through enduring female bonds .

Female bonding is viewed , by feminists , as a form of empowerment that helps women face various challenges . Louise Bernikow feels that it is a strong sense of ‘oneness’ that lies at the base of female friendship , and it is this very sense of unity that advocates empowerment : “ Female friends are more often eye to eye . It is the creation of ‘us’ that is more important , we ‘two’ – and in this very different arrangement lie the great depths and the great raptures of our friendship” (119) .

The reason why women bond with each other has been variously interpreted. Elizabeth Abel acknowledges the need for commonality as opposed to complementarity that lies at the core of such bonds . She notes that , “Serious novels that focus on the actual friendships of women , however , suggests that identification replaces complementarity . . .” (415) . Abel shares Nancy

Chodorov's interpretation that it is the desire for identification in the preoedipal period that unconsciously promotes female endearments in the oedipal phase. This is an unconscious psychomatic process that draws women together, and they seek commonality rather than complementarity in their friends. Female intimacy arises out of the desire to find one's reflected self in the other.

Contrarily complementarity entails a shared identity where two opposing selves merge to form a single whole. The phenomenon of female complementarity can be best explained by borrowing Cicero's words: "as almost to create one person out of two" (111); Cicero's description of friendship very accurately characterizes the dynamics of complementary female friendship. Some scholars have deciphered an underlying need for complementarity in homosocial bonds.

A post colonial writer with a diasporic identity, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is invariably drawn towards immigrant and women's issues in her writing. A close analysis of the fictional world of Divakaruni enables one to recognize an undercurrent of sisterhood running through most of her works. In doing so she identifies herself with the occidental rather than with the oriental. Her fiction relates to the tradition of the West, since Indian writers from Anita Desai to Arundhati Roy have ignored sisterhood in their focus on feminine issues. The author herself confirms it when she says in an essay for *Bold Type*, "... 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" (n.p.). This is probably what led her to explore the profundity of female bonding in *Sister of My Heart*. Since bonding and betrayal are two aspects of women's relationship, Divakaruni next proceeds to examine the effects of disruption of female friendship in her work *The Vine of Desire*. A sequel to *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni's fourth novel *The Vine of Desire* clearly does not valorize sisterhood, rather it seeks to problematize female homosocial bonds. The narrative depicts the forces that challenge the emotional bond between the sisters (Anju and Sudha) and the ways in which they succumb to or survive the situation. Her wonderful ability at encapsulating the complexity of the emotional landscape in her characters need to be acknowledged.

It has been already perceived how the healing and empowering effect of their intimate friendship help the sisters survive the various adversities and attain selfhood in *Sister of My Heart*. It is this seemingly unflinching solidarity that ultimately enables them to reunite in America after much individual ordeals and sufferings. Surprisingly enough, this re-union gives rise to certain unwanted and unforeseen complexities in their lives compounded with emotional uprisings that eventually lead to a break-up of the impassionate 'sorority'¹. The love and trust between them eclipse as they part ways to find their own happiness and rebuild their identities. This paper seeks to analyse the causes that shake the very foundation of the bonding among the women in the narrative. It also seeks to explore if love and empathy which underlie the bonds can rejuvenate the endearment among the women. The paper has been analysed in the light of feminist literary criticism.

The story in the sequel *The Vine of Desire* begins with a proleptic account, of the pain and suffering ensuing Anju's miscarriage, that informs the Prologue. The person whom Anju needs the most at this moment of crisis is none other than Sudha, her cousin. And the narrative in *Sister of My Heart* which ends with Sudha's arrival in America along with her baby daughter, Dayita, resumes in Chapter I in the sequel with the omniscient narrator describing how an excited Anju makes preparations for the arrival of her dear cousin Sudha. Divakaruni takes up the strings of narration just from this point in *The Vine of Desire*. The novelist follows the

friendship and communion of the cousins to see how this re-union enables them to cope with their loss . The relocation gives Sudha the opportunity to find new avenues and to pursue new dreams thereby forgetting the pains of her failed marriage . Anju , on the other hand , recovers from her state of delirium to get back to her college . The new country with its different set of values invariably has its impact on the immigrant psyche of the two women who are desperately trying to survive in an alien culture and environment . And what comes as a consequence of this strife for survival is the realization of the limitations of the old values and concept of womanhood . This leads to the adoption of a value system that is more flexible and broader in scope . It was important for Anju to realise that womanhood is not defined by domesticity and motherhood alone . Being merely a wife and mother is not enough to attain selfhood . The other cousin Sudha who had been subjected to the challenges of single motherhood (in India) eventually realizes the essence of being a free woman . Liberating herself from the fetters of patriarchal parameters , she chooses to live life on her own terms .

Even in America they continue to be the best of friends , caring and nurturing each other until their deep rooted love for each other is shaken by male intrusions. Divakaruni seems to suggest that female solidarity is not invulnerable in a society based on androcentric ideas . An analysis of the failure of female relationships in this narrative clearly points at two major factors . One , it is the patriarchal influences which disrupt the bonding between the cousins , and the other is the distance of space and time that weaken the mother-daughter ties in the narrative . Interestingly , on the one hand it is the patriarchal structures of oppression and suppression that engender female bonding , on the other it is the operation of this very patriarchal hegemony that also threatens such bonding . In her ground-breaking work *Sexual Politics* Kate Millett explains that the relationship between the sexes has been , throughout history , one of dominance and subordination . Recognizing patriarchy as being political , she further asserts that like politics patriarchy is an arrangement whereby “one group of people is controlled by another” (23) . The various forms of patriarchal control and oppression are perceived as class distinction , racism , sexism , adultery and polygamy . Again these tools of oppression become instrumental in some way or the other in setting women against one another , thereby endangering female homosocial bonds . In the novel under review the law of the father manifests itself through the male (Sunil) desire to possess the female (Sudha) , to enslave the victim spiritually and sexually . Sunil’s tendency to possess is actually a reflection of the male ideology of dominance and subordination. Patriarchal dominance and possession is a common psychological trait of men in a society based on androcentric values . In this novel the forces of patriarchy , that tear apart the cemented relationship between the cousins , manifest themselves through the intentions and activities of Sunil . Sunil’s emotional rejection of his wife Anju and attraction for Sudha resulting in adultery completely jeopardizes the bond between the two sisters . Finding it impossible to forgive either Sunil or Sudha for their betrayal of her (Anju) love and trust in them, Anju severs her relationship with both .

When the cousins come together again as adult women in San Francisco , the childhood bond is renewed . They are obviously happy in each other’s company . They sit and chat for hours with Dayita playing between them . Anju makes sure that Sudha and her daughter (Dayita) feel secure and happy . Sudha engages herself in household activities and pleases them all with her culinary skills . They empathise with each other’s problems with a love and understanding that is typical of genuine sisterhood . But at times the uneasy presence of Sunil seems to mar everything . Amidst all happiness one can easily decipher an underlying note of tension in the household:

“ The evenings after Sunil returned , were the worst . Each atom of air tense , resisting inhalation . The walls loomed inward , swollen with claustrophobia . Guarded greetings all around . . . Dinner would be full of fractured words , Anju talking too much , trying to pretend everything was fine .”(37)

This arises partly out of the fact that each one is aware of Sunil’s secret feelings for Sudha , and with Sudha around it is difficult for Sunil to behave normally . Again in her desperate attempts to conceal the increasing emotional hiatus between herself and her husband , Anju is at times unusually chirpy . On the other hand , Sudha , while keeping a safe distance between herself and Sunil , relentlessly provides healing and nurturing to enable Anju to accept the reality and pick the pieces of her life :

“When the apartment door closes behind Anju , Sudha leans against it and shuts her eyes . Eight in the morning and she is tired already . The effort of staying out of Sunil’s way until he leaves for the office , the effort of getting Anju ready , in the little time that is left .”(54)

The subtle undertones of discomfiture of the characters do not go unnoticed . Sunil who has taken to caring and cuddling Dayita ever since the arrival of Sudha confesses to the kid that he feels he’s ‘drowning’ (46) and is very ‘tired’ and that his ‘struggle has just started’ (47) . Even Sudha realizes her precarious condition in the household soon after joining Anju and Sunil in San Francisco . Her interpretation of Anju’s dream of the meteor replacing the planet testifies her hidden fears : “The dream had another meaning , though Anju didn’t recognize it . Some fears are like that , slippery and deep down as mudfish . The planet was Anju herself. If so , was I the meteor?”(34) . It is evident that she has premonitions about the approaching storm . So Sudha tries to keep away from Sunil as much as possible . It is this complexity of life and relationships that Divakaruni portrays in the narrative . Obviously it is a hard time for the three of them as they try to fight their conflicting passions secretly . Being unable to communicate freely with each other they turn inward donning a false countenance of composure . Caught in a mesh of complexities and secrets they live as alienated beings within the four walls of the small apartment , reticent and unsure of themselves :

“ A tableau of silence : three people , inside their chests small black boxes , holding inside them smaller , blacker boxes . Secrets packed in secrets . . . Some of these they know , some they guess at . . . Until , at the very center of the chest , the secret of whose existence they are totally unaware . The secret of their own self , already pollinated by time’s spores , waiting to burst open when they are least prepared for it” (70) .

Failure in communication is clearly an indication of deterioration in relationship . Each of them suffers from a restlessness which they can neither articulate nor dismiss . The forces of separation prove stronger than the power of unification . The author unambiguously portrays the inevitable outcome of the situation . That the sentimental sisterhood of Anju and Sudha receives a great setback as they can no longer rely on each other , is quite apparent. No doubt the dynamics of their relationship changes fast , providing them with no time to redress the situation. The preceding novel *Sister of My Heart* firmly establishes the elements of complementarity and commonality in the relationship between the cousins . It has been perceived how the two of them kept each other completely insinuated during their growing up years . However , the fact that as they grow older they are being increasingly sucked into the vortex of patriarchal forces endangering their bonding, demands critical attention . In the novel under review they are seen

making ardent efforts at rebuilding their lives with each others help and support , quite unaware of the evil forces that play havoc with their intentions . Unlike Anju , Sunil is not particularly happy about Sudha ‘s coming to America probably because he knew that this would fuel the simmering fire of passion in his heart for Sudha . He had developed an instant liking for her when he saw her the first time . He had even managed to collect and preserve Sudha’s wedding day handkerchief as a token of his unrequited love . At the airport when Sudha arrives with Dayita , it is obvious how pleased Sunil is when a co-passenger mistakenly remarks that he is blessed with a beautiful wife and daughter . All this does not escape Anju’s eyes , yet she is unable to redress it . Sunil finds it difficult to remain indifferent with the object of his desire (Sudha) right in front of his eyes , for he himself confesses :

“How tonight , serving spinach dal , your mother curved her fingers around the ladle . Her slim , bare wrist , at once strong and fragile . Her unpainted , glowing nails . I followed the silvery straightness of her arm up , up , until it disappeared into her blouse . . . A longing to touch it shook me so hard . I thought I wouldn’t be able to stop . I had to get up and leave the table”(49).

Even at his office he feels restless, his mind straying . It can be well perceived how his long suppressed desire gains momentum as he rushes back home from office , impatience building up inside him at the slightest cause of delay :

“He is like an animal whose hair , ruffled the wrong way by a thoughtless hand , stands up in prickly patches . . . Can you sense inside him the desire for speed ,building like compressed steam ? But the four-thirty traffic has him firmly in its embrace . . . Raindrops gather their fatness against the windshield . . .He slashes them away with the wipers , which he operates , unnecessarily , at full speed .” (63)

Completely possessed with the thought of gratifying his desires , he commits the forbidden act , as the omniscient author narrates the incident with internal focalization on Sunil:

“He kneels by the bed . He kisses her . . . her face in his hands . He will crush her into himself , he will swallow her if that’s the only way for them to be together . This is the kiss he has imagined over a hundred unsatisfied nights .”(65)

This is to be read as an act which arises out of the desire to satisfy the male ego , as Simone de Beauvoir explains , “ Man does not merely seek in the sexual act subjective and ephemeral pleasure . He wants to conquer , take and possess ; to have a woman is to conquer her . . .” (176) . Obviously it is the chauvinistic conditioning that prompts him to such acts of brazenness. . He feels that the prerogative of choosing, rejecting and possessing lies only with him .Unwittingly both the cousins fall victim to male hegemony . After this incident Sudha finds herself in a state of confusion . Her dilemma is evident when she says , “ What shall I do? I want an existence iridescent as nail polish . I want sleep . I want to bite into the apple of America . I want to swim to India , to the parrot-green smells of childhood . I want a mother’s arms to weep in . I want my weather-vane mind to stop its maniac spinning . I want Sunil” (87) . Driven by guilt she wishes to flee the apartment . In her mind she regrets , “ I’ve done that which I shouldn’t have . . .I’ve kissed your husband and liked it”(108). The ambivalence in her attitude rings loud in these lines, as her sense of morality is at war with her latent cravings . Once seduced by Sunil , Sudha cannot resist feelings of getting more out of life :

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

Why not .

I deserve more .

I am young , and life is passing .” (80)

Yet her conscious mind would not allow her to betray her cousin for she says , “I can’t stay in my cousin’s home . My presence saws at the frayed rope that holds Anju and Sunil together . Maybe it would break anyway – but I can’t bear to be the reason .” (104) . Nevertheless this small act of betrayal is enough to leave a crevice in the relationship between the cousins . Sudha , sensing this , acknowledges it with regret, “ Only now , in its loss , I know the value of what the two of us had . A metallic fog has wound itself around me . Is this how other people go through their lives? . . .They hold out their arms , hoping to connect , but the metal glints , brutal as a mirror . All they can see is their own face . They-we open our mouth to call out , and fog fills it like cotton candy” (109) . Both the cousins are well aware of the complexity and vulnerability of their situation . Anju makes an indirect reference to her fears about Sunil and the crisis in her personal life in her college assignment . She writes about a mysterious ‘She’ who ‘flew all the way from India’ (166) to cast a spell on Sunil who ‘kicked off morality and obligation like a pair of worn-out shoes’ (166) . Finding herself in a dilemma , she suffers intensely . She can reject neither her husband nor her cousin . Fully aware of the reality of their situation , Anju can detect the gradual corrosion in their relationship . The omniscient author probes into the mind of Anju to find it burdened with thoughts she cannot prevaricate :

“ And yet it *is* her life – just as the woman inside is her much-beloved cousin , though of late their minds repel each other like the opposite poles of magnets . The cousin she herself called to America (but why? She cannot quite remember) and to whom her husband is (still?once again?) attracted . Ah , did they think she doesn’t see? She sees it all . What she cannot ascertain is how she feels” (125) .

The degeneration in their relationship can no longer be overlooked , and it is highly ironical when Anju tells Sudha , “You’re the one closest to me , the one who understands me best . The one I trust most of all”(108) .

A study of the intricate workings of Sunil’s psyche would only reveal the various facets of patriarchal thinking ingrained in it . As already explained he represents the patriarchal forces that work in stages to disrupt the friendship . He showers all his love and affection on Dayita , and even teaches her to call him ‘baba’ . This can be read as a manipulative effort to win over Sudha . Again his insistence that Sudha is also part of ‘ Sunil Majumdar and family’ (as the invitation card reads) and must accompany them to the Chopra’s anniversary party reveals his typical male ideology of commodifying the female ; of invalidating the female identity . Sudha is quick to realise the disastrous nature of his possessiveness when she says , “Possession wound its way around me like a nylon line , impossible to break”(116) . He even resents Sudha’s going out on a date with Lalit , the US based doctor , who becomes quite enamoured of her . Green with jealousy Sunil cooks an extra spicy pancake for Lalit which leaves him almost choking to death . That Sunil chooses to bond and betray according to his whims , is evident when he tries to kiss Sudha or when he indulges in incest with Sudha without any tinge of guilt . For him Sudha is the object he must possess . Immanuel Kant theorises this phenomenon in his *Lectures on Ethics* , explaining that when sexuality is exercised outside the context of monogamous marriage it leads to objectification . And his aggressiveness , also , partly arises out of the internalization of a typical male ideology that He is the ‘subject , the Absolute’ and she (Sudha) is the ‘other’ , no better than an object . And it is his will to possess the object that actually threatens the bonding

between the two women . He has no qualms about breaking the sanctity of his marital relationship . Again when Anju is furious with him on discovering that Sudha had left them to find shelter elsewhere , he remains nonchalant . He suffers the verbal and physical abuses of Anju with an air of indifference . Finally he tells his wife of his firm decision to legally terminate their marriage , little realizing how difficult it would be for her to bear the shock :“We aren’t any good for each other anymore – you see that , don’t you?” (238) .

Never for once does he confess his guilt and ask for forgiveness from Anju . Neither does he show any inclination towards setting things right for himself and Anju . Anju and Sudha fall victim to the hegemonic forces , which take a toll on their friendship even before they can resist it. All their efforts at helping each other live better lives fall flat .

The mother-daughter bond which was so significant in *Sister of My Heart* is shown to slacken gradually in the present narrative . The mothers had teamed up to protect themselves and the daughters , guiding and guarding them through all ordeals . An analysis of the narrative clearly portrays how the distance of space and time weaken the ties between the mothers and the daughters. Chapter Twelve which is formed solely of letters written by the mothers to the daughters enquiring about their well-being , providing suggestions and guidelines to overcome difficulties , clearly elaborate how they are trying to reach out to their daughters . Again considering the letters that Anju writes to her mother but does not send reveal her desperation to connect with her in a period of utter crisis . She wishes to seek her support and guidance as is clearly evident when she writes , “ Mother I need advice . Things are going badly here , not like you imagine at all . Sunil is so tense , he’s like a rubber band stretched to breaking . . . And Sudha – I was looking forward to so much having her here , but it isn’t the same as when we were young . . . Oh mother , I’m so afraid , I don’t know what to do” (73) . But unfortunately her attempts at seeking help and sustenance from a relationship that was until recently strong enough to protect from all evils , get thwarted as she deliberately tears up those letters , intending not to disclose facts to her mother . Instead she writes to her mother , pishi and aunt Nalini assuring them of their well-being , “ We are all well and happy here . Dayita is a real joy and amuses us for hours . . . Don’t worry about us . . . we are fine” (73-74) . Since they are so far away , in a different clime and culture , Anju and Sudha deem it improper to worry them about their own problems. Here the physical distance between the women can be identified as one of the causes of lack of communication leading to a disruption of their bonding . As the mothers are kept in the dark about the truth of their situation , they are unable to provide the necessary support . Sharing is an important aspect of female bonding . The act of sharing , which involves receiving and reciprocating , actually bring women closer to one another , as Hudson- Weems’ definition of sisterhood goes , “ a reciprocal [bond] . . . in which each gives and receives equally . . . demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other . . .” (65) . But both the cousins are oddly silent on various problems that have cropped up in their lives and reluctant to discuss it even with their mothers . It is too late when the women back in India are briefed on the real situation in America . The failure in communication can be traced back to several reasons . It is not only the physical distance that keep them estranged , but also the generation gap . The cousins who are now adult women have a definite worldview which does not conform to the old order represented by the mothers . Aunt Nalini believes that the only way for Sudha to achieve happiness and respectability lies in marriage to a prospective man . But Anju and Sudha have already realised that marriage is not the only destination for women . Rejecting the pre-ordained role of a woman Sudha seeks fulfillment in a femininity that is characterized by freedom vis-a-vis flexibility of choice . She is propelled by the voice inside her that says , “ I want something

more than my husband and my children and my home” (Freidan 32) . A single mother and an independent woman is what she aims at becoming , knowing well that she will have to work her way to it without support from the mothers . Neither the mothers are able to understand their problems , nor the daughters able to articulate their feelings and desires . Obviously it is the clash of ideas and ideals that strain the relationship between the older and younger women . Thus a complete lack of communication becomes a vital factor in disrupting the mother-daughter bonding .

The sisterhood that has been built up in *Sister of My Heart* is shown to be disintegrating , and the two cousins keep drifting until all ties are snapped . After her final betrayal of Anju , Sudha hurriedly leaves the apartment to take up the job of a caregiver to an old man . She cannot forgive herself the guilt of incest that she has committed . And not intending to harm Anju further , she goes away from her life forever . Rejecting Sunil’s proposal of marriage she goes her way to find her own space . The suddenness of her departure affects the marital relationship of Anju and Sunil which , fragile as it was , breaks up . Being a victim of circumstances Anju can neither save her marriage nor her friendship . Therefore it cannot be denied how male intrusions prevent the cousins to bond the way they did in their childhood .

However , Divakaruni’s intention had never been to show her protagonists suffer mutely . They have this intrinsic power to overcome their sorrows, and achieve selfhood . They rethink their roles as women , and pursue their dreams only to find happiness in being themselves . Though the bond between Anju and Sudha get severed which is , indeed , very painful for both of them , they move on . Anju finds fulfillment and independence in joining a writers’ group and learning para gliding . She learns to fly , literally as well as metaphorically . Sudha seeks fulfillment in being an independent woman and a single mother . While Anju finds her true forte in writing , Sudha decides to return to India with the old Mr. Sen to live in Jalpaiguri . Thus *The Vine of Desire* unfolds the story of the cousins’ re-association , betrayal , estrangement , forgiving and moving on , with deep psychological insights . When the strong bond of sisterhood is ruptured leading to the estrangement of the cousins , the narrative invokes skepticism regarding the permanence of such bonding . But Divakaruni’s intention is not to underscore the idea that patriarchy gets the better of the women , and they find themselves defeated and cheated . Contrarily the novelist’s consistent efforts at dismissing such negativities can be perceived as the novel ends on a positive note . In the final chapter when the cousins meet for the last time in America , keeping aside all the bitterness , it signals the possibility of a renewal of their friendship . The very fact that in spite of being torn apart by circumstances they come together for the last time , goes on to prove that the unfathomable love for each other has not been totally eradicated from their hearts . In an attempt to resolve differences Anju sums up , “ Whatever happened . . . I tell myself is like the dream I had last night . What does it matter if it was a good dream or a bad one? Neither kind is going to help me live my life today , is it?” (362) . The hiatus between them has been bridged and they don’t feel the bitterness any more . That they again become one , blurring the boundaries between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ , is metaphorically suggested when the author describes a small incident :

“ Sudha nods , takes the bottle from Anju , drinks . When she hands it back , Anju drinks from it too . Her lips touch the mouth of the bottle where Sudha’s mouth had been just a moment earlier” (361) .

Here lies the enigma of female bonding . The author herself acknowledges the mysterious power of this perpetual bonding that never gets ruptured completely, as she writes :

“Oh, we fight too. We're sometimes furiously competitive and bitchy and exasperated. But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other. Ourselves with all our imperfections. Ourselves uncomplicated by all the emotions that complicate our other relationships: duty, lust, romance, the need to impress or control. We can be women and know that, as women, we are understood” (*Bold Type*) .

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Notes

1. ‘Sorority’ is derived from the Mediaeval Latin word ‘sororitas’ meaning sisterhood; sorority means a social club for females .

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