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# The Portrayal of Love and Desire in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*

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## Abstract

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Vine of Desire offers a nuanced examination of love, desire, friendship, marriage, motherhood, and female independence. The novel follows Anju and Sudha, two women whose deep emotional connection lies at the heart of the narrative. Their bond represents a love that endures across distance, hardship, marriage, and emotional turmoil. Yet, when Sudha enters Anju's married life, complications arise as Anju's husband, Sunil, develops a strong attraction to Sudha. The novel depicts various forms of love, including friendship, romantic love, maternal love, and self-love. Anju and Sudha's relationship is especially important because their emotional bond challenges conventional views on the primacy of romantic relationships. Meanwhile, Sunil's attraction to Sudha breeds jealousy, insecurity, guilt, and discord. Sudha's journey also highlights the significance of self-respect and independence. This article contends that The Vine of Desire presents love and desire as closely related yet fundamentally distinct emotional forces. By depicting the experiences of Anju, Sudha, and Sunil, Divakaruni reveals the intricate nature of human relationships and underscores the value of freedom, self-awareness, and emotional accountability.*

**Keywords:** Love, Desire, Friendship, Marriage, Female Identity, Independence, Diaspora.

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## Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known Indian-American author whose books often delve into topics like women, immigration, family ties, identity, history, and multicultural experiences. Her work often centres on women's emotional experiences as they balance conventional expectations with individual autonomy. According to Divakaruni's official biography, key themes in her writing include women, immigration, family, and the difficulties of living in a multicultural society.

*The Vine of Desire*, published in 2002, is the sequel to *Sister of My Heart.* The novel reunites Anju and Sudha, two women whose childhood friendship continues to influence their adult lives. The narrative moves from India to America and explores the difficulties women face when living between cultures. The relationship between Anju, Sudha, and Sunil becomes the novel's main source of emotional conflict. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and its sequel, *Vine of Desire,* tells the story of two cousins, Anju and Sudha, the former free-spirited and vibrant, the latter submissive and vulnerable. Fairy tales, myth-making, dreams, letters, and assignments create heterotopic spaces that often provide a disturbing access to the psyche of the two women. These Foucauldian heterotopic worlds seem to reflect lived reality through these discursive spaces, yet they threaten the placid exterior of the smooth, flowing, linear narrative with disturbing revelations (Nanda 1). A useful way to approach these relationships is to distinguish between feeling and action.

A person may experience affection or attraction without fully understanding its effect on others. The central problem is therefore not simply the presence of desire, but the choices made in response to it. This reading considers the private and social dimensions of love together. Personal feelings develop within relationships that already contain duties, memories, and expectations. By examining these pressures together, the paper considers how love may support individual growth while also demanding respect for another person's freedom.

## Form of Love in Female Friendship

This article examines how *The Vine of Desire* portrays love and desire. It focuses particularly on female friendship, romantic attraction, marriage, motherhood, and the search for individual identity. In the novel, the most significant form of love is the emotional connection Anju and Sudha share. Their bond begins in childhood and endures even as marriage and physical distance separate them. "Friends were seen as key elements in some mothers' lives, and sometimes were defined as 'family', providing emotional as well as practical support; but they were almost entirely absent in the lives of others" (Alsarve 1). Their love surpasses typical friendship because they confide in each other their fears, memories, hopes, and emotional suffering. "[…] Keep me with you. She was crying too. Don't you think I want to? More than anything else in the world? Don't you know I'd give up everything in my life, right now, if I could, for that?" (TVOD 4).

When Sudha arrives in America, she expects Anju's friendship to provide emotional support. Similarly, Anju relies on Sudha during a challenging phase of her

life. Consequently, the novel portrays their relationship as a means of healing. The novel's official summary states that the women' s "deep-seated love" gives them the support they need during their personal hardships. "The day Sudha stepped off the plane from India into Anju's arms, leaving a ruined marriage behind, their lives changed forever. . . " (TVOD 9).

Their friendship matters because both women face emotional challenges in their marriages and personal lives. Anju endures emotional instability following a miscarriage. Sudha works hard to establish an independent life while being a mother. Their relationship offers a space to share experiences others might not fully grasp. Wherefore, Divakaruni depicts female friendship as a powerful manifestation of love. "The good of friendship does not just give us reason to propagate status-affecting attributes; it itself can be a status-affecting attribute" (Schwartz 4). The emotional bond between Anju and Sudha contests the conventional notion that a woman's primary relationship must be with her husband.

Attachment processes may also manifest differently in collectivist contexts. When emotional expression is limited, anxiously attached individuals may be more distressed, with fewer opportunities for reassurance, making them more susceptible to alternative relational outlets. Similarly, avoidantly attached individuals may receive cultural affirmation for emotional distancing, potentially intensifying the association between avoidance and relational disengagement (Iftikhar and Malik 3).

Anju and Sudha's shared past helps explain why the threat to their friendship carries such emotional weight. Each woman knows parts of the other's life that a new companion cannot easily understand. Their friendship provides continuity as marriage and migration change their daily lives. A long history does not remove the need for honest communication. Familiarity can create the belief that the other person will always understand without explanation. When their needs begin to differ, this expectation becomes difficult to maintain. Their relationship, therefore, invites a reading of friendship as an ongoing practice of listening, care, and adjustment.

Support within this friendship also raises questions about personal boundaries. Helping a friend does not mean that either woman must give up every private need or accept every painful situation. Their bond can remain valuable while still requiring distance or disagreement. This distinction matters because female care is often understood primarily through sacrifice. The relationship between Anju and Sudha offers room to ask whether lasting care can include protecting oneself. From this perspective, friendship gains strength when both women are recognised as separate people, each with the right to make decisions.

**Love, Marriage, and Emotional Conflict**

The novel also examines romantic love in relation to marriage. In *The Vine of Desire,* marriage is not shown as a promise of emotional fulfilment. Instead, Divakaruni highlights the tensions that can arise among love, commitment, and personal desire.

Anju's marriage to Sunil becomes emotionally rocky because Sunil is drawn to Sudha. The novel's official summary states that the women's bond is "shaken to the core" when they face Sunil's intense feelings for Sudha. This tension shows how fragile marital bonds can be when trust is put at risk. Anju feels emotionally insecure because she believes her husband is attracted to another woman. Sudha, too, feels guilt, knowing that Sunil's attraction could harm her emotional connection with Anju. Thus, the novel suggests that romantic love by itself cannot sustain a relationship. Trust, loyalty, and emotional accountability are also essential. Marriage becomes challenging when desire clashes with commitment.

Anju's experience also highlights the difference between living together and feeling emotionally secure. A shared household does not automatically provide comfort when trust is uncertain. The attraction between Sunil and Sudha makes ordinary closeness harder because Anju must question the meaning of the relationships around her. Her pain can therefore be read as a response to the loss of a dependable emotional space. The conflict suggests that commitment requires attention to another person's vulnerability. It shows up in daily conduct, including honesty, consideration, and a willingness to face uncomfortable feelings before they deepen the distance between partners.

**Desire and Its Consequences**

Desire stands out as one of the novel's most important themes. The title, The Vine of Desire, hints at something that grows, spreads, and becomes hard to manage. Like a vine, desire can seep into various parts of a person's life, shaping their thoughts and relationships. Sunil's attraction to Sudha is the clearest example of desire in the novel. His feelings create friction among the three main characters. His attraction is not just personal; it affects Anju's confidence, Sudha's choices, and the household's stability.

The novel describes the main conflict as the moment when the husband of one becomes dangerously attracted to the other. This scenario highlights the distinction between love and desire. Love demands care, responsibility, and concern for another's welfare. Desire, on the other hand, can turn selfish when it centres solely on personal gratification. Through Sunil, Divakaruni shows how unchecked desire can undermine trust and emotional security.

Desire also affects the female characters. Yet, the novel does not depict women simply as objects of male desire. Sudha and Anju have their own emotional needs, aspirations, and desires. They seek independence, respect, safety, and control over their lives. Thus, desire in the novel carries both positive and negative connotations. It can signify attraction and emotional yearning, but it can also represent the longing for freedom and self-determination.

The distinction between harmful and constructive desire depends partly on how it treats other people. A wish for affection becomes troubling when another person's trust is treated as less important than immediate satisfaction. By contrast, a wish for independence may allow a person to act with greater honesty and responsibility. These different forms of desire should not be judged as though they were the same.

The women's search for a meaningful life helps broaden the discussion beyond romantic attraction. Desire becomes a way of understanding what people feel is missing from their lives, while responsibility asks how they can respond without reducing others to instruments of personal happiness.

A key accomplishment of *The Vine of Desire* is its depiction of female friendship. Anju and Sudha's bond often feels more emotionally significant than their relationships with men. Their friendship is rooted in shared memories and mutual understanding. Even when conflict drives them apart, their emotional bond remains important. Thus, the novel implies that friendship can be just as meaningful as romantic love.

The bond between Anju and Sudha also highlights the value of women supporting each other. Each character faces distinct emotional and societal pressures. Their friendship gives them strength during tough times. Divakaruni's depiction of their friendship suggests that female relationships are intricate, strong, and vital for women's emotional well-being.

**Self-Love, Independence, and Female Identity**

The novel's main emotional question isn't just whether Sunil will pick Anju or Sudha. It's also whether the two women's relationship can endure the challenges that desire brings. The tension between love and desire is closely tied to female identity. Both Anju and Sudha must figure out who they are apart from their relationships with men. Sudha works hard to become an independent mother and woman. Anju struggles with emotional insecurity and the pressures of marriage. "Emotional security theory explains the effects of interparental conflict (IPC) on family relationships" (Göz-Çengelli and Eroğlu-Ada 2). Their experiences show that women cannot achieve a full identity through romantic relationships alone, highlighting self-love as a significant type of love. Before a woman can have a healthy relationship with others, she needs to recognise her own worth. "While sex is claimed to be tied to the physical body and gender encompasses the social meanings attributed to women's experience, both categories are subject to social determination" (Melton 4). The longing for independence matters as much as romantic longing. Both Sudha and Anju yearn for emotional freedom. They want to make their own life choices rather than just following what family and society expect.

Motherhood gives this search for independence a practical dimension. Sudha's concern for her child means that personal choices also involve care, stability, and the future. Her wish for freedom cannot be separated from these responsibilities. At the same time, motherhood does not erase her own emotional needs. Reading these needs together avoids presenting motherhood as either complete sacrifice or a barrier to personal growth. Her situation instead raises a harder question: how can a woman care for a child while building a life that protects her dignity? This question connects maternal love with the broader theme of self-respect.

Self-love also involves accepting that emotional recovery may be gradual. Anju and Sudha cannot immediately escape the expectations and attachments that have

shaped them. Recognising their worth requires them to reconsider the roles through which they have understood themselves. This process does not make relationships unimportant. Rather, it allows them to assess relationships by whether they support mutual respect. Independence can therefore be understood as the ability to make considered choices, including seeking support. It does not require a woman to become isolated or to deny her need for affection.

**Cultural and Diasporic Context**

The novel's American setting also adds to this exploration. Caught between Indian traditions and American notions of freedom, the characters are pushed to rethink their views on marriage, family, and personal choice.

Migration complicates these questions because a change of place does not erase earlier values or memories. The women carry familiar ideas about duty, marriage, and belonging into their new surroundings. America may offer different possibilities, but people still have to understand them through personal experience. It would therefore be too simple to describe India only as a place of restriction and America only as a place of freedom. The conflict emerges as the characters negotiate different expectations. Their lives show that cultural identity is shaped through everyday decisions as well as through attachment to a country.

The women's friendship is especially important in this setting because it links belonging to personal memory. A familiar companion can make an unfamiliar environment feel less distant. This closeness may also place heavy expectations on the relationship, particularly when other sources of support seem limited. The diasporic setting thus deepens the conflict's meaning: a damaged friendship can threaten both emotional comfort and a sense of continuity. Their search for identity involves deciding which parts of their shared past to preserve and how to create space for new experiences.

**The Symbolism of the Vine**

The title, *The Vine of Desire,* carries symbolic meaning. A vine grows without stopping and extends into new areas. Similarly, desire can develop in a person's mind and affect many relationships. The title implies that desire is not always simple to control. Sunil's attraction to Sudha starts as an emotion but slowly affects the entire relationship among Anju, Sudha, and Sunil. The vine imagery also hints at entanglement. The characters become emotionally intertwined. Their relationships are hard to untangle because love, friendship, desire, guilt, and responsibility are all linked. "We are but the creatures of our origins and, however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghost from our past stands not far behind and we are not easily shaken off" (9). Therefore, the title aptly captures the novel's main theme: human emotions can grow in unexpected ways and lead to complex outcomes.

The image of the vine can also be read in relation to care and limits. Growth alone does not tell us whether something benefits the lives around it. Similarly, the strength of a feeling does not prove that acting on it is right. The image encourages attention

to the conditions under which attachment develops. Relationships need room for each person to grow, but they also need limits that protect trust. This interpretation connects the title with the paper's central argument: love and desire become meaningful through their effects on others, rather than through emotional intensity alone.

**Conclusion**

*The Vine of Desire* portrays love and desire as intricate, powerful forces in human life. Divakaruni explores different kinds of love, including friendship, romantic love, maternal love, and self-love. Among these connections, the bond between Anju and Sudha remains the book's emotional core. The novel also highlights how desire can be destructive. Sunil's attraction to Sudha leads to jealousy, guilt, insecurity, and emotional turmoil. Through this scenario, Divakaruni separates desire from responsible love. Desire can be strong, but love demands trust, loyalty, sacrifice, and emotional insight.

Sudha's path underscores the significance of independence and self-worth. Anju's experiences show the fragility and uncertainty that can exist in romantic relationships. Together, their narratives demonstrate that women must find their own identity beyond societal expectations and relationships with men. Pronto, *The Vine of Desire* suggests that love can both bring people together and create challenges. It can offer strength and healing; later, jealousy and desire can complicate it. Divakaruni's novel portrays human relationships as emotionally nuanced and stresses the importance of freedom, self-awareness, and personal dignity.

Taken together, these themes suggest that a successful relationship cannot be measured only by its duration or by the strength of attachment. Its value also depends on whether the people involved can speak honestly, recognise harm, and respect each other's choices. The experiences discussed in this paper make emotional responsibility central to the distinction between love and desire. Care becomes meaningful when it allows another person to remain a person with separate needs, rather than an answer to one's own loneliness. This understanding also gives female friendship and maternal love a central place in the discussion. They reveal forms of commitment that extend beyond romantic partnership. At the same time, the emphasis on independence shows that caring for others should not require the loss of personal dignity. The novel can therefore be read as an invitation to examine both the support relationships provide and the limits they need. This reading connects emotional growth to the ongoing effort to balance closeness, freedom, and responsibility.

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