

Deciphering Sisterhood: A Semiotic Exploration of Shared Symbols in Indian Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This research article investigates the multifaceted concept of sisterhood within feminist theory and literature, emphasising its role as a symbol of the collective struggle against patriarchal oppression. It explores different aspects of women's shared experiences and collective action with various labels encompassing sister-friends, comadres (co-mothers, allomothers), sworn sisters, hermanas del alma (sisters of the soul), and numerous others. First-wave feminists popularised the term to promote unity among women, intending to address personal, political, and gender-related issues. This paper explores the theme of sisterhood in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni *Sister of My Heart* and *Mistress of Spices*, examining how these novels serve as a powerful catalyst in female relationships. The analysis uncovers the profound significance that everyday objects and our surroundings can hold, symbolising the characters' emotional transformations and the unbreakable bonds of sisterhood through semiotics. Additionally, the analysis enhances our comprehension of the novels and provides a broader outlook on the emotional support and companionship in female friendships, emphasising their positive impact on women's overall well-being.

1. Introduction

Sisterhood, symbolising feminist solidarity, represents the collective struggle against patriarchal oppression. The concept (sisterhood), whether through blood or by choice, holds a significant place in literature, connecting with readers from different cultures and generations. Over the years, feminist theorists have offered various interpretations and definitions of sisterhood, as Hooks views sisterhood as a political solidarity among women that transcends racial, economic, and social boundaries. She emphasises that sisterhood must be built on mutual respect, shared goals, and a commitment to collective struggle [1] (p. 125). On the other hand, the term sisterhood is also treated as a concept that transcends the biological bond of siblings. Lorde defines sisterhood as a form of solidarity that recognizes and honours differences among women, including race, class, and sexuality. She argues that sisterhood should be a transformative force that challenges systems of oppression and embraces the diverse experiences of all women [2].

However, First-wave feminists coined the phrase to describe a sense of affection, camaraderie, and cooperation among women to solve personal, political, or gender concerns [3] (p. 2). It encompasses a profound and enduring connection forged through shared experiences, mutual support, and unconditional love. This theme has been a recurrent motif in literature, serving as a powerful lens to explore the complexities of female relationships and the transformative power of solidarity. It was the belief of the feminist researchers who were a part of the First Wave of feminism that the only way to establish a powerful sisterhood was to alter how women thought about the oppression of roles of sex. This shift can subsequently lead to political solidarity among women, which can serve as an inspiration for the destruction of patriarchy. According to Sebastian, sisterhood is a camaraderie among non-related women [4] (53). On the other hand, Hooks (1986) claims that superiority or negative competition harms women's friendship and collaboration, which results in the operation and downfall of women in a patriarchal society [1] (p. 133). Furthermore, Wollstonecraft (1992) recognises envy among women as a root of both individual and communal failure in society [5] (p. 297).

1.1. The Theory

There is a tendency for females to show care and support for one another. The most concise statement came from Joseph Buckminster, who stated that women were "accustomed to feel, of-tener than to reason" [6] (p. 16). Numerous examples in the animal kingdom also demonstrate this phenomenon. As an example, female monkeys engage in grooming behaviours, lionesses provide nourishment to each other's cubs, and female elephants have a distinct method of communication using low-pitched vocalisations[7]. Similarly, the desire for female companionship among women has deep historical origins. As men engaged in hunting and women focused on nurturing, females formed a unique bond that aids them in navigating life's challenges. Even when

advocating for more serious female friendship, there is a biological component that contributes to the unique bonding that women experience. According to medical science “The tending instinct facilitates the release of oxytocin- an anti-stress neurohormone” [8]. “Originally labor, lactation, maternal behaviour, and social bonding, oxytocin plays an important role in promoting relaxation, healing and sense of well-being” [9].

"Women's happiness is contagious" [10]; therefore, personal female friendships boost their self-esteem, connectivity, and satisfaction. Female companionship yields beneficial outcomes that permeate every aspect of women's lives. According to a study conducted by Tannen (2010), having a sister can positively affect her siblings' health [11]. “Sisters are often more skilled at listening, discussing problems, and caring for others than brothers” [12]. Moreover, having a best friend present during stressful events significantly protects children from the negative effects of such difficult experiences [13]. Kimberle Crenshaw highlights that the concept of sisterhood often fails to consider intersecting identities such as race, class, and sexuality, thereby overlooking the unique experiences of women who endure multiple forms of oppression [14] (p. 34). Chandra Tapade Mohanty's postcolonial argument views the notion of sisterhood, as frequently rooted in Western perspectives, which can marginalise and misrepresent women in the Global South. She calls it a more nuanced understanding that respects cultural differences and diverse experiences [15].

Similarly, Nancy Fraser points out that sisterhood can sometimes ignore economic inequalities among women. She insists that feminist solidarity must address class and economic justice to be genuinely inclusive [16] (p. 61). Judith Butler, as a queer critic, raises concerns about sisterhood enforcing normative gender identities, potentially excluding non-conforming individuals. Butler also emphasised the necessity of a more flexible and inclusive approach to feminist solidarity [17] (p. 5). Lastly, Shulamith Firestone's radical feminist critique suggests that sisterhood can be overly focused on personal relationships rather than systemic change. She argues that feminist solidarity should prioritise revolutionary action to dismantle patriarchy [18]. To foster a truly inclusive feminist movement, it is essential to integrate these diverse perspectives, ensuring that the movement addresses the complexities of identity, culture, class, gender, and systemic oppression. According to theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin "Descendants of the diasporic move-ments... have developed their own distinct cultures which both preserve and often extend and develop their original cultures" [19]. By doing so, feminist solidarity can evolve to genuinely reflect and support all women's varied experiences and struggles.

According to Frank L. Mott, a representative of American magazine literature quoted from the Christian, Scholar, and Farmer's Magazine, "Everyone boasts of having a tender and delicate heart, and even those who know themselves deficient therein, endeavour to persuade others that they possess these qualities" [20]. Henceforth, the recognition of the heart appeared to increase women's status while justifying no change in their allocated roles. They have an abundance of "heart", which is their primary asset. In addition, another magazine contributor praised women as "all the virtues that are founded in the sensibility of the heart. . . Pity, the attribute of angels, and friendship, the balm of life, delight to dwell in the female breast. What a forlorn, what a savage creature would man be without the meliorating offices of the gentle sex!" [20] (p. 141). Therefore, religious and secular prescriptions for women's responsibilities, as well as vows of praise, lead to women's moral traits. Additionally, there are sporadic instances in the mindset of parents to bring up their daughters. Because women's gender-related experiences occur in a stratified and hierarchical society [21](p. 65), the contributors acknowledge that women's realities intersect with gender, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, age, religion/spirituality, and other diverse characteristics.

2. Sisterhood with Heart

Identifying women with "the heart" was a veiled reference to gender injustice. Dependence inspired women's social motives. The association of women with the heart suggests that they could establish genuine interpersonal connections with other women. As Reverend Amos Chase of Litch-field, Connecticut (1972), stated, that "woman of fine feelings cannot be insensible that her constitutional condition is secondary and dependent among men, nor can she long want conviction that the sure way to avoid any evil consequence ...is to yield the front of battle to a hardier sex" [22] (p. 112). If women were seen as reliant on other people (men) for support and safety, then maintaining oneself required interpersonal competence. Rousseau's characterisation in Emile was the most explicit and famous expression of this logic in the eighteenth century: "Woman, weak as she is, perceives and judges the forces at her disposal to supplement her weakness, and those forces are man's passions" [23] (p. 350).

Although the intention is to emphasise the complementary qualities of the two sexes while keeping women submissive, identifying women with "the heart" meant that they would only find reciprocal interpersonal relationships with other women and through this relationship, they can discover that their ability to relate is limited to individuals of the same gender. In fact, in the eighteenth century, women were compelled to form sisterhoods and friendships for two reasons. First, women who are considerably defined by "the heart" would strive to find friendships who share similar sentiments and second, because males were seen to be superior to women, it was un-reasonable to expect them to reciprocate women's sentiments. "Who else but a woman can truly understand the depths of a woman's heart?" [24] (p. 18).

Hence, the importance of emotional relationships and understanding among women is evident in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels, which explore sisterhood beyond biological ties, in addition to female connection and disobedience of social standards. The central theme of Divakaruni's writing running through all her writing is "Sisterhood"—that enigmatic female friendship that exists outside of families and constantly shows itself in connections between women despite all patriarchal indoctrination. Divakaruni's emphasis on sisterhood aligns her with the Western tradition rather than focusing solely on India. Her fiction is part of a growing body of Asian American women's writing that focuses on the diasporic delusion of first or second-generation Asian immigrants in a hostile environment.

2.1. The Theme

Her novels explore the realm of fantastic storytelling, creating vibrant landscapes where women embrace and honour their femininity in unique ways. Nagajothi explains that "the major theme in all [Divakaruni's] writings is sisterhood, that mysterious female bonding which goes far deeper than conventional familial ties and which insistently surfaces in women's relationships despite all patri-archal conditioning" [25] (p. 132). Through Divakaruni's writing, the idea of femininity is shaped; her novels present a definition of the term that honours female autonomy, sisterly solidarity, and selfless generosity all at once. Some Western feminists may find the underlying ethos of this writing questionable, as it goes against the second-wave feminist movements that aim to challenge tradi-tional portrayals of women as self-sacrificing nurturers, mothers, sisters, healers, and heterosexual lovers. Divakaruni's protagonists, Tilo (Mistress of Spices) and Anju (Sister of My Heart), encounter the modern Western mindset of the late twentieth century upon their arrival in California. The two novels explore and challenge this assertive form of feminism as the female characters navigate between the East and West, both physically and emotionally.

However, viewed from a different angle, Divakaruni's fiction works both address and speak to the fundamental question of what it is to be a feminine woman that lies at the core of second-wave feminism and that we have yet to fully resolve in the twenty-first century. Divakaruni's stories show that women, frequently defined by "the heart," desire friendship and connection with those who share their emotions. She utilises traditional South Asian iconography in both the novels *The Mis-tress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* to expand readers' understanding of sisterhood. In *The Mis-tress of Spices*, we are introduced to the formidable deity known as "Fist Mother", the first character that reminds Western readers that religious symbols dominated by masculinity are not universally applicable. According to Kwok Pui-Lan, Asian culture is characterised by religious pluralism and less rigidly defined religious identities compared to the West. This cultural difference may offer Western feminists alternative narratives, symbols, and historical examples related to the represen-tation of women [26] (p. 162).

The First Mother, governor of the Island of Spices and leader of the island's novitiates is an incredibly captivating female figure. The narrator describes how young women develop a strong and intense affection for First Mother, also known as "The Old One". If they are denied access to the Island of Spices, they resort to drastic measures and throw themselves into the sea. Upon their initial encounter, First Mother describes to Tilo how a strong desire to be a part of her overwhelmed her, much like the relentless waves she had struggled against throughout the night. As the story pro-gresses, we gradually discover the unique qualities of the first Mother: She possesses extraordinary abilities and a perceptive understanding of the human heart. In her other novel *Sister of My Heart*, unlike *Mistress of Spices* is not a fantasy fiction. The narrative revolves around the strong bonds between two women Sudha and Anju, creating a captivating story of sisterhood. As her characters manage the intricacies of life, their relationships, built across cultures and continents, serve as a source of both resilience and challenge.

Anju is the most rebellious character in the book from the outset; even as a young child, she disbelieves what

the novel's opening line about the "old tales"- that "the first night after a child is born, the Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be" – tells us about them [27] (p. 6). The character of Anju is aligned with Sara Ahmed's views as she conceptualizes sisterhood as a form of feminist kinship that involves shared experiences of navigating patriarchal structures. She states that "it is important to create supportive spaces when women can collectively resist and challenge gender norms" [28] (p. 135).

According to Arthur J. Pias, Indian women in myth and epic continue to serve as role models today. Pias also identified traces of enticing qualities that Banerjee associated with 'female bonding' during her childhood experiences [29]. Divakaruni (1998) agrees with the statement in an essay titled *What Women Share*, where she talks about how frequently her grandfather told her stories from Indian epics and how she had always looked for that sense of sisterhood she knew must have existed among those great women. She also adds, "The aloneness of the epic heroines seems strange to me even as a child. I could see that this was not how women around me lived, whether in the villages or middle-class Calcutta" [30] (p. 105).

Divakaruni's storytelling technique is characterised by vivid and descriptive imagery influenced by oral tradition and incorporates elements of feminine mysticism. Furthermore, according to Zupancic, Divakaruni's writing focuses on immigration and women's issues without favouring one gender over another [31]. The main emphasis is on the ability of her female characters to liberate themselves, mainly mothers and/or daughters, from various forms of oppression and emotional constraints [32]. These women rely on cooperation, friendship, and deep emotional and spiritual connections to achieve this liberation. The bond between women is so extraordinary that it has the potential to transform their lives profoundly [25] (p. 129).

Divakaruni, with an immense storytelling talent, has written her novel *Sister of My Heart*, inspired by *The Ultrasound*, published in 1991. The plot of *Sister of My Heart* revolves around two women, Anju and Sudha, who are biologically distant cousins but destined to share the same home on the night of their births. The tale of their twin birth ignited their imagination and played a vital role in glorifying a sisterly bond between the two females, as Anju's birth was relatively smooth, unlike Sudha's, who didn't arrive until midnight. Sudha proudly stated, "'That's why Anju is my twin, don't you see'..... 'Because she called me out into the world'" [27] (p. 30). They develop into inseparable sisters throughout their childhoods. Anju descends from the esteemed Chatterjee lineage, whereas Sudha's ancestral origins remain unknown.

3. Context and Relevance

The novel *Sister of My Heart* is divided into two parts: "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" and the second as "The Queen of Swords" which sheds light on the unhappy experiences faced by Indian women. The main female characters, Anju and Sudha, gradually discover the art of reaching towards self-realisation and find a sense of harmony in their lives. Anju and Sudha share an incredibly strong bond as sisters. Divakaruni skillfully allows Anju and Sudha to speak in their unique voices, seamlessly shifting perspectives throughout the narrative. In the novel, the narrative technique emphasises the dissimilarities between the two characters and the occurrences in their lives. Anju has a straightforward personality, while Sudha, on the other hand, is imaginative and sensitive, displaying a contrasting nature. Sudha introduces Anju with a dialogue, "That's because the servants sneak in during the night and eat them," which is an example of Anju's logical experiences and insights.

3.1 Analysis

The first chapter in the novel deals with Sudha's narration, and it is Sudha's narration that introduces us to the other characters. Singhji, AbhaPishi, Gouri Ma and her mother Nalini:

"There's Pishi, our widow aunt, who threw herself heart-first into her younger brother's household when she lost her husband at the age of eighteen. Dressed in astute white, her graying hair cut close to her scalp in the orthodox style so that the bristly ends tickle, my palms when I run my hands over them . . . [27] (p. 7)"

"There's Anju's mother, whom I call Gouri Ma, her fine cheekbones and regal forehead hinting at generations of breeding, she comes from as old and respected family as that of the Chatterjees which she married into. Her face is not beautiful in the traditional sense – even I, young as I am, know this. . . . [27] (p. 8)"

"Lastly – I use this word with some guilt – there is my own mother, Nalini. Her skin is still golden, for though she's a widow my mother is careful to apply turmeric paste to her face each day. . . . She laughs often, my mother, especially when her friends come for tea and talk. [27] (p. 8)"

Interestingly, it is worth noting that the portrayal of sisterhood in Indian fiction has not precisely followed the typical Western development trend. In addition to traditional Indian society, there is a clear division between men and women. This division has led to the perpetuation of social stereotypes that hinder female bonding. Therefore, men promote the idea that women should keep relationships merely with men and portray women as rivals to one another. Hooks examines the connection between these beliefs and ideals and the patriarchal nature of society [1]. According to Hooks, patriarchy is a social and political system that seeks to establish the dominance of men over women. While the relationship between a mother and son is highly valued, the bond between a mother and daughter is often overlooked.

Similarly, sibling bonds are privileged, but women's friendships are marginalised. Zygodlo Grazyna in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* views sisterhood as a form of alliance and mutual support among women, particularly those on society's margins. She highlights the significance of embracing one's cultural identity and working together to dismantle oppressive systems [34].

Anju and Sudha's mothers, Gaouri and Nalini (sister-in-law), can also be seen as exemplifying sisterhood in the Chatterjee family. The relationship (Gaouri and Nalini) matches Adrienne Rich's acknowledgement of the shared experiences and struggles of women, particularly in the context of motherhood and domestic life. Adding to her point, she also underscores the importance of women supporting each other in the face of patriarchal oppression [35]. Their strong bond of kinship has only grown stronger after the passing of their husbands, remaining steadfast throughout their lives.

"Our mothers, lying in beds they would never again share with their husbands. My mother weeping, her beautiful hair tangling about her swollen face, punching at a pillow until it burst, spilling cotton stuffing white as grief. Gouri Ma, still and silent, staring up into darkness which pressed upon her like the responsibilities she knew no one else in the family could take on [27] (p. 8)."

The experience of the similar agony of loss between Gauri and Nalini binds them together. The common experience of agony caused by the tragedy of their husbands' death unites Gauri and Nalini. The supportive network among women helps them realise their full potential and also creates empathy through shared experiences with mutual support in fostering feminism [36].

Exploring the concept of "femininity" in a more advanced society is often seen as the opposite of "feminism", it's rejected, unloved sisters. Lynn Segal encapsulated this particular point of view by stating that "it is women's mothering and nurturing activities, and the social beliefs that support them, which are crucial to the maintenance of women's general subordination and economic dependence" [37]. Anju's and Sudha's three mothers, Pishi, Gouri Ma, and Nalini, although often at odds with one other, form an alternative family that allows both girls a certain degree of freedom- Gouri Ma searches for a match for Anju that will enable her to go to university. Despite some resistance from Nalini at first, all the mothers protect and support Sudha and baby Dayita when Sudha leaves her new marriage behind.

In the final version of the story, Dayita becomes the central figure for all the females in Chatterjee's family. "The unborn daughter gave her mother the courage to leave and the flaming sword made of light so that none dared prevent her from going (211)" is an example of disparity from the one Pishi tells about Bidhata Purush, who possibly "doesn't come for girl babies," At the end not only do the mothers support the baby (Dayita), but they fall helplessly in love with her:

"I'm her real grandmother," says my mother. "She even looks like me. Give her to me" "No you're not," says Pishi, hands on her hips. "It's love that makes a relationship, as much as blood. Plus she's a lot prettier than you ever were..... Gouri, Gouri! Did you sneak up on us and take Daya-Moni away again!"

Pishi's words, "It's love that makes a relationship," stand out in particular here, as this message runs through both chapters in the novel. Divakaruni points out emphatically that love is something that we create between us at a local level, but it is something women often extend beyond local relationships, too. Divakaruni skillfully crafts narratives that resonate with female readers, providing a framework for us to "graft onto" considering the connections between different symbols and the deeper meaning behind Sudha's journey to save her daughter from feticide, further reflecting light on Sudha's interpretation of the story, which brings solace to her cousin and daughter. "The story expresses deep respect for women who sacrifice time, money, and energy for one another- as sisters, mothers, friends, and strangers too" [38].

The *Mistress of Spices* is also part of a rich tradition of feminist speculative fiction and fantasy writing from

the 20th century that explores the importance and joy of sisterhood within women's communities, which includes *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkin Gilman [39], *Les Guérillères* (1969) by Monique Wittig [40], *The Wanderground* (1979) by Sally Miller Gearhart [41], *The Marriage Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980) by Doris Lessing [42], and *Body of Glass* (1991) by Marge Piercy [43]. Similar to several female writers of speculative fiction, such as those included above, Divakaruni is intrigued by the idea of creating a post-patriarchal environment free from violence or restriction, where women are able to express and grow their varied abilities freely.

Tilo, the protagonist in *The Mistress of Spices*, shares an incredible bond with other females living on the island. Divakaruni drives her story with Tilo's particular internalized belief system, which is essentially an imagined scenario in which her spices works with higher powers in the cosmos to veer reality away from catastrophic ends. Her bond with the others novitiate on the island holds equal significance to her connection with First Mother. They joyfully swim in serene lakes and embrace their bond, nurturing each other's needs and sharing intimate moments like a group of sisters as they "[gather] wild spinach, [roast] chapatis and [braid] each other's hair" (10). As each woman departs for a new destination, Tilo asks herself, "When had they slipped into my heart, these girl-women glowing translucent, chaste as alabaster, the last ones in the world to know who I was, and how it felt to be that" (10).

According to Swathi Krishna, "If Tilo's transformation is fantastical, then the female bonding and the evolving mother-daughter relationship between Tilo and Lalita is no less magical, and Divakaruni's novel depicts how such tropes work as a strong force that may undo the control wielded by patriarchal Indian cultural codes and help women forge autonomous identities" [44]. Divakaruni's portrayal of female relationships is unique, intimate, and even unconventional. In her analysis, Sturgis highlights the significance of women's connections with one another as a source of empowerment for enacting personal transformations. She states that "it is from their connections with each other that women draw the power they need to work transformations in their lives" [45] (p. 16). This observation sheds light on Tilo's revolt against spices and the confidence she develops at the time of living on the island, as well as when she becomes "Maya" in California.

"The formation of one's identity is greatly influenced by how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them" [46] (p. 46). Comparing the statement, we can analyse Tilo as a victim of the pre-notion judgement of society as she sees herself as "a bent woman with skin the colour of old sand, behind a glass counter that holds... sweets of their childhoods". Out of their mothers' kitchens" [33] (p. 11), Tilo describes herself as having an "old woman voice and an old woman body" [33] (p. 53) covered with "creases and gnarls and with wrinkles like an old snake" [33] (p. 11). She respects the elders who come to her store, referring as "dada" - a term used by Indians for high respect. "She is not seductive but rather matronly. Moreover, she does not express her opinions and offers advice only when she is asked" [47].

Through her acts of assistance to her fellow Indians and her exploration of her sensuality, Tilo manages to liberate herself from the constraints of her culture, like taking steps against spices to assist Geeta, who faces opposition from her family due to her relationship with a Mexican man. Tilo also stands with Lalitha, who is experiencing domestic abuse from her husband. Tilo asserts, "Here in America, maybe we could start again, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling us how a man should act, what is a woman's duty. But ah the voices, we carried them inside our heads" (103). Lalita is eventually able to get past the conventional Indian vices in her head that remind her of her responsibilities as a wife and leave her husband and house. She boldly challenges the traditional norms and regulations surrounding spices, ultimately forging her unique Indian American identity.

Lalita is eventually able to get past the conventional Indian voices in her head that remind her of her responsibilities as a wife and leave her husband and house. "Even though Tilo's transformation is fantastical, Divakaruni's novel shows how these tropes can be a powerful force that can help women forge independent identities and overcome the control that patriarchal Indian cultural codes wield over them" [44].

4. Conclusions

Divakaruni's masterful use of shared symbols in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Mistress of Spices* goes beyond mere description. Through a semiotic lens, these symbols become potent tools to portray the multifaceted nature of sisterhood. The analysis reveals how seemingly ordinary objects can be imbued with rich meanings, reflecting the characters' emotional journeys and the enduring connections that bind them together. This exploration enriches our understanding of the novel and offers a broader perspective on the complexities of

sisterhood across cultures. Divakaruni's novels create their fictionally "distinctive" cultures by concentrating on women's relationships and communities. These works "preserve" and "extend" their "original cultures" by showcasing women who are proud of the feminine- proud to be nurturing, compassionate, and loving, also proud to stand together and fight against social injustice. Women's supportive interventions, like those of First Mother and Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices*, add close-knit female connections, like Sudha and Anju and their family of three mothers in *Sister of My Heart*, have led to a shift in how women live in the 21st century.

Feminity should not be seen as a negative label associated with weakness, regardless of whether it is females or males. Instead, when embraced in its entirety, femininity embodies strength and empowerment through compassion. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni beautifully showcases this truth with grace and sensitivity in her novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Mistress of Spices*. This article lays the groundwork for further exploration of semiotics in Divakaruni's work. Future research could examine colour symbolism, recurring imagery related to nature, or the significance of food and objects associated with specific cultural practices. Additionally, comparative studies could explore how other authors utilise symbolic language to portray sisterhood in different cultural contexts.

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