



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

(born **Chitralkha Banerjee**, 1956 is an [Indian-American](#) author, poet, and the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the [University of Houston Creative Writing Program](#).

Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*, won an [American Book Award](#) in 1995, and two of her novels (*The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*) were adapted into films. *Mistress of Spices* was short-listed for the [Orange Prize](#).

Divakaruni's works are largely set in [India](#) and the [United States](#), and often focus on the experiences of [South Asian immigrants](#). She writes for children as well as adults and has published novels in multiple [genres](#), including [realistic fiction](#), [historical fiction](#), [magical realism](#), and [fantasy](#).

Chitra Divakaruni's Aha! Moment

"But You're A Girl!"

O, The Oprah Magazine | From the December 2001 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*

If a 13th-century Indian woman could tear off her veil, command men and ride elephants into battle, then so could 10-year-old Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

I clearly remember the day I first came across Sultana Raziyya. It was a delicious monsoon day in Calcutta, dramatically dark and wet and windy. I was 10 years old—and very unhappy. I'd just been told by my mother that I could no longer run out to the flooded street and float the paper boats that I was an expert at making and get soaked in the warm rain with the other children the way I always had. I was too old now and it wasn't proper.

But my brother was older, and he still did it, I pointed out, flabbergasted by this failure in maternal logic.

"That's different," my mother said, her eyes sad but firm. "You're a girl."

I couldn't believe my mother was saying this...the one who always encouraged me to try harder in school, who told me I had the brains to win the first-place prize? It was my first experience of the prison the world constructs around women and their bodies. And it was the first intimation I had that even my mother—my all-powerful mother—had no power to break through the thorny bars of this cage.

I opened my brother's Indian history textbook, which was lying on the desk. I flipped desultorily through the pages. It was a boring book—lots of small print, few illustrations, and those mostly of crumbly old buildings or stern-looking bearded men. But one of them stopped me.

In this picture a woman sat on a tiger skin while a man knelt nearby, offering her his scimitar. Instead of flowing veils, she wore the male attire of the medieval age—baggy pants and a vest. Instead of daintily sniffing at a rose, like the women in my father's book of Mughal paintings, she leaned forward boldly to grasp the weapon offered to her.

The caption below the picture said Sultana Raziyya. The Sultana was the first woman to sit on the throne of Delhi. (Later I would discover that she was the only woman to do so until Indira Gandhi came to power in the 20th century.) In 1236 she was nominated by her father, Iltutmish, to succeed him and overcame her weak brothers to rule the volatile kingdom for a brief time.

Raziyya shocked her Muslim court by promptly dispensing with her veil and presiding over them barefaced. She passed laws on racial and religious tolerance (issues they obviously didn't care for) and levied taxes to build schools and wells. She could recite the Koran but preferred to write poetry, and she made friends with a number of writers and artists.

The aghast noblemen were forced to revolt against Raziyya. She set her troops against them, but was captured and thrown into prison. But Raziyya didn't give up so easily. She talked her jailer, one of the nobles who was formerly part of the opposition, into marrying her and helping her escape. She died heroically while leading one last, superbly scandalous charge from atop a huge elephant shortly afterward in 1240.

Here was someone who had refused to stop when people said to her, "You can't do that! You're a girl!"

It would take me years to figure out a strategy, and more years to hone my fighting skills. It would take much self-searching to decide that words would be my scimitar. I promised myself that, like Raziyya, I wouldn't give up. I'd do my best to slash through the taboos that

bound us women as tightly as mummy wrappings, to show the world what we could achieve.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the author of *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* and *Sisters of My Heart*.

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