

Transcontinental Sisterhood and Diasporic Identity in Divakaruni's 'Before We Visit the Goddess'

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) deals with three stories in the form of a novel which presents the lives of three protagonists – Savitri, Bela and Tara – who are separated from each other in terms of spatial transcontinental distance but have a bonding which helps them survive the times of crisis. The novel presents a sense of 'transcontinental sisterhood' which is necessary in the present day of globalization, when mass migration is the order of the day. Divakaruni presents through this novel the essence of women's existence and thereby tries to forge an identity for her protagonists.

Key Words: Before We Visit the Goddess, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Diaspora, Female bonding, Identity, Immigrant, Sisterhood, Transcontinental

Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1956 is an award-winning author, poet, activist and teacher. She was nineteen when she went to the US, where she received a Ph.D. degree from the University of California at Berkeley. She is the author of highly acclaimed books such as *Arranged Marriages* (a collection of short stories), *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of my Heart* (have been adapted into a film), *The Vine of Desire* and *The Palace of Illusions*. Her latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) deals with immigrant experience especially the lives of immigrant women. She destroys myths and stereotypes, breaks down barriers and dissolves boundaries to help women find their own identity. Her favourite themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, women, immigration, history, myth, and the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. She was one of the

many writers who pondered over the issues of the migrant people, especially the women in the diasporic situation. Rose comments: "A strong characteristic of Divakaruni's novels is the exploration of relationships between women, the inter-generational gap, the challenges and victories woman experience and the cultural differences of living in India and the US." (Rose) Shikha Kumar comments on Divakaruni's focus on the issues related to diasporic women's identity:

"Divakaruni is an immigrant herself – she moved to the US from Kolkata four decades ago and now lives and teaches in Texas. Writing about identity has always been important to her, and thus, percolates into her characters. "When I moved to America, my own identity kind of underwent a shock. I was living away from home for the first time, learning to be independent and really

revising the definition of what it meant to be a woman, and a successful woman,” she says.”

The term ‘diaspora’ was once used to describe Jewish and Greek scattering to different parts of the world but today, its scope has enlarged, in present times, to embrace all phenomenon related to migrations, caused by social, political and economic factors, resulting in a community marked by an ethno-communal consciousness and a shared nostalgia for original homeland. Forced expatriation took place mainly during the colonial periods, while the search for economic prosperity in the developed nations of the world has resulted in voluntary migrations of people as people moved across lands in search of their economic wellbeing. Sudesh Mishra while commenting on diasporic writers writes: “Whereas the writers of the old diaspora tend to concentrate on the chinks within, say the girit enclave, the new diasporic writers are inclined to inhabit the luminal or threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities that defines the experience of migrancy.” (287)

Beena Agarwal in her “Introduction” to *Women Writers and Indian Diaspora* states about women diasporic writers that “Cultural ideologies are gender specific and women predicament in a state of cultural geographical shift generates a complex pattern of feminine mystique. The distinction arises out the three components –

- a) the realization of inferiority as a woman,
- b) realization of insecurity for their inaccessibility to western cultural values, and

- c) the strong bonding with national cultural identity coupled with the exceptional sensibility for personal relationship.” (3)

Thus, women are in a strange situation in a diasporic set up as they are doubly marginalized, weak and insecure. Their precarious existence finds manifestation in their writings where the entire canvass of feminine experiences including the issues of motherhood, female sexuality, dynamics of marital harmony get coupled with the poetics of ‘exile’, ‘aloofness’, ‘nostalgia,’ ‘nationalism’, and the quest for familial and personal relationships.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Before We Visit the Goddess*, a novel written in the form of stories, deals with lives of three strong female protagonists – Savitri, Bela and Tara – the three who are the grandmother, the mother and the daughter respectively. Through the portrayal of the lives of these three generations of females a sort of family history is being painted which talks about issues across generations and continents. Even though these three females live miles apart from each other – yet their lives are interconnected in a strange way. The interconnectedness of their lives makes us wonder at the way the author Divakaruni points out the notion of female bonding. Even though the male characters exist in the novel; but those male characters are depicted from the perspective of the roles that they in the lives of these three women. The primary concern of the author seems to portray the way in which these three females are interconnected (female bonding) to each other even though they do not live together. These three females are not sisters to each other, but there is a kind of sisterhood in the

sense of female bonding which is so strong in their lives that at the moment of crisis in their lives they fall back on each other even though there seems to be a communication gap between them.

Sisterhood here refers to a kind of asexual relationship that women share where they understand one another and extend support in times of need and crisis and become a mutual source of strength. Feminists point out that sisterhood is essential for women to live in a patriarchal set up if they have to fight the ways in which they are being oppressed and suppressed in a male-dominated society. In the case of the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*, the sisterhood is multigenerational as well as transcontinental. Hudson-Weems, while elaborating on the concept of sisterhood, talk about its positive impact on the lives of women:

“This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to a sexual 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.” (Mookherjee)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s uniqueness in the novel is that she could bring the notion of transcontinental sisterhood which is very necessary in today’s globalized world where mass migration of people from one nation to another is the order of the day. As people

migrate, they often are encountered with many a crisis in their lives which necessitate that they have strong bonding to fall back on. In the novel, Bela falls back on her mother, and Tara falls back on her mother and grandmother as a source of their strength even though they are not able to live together in the same nation. It is true that both Bela and Tara are difficult daughters to their respective mothers as in the initial part of their lives there is a lack of warmth of the mother-daughter relationship.

Divakaruni does not show a relationship between mother and daughter where there are no complexities. She presents a conflicted relationship where there are lots of stubbornness, misgivings and misunderstandings. Durga, a village sweet-maker, whose husband was a simple part-time village priest, wanted her daughter, Sabitri to receive a quality education in a college and have a career. Since her husband is a simple part-time village priest and she didn’t have enough financial resources, she expresses her desire before Leeyamoyi, who lived in Kolkata and was the wife of Mittir, the wealthiest man in the village. She tells her:

“Sabi does not want to get married Rani Ma. She wants to go to college. Wants to become a teacher. She’s smart. Stood first in the matric exams in the Girls School. But we don’t have the money” (6)

Sabitri got admission in Kolkota college and starts living in Lelamoyi’s house. She faces silent contempt of servants in the Mittir household, but she sticks to her resolve of going to college and pursuing her studies diligently. This arrangement comes to an

abrupt end when she falls in love with Rajiv, Leelamoyi's son, and the news of their affair is conveyed to Leelamoyi. Sabitri is thrown out of the Mittir household and without having any other place to go, she goes to her college, where she sits and cries. Her mathematics teacher, Bijan finds her in the college, gives her shelter and later marries her.

She starts living a happy life with her husband, Bijan, who joins a giant oil corporation and gets promoted to a high position of leadership position. They are blessed with a daughter, Bela. Being obsessed with "her first humiliation and heartbreak," (34) she goes to visit Leelamoyi's house to exhibit her new-found prosperity and status. There she meets Rajiv, who kisses her hand in front of her daughter, Bela, who in her innocence tells her father Bijan about it. This innocent comment drives a deep wedge between Bijan and her. Their marital relationship practically dies. Bijan becomes very cold and distant and stays with her only for the sake of his daughter Bela.

When her husband dies in a refinery fire in Assam, Sabitri fights a legal case against the giant oil corporation and wins the compensation and decides to settle down in Kolkata. She had inherited the art of making sweets from her mother and wishes to use it to start a new enterprise "Durga Sweets", which was named after her mother. She started this enterprise to provide financial security to her daughter, Bela. Though she tried in her life to adjust to the professional demands and her life with her daughter Bela yet there was a growing resentment in Bela about how she used to spend less time with

her. "In her youth, Bela had been jealous of how much more time Sabitri spent with Bipin babu than with her ..." (93).

Sabitri and Bela have a love-hate relationship, which takes almost a lifetime to get settled. Bela was proud of her mother, who cared for her needs, but she also held her responsible for the death of her father and brother. Bella falls in love with her classmate, Sanjay, a student leader with radical left leanings. Bela feels estranged with her mother when she opposes this relationship. Sabitri tried to keep Bela away from Sanjay but could not prevent her from following Sanjay to America, where he had escaped earlier for security. Her married life is very tumultuous. She is blessed with a daughter, Tara. Sanjay turned out to be a possessive husband, who would not let Bela meet her mother. Tara is very fond of her father, while her relationship with Bela was marked with similar subliminal hostility, as can be perceived in the relationship between Bela and Sabitri. Tara, born and bred in United states, does not feel obliged to acknowledge her Indian heritage. But others constantly expect her to keep in touch with the members of Indian community. Thinking about her relationship with her parents, she reflects: "Towards my father, whom I'd loved more than anyone ever, my feelings are as unambiguous as knife. My mother is more troublesome case." (64)

Thus, though apparently, it seems that the mothers and daughters do not share a cordial relationship – but it is the mothers on whom the daughters fall back on in times of crisis. It is true that Bela didn't ever visit her mother even once after running away to America with Sanjay after marriage. Also,

though Bela is a ‘difficult daughter’, yet even she has her moments of weaknesses, and there is always a tendency in her to reach out to her mother. In the novel, we see that both Bela and Tara call up their respective mothers when they are faced with an extreme crisis. Tara, having broken up her relationship with her parents, asserts her independence as an American young woman and moves on. Yet when confronted with a crisis, she longs for her mother:

“I’d called because I was scared. Because suddenly I wasn’t sure if I was doing the right thing. I said to myself, if she says, Don’t, I’ll cancel the appointment. If she says, Come, I’ll drive up to wherever she’s living now.” (126)

Bela also had reached out to her mother in a similar manner, when she was faced with a crisis in her life when her husband and daughter abandoned her. She was deeply perturbed on hearing that Tara intends to leave her college. She seeks her mother’s advice and later tells Tara:

“When you told me you were dropping out of college, Tara, I didn’t know what to do. I’d dropped out of college myself – so many of my problems stemmed from that. I didn’t want the same thing to happen to you. I guess that’s when people call their mothers – when their world is falling apart.” (206)

Sabitri immediately responds to Bela’s desperate request that she should write to her and persuade her to continue her studies. On receiving a call from Bella, “an old need twisted in Sabitri’s chest. Protect. Protect.” (2) In spite of her ill health, she starts writing Tara a letter. She writes Tara a detailed letter unraveling her life with a

view to persuade her. She tells Tara: “Granddaughter, this is the truth: if you are uneducated, people look down on you. To survive you are forced to accept crumbs thrown from a rich man’s table.” (11) She shares, in the letter, the details of all her struggles and wishes to inspire both Bela and Tara by sharing her greatest achievement- her final perfecting of a new dessert recipe, which lifted her enterprise, Durga Sweets, to great heights. She invests every bit of her energy in writing this letter and dies of a heart attack as soon as she is done with it. She sacrifices her life to respond to her daughter’s request.

An analysis of these mother-daughter encounters highlights these aspects of the mother-daughter relationship:

- a) that mothers will always remain faithful and think in terms of their daughter’s good;
- b) however, difficult the daughters are, mothers will always remain by their daughter’s side to help the at the moments of crisis; and
- c) the daughters will always fall back on their mothers whenever there is a crisis.

These three aspects point out that there is a kind of female bonding between mothers and daughters, which cannot be easily snapped or disturbed. The image of the mother always is there in the minds of the daughters helping them out to live their lives. Savitri will always be there in the back of mind of Bela, Bela will always be there for Tara and so on and so forth. It is this which makes the women forge an identity for herself in this difficult world – more so when the world is a transcontinental one

where one finds it difficult to moreover forge an identity because of the cultural disparities.

In a hostile diasporic world, when Bela is left alone, being abandoned by her husband and daughter – she has to come up with a living for herself which will make her survive in a hostile world. From Sabitri, Bela had inculcated the culinary skills in her genes and she then starts her own blog “Bela’s Kitchen” and also writes many popular cookbooks which makes her survive. Tara speaks:

“My mother has several cookbooks and a popular food blog Bela’s Kitchen, now well into its second decade. My grandmother Sabitri’s deserts were legendary in Kolkata – so I’ve been told. No wedding is my great-

grandmother Durga’s village was considered complete without her special malpua, golden fried and dipped in rose syrup, sprinkled with crushed fennel seed.” (185)

It is these culinary skills that Sabitri has inherited and in difficult times it is this which makes her survive the problems and come up with an identity for herself as a liberated female who can survive by her own rights without the social and financial security of the husband. It is in this ‘moments of becoming women’ by her own right in the diasporic atmosphere of America that Bela comes up with an identity of her own with the moral support of her mother who lives miles apart in Kolkata.

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