

# Exploration of Diasporic Identity as Projected in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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## Abstract

This research article explores the theme of 'Diasporic Identity' in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*. It is an attempt to highlight the concept of the women psyche and the cultural oscillation experienced by the characters Sabutri, Bela, Tara. 'Straddling between Cultures' is the common outlook of Diasporic culture. The female characters in this novel straddle between the culture of the homeland and the host land. In the period of globalization, migration is a common phenomenon. This paper neatly concludes with the emerging trend in literature, which signifies the dilemma of immigrant self and deals with the issues like gender, race, religion, education, language, codes of behavior and cultural practices. This article helps us to understand human experience as a combination of cultural forces in each of us.

**Keywords:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Cultures, tradition, migration, gender, self identity.

Women writing have come of age, overcoming its difference. Most of the women writers and feministic writers have discussed on the issues of gender construction and its impact on the psyche of the girl child, traditional interpretations of motherhood, exploitation within and outside the family, influence of gender stereotyping on career/life options, etc... Diasporas may be migrants but the ones who have settled in specific countries constitute the mainstream like Indians in foreign countries especially in USA. Temporally, they are located in the past historical moment Diasporic foregrounds migration both by choice and by compulsion.

The diasporic writers in their own ways have tried to offer through discourse of terror a warning to the future generation. Divakaruni tends to use her writings in a way to reject the culture of violence. She has tried to grapple with the complex, confusing and fast charging social and political realities. She has depicted the impact of discriminations on ordinary people. She had presented the conflicting passion and demands that come to women as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers.

Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni has been educated at Loreto house, a convent school run by Irish Missionary and presidency college, Kolkata. She has moved to the United States in 1977 for her higher studies. At present she lives in Bay area with her family. She teaches writing and composition for several years at Foothill College, Los Altos. She has been teaching creative writing at the University of Houston. She is a co-operative founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline found in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. She also serves on the emeritus board of Pratham Houston, a non-profit organization working to bring literacy to disadvantaged Indian children.

Divakaruni's works has been published in over 50 magazines, including The Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker and her writing has been included in over fifty anthologies including the Best American Short Stories, the O'Henry prize stories and the pushcart prize anthology. Her fiction has been translated into twenty nine languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian, Bengali, Turkish and Japanese.

Divakaruni is at her best in exploring the themes of love and longing desires, process of understanding, self-analysis and discovery. In her writings, women play a predominant role and as a writer, she justifies her choice. Her writings project woman characters a bounding passion. They draw upon boundless inner strength. Her themes are the Indian experience, contemporary America, history, myth and the challenges of living in a multicultural world. She has begun her writing as a poet. Her two latest volumes of poetry are *Black Candle* and *Leaving Yuba City*. She has won several awards for her poems, such as a Gerbode Award, Barbara Doming Memorial Award and Allen Ginsberg Award. Two of her major collections of short stories are Arranged Marriage: *Stories (1995)* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives (2001)*. In those stories, the author narrates about the immigrant brides who are both liberated and trapped by cultural change.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's unique perspective on what it means to live as an immigrant in the United States has influenced most of her work. To most of them, America is a land of opportunity, providing them with a new life, and a way of escape from the dominant factor. The dominant factor can be anything which an individual thinks to be a different one. Each culture is different but human experience such as desire, pain and joy are universal. Divakaruni's novel *One Amazing Thing* helps us to understand human experience as a combination of complex cultural forces operating in each of us. The characters in the novel are from different cultural background but they have one thing in common- domination by a superior force. The present paper discusses the different consciousness that operates in general within an individual and focuses especially on how these consciousnesses has put the characters in dilemma.

In the period of globalization, migration is a common phenomenon. One of the emerging trend in literature is to present the dilemma of immigrant self which includes issues

like gender, race, religion, education, language, codes of behavior and cultural practices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a distinct South Asian writer with a well established position in literature. She belongs to the group of Indian writers who focus on postcolonial diasporic identity. As a writer, she has represented many genres such as poetry, short fictions, novels and essays. The experience of the immigrants in the United States forms the core of her fiction. Divakaruni stresses upon the concept of double consciousness in *Before We Visit the Goddess*. The term, “Double Consciousness” was first used by W.E.B. Du Bois in his book, *The Soul of Black Folk*. It is an individual’s feeling of having more than one social identity, which makes him/her difficult to develop a sense of self. Originally Du Bois used this term in order to explain the minds of African-Americans living in the Southern United States. Today critics and researchers employ this term to bring out the in-between state felt by the characters. It is a study that promotes human understanding. Double Consciousness and homelessness are the two features of postcolonial Diasporas. Double Consciousness or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused. In the Diaspora this feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither, rather than to both of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement .

Divakaruni’s latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* travels across two continents and three generations of women. Divakaruni seamlessly takes us from rural India to modern life in Houston and Austin. If Sabitri is Bengali in her passionate love for sweets and Bela straddles two cultures, Tara is as far removed from her roots as one can imagine. The author paints her as the stereotypical rebel-a drug-addict with an eyebrow piercing and spiky dyed hair, with no knowledge of gotras and temples and Indian culture. Tara is strangely the opposite of her grandmother. While Sabitri yearned to be educated, Tara throws away education to find herself a monotonous job instead. It’s a topsy-turvy world where previous generations look forward while the present generation looks backward. But we learn later that Tara’s dreams are not regressive; they are just different.

The uniqueness of Divakaruni’s fiction *Before We Visit the Goddess* lies in her bringing together the people from different cultural background and making them share their experience. Language and culture transformed when they come in contact with others. The immigrant writers write in relation with the culture of their homeland and at the same time adopt and negotiate with the cultural space of the host land.

Being the relative of the immigrant the non-immigrants are also forced to learn the language of their immigrant relatives. When Sabitri is asked to write a letter to Tara to bring her in the right path Sabitri, wonders,

“What can she write in her rusty English to change Tara’s mind? She cannot even imagine her granddaughter’s life, the whirlwind foreign world she lives in” (3).

All that she has known of her grand-daughter, Tara, is what she has managed to acquire through the photographs that her own daughter Bela, the mother of Tara, has sent her. Making various attempts to write, resulting in false starts that make the letter sound moralize and inappropriate, even to her, she ultimately joys down her own experiences and decisions that have shaped not only her own future, but inadvertently also that of her daughter Bela and possibly even in turn of her granddaughter Tara. A letter that travelled the boundaries of time and space and which despite lying unopened for almost quarter of a century. The letter has kept the three generation of mothers and daughters away from each other.

The three generation of women have been not merely separated by space Sabitri being in India, Bela travel from India to America and Tara being born and brought up in America, though both Bela and Tara live in different parts of the country, as Sabitri and her mother Durga also by their beliefs their lifestyles and the mental and emotional borders they have drawn between themselves walling the other person out. Interestingly, though, their lives run a close parallel, in the decisions they take and the impact it has on their life and relations, given that these decisions bring with them their unwritten ‘other’ dependency and restrictions, which all three women, being by nature independent and impulsive, either consciously or unconsciously , regret and resent.

This book signifies its coming in the age of diasporic writing, where the travel undertaken is not merely across physical space, but also largely through the mental space of the three generation of women. The emotional distance that emerges between the three women and within each of them, as they seek to pursue their dreams. This emotional disconnect coupled between the dreams that the women wish to pursue and the reality, that in actuality unfolds, is what constitutes the major borders that the book dwells upon. Despite the death of Sabitri and the imminent separation of Bela, who is to go to an old age home, and Tara, who is to go back to their own life, with her husband and son, in the end these borders are dissolved and the women understand each other and themselves better.

What actually pushed them apart, which is also what creates a feeling of alienation, in the diasporics, is the “longing to be included” (10). Beginning with an external displacement and a yearning for their home, it eventually manifests in an internal displacement; as one gets alone, disaffected only from others, but also gradually from one’s hopes and dreams, thus driving deep the sense of loss and alone, disaffected that endlessly shifts from outside to deep within. Sabitri first experiences this displacement and loss, when she moves from her parents’ home, in a village far away from Kolkatta, to the city, in order to pursue her dreams. This moving, which is underlined with both anxiety and anticipation, then gets manifested in an adjustment and acceptance that remains so. “Even the most startling adventure, sooner or

later, must become routine. So it was with Sabitri” (8). Then eventually turns to doubt and disillusionment “Sabitri was mostly grateful to be ignored. The village school had not prepared her adequately: it was only with frantic effort that she managed to keep up” (9).

This, in turn, can lead to become complacent or even cocky and making errors of judgment that can then cost oneself more than what one is prepared to pay, as Sabitri realizes, when she is turned away from the home of her benefactor Leelamoyi, into the dark night, because she guesses that she will make a good daughter-in-law, for the son of the house, despite having come from a social class that is far lower than that of Leelamoyi, though her caste is comparable, given that she is the daughter of a temple priest, and it is a result of her caste that despite she being an outsider, she is not brazenly humiliated, though she is often ignored and treated badly, until she makes a wrong move and is therefore thrown out of the house.

The borders Bela experiences, like in the context of Sabitri, begin with her leaving her parents’ home to travel to America, to be with her lover Sanjay. Unlike Sabitri, though she leaves without her mother’s blessings, prevent every attempt of Sabitri to keep Sanjay away from her “A man who - Sabitri had known this in every vibrating nerve of her body - was utterly wrong of her” (31). Like Sabitri, she also feels extremely lonely and out of place, after her displacement both when she first moves to America and later when she is pregnant and longs to be with her mother.

“Dangerous fantasies flitted through her mind. If she had allowed Sabitri to arrange her marriage, she would have been living in India. She would have gone to her mother’s home for the birthing, as was the tradition, to be cared for and pampered. Sabitri knew what she liked in a way that Sanjay never would” (103).

This realization, however, not merely leaves her with a sense of loneliness, but also leads her to decisions and actions that ultimately separate her both from Sanjay and her daughter Tara.

Diaspora being a theme more consistently and obviously explored by Divakaruni, in her earlier writings, *Before We Visit the Goddess* serves as a concern that constitutes a flitting but persistent backdrop but one which is nevertheless explored from diverse angles. As Divakaruni recounts in her interview with Google, she has managed to, in this book, not only a touch upon life in America, but also places a part of her book in Houston. Through this context, she brings out the experiences of the diasporic culture in an alien land and also captures the opposing emotions that go with it; though she does not talk on this aspect too much. Bela, on landing in America, finds the invisibility it gives her and the modernity in the culture enticing,

She threw her arms around him the way she never could have done in Kolkata and kissed him on the mouth. No one catcalled. No one harassed them or took umbrage or even noticed, except for an old man who offered them a pensive smile. When she had enough breath to speak again, Bela said to Sanjay, “I think I’m going to be happy in America. (92)

This sense of loss and appreciation is also experienced by her protagonist Bela, with time and as a result of her inability to even visit her mother, due to the approach of her husband Sanjay (who hates her mother Sabitri and is unwilling to forgive her, due to the comment she made in meeting him and appointing a person to watch over Bela, so that she wouldn’t meet Sanjay) and given that Bela has not come on legal papers, which might result in her not being able to return to America. Her longing for India and all that she has left behind thus keeps growing stronger and takes root within her, resulting in her attempt to convince her mother appearing as a projection of the need to convince herself,

“Dear Mother, I’m very sorry to tell you that I’m cancelling my trip to India. I know you were really looking forward to it, and to seeing Tara for the first time, and so was I. but Sanjay absolutely refuse to let us go. Yesterday we had a huge fight over it. He claims that it’s not safe. He’s also afraid that since he and I both left India with documents that weren’t exactly legal, I might be detained, and Tara along with me. He’s also afraid that certain parties might find out that we’re coming and harm us, since he’d been on their hit list before he escaped. I’m not sure if any of this is true, but since he feels so strongly, I’ve decided not to argue any more about it, at least for now.”(77)

A visiting professor, Dr. Venkatachalapathi, whom Tara escorts around, to visit the Meenakshi temple in America, as per his express wish, or rather that of his wife, himself goes through a scope of emotions or experience, in its context. When the temple appears before him, after their long journey, he finds,

“The temple was an architectural disappointment, through Dr. Venkatachalapathi, another valiant but doomed attempted by the immigrant community to re-create the Indian experience. This could never compare to the original Meenakshi Amman Kovil of Madurai, fourteen sculpted gates rising twenty stories tall. The energy inside that sanctum, born of centuries of chanted prayers – how could you hope to re-create that in this flat landscape dotted with strange trees, on the wrong side of the black waters?” (127)

What is attracting however is that, as he decides to enter the temple, his perspective reflects an understanding of how the culture needs to adapt to suit the times and environment. Even when Tara hesitates away from entering the temple because of her appearance and the manner in which she is dressed, he asks her to come along, requesting her only to remove her

eyebrow ring and offering her a shawl to cover herself. He however mentions to her a couple of small things that they need to do *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Moreover, when Tara gets curiously involved in the prayer, he is offering, in the memory of his daughter Meena, he decides to offer prayers (*archana*) also to her. Aware that the priest will not offer the prayer, without knowing Tara's birth star, Dr. Venkatachalapathi tells the priest that Tara is a member of his family and asked the priest to offer prayers accordingly. The priest, though he does not really believe what Dr. Venkatachalapathi is saying thinks that he is merely an employee of the temple, goes ahead and offers the prayer.

What further adds complexity to the exploration of theme of approach to heritage is that Tara, who prides herself on being an American and has groomed herself like a typical young American girl, with spiky hair, rings on her eyebrow and the middle of her tongue, is yet not allowed to forget her lineage, by one of her only friends and colleague Blanca, who insist that Tara should connect with the Indian community, even if she has never been to India and does not desire to own up to her identity "She hands me a crumpled copy of the Indo-Houston Mirror. "You need to be in touch with your people". It's a sore point between us, what Blanca sees as my abandonment of Indian community and I consider self-preservation". (50)

Divakaruni has explored all the sufferings of the immigrant people. The characters in her novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* show the clear picture of the in betweenness of the characters in a dramatic way. The insight provided in this chapter is an eye opener to view the different dimension of consciousness working within us. Divakaruni is a writer who writes to promote human understanding and compassion.

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