

# Dire consequences of devastated motherhood and daring daughters- A Diasporic perspective of Chitra Banerjee's Before We Visit the Goddess

V. Samuel Morris, M. Poonkodi

*Abstract This study is focused on the novel Before We Visit the Goddess that deals with the mother and daughter relationship and their lives both in India and as immigrants in America. The diasporic writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni discovers the nuances of details connecting India to Texas, intertwining the emotions of three courageous women who struggle to attain their independence and fulfil their life goals. During the process of attaining their goal, they break the rules, and compromise with situations that compel them to commit mistakes in piles, both irrevocable and irredeemable. Divakaruni, makes clear that Indian women living abroad as well as in India devastate their life for all fault of their own. Every form of relationship that women establish with others, less exercising their discerning sense brings doom upon themselves. The worst of all troubles they face is due to their own disillusionment. Sabitri, Bela and Tara are three women representing three generations, though had an opportunity to fulfil their dreams either sexually get involved with men or take reckless decisions that bring them inexplicable woes and sufferings. The interpersonal relationship among themselves gets jeopardised. Yet they determine to sustain their bond and confront the challenges daringly. This paper is an attempt not only to diagnose the impact of conflict and controversies between mothers and daughters, but also to explore the themes of Cultural Nostalgia, Familial Relationship and Immigrant Identity from diasporic perspective.*

**Keywords:** mothers, daughters, culture, diaspora, immigrant, identity, women.

## I. INTRODUCTION

'Diaspora' stands for all those who have migrated to different countries across the world in search of better life and opportunities. The Indian diaspora is one of the largest Diasporas in the world. During seventeenth century the number of Indians migrating to different parts of the world from India has considerably increased. The Indians history of migration to United States was during post 1965. Earlier it started with male and later in 1990's fifty percent of women migrants migrated legally, either holding the Visa as wives, academicians, Scientists or as entrepreneurs. They did not stop being so but also chose writing as their career. Their literary contributions claimed them the title as Diasporic writers. The common thread that is found in their writings is the dissemination of their varied social and domestic experiences in the foreign land through the genre of fiction.

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V. Samuel Morris, Karunya Institute of Technology and Sciences, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. M. Poonkodi, Karunya Institute of Technology and Sciences, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. (Email: poonkodi@karunya.edu).

These writers highlighted the trials and tribulations of migrants through their characters in their writings.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born on July 29, 1956 in Calcutta, India. She is a first generation immigrant writer, and an author of eighteen books. Today, she is one of the new wave immigrant writers who depicts the domestic pains of women as Indians at patriarchal home and their ethnic issues as migrants in an alien land. Irrespective of being empowered with education and economic independence they suffer due to domineering attitude of men. Indian men are taught by Indian dogmas and traditional practices at home that man is superior and woman is inferior: "Male power is constructed and maintained through institutional and cultural practices that aim to bolster male superiority through the reinforcement of female inferiority" (Sipahutar, 2018). Divakaruni focuses mainly on gender issues, women empowerment, discrimination and human relationship.

Chitra Banerjee's Before We Visit the Goddess deals with familial relationship. The women characters Sabitri, Bela and Tara are the central figures of this novel who are entangled within the net of solitariness, loneliness and aloofness because of their own choices in their lives. Divakaruni projects the estranged life of these female characters. All their lives are connected together for the same reasons. Breaking the traditional boundaries causes an impact on their lives. The author takes us from rural Indian traditions to western cultures to prove that women's conditions are the same wherever they live. Sabitri, a typical Indian mother, dreams of being educated in her childhood. Leelamoyi, a rich lady in the town promises to fulfil Sabitri's ambition.

Being encouraged and feeling secure under her wings, Sabitri continues her studies but one blunder of falling in love, costs her to learn heavy lessons in her lifetime. Bela, the daughter of Sabitri, through a strong willed person, despite her mother's advices and warnings flees to America to be with her lover. Her life in America is vastly different from her imaginations forcing her to witness and experience two contrast worlds. She is disillusioned being tossed between two cultures. She is caught up in circumstances that shatter her relationships. Her husband moves out of her life and Tara and her daughter also leaves her. Her life becomes a complete mess as a migrant in the alien land. The life of Tara is portrayed as a westernized person who never knows about her roots. Her prospects in America is no better than her

## DIRE CONSEQUENCES OF DEVASTATED MOTHERHOOD AND DARING DAUGHTERS- A DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE OF CHITRA BANERJEE'S BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS

mother's. After quitting her education, she seeks job for her living. But America does not provide her chances to live with dignity. Instead it compels her to lead an indecent and an immoral life. Unexpected situations and wrong friendships change the personalities and lives of these three women belonging to three generations. These mothers and daughters are mentally strong but they complicate their own lives making them bitter and melancholic. Chitra Banerjee explores the immigrant angst and displaced identities of these women in her novel and this paper proceeds to discuss the above.

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The present work surveys the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee as a primary source to bring out the issues of immigrant women who struggle hard to survive in the migrated land. As they are caught between two opposing worlds, their relationship with their family especially with men is jeopardized and also is split. Women of India, face the gender issue as their primary challenge in the society. The lives of women in homeland and abroad make no differences, and they are torn between old and new world values (Kalaivani, 1995).

The bond between grandmother, mother and daughter has always been a loved one. But for a migrant woman, the cultural and generational differences subject them to physical and psychological tensions and tortures that force them to depart from their loved ones but if not for the education that they have received they cannot stand courageously and boldly to face the challenges. (Mookherjee, 2015). The importance of education for women is the greatest strength to stand on their feet (Suhana, 2018). Sabitri, a sixty seven year old woman living in India and her daughter Bela, settled in America shuttle between the two worlds through nostalgia. Sabitri even at her old age regrets for the mishap that had happened in her age. Though got an opportunity to be educated, her wrong relationship with men ruin her aspiration and her dream is shattered. The hope she has on daughter is also splintered to pieces, irrecoverable. With no hold upon her daughter, she watches her leaving home helplessly.

### III. DISCUSSION

Divakaruni narrates about three generations of mothers and daughters. The three major characters Sabitri, Bela, Tara exercise to live according to their own choices. These strong women are towards independence and they prove that the women of today undergo self-transformation breaking barriers to attain their goal. Chitra's women not only in this novel, even in her other works are projected as bold enough to break from any barriers and obstacles that men erect for them in the patriarchy society (Suhana, 2018). They also know the art of living all alone courageously. Sabitri as an Indian mother and grandmother is brought up in the traditional customs. Her urge to get education is an impossible dream. But her dream begins as an adventurous journey with the help of a rich lady, Leelamoyi, who promises to take care of her studies: "I'm lucky to be in Kolkata, getting an education. How many girls get this opportunity? Soon I'll get a great job. I'll earn enough money so my family will never be hungry again" (Divakaruni,

2017). Later one misstep costs her to suffer the entire life. She is thrown out of the house when she is found to have an affair with the rich lady's son Rajiv which brings an end to her studies.

After her marriage, Bela's a situation makes her to meet Rajiv accidentally but it is misunderstood by her husband Bijan and he breaks his relationship with her and that could not be repaired. India, a patriarchal society does not encourage any kind of love affair before or after the marriage with men who are not their spouses. If premarital or post marital affair is exposed to them, they no longer tolerate or forgive their wives. They resolve to untie their marital bond in no second. It also clearly shows that what the Indian society believed about women's sexuality. Men feared if freedom is given in this regard, they turn to be powerful and that poses a threat to societal and familial disorder. Hence based on religious texts, they oppressed women:

The power of women is strongly linked to sexuality. Women, as objects of sexual attraction that are attributed a much higher capacity and desire for sexual relations than men, have the power to influence and dissuade men from a higher purpose. Inappropriate sexual relations can create dire consequences for men. Therefore, to perpetuate order and merit within society. It is necessary to reign and control the power of women through restrictions on her sexuality. (Mahajan, Pimple, Palsetia, Dave, & Sousa, 2019)

After the death of her husband she braves all odds and stands as an energetic woman and a mother. As a widow she never lets loneliness to creep into her mind, and feels resolute and determined to bring up her daughter as a successful woman: "I won't go mad. I have a daughter to bring up." (Divakaruni, 2017). It is the thought of her daughter's life that has been encouraging her to find means to survive. She runs a sweet shop, becomes a famous sweet maker in the town and succeeds in her life.

Bela, daughter of Sabitri, is a strong and self-possessed woman who stands determinant to marry the man of her choice despite of her mother's advice and warnings. Bela starts to argue with her mother "Bela said I hate you forever ... and Sabitri replied "only until you have your own teenage daughter," (Divakaruni, 2017). In all her fictions, Chitra Banerjee demonstrates mother and daughter relationship as a complicated and a controversial one and this is considered to be a general trend in diasporic novels. Women going abroad, not only break the rigid conventional rules that restrict them from making a choice of their own at the same time they revolt against their parents, especially their mother, who worries about the sanctity of the marriage and also about the level of security the love marriage gives to their daughters. Displacement from orthodox culture to sophisticated and modern culture gives freedom to Indian women to follow their mind and take daring resolution to be as they like. (Jasrotia, 2018)

Bela never hesitates to break her ties with her mom or with the familial norms, and moves to America to live her life happily with her man. Bela says to Sanjay, "I think I'm going to be happy in America" (Divakaruni, 2017). Once landed in

an alien land outwardly women undergo changes: their dress pattern changes and they become stylish enjoying the sudden liberty they get through marriage. But the happiness does not continue. When they meet out any crisis, they earnestly wish they are in their native land with kith and kin taking care of them. To negotiate with issues related to family while living abroad, is very difficult. In India parents would intervene to extend their physical, psychological and financial support: Marital conflict is solved amicably; monetary help shall be provided at odd hours; new babies born or taken care of by them: "Circumstances and choices have prevented meaningful communication among the women, keeping them away from each other throughout their lives. But somewhere in their heart of hearts there lies a secret desire to reach out to each other. One can easily perceive the desperate urge to fall back on the mothers in times of crisis" (Mookherjee, 2015) When Bela becomes pregnant she longs for her mother's love and in remorseful tone says that arranged marriage would have assured her a better married life: "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" (Divakaruni, 2017). These thoughts are a blend of memory of her homeland and desires to get back to the love of her mother.

### RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Life changes unexpectedly. It is not according to her dreams; the situations that happen around make her to realize her wrong decisions. After the difficult divorce with her husband and her daughter having moved away from her life, she is left alone in that alien country. The familial relationship is shattered. The ache of separation makes her an alcoholic. "It shows how complex is the problem that Indians try to cope with in a foreign land. Majority of the characters are new settlers in the alien land and at the beginning of their life in America, they find it extremely difficult to adapt to the American way of life, American culture and personal morals" (Kalaivani, 1995). But the disappointed life turns positive when Bela befriends a gay Kenneth. Bela shares about her past life in India. She tells about her mother's cooking and her dance skills. Kenneth encourages Bela to continue her mother's cooking recipes and follow her homeland cultures.

Tara, daughter of Bela, is grown up among western culture. She is never informed about her roots in India. Though she yearns to know about it her mother never reveals it to her. She is a stubborn and proud person like her mother, but opposite to her grandmother. Sabitri dreams of her education in her childhood but Tara wants to quit her schooling unwilling to accept the benefits of being educated. Durga's mother humiliating herself pleads for her daughter's education. Sabitri felt embarrassed standing at the mercy of Leelamoyi. But her desire to be educated instills in her a sense of forbearance and she lived in the rich woman's house. She knew that education would fetch her self-respect and a life of her own: "The education and skills are the means to enhance employment opportunities and improve working conditions. Education also empowers women by enhancing their ability to attain higher status in the society" (Khan, Mahmood, Akhtar, & Muhmood, 2014). So when she hears from her daughter that Tara intends to stop studying, she feels perturbed and in an anxiety questions her daughter why the

parents could not convince her as both father and mother. She herself attempts to write a letter to her; Those letters drafted, redrafted express her attitude towards education and being educated is an opportunity. "Granddaughter, people look down on a woman without education. She has few options. To survive, she is forced to put up with ill-treatment she must depend on kindness of strangers, an unsure thing. I don't want that for you" (Divakaruni, 2017)

Tara's life is without any goals. Her imbalanced life makes her learn dangerous lessons in her life. After her father and mother's separation she has no support either physically and mentally. She gets into bad companies, starts to drink, and consumes drugs. Her weird appearance shocks the onlookers:

She was a puzzle, with her Indian features and Texan boots, her defiant piercings, the skin stretched thin across her cheekbones and crumpled under her eyes. And that spiky hair, now fallen limp as a child's over her forehead. He has dead somewhere that it was a style that lesbian affected. What kind of Indian family, even in America, would produce such a hybrid? (Divakaruni, 2017).

The men who she meets and with whom she confides her thoughts indirectly helps her to self-interrogate herself and realize the reality. However she has already damaged her life and it is irreparable. As any American girl would do, she opposed her parents and got involved in affairs that in return gave forth disappointment, betrayals and finally a pregnancy. "Dad coming up to my campus my very first semester and telling me that he and mom were getting a divorce. Or Robert, my first real boyfriend, and the day I came home unexpectedly and found him in bed with another woman" (Divakaruni, 2017). Later in her life she worries about her abortion, she says "I had an abortion. Do you hear me? An abortion I never told anyone this. Two years ago, this exact day, I killed my baby" (Divakaruni, 2017). Her prodigal life too has a positive change like her mother's life after she meets an Indian Dr. Venkatachalapathi. Tara feels the fatherly love from him. She says "Dad went on his merry way. I've avoided Indians, males in particular. Why should this bald old man mean anything to me? (Divakaruni, 2017) For the first time in her life she is taken inside a temple. His simple advice to purge the self-changes her life completely: "Before we visit the goddess," he said, "We must cleanse ourselves" (Divakaruni, 2017). Her life is renewed and she goes back to her mother. Chitra Banerjee reunites the relationship in the end of the story. Bela and Tara recollect the memories of Sabitri of their mother and grandmother and the Indian culture. They gaze at the photos and Tara reads the letters written for her by Sabitri. The final words of Sabitri ends like this "Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame" (Divakaruni, 2017).



#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The whole discussion of this article deals with mother and daughter relationship. The author Chitra Banerjee shuffles the story between two countries and her characters. She has focused on the struggles and the miseries of these characters but portrays them as strong and self-esteemed personalities. We find these energetic women never fear of the troubles in their life. They strive to fulfill their dreams and goals and succeed to move forward shaping them to the situation. But the familial bonding of these characters are contradictory to each other. A mother's love is considered as the greatest love of all in this universe but the daughters here lack the feeling of being loved. It also lets them get caught in the web of physical issues leading to their mental sickness. The fractured identity as a migrant and the alienation from the family make them long for love and care. Their own choices in life decides their destiny. Finally the interference of positive personalities in their lives helps them to bond with their relationship.

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