



Fortunate lamps and fire bands: *Before We Visit the Goddess* as a multigenerational transcontinental tale

Suhana PA

Guest Lecturer, MES Kalladi College, Mannarkkad, Kerala, India

Abstract

Diasporic literature includes all those literary works written by authors outside their native country, but these works are about native culture and background. Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of alienation and loss, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation and deals with existential rootlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity. Chithra Divakaruni Banerjee, the famous Indo American poet, shortstory writer and novelist, is often noted for her vivid portrayal of the life of Indian immigrants in America, especially of Indian women who reaches America as brides and find it hard to belong to either of the cultures. Her latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* is the story of three resolute women across ages. It explores the relationship Sabitri, Bela and Tara – grandmother, mother and daughter share with each other and the men in their lives. The novel explores the complex relationship between the mothers and daughters, and how they discover their greatest sense of strength in one another. *Before We Visit the Goddess* portrays the complexity of these multigenerational and transcontinental relationships, sweeping across the twentieth century from the countryside of Bengal, India to the streets of Houston, Texas.

Keywords: Diaspora, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, multigenerational and transcontinental relationship of three women

Introduction

Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee, the famous Indian American poet and novelist is known for her many works that chronicles the multilayered lives of South Asian Immigrants. Born in Kolkata in 1956, she went to the United States in 1976 for her studies, after gaining her Bachelor's degree from Calcutta University. She did her Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and PhD from the University of California. She did many odd jobs to complete her education such as babysitting, selling merchandise in a boutique etc. She has proved herself as one of the most prominent Indian women writers with her talent and creativity. She teaches Creative Writing Program in the University of Houston. Her works include *Arranged Marriage*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my Heart*, *Vine of Desire*, *The Palace of Illusion*, *Oleander Girl* and her latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Her writing is fueled by her own experiences as a first generation immigrant and a woman between cultures and traditions. Her concern for women of her own heritage is transmitted through her novels and short stories.

Before We Visit the Goddess is written in the form of a novel in stories. It traces the lives of three resolute women across generations. The novel takes shape through the narration of different characters including Sabitri, Bela, Tara and the important men in their lives. It does not follow any chronological order and some events are narrated by different characters from different point of view. The novel depicts only the major events in the life of Sabitri, Bela and Tara but weaves a form of family history across generations and continents. It explores the relationship they share among themselves and with the men in their lives. It is a complex tale of love, loss and identity and celebrates the strength of womanhood.

Before We Visit the Goddess deals with the lives of Sabitri, Bela and Tara connected to each other through Grandmother, mother, daughter relationship. The novel focus on how the lives of these women remain interconnected and dependent on each other even when they live miles and years apart. The daughter of a poor sweet – maker in rural India Sabitri yearns to get college education but her family's situation makes it an impossible dream. Then an influential wealthy woman Leelamoyi agrees to take Sabitri to Kolkata and send her to College. Life in the great mansion of Leelamoyi was very difficult as no one cared about her and everyone looks down upon her as a charity case. She makes sweets for Leelamoyi and gains her goodwill, but suddenly loses all as Leelamoyi realises that Sabitri was actually having a relationship with her son Rajiv. Heartbroken and desolate Sabitri finds comfort from her Maths professor Bijan whom she later marries. She helps her husband to become a successful man and always nurtures revenge against Leelamoyi. The day she realizes her love for her husband also becomes the day she loses him. He suspects her of having an affair with Rajiv, becomes a drunkard and their life becomes miserable. She feels anger towards her daughter Bela who innocently made it all happen. Her second child dies of fever in Assam. Her husband dies after a while in an accident at the company. Sabitri fights bravely against the company for compensation, all alone. With the money she receives, she builds up her business Durga sweets, named after her mother, to take care of her daughter. Over the years she becomes a successful business woman with the help of her devoted assistant Bipin Bihari. Bela hates the business as it keeps her mother away from her. Bela, who always felt to have been wronged by her mother flees to America with her political refugee lover, dropping college despite Sabitri's warnings. Both the country and her love

prove nothing similar to her imagination. Forced to forge her own path Bela unwittingly imprints her own child, Tara, with dangerous lessons about adulthood. Tara, who believes her mother to be responsible for her parent's divorce, runs away. She drops college and lives aimlessly until a life changing event makes her rethink and come back. Bela meanwhile find new friendship and learns to live a happy life by writing recipe blogs and books. The novel ends when Sabitri's letter to Tara, try to stop her from dropping college reaches her after many years. The letter reveals to her how the life of her Grandmother, whom she never met in person but always wished to get in touch with, had influenced the course of her life. She realizes her sufferings are not much when compared to her ancestors.

"What makes a successful woman?" is the most important question raised by all the female characters in the story. Does it change according to time and place? The novel portrays Sabitri, Bela and Tara facing the most difficult situations of their lives. All alone in their life, they unconsciously gains their strength from their ancestors and strive towards success. Sabitri's life is always controlled by the words of her mother Durga: "Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. Wicked daughters are fire bands, blackening the family's name." (Divakaruni, 20). In the beginning she is frightened of turning out to be a fire band when she contemplates leaving Kolkata and afterwards during her relationship with Rajiv, Bijan etc. But finally she realizes that being able to achieve something of one's own make one a fortunate lamp.

One day, in the kitchen at the back of the store, I held in my hand a new recipe I had perfected, the sweet I would go on to name after my mother. I took a bite of the conch shaped dessert, the palest most elegant mango colour. The smooth creamy flavour of fruit and milk, sugar and saffron mingled and melted on my tongue. Satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone. No one could take it away. That's what I want for you my Tara, my Bela. That's what it really means to be a fortunate lamp." (32)

This has nothing to do with the traditional ideas of feminine virtues or ideal woman. After her husband's death she fights against the company for compensation in her complete determination to take care of her only hope, her daughter, Bela. She wins the case and sets up her own business with the money. Bela and Tara too finds light and becomes fortunate lamps later in their life after undergoing the most difficult experiences of their lives. Divakaruni seems to hint at how her women are capable of picking themselves up and living on their own their terms, all alone. They break free of all the ties society erects for us. These three resolute women share their thoughts, their feelings being a woman and create a separate world of their own. Men do not play the central roles in these new worlds.

Durga, Sabitri and Tara are named after mythological characters of great strength. But these mythological women were also noted for their docile nature. Divakaruni's characters are anything but docile. They cannot be controlled by the stereotypical ties of feminine virtues. They are complicated, messed up, scheming and powerful – humane in every aspect. Thus Divakaruni's characters can be considered

an attempt at breaking traditional beliefs of feminine virtues Cuisine act as a means to transfer love, culture and relationship in the story. This is a recurrent idea in the novels of Divakaruni where the diasporic community tries to keep in touch with their mother land and culture through the food. Here all the women treats Indian cuisine as a means to bring in the love of their ancestors.

Education is another important idea discussed in the novel. Education for a woman is considered her greatest strength. The novel begins with Tara's decision to drop college and Bela requesting Sabitri to stop her. Sabitri herself had this great desire for education which brought her to Kolkata and brought in all the changes in her life which would have ended insignificantly at her village. Sabitri tells Tara, "Without education, a woman has little chance of standing on their feet. She will be forced to watch from the sidelines while others enjoy the life she has dreamed about." (4)

Bela dropped her college and eloped with her lover to America. There she found that she could do nothing much to help Sanjay without an education. After her divorce she struggled to make a living without a degree until she started writing blogs and books with the help of Kenneth. Proper education would have helped her handle these situations better. Tara decides to drop college after her parents' divorce. She cuts all connections with them, becomes a drug addict, do many odd jobs, have many relationships, becomes a kleptomaniac and lead a messed up life until she met Dr. V. Dr. V is a father like figure and his influence makes her get back to college. Sabitri's letter reaches her only after years, when she has a good life with a happy family.

This intergenerational saga introduces three strong women who unconsciously find their greatest support in their ancestors. The actions of one woman however insignificant it might seem in their own point of view, monumentally affects the life of other. Women's stories, it is said, help us live and dream as women. Finding their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared, named and shaped into literary form gave a sense that their own existence was meaningful, that their views of things was valid and intelligent, that their suffering was imposed and unnecessary, and a belief in women's collective strength to resist and remake their own lives. Writing by women can tell the story of the aspects of women's lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealized in the majority of traditional texts. (Maitra 17)

Just like Tara who finds solace after reading Sabitri's letter, the novel can provide strength for many women.

References

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