

Dislocation and Identity Issue: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* with Special Reference to Sabitri, the Grandmother

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Abstract

Women's miserable plight, their sufferings and struggles for existence in Indian male-dominated society have very often been the major concerns for many literary artists. The situation becomes more critical when such women undergo movement from home to alien land. They get doubly disturbed as they come in contact with alien culture which turns out to be absolutely new and unfamiliar for them. Being one of the most distinguished Diasporic Indo-American writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has also chosen the same theme of women's struggle for identity and has represented the same through many of her literary creations. *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) is one such novel where the primary focus is given on three generations of women such as the grandmother, the daughter and the granddaughter and their struggle in establishing their own identity both in India and in the USA. In the novel the most crucial part is played by Sabitri, the grandmother, whose letter written to her granddaughter becomes a medium through which Divakaruni streams all the life incidents and experiences of the old lady. It works as a powerful medium through which the lady shares messages as to how a woman can fight the odds of life and become a self-reliant being by developing a distinct identity of her own. It is noteworthy that this is a common theme for Divakaruni but in this latest novel it has been treated with a difference by conferring it a distinct touch. The present paper aims to capture the exceptional role played by the old lady in fashioning the life of her daughter and granddaughter living abroad.

Key words: Dislocation, Identity issue, Migration, Diasporic, Women's self-identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name.

Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame. (Divakaruni 20)

The above lines speak of the traditional role and the portrait that our society expects from a daughter. Hence, the primary concerns of the present paper are the women, the mothers and above all the daughters. In Divakaruni's novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* the three women characters are Sabitri, the grandmother; Bela, the mother; and Tara, the granddaughter. All of them play crucial roles in the development of the action of the novel, which gives an account of their struggle on the way of establishing a distinct identity of their own, in India and in abroad. However,

the most dominating character who directs and controls almost the overall action of the novel is Sabitri, the grandmother.

Migration, dislocation and dislodgement, the prime issues of diasporic literature, once again, become the concerns of Divakaruni's novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* but with a difference. Again, women's struggle for recognition and self-identity, the very familiar theme in Divakaruni's works, remain the central concern of the novel. The primary character who captures the whole attention of the readers and stands as the spokesperson of women empowerment and women emancipation is Sabitri, the grandmother. It is she who regulates and controls almost the whole action of the novel. The present paper is an attempt to examine the exceptional role played by this very woman character.

I. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

As we read the novel, we notice Divakaruni unveiling the culture specific issues related to women, specifically girls and their roles in society. This becomes more decisive especially in case of migrated women. Hence, Beena Agarwal maintains, "Cultural ideologies are gender specific and women predicament in a state of cultural geographical shift generates a complex pattern of feminine mystique". (3)

As regards the migration and dislocation, in the novel, it occurs essentially in the life of Bela, the daughter of Sabitri and the mother of Tara, the granddaughter. As usual we notice the feeling of loneliness, longing and nostalgia in her life, who lives in Houston, USA, with her husband Sanjay and her daughter Tara. But at the same time we don't miss the loneliness, longing and nostalgia in the life of Sabitri living in India. She has been absolutely unhappy with the elopement and marriage of Bela with Sanjay and their consequent movement to USA. Thus though in case of Sabitri there is no geographical dislocation, but she has been highly dislocated from the psychological point of view. The novel begins with Sabitri in her old age living in Kolkata with her caretaker Rekha. We witness her trying to write a letter to Tara, her granddaughter, staying in the USA, asking her not to leave her study. Through this letter Sabitri exposes many untold incidents of her life and it also serves as the medium through which we are able to study the strong, resolute character of the grandmother.

It is Bela, who, finding no other alternative, communicates her mother about Tara's decision to discontinue her study. As a response to this, Sabitri writes the letter addressing Tara whom she has never met. Sabitri begins, "...Without Education, a woman has little chance of standing on her own feet. She will be forced to watch from the sidelines while others enjoy the life she has dreamed about" (Divakaruni 4). Though she throws away this piece of paper with these words written, but they undoubtedly help us to peep into her independent thought, her attitude to women education and above all the social reality. As she reminisces on her past, she continues her letter and writes, "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 the kindness of strangers, an unsure thing, I do not want that for you-" (Divakaruni 8). Once again each and every word of Sabitri speaks of the miserable plight of women in a male dominated society with all its conventional cultural mindset. The words also stress on the importance of women education to make them free of ill-treatment in society and to help them 'go through life with their head held high'. (Divakaruni 6)

Sabitri is the only child of a part-time, simple village priest (father) and a village sweet maker Durga (her mother). Her principal ideal and guiding personality is her mother who used to say that 'good daughters were fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name and wicked daughters were firebrands, blackening the family's fame' (Divakaruni 20). It is this principle that leads Durga to take her daughter Sabitri to Kolkata in Leelamoyi's house for perusing her higher education. She tells Leelamoyi, "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" (Divakaruni 6). These words express the utter helplessness of a Bengali mother who, though strongly willing to educate her daughter, unable to do so due to financial difficulty. Hence, Sabitri, the 17years old girl starts her higher education staying at Mittir household.

As a teen-ager, Sabitri has been very much sensitive about her own identity and often about women's in general. Thus, on Durga's reply to Leelamoyi's query about her name (Sabitri), when the later says, "Ha! Ambitious, aren't you, naming her after the mythic heroine who snatched her husband from the clutches of Death himself. Well, you'd

better find her a match fast, else she won't have a husband at all" (Divakaruni 6). At this Sabitri feels highly insulted, her womanhood reacts instantly and she tries to get back.

Sabitri's position in Mittir household is like that of a migrant in an alien land, where she finds herself in an in-between condition. She has been the victim of ill-treatment in this house and is unable to identify her "complicated position in the household's hierarchy" (Divakaruni 10). She is 'neither servant nor master' (Divakaruni 10) and hence, she has been in a dilemma about her own identity in the household. However, she continues her study with much patience in order to fulfill her dream. Her sense of gratitude, her dream to be self-reliant, her deep concern as a sensible girl towards her family's poor financial condition have been reflected in the words which she would have written to her mother if she were able to read. The words are: "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 11). These lines also expose the predicament of countless girls who remain deprived of education due to poverty and lack of a conducive environment in rural India. Here we also notice a strong willingness of Sabitri to stand on her own feet and stand by her family's distress.

Sabitri's whole life proves to be full of struggle and unwanted incidents. But she knows no compromise and remains absolutely resolute in her journey till she breathes her last. During her stay at Leelamoyi's house she falls in love with Rajiv, Leelamoyi's son and this relation becomes too deep as the days pass. The moment this message reaches Leelamoyi's ears, Sabitri has been thrown out of the house. Being utterly helpless, she takes shelter in her own college from where Bijan, her mathematics teacher takes her to his house and later marries her. Though they had been leading a successful conjugal life, but this happiness doesn't last long. Her years ago relation with Rajiv becomes the cause of unrest in her life. She doesn't lose heart in attaining early widowhood following Bijan's accidental death in a refinery fire in Assam. Her indomitable spirit can be traced in her reaction to one of her neighboring women's consolation on her husband's death asking her not to lose heart. She instantly replies, "I won't go mad. I have a daughter to bring up." (Divakaruni 111)

Thus Sabitri fights legally against the Giant Oil Corporation and receives compensation for her husband's death. She opts to stay at Kolkata and opens a sweet shop named after her mother as "Durga Sweets". The prime intention behind this is to have some financial support for upbringing her daughter Bela especially her educational support. When Bela wishes to marry Sanjay and move to America leaving everything behind, Sabitri strongly opposes as she prefers education to anything else. She believes proper education is the only weapon which can equip one to know and understand the world. She writes, "When you are poor and ill-educated, how unequipped you are to read the world. All you know is your place in it: down near the bottom" (Divakaruni 16).

Bela's marriage with Sanjay and her movement to America once again throws Sabitri to one of the toughest situations in her life. Consequently, she becomes terribly lonely. Her longing for her daughter knows no bound. For two weeks she doesn't attend her sweet shop and even doesn't take her food regularly. Often she wishes Bela to visit her or even she herself to visit Bela's place before Tara's birth. But time and again she gets disappointed sometime by a letter or a call from Bela expressing her inability to arrive. This further heightens Sabitri's frustration. Yet somehow she manages the situation and concentrates on her business. In spite of all these, till the last, we don't miss her affection and motherly feelings for Bela, when she receives a letter from Bela, loses all her hope and says, "She's never going to come and see me, is she?...All this time, I've been holding on to Durga Sweets for Bela's sake- in case something happened to her and she needed to come back and start over" (Divakaruni 78). And finally we witness her death with all the pangs of separation in her chest, leaving messages and lessons for Bela and Tara to follow.

So far Sabitri's relation with her daughter Bela is concerned, she has been so caring about her, specially about all her needs. Bela too feels proud of her mother. However, Sabitri's deep involvement in her business and her relation with Bipin Bihari makes Bela somewhat jealous and dislike her mother. But once she attains the motherhood and faces difficulty in rearing her own daughter, she realizes the truth. While reading her mother's letter she confesses the fact, "Even as a child, I was sullen and difficult. I blamed her for my dad's death. And even more for my baby brother's. I felt it was her job to keep him safe. I did not know then that mothers can't necessarily save their children, no matter how much they want to." (Divakaruni 206)

Being dislodged, Bela faces double disruption. On the one hand, her separation with her mother and difficulty in adjusting with the alien culture, on the other, she is left alone by her husband and daughter. Her reminiscence and longing for her own land and people is noticed in her way of murmuring song like 'Yeh Shaam Mastani'. In

America she terribly misses her mother too. She even thinks if it were an arranged marriage, she would have been living with her mother. Like Jhumpa Lahiri's Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake*, she becomes deeply nostalgic as the text runs, "... She would have gone to her mother's home for the birthing, as was the tradition, to be cared for and pampered" (Divakaruni 103). This is evident in the way she seeks her mother's advice when Tara wishes to discontinue her education. She 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" (Divakaruni 206). These words are a flashback on her past, her own life, as well as they help us peep into the core of her heart where her unexpressed pains related to her life and her mother are hidden.

Like her mother, Bela too, when left alone, doesn't give up. She follows her mother and begins with what she has inherited from her. She opens a web page by the name "Bela's Kitchen". In this connection Tara states:

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. (Divakaruni 185)

Thus we see Tara, a second generation diaspora, the daughter of Bela, feeling proud of her mother and grandmother's identity.

Tara has never been to India, her ancestral land and has never met her grandmother too. So far her relation with Sabitri is concerned, whatever she knows about her and India is from her mother only. She has been her father Sanjay's sweet heart and as the text narrates, "He had made himself the centre of her life..." (Divakaruni 175). But her parents' divorce brings about extreme darkness in her life which she finds to be totally meaningless. Speaking about her relationship with her parents she maintains: "Towards my father, whom I'd loved more than anyone ever, my feelings are as unambiguous as knife. My mother is more troublesome case." (Divakaruni 64)

Being absolutely ignorant of her root and so shattered by the sudden break-up of her parents, she develops some unexpected behavioral activities. In her struggle of life she faces many obstacles and tries her hand at various jobs such as the governess of Mrs Mehta, driver, etc.

We notice a shift in Tara's life when she meets Dr. Venkatachalapathi a father from India in whom she finds the touch of an affectionate father. But this too lasts for a very short period of time. It is through her only child Neel and her husband Gary that she sets herself back in the main stream of life. Like her grandmother Sabitri, she too has an indomitable spirit in her, has a self respect and so declines to accept any support from her father, be it moral or financial. When her mother says, "Tara, you have no ambition", she proves that she has got that strength and spirit in her to restart a new life after the betrayal of Robert and subsequent abortion. She declares: "My mother was wrong. I do have ambitions; they are just not the same as hers. I want to be able to hold on to my job, bland as it is, in the human resources department of my company.....I want to cure myself of the disease hiding inside me like a canker curled up in the heart of a rose." (Divakaruni 186)

As Tara reads the letter of Sabitri, it casts a magical impact on her. She feels highly relaxed and recognizes that 'in the context of my grandmother's life, mine seems a little less desperate.' (Divakaruni 206)

Deepa and Anuja in their article "*Before We Visit the Goddess: An Epitome of Gynococracy*" find a new flavor in the novel in interpreting women characters. They point out that the three central characters like Durga, Savitri and Tara have been named after mythological characters and have been represented from a novel standpoint. The writers maintain:

What the author skillfully portrayed is that these mythological women are known not just for their fiery spirits alone but also for their passive, quiet, domesticated avatars, for their unfailing loyalty to their husbands. It is herein, that Divakaruni departs from the age-old traditional narratives. Her protagonists cannot always be weighed against our stereotypical notions of what feminine virtues are. They are complicated, messed up, scheming, powerful – humane in every respect. (Deepa and Anuja 421)

This is very much a fact in respect of all the three major women characters especially that of Sabitri. In this connection the final words of Sabitri's letter deserve mentioning. Speaking on herself, the way she developed a recipe of her own, she writes:

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 dead mother. I took a bite of the conch-shaped desert, the palest, most elegant mango color. The smooth, creamy flavor 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 fortunate lamp. (Divakaruni 208)

Here we witness the exposition of Sabitri's inherent ability or inner potential through experiment and without any outside interference or help. Here is a self-reliant, self-conscious woman who wishes to leave her set example and the message for her daughter and granddaughter and in fact, the generations of women to come. All through her life she passes through many odd situations but in spite of being absolutely lonely, she faces those boldly and finally proves herself to be a 'fortunate lamp' with a distinct identity of her own.

II. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the character of Sabitri in *Before We Visit the Goddess* is a unique creation of Divakaruni. Here, though we have two other major women characters namely Bela and Tara who are also the indispensable part of the action of the novel, yet it is Sabitri who regulates the whole action from the very beginning till the end. The novel undoubtedly captures the traditional themes related to women, but here Divakaruni deviates from her usual stand and highlights the same with some novel touch. Named after a mythological character, Sabitri stems from a rural background, follows unending struggle throughout her whole life. Of course she doesn't experience any geographical dislodgment, but her psychological displacement caused by Bela and her movement to overseas cannot be overlooked. Equally noticeable is her loneliness and longing for her daughter and the consequent nostalgia all through her letter addressed to Tara. The theme and the women characters in the novel are undoubtedly traditional, but the way Divakaruni portrays them especially Sabitri, has offered it a new height. The whole letter of Sabitri is self-exploratory that speaks of the pangs, sufferings and experiences of her own life as a girl and a woman. Being a resolute and indomitable woman she doesn't stoop before any impediment and only knows how to 'go through life with one's head held high' and she believes that education is the only tool that can help in this regard. She is a powerful agent of women empowerment and emancipation, a set example of women's self-reliance, who keeps a high opinion about girls' and women's education. Hence, she suggests Tara not to discontinue her study if she wants to lead a happy and prosperous life unlike Bela, her mother. In fact, this message has been served not only for Bela and Tara, but for all those girls and women who want to lead independent life with a distinct identity of their own.

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