

Quest for Identity and Diasporic Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

M. Mayuri,
MPhil Research Scholar,
Jamal Mohamed College,
Trichy -20

Research Advisor
Dr. A. Abdul Hakeem,
Assistant Professor,
PG & Research Department of English,
Jamal Mohamed College,
Trichy - 20

Abstract

A great story teller Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* portrays three generations and their strong bond even after getting apart from each other. This research paper focuses on the search for identity and diasporic consciousness as entwined by the author in the novel. The novel is a discourse on identity and independence as strived and achieved by all the characters.

Keywords : Identity, Diaspora, Self, Culture, Indianness

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* is an extraordinary saga of three generations consisting of grandmother Sabitri, mother Bela and daughter Tara—in relation to each other and the men in their lives. The novel highlights the resistance that women confront generation after generation in their journey towards independence. The characters are placed over the distinct geographies of rural Bengal, Calcutta and modern Houston to unfold their stories to the readers. Devakaruni artistically blends Indian myths and oriental magic with the immigrant experience

Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. The immigrants, whatever their reason for migration be, financial, social, political, no matter whether they migrated for trade and commerce, as religious preachers, as laborers, convicts, soldiers, as expatriates or refugees, exiles (forced or voluntary), or as guest workers in search of better life and opportunities have shared some common things as well as differences which are based on their conditions of migration and period of stay in the adopted land. Mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes, the memories of their motherland, the anguish of leaving behind everything familiar agonizes the minds of migrants. William Safran has observed that; “---they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.” (Safran, 1991:23)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an immigrant, herself from a middle class educated family from Kolkata, India. Therefore, immigrant experiences are portrayed in her writings. She delineates the expatriate young women living in the U.S, who struggles hard to sustain self-identity in fluctuating alien culture. She writes as an Indian in America and about people migrating to the west and are caught in multiple cultures. She depicts the women especially caught up in multicultural challenges; she is affected by such multiple levels of both cultures. She brings out the state of flux and reflects the mirror image of the particular environment and the world around her; the relations are torn between belonging and not belonging.

Quest for Identity and Diasporic Consciousness

Before We Visit the Goddess (2016) Sweeps across the twentieth century from the countryside of Bengal, India to the streets of Houston, Texas. It takes readers on an extraordinary journey through the lives of three unforgettable women: Sabitri, Bela, and Tara. As the young daughter of a poor rural baker, Sabitri yearns to get an education, but schooling is impossible on the meager profits from her mother's sweetshop. When a powerful local woman takes Sabitri under her wing, her generous offer soon proves

dangerous after Sabitri makes a single, unforgiveable misstep. Years later, Sabitri's own daughter, Bela, haunted by her mother's choices, flees to America with her political refugee lover—but the world she finds is vastly different from her dreams. As the marriage crumbles and Bela decides to forge her own path, she unwittingly teaches her little girl, Tara, ineffaceable lessons about freedom and loyalty that will take a lifetime to unravel. In a novel spanning India and the United States over 60 years, richly drawn characters negotiate the desire for education against family obligations and romantic entanglements. Sabitri has never met her American-born granddaughter, Tara, but after receiving word the girl is considering dropping out of college, she begins to write a letter detailing her own life. Originally focused on education, Sabitri was dismissed from her sponsors' home after falling in love with their son. She would go on to marry one of her professors, have a daughter, Bela, and build a business baking sweets after the death of her husband. Bela also left school to elope to the United States with her boyfriend, after which she never returned to India or saw her mother again. In the U.S., Bela deals with her alienation from her family and culture disconnect which is passed on to Tara. Divakaruni's novel explores the moments that reverberate across generations as well as the quiet erosions of culture that happen over time.

The story spans the struggles of three generations of Indian women with love, loss and erosion of culture at the same time the story also traces their ultimate rise against odds. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni clearly depicts her consciousness about society and social customs. By the detailed study of her two novels, it can be clearly said that Divakaruni underlines the difference in the social set up in India and America. In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, the author has very neatly woven the three women protagonists of the story who are geographically and emotionally incoherent. even in the milieu of the harsh phrase of current political climate about immigrants and people of non-Christian faiths, Divakaruni expressed her higher hopes for America. Similarly the depiction of Godhrakand and 9/11 calamity and the responses of migrants and other Indian characters exposes the writers consciousness of current political scenario and human psyche in India as well as abroad. . *Before We Visit Goddess* is another good example of Indianness and nationality consciousness in Divakaruni. Both Sabitri and Bela represent Indian psyche, however, they go against stereotypical Indian beliefs. Similarly, Tara the second generation Indian Diaspora is also shown to be realizing her Indian consciousness at the end.

It has been seen that Divakaruni's writing often centre around the lives of immigrant women. She confesses that women in particular respond to her work because she is writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationship. She wants people to relate to my characters to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to be prejudiced when they meet them in real life. This interest for women began when she had left India. Hence, ChitraDivakaruni is stimulated by the dual forces of pre-immigration and post-immigration conditions. She is also affected by the miseries of women in patriarchal society and also by the desire to preserve wistful memory of homeland. Therefore, the sense of nostalgia and quest for identity is often seen among the dislocated and displaced people in most of the Diaspora writings. The characters find themselves put out of place from the home and society. They are upset emotionally

Conclusion

Every migrant is conscious about the other side of the experience yet he/she chooses to travel. ChitraDivakaruni portrays her own experience of migration in most of her works. From the study of her both of her latest novels it can be assumed that her works project Indian experiences, contemporary American life style, history, myth, and the challenges of living in a multicultural world. In 'Before We Visit the Goddess' she very cleverly depicts that how Indian society plays a role in creating an identity of a person especially of a woman and further putting her in situation where she faces her own Identity Crisis. She successfully displays Indian society which witnesses Indianness in her writing.

A very meticulous description of various Indian rituals during engagement, wedding or any other routine day has been brought out in the novels. At the same time she also makes her reader well acquainted with Indian food, cities and songs as well giving a clear picture of real India in both of her books. It is also studied and concluded that women writers of Diaspora and women Diaspora writers are overall autobiographical in a number of ways and so as Divakaruni, particularly when she deals with her past in India and addresses the longing to return to a homeland inhabited by her ancestors. Her endeavor through her writing is to recreate her understanding of the world of immigrants that float in her space continuously.

Works Cited

Dhanam, K S. “*Negotiations with New Culture: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Mistress of Spices.*” Critical Essays on Diasporic Writings, edited by K. Balachandran, Arise, 2008, p. 62.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. “*Before We Visit the Goddess*”.Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2017.

Rao Mehta, Sandhya. Ed., *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Newcastle Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

