

Before We Visit the Goddess: A Unique Saga of Idiosyncratic Women Who Triumphed Displacement, Disillusionment, and Dilemma

Dr. Kiran Kumar Kalapala*

*Assistant Professor of English, English Language Institute, Jazan University,
Jazan-45142, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1483-806X>*

Abstract

This paper is an endeavour to analyse Chitra Banerjee's novel, "Before We Visit the Goddess (BWVG-2016)- primarily on the issues of displacement, disillusionment, fear, and dilemma experienced by women of three generations in diverse cultural conditions. The non-linear presentation of chapters in the novel sheds light on the lives of the grandmother Sabitri, the mother Bela, and the granddaughter Tara to create narrative tension. All these woman characters struggle to survive in the most difficult and different cultural environments. This paper emphasises the strong characteristics of Chitra Banerjee's novel i.e., the exploration of relationships between women, the generation-gap, challenges, and frustrations encountered by women in India and the U.S. The three women in this novel undergo soul-searching, endure suffering, and draw inner strength to sustain unpleasant situations. In this iridescent saga about the lives of women in India and immigrants in America, Chitra Banerjee magnificently builds the inner strength of her characters to combat hardships courageously, elegantly, and imperturbably. Finally, Chitra Banerjee persuades the readers to view their reflection in the characters of the novel and to decide how they want to live their lives, by leaving the climax open.

Keywords: Iridescent saga, relationships, generation gap, diverse cultures, endurance, inner strength, geographical boundaries, reconciliation.

1. Introduction

South Asian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author, poet, fiction writer, and professor of creative writing. Her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, women, immigration history, myth, family, and the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, and her work appeared in over a hundred magazines and anthologies. Several of her novels and stories have been made into films and plays. Divakaruni teaches creative writing at the University of Houston and writes for both adults and children. In 2015, she was

chosen by the Economic Times for their list of “Twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women”.

This paper analyzes Chitra’s novel “Before We Visit the Goddess” (BWVG) as the source to explore the theme of emotional thought connections between women of three generations. When the interviewer at Literacy Advance Services asked, “What is the Indian in you to bring your books”, Chitra Banerjee said, “I think the Indian in me remembers India very well and knows the culture. What I bring to my books is this whole understanding of immigration-how it changes us, and how it changes the new country in which we find and all of that is important for me.” It is clearly understood that Chitra Banerjee’s works reflect the themes she told the interviewer. Before We Visit the Goddess is not different from those themes. It revolves around the emotions of women that were born and brought up in Bengal. Of course, Tara was born in America. Women in India face issues of gender, class, caste etc. The lives of women in a foreign land are of no big difference. In fact, they are caught between the two cultures. The nagging scene of guilt, the quest for identity, continuous displacement of self, and nostalgia are frequently discovered in their lives. All these characteristics of diasporic writings are evident in Before We Visit the Goddess.

The three protagonists Sabitri, Bela, and Tara are women who live according to their own preferences and distinct lifestyles. While Sabitri lives in India throughout the novel, Bela, her daughter deserts her and flees to America to live with her boyfriend, Sanjay, a political refugee. Tara who was born and brought up in America doesn’t see her grandmother Sabitri but is reconciled with her mother Bela, toward the end of the novel. It’s Sabitri’s letter that brings reconciliation between the mother and the daughter. The three characters are bound with ardent love and affection. Even though they made their lives miserable by authoring indispensable lapses, they realize and ameliorate them towards the end, and savor the beauty and subtlety of life.

2. Displacement, Nostalgia, and Alienation

Chitra Banerjee is exceptionally good at exploring the tender, bittersweet, beautifully wrought tales about love and longing, exiles and loneliness, misunderstandings and sacrifice, success, and independence. Before We Visit the Goddess navigates gradually through these traits and steers us from rural Bengal to cosmopolitan cities in America. The novel is yet another manifestation of diasporic writing in which the women of three generations travel across the physical and mental spaces. Though there appears temporal physical alienation between the mothers and daughters, there lies a deep loving bond and nostalgia consistently in their minds.

“You’ve got to write to her, Ma! You’re the grandmother. If you stress the right things, point out the dangers of her stupid choice, perhaps it’ll stop Tara from running her life!” (BWVG 8)

Bela who escaped to America to live with Sanjay always felt displaced and alienated from her mother. She wrote to her mother, Sabitri that Tara needed her advise to give up her thought of dropping out of college. Due to this, Sabitri suddenly felt much older than her sixty-seven years. She didn’t have the strength to ask for more details and so she promised

Bela that she would write a letter to Tara. While writing the letter Sabitri recollects the myriad crises she confronted in her life. She too had to experience displacement and loss when she left her mother Durga, to go to Kolkata to pursue her tender dream of higher education. As she knows the value of education, she writes to Tara,

“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.” (BWVG 13)

When Durga bid goodbye to her daughter, her eyes had glittered like broken glass. The emotional heart springs of the mother and daughter are craftily painted by the author. Sabitri sustained consistent mistreatment during her stay in the Mittir’s house as an ineligible benefactor under the haven of chivalrous but whimsical lady, Leelamoyi. When Sabitri made a wrong choice, she was driven out into darkness. Her misjudgment about Rajiv ensnared her life and turned it topsy-turvy. Rescued and married by *yanky Maths professor* Bijan Das Babu, she revelled in hymeneal life for a while. She learned to love Bijan concealing her former affinity with her proscribed beau, Rajiv. When Bela naively disclosed that *“there was a man, downstairs. He kept crying and kissing Mamoni’s hands,”* (BWVG 32) her apprehensions sprang up afresh-yet another misstep capable of ruining her life. The psychological tussle lingered throughout Bijan’s alcohol addiction, his tragic demise in a fire accident, widowhood, and fighting for justice in the court of law. Ultimately, she triumphed over all the anxieties and proved herself an undefeated business woman. Sabitri bore the brunt, again and again, *seduced by different dreams* like outsiders do in foreign lands. When Bijan passed away she endured the loss and resolved to live for the sake of Bela. When Bela broke her heart and eloped, she lived with a conjecture that Bela would come to her again. She retired to her parent’s village, though she hated it when she got a letter that Bela wouldn’t come to India.

“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. I don’t trust that Sanjay. I don’t. But it’s no use, he’s got his claws deep into her.” (BWVG 71)

“Sabitri was usually such a strong woman, but her daughter was her Achilles’ heel,” Bipin Bihari spoke to himself when she passed away, “she was energetic and sharp-eyed as ever, and soon everyone forgot that she had been away at all.” She didn’t succumb to the circumstances during the seasons of disillusionment.

3. Disillusionment, Dilemma, and Loneliness

Sabitri experienced isolation while living in Mittir’s house. She reached Kolkata with her mother’s blessings. But Bela abandoned her mother for the sake of her dream beau and fled to America. Life with her mother was content, but with Sanjay, in a foreign land was strenuous to the core. She had to deal with all the complex problems alone. She worked hard to earn money for her small-scale aspirations, looking for odd jobs intermittently.

“She had seen an announcement at Lucky’s couple days back. They needed shelf stockers. She could get on a late shift, after her stint at Tiny Treasures. Save the entire amount. When she had enough, she would hand it triumphantly to Sanjay and insist that he buy out Bishu. Finally, then, she would have a house of her own” (BWVG 89)

When Bela discovered that she was pregnant, she was terrified. She couldn’t comprehend how it happened despite taking precautions and buying all those expensive condoms they couldn’t afford. The only way she knew to keep herself from dissolving into tears was turning on the TV, feigning a manic cheerfulness as she watched one comedy show after the other.

Bela’s desperate straits in the new country are like ‘psychological symptomatology in Indian immigrant women’ that are brilliantly analysed by Moghaddam, Ditto, and Taylor (1990). She felt lonely even though she was living in Sanjay in the land of opportunity.

She yearned for Sabitri more than she had in a long time. *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.* (BWVG 90)

Even though she longed dearly to call her mother to America, she knew apparently that Sanjay hated Sabitri. Though reasonable about most things, he still fumed about the humiliation of Sabitri sending that door man-guard to college with Bela. So, she wrote to her mother seeking her advice and got a quick reply:

“Don’t worry about all those new-fangled notions. I want to go to America to take care of you -and the baby when it arrives. When should plan my trip? You won’t have to buy my ticket- I have enough in my bank account.” (BWVG 93)

When she read that part of the letter, Bela began to cry. How much she must love Bela and even more, the little one who was coming- to be willing to hand it over. She hadn’t wept like this since she was a child. For the first time, Bela admitted that her marriage swirled in her like a dust storm. She was stuck in the dingy apartment, stuck in a dead-end job she hated, stuck under a load of unpaid loans so heavy that she’d probably never be able to squirm out from under them and go back to college. As they walk in and out of cultural frames that are often incompatible, migrants struggle to deal with the contradictions they see outside and within themselves (R.S Hegde1998). This is the quintessential diasporic experience unveiled in her life in a foreign country.

“Lying in bed with his arm around her, her lips nuzzling the back of her neck, she thought, tomorrow I’ll ask him about having Ma come and visit. May be, for the baby’s sake, he’ll agree.” (BWVG 94)

When Tara thought of dropping out of college, she called her mother in a ragged voice and told her, “You’ve got to write to her, Ma! You’re the grandmother. If you stress the right things, point out the dangers of her stupid choice, perhaps it’ll stop Tara from ruining her life!” Tara had never seen Sabitri. But Bela wants her to be advised!! This is yet another quality of an immigrant.

4. The Outsider Personality

“She was a puzzle, with her Indian features and Texan boots, her defiant piercings, the skin stretched thin across her cheekbones and crumpled her eyes. And that spiky hair, new fallen limp as a child’s over her forehead.” (BWVG 108)

Tara was a puzzle to the parents as she was born and brought up in America. She had never been to India. She had no experience of Indian culture and had never thought of her family roots.

When Tara told her mother that she was dropping out of college, Bela remembered that she too dropped out of college herself and the problems stemmed from that. So, she didn’t want that to happen to her daughter. *“I guess that’s when people call their mothers-when their world is falling apart,”* Bela told her mother that she must write to her granddaughter to change her mind as it was her duty. She did not think how much her news might distress her.

“Oh, poor mother, all my life I’ve given her only trouble. 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 didn’t know then those mothers can’t necessarily save their children, no matter how much they want to.” (BWVG 174)

The outsider in Bela couldn’t understand her mother for such a long time. By the time she understood, with her insider mind, her mother wrote a letter to Tara explaining her personal experiences, underwent severe trauma, suffered a massive heart attack, and passed away.

Tara didn’t care for her parents as she was a lackadaisical and nonchalant girl raised in a complacent culture. She didn’t have any responsibilities or ambitions in her being. She was such a waffling girl that she fell victim to the alluring drug culture. She was naturally carried away by her bad companions – drinking, drugs, and prodigality, consumed by the lusts of the adolescents. Tara’s emotions reflect the typical foreign-born immigrants’ emotions.

While Tara decided to drop from her college, her grandmother Sabitri struggled a lot during her childhood for being educated at the charity of a rich lady, Leelamoyi. Sabitri wrote to Tara,

“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” (BWVG 9) as she was quite disturbed to hear from Bela that she and Sanjay couldn’t convince their foreign-born daughter.

5. THE FORTUNATE LAMPS

Something surprising happened in Tara’s mind when she drove Dr. Venkata Chalapati to Meenakshi temple. He insisted Archana on her name, and advised her, “Go back to school, Amma. Don’t give up”. “Before we visit the Goddess, we must cleanse ourselves, “his words rang in her mind. While returning from the temple, she (un)fortunately met with an accident.

Amazingly – not too long after the accident, she straightened herself out, went back to school, graduated, and found a decent job. How did this happen? (BWVG 14) When Tara

read her grandmother's letter, she understood that her life was a little less desperate than hers. The words of Sabitri echoed in her disorganized mind.

"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."
(BWVG 175)

These words transformed her life. Sabitri spent the last hours before her heart attack writing to her dearest granddaughter like the mythological character, Sabitri, fighting with Yama Dharma Raja to get back her husband's soul. Even though she was a desperate woman, she helped Tara resolve her life-long mistakes. "The Universe had given me an undreamed-of-gift. I must reciprocate (BWVG 171) "Do you know - I take things that I should have but didn't get. Things that mean happy memories. Things that stand for love and commitment. But sometimes I steal things that mean nothing. I steal them because there's a big hole in the middle of my chest and stealing fills it up for a moment." These are the typical feelings of diasporas illustrated in this novel. However, Tara surmounted all these feelings of resentment with the help of Sabitri's tender exhortation and evolved as a fortunate lamp.

6. Conclusion

This is a multi-generational and transcontinental saga of idiosyncratic mothers and daughters who travelled across the boundaries of time and space both physically and mentally. Each of them explores their dreams. Though they seem to be emotionally disconnected, there lies an incomprehensible bond resonating in their minds. The diasporic features of displacement, disillusionment, and dilemma are evident in the lives of these women. The emotional thought connections between the women of the three-generation are beautifully portrayed. The culminating point is that the women draw inner strength to deal with their hardships and evolve with flying colors triumphantly.

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