

## Immigrant Angst in Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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### Abstract

The Indian Diaspora forms a considerable chunk of population in the United States. Drawn by the host of opportunities that the American fabric of life provides, ample number of migrants for varied reasons have moved into America and made it a permanent home. However, this settling down is fraught with a number of new experiences as the diasporic selves are caught invariably between two worlds and two very divergent cultures. The feelings of alienation, rootlessness, marginalization and a search for identity become the integral part of the experience of expatriation and transplantation which have become the most striking features of diasporic writing. More so the women immigrants find it emotionally very challenging to adapt to a world, where unbridled freedom itself can become troublesome. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such Indian American writers who speaks from diasporic subject positions of women and explores the psychic terrain of diaspora in most of her novels. The present paper is focused on her latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*, to study the four generations of women, whose shifting to new pastures brings into their lives a hoard of problems and complexities. Their individual attempts to cope, their initial hiccups, displaced identities and immigrant angst weave a rich tapestry of the diasporic lives of these women enabling the study of Indian diaspora from a gendered perspective. So, this paper attempts to examine the typical issues encountered by the Indian women

immigrants, their struggles and negotiations to finally establish their individual identities as presented in the chosen novel.

**Keywords: Diaspora, gendered perspective, alienation, immigration, angst**

“This was something I had achieve 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.” (p.208)

The above lines written down by Sabitri as a sane piece of advice by a dying woman to her granddaughter and her daughter clinch the whole novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* together. They are also the concluding lines of the novel and are the gist of novelist’s experienced philosophy, that was also what also what Simon de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* vouches for, that is each one of us will find solace only when we transcend ourselves and achieve what is unique to ourselves, that which demarcates us from others and gives us an identity.

The novel among other themes also works out the quest for identity and a struggle for acceptance through the multiple narrations of a number of characters. Beginning with Durgea, Sabitri’s mother who lives in a village near Kolkata, Divakaruni presents a strong ambitious woman who establishes herself as an expert sweet maker and derives her identity from it. Using her skill of making confectionaries, Durga is able to make herself known for the best sweets in her village, and becomes the chosen one by the rich householders for sweets during all special occasions, which also gives economic sustenance to Durga’s family. It’s on such an occasion that Durga while catering sweets to the Mittirs, very strategically wins an opportunity for her academically bright daughter Sabitri to study in Kolkata. Though

appearing only in the first chapter titled 'Fortunate Lamp,' Durga is present all through the novel – as it is her skill of making sweets that is inherited by her daughter Sabitri, that gives her a foothold in her troubled times, and the establishment of the shop 'Durga Sweets' in Kolkata, ultimately giving her the much-needed stability and an individual identity. Also it is Durga's parting advice to the Kolkata bound Sabitri that "Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name" that pervades through the novel as a check to all the women in the novel who waver from their resolve, thereby making Durga a living presence in the novel whose thrust that her daughter should get educated, uplift herself and make a name and earn a social standing as an independent and accomplished individual, becomes a message for all women in the novel. In fact, it was Durga's words and her determination of educating her daughter sustained Sabitri initially in the ambience of indifference and cold treatment that she received in the Mittirs house. Sabitri recollects-

"To send Sabitri to Kolkata, she'd had to fight all their relatives, who warned her that she was sending the girl to her ruination. Remembering that gave Sabitri the strength to go down to her cheerless room for another long night of study"(P.44)

Hence, it was Durga's intense desire and maneuvering that transplanted Sabitri into a new land, though only a nearby city Kolkata, yet it displaced Sabitri and set her on a new path of establishing her own identity. However, Sabitri, enamoured by the little kindness shown to her by Leelamoyi and attracted by the closeness that Leelamoyi's son Rajiv developed towards her, loses sight of her target of becoming a teacher and ends up being unceremoniously thrown out of the Mittirs house. But she is fortunate to get shelter from her Mathematics professor Bijay Dasgupta, who later marries her, and to the delight of Durga, also encourages her to study even after the birth of their daughter Bela. But Sabitri fails to see reason, as the comfort of marriage makes her complacent, only to realize later in harsh

circumstances, what her mother had meant. It is only later in her life, after the death of her husband in an accident that she finally is able to carve an identity for herself through the establishment of Durga Sweets and inventing her own signature dish, naming it after her mother 'Durga Mohan.' It is the elation of the moment of making this dish, as she confesses in the letter to her granddaughter that gives her highest happiness and sense of worth. As Bipin Bihari, Sabitri's closest confidante and manager of Durga Sweets remembers-

"It must be the saffron I put in. Oh, Bipin, I'm so happy, I don't think I've ever been happier." (P.85)

It's through this sweet Durga Mohan, that Sabitri finally plants herself and her mother's identity firmly in an alien land Kolkata, and flourishes there. However, as no parent however strong, can lead their children on safe and well-meant paths; so also, Sabitri fails in settling her daughter Bela comfortably. In all haste, Bela runs away to America, on forged papers to marry Sanjay Dewan, a man struggling to eke out a living for himself. The third-generation daughter 'Bela' is now in the roller coaster of life, an illegal diasporic, trying to plant herself in an alien land, with only the anchorage of her passionate love for Sanjay. As an immigrant, she undergoes lots of anxiety and emotional turmoil, trying to adjust to a life of bare minimum, small dreams and bearing the burden of mothering and motherhood without the support of her own mother, the cultural shocks in store for her in America, as she is ill-equipped to take on any decent job without a degree makes her life all the more difficult. When the hopelessness of her situation dawns on her during her unplanned pregnancy, her anxiety torments her-

"Great, tacking sobs erupted from Bela. She hadn't wept like this since she was a child. She couldn't stop even though she knew that getting worked up was bad for the baby: all the books had agreed on that. But everything she had tamped down, all her



disappointments since-yes, for the first time she admitted it-her marriage, swirled in her like a dust storm. She was struck in this dingy apartment, struck in a dead-end job she hated, struck 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.” (P.107)

However, it is in the delirium of her fever that Bela finally realizes the sacrifice of her mother and the unkind act of herself, of abandoning her mother. She recollects how soon after the funeral of her father,

“A well-meaning neighbour-woman said, “You’ve got to cry and let it out, or you’ll go mad.” Sabitri had looked at her, her face expressionless. “I won’t go mad. I have a daughter to bring up.” (P. 111)

It is in her fit of fever that Bela ultimately is able to see her mother’s association with Durga Sweets in proper light-

“Durga Sweets, Bela saw now, had been important to her mother only because it was a means of providing Bela with all she needed, and then Bela had abandoned her” (p. 111)

Having put up with all the sufferings, when Bela had finally adjusted to her American routine, with her daughter ‘Tara’, Sanjay and Bishu, Sanjay’s best friend, a regular visitor to their home, life offers its twist, and Sanjay develops an unnatural suspicion on the relationship between Bela and Bishu, loses his peace of mind, distances Bishu from their lives. The suffering caused by this separation results in Bishu’s death within two years. It’s only then Sanjay realizes that all the way he was playing to the tunes of Tara, who had masterminded this separation of Bishu from them. Sanjay who was indebted to the favours of Bishu, right from his liveless childhood times is now overcome with guilt and grief and

decides to teach Tara, a lesson. He purposely takes charge of baby Tara on himself, detaches her from Bela, makes himself inevitable to the baby and when Tara turns into her teenage shocks them with his decision to divorce Bela. However, this decision not only punishes Bela but wrecks devastation on Tara, who finds herself completely uprooted with no sanctuary to nurse her bruised soul. Alienated by her parents' divorce, let down by her most beloved father, in an alien land with no relatives to give her the necessary anchorage, she loses sight of her purpose in life. She quits her education and moves out of home and disconnects herself completely from her parents. Having lost her husband and daughter, Bela now is devastated. She has no job, no love or purpose in life and tries to take her life. But, somehow, after shifting places, in her drunken shrunken state, meets Kenneth who also was suffering pangs of desertion from David, his boyfriend. Ironically, it is Kenneth, an American gay who restores her to health and equilibrium in life, as Kenneth gets Bela a job in a local store, gets her to shed her kilos, overcome alcoholism and reinvent her culinary skills and establish her Blog- 'Bela's Kitchen'. Again, it is only her inheritance of her skill at cooking, from her grandmother Durga and her mother Sabitri that gives Bela a sense of stability, a purpose and an identity as Bela's cook books are well received and makes her well known. Bela survives and re-establishes her connection with life independently, only to get in touch with her daughter late in life.

Tara, on the other hand, does multiple dead-end, low paying jobs, is at the mercy of strangers for love who use her, has an abortion, gets into drugs, alcoholism, losing all connect with life, finally becoming a kleptomaniac. Chitra Divakaruni paints a picture of a helpless, alienated state of this second generation diasporic, Tara, whose only connect with America, was through her parents, and having lost it, the sheer independence the country offers can devastate the rootless person. In her search for titbits of life, she develops an obsession of

stealing the items which for her symbolize affection, care and live, which she fights to overcome, once she courts death during one of her driving escapades,

A small episode of meeting an old woman ‘Mrs. Mehta’ from India, when Tara gets hired to look after her temporarily to facilitate Mrs. Mehta’s son and daughter-in-law go on a vacation, gives her first brush with an Indian woman. Tara’s immediate adjustment with her gives a clue of what is lacking in her life – the emotional support and unconditional love that only close relatives with empathetic bonding can provide. Similarly, when she gets hired to drive Dr. Venkatachalapati, a visiting economist from India, to Meenakshi temple at Pearland, since partake of all the rituals along with him, though it is her first visit to temple. Her visit to the Goddess seems to soothe her disturbed mind, and Dr. Venkatachalapati fills up the void in her of an absent father. His simple advice to purge the self, changes her life completely:

“Before we visit the goddess,” he said, “We cleanse ourselves”. (P. 135)

Mesmerised by the chanting of mantras and offering personalized prayers to the Goddess, the scent of the holy ash has a cathartic effect on her, and she longs to really purge her life. She muses-

“A prayer was offered in my name-probably for the first time in my life. Now I’m jubilantly carrying back a handful of squished flowers, an apple, a paper cone of ash, and a Styrofoam container filled with mushy porridge. And the magical smell” (P. 129)

Soon after her car meets with an accident, and getting face-to-face with death, for the first time she opens up her heart to this stranger Dr. Venkatachalapati and confesses about her abortion. His confession of having lost his own daughter ‘Meena’ for his non-acceptance of her lesbian orientation, somehow heals both, and taking his advice, “Go back to school,

Amma. Don't give up," (P. 135) Tara takes charge of her life once again and enrolls herself in college. She even consults a son Neel, and takes stock of her life. She even meets her mother, spends time with her and tries to set tight her estranged relations with her. The ultimate healing happens to Tara through her connect with her grandmother Sabitri, when she finds the letter that Sabitri had written to Tara, persuading her not to quit her studies. Tara finds her roots, her connect to her legacy and derives the stability that she so much needs. The letter in fact, gives Tara the strength and resolve to overcome her kleptomania, because she for the first time, tries to return the stolen item, this time a photograph of her grandmother Sabitri from her mother Bela's album, which she stole inspite of her mother's refusal to give it to her. Tara narrates this an achievement-

"I go to my bedroom and retrieve the sepia photo from my carry-on. It isn't easy. K take a deep breath and hold it. I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood. Twice I turn back. But finally, I manage to walk with the photo to the family room, stepping carefully in the dark. I'm going to put it back in the album.

Dr. Berger, it's the first time in my life that I'm returning what I've stolen. I think you might call this a landmark moment" (P. 202)

However, Tara gets caught by her mother during her attempt to put the photo back in the album, which finally leads to Tara's confession to her mother, revealing the angst in Tara due to uprooting that most immigrants face. She shouts-

"Do you want to know why I steal? I take things that I should have had 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.'" (P. 204)

However, the disclosure of her innermost secret to her mother relieves her, and she thus is set on the path of rejuvenation, healing all the bruises that she suffered due to lack of emotional attachments with people other than her parents.

Thus, Chitra Divakaruni describes the journey of Diaspora, especially women. In most of her works, she talks about immigrants encounter in new country and how one loses one's identity and becomes a nameless person but this also gives one an unknown sense of freedom. In the present novel too, she touches upon the discomfort that displacement brings in. Be it Sabitri, Bela or Tra, all the three women suffer immigrant angst while trying to adapt to the milieu outside their locale away from their near and dear ones, in exile and loneliness. As K.S Dhanam writes Divakaruni also contrasts the lives and perceptions of first-generation immigrants with that of their children born and raised in foreign land. And inevitably, it includes the Indian American experience of grappling with two identities. She has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos. Her writing course with her identification is with a brave new world forging to life. Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today's issues are threaded through with an ongoing search for identity beyond anthropology, beyond sociology and beyond academia.

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