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The Absent Father: A Study of Gender Representation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in India in 1956, is a prominent diasporic writer and a poet. Her writing is fueled by her own experiences as a first-generation immigrant and a woman caught between cultures. Indian themes, customs and traditions, therefore, find frequent expression in her stories. The acclaimed author of seventeen novels, which include bestsellers like *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Mistress of Spices* (2009) and *Arranged Marriage* (2011), Divakaruni has released her latest book, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, this year. It traces the lives of three resolute women across generations. It explores the relationships they share amongst themselves and the men in their lives. It is a complex tale of love, loss and identity – a tale that above all, celebrates the strength of womanhood. .

Keywords: Diaspora, Androcentric, Absent Father, Loss, Memory, Identity, Womanhood

This paper will be exploring gendered representation in the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) by the diasporic author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Particular emphasis will be put on the figure of the 'absent father'. It will also look into ways in which womanhood has been celebrated. An indigent Savitri is a bright scholar, whose dreams of a higher education are several notches higher than her station. Her ambitious dreams of education and more, start burgeoning only when she is taken under the wings of her benefactress, the irascible Leelamoyi. Savitri's rose-tinted dreams do not, however, last long. They come crumbling down as she loses her first love, and along with that the naivety of a rural girl still in her teens. Much later, she finds fleeting happiness in her marriage, but only when it is too late. Widowed, and with a daughter, she fights all odds with extreme bravado. She runs a sweetmeat shop, and rears Bela, her child, single-handedly. Bela, in the grip of young love, however elopes to America, never to come back home again. Life takes unpredictable turns even in her life. Love, she realises is no longer the honeyed dream she had

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once chased. She, too, has to combat life and its challenges, all alone. Finally, we get a glimpse of Bela's daughter, Tara – disillusioned and rebellious. Ignorant of her roots, she hankers after an identity. She seems half-way lost. But Tara, too, picks herself up and begins anew. Savitri, Bela, Tara – all the three women are shaken out of their shelters and are forced to wake up to the realities of life. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni paints these complex lives with a delicate yet dexterous stroke, creating a rich tapestry of emotions.

Before we venture into an understanding of what diasporic literature and its concerns are, we need to look into the basic premise of the term 'diaspora'. Diaspora as an evolving concept can be traced back to William Safran (*Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*, 1991), who defines it as referring to a community which got dispersed and shared a yearning for a way back 'home'. Memory, nostalgia, an inextricable link to the past and a deep embedded sense of loss are what we associate with the term. Gayatri Gopinath in her book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005) further outlines the inherent patriarchy of its etymology. Diaspora indicates, as she argues, dispersal – and the androcentric metaphor of dispersal privileges "male procreation and patrilineal descent". The "patriarchal and heteronormative underpinnings" of the term have repeatedly been adverted to. How then, in this rigid male-centric structure, are women to be posited? Are these women pushed aside to the brink, with their voices gagged? Or are their silences pregnant with hidden possibilities? How are such possibilities unfurled in the hands of a woman writer? Are new ways sought to grapple with the blinkered notions of gender? Male discourses have by and large, elided women, rendering them invisible. Alienated from power structures and social recognition for too long, has the woman writer finally learnt to imbue her creations with fierce resistance? Has the woman writer learnt to re-write herself? Debates revolving around these questions are far from being labeled new. "Gender is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language.... We talk about gender roles, worry about the gender gap, question whether our ideas are not gender-biased or gender-specific..." (Glover and Kaplan, 2009). 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 view 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 idealised in the majority of traditional texts (Walters, 2005).

How are the female characters in this particular text, one authored by a diasporic woman writer been dealt with? In this paper, I have tried examining the ways in which notions of gender have

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been subverted or conformed to. But what has particularly been emphasised is the figure of the 'Father'. *Before We Visit the Goddess* is not a text that seems to lack male characters. Yet what is striking is the fact that almost all of them are deftly brushed aside as the story moves towards its closure. We merely come across a few names, a few stray incidents here and there. The meatier roles are always allotted to the women alone. Shattered dreams, broken families, battered souls fighting their way back – this is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's latest novel in a nutshell.

Before We Visit the Goddess, interestingly, has almost all of its female protagonists named after mythological characters – Durga, Savitri, Tara, symbolising female strength. Divakaruni, therefore, invokes traditional narratives of culture and reinterprets them from a new perspective. She has breathed in a new lease of life into her protagonists. She has unstintingly armoured them with fortitude – something that they draw from the mythological characters they are named after. What the author skillfully elides is that these mythological women are known not just known for their fiery spirits alone but also for their docile, reticent, domesticated avatars, for their unfailing loyalty to their husbands. It is herein, that Divakaruni departs from the age-old traditional narratives. Her protagonists are anything but docile. They cannot always be weighed against our stereotypical notions of what constitutes feminine virtues. They are complicated, messed up, scheming, powerful – humane in every respect. *Before We Visit the Goddess*, therefore, subtly deploys a revisionist strategy. The author invokes the past, simultaneously offering a partial critique of the gendered notions coded into them. As Adrienne Rich had put it in her "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision":

The act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us [women] more than a chapter in critical history: it is an act of survival. We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.

Thus, Divakaruni's revisionist strategy becomes an act of creation, of transcreation. *Before We Visit the Goddess* does not narrate the story in a linear, phallogocentric manner. Contrary to the androcentric undercurrent of the term 'diaspora', this diasporic text reverts back to a very feminine, fluid style. Techniques like flashbacks, dream sequences, hallucinations, epistolary forms are adopted. The story is articulated in moments of incoherence and disruption. Letters become an integral part of the narrative strategy. As Janet Altman explains, "the letter-writer is always in dialogue with a possible respondent [and] any letter appears as a part of potentially ongoing sequences." (1) Letters can be seen as a metaphor for literature at large; a mise-en-abyme of the problems of communication from the author to the reader. Much like Mrs. Dutta in Divakaruni's short story titled "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter", Savitri, too revises every word that she has penned down for her grand-daughter Tara but ultimately decides to bare out her life, her experiences with an air of extreme candour. Like our *Thakurmar Jhuli* where grandmothers pass down stories coded with those not-so-apparent moral prescriptions, Savitri's letter, too, is subtly loaded with lessons that she has learnt from life. She preserves her memories pickled in the bitter-sweet flavours

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that life has offered, and holds up the platter for her grand-daughter. Like a griot, she retains a slice of her life only to pass it down to her next generations. It becomes a cherished shared secret among the three – Savitri, Bela and Tara.

On the surface, though the novel might seem to rest on the experiences of these three women, on a deeper glance we find a few important male characters as well. They buttress the main narrative and help it move forward. To begin with Savitri, we realise that even after having thumbed through the entire novel, we hear Savitri's father being mentioned only twice. Whereas Savitri is seen fondly reminiscing her mother Durga, time and again, acknowledging her efforts in chiseling her daughter the right way, she barely recalls her father. It is only vaguely that she touches upon the subject – she narrates that she has been spared the wrath of her benefactress only because her father was a priest. Even during her stay at the Mittir mansion, we never come across Mr. Mittir, Leelamoyi's husband. Savitri has had comforting presence of neither his father nor even a father-figure once she lands in Kolkata. The only man she genuinely feels for is Rajiv, the son of the Mittirs, who significantly fails to sire an offspring. She even confesses to Tara, "...if Rajiv had come to her, she would have walked out with him. She would have lived as his mistress, not caring if she blackened her family's name beyond all salvaging. Granddaughter, here is my most terrible secret: even after I had given birth to Bela, I would have done it." (2) Rarely do we hear Indian women, more so a grandmother, confessing her feelings in this forthright a manner, asserting her sexuality this strongly. She does not shy away from revealing the darkest recesses of her being. "The power of a man is like a bull's charge, while the power of a woman moves aslant, like a serpent seeking its prey. Unless you use it correctly, it won't get you what you want." (3) We never lose sight of Savitri's stratagems to yield power over her husband, Bijan. "A sentence here, a phrase there, a small plaintive smile, the slight press of a breast against his arm. That's all it took, because he wanted to give his wife and child the best of everything." (4) Bijan is portrayed as a loving husband and a doting father. Bela, too shares a deep bonding with her father. He is the one she can confide in. She treasures the time they spend together. She, however, loses her father, firstly to a terrible drinking habit and finally in an accident. Bipin Behari, someone who deftly plays Savitri's friend and confidante would have been way too glad to have shouldered the responsibility of playing the father. Bela adamantly refuses to let him in her own private world. She shudders at the thought of replacing her father. Once Bela leaves for America with her boyfriend Sanjay, we find her trying desperately to set up a happy-family-scenario. She cooks Indian curries – spicy and hot, wears traditional silk sarees, joins Sanjay when he hums 'Yeh Shaam Mastani' in a tone oozing romance. She tries to create a slice of the 'home' she has left way back in India. Women have always been glorified as being the custodians of cultural heritage. As Anita Mannur suggests, "women are frequently (but problematically) associated with positions within the domestic cultural economy and charged with maintaining the edifice of home life." (5) Bela, too, like her mother starts manipulating her husband. It's interesting how Divakaruni keeps delineating scheming, conniving mothers. The resplendent, glorified image of the mother is not what enjoys the limelight. As Sashi Deshpande rightly points out, "We have this stereotypical image of what a loving mother is like, that we find any variation to be lacking in 'motherly' feelings. It seems to me that we need to get rid of these



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images to release ourselves from guilt.” (6) Divakaruni’s portrayal of mothers seems to follow a similar trajectory. The moment Sanjay realises the foul-play, he swears vengeance. The weapon with which he wishes to strike back is none other than their only child, Tara. Tara becomes an ignorant pawn in the hands of the father she had blindly adored. She is shattered when Sanjay violates her trust. The broken family, the breach of trust leaves her completely bruised to the core. She drops out of education, becomes a drug-addict, falls in bad company, only to spring back to her normal life once she meets Dr. Venkatachalapathi. An Indian, who has failed her daughter’s expectations and has lost her forever, way back in India, he finds a daughter in Tara. They visit the temple of Goddess Meenakshi together and he offers a prayer for her. He, for those brief moments, plays the affectionate father, Tara missed way too badly in her life. Dr. V, as she calls him, has to leave. The only thing that could remind her of him – the white shawl, a symbol of warmth too gets burnt to ashes, obliterating the last vestiges of a fatherly love. With the departure of Dr. Venkatachalapathi, the last Indian father/ father figure makes an exit. It is only Tara’s son, Neel who gets to cherish the affections of both the parents. The absent father all throughout the novel is finally compensated in the figure of Gary, Tara’s American husband. It is striking, therefore, that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni saved the dutiful father only for a male child in the end.

Divakaruni seems to hint at how her women are capable enough of picking themselves up and living lives on their terms, all alone. They break free of the cocoon, society erects for us. They completely defy the overarching power of the phallus, the edicts of patriarchy. These three resolute women share their thoughts, their feelings of being a woman and create a separate world of their own – one that is almost devoid of men. A gynocentric world is created within the androcentric structure of the diaspora. The story of Savitri, a name that alludes to the sun-god (Savitri is the daughter of the sun-god according to Hindu scriptures) reaches Bela (usually in Bengali it denotes shore, but with a slight phonetic variation it can also be read as mid-noon) and finally with Tara (the Bengali word for a star) reaches its penultimate destiny. The story both literally and metaphorically completes an illusory circle. The closure can be best summarised with the words of the author herself,

In the best friendship I have had with women, there is a closeness that is unique, a sympathy that comes from somewhere deep and primal in our bodies and does not need explanation, perhaps because of all the life-changing experiences we share – menstruation, childbirth, menopause. The same tragedies, physical or emotional, threaten us: the infidelity of a spouse or boyfriend, rape, breast cancer, the death of a child who had grown inside our body. But ultimately we can be ourselves with each other. Ourselves with all our imperfections.... We can be women and know that, as women, we can understand (Divakaruni, 1999).

Endnotes

¹ Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 148, Print.



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² Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Before We Visit the Goddess* (New Delhi: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 30, Print. ³Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* (New York: Picador, 2008), 52, Print

⁴ Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Before We Visit the Goddess* (New Delhi: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 23, Print.

⁵ Anita Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora", *MELUS*. 32.4 (2007): 11-31, Web, Aug. 12 2014.

⁶ Cited in Sandhya Rao Mehta, ed., *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Newcastle Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 6, Print.

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