
Diaspora and the Duality of Self: An Analytical Exploration of Identity and Cultural Dislocation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess and Oleander Girl*

S. Prathibha Priyadarshini, Research Scholar, Department of English, Osmania University.

Paper Received on 25-11-2023, Accepted on 28-12-2023, Published on 31-12-23

DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.4.289

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels, *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Oleander Girl*, extensively explore the interrelated themes of 'identity' and 'diaspora', providing intricate depictions of women as they navigate through the multifaceted challenges of cultural dislocation and self-discovery. Through the multi-generational narratives in *Before We Visit the Goddess* and the personal quest to find one's own identity in *Oleander Girl*, Divakaruni explores how the characters reconcile their inherited cultural identities with the realities of life in a foreign land. This article offers a comparative analysis of these themes, focusing on the influence of memory, tradition, and intergenerational conflict in the development of the protagonists' identities within both novels. It illustrates how Divakaruni's writing provides a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on the complexities and opportunities inherent in the diasporic experience, particularly for women.

Keywords: Diaspora, Tradition, Memory, Identity Crisis, Immigrant and Homeland.

Introduction

Diasporic literature endeavours to articulate the challenges faced by immigrants as they arrive at unfamiliar territories. Both voluntary and forced migration engenders feelings of displacement, isolation, and confusion, exposing individuals to discrimination based on race, culture, religion, and language. Diasporic authors strive to explore the struggles of immigrants. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as a diasporic writer, delves into the trajectories of immigrants and the anguish of exile. Her works usually delve into, fractured identities, immigrant experiences, multicultural societies, inter-generational conflicts, and the ramifications of decisions, particularly from the perspective of female protagonists.

As a noteworthy contributor to contemporary diasporic literature, Chitra Banerjee has consistently explored themes related to identity, migration, and the intricate experience of existing between cultures. Her narratives predominantly feature female protagonists who confront the multifaceted nature of cultural dislocation and the difficulties associated with constructing a cohesive sense of self, in a world where they must constantly negotiate between tradition and modernity. *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Oleander Girl* are two

of her most compelling works that address these themes.

Identity and Cultural Dislocation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

In *Before We Visit the Goddess* three generations of women make significant decisions that alter their lives, embarking on a quest for identity. The female protagonists grapple with an 'identity crisis' as they contend with various distractions, conflicting aspirations, and the repercussions of their choices.

The narrative is presented through shifting perspectives, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the characters' experiences. In the text, Sabitri, the eldest of the three female protagonists, writes a letter to her granddaughter, Tara, recounting her life story in an attempt to persuade Tara to not discontinue her education. Sabitri reflects, "She is not equipped to advise Tara, she knows this. But perhaps, if she shares her life, the girl might see something there" (14). However, despite Sabitri's hopes, all three women—Sabitri, her daughter Bela, and her granddaughter Tara—make the decision to drop out of school, significantly shaping their lives and destinies. Tara eventually finds the letter, which had remained unopened for years, too late to influence her original decision, though she later reverses it. This discovery helps Tara understand her mother better and reconnects the three women, allowing them to push away the past "that vessel in which all emotions curdle to regret" (4).

Sabitri, grappling with her "rusty English" and her inability to understand the

complexities of her granddaughter's experiences, reflects upon her situation "What can she write in her rusty English to change Tara's mind? She cannot even imagine her granddaughter's life, the whirlwind foreign world she lives in" (3). Despite false starts that feel preachy, Sabitri ultimately narrates her life's experiences with the intention to provide insight through her narrative. This letter, spanning both time and space from India to America, remains unread for nearly twenty-five years. However, it ultimately allows the reconciliation of emotional and generational gap between both women. The novel delves into the concept of 'borders' both physical and emotional, questioning their necessity and significance. The three generations of women are not only separated by geography—Sabitri in India, Bela moving from India to America, and Tara born and brought up in America—but also by their beliefs, lifestyles, and emotional barriers. Their parallel decisions to drop out of school result in dependency and restriction, which all three women, naturally independent and impulsive, regret later.

The novel explores how the "longing to be included" (10) drives alienation, beginning with external displacement, leading to internal isolation from oneself and one's dreams. Sabitri first encounters this sense of displacement, upon relocating from her village to Kolkata in pursuit of her dreams. A transition characterized by both anxiety and anticipation, that ultimately culminates into disillusionment. Sabitri's distorted understanding of her own circumstances leads to costly mistakes, such as, when she

presumes she would make a good daughter-in-law for her benefactor Leelamoyi's son, despite their differing social classes. This miscalculation leads to her being thrown out of the house, thereby highlighting the rigid boundaries of social class and their profound impact on her life and relationships.

Bela's experiences resonate closely with Sabitri's, beginning with her relocation to the United States along with her partner Sanjay, against Sabitri's wishes. Similar to Sabitri, Bela grapples with feelings of isolation and dislocation, yearning for her mother's nurturing presence, particularly during her pregnancy, highlighting the emotional and physical distance between them. Despite these distances, Divakaruni adeptly captures the intrinsic bond that exists between women, particularly between mothers and daughters. Bela's request for Sabitri to write to Tara, while deliberately omitting the real reason for Tara's decision to drop out, exemplifies this profound, unarticulated mother-daughter connection. Sabitri, in turn, instinctively understands the challenges that Tara was facing, thereby bridging the emotional gap, despite the physical distance.

The concept of diaspora emerges as a subtle yet enduring theme in Divakaruni's work. It effectively captures the complexities of the immigrant experience in the United States and the emotions it evokes. Bela's initial joy upon arriving America, gradually transforms into feelings of isolation and yearning for her former life. Through the narratives of her characters, Divakaruni explores the significance of cultural heritage and the necessity of

adapting to new socio-cultural environments. Tara, despite fully embracing an American identity, is unable to sever her ties to her Indian heritage. This connection is underscored by her friend Blanca, who emphasizes the importance of Tara engaging with the Indian community, even if she has never been to India and does not desire to own up to her Indian 'identity'.

"You need to be in touch with your people. It's a sore point between us, what Blanca sees as my abandonment of the Indian community and I consider self-preservation." (50)

Through the lens of these three characters, Divakaruni explores how 'identity' is dynamic rather than fixed, continuously influenced by individual decisions, cultural norms, and the experience of inhabiting a diasporic space. Sabitri's story, for example, highlights the sacrifices that often accompany migration and the loss of a stable, rooted identity. Bela's experience reflects the challenges of raising a child in a foreign culture, where the values she was raised with seem increasingly irrelevant. Tara, as a second-generation immigrant, grapples with the complexities of belonging to two cultures yet feeling at home in neither.

The novel's structure, moving back and forth in time and between different perspectives, mirrors the fragmented and multilayered nature of diasporic identity. Divakaruni illustrates how each woman's identity is influenced by her connection to her cultural background and the new

environment in which she exists. The variations among Sabitri, Bela, and Tara in their perceptions and negotiations of identity shows the impact of diaspora on the formation of self, proving that 'identity' within a diasporic framework is inherently fluid.

Identity and Cultural Dislocation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl*

Divakaruni's novel *Oleander Girl* examines the complexities of identity, focusing on themes such as self-doubt, ambivalence, and identity crisis. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of national and political turmoil in both India and the United States. In 2002, the Godhra riots created religious tension throughout India, while America declared a "war on terror" following the Twin Tower attacks. Following which, immigrants in America faced suspicion, segregation, and rejection. *Oleander Girl* references these events, focusing on their impact on the Roy and Bose families in Kolkata and beyond. While Divakaruni does not thoroughly explore the origins and consequences of the riots, she conveys their repercussions through the dialogues of her characters. Families of the Hindu faith, such as the Roys and Boses, occasionally discuss the religious riots, often reflecting views that attribute violence solely to Muslims. For instance, Bimal Roy remarks,

"Ah, yes, those Muslims. A violent lot. Did you hear about the incident on the train today in Gujarat? All those Hindu pilgrims they burned to death?" (21).

The novel delves into the theme of identity and its crisis through the character of Khorobi. Korobi's limited knowledge of her parents, provided by her grandparents, does not impact her until her grandfather's death. Her journey to discover her true identity begins when her grandmother reveals that her father is alive and living in America.

Your dear grandfather lied to you - and forced me to do the same. Your father's alive. His name is Rob. Yes, Rob. He lives in America." (52).

The revelation of her father's survival causes Korobi to re-evaluate her life from two distinct perspectives: experiencing joy at the revelation and becoming curious about uncovering more details. As a result, her life shifts towards an uncharted territory, involving not only unfamiliar circumstances but also a foreign land altogether. Upon Rajat's reluctance to help Korobi find her father, prior to their wedding, Korobi questions

"You want me to go through my whole life with my in-laws pretending that my father is dead? That he was Indian? Why? Are you ashamed of who I am?" (73)

The very question motivates her to conquer various challenges as she embarks on a search for her paternal lineage.

When Korobi travels to the United States, she is confronted with the realities of her mixed heritage and the complexities of living between cultures. Her experiences in

America, where she is both an insider (due to her father's nationality) and an outsider (because of her Indian upbringing), force her to re-evaluate her true identity. Divakaruni uses Korobi's journey to explore the tensions between tradition and modernity, the homeland and the diaspora.

Discovering her true identity proves to be a devastating experience for Korobi as she says,

“My entire notion of who I am was shaken up. I felt betrayed. Unworthy” (273).

Korobi gradually learns multiple facets to her personal identity. Initially, she learns that her father Rob, is alive and is of American descent. Subsequently, she uncovers the fact that her father is actually African-American. Finally, she comes to the realization that she is illegitimately born to her parents. While the first and second layers of her identity initially shock her, they do not deter her unwavering determination to understand herself. However, the revelation of her illegitimate birth shatters her sense of self, causing her to feel a sudden and profound sense of shame and conflict with her previous sense of identity.

“Some kinds of success are worse than failure. It would have been better not to have found my father than to live with this profound shame. I'm furious with everyone - my mother, my father, my grandfather.” (246)

Korobi's quest for identity highlights the evolution of women in her

family. Sarojini, Anuradha, and Korobi show a gradual transition in identity formation, influenced by time, space, and a desire to break free from homogenous notions of identity.

Divakaruni empowers Korobi by depicting her resilience in the face of an identity crisis. Korobi's journey demonstrates the flexible and multifaceted nature of one's own identity. While *Oleander Girl* addresses various aspects of identity formation, the focus is not solely on diasporic identity. Although Korobi's journey to America and interactions with diasporic characters are significant, the narrative centres on her personal quest for identity rather than the broader implications of diaspora.

Conclusion

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Oleander Girl* themes of identity and diaspora are explored, offering significant insights into the complexities of human existence. In *Before We Visit the Goddess* the narrative traces the inter-generational journey of three women—Sabitri, Bela, and Tara—whose identities are shaped by their familial ties, cultural heritage, and personal aspirations. Divakaruni skilfully navigates through themes of migration, displacement, and the quest for belonging, illustrating how diasporic experiences transcend geographical boundaries. Similarly, in *Oleander Girl* Korobi's search for her patrilineal identity unfolds against the backdrop of national and political crises in both India and America. Through Korobi's journey, Divakaruni highlights the fluidity and complexity of

identity, challenging conventional notions of belonging and cultural assimilation. Across both novels, Divakaruni intertwines themes of identity and diaspora, offering profound reflections on the human condition and the enduring search for self-discovery amidst the complexities of modern life.

References

Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra. *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *Oleander Girl*.

New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014.

Safran, William, et al. *Transnational Migrations*. Routledge, 18 Oct. 2013.

Dr. Bhishma Agnihotri. *Bridging Global Indian Diaspora*. Prabhat Prakashan, 1 Jan. 2020.

Sahay, Anjali. *Indian Diaspora in the United States*. Lexington Books, 16 May 2009.

Jayaram, Narayana. *The Indian Diaspora*. SAGE Publishing India, 6 May 2004.

How to cite this article?

S. Prathibha Priyadarshini "Diaspora and the Duality of Self: An Analytical Exploration of Identity and Cultural Dislocation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *Oleander Girl*" *Research Journal Of English (RJOE)*8(4), PP:290-295,2023