

**(E)MERGING BORDERS: EXPLORATIONS OF GENDER
AND HOME IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS**

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Abstract

The notion of borders and their unstated others – ‘home’ and ‘identity’ – find a central place in diasporic discourse and serve as a strand that unifies it, a theme that is explored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in ‘Before We Visit The Goddess’. My paper would engage with the novel-in-stories as an attempt at questioning and crossing these borders, in order to seek a home that may be transitory, in its physical manifestation, but is nevertheless one that seeks to anchor the mind and thereby liberate the individual from the shackles that have ironically moved beyond societal constrictions to becoming personal ones.

Keywords: borders, diaspora, identity, gender, Divakaruni.

What is more painful, the misplaced past or the runaway future? I did not know.

(Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 140)

Caught between nostalgia and regret, a past that can never really get wiped away or completely left behind and a future that is essentially shaped by it; the writing, emerging from the diasporic space, has essentially revolved around questions of identity and home that acquire an added dimension, when sketched from the perspective of a woman. *Before We Visit The Goddess* (2016), the latest work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is an experimentation, with both form and content, which makes it stand apart from her earlier writing, while nevertheless serving as an extension of her style, the themes she has explored and women, forming the anchors, around which the narrative is built.

Labelled among “the 20 most influential global Indian women”, by *The Economic Times* (2016), as stated in an Interview by Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, Divakaruni in *Before We Visit The Goddess* adopts the short stories in a novel form, to allow the narrative to move across spaces within India and, by crossing the seas, into America, as her characters leave their “home”, in search of

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opportunities that not merely shape the lives of those making the choice, but also of their families, raising questions of identity, home and borders. The novel thus explores, as Radhika Santhanam opines, in her article – “A Hit about Misses,” which appeared in *The Hindu* (2016), “Complex familial relations across borders (which) are presented in an empathetic way, giving us more of an understanding of love, loss, and Bengali culture, like Divakaruni’s earlier books”.

As the book progresses, the three female protagonists, who span three generations, probe their own identity, in an attempt to understand or, at times, even justify their own lives and actions, in the process inadvertently understanding each other’s motives and actions better, thus crossing and ultimately erasing the boundaries of space that for years together have kept them apart.

The novel that thus traverses across two continents and three generations of women is one, which examines these borders as, in the words of avtar brah,

territories to be patrolled against whom they construct as outsiders, aliens and the Others; forms of demarcation where the very cut of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where the fear of the other is the fear of itself, places where claims to ownership, claims to 'mine', 'yours' and 'theirs' - are stated out, contested, defended and fought over. (brah, 1996:198)

Beginning with Sabitri, the eldest of the three female protagonists, in the novel, writing a letter to her granddaughter – Tara – narrating to the granddaughter the story of her own life, the decisions she made and the actions they set in motion, some that were premeditated and others that she had not envisaged, she attempts to influence her granddaughter to change a decision - that of dropping out of school, realising nevertheless that “She is not equipped to advise Tara, she knows this. But perhaps, if she shares her life, the girl might see something there” (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 14). Unfortunately, however, this decision – that of dropping out of school, is a decision which all three women take, which in turn majorly shapes their life and destiny.

The book ends with Tara finding the letter, which her grandmother – Sabitri had written, which had lain unopened for years together, and therefore was one, that could not really make a difference to the decision, that Tara had made, about dropping out of school (though it was a decision which at a later point Tara had reversed) but which, nevertheless, helped her understand her mother better and bound the three women, in a way that had not been possible, for many years. This chance encounter, with the past, helped them, as the book says, in pushing away the past “that vessel in which all emotions curdle to regret” (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 3).

In the letter, the grandmother, Sabitri, who tells her own story wonders, “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” (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 3). All that she has known of her granddaughter, Tara, is what she has managed to accumulate through the photographs that her own daughter Bela, the mother of Tara, has sent her. Making varied attempts to write, resulting in false starts that make the letter sound preachy and inappropriate, even to her, she ultimately jots down her own experiences and decisions that have shaped not only her own future, but inadvertently also that of her daughter Bela and possibly even in turn of her granddaughter Tara. A letter that traverses the boundaries of time and space (being sent from India to America) and which, despite lying unopened for almost a quarter of a century, aids in erasing borders that have kept the three generations of mothers and daughters away from each other.

What the novel essentially explores is how borders get drawn and entrenched, at various levels, raising the question as to – “what one is walling in or walling out” – where ultimately, like in the context of the poem ‘Mending Wall’, by Robert Frost, these borders/walls lose both their meaning and the reason as well as the significance of their presence, remaining nevertheless dividing factors that serve to unconsciously reiterate the belief that “Good fences make good neighbours”, without anyone really knowing or even caring why.

In fact, the three generation of women have been not merely separated by space – Sabitri being in India, Bela traversing from India to America and Tara being born and brought up in America, though both Bela and Tara live in different parts of the country, as have Sabitri and her mother: Durga (who looms large over the novel, though she is not directly a character in it) – but also by their beliefs, their lifestyles and the mental and emotional borders they have drawn between themselves – walling the other person out. Interestingly, though, their lives run a close parallel, in the decisions they take (dropping out of school) and the impact it has on their life and relations, given that these decisions bring with them their unwritten ‘other’ – dependency and restriction, which all three women, being by nature independent and impulsive, either consciously or unconsciously, regret and resent.

This book, furthermore, signifies the coming to age of diasporic writing, where the travel undertaken is not merely across physical space, but also largely through the psychic space of the three generation of women. The displacement that is physical eventually constitutes the least of their problems and concerns and serves, if at all, only to accentuate and underline the emotional distance that emerges between the three women and within each of them, as they seek to pursue their dreams. This emotional disconnect, coupled with the disconnect, between the dreams that the women wish to pursue and the reality, that in actuality unfolds, is what constitutes the major borders that the book dwells upon. Despite the death of Sabitri and the imminent separation of Bela, who is to go to an old age home, and Tara, who is to

go back to her own life, with her husband and son, in the end, these borders are dissolved and the women understand each other and themselves better, thus finding their identity and anchor.

What has actually pushed them apart, which is also what creates a feeling of alienation, in the diasporics, is the “longing to be included” (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 10). Beginning with an external displacement and a yearning for their home, it eventually manifests in an internal displacement; as one gets alienated not only from others, but also gradually from one’s hopes and dreams, thus driving deep the sense of loss and alienation that endlessly shifts from outside to deep within. Sabitri first experiences this displacement and loss, when she moves from her parents’ home, in a village far away from Kolkatta, to the city (Kolkatta), in order to pursue her dreams. This moving, which is underlined with both anxiety and anticipation, then gets manifested in an adjustment and acceptance that remains so – “Even the most startling adventure, sooner or later, must become routine. So it was with Sabitri” – or then eventually turns to doubt and disillusionment – “Sabitri was mostly grateful to be ignored. The village school had not prepared her adequately; it was only with frantic effort that she managed to keep up” (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 8-9).

This, in turn, can lead to becoming complacent or even cocky and making errors of judgement that can then cost oneself more than what one is prepared to pay, as Savitri realises, when she is turned away from the home of her benefactor - Leelamoyi, into the dark night, because she presumes that she will make a ‘good’ daughter-in-law, for the son of the house, despite having come from a social class that is far lower than that of Leelamoyi, though her caste is comparable, given that she is the daughter of a temple priest; and it is as a result of her caste that, despite she being an outsider, she is not brazenly humiliated, though she is often ignored and treated shabbily, until she makes a wrong move and is therefore thrown out of the house.

Divakaruni, through the story of Sabitri, thus indirectly explores the social class borders that are drawn along the lines of class and caste and create a divide that can most often never be crossed, let alone bridged. These social borders, paradoxically, in turn also birth borders at diverse others levels – whether it is in one’s nature (despite being a rather naïve and extremely nice person Sabitri traps her Maths Professor, Bijan into marrying her) or between people (it is her desire to seek revenge, which then drives a wedge between herself and her husband, Bijan or the impulsive slap that she in an infuriated moment gives her child - Bela, who innocently tells her father about her mother’s encounter with her former lover Rajiv, that ultimately alienates Bela from Sabitri and compels Bela to leave her studies and escape with her lover Sanjay, to America, despite Sabitri’s warnings about the possible pitfalls this may result in).

The borders Bela experiences, like in the context of Sabitri, begin with her leaving her parents' home to travel to America, to be with her lover Sanjay. Unlike Sabitri though, she leaves without her mother's blessings, thwarting every attempt of Sabitri to keep Sanjay away from her – "A man who – Sabitri had known this in every vibrating nerve of her body – was utterly wrong for her" (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 31). Like Sabitri, she also feels extremely lonely and out of place, after her displacement - both when she first moves to America and later when she is pregnant and longs to be with her mother,

Dangerous fantasies flitted through her mind. 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. Sabitri knew what she liked in a way that Sanjay never would. (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 103)

This realisation, however, not merely leaves her with a sense of loneliness, but also leads her to decisions and actions that ultimately alienate her both from Sanjay and her daughter Tara.

What gives an additional edge to *Before We Visit The Goddess* is the manner in which Divakaruni also manages to capture the quintessential nature of women, who can, despite the physical, emotional and psychological spaces between them, still understand each other, more so when the relation between them is that of a mother-daughter. Thus, Bela's mother Sabitri, despite the great distances that separate them (Sabitri being in India and Bela being in America and Sabitri not being able to reconcile herself to Bela's leaving her for Sanjay on the one hand and Sanjay not allowing Bela to visit her mother, or allowing the mother to visit her, on the other, creating an unbridgeable gap between them) can capture the concerns and realities of her daughter's life, without her daughter even mentioning them. In fact, Bela, when she calls Sabitri, at the beginning of the novel, to tell her to write a letter to Bela's daughter Tara, only mentions that Tara has dropped out of school and that she would like Sabitri to advise Tara. However, crossing the borders of time and distance, that has separated them, Sabitri is able to gauge that the actual reason for Tara dropping out of college is that Sanjay – Tara's father – has abandoned them both.

The decision that links the three generation of women despite them being apart – that of dropping out of college – consequently manifests even in Tara's life and also results in her breaking her ties with her mother. Though each of these women does manage to pick up her life, in the end, what Divakaruni explores is how, with each succeeding generation, the borders that divide them, from within and without, keep getting more diverse, making it increasingly difficult for them, to go back to what could be considered a 'successful' life.

In doing so, what the book primarily explores, as Divakaruni has also candidly mentioned, in her interview at Google, is what constitutes success for a woman. In the end, it lies in, as Sabitri realises, creating happiness that is not dependent on somebody else, but rather a happiness that emerges from within. Incidentally, Sabitri experiences this when, after many attempts that others find good, but she doesn't, she manages to prepare a sweet (which she names after her mother Durga, in her memory) and realises "Satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone" (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 32). This awareness is also the note on which the novel ends, highlighting its significance, for both the author and her protagonist.

What is interesting, moreover, is that despite these borders (whether physical or emotional) that lie between these women, there is a connect and continuity, in their lives and actions, where each, in an attempt to break away from the past and disobey her mother, in order to assert her own identity and being, is condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past; and, though, in a different time and space, their manifestations are different, their ramifications are the same. The decision to drop out of school thus compels each of them to take up jobs that take them away from their dreams or the life they had envisaged for themselves, create a turbulent personal space and leave them lonely and with their own set of problems. Eventually though, each of them does manage to resolve these, to different extents, and thereby erase their psychic borders and thereby reach out to the other, making them exorcise themselves of the ghosts of their own past – real and imagined. The book thus goes on to show how, as Indu Prabha (2016) has said, in *Muse India*, "Identity, in general, is a paradoxical term both for its sameness and distinctiveness".

This being the main concern of *Before We Visit The Goddess*, the novel, through its stories, also explores, at varied points, in the book, issues that directly link it to concerns of the diaspora as well as gender. Gender, over and above, being explored from varied angles, in the context of the three female protagonists, is also touched upon in the light of the 'other' of gender and the stereotypical reactions of fear and denial that it evokes on the one hand and the casual acceptance of it, on the other. Despite being close to his daughter and being a professor, while Dr. Venkatachalapathi is unable to accept his daughter being a lesbian, resulting in him cutting off all relations with her and culminating in her suicide, Bela, though far lesser 'educated' and with much lesser exposure to the world, is totally accepting of her friend Kenneth being gay. What she objects to is him not being open with her about it, "That was because you didn't trust me enough to tell me," she said angrily. "My husband, he was like that, too. Kept all kinds of things from me. Thought I wasn't strong enough to deal with them" (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 158).

Diaspora being a theme more consistently and obviously explored by Divakaruni, in her earlier writing, in *Before We Visit the Goddess* serves as a concern that constitutes a flitting but persistent backdrop; but one which is nevertheless explored from diverse angles. As Divakaruni recounts in her interview with Google, she has managed to, in this book, not only touch upon life in America, but also place a part of her book in Houston, given that she is now living there and feels confident about capturing the flavour of Houston in her book. Through this context, she encapsulates the experiences of the diasporic in an alien land and also captures the opposing emotions that go with it, though she does not dwell on this aspect too much. Bela, on landing in America, finds the anonymity it gives her and the modernity in the culture enticing,

She threw her arms around him the way she never could have done in Kolkata and kissed him on the mouth. No one catcalled. No one harassed them or took umbrage or even noticed, except for an old man who offered them a pensive smile. When she had enough breath to speak again, Bela said to Sanjay, "I think I'm going to be happy in America. (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 92)

However, after this initial euphoria has passed, as Tara records, while speaking about her mother,

When my mother first moved from India to Northern California, she felt dreadfully alone. One winter day when my father was at work, she walked to a park and sat on a bench, just to get away from the dark, empty apartment. A storm started, but she didn't move. (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 60)

Like her character Bela, Divakaruni opines that she too finds immigration, the physical crossing of borders, both transformative and terrifying. Consequently, she reflects upon how distance from the land and people, one has, often out of choice, left behind, makes one value those experiences and reconsider them, in a fresh light. As she recounts, in her interview (2016), at Google, "Immigration made me a writer, when I was in my culture, I didn't think about it." She however admits that being away from the culture made her "appreciate it, have questions about it, miss it, recreate it, write to understand it for myself," based on "what I was seeing around me".

This sense of loss and appreciation is also experienced by her protagonist Bela, with time and as a result of her inability to even visit her mother, due to the approach of her husband Sanjay (who hates her mother Sabitri and is unwilling to forgive her, due to the comment she made on meeting him and appointing a person to watch over Bela, so that she wouldn't meet Sanjay) and given that Bela has not come on legal papers, which might result in her not being able to return to America. Her longing for India and all that she has left behind thus keeps growing

stronger and takes root within her, resulting in her attempt to convince her mother appearing as a projection of the need to convince herself,

Dear Mother, I'm very sorry to tell you that I'm canceling my trip to India. I know you were really looking forward to it, and to seeing Tara for the first time, and so was I. But Sanjay absolutely refuses to let us go. Yesterday we had a huge fight over it. He claims that it's not safe. He's afraid that since he and I both left India with documents that weren't exactly legal, I might be detained, and Tara along with me. He's also afraid that certain parties might find out that we're coming and harm us, since he'd been on their hit list before he escaped. I'm not sure if any of this is true, but since he feels so strongly, I've decided not to argue any more about it, at least for now. (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 77)

Divakaruni accounts for the value of this past and heritage, for most diasporics, in the light also of “what [do] we pass on to our future generations... especially if we live in a different cultural space”. She however also states that “the heritage we give them should be appropriate to their environment”. This forms a subtle, yet important, theme, explored from different angles, in *Before We Visit the Goddess*. A visiting professor, Dr. Venkatachalapathi, whom Tara escorts around, to visit the Meenakshi Temple in America, as per his express wish, or rather that of his wife, himself goes through a gamut of emotions and experiences, in its context. When the temple appears before him, after their long journey, he finds,

The temple was an architectural disappointment, thought Dr. Venkatachalapathi, another valiant but doomed attempt by the immigrant community to re-create the Indian experience. This could never compare to the original Meenakshi Amman Kovil of Madurai, fourteen sculpted gates rising twenty stories tall. The energy inside that sanctum, born of centuries of chanted prayers – how could you hope to re-create that in this flat landscape dotted with strange trees, on the wrong side of the black waters? (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 127)

What is alluring however is that, as he decides to enter the temple, his perspective reflects an understanding of how the culture needs to adapt to suit the times and environment. Even when Tara shies away from entering the temple because of her appearance and the manner in which she is dressed, he asks her to come along, requesting her only to remove her eyebrow piercing and offering her a shawl to cover herself. He however mentions to her a couple of small things that they need to do ‘Before We Visit the Goddess’. Moreover, when Tara gets curiously involved in the prayers, he is offering, in the memory of his daughter - Meena, he decides to offer prayers (*archana*) also for her. Aware that the priest will not offer the prayer, without knowing Tara’s birth star, Dr. Venkatachalapathi tells the priest that Tara is a member of his family and asks the priest to offer prayers accordingly. The priest, though he does not really believe what Dr. Venkatachalapathi is saying,

given that he is merely an employee of the temple, goes ahead and offers the prayer.

What further adds complexity to the exploration of theme of the approach to heritage is that Tara, who prides herself on being an American and has groomed herself like a typical young American girl, with spiky hair, piercings on her eyebrow and the middle of her tongue, is yet not allowed to forget her lineage, by one of her only friends and colleague Blanca, who insists that Tara should connect with the Indian community, even if she has never been to India and does not desire to own up to her (Indian) 'identity'

She hands me a crumpled copy of the Indo-Houston Mirror. "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. (Banerjee Divakaruni, 2016: 50)

In all, what the book explores at length and in diverse ways is the notion of identity, as perceived by the self and others; home, as imagined and experienced by the self and others and borders as drawn by the self and others, within or without, seeking to question whether or not these are actual constructs or then creations of the mind. For, after all, as Divakaruni herself remarks, in an Interview at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, "Home for me is a very amorphous and shifting concept. America is my home in one special way – India is my home in another... Ultimately, though, as I grow older, I feel one's true home is internal, kind of a spiritual locale".

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