

Indian Migrants in America: A Study of Isolation and Approval in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

ANANTAKUMARBANERJEE

Abstract. Chitralekha Banerjee (29 July 1956), well known as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American novelist, poet, essayist and the professor of creative writing program at the university of Houston. Born and brought up in Calcutta and later moving on to the United States for her higher studies, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni became very much interested in pursuits concerning women. As a first-generation Diaspora, her capability of extraction of the transculturalism – a collective form of the social integration keeping cultural distinctiveness, is harmonized aesthetically with her concern of Indian cultural heritage, of immigrant encounters of isolation and of approval in the multicultural perspectives. This paper aims to seek the cause of cultural and sociological domination, adaptation, and amalgamation in the different ethnic groups due to spatial migration from home land to the land of unknown identity of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni herself and its reflection on her *Before we Visit The Goddess* (2016) - a story of intergenerational saga that urge to portray the crises in the psychological state of the female characters of three generations who might have been designed by the novelist to display the replica of the sweet remembrances of the novelist herself about Indian culture, history, myths, food habits, religious practices and society which are purely rooted in Indian soil.

Keywords : Diaspora; isolation; transculturalism; adaptation; integration.

Chitralekha Banerjee (29 July 1956), well known as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American novelist, poet essayist and the Professor of Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. Born and brought up in Calcutta and later moving on to the United States for her higher studies, Chirtra Banerjee became much interested in pursuits concerning women. As a first-generation Diaspora, her own capability of adaptation to American life of multicultural, multilingual, and multi-professional aspects as well as her marriage with Murthy Divakaruni – a man of mixed culture of South Indian tradition and American culture, having a complete opposite professional identity and experiences, have been aesthetically well proportioned in her literary depictions. She took

Received : 14th June, 2023; Accepted : 23rd June, 2023

primary initiative to work with the Afghani women refugees, women from the shattered families. Her engagement with MAITRI- a help line for the domestically distressed South Asian women in USA, founded in 1991, has provided us the necessary impression about her concern for breaking up the traditional and stereotype feminine virtues, establishing an individual and independent identity. Indian cultural and ancestral heritage in transcultural perspectives and immigrant encounters of isolation and approval in multicultural perspectives have been well harmonized in her works. Her excellence soars as a creative writer with the publication of her first novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), followed by *Sister of My Heart* (1997). Her other major novels include *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *Palace of Illusion* (2008), *One Amazing Things* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2015), and *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016). All these novels are concerned with the predominant proposition for immigration, Diaspora (Temporal Diaspora and Spatial Diaspora), history, myths and cultural diversities along with an integration of major social issues that are prevalent in the contemporary society. Her novels, based on Indian migrants (women) settled in America and their challenges and compromises with the hybridized situation in the new land, are the representations of the undercurrent reflection of her own way of becoming an artist of Diaspora Literature, getting transformed from a lady of typical Bengali (Kolkata) culture to an individual identity of trans-culture.

“Tender, bitterness, beautifully wrought tales about love and longings, exile and loneliness. I was reminded of the songs of separation sung by Bhojpuri Women: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni discovers new nuances in the “biraha” that creeps into the lives of migrants,” wrote Amitav Ghosh, in his words of praise for *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016). This is a novel in stories that has taken its shape through the projection of female characters of inter-generations like Durga, Sabitr Bela and Tara. Interestingly, the characters of Durga, Sabitri and Tara have been named after mythological characters of great power, strength, and courage which are symbolically accorded with those characters along with Bela. As story of three pairs of relationship- two pairs of mothers and daughters, and a pair of grandmother and granddaughter, it “captures the gorgeous complexity of these multigenerational and transcontinental bonds, sweeping across the twentieth and twenty – first centuries from the countryside of Bengal, India, to the street of Houston, Texas – an extraordinary journey told through a sparkling symphony of male and female voices” (*Before* [back of the cover page]). Chitra Banerjee’s own experiences of immigrant isolation and approval have become the fuel to

the fire of her presentation of the struggles, crises, desires, and compromises with the time, space, and circumstances of the major mother figures of the novel. Here different dimensions of inter-relationship of the obstinate mothers and their difficult daughters have been framed out.

Before We Visit the Goddess unfolds the story of events of the lives, challenges, compromises with different situations of the major characters Sabitri, Bela and Tara. They are interconnected to one another through Grandmother, Mother, and Daughter relationship, though Sabitri and Tara are spatially distanced from each other. Even their scope of communication is nebulous. In spite of being a minor character, Sabitri's mother Durga's initiatives in her life; innovative power of making different sweets for the dessert are waved as the inherited qualities to her later generations whose lives at the time of different crises, find its invisible supports that uplift their status from an average to an individual and an independent identity. Sabitri is a daughter of a poverty-ridden sweet maker, named Durga. Sabitri's great wisdom in her life is to attain college education and to be teacher. In spite of being "stood first in the matric exams in the Girls School"(6), the poor financial condition of her family becomes the main obstacle in the way of her soaring. Finally, her dream comes to be true, when Leelamoyi "who lived in Kolkata and only visited the village under duress during festival time, was known to have a Sharpe tongue, unpredictable moods and elevated notion of her own importance" (5), takes her responsibility to be stayed in their home in Kolkata and of the necessary financial support of her study though the monthly stipend is "barely enough to pay her fees and her tram fare" (90). Sabitri's love affair with Rajib – son of Leelamoyi, for which she loses her place from "Mittir of Shyambazer", her marriage at the temple of "Kalighat" with Bijan – the Maths professor of her college; Bela's birth and upbringing, and her shifting with her husband Bijan who has become the "new manager of National Oil (Assam Branch)" (36) are all incidental in Sabitri's life. Her married life – full of sufficiency and aristocracy; unexpected meeting with Rajib, and his kissing of her hands, Bela's innocent revelation to Bijan about the unwanted exchange of passion between Sabitri and Rajib; their Assam Life, and Bela's accident; Bijan's reckless drunkard life and death, and finally Bela's elopement with Sanjoy to America, giving up her college are all accidental that have changed Sabitri's life. Bela's life in America becomes too much. She has to struggle with the changed situation with lot of financial crises even after her three years of her married life. So that her adjustment with "long hours she put

in at Tiny Treasure Child Care” (95), makes her tired of both mentally and physically. She feels that she could do nothing for Sanjay without proper education. When she is pregnant, she misses her mother’s care which is usually provided to a conceived woman by her own mother in India. After her divorce, she starts to write blogs and books on Indian recipes which find its fulfillment with her initiative of writing “Bela’s Kitchen” (154) - a blog on Indian cooking that promotes her own identity. Finally, Tara, after her parent’s divorce, leads an indisciplined life of multiple relationships. She becomes a drug addict and engages herself with many odd works, dropping out from her college education. Tara’s meeting with Dr. Venkatachalpathi, makes her way in the real destination. Dr. Venkatachalpathi influences her to renew her college education. Finally, she attains a good life.

This story of intergeneration is based on isolation and adaptation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has stated here an affirmative disposition about the transmission of cultural fluidity through the projections of different layers of crises among the three generations. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has presented Sabitri’s feeling of alienation, and her continuous struggle to adjust with her ever changing situations that comprise primarily her early life in her native village as ‘Sabi’ - the daughter of a village sweet maker; her suffocated life in Mittirs of Shambazar in Kolkata (22) as sweet maker daughter - the charity case under patronage of Leelamoyi who is considered as the Rani Ma, her passionate days of love with Rajiv as Tri in the terrace of the Mittir house. In the second phases of her life, we find her as a wife of a high profiled corporate person; as a mother of Bela, and finally as the Durga Sweet’s owner, an individual identity. This journey of her identical transformations attains different kinds of socially, and culturally isolated dimensions; approvals with different ethnic groups across India – from a village near Porabazer Station to Kolkata; from Kolkata to Assam, and then Kolkata. In Kolkata, she comes across with an aristocratic culture of hierarchical status of the Mittir family, having a gatekeeper with “lathi on the paved driveway” (7), Sarkar Moshai, the Mittir’s manager, Paro - Leelamoyi’s favorite maid servant along with a different food culture. Their preferences for the special dessert that she has made out of Rosogollas - the soft round balls, floating in syrup that had “exploded into Hundred pieces” (12), tea with “crisp kachoris, stuffed with spicy green peas” (18) at the time of playing “Twenty-Nine”, “the aroma of dishes being cooked for the Mittirs – jackfruits curry, mutton korma, biryani” have made “her stomach ached with the longing to be included”

(10). After her marriage with Bijan in Kolkata, she meets a distinct culture of sophistications and a “Westernized habit” of putting on a “thin cotton night-chemise which “showed off her figure” (23). But her experiences in Assam where Bijan has been assigned as the new manager of the National Oil (Assam Branch) are corporate in culture. She has to go to the club as it is the part of Bijan’s responsibility to attend the official gatherings, despite their lack of conjugal interconnections that force her to be accustomed only because of Bela. The novel has picturized the cyclic rotation of Sabitri’s life that has become the bridge between ancestral heritage and the transcultural changing status of multicultural perspectives in the life of Tara – her granddaughter.

“Diaspora refers especially to the movement – forced or voluntary of the people from one or more nation – states to another. The flow of goods and capital across national boundaries” (Jayaram, 3). Bela is represented here as the women of the two nations - a victimized immigrant with rootless feelings. She experiences different intra-cultures in India and cross cultures in America. Early stage of her life in Kolkata avails herself a life of ever cared child of her parents. Her father Bijan even wishes her to give a trip to the “Grand Hotel for ice cream and then Zoo” (*Before We Visit the Goddess*, 30). But she leads an isolated life in Assam and she “guesses that Assam, too, has its rules, but no one has taken the trouble to tell her what they are” (34). She has been in Assam for three months and “each time her parents go somewhere, she’s certain that she’ll never see them again. There is no one to whom she can confess this new timidity” (36). As responsible parents, when they return, how late it is, they come to her room. Bela’s only company is the Ayah and her stories of “Worse things” (36). Even in the school, “she is friendless among the local schoolgirls” (40) who whisper in Assamese when she comes to them. Even “the teachers, with their heavy Assamese-tinged English, narrow their eyes at her” (40). Her father’s higher official position and the language become the main barrier that abstains herself from her free association with other culture that causes a crisis. Some time she misses Leena, once her best friend in Kolkata. Her nostalgia relates to her days in their “charming high-rise flat near Deshapriya park” in Kolkata, her playing “hopscotch with her friends after school” (40), and her memory of the Victoria Memorial. Here Bela’s depressed mind creates a dreamy association with the magician, “perhaps it was a hypnotist” (146) with whom she shares alien state of her mind. This magical state in reality causes an accident by falling “from the swing and hit her head” (146) and she remains sick. From that part, her life takes another turn.

They come back to Kolkata again. But this re-association with the Kolkata culture; her father's sudden death in an accident; her mother's struggle to bring up her; her mother's effort to establish Durga Sweet that had been important to her mother only because it was a means of providing Bela with all she needed are all her challenging assimilations with changing circumstances. But Bela's sudden elopement leaving her native city Kolkata in search of her true love Sanjay – a political immigrant who has already eloped to America; her struggle in the new land of geography, culture, and life style; her regrets for her mother, and her maternal love, make her haunted with the cross-cultural fusion and association that cause a psychological dilemma. Bela's separation with her husband for which she is blamed by her daughter Tara, makes her life crucial, and she is addicted to alcohol. But in such a tempestuous condition, her friendship with Kenneth, a transcultural friendship, has given a soothing touch in her tottered mind. Bela's acculture capabilities, and her concern for ancestral heritages have been harmonized by her feminine sensibility, overcoming all racial and cultural obstacles.

The character of Tara - a second generation diaspora of Indian ancestry, but born and brought up in America, is a complicated one whose life not only consists of losing of the uprooting previous culture, but also builds a status to be incorporated with the created idea of consequent new cultural phantasm in multicultural perspectives. Her fierce longings to be an independent and an individual one; her imbalanced and irregular life style, and the discarded relationship with her parents are the evident of her neo-cultural formation. She undergoes a series of odd jobs and maintains many love relationships, but her strong craving for self-identity brings nothing but a gloomy loneliness. But her sudden acquaintance with Dr. Venkatachalpathi as a father figure before they visit the Goddess Meenakshi, and the letter that Sabitri has written, conveying her own life of struggle as woman, obeying Indian ancestral heritage have acquainted Tara with her root and native cultural traditions that bring a shower of consolation and peace in her scorched and distracted mind of American multicultural soil.

The problems related to diaspora, transculturalism and multiculturalism generate a besting impact on the three characters of intergeneration. It is significant to note that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has projected, analyzed and dissected these problems – the see-saw movement of mind between and among the concepts, concerned with what is diasporic, transnational, and multicultural from the point of view of female sensibility, and psychic condition. The realization of the

problems on part of the novelist is convincing, although at times it may create some kind of healthy and scholastic debates.

Ananta Kumar Banerjee

Research Scholar
Dept. of English
Seacom Skills University
Kendradangal, Bolpur
Birbhum, West Bengal

Works Cited

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Before We Visit the Goddess*. UK : Simon & Schuster 2016.
- Jayaram, N. "Introduction: The Study of Indian Diaspora." *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*, edited by N. Jayaram, New Delhi : Sage Publication, 2004.

