



## **EMPOWERED MIGRATION: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF OPTIMISM IN DIVAKARUNI'S *BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian- American writer. She is a very notable diasporic writer. She has received American Book Award for her short story collection, Arranged Marriage. Her novels are greatly influencing amidst Indian and Indian- American readers. Mostly, all of her works are set in India and America. Struggles and experiences of south Asian immigrants are focused in her works. She has written in multiple forms of literature, such as poetry, short story and novels. She writes not only for adults but also for children. Her creativity and versatility would be felt in her novels. Each novel of Divakaruni would be unique in its own way. She has written both realistic and unrealistic fictions. The Last Queen (2021) is her attempt on historical fiction. Her usage of magical realism in her novel, Mistress of Spices (1997) is tremendous. Her extraordinary works, The Palace of Illusions: A Novel (2008) and The Forest of Enchantments (2019) are the renditions of Hindu epics, The Mahabharata and The Ramayana. She voices out the victimization of women through her novels and also she shows a light of hope for them. Her novels are set in way which direct a path of success to the immigrant women readers from their struggles. This article mainly focuses on the struggles on female characters of the novel, Before We Visit the Goddess and further highlights their acceptance of reality in an optimistic manner.*

**Key Words:** Immigrants, Women, Reality, Optimism, Struggles

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## INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian- American writer, who was born in India and migrated to America. As an immigrant she can easily understand the problems faced by other migrated women. She expresses the plight of immigrants of different generations as well. In her novel, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni emphasizes the challenges faced by three generations of women. She focusses on the issues of diaspora such as cultural imbalance, identity crisis and nostalgia along with the other basic factors of migration like discrimination, fear of new land and new culture, security, financial and social conditions. Unlike other diaspora writers, she writes to bring some positive solutions to the migrants' problems. She portrays strong female protagonists who would undergo challenging situations and find a positive way out through those characters she motivates her readers and immigrant women across the globe. This paper aims to express the complexity and eternal bond of mothers and daughters in *Before We Visit the Goddess*.

*Before We Visit the Goddess* is a remarkable work of Divakaruni. It projects three generations of women and their life experiences. The female protagonists of the novel, Sabitri, Bela, and Tara, represent immigrants of different generations. Sabitri never left India before but her daughter Bela, goes to America to marry her political refugee boyfriend, who found escape in America. Bela's daughter is born in America and never visited India. She never wants to have Indian identity because she feels that she is no way related to India. She feels that she is completely uprooted from..... This novel projects three female characters with their different life experiences but the important aspect which connects them in the novel is rootedness of the motherland. Divakaruni with her extraordinary story telling abilities weave all the elements of diaspora, cultural conflicts, mother-daughter relationships, family system, women education, and financial distress. Divakaruni voices out the problems of immigrant women through her novels. Her female characters face various challenging situations and always find hope in life.

In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Sabitri, Bela and Tara are the major characters. Sabitri is an elderly woman, who never left India. It is hard for her to move few miles away from her hometown. Sabitri was once sent to Kolkata for higher studies with Leelamoyi, a wealthy landlady. Sabitri finds it very difficult to move from her hometown. Her mother Durga was a poor sweet maker. Durga wishes her daughter to be educated. Durga was working in Mittir's house, a rich family in the village. Initially, Sabitri was discouraged to pursue her studies by Leelamoyi, Mittir's wife. Later Sabitri went to Kolkata to pursue her studies, stayed with Leelamoyi. She lived with Leelamoyi's servants, they considered her as a burden and one of the favorite servants of Leelamoyi saw her as rival. Sabitri prepared a very delicious sweet for Leelamoyi's guests. Leelamoyi started enjoying Sabitri's company. Sabitri spends a lot of time after her college and she got silk sarees from Leelamoyi as present. Sabitri turns the challenges into opportunities of development.



On the other hand, Sabitri developed a relationship with Rajiv, Leelamoyi's son. Leelamoyi came to know of their late night conversations in terrace, she has thrown Sabitri out of the house in the midnight. Sabitri was disappointed and betrayed. She found shelter in boy's hostel, next to Leelamoyi's house. Her Math professor, Bijan took her to his house. Sabitri understood Rajiv married a rich man's daughter. Sabitri was greatly disappointed and gradually accepted the reality and she agreed to marry Bijan. He insisted her to continue her studies but she refused. She kept on asking her husband to earn a lot, expecting luxurious life. Sabitri lived a happy life. She wanted to show Leelamoyi that she was happily married and had a daughter, because she came to know that Leelamoyi had become widow and didn't have grandchildren also. Sabitri wants to make Leelamoyi, who betrayed her, feel jealous about her successful life. But she was not recognized by Leelamoyi, instead she was called by her mother's name, Durga. This made Sabitri feel guilty. On her way back to home she met Rajiv and found him as a failure too.

Sarojin lost her son and in few years she lost her husband also. These loses devastated her life. She lived for her daughter Bela, and was conscious about her studies. After her mother's death, Sabitri started a sweet stall, 'Durga Sweets', named after her mother. She grew financially stronger and independent. Bibin Bihari joined her sweet stall. He proposed her to marry him she agreed to be his friend forever. She concentrated completely on her sweet stall business. Thus she has changed all her sufferings into success. She began her life as daughter of Durga, the sweet maker. She realized that her identity is from her mother Durga, a sweet maker. She expresses that, through these words, ""She died when I was in Assam, Sabitri was saying. " I couldn't even be at her deathbed, I was so tangled in my own troubles then. But through Durga Sweets I'll make her into a household name in Kolkata." (87, BWVG)

Bela, was the only daughter of Sabitri and Bijan. She had an illusion, where she found a magician who often visible to her and called her to go with him. She kept this as a secret of her life. Bela spent most of her in alone as her mother focused much in her business. She was in love with Sanjay, her senior in college. He was an active member in a political communist party. Sabitri advised him to leave Bela and focus on studies. Sanjay was involved in a political riot, he was about to find refuge in America. Bela went away with him without her mother's knowledge. Bishwanath Bathuri, Sanjay's friend gave shelter to them in America. She was just 19 years old by the time. She did not completed her studies.

She was not able to adapt in the new country. To meet the financial needs, she worked in a day care as care taker for four years. Bishu-da was more than a friend, parent-like to Sanjay. Bishu-da was a good uncle for Tara as well. He took care of Bela, when she was pregnant. Bela wanted to be with her mother, but Sanjay didn't allow her to go to India. She doesn't like Bishu-da as he took most of Sanjay's love and attention. They gave half of their house to a family for money and the tenants were not cooperative with them. Sanjay and Bishu-da poisoned their tenant's pet. The tenants threatened Bela in supermarket. She didn't like



Sanjay's approach towards their tenants. So, she pretended that Bishu-da was having a relationship with her. Sanjay was disappointed and arranged a job for Bishu-da and sent him very far. After Bishu-da's death in few years, Sanjay received his insurance savings and he found no grief in Bela on Bishu-da's death. Sanjay understood Bela has deceived him. He was waiting for a right moment to take revenge upon Bela. He waited until Tara manages on her own without her parents' support then he divorced Bela.

Bela suffered a lot after her divorce. Her daughter Tara, dropped out of college and doing some odd jobs in America. Bela lived all alone in America without enough financial support. She sometimes stayed hunger. She met Kenneth, her neighbor who became her best companion. He recommended her to take up a job in Lance's grocery shop. But his partner Lance was not happy about their relationship. Ken and Bela had their dinner together. She shared about her to him except some important life secrets. Ken did not reveal her that he is a gay. He suggested her to start a blog, 'Bela's Kitchen'. He said, "You could start with a blog. I write one for our bookstore. It isn't difficult. I'll set it up for you. You can call it Bela's Kitchen". (151, BWVG). She had a motherly relationship with him.

Finally, Bela and Tara reunited. She lived happily with her daughter's family. Divakaruni brought a positive solution for Bela's problems. Though Bela left India and settled in America, Indian culture and tradition reflected every activity. Bela always wanted herself to be connected with her motherland. She always tried either to go to India or to bring her mother to America but all her efforts failed. She was once a good dancer but she stopped dancing after her marriage, she danced for Ken. In her blog, she brought all Indian recipes. She wanted her mother Sabitri to advise her daughter Tara on her decision to quit studies, though Sabitri had not seen Tara. Thus Bela always held her Indian identity.

Tara was portrayed as the first generation immigrant. She had no connection with India other than it was her ancestors' land. Tara discontinued her studies and was doing some odd jobs. She was informed about her parents' divorce in her favorite restaurant by her father. Sanjay was betrayed by Bela already and he was postponing his divorce for Tara, thinking that his decision would spoil Tara's education. However this separation of her parents caused Tara's discontinuation from studies. Sanjay had appointed an investigator to guide her to know her whereabouts. He provided financial assistance as well but Tara never cashed any of his cheques. Tara was betrayed in a relationship. She had her abortion too. Her life was full of disappointments, betrayal, and failures. She called her mother over phone after her abortion as she wanted to be with her mother but Ken attended her call, by then she understood that her mother had moved on after her divorce and Tara didn't want to disturb her mother thereafter. Though there was a slight disappointment in her, she did not hate her mother for that and she accepted her mother as she was.



Tara never wanted to reveal her Indian identity but in some situations, she was unwillingly accepted her Indian background and completed her duties well. One such situation made her to be the care-taker of an old Indian woman. She hesitated to accept the offer later she took good care of the woman. Again when Tara was working as a car driver, she was asked to take an Indian, Dr. Venkatachalapathy to Meenakshi Temple in America. Though she unwillingly accepted the task, she had a mysterious experience out of it. The car Tara had driven, with Dr. V met with an accident. He was reminded of his daughter Meena, who had died already. Tara was also sharing her life experience with that stranger. Thus Tara turned her poor situations into a positive one.

Dr. V invited Tara to the temple, where Tara had never thought of visiting. She also accepted his invite. He offered her a white shawl as her costume was not appropriate to wear inside the temple. The visit to the Goddess, the strange vibration, smell of holy ashes, and the ringing bells were strange for her. But still she experienced a familiarity in it. Divakaruni had attempted to connect a string between generations. Tara understands the importance of Indian culture and tradition. This had brought a turning point in her life. Tara accepted her mother and realized her mother's struggle to bring her up. Bela got her leg fractured and Tara took care of her. Unlike Sanjay, Tara's husband was also in good terms with Bela. Tara was Kleptomaniac. She was fired from job many a time due to her habit of stealing.

At the end of the novel, Tara had stolen her grandmother's photograph from her mother's album. She wanted to overcome this problem so, she went to keep it back in the album. She was caught by Bela. Bela accused Tara for stealing. Tara was hurt and she blamed her mother pointing all her mistakes out. Bela defended herself. Later both of them understood their mistakes and discussed positively on them. This part of the novel cleared many of the untouched issues, and hidden secrets. Tara recognized her Indian identity and found solution for all her problems. Divakaruni had brought a positive conclusion to the novel in a logical and a possible way. The author always tries to provide positive solutions to the issues of diaspora. This novel, *Before We Visit is the Goddess* is also a fine instance. The letter from Sabitri to her granddaughter had got the solution. It said, "... *This was something I had achieved 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*". (208, BWVG). Sabitri advised Bela and Tara to be independent which was necessary for all the women in the society.

People migrate to different places due to two basic factors namely, Push factor and Pull factor. Unfavorable circumstances prevail in the homeland would lead to migration. People of a country may not feel comfortable in their homeland due to undesirable political and climatic conditions, disease, financial crisis, and less job opportunities, they seek best opportunities to grow outside their country, they push themselves out of their homeland to find better life opportunities. This is known as push factors. On the other hand, people may

find attractive job opportunities, financial stability and desirable lifestyle in a foreign land. This could be a reason for their migration. In this novel, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Bela did not have desirable situation to live with her mother in India. Bela knew that her mother would not accept her love with Sanjay. Sabitri had appointed a security to stand in front of Bela's classroom to watch her whereabouts. Bela grew alone because, after her father's death her mother had to focus on her sweet stall business. She had lived her life mostly in loneliness. Moreover, her boyfriend Sanjay, whom she considered her only solace from loneliness, was in a trouble. He was supposed to move to America. She understood that Sanjay would not come to India again, so she determined to go with him. Bela's social and love life pushed her to migrate to America. Whereas Tara, who was born in America, never thought of leaving the country. She had got a lot of job opportunities in the land though she drop her studies. Her grandmother Sabitri who lived in India also died, so she didn't have any reason to go to India thereafter. Her visit to Meenakshi Temple located in the U.S. had connected her ancestral land and the newfound land. She was satisfied with her identity and that redeemed her from all the problems.

Migration occur based on above mentioned push and pull factors. The present generation immigrants would not blame on their situation rather they accept the reality. Instead of finding similarities and dissimilarities and thinking over their identity, they agree to the situation and look for betterment. Divakaruni's novels never fail to express the reality she proved that identity can never be a complaint or defect rather it could be a positive aspect of an individual.

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