



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

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ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

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S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



### Metamorphosis of Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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#### Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an accomplished and prominent writer in the realm of Indian writers of diaspora. She has been included in the enlist of 'Twenty Most Influential Global Indian Women' by the *Economic Times* in 2015. Her fictions are mostly based on India and United States. Her works exemplify on women's inner feelings and sensibilities and the clash between old and new values. She portrays the characters transformation to search their identity in the alien land. This paper highlights the women characters in both the novels *Oleander Girl* and *Before We Visit the Goddess* on the process of transformation while facing the problems and challenges in their life

**Key words:** accomplished, prominent, exemplify, sensibilities, transformation, alien land

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#### Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a celebrity Indian American author in the era of the twentieth century Literature. She vitalizes in her novels the immigrant women's primitive way of life in the host land as they are firmly rooted in tradition. She says,

So much of my writing was a response to imagination and being far away from my culture that really made me want to write about India. If I did become a writer in India, surely I would have written about other things. I do work with Indian women. I have several students right now at the University of Houston who are Indian or Indian American or South Asian. (Interview; Ranjan)

Her novel *Oleander Girl* (2013) reveals the story of the protagonist Korobi, an eighteen years old girl orphan at birth has been brought up by her grandparents Bimal Roy and Sarojini. *Before*



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*We Visit the Goddess* (2016) depicts the life of three women, grandmother Sabitri, her daughter Bela and her daughter Tara. The story unfolds with Sabitri writing a letter to her grand-daughter Tara in U.S emphasising her to continue her studies as Bela insists her mother to advise her. Divakaruni in both the novels exhibit the changes in the female characters to adopt in the worldly life.

The grandmother characters in both the novels picture the life of the Indian women. Simon de Beauvoir says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex* 295). Divakaruni exposes the woman attaining womanhood in both the novels. The grandmother Sarojini in *Oleander Girl* is a submissive wife to her husband. Korobi, the grand-daughter of Bimal Prasad Roy and Sarojini pursues her education at a boarding school to enhance her education and raise her discipline. Her grandfather is an advocate to whom Korobi is intensely attached. He is a disciplined man and decision maker of the family. Korobi meets Rajat Bose, the Scion of Barua and Bose Art galleries in a birthday party where Rajat admires her are accentuated by his words. “The way you’ve grown up, orphaned at birth, hidden away in some mountain valley, and now guarded in that ancient beautiful mansion by your ogre of a grandfather-why, just listening to you was like entering a fairy tale!” (*Oleander Girl* 17).

Korobi’s grandfather accepts their wishes and their engagement are arranged. Korobi’s grandfather is deceased after the eve and her docile grandmother reveals the truth about her father living in America. She encloses the fact that the grandfather has made her promise in front of the goddess never to confess the truth to the granddaughter. Her grandmother is subordinated by the adamant nature of her grandfather. Divakaruni breaks the silence of the women characters which gives strength to their determination to face the problems in life. Sarojini breaks her silence after the death of her husband for the sake of her granddaughter.

Divakaruni in her novels explores the harsh realities of life and the self-anguish of the characters when their liberty, love and longing are distorted. She in the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* represents grandmother Sabitri as the daughter of a poor sweet seller who wishes to go to college and her aim is to become a teacher. She in order to pursue her education starts to live in



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Leelamoys' house, the upper cast Brahmin woman who shifted her life from the village to city. She works there, "She woke early and heavy-eyed and rushed to the kitchen to prepare desserts: mihidana and malpua, pithay made from sweet potatoes, fried and dipped in thick syrup. Leelamoy's friends loved them" (*Before We Visit the Goddess* 46). Chitra Banerjee presents that Indian women show their affection through the choice of food. Sabitri falls in love with Rajiv, the son of Leelamoy who has been forced to do the Medical course to handle the family business, a hospital. Leelamoy deserts her when she knows the love affair and Rajiv does not support her.

She is helpless and Bijan, the Maths professor a kind hearted person gives shelter to her. She fabricates her past to him and with fortitude she marries him. She bears two children Bela and Harsha comforting a sophisticated life with her husband. Her life turns in to gloominess at the death of their son Harsha due to dengue fever when he is two years old and when her husband faces the accidental death in a refinery fire in Assam. She claims legal rights with the company for compensation which helps her to start "Durga Sweets" a sweet shop in the name of her mother at Kolkata to lead a new life with their daughter Bela. Bela feels as her mother is occupied with sweet shop she lacks care for her. Sabitri shares her secret life with her granddaughter Tara whom she has never seen in her life to scrutinize the values in her experience. Divakaruni portrays Sabitri as a bold and courageous woman as she struggles to carve her own identity.

Divakaruni through the daughter characters, Anu and Bela in both the novels depicts the plight of existence of the life of immigrants. Sarojini's daughter Anu in the novel *Oleander Girl* is sponsored scholarship to study at the University of California in Berkeley. Her father agrees to send her after she makes promise before the Goddess that she would not marry without his permission. Anu's love affair with Rob an American provokes Bimal Roy to abandon her. Anu returns to India after six months with her pregnancy to see her parents. She wishes to have the baby in America but her father persuades her to stay with them. The critical situation evokes an argument between them in which Anu missteps down the stairs.



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She dies giving birth to her premature child in the hospital. Bimal Roy sends Sarojini and the child to the village home and he creates a fake story as Anu's husband is a law student in America who dies in a car accident. The secret of Korobi's parentage is known only to Bimal Roy which fades away as days passed on. Sarojini confesses the truth to her granddaughter, consoles her by saying only affection makes them to deceive her. Sarojini is dreadful to react against the wish of her husband even though she is desolated from her daughter. Beena Agarwal says,

In her novels, Chitra Banerjee distinctively acknowledges that women in spite of their cultural awareness and commitment to nationality and religion retains her autonomy for self-realization, self-affirmation and a candid confession of her female sexuality and female desires. It is a pure state of female consciousness that is beyond the domain of history, religion, geography and the accepted paradigm of culture. (*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A New Voice in Indian English Fiction* 211)

Sabitri's daughter Bela in *Before We Visit the Goddess* loves Sanjay, who is the student leader of the communist party CPI (M). She deserts her mother and moves to America with fake papers to meet Sanjay. Sanjay discontinues his studies as police searches him as he is a member of Naxal party. He leaves to America with the forging paper which is created by his childhood friend Bishu. Bela feels Bishu as a rival in her love as Sanjay is dependent on Bishu for all his needs. Her strategy to raise Sanjay out of Bishu's influence makes her to present as well-loved to Bishu generating a jealous feeling to Sanjay. Sanjay's anonymous letter causes suspension for Bishu's current job in California. Bishu dies within two years after he settled with another job in Utah. Bela is not able to meet her mother after her life with Sanjay because of his illegal practices.

Sanjay divorces Bela after twenty-one years of married life as he feels he is betrayed her by separating Bishu from their family. Kenneth is empathetic to Bela when she is abandoned by her husband and daughter. Bela calls Sabitri for help when Tara drops out of the college to contend the dangers of life without education to her. She is the first



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generation immigrant who strives for her identity. Bela like her mother occur culinary skills which enables her to write some popular Cook Books to achieve financial profitability by creating her own blog 'Bela's kitchen'.

Divakaruni portrays the granddaughter characters Korobi and Tara in different aspects. Korobi who is brought up in a traditional way frees from the bondage of convention and takes bold decision in her life. Tara the second generation immigrant undergoes different phases to create an identity for herself. Bharati says

Chitra Banerjee's treatment of feminism is different in the senses that her protagonists are generally not rebellious in nature; rather they suffer only to learn how to face the harsh realities of life. Each character rises to the occasion by asserting her individuality, choosing to live her own life and overcoming strange and difficult circumstances and finally emerges as a victor. They make the best what they can of their life. When they have a chance they struggle and discover happiness and at other times they settle for whatever best they can do, rather than stagnate under male suppression. (*Diaspora Allegiance Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction 152*)

The granddaughter Korobi in *Oleander Girl* faces the shocking truth of her origin. She is firm to reveal the truth to her fiancé and his mother. She makes a fierce decision to search her father in America by her own self. Rajat feels discomfort to investigate her father's heritage as it may incur to scandal before the wedding. Korobi asks him, "You want me to go through my whole life with my in laws pretending that my father is dead? Why? Are you ashamed of who I am." (*Oleander Girl 73*) Korobi is strong in her determination and travels to America avoiding the suggestions of Rajat. She is panic in the Kennedy Airport as Mitra is late nearly half an hour to pick her up. Seema, wife of Mitra indulges her to dwell in an alien land. Desai, the detective and Vic his nephew helps her to overcome the hurdles and disappointments in searching her father. She sells her hair when she craves for money. She changes her traditional life and be courageous to proactively seek truth. She identifies her father is Robin Lacey a Black American



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with the help of Mrs. Anand her mother's roommate. When she meets him she learns that she is the illegitimate child as her mother hesitates to marry him due to the vow he made to her father.

Her father visits India in search of the family and hears the message of the death of Anu and her child and returns with a death certificate and ashes. He is married and lives with three children and believes Korobi to be his daughter only by her name as it is Anu's choice. Korobi feels that her marriage would not be accepted by the Indian Bengali family because of her identity. She restricts her relationship with Vic and the basic convention and values imbibed in her makes her to return to India. She conveys the truth to Rajat's family who are accustomed to social status and family name but they accept Korobi for her simplicity and courage. Korobi enables to balance between tradition and modernity decides to stay in her ancestral house after her marriage with Rajat. Her grandmother thinks at the marriage of Korobi

Look now at our granddaughter, strong and beautiful. She has travelled the world and chosen to come back home. Perhaps her mother would have, too, if we had let her. See her land in the hand of her husband. He, too has travelled, gone astay, swung back. (*Oleander Girl* 284)

The granddaughter Tara in *Before We Visit the Goddess* who is more compatible and warm with her father is shattered by the divorce of her parents. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through the character Tara represents the various dimensions of cultural displacement. She discontinues her studies and detaches from her mother. She undergoes various jobs such as janitress and driver and shuffles the job when caught while stealing the things. She believes as things are snatched from her life which tends her to steal things and throw away. Tara loves her boyfriend Robert intensely but soon discovers him with a girl in his apartment when she arrives unexpectedly. She is desolated by her lover and induces abortion. Tara says her dejection in life,

Dad coming up to campus my very first semester and taking me out for dinner to my favourite restaurant and telling me that he and mom were getting a divorce. Or Robert, my real boyfriend, and the day I came home unexpectedly and found him in bed with another woman. (*Before We Visit the Goddess* 123)



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She desperately calls her mother in the critical situation but hearing Kenneth's voice she tacitly decides another male is in her life. She continues her studies after she faces an accident and settles in her life with a suitable husband Gary. She gives birth to her son Neel who changes her world and she thinks her misplaced reminiscence. Her husband takes effort to reunite with her mother and Dr. Berger, her therapist also wishes the same.

Sabitri's letter completes with these words and she dies in a cardiac arrest.

....My happiest moment would come much later. One day, in the kitchen at the bank of the store. I held in my hand a new recipe I had perfected, the sweet I would go on to name after my dead mother. I took a bite of the conch-shaped desert, the palest, most elegant mango color. The smooth creamy flavour of fruit and milk, sugar and saffron mingled and melted on my tongue. Satisfaction overwhelmed me. This was something I had achieved by myself, without having to depend on anyone. No one would take it away. That's what I want for you my Tara, my Bela, That's what it really means to fortunate lamp. (*Before We Visit the Goddess* 208)

BipinBihari posts the letter to the University of Tara but she is able to read it only after she settles in her life. Tara from the letter is familiar about her grandmother ultimately and her relationship with her mother is resolved. Her grandmother insists on to create an identity without the dependence of others.

### Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni pictures in her novels the self-transformation of her characters to reinvent their identity. Women's suffering in their lives remains as the seed of resistance increasing a new identity. NandiniBhadra says about the Asian American writers as they selected for study are women who

live a hybrid life in an in-between zone, a threshold space where identity is endlessly constructed and tell stories of men/women with hyphenated identities,



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divided fissured selves, and the worlds they challenge are almost exclusively male dominated (*Locating Asian American Women Writers in the Diaspora* 23).

Sarojini who lives under the shadow of her husband changes when she realizes that she has to be responsible for the household matters and supports Korobi in all her wishes even to sell her gorgeous dowry pieces for the need of money to go to America. Anu's life turns to be a failure as she is subjugated by her father in her desire to live a modern independent life. Korobi a sensitive and modest woman passes through different stages in life and transforms into a courageous, determined and independent woman prepared to overcome all challenges in life. Sabitri transmogrifies into a strengthened woman as a young widow and creates an identity as the proprietor of 'Durga Sweets'. Her daughter Bela who is bonded with her husband emerges into a liberated individual and acquires financial security independently by her cook books and running her own blog 'Bela's Kitchen'. Tara changes after the birth of her son Neel and she rectifies her life which she has misplaced in the past with the help of her husband. Divakaruni in both the novels *Oleander Girl* and *Before We Visit the Goddess* portrays the female characters metamorphosis to survive in the world and finally create an identity.

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