



Nostalgia, Home and Belonging: A Diasporic Reading of *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

This paper "Nostalgia, Home and Belonging: A Diasporic Reading of Before We Visit the Goddess by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" examines the major theoretical approaches to the diaspora, as well as the concept of home and belonging and nostalgia. This novel revolves around the lives of three generations of women Sabitri, Bela, and Tara, and their strong bond even after getting apart from each other. Their lives are filled with pathos, pain, dreams, desires, and alienated belongingness. It focuses on the resistance these women confront generation after generation. The paper also explores the role of nostalgia in diasporic and its role in creating the sense of home and belonging in the characters.

Keywords: Belongingness, Diaspora, Home, and Nostalgia.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a diasporic writer. Born in India, Kolkata, and currently resides in Houston. She has written several novels such as *Mistress of Spices*, *Before we Visit the Goddess*, *Arranged Marriage*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *Palace of Illusion*, *One amazing Thing*, etc., her fictions have been translated into 29 languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian, Bengali, Turkish and Japanese. Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* was made into an English film, the novel *Sister of My Heart* was made into a Tamil TV serial, a short story, "The Word Love," from the collection *Arranged Marriage*, was made into a bilingual short.

Before We Visit the Goddess is a story of the migration and dislocation of Bela, daughter of Sabitri and mother of Tara. One can notice the loneliness, longing, and nostalgia in the life of Bela who lives in the United States with her husband Sanjay and daughter Tara. Bela's mother Sabitri's life is also filled with loneliness and nostalgia about living in India. Sabitri is not happy with Bela's elopement with Sanjay and marrying him and the further movement to the US with him. The story begins with Sabitri, the grandmother writing a letter to her granddaughter about not quitting her education. Through her letter, she narrates the untold stories of her life. The story also ends with Tara reading the letter written by her grandmother.



This paper focuses on the idea of nostalgia, home, and belonging by analyzing the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Boym's representation of nostalgia suits the best to explain the emotions of the characters in the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Boym's presentation helps in understanding an individual. The two types of Nostalgia according to Boym are:

1. Restorative Nostalgia
2. Reflective Nostalgia

"Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (Boym 42). Restorative Nostalgia is going back to the past or the memories of home by recreating the memories of home and longing. Restoring the past gives a great relief.

"Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (Boym 42). This type of nostalgia lingers on materials like the ruins of the past. It centers on longing and made to accept that past is past. It does not rebuild the home, this type of nostalgia is aware of the gap in between the identity and resemblance.

These distinctions can be analyzed in the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Divakaruni. The character Sabitri is a daughter of a poor baker in rural Bengal. She longs to get educated but it is an impossible mission for her because of her family's economic condition. But fortunately, she gets to study as a rich lady who comes forward to sponsor her studies. But this lasts longer as she falls in love with the rich lady's son Ravi, this incident changed her whole life. She is forbidden and at last, she is taken care of by her professor and ended up marrying him as he wishes to marry her. Her trouble doesn't stop by then, it continued throughout her life. She loses her husband and son in a fire accident and has been left stranded. She decides to return to the parental home and runs a sweet stall in her mother's name in her remembrance. She now lives in rural Bengal and is reminded of her past and gets great relief that she gets the same identity as her mother. She says that: "She died when I was in Assam. I could not even be at her deathbed; I was so tangled in my trouble then. But through Durga sweets, I'll make her into a household name in Kolkata" (Divakaruni, 87).

Analyzing the different kinds of nostalgia by Svetlana Boym, the character Sabitri is a perfect example of "Restorative Nostalgia". She longs to have a sweet stall as her mother had; she returns to her native and sets up a sweet stall in the name of her mother in her remembrance. Thus restoring the past gives her great relief.

The second and third Generation women; Sabitri's daughter Bela and Sabitri's granddaughter Tara are perfect examples of "Reflective Nostalgia". After Sabitri's death, both Bela and Tara read the letter along with the photo written by Sabitri. She narrates her life incidents in the letter. Tara likes the photo of her grandmother and wishes to keep it for herself as her remembrance but Bela doesn't approve of it. But somehow she manages to take the photo without knowing Bela, but she finds it out.

"What is in your hand"

I offer up the photo, feeling much like a four-year-old caught with my hand in the cookie jar.



My mother stares at it, then at me, anger replacing the surprise on her face
Were you taking it? After I had told you, no? Taking my mother's picture, which
would have given me a little comfort in that mausoleum? (203)

The photo remains to be the only heirloom for both Bela and Sabitri; they wanted to have that photo in the memory of Sabitri. They both do not want to return to India as they have adapted to fit themselves in the alien country even though they do not have a very good job. They have learned to survive by doing petty jobs to fill in their stomachs.

Analyzing the forms of nostalgia; the characters are pretty well developed to convey their nostalgia as well the problem they faced in their life. The author takes characters from rural Bengal to modern life in America. Tara is the exact opposite of her grandmother as Tara looks backward and the previous generations like Sabitri and Bela look forward to betterment in their life. Tara dreams differently. The following passage from the letter written by Sabitri to Tara shows how Sabitri looks forward to the world; "*Granddaughter, people look down on a woman without education. She has a few options. To survive, she is forced to put up with ill-treatment. She must depend on the kindness of strangers, an unsure thing. I do not want that for you—*" (8).

The nostalgia of multi-generational women in the novel is brought out beautifully by the author throughout the novel through various incidents. Nostalgia, home, and belonging is an important tool in diasporic writing. The Svetlana Boym forms of nostalgia aim on nostalgia as an individual's emotions. Thus the author has brought out the Nostalgia, home, and belonging in her novel through the characters and the incidents.

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