

Transcultural Encounters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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ABSTRACT:

The term transculturalism was introduced in the 1940s and has been discussed further by philosophers, sociologists and cultural theorists. Transculturalism is a combination of elements of more than one culture. It is the emergence of new cultural forms accompanying globalization, a consequence of culturally diverse populations in countries like the United States of America, Canada, etc. Transculturalism occurs in situations where people of diverse cultural backgrounds meet, communicate and interact with each other. It also provides a cultural learning environment where individuals might acquire new skills and knowledge. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer who focuses on identity crisis, globalization, transculturalism, transnationalism and rootlessness of the immigrants. The aim of the paper is to examine the transcultural encounters in Divakaruni's novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* and the ways in which these aspects head towards the construction of new identities. The novel depicts the complexities of the transcultural identities, especially of the second-generation immigrants and the life of the South Asian immigrant women settled in the United States of America.

Keywords: transculturalism, diaspora, psychology, immigration, culture, sociology.

Transcultural citizens take in the best of the cultures, the native and the adopted. They try to negotiate with the new culture acquired by the amalgamation of two cultures. The immigrants from Asia who have settled down in the United States of America are perfect examples of transculturalism. After assimilating into American culture, they even make negotiations in their own culture and also try to incorporate their traditional aspects into the American culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer who focuses on identity crisis, globalization, transculturalism, transnationalism and rootlessness of the immigrants. Divakaruni, also being an immigrant, was caught between two cultures. Cultural conflicts, identity crisis and searching for roots are important themes in her works. Divakaruni's fictions depict the complexities of the transcultural identities, especially of the second generation immigrants and the life of the South Asian immigrant women settled in the United States of America. The second generation immigrants here refer to the children of Indian expatriates who are born in America. Brar comments about these second generation immigrants as:

The role of these subsequent generations is central to the discussion of continually changing sensibilities of diasporic community. These generations suffer from double marginalization- first because of their ethnicity, and secondly due to generational

differences. They become a sub-minority within a minority in the multiethnic, multicultural world of the West. (Brar 213)

The second-generation immigrants have to face the challenges posed by their ethnic cultural roots as well as try to assimilate into the host country. The wrench of both the cultures creates a cultural conflict and they struggle between the home and the host culture.

Transculturalism involves various cultural combinations, associations and intricacies in the formation of a new culture. It unifies various cultures and brings it together to form a new culture which is common. Members of a common cultural group share the same system of values and beliefs. But when they are exposed to different cultural experiences, these multiple cultural experiences integrate into the person's identity. They have the ability to speak two languages fluently and behave accordingly in two different cultural surroundings. They can identify themselves with both the cultures as they have been brought up under the exposure of the two cultures. Sometimes this effect can give rise to new cultural forms often referred to as transculturalism. The term transculturalism was introduced in the 1940s; it is a combination of elements of more than one culture. It is the emergence of new cultural forms accompanying globalization, a consequence of culturally diverse

populations in countries like the United States of America, Canada, etc.

Before We Visit the Goddess is a novel with characters from different cultural backgrounds and the characters undergo cultural transformation which leads to the construction of new transcultural identities. It is a novel about the lives of three generations of women and it analyses the bond shared among these three women, Sabitri the grandmother, her daughter Bela and Tara, the daughter of Bela. The novel spans over a period of sixty years in India and America and brings out the inter-generational conflicts very well. Bela is the daughter of Sabitri who is the owner of a sweet shop, Durga Sweets. Bela falls in love with Sanjay, a young political refugee and elopes with him to America. Sanjay fails to support her as a husband and conflict rises between them. After the birth of their daughter, Tara, Sanjay walks out leaving both of them alone. Bela feels alienated in the foreign land with the new born child, deprived of support to survive and bring up Tara. Tara grows up causing many conflicts between her and her mother, Bela. She refuses to listen to Bela and decides to quit college just after her first semester. Bela calls Sabitri for help when Tara decides to quit her college education. Bela requests her mother to write to Tara and advise her to continue her education.

After dropping out of school, Tara starts working part-time in University Transportation. Yvonne, her supervisor thought that she is the right person as an Indian to accompany the professor, Dr. Venkatachalapathi to the temple and drop him at the airport after that. He is shocked at the first sight of Tara in the hotel lobby and even wishes that he need not be associated with her, “an Indian woman with spiky dyed hair and a ring through her eyebrow (and a stud, he would discover, all too soon, pinned to the centre of her tongue) was far worse” (121). Her dressing style is far from being an Indian but she looks like an Indian and she would stand for an example of a transcultural person. Transculturalism is a cultural development which surpasses the boundaries of traditional, racial and national cultures transcending the limitations of the traditional notion of culture. Tara, born and brought up in America always wishes to stay away from her community get-togethers fearing clashes. Sabitri shares her life experiences with Tara in the letter which she writes to her. Sabitri could not

afford for a college education in Kolkata for which she stays as a servant in Leelamoyi’s house. Presently, her grand-daughter Tara lives in America and is fortunate enough to get education but she decides to quit it. Bela discontinues her studies and flew to America following her boyfriend, planning to get married there after which she could not continue her studies. Sabitri writes in the letter to Tara how important education is in a woman’s life and how it would help her to be independent.

Tara’s life changes after her chance meeting with Dr. Venkatachalapathi. According to Dr. V, that is how she calls him, she reminds him of Meena, his dead daughter who was of the same age as Tara. But Tara looks very different, “What kind of Indian family, even in America, would produce such a hybrid?” (124) wonders Dr. V. He observes Tara,

She was a puzzle, with her Indian features and Texan boots, her defiant piercings, the skin stretched thin across her cheekbones and crumpled under the eyes. And that spiky hair, now fallen limp as a child’s over her forehead. He had read somewhere that it was a style that lesbians affected” (124).

Initially she does not like to be associated with an Indian as she does not think of herself as an Indian. She accompanies Dr.V to the temple reluctantly because she has never visited a temple before that. But when she steps into the temple she is beaten up by a scent which seems very familiar to her, “A mix of crushed flowers, incense, and a woody odour which I’ll discover is holy ash- it’s strangely familiar” (125). She was born and brought up in America, but she can feel her connection with the temple. Dr. V introduces the divine goddess family to Tara, goddess with her husband, brother and the animals they ride on. She learns about the goddess with interest and curiosity though she could not remember the names. She removes the ring on her eyebrow before she enters the temple and covers herself with a shawl around which she gets from Dr. V’s suitcase. She is curious about the rituals performed in the temple as the Indianness is within her and it starts to peek out once she steps into the temple. Dr. V offers to give her name for the archana but he is worried that she is not aware of her birth chart, “how would you know who you really were? Adrift in the universe, how would you navigate

your life?" (128). Probably she could not progress in her life because of the lack of knowledge about who she is and where she belongs.

Tara's identity issues are similar to that of Rakhi's in *Queen of Dreams* in which Rakhi believes that she is an American being born and brought up there but still there are situations which questions her identity as an American, she describes her Indian features, "It's familiar and yet, suddenly, alien" (271). She feels as an outsider to the country where she was born and brought up, as well as to her home country. Tara feels the same in the temple when she could read from the priest's eyes that she does not belong there. The chanting of the priest, the smell of the holy temple and the archana performed create interest and curiosity in Tara's mind, "I thought about how they'd wandered through the centuries until they found their way here, to America, to be recited for me" (129). Dr. V influences Tara's life to a great extent and guides her to continue her studies. Before entering the temple, Dr. V informs Tara that they have to remove their shoes and clean their legs, "Before we visit the goddess, we must cleanse ourselves" (135). She cleanses her mind of her previous sins and after the temple visit she starts a new life. He instigates in her the interest for Indian cultural values. The smell which is "strangely familiar" (125) would have a lasting effect and would be remembered throughout her life. This confirms that the Indian values she had imbibed stays with her along with the American cultural values with which she was brought up. She decides to continue her studies and keep the past out of her life.

Bela Dewan shows her transculturality by her willingness to transcend cultural boundaries and accept tinges of another culture. It is very easy for her to create bond and friendship with people of different culture and it needs some effort to form such transcultural relationship. Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* also a similar character, her kindness helps her to form friendship with people of the other cultures as transculturality enables a person to oversee the cultural differences and enjoy the common characteristics they have. Food is a cultural metaphor as the female immigrants emphasize their presence in the foreign land through their cooking competency. Bela shows her competence in cooking in America by starting cooking demonstrations and a blog to expose her

culinary skills thereby creating her own identity in America. She is concerned about the authenticity of the food as well and try to make it suitable for her American customers also.

The narration shifts between present and past as Divakaruni uses the stream of consciousness technique to narrate the stories of the three women who belong to three different generations. The difficulties faced by all the three women in the novel are different and there are inter-generational conflicts as well as intercultural conflicts.

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