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Weaving Narratives across Generations in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Queen of Dreams and Before We Visit the Goddess*

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Abstract:

Diasporic writing began as an attempt to express an immigrant's predicament as he lands in an alien land. Migration whether forced or voluntary resulted in emanating a feeling of dislocation, ambivalence, alienation, confusion as they face discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language etc. By and large, diasporic writers have attempted to speculate as well as portray the enigma of being an outsider. The problem of settlement was indeed prominent in the first generation immigrants who had both the memory and desire of their homeland they had left behind for whatever reason. The writer captures this fractured and hyphenated identity, the challenge of retaining his culture even if symbolically in the alien land. This paper focuses on the use of stories, letters, journals etc as the first generation immigrants weave narratives to connect with the second generation immigrants thereby filling the vacuums in their life.

Keywords: dislocation, ambivalence, alienation, narratives.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a writer who writes immensely about the trajectory of the immigrants, the trauma of being in exile. Herself being a first generation immigrant and moreover a woman between cultures and traditions, her short stories and novels are fueled with her own experiences. All her books explore the problems and adjustment issues of the immigrants. She is mainly interested in the lives of the second generation immigrants as she states in an interview: "Jhumpa Lahiri and I share an interest in the lives of the second generation- the children of Indian ancestry who are born in America. How do they relate to India? How are they different from their parents? What happens when they make the reverse journey back to the country of their origin?" (academic.oup.com). The difference between her and other diasporic writers lies in her exploration of magic realism in her novels. She has a deep

rooted sense of belief in the ancient Indian epics and folktales and she makes immense use of these narratives in her writings in terms of style, theme and technique and this is what lends an exotic touch to all her writings no wonder she has been projected as a writer who depicts exotic India. She explains in an interview: "that perhaps comes out of my own personal background where my grandfather was a great oral storyteller....He told us stories out of our epics and out of our fairy tales and folktales. I think I have thus developed a great love for the epic stories, and the folktale tradition. I have tried to weave much of it into my work, often in a modern context."(academic.oup.com). She offers this age old Indian tradition to her characters as a panacea to all their immigrant problems as total Americanization seems impossible. In fact, her novels offer to give a message to all immigrants that proper settlement is only possible if we hold our roots tight. In this process of reclamation of roots she finally builds up a tradition through stories, letters, myths and journals thereby regenerating the Indian narrative tradition. The present paper attempts to analyze the use of letters, stories, dream journals and mythsetc. as a means to create an identity and the necessity to hold native tradition in an effort to come to terms with the new homeland.

The paper will focus on her two novels: "Queen of Dreams" and "Before we Visit the Goddess" deal with the problems of immigrants. In both the novels Divakaruni ventures to weave a tradition through grandmother, mother and daughter with the help of letters, stories and journals. Earlier when the indentured labourers were sent on exile, they missed their culture, therefore, during their second visit they took their women along with them. Indian women took basil plants as a symbol of culture. Chitra Banerjee does the same in her novels. Her women characters remain connected to one another and try to come to bridge the gap between the two worlds. In 'Queen of Dreams' there is Mrs Gupta, her daughter Rakhi and Jona, the granddaughter. Rakhi is able to control the chaos around her through her mother's dream journals. In 'Before We Visit the Goddess' again we have three women representing three generations; Sabitri, the grandmother, Bela the mother and Tara, the granddaughter. Divakaruni is an expert at exploring the intricacies of mother daughter relationship and she beautifully weaves the love hate relationship between them. Both the novels exhibit minute nuances and complications of such relationships. In "Before We Visit the Goddess", Bela always turns to her mother whenever she is in trouble and finally the letters written by Sabitri save Tara, her granddaughter.

Uma Parameswaran observes at one place, "...every immigrant transplants part of his native land in the new country...."(Pg.137-138). This applies to the characters in Divakaruni's novels as well. In the Queen of Dreams, Mrs. Gupta as described by her daughter is 'secretive, stubborn and reliable' (pg.8) uses her talent of interpreting the dreams in order to survive in America. Mrs. Gupta is quite similar to Tilo of Divakaruni's another novel The Mistress of Spices. Tilo uses spices to cure people and Mrs. Gupta has her dreams to heal the troubling souls. Her aunt had given sand in a pouch while she was on her way to America telling her that she would need it in America. This sand helps her to remain in contact with her land of birth. It is able to relieve her of that feeling of rootlessness which otherwise would have been very painful. This is her own way to adjust in the adopted land. She hardly interacts with people but is able to relieve strangers coming from different places within nothing common among them. Similarly in "Before We Visit the Goddess" Bela's gift of cooking saves her when she is on the verge of collapsing. Rakhhi's father is not only able to reconcile with her daughter but also manages to create a space that celebrates multiculturalism in its own way. Divakaruni seems to suggest that the only possible way to adjust in the host country is by retaining the essence of the native tradition while assimilating the alien culture. The relationship of Rakhi with her parents and Tara with her mother Bela also elucidates the characteristic difference between the first generation and second generation immigrants.

Mrs. Gupta wants her daughter to identify with this new land. She does not want her to go through that sense of incompleteness which is felt by the most of the immigrants. That is why, she deliberately avoids talking of India, but this makes Rakhi more curious about India. What Mrs. Gupta fails to see is the difference which is visible everywhere outside her home. Rakhi can feel this difference all the while when she is at school or at her friend's place, it's very much prominent and unavoidable. Rakhi's alienation operates at two levels: both at home and the outside world. She has no idea of India, a land addressed as home by her parents. Her parents though fond of India never talk much about it. Her mother has her own life and mysteries about which Rakhi has no clue. She feels different when she goes to the school. She is quite curious about India: "I would have preferred the stories to have come from India, where she grew up, a land that seemed to me to be shaded with unending mystery."(p4). Her desire for this homeland is reflected in her paintings where she has drawn Indian market scenes, temples, cityscapes, bus drivers at lunch all that she could gather from the photographs. She often finds herself too much

an American and longs to know about India. It's only later that Mrs. Gupta realizes her fault. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni emphasizes the need to hold on one's root if one has to survive in an alien land. When Mrs. Gupta tells Rakhi that she should introduce something authentic to save her restaurant that it isn't a real cha shop, and that it's a "westerner's notion of what's Indian"(89) Rakhi confronts her furiously: "And whose fault is it if I don't know who I am? If I have a warped western sense of what's Indian?"(89) Mrs. Gupta accepts her fault and her predicament is emblematic of all those Immigrants who are at loss when it comes to the upbringing of their children in a foreign land: "I thought it would protect you if I didn't talk about the past. That way you wouldn't be constantly looking back, hankering, like so many immigrants do. I didn't want to be like those other mothers, splitting you between here and there... But by not telling you about India as it really was I made it into something far bigger.... It pressed upon your brain like a tumour. (p89) We generally find these two set of characters in Divakaruni's fiction: those like Rakhi, who wish to savour every memory of their homeland and the ones like Belle (Balwant Kaur) who wishes to scrape off every inch of their desiness. Belle doesn't want to go to her parents as she hates the kind of life they live. She dresses up like a true American as it makes her feel liberated. Rakhi craves to know about India. After the accidental death of Mrs. Gupta Rakhi finds her dream journals, these journals open the doors to all the mysteries of Rakhi's life. It's a kind of retrieval process where she not only retrieves her chai house but also her relationships. The Chai House is transformed into 'chaer doken' as it would be called in kolkata. That's how they plan to put a soul into it. As pointed out by the author this is the only way to survive; by sticking on to their authentic culture only the can combat such commercial ventures as Jawa. Earlier in the novel death has been said to be a beginning and later Mrs. Gupta's death not only redeems her but also serves to loosen several other knots: "Death ends things, but it can be a beginning too. A chance to gain back what you have botched...." (p3).So Mrs. Gupta's deathrevives the relationship between Rakhi and her father and also her relationship with her husband.

Unlike many of her contemporaries Divakaruni feels connected to the land of her birth. She has an entire tradition of native folklore, mythologies, memories and stories at her back which she brings out through her writings. She is fond of lending that native aura to her writings. Whether it be 'Queen of Dreams' or Before 'We Visit the Goddess', she never misses the chance to create an authentic Bengali culture. May be this is her way to deal with the dilemma of being

an immigrant. In the ‘Queen of Dreams’, Rakhi who has always wanted to know India gets acquainted with India after her mother’s death. The dream journals fill all the gaps and the stories of her father complete the process of reclaiming the past. They have provided her something she had been wanting all her life; her mother’s past life, her secrets, her mother’s relationship with her father etc. Her father helps her in reading the journals by translating them to restart her business. Finally her mother’s dream journal avail her all that she had lacking. The diet busters are replaced with “pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana” (p165)and the chai house is transformed into Kurma House; a name chosen by Rakhi’s father. The novel addresses the issues of commercialization and that it can only be combated through originality. Rakhi’s mother had suggested her to introduce something authentically Indian and her father helps her in creating the same. When she discusses about Java, her competitor her father comments: “We’re about to do something totally different, something she can’t match. You just watch, beti” (p184) Kurma House with its Indian dishes, real cha and humble environment becomes a cultural space that fills the vacuum in the life of the immigrants. It is not only food but also music that provides them that homely warmth they have been harping for so long. Rakhi’s father sings song from Bollywood movies for a group of Indians (mostly first generation immigrants) who visit Kurma House every evening. During that time they forget everything: “For them what happened in this shop isn’t a performance but a ceremony, something they were part of.”(p194)Gradually the group is joined by people belonging to different races: Afro-American, south Asian etc. They bring different musical instruments with them and finally they are able “to find something they thought they would never find in America.”(p196) Rakhi finally understands what her mother had meant by authentic: “You can succeed if only you do something different create a special attraction, something that means more to people than money.” (p46) Rakhi along with her father had succeeded in creating an oasis something no other place could match. That is why, when there is fire in Kurma House, customers help to restore it. Soon the place is filled with a Tibetan ball, a Persian rug, an African mask and so on. These are ordinary things but they are precious to their owners as they “carried them all the way to this country from their past lives.” (p240) and again when it is raised to the ground in post 9/11 riots, they come to help and stand by the owners. There is an unspoken bonding they share that helps them retain their identity amongst all odds. All her life Rakhi’s

mother had deprived her of her own roots but maybe she realized that this was the only way to survive. With this new gained knowledge Rakhi is able to put her disheveled life in order.

In "Before We Visit the Goddess" Sabitri shares a hyphenated relationship with her granddaughter Tara. She has no clue to the kind of life Tara lives thousands of miles away from her. For her Tara remains the small shy girl of the photograph sent to her by Bela long time back. Tara on the other hand feels a vacuum in her life as she has no clue to her parents past life. She knows nothing about her roots. This vacuum in her life makes her steal things wherever she happens to work. She is married and a mother still she fails to understand the cause of this disease. But she has never spoken about it to anyone. She even takes therapy for curing herself. But again the real therapy is achieved when she gets to read the letter of her grandmother written for her before she finally left the world. Sabitri had been asked by her daughter Bela to counsel her granddaughter Tara who was about to leave her studies in the middle. (Again a characteristic Indian behaviour of going to mother when the circumstances fail the efforts). Sabitri's own life has been quite challenging, from a small village to establishing Durga Sweets, she had steered ahead quite bravely. One can say that she is an adept survivor. So when she is asked to advise her granddaughter, she could do so only by narrating her own experiences as a daughter, a wife and a mother. Divakaruni again establishes the tradition of mother and grandmother narrative as a closed unit. Sabitri knows the feeling of alienation. She had also lived as an outsider Mitra's mansion. Her life there at the Mitra's was quite analogous to an immigrant's predicament: "It took her sometime to understand her complicated position in the household's hierarchy: neither servant nor master..... Her stomach ached with the longing to be assimilated."(p10) Like all her female protagonists Sabitri too is made of stern stuff. She never gives up in the face of adverse circumstances. The advice she finally gives to her granddaughter is quite similar to the one given to Rakhi by Mrs. Gupta. She tells her to find something that is her own: "...I held in my hand a new recipe I had perfected, the sweet I would go on to name after my dead mother....The smooth creamy flavor melted on my tongue....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 fortunate lamp."(p32) Sabitri had taken recourse to her mother's art of sweet making in the hour of need. Bela does the same quite late in her life. But unlike Sabitri, Bela had failed to pass on that legacy to her daughter. Bela had managed to survive in America as she could discuss with her mother thereby maintaining that

cultural link which is indispensable for survival in an alien land. Her mother's death and her divorce leave her stranded and finally she manages to save herself through cooking (something she learnt from her mother).

The novel addresses the issues of dislocation, rootlessness, alienation as well as illegal migration and its consequences. Sanjay and Bela's predicament is emblematic of the troublesome situation of the illegal immigrants who land in America hoping to lead a blissful life. They have to struggle for even minor things. Bela's loneliness is more painful because she had been leading better life in Kolkata. America didn't prove to be land of promise in her case; she had to take a menial job at Tiny Treasures Child Care. She hated the job: "...the endless diaper changing and vomit cleaning.... Then came the household chores. Cart the groceries back from Lucky's, three blocks away. Lug the laundry down on the ground floor. Lug it up again. Sweep and mop the pocked linoleum floor that refused to look clean..." (p95) Moreover, the constant intrusion of Bishu da, Sanjay's friend hampers her view of perfect world. She contrives a plan to get rid of him. Sanjay realizes the truth and divorces her as soon as Tara is old enough to handle herself. This leaves Bela heartbroken, she becomes addicted and is on the verge of destroying herself when her neighbour saves and helps her to stand for herself. Her cookery books get her success, satisfaction and identity, something she had craved so far. She was trained by Sabitri and finally it's her mother's training that saves her in an alien land. But Tara is deprived of this connection as she never got a chance to know India and her people. This emptiness gets more prominent after the divorce of her parents. She ends up becoming a kleptomaniac. That is why, when she finds Sabitri's photograph and a letter addressed to her, she gets infuriated: "I could have known this woman, visited her, loved her and been loved in return. I might have been able to turn to her when everything in my life started to go wrong. Perhaps things would have ended up differently then. My mother kept me from all that." (p.197) Bela had failed to provide Tara that warmth, care and protection which Sabitri had given her unasked for. But the letter from Sabitri fills the vacuum in her life. The letter connects her to her roots.

Divakaruni has adopted this vision in her writings. All her novels carry characteristic imprint of Indian culture and tradition. She reinvents them to reclaim her past and offers the same to her readers. In the 'Queen of Dreams' she uses 'Brihat Swapna Sarita' the dreams are inserted in the real time frame which lends a touch of magic realism to the novel. In Before We Visit the Goddess also there is a touch of magic realism. Earlier also she has used such narratives

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to bestow an authentic Indian touch to her stories. This is how she addresses the feelings of alienation, dislocation and rootlessness experienced by the immigrants for so long.

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