

Polyphonic Narratives and the Rediscovery of Memory: Exploring the Postmodern Storytelling in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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Abstract

The paper deploys interpretative frameworks emanating from postmodernist, feminist and cultural theories and memory studies to explore the possibility of emergence of new paradigms in *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2016). The novel charts the chequered trajectories of three generations of women—Sabitri, Bela and Tara, who find their comfort not in closures but instead in learning the nuances of inherited memories. The tales re-told through multiple vantage points penetrate through different temporal and spatial dimensions and generate interesting subversive and empowering avenues to navigate the paradoxes of experiential realities. Consequently, the protagonists are compelled to interrogate their positionality in the dizzying world of transnational migration and cultural globalisation and also vis-à-vis each other. The introspection also makes them discover that their greatest strength lies in intergenerational bonds and enriching the emotional ecosystems that they inhabit.

Keywords: Memory studies, diaspora, postmodernism, fragmented narratives, inter-generational trauma.

Memory studies provide a significant conceptual framework for analysing diasporic postmodern feminist texts as these narratives explore inter-generational trauma, fractured identities and self-alienation experienced by women while traversing through the contradictions of their native

identities and transcontinental encounters. For diasporic women, memory transmogrifies into an act of subversion as personal recollections pose a challenge to hegemonic narratives. Postmodern storytelling's focus on ambiguous timelines reinforces the fragmented interiorities of diasporic consciousness by drawing attention to how the past manifests itself in the present through retrospections. Consequently, the very act of remembering becomes a political tool through which agency can be conceptualised outside the conventionally celebrated patriarchal frameworks and nationalist rationales. Memory offers diasporic women an opportunity to re-configure their intermediate status—neither completely tethered to the native land nor the host country, while privileging their lived experiences. This carries a powerful implication that the self is always in a state of becoming, always in negotiation with the social-cultural and politico-economic contexts. In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2016) deploys disjointed narratives to reflect on the ruptured identities of three generations of women: Sabitri, Bela and Tara, who struggle to make sense of themselves in a society characterised by a whirlwind of shifting perspectives; blurring the line between the past, present and future and experiencing every lived reality through a curious mix of nostalgia and reluctance.

In the novel, memory is refashioned as a dynamic process rather than as an immutable past, mirroring the chaotic diasporic existence and emotional miscommunication. The constant back and forth across time and space subtly suggests that subjectivity and memory can only be retrieved through multiplicity and retelling. By drawing attention to the postmodern narrative techniques, memory studies and feminist and cultural theories, I would like to explore the possibility of emergence of new paradigms in the ruptured narratives. These frameworks find their resolutions not in closures but gravitate towards connections which are eventually posited as an immense source of comfort and resilience. They also challenge the nuances of experiential realities of patriarchies across different generations and continents. The multiple tales allegorically stand not only for the interpenetration of different spatial dimensions but also contribute to the intensification of presentness as the supposedly distinct worlds dissolve into each other—sometimes seamlessly, at other times with abrupt disjunction.

Before We Visit the Goddess charts the character arcs of three generations of women—Sabitri, who is anchored in Bengal; Bela, who is mentally

torn between India and the US and Tara who feels lost and confused in the US. Their journeys reveal their inextricably interlinked lives of hope and despair, precarity and fortitude. The deployment of fragmented narratives and disrupted chronologies to lay bare their inner turmoil, dovetails with the dislocation, cultural anxiety, identity crisis and ruptured memories experienced by them. Divakaruni approaches the novel through postmodern storytelling but situates it within the framework of diasporic, feminist sensibility. Memory, in its multi-faceted versions—personal, familial and cultural, provides a mechanism for formation of subjectivities, inter-generational transmission and silence.

By building upon significant theoretical insights such as Paul Ricoeur's (1992) "narrative identity," Marianne Hirsch's (1997) "postmemory" and Linda Hutcheon's (1988) "postmodern poetics," I would like to explore the novel as a repository of women's pasts where memory functions as a means of continuity, resilience and renewal. Memory Studies demonstrate that remembering the past is not merely a passive phenomenon; instead it is characterised by an active reconstruction. Ricoeur's concept of "narrative identity" argues that people make sense of themselves by sharing their life stories and this very act of narrating reconstitutes memory into a consolidated entity. In the novel, the absence of chronological linearity debunks the hankering after the conventional narrative closure and replaces it with savouring the interconnectedness among the three female protagonists.

Multiple focalisations and temporal loops ensure that every voice in the novel echoes and contours another. The novel's framework—stories within stories, letters, flashbacks, dialogues between the present and the past, constructs an overarching narrative. In fact, the very act of storytelling becomes an act of healing through negotiating the layered dilemmas and successive losses and departures that happen within the site of the 'home' itself. As a consequence, meaning-making happens not through linear progression but through characters and concomitantly, reader's piecing together of the remnants of memories. For example, the novel commences with Sabitri writing a letter to her granddaughter, Tara, whom she has never met despite having a deep yearning to see her. Her familiarity with her granddaughter has been aided only through the photographs that her daughter Bela, has sent her. As a consequence, she makes various attempts to write and finally decides to pen her own experiences that have shaped not only her own life, but inadvertently

also that of Bela's and possibly even Tara's. The act of writing letters makes her re-assess the landmark episodes of her own life from a fresh perspective. She rethinks about the life in rural Bengal, her childhood dream to get education, her romance with her benefactor's son and its tragic end, her marriage, death of her husband and son, her complicated bond with her daughter and the establishment of the Durga Sweets after the name of her mother. Sabitri does not mince words and expresses her feelings frankly when she remarks about her unrequited love for Rajiv and how she would have lived as his mistress because she was so smitten with him—"Granddaughter here is my most terrible secret: even after I had given birth to Bela, I would have done it" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 30). She also does not shy away from mentioning the strategies deployed by her to wield power over her husband, Bijan. Through the act of writing the letter, Sabitri assumes ownership of her memory and transmits it to the next generations like a matrilineal archive, reinforcing Ricoeur's (1992) concept that memory contoured by the power of narrative transforms into identity.

Sabitri's letters to Tara show up sporadically in the novelistic space and function as broken interactions—partly contemplative and partly cautionary. This intermittent correspondence destabilises linear chronology. The reader scrambles to put it together, the inner demons of the characters reverberate across time, making the transference of maternal legacy between mothers and daughters a complex and layered phenomenon. The self-reflexivity and polyphony of the narrative structure assume significance in delineating a mnemonic instability. This goes on to emphasise that remembering events from the past is not a static activity but instead susceptible to distortions and perceptual biases. Fractured spatiality when juxtaposed with the overall narrative impulse adds another layer to characters' bereavement as the constant back and forth movement enhances the sense of dislocation. The shifting vantage points interrupt a singular voice and subvert the centralised source of authorial power. This is in sync with postmodern narratives' resistance towards a monolithic meaning-making. Each woman's story exists partially in isolation and then blends with the other women's stories and the overall narrative framework, reiterating how memory and identity co-exist through incomplete recollections. This is a step towards endorsing the open-endedness of postmodern story-telling. Additionally, the oscillations between first-person and third-person

narration of women's stories, peppered with interior monologues of the peripheral characters such as Bipin Bihari and Sanjay, unsettle the reader's easy comprehension of the text.

Through acts of remembering and forgetting, belongingness is re-worked amidst the chaos accompanied by migration. Divakaruni demonstrates the power of nostalgia to mount an attack on pressure towards cultural assimilation, and foregrounds how diasporic women envisage affiliation through memory rather than geographical rootedness. Therefore, reminiscing about the past becomes a feminist intervention in official histories that relegate women's voices to the peripheries. This brings our attention to another pertinent conceptual framework—feminist memory theorist, Hirsch's (1997) "postmemory" which highlights the concept of intergenerational memory in which posterity vicariously experiences the past through stories, relics, and pictures of the previous generation. Tara has never visited India and her idea of it is shaped by Sabitri, her grandmother's letters that reach her after she has died in Bengal and the traces of culture that Bela, her mother bears in her routine. Tara grows up in Texas but remains connected to India through memory and cultural remnants. Bela also occupies a liminal space. Her abandonment of her mother, elopement to the US has uprooted her from the familiar world of her childhood. But despite geographical distancing, the past lives on through her mother's memories, native recipes and the cultural paraphernalia that has become a part and parcel of her mental make-up. Once Bela flees to America to be with her boyfriend Sanjay, she frantically tries to set up vignettes of a cheerful family. She cooks Indian curries, dresses up in traditional silk sarees and endeavours to create a semblance of the 'home' she has left way back in India. This demonstrates the intergenerational transference of memory among women and how inherited trauma and unrequited desires influence identity formation.

Sabitri, Bela and Tara share a psychic connection built on the unsaid and the unsayable, exhibiting Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" that the second generation may absorb the memories of previous generations without having directly lived those realities themselves. The supposedly domestic spaces like the kitchen are re-invented as they function as mnemonic sites where mundane activities and their remembrances become the avenues for women to re-write the inherited societal scripts. These unfulfilled dreams are recontextualised as a matrilineal storehouse documented through the interplay of gastronomy, emotion and memory

and help the reader understand the moments from different points of view. This feminist refashioning of memory also links it with Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of "hybridity," where identity is constructed in the "in-between" spaces of negotiation as the protagonists challenge the dominant cultural narratives and cull out spaces from the margins to reinvent themselves. Though memory is more than a nostalgic indulgence, it plays a very pronounced dual function in the diasporic context: For Bela and Tara, the past operates both as a foundation and a liability. The novel seems to be suggesting that precarity can arise in multiple contexts, even in the place ostensibly designated as 'home' owing to social disparities, economic pressures or ideological differences (Ahmed et al., 2003, pp. 2-3). This is manifested in Tara's superficial integration in the American culture and her kleptomania is to be read as a byproduct of the questions of her identity that haunt her. Bela tries hard to sever her connections from India after she flees to America but as her life progresses, she finds herself in a perpetual conversation with her mother's memories.

Written in a stream of consciousness style, the novel also stresses that omissions and silences are sometimes voluntary and at times circumstantial. Sabitri, Bela and Tara have skeletons in their closets that they refuse to share with each other. Their wounds fester and regrets assume inordinate proportions as huge gaps hover over their disrupted dialogues with each other. These voids, absences and muted spaces are as significant as what is shared. Ricoeur (2004, p. 414) also argues that forgetting constitutes an important component of experiencing memory in postmodern texts. Eventually, Sabitri, Bela and Tara are compelled to confront their repressed memories and negotiate these discontinuities. Sabitri opens Durga Sweets after her mother's name and the recipes function as the embodiment of her mother's memory. She remembers her mother's teachings and translates them for her daughter and granddaughter so that they can partake in them. When Tara reads her letters, it unleashes a massive change in how she understands her own life. Past takes on an educative role and transmits its lessons.

Before We Visit the Goddess also lends itself to a reading through the framework of Linda Hutcheon's (1988) "postmodern poetics" as her concept of "historiographic metafiction" can be used to understand how migrant women unsettle the phallogentric state and official diasporic accounts. The novel represents gendered histories through kinship

betrayals, unrequited love and misunderstandings. Sabitri's character trajectory challenges the conventionally accepted narrative of success by showing that being anchored does not always signify stasis. Bela's elopement to America highlights that travel is not transcendence and migration can extract an unbearable emotional price. Tara's bildungsroman shows the contradictions of second-generation migrant women. The novel interrogates gendered cultural expectations and stereotypically cherished ideals of femininity in both homeland and host countries. Divakaruni has mobilised the postmodern irony to reveal the paradoxical working of power and scrutinised the ambiguities of diasporic experience. The novel exposes the discursively constructed nature of hybrid identities and the impossibility of stable cultural belonging. Bela runs away to America and desires to escape the emotional baggage of being Sabitri's daughter but ends up replicating her experiences in America. Similarly, Tara does not acknowledge her Indian roots but her eventual catharsis happens only after she confronts her past. For Hutcheon, the politics of representation throws light on an intersectional lens to unpack identity while the self-reflexivity of the postmodern narrative with its *mise-en-abyme* style exposes the constructedness of the narrative.

The novel unsettles the hegemonic rationale that celebrates 'woman' as a steadfast symbol of 'tradition' and complicates the binarization of victim-shaming and glorification to which she is frequently subjected. The collapse of all that was learnt in childhood and erosion of time-honoured certainties make the protagonists suffer profoundly before they come to a realisation that their sense of self-sufficiency is intertwined with the shared transcontinental memories. Their confrontation with life coerces them to recalibrate their bonds. As such, readers are made privy to the possibility of an alternative to the normative rendering of diasporic experience, as the story moves beyond the theme of a clash of cultures. Sabitri, Bela and Tara are able to envisage and finally live a life outside the repressive familiar structures that had seemed inevitable earlier. The unlearning is premised upon a newfound understanding that does not diminish but rather enhances the emotional ecosystem they inhabit. The novel foregrounds the shifting palette of emotions that they experience for each other only to discover that their greatest strength lies in their communal remembrances especially when their lives assume a similarly tragic turn.

As Sabitri, Bela and Tara try to navigate the labyrinthine challenges in life, they form unconventional friendships—both with men and women who help them nourish their innate talents and skill-sets. Sabitri forges a close platonic bond with Bipin Bihari, an employee at Durga Sweets. Bela is encouraged by her American neighbour, Kenneth to create her own cookbook after her divorce when she was practically living in shambles. In a serendipitous stroke of luck, Tara meets Dr. Venkatachalapathi and Mrs. Mehta who play the role of surrogate parental figures when she is dealing with her breakup and abortion. This eventual reconciliation with one's choices is predicated upon a renewed understanding of each other and learning to live with unanswered questions. The culinary ventures of Sabitri and Bela should not only be seen as characterised by a desire to establish a cultural cornucopia. Along with rekindling their bond with their mothers, these are exercises aimed at financial self-sufficiency, an act of reclaiming one's selfhood when everything familiar seemed to be falling apart. The act of remembering is also closely nested in material practices. Past is nothing less than a hydra-headed monster, it returns in countless, relentless forms. But it is crucial to be cognisant of the fact that the triggering of memories does not happen in a state of vacuum, instead they are deeply tied to the socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts.

Divakaruni does not make attempts to defend or embroider her characters' actions. The protagonists' anxiety about a looming sense of ontological instability and unpredictable nature of life define their journeys as they have experienced the fleetingness of happiness, time and again. *Au contraire*, she lets them progress towards a more refined perception of themselves. The readers are offered an inside view of their vulnerabilities and their blind spots that are responsible for rifts that cannot be remedied easily. As a consequence, Sabitri dies alone in India, without having been able to see Bela again and without ever meeting Tara. Circumstances and haunting insecurities prevent Bela from fully confiding in Sabitri to make her understand the reasons behind Sanjay, her husband, not agreeing to invite her mother to the US, or help with the newborn baby. As the novel comes to its closure, there is hope that Bela and her daughter Tara may rework their equation that is not premised upon apprehension and persistent suspicion. An uncanny connection between Sabitri and Tara is worked out in the novel which functions like a fulcrum that holds the fragmented narratives together.

Tara's incidental visit to a Hindu temple in Texas does not provide any sense of surety that she could overcome her sense of confusion and re-establish her connection with her heritage. However, it holds metaphorical weight: the goddess residing in the temple may inspire Tara to find her innate worth and the female genealogy to which she belongs, beyond national and geographical boundaries. The narrative meanders in a kaleidoscope of fragments from several time frames that eventually coalesce like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, balancing these two key moments: Sabitri's writing and Tara's reading of her letters.

Eventually, Tara's progressive marital dynamic with an American, Gary, is posited as a whiff of fresh air in what seemed to be an unending claustrophobic cycle of familial oppression. Obviously, it would be a very superficial approach to view their marriage as propagating a smooth cultural assimilation. The fetishisation of hybrid identities and risks of inter-race marriage getting co-opted by a neo-liberalist regime remain valid concerns. But what makes this union interesting is that it actively, though a bit self-critically, destabilises the obsession with claims of 'authenticity' and 'pure origin.' It is a step forward in revealing the constructed nature of all identities and highlights both the triumphs and challenges that lie ahead for identity politics in a dizzying world of transnational migration and glocalisation. The novelistic universe does not seem to privilege a single narrator, no history is shown to be final and complete and the polyphonic structure questions the very reliability of memory. At the same time, the embedded narratives, ironical self-awareness and intertextuality are not mere stylistic additives but emerge from the material conditions of protagonists' lives, performing Hutcheon's (2002) idea of postmodernism that is inseparable from its socio-cultural context. Reading *Before We Visit the Goddess* through the lens of memory studies and postmodernist, feminist diasporic theories seems to suggest empowering and emancipatory possibilities in re-visiting the past. Acknowledging the memories and translating them for the coming generations is crucial for fully living in the present moment and re-claiming one's sense of self. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that this reclamation is an ongoing activity, a dynamic process of engagement with self and others, shaped by the *tour de force* of memory, lived and experienced one moment at a time.

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