



# UNVEILING MEMORIES: THE INFLUENCE OF INTERWOVEN NARRATIVES OF PAST AND PRESENT IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS*

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**Abstract:** The current paper discusses the relation between 'memory' and 'migration' as cited in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*. Divakaruni's novels majorly focus on the immigrant experience and present how the shift in America's commitment to multiculturalism caused a surge in the number of immigrants. While the immigrants benefit on the economic front, they are always preoccupied with memories of their home and homeland. These memories often glorify the home land i.e., the past. This glorification of the past is often a reaction to the shortcomings that immigrants experience in the present. Immigrants, therefore are in constant engagement with their past. However, a few who immigrate often choose to assimilate into the core culture of the adopted land. But, Divakaruni's novels provide ample scope to explore how immigrants cannot disengage with their past. The past and the present are intertwined. Divakaruni's novels add another dimension to this argument where the present occurrences and their effect on the human psyche aids in getting a clearer picture of the past. The current paper aims to explore the relationship of 'memory' and 'migration' under this light. Primarily it aspires to understand the impact of memory on the immigrant within the multicultural context of the United States. By doing so, the paper attempts to decipher whether memory plays an enabling or disabling role in the lives of immigrants in a multicultural scenario. This paper therefore aims at exploring the politics of memory as presented in *Before We Visit the Goddess*. The selected text centres around the lives of three women who have been separated by 'migration' and but remain connected to each other through 'memories.'

**Keywords:** Immigration, memory, multiculturalism, assimilation, diversity, globalization

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American author is acclaimed for her novels that centre around the trials and tribulations of individuals who experience marginalization not just within contemporary society but also down the annals of history. Divakaruni's portrayal of these shortcomings underscore the need of creating powerful characters who can both voice their thoughts and control their destinies. The characters in her novels are elevated to a position from which their silenced voices are heard and their broken lives rebuilt. They evolve to become masters and not victims of their situation. Besides, Divakaruni is one among the few authors whose literary works span across diverse themes like magical realism, feminism, culture, mythology, partition literature, history and most importantly the immigrant experience.

Divakaruni's reiteration that her writing was fuelled by her migration to the United States and the distance that it offered allowed her to understand her past and its memories better proves Julia Creet's argument that "Migration rather than location is the condition of memory" and that it could also mean, migration, "between times, places, generations and media, from individuals to communities and vice versa, movement is what produces memory..." (09). The memory of 'home' and its absence is strongly felt by immigrants who leave behind everything familiar for a promising future in distant yet developed nations. The immigrant experience is often characterized by feelings of loneliness, alienation and rootlessness in their adopted country. While Divakaruni's early novels depict these aspects of immigrant experience, her recent novels project the current scenario where immigrants consciously choose to migrate and show a meagre desire to return. The reason for this shifting trend is the increase in economic opportunities and the evolving multicultural spirit in the evolving multicultural spirit of the United States. Thus, the immigrants carry their cultural practices beyond the borders of nations and stay connected with their homeland, while achieving economic benefit.

On the one hand, memory plays a crucial role in the immigrants' efforts to recreate their past, their home in a foreign land. It acts as an agent of culture that sustains immigrants away from their home, in the long run. On the other hand, the constant recollection of one's past can negatively impact the psyche of the immigrant by reminding him/her of the life that they have left behind in their home land. Thus, memory's role as an empowering and disempowering agent becomes a vantage point from which the politics of memory with special reference to migration can be explored.

The current paper closely examines the relationship between 'memory' and 'migration' as cited in Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*. The paper dwells on how an occurrence in the present, when encoded by the brain becomes a memory that is available for consumption later through either voluntary or involuntary recollection, thereby validating the idea that the past intersects with the present and influences our lives. The most important facet that will be dealt with is the role that memory plays in the lives of immigrants. By doing so, the paper aspires to answer whether memory acts as an enabling or disabling factor within a multicultural nation like the United States and assesses if its influence is the same on First and Second-Generation immigrants.

The novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* spans across the lives of three generations, where the grandmother Sabitri, the daughter Bela and the granddaughter Tara are present in each other's lives through memories. On the one hand, Sabitri spends all her life in India and Bela spends part of it in India and the rest in the United States, a place that she chooses to elope to with her husband Sanjay. On the other hand, Tara spends all of her life in the United States as a Second-Generation immigrant. Tara, the Indian-American granddaughter has never been to India, although it plays a crucial role in her life. India influences her strongly and is a part of her mental landscape. Although Sabitri, Bela and Tara have distanced themselves from each other over time, the memories of their times together recur either consciously or otherwise. As Daniel Schacter asserts, "...we cannot separate our memories of the ongoing events of our lives from what has happened to us previously" (05). This emphasizes the fact that there is no disengagement between our experiences of the present from those of the past.

The resurgence of memories, depending on the situation and context, can cause either positive or negative impact on the person who recalls them. Bela's elopement with Sanjay leaves Sabitri in a house full of things that remind her of her daughter. Her absence triggers Sabitri's anguish mind and a series of memories associated with Bela are retrieved. The "gauge" on their study table in the house, brings back memories of the night on which the mother and daughter had their fight over Bela's relationship with Sanjay. Bela's absence from 'home' reinstates the dormant memories that would otherwise seem insignificant. This aspect is reinstated when Bela declines selling the chain that her mother had gifted her on her eighteenth birthday. Although the chain is an inanimate object, Bela's distance from home i.e., her mother, makes it a symbol loaded with her mother's memory. The significance of the chain is apparent as, "...she wore it everyday because it bore her

mother's touch" (Divakaruni 109). This goes in line with Creet's observation that, "...migration has an effect on how and what we remember and the displacement intensifies our investment in the memory, illuminating the topos of memory itself" (10). Thus, the chain which merely is a piece of jewellery when Sabitri hands it to Bela, is infused with memories after she migrates to the United States. The chain transforms into an important symbol of Bela's past.

Although Bela consciously chooses to migrate to the United States with Sanjay, there is always a part of her that longs to be at home with her mother. In comparison with Sabitri, Bela's experiences are more intense as she is one who goes away from home and from Sabitri. Sabitri's absence and the impossibility of return to her home in Calcutta brings out a "sense of estrangement, sadness and loss, and the want for meaning in life...." Rosinka categorizes these feelings of melancholy as part of the "emigratory experience" (06). Bela's tiny apartment in the United States and the discomfort of sharing it with Sanjay's friend often reminds her of her spacious house in Calcutta. These emotions intensify during Bela's pregnancy, where the deprivation of her mother's love and care, makes her experience a grave sense of estrangement and loss. Bela tries to bridge the gap between her home in India and in the United States by staying in contact with her mother. Their correspondence over letters and expression of love and longing to see each other gives her the strength to cope with the shortcomings of her present.

While Bela derives strength from her memories in India to deal with her present, the cultural landscape of the United States of America too plays an enabling role. The evolution of the United States of America as a multicultural nation empowered many immigrants to overcome the complexities post migration. The withdrawal of the demand for 'swift assimilation of aliens' into the American cultural and political core, provided immigrants with ample scope to not just retrieve memories of their home but also to recreate the same in their new land (Parekh 05).

On the one hand, immigrants began reviving their cultural practices away from home, while on the other hand, feminists like Suzan Okin began to voice their concern regarding the negative impact of giving minority communities -like the immigrants in this case- the right to practice their culture. Okin's concern finds its validation when immigrant communities follow certain cultural practices that have a debilitating effect on women. In its smallest form, the memory of patriarchy and its sustenance in the United States has its effect on women who have tried to escape the same in India. This is visible in the conflict that ensues between Bela and Sanjay over their religious beliefs. Sanjay, a communist, declines Bela's request of placing an altar in the house. He in turn decides to make Bela forgo her religious beliefs and keep their daughter Tara away from the same. In this case women as agents or perpetuators of culture have no discretion of their own. Women are expected to mediate cultural practices as approved by the hegemonic forces of the patriarchal society. Memory, therefore, in the form of everyday practices can wield control over women and can run the risk of having a disabling impact within immigrant households.

The thriving of hegemony within the cultural memory of the immigrant community and its practice can cause damage to the multicultural fabric of the American society. This is well elucidated in Ghassan Hage's observation that some memories play, "...a debilitating function and produce a state of passivity, where the subject is unable to 'deploy' himself or herself in the environment in which he or she is operating" (416). However, Divakaruni's novels provide multiple instances to prove otherwise. Multicultural societies act as experimental grounds on which immigrants find ample strength to liberate themselves from the clutches of cultural practices that limit their functioning.

Sanjay's decision to divorce Bela, leaves Tara in an extremely vulnerable position causing her to feel lonely. Bela reaches out to Sabitri to intervene and make Tara change her decision. But Sabitri's letter does not reach Tara until much later in life. On the one hand, Bela suffers loneliness and bankruptcy. Both Sabitri and Bela are reminded of how they too during their young age had relinquished the opportunity to study. Sabitri's sponsor and benefactor had disowned her and she had to leave college as she was to marry her teacher. While, Bela quit college to elope with Sanjay to the United States. Sabitri succumbs to old age and passes away after the completion of the letter. Whereas, Bela endures hopelessness until she befriends Kenneth, her neighbour.

With Kenneth's encouragement, Bela voluntarily recalls her mother's recipes, publishes them and derives hope for her future. The physical or geographical distance from one's home country becomes less of an issue in the present context because multicultural societies accommodate immigrants with cultural attributes. Globalization had motivated markets to evolve and make available goods from the markets worldwide. Therefore, Bela's clients and cookery students, although not Bengali, are able to develop interest in her food

and procure the ingredients from local stores. Although Bela is a good cook on her own, she voluntarily retrieves her mother's recipes and reproduces them in America. Her potential to recreate her mother's recipes with simple modifications to suit the American taste, makes her a desirable member of the multicultural world. Her blog 'Bela's Kitchen' and her cookbooks constitute to become an important part of her identity, an identity that she would not aspire to craft for herself if she was still married to Sanjay. Despite her mother's demise Bela was able to rebuild her relationship with her mother through the food that she cooks. 'Food' and 'home' are often nostalgically associated with the mother. Bela's memory of her mother's food and her ability to recall them empowers her. Thus, memory of the Indian and cultural past plays an enabling role in Bela's life.

First-Generation immigrants often exhibit fondness and enjoy first-hand connection with their former country unlike the Second-Generation immigrants. The Second-Generation immigrants often rely on First-Generation immigrants to act as bridges between their Indian lineage and their American present. This indispensable connection capacitates the First-Generation immigrants to embrace the cultural changes and to mediate the same to the next generation. They cope with their difficult times in the present by relying on the memories and regain control over their lives. Bela restores her life to normality when her bitter memories are overshadowed by her mother's memories. Bela's passion for cooking empowers her to build a career for herself and keep alive her mother's memories. It is quite axiomatic that for the First-Generation, the past is often synonymous with their lives or the lives of their loved ones in India. Thus, whether desirable or not, the past always seeps into the present.

Second-generation immigrants, however, associate themselves with India through the memories and the connection that their parents have with India. Depending on their experiences, the First-Generation immigrants decide whether their children should be acquainted with their cultural past. On the one hand, First-Generation parents teach their children customs, traditions and language with the motive of helping them stay connected to their roots. Conversely, a few others encourage their children to assimilate into the American cultural core, primarily for better prospects. In addition, incidents like the 9/11 where immigrants suffered hatred and racial discrimination forces parents to elude their children from exhibiting any affiliation towards their cultural past. Sanjay experiences racism when the police does not register his complain against his American tenant who refused to vacate their house. He stresses on encouraging Tara to abandon her Indian heritage and embrace the American lifestyle. However, Tara's life makes it quite apparent that dissociation from one's past, especially cultural past, cannot be absolute. The role of the Indian household as a disseminator of cultural memories is further shared by the multicultural society of the United States of America. The increase in the number of immigrants, facilitates Tara's enculturation even outside the boundaries of her home. Multicultural societies act as safe carriers of multiple cultures and the thriving of these cultures amidst this pluralism is what connects Tara to her Indian past. Even though Bela repudiates talking to Tara about India or her past, the Bengali cuisine that she cooks, the Bollywood music that she and Sanjoy enjoy listening to partially acquaints Tara with the popular memory of Indian culture.

Tara's limited exposure to her Indian past does not equip her with enough memories to subdue the effects of certain tragic incidents in her life. The experiences that Tara has as a young Second Generation immigrant does not equip her with memories that can subdue the effects of certain tragic incidents that occur in her life. The two major incidents-her parents' separation and her abortion- impair her functioning and social interaction. Although Tara tries to repress these memories, they constantly reappear revealing the fact that, "time and memory are inextricably woven; memories always refer to the past and often shape the future" (Schacter 72). When her boyfriend Robert cheats on her she is reminded of how her father cheated on her mother (Divakaruni 68). However, the irrevocable relationship between Tara's past and present changes course when Tara meets. Mrs. Mehta and Dr. Venkatachalapathi, who act as positive agents of the past. They become the initiating point for Tara's reconciliation and healing.

Despite her dissociation from her Indian heritage and the influence of negative memories at hand, Tara's mind becomes replete with Mrs. Mehta's memories of her life in India. The time that she spends with Mrs. Mehta's- who according to Tara could be as old as Sabitri, her grandmother- gives her the required space and memory to understand her mother immensely. When Robert declines Tara's decision to stay as Mrs. Mehta's caretaker, she convinces him saying, "Not just any old woman. An Indian woman. She could be my grandma, Maybe she'll teach me some great Indian dishes..." (57). This association aids Tara in developing a close bond with Mrs.Mehta.

Mrs.Mehta's recollection of her life as a subservient daughter-in-law and wife guides Tara into understanding her mother's plight from a better perspective. The validation for Bela's subservience to Sanjay and anger towards Tara for not stopping him comes from her realization that Mrs.Mehta's marriage was no different from her parents'. Having grown up in America, she found it difficult to understand the inbuilt patriarchy within her family, therefore failing to perceive how one sex could dominate on the other. While Mrs.Mehta normalizes this hegemonic power of marriage over subservient women, Tara gathers a better understanding of her past. Thus, occurrences in the present can give a better understanding of the past, as it did for Tara. Mrs. Mehta's memories of her life in India aided Tara in retrieving her own memories and interpreting them in a better way.

The nostalgic memories that Mrs.Mehta shares, ignites within Tara the desire to visit India. Her conscious recollection of her Indian past takes a storied form when she narrates them to Tara. Tara think to herself, "I've never been to India. Never felt the desire to go. But now, as I listen to Mrs. Mehta's stories, I feel a jab or regret" (BWVTG 63). Mrs. Mehta's narration of stories of her past draws Tara out of her pain over her failed relationship with Robert.

Tara's second significant encounter that gives her a closer glimpse of her Indian heritage is when she is asked to chauffeur Dr. Venkatachalapathi to a temple in Pearland. The tourist company's decision to appoint a Indian driver for an Indian visitor proves advantageous for Tara. However, Tara's Indian identity is just something that she inherits from her parents and has nothing of her own in it. Her apprehension is evident when she thinks to herself, "I hadn't been to India, I didn't hang with Indians. I didn't even think of myself as an Indian. And even if I had, no two Indians were just like each other" (BWVTG 120). This is proven right when Tara meets Dr. Venkatachalapathi who is completely different from her.

Tara's demeanour reminds Dr.Venkatachalapathi of his daughter Meenakshi, who had recently passed away. While Tara accompanies him inside the temple, he volunteers to perform a pooja for her. The ambience in the temple reminds her of her mother's little altar on the kitchen shelf. At the back of her mind, memories of her abortion try to wear her out, causing an accident on their way back. Although neither of them are hurt, the accident's impact on Tara's guilty mind forces her to speak to Dr.Venkatachalapathi about her abortion. Tara's vulnerability pushes Dr.Venkatachalapathi to agonize over his daughter's death. While both reconcile after sharing their memories, the experiences of the entire day inspire Tara to rebuild her life. She gets back to college and mends her relationship with her mother. The 'therapeutic' nature of memory is seen when Tara vocalizes and shares it with Dr. Venkatachalapathi (Rosinka).

Another important aspect of Tara's behaviour that has close connection with memory is her kleptomaniac tendencies. She vents her displeasure and anxiousness by taking away something from one place and abandoning it elsewhere. She steals Robert's stuffed raccoon when he cheats on her, she takes a Jesus statue from the store that she worked at, she steals textbooks in college, she took away Meenakshi's shawl after the accident for not getting to have a father like Dr.Venkatachalapathi. Her kleptomaniac tendencies continue even after she is married with a kid. She addresses this issue only when Sabitri catches her steal a photograph. She justifies her actions by saying, "I take things that I should have had but didn't get. Things that mean happy memories....I steal them because there's a big hole in the middle of my chest and stealing fills it up for a moment" (Divakaruni 204). Tara is able to rectify her actions only after she receives a letter from Sabitri that was written to her younger self who wanted to discontinue college. Sabitri's memories provide Tara the refuge that she needed. Nostalgizing over her grandmother's letter, that speaks at length about her childhood, youth and old age, enables Tara to connect with her closely and transform her actions. This becomes an "active insertion of memory in the construction of the present and the future" (Hage 417).

Like Tara, many of the Second-Generation immigrants and most of the First-Generation immigrants are reluctant to leave their new country. Memory enables immigrants to build new homes in America on the foundation of Indian culture. For Tara, who is distant and unaware of her Indian past, whose present is unstable and future without hope, Sabitri's letter fuels the memories that she requires to create and identity for herself. The memories that Sabitri enlists in her letter, takes Tara to different places in Kolkata, Delhi and Assam. The letter constitutes not just an access to one's Indian cultural past, but also stories of how Sabitri built her life despite the adversities.

To conclude, memory is not a stagnant aspect of our lives. It is fluid, therefore it constantly evolves and is reconstructed in the mind of the one who has encoded it. Although immigrants live valourizing and glorifying their former countries, Divakaruni's characters negate this idea and bring in a realistic dimension.

Within societies that emphasize assimilation, immigrants are expected to integrate into the country's cultural landscape or the dominant culture of the society. Immigrants are expected to enter a country and develop a thorough understanding of the country's cultural heritage, at the expense of forgetting one's own history. But such complications do not overtly exist in multicultural societies, as these countries are to promote tolerance and recognition to other cultures including their own. Hence, multicultural societies become liberal spaces for immigrants to build themselves a home through their memories of the past.

Bela and Sanjay, as First-Generation immigrants enjoy their Bengali cuisine and Bollywood music in the United States. Their 'home' becomes their haven where they maintain their connection with their past. But, for Tara, neither their 'home' nor their family become propagators of their cultural memory. This does not allow her to live a life dissociated from her past. She is able to overcome her painful repressive memories in the United States through her meeting with Mrs. Mehta and Dr. Venkatachalapathy, who act as propagators and facilitators of the past into her life. In all, Tara is able to rebuild her 'home' because of the intrusion of the past through the memories of Mrs. Mehta, Dr. Venkatachalapathy and most importantly her grandmother Sabitri.

Memory, therefore, in all its vicissitudes demonstrates its inevitability in one's daily life. The persistence of the past on one's present and the role that the present plays in comprehension of the past, makes memory an enabling agent of culture. Multicultural societies basically create an atmosphere of possibility that allows immigrants to experiment and determine the impact of their cultural experiences. Prevalence of multiculturalism enables individuals to rebuild their lives on foreign soil and relocate them from margins to the periphery. Thus, memory acts as an enabling factor within a multicultural society by creating possibilities for immigrants, thereby upholding the multicultural principles of acceptance and inclusivity.

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