

## Reclaiming Identity and Negotiating Patriarchy through Knowledge in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment via education in *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novel depicts the lives of three generations of women Sabitri, Bela, and Tara whose stories illustrate how education, resilience, and life lessons facilitate empowerment. The paper contends that learning in the novel transcends formal schooling, arising from personal challenges, cultural memories, and intergenerational narratives. The novel illustrates Sabitri's resolve to seek education despite societal constraints, emphasizing how knowledge serves as a means to challenge patriarchal norms and attain autonomy. Bela and Tara inherit the challenges and insights of the preceding generation, exemplifying how experiential learning influences women's identities and decisions. The novel depicts empowerment as a progressive journey where women navigate cultural norms, familial obligations, and individual ambitions. This study illustrates how Divakaruni's narrative emphasizes women's autonomy and resilience within patriarchal and diasporic contexts by analyzing the transforming effect of learning. The study examines that the novel frames learning both cognitive and experiential as an essential catalyst empowering women to confront inequity and alter their societal roles.

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Intergenerational Learning, Diasporic Experience, Feminist Literary Criticism.

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### Introduction

Indian Literature encompasses the extensive corpus of literary creations originating from the Indian subcontinent, spanning numerous languages, civilizations, and historical epochs. It embodies the diversity of India's social, cultural, intellectual, and historical experiences. Indian literature has progressed through various phases, commencing with ancient oral traditions and extending into modern world literature. The initial phase of Indian literature is grounded in holy and intellectual works, including the Rigveda, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. These writings introduced fundamental themes such as dharma, morality, heroism, and human obligation, which have persistently influenced Indian literary traditions. In the medieval era, Indian literature thrived through regional languages and spiritual movements. The Bhakti and Sufi traditions generated poetic compositions that highlighted spirituality, devotion, and social egalitarianism. These literary forms facilitated the accessibility of literature to the general populace by transitioning from classical Sanskrit to regional languages, including Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, and Marathi.

The colonial and postcolonial eras signified a substantial evolution in Indian literature. Authors commenced examining themes including national identity, social reform, gender issues, and cultural conflict during colonial governance. In contemporary times, Indian English literature has achieved international acclaim through authors who depict the intricacies of Indian society and the

experiences of the diaspora. Modern authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni enrich this legacy by examining themes of migration, cultural identity, gender disparity, and women's empowerment in their works. Currently, Indian literature persists in its evolution as a vibrant domain that embodies a multitude of voices, languages, and viewpoints. It not only safeguards India's cultural history but also addresses contemporary themes such as globalization, gender equality, and social transformation, rendering it a significant field of study in international literature.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a leading figure in modern Indian diasporic writing. Her novels, short tales, and poetry have garnered international acclaim for their exploration of issues including cultural displacement, gender identity, migration, and women's empowerment. Her literary oeuvre frequently examines the lives of South Asian women as they navigate the dichotomy between conventional cultural expectations and contemporary global realities. Due to her thematic depth and narrative complexity, Divakaruni has garnered various literary accolades during her career. Her initial accomplishment was the short story collection *Arranged Marriage*, which received the esteemed American Book Award. The anthology received widespread acclaim for its nuanced depiction of immigrant women's lives and the emotional intricacies of cross-cultural experiences. The

acknowledgment positioned Divakaruni as a significant author in Asian American and diasporic literary traditions.

Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* received significant recognition and further bolstered her literary profile. The novel's distinctive blend of magical realism and cultural symbolism garnered international popularity and was subsequently made into a film. Besides her writing, Divakaruni has been honoured with the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Literary Award for her contributions to multicultural literature. In addition to literary accolades, Divakaruni has been acknowledged for her services to education and social awareness. She has been awarded the PEN USA Award and acknowledged by several cultural and literary organizations for her advocacy of South Asian voices in global literature. Her works are extensively examined in universities and have been translated into other languages, demonstrating her global influence. Divakaruni has solidified her status as a prominent character in current world literature by her literary accomplishments and accolades. Her writings persist in enriching feminist and diasporic literary debate by emphasizing women's resilience, cultural identity, and the transformative potential of narrative.

In modern feminist discourse, the interplay between knowledge, gender equality, and women's empowerment has emerged as a crucial domain of literary and cultural investigation. Literature often serves as a powerful medium through which women's struggles against patriarchal constraints and their journey toward self-realization are represented and reimagined. In this framework, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings hold significant relevance in diasporic and feminist literary studies. Aarthika says, The inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms. Her narratives often emphasize the experiences of women navigating identity, societal expectations, and social constraints in their pursuit of autonomy and selfhood.

This paper's fundamental theme is to analyze the role of knowledge and learning as crucial tools for attaining gender equality and empowering women. In numerous social and cultural contexts, women have always encountered systemic inequities that restrict their access to education, decision-making authority, and social independence. The acquisition of knowledge via formal education, experiential learning, and cultural transmission empowers women to confront these constraints and assert their agency in both private and public domains. The report contends that learning extends beyond formal schooling to encompass life experiences, social interactions, cultural memory, and intergenerational knowledge. These educational modalities enable women to cultivate critical awareness of their social circumstances and empower them to navigate patriarchal frameworks that conventionally limit their roles. As women acquire information and chances for personal development, they are more capable of redefining their identities, engaging in social transformation, and championing equality.

The study underscores that women's empowerment is a progressive and multifaceted process encompassing self-awareness, resilience, and the ability to challenge repressive social norms. Knowledge thus serves as a revolutionary catalyst that bolsters women's confidence, arguments their decision-making capabilities, and empowers them to engage actively in molding their own lives and communities. "*Women have to learn to survive on their own strength*" (Divakaruni 67). The study emphasizes the connection between learning, empowerment, and gender equality,

underscoring the larger importance of knowledge as a driver of social change. It illustrates that empowering women via education and experiential knowledge not only advantages individual women but also fosters the creation of more equal and inclusive society. The novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* provides a compelling exploration of women's lives across three generations, portraying the interconnected stories of Sabitri, Bela, and Tara. The narrative demonstrates how knowledge and education serve as transforming agents that empower women to confront conventional power structures and inequity. The novel challenges traditional views of learning that prioritize formal education, advocating instead for a comprehensive understanding of knowledge derived from lived experiences, cultural memory, emotional resilience, and intergenerational storytelling. These modes of learning influence the characters capacity to face personal adversities and reconstruct their identities within familial and social contexts.

The motive of education as a catalyst for women's empowerment is prominently illustrated in *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The story chronicles the lives of three generations of women Sabitri, Bela, and Tara whose individual experiences illustrate how both formal and experiential learning foster female autonomy and the quest for gender equality. "*We pass on more than we know from mother to daughter, from one generation to the next*" (Divakaruni 201). The tale demonstrates that knowledge serves as a vital instrument for women to defy patriarchal limitations and redefine their positions within familial and societal contexts through their interrelated stories.

Sabitri's character embodies the initial phase of this transforming process. Emerging from impoverished and constrained circumstances, she saw education as a means to autonomy and self-sufficiency. Her resolve to seek education despite financial adversity exemplifies the challenges faced by numerous women striving to surmount systemic injustices through knowledge acquisition. In Sabitri's situation, education not only fosters intellectual development but also empowers her to confront conventional expectations imposed on women and to conceive a life beyond confining social standards. "*Mothers and daughters are like that. They always hurt each other, but they can't stay apart*" (Divakaruni 112). The experiences of Bela and Tara further elucidate the significance of intergenerational learning. Despite their upbringing in disparate cultural and geographical circumstances, their lives are profoundly influenced by the teachings, errors, and recollections inherited from the preceding generation. This dissemination of information demonstrates that empowerment extends beyond personal accomplishment and is also shaped by collective experiences and inherited insight. "*In a new country, you have to remake yourself, piece by piece*" (Divakaruni 89). The novel illustrates how experiential learning aids women in managing personal conflicts and societal pressures through Bela's emotional issues and Tara's quest for identity.

Furthermore, the narrative structure itself underscores the importance of storytelling as a means of acquiring knowledge. Letters, recollections, and thoughts function as mediums through which the characters convey their experiences across generations. This novel components underscore that education arises not solely from formal institutions but also from experiential realities, emotional fortitude, and cultural recollection. "*Regret was like a shadow that followed me wherever I went*" (156). The novel illustrates empowerment as a progressive and evolving process

through the depiction of several interwoven experiences. Knowledge acquired through education, personal adversity, or intergenerational transmission serves as a potent tool for women to navigate patriarchal norms and affirm their individuality. The novel emphasizes the transforming capacity of education in creating women's identities and advancing gender equality in both familial and diasporic settings.

Sabitri's resolve to pursue education over financial adversity and societal pressures exemplifies the challenges faced by women striving for autonomy in constraining circumstances. Her experiences provide the groundwork for future generations, illustrating how knowledge can serve as a form of resistance against patriarchal rule. Anuar says, Bela is another victim of phallogocentric tradition the production of values based on resist patriarchy. The experiences of Bela and Tara exemplify the transfer of knowledge, challenges, and insights over generations, emphasizing the significance of experiential learning in developing women's agency and self-awareness. The novel depicts empowerment not as an instantaneous attainment but as a gradual and intricate process shaped by resilience, introspection, and personal development. "Your life is your own. You have to decide what you want to make of it" (Divakaruni 28). This study thus investigates how learning both cognitive and experiential serves as a mechanism of resistance and empowerment within the novel. This paper contends an analysis of the intergenerational experiences of female characters, Divakaruni's story redefines knowledge as a transforming instrument that empowers women to navigate patriarchal limitations and affirm their individuality. The novel enhances feminist discourse on gender equality by demonstrating how women assert agency via the collection and dissemination of knowledge.

The paper posits that knowledge and learning serve as potent mechanisms of resistance, empowering women to confront patriarchal limitations in *Before We Visit the Goddess*. The story depicts the interwoven lives of three generations of women Sabitri, Bela, and Tara whose experiences illustrate how education, "Education is the only thing that cannot be taken away from you" (Divakaruni 49) personal challenges, and intergenerational wisdom influence women's identities and agency. It contends that learning in the novel transcends formal schooling, encompassing experiential knowledge, cultural memory, and intergenerational storytelling. The narrative demonstrates how Sabitri's will to seek education and autonomy, despite societal and economic obstacles, transforms knowledge into a means of challenging patriarchal dominance. Richa Sharma says, The protagonists exhibit the willpower of both the mother and a woman and a strong sense of affection. The future generations, Bela and Tara, inherit the challenges and insights of their predecessors, underscoring how the transfer of information fosters the evolution of female autonomy and self-awareness. This paper illustrates that the novel portrays empowerment as a long and transforming process, wherein women navigate societal expectations and reinvent their positions within family and society through the examination of intergenerational experiences. The study underscores that the narrative portrays knowledge as a transformational power that fosters gender equality and empowers women to regain autonomy and voice within patriarchal and diasporic settings.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the discourse underscores the pivotal importance of information and education in advancing gender

equality and women's empowerment. Access to education, experienced insight, and the dissemination of cultural knowledge collectively foster the development of women's agency and self-awareness. Knowledge empowers women to critically analyze the social and cultural frameworks that frequently limit their prospects and to contest the patriarchal standards that influence their existence. The study highlights that empowerment is not an immediate attainment but a progressive and dynamic process influenced by resilience, introspection, and the ongoing pursuit of knowledge. Through education whether formal or experiential women acquire the confidence and intellectual capability essential to reinvent their identities, engage in decision-making, and express their autonomy in both private and public domains. Knowledge serves as a transformative catalyst that enhances women's capacity to address societal inequities and seek equitable opportunities. Moreover, this paper highlights the extensive social ramifications of empowering women through education. When women possess knowledge and critical awareness, they enhance not only their own growth but also the advancement of families, communities, and civilizations. The advancement of gender equality necessitates continuous efforts to provide access to education, opportunities for personal growth, and the acknowledgment of women's experiences as significant sources of knowledge. Ultimately, the article asserts that education serves as a potent catalyst for social transformation. Through the promotion of intellectual development, resilience, and self-determination, knowledge serves as an essential instrument for women to confront inequality, reform societal institutions, and advance toward a more equitable and inclusive future.

Before We Visit the Goddess by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni still has a lot of room for research, especially in interdisciplinary and comparative settings. Future studies can use more comprehensive postcolonial and transnational feminist viewpoints to examine the connections between gender, diaspora, and cultural memory. Deeper understanding of intergenerational trauma, identity development, and the function of storytelling as resistance may be revealed through a comparison with other works of diasporic fiction. The book also encourages more research on knowledge as a means of empowerment in marginalised female areas and its applicability to current discussions about migration, globalisation, and hybrid identities. These methods would broaden the text's critical interpretation beyond feminist readings to include broader theoretical and cultural aspects.

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