

Exploring the Formation of Women's Identity and Subjectivity in Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

This paper primarily aims to show how three women characters thrive on forming their subjectivity and identity through different generations belonging to different continents. Secondly, this paper aims to analyze the role of men in shaping the subjectivity of female characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddesses*. This novel portrays three women who lived their lives in separate places in a discrete style. All of them have distinct experiences of living their life. Doing so, they possess an independent vision about life in general and womanhood in specific. All of these characters are forced by some patriarchal frameworks to face topsy-turvy in their life. For instance, they have to stop their education from going further and are displaced from their born place earlier. Furthermore, they are restricted to be a source of income for a house instead are limited within chores of the house. Despite all, they finally get to the bottom of it on their aptitude. Therefore, the researcher claims that being a women-centered story why female characters must struggle a lot for making their identity and how the female characters come to know the importance of their identity and subjectivity in the text.

Having entered into modernization and globalization, women have become more conscious regarding their freedom, existence, and identity. With time, they realize the essence of becoming a female. Moreover, this realization has made women more alert regarding their roles and identity in society. Such alertness in them has challenged institutionalized patriarchal norms. This kind of uprising in women, however, might make them socially paralyzed.

On the one hand, they are appraising the essence of being a 'female' yet doing this; they are intrinsically seeking the connectedness with patriarchy. This novel has not simply empowered women by showing feminine power, roles and subjectivity. Instead, it has shown how females long to have a paternal cult over them no matter which society they belong to.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-) is an Indian American author, poet, and professor. She is an author of *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a short story collection published in 1996 and had won the American Books Award. Another remarkable novel by Banerjee is *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), which is about the struggle faced by immigrants who moved geographically, politically, socially, and culturally from their homeland India. Along with this, *Sister of My Heart* (1999) is also a well-known novel by her. Both books are adapted into films. Besides these, other recognized books by her are *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Lives of Strangers* (2007), *Palace of Illusions* (2008), a national best-seller for over a year in India, *Oleander Girl* (2013), *The Forest of Enchantment* (2019). Banerjee's writings are generally based on Indian cultures, reflecting the lives of Indian Women and reflecting upon the Hindu Mythology. She presents her story generally from the point of view of females, exploring the struggle, pain, and suffering of women scattered across the world. Additionally, her text reveals Banerjee's experiences as an immigrated female who has gone through many hard times to stabilize her identity in a new society and culture. The author belongs to the Indian American writing group; therefore, her mindset is rooted in the Indian culture and lifestyle of Indian women, so most of her text seems to be an empowering agent for females.

This research focuses on the formation of woman identity and subjectivity in the text and tries to answer if there is any role of men in configuring the identity and subjectivity of female characters in this novel. Woman subjectivity is generally defined as how women lived their lives independently without being influenced by any object. Further, it also concerns how their actions and characters contributed to forming identity and pertaining to existence. Subjectivity is a way to see history from the perspective of the person who lived that history, including women living an ordinary life. Additionally, it focuses on how women have taken the personal, social, and political meanings of being a female.

The concept of female subjectivity widened from the second wave of Feminism. However, it has its origin way back in ancient Greece. From the time of Plato and Aristotle, there was debate regarding equality and polarity between males and females. Plato being liberal believes in sex unity theory and focuses on an egalitarian society where men and women are subject to equality. Unlike Plato, Aristotle has always made the male a subject of superiority and the female subject to man's domination. Discussing how was the concept regarding women in Early Jewish philosophy, Sir Prudence Allen writes:

Are women and men wise in the same or different ways? And are men and women Virtuous in the same or different ways? The answer to these questions filtered from Greek philosophy into Jewish Philosophy. Specifically, the nature of a woman from a philosophical perspective, which worked its way into the heart of Jewish considerations, included by a Pythagorean table of opposites that associated a male with left and female with the right, Hippocratean medical theory associated the male with hot and female with

cold,... the association of the female with the lower and the male with higher powers of the soul. (90)

Allen further puts forth Philo's fundamental concept of the woman where he has compared Man's and woman's ability of understanding and reasoning with their role in progressing the generation. In doing so, he has characterized men as active subjects whereas females as a passive ones. Allen claims Philo to be influenced by the Aristotelian concept of sexual polarity and quotes Philo's differentiation regarding reasoning capacities of male and female;

The male is the provider of fertile seed, and the female as the passive receptacle for the seed is a fundamental part of Philo's concept of woman. He also devalued the female element in his derogatory reference to softness and womanish thought. So, just as the woman played a passive role in the generation, so feminine thoughts ought to be passive in receiving the active ordering of masculine thoughts in mind. (94)

Having contemplated these precedent arguments of Plato, Aristotle, and Philo, we can conclude that female subjectivity, gender issues, and equality are not neoteric issues; rather, they had remained in a subordinated form in ancient times. Moreover, the concept of woman subjectivity differs from past to present. Ancient philosophers regarded women as a subject and labeled them as per their standpoint. Unlike the past, woman subjectivity focuses on representing women's lives based on their own experiences and flair, remaining out of any objective interference.

Though the origin of female subjectivity dates back, it gained weightage during second-wave Feminism when Simone de Beauvoir made a controversial statement, "He is the subject, he is absolute- she is the other." Since when this bold

pronouncement was made, many feminists are struggling with female subjectivity. De Beauvoir believes that women are never granted their freedom; that's why they never sense the value of individualism. Further, she claims that women do not confiscate a subjective attitude because they are called 'women' by men, and even women don't say 'we' but instead refer to themselves as 'women'. As a result, they scare the ability to unify themselves in a chain and resist established patriarchal-social norms.

Explaining the situation of women further in her book *The Second Sex*, she writes;

The woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world inequality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as a man's, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. (6)

Simone de Beauvoir problematizes the tendency to center men as subjects while peripheralizing women as "objects". Such unfairness between man and woman exists in every socio-cultural domain. Therefore, she declares the necessity of subjectifying the "other". She asserts that females are no more objects/others; rather, they must be emancipated from every patriarchal restraint, and both men and women should uniformly engage in the political, social, and cultural realm. De Beauvoir's famous statement "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" reinforces her argument that women's roles are not born along with them instead born after them. Along with their function in society, their subjectivity is also arbitrary because the culture and society define it. Exploring how woman's subjectivity is understood and emphasized not only encapsulates Beauvoir; instead, some myriad theorists and critics are contending to foreground women's subjectivity in every single sphere. However, Beauvoir has presented her statements based on historical actuality and the

contemporary treatment of women, and now the situation seems to be different.

Nevertheless, we still can trace many discriminations between men and women in our society.

Discussing the issue of Gender and Subjectivity in Simone de Beauvoir and contemporary Feminism, Sonia Kruks explains Beauvoir's idea of "situated subjectivity", "In her account of women as subjects "in situation", Beauvoir can both acknowledge the weight of social construction, including gender, in the formation of self and yet refuse to the self to an "effect" (92). Beauvoir believes both gender and self as an outcome of social construction. Gender roles are assigned to men and women by societal conventions. Men are regarded as a pillar of the house who strengthen the economy and dare to run a household. No matter how strong and reliable they are for earning money, women are taken as inferior to men. They always fear what others think about them if they exceed the conventions set by society. Comprehending subjectivity in the discursive and socio-cultural realm, Kirby defines subjectivity on three-dimensional architecture- impacted by and developed from the individual and experiential consciousness, historical, socio-cultural, and discursive locations, and social relation in and across space (185). Analyzing her definition, I consider subjectivity to be formed by the experience that one goes through in different social and cultural realms. Across the space, people undergo many socio-cultural and psychological incidents that lead them to various understandings of life. Acculturating such insights, they can make their subjective understanding of life.

Banerjee's text comes up with three different stories of three women. They have their own lived experiences as a woman. Their thoughts and roles are set as per the society where they have acquaintance. All of these women are bound with certain convictions set by the family, society, and culture. Going through all these

convictions, they gain some experiences in their life, and with the help of it finally, they can understand what it means to be a 'woman'.

Many scholars and critics have reflected their views in *Before We Visit the Goddess* regarding feminine issues and identity. Discussing the dislocation and identity issues, focusing on Character Sabitri in *Before We Visit the Goddess*, Abida Begum analyses the story of dislocated Bela, who has moved from her native land and immensely suffered from Nostalgia. She perceives her life from the lens of a migrated woman who has to overcome many hurdles in a foreign culture. Similarly, there is a Sabitri, an old lady who expresses her story from the eye of a woman who suffers from the stereotypical patriarchal society in her land. Finally, another subject named Tara, a teenager is in-between two different cultures, separated from her parents and familial roots define womanhood from the point of view of a teenager. Elaborating, Sabitri's life, Begum, has shaped her as a central and robust woman character who has struggled a lot to establish her own identity and be a vital subject in a story. Begum writes;

Here we witness the exposition of Sabitri's inherent ability or inner potential through experiment and without any outside interference or help. Here is a self-reliant, self-conscious woman who wishes to leave her set an example and the message for her daughter and granddaughter and in fact, to the generations of women to come. Throughout her life, she passes through many odd situations, but despite being lonely, she faces those boldly and finally proves herself to be a 'fortunate lamp' with a distinct identity of her own. (372)

Sabitri becomes an idol to her daughter and granddaughter because, despite the poor financial conditions of the family, she decides to take a risk to further her education. Doing so, she becomes able to be an inspiration for both Bela and Tara. Though all of

them belong to different age groups, they share the same identity as a 'woman'. Therefore, somewhere and somehow, they have a common ground to share their sufferings, endurance, and inferences they got throughout their walk of life. At the end of the novel, both Tara and Bela get a letter written by Sabitri sharing her lifetime battle to establish her distinct identity. Reading the letter, they are lighted up, seeing how Sabitri has taught to achieve something on one's own. In the letter, she mentioned, "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 means to be a fortunate lamp" (208). Bhagyashree Shrimat Pawar analyzing Banerjee's writings from the diasporic perspective exposes the truth that immigrated women also suffer from various restraints. Additionally, she reveals how the writer represents the status of immigrated women in her writing. She writes:

Divakaruni as a diasporic feminist has painted various difficulties of Indian immigrant women experiences in the diaspora which includes their marginalized position, oppressive attitudes of patriarchal mindsets, otherness, and many such, but simultaneously also provides the voice of resistance to such activities and portrayed her strong condemnation to male-dominated society through her ideas of New Woman (8).

As explained by Pawar, Banerjee, in this novel, has not only shown the difficult phase of a woman instead, but she has also portrayed multiple instances where female has countered stereotypical patriarchic credo. In the case of Sabitri, one of the leading characters in the text, in the declining years of her life, lauds the value of being a liberated woman. When she knows that her granddaughter Tara has dropped herself out of college, she writes a letter convincing her about the consequence of not being educated. Sabitri says, "Granddaughter, people look down on a woman without

education. She has a few options. To survive, she is forced to put up with ill-treatment. She must depend on the kindness of strangers, an unsure thing. I do not want that for you"- (8).

Here, Banerjee shows how the experience of one woman is assisting another woman living in a different place to strengthen selfhood and subjectivity. She does not want her daughter and granddaughter to go through the same dearth she went through in her life. After going through economic deprivation, familial detachment as Sabitri had to move to Mumbai to get her further education by working at Lelamoyi's House, failure of love life and later on marriage life, unable to complete her education, death of his husband, and separation with daughter shattered Sabitri grievously. Despite all these, she invigorated herself and struggled for the rest of her life. She spent the rest of her life in a sweet shop named after her mother, 'Durga Sweet'. Whatever she achieved after the complications described above was on her stand. Hence, Sabitri, in the story, signifies herself as a self-sufficient woman setting up her individuality and making her distinct identity as a sweet maker.

The women's subjection towards different sorts of exploitation and prejudice has not invaded Eastern countries only. Instead, European and Western countries have been exercising such bigotry since the advent of their society. In the reaction to before-mentioned exploitations, there was an on-set of The Women's Liberation Movement from the United States during the mid-twentieth century and dilated to the European nations. For this kind of repression done on females, patriarchy is predominantly taken as a leading impetus. Our society enshrines patriarchal culture and hence its ethics lie in power and domination. From way back, our society has declared patriarchy as its constitution, which has been executed upon women's lives.

Discussing the same idea Mary Baker in her article "Patriarchy and Inequality: Towards a Substantive Feminism" writes:

Although oppression of women is not the point of patriarchy, a social system that is male-identified, male-controlled, male-centered will inevitably value masculinity and masculine traits over femininity and feminine traits. In such systems, men (and women) are encouraged to regard women as being suited to fulfill male needs. (24)

In this novel, the same systems can be found in many instances. The system has not only invaded India instead; America also seems undifferentiated from that system. After looking over Bela's life, it shows how hard time she has in America. Bela is left helpless when she knows his husband is cheating on her and wants to split up the relationship. At that time, she bows down to her husband and makes her daughter bow down too for not leaving them alone. When Bela was pregnant, Bela frequently recalls her mother and how a pregnant woman and a newborn child are raised carefully in Indian culture. She wants her mother to be with her because there was no one to take care of her except her husband. Bela is hugely haunted by her native culture, food, and motherly love when she was in the critical situation of her life.

Banerjee portrays how Bela fantasizes:

If she has allowed her mother to arrange her marriage, she would have been living in India. She would have gone to her mother's home for the birthing, as was the tradition, to be cared for and pampered. Sabitri knew what she liked in a way that Sanjay never would. Her favorite desserts are from Durga sweets, Sandesh stuffed with chocolate, or dark, glistening balls of pantus in rosewater syrup. (103)

Bela is caught in between two cultures; Indian culture and American culture. This kind of betwixt feelings question her identity and subjectivity and put her in a catastrophic situation. Explaining how migration results in pain and nostalgia, M. Mayuri in her article “Quest for Identity and Diasporic Consciousness in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Before We Visit the Goddess*” asserts, “Mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes, the memories of their motherland, the anguish of leaving behind everything familiar agonizes the migrants” (660). Similarly, quoting Kalaivani analysis of gender issues across the boundary in this novel, Morris and Poonkodi write:

The present work surveys to bring out the issues of immigrant women who struggle hard to survive in the migrated land. As they are caught between two opposing worlds, their relationship with family especially with men jeopardized and also is split. Women of India, face the gender issue as their primary challenge in society. The lives of women in their homeland and abroad make no difference, and they are torn between old and new world values. (2966)

In the story, she admits herself as an uneducated woman for whom it is tough to get a good job in America. Having spent a couple of years in America, she feels exhausted doing baby care and cleaning work. Bela is tired of staying in an old and confined area of the apartment. There is not even a single house that they could say is owned by them. Moreover, when she knows her husband is not as sincere as he used to be before, she repents for getting married. Author writes:

yes, for the first time, she admitted it- her marriage swirled in her like a dust storm. She was stuck in a dingy apartment, stuck in a dead-end job she hated, stuck under a load of unpaid loans so heavy that she'd probably never be able

to squirm out from under them and go back to college... "Oh baby," she whispered. "What am I going to do?" (107)

Bela seems to be in a dilemma about what to do next. She does not have any idea about where her life is heading towards. After she arrives in America, most of the time, she was dependent upon Sanjay. From house mortgage to every essential for home is managed by Bela's husband and his friend Bishnu. Since Sanjay was the primary source of Income, Bela has to cancel her trip to visit her mother in India, and she even has to stop making phone calls to India because Sanjay orders her to do so. When they are expecting for baby, Bela's work slows down. Since then, it became intricate for them to run their household. During this crisis, Sanjay professes to Bela that she is irresponsible and very passive at coping with the economic transactions of the house. Sanjay says, "you know nothing of what it takes to survive in the world, the values you have to sacrifice, the choices you have to make. You never had to learn, because he and I were taking care of you all along" (117). These lines from Sanjay manifest patriarchal credence inside him. He forgets the way how Bela is carrying out the household work when Sanjay is at work. Further, he slays Bela's sacrifice by leaving her mother alone in India and leaving her study for Sanjay. At this moment, she questions her own identity and subjectivity.

This kind of Patriarchal fraternity exists in many Asian families who have moved to America and other European nations. Avtar Brah, in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* elucidates:

Feminists have argued that family institution constitutes one of the key sites where the subordination of 'women' is secured. Patriarchal ideologies consist of 'home' as a 'rightful' place for a woman. Marriage constitutes a pivotal mechanism in the regulation and control of female sexuality. 'Family' is also

where the appropriation of women's carrying work masquerades as 'labor of love. (76)

In the first half of the story, a similar situation occurs in the life of Sabitri and Bela because both, along with their husband, carry on the legacy of Indian culture. They always remained in subordinated place in comparison to their partners. Doing so, they have to transmute into the stereotypical conventions set by the family, where they lose their individualism. For each of the two, marriage becomes a snare that restricts them from access to education and other societal affairs; instead, it confines them in domestic work, which men think of as a 'labor of love. Mary Becker explaining visibility and invisibility of men's and women's roles and how each of them is valued as per their role writes:

Women and men become visible and invisible under different conditions in a patriarchal culture. Women are invisible when they do something well, such as raising children into healthy adults or coming up with a brilliant idea at a business meeting. Men, on the other hand, become invisible when their behavior is socially undesirable and might raise questions about the appropriateness of male privilege. (29)

Banerjee has portrayed the same feature in Sabitri and Bela, who are strongly responsible for making their house heavenly. In the case of Sabitri, she believes that she has converted herself into a typical homemaker to make her husband happy. Sketching Sabitri's characteristics narrator narrates, "She cooked him the dishes he most enjoyed, the comfort foods of a man who had grown up poor...After dinner, she put on thin cotton, night-chemise, which showed off her figure- she had recently taken on this westernized habit" (23). Thus, changes in Sabitri witness the commitment made by her toward her family. Though she is not involved in administrative and

official work, she is indirectly liable for upgrading Bijan's position in his office. Hence, Sabitri writes to her granddaughter, "I created desserts that became the talk of the town. I wonder if Bijan realized that many of his tough deals fell into place because of my dinners" (24).

Unlike major women characters, life has treated Tara differently, although her story is like her mother and grandmother. Tara is born in the land of America and brought up in American culture. Therefore, she does not have cultural proximity with India. Despite living in an advanced nation, she is not left untouched by hurdles. Like Sabitri and Bela, her life goes through some misfortunes. She has to be separated from her parents at an early age of life. Further, her relationship with her boyfriend comes to an end. It was not enough to hurt her. The most painful part was when she has to abort her baby impregnated by Robert. Afterward, she falls into drug addiction and drops herself out of college.

Tara's characteristics in this novel are a little ambiguous. Sometimes, she describes herself as a strong girl who does not need men's support. Meanwhile, she awfully pursues it. This nature of Tara can be noted in some of her conversations with her friend Blanca. Blanca wonders if Tara's boyfriend called Tara too fat. In reply, Tara admits, "I don't need a man to tell me what I am" (50). At the same time, she also shares how madly she misses the time she spent with Robert. Tara continues, "but I love showering with Robert, his fingers unbuttoning my clothes, letting them drop where they will, the way he holds me as he soaps my back, as though I were a child who might slip and fall." (56)

When it was time Tara has found a job in an Indian family, she seems so excited to get into it, hoping to learn some Indian food culture from them. Despite Robert's denial, she goes for that job. Tara is a little more independent than her

mother and grandmother because she has heard and seen many stories where women are trapped by husbands and are dominated all over life. When working at Mehta's house, Mrs. Mehta also shares her bitter experience with her husband. Mehta says, "so many times Mr. Mehta gave me grief, I had to get his permission for every little thing: read a book, go to the cinema, even phone my parents" (68). Thus, such corroboration from different people teaches Tara not to limit herself in a men's grip. She envisions the freedom of women and says, "I begin the story of the Pleiades, women transformed into birds so swift and bright that no man could snare them" (68). Bringing a mythical reference to the Pleiades, Banerjee has surpassed the competence of female characters in a novel. Just like the Pleiades who were converted into stars to prevent themselves from being raped by Orion, in the same way, Tara also desires to set herself free from the suppression of males.

Withstanding the above fact, Tara faces the same problem as her mother and grandmother did regarding her individualism and paternal love. When she was small, Tara and her mother are left alone by her father. Afterward, Tara leaves Bela thinking that she is responsible for their divorce. Since then, she starts living far from the house. Though Tara is out of reach, she constantly seeks paternal warmth. Therefore, she quests for fatherly vehemence in other people. Tara, who has her heritage rooted in India, is almost unaware of Indian culture. Since she is unfamiliar with Indian culture, she cannot understand the value of womanhood. Therefore, Tara disrespects her mother and makes a mess of her desires, womanhood, and identity. Being a Hindu, she never visits the temple. Once, she has to take Dr. V to the Hindu temple, where she gets to know the importance and power of women. Banerjee employs the images of the Goddess in the temple as a symbol of women's strength and vigor.

Analyzing how a temple has played a lead role in crowning the sense of strength and power, Metka Zupancic explains:

Tara incidentally visits a Hindu temple in the United States, in Texas... this event does not offer a promise that she could overcome her sense of social instability and that she could reconnect with her heritage. However, it bears a symbolic value: the 'goddess in the temple may eventually allow Tara to find the 'goddess within', her intrinsic value. As an inherently strong woman, she may finally accept her family and the female genealogy to which she belongs, beyond national and geographic boundaries. (297)

In this way, the story discloses the way how displacement is also a major factor in forming women's identity in the story. These women are displaced from their homes for some reason. Such displacement results in their loneliness and alienation from their culture and family. However, they manage to hoist from that position and can grab a successful life. As per their undergoing, they have made their own identity and subjective understanding of life. At the end of the story, they can understand their connection with each other. Examining how displacement plays a vital role in women's life Shridhokar in her article, writes:

Beginning with an external displacement, and yearning for their home, it eventually manifests in an external displacement; as one gets alienated not only from others but gradually from one's hopes and dreams. Thus, driving deep the sense of loss and alienation that endlessly shifts from outside to deep within. (78)

Sabitri, Bela, and Tara all of them, leave their house for different reasons and get disconnected from each other. They are set against each other; so, they seek help and

consolations from others. As time passes, they realize the value of self. Thus, they wake up with vigor and fight against their hustle, and finally are rewarded with a successful life. Sabitri imparts the lesson of selfhood to her daughter Bela and granddaughter Tara. Even though everyone in this story is betrayed by their male partner from one way and another and is compelled to live a melancholic life that questions their identity and subjectivity, they finally recognize the purpose of being. Even though Banerjee in this femicentric novel has become able to give justice to all female characters, but the ending part of the novel seems contradictory to the previous part. Throughout the story, the author is trying to advocate the struggling phase of females but lastly, she ends up the three-generational female chain by Tara giving birth to a male child named Neal. The first part of the research attempts to analyze how three women characters surpass their suffering and become able to build their recognition. However, Banerjee has ended up the story with the birth of a male child. This ending brings her effort throughout the novel of empowering women into dispute. Therefore, in the second part of the research, the researcher tries to discover the rationale behind the involvement of male characters in this novel and how these male characters succeed in justifying the role of 'new man'.

Gender studies, in the present context, has become an interdisciplinary approach-focusing on gender equality and identity- including female studies, men's studies, lesbian Gay, and queer theory, and their representation in literary pieces. It started drawing the attention of most readers and critics post-1990. Before it came into the leading edge, Feminism remained an ear-catchy issue that overruled the issues of other genders, aiming for the equality of sexes in every social and political sector. It was when the female revolted and challenged male-centric society and foregrounded the unjust that females have faced. Challenging the patriarchal society,

women demanded impartiality and refused the stereotypical gender roles assigned by society. In the race of institutionalizing matriarchal norms, patriarchy became the primary cause of women's oppression. Males were negatively portrayed as having the power to subsume woman's dignity and freedom, letting them be around male chauvinism. This revolution entered into the literary genre where males are apathetically portrayed. As a result, male roles in female's life started fading from the mind. However, the way the patriarchy has been defined seems unjustifiable. Indeed, women are not merely a victim of a male instead there is an inestimable count of women whom female themselves has exploited. Expounding on the feminine issue, many theorists and critics stand against patriarchy while others disagree with the patriarchy as a mere cause for female subjugation. Clarifying the concept of patriarchy Denise Thompson in *Radical Feminism Today* writes:

Patriarchy is the most common term used to designate the social problem identified by Feminism. Nevertheless, in its usual meaning of 'rule of father', the term patriarchy is a misnomer applied to the form of domination challenged by Feminism. The paternal domination portrayed in western history, myth and literature is the rule of the father over the son. It involves the imposition of, or struggle against, the ascendancy of some men over other men. (60)

In the exact text, *Radical Feminism Today*, Thompson adds the reflection of Chandra Mohanty. The latter is also reluctant to use the term patriarchy as a denotation of male supremacy over the woman as she believed that there is no universal patriarchal framework to subdue the woman. Quoting Mohanty, Thompson writes, "Chandra Mohanty also objects to any use of the term 'patriarchy'. There is, she says, no patriarchal framework...unless one posits an international male conspiracy or a

monolithic, a historical power hierarchy" (108). Denying the canonization of patriarchal domination, Mohanty even blames Western feminist writing for focusing on the "third world woman" and making it monolithic discourse which resulted in peripheralization of others genders and suppressing the heterogeneity of subjects, "'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject', a discursive construct which results in the suppression... of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question". (108)

Sabitri, who belongs to a less privileged society where education for women is objectionable, runs her later life indulging herself in a sweet shop. She could not make her conjugal life till doomsday thus persists as a single woman, yet a man named Bipin Bihari remains as a wingman for Sabitri until her end. Even Sabitri believes that Bipin Bihari has remained significant for the whole time, especially he holds the title role in Sabitri's business. Once, robbers crashed into Sabitri's shop and wounded her and Bipin Bihari badly. There was no time when Bipin Bihari left Sabitri in a crisis. He helps her feel relief from the wound, and this is when she honestly confesses what she feels about Bipin Bihari when he proposes to her to marry him. "Every day of my life. I'm thankful for you. Without you, Durga Sweets would have gone out of business a long time ago. But more than that, you're my friend, the only one to whom I can talk, ... "I love you too". But not like that" (83). After the denial of Sabitri, Bipin Bihari stays with her and assists Bela in her business.

Due to radical revolutions demanding gender equality, femininity and masculinity have been misunderstood, misdeemed, and misinterpreted. Feminists around the world have taken patriarchy as a system that holds power to do systematic bias. Males are taken as governing figures who always have ascendancy over females' approach in every field, and accordingly, they are rendered in literary texts as well. Oppositely, females are shown hegemonized and subsumed by male-centric

narratives. Here, the story revolves around the lives of three women. The novel is woman-centric, which calls attention to the struggle, hassles, and how they uphill the battles of their lives. However, it also shows the inevitability of males in the lives of females. The author shows that men are not always disastrous and troublesome by involving different male characters in the text.

It is believed by Andrea Waling as well, who quoting in her article, writes about the two types of masculinity men can perform: hard masculinity and soft masculinity:

There are also "types" of masculinities men can perform, such as hard masculinity, characterized as adhering to a model that involves stoicism, hard labor, and aggression, whereas those who are characterized as having soft masculinity then are considered to be much more nurturing, caring, and engaged in feminizing practices. (97)

Bipin Bihari is the man who has performed soft masculinity throughout the novel, indulging in the households of Savitri's sweet shops, penetrating himself into the emotions of Sabitri, and always solicitous towards her. He is the man who stands with Sabitri during her ups and downs and after her death; also, he is only there to perform the funeral of Sabitri. Bipin Bihari's portrayal in this novel confronts and alters the stereotypical roles of man. Rowena Chapman calls such man as a 'New Man' who is "a response to the pathologization of masculinity by feminists,...he is involved with child-care, he is responsible for contraception, he cooks dinner and takes out the rubbish, he is sensitive lover,...", quotes Keith Green and Jill LeBihan. (259)

For ages, our lives have been ruled by stereotypical roles that are assigned by societal conventions. To be specific, Indian societies are male-centric, and there is the

dominion of male meta-narratives. Therefore, the roles of women are always colligated and fused in patriarchy. This tendency can be seen in all three female characters Sabitri, Bela, and Tara. Tara, Bela's Daughter, utterly unknown about the Indian culture as she is born in the United States, has to be separated from her parents early. Living independently, she dates a boy named Robert, but unfortunately, their relationship ends when Tara aborts the baby after her boyfriend compels her to do such. So why? Living in a westernized and liberal society, she decides to terminate the baby sprouting inside her womb, risking her health. Like this, repeatedly, all the characters in this text let themselves be overruled by males' decisions and continue to yearn for a paternal ruling. When Tara started being lonesome, she encounters many people, and amongst them, Dr. V is one. Dr. V is an outsider and has a brief, still immense role in Tara's life. Like Dr. V, Kenneth is also an outsider but has played a remarkable role in Bela's life. On the one hand, all of them are troubled by men, which creates hatred towards paternity; on the other side, the men give and changes everyone's characters' lives.

Finally, the novel ends with Tara getting married to an American man Gary and begetting the son Neal. The author has ended the three-woman generational chain by the born of Neal. Once Tara was immensely loved by her father, which she cherished a lot. Later, her father used her as a weapon to break the relationship with her mother. When she knows this, she is shattered, destroys herself in every manner she can. She drops out of college, becomes a drug addict. Eventually, her life gets changed after meeting Dr. V, in whom she finds a fatherly figure. This meeting changes her life, and she decides to spend life with her husband Gary and son Neal. Critiquing the end of this novel, Trina Mitra writes, "the absence of father throughout the novel is finally compensated in the figure of Gary, Tara's American husband.

Therefore, it is striking that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni saved the dutiful father only for a male child in the end" (20). Dr. Suchi Agarwal, in her writing, presents her insights on the power of narrative in the depiction of the relations with the reference of this novel concludes, "we find that these three women go through the same turmoil in their lives: love, betrayal, purpose, and success. Sabitri, Bela, and Tara find Bipin Bihari, Kenneth, and Gary to make them realize their potential to complete their self". (329)

To conclude, the instances mentioned earlier show the relationship between males and females that the author in the text depicts. Also, how some bonding between male and female work splendidly whereas some miss the boat. Holding over this wing, my next major concern in this work is to foreground why female characters are attached to males in one way or another.

Feminist discourse took up the space for a long time, invalidating patriarchal discourses, and raised the voice against excluding women from mainstream political, social, and cultural realms. Societal convictions always put women at the periphery and men at the center. As a result, they are assigned with the stereotypical role determined by social credo. In opposition to it, the feminist campaign started and split into three waves. They fight for political inequality, social disparity, patriarchal chauvinism, and cultural prejudices between man and woman. Within these three waves, different feminists presented various sorts of woman issues in distinctive ways to resist patriarchy. Writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Ann Oakley, Kate Millet primarily focused on literature or cultural activities and secondarily boosted women in political enterprises. Unlike these writers, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray shifted their focus to 'feminine writing', which claimed that existing writing

structures are insufficient for provoking feminine, so a new form is needed of language. Green and LeBihan, in their book, write,

Whilst Cixous insists on the 'otherness' of feminine discourse- on the way fixed forms of phallogocentrism repress it... Luce Irigaray insists on the subversive potential of women writers who must work within the symbolic system into which they are placed, but which they can effectively undermine by parody, dialogue, or by filling in the spaces that male-dominated discourse has left behind. (246)

Luce Irigaray also regards the woman's body as the leading agent to counter-attack male domination. Unlike Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva focuses on the semiotic, pre-symbolic stage of infants. She believes that this semiotic can shake the rigidity created by phallogocentrism. These sorts of ambiguities among feminist writers made other writers look upon it with suspicion. Questioning about Feminism and centralizing the concept of gender study are the consequences of such categorization among women.

This questioning gives rise to the alternative discourse, the Men's Studies, which attempts to redefine masculinity and asserts the importance of masculinity within Feminism. Many writers like Rowena Chapman, Victor Seidler, and Lynne Segal positively assert men's involvement in Feminism as an indispensable effort at the present day. Green and LeBihan explaining the Lynne Segal's perception about 'Representation of masculinity' elucidates, "Her suggestion, implied here, is that, instead of reading male characters in novels as human and gender-neutral, we see them as examples of a constructed masculinity, just as are the women characters who feature with them" (261). This kind of masculinity constructed by the author exhibits the cruel, rude, and stern figure who is typically a controlling freak, whereas some are depicted as a delicate and modest personality.

In Banarjee's *Before We Visit the Goddess*, all the men characters who turned out to be faulty later on once have played a role of an ideal husband and father. Also, the external character like Dr. V has been a cause of his own daughter's death. The father-like figure and a life-changing factor in Tara's life is a life-taking agent of her daughter. So, Banerjee has delineated changing role of most of the male characters in her novel as quoted by Green and LeBihan about Lynne Segal's statement, who believed the different varieties of representation of masculinity from a tender father to sex beast (261). The significance of the father's role in Bela's and Tara's life cannot be deniable. Throughout the plot, at many points, both female characters have realized the presence of their father's notable one, and the memories with their father frequently haunt them.

Tara seems to be more desirous of having her father in her life is proven by her affection towards Dr. V. The hidden endearment and yearning towards her father are replaced by Dr. V, who can harmonize the uneven life that Tara is living. Such attachment calls Sigmund Freud an 'Oedipus Complex', which is defined as an intense attraction of a child towards their parents of the opposite sex.

Foregrounding Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, Patrick Mullahy writes, "The newborn female infant is...just as dependent on the mother as male. However, as she develops, she begins to manifest an interest in the father...lavishes affectionate devotion on the father, and manifests a desire to set aside mother as superfluous and take her place" (26). Such fondness towards father can be unearthed in both Bela and Tara. It was the occasion when Bela, with her parents, was living in Assam. There was a time when the magician highly tempted Bela. It was the mesmerizing part of her life that she could not forget in her later part of life. As Bela's father seems to be very busy, she has to spend most of the time with Sabitri, her mom.

Bela prefers to spend time with her father and shares her experience with him. In this regard, the Narrator narrates how Bela adores her hours with her father, "Do you believe in Magician?" Bela asks Bijan on the way to school. Immediately she regrets the question. She treasures this time, her only chance to be alone with her father" (38).

Similarly, another incident happens in Assam when Bela was hurt by a magician, making her unconsciously fall on the ground. When Bela regains her consciousness, it was her father whom she profoundly wants, "I do not think she's disoriented," Bijan interjects, suddenly, hoarsely. Bela hears him striding to the bed, her champion. She waits for him to throw his arms around her, but he isn't paying attention" (47). There is an absence of fatherly love for all three females. Thus, all of them seek their father's endearment throughout the story. Though Banerjee's text is gynocentric, she has brought out some essential male characters whose role is immense in developing the story.

Discussing the role of the father in this text, Trina Maitra writes in her article, "The Absent Father: A Study of Gender Representation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*" writes, "the absent father throughout the novel is finally compensated in the figure of Gary, Tara's America Husband. It is striking, therefore, that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni saved a dutiful father only for a male in the end" (20). The author has ended the story in a fourth generation, with the birth of Neal, son of Tara. As a result, the text ends up portraying a gynocentric world within an androcentric structure.

Hence, in this way, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has artistically presented the story of three women and their subjective experiences about life. She has incorporated different temporal, spatial, and cultural settings and has shown how these circumstances affected their standard of living. The writer herself belongs to the

Asian-American group and especially an Indian woman; therefore, she exhibits her own experiences which she went through when she first came to America. In this way, the research has shown how Sabitri, Bela, and Tara endures many nuisances in their lives. Owing to such hardship, they can give a vantage point to look upon the way of life they lived. These female characters in the novel urge themselves to make their own independent and robust personality by withstanding and confronting the barrier set forth by conformist patriarchal society.

Accordingly, the researcher finds socio-cultural factors playing a significant role in forming women's subjectivity in this novel. Every leading character here is influenced by the culture and society where they are brought up. They initially decide to follow the conventions constituted by society. When their life is messed up with the chaotic situation, they realize the value of selfhood and individuality. Onwards, all of them make their way to progress in life. Sabitri ends up running up her own sweet business, Bela, living in America, started her cooking work, and Tara, who dropped her out from college, continues her study. She also realizes the importance of her mother lately, which she had not at an early age of life. By the end of the story, though Sabitri has already died, Bela and Tara understand the virtue of self-made identity through the letter written by Sabitri. Besides that, displacement from home is another integral factor in exploring the identity of female characters in novels. All of them are displaced from their home and drift to new environments. They have to face several hurdles and dominations being a female. Furthermore, they are cut off from their education, relationship with family, which leave them shattered. However, going through every misfortune, finally, they can make a happy life being successful women. Lastly, another factor that helps in recreating women's identity in this text is 'the role of men'. Though some male characters betray the female characters here,

some males stay and support females in their tough luck and make them realize their inherent power.

Summing up, the researcher claims that, in the era of globalization and modernization, people tend to mobilize from one place to another, and the women population is also incorporated. Due to this tendency, lots of revolutions are taking place in the case of gender equality. For that reason, women are becoming more conscious about their rights, equality, identity, and subjectivity. In this text, the researcher analyses why three female characters face problems in society and how they struggle to fight against it to build their subjective understanding of their lives. On another level, research also focuses on how still women long for paternal support to move forward. No matter how modernized the society is and how hard these three characters go through in the story, they ultimately end up having a male supporter in their life. Hence, this researcher concludes that, although Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has created a female-centered story and their struggle for identity in society, she has shown the equal role of men in it. Either in a good or bad way, male characters have made their role in forming the subjective understanding of life to all the female characters in the story.

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