

### REVIEW OF 'BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS'

by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Publ: Simon & Schuster

Price: Rs 499

Stories of mothers and daughters have been written many times before. But in the hands of a superb story-teller like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the intertwining emotions familiar to all women of guilt, blame and overweening love becomes an engrossing and affecting read.

On the very first page of the book, a woman lies dying in a remote part of Bengal, surrounded not by all the people she has loved but only the memories of them. In the lonely darkness of this scene, Divakaruni describes jackals howling in the countryside, casting what I believe is a nod to the complexities of the mother-daughter bond, primeval in its power. 'Maybe they have a blood memory of how it was before humans came and pushed them to the edges,' she says of the jackals but it is this 'blood memory' that we recognise over again while reading her story in which three generations of women effect damage on each other, wittingly, unwittingly, utterly helpless to the love that overwhelms all else.

Sabitri is born to a poor sweet-maker in rural Bengal but, using her wits to claw her way out of poverty, she rejects a possible life of luxury to return to sweet-making, dedicating her talents to creating a perfect mango & saffron sweet she will name after her mother. Her daughter, Bela, whose innocent childhood utterance Sabitri blames for the destruction of her marriage, grows into a rebellious young woman who elopes with her Communist lover to the safety of America during the rise of the Naxalist movement in Bengal. The mother and daughter do not meet again but, years later, Sabitri feels compelled as she dies to write a letter to the American

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granddaughter she does not know, terrified that this young woman will make the same mistakes both Sabitri and Bela did, such being the manner of 'blood memory'. Tara, scrubbing along the edges of life in Houston, is wrestling with her own demons, but she too, discovering an old photograph of her grandmother holding her mother as a child, can feel the stirring within of that old timeless bond that will, in the end, be the salvation of her.

This multi-generational story of exile and survival moves back and forth from Calcutta to Assam to Houston, time-lines fracturing and shifting sometimes in a matter of a few paragraphs. Thankfully, the author maintains a firm hold over the narrative throughout which never once falters or confounds.

It is one of the dangers of a story featuring such strong female protagonists, that the male characters will remain pen-sketches, pushed into the background. However (and this sometimes with no more than the application of a few precise sentences), we have charming Sanjay who spurned his Communist past for the conveniences of life in America, gentle Bipin Bihari who sacrificed so much for love, Bela's gay friend Kenneth who is ultimately her redemption, even the irritable Dr Venkatachelapati who, despite the briefest of appearances as he visits America for a conference, provides Bela with a life-saving message and leaves us, the readers, with a reference to the Goddess of the title.

Such light and effortless shaping of credibility is the mark of an experienced novelist and this book could easily be used as a textbook for students learning the craft of fiction. Here is proof that one does not need page after page of description to set a scene or render a character believable.

Turns of phrases such as, 'days slow as cattle grazing in a parched summer field'. And the description of a grieving woman curled up on a fawn velvet chair, 'weeping until the fabric turned dark with her sorrow' are proof that real creative power comes from economy of language and a reflective, thoughtful mind.

*(Jaishree Misra is the author of eight novels published by Penguin & Harper Collins.)*

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