

Gender, Resistance, and Identity: Women's Rewriting of the Self in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

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ABSTRACT

The image of Indian women has often been associated with the act of obedience and submission. Previous studies on gender and sexuality in India's literary tradition and culture point to the dominance of heteropatriarchal normativity and the scarcity of the image of a powerful woman capable of contesting and dismantling such impositions. In this study, we argue that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) presents a more nuanced image of the Indian women who constantly problematize the mainstream prescriptions of gender roles and boundaries. In pursuit of the argument, this study aims to explore the novel to examine the multiple ways in which the leading female characters contest, negotiate, and reconstruct pre-existing definitions of gender identities. As an analytical framework, we draw upon the poststructuralist feminist Hélène Cixous's notions of "the feminine," "the other," and "*écriture féminine*" (feminine writing) to shed light on female characters' struggles against submission to patriarchal discourses. The findings reveal that the three female characters—i.e., Sabitri, Bela, and Tara—resist discourses of masculinity through empowerment in their unique ways: establishing a business, getting a divorce, and having an abortion. Through such practices, the female characters demonstrate the will of both a woman and a mother and a strong sense of love that works as a key factor in their resistance to patriarchy and rewriting identity relations.

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Keywords: *Écriture féminine*, the feminine, identity, India, resistance, the other

INTRODUCTION

India is historically dominated by a patriarchal culture that not only demands women's obedience and submission to their male counterparts but also encourages their silence when facing "discrimination, subordination, exploitation, and subjugation" (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021, p. 427). Many scholars have indicated that the prevailing misogyny is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and is powerfully reinforced in its literary tradition, where the figure of an active Indian woman capable of contesting and dismantling patriarchy is relatively rare (Bhopal, 2019; Hapke, 2013; Singh et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, we argue that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) provides profound insights into the subtle and intricate empowerment practices that Indian women adopt to resist and redefine mainstream prescriptions of gender roles and boundaries. The female characters reflect the collective consciousness of Indian women while showing individuality in their resistance against patriarchy. The novel narrates the story of three generations of mothers and daughters—Sabitri, Bela, and Tara—who are in pursuit of deciphering the meaning and purpose of their life. At the novel's crux is a strong sense of love that functions as the driving force behind the three characters' life decisions and ambitions. Although love is conventionally viewed as a feminine quality of subdued nature (Jaggar, 1989), the novel features it as a principal element deployed by female characters to topple the patriarchy and

redefine their identities. In pursuit of this argument, this study aims to explore the novel to examine the multiple ways in which the female characters contest, negotiate, and reconstruct pre-existing definitions of gender identities.

The present article draws upon the poststructuralist feminist Hélène Cixous's notions of "the feminine," "the other," and "*écriture féminine*" (feminine writing) to achieve this goal. These analytical concepts are employed to study female characters' individual and cooperative endeavors to change the status quo. Cixous theorized the three notions to emphasize the importance of unorthodox forms of feminine expression in resisting traditional binary impositions of gender and in rewriting new definitions of self. This framework is useful in understanding how one can liberate itself from the shackles of patriarchal obligations and embrace the limitless potentials of feminine desires instead, and thereby formulate a sense of self or a new feminine identity that is dissociated from a discourse of masculinity (Sellers, 2003). In this relation, the concept of "the other"—as a metaphor for exiled energies or the excess (Cixous, 2003a)—is theorized as subverting the traditional binary pairs of men/women and masculine/feminine. Therefore, exclusion of "the other" from the binary creates the "unknown," through which its creative driving force renders the negation of phallogocentric thoughts possible (Cixous, 2003b).

Furthermore, a Cixousian perspective brings to light the manifestation of

subjective feminine experience as a central feature of a woman's life in the novel. In this framework, the notions of "the other" and "the feminine" provide an alternative for phallogocentric thoughts to be dissected and reconstructed. In like manner, *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing, offers insights into women's constant struggles to reshape their destiny. By continuously writing and rewriting the past and the present, the female characters move towards the desired future in the name of motherly and womanly love. It is crucial to explore the patriarchal ideology that prescribes and dominates hierarchical gender relations and the literary responses to this male-dominated context to grasp the mechanism of such deconstructions and reconstructions fully.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Contextual and Literary Background

In recent decades, economic growth and structural advancements have positively transformed India's social, political, and cultural landscape (Nazneen et al., 2019). However, despite the progressive changes concerning the issues of gender and sex, Indian women are still confined to the long-existing patriarchal values and norms. Embedded into the country's traditional culture is the belief that women are the male's responsibility, whether as wives, daughters, or mothers (Jain, 2014; Sharma, 2017). Adherence to this patriarchal belief system has fostered a static and fixed definition of gender roles that have, in turn, deprived women of their independence and

autonomy (Mohanty, 2003; Siddiqi, 2021). Ethnographic studies have shown that a similar culture of gender stereotypes and expectations prevails among the Indians in the diaspora (B. Das, 2021; Jagganath, 2017; Sahoo & Shome, 2020). According to these studies, Indian diasporic communities have maintained—either passively or actively—their ethnonational identities insofar as the traditional perceptions of gender and sex shape the Indian culture in the diaspora.

The notions of gender and sexuality and the long-existing hierarchical gender relations lie at the crux of many of the literary works of Indian women, both nationals and in diaspora (Asl et al., 2018). Most of the literary works by contemporary women writers from India revolve around the current condition of women, marriage, family ties, motherhood, and the masculine discourses of the Indian culture and tradition. The prevalence and commonality of these topics highlight the significance of feminine struggles for identity-making within the male-dominated Indian society. Similarly, Indian diaspora writers explore these topics with further intricacy by reflecting on the processes of identity formation (Anuar & Asl, 2021; Asl & Abdullah, 2017; Kumari, 2018). In doing so, diasporic women writers take up the challenge to question the essentialist notions of identity as fixed and unchanging. Contrary to traditional Western feminism that "refers to third world women as a homogenous, singular group" (Shameem, 2016, p. 193), diasporic Indian women writers uplift the identity of diasporic women as individual, distinctive, and complex.

The South Asian women writers of diasporic experience generally explore the heterogeneity and constant metamorphosis of identities (Anuar & Asl, 2022; Laxmiprasad, 2020; Shukla & Shukla, 2006). Indeed, the significance of gender and sexuality of Indian women and Indian women of diaspora is reflected as a primary element in literary works by Indian women writers. According to Rajeswari and Rajarajan (2019), literary writing provides a platform where subjective feminine experiences can be rediscovered from the new perspective of women's voices. In this relation, diasporic Indian women writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni seek to represent marginalized Indian women's voices through their compelling portrayal of female characters living in diaspora in fictional works (Laxmiprasad, 2020). S. K. Das (2016) states that while the three writers explore the same aspects of gender and identity formation in search of 'home,' there is a generational difference in the representation of 'belongingness' in the Indian diaspora of the three writers. As such, Divakaruni's fiction is specifically selected for it explores various issues related to women's identity, such as:

mutual help among the women who strive for their life and identity [...] the various aspects of women such as women in love, women in family and society, women in the alien soil, their troubles and adaptation and their bravado of survival [...] the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood

and their assimilation, their struggle between the two worlds and culture. (Rajeswari & Rajarajan, 2019, p. 366)

Even though scholars like Laxmiprasad (2020) believe that the portrayed female characters in Divakaruni's works are imperfect beings who struggle for their identity, her literary writings seek to rejuvenate the novel and subjective feminine experience. This goal is achieved by centering her works around female characters' daily encounters with patriarchal impositions as well as their active participation in reconstructing their identities (Zupančič, 2020). Therefore, exploring the Cixousian feminist perspective adopted as the theoretical framework for the present study to examine such contestations and negotiations in *Before We Visit the Goddess* is crucial.

The Conceptual Background: Cixous's the Other, the Feminine, and *Écriture Féminine*

At the heart of the Cixousian framework is the emergence of a revolutionary practice of writing the feminine language and motherhood, which aims to reconstruct a self unaffected by the history of phallogocentrism/phallogocentrism. In realizing this, Cixous has developed the concepts of "the feminine" and "the other" that are crucial in actualizing feminine writing or *écriture féminine*. Cixous' theory is built around the need to resist phallogocentrism/phallogocentrism, where language is limited to the foundation of reason and rationality.

According to her, “the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, [which] has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism” (Cixous, 1976, p. 879). Here, Cixous problematizes the male-centered perspective in writing and censures the blatant disregard for the more obscure “feminine” aspects of the body. In order to break down this structure of power, Cixous formulates a distinguished method of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing as an alternative practice. The two concepts of “the other” and “the feminine” that she theorized as part of other bisexuality become the basis for this revolutionary practice of writing the feminine body and experience. Thus, the approach to the study of the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* is drawn from the Cixousian concept of feminine writing, through which the embodiment of “the feminine” and “the other” provide an opportunity for women to reclaim their stories and identities.

When discussing “the feminine” and “the other,” the first component that has to be studied is the primary binary division of gender roles and definitions. According to Farahbakhsh and Bozorgi (2013), Cixous sees male/female as the main binary that reproduces patriarchal order, which in turn triggers the birth of other binary oppositions founded in phallogocentrism. For this reason, this dyadic structural order limits creativity and rules out different possibilities beyond its framework. Cixous’ “the feminine” serves to valorize the ‘lesser’ half of the

binary pair masculine/feminine because “feminization, after all, is not an erasure of a male half of a binary, but a representation of all that conventional writing has left out of its discourse” (Hoctor, 2013, p. 18). Cixous (1996) then proposes “the other” as a third gender, a constructed self that is prompted but excluded from the binary pairs of male/female and masculine/feminine. The “feminine” that she speaks of becomes a necessary element in “keeping alive the other that is confided to her that visits her, that she can love as other. The loving to be other, another, without its necessarily going the route of abasing what is same, herself” (Cixous, 1996, p. 86). In other words, “the feminine” and “the other” are interrelated forces that validate the “irrational,” the whimsical, and the excess that is otherwise neglected and unattainable through phallogocentrism/phallogocentrism.

To understand “the other” not as a separate but a complementary aspect of “the feminine,” the term shall be viewed as an extension of the feminine desires where exclusion from the established male/female and masculine/feminine is possible to navigate the subjective experience as third sex (Cixous, 1976, 1996). Cixous discusses this idea in parallel with the term mother, a prominent and recurring element that shapes a large area of her theory. Torre states that “Cixous’s “mother” is not a name, meaning that it is not a role, a figure, a social category” (2010, p. 174). However, the existence of the self as a m(other) is liberated from phallogocentrism regardless of one’s biological sex. While

the term mother that she speaks of is metaphorical, it is nevertheless inextricably linked to birth and motherhood, both in the metaphorical and physical sense. According to Jordan, Cixous views women's strength in giving birth as a "self-actualizing and self-resourcing process" (2016, p. 96). Thus, the birth of "the other" is salvation for women (by becoming m(other)) to recover and reclaim their selves that were lost due to phallogocentrism/phallogocentrism, and where the feminine subjectivity becomes a necessary inclusion that makes up the whole complete self.

Cixous also weaves a strong connection between writing and birthing/motherhood to establish the basis of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. In *Coming to Writing*, she draws a parallel between writing and motherhood:

She [A woman] gives birth.... She has her source. She draws deeply. She releases. Laughing. And in the wake of a child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! ... A child! Paper! Milk. Ink. Nursing time, And me? I'm hungry too. The milky taste of ink! (Cixous, 1986/1991, pp. 30-31).

Cixous likens child and milk, inherently associated with motherhood, to paper and ink, respectively, which are inevitably crucial instruments to writing. With the 'ink' that comes from being a mother, she writes a new beginning for herself on her 'paper.' As stressed by Cixous, a woman is inclined towards a new beginning as she "couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation

(or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself: because she's a giver" (1976, p. 888). In other words, a woman does not fear castration because it does not deprive but amplifies her capacity to love herself and others. For this reason, feminine writing is a literal and symbolic act that appropriates the production of feminine desire through nurturing "the feminine" and "the other." Feminine writing is not only an act of using ink on paper but also a metaphorical act of rewriting destiny by embodying womanly experience and motherhood.

In relation to motherhood, Cixous forges a connection between giving and affection as the very same properties that shape the act of feminine writing. She implies that women's empowering forces of motherhood and nurturing are similar to the writing of the m(other) and the self. It aligns with Jordan (2016), who views Cixous' writing as distinctively of human creativity, where life and love overpower the forces of destruction and death associated with the feminine sex. Cixous subverts these conventions by introducing feminine solidarity: "woman for women.—There always remains in a woman that force which produces/is produced by the other-in particular, the other woman. In her matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter" (1976, p. 881). Therefore, birth and motherhood are viewed as intimate feminine experiences of "the feminine" and "the other" that liberate women and enable the act of feminine writing—a form

of writing from a woman for women. In addition, the basis of birth/motherhood and writing are inseparable from the notion of love. Bauerova (2018) asserts that Cixous rediscovers the relation between a woman and a mother, and through this, the unity of a mother with her child and her other is formed from the basis of acceptance and love. Similar to how motherhood rejuvenates love within a woman, writing becomes a site to restore and reconnect to “the feminine” and “the other,” to accept and love them as parts of the self. In other words, reclaiming the self becomes the first step that enables this revolutionary ‘new love’ for women.

Cixous’ feminine writing is introduced based on rejecting the phallogocentrism of language by asserting feminine subjectivity in their writing. Through the subversion of patriarchal influence in language, feminine writing seeks to manifest women’s underlying reality and true nature. However, according to Jones, *écriture féminine*, although a powerful concept, has been criticized as “idealist and essentialist, bound up in the very system they claim to undermine” (1981, pp. 252-253). While this statement is not unjust, feminine writing undermines as much as it does acknowledge phallogocentrism and patriarchy, for the deconstruction of such systems can only be realized through a profound understanding of their flaws. Therefore, despite the idea of feminine writing being “idealist and essentialist” (p. 252), it allows for an alternative view to the repressed, subdued side of the feminine, giving it an appropriate

space to materialize without completely detaching the values of reality as its foundation. Cixous’ concept of feminine writing is purposefully subjective to provide a site to reconstruct the feminine experience within the existing male-privileged system.

In *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), feminine writing is an essential aspect through which “the feminine” and “the other” is manifested. The concepts of “the feminine” and “the other” is prerequisite to catalyzing and reinforcing the realization of feminine writing. It is because feminine writing requires a female subject to dismiss the binary of masculine/feminine and embody the third sex before it can be carried out. This mode of writing that Cixous speaks of may be a physical and/or metaphorical act, where the story of a woman’s life is rewritten to break from the chain of predestined fate. In the case of this novel, Cixous’ feminine writing can be incorporated to study the significance of physical and metaphorical materialization in assisting the reading and understanding of the characters and their stories. Hence, “the feminine” and “the other” are crucial elements in writing and rewriting that are the basis of Cixous’ feminine writing, where the subjective feminine experience can be translated into the novel interpretation of the characters in the novel.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Objective

This study aims to challenge the stereotypical representations of Indian women as submissive and obedient victims

of heteropatriarchal relations of power and emphasize the portrayed women's active participation in resisting the prevailing perceptions of gender and sex. Two minor objectives are to be pursued in the present study to achieve this primary goal: First, to examine the multiple ways the female characters question and resist heteropatriarchal normalizations of sex and gender through empowerment; second, to analyze the different means through which the female characters reinscribe and reconstruct their definition of the self.

Methodology

The article uses a Cixousian analytical framework—a poststructuralist feminist perspective—to analyze Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016). First, a close reading of the text is performed to examine the fictional representations of female characters' everyday practices of contesting, negotiating, and re-writing existing definitions of gender and identity. Therefore, the main data collection method will be a textual analysis of the novel.

Material

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) is selected for analysis in this study as it relates the life story of three generations of Indian women who are connected by blood and their family status as mothers and daughters. The novel is directly related to the central argument of this study as it explores the various ways in which women of different ages,

times, and places find their greatest source of power in each other. Each of the female characters must be analyzed individually. It is due to the multiplicity of insights into the collective consciousness of Indian women offered from the standpoint of diaspora and generational differences. The complex relationships among women are explored through the characters of Sabitri, her daughter Bela, and the granddaughter Tara who create their identity through different kinds of love. Sabitri is a widow who sets up a dessert shop called 'Durga Sweet' as a means of living. Her daughter, Bela, feels emotionally disconnected from her because Sabitri spends more of her time in the shop than with her. Later, Bela flies to the United States to live with her boyfriend and later husband, Sanjay. Bela's part of the story tells the failure of her love and marriage. Much like her mother and grandmother, Tara faces emotional difficulties as a result of having an abortion and a conflict with Bela that extends for years. The novel ends with both Bela and Tara reading a letter from Sabitri, recounting her life story. Through this letter, they learn the meaning of love and independence for a woman and a mother.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Resistance Against Patriarchy Through Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a product of resistance against patriarchy. As reflected in the selected novel, each female character has initiated change whereby self-empowerment becomes the outcome of patriarchal resistance. The first character introduced

is Sabitri, a victim of patriarchy who later manages to resist patriarchy through self-empowerment. Her mother, Durga, is their village's hardworking and known sweet-maker. However, the family is not blessed with wealth. When Sabitri is given the opportunity to further her studies in tertiary education, she has to seek the kindness of the Mittirs for a place to stay and food to eat. Then, Sabitri falls in love with the Mittirs' son, Rajiv. Their forbidden romance later leads to her fallout with the Mittirs family. Having to salvage the situation, she decides to marry her math professor, who has been interested in her and helped her following the event with the Mittirs. Over the years, Sabitri realizes that her old lover, Rajiv, "had been weak and pampered, too weak to stand up for [her]. He must have known that his mother had thrown [her] out of the house. But he hasn't even inquired after [her]" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 28). In this situation, the action of Rajiv's mother is read as a result of the internalization of patriarchy. She upholds and participates in the subordination of other women—in this case, Sabitri—because she cannot share her "monopolistic power, affection, and love of [her] blood relation" (Habiba et al., 2016, p. 217). The force of patriarchy at play shows the powerlessness imposed upon Sabitri that is beyond her control due to poverty. It leads to her dependence on others—the Mittirs and, afterward, her husband before his death. These episodes of her life call for Sabitri to challenge and resist the patriarchal ideology of Indian women.

Cixous' "the feminine" and "the other" is characterized by the resistance to patriarchal binary thoughts. The female characters in *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) embody these notions as part of the condition in their journey of rewriting their life. Sabitri is an example of a Cixousian woman who adheres to the ideal that Cixous outlines. As stated, this framework allows for a "she" that is excluded from the masculine order (Sellers, 2003), thus making possible the materialization of the third sex/"the other" from "the feminine." In the novel, Sabitri embraces "the feminine" and makes it the source of her pride by subverting the very same 'lesser' binary pair into her own: "But how Sabitri had enjoyed cooking! This morning [...] when the milk had thickened perfectly, no ugly skin forming on top, she found herself smiling as she had not done since coming to Kolkata" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 12). In this context, the manifestation of "the other" comes in the form of pleasure from making sweets. As Cixous emphasizes, "the other" is free from pre-existing binary oppositions of male/female and masculine/feminine and is characterized as being "whole and entire" (1976, p. 891), with disregard to castration. Therefore, making sweet—a traditionally reserved activity for women—is reclaimed and remade into an activity that is not gender-specific but measured at the level of 'wholeness' it brings. With this creation of the novel self, "the feminine" is not simply an element that exists as the binary opposition of the masculine. It is instead rejuvenated as a singular element

that brings out the excess outside of the 'known.' As Sabitri turns sweet-making into her very own personal pleasure, she embeds within her the subjective understanding that reshapes the feminine experience into a source of love and pride.

Hence, "the other" that she keeps alive inside her catalyzes the many decisions she later makes in her life. In order to care for Bela after the death of her husband, Sabitri opens a sweet shop named Durga Sweet in the memory of her mother. This important event marks a new beginning where Sabitri takes the unconventional role as the sole provider for her family. It is known that women in traditional Indian families are confined within the home space and/or tied to their husbands. Therefore, they are unlikely to pursue a 'masculine' career, such as starting a business. However, Sabitri makes this an exception for the connection she seeks to keep between herself, her mother, Durga, and her daughter, Bela. Sabitri names the sweet shop after her dead mother as a symbol of love. As Sabitri states about Durga, she was the most talented and hardworking sweet-maker Sabitri has ever known but had never been appreciated as she deserved. By doing this, Sabitri is not only keeping alive the tradition of sweet-making in her family but also honoring her mother. Similarly, to bring up Bela, Sabitri rebuilds her life surrounding this business. The establishment of Durga Sweet and the pursuit of a 'masculine' career out of love for Bela reflect Cixous' association of womanly love that emphasizes 'love' as an element that allows for transformation and

brings about differences: "wherever she loves, all the old concepts of management are left behind [...] she finds not her sum but her differences" (Cixous, 1976, p. 893). In this manner, Durga Sweet appears to be Sabitri's 'difference,' a physical proof of the love Sabitri has for her mother and daughter.

Besides, the losses that Sabitri faces harden her into an independent woman. For instance, Sabitri's husband's death forces her to become independent and self-relying—as highlighted by the manager of her sweet shop, Bipin, who is: "startled by her firm, urbane grip [...] where did a Bengali woman dressed in widow-white learn to shake hands like that?" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 87). Although such a small gesture, a handshake can indicate someone's personality. In addition to this example, Bipin later brings up that Sabitri knows of darkness: "the death of her husband in a refinery fire which, some people whispered, had been started by the union workers. Afterward, she has to fight the company lawyers, a bitter, lengthy court battle, for compensation" (p. 84). Later, Bela's leaving for the United States adds to this, as her daughter is her Achilles' heel. Regardless, after taking a break for two weeks, Sabitri returns to being her energetic self, and all the employees except Bipin Bihari forget she had been away. These events in her life mark the losses of loved ones as the main factor of her independence.

Similarly, Bela is another victim of phallogocentric tradition—the production of values based on phallogocentrism—who manages to resist patriarchy. Bela has sacrificed her relationship with Sabitri,

her mother, by eloping and marrying Sanjay without her permission. Although Bela's marriage with Sanjay is built from mutual love, a conflict of power and trust accumulates over time, resulting in a divorce forced against her will. Bela states that Sanjay likes to keep secrets from her and decides what is best for her: "My husband, he was like that, too. Kept all kinds of things from me. Thought I wasn't strong enough to deal with them" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 158). This one-sided divorce decision also causes a fallout with her daughter, Tara, who believes the divorce is Bela's fault. Her role as wife and a mother is confined to her relationship with Sanjay, as she loses her husband and Tara in the process. Nevertheless, these prior events initiate Bela's resistance to patriarchy by adopting "the feminine" and "the other," making a life for herself outside her sole reliance upon her relationship with Sanjay.

The reading of the character Bela can be analyzed through Cixous' "the feminine" and "the other." After the divorce from her husband, Bela starts living on her own with alimony until Sanjay declares bankruptcy, which leaves her penniless. Like Sabitri, she embraces cooking and uplifts it as a site to restart her life and channel her love and pride. Cooking has been a significant part of Bela's life, as stressed by her daughter Tara, "my mother was easygoing about many things, but not the preparation of food" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 185). By establishing Bela's Kitchen, where she shares traditional Indian recipes, Bela not only reconnects with her culture but also with her identity

and self. Despite the divorce forced upon Bela by Sanjay, the difficult event later leads to her independence as she learns to break the gender expectation of an Indian woman. According to Sivakumar and Manimekalai (2021), Indian women are not expected to work outside the home, and those who do so are thought to be less valuable and less respectable. In the novel, Bela must learn to earn money by herself by demonstrating cooking. Because she needs to improve her communication skill and assert herself, she begins practicing answering the audience's questions, receiving compliments, smiling, and making "flashy moves" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 149) while demonstrating cooking. As the prospects of ambition, confidence, and assertiveness are found to be lacking in working women (Lathabhavan & Balasubramaniam, 2017; Terjesen & Singh, 2008), Bela's initiatives are a big leap of faith in herself. Hence, Bela resists patriarchy by independently earning money for herself and becoming an active agent in her own life.

Besides, Bela also welcomes "the feminine" and "the other" by picking up dancing again after the separation from her husband, Sanjay. She used to love dancing when she was young. When she pursues her lover in the United States, although she puts aside this desire, she never completely abandons it. Bela re-centers her life around herself and what is important to her by acknowledging her love and desire for dancing. She states that she would love to wear her dress and dance again, through which she could provide herself with a

momentary but meaningful connection to her inner self and forgets life. When Bela wears the outfit, “there was something otherworldly in the way she moved, the way she lifted her arms and spun around, the red-and-white silk blurring like an undulation of fire” (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 159). Bela displays her capacity “of self-constituting a subjectivity that splits apart without regret” (Cixous, 1996, p. 90). The term “splits apart” is used to characterize the capacity of feminine subjectivity that spreads out and releases without being destroyed shall a woman embrace it—alive—as opposed to the belief of embracing “femininity to be associated with death” (Cixous, 1976, p. 885). This reconciliation with the feminine desire catalyzes the formation of her identity and self, where the feminine is rejuvenated as a component that gives birth to the subjective experience of “the other” personal to her. Following the analysis of the female characters, their oppression is followed by resistance to patriarchy that comes in the form of self-empowerment. It is achieved through a reassessment of past experiences and reconnection to the feminine that validates feminine desires from within. Resistance against the concept of patriarchy is first implemented through the realization of its influence, followed by the conscious establishment of a newly liberated self.

The Rewriting of Identity and Self

In the novel, the female characters’ resistance to patriarchy is completed through the practices of reinscribing and reconstructing

their definition of the self. After breaking away from the phallogocentric tradition of patriarchy, the female characters build and learn their history through a new feminine language that resonates with Cixous’s theories. This feminine language entails reworking against dominant, rationalist, and largely masculinist language economies with creatively and resistively writing (Nautiyal, 2016). Thus, the materialization of feminine language through feminine writing allows each female character to employ a different practice of reinscribing and reconstructing her definition of self that suits her personal needs. With consideration of circumstantial and subjective feminine desires, the female characters seek to recreate a self-imposed sense of identity that belongs exclusively to themselves. To achieve this, they reconnect to the deepest part of their desires and bring to life the existence of their feminine desires without fear of castration.

The practices of reinscribing and reconstructing the definition of the self are dynamic and distinctively personal for every woman in the novel. Sabitri demonstrates a capacity for attaining a sense of self and identity through a successful recreation of a recipe of sweet. As shown in the novel, sweet making is an important link between Sabitri’s present to her past. According to Jagganath, “food is one of the most significant cultural markers of identity” that becomes a channel “to understand social relations, family and kinship, class and consumption, gender ideology and cultural symbolism” (2017, p. 107). Sabitri’s sense of self and identity is renewed when

she becomes successful in recreating a recipe of sweets that belongs to Durga, through which it becomes a representation of motherly love from Durga to her and from herself to Bela. At the same time, Sabitri also relives a significant connection between herself and her mother, who was a sweet-maker. In practicing this, Sabitri not only commemorates her mother's death but remakes the notion of happiness and independence interlaced with her womanly experience. Similarly, Bela's reconnection to the root of Indian food and culture is an important signifier of the practice of reinscribing and reconstructing the self. Cooking and dancing become the manifestation of feminine desires from within. While both are traditionally considered feminine activities tied to the patriarchal narrative of women, Sabitri and Bela manage to reclaim and reconstruct a new personal meaning into these activities. Through their love for cooking and dancing, Sabitri and Bela do not forsake parts of themselves that were first shaped by their gender and culture but instead take them as theirs to be owned and cherished. Whereas for Tara, she first incorporates the power of imagination where fiction functions as an outlet to generate a common space relative to her experience in the real world. The common space is where the notions of fictional women reside. Thus, Tara reimagines a woman's state of being by creating a bridge between fiction and herself in reality. Later, as this practice is insufficient, Tara begins to rewrite her definition of self by embracing reality and motherhood.

Cixous emphasizes the empowering aspect of stories, imagination, and creativity. The subjective feminine desires are infused into stories to be understood as separate but not completely detached subjects from an individual. Similarly, Tara uses the power of imagination and creativity to weave an intimate connection between stories and her life experience. When Tara becomes friends with an elderly Indian woman for whom she is working as a caregiver, she tells about her life by weaving stories into it. For example, Tara tells the old woman about her cheating boyfriend in relation to the story of the Hercules constellation. The story is about his cheating with another woman, which results in his death at his wife's hand. In a different story, Tara constructs a site through which her desire for a self that is free and cannot be impaired by men can be materialized: "[she] begins the story of the Pleiades, women transformed into birds so swift and bright that no man could snare them" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 68). By interlacing her experience with fiction and using fiction as an outlet, Tara can incorporate space for herself where such desires are fathomed. She reflects upon the fictional woman as she reconnects with her own experience as a woman in reality.

Similarly, the advice that is being passed down uses vivid imagery to leave a deep impression in the receiver's mind: "Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's name" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 20). It is the first verbal advice that Durga passes to Sabitri before Sabitri writes it in her letter to Bela

and Tara. In the novel, the term “wicked daughters” can generally be understood as daughters who bring shame to the family. In Sabitri’s situation, she views herself as a “wicked daughter” due to her secret relationship with Rajiv, even though it is built on the foundation of love. A similar line of thought can be derived from the figure of Medusa examined by Cixous. While Freud claims Medusa to be a symbol of a terrible mother, Cixous believes that her petrifying gaze is both sexually stimulating and terrifyingly deadly, which she considers a liberating force for women (Alban, 2017). However, as Cixous emphasizes, the same seductive and deadly Medusa can be a figure of empowerment, where the very aspect of her much-feared femininity becomes her source: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (Cixous, 1976, p. 885). An example of this much-feared femininity in the novel is reflected in Sabitri being forced to leave upon the revelation of her love relationship with Mittir’s son. In this instance, from the perspective of Rajiv, who assumes the role of an agent of patriarchy, Sabitri can be likened to Medusa, who expresses her love and an extensive capacity for feminine desire. This capability to want and desire more than what has been prescribed for her by phallogocentric tradition is considered detestable as it goes against gender norms. However, like Medusa, Sabitri is ‘not deadly’ but a woman capable of desiring and loving in all her femininity. In these examples, the element of imagination is implemented to establish a distinguishable and powerful comparison with reality.

Feminine writing can be viewed as an act of love from a woman to another woman. Cixous emphasizes the necessity of this act through the physical and metaphorical aspects. In the novel, writing is central to the female characters in how it connects a mother to her daughter and a woman to a woman. *Before We Visit the Goddess* opens with the female character, Sabitri, writing a letter to her granddaughter, Tara. Sabitri has received news about Tara dropping out of college from her daughter, Bela. The raw force of womanly love and desire makes Sabitri write. Cixous emphasizes that writing is not simply for the sake of writing but is led by this desire “in the depths of the flesh, the attack. Pushed. Not penetrated. Invested. Set in motion” (1986/1991, p. 9). Through this act, the physical manifestation of feminine writing that takes place can be translated as a form of selfless confession of love through the sharing of womanly experience: “She looks down at the page. What made her write this foolishness? [...], but perhaps, if she shares her life, the girl might see something there” (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 14). With Cixous’ imagery that links a mother’s milk and her child to ink and paper, the content of the written letter can be viewed as a mother’s ‘milk’ to a child. The milk symbolizes the generosity and abundance of a mother’s love, through which she inscribes her wisdom into the child’s life. Sabitri writes about the joy of having perfected a new recipe for the sweet she would later name after her dead mother. In this letter, she tells them that joy is something she has created by herself

without having to depend on anyone so that no one can take it away. Then, Sabitri emphasizes that this same joy is what she wants for Tara and Bela. In other words, Sabitri means to impart the unprecedented contentment that comes with independence, with creating and owning herself, because it is a form of liberation that is exclusively theirs. Therefore, the act of writing, as demonstrated in the novel, is an extension of the form of motherly love.

Furthermore, the female characters in the novel forged the connection between food and culture to rewrite self and destiny. Food is an element that becomes the catalyst for reclaiming independence in women's lives: Bela has several successful cookbooks, a popular food blog, and *Bela's Kitchen*, whereas Sabitri's desserts are well-known in Kolkata. In relation to Cixous' feminine writing that emphasizes the significance of "bring[ing] women to writing" and placing "herself [a woman] into the text—as into the world and history—by her movement" (Cixous, 1976, p. 875), the cookbooks and the blog shall each be considered as an avenue where Bela rewrites her past self by regaining her independence. For Bela, who has been mostly dependent on her husband throughout her life in America, their divorce has caused great turbulence. *Bela's Kitchen* is a means to build and support a new life outside her marriage. It becomes a source of strength that reconnects her with her root and her family. Similarly, Sabitri established *Durga Sweets* after the death of her husband to rebuild a life for herself and her daughter and to honor her dead mother, Durga. The

decision can be viewed as another example of a form of motherly love: "All this time, I've been holding on to *Durga Sweets* for Bela's sake—in case something happened to her, and she needed to come back and start over" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 78). Therefore, *Bela's Kitchen* and *Durga Sweets* are tangible manifestations of the rewriting of the women's lives in their attempt to reconnect with culture and family.

Besides, the novel bridges a connection between feminine writing and the process of reclaiming femininity and embracing the self unabashedly. For instance, after the divorce, Bela returns to accepting and reconnecting with the part of feminine desire and the culture she has forsaken in pursuing young love. By embodying the feminine, such raw desire is given an opportunity to be materialized into reality. Bela states she used to love dancing and performing in front of an audience. She felt a thrill she had never felt through dancing and performing since: "Moving to the beat of the tabla, I forgot my life" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 151). It implies that dancing is meant as a site to rejuvenate her deepest desire. Only through dancing again can Bela incorporate "the existence of alternative forms of relation, perception and expression" as suggested by Cixous to be associated with feminine writing (Sellers, 2003, p. xxix). Bela appears young and happy, like a girl, as she dances again. In other words, this novel expression uniquely belonging to Bela is a channel through which her feminine desire writes and dreams and "invents new worlds" (Cixous, 1996, p. 72). Thus, Cixous' feminine writing allows

the healing of repressed feminine desire and owning it proudly as part of oneself.

Cixous' feminine writing is a continuous process of writing and rewriting. The novel focuses specifically on Tara, who has gone through the process multiple times in her life. As Cixous (1976/1981) explains in *Castration or Decapitation?* about woman and loss, to go on living, a woman has to take up the challenge of loss by living it and giving it life. It is reflected in Tara's story, where she faces a series of losses before reclaiming them. It begins with her dropping out of college to start working due to her frustration regarding her parents' divorce. Then, she decides on abortion after her boyfriend, who gets her pregnant, leaves her. These important prior events lead to the rewriting of her destiny in which Tara reclaims the dream she has lost by "taking loss, seizing it, living it" (p. 54). First, Tara builds back her foundation—she returns to college, graduates, and embarks on a career. Then, she marries a man she loves and goes through a successful pregnancy. Finally, the birth of the baby awakens motherly love within herself in the similar way it does to Sabitri and Bela: "Neel's birth changed things some [...] I don't know why I found myself weeping. Maybe it was postpartum hormones. I held him to me and cried like I'd never cried before" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 188). Tara realizes nothing can amend the abortion she has willingly gone through in the past, but when she ceases crying as she holds Neel, she knows something in her is changing. Following the baby's birth, Tara goes through a rebirth of her

own—i.e., a cathartic realization that prompts the embodiment of womanhood and motherhood. In other words, by giving birth, Tara gives herself the means to rewrite her destiny without forsaking the experience she has written for herself in the past.

The act of rewriting in *Before We Visit the Goddess* intertwines the aspects of m(other) and religion. For example, in relation to pregnancy and m(other), Cixous explains that water is inextricable to the woman's body:

Unleashed and raging, she belongs to the race of waves. She arises, she approaches, she lifts up, she reaches, covers over, washes a shore, flows embracing the cliff's least undulation, already she is another, arising again, throwing the fringed vastness of her body up high, follows herself, and covers over, uncovers, polishes makes the stone body shine with the gentle underserving ebbs, which return to the shoreless non-origin as if she recalled herself in order to come again as never before.... (1996, p. 90-91)

According to Ramshaw, Cixous draws this parallel between water and motherliness where a woman is emphasized as "'living water,' *agua viva*, ever-growing and spreading; fearless: for how the sea can be afraid of the land it is blanketing, enveloping? how can the watery womb be fearful of the fetus it is protecting and nourishing?" (2003, p. 25). In this parallel, water is used as an element that symbolizes a woman's bodily fluid—i.e., blood and

amniotic fluid—to nurture and protect life. In relation to Cixous' conceptions of birthing and motherhood, a similar form of kindness and generosity can also be found in religion. Even though Cixous has not specifically outlined this connection, religion often considered the water element a general symbolism. According to Rasool (2019), in Eastern religious thought, the imagery of water and sea is celestial due to the motion of flowing inward and outward. Therefore, water can be associated with purification and redemption of life from the viewpoint of religion. The similarity of the element of water and sea between religion and Cixous's motherliness lies in its abundance and healing property. The process of remaking and rewriting life is then prompted by having been blessed by the unyielding water—i.e., the feminine source—of a goddess and a mother, respectively. In the novel, Tara has been assigned to be a chaperon for Dr. V, who has come to America to give a lecture. Later, Dr. V requests to visit a temple during their ride back to the Airport, where he tells her that they must cleanse themselves before visiting the goddess: "...he aimed the hose toward me. Water pooled over my feet and under my burning soles [...] That cool silver shimmer in the blazing afternoon. That small benediction. How can I forget it?" (Divakaruni, 2016, p. 136). As demonstrated, it is through the kindness and the love offered with the grace of the goddess that one can reconnect with other people and rekindle hope. Tara starts the process of rewriting her life for the better after this event, through which the relief

from the water is a blessing that likely catalyzes this process. It is comparable to the relationship between a mother and a child, where such selfless love and acceptance from a mother become benedictions to a child's life.

Multiple practices are employed in the rewriting of self and identity. The act of feminine writing, both physical and metaphorical, is implemented by the characters to deconstruct and reconstruct their predestined fate associated with gender. Physical writing that comes in the form of text—Sabitri's letter and Bela's cookbooks and blog—is a product of love and courage in desiring a change in themselves and other women. Whereas metaphorical writing comes from redefining life through the manifestation of changes initiated from within an individual. Consequently, physical writing is a means to reach out and share with other women, while metaphorical writing is an abstract, personal, and subjective process to reclaim a self for every woman. Each female character negates patriarchal influence in their life by recognizing feminine desire as a source of strength instead of weakness. In this respect, the outcome of rewriting herself and identity lies in the emergence of feminine writing, where "the feminine" and "the other" is materialized.

CONCLUSION

This study employed Hélène Cixous' concepts of "the feminine," "the other," and "*écriture féminine*" as an analytical approach to explore Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the*

Goddess (2016) and examine the female characters'—i.e., Sabitri, Bela, and Tara—encounter with male-centered impositions of gender roles and boundaries. The primary focus of the study has been on how the three characters' experiences of dramatic losses—i.e., separation from their husbands and/or daughters—have transformed their lives. This change can be attributed to the successful emancipation from the patriarchy that has made reconstructing their lives possible through the rewriting of self and identity. The female characters resist patriarchy amidst the Indian cultural influence in their idiosyncratic ways. For example, Sabitri becomes independent after her husband's passing, resisting the norm of the feminine role by establishing a business named Durga Sweet, which becomes a source of income to raise her daughter, Bela. Later, through the physical act of writing, Sabitri aims to leave her own feminine experience in the form of a letter to her daughter, Bela, and her granddaughter, Tara. The practice underlines the importance of women's reclaiming and narrating their own life stories. Similarly, Bela achieves autonomy after her divorce, a feat uncommon for an Indian woman living abroad. Through her independence, Bela learns to reconnect with her feminine desire and gives herself the room to realize "the other." The metaphorical manifestation of feminine writing can be seen in Bela's life transformation after the divorce, resulting from rewriting herself and identity through gaining independence and living for herself. Likewise, Tara's metaphorical rewriting

of self and identity is achieved through acceptance and motherhood. Although she never forgives herself for having aborted her baby, Tara mends the present by conceiving again and birthing another baby. Therefore, all the female characters demonstrate the will of a woman and a mother and the love that becomes the most significant factor in their resistance to patriarchy and their rewriting of the self and identity.

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