

# The Faces of Nostalgia in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novel "Before We Visit the Goddess"

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### Abstract

*Nostalgia has become a popular topic of study across various disciplines. This paper explores how the ideas of nostalgia differ by the two authors in their writing and analyzing them concerning the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The four forms of nostalgia, according to Gary cross, help us unmasking the fascinating, idiosyncratic character of modern nostalgia, and the two kinds of nostalgia, according to Svetlana Boym, helps us in understanding the emotions of the individual.*

**Keywords:** Chitra Banerjee, Before we visit the Goddess, nostalgia, family

Boym, Two kinds of nostalgia characterize one's relationship to the past, to the immigrant country, to home, one's self-perception, and these two kinds of nostalgia do not explain the nature of longing nor its psychological makeup and unconscious undercurrents (Poem 2016). They are all about how we view our relationship with a collective home. Boy does not talk about the individual psyche but the interrelationship between individual and collective remembrance, but I am going to discuss in the point of view that Boym's interpretation of nostalgia best suits to explain the emotion of the characters in the novel of Divakaruni. The Two Kinds of Nostalgia are

1. Restorative Nostalgia
2. Reflective Nostalgia

### Restorative Nostalgia

Restorative Nostalgia emphasis nostos (which means 'return home'), and it rebuilds the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. It is obvious in total reconstructions of monuments of the past. Restored or invented tradition refers to a set of practices governed by the accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature, which inculcated certain values and norms of behavior by repetition. There are two paradoxes. First, the more rapid and sweeping the pace and scale of modernization and second, the stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is presented. (TFN, 55).

The two main narrative plots of Restorative nostalgia is the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory. To conspire means literally to breathe together, but this collective breath does not smell very good. Conspiracy is used pejoratively. The mechanism of this kind of conspiracy theory is based on the inversion of cause and effect and personal pronouns "we" (the conspiracy theorists). We feel insecure in the modern world and find a scapegoat for our misfortunes, and we don't like it when somebody is different from us.

We project our dislike on them also we believe that they too will dislike us. “They” conspire against “our” homecoming; hence “we” have to conspire against “them” to restore “our” imagined community. This way, this conspiracy theory can come to substitute for the conspiracy itself. Much of the twentieth-century violence from pogroms’ to Nazi and Stalinist terror to McCarthy’s Red scare, operated in response to conspiracy theories in the name of a restored homeland. (TFN, 56)

Conspiracy theories, like nostalgic explosions in general, flourish after revolutions. The French Revolution gave birth to the Masonic conspiracy, and the first Russian revolution of 1905 was followed by mass pogroms inspired by the spread of the theories of Judeo-Masonic conspiracies. Nostalgia is an ache of temporal distance, and displacement says Boym. Restorative nostalgia takes care of both of these symptoms. Displacement is cured by a return home. (TFN 57). From this idea of Boym, we come to know that the Restorative nostalgia deals with the concept of performance home and relive the way things were in the past.

To explain this, she cites the Sistine Chapel. Many paintings on the ceiling became so aged by candle smoke. When she visited the chapel after the restorations, she was struck by a strange and moving spectacle. It revealed a mysterious cosmological vision. With the help of advanced computer technology, most of the cracks in the background and even the loincloths on the male figures were removed to get back the originality. Hence restoring the past gives one a sigh of relief.

### Reflective nostalgia

Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, (which means longing) in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. It lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time. It centers on longing and let us simmer in the yearning feelings and accept that the past is past.

Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home. This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary. This type of nostalgia is aware of the gap between identity and resemblance. The sense of distance

derives them from telling their story to narrate the relationship between past, present, and future.

Boym, in order to understand this better, she tells us about the Bar Nostalgia, a café in the center of Ljubljana that she had visited in 1997. The name of the Bar is the Nostalgia Snack bar, and it was decorated in the style of the 1960s. It is called a friendly place, but this Nostalgija Snack Bar restores nothing, says Boym. There was never such a café in the former Yugoslavia. This is a new kind of space that plays with the past and the present, and it exudes the Central European Café Culture, and it gently mocks the memory of the last Yugoslav generation.

Gary Cross, the distinguished professor of Modern History at the Pennsylvania State University in his book *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* mentions four forms of nostalgia.

1. Communal Nostalgia
2. Familial Nostalgia
3. Fashion Nostalgia
4. Modern Nostalgia

### Communal Nostalgia

Gary Cross taking a longer perspective says that nostalgia in any form was practically absent from our ancestors of two centuries ago as few people traveled not more than a day’s walk from their birth-place. There was not much to be nostalgic about with little movement or change. Modernity began to change all our ancestors’ myth because of the increased travel. Change of place rather than time created the first nostalgia. This idea is echoed by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hoffer.

The word “nostalgia” comes from two Greek roots, nostos meaning “return home” and “algia,” meaning ‘pain’ or “longing.” Hence nostalgia means “homesickness.” In 1688, the word nostalgia was coined by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, meaning “longing to return home.” The Swiss mercenaries in the French army who longed to return to their Alpine villages were the first noted nostalgia. Dr. Hoffer believed that nostalgia induced nausea, loss of appetite, cardiac arrest, and even suicide. He feels that nostalgia was triggered when Swiss mercenaries ate soups and village milk from home or heard folk melodies, especially a certain rustic cantilena used by shepherds to drive herds to pasture

in the Alps. He advised them the usual cures, opium, and leeches from the army to visit home in the Alps. (CN 6&7)

The European soldiers and sailors were also afflicted by nostalgia in many wars of the eighteenth century that took them far from home. The British, who were more accustomed to traveling and colonizing distant regions were less affected, but the farm boys were depressed with the longing to return home when they are made into soldiers during the American civil war, and the officers like Theodore Calhoun tried to shame them with bullying and manly marches. Early nostalgia was a problem for only the few who were displaced, and that would begin to change toward the end of the 18th century. The physicians of the enlightenment during the eighteenth century thought that the ailment of nostalgia would gradually give way to the benefits of progress, but by 1800, nostalgia was no longer restricted to homesick soldiers as it affected the multitude of Europeans with a longing for past places and pasts.

According to Gary Cross, who would probably be called today, a 20th century US cultural historian opines that modernity meant disdain for tradition and the old, but progress also made people nostalgic for what had disappeared. Modern people discovered inexorable change and tried to get the past back as a possession. The Romantic Movement emerging at the end of the eighteenth century, rejected the Enlightenment's confidence and ached for the disappearing world of the preindustrial village and celebrated a longing for the past. As progress advanced in the nineteenth century, so did nostalgia for lost communities. Memory settled in many places- in museums and monuments as well as schools, where students were indoctrinated with national history and literature.

Today nostalgia has become an even stronger theme in the cultural or political wars, and hence nostalgia was hard to separate from heritage-national, regional, ethnic, and religious. This divides us ethnically, religiously, culturally, and politically. Public shrines and museums tried through words, symbols, and artifacts to replace lost sites of the community-ancient neighborhood, or churches, or battlefields. It would be surprising that 95 percent of existing museums date from after World War II,

as people across the globe *seek identities* through the collected artifacts of the past. This is communal nostalgia. (CN 9)

### **Familial Nostalgia**

The second form of nostalgia is familial nostalgia that evoked and realized through personal possessions. Sometimes these were handcrafted heirlooms or family portraits. Sometimes this form of nostalgia was handcrafted heirloom or family portraits other times they were souvenirs brought back from once in a lifetime. Pilgrimage to a religious shrine or even from a seaside resort. This form of nostalgia was more domestic and personal than the monument makers. They retain the memory of family in various ways like hanging the portraits of the ancestors on the wall or fixing their crafts work on the shelf etc. This practice of preserving and displaying heirlooms and portraits was long associated with the aristocracy, but according to Walter Benjamin, the bourgeois home of Paris in the nineteenth-century, was like a miniature theatre of photos furniture and mementos that privatized nostalgia. The new technology like camera fostered these personal ties.

### **Fashion Nostalgia**

The third form of nostalgia is for past fashion or styles of the former era. Distinctive patterns of design and the fashionable goods amidst the middle class emerged during the industrialization. Fashion nostalgia was based on an identification with the past in art, clothing, jewelry, furnishings, architecture, and artificial landscape and not on the loss of community or family. This type of memory-making about the goods were the products of commercial culture. Nostalgia fashions and styles can be seen in neoclassical literature in the late eighteenth century and renewed interest in American colonial furnishings in the mid-nineteenth century. Many Victorian writers bring in the fashion and styles of the nineteenth century in their novels with a wonderful description of furniture and places that come to their minds. In this type of nostalgia, the goods can be handed over to the next generation, unlike consumed nostalgia. For example, in Indian culture, yearning for the ancestral home, jewels, and furniture are

quite commonly seen in the younger generation or nostalgic towards the petty objects that we develop hatred first and likings next.

### Consumed Nostalgia

The fourth form of nostalgia had emerged in the twentieth century, and Gary Cross calls it a Consumed nostalgia. Consumed Nostalgia is a longing for the goods of the past that came from a personal experience of the stressful world of fast capitalism.

The fashion nostalgia is a longing for the past stylized goods, while the consumed nostalgia of the second half of the twentieth century is about the revival of a style materializing a former era. By the twentieth century, these included, of course, Cars, and clothes also entertainment, especially recorded music, movies, and later television. This stress results from a modern phenomenon. People found identity and meaning in specific goods, but their selfhoods were threatened when those things disappeared. This nostalgic impulse came from a desire to get them back, and most importantly, this longing was rooted in the formative years of consumers-Childhood and youth.

Consumed nostalgia was difficult to pass down to the next generation as it was not based on the symbols and rituals of a longed-for community or family life since this consumed nostalgia shares much with more traditional forms of memory and nostalgia in the past like nostalgia today was rooted in objects. People have to depend on long-needed material and sensuous markers to get themselves in touch to recall their social or family heritages. Why they have to depend on the object is because of their family member's absence, and to overcome their aloofness, they ought to search for the objects which became a potion for this disease. Consumed nostalgia took definite shape in the 1970s in the United States, and what makes consumed nostalgia different is not primarily its materiality or by the celebration of the time-fixed commodity but its origins in fast capitalism and personal memories of the ephemeral commercial goods first experienced in childhood and youth. Here, the goods cannot be passed over to the next generation as fashion nostalgia can. This is rooted in the formative years of consumers. Here the

consumers are childhood and youth.

This type of consumers can be seen almost in the life of everyone. This type of nostalgia can be seen throughout the novel, with all the three types of generations. Sabitri looked back at her past and regretted spoiling the opportunity that she gets for her education. Bela, daughter of Sabitri, regret marrying the politician and breaking up her studies. Tara, she too regrets having quit her college life for the sake of Robert. Almost all three characters make the same mistake of breaking up their education and realize their stupidity of losing their opportunity, also Bela and Tara, they both were sailing on the same boat in their marriage life.

Gary Cross thinks that one may assume that the new country, novel and adventurous might be immune to nostalgia, as Jefferson noted from the mercenaries in the civil war that they could not liberate themselves from the disease of nostalgia as homesickness, because so many Americans were so frequently uprooted. He further continues that Americans were not free from the monument or heirloom nostalgia of Europeans as the late nineteenth century American Parlours were decorated by the extraordinary array of chiseled marble or the clutter of inherited furnishings and the business in souvenirs memorializing a summer day with friends and family at Coney Island in 1900 flourished as it did at European seaside resorts. (CN 11&12)

Here Gary Cross in his book conveys the readers that this contemporary nostalgia certainly has little in common with the experience of those poor Swiss soldiers, but consumerism has given us a new way of thinking for the past while Boym focus on the two concepts of thinking: 'return home' and accepting that the past is past and the former throws light on longing for the lost objects while latter highlights the emotions of an individual.

Now, these distinctions shall be analyzed concerning the novel "*Before we visit the Goddess*" by Divakaruni. Let us first take the character of Sabitri, the daughter of a poor baker in rural Bengal, who yearns to get an education but venturing into a college is an impossible dream for her and her family and, fortunately, a rich lady has come forward to sponsor her education, and it is her misfortune to slip the chance of getting inculcated as she falls in love

with the rich lady's son, Ravi. This has changed her life, and her forbidden condition gave the professor the advantage to convey his desire to marry her, to whom she reciprocates reluctantly on having received his concern in her troubles, and yet troubles continue to chase her by taking away her husband and her son in a fire accident. She came back to her parental home with her daughter and continued to live there by running a sweet stall in her mother's name Durga as her remembrance. She stay in rural Bengal now and then reminded her past life, which gave her a sigh of relief as she gets the same identity as her mother gets. Sabitri puts forth:

'She died when I was in Assam.' I could not even be at her deathbed; I was so tangled in my trouble then. But through Durga sweets, I'll make her into a household name in Kolkata. (BVG 87)

After analyzing the forms of nostalgia, discussed by the writers Garry Cross and Svetlana Boym, the character Sabitri is an example of both communal and restorative nostalgia because she was longing to have a sweet stall of her mother and she returns to her parental village to start a sweet stall in the name of her mother, Durga.

Sabitri also best reflects the familial nostalgia in the following passage.

All Sabitri has is a handful of photos. The child Tara in a costume, brandishing a broomstick, celebrating some odd American festival, the point of which Savitri could not figure out. A teen age Tara at a special party called a prom, alien and glamorous in a strapless dress. Sabitri had been intimidated by her glittery cheekbones, the sophistication of her plucked eyebrows. How different from the photo she kept in her drawer, under her sari-blouses: baby Tara in Bela's arm, peering from under a woolly blue hood, a foggy orange bridge is floating in the distance. That had been the first photo. Sabitri still remembers the pang she felt on receiving it because she had so wanted to be present at Tara's birth. But she hadn't been invited (BVG 3&4)

The second and third generations: Bela, Sabitri's daughter, and Tara, Sabitri's granddaughter, are the best part of reflective nostalgia and familial nostalgia. After the death of Sabitri, her daughter Bela and her granddaughter Tara read the letter along with a photo

of Sabitri. Sabitri had started telling her own story in a letter. Tara liked the photo of her grandmother, and she wanted to have it by herself as her remembrance to which Bela refuses, but somehow Tara manages to take the photo without the knowledge of Bela who angrily asks her:

Were you taking it? After I had told you, no? Taking my mother's picture, which would have given me a little comfort in that mausoleum? (BVG 203)

In the above passage, the photos remain their heirlooms, and both Bela and Tara wanted to have that in memory of Sabitri, but both of them do not want to return India as they have fit themselves to survive in the alien country even when they are not put in a good job. They learned to survive there by doing petty works to fill their stomach.

Analyzing the forms and kinds of nostalgia, the characters are well developed to convey their nostalgia as well as the problems that they face in their marriage life. Divakaruni takes the characters from rural India to modern life in America. Tara is opposite of her grandmother as Tara looks backward while the previous generation looks forward, but we learn later that Tara's dreams are just different. Sabitri's letter to Tara shows how Savitri looks forward to the world.

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 (BVG 8)

The nostalgia of multi-generation is echoed in the novel wonderfully by the author throughout the novel by the interpretations of the forms and kinds of nostalgia by Garry Cross and Svetlana Boym. The former focus on nostalgia for the objects and the latter focus on nostalgia as an individuals' emotion.

### Abbreviations

1. TFN - The Future of Nostalgia
2. CN - Consumed Nostalgia
3. BVG - Before We Visit the Goddess

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