

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS :ETERNAL BONDINGS – A STUDY OF DIVAKARUNI’S *BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an acclaimed and prolific writer of the Indian diaspora settled in America seems fascinated by the enigma of female bonding . In most of her works she depicts nurturing relationships between women and strong female ties that ultimately provide healing , security , support and above all empowerment . She belongs to the fraternity of women writers like Amy Tan , Chen Ran , Toni Morrison , Alice Walker and Mariama Ba who portray sisterhood in its varied forms in their fiction. This paper seeks to examine the intergenerational bonds that develop between women in her latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess*. The paper aims at analyzing the ways in which the women remain connected in spite of their strained relationships with each other . The novel is essentially an exploration of the different aspects of the mother daughter ties . The discussion will illumine how the bonds of love act as a binding vine to unite the difficult daughters and their stubborn mothers .

Keywords : sisterhood , empowerment, intergenerational , diaspora , female bonding .

Among contemporary writers of women’s fiction one may perceive a growing concern for exploring female ties in its varied forms . Writers from across the globe are engaged in portraying the different facets of sisterhood . Amy Tan , Chen Ran , Mariama Ba , Toni Morrison , Alice Walker , Manju Kapur and Sashi Deshpande underscore the essence of female bonding in their narratives . Sisterhood forms a recurrent motif in the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as well . Divakaruni is a Postcolonial diasporic writer of Indian origin . An award winning writer , Divakaruni seems fascinated by the enigma of female bonding that connects women in ways that they themselves are unaware of . She herself confirms it when she says in an essay for *Bold Type* , “ . . . I find myself focusing my writing on friendships with women , and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives , lovers and mothers .” (n.p.) . Moreover , her work with MAITRI , a helpline for abused South Asian women immigrants in the US , has provided the necessary impetus for her inevitable choice of the theme of sisterhood . This paper seeks to examine the nature of bonding that exists among women across generations in her novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* from 2016.

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The dynamics of women's relationship with each other is an issue of common concern among feminist critics and practitioners . Female friendships , according to Lilian Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg , are significant enough as they provide a framework for an analysis of intimacy and affection between women . The idea of 'sisterhood' draws the attention of theorists like Bell Hooks , Clenora Hudson-Weems , Elizabeth Abel and others to study the impact of female ties in the community . While defining 'sisterhood' in *Africana Womanism* Hudson-Weems states:

This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings , their fears , their hopes and their dreams . Enjoying , understanding and supporting each other , women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other . With such love , trust and security , it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood .(65-6)

This definition further infers that it is a uniquely vital relationship in a woman's life . It has the potency to re-shape the life of a woman . It is a veritable support system that can get women through the extremely trying situations . Sisterhood is an important aspect of Afro-American women's fiction . Writers like Morrison , Gloria Naylor , Alice Walker acknowledge its importance as it is essential for the survival of women of their community against the constraints of patriarchy , tradition , polygamy , colonialism and any other form of prejudice . In this context Obioma Nnaemeka observes , " Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship , sisterhood and solidarity , and in the process reinvent themselves" (19) . Literary portrayals of female friendships have evolved gradually over the years from Jane Austen and Sarah Orne Jewett to Joyce Carol Oates to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker . And it was not until women writers realised that strong bonds between women act as a mode of survival and a means to selfhood that they began to celebrate sisterhood , women's community and female difference instead of female antagonism . As early as 1915 , Charlott Perkins Gilman in her utopian fiction *Herland* examined the depths of female bonding only to discover how it remained unaltered and undisrupted even at the face of the strongest challenge . When the lonely protagonists of Kate Chopin's *At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* (1899) arrive at the realization that friendships among women provide an alternative , positive and meaningful life-style , quite contrary to the male-female dynamics which is fraught with inadequacies , the value of female bonding is firmly affirmed . In this regard it may aptly be pointed out how Laura in May Sarton's *A Reckoning* (1978) admits that "one of the real connections , one of the deepest and most nourishing , in some ways more than my marriage , good as that was , had been a passionate friendship with a woman" (243) . Again the relationship between Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) has remained one of the most celebrated relationships in the corpus of women's fiction . In the words of the author herself , "Friendship between women is special , different and has never been depicted as a major focus of a novel before *Sula* . Nobody even talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual , and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*" (qtd. in Barat 53) . In fact female friendship is central to the fiction of Afro-American women writers . Female bonding as a feminist strategy of survival has been

explored more widely in the West than in the East , especially by Black women writers like Toni Morrison , Alice Walker and others who share a common experience of oppression and double marginalization of race and sex. These writers underscore the importance of female solidarity and endearment above all other familial ties as they go a long way to provide comfort , healing and security . Alice Walker in her Pulitzer prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) offers a classic example of the kindred spirit among women that enable them to overcome oppression . Mariama Ba a black diasporic women writer explores the depths of female friendship in her novel *So Long a Letter* . The communion that she depicts ultimately extends to solidarity as her female protagonists Aissatou and Ramatoulaye not only empower each other but also participate in nation building . All these writers have tried to illumine the psychological underpinnings in female friendships . The emotional support that they derive from each others company enables them to overcome various other obstacles . Even British writers like Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen have explored female psychological processes in their works only to discover how emotional fulfillment is achieved through enduring female bonds .

Female bonding is viewed , by feminists , as a form of empowerment that helps women face various challenges . Louise Bernikow feels that it is a strong sense of ‘oneness’ that lies at the base of female friendship , and it is this very sense of unity that advocates empowerment :

“ Female friends are more often eye to eye . It is the creation of ‘us’ that is more important , we ‘two’ – and in this very different arrangement lie the great depths and the great raptures of our friendship .” (119)

Distinguishing between female and male friendships Bernikow further asserts that while the former is an intimate ‘eye to eye’ relationship , the latter tends to be more instrumental where the eyes are ‘fixed not on each other but what is out there’ . Their eyes are ‘like the eyes of men marching to war . . . they are shoulder to shoulder’ (119).

Divakaruni’s latest novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* is the story of three women – Sabitri , Bela and Tara –who are separated by space and time but strangely bonded in love . The narrative encapsulates a complex web of relationships between mothers and daughters that speaks of multigenerational and transcontinental bonds . The author explores the different kinds of love that exist between women and which act as a binding force across generations . It narrates the story of three generations of women (grandmother , mother and daughter) who part ways from each other only to discover that their greatest source of strength lies in one another . Here again Divakaruni underscores the mysterious yet enduring nature of sisterhood that can work miracles to provide sustenance and empowerment to each other . The predicament of each of the three women is different , they adopt different means to achieve their ends , yet they are connected in strange and subtle ways that steer them through the difficult terrains of life . Unlike *Sister of My Heart* here the author does not depict a sweet , loving and endearing mother daughter relationship . Relationships are almost inevitably strained in *Before We Visit the Goddess* . The mother daughter relationships are conflicted and complex . Bela and Tara are difficult daughters to their mothers . There is lack of warm attachment between the women .The ambivalence arising out of misgivings , misunderstandings and stubbornness can be best explained through the concept posited by Elizabeth Brown Guillory :

“ . . . the mother –daughter dyad experiences a love/hate relationship , often because the mother tries painstakingly convey knowledge about how

to survive in a racist , sexist and classist world while the daughter rejects her mother's experiences as invalid in changing social times" (65) .

The text under review depicts three pairs of relationships . There are two pairs of mothers and daughters , and a pair of grandmother and granddaughter who remain veritable strangers to each other almost throughout the story . Sabitri and her granddaughter Tara has remains spatially distanced from each other with the scope of communication between them almost nil . Let us first review the dynamics between Sabitri and her daughter Bela . Sabitri's life has been one of the most unconventional ones . Treading a path where choices were difficult and challenges were tough , she moved on unfaltered . The daughter of a poor sweet meat seller she had high ambitions : "She wants to go to college . Wants to become a teacher . She's smart . Stood first in the matric exams in the Girls School" (6). She was in no way an ordinary village girl . Fighting a lot of insults , injustices and disappointments she is finally able to carve out a niche for herself through her own enterprise "Durga Sweets" . Her marriage has been in some ways a marriage of convenience as it provided her the social security that she needed so badly in an alien city . Though she does not conform to the image of the doting wife and loving mother , she performed all the duties of a wife and mother uncomplainingly . After the accidental death of her husband in a refinery fire in Assam she fights a legal case with the company , secures a compensation and relocates to Kolkata . After much trials and tribulations Sabitri is able to come back to a normal life , and provide her daughter with the security , comfort and affluence that any father would have done . That she is a powerful woman , quite atypical of women of her time , needs to be acknowledged here . Her immense strength of mind , confidence in her abilities and strong determination does not go unnoticed . Unfortunately her long period of struggle took a toll on the mother daughter bonding . Even before she could realize it a rift had already developed between the mother and daughter Bela . Its origin can be traced back to the day when Sabitri slapped Bela for the first time , and thereafter things went wrong between them . All emotional ties were ruptured never to be regained again :

"The first time you hit your child with all your strength , wanting to hurt , it changes things . She feels that sting again now . It travels up her arm and lodges in her shoulder . The splotch blooming red on her cheek . The way she shrank back against the car door . Was that when the troubles between them began ?" (33-34) .

Though Sabitri loved her daughter dearly , she could never apologise to her for this rude behaviour . Years later when she sits down to write to her granddaughter , she utters those unspoken words :

"I'm sorry , Bela," she says . "Forgive me ." Words that all these years she hadn't been able to speak . (34)

Sabitri would remain so engrossed in her business during Bela's adolescence that she remained completely oblivious of the growing resentment in Bela : " In her youth Bela had been jealous of how much more time Sabitri spent with Bipin babu than with her . . ." (93).

The love hate relationship between Sabitri and Bela finds reflected in a different time and clime in the relationship between Bela and her daughter Tara as well . A single misunderstanding causes the mother -daughter duo (Bela and Tara) to drift apart . As daughters , both Bela and Tara develop an animosity towards their mothers which remains unmitigated and takes a lifetime to renew the bond of love . This is how Tara describes her mother :

“Bela Stubborn Dewan , that’s my mother” (183)

Tara’s feelings towards her parents are highly contrasted . She is more friendly and comfortable with her father , while she has her reservations about her mother :

“Toward my father , whom I’d loved more than anyone ever , my feelings are as unambiguous as a knife . My mother is a more troublesome case” (64) .

The ambivalence in her relationship with her mother rings loud when we find her hesitant and doubtful of the impending meeting with her mother that takes place almost after a decade of their separation :

“I’d been nervous about coming out here . I had never spent an entire week alone with my mother since the divorce . The few times we’d met , on occasions of family importance , my husband and son had acted as buffers . Otherwise it was emails or duty calls , brief , pragmatic exchanges of information , mostly to prove to each other that we ‘were doing just fine” (183) .

It is unambiguously clear that Bela and Tara did not share an emotionally fulfilling relationship with their mothers . For Tara her mother is a ‘taken for granted ‘case whom she can desert at her own will . She did not flinch when she severed all her ties with her mother right after her parents’ divorce . Least caring for her feelings and well –being Tara left her for good to live with the flawed notion that Bela , her mother , was solely responsible for the divorce and the ensuing problems in her (Tara) life .

As mothers Sabitri and Bela have always tried to provide support and guidance to their daughters, relentlessly trying their best to prevent them from making choices that might ruin their lives . When Bela calls Sabitri from thousands of miles away , the motherly instinct in Sabitri immediately recognizes the urgency in her ragged voice . The desperation in her voice makes the mother restless as the omniscient author declares , “ An old need twisted in Sabitri’s chest . *Protect , protect* ” (2) . She has always felt the need to help and guide her daughter no matter how indifferent and selfish Bela had been in the past . Bela had never been a dutiful daughter . Always engrossed with her own problems , she didn’t ever visit her mother after running away to America to marry Sanjay . Though it grieved her immensely , but Sabitri’s love and concern for Bela and Tara remained unaltered . Disregarding her failing health and the causes of her annoyance for Bela , she readily complies to her request to write to Tara . This is because Sabitri had already comprehended a deeper truth :

“Already she knew the most important thing : if her daughter – proud , stubborn , so like herself – had had anyone else to turn to , she would never have called Sabitri for help” (3)

So she sits down to write to Tara who has decided to drop out of college . Bela thinks that “ it would be the worst mistake of her life” (2) and since the girl has stopped listening to “anything her mother said nowadays”(2) , she implored Sabitri to write to her pointing out “the dangers of her stupid choice” (2) . Bela feels that if her mother communicates with the granddaughter it might deter Tara from taking insensible decisions that will ruin her life altogether . It can be clearly perceived how anxious both mothers are for the well being of their daughters . No matter how strained their relationship is , they turn to each other for help .When Sabitri has almost completed the letter she has a cardiac arrest and falls from the bed . Even in

her death bed she is anxious about the letter : “It is the only thing that matters now . It must be put in the mail . It must” (34) . Earlier Sabitri had wanted to visit Bela several times when Tara was a baby . One day she even confessed to Bipin Bihari , the manager of her sweet store , that all those years she had 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” (78) . Even Bela as a mother tries her best to protect her daughter Tara from all evil influences . When Tara cuts off all her ties with her mother , the mother becomes desperate and this can be easily perceived in Bela’s frantic attempts to seek her daughter :

“ I called her cell phone . . . but she wouldn’t pick up . I even went to the university and talked to her classmates in case they knew anything . I was so frantic , for days I drove around the Montrose area . I never did find her . . .”(145) .

Circumstances and choices have prevented meaningful communication among the women , keeping them away from each other throughout their lives . But somewhere in their heart of hearts there lies a secret desire to reach out to each other . One can easily perceive the desperate urge to fall back on the mothers in times of crisis . Both Bela and Tara call up their mothers when faced with the worst crisis of their lives . When Tara conceived and was contemplating abortion , she needed emotional support . So a confused and distraught Tara called up her mother for advice and support for she had none to turn to . This is what she says :

“I’d called because I was scared . Because suddenly I wasn’t sure if I was doing the right thing . I said to myself , *If she says , Don’t , I’ll cancel the appointment . If she says , Come , I’ll drive up to wherever she’s living now*” (126) .

Bela also acted in a similar manner one night when she found herself totally helpless after being abandoned both by her husband and her daughter . She desperately needed her mother’s intervention to prevent Tara from falling into bad company . She feels it her responsibility to protect Tara , and at the same time chooses none but her mother for help and support :

“When you told me you were dropping out of college , Tara , I didn’t know what to do . I’d dropped out of college myself – so many of my problems stemmed from that . I didn’t want the same thing to happen to you . I guess that’s when people call their mothers—when their world is falling apart” (206) .

As daughters both Bela and Tara have proved to be quite troublesome to their mothers . Bela confesses , “ Even as a child I was sullen and difficult” (206) . They have been the cause of much grief and anxiety to their mothers , parting ways with them and deserting them callously to seek their own happiness . Sabitri had warned Bela against Sanjay , but to no avail . Years later her own daughter Tara acted in quite a similar manner though circumstances and choices were far different . Not that in doing so they have achieved success or happiness . They have had to face challenges and trying situations . From their varied experiences and interactions they learn many lessons . Surprisingly all through their voyaging they could never dismiss thoughts about their mothers . The image of the mother kept lurking in the inner recess of the memory . The mother remains as the perennial source of love , affection and support no matter how much the daughters spurned at the mothers . The eternal bond of female solidarity is not easily snapped.

There have been instances when Bela and Tara felt a desperate longing for support sustenance and healing from their mothers . Once while conversing with Kenneth , her neighbor in Austin , Bela fell to reminiscing her life in Kolkata before her marriage . She also talked about her mother and how she became the proprietor of Durga Sweets that gained immense popularity . Her mother had great culinary skills and she worked out innovative recipies . Kenneth sums up the episode in the following manner :

“Over dinner Mrs. Dewan opened a large bottle of wine and told me about Kolkata , the city where she had lived before marriage . Life in Kolkata seemed dangerous and exhilarating . Kolkatans loved deserts ; they thought nothing of travelling across the traffic-choked city to the famous sweet shop Mrs. Dewan’s mother owned to sample her Durga Mohan . Streets flooded during the monsoons , so that as a girl Mrs. Dewan had to ride a pull-rickshaw to school” (143) .

Bela too has a flair for cooking as Kenneth acknowledges , “ . . . there was no mistaking her talent” (149) . While recommending her for cooking demonstrations at Lance’s grocery , Kenneth was quick to add a compliment : “She was good cook” (147) . While dining at Bela’s almost regularly and savouring the Indian delicacies like singaras “stuffed with cauliflower” , “light caramelized yogurt” or “misti doi” , “murgir jhol” and “mugger dal” (143) Kenneth unmistakably discerned her culinary skill . The fact that Sabitri has passed on her genes to her daughter is quite evident here . In this way she has remained with her daughter through thick and thin , motivating her in an indirect and invisible manner to make the best use of her potential . So a few years later we find Bela as the author of some popular cookbooks and successfully running her own blog ‘Bela’s Kitchen’ . This is what Tara , the granddaughter of Sabitri , has to say regarding the expertise that runs in the family :

“ My mother has several successful cookbooks and a popular food blog , *Bela’s Kitchen* , now well into its second decade . My grandmother Sabitri’s deserts were legendary in Kolkata – so I’ve been told . No wedding in my great- grandmother Durga’s village was considered complete without her special malpua , golden-fried and dipped in rose syrup , sprinkled with crushed fennel seed” (185) .

Thus we find that the women are strangely bonded . Surprisingly it is this that enables them to survive and build their identities . After the loss of their husbands both the mother (Sabitri) and daughter (Bela) needed a real boost to move on . Sabitri by judicious blend of her culinary and business skills is able to establish her identity . She sets up ‘Durga Sweets’ , a tribute to her mother . Years later in a different socio- cultural mileu Bela too is shown to utilize this inheritance to ensure a stable income that will keep her going even without her alimony . She starts giving cooking demonstrations in Lance’s grocery on authentic Indian recipes that were “easy enough for her audience” (149) . When her second cookbook is published the publisher even arranges a tour for her in seven cities . Thus she is able to overcome her drinking problem and utilize her skill in a constructive manner . From a diffident , dejected , miserable and dependent soul she transforms into an active , confident and liberated individual who does not require the social and financial security of a husband . Thus the mother’s skill genetically transmitted to her daughter enables her to achieve ‘self –actualisation’ . Defining the term self-actualisation’ the noted psychologist Carl Rogers states that it is a process of becoming oneself ,

of becoming fulfilled , of developing one's unique psychological characteristics and potentialities . Self-actualisation is a form of empowerment which the radical feminist Mary Daly refers to as the process of "women becoming" (qtd. in Tandon , 45) . Evidently both Sabitri and Bela have achieved self-actualisation through realization of their true potential .

Bela's daughter ,Tara , does several odd jobs after dropping out of college . She is a second generation immigrant who has completely assimilated into the American culture . Once she was attending an old Indian woman , Mrs. Mehta, who refused to be left alone at home because it felt extremely lonely as she says , "I feel like I'm being buried alive"(60) . Instantly Tara is reminded of her own mother :

"When my mother first moved from India to Northern California , she felt dreadfully alone . One winter day when my father was at work , she walked to a park and sat on a bench , just to get away from the dark , empty apartment . A storm started , but she didn't move" (60) .

Lying down on the bed one night at the Mehta's Tara could not get any sleep as her mind was "invaded by memories"(64) . She thinks of her mother :

"She's probably still living in the Houston suburb where I grew up , though not in our house , which was a casualty of the divorce . The last time I saw her-just before I dropped out of college-her face had been puffy , the beautiful bones of her face blurred by grief . She hadn't made the bed or taken out the trash" (64) .

No matter how far away Tara is from her mother she cannot prevaricate thoughts of her mother . The implication is that there is a psychological craving for her mother . She actually longs to be with her . It is a psychosomatic process that finds explanation in Nancy Chodorov's theory . According to Nancy Chodorov a girl always defines herself relationally . The pre-oedipal identification of a girl with her mother results in bonding in the oedipal stage . Her pre-oedipal sense of attachment to the mother determines her sense of identity and her experience of the oedipal phase.

It is interesting to note that the narrative which begins with a letter actually ends with the very letter being read out by Tara to whom it was written . This letter that Sabitri writes to her granddaughter Tara in response to Bela's frantic phone call in fact becomes instrumental in renewing the bond between the mothers and daughters and grandmother and granddaughter . But unfortunately Sabitri dies before she could post the letter . And the letter reaches its rightful owner about a decade after being written . This letter mysteriously acts as a secret and unifying force that brings the women together , resolving all differences and misunderstandings among them . The letter actually has a cathartic effect on the two women – Bela and Tara.

The letter is very significant in the context of the story. It enables Tara to know her grandmother intimately – the grandmother whom she had never met and who remained a complete stranger to her all these years . She recollects that whenever she asked about her grandmother her mother would change the topic .

"When I was young I asked my mother many times about my grandmother . But she never liked to talk about it . I knew Grandma passed away around the time of the divorce , but I didn't have any details , and later , when my mother and I started speaking again , I'd been reluctant to bring

up a topic that would surely have been painful for her . Perhaps , finally this letter will help me parse the mystery that is Sabitri Das” (201) .

As for Sabitri she had only a few photographs of Tara which are not enough to know a person well . But still she concedes to write to her unknown granddaughter being compelled by a sense of duty , love and concern . The communication that she initiated became complete only when Tara came across the letter accidentally years later as she was rummaging through her things at her mother’s house . Though by this time Tara has moved on in life , but still the letter offered her the key to meaningful existence .

During the letter reading episode some argument , accusations and bickering take place between the two women (Bela and Tara) over some past issues that has so long remained unresolved . Surprisingly all differences are sorted out and misunderstandings resolved as they read the letter. Also Tara gets an opportunity to know her mother better by reading the contents of the letter . Browsing through the letter she realizes the depth of her mother’s love and concern for her . She gets the opportunity to re-evaluate her mother with whom she never shared an emotional relationship . She had accused her mother wrongly and misjudged her . On the other hand it also enables Bela to dismiss all feelings of animosity towards her own mother Sabitri . On coming to know of the circumstances that led to her death , Bela holds herself responsible :

“That night – probably just as my mother was having her heart attack –I took sleeping pills . . . I didn’t hear the phone when it rang . The next morning , I woke up on the bathroom floor , dry-mouthed , my head feeling like it was about to split open . . . I dragged myself to the phone and checked for messages . I was hoping you’d call back . But the messages were all from my mother’s phone . . . I skipped them . . . The messages weren’t from her though . They were from Bipin Babu , our old manager at Durga Sweets . . . By the time I realized this everything was over , even her ashes scattered. Tara I’d killed my mother !” (207)

This realization is too agonizing for her as she “rocks back and forth , her shoulders shaking” (207) . At this moment Tara too realizes the pain she had afflicted on her mother , and confesses “how near she herself had come to death because of me” (207) . It is a moment of intense emotional purgation for the two women who find themselves united in pain :

“Pain makes us crazy . . . My mother clutches at the collar of my shirt . I rub her back and feel her tears on my neck .It’s been decades since our bodies have been this close . It’s an odd sensation , like a torn ligament knitting itself back , lumpy and imperfect , usable as long as we know not to push it too hard.” (207)

Thus a rejuvenation of the bond between Tara and Bela is initiated through confessions and painful realizations which , in turn , is instigated by Sabitri’s letter .

Sabitri who had always wanted to reach out to her daughter and granddaughter is finally enabled to do so on the last day of her life through the letter . She writes about the journey of her life , the impediments as well as her achievements . She freely shares secrets that till then no one else knew . Knowing full well that Tara would not be able to relate to all these , still she wrote with the hope that she might glean out something important from the letter which might help her lead a better life . She dies soon after completing the letter . Even with her health failing and memory dwindling she is desperate to communicate to her estranged daughter and granddaughter the

secret of meaningful existence . It takes her almost a life time to learn that self-actualisation is the only key to success and happiness . And she urges them to work towards realizing their potential which will actually provide a satisfaction that is incomparable to any other achievement . An excerpt from her letter will clarify the point . She writes :

“ . . . My happiest moment would come much later . . . One day , in the kitchen at the back of the store , I held in my hand a new recipe I had perfected , the sweet I would go on to name after my dead mother . I took a bite of the conch-shaped dessert , the palest , most elegant mango color . The smooth , creamy flavor of fruit and milk , sugar and saffron mingled and melted on my tongue . Satisfaction overwhelmed me . This was something I had achieved by myself , without having to depend on anyone . No one would take it away . That’s what I want for you , my Tara , my Bela . That’s what it really means to be fortunate lamp” (208) .

The parting words of Sabitri are too invaluable to be taken casually . She implores them (Bela and Tara) to search for the Goddess within them , and it will guide them in their endeavours . Sabitri has been able to transmit to the younger women the essence of life . Having done it she unconsciously renews the intergenerational bond bridging all transcontinental , cultural and generational differences that have kept the women apart so long . In truth , the letter acts as a unifying force bringing together the three women . Metaphorically viewed it acts as a binding vine to bring together the difficult daughters and the stubborn mothers .

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