Depiction of Indian Culture in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Before We Visit the Goddess'

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Abstract:
Chitra Banerjee portrays her own experience of migration in most of her works. From the study of her both of the latest novels it can be assumed that her works project Indian experiences, contemporary American lifestyle, history, myth, and the challenges of living in a multicultural world. In Before We Visit the Goddess she very cleverly depicts that how Indian society plays a role in creating an identity of a person especially of a woman and further putting her in a situation where she faces her own Identity Crisis. She successfully displays Indian society which witnesses Indianess in her writing. A very meticulous description of various Indian rituals during engagement, wedding or any other routine day has been brought out in the novels. At the same time she also makes her reader well acquainted with Indian food, cities and songs as well giving a clear picture of real India in both of her books. It is observed in the novel that Divakaruni has presented the glimpses of India of her memories through her characters, description of events and even through the presentation of patriarchy mentality. Divakaruni's description of India and her recreating India and Indianess in Before We Visit the Goddess, remind the researcher of The Sister of My Heart's Anand Mulloo's words. He has mentioned:

"Looking back in nostalgia to the motherland, to reconstruct imaginary homelands, in towns and villages, in Little India's or new China towns becomes an urge, a habit and a compulsion, a homeward journey, with its Imaginative geography and history, its politics, memory and desire."

Keyword: Myth, History, food, culture, customs, Intergeneration, migration, lifestyle, society, tradition, rituals Diaspora.

Divakaruni's sensibility for Indian identity and cultural bonding is revealed on every page of the book. Yet it is known that Divakaruni did not ride an elephant to school as a child, and the bindi on her forehead she wears only when she dresses in traditional Indian attire which she believes has no religious significance. For her it is mostly just for embellishment, and she chooses the colour to match her sari. At the same time it is seen that she has understood Indian culture so well that she makes even her foreign readers be familiar with the real India. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni seems to be very much conscious about the myth among the Indian women. She makes conscious efforts to present Indian culture and tradition in her works. Before We Visit the Goddess also witnesses the writer's attitude towards her motherland which is full of positivity and hope. The story is seen to be reflecting her reverence of Indian culture. Along with this, her pride in Indian food, folklore, Bengali language etc. have been explored.

Divakaruni relates Indian culture with superstitions too. The description of magician and superstition in Assam as well as traditions and beliefs are well woven in the story of Sabitri and Bela's childhood. At the same time there is another group of people who rejects such traditions calling it Bloody superstition. When Ayah in Assam “Puts a little dot of soot on the baby's cheek. Bijan wiped the mark from the baby's face roughly with his handkerchief making him cry”

Other than dogma and doctrines, Food is one more parameter to define one's culture. Chitra Banerjee's affiliation with Indian culture and food is clearly revealed in the story. Divakaruni makes blatant references to food and food preparation in the novel which not only expresses the Diaspora voice in America but also distinguishes individual's identity. Bela when shifts in America, “She disdained American food and took pride in preparing, from scratch, spicy fish curry or potatoes seasoned with panch phoron and whole red chillies”
Cooking is a source of income, pride, and happiness both for Bela as well as Sabitri. This becomes a way for the women to connect to their mothers, through Bela's Kitchen and Durga Sweets, respectively. Each one chooses an Indian dish mentioned in the novel which brings it with them to the next meeting. The characters in the story cook a dish from his or her own heritage and relate how it is connected to the previous generation.

Frequent references of food preparation and recipes is also shared by the author even in America and makes the Indian as well as foreign readers taste the assorted Indian recipes. It is further seen that Bengali food is highly appreciated even in foreign land. The Diaspora characters do not fail to be grateful for Bengali food.

Eventually it is studied that Divakaruni is fond of exerting and ethicizing Bengali Indian practices and values all the way through the novel. This includes varied rituals and rites such as cremation ceremony, marriage, temples, concept of life and death, dressings, decorations, food, and so on. Divakaruni brings about the contrasting cultures of India's America. The story persistently centres on the transculture. The characters in the vein Bela and Tara are found to be moving between two worlds which unconsciously arises cultural crisis resulting loss, alienation, rootlessness and dislocation which are experienced by every immigrant. Divakaruni tries to embody experiences of expatriates who at the outset try to adjust with the new culture and society into which they moved nevertheless at the same time they are not disposed to follow the new land's culture entirely. Mentioning of temples in America as well as in India brings forth Indian beliefs of Gods and Goddess. Description of Meenakshi temple of Madurai and the comparison of its resemblance temple in America itself bring out the writers keenness and sensibility towards originality of Indian temple constructions and values. Through Before We Visit the Goddess the author looks at intergenerational issues and how the children of immigrants are carrying their culture forward and how the concept of heritage can have both a positive and negative impact.

As seen earlier Hindi movies and Bollywood songs play a vital role in holding fast Indian culture in America. The author uses generalised images assorted with specific reminiscences of Sanjay who would set down to listen Bollywood songs. Cultural productions such as Hindi movies thus are alluded to as cultural victuals to the diasporic Indians living in the US. Movies provide the necessary distraction and sometimes cultural nostalgia.

The characters are discovered to become nostalgic discovering the inner self through cultural crisis, the connections with separated mothers and realization of one's strength. In such intergenerational and transnational saga one finds, at the crossroads of geographical and cultural interaction, the issue that is raised by this diasporic novel is that life which like a river of influence comes down the generations leaving an imprint of the past at various stages of our mental development as well as in shifting contexts.

Likes all her other novels Before we visit the goddess is also set against the back drop of two countries India and USA . But the way it differs from her other books is that the story is narrated by the three lead characters. This is the story of three women. Sabitri, Bela and Tara and the only thing that connects them are that they share the grandmother - mother-daughter relationship. Bela recalls her nation, regrets her decision and long for her mother during her pregnancy. She is often to be surrounded by dangerous fancies which flitted through her mind. Time and again she thinks of her mother that if she would had allowed Sabitri to arrange her marriage, she would have been living in India, She would have gone to her mother's home for the birthing. Bela missed her mother's pamper and care during her pregnancy. Bela gets lost among alienation, and economical crisis in foreign land. She undergo immense mental trauma. At the age of 50 she finds herself a divorcee, addicted to alcohol and her daughter who is second generation Diaspora, · blames her for the divorce.

It is truly observed that memories establish a connection with past, that past can be of an individual or it can be a collective past, past and memories about ritual, culture, history, ancestor and at times it stirs the sense of identity. Before We Visit the Goddess begins with such memories connecting granddaughter and grandmother and therefore connecting Indian and American Indian or Indian and the Second generation Diaspora. The author justifies Sabriti, the mother or grandmother of the other principal
female characters as she has returned to her ancestral village after an action-packed life in Kolkata and then she begins to write a letter to the granddaughter whom she has never seen. In this way Divakaruni puts the narrative into motion. Such connections give a push to the memories of Sabitri unveiling the story of Bella her daughter and Tara her granddaughter. Sabitri goes back to the memory lane when she gazes the first picture of Tara in Before We Visit the Goddess.

It is truly believed and explored that Divakaruni shares memories which involve legacies, traditions, histories, heritages and at times nostalgia that becomes distorted memories. Divakaruni's application of cultural memory both past as well as present which adds distinctive features to her female characters such as Sabitri, Bela and Tara, underlining the importance of cultural identity eventually. However some memories become oblivion. When Bela recalls her school proverbs she realises the oblivion nature of connections and memories.

It is also noted that Divakaruni has made her fiction very much relevant to Bengali Indian Diaspora through her mentioning of Bengali culture. Such consciousness of cultural identity in the story is discussed. In addition to this, it is also seen that even the minor male characters in the novel too become nostalgic in foreign country whey they encounter some or the other situation which would connect them with their past. Dr. Venkatachalapathi in America becomes nostalgic and loses himself in the memory of his daughter Meena; her childhood, her love affair and her death. Therefore, it is understood and analysed that the memory reflected by the author is fore grounded through Indian culture and Diaspora Indians makes use of such connections. Thus it is clearly revealed from the text that Divakaruni deploys the memories, past, histories, feeling of nostalgia to reconnect with India.

It is seen in the novel that like her other novels, Divakaruni recollects and narrates Indian culture, psyche, village, customs etc. with such tools acquainting her readers with Indianness. In this way she brings out the consciousness about National Identity, Cultural Identity, Social Identity and even Political Identity of her own and her various major as well as minor characters in the story.

Conclusion:

It is very scrupulously noted that the author unconsciously and indirectly makes the comparison between two different culture and tradition of east and west. For instance, the relationship between the grandmother and mother is set in India, and then the mother and daughter set in the U.S. Divakaruni by moving back and forth between India and America, explores both of the cultures, and the ways in which they are both changing, are central to the novel. Ultimately she makes the reader understand that culture in America is a very complex thing, because so many people have brought their cultures into that land. Moreover, the way cultures are different and shape the Diasporas in different ways, and yet the writer is fond of discovering things at the heart of each culture which are human and timeless. Therefore she is more interested in representing cultural assimilation rather than cultural crisis however the later turns to be a very natural phenomenon while presenting Diasporas.

Reference:

3) Ibid, p. 95.