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Myth & Gender: A Critical Reading of Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess*

“Before we visit the goddess,” he said, “we must cleanse ourselves.”

Abstract:

A great story teller Chitra Banerjee in her latest novel portrayed three generations and their strong bond even after getting apart from each other. This research paper focuses on the use of myth and gender as entwined by the author in the novel. The novel unfolds the journey of women to womanhood. The novel is a discourse of identity and independence as strived and achieved by all the characters.

Keywords: Myth, Gender, Diaspora, Self, Identity, Narrative

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* is an extraordinary saga of three generations consisting of grandmother Sabitri, mother Bela and daughter Tara—in relation to each other and the men in their lives. The novel highlights the resistance that women confront generation after generation in their journey towards independence. The characters are placed over the distinct geographies of rural Bengal, Calcutta and modern Houston to unfold their stories to the readers. Devakaruni artistically blends Indian myths and oriental magic with the immigrant experience. She modifies Indian legends and reinvents the myth. This mythic framework contributes to the creation of the close knitted feminine world in the novel.

The author has a special affinity for myths. Her Indian heritage pushes her to combine history, myth and magic together as she often uses mythological references in her novels. She modifies Indian legends and reinvents the myths to create fantasy. In doing so she uses culture as a troupe through food, dress, rituals, and customs to highlight her mythical framework. Noted scholar Maria Lech in her book *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, explains that the purpose of myth is to explain matters in scientific way of a pre-scientific age. These myths tell about the creation of man, of animals, of landmarks; why or how certain phenomena came to be; how and why rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue? The similar idea about the role of myth can also be seen in the work of Percy Cohen, where he classifies the theories of myth into seven variants;

1. That which treats myth as a form of explanation;
2. That which treats myth as a form of symbolic statement which has a function.
3. That's which treats it as an explanation of the unconscious.
4. That which accounts for it in terms of its function in creating and maintaining social solidarity and cohesion.
5. That which stresses its function in legitimating social institutions and social practices.
6. That which treats it as a form of symbolic statement about social structure possibly linked with ritual.
7. Structural Theory (337-353)

Divakaruni's novel falls into the second variants which treats myth as a form of symbolic statement which has a function. In this novel the author has used the myth of goddess Meenakshi who becomes symbolic of the three women characters in their quest of self-exploration.

Tracing the Myth through the title

The title *Before We Visit the Goddess* unveils the intentions of the author. It has also been used as a title of one of the chapters where she refers to one of the Meenakshi temples in Houston that was established by the devotees of the goddess Meenakshi of Madurai. There is close connection between the three female characters in the novel and the myth. As per the mythology the Pandya king of Madurai was childless and the gods blessed him with a daughter who was born from fire. She was called Tadaatagai and more popularly as Meenakshi. She had three breasts and it was foretold that the extra breast would disappear the day she met a man worthy of being her husband. She was raised as in the royal art and sciences and she succeeded her father and then decided to go on the conquest of the world. After defeating all the kings, gods and ganas and nandi she finally met her match in a young hermit who turned out to be Shiva. When their eyes met her extra breast disappeared and she realized that she is reincarnation of Parvati. She took the hermit now named Sundareshwara to her city Madurai to be her husband. The three female characters of this novel are the three breasts of Tadaatagai (Shakti) who after meeting their Sudareshwara (in this case not the male counterpart but the self) while the males only work as a catalyst to spark their quest. Though the novel tries to present the feminine world what is so peculiar about the author's style is that like her other novels in this novel also we find Sabitri, Bela and Tara achieving their quest of identity after meeting their male counterparts Bipin, Kenneth and Gary respectively. Like Goddess Meenakshi's third breast these three women get rid of their faults and flaws by finding the inner strength. Sabirti writes about this moment of introspection and self-realization when she writes,

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 could take it away. That's what I want for you, my Tara, my Bela. That's what it really means to be a fortunate lamp.... (32)

Similarly Bela gets this understanding of divinity by her Bela's Kitchen and Tara by accepting her reality. Divakaruni has used mythological names and incidents multiple times in the course of the narrative. The preamble to the book begins with the verse from the Manusmriti, "Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased." She also refers to Savitri, who follows Yama to the edge of the world to get back her husband's soul. Furthermore almost all of her female characters in the novel are named after mythological characters—Durga, Savitri, Tara, Meena. Susan Bayly in her book *Saints, Goddesses and Kings* has highlighted that the reverence for goddess Meenakshi is a part of the Hindu tradition that integrates with the Dravidian Hindu society where the "woman is the lynchpin of the system" of social relationships. Through this novel Divakaruni invokes traditional narratives of culture and reinterprets them from a perspective suggesting divinity and strength of these characters. The reference of these mythological strong women characters reflect the matrilineal traditions in South India that "penultimate [spiritual] powers rest with the women. (Bayly 44-47)

The novel traces the history of its origin in the early 1950s when young Sabitri, moves to Calcutta to pursue her higher education in the house of wealthy Mittirs. The only son of Mittir's falls in love with Sabitri that forces her to leave the house and further complications in the family in the years to come. Rebelling her mother Sabitri's daughter Bela, moves to US following her lover in 1970s – and never returns. Bela's daughter, Tara, drops out of college after her beloved father decides to leave them in 1995 and follows her own purposeless life. The story of these three woman is also symbolic of completeness in entirety as the name Sabitri is related to the dawn as in Indian mythology Sabitri is the daughter of the sun god

that further reaches to Bela (mid noon) and finally Tara (Star) suggestive of night. So the story metaphorically completes the cycle of day and night; of good times as well as the bad. Even the plot circular as the end is in the beginning.

Magic Realism

The author beautifully weaves the elements of magic realism in the narrative while talking about “Bela’s secret”. (42) Bela always believed that disclosing the secret of magician to her mother might result in loss. Like a perfect story teller we find Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni narrating this incident of magician and importing the readers to the unconquered magical world of Bela. There is a thin line between imagination and reality and in case of magic realism this line gets blurred. In case of “Bela’s secret” the first meeting with this man seems to be realistic as his description “band tied pirate style” (37) is suggestive of his native origin. Moreover the fact that he was aware of Bela’s family background further supports this belief. But the later episodes seems to be a powerful representation of magic realism where the incidents seem to go beyond the common comprehension. When he meets Bela for the next time while she was sitting under the mango tree “thinking” he appears and it startles her so much that pen she was holding falls leaving the trail on her dress but the magician removes it just by running his fingertips. Later he offers her something to eat that shakes her head and then he says, “It will teach you not to care what people think about you.” (41) Intoxicated it appears to her that the magician was reduced to the size of a spore before vanishing in the wind. Along with this there is reference to Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Lady of Shallot” that Bela is learning for her class assignment, “There she weaves by night and day/ a magic web with colours gay/she has heard a whisper say/ a curse is on her if she’s stray” (42) the lines seems to be suggestive the parallel that Divakaruni tries to establish between Bela and Tennyson’s lady of Shallot. In the tower she weaves her magic web day and night. She knows there is a curse upon her if she looks down at Camelot, although she

does not know what the curse is. Similarly Bela also knew that the car incident has cursed her life forever for some unknown reason, “There was a man, downstairs. He kept crying and kissing Mamoni’s hands. Mamoni, why was he kissing your hands?” (32) After this incident their life completely changed and Sabitri held Bela responsible for the miseries’, “Stupid girl—you’ve ruined everything.” (33)

Like lady of Shallot, Bela also weaves web of imagination around her and though barely eleven is enchanted by the presence of the magician’s presence similar to the reaction of lady of Shallot for Sir Lancelot. The fact that the magician knows the innermost thoughts of Bela gives a reason to believe that he was just a part of her imagination as he says, “the baby they will not miss you so much they might even be happier with you gone after all, you ruined everything for them” (45) and he again gives her globules to eat that led to her hospitalization. The technique through which the incident is narrated is beyond any flaw and for this the complete credit goes to the author.

Narrative Technique

The narrative technique is unique with multiple narrative submerging in one voice. While Sabitri’s story uses letters as a major device (Fortunate Lamps:1995), we learn one large chunk of Bela’s story from her gay American neighbour, Kenneth, and the other from the medical journal of her long-estranged husband, Sanjay. Tara’s accounts mostly deploy the first person, except for a moving intervention by Dr Venkatachalapathi, who, in the course of a remarkable afternoon – of, among other things, visiting the goddess – is able to stem her free fall since she left university after her first year. The year is provided helpfully in the title of every chapter to create a flawless chronological structure of the novel. Techniques like flashbacks, dream sequences, hallucinations, epistolary forms are beautifully adopted to give it a distinct narrative style. The story is articulated in moments of incoherence and disruption making it very fluid. Letters become an integral part of the narrative strategy. Sabitri’s letter

is loaded with lessons that she has learnt from her life that is cherished and shared among the three generations.

Diaphanous Representation of Males

In Madurai's Meenakshi Temple there are two separate shrines for goddess Meenakshi and god Sundaresvara. Within the complex the Devi's shrine is more centrally placed to signify it as a *pradhana murti* or 'more important' in comparison to Dev. (Fuller 321-348) Similarly we find that Divakaruni has created all male characters in a dull hue. The author has given a very different treatment to the male counterparts who are either left silent or are given a passing reference. Starting from Sabitri's priest father has a slightest mention further we don't come across Mr Mittir in Mittir Mansion. It was only Rajiv who has been loved by Sabitri unconditionally so much so that she confesses to her granddaughter, "... if Rajiv had come to her, she would have walked out with him. She would have lived as his mistress, not caring if she blackened her family's name beyond all salvaging. Granddaughter, here is my most terrible secret: even after I had given birth Bela, I would have done it." (2) Further the mention of Bijan is portrayed as a loving husband and a doting father. Later Bipin Vehari plays an important role in Sabitri's life by playing the role of Sabitri's friend and confidante along with shouldering the responsibility of father figure. The next man that we find a mention of is Bela's lover Sanjay with whom she leaves for America to set up a happy family. After Sanjay's betrayal the broken family and specially the dejected daughter Tara falls in bad company, drops out of college and becomes a drug-addict. Her life changes when she meets Dr Venkatachalapathi. An Indian father who lost his daughter back in India. Only for the brief moments both of them find the missing part of their identities. Dr V. finds a daughter in Tara and she finds the affectionate father. The person that she misses the most in her life. The white shawl given by Dr V. to Tara becomes the symbol of this warmth but that

too gets burnt suggesting the deprivation of this warmth in Tara's life. The only child who gets the love and affection of both parents is Neel, Tara's son.

Food as a Motif

Food is a central motif here as it provides both healing and meaning to life from generations. It also symbolizes the coded wisdom trickling down from the maternal side. Sabitri adapts her culinary skills from the memory of her mother Durga's innovative recipes. Bela turns to cooking to her fortune swaps from a minimum wage job to food blogger and cook books. Even Tara discovers her culinary skills for Bengali recipes. Divakaruni has used food as a very important trope to suggestion the assimilation and nostalgia in the immigrant kitchen where in it works to bridge the gap between two nations, two cultures and coping with the memories of familiar landscape.

Conclusion

Before We Visit the Goddess captures the complicated multigenerational bond across the border in different voices. With the help of mythological framework the author produces a narrative blended in reality and magic. Sabitri, Bela and Tara are also cultural ambassadors of their distinct cultural sensibilities by bridging a beautiful link between East and West. The author puts forth a discourse on women, womanhood and femininity.

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