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The Power of Narrative in Depiction of Three Generation Relationship with reference to *Before We Visit the Goddess* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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“Sometimes a homeland becomes a tale. We love the story because it is about our homeland and we love our homeland even more because of the story.” (Refaat Alareer, Gaza Writes Back)

Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee is one of the major novelists of Indian diaspora who have achieved enviable positions within a comparatively short creative span. Her female protagonists are memorable and real representations of diasporic Indian women. Divakaruni's books are directed mainly to women of all races and faiths who share a common female experience. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their cultures and religions. She also contrasts the lives and perceptions of first generation immigrants with that of their children born and raised in foreign land. And inevitably, it includes the Indian American experience of grappling with two identities. Through her great art of storytelling, she portrays three generations and their strong bond even after getting apart from each other. My research methodology for this paper will be qualitative and close textual analysis to analyze the storytelling technique adopted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Keywords: Diaspora, immigrant, identity, self, three generation, storytelling, narrative.

Introduction

The Modern Diasporic Indian writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. One class comprises those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore. The other class comprises those who have been bred since Childhood from outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin. The writers of the former group have a literal displacement where as those belonging to the latter group find themselves rootless. Both the groups of writers have produced an enviable corpus of English literature. The Diasporic Indian writers have generally dealt with characters from their own displaced community but some of them have also taken a liking for western characters and they have been convincing in dealing with them. Two of Vikram Seth's novels *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music* have as their subjects exclusively the lives of Americans and Europeans respectively. Two of the earliest novels that have successfully depicted diasporic Indian Characters are Anita Desai's *Bye –*

Bye Blackbird and Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*. These novels depict how racial prejudice against Indians in the UK of the 1960s alienates the characters and aggravate their sense of displacement. Bharati Mukherjee's novels like *Wife* and *Jasmine* depict Indians in the US- the land of immigrants, both legal and illegal-before globalization got its impetus.

Salman Rushdie in the novel *The Satanic Verses* approaches the allegory of migration by adopting the technique of magical realism. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* has the character Ila whose father is a roaming diplomat and whose upbringing has been totally on foreign soils.

Born in Kolkata on July 29, 1956, the daughter of R.K. and Tatini Banerjee, Divakaruni went to United States for her studies in 1976 after gaining her Bachelor's degree from Calcutta University. She did her master degree from Wright State of University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D from the University of California, Berkeley. She did many odd jobs to complete her education. She was employed in many odd jobs such as babysitting, selling merchandise in a boutique, washing instruments in a science lab, etc. But because of her talent and creativity, she has proved herself as one of the renowned women writers of today. She currently lives in Houston, Texas which reflects in her many works. She teaches Creative Writing Program in the University of Houston. She is also serving on the Advisory Board of Maitri in San Francisco Bay Area and Daya in Houston. Both the organizations help South-Asian and South Asian American women who are the victims of domestic violence. She is also involved with Pratham, a non-profit organization that seeks to improve literacy among disadvantaged Indian children.

Divakaruni's work has been published in over fifty magazines including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker* and her writing has been included in over fifty anthologies including the *Best American Short Stories* the *O. Henry Prize Stories* and the Pushcart Prize anthology. Her fiction has been translated into twenty languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian and Japanese. Her works include: *Arranged Marriage* (1995), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1998), *Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), *Neela: Victory Song* (2002), *The Brotherhood of the Conch* (2003), and *The Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013). Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* was released as a film of the same in 2005. In addition, her novel *Sister of my Heart* was made into a television series in Tamil and aired in India, as *Anbulla Snegithiye* (Loving Friend).

Before We Visit the Goddess is the latest novel written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni published in 2017. Like her other previous novels, *The Palace of Illusions*, *The Queen of Dreams*, *One Amazing Thing*, the present novel is also remarkable for its striking storytelling technique. The novel deals with the entangled relationships of three women, Sabitri, Bela, and Tara belonging to three generations and sharing grandmother-mother and daughter relationship.

The novel unravels the life of three women- though separated with time, circumstances and moreover by their choices they make in their lives, still get connected due to their family

bond and shared grief. Sabitri, a child of village priest, daughter of Durga, living in utter poverty thrives for education to pursue her dream to become a teacher though unfortunately she deviated from her dream and finds her complete world in her husband, Bijan and daughter, Bela. The story unfolds with the presence of Sabitri, an old lady, having breathing problem, living in Kolkata with her only janitor, Rekha, putting her efforts to write a letter to her grand-daughter, Tara in the USA to caution her not to leave her studies in between as informed by Bela who is also distanced from her daughter after her divorce from her husband Sanjay Dewan. Sabitri without seeing and meeting her grand-daughter ever in life is worried about the future of Tara which emphasizes on the theme of belongingness in Diaspora Literature. It hardly matters how far one is living from her relatives and loved ones, all these geographical boundaries stand insignificant if psychologically and emotionally they are connected.

Narrativity: Literature Review

Boris Tomashevsky, working first and foremost on a theory of narrative, Tomashevsky distinguished between story (fabula) and plan (sjuzet). According to him,

- (i) The story is the authentic sequence of proceedings as they have occurred, and is nearly raw substance for artistic work. Plot is the artistic demonstration of these events.
- (ii) Plot may use recurrence, reordering, and juxtapositions to amplify literary effect (suspense, for instance). Plot therefore prevents us from regarding the events as familiar.

Boris Eichenbaum: Eichenbaum is superior as a literary historian and narratologist. In his famous essay on “The Theory of the Formal Method” (1926),” he emphasised the autonomous nature of the work of art, and analysed the tale without any reference -to extra-literary referents. Eichenbaum elaborated the concept of skaz (“to tell”) through Third person narration and the syntax of direct speech marked by the character. He rejected traditional concept of form and content, suggesting that the notion of “technique” was more relevant than, the one of form.

The analysis of narrative has been **Genette**’s abiding concern, as his voluminous work on the subject adequately demonstrates. Here ‘we shall look at the more important notions of the narrative suggested by Genette.

Genette, for instance, argues that the narrative voice has many levels. The voice is constituted by the following elements:

(1) Narrative Instance: This refers to the actual moment and context of the narration, the: temporal setting” of the enunciation of the narration. This context of the narrative moment is crucial to understand the meaning of that utterance.

(2) Narrative Time: this is the time indicated by the tense (of the verb) in the narrative. The narrative instance also indicates the time of narration with respect to the events narrated For example, the narrative may be about a future event where the narrative time is prophetic. Or, in certain novels the time of the event is the time of the narrative itself where the event is narrated as it happens. In third person narratives there is no such time of narration, because

the event is recounted from a perspective outside the narrative itself. Thus narrative time refers to the time of the narrative.

(3) Narrative Levels: This refers to the relations of the acts narrated to the narration itself. For example, is the narrative a story within a story, for instance, the narrator may tell us about the events which lead to his narrating to us the story of a character.

Discussion

In the present novel, there is a constant shift in narration from first person to third person and then gradually coming back to first person having variety of speakers in different chapters. The story keeps shuffling between time and space, present and past and suddenly gets interrupted by author in between. The author uses the language so swiftly and lucidly that story shifts from first to third person narration quickly and effortlessly.

The tone of Sabitri's letter is confessional who wants to make Tara a part of her secret life which she never shared even with her daughter, Bela, a brat child. While emphasizing on education which is a must for a woman as she writes: "Without education, a woman has little chance of standing on her feet. She will be forced to watch from the sidelines while others enjoy the life she has dreamed about." (Before We Visit the Goddess 4) In her own life also, primarily, education was the most important dream which she could not chase completely due to the pressure and burden of marital life. She left her parents in village and started living in Kolkata with Leelamoyi, the upper cast Brahmin woman who was quite happy with her until she knew of growing intimacy of Sabitri and her son, Rajiv who was pursuing his studies to become a doctor so that he could take over the family business, a hospital.

While writing the letter Sabitri is lost in memories. She does not know what made her write about her love relationship to her unseen grand –daughter, Tara but she does not want to crush her memory. She wants to share her life to make Tara acquainted with the reality she faced in her own life. Like other young women, her heart also got swollen with the love which was so powerful that she started meeting Rajiv on the terrace of the big house under the veil of a quilt, how their love was blooming, how she was addressed, 'Tri' out of love by him. The memory of that golden time sways her into thoughts: "she loved the way he shortened her name, made it unique. But a moment cannot become a whole life. She knew that. She was hungry for more." (Before We Visit the Goddess 17)

Sabitri was always living under the guiding impression of her mother, Durga who used to say:

"Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name.

Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame." (Before We Visit the Goddess 20)

On getting deserted from the house, unsupported by her lover, Rajiv, she found herself all alone in her life at that point of time. Finally sheltered by the Maths Professor, Bijan, a simple and a kind gentleman whom she fabricated about her past with and managed to marry

him and enjoyed the luxuries of settled fortunes of her husband. Sabitri whose journey pioneered with education finally found purpose of her life only in her husband and daughter which finally led her to purposelessness as her husband died leaving her as a young widow with a daughter, Bela, who also deserted her and eloped to the USA for the love of her boyfriend, Sanjay.

Sabitri is a woman of human flesh and blood. She cannot hide her inner insecurities. Getting once duped by the higher class in form of Leelamoyi and Rajiv, she wants to avenge on them by making a show off of her fortunes. She tries to calm down her humiliated soul by meeting Leelamoyi, a widow now, unattended and uncared by Rajiv and her daughter-in-law after seven years by flaunting her car, driver and husband and daughter as she got to know that Rajiv did not have children to appease Leelamoyi with the title of grand-mother. Sabitri is amazed at the feeling that how she is opening the layers of unsaid, undiscussed, unshared past with Tara that how her hands were kissed by guilt-stricken Rajiv that day and how Bela mentioned the same in front of Bijan in her childhood ignorance. But today Sabitri has discovered a new truth of her life that Rajiv was too weak to take a stand for his life so there is no regret for that lost relationship. After this episode, we witness a new Sabitri who turned out to be a strengthened woman who fought with the company to get the compensation after her husband's sudden death, and opened Durga Sweets, nurtured it day and night, made it her all time dream for better future security of Bela. After finding a purpose and dream in her life, she never felt a necessity of a male in her life to dominate it, monopolize it, support it, further though she felt emotional security with her friend and employee, Bipin Bihari an employee at the Durga Sweets. Sabitri has by now found a new meaning in life which can't be just fulfilled or achieved by being someone's beloved or wife.

She has a grand purpose in her life which she finds one day to carry forward the name of her deceased mother, Durga, by inventing a new recipe, unsupported by anyone. She admits:

“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 colour. The smooth, creamy flavour 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...” (Before We Visit the Goddess 32)

Sabitri dies with these words leaving her life jotted down on papers which will be posted by Bipin Bihari to the University of Tara unknown to the fact that they will be lying left in an unopened box and will be read by Tara when she would have been settled with a husband and a son and who would be trying to settle a new bond with her mother, Bela which she could not nurture under her vehement, wayward and unguided youth. Tara feels deeply comforted on reading the letter addressed to her by her grand-mother which makes her feel and realize that ‘in the context of my grandmother's life, mine seems a little less desperate.’ (Before We Visit the Goddess 206)

The story of Sabitri beautifully blends in the story of Tara and Bela that a modern conscious reader hardly realizes that he/she is reading three different stories of three generation enacted in three different time periods and space. No doubt, one story is merging in another giving a lift to second and landing it to third and finally culminating all. Secrets hidden in each story is kept intact which leave the readers spellbound until end of it, i.e., Tara taking Kenneth's voice as another male in Bela's life who finally turned out to be like a son to her mother. In the same way, Bela hated her mother whole life thinking her responsible for her father's and her younger brother Harsha's death as she confesses on reading her mother's letter and sobbing over it:

Even as a child, I was sullen and difficult. I blamed her for my dad's death. And even more for my baby brother's. I felt it was her job to keep him safe. I did not know then that mothers can't necessarily save their children, no matter how much they want to. (Before We Visit the Goddess 206)

If we look at the three narratives carefully, we find that Tara suffers due to the divorce of her parents. She turns out to be a torn, beleaguered youth, playing with her life, career and even future. Before her parents get separated, whenever we meet her, she is a happy child but the misplaced relationship of her parents disturbs her to such an extent that she blocks the number of her father and distances herself from her mother. After consecutive break-ups with her boyfriends, leaving her university, trying her hand at different jobs like governess of Mrs Mehta, driver, etc, catching the habit of stealing, shuffling the jobs if caught red-handed, finally finds a suitable husband like Gary and Dr. Berger, her therapist who also want her to re-define her relationship with her old mother. She knows that it would be harder for her mother than for herself to re start their relationship after a long gap of communication. But still she tries to come out of her misplaced past and wants to save her runaway future.

In the three stories of these three women, we find one common thing that they were betrayed by their male counterparts. Like her grand-mother, Sabitri, Tara also goes through heartbreak. Her boyfriend, Robert whom she loves because "Robert is nothing like my father", she finds with a girl at his apartment during her sudden arrival there with Mrs Mehta. She remembers that her mother, Bela also had never suspected her father in her twenty-one years of marriage. But one fine day, he suddenly declared about his extra-marital relationship at breakfast table when she was serving him a crisp dosa. She took it so casually that she did not understand the plethora after it. She could not believe that it was the same man, Sanjay for whom she deserted her mother back in Kolkata and flew all alone through flight with fake papers just in the hope of true love. Tara remembers: "My dad cheated on my mother...still, the day he was leaving, she fell at his feet and begged him not to go." (Before We Visit the Goddess 68)

Initially Sanjay loved her, pampered her during her pregnancy, created a new world of three persons- Bela, Sanjay and Bishu (Sanjay's close friend). Gradually, Bela found them involving in illegal practices, forging papers, etc. Bela found Bishu as a rival in her love for her husband. Finding Sanjay under complete influence of Bishu, Bela felt insecure. She wanted to bring Sanjay out of Bishu's influence. For that she uses Bishu only to make Sanjay jealous of their growing intimate relationship. She manipulated with Sanjay to such an extent

that Bishu had to leave them due to the suspension from his current job and after that he died within two years.

Sabitri and Bela were contradictory to each other in their temperament. Sabitri could fight with the world for her daughter. Though being unfortunate with her destiny to receive a young widowhood, she did not spend her life over the past. When a neighbouring woman asked her to cry and let it out, she said, “I won’t go mad. I have a daughter to bring up.” (Before We Visit the Goddess 111)

She dedicated all her life to Bela and Durga Sweets. Later her daughter developed unending hatred for Durga Sweets due to her mother’s day and night engagement with it. She even disliked Bipin Bihari because of the closeness with her mother. On other hand, Bela was a brat, stubborn since her childhood. She envied her mother and loved her father, Bijan excessively. During her stay at Assam, only two people formed her world- her father and the magician- “Bela’s magician. Bela’s secret” (Before We Visit the Goddess 42). She does not trust her mother anymore on the subject of magician thinking that if she discloses her secret of magician, he will never return to her.

The scene of magician and Bela is beautifully painted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her style has a perfect blend of reality and fiction. We are suddenly landed on a magical world of supernaturalism with a continuous touch of mundane realities and relations. The objective of magical realism is to bring us fresh presentation of the everyday world we live in. The artist does not hover only on self-analysis and introspection rather she views the world in universal and recognizable images. A magical realist employs fresh and inventive images while maintaining an illusion of reality. Magical realist writers depict the ordinary as miraculous and the miraculous as ordinary. Thus magical realism leaves us with the understanding that the strange world described by the artist is one that real people really live in. It deepens our understanding of the people and the world around us.

Magical realism is an art movement which began during World War I. It is a representation of art with elements of fantasy and its goal is to tap into emotional reservoirs within all of us. It tricks us, and makes us question what is real and what isn’t. Magical realism is the blurring of fact and fantasy. The willing suspension of disbelief is when the audience can accept a certain level of implausibility in order to maintain the flow of the story. Suspension of disbelief becomes important for the story to be accepted and appreciated. In a sense we co-create our reality. And we do that all the time, every day. One day we wake up and we’re in a great mood: the city we live in is a beautiful city, the next day it’s an ugly city. That’s just the way we interpret things. We’re not free necessarily to choose the facts of our life, but there is an element of freedom in how we interpret them. Till the story ends, Bela is maintaining her secret of magician close to her heart. She grows with it and fantasizes it and does not want to come out of her magical world of which once she was a part of.

John W. Scott in his essay, “Storytelling”, put forth a definition of storytelling: “Storytelling is a quintessentially social activity. It requires not only readers or listeners, but other storytellers. Stories are at once the raw material and the cultural product of memory. Their

telling creates a sense of immediacy (even when they are about very old events and actions) and what Kant (in a different context) referred to as “the universal feeling of taking part.” (*History and Theory* 205)

Chitra very beautifully depicts the story of young Tara who was totally dependent on her father who deserted her after his divorce from Bela. After this incident, Tara had no meaning left in her life. “He had made himself the centre of her life, and then he had left” (*Before We Visit the Goddess* 175). After this traumatic incident she herself cut off from her mother as well on the declaration of her father that her mother has already played being unfaithful to him, he had only reacted to her action. This fact of her parents on whom her life was founded, beleaguered her to such an extent that she became unhappy with herself. She refused to accept any moral and financial support from her father just to be independent which she somehow managed to be. Her mother once announced: “Tara, you have no ambition.” After going through betrayal in relationship with Robert and ensuing abortion, she still manages to come out of her tattered past and prove herself as she says: “My mother was wrong. I do have ambitions; they are just not the same as hers. I want to be able to hold on to my job, bland as it is, in the human resources department of my company.....I want to cure myself of the disease hiding inside me like a canker curled up in the heart of a rose.” (*Before We Visit the Goddess* 186)

She went through displaced rage....was most angry with herself after her parents’ divorce. When she needed her mother the most she found her moved on with her own life. She had not been available morally and emotionally for her daughter but when she herself gave birth to her son, Neel, he changed her world. Afterwards she found herself crying for the entangled and misplaced past. She realized that she herself did not try even once to make up for the things which were snatched from her. It was only the effort of her husband, Gary who wanted her to make up with her mother. Thus a right man in her life rectified every mess of her past whereas Sanjay tried to create a gulf between Sabitri and Bela. He totally snatched everything which was glorious in her past from her and wanted to possess her finally to desert her.

Conclusion

Thus we find that these three women go through almost common turmoil in their lives: love, betrayal, purpose and success. Sabitri, Bela and Tara find Bipin Bihari, Kenneth and Gary to make them realize their potential to complete their self. Thus three stories are narrated in a very effective and enchanting manner by the great craftsmanship of Chitra Banerjee who finally emerges to be a guide and sage as depicted in the words of Walter Benjamin: “The Storyteller joins the rank of teachers and the sages.” (*The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai’s Leskov*, 14)

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