

OPINING RELIGION AS AN INNATE INCLINATION THROUGH THE WORK OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract

Culture is considered to be the beliefs, way of life, norms or art of a particular society or civilization. Cultural practices encompass the customs of people which are in conventions based on their tradition. It is a particular group or region consists of the lifestyle of the people in it and the way they generally behave. Acculturation is taking over the cultural practices in recent decades. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an award winning author's novels are one of the best examples of novel with the rudiments of culture, tradition and society. The current study aims to highlight the unique attempt of the author of making her second generation young atheist character Tara experiencing the religious belief in the premise of place of worship. The change in the thought after experiencing religious premises is focused in this current study.

Keywords: Religion, Atheism, Connectivity, Innate feeling.

Abbreviations: BWVG – *Before We Visit the Goddess*

Literature is a manifestation of the cultural, social, and political growth of a nation. In recent decades culture by means of global interpretation has given new dimensions to literature. The vast treasured cultural heritage and spiritual wisdom of India has significantly contributed to the growth and development of the literature. Culture and tradition can be considered as the

rudiments of novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her novels give detailed delineation of the culture, tradition, religion and various norms and practices of her native country and some of the foreign countries like United States of America, and China as well. She explores in her novels the life of Indians for generations both in native land and foreign land. Preserving the culture is the prestige of all countries. Chitra Banerjee's novels are an evidence to prove it.

The author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni not only limned the ancient culture of the countries in her novels with her competence but also the emerging propensity in belief of people. Atheism though falls in ancient period it is at present a taboo. The author exposed the severity of atheism in her novel. Atheism is, in general, an absence of belief in the existence of deities. Atheism proclaims humanity as the absolute source of ethics and values. It permits the individuals to resolve the moral problems themselves without resorting to God. Manoeuvre to this argument Marx and Freud conveyed certitude of liberation, development, and unfettered happiness. French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was less concerned with refuting the existence of God than with instituting that, "man needs ... to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God." (Sartre 24). The author made a different attempt of making the daughter of an atheist experiencing the premise of the temple. She adroitly brought out the innate connectivity of her young character Tara with the rituals of the temple.

In the novel *Before We Visit the Goddess* Tara's father Sanjay Dewan was a communist. Theism though followed by many it can't exist where Communism exist. Thus, Marxism-Leninism, named after Marx and Lenin, founders of Communism, advocates atheism rather than the religious belief. The author thus limned the widespread belief of atheism among the Communist people.

Through the character Tara the author divulged the pertinacious behaviour of a Communist against religion, "My father, who was a Communist in his youth, was dead against it" (BWVG 125). As he considers prayer as a trivial, he never permitted his family members to offer a prayer in temple. He represents the common tendency of an atheist to not to allow their fellow members to worship God. Her mother lost the squabble with him to set up an altar in their home and thus a tiny statue of Goddess was present at their home along with the spices in the kitchen shelf. Since her father was the fulcrum of Tara's existence she was convinced that, "religion was the opium of people" (BWVG 125). She hardly followed the faith of her mother and she never repents for tossing the holy picture at the bottom of suitcase, given by her mother when she left for college hostel.

The author juxtaposed the belief of atheism with the presence of God through Tara. Tara when happened to visit Meenakshi Amman Temple at Texas, which was a recreation of Meenakshi Amman Temple of Madurai, with Dr. Venkatachalapathi, she felt a sense of belonging in the temple. Initially she was wondering the practices of temple, “What was the priest going to do? What was an archana? Did the prayer have a special significance?” (BWVG 127). Dr. Venkatachalapathi gave a brusque refusal and clarified her that worshiping God had shaped his life and he would prefer to stop at temple even for a short time since offering prayers matters than the time spent inside the temple.

The recent demarcation on the deck up style was because of the cultural collaboration happened in India. Women are prohibited from wearing leggings, tights, sleeveless tops and short skirts in temple. Some temples insist that male devotees should be bare bodied above the waist. Tara, a girl in her teens who always preferred rugged attires, had a chance to visit the Meenakshi Temple near Texas. Though she is a daughter of an atheist she questioned her appearance before entering into the temple, “... she pointed to her jeans, to the tight black T-shirt stretched over the bony torso, “Is it okay to come in like this?”” (BWVG 125). Such dress etiquette is followed not only in Indian temples but also in all parts of the world wherever the temple is situated. Tara, despite of being an atheist, she uphold the norms formulated in the temple, “removed my eyebrow ring before entering the temple” (BWVG 126). Dr. Venkatachalapathi offered her his daughter’s piece of cloth, “swaddled myself in a shawl” (BWVG 126) to cover her inappropriate attire.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni described the appearance of the temple in which it has been architected, and the theophany of deities of the Meenakshi Temple in Texas. The author made her description when both Tara and Dr. Venkatachalapathi entered the temple, “pillared hall towards the deities ... goddess, with her husband to her right and her brother to her left. Here are the brother’s consorts. Here are the animals the deities ride” (BWVG 126). She also touched the sense of smell in her novel, and brought the feel of the odour of the temple. She described it as, “... scent. A mix of crushed flowers, incense, and a woodsy odor which I’ll discover is holy ash” (BWVG 125). The premise of the temple was filled with a strange reeks with the overpowering combination of aroma of flowers, sweets and coconut. Incense is used for aesthetic reasons and for aromatherapy. The combination of all these smells creates a divine feel in Tara. Such aroma can only be felt in the place of worship.

Dr. Venkatachalapathi called the priest of Meenakshi Amman Temple of Texas in his native language Tamil. He has a great faith in doing archana along with his prayer in temples. It is a special puja done for God or Goddesses for the sake of an individual by

priests of that temple. It requires the birth star and family lineage of a devotee. To recite mantras the priest requested for birth star to invoke individual blessings.

Dr. Venkatachalapathi gave his details in Tamil:

He called to the priest in Tamil and briskly requested that an archana be performed for Meenakshi Venkatachalapathi. He provided the necessary information and the priest limped off towards the goddess, carrying his bell and his bowl of vermilion powder. (BWVG 127)

The author through her characters delineates the faith of people. They believe doing archana is “for good luck” (BWVG 127). It gives an immense satisfaction for the devotee. Another belief of doing this archana is, “For Blessing, in this life and the next” (BWVG 127), since people believe in reincarnation. They believe that a person’s spirit migrates to a newborn body after their current life. According to them the body dies, but not the soul. To them current karma impacts the future circumstances in this life, and also the future forms and realms of life. Good intent and current action lead to a prosperous future and heavenly aftermath of life.

Tara’s father was an opponent of theism and so he never documented any astrological signs of the members of his family. When the priest asked for the gothram and birth star of Tara to perform special pooja, she was perplexed. Dr. Venkatachalapathi manipulated the situation and replied that, “she came from a family that did not keep track of such things. She probably did not even possess birth chart” (NVS 128). He then managed by saying that she belongs to his community and gothram.

At the end of the temple experience Tara realized the verity in his words and she was, “jubilantly carrying back a handful of squished flowers, an apple, a paper cone of ash, and a Styrofoam container filled with mushy porridge” (NVS 128-129) as holy returns from temple. She felt as if she was hypnotized on the rise and fall of the syllables of chanting of forgiveness prayer. As a daughter of atheist she was wondering about the holy smell of temple premises and the gooey texture of porridge.

The unprecedented attempt of making an atheist experiencing the highness and premise of religious places gives an insight of the cultural practices. Through her second generation young atheist character Tara, the author Divakaruni tries to divulge the fact that the innate feeling and connectivity to their religion cannot be uprooted from a person. The systematic believes and set of practices pursuit the people to live a good healthy life.

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