

Social Learning Through Children's Literature: A Study of *The Conch Bearer* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract - India is prosperous enough in its cultural and traditional realm. Writers have always been inclined to explore these enlightened phenomena to magnify the cultural and social values in their readers. But as the nation is making scientific and technical progress, it is lacking in its cultural, social and moral values. Modern generation is the severe victim of this blind race of development. They are lingering between the tradition and modernity. So there is a dire need to introduce our tradition and culture to young generation to produce ethical values and children's literature has always been preoccupied with this thought. The present novel is also a powerful attempt of the author to inject the moral values, compassion, love, goodness, honesty etc. in youngsters through a story of two children, Anand and Nisha. Abhaydatta, their companion and guide, brings out the importance of the great Indian culture, its values and introduces them to the magical world of the Silver Valley. Anand encounters Surabhanu, the evil force in his journey to return the Conch to its rightful place and emerges out as victorious warrior. Anand's learning from the outer world serves to enhance his understanding of his inner capabilities and encouraging him to become a good human being.

Keywords - Children, literature, culture, social norms, learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English has blossomed as a grand tree with many branches whose seed was sown during the British rule. This tree was under the care of many writers like Sri Aurobindo, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulkraj Anand and many more. The Modern era has produced many talented writers who are not only making their name in India but also getting awards and accolades all over the world. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the modern writers who made her writing as a medium to deal with some modern issues related to women, immigration, Indian experience and joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. She takes her inspiration from history, myths and contemporary affairs. She also writes for children and young adults. The present paper is the study of her novel *The Conch Bearer*. Through this novel she successfully achieved her goal of introducing Indian culture and social norms among her targeted readers i.e. children. We are rich enough in the area of knowledge which is stored in our ancient scriptures like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, and Puranas etc. These storehouses of knowledge are old but also pertinent in present time. Writers have always been inspired from these great sources to enhance the cultural and social values in their readers. But as the nation is making scientific and technical progress, it is lacking in its cultural, social and moral values. Modern generation is the severe victim of this blind race of

development. They are lingering between the tradition and modernity. So there is a dire need to introduce our tradition and culture to young generation to produce ethical values and children's literature has always been preoccupied with this thought. The present novel is also a powerful attempt of the author to inject the moral values, compassion, love, goodness, honesty etc. in children through a story of two children.

The increasing attention paid to child and childhood in present era infused the study of children's literature with enthusiasm and novelty. It has also brought the exciting and innovative aspects of children's literature into prominence along with the beneficial insights from researchers, psychologists, historians, sociologists as well as literary critics. The major concern is on the portrayal of children highlighting their psychological and cultural perspectives to know the children, childhood and changes occurred with the time. In present scenario when cultural and traditional values are fading, it becomes imperative for children to know and learn their values. There is a dire need to develop positive attitudes towards one's own culture and the culture of others for both personal and social development of the children. *The Conch Bearer* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a remarkable experience of childhood with some basic and natural characteristics through the two main children

protagonists. The novel is an adventurous story of their journey full of physical and mental obstacles. The story begins with a twelve year old boy Anand, who is poor and works at a tea-stall to support his mother and sister. Like other children, he also wants to go school and live a normal happy life. But his life got worsen after the departure of his father. He is a boy full of imagination and a staunch believer of magic. He wished, "...that someone would give him a magic apple like the one he had read about and a magic telescope...Then I could make Meera better, and we could see where father was, and if he was all right." (4) But his mother's comment removes the veil of his imagination when she asserts, "Those things happen only in story books, son. Don't you know that by now?" (5)

One of the main preoccupations of children's literature has always been to prepare children to become the next generation by introducing ideas and thoughts about how the society is organized, their role as the part of society and how that society fits into national and worldly perspectives. For this reason, children's literature is always seen to be written into the frame of the norms, values, culture and system of the societies and people around them. At the same time it should offer the literature of contestation, supplying alternative views, opinions and approaches that stimulate inspirations to think in new ways about the life, society and how it could be shaped in better ways. Anand and Nisha both are characterized as the future generation at the road of learning, knowing and shaping the world. The deliberate reading of the novel gives an entire experience of knowing children and many common aspects of childhood. Chitra Banerjee targets her children readers to enjoy and learn through the interesting heroic, and enterprising ventures of Anand. She demonstrates a real world with imaginary characters and situations. Anand improves his ability to think and perform by observing the world around him in a new and different way and considering ways of living other than his own. His faith in magic plays a pivotal role throughout his journey. It is his belief that brings Abhaydatta, an old healer from *the Silver Valley* to Kolkata and bestows him the responsibility to return the magical conch to its rightful home. His journey deals with some timeless truths about human condition from humorous to the tragic.

The child acquires his cultural values, beliefs and problem-solving strategies by interacting and intermixing with more knowledgeable members of society. In this novel Anand and Nisha embark a journey without having any prior experience and knowledge. Anand learns a lot about the harsh realities of life when the responsibility of his mother and younger sister falls on his shoulders. Similarly, Nisha who was separated from her parents when she was three or four. She does not remember anything not even her name. She lives under an ice-cream cart and sweeping the market place. It is their social encounter and meeting with Abhaydatta that open the new ways to learn, think and understand the people and society around them. The novelist also urges to

introduce the great Indian culture by weaving it with the story. Anand does not ask many questions to Abhaydatta but he observes his actions and words when he happily replies all the questions and curiosities of Nisha. He simply contemplates on the situations he faces and tries to learn from his mistakes and his actions. When *the Conch* starts talking with him, he finds an enterprising and dynamic guide. He invigorates Anand towards the critical learning and using his own brain and skills to overcome from difficult situations. At one place Anand angrily asks *the Conch* why he does not speak to him when he needs him the most. *The Conch* replies in his calm voice, "Some things belong to the realm of humans. There, you must ask other humans for help-or, better still, help yourself." (150) Abhaydatta brings out the importance of the great Indian culture and its values throughout their journey and in their conversation. Nisha is younger than Anand but she is an intelligent, witty and quick learner. She manages her life bravely being an orphan girl. Even she has better understanding of people and society than Anand.

Human beings are social creature who make his society and its norms. These norms govern them by making certain boundary lines of dos and don'ts which they have to follow for being a part of that society. But as they are making scientific and technical progress, they are turning more individualistic and urging for complete freedom from society. They find society as the biggest hindrance in the way of their success. They don't hesitate to violate the rules and regulation without considering their significations and consequences. They make their own rules and apply according to their preference and convenience. Surabhanu represents the modern man's greed for power and luxurious life. He wants to use the magical power of the conch for his personal gain not for the welfare of humanity. On the other hand people like Abhaydatta, Anand and Nisha still think for the betterment of people without any personal greed. Divakaruni has portrayed Indian sights, smells and tastes through her tale in fresh and riveting manner and made it different with characters that possess both good and evil. She has explored the fine line between faith and magic to attract the youngsters to learn, know and understand the fundamental social ethics which are universal and must be followed by everyone to make the society a peaceful and blissful place to live. Abhaydatta chooses Anand for a great deed of returning the magical conch to its place on the basis of his inherent goodness, honesty and compassion. He warns him about the presence of the evil force, Surabhanu, who is behind *the Conch* for his own gain and become the most powerful person on the earth. Abhaydatta is running from him to save *the Conch* as he finds himself incapable to fight with his power. Anand starts his journey with Nisha who gives him Abhaydatta's message; "Things are not what they seem." (59) Surabhanu tries to distract him by serving delicious food and control his mind in order to reach *the Conch*. Both the children go through many mental and physical hurdles

throughout their journey of *the Silver Valley*. During their journey Abhaydatta teaches them many things-sometimes giving answers of Nisha's non-stop questions, Anand's mental dilemma, his silence Nisha's curiosity to know everything and sometimes telling them stories to warn them about upcoming dangers. From his journey Anand learns that evil entices and seems powerful and victorious in the beginning but truth emerges out as the ultimate truth winner after facing uncountable hurdles. Anand shares a wonderful bonding with *the Conch* who serves him like a true mentor. Whenever Anand finds himself confused or trapped, *the Conch* comes out as a savior. At one place Anand calls himself fool for not understanding the condition laid by the voice coming from the silver valley. On this *the Conch* berates him in whisper that; "It's a wise fool who knows his own folly." (197) One of the three voices asks him to choose the one virtue out of the three-honesty, loyalty or compassion in order to test him before entering into *the Silver Valley*. After contemplating every aspects of the three virtues Anand deduces:

I can't choose just one. The three virtues are connected- one can't exist fully without the other. Without one, the others lose their flavor. Honesty without compassion is too harsh to do any good. Compassion without loyalty lacks power, so you can't help the people you care for. Loyalty without honesty may make you follow the wrong person, or the wrong cause. (203)

The voices appreciate him for his presence of mind and understanding and happily welcome him into the magical world of *the Silver Valley* but at the condition of leaving his companions outside. For a moment many thoughts bewilders him. He is just one step away from his ling desired world but at the same time he has his two companions without whom he could not reach at this place. At last he listens to his heart and rejects their offer of entering alone by saying;

...but if I turn back on my friends now, what good will I be to anyone? Those virtues we talked about earlier-honesty, loyalty, compassion- I'll have lost all of them, and without them, my powers can't be used for the right causes. They'll be twisted into evil until I become a creature like-like Surabhanu. (210)

Things never remain the same and changes are constant. It is also applicable in the social sphere. Modern generation finds society and its rules suffocating and irrelevant. They defend their take by saying that our ancestors had made these social norms according to their time and understanding of that social milieu. So they rejects them on the basis of being orthodoxical. But at the same time they forget that without rules and order nothing can work. They ignore old rules by making their own rules. And with the passage of time their coming generation would also feel the same about their so called new rules.

Indian civilization is known for its greatness and insightful historical background. It is the land of many enterprising sages, scholars and rulers who have contributed in the construction of a better society. Our ancient scriptures like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Veda, Puranas, and Upanishad etc. all provide the proper conduct that must be followed by all the members of the society. Although all social norms can't pertinent in all time and always require some amendments, addition and elimination according to time, and circumstances. Rules are everywhere, nothing can work without them. Even animals and birds follow certain rules. Modern generation has forgotten its tradition, culture and ethics and it is the biggest reason that we witness many crimes, corruption, anarchy, violence, cruelty etc. in ancient times children were sent to perform their Brahmcharya Ashram in order to gain educational and ethical knowledge. But in today's fast technological time, children spend their most of the time with their books, online studies and gaming etc. and lack in their inner and social development. One thing the modern children still love to do, is to be in the world that is related to themselves whether it is movies, serials or books. Children's literature can be proved an entertaining resource to inculcate social and moral ethics in the coming generation. *The Conch Bearer* is also a venture undertaken by two children in order to furnish its readers with some learning for their social development.

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