

Dimensions of Culture in *Something Barely Remembered*

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Abstract

Something Barely Remembered by Susan Vishwanathan, is a collection of fourteen delicate stories intertwined and juxtaposed to give a novel like image. This research paper endeavors to analyze various aspect of culture embedded in this work. Culture forms an integral part of every society. Culture finds its expression through language, religion, food habits, gender etc. This paper throws light on how these aspects of culture finds its expression in various forms in this work.

KEYWORDS: culture, language, religion, patriarchy

Introduction

Susan Vishwanathan, a renowned sociologist, respected academician and a social anthropologist, through her lyrical prose style has mesmerized the reading public. Her fame rests on her works like *Visiting Moon*, *Phosphorus and Stone* and *Something Barely Remembered*.

Something Barely Remembered is a collection of 14 delicate stories intertwined and juxtaposed to give a novel like image. The stories are separated by time and space but still make a knot elsewhere in the narrative. The novel deals with the life of men and women in a small place in Kerala called Puthenkavu. The work is filled with arrivals and departures. In the first story *Lukose's Church* it speaks about the character Lukose who leaves the place to become a priest. Lukose reminiscences "I would go in apprentice to my fathers brother who now celebrated the Holy Eucharist there" (11) and in the story *Summer and Then the Rain* depicts the motif of arrival. *Summer and Then the Rain* speaks about the character Ivan, who "come home to die"(37). Thus the work has a pattern. The narrative moves forward with rhythmic pattern of arrivals and departures, separations and unions.

Language forms an integral part of every culture. Language is a medium through which culture is preserved and transacted from one generation to the next. In *Something Barely Remembered* language plays a vital role. It helps to bring out the authenticity of a particular culture. The novella passes from Puthenkavu through Munich, Rome and Casablanca. The language of Kerala ie Malayalam is employed in order to bring the authenticity of the situation. The words like "Achen"(3), "Englishkarti"(17), "Ammachi" (21) etc is referred in the work to show that the setting of the short stories is somewhere in Kerala. The places like Puthenkavu, Munnar, Alapuuzha come across through the dialogues of the characters to show that the setting is somewhere in Kerala.

Culture expresses itself through religion. The work starts with *Lukose Church* where the character Lukose leaves home in order to become a priest. The addressing of priests and religion shows the importance of religion in the Kerala scenario. The work show how the priests are respected in the place. It also shows how their advices are taken into consideration by the people. Thus in the *River and Sea*, father George advises Anna when she leaves for Rome with her uncle Job, "Father George, my teacher, looked in

through the glass. He was desperately trying to say something. “Don’t forget your prayers, Anna,” I finally heard, as I lowered the pane. “No, I won’t forget” (22). We can see similar presence of priest in *The Journey of Dispossession* where the priest comes to meet Sarah to enquire why she fainted in the church. The reverence that Kerala scenario shows towards priests is very clearly showed through this event “She sat at the edge of the bed, the priest sat on the large arm chair. His face was thin and grave, large eyed his beard silver in the shadows. “You are not well I hear”(68). In *Water Birds* Lukose Achen advises Mariam “ I mean why don’t you go and live with your grandmother and look after her”(162). So the work showcases a cultural situation where priests and religion is given more importance.

Eating food and its preparation forms a chief motif in this work. Food is an important aspect of every culture. Or in a sense every culture has its own food habits. Right from the first story *Lukose Church* to the last *Water Birds* we can see that food preparation and eating, forms a central motif in most stories. Eating food helps to bring all the characters together and also shows the cultural variation of each setting. Thus through the story the writer brilliantly shows the cultural variations through food habits. In the story *Summer, and Then the Rain* Ivan is told by his sister “I made it just the way you like it”, she said, stirring the tea leaves continuously. He did not reply. “Its Lent, is’nt it? He said looking at what she had cooked for there was no meat or fish”(39). To adapt to a new culture it also means accepting the food habits of the new place. It is clearly evident that one may find it initially difficult to adapt to a foreign food culture. Thus in *Shadows Painted Over* Isak advises Susen “Don’t be mean, Susen fresh fish smells and meat is so bloody and the chickens probably artificially inseminated. All America is eating broccoli”(75). The last short story *Water Birds* also discusses about food. Food habits and food preparation is mentioned through out the work.

Female characters play an important role in this novella. Their dreams, aspirations and defeats make the novella. In this work it is evident that women gaining power and empowerment through their female counterpart. Even though the characters are shown as having life partners they fail to understand their full emotions. The female characters are pictured through every angle. The work showcases the dreams of a little girl through Anna, expectations of a wife in Sarah, concerns of a mother in *Fire Drill* and anxieties of a divorcee in Mariam.

The work boldly portrays the universality of patriarchal culture. Right from Puthenkavu to America we can see the element of male domination. The male superiority becomes evident if we try to read in between the lines and tries to fill the gap. In the story *River and Sea*, Ammachi wants Anna to be under the protection of Job, Amma is anxious of her divorcee daughter Mariam in *Water Birds*. All these events show the universality of patriarchal culture where a woman is considered feeble and docile and should be under the protection of men. The author is in no way supporting the patriarchal culture but she is portraying the naked truth of the universal acceptance of the patriarchal cultural pattern.

Thus the work portrays the reality that the culture changes from one region to another but their core value remains. The work also voices the reality that culture is never static but it is transient. Thus through the fourteen delicate short stories author deals with the subtle details of pain and anguish of human existence.

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