Euphoria: The Characters and Their Knowledge

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Euphoria is a novel based on the life circumstances of the American anthropologist named Margaret Mead. The novel was authored by Lily King and was published in the year 2014. Lily King has tried to shed light on the quest of knowledge of the three anthropologists, which include Margaret Mead described as Nell Stone, along with her two husbands Schuyler Fenwick and Andrew Bankson. The story has been described from the point of view of Andrew Bankson, who was on the verge of death, due to the exhaustion and vagueness of his research work; however, the arrival of the fellow anthropologist provided him the opportunity of clearing his ideas. Acquiring the knowledge, based on the detailed observation and experimentation was the most important motive of the characters of Euphoria, who were not ready to settle just for the superficial knowledge. Epistemology, which is the study of the nature of knowledge, its validity and methods may hold great importance in the life of the characters of Euphoria who strived hard to study the tribal groups in Guinea.

Gaining knowledge was the most important objective of the characters of Euphoria as they moved from the comfort of their homeland to an unknown place, in order to study the tribal people. They were curious to know the culture, traditions, and lifestyle of the tribal people, as well as how they came to know and adopt their culture and traditions. The author included the description in her writing that,

“She tried not to think about the villages they were passing … the tribes she would never know and words she would never hear, the worry that they might right now be passing the one people she was meant to study, a people whose genius she would unlock, and who would unlock hers, a people who had a way of life that made sense to her (p. 8).”

The only purpose of studying the tribal people was not to know their roots; however, Nell Stone was of the view that she would be able to know more about herself by learning other people. It was connected to the concept of epistemology, as she thought that the nature of knowledge, its validity, and methods, did not only uncovered the truths about that particular tribal group but about the whole humanity. King explained in her book that “The meaning of life is the quest to understand the structure and order of the natural world—that was the mantra I was raised on. To deviate from it was suicide (p. 32).” She sheds light on the importance of learning about the structure and order of the natural world in the life of the social scientists, who thought that their lives were purposeless without that one thing. Being continuously involved in the process of exploring the structure of the natural world was the sole purpose of the life of the characters of Euphoria and accounted as knowledge for them (King, 2016).

The characters of Euphoria have shown that the information passed through the words is not the only form of knowledge. Although language is an important medium of transferring the knowledge, observing the tribal people, who had a different language provided the anthropologist with the opportunity of understanding the raw information which was not dependent on words. King described in her novel that

“You don't realize how language actually interferes with communication until you don't have it, how it gets in the way like an over dominant sense. You have to pay much more attention to everything else when you can't understand the words. Once comprehension comes, so much else falls away. You then rely on their words, and words aren't always the most reliable thing (p. 79).”

Understanding the information and knowledge without the use of words provided the opportunity to the anthropologists to concentrate on its empirical meaning, which accounted as knowledge for them. They were able to explore deep meanings, instead of settling for the superficial meaning. The exploration of knowledge and its implication on the life of the tribal people, as well as on the life of the characters of Euphoria provided them the opportunity to enlighten and support each other. They helped each other in their quest of knowledge, sharing new ideas and perspectives towards the structure and order of society and nature which became the source of their professional growth. The author explained in her book that

“Nell and Fen had chased away my thoughts of suicide. But what had they left me with? Fierce desires, a great tide of feeling of which I could make little sense, an ache that seemed to have no name but want. I want. Intransitive. No object. It was the opposite of wanting to die. But it was scarcely more bearable (p. 86).”

The sharing and quest of knowledge was the only thing which was able to save Bankson from his suicidal thoughts. His understanding of the tribal group was making him skeptical and getting a chance to discuss the developments with his colleagues, enabled him to clarify his ideas. So, the quest of knowledge was the main thing which bound the characters of Euphoria (King, 2016).

Gaining the information from the first-hand experience of observing the tribal people, as well as the structure and order of society accounted as knowledge for the characters of Euphoria. They were able to question their own existence as well as learn from the traditions and experiences of the tribal people about their own selves which developed their knowledge about society and humanity.

Reference

King, L. (2016). *Euphoria*. Christian Bourgois.