Book Review: Cutting for Stone

Author Name(s), First M. Last, Omit Titles and Degrees

Institutional Affiliation(s)

Book Review: Cutting for Stone

The novel, *Cutting for Stone* is written by Abraham Verghese who is an Ethiopian born, American author. The author also happens to be a medical doctor and share an equal interest in literature and fictional writings. He is currently teaching as a professor at Stanford University School of Medicine and before this book, he has also written another novel titled, *My Own Country* followed by *The Tennis Partner*. (Abraham Verghese | National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), n.d). This novel is an attempt at retelling the human essence and humanity in general, which can be seen in medical practice since these practices deal with patients and survivors. In the medical field, doctors and paramedical staff view human vulnerabilities and the power of miracles every day. Likewise, they view human life and its importance quite closely. It also describes the universality of human life since this book shares experiences of three settings, America, India and Ethiopia. Humans may have cultural, religious or ethnic differences but the spirit of humanity and value of life serves as a universal phenomenon. The author, Verghese proclaims that he always gets fascinated by the old tales and old rituals, so his book is based on those old retellings of cultural heritage and native past of three different countries over the past five decades.

This book describes the human emotions of affection, love, betrayal and how these sentiments affect human nature and can be felt universally. The very title “Cutting for Stone” is symbolic of the “Hippocratic oath” (Verghese, 2012, p.95) which signifies the birth of twin babies in a hospital located in Addis Ababa, fifty years ago. These twin babies were born in a state that their heads were joined together and their mother died while giving birth to them. They were given birth by an Indian nun and their father was an English surgeon. The plot revolves around the life events of these brothers, Shiva and Marion by the Indian doctors, who were abandoned since their father leaves the country after hearing about the demise of his wife. Both Shiva and Marion spend their time in the suburbs of Madras, India. They are raised by the Indian physicians because they take up the responsibility as their guardians. These twins spend their youth in Ethiopia, where they closely look at the poverty and hunger-stricken circumstances of the local people. Their personalities have different characteristics such as Marion is shy and sweet by nature, whereas, Shiva appears as vocal and an extrovert being. They have to share lodgings with the servants because of the turbulence created after the civil war. The war also collapsed the country at both a political and an ideological level.

These brothers shared a deep bond and they could not be separated for a second, their companionship made them believe that they were not Shiva and Marion, instead, they were “ShivaMarion” (Verghese, 2012, p.353). In their happy lives, there comes a twist and they encounter betrayal for the first time when Shiva gets sexually involved with their housekeeper's daughter, Genet. Marion loves this girl and he considers this as an act of betrayal and slowly goes into depression. Disgusted by Genet’s behavior, Marion seeks escape and travels to America. Genet, establishes herself as a political figure and initiates Ethiopian liberation politics. He becomes a surgeon in America and by fate, meets his father in the hospital. He studies various medical practices, while practicing, Marion comes across various human rights violation practices in Africa under the guise of medical treatments. For instance, forced use of FGC, early pregnancies, ill-trained midwives and unskilled practitioners in poor African regions. His old acquaintance, Genet also becomes a self-imposed victim of this practice as a way of punishing herself for her mother’s suicide attempt. She tells Marion “I am bleeding because the scars…I always bleed with…intercourse. Rosina’s gift to me” (Verghese, 2012, p.330). He again views the human emotions of belongingness and affection with one's family but he cannot erase his memories of betrayal and unrequited love. His relationship with both his father and brother takes many twists and turns as the story unfolds. The author, Abraham Verghese argues that doctors both feel and experience these emotions since they deal with people as messiahs. Similarly, they go through the kindred spirits of love and belongingness because they are humans first and their professional duties cannot account for their emotive needs. Likewise, the diverse characters and setting, reveal human experiences under both the happy and vulnerable state.

The book begins with the poetic verses of Rabindranath Tagore, through this, the author has included diverse literary references as well:

“And because I love this life  
I know I shall love death as well.  
The child cries out when  
From the right breast the mother  
Takes it away, in the very next moment  
To find in the left one  
Its consolation” (Verghese, 2012, pg. 1).

The writer has used various literary techniques in this book, such as bildungsroman, to develop the characters as the plot progresses. The concept of borrowing direct words from the Hindi language is also present in the story, for instance in a dialogue, when the brothers are treated as outcasts by the Ethiopian neighborhood, they say “despite speaking Amharic like a native…I was a ferengi—a foreigner” (Verghese, 2012, p.252). Similarly, the postcolonial essence of identity and cultural assimilation also makes this book, a postcolonial novel. For example, the idea of helping the Ethiopians in fighting for their liberation receives severe backlash “This isn’t your fight.” Of a fellow Ethiopian, he says: “I think he saw me as an expatriate, someone without a stake in this war” (Verghese, 2012, p. 252). The book follows a style of poetic prose and every line invokes the spirit of human sentiments in the reader. The events are told by the third person, omniscient narrator who captures the life events of all characters and depicts their objective portrayal. This shows the literary capabilities, as well as the medical knowledge of the author. He has blended both the areas so well that it often gets hard to tell if the reader is reading medical case histories of literary anecdotes. The meticulous details and highly descriptive use of language, make this novel a remnant of old literary classics with a touch of contemporary fiction. For instance, the details of Marion's first visit to America, captures the details and walk the reader through his experience "freeways looping over one another” and “like tangled tapeworms” (Verghese, 2012, p.358). Moreover, this book carries a cathartic essence for the reader because it carries elements from the past and connects it with future events to answer many assumptions and mysteries (The Common). Apart from the use of multiple literary devices the novel also discusses medical terminologies at length. Since this book is a combination of both literary and medical science inquiry into human life.

*Cutting for Stone* is a beautiful novel that evokes the interest of the reader due to its run on lines and poetic prose writing style. Similarly, the story spans over five decades and discusses the life events of diverse characters belonging to Ethiopia, America, and India. The rich storytelling technique of combining both the past and present elements to form the plot gives this novel a universal and postmodern niche.

References

Abraham Verghese | National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2019, from https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2016/fall/feature/abraham-verghese

Review: Cutting for Stone | The Common. (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2019, from https://www.thecommononline.org/review-cutting-for-stone/

Verghese, Abraham. *Cutting for stone*. Random House India, 2012.