

Myth in the selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is considered to be one of the greatest story teller in the contemporary Indo-American English novelists. She had used various narrative techniques in her writing, which are the unique blend to set her apart from other novelists. The present research paper focuses on the use of myth in her selected novels. She has used different settings in her novels. No novel of Divakaruni is completed without the use of myths. Her protagonists are women in all her novels, through women characters she depicts the deep-rooted culture of Indian tradition.

Keywords: Myth, mythology, mistress, Rituals, narratives

Introduction

Myth is described as stories from the past life, that explains about the gods and the legends of the history. Myths usually tells about natural or historical events. Myth is folklore genre having stories that play a vital role in ruling the society. Myth consists the stories of gods, goddesses and supernatural human beings. Myths are closely linked with religious beliefs endorsed by priests, rulers and extraordinary human beings. People or societies generally believe that these myths and legends belonged from their past history and believed it to be true account of their ancestors. Myth greatly influence their customs and rituals.

According to Cambridge Dictionary:

“A traditional story. esp. One which explains the early history or a cultural belief or practice of a group of people or explains a natural event”

C. S. Lewis has explained the value of myth, saying it has rich significance in the roots of our ancestral life. He says :

“The value of myth is that it takes all the things you know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity”

As per Isaac Asimov views in his book ‘The Foundation Edge’. He is of the view:

“A myth or legend is simply not made up out of a vacuum. Nothing is -- or can be. Somehow there is a kernel of truth behind it, however distorted that might be”

Myths in the novels of Divakaruni

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an extra ordinary story-teller. She has used many narratives in her writings, one of the most important of them is Myth. India is a country full of myths and the stories of legends. Being an Indian she has used myths not as merely stories but as a teacher to teach the value of traditional Indian life. The myths gives strength to face the challenges of life. She has written seven novels and in all her novels she has used myths. Her purpose was to convey the truth behind the mythological stories to prove that the myths are helpful to overcome the personal and social problems of immigrants and native people. All the

protagonists of Chitra exposes the sufferings of immigrants, and they overcome it with the motivating morals of myths. Most myths explain the rituals and customs of society that guides the social and cultural norms to the human beings. The study of mythology should not be considered as an escape from reality, but as a search of deeper understanding of mental condition of human being.

Myths play an important role in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s works. These are part of Indian human life without which we can’t imagine India. The references in her work help the readers to get in touch with traditional and cultural life.

It is Divakaruni’s narrative technique which made her works prominent and separate her from other writers. Myth is included in her unique writing style. In an interview to Preeti Zachariah on April 24, 2013, Chitra said:

“I came from a traditional family ... the world around me was suddenly so different. Immigration was certainly a transformational experience and I tried to explore its intricacies”.

Divakaruni used myth to convey her traditional ideas vividly. Myths represent our understanding about truth and help us in becoming a good human being. The main forms of mythology are- myths, legends and folk tales which provide us the real value of culture. Stories like The princess Of The Snakes in ‘The Sister of My Heart’ provides the morality and strength to the readers. Myths are used as a tools to represent the unpleasant experiences of modern life, which help the novelist to create a framework for female universe. The world of Divakaruni’s myths symbolize the world of feminine world. It is the world in which women extend their hands to other women in place of waiting for the men. She used myths not only to show her roots in India but also to re-evaluate Indian women in the alien surroundings. She is fond of using myths as myths play a vital role in the life and literature of India. There are some selected novels to evaluate on the basis of the Divakaruni’s use of myth.

The Mistress of Spices

Throughout the novel, Tilo, the protagonist represented as the finest example of mythological woman. The woman who spent her whole life for the benefits of others. She sacrificed her own wishes, her love-life and everything for benefit of others. Tilo, with supernatural power of seeing the future of others and heals them with the help of hidden power of the spices, who were settled in Oakland, California. Each chapter of the novel is named after a spice, which has a specific power of healing. Each spice has its own mythological story. San Francisco Chronicle praises Banerjee's first novel:

"The Mistress of Spices is a marvellous combination of myth and romance, social critique and poetry."

The old woman gave her the name 'Tilotama'. Tilo learnt the special powers of controlling spices from her. The different characters suffer from the sense of alienation, cultural crisis, personal problems and feel nostalgic. The novelist described Tilo as:

"Tilo's forehead was flawless like a new opened shapla leaf, nose tipped like the til flower. Mouth curved as the bow of Madan, god of love, lips color of - there are no other words for this crushed red chillies" (M. S. 279)

The first chapter is named as 'Turmeric'. Turmeric mentioned about the mythology of devas and asuras at the time of churning of ocean. Tilo says that the spices tell her their mythological stories, when she holds them in her hands. In her introduction the turmeric says:

"I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between." (M. S. 13)

About the quality of turmeric Tilo says,

"Turmeric, shield for heart's sorrow, an ointment for death, hope for rebirth." (M. S. 14)

Tilo visualized an accident of Haroun. To change the fate or to protect him from accident, Tilo decided to charm kalo jire for Haroun. She told about the spice that it referred in the Hindu mythology as Ketu, one of the planets.

"Kalo jire, I think, just before the vision comes me again, blood and shattered bone and a thin cry like a red thread strangling the night. I must get kalo jire, spice of the dark planet ketu, and protector against the evil eye" (M. S. 30-31)

Tilo understood and solved the problems of the people. She recovered them with the help of special chanting with her spices. Many people visited her shop and shared their problems with her. She put her chanting and prayers in their bags even without their knowledge. Agni, the God of fire and the place of Ramayana's lanka had their own mythological significance, these are also mentioned in the novel. Chilli spoke and sang in a hawk's voice on the bleached hills circling the Sun where nothing grows:

"I lanka was born of Agni, god of fire. I dripped from his fingertips to bring taste to this bland earth" (M. S. 37)

Tilo made her relationship with Raven, a lonely American, when she realized that she need to be loved. At that time also, she was thinking of the welfare of the people. She wanted to serve herself for the people in the alien land. At the end, to live the life of an ordinary woman for her love and desires she decided to live her life as 'Maya' with Raven. She consumed makaradwaj, the most potent spice for changing. After consuming it for three day, she started getting her youth back to give pleasure to Raven, who loved her sincerely.

Sister of my heart

There are the number of incidents in the novel which reflected the mythological connection. One morning, Gopal left from his home and didn't return for three days. When he came back he called the family members to show them the ruby that he brought with him that day. The novelist described the ruby and its beauty which was in Gopal's palm. She explained:

"The ruby must have sparkled like fire and ice together, like a teardrop wept by Jatayu, the mythological dragon-bird" (S. H. 42-43)

The incident when Anju told Sudha about her plan to skip the class for watching the new film that afternoon. Sudha frightened to listen that but Anju called her coward and encouraged her. Sudha could not utter a word thinking:

"What words can I speak with my throat that has turned blue as lord shiva's from the poison I've swallowed" (S. H. 70)

When the parents of Anju and sudha came to know about the episode of skipping the class for watching the movie. They started searching bride groom for them, planning to get them married as soon as they complete their schooling. Sudha felt restless as she had fallen in love with Ashok, she met I the theatre. She was drowned in the dreams thinking:

"Lying in the bed in the midst of my suffocation rage, I think, strangely, of Hercules. At school we have been studying the legends of Greece and Rome" (SH 84)

The parents of Sudha and Anju were very strict in discipline. They didn't allow them to go to school alone. They arranged a car for them to pick and drop to school. Sudha was willing to meet Ashok that was quite impossible in that circumstances. One day the car stopped at the red light, Ashok rushed into the car at the same place. Sudha opened the window as she was already prepared for that. The incident reminded them about the story their Aunt Pishi told during their childhood:

"The great lovers of the myths Shakuntala and Dushyants, Nala and Damayanti, Radha and Krishna, how they would appear to each other in dreams and share their deepest secrets" (S. H. 96)

There are many other examples of myth in the novel. When the marriage of Sudha was fixed with another person in place of her lover Ashok, she was quite normal and even didn't oppose for marriage. Anju was surprised to see that and remembered the story of Rukmini and lord Krishna. On another occasion Sudha searched the falling star in the sky, which is believed to fulfill the wishes of an individual. She was perplexed in her own desires, opposing her own desires she wished for a better married life partner for Anju. In that situation Anju thought of Arjuna and Krishna. Both Anju and Sudha were born and married on the same day. The putting sindur on the forehead in the traditional ways show the mark of a married woman. Sudha found her husband Sunil at fault, still she said that she would protect him as goddess Lakshmi. In their childhood their mothers always disagreed with them, even argued aggressively but after that situation, they would all be together. They used to laugh at that situation and start supporting them:

"They were like the holy trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, keeping out little domestic world on track" (S. H. 152)

When Anju shifted to California Sudha dreamed of Prem, an imaginary son of Anju and Dayita, the unborn daughter of her own. The boy stretched the little hand of her daughter. She woke up suddenly, she was crying but she didn't know why she was crying. She explains her dream:

“Last night I dreamed of Prem. He was as blue as Krishna, and floating like a snowflake in milky light. He stretched out his little hands to us, Dayita and me, and said, ‘come’ ” (S. H. 294)

The Vine of Desire

The Vine of Desire was sequel of the Sister of My Heart. Anju and Sudha were teenagers when their aunt Pishi told them the tales of Nala and Damyanti. In the same manner Sudha told the story of Ram and Sita to her daughter Dayita, besides that she also narrate some other mythological tales of Jamvan and Savitri. Sudha remembers the comments that aunt Pishi said:

“A woman’s beauty can be her wealth, but also her curse” (V. D. 69)

Sudha told the stories to Dayita without knowing whether she was understanding or not. As she was told stories in her childhood, she felt motherly, telling the stories to her daughter. She told her the story of Ramayan, when Sita saw the golden deer in the forest. She compelled her husband to bring the golden deer for her. Ravan stole Sita from her kutiya trickily called her out of ‘Lakshman Rekha’. She said to Ram:

“If you loved me as much, you would catch the deer so I could have it as a pet.. Do not step outside this boundary, he said to Sita”. (V. D. 75)

Once Anju discussed with Sudha about feminism and predicament of woman. She talked about male fantasy and praised a woman named Griselda, saying that she was a copy of many indian heroines like Sita, Damyanti and Savitri. Sudha was attracted towards Anju’s husband, Sunil so that she decided to leave her home in guilt consciousness. She left the home in the search of a job. She left with some things with her among them a toy bear, which was gifted to her daughter by Sunil. Sunil gave it the name Jamvan, the famous fighter bear in Ramayan.

Sudha got a chance to meet Ashok, her lover in California. He made a painting of Anju, she was surprised at the painting that he made in his artist book even without looking at her. When she asked him the reason of not looking at her, he explained that he feared that if he looked at her she might disappear. He said:

“I was afraid – like in the story of Eurydice- that you might disappear”. (V.D. 333)

When Sunil’s mother desired to propitiate the death ceremony of his father. Though Sunil didn’t have any faith in that type of rituals. He got ready for his mother’s satisfaction. The priest told him about the importance of traditional rituals and myths behind that.

Anju was given an assignment to write a piece of work to reinterpret music or any character from epic. She selected Draupadi, the main female character from Mahabharat. She wrote about the difficult life of Draupadi and raised her voice asking feministic questions:

“What right has a man to gamble away his wife as though she were a mere piece of property? (V.D:343)

The Conch Bearer

The conch is considered to be a sacred instrument in Indian mythology, that usually blown on the auspicious occasion or to declare something to be happened. The conch was introduced with us in the novel when Abhaydatta, the master healer showed conch to Anand. Anand is the main character, a twelve years old boy. Abhaydatta told him

about where it was got. There are many examples of myth in the novel The Conch Bearer. The conch itself has a mythological link behind that, as conch is used by mythological characters like Nakul, Sahdev and their fathers, The Ashwani Kumar:

“It came out of an ancient time, of myth, when, it is said, great heroes roamed the earth. These heroes were the sons of gods - and their fathers often gave them magical gifts. Two such heroes were named Nakul and Sahadev. Their fathers, the Ashwini Kumars, who were the physicians of the gods, gave them the conch”. (C.B. 25-26)

In the silver valley, when people started discussing about their next keeper of the conch, as Surabhanu came to them with his youth, sweetness and passion to learn. They said that their current keeper was old and ill. They talked about him and his dark changes with the help of conch, which he learned to invoke and had studied its special qualities. He started talking with some people of brotherhood to rule over the earth with the special powers of the conch. He also said that the earth is overcrowded and full of evil people. If they would rule the earth the Golden age Might come on the earth. The old man sighed:

“Ah, yes, he was clever enough to promise them goodness, and a return of Satya Yug, the first age of truth.” (C. B. 30)

At the time of their enterprise Anand and Nisha faced many difficulties. On their way they saw that somebody had placed a large earthen pitcher of water and a dipper near Lord Ganesha’s Statue. Anand was feeling tired and he went forward to drink water. There was a sign near the water. It is said:

“BEFORE YOU DRINK, TRAVELLER, YOU MUST WASH YOUR HANDS AND OFFER A PRAYER AND A FLOWER TO GANESHA, THE REMOVER OF OBSTACLES. Beside it sat a bowl of marigold, somewhat wilted from the heat” (C.B. 81)

Abhaydatta told Anand that he must rely more on his own intelligence and less on his magical powers, as they were taught in brotherhood. The magic was used for the services of the world, or at the time of risk of survival. The old man advised him not to use the powers which are forbidden by brotherhood. He also warned about the powers of conch, which could be good as well as dangerous for him. He said:

“The conch will attract you. It will tempt you. It has great powers, but you must resist it. Remember, the conch could be as great a danger to you” (C. B. 119)

In the other episode Anand admired the beauty of a tree in Silver Valley. The man on the left side told that was looking at tree is called parijat tree. He explained:

“It is said they were brought from the heavenly garden of Indra, and of all places on Earth, it is only in our valley that they have survived”. (C.B:205).

Queen of Dream

There are few mythical characters in the novel Queen of Dreams such as Madusa and Circe. Rakhi noticed that the manager of Java cafe had an evil glance at her. She informed her father to see the manager but she didn’t explain about her real situation:

“Her thoughts like a lightning flash – if his eyes met hers, she’d turn him into stone, like Medusa, or enchant him, like Circe.” (Q. D.183-184).

The new learners learned about to dream of others. When Mrs. Gupta was there in the cave, She was expertised by Jahanvi. She trained her in the study of dreams out of

history and myths.

“The dream of sage Narad who turns into a monkey, the dream of defeat and death, sent to him in warning – they all come back to Rakhi, though the years had eroded their details. But she remembered the dream of Tunga-dhwaja in the forest”. (Q. D. 189)

The Palace of Illusion

Novel the Palace of Illusion in itself is a complete myth, as it is based on the Indian epic Mahabharata. She attempted the novel in different aspect, as Diwakaruni wrote the novel with a feminine point of view. This novel is the collection of her childhood memories. Any woman having five husbands at the same time is big issue. Chitra narrated the story through the mindset of Draupadi that is Panchaali. Panchaali was passionate about Karna and she had a strong bond with her mother-in-law, Kunti. Chitra had read the Mahabharata in her childhood, so she depicted every character with a minute detail. Panchaali was very much closed to lord Krishna, who was very close to Draupad. Many references are given of lord Krishna in the novel about his birth and difficulties, but it was Krishna, who always defeated every hurdles of his life. The incident of childhood is described in the story.

“How, in infancy, He killed a demoness who tried to poison him with her breast milk and how he lifted up Mount Govardhan to shelter his people from a deluge that would have drowned them”. (P. I. 10)

The centre point of the epic was the kingdom of Hastinapur, for which there was the rivalry between two parties of Kuru dynasty, the Kauravas and Pandavas. There is the reference of Narad, the sage, whose favourite activity was to collect gossips and spread that here and there to create problems among others. Draupadi realized that there must be some trouble, if Narad paid a surprise visit to Yudhishthir. It is described about Narad:

“He had already contributed to the demise of several regimes, and was justly known as Narad Troublemaker. Draupadi wondered what he was planning” (P. I. 156).

Yudhishthir usually took several hours to discuss with his brothers and wife about their misfortune. They explained that sages had told that there were many people who suffered more than them in their lives. In this connection they shared some example of difficulties the people faced. Draupadi said:

“My favorite was the story of Nal and Damayanti, perhaps because of its parallels to our life—parallels than Yudhishthir didn't seem to see”. (P. I. 208)

The sun God appeared in the dream of Karna to warn him. Karna asked the sun god about his father. The god refused to tell that, but told that his mother was queen and his father was a god and he was nobly born. He advised Karna not to relinquish his gold armor and earrings. As without them he could not defeat Arjuna and in that way he could not survive, that was the reason lord Indra wanted his gold armor and earrings. He advised Karna:

“Listen carefully: tomorrow, before Indra speaks, forestall him by saying that you will give him anything but your armor. In this way, you will not break your promise”. (P. I. 240)

There are some references of Ramayana also in the novel, when Draupadi came across an asoka tree, she realized that all the misfortunes of Sita were born under the asoka tree. On the other occasion, Darupadi's sleep was disturbed on

one night. Half waking she dreamed the last dream of the war that she was talking to Krishna. When Krishna opened his mouth to speak, she could see the whole earth, heavens with planets and fiery meteors inside his mouth. The scene after the death of Karna is also a fine example of Indian myths. As Vyasa wrote:

“At the moment when Karna died, the sun plunged behind a cloud so dark that people feared it would not return. Despite the brutality of his death, his face held an enigmatic smile. A divine glow left his body and circled the battlefield as though searching for something before it discarded this world. Some have doubted his words, but I can vouch for their truth”. (P. I.297-298)

This novel depicts the internal feelings of Panchaali at the different stages of life. Her passion and love for Karna was kept secret in her heart till the end.

Conclusion

The most outstanding part of Chitra Banerjee Diwakaruni's narrative techniques are myth, legend and magic realism in her novels. Through these techniques Chitra was able to do justice with the condition of Indian women agony. In most her novels Diwakaruni used a blend of Myth and magic realism besides other techniques. G. Sundari, A researcher in an international journal says:

“Chitra Banerjee Diwakaruni is one of the outstanding voices of the immigrant writers. In most of her novels, psychology, mythology and folklore and interrelated”.

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