Myth and Diaspora in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*

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Abstract- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes use of myth to highlight the spirit of experiences that their characters undergo in most of her novels. The present chapter focuses on the Indian myth and mythology used by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the novels of Sister of My Heart and A Fine Balance. She enriched Diasporic literature through creative ways, structural exactness, recounting myths, appropriate consequence, symbols, implication and outcome in her novels. In India, legends are all further remarkable one and they take for granted a captivating role in the life and literature of the nation. Its principles have enlivened the Hindu society and have formed its mind

INTRODUCTION

Myths, mythology, folk tales are very much a part of Indian culture. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has exemplified the idea of 'home' and penned experiences which reflect not just the locale but also the inherent tradition and culture. This further has paved the way to portray India with her sheer grandeur, tradition, realities, myths and heritage in the most eloquent way. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has composed the novel *Sister of My Heart* in epistolary form conversed alternatively by two major characters Anju and Sudha and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* into two books: "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" and "The Queen of Swords". Reference has been made to snakes and Rani of Jhansi. The way in which the stories are narrated adds to the meaning of the novel and *Sister of My Heart* has been presented the way in which a young girl is exposed to the myths of Savitri and Sita. Sudha's mother makes her cite proverbs such as "*Pati Param Guru*" (SMH 53). But the same novel also shows Sudha who refused to abort her unborn girl child. Pishi's moral support enables Sudha to challenge tradition and she rebukes the mothers and the society at large. As Thornell in her study has mentioned:

> *Mythology and literature can be a useful means of determining the paradigms of a culture. Myths and literature can teach us how another culture views its life events. They provide insights about the religion, customs and rituals of a civilization. They also provide models of societal expectations and demonstrate human behaviour. Myths also teach us about ourselves. (Thornell 57)*

There is more myth and mystery surrounding the fathers of the girls as one part of the story is told by Pishi to Sudha. Sudha's father lured Anju's father to the cave of rubies with a story about how a friend of his had inherited a ruby brought from the cave. Later, towards the end of the novel, Sudha gets to know the incredible truth that the man Singhji who has, for so many years served in their house as the driver is really her father. But in the end neither the myths nor the facts about the male world have any influence on the girls. They do not affect the relationship between them in any way.

The opening words of this novel are: "They say in the old tales..," and stories from Indian mythology punctuate the narrative. Divakaruni dedicates her second novel, *The Vine of Desire*, to "those who told me stories and those to whom I tell them now" (VD 1). It would be hard to enjoy *Sister of My Heart* without an interest in Indian myth, respect for the Hindu belief in the inexorability of an individual's karma or destiny and sympathy for the dilemmas of young women in a traditional society.

A displacement is always a problem posing situation whether forced or self-imposed and often lead to enormous outpouring of creativity in almost every field – art or film or for that matter in writings in a way or other. It is the motivational force that drives the diasporic writers to pen their experiences in the form of literature. Edward Said's reflection on these conditions of exile is noteworthy:

> *I think that if one is an intellectual, one has to exile oneself from what has been given to you, what is customary and to see it from a point of view that looks at it, as if it were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself. That allows for independence –*

> *commitment – but independence and some kind of detachment. (Said 13)*

The diasporic writing is full of feelings of alienation, love for homeland, disperse and dejection, a double identification with original homeland and adopted country, crisis of identity, mythic memory and the protest against discrimination in the adopted country. An autonomous space becomes permanent which non-Diasporas fail to fill. Aizaz in his article, "In Theory: Classes, Nation, Literatures" explains:

> *Diasporic writings are to some extent about the business of finding new Angles to enter reality; the distance, geographical and cultural enables new structures of feeling. The hybridity is subversive. It resists cultural authoritarianism and challenges official truth. (Aizaz 126)*

Diasporic literature helps in understanding various cultures, breaking the barriers between different countries, localizing the global and even spreading universal peace. Diasporic writers live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories. Indian Diasporic writings help in many ways and is a powerful network connecting the entire globe. The history of diasporic Indian writing is as old as the diaspora itself. In fact, the first Indian writing in English is credited to Dean Mahomet, who was born in Patna, India and after working for fifteen years in the Bengal Army of the British East India Company, migrated to "eighteenth century Ireland and then to England" (Kumar xx) in 1784, exclaims Amitava Kumar in his work *Away: The Indian Writer as an Expatriate.*

The Indian protagonist caught in this web of familiar dualism of tradition versus change, mysticism versus materialism, morality versus free will, is a part of Modern India. The choice of the English language to write Indian fiction is central to the whole situation of this East-West clash. As Srinivas Iyengar says:

> *Peculiarities of Indian life and experience and speech...don't easily admit of translation into English terms of special interest therefore is the Indian's creative use of the English language to evoke the genuine currents and nuances of Indian life (Iyengar 45).*

From the beginning, there are hints about how the future of the sisters will evolve. The girls Anju and Sudha narrate the chapters alternately, so that one sees life through the eyes of each of them at eight years old, then at twelve, then as convent school girls escaping to the cinema unchaperoned and finally as married women, one braving the new world and the other in the house of a husband for whom she has affection but not love. All the men in *Sister of My Heart* have fatal flaws, except for Singji, the Chatterjee's faithful, deformed Chauffeur, who stays with the family as their fortunes fail.

The symmetry of the tale, echoing perhaps the duality of much Hindu mythology, is made acceptable by the twists in the plot. Coincidence is waiting behind every door, enabling the girls to expiate the wrongs of their fathers, but the key story is that of the courageous Rani of Jhansi whom Sudha must make her model. The mythic frame work of this novel contributes to the creation of a female universe. The world of the myth is essentially feminine in nature as opposed to the cerebral world which is masculine. And in *Sister of My Heart* there is an attempt to create fresh myths or at least give new interpretations to existing ones. At the same time, Divakaruni rejects conventional myths and creates new ones.

In the first book "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes," both the protagonists attempt to conform to the traditional feminine roles as designed by the male hegemonic society. This is symbolized by the traditional fairy tale of the princess in the palace of snakes waiting for her Prince charming to rescue her. The second book, "The Queen of Swords" is not a traditional fairy tale. When Anju is upset over her miscarriage Sudha tells her this tale and Anju recovers. Then she relates what happened to the three mothers. Pishi, the usual storyteller, asks her about the story she has told Anju. This new myth symbolizes the new feminine world that Divakaruni envisages. It is a world across the rainbow, ironically, a conventional symbol of hope, where women rescue other women and do not wait helplessly for the men.

This change is seen not only in the story that Sudha narrates but also in her attitude and her actions. During their childhood the girls used to enact the fairy tales that Pishi told them. Sudha always played the role of Princess in danger and Anju the Prince who rescued her. When Sudha falls in love with Ashok and the mothers decide to get her married elsewhere, she waits for him to make all the moves and rescue her. But after her marriage to Ramesh, she enters a household ruled by her tyrannical mother-in-law. She puts up with the ill-treatment there for a long time, being still the conventional

Princess of the fairy tale, waiting for her husband, the Prince to rescue her.

Divakaruni makes use of mythological metaphors to accentuate the liveliness of experiences that her characters undergo. She reveals the glorious stories of Rani of Jhansi through the voice of Sudha to Anju at the time when she is depressed because of her miscarriage and helps her to regain her strength. Sudha narrates it also to her daughter Dayita, on their way to America, in a different way. She even reveals the story of Lord Krishna who helped his sister Draupadi in times of need and considers the lost child of Anju to be Lord Krishna in the symbol of a star in the sky - thus leading Dayita to a bright future. Nilanjana S. Roy in an article entitled "Mushy Sister Act" comments:

> *If you're a disciple of Gurumayi, as Divakaruni is and a fan of the kind of New Age literature that believes in "twin souls" and a believer of woman's lib so long as it includes a handsome, faithful, sensitive prince in the storyline, this novel is the perfect present to yourself. Followers of feminism, both the Indian version and the imported kind, will find Divakaruni's arguments as easy to digest and harmless as regurgitated pap. (Roy 28)*

When Sudha is confirmed by tests of carrying a female baby, her mother-in-law tries to force her into an abortion. But to protect her baby, Sudha leaves her husband's home for her parental home in Calcutta. She transforms herself from the Princess in the palace of the snakes to the Queen of swords. Sudha refuses to return to Ramesh; she also turns down the conditional offers of Ashok to marry her. Sudha's journey to America is really the beginning of her journey to a new world of women. In an interview with Arthur J. Pais in *Emory*, Divakaruni confesses:

> *I have been watching how Indian women were forced to do certain things -- as the stories of sacrifice and devotion in the mythology demand from them. And then there are inspiring stories about women like the Rani of Jhansi that offer women refreshing role models -- and the strength to fulfil their own destinies. (7)*

Divakaruni has also brought out the importance of the position of stars for good fortune and this is associated with good luck in Indian tradition. Observing her aunt's obsession with all astrological matters, Anju ironically comments: "Our stars must be really well aligned this month, Aunt Nalini keeps saying. First Sudha's marriage is all set, then I get a proposal and now someone wants to buy the bookstore" (SMH 124).

Myths associated with child - rearing have also been presented in *Sister of My Heart*. These myths incorporate the rituals and vice versa and it also to a great extent reinforces the concreteness of the Hindu social structure. Divakaruni for instance has described the ritual of *Shasthi Puja* and the wait for the *Bidhata Purush*, a ritual which seems to have evolved from old Puranic myths. They say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born as:

> *The Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be. That is why they bathe babies in sandalwood water and wrap them in soft red malmal, colour of luck. That is why they leave sweetmeats by the cradle ... If the child is especially lucky, in the morning it will all be gone". (SMH 3)*

Pishi has her own superstitious beliefs and she is enwrapped in the consciousness of the past. Her belief reflects ironic contradictions inherent within the Hindu socio-cultural situation. Rupinder Kaur in the article, "Poetic Echoes from the Indian Diaspora in North America" examines:

> *Divakaruni thinks of the cultural encounters as an enriching though complicated and difficult experience. She emphasizes that an interaction between cultures can help to tone down and modify the negative elements of both the Indian and American manners and morals. She still upholds certain values and virtues of her Indian way of life. (Kaur 12)*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has documented a crucial issue of arranged marriage and therefore the way how matrimony is related to horoscopes as a final resort. Though Anju and Sudha are educated, nobody has a say in terms of marriage. Gouri Ma guarantees Anju that she is going to marry her off to a person who will let her study any further and so consults astrologers to match horoscopes.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has tried to question the long ceremonies related to wedding that characterize Hindu customs. The time, cash and energy spent on the ceremonies of wedding force the readers to question the requirement of such ostentatious arrangements. complexness and length of the traditional wedding rituals are given altogether its authentic richness. The manner in which Chitra

Banerjee Divakaruni has mirrored the method of wedding and also the mysterious Indian cookery also focuses on the tradition of India that is made rich and varied.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has related the Indian diaspora and the very idea of a diasporic literature is pregnant with two relationships: One, the relationship to its motherland that gives rise to nostalgia and reminiscences; second, the forged relationship with the new land and its people, which gives rise to conflicts and split personalities. Her writings of diaspora most probably dealt with alienation, exile, myth, loneliness, cultural conflicts, sense of rejection by the host community, efforts at assimilation, sprinkled with descriptions of home again which become sometimes romantic outpourings of nostalgia and longing.

CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is witty at the art of narrating stories of Indian woman, tradition, culture and myth from her home in California. She uses myths not only as hold to associate herself with India but also to re-evaluate more reflectively on those surrounding the good, self-effacing and self-sacrificing Indian women. She shows relevant issues that are of the Indian mind set. She has beautifully narrated the renowned ancient Indian epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, myths, folk tales as sources in her novels.

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