



MYTH AND FOLKLORE IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL

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Abstract:

Divakaruni uses mythic and folkloric motifs in her novels to mythopoetically narrativise the struggles that mark the Indo-American diasporic existence and female experience. This is not just a narrative style but a process of giving a cognisable shape to the chaotic matrix of women's existential and experiential predicaments in an alien land. It is figured forth through her mythological or quasi-mythological and folkloric treatments of some existential severe, political and cultural issues. This paper studied Myth and Folklore in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novel.

Key Words: Mythopoetically, Narrativise, Myth and Folklore

Myth and folklore are fundamental aspects of cultural and literary experiences and have been great sources of creativity. Hence, in contemporary times, they have become essential tools in the preservation of both history and culture. History has a past, whereas myth and folklore are ever-present. However successful it may be, writing using myth as a lens through which to see the modern world has unique difficulties.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indo-American author, a notable social activist, poet and teacher of creative writing, was born in Calcutta in July 1956 in a traditional Hindu Bengali family. Divakaruni shifted to the US in 1977 and completed her Master's degree at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. In 1985, she obtained her doctoral degree in English Literature of the Renaissance period from the University of California, Berkeley. While pursuing her study at Berkeley, Divakaruni involved herself in social service activities and cofounded MAITRI, a helpline for South Asian women, which brought her into close contact with many immigrant women. The organisation provided help, counselling and advocacy to South Asian immigrant women who were victims of violence and abuse. It helped them face this "powerful and poignant experience" and assisted them to "act as a bridge linguistically, socially and culturally."

Folklore shapes our social consciousness in clandestine ways. It needs to be noticed that Divakaruni follows the tradition of women storytellers in her novels. In an oral culture, women transmit unofficial cultural texts. Just as in *Nathaboti Anathbot*, Shaoli Mitra impersonated female kathak. In the same way, Divakaruni is also posing as a storyteller. It is not just that she is following the Western 'fantastic' traditions, but instead, she is working as an amalgamator of post-modern magic realistic story-telling strategies and the Indian ways of story-telling, especially those handled by women in oral traditions. Her mythopoesis is not symptomatic of a dominant nationalistic myth-making, and it is embedded in the submerged tradition of female transmitters of oral narratives containing what Ashish Nandy would call "non-historicised pasts." Just as Toru Dutt heavily drew on the mythic and folkloric elements orally transmitted by rural women of Bengal and thus was different from the Bengali Nationalist male intellectuals who tried to hegemonise as the official version of Hindu myths, Divakaruni too involves herself in this marginal tradition of story-telling by women. In this sense, she is upholding, celebrating and embodying a gyno-centric approach to myth and folklore.

The Mistress of Spices the tussle between the inner and outer world in the life of a protagonist, Tilo, who symbolises the journey of a woman from childhood to adulthood, innocence to maturity, and from darkness to light and in the meanwhile, crisscrosses the world of corporeality and magic, surpasses the limits of geographical territories and evolves changes with every experience. Tilo is the penname of Tilottama, "the very essence of til, which bestows life and brings back both health and hope" (TMOS 42), the name symbolic of a myth in the Very early Vedic age. She is the goddess of power, mysticism and knowledge. She is also "the stunning apsara who served in the court of the Rain God Indra. The most graceful of dancers and a crest-jewel among ladies was Tilottama" (TMOS 42). The Old One in the novel recites the myth of Tilottama, who "was condemned to spend seven lifetimes on earth reincarnating as a lowly mortal. Seven lifetimes cut short by death due to old age and sickness, with people avoiding her contorted and leprous limbs out of revulsion" (TMOS 43). Divakaruni works to create a feminine cosmos populated by strong, independent women who band together to face adversity in a male-dominated society without losing their own sense of worth. Tilottama, who is born as Nayan Tara, is "coloured like mud" (TMOS 7) and feels depressed and isolated because society has rejected her:

"... Was it the lonesomeness, the yearning that was becoming furious in a dark girl that had been allowed to explore the hamlet unattended, with no one caring enough to warn her Do not do this" (TMOS 8).

Divakaruni alludes to the realm of magic when she mentions the snakes. "Snakes are the oldest living species, and they are also the ones closest to the earth's mother. They all intertwine and slide across her breast. Since the beginning, I have adored them" (TMOS 21). Feminine snakes represent the unseen reality of this cruel planet that the man living in the waters and under the sea beds cannot see. Tilo's allurements for snakes symbolises the feminine tendency to self-transformation in the sense that just as snakes renew themselves by shedding their skin and have the shape-changing capability, Tilo also renews and adapts herself to a new situation and environment. Tilo is stripped of her youth and has certain norms to follow as "the mistress of the spices", yet her original identity remains intact though suppressed, which is revealed when she says, "This disguise unravelling about her feet like an old snakeskin as I rise, crimson and fresh and glistening with moisture" (TMOS 49). Mohanty reaffirms the significance of the myth of snakes:

Snakes are linked with all fertility deities, including Kali, and this includes Kali. Snakes are considered symbols of rebirth since they constantly shed their skin and replenish themselves, much like how the land regains its fertility annually. Snakes are also emblems of kundalini, the dormant seed of esoteric knowledge that is found coiled inside all creatures and may be awakened via the practice of a variety of Tantric rituals (Mohanty 18).

Tilo is pleaded with by the snakes to remain as their SarpaKanya when they tell her about the wonderful and mystical spice island, but fate has other plans. She moves to explore the secret world beyond the natural world, a feminine world of magic and spices. As soon as she lands on the island, her memories are wiped off, and she wonders, "Who was I? I could not say. Already my name has faded in the rising sun like a star from a night that has passed away" (TMOS 33). With her magical prowess, Tilo reigns over the patriarchal world. Tilo, defying the normative masculine perspective on women, assumes the mystical form of the "mistress" - an old, ugly body - to alleviate the sorrow of many, particularly ladies in the faraway nation who feel alone and abandoned. This mystical, undiscovered distant matriarchal land of spice challenges the conventional patriarchal world. The matriarchal society exists in a magical, mystical region rich with spices. Vraja is characterised as a paradise of ideal natural beauty, and this hallowed realm is an inversion of the Rasa Lila that occurs there, far beyond the cosmos, in the highest domain of the celestial world. The scenery here was so beautiful that even Krishna couldn't resist playing some ethereal tunes on his flute. In Indian culture, the attainment of the Supreme Being is said to be accomplished through asceticism and renunciation. Similarly, the Mistresses strive to settle in the estranged land through rigorous asceticism."

"The island has been there forever, said the snakes, the Old One also. Even we who saw the mountains grow from buds of rocks on the ocean bed, who was there when SamudraPuri, the perfect city, sank in the aftermath of the great flood, do not know their beginning.

And the spices ?

Always. Their aroma is like the long curling notes of the *shehnai*, like the *model* that speeds up the blood with its wild beat, even across an entire ocean.

The island itself, what does it look like? And She?

We have only seen it from far: green slumbering volcano, red sand of beaches, granite outcrops like grey teeth. On nights when the Old One climbs the highest point, she is a pillar of burning. Her hands send the thunder – writing across the sky" (TMOS 23).

On the fabled spice island, the oldest and loveliest lady is known as "The Old One," and she acts as a conduit between the island's ancient history and the modern day. Tilo is the present, while the Old One is the past. Tilo and other novices feel, "Like the waves I had battled all night, a need to belong to her tossed and turned me over and over again" (TMOS 33). Compared to the androcentric mother-daughter connection, this one is significantly different. The Old One's relationship with the females is not predicated on a hierarchy of male power. The girls who are refused to enter into this female universe take away their living:

Because death is more accessible to bear than the ordinary life, cooking and washing clothes and bathing in the women's lake and bearing children who will one day leave you, and all the while remembering her, on whom you had set your heart (TMOS 34).

During their training as Mistresses, the most worthwhile tenets of life's lesson they learn is that of female bonding. As Tilo admits:

The lessons we learned on the island might surprise you, who think our Mistress-lives are full of the exotic, mystery, drama, and danger. Those were there, yes, for the spice power we were learning to bend to our purposes could have destroyed us in a moment if wrongly invoked. However, much of our time was spent in ordinary things, sweeping and stitching and rolling wicks for lamps, gathering wild spinach, roasting chapatis, and braiding each other's hair. We learned to be neat and industrious and to work together, to protect one another from the Old One's anger, her tongue that could lash like lightning. (But thinking back, I grow unsure. Was

it real, that anger or a disguise put on to teach us, fellowship?) Most of all, we learned to feel without words the sorrows of our sisters without words to console them. In this way, our lives were not so different from those of the girls we had left behind in our home villages. Moreover, though then I chafed and considered such work a waste of my time (I would not say I liked all things ordinary and felt I was born for better), now I sometimes wonder if it might not have been the most worthwhile of the skills I learned on the island (TMOS 52).

After being married, Lalita, now known as Mrs. Ahuja, stifled her talent for sewing and her joy in being a strong, self-reliant woman. Because she resents her family for keeping her in the shadows by marrying an older guy, her husband assaults her. She was very despondent and spent the whole trip to America in "quiet and tears, silence and tears" (TMOS 102). Being illiterate prevents her from going back to India to be with her family; a woman has no right to live anywhere except in her husband's house; "At least with him I had honour" - her lips curve slightly at the word - "since I was a wife" (TMOS 102). Despite Ahuja's insistence that he is a guy who can quite well take care of his wife, he has forbidden her to leave the house, send or receive mail, or look for work. She is only allowed to go to the spice shop. She fears both death and the end of her life without a kid. Women's solidarity and empathy drive Tilo as she listens to Lalita's suffering, rubs her arm to console her, and gives Lalita the strength to stand up to her abusive husband "Never forget this, daughter, no matter what happens. Your informing me was completely within the rules. No guy has the right to abuse you physically or emotionally, whether he is your spouse or not" (TMOS 105). Both the spices and a copy of *India Currents* are on sale. Tilo's magazine served as inspiration for Lalita, and with the helpline's volunteers by her side, she left her husband's house. Introspection led her to the conclusion that "she deserved respect, happiness" (TMOS 272). She now has trust in herself rather than in God or organised religion, and she is filled with confidence and self-esteem. "I don't feel like praying. Whom should I beseech for a blessing? Ram, who cast Sita into the wilderness when she was pregnant out of fear of what others might think. It's not only us, even our gods treat their women like trash" (TMOS 272). Tilo, a fictional representation of Divakaruni, is a support system for battered women like Lalita. MAITRI.

Tilo- a young lady cloaked in the body of an old woman, who is the mistress of spices and is forbidden by the First Mother to look into the mirror, is reconciled with her lack of beauty, "loose lapped skin" (TMOS 59), "twisted bones" (TMOS 59), and "misshapen hands" (TMOS 59) till Raven makes an entry in her life. Interestingly Raven could get the impression of her beauty under her ugly cloak, and she confesses, "that pleased look in his eyes, as if he had peeled back my skin to see what was underneath. He takes my hand, and his lips are both hard and soft against my surprised cheek" (TMOS 191). He brings her some lovely dresses and insists she wears them "gossamer and spiderweb spangled like dew. When I lift it is long and loose to my feet and white as the first dawn. The loveliest dress I have seen" (TMOS 191). Immediately she points out she is not good-looking, and he replies reassuringly, "This body, I know it is not the real you" (TMOS 192).

Conclusion:

In her works, Divakaruni employs mythological and folklore tropes to mythopoetically narrate the hardships of Indo-Americans' life in the diaspora and the feminine experience. This is not merely a narrative style but a process of providing a recognisable structure to the fundamentally disordered matrix of women's existential and experiential predicaments while living in a foreign country. For a woman writer who has experienced diaspora, the "foreign country" is not just the new geo-cultural location with which she must come to terms but, perhaps more importantly, the realm of patriarchy itself. The diasporic situation and the existential alienation caused by patriarchy become integrated into her feminist diasporic consciousness, which is figured forth through her mythological or quasi-mythological and folkloric treatments of some existential severe, political, and cultural issues.

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