TREATMENT OF MYTHS IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSION AND THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS

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Abstract

Knowing and comprehending the implications of mythological tales, symbols, and themes in diverse culture contexts are integral parts of treating myth. It includes research into mythology as a psychological and symbolic language, a cultural and historical artefact, and a source of individual and societal meaning-making. Using diverse analytical techniques and tools to the study of myths includes using comparative mythology, psychoanalysis, archetypal theory, and literary criticism. The study of myth ultimately aims to increase our comprehension of the human predicament, our relationship to the outside world, and our search for transcendence and meaning.This study on 'treatment of myth in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'the forest of enchantments' and 'the palace of illusion' aims to articulate how the myths and magic of the Hindu epics have been kept vigorous through the two prominent works of an effervescent author of the decade, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The article also aims to analyse the combination of modernity infused in mythology which takes the versatile form of fiction.

Key words: Treatment, myth, illusion, enchantments

INTRODUCTION

Indian mythology is a rich tapestry of stories, gods and goddesses that have been passed down the centuries. These myths have played a significant role in shaping Indian culture and continue to be an integral part of Indian society today. However, the interpretation of these myths have evolved over time. While, the concept of mythology dates back to centuries down the ages, the induction of postmodernity in this genre is brilliantly outshining. The two novels have outperformed in the genre of mythology fiction humanifying and incarnating the divines. We have seen humanification of mythical characters both in Greek and in Indian texts. One of the prominent example from greek mythology is Medusa. In Greek mythology, Medusa was a terrifying creature with snakes and hair whose gaze could turn men to stone. However, in modern retellings, she is often portrayed as a sympathetic figure who was transformed into a monster against her will. Another examples in literature is the reinterpretation of Prometheus. Prometheus in Greek mythology was a bearer of intelligence and knowledge while Shelley's interpretation of Prometheus empowers him as a liberator of humanity and an ideal of the enlightenment. The study of myths or the treatment of myths in this manner is significant as myths are codes signifying the human reality similarly as linguistic codes used in several writing or texts. Human association with the divine is one exquisite topic. While the concept of authenticity is a recently growing topic in context of its relevance to the original existing texts, the implication of myths reappears several times through dreams and flashbacks to give the texts appropriate touch proving the research to its utmost extent. Mythologies dates back to an era which only exists through texts and personal experiences. Thus, mythification continues to happen through texts. Sita or Draupadi was not known to human but reinterpreting these characters labels them new women and it continues adding to the mythification culture.

Mythologies and sacred texts are the backbone of Indian culture. When everything else is equal, protecting culture takes the forefront. The works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are sheer testament to this. She eventually happens to be the pioneer of mythological fiction. As myths have played a significant role in world literature, it has passed through various stages of explanations and interpretations. As Devdutt Pattanaik says "Myth is somebody's truth, it is not fiction, nobody's truth. It is somebody's truth." The myth parables and short stories that shape and define our society provide countless opportunities for dramatists and playwrights to present the social reality of the time. One of the reasons that amplified the popularity of this genre to mass readers is the familiar yet compelling stories, the stories that passed down to them through word-of-mouth was now available in a plainer manner and were embedded with great creativity to the original epics. In India, stories were all around us through myths and parables. Indubitably, most of us are familiar with the broad outline of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Therefore it is not surprising that readers like to read mythological fiction which is based on these stories. After-all it is the default setting of our childhood, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. We ingested these tales consciously or unconsciously, whether it was during routine celebrations at home or an impromptu story time by our grand parents or relatives. Everytime there is a family gathering there always was stories come up to us that was mythology driven. Ofcourse there is no one universal truth but a good book always tries to show the most acknowledged one. About Sita's character portrayed in 'The Forest of Enchantments' she says.

"She deals with immense difficulties with elegance and strength that is the message I want me and women today to have from Sita's character so that when we are telling our young women be like Sita this is the Sita I want". Through this novel she has proved that the fire test Sita takes was absolutely her own call and that do finds a mention in Valmiki's Ramayan.

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

It is not everyday we come across an author who sets out to show us the world through the lens of a woman; Chita Banerjee does that for us. An India-born American author she has forayed into multiple genres, including magical realism, myth, realistic fiction, historical fiction and fantasy. She is an award-winning author with 21 published books for adult and children. Her works have been transformed into a variety of media, including operas, plays and films and have appeared in 30different language. In addition to teaching creative writing at the University of Houston, Divakaruni has won numerous honour including the American Book Award and PEN Josephine Miles Award. Together with her literary accomplishments, she also works with groups like Pratham, Daya and Maitre as an advocate for domestic abuse awareness and education. Her sheer inspiration from the epics include Valmiki's Ramayan, Adbhuta Ramayana. Kamba Ramayana and her most reviewed one happens to be Bengali Krittibasi Ramayana from 15th century.

Her two great retellings 'The Palace of Illusions' , the story of Panchali written from a women's glass and 'The Forest of Enchantments', which Divakaruni famously calls 'Sitayan' has brought her immense reputation. She says "It is crucial for me to allow a woman to tell her own story". She has dealt and managed to stick to the epics narrative to its greatest extent. Simply switching the narratives has made her writer of the decade.

THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

The Palace of Illusion is a retelling of the great Hindu epic Mahabharata written in first person narration from Panchaali's point of view. This project taken up by the writer is taken from a feminist point of view. It is entirely feminist reading of the epic. It is noteworthy that Divakaruni was able to create a fascinating protagonist for her account of the Mahabharata in the current era. The modernization of the original story is appropriate because it has done a good job of honouring the female protagonist the author created. Divakaruni presents a very firm responsibility for the character portrayal of Panchaali. In author's note she writes:

I made a promise to myself all those years ago. If I ever become a writer, I thought, I will recreate the story of the Mahabharata, I will recreate the story of the Mahabharata, I will place a woman in the forefront of the action. I will uncover the story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. She will narrate the entire story, colouring it with her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs, her heartbreaks and achievements, her strengths and her faults, and the unique, timeless way in which she understands her world and her place in it. From the beginning, I knew who this woman would be. Panchaali. (*xv*)

Divakaruni's character is a strong-willed woman with a rebellious streak. She can't live a happy life if the men in her life control her. Despite her brother's insistence that she focuses on feminine interests, she is determined to learn what a king is supposed to know. As a result, she learns war skills and political lessons that men were only supposed to learn at the time. She has the ability to choose who she wants to marry. She has strongly defended the eminent writer's and theorists. Yudhishtira describes Panchali as "the goddess Lakshmi herself in stature, grace, and complexion; eyes like lotus petals; a woman who is an ideal wife to guide, serve, and sustain a man at all times"(260) in R.K.Narayan's *The Indian Epics Retold*. Stands in stark contrast to the above stratified notions, Banerjee has offered an authoritative opinion to rationalise the importance of women in her epic. Her female character despises being the woman society estimates her to be.

> I was given lessons in singing, dancing, and playing music. (The lessons were painful, both for my teachers and me, for I was not musically inclined, nor deft on my feet.) I was taught to draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival. (Mt paintings were blotchy, and my designs full of improvisations that my teachers frowned at.) I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me (29).

The novel's narrator is just not ones everyday person. Panchaali (Draupadi) is the fire born princess. Divakaruni's character throughout her narrative is neither servile nor subordinate, but rather self reliant and keen on making her own decisions. The female protagonist in the novel advocates for her autonomy and rights. This project seeks to delve underneath the the predominantly masculine viewpoints on women's representation in literary texts. In comparison to a general chauvinistic concept of assessment of female characters in texts in general, a feminist literary interpretation of the novel has been quite scant. This task aims to close that disparity. Divakaruni has presented Draupadi as a strong character. Notwithstanding of being occupied in a patriarchal society, she is heroic and can present herself in a strong role. Draupadi is capable of staying bold in her choices and actions despite experiencing challenges and detriments in her life and being subjugated. Knowing the story of her birth from Dhai ma, her resistance to accepting her name 'Draupadi' resonates her valour in one of her monologue in the novel:

> Dhri's name fell within the bounds of acceptability— though if I were his parent I might have picked a more cheerful appellation, like celestial Victor, or Light of the Universe. But Daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history? I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice. But in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name. (5)

Also her bold and determined self is reflected when lessons were given by tutor. She always came up with strong come backs which would upset him but her protest and disparagement at his face is portrayed as a battle of her existence on behalf of all women. On her tutor's declaration "…..for, it is not fitting that a celibate should think too much on the ways of women, who are the path to ruin…"(24) she presets strong disapproval

right on to his face. Her denial to prevailing patriarchy is seen as an absolute resentment despite knowing that she might be punished if her father comes to know about any of her behaviours. When the tutor shots a comment on her through Dhri " Prince, I have recalled one rule of conduct which you may tell your sister: A kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, and sons. If they should be called to wars, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfil a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield."(25-26); she utters a monologue where she speaks of better ideas than her tutor:

> I thought of the husbands and sons that everyone assumed I would have someday. The husband I couldn't visualize, but the sons I imagined as miniature versions of Dhri, with the same straight, serious eyebrows. I promised myself I'd never pray for their deaths, I'd teach them instead, to be survivors. And why was a battle necessary at all? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men? I'd teach them to search for those.(26)

Lois Tyson in his work *Critical Theory Today* says " From a feminist perspective when we interpret text or anything else, the way to deal with our subjectivity is not to try to avoid it but to be aware of it as possible, to include it in our interpretation as fully as possible, so that other will be able to take it into our account when evaluation our viewpoint."(95).

Divakaruni's character is much feminist in her voice and act. Panchaali is a strong and independent character who fights alongside the males for her freedom throughout. To affirm her individuality and self-esteem, she fights and does her best to come forward with. Despite losing the dice game to his opponent Duryodhan and being sexually harassed in the King's court, Yudhisthira does not give up hope. Rather, she makes a vow to never tie her hair again until she has dipped her hair in the blood of her opponents. It was a challenge for the male-dominated society, where women were stereotyped as weak characters. She is able to demonstrate that she is incredibly brave and competent of exacting vengeance on the perpetrators. She was not the type to let things slip through her fingers. Instead, she became the catalyst for the Pandava brothers to settle their family feuds. Women are desired to be sentimental and sympathetic, but Draupadi is portrayed as a vengeful woman. Women who were not expected to be involved in war have become the cause of war. Not only is Draupadi given the cause, but she is also given the 'special vision' of seeing crucial components of the Great War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Even in the last paragraph of the novel Panchaali's belief echoes proving her heroic name and she speaks her flaws inhesitently

> I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—- but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali. (360)

THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni yet again after ten years of gap after *The Palace of Illusion* rewrote another epic. Instead of reiterating the Ramayana, the much melodic debacle of Rama's glory and gallantry, she. Chose to write the *Sitayan,* the incredible story of Sita. The Forest of Enchantments has indeed been outlined as "a sita's version of Ramayana" and has been designated one of the most memorable books of 2019. Divakaruni, says her novel about Sita has been the work for nearly ten years, following the publication of her novel about the Mahabharat, *The Palace of Illusions.* She claims that it was the longest she had ever spent 'obsessing over a book,' and that she ended up working the toughest on these two novels. Ramanayna is perhaps the only Hindu epic that is passed down to us ever since our childhood days through words of mouth. Divakaruni found it really challenging to deliver a Sita's version of this epic. The writer says even she wasn't sure of the character portrayal of Sita but she shows a firm believe of it when she writes " But I couldn't give up on her either. Sita's story haunted me. Because it was the first stories I was told, and because I sensed there was a disconnect between the truth of Sita was more than what we took her to be." She speaks with great diligence what she concludes of Sita from the epics she researched on, those includes Valmiki Ramayan, Adbhuta Ramayan, Kamba Ramayan and most read happens to be The Krittibasi Ramayan from the fifteenth century. The three points she concludes on reading these epics were:

> One: Sita may be the incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi but, having taken on a mortal body, she is human, too, with human failings. As is Ram.

> Two: Sita's choices and reactions stem from courage, though often it is a quite courage, easy to mistake for meekness. It is the courage of endurance, of moving forward in spite of obstacles, of never giving in. It is the courage that has been reflected for centuries in the lives of women.

> Three: The story of Sita and Ram is one of the greatest and most tragic love stories— not just in our Indian culture but in the World. (ix)

Having said that she delivers a brief of this work:

> I'm going to write the story of Sita, I said, I've always been fascinated by the Ramayan. Just like Panchaali, my Sita (yes, with the presumptuous intimacy of authors, I thought of her as mine) will tell her own tale. She'll fill in the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories and defeats. She'll tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directed the course of her life. What she believed in. What interested and moved her. How she felt when faced with the deepest of tragedies. And what gave her the ability to overcome them. (vii)

Divakaruni's treatment of myth in the novel speaks volumes, she has painted Sita as character existing in the era we are reading this mythology fiction. When Sita seeks permission to write a story of her own from sage Vyasa and sits to write her story what she sees and explains is quite significant she says:

I unplugged the inkpot and was startled to see the colour the sage had chose for me. Red. But of course. How else could I write my story expect in the colour of mensuration and childbirth, the colour of the marriage mark that changes women's lives, the colour of the flowers of the Ashoka tree under which I had spent my years of captivity in the palace of the demon king? (3-4)

The rendition of Sita's story is a progression of the classic version but varies in aesthetic. Valmiki's Sita was enveloped with piety and was lauded as a deity of penance, but Divakaruni's Sita altogether wears a different being who succumbs to profound hesitation and occasional burst of dejection and that's how society today envisions there favourite character if they ever existed in human form. While saying this we do have example of Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* ,where he shows us that Lord Shiva was a human and he exists among us individuals. Thereby to a great extent Divakaruni's Sita appears more endearing in this new world of fourth wave of Feminism. The subject of male privilege against women liberation is pronounced in Divakaruni's demonstration of Sita's character. Sita's ultimate refusal to Ram's invitation to return to Ayodhya after taking the fire test represents the pinnacle of her independent thought, wherein she does not compromise in refusing to the request of the man whom her heart yarns for. Thus, the final display of Sita's part is honourable. Her tragic ending ends with an intimate one. She says:

O king of Ayodhya you know I'm innocent. And yet. Unfairly, you're asking me to step into the fire. You offer me a tempting prize indeed— to live in happiness with you my children. But I must refuse. Because if I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren't guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. I can't do that to them. (336-337)

CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion* and *The Forest of Enchantments* seems to have received the treatment of myth infused with modernisation of character that shows an appeasing characteristics. She has given feminist angles to various mythological characters through her novels. Association of humans with the divine is exploited to make case of mythification in terms of mythical characters. She has operated on mythological figures and have rightly codified social reality in the form of socio-cultural aspects of the society by reinterpreting the divines thereby these women fits perfectly to historicity of texts and yet outperforms as women coexisting well with fourth wave feminism who contributes to the social stratification of traditionally marginalised groups.

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