



Mythological Image Of Women : A Critical Study Of The Select Novels Of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Anshu Kumari¹, Research Scholar, LNMU Darbhanga, Dr. A.K Bachchan², Professor and Dean,
faculty of Humanities, LNMU Darbhanga, Bihar.

Abstract :

India is a land of myth. Myth has included many cultures, communities and the ways of living life. Myths are tales that are told with imaginative thought and reveal the nature of the universe. Indian English literature is filled with stories taken from the *Upanishads*, the *Vedas* and the *Epics*. Myths teach us the way of living, and values related to culture and tradition. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an amazing writer whose writings are based on the ideas of myth, magic, culture and tradition. In her novels she has used myth as a tool to show the truth behind the mythological stories and wants to prove how myth helps the immigrants to solve their problems of life. *Tilo*, *Anju*, *Sudha*, *Draupadi* are the characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Through these characters she exposes the sufferings of women and how they face and handle the problems with the help of myth. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represents the mythological image of the characters in her novels. By making the female characters powerful, independent and obstinate, she reinvented, rewrote and redefined them. Present article explores the mythological image of women. It also analyses the fact that myths act as a moral instructor who directs human being to live an ideal life. It gives a new interpretation of the voices of women as depicted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Keywords : Mythological Image, Myth, Moral Instructor, Epic, Culture.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific writer in the field of Indian English literature. She was born in 1956 in Kolkata, India. She received her Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the co-founder and former president of *Maitri*, a helpline for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. She lives in Texas where she is the McDavid Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has written various novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), *The last Queen* (2021) and *Independence* (2023). The major themes of her novels are identity, alienation, marital problems, feminism, rootlessness, cultural crisis and myth.

Myths are traditional stories that are created within cultures in order to give explanation. It is a kind of narrative story which explains how the world came to be in its present form. The word myth comes from the Greek word *mythos*, which means narrative, speech, myth, fiction and plot. Mythology is collection of myths. According to Cambridge Dictionary, “An ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts” (2019). Myth is a kind of communication that shows the relationship between human being and society. It is a kind of symbolic representation of tales. Myth explains the idea of life after death and life after birth. It makes an understanding between right and wrong. To preserve India’s memories, beliefs, civilization and culture, Indian English writers have included myths into their writings. In an interview to The Times of India. Divakaruni’s says:

“I’ve always interested in the lives of women but I think I’m more inclined to push the envelop now, having my main characters grapple with situations our community shies away from-broken marriages, alcoholism, gay issues, abortion, and yet I’m still interested in age-old themes such as mother-daughter relationship and myth, I love myth, from *Mistress of Spices* to *Palace of Illusions*, mythic tales are a driving force” (2017).

The novel *The Mistress of Spices*(1997) is about the magical powers of the spices. The chapterisation has been done in the name of spices. Each chapter represents the healing power of a particular spice and mythological story related to it. The problems of immigrants are solved through these spices. *Tilo* is the protagonist of the novel who was born with special powers. She can foresee the future of others. These supernatural powers make her famous and her fame is heard by the pirates. The pirates take her with them. *Tilo* holds a prominent place in all her ventures.

When *Tilo* becomes the Mistress of Spices under the supervision of “The first Mother” (Divakaruni,5), she is named *Tilottama*. The first mother gives training to young girls about the healing power of spices to help the people. After learning the special powers of spices, *Tilo* runs a store of spice in *Oakland, California*. *Tilo* hears the problems of the people and helps them. They are *Ahuja’s* wife, *Haroun*, the taxi driver, *Jagjit*, *Geeta*, *Raven* and many more. She uses her power to recover them from problems. She instructs people and directs them in the right path. In the end of the novel, she decides to live her life as ‘*Maya*’, the name given by *Raven*. She falls in love with *Raven* and wants to live with him. In that time too, She hears the problems of people and wants to solve them. Each spice has the healing power. *Turmeric* says, “I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the 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” (Divakaruni,13). *Fenugreek* says, “I am fresh as river wind to the tongue, planting desire in a plot turned barren” (Divakaruni, 47). Thus each spice has its own special quality and the mythological story. In an interview, Divakaruni says:

“In Indian folk belief, spices are used for more than flavourings. They have magical powers all their own, and they provide remedies for physical maladies as well as cures for spiritual ills. You have to be careful how you use the spices, since their misuse can be dangerous. If you don’t follow their rules, the spices can destroy you. In the novel, I made the rules into laws from the divine realm, *Tilo* could not transgress without serious consequences” (1997).

In the novel, *Tilo* represents the mythological image of a woman. She devotes her entire life to others. She sacrifices her youth, her beauty and her love for others. Spices instruct her and helps in making an understanding between right and wrong.

The Palace of Illusions (2008) is the retelling of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* from *Draupadi’s* point of view. The story is narrated by *Panchaali*. The novel covers the whole life of *Panchaali* from her birth, her rejected childhood, her marriage with the *Pandavas*, her friendship with *Krishna*, her love for *karna* and her journey as a women. In the epic *Mahabharata*, *Panchaali* is represented as a weak women. She could not protect her self-respect when she was taken in half naked condition in sabha. Divakarui represented her as a strong woman in her novel. She says:

“I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of men’s exploits. Better still, I could have one of them tell it herself, with her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her hearts breaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her palace in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali ? it is her life, her voice, her questions and her vision, that I invite you into the Palace of Illusions” (Author’s note, P XV).

The novel starts with *Draupadi*’s birth from fire with her brother *Dhristadyumna*. She is the unexpected one. God of fire gives her to King *Drupad* with a prophecy that “She will change the course of history” (5). The story of her birth was told by *Dhai Maa*.

In the novel *Draupadi*’s life has been presented as a series of choices made by her. Her first impact was on education. Her education is neglected by her father and tutor. She could not understand why it was done. Her brother *Dhristradyumna* helps her to understand the duty of a *Kshatriya* woman. He says:

“A Kshatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfill heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield”(Divakaruni, 26).

On this statement, *Panchaali* replies_ “And who decides that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men? A man, I would wager ! Myself. I plan on doing other things with my life” (Divakaruni, 26).

Swayamwara has been arranged for *Draupadi*’s marriage, but it had already been decided that she has to marry with *Arjuna*, a warrior. She got married to *Arjuna*. When *Kunti* unintentionally said that all five of you share what you have brought. To keep the words of *Kunti*, *Draupadi* had to marry all the five *Pandavas*. She says:

“To keep me chaste and foster harmony in the Pandava household, Vyasa designed a special code of marital conduct for us. I would be wife to each brother a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively. During that year, the other brothers were to keep their eyes lowered when speaking to me. (Better if they didn’t speak at all.) They were not to touch me, not even the tips of the fingers. (...) Each time I went to a new brother, I’d be a virgin again” (Divakaruni, 119-120).

When *Draupadi* was gambled away by her husbands, she protests and says, “I’m a queen. Daughter of *Drupad*, Sister of *Dhristadyumna*. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can’t be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl” (Diakaruni, 190). *Draupadi* cursed *Kauravas* for her humiliation in the court and declared the greatest war. After this incident her way of thinking was changed. She became strong. She realises:

“All this time I’d believed in my power over my husbands. I’d believed that because they loved me they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me-as much perhaps as any man can love-there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. (...) I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, It was as much from them as from our enemies” (Divakaruni, 194-195).

Divakaruni presents *Panchaali* as a revolutionary woman. She firmly rejects the evils of society. She faces challenges and struggles throughout her life. She never gives up. *The Palace of Illusions* discovers the hidden thoughts of her, and her attitudes towards life. *Divakaruni* successfully represents the mythological image of *Draupadi* with modern perspectives.

The epic *Mahabhart*a is full of moral teachings. These moral teachings are useful to live a perfect life. *Panchaali*’s thoughts are revolutionary which give moral instructions throughout the novel. All aspects of human life has been presented in the novel. Nothing is left untouched.

Conclusion :

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a great Indian-American author. Her novels are based on myth, racial issues, identity crisis, immigration and alienation. Through her novels, she explores and preserves her culture and tradition. Her novels are filled with moral teachings intended to help people. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses myth in all of her novels to show how myth is intertwined with the characters's lives. She uses myth as a vehicle to give life lessons. Myth acts as a moral instructor in her novels. Divakaruni always gives voices of female characters. Women and their problems are at the centre of her novels. She explains the role of women in the lives of men and demonstrates how women should be cherished and appreciated. She fills courage and determination in her female protagonists. Her characters are struggling to fulfill their dreams and desires. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells the story of the epic *Mahabharata* from *Draupadi's* perspectives to show her courage and determination, her place in society her thoughts towards life. *Tilo* is the protagonist of *The Mistress of Spices*. In this novel, Divakaruni depicts the supernatural powers of *Tilottama* and shows the mythological image of her. She is the Mistress of Spices who uses her power to heal the problems of people. Spices Play an important role in her life. Spices act as a guide for her throughout the novel.

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