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THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE AND TRADITION VIA MYTH
A STUDY OF THE SELECT NOVELS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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ABSTRACT

'Unity in diversity' is the motto of our nation. India is a diversified country with many languages with many cultures and the people also different from one state to another. India's is called as 'Hindustan' as it was full of Hindus once upon a time. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni employs myth in her novels to show the people how culture, tradition, religion and ecology play an important role in the lives of man. Myths are the stories that are based on tradition, culture and religion. They are not mere stories and they serve a more profound purpose in ancient and modern cultures. They are as relevant to humans today as they were to the ancients. They answer the timeless questions and serve as a compass to each generation. It directs the humans in the right path. Divakaruni novels present how myth reveals the importance of culture and tradition of a particular society and how it helps the people to overcome from their own inner an external problems of life. Myth is a medium for Divakaruni to explicit her ideas vividly.

Key Words: Myth, Culture, Tradition, Immigration, Multiculturalism, Immigrants

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The themes of cultural continuation and perpetuation are woven into narratives of change, often dramatic geopolitical change or territorial dislocation. References are made to deities, local legend, ancient myths (...) but these are not mere backdrops to the main narrative but are embedded into the narratives of the characters' lives. They thus have an a etiological or ethnographic value, and they reveal the tentacles that tie South Asian women to their cultural origins. (Naidu 382)

Myths help, instruct and make the humans to lead a peaceful life. Coming to mythology, India was a country of Hindus once and it's known as Hindustan, so their mythology is simply known as Hindu Mythology. Later due to migration, many mythologies can be seen in India. Like Greek Mythology, Hindu Mythology has a remarkable place in the world's civilization and culture. Greek mythology and Hindu mythology both have many similar qualities but they are only different by their place and names. At present, India is a country with

many mythologies of the world due to the migration. Likewise each country is mixed with the mythologies of other country that make the writers to compare the mythologies and find the commonalities in them. Swami Vivekanda's words expose the true purpose of cultural and traditional values among the mankind. "No amount of force, or government, or legislative cruelty will change the conditions of a race, but it is spiritual culture and ethical culture alone that can change wrong racial tendencies for the better". The temporary remedies could not give solution and it's just postponed the situation a little later. The psychological change in the mind of the people is the only solution for any problem.

What makes the man to think of changing? Culture and tradition have a vital role in the lives of people of any nation. That determines their attitude towards other people, their culture, religion and way of living. As far as Hinduism concerns that the entire human beings are their fellow beings and they have to respect the others and their views. The rich culture and traditional heritage is the another name for India. The people may be migrated to all over the world but their culture and tradition accompany them to survive in any circumstance. They adopt the other cultures easily with theirs and go on with their lives. Hinduism is known for its myths and their aspects. More than gods and goddess, nature has the mythological values in Hindu Mythology. Tree, Snakes, Monkey's, Crows, Rats, Plants, and so on are the gods in many communities not only in the tribes but also among the people who are living in metropolitan cities in India. Nature is the true seen god of the people all over country. Without any partiality, the people of many religions accept nature as their god and worship it. It is one of the most unique qualities of Hindu Mythology and Hinduism.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who was born in India and settled in US, takes this as an advantage, presents the mythological aspects of these cultures from her own experience in her novels and blends the different cultures in her works to discuss the problems of the immigrants across the boundaries. Divakaruni employs myth to present a vivid picture of Indian culture, how it helped in binding the culture of the past with the contemporary multicultural world. Myth is a literary device used by her and it lends a kind of uniqueness to her writings. There is no story without the touch of myth by Divakaruni. Her novels are the beautiful carvings of her personal and social experiences with the theme of myth.

Knowingly or unknowingly, Divakaruni employs myth in her novels to make the readers understand the importance of culture, tradition, religion and ecology in their life. They are nothing to do with the practicality of life; this is the thinking of many people. Whether cultural, traditional aspects have values in the lives of man or them merely customs which are followed for so many years? Many doubts have risen due to the modernization. Divakaruni gives answers for all those questions via her novels. They are undoubtedly the wonderful teachers of culture, tradition, religion ecology and human values. They instruct the people from the experience of the other people's lives. They are not merely stories of the past to get fame. They are the creative works of art by Divakaruni to her community and the people who suffer like her. The contemporary world has many unanswerable questions, which can be answered with the help of myth. The people who live in abroad have to face many issues like different culture and tradition, life style and so on. The women are the protectors and transformers of culture and tradition from the past to future, as immigrants they face many issues than man. Divakaruni deals with women characters of all age, who live in abroad and happen to visit India. They are caught between two opposing worlds. These women bind the two different worlds with the help of myths in her stories.

The Mistress of Spices is the first and foremost novel of Divakaruni which talks about the cultural and traditional diversities of two countries and how nature heals the humans from their sorrow and grief. Tilo is the mistress of spices, who leads her life all alone in the Spice Store at Oakland, California with her supernatural power of foreseeing the future of others. She solves the problems of the immigrants who are her own people of different religion and community. She sacrifices all her wishes, her life, and herself for the sake of others. The first woman who instructs her and guides her in all way, teach Tilo to do these prayers and healing the people with the help of spices. What are the problems faced by the immigrants in the beginning? How do they lead their life in an alien land? How do they face the racial, cultural and traditional discrimination there without any support? How do the women survive there in the opposite culture? Their way of living, the

problems of relationship and self-identity are some of the problems of the immigrants who are migrated to there for many purposes.

Tilo helps them by putting the spices which may cure their problems without known to them with her prayers and chanting. Tilo wants to warn Haroun but she could not leave her store. Haroun, a taxi driver is beaten by the racist group and this made her think of breaking the rules laid for the mistresses. The racial consciousness makes the immigrants to think of homelessness that is presented in this novel. Sansam says about this novel, "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores India and America as two different worlds epitomizing of different cultures and for the two immigrants Indian, new life in America was like being thrown into the sea even before learning how to swim." Tilo gradually turns out to be a psycho - immigrants. With a pathetic undertone, she declares, "All who come to my own store on Saturday, I love them." (81) She recalls:

So many people on Saturday, it seems the walls must take a deep breath just to hold them in. All those voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English layered on the other like notes from a *tempura*, all those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where. And so I must listen to the spaces between, must weigh them in my coral boned hands. (TMOS 81)

These words prove the real life of the immigrants there. They are longing for their culture, tradition and the way of living which are not possible there. She heals the psychological and the physical problems of the immigrants through her spices. Lalita's marital problems, Geeta's grandfather's love for his cultural and traditional values, Haroun's state of being a taxi driver under many racist attacks, and others problems are handled with ecological treatment which binds them to their motherland mentally by Divakaruni in the voice of Tilo.

D. B Gavani commented on *The Mistress of Spices*:

The novel validates women empowerment through articulation of their desire. As with her protagonists in the short stories, Divakaruni argues for recognition of women's full control of their bodies. Once Tilo is in touch with her own sexuality, she can no longer assuage others pains or even see into the future, but she can live the life of the young woman. The mistress has to extinguish herself in order that the woman find her voice, follow her desire and search for an identity outside of that of a ministering angel. She must live her domain, the beautiful, organized spices store, in order to fulfill desire. (Gavani 81)

Sister of My Heart and *The Vine of Desire* gives an account of the life history of Sudha and Anju who lead their life in India and America for sometimes. *Sister of My Heart* is divided into two books: 'The Princess in the Palace of Snakes' and 'The Queen of Words'. In the book one, the journey of the girls from their birth till their marriage has been described. Many similar incidents happen from their birth to marriage. They are married on the same day with two different personalities which make their life so different. The second book is titled 'The Queen of Swords' which gives the story of what happens after their marriage.

Sister of My Heart presents the story of the two girls from their birth to their marriage. In this novel, Divakaruni gives a detailed account of Indian culture, tradition, religion, rituals, customs and how nature is the part of their life. They are brought up by three women's, the girls' mothers and their aunt. The three elderly women make the two girls to understand the importance of following the customs and rituals of the religion very clearly. The cow as a goddess, the worship of thulasi maadam, what a woman can do and not, what are the rituals and customs of the society? are dealt in detail by Divakaruni. The elderly ladies of Anju and Sudha's family teach them what is our culture and tradition and how one should protect them by sacrificing themselves and their lives. Both Anju and Sudha suffer a lot in their marital life but they face their problems through their mother's teachings. Sudha faces hardship in her husband's house, and she has to do many rituals to get conceived. Those rituals teach her what is life and for what the people are living all their life? The same time, in America, Anju leads her life all alone with her husband Ashok. She understands how her culture and tradition help them to lead a peaceful and lovely life with their family. In this alien land, all are living in an island of their own houses. Divakaruni reveals that the simple mythological stories (Thulasi, the purest of all

women, cow, the real mother of many children and so on) instruct and regulate the women of all times and how culture and tradition help the women to come up and face their psychological and realities together via myth in this novel.

The Vine of Desire depicts the story of the girls after their marriage life. Sudha suffers a lot in her mother-in laws home. When she conceives with a girl child, she is forced to abort but firmly she leaves her husband with the moral support of Anju and goes to America. Meanwhile, Anju learns the household art with the help of her husband, shares her life to her inmate sister, Sudha. Here the American way of living, their thinking of culture, and the western impacts have been discussed by Divakaruni. How the situation makes Anju and Sudha in a different way, and how they turn their life in the righteous path are discussed. Sudha and Sunil, Anju's husband fall for each other in Anju's absence, Sudha feels guilty after that and then she decides to go to India as a caretaker to Mr. Sen's family with her child. The changes in the mind of Sudha and Anju happen only because of their cultural and traditional heritage. The simple myths which remind Sudha that she is going on a wrong path and what is the righteous path to go?

Oleander Girl (2013) is the story of Korobi of Roy's family, a girl who knows nothing of her parents. Korobi has been brought up by her grandparents Sarojini and Bimal Prasad Roy and lives in Kolkata. When she knew about the truth about her birth she takes a journey to US in search of her father whom she had thought to be dead. The story begins on 27th February, 2002 and is set against the backdrop of Godhra riots and 9/11. Her mother died at the time of her birth, was sent to the hostel for studies, gets engaged to Rajat of Bose family. Her grandfather dies and then knowing the truth about her birth, she decides to undertake a journey to USA to discover the truth. Her grandmother who had always been submissive supports her. She hires a private detective, Desai and shares this truth with Rajat and his parents Mr. & Mrs. Bose. They hesitated in the beginning, all of them accept and they decide that she must come back if she does not find her father within two months. Bose's have an art gallery in India & US and the caretaker in US is Mitra with whom she stays in US. Mitra's wife Seema is pregnant and she gives a good company to Korobi. She faces many struggles while searching her father. Her life is in threat. But she firmly finds the truth about her father and returns to India. In India, she is not welcomed by any. Later, her fiancé understands her and they are together in her garden. The cultural and traditional conflicts between Korobi and her grandfather are portrayed in this novel.

The identity of the South Asian diasporic woman and how they try to preserve their culture, tradition, religion and ecology via myths are the theme of her novels. Many issues have been faced by the immigrants; the cultural conflicts, traditional issues, religious point of view, their longing for peaceful life which is not possible always in the alien land and how nature gives remedy for their personal, psychological and physical problems. The problems of immigrants are as common as they are in their motherland; the only thing is they have to face it without their homely atmosphere (the well protected and supporting environment). Divakaruni says to Metka Zuphanic in an interview in 2011 regarding *One Amazing Thing*:

I am trying to bring together things out of my heritage and actually going back deep into the ancient heritage of Indian literature, as well as the very global and multicultural society in which we live here in America and all over the world (...) I wanted to explore the spiritual question of what we do in such circumstances, a question for each of the characters and hopefully for the readers. (Divakaruni)

Through these lines she explains that what is her purpose of using myth to present the story in such a manner? Divakaruni's mythological representation of women characters and the cultural and traditional aspects of myth are to prove the self consciousness of the immigrants, quest for identity in an alien land, emergence of new and modern women, the transformation, gender issues, discrimination, rootedness, and the issues of immigration encountered by women, multiculturalism and so on. Divakaruni's women characters face the hurdles and come out victorious with the help of myths.

Divakaruni tries to present these themes only to some psychological consolation to the immigrants via myths. Mythology is the representation of culture, tradition, religion and natural elements via stories. There is no solution for the problems faced by immigrants. The only solution probably is to accept the fact and realities of immigration and accommodate themselves to fight against the problems. Divakaruni writes novels of this

kind based on the stories of immigrants with mythological aspects to give mental strength and moral support to face the obstacles and barriers in the immigrant's life. Divakaruni tries to present integration as a two-way process, wherein both the communities make efforts to understand and accept the other. In an interview with Riya Bhattacharjee in 2008, Divakaruni says about her own immigrant experience as,

It was being an immigrant that made me into a writer, because when I moved away from my culture, I began to be able to see it more clearly. When I was living in Calcutta, my culture was all around me. I didn't give it much thought. It was only you are in a place where you don't have many Bangali's around you, you can't speak your language, you can't eat your food, then you start thinking about those things, what they meant to you, you want to recreate those things.

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