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**SISTER OF MY HEART AND THE VINE OF DESIRE: DENIAL OF CONSERVATIVE MYTHS  
AND FORMATION OF NEW**

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**ABSTRACT**

A myth is a story that has significance to a culture (or species), a story that addresses fundamental and different questions that human being ask: who and what I am, where did I come from, why I am here and how should I live, what is the right thing to do, what is the universe, how did it begin? Storytelling involves the recounting of legends, myths and also the tales of one's family and familial history. Indian Women writers have deftly used myth and legend in their writings as a practice of women of all the classes and caste. Fiction becomes an important place for questioning the validity of the patriarchal myths that have created a faulty impression of women and womanhood. When these women novelists start questioning and reinterpreting the male created myths in their works they tend to explore their power both as women and as creative writers. Indian women writers have not rejected myths altogether, but made a positive reconstruction of it. This research paper observes how does Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her two novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* deny the conservative myths and created new ones.

Key words: Myth, Denial, Creation, Patriarchy

Myths are not only simple, innocent tales, but also symbols and images which bear political, social, historical and cultural meanings and codes. Many thinkers and writers have tried to analyze these myths and thereafter deconstructed them to uncover the ideology behind them. Similarly, many writers have attempted to rewrite these myths from different point of view to emphasize the missing or consciously underestimated elements. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who has authored celebrated works of fiction, is known for conjuring up a world of fantasy in her novels. Her subjects revolve around Indian migrants settled in the US and their immigrant experience. With these interesting stories Divakaruni also refers liberally to fables, myths and legends and weaves a story so beautifully around them that it makes reading her enchantingly enriching. In her interview with Erika she says that she aims to bust myths and stereotypes and hopes to dissolve boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and even different worlds with her writings.

Myths are the most powerful tools used by patriarchy to subordinate women in the use of language. Myths attribute to women a gender identity built on the binary logic and a sexual identity submerged within the phallic system. The all-pervading effect of these myths is, one may call it that the grown woman may not manage to completely shrug off the aura of fantasy or mythical association, and, then the life could contain a

series of disillusionment. Simone de Beauvoir has also expressed commonly held feminist opinion by arguing that mythology validates the subjugation of women in patriarchal culture. The women in myths are often not rebellious figure, but rather larger than life symbols of obedience, submissiveness and/or male sexual fantasy. As Madhu Kishwar opines, the mythical ideal woman is presented as a selfless giver, someone who gives endlessly, gracefully, smilingly, whatever the demand, however harmful to herself. She gives not just love, affection and ungrudging service, but also, if need be, her health and ultimately her life at the altar of duty to her husband, children and the rest of the family. (In Search 48) Fiction becomes an important place for questioning the validity of the patriarchal myths that have created a faulty impression of women and womanhood. When these women novelists start questioning and reinterpreting the male created myths in their works they tend to explore their power both as women and as creative writers. Indian women writers have not rejected myths altogether, but made a positive reconstruction of it.

Divakaruni's second novel *Sister of My Heart* is the story of two protagonists Anju and Sudha and their story is told alternately in first person narration. Sudha is seen rooted in tradition and always unquestioning regarding the matters of her life and used to accept the societal codes of conduct, whereas Anju is more insubordinate and challenges the myths of superiority and validity. Indian women writers have reworked on ancient legends. This approach involves deconstructing the original stories in some way drawing attention to the constructed nature of the narrative to deny that such narrative has any relationship to reality, thus paving way for radical rewriting. In *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni also denies the conservative myths and created new ones. The first book in the novel is titled 'The Princess in the Palace of Snakes'. In this part, the protagonists try to confirm the traditional feminine roles allocated by the male dominated society. This is evident from the traditional fairy-tale of the princess in the palace of snakes waiting for her Prince Charming to rescue her.

The second book is titled 'The Queen of Swords', is not a traditional fairy tale. In the Book One, Anju and Sudha, having lost their fathers before their birth, are brought up by three women, their widowed mothers and aunt Pishi, a member of their household ever since she lost her husband at the age of eighteen. The lives of these Chatterjee girls thus shaped by the three widows without male interference are still under the influence of the male hegemonic past. The community in which they live is the legacy of male ancestors – a community that pressurizes the members into conformity and normative modes of behavior and denying them the chances of individuality. In *Sister of My Heart* the two protagonists of Divakaruni Anju and Sudha narrate their stories alternatively bestows them with not only the capacity to tell their own stories, but also empower them with the power to interpret and shape their reality. The popular myth of the society says that the night, the child is born the deity Bidhata Purush comes down to earth to decide the destiny of the child. The disappearance of the sweetmeat is the indicative of his blessings.

They say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born, the Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be... That is why they leave sweetmeats by the cradle. Silver-leafed sandesh, dark pantuas floating in golden syrup, jilipis orange as the heart of a fire, glazed with honey-sugar. If the child is especially lucky, in the morning it will all be gone(SMH 3).

Anju always refuses to believe this story as she says: "That's because the servants sneak in during the night and eat them," says Anju, giving her head an impatient shake.... (SMH 3). Aunt Pishi tells the girls that in their case the sweet meats remained untouched because they were girls, thus implying that the women are doomed to suffer. When Sudha asks Aunt Pishi, "Pishi Ma, tell no, did the sweets disappear for us?"(SMH 5) Sorrow moves like a smoke-shadow over Pishi's face. Finally, she says, her voice flat, "No, Sudha. You weren't so lucky."...Pishi shakes her head in regret "may be BidhataPurush doesn't come for girl-babies." (SMH 6) Anju, the skeptic, rejects the insinuation out rightly, but Sudha, more traditional among the two, accepts. Here myths are represented as stereotypes, as BidhataPurush blesses only the sons of a family and dejects the girl babies. Similarly, when Sudha's Mother-in-law takes her to visit the temple of Goddess shashthi for a male heir, the stereotypical myth is evident.

Myths and legends that are also products of a male-oriented culture, play an important role in formulating the ideas on which woman is to base her life. Their discourse is male centered and the mythological stories have represented feats of masculine prowess. The conflict for Indian women arises when

they try to carve out a viable space for themselves in the society which is suffering from Sita-Savitri Syndrome. Various questions arise regarding the actual status of women such as who is the real woman? Where is the real woman - What is her real entity? Has she an identity of her own? The primordial myths gave woman an identity that is stereotypical and has been reinforced by archetypes for ages. Anju migrates to America after her marriage and her misconception about the freedom shatters. She realizes that living a life of modern women is not a sign of emancipation; instead she finds it difficult to cope up and descends into deep despondency. Sudha narrates the story to Anju in America, she reinterprets the myth, and the princess instead of waiting for the prince to save her, finds courage to flee from the prison and finds asylum with a woman. The reference of myth is again evident in "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes": "Once there was a princess, who lived in an underwater palace filled with snakes. The snakes were beautiful - green and yellow and gold and gentle. They fed her and played with her and sang her to sleep" (SMH 86).

The above resemblance of the myth is to show, how Anju loves Sudha very much, as Sudha is a princess and Anju herself a snake, to take care of Sudha. Through the myth, Divakaruni wants to show the sisterhood among Sudha and Anju. Sudha is also deeply concerned about Anju. The mothers don't reveal the incident of Anju's miscarriage, but somehow she gets to know the truth and consoles Anju through the same story delivered in an entirely different way. In the second book 'The Queen of Swords' Sudha talks to Anju, but the story has now taken a different shape.

The notion of myth has undergone a change within the last century with many modern writers as they have presented it in reversals or they choose to subvert it. In *Sister of My Heart* the myth of the princess is reverted by Divakaruni when Anju is disturbed over her miscarriage, Sudha tells her this tale and Anju recovers. Then she relates what happened to the three mothers. Then Pishi, the usual teller of tales, asks her about the story she told Anju. 'I told her a story'. . . . 'The Queen of swords', I say. (SMH 286) 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. When she was a child, and still under the influence of accepted patriarchal ideologies, her favorite past time was to make up stories of princesses in underground dungeons rescued by the princes. During their childhood, the girls used to act out the fairy tales that Pishi used to tell them. Sudha always played the princess in danger and Anju the prince who rescued her. Even while they were play-acting, Sudha would never reach out to the prince and ask him to help her. She always said that it was the duty of the prince to do all the hard work and rescue her. Later, when she falls in love with Ashok and the mothers decide to get her married elsewhere, she waits for Ashok to make all the moves and rescue her. Myth works on the basis of readers and authors having common assumption, depending upon the readers to make the connection between the protagonist and the mythical character. The use of familiar myths in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels brings the reader in the vicinity of the struggles and complexities of the protagonist's life.

Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire* is a striking novel of extraordinary depth and sensitivity which is also considered as a sequel to her novel, *Sister of My Heart*. Divakaruni takes up the story of Anju and Sudha where she left them at the end of their novel *Sister of My Heart*. The sequel begins with Anju's tragedy of miscarriage, emotion and trauma of separation of her son from her womb due to abortion and this results in depression in Anju, whereas Sudha after escaping from the tyrannical rule of her mother-in-law in India moved in with Anju and her husband Sunil in San Francisco with her infant daughter Dayita. After her miscarriage Anju's hopes of making the family has been shattered and she desperately needs the sisterly support after her abortion and calls Sudha to America with her daughter.

Anju and Sudha adopt American culture and throw some Indian traditional beliefs and thinking. The myths have a great impact on Anju's displacement, and her throwing the Indian values which are controlled by Hinduism. In *Sister of My Heart* Anju doesn't believe in Indian myths and the Indian ceremonies to the gods, this trait is also visible in *The Vine of Desire*. She shows a strong dissent towards myths and Indian cultural values. Anju disbelieves the myths and Hinduism and thus try to retain her American identity in this alien land. As Sudha brings a Hindu calendar with her from India and paste it in the kitchen, she reads, "She snickered as

she read them aloud: people who begin the journey in the month of Bhadra never come back. A wedding conducted in Aashwin ends in calamity. Books should not be read, but only worshipped on Saraswati Puja, the day dedicated to the goddess of learning” (VD 150). Anju’s disbelief to the traditional culture and myths indicates her attempt to prove that following the traditional belief in no longer make any sense to her. In this way she wants to leave her Indian identity behind.

Myths, by their nature are given to abstraction and over simplification. Easy binaries that are deployed in explaining the position of Indian women have been habitually the ideological enclave of exploitation. If, as said above, it is predominantly the women who tell the stories and recount, augment and otherwise keep the myth alive than it may be ironic that it is the women who partially at least forge the very chains which may be used to bind them.

Sudha, a staunch believer of myths and traditional stories in *Sister of My Heart* becomes disenchanted with the stories in *The Vine of Desire*. Sudha refuses to believe in Indian folk stories because she finds the stories unrealistic. In America Sudha narrates the stories of Ramayana to Dayita because Pishi has advised her for doing so (VD 78) but she has now disillusioned with the myths as she finds them far away from the reality. Narrating the tales from the epic Ramayana to Dayita Sudha somehow gives vent to her own thoughts. Once she narrates the story of how the demon Ravana stole Sita Ram’s Consort from her home. This story is symbolic of Sudha’s own life. As Lakshman draws a magic circle around Sita and advised her not to come out of it. Sudha reflects

each of our lives has a magic circle drawn around it, one must not cross. Chaos waits on the other side of the drawn line. Perhaps in leaving Ramesh I had already stepped outside my circle. With the kiss, Sunil trampled the circle his marriage has etched around him. What is there now to keep us safe from our demons? (VD80)

Sudha in another way thinks that the stepping out of Ramesh house has been a big decision and definitely she faces a chaos waiting for her on the other side. Sudha narrates to Dayita the tales from The Ramayana and one day she dreams of Sita’s trail after she was rescued from demon Ravana. Sita urges Ram to light fire for her as she has to prove herself. She stepped into the fire, but the God of Fire himself brought her back and proved her innocence, “She stepped into the flames. But she didn’t burn. The god of fire himself brought her back and vouched for her innocence. Ram and Sita were happily reunited. (But, having been doubted that way, can a woman be happy again?)” (VD 313)

The image of ‘Sita’ has a profound effect on the Indian psyche. Her chastity and loyalty to her husband represents the ideal for an Indian wife. This ideology survives even among modern, upper-class Indian women who defer to their husbands in an almost instinctive way. Sudha expresses qualms whether a woman can be happy after being asked for such test. In other words, religious myths suppress a woman on the question of her autonomy and freedom.

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