

Mythical Representation Of Women Characters: A Critical Study Of The Select Novels Of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

India is a legendary nation where myths have absorbed many cultures, social systems, and ways of living. Myths are creatively imagined tales that portray the universe as it is. Many works written by Indians in English draw inspiration from epics, the Vedas, and the Upanishads. Myths not only aid in improving our lives but also teach us the values of our culture and heritage. Myth, magic, culture, and tradition run deep in the works of the famous novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She uses myths to prove that legendary stories are true and to show how immigrants use myths to overcome obstacles. The protagonists in Divakaruni's novels—Tilo, Sudha, Anju, and Draupadi—reveal the suffering of women and their use of myth to cope with problems. There is a mythical quality to the characters in her writings. She gives female characters new qualities such as independence, tenacity, and strength, and she rewrites, reimagines, and redefines them. This article explores the depiction of women in mythology and examines how myths may be used as a moral compass to help individuals achieve their full potential. It also provides a new perspective on the ways in which Divakaruni depicts the voices of women.

Keywords

Mythological Image, Philosophy, Moral Instructor, Epic, Values.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a Professor of Creative Writing, poet, fiction writer, and award-winning novelist of South Asian American descent. Indian culture, modern America, women, immigration, mythology, family life, and the challenges of multicultural society are some of her recurring themes. More than one hundred publications, including periodicals and anthologies, have included her writings, and her novels have been translated into twenty-nine languages. She has received several accolades, including the American Book Award, the Light of India Award, the Premio Scanno (Italy), and the Barbara Deming Award. At the University of Houston, Divakaruni teaches creative writing and writes for readers of all ages. *The Economic Times* included her in its 2015 list of the Twenty Most Influential Indian Women Abroad.

Divakaruni's works include *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), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). Identity, estrangement, marital conflict, feminism, the search for belonging, cultural rupture, and myth are dominant themes in her novels.

Traditional tales within communities are called myths, and they are used to explain the world. A myth is a narrative that describes the origins of the universe as we know it today. The Greek term *mythos* denotes story, discourse, tale, fiction, or plot, and it is from this root that the English word *myth* is derived. A body of myths is known as mythology. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines mythology as "an old narrative or sequence of stories, notably recounting the early history of a group of people or regarding natural phenomena and facts" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). Indian authors writing in English frequently use mythology to preserve Indian history, beliefs, culture, and civilisation. In an interview with *The Times of India*, Divakaruni stated:

"I have always been interested in the lives of women, but I think I am more inclined to push the envelope now, having my main characters grapple with situations our community shies away from—broken marriages, alcoholism, gay issues, abortion. Yet I am still interested in age-old themes such as the mother-daughter relationship and myth. I love myth; from *The Mistress of Spices* to *The Palace of Illusions*, mythic tales are a driving force" (Divakaruni).

The Mistress of Spices (1997) explores the mystical properties of spices, each associated with a legendary narrative that depicts its medicinal powers. The protagonist Tilo is born with extraordinary abilities, including the power to foresee the future. She is renamed Tilottama after becoming the Mistress of Spices under the guidance of the First Mother, who teaches girls the medicinal use of spices (Divakaruni 5). Later, Tilo becomes the owner of a spice shop in Oakland, California, where she helps others using the power of spices. Each spice embodies a mythic voice. For example, turmeric declares: "When the devas and asuras churned for the riches of the cosmos, I, turmeric, sprang from the ocean of milk" (Divakaruni 13). In this way, Divakaruni blends myth and contemporary struggle.

The Palace of Illusions (2008) retells the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* through the eyes of Draupadi. The story follows Panchaali from her birth to her marriage to the Pandavas, her relationship with Krishna, her hidden love for Karna, and her struggles as a woman. In the author's note, Divakaruni writes of her intentions:

"I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of men's exploits.... It is her life, her voice, her struggles and her triumphs that I invite you into" (*The Palace of Illusions* xv).

Draupadi rejects the traditional role of womanhood when she asserts: “And who decides that a woman’s highest purpose is to support men? A man, I would wager!” (Divakaruni 26). Her transformation becomes evident when she defiantly protests her humiliation in the court: “I am not a coin to be gambled away nor a dancer to be summoned to the court!” (190).

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned Indian-American author whose work explores themes of migration, identity, race, and mythology. She uses myth to illuminate the struggles of women and to empower them. Her female characters are strong and self-reliant. Through myth-based retellings such as *The Mistress of Spices* and *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni reshapes traditional narratives to highlight women’s voices and their fight for autonomy.

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