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Myth as a narrative tool in the mistress of spices

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the greatest story teller in the present scenario of English novelists. She had used different narrative techniques in her writing, these are the unique blend of techniques. The present research paper focuses on the use of myth in her first novel, 'The Mistress of Spices'. The novel presents the different phases of a girl's life, who was born with magical powers. The journey of a girl from an Indian village to Oakland, USA with lots of difficulties. The novel finally ends with a clash between duty and personal desire to lead a simple woman life leaving all magical world of spices.

Keywords: Myth, mythology, mistress, custom, narrative

Introduction

The term myth has been taken from Ancient Greek word Mythos which means 'speech, narrative, plot, from where it reached in English and other European languages. Myth is a genre narratives consisting of great legends that play a fundamental role in ruling the societies according to them. These fundamental stories are called myths. Myth is described as stories from the past life of a particular society. The main characters in myths are gods, goddesses and super humans. These stories tell about some type of leaders that usually contain legends. The myths also endorsed by the rulers and priests or saints with a link of spirituality in it. Generally the people of a particular society consider that the myth and legends are the true account of their ancestors, which becomes the base of their customs and rituals. The oxford University press defined the scholarly term as:

"A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodied and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon"

Isaac Asimov has defined myth in his words as:

"A myth or legend is simply not made up out of a vacuum. Nothing is--or can be. Somehow there is a kernel of truth behind it, however distorted that might be"

C. S. Lewis explained the value of myth in the narratives of fiction writing. According to him it helped the people to connect with their traditional culture and help them to restore their own cultures which is most familiar to them. He writes:

"The value of myth is that it takes all the things you know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity"

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an extra ordinary story-teller. She has used many narratives in her writings, one of the most important of them is Myth. India is a country full of myths and the stories of legends. Being an Indian she has used myths not as merely stories but as a teacher to teach the value of traditional Indian life. The myths gives strength to face the challenges of life. She has written seven novels and in all her novels she has used myths. Her purpose was to convey the truth behind the mythological stories to prove that the myths are helpful to overcome the personal and social problems of immigrants and native people. All the protagonists of Chitra exposes the sufferings of immigrants, and they overcome it with the help of motivating morals of myths. Most myths explain the rituals and customs of society that guides the social and cultural norms to the human beings. The study of mythology should not be considered as an escape from reality, but as a search of deeper understanding of mental condition of human being. A critic Devasree Chakravarti gave his opinion on the on the use of myth and the importance of spices in the novel. In this regard he said:

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“Divakaruni takes up the image of the spices and the woman as complimentary, and fuses them in the enigmatic and mysterious character of the mistress of the spices. But here the spices also represent the heritage of tradition that forms and restrains the mistress”.

Myths play an important role in Chitra Banerjee Diwakaruni's works. These are part of Indian human life without which we can't imagine India. The references in her work help the readers to get in touch with traditional and cultural life. It is Divakaruni's narrative technique which made her works prominent and separate her from other writers. Myth is included in her unique writing style. In an interview to Preeti Zachariah on April 24, 2013, Chitra said: “I came from a traditional family...the world around me was suddenly so different. Immigration was certainly a transformational experience and I tried to explore its intricacies”.

Divakaruni used myth to convey her traditional ideas vividly. Myths represent our understanding about truth and help us in becoming a good human being. The main forms of mythology are- myths, legends and folk tales which provide us the real value of culture. Stories like The princess Of The Snakes in 'The Sister of My Heart' provides the morality and strength to the readers. Myths are used as a tools to represent the unpleasant experiences of modern life, which help the novelist to create a framework for female universe. The world of Diwakaruni's myths symbolize the world of feminine. It is the world in which women extended their hands to other women in place of waiting for the men to help them. She used myths not only to show her roots in India but also to re-evaluate Indian women in the alien surroundings. She is fond of using myths as myths play a vital role in the life and literature of India. The present novel to evaluate on the basis of the Diwakaruni's use of myth is The Mistress of Spices. It was Divakaruni's best selling novel written with a blend of prose and poetry full of myth, magic and reality. It was shortlisted by San Francisco Chronicle in one among the hundred books of 20th Century. Chitra expressed her views on that occasion as:

“I wrote the book in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth in my attempt to create a modern fable”.

The novel is the story of a girl who was born with magical powers. Her magical powers became the reason of her sufferings as she was abducted from by the pirates. With her magical powers she ruled over the pirates and finally became the Mistress of Spices. Throughout the novel The Mistress of Spices, Tilo, the protagonist represented as the finest example of mythological woman. The woman who spent her whole life for the benefits of others. She sacrificed her own wishes, her love-life and everything for benefit of others. Tilo, with supernatural power of seeing the future of others and heals them with the help of hidden power of the spices, who were settled in Oakland, California. Each chapter of the novel is named after a spice, which has a specific power of healing. Each spice has its own mythological story. San Francisco Chronicle praises Banerjee's first novel:

“The Mistress of Spices is a marvellous combination of myth and romance, social critique and poetry.”

The old woman gave her the name 'Tilotama'. Tilo learned the special powers of controlling spices from her. The different characters suffer from the sense of alienation,

cultural crisis, personal problems and feeling of nostalgia. The old one advised her to be aware about her future as she has the sign of disobedience. During their learning period also sometimes she didn't pay attention on what they were taught by the old ones. Though she learned very well to master the spices still the Old one warned her not be disobedient. She has taken the name Tilotamma from the most elegant of dancers, crest-jewel among women and the most beautiful apsara of the court of Indra, the god of rain. Lord Brahma made her the chief of dancers in Indra's court and warned her never to love a men but to dance only. In the same way the first mother warned her not to involve with any man for the sake of love. She warned her for the punishment too. The mistresses are made to remove the problems of the world and not their own joy as it was forbidden. She told Tilo about the result of Tilotama, the apsara when she disobeyed her rules offered by lord Brahma as:

“Tilottama, disobedient at the last, fell. And was banished to earth to live as a mortal for for seven lives. Seven mortal lives of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted, leprous limbs” (P. 43)

The spices are the centre characters of the novel, as it is already told that names of the chapters also given on the based of different spices. The spices themselves talk to Tilo and tell her about their origination and powers among them. The personification of the spices itself included as a myth in the novel. The first chapter is named as 'Turmeric'. Turmeric mentioned about the mythology of devas and asuras at the time of churning of ocean. In the process of churning the ocean they found both poison and nectar as well. Turmeric introduced herself to be the part of that churning and it was found between the poison and nectar. Tilo says that the spices tell her their mythological stories, when she holds them in her hands. In her introduction the turmeric says:

“I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when 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.” (P. 13)

Turmeric also told about its secret powers of healing to her mistress. About the quality of turmeric Tilo explained:

“Turmeric, shield for heart's sorrow, an ointment for death, hope for rebirth.” (P. 14)

Tilo visualized a serious accident of Haroun, a taxi driver. She even avoided her most charming moment of life with Raven for the sake of security of Haroun. She kept her lover on hold to save the life of an ordinary taxi driver. Last time he visited the store and asked her to make a magic packet to keep in his car for a better luck. She visualized a serious accident and with the secret powers of spices she wanted to reduce the seriousness of the accident. To change the fate or to protect him from accident, Tilo decided to charm kalo jire for Haroun. It was forbidden for her to leave the store still she took the risk to save his life. She told about the spice that it referred in the Hindu mythology as Ketu, one of the planets.

“Kalo jire, I think, just before the vision comes me again, blood and shattered bone and a thin cry like a red thread strangling the night. I must get kalo jire, spice of the dark planet ketu, and protector against the evil eye”. (P. 30-31)

Tilo understood and solved the problems of the people. She recovered them with the help of special chanting with her spices. Many people visited her shop and shared their

problems with her, even without sharing too, she could realize their problems. She put her chanting and prayers in their bags even without their knowledge to solve their problems. He helped many people with her spices such as Jagjit, Lalita. Geeta and her grandfather, Hameeda and Haroun. At many places the novelist mentioned the Indian Epic Ramayan. She discussed about Agni, the God of fire and the place of Ravan's kingdom Lanka from the epic Ramayan. Lanka which had its own mythological significance. Chilli spoke and sang in a hawk's voice on the bleached hills circling the Sun where nothing grows:

"I Lanka was born of Agni, god of fire. I dripped from his fingertips to bring taste to this bland earth. / Lanka, fire-child, cleanser of evil, for when there is no other way". (P. 37)

India is a country with lots of myths in its tradition in the daily lives such as- the cat crosses the road in front of you, somebody sneezed at the time you were leaving from home and number of other examples. Chitra Divakaruni also included the examples of Indian traditional myth which forbade to do something in a particular circumstances. There are number of such myths, one of them is not to eat rice on the eleventh day of the moon called ekadasi. It is believed that if you eat rice on ekadasi it would be equal as you have eaten worms. Dakasha came into the store with her starched and shiny nurse uniform with her smile. When Tilo asked her what she needed that day. She explained that:

"Aunty today is ekadasi you know, eleventh day of the moon, and my mother-in-law being a widow must not eat rice. So I thought maybe some cracked wheat to make dalia pudding for her and as long as I was here, might as well pick up some of your methi, my husband is so fond of methi paranthas". (P. 80)

Tilo wanted to to enjoy one full night with her lover, Raven. She wanted to look young and beautiful in place of her old and wrinkled skin so that her lover could appreciate her. She requested her spices to make her extremely beautiful. She wished not to show her old body but a breast like a curved mango to cup in her lovers palm and thighs long lean like a eucalyptus. She took help of abhrak and amlaki to remove her wrinkles of her old face. And finally asked makaradwaj, the king of all spices to make her beautiful. Makaradwaj which was used by Ashwani Kumar, the renowned physician of gods. Tilo said:

"I would call on the others, abhrak and amlaki to remove wrinkles and blacken hair and firm the sagging flesh. And the king of all makaradwaj rejuvenator whom the Ashwani Kumar, twin physician of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers". (P. 82- 83)

In Indian mythology it is believed that the people are born with their fate. Everything is written in their fate even before their birth. Once on the request of Geeta's grandfather, Tilo visited Geeta's office to discuss the problem of their family. Geeta told her about her grandfather that he was a person who dominated the family members. She blamed that it was her grandfather who turned the family members against her. Even if his father didn't follow his words he gave threats to go back to his country, India to die there peacefully. Geeta disclosed that she was in love with a guy named Juan. She also said that her grandfather had the medieval ideas about arrange marriages, she couldn't tell her parents about Juan. Tilo

wished to help Geeta's in her choice at once but she only thought what would she say:

"The old one taught it to us many times. Your fate in born with you, stitched into your birth stars. Who can you blame for it?" (P. 135)

Finally when Tilo left only seventy-two hours in the store. She started thinking that which were the people whom she wanted to help before the time was over. First she thought to help Haroun. She took the jar of red chillies which was surprisingly light. She hesitated for a moment because she knew that there wouldn't be turning back. Then she thought of Mohan with blinded eyes and number of others who faced injustice in the alien land. Ultimately she took Lanka or red chilli, who she thought had been waiting for a long time for that type of moment. She poured the chilli on the cloth end and tied a knot that couldn't be untied. When She started chanting, the First Mother warned her that she should not have broken the jar but Tilo replied that it was necessary at that moment. The First Mother told her that she should not have released its power into the city as it had too much anger in it. Tilo justified her chant saying:

"But mother, the anger of chilli is pure, impersonal. Its destruction is cleansing, like the dance of Shiva. Did you not tell us this yourself". (P. 235)

Tilo received a letter of Lalita, who was extremely tortured and beaten brutally by her husband. She discussed her matter with Tilo and she gave her a magazine telling that she also had rights of her own. In the magazine there were helpline numbers. She informed Tilo that she was not at her at that time and thanked her for giving that magazine. She told her that they didn't have any children, when she asked to go to the doctor, he allowed her but when doctor told to check her husband, he became angry. And threatened her to show his manhood. She was terrified but remembered Tilo's words that no man even husband had the the right to force her to his bed. He tortured her and told her not to go out of the home. She searched the magazine and called the number she could not speak but the woman on the other side was an Indian and she understood more than what she spoke. She packed the bag took all jewellery, documents and money as much as she could find and went with two women picked her from bus stop. There were some other women who also suffered from these types of brutalities. She saw other women praying to Ram for asking forgiveness for leaving her husband. Lalita said that she couldn't even pray, as she explained the injustice with Sita, his own wife. She said:

"Who shall I ask to bless me? Ram, who banished poor pregnant Sita to the forest because of what people might say? Even our gods are cruel to their wives". (P. 272)

Tilo made her relationship with Raven, a lonely American, when she realized that she need to be loved. At that time also, she was thinking of the welfare of the people. She wanted to serve herself for the people in the alien land. At the end, to live the life of an ordinary woman for her love and desires she decided to live her life as 'Maya' with Raven. She consumed makaradwaj, the most potent spice for changing. After consuming it for three day, she started getting her youth back to give pleasure to Raven, who loved her sincerely. When Tilo changed herself for Raven with the help of spices specially Makaradwaj. She transformed into a young and beautiful girl. The novelist described the beauty of Tilo in her words as:

"Tilo's forehead was flawless like a new opened shapla leaf, nose tipped like the til flower. Mouth curved as the bow of

Madan, god of love, lips color of - there are no other words for this crushed red chilies” (P. 279)

Conclusion

Therefore we can simply say that Divakaruni has employed myth in *The Mistress of Spices* beautifully. The novel has the blend of myth and magic realism as fantastic tools of narrative. Myth is included in the novel at different places with logical reasons. It involved the stories and places of the epic Ramayan, examples of day to day life of Indian traditions and immovable trust and interest of Indian people in gods and legends. A Hollywood movie was made on the based of the novel *The Mistress of Spices* with the same title in the year 2005. The role of Tilo was played by famous actress Aishwarya Rai. Gurvinder Chadha who made this movie expressed his views in an interview with Mike Davies:

“There is, it seems, a spice for all occasions, all moods and all problems. The right one can bring you love, solve domestic troubles or even get you a job. At least that’s the premise behind *The Mistress of Spices*” .

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