

Fantastic Quest for Self-Recognition and Revivification of Humanity in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* Trilogy

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Abstract: The Indian American author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was inspired by fantastic and extravagant tales from classical mythologies narrated to her by her grandfather. By writing for children, she wanted to pass on this legacy to her children as well as millions of others who are caught in their minority status due to immigration to other countries. The paper analyzes the reasons that influenced her writing of young-adult fantasy series, *The Brotherhood of the Conch* trilogy comprising of *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) and *Shadowland* (2009) that is embedded in the rich and abundant folklore of India. Through the genre of children's literature, Divakaruni seeks to revive old traditions and values of the homeland that would help the immigrants especially, in bringing out their better and stronger selves. Portrayal of an authentic picture of roots by reviving memories of the homeland is an act of self-affirmation. The paper traces the journey of a young protagonist Anand and his companions Nisha and Abhaydatta on a fantastic quest towards self-realization and restoration of humanity from darkness and collapse. Divakaruni's aim was to inspire children and adults from other cultures (especially the dominant cultures) to discover, acknowledge and celebrate remarkable similarities and dissimilarities among divergent cultures. The children characters from minority cultures are projected in all their grandeur and heroism inspiring millions others caught in their minority status to discover their true self and get rid of their complexes. Her writing for children would also help people appreciate and identify with children from minority cultures in a better way. Divakaruni believes that no culture is absolute or perfect. What is needed is blending of the cultures to bring out the best in you. She intends to bring together children from various backgrounds and ethnicities for a common cause.

Keywords: folklore, children's literature, fantastic, self-affirmation, self-realization, culture, values, tradition.

I. Introduction

I spent childhood vacations with my grandfather in a little village three hours outside of Kolkata. At night, he would bring me and my cousins together, light a kerosene lamp, because there was no electricity, and tell us wonderful stories from folktales, fairytales, and epics.... It made me understand the power of storytelling, and how, through stories, so much is communicated and passed on from generation to generation. (Divakaruni 2015)

The Indian American author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was influenced and inspired by fantastic tales from classical mythologies like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* narrated to her by her grandfather. That is the legacy she wanted to pass on to her children as well as millions of others caught in their dilemma due to immigration. Her young-adult fantasy series, *The Brotherhood of the Conch* trilogy comprising of *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) and *Shadowland* (2009) are rewarding by-products of this effort. Divakaruni was introduced to Bengali folktales such as the well-known *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Sack of Stories) at a young age. In an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama, Divakaruni acknowledges this fact, saying:

I loved reading. I read a lot of folktales and fairytales. You know I really like mythic and legendary material and I think that's such a rich part of my culture that I want to keep bringing back in different ways, not necessarily in magical ways, but may be in the ways in which magic influences people's thinking and their way of seeing the world. (2000: 3)

Folklore provides insight about various aspects of a culture – its religions, customs and rituals. It also demonstrates human behaviour and teaches us about ourselves. Children's literature in India is deeply embedded in its extremely rich and abundant folklore. India is known for its marvelous storytelling traditions. Traditional tales, myths and legends have been retold (mostly orally) since times immemorial. *The Panchatantra*, a collection of short stories narrated by Vishnusharma, *The Jataka Tales*, *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, and *The Hitopadesha* formed the basis of such tales. Similar folktales, myths and epics find their way in the works of Divakaruni. They serve a foundational purpose in her works and are not merely an embellishment.

Divakaruni's books for children also includes *Neela: Victory Song* (2002). It is a segment of the series entitled "Girls of Many Lands" and portrays the wondrous adventures of a twelve-year-old girl, disguised as a boy, on a mission to find her missing father. The setting is India during freedom struggle. She has also penned

Grandma and the Great Gourd, a re-telling of a traditional Bengali folktale. Maria Alonso Alonso justifies the use of “folkloric elements” by writers of diaspora “in order to achieve greater intimacy with traditional realities”(2015: 210). Their writing indicates “a turning of the rhetorical gaze to the cultural heritage as a form of resistance and as a way of vindicating the enfranchisement of dispossessed communities in certain host countries”(210). For Divakaruni too, retrospection and retraction are the beacon lights that help to keep her own hope and that of other immigrants alive. Children of these immigrants feel more perplexed and disoriented as they are neither able to relate to the culture of their parents’ nor able to assimilate in completely with the culture of the adopted homeland. Through her fantasy novels, Divakaruni takes the responsibility of portraying an authentic picture of their roots by reviving her memories of the homeland as an act of self-affirmation. Uma Krishnaswami in an interview with Divakaruni reveals the distinctiveness of the trilogy she wrote for children:

The *Conch Bearer* and its sequels are unusual in that they draw from the cultural and literary history of their setting in a consistent, organic way. The conch itself, the visitor who creates a feast out of minimal offerings of food, the rejection of a heaven-like place in favor of loyalty and friendship—each of these aspects echoes aspects of Hindu mythology. (2014: par.1)

Moreover, Divakaruni modernizes these mythic and folkloric elements to fit the contemporary context. In one of her essays, “Dissolving Boundaries”, she says, “I wrote in a spirit of play collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create modern fable” (1997: par. 5). Divakaruni provides an alternative world of magic, magic and folklore which exists alongside the real world challenging and questioning some weighty issues. In the three books, Divakaruni creates the enchanting world of ‘The Silver Valley’ that exists alongside contemporary Kolkata. Thus, her novels are an effortless amalgamation of the realistic and the fantastical world of myth and magic. She blends the marvelous into the ordinary and the mundane. Metka Zupancic in her paper, “Ethics of Wisdom and Compassion” states:

Divakaruni’s literature represents a daring yet also smooth and spontaneous interaction between various worlds and ways of existence, those considered as “real” and those considered as “supernatural” or “imaginary”. (2013: 106)

The kind of magic she uses is close to the style of magical realism. *The Brotherhood of the Conch* trilogy is loaded with numerous instances of the extraordinary that is evenly woven into the ordinary setting. A stark resemblance with the famous *Harry Potter* series by J.K Rowling especially with the first part, *Harry Potter and the Philosophers’ Stone* cannot be ignored. However, Divakaruni’s magic is unique and distinct in that it is dipped in Indian flavour. She introduces young readers both in India and abroad (particularly for the children of Indian descent living abroad) “to the Indian landscape, Indian ways of life, and Indian philosophy and values” cast in a venturesome story (Divakaruni, 2014). In *The Conch Bearer*, Divakaruni takes us back to ancient India where occult and more reliable ways of healing like Ayurveda and yoga were prevalent. Indian values of compassion, honesty, loyalty etc. are manifest throughout the trilogy. *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* portrays a beautiful picture of the current and historic India. The crowded village is described in extraordinary details. Mughal period is described in its vivid detail with its mesmerizing palaces, fine details of Indian food with its mouthwatering smells. *Shadowland* instills in us the Indian values of collective responsibility and deep love for humanity.

The trilogy traces the journey of a young protagonist, Anand and his companions Nisha and Abhaydatta on a fantastic quest towards self-realization and restoration of humanity from darkness and collapse. The first book, *The Conch Bearer* marks the beginning of the quest. It begins with a young boy, Anand defeated by the difficulties life has forced upon him and his family, yearning for some magical intervention. His wish is answered in the form of an old man, Abhaydatta, who comes at his doorstep one fine day. The man happens to be one of the healers of Brotherhood, a group of men endowed with magical powers, the powers of mind joined together in a common cause of serving humanity. They have been endowed with special spiritual powers to help human beings. They can look into the future, can cure sickness, can travel to any time and age, and even have the ability create rain and storm and the power of remembrance and healing. Divakaruni takes us into the mystical world of ‘The Silver Valley’ in the *Himalayas* thousands of years ago where the healers were given the responsibility of taking care of the conch. She places at the center of the trilogy, a magical object – the ‘conch’ presented as a symbol of supreme power and magic, a product of the Indian mythic times during which great heroes – sons of gods endowed with special powers from their forefathers were born. Nakul and Sahdev, the youngest of Pandava brothers were the original owners of the conch who used it to heal men and animals and to cure drought and famines. In the great battle of *Kurukshetra*, this conch was used to bring the dead warriors back to life. In the present times referred to as ‘*Kali Yug*’, the fourth age of man, their task has become more difficult and crucial – to protect humanity from “disintegration and darkness” (2003: 27). Surabhanu, a promising young man, to be made the next “Keeper of the Conch” (2003: 29) becomes corrupt with power and steals the conch for his selfish motive. Divakaruni empowers two young children, Anand and Nisha who along with their mentor, Abhaydatta, set out to restore the ‘conch’ to its rightful place. In the second part of the

trilogy, *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, Anand and Nisha set on yet another excursion to save their mentor, Abhaydatta when he is sent on a jeopardous task. They plunge into action to save a village from a jinn sneaking in the forest know to be extracting souls of the people. The most fascinating aspect of the novel is that Divakaruni takes the reader back in history, hundreds of years when Moghuls ruled India. Here, Anand has an encounter with powerful and dangerous sorcerers. The mirror here becomes an object of power that will transport Anand into this period of history and out of it with his companions to fight the evil and protect his companions. With the conch stolen once again in the third and the final part, *Shadowland* and 'The Silver Valley' reduced to a wasteland, Anand and Nisha embark on their final expedition to the aloof scientific world of 'Shadowland' set several hundred years in the future to restore the conch and the lost peace in the valley. They are perseverant, determined and brimming with deep love for mankind to save the world from destruction. They journey to the center of this strange land, the city of Coal, with the help of the magical mirror, and as they meet people along the way, they slowly find cues to what had happened, and how they could possibly bring back the world as they knew it. The city is cloaked with thick smog, exhausting the supply of oxygen to dangerous level. This world is robotic, completely devoid of human emotions and feelings, with no faith in the magical or wondrous. The division between the haves and the have-nots is stark with the chosen ones getting to live in bubble compounds while the others have to toil as labourers. Acts of rebellion are suppressed by preventing the labourers from any kind of interaction with the aid of electronic blocking towers and electric collars. Divakaruni foresees utter destruction symbolized by extreme pollution, unpleasantness and intolerance with strong class division in the near future if immediate steps are not taken to save humanity and the planet. But the writer never thinks of the future as bleak, however unpleasant the present state of affairs may be. She constructs positive pictures of the amalgamation of cultures (American and Indian in particular) by mixing the past symbolized by folklore with the present day realities. In her article, "The Road To Shadowland", Divakaruni has aptly put down the indispensable role that books (diaspora here) play especially for children:

Books to me had always been a way of opening up the world; of learning about, appreciating, and identifying with lives and cultures different from my own; of seeing that ultimately we were not so different in our essential humanness. I had hoped, through my writing, to share my stories, my culture, and the history of my people with readers who were Indian as well as those who came from other backgrounds. I had hoped to dissolve boundaries between people and promote understanding- of the self, and of those we might have labeled "other". (2010: 218)

What appeals and beguiles us about children's literature according to a renowned author of children's literature, Barbara F. Harrison is that the journeys of children "are written by adults who have brushed the dust from the past and have looked long and hard at what they have found. They are wise in memory" (1981: 243). Being an immigrant herself, Divakaruni has experienced the pleasant and unpleasant ordeals of living in another country. She did not want her own children and other children like hers from minority cultures living in adopted countries to feel inferior about their selves. Thus, in her young adult novels, she brings them to the forefront. The children characters from minority cultures (South Asian here) are projected in all their grandeur and heroism inspiring millions others caught in their ambiguous status to discover their true self and get rid of their complexes. Harrison views literature as a medium that "allows us, as it does our children, to hold life in our hands, the whole and the parts, to gather them into a coherent pattern". It allows us to understand the "ambiguities and ambivalences" of life and makes us stronger to confront life with greater courage and strength (1981: 253). Divakaruni firmly believes that this goal could best be accomplished through the genre of children's literature. Zupancic, in her interview with Divakaruni observes the trilogy to be radical. The novel, Zupancic asserts brings in together "the boy on the quest and the girl from the lowest castes in society, almost outcasts.... Using the framework of esoteric teachings from the Himalayas, you make them into spiritual heroes who may save the planet" (2012: 96-97). She portrays them as valuable beings and gives them the notability they deserve. Divakaruni endows in a young boy, a massive responsibility of bearing the 'conch', of becoming the 'conch bearer' in order to restore it to its proper place. The conch, out of all the powerful people chose this young boy:

Who knows? Maybe it sensed in you a special gift that neither you nor I know of yet. And when you touched my hand earlier today, giving me the tea, I felt your kindness. That itself is a valuable gift (Divakaruni 2003:33).

In this task, a young sweeper girl, Nisha, accompanies him. Together, they undertake an adventurous and dangerous journey, a quest in which they will discover themselves and return the magic object to its secure home. Divakaruni's aim was to inspire children and adults from other cultures (especially the dominant cultures) to discover, acknowledge and celebrate remarkable similarities and dissimilarities among divergent cultures. This would also help people appreciate and identify with children from minority cultures in a better way. She shares her thoughts in an interview, "Sisters and Spices" with Sujata Shekhar:

In Victory Song, set during the Indian independence struggle, I show that children in their

early teens, even ten-year olds, played a part. They were often carriers of messages because they could go places adults couldn't. Or in my trilogy *The Conch Bearer*, I created this fantasy adventure inspired by Indian folktales. I want not just for South Asian kids to read my books, but for others to relate to South Asian heroes and heroines. (2015)

Divakaruni believes that no culture is absolute or perfect. What is needed is blending of the cultures to bring out the best in you. She intends to bring together children from various backgrounds and ethnicities for a common cause. Anand becomes her spokesman in bringing together people from dissimilar backgrounds for a common cause of saving mankind and their planet from extinction (*Shadowland*). For that, they need to go back to their roots and strengthen them in order to realize their true selves and work towards a cause. Having stayed in a multicultural society, she wants to give the message to young readers to adopt the best of all cultures in order to overcome obstacles. According to Zupancic, *Shadowland* is "environmentally oriented and insisting on our collective responsibility for the destiny of the planet" (2013:113).

Divakaruni's works for children were also written as an attempt to meliorate the disappointment she felt as a resident of America post 9/11. She acknowledges the fact in one of her interviews quoted in "I explore complex diaspora identities: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni":

I have both a personal and larger reason to write children's books. After 9/11, there was so much distress in America that it led to an interesting cultural breakdown. Some of our communities were targeted. Many of our adults shut themselves off from other cultures. I tried to bring children of Indian and other cultures together in my literature.

A first-hand experience of racial abuse after 9/11 attacks made Divakaruni question her works. That was when she decided to write for children. She firmly believes that children are the future of the world. It is imperative to have an impact on children through writing as their views about life, people, culture and society were still in their formative stage. Divakaruni's agenda is to empower and help restore and establish the selfhood of children from South Asian origin by getting them acquainted with their roots. Moreover, she wants children from other cultures to relate to these characters and acknowledge their uniqueness at the same time. This would make them grow less suspicious of people from minority backgrounds and minimize their demeaning and derogatory stance. Divakaruni articulates her ambition in "Road to Shadowland":

My hope for children of Indian origin was that if they saw themselves reflected in art, it would interest them in their culture and strengthen their sense of identity. My hope for children of other backgrounds was that they would come to love the Indian characters in the books and see parts of themselves reflected in them. (2010: 218)

In Harrison's opinion, children's writing "is concerned with human experience, with heroic possibilities fulfilled and unfulfilled, with longings which are gratified and longings brought down by circumstance" (1981: 243). Divakaruni wanted to portray a world where nothing comes easy. It is only through hardships and sufferings, one reaches self-realization. Anand struggles to survive and provide for his family when his father goes missing. Nisha is an orphan who makes her living by sweeping streets. Moreover, according to Harrison:

Misconception about children's literature can be attributed, at least partially, to the curious myth of childhood as an idyllic state free from burdens, to be prolonged and to be patronized. (244)

It is absolutely wrong to assume that writing for children is less demanding and less strenuous task. Peter Hunt, a British scholar and a writer of children's books in his introduction to the book, *Understanding Children's Literature* states that children's literature has been conjectured to be "blissfully free of the 'oughts'—what we ought to think and say about them" (1999: 1). He believes that books for children are more than just a source of private delight. They have direct or indirect social, cultural and historical influences:

They are overtly important educationally and commercially—with consequences across culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development. (1)

Thus, Hunt considers children's books as "complex" (2). Even more complex he says "is the position it finds itself in between adult writers, readers, critics and practitioners, and the child readers" (2). The task of writing for children is more elaborate and intricate even though the language they opt for is simpler. In fact, it makes use of excellent metaphors and parables to convey the intensity, profoundness of feeling and emotions. The 'conch' and the 'mirror' used by Divakaruni in her trilogy act as excellent metaphors. Zupancic states:

The magical objects such as the conch and the mirror are metaphors for the need to acknowledge the existence of other dimensions and forces at work in the universe, but especially a call to all of us to understand that we would be lost without these dimensions—as they cannot function without our cooperation—again, without our deepest commitment to love and understanding. (2013: 115)

The companionship of Anand and Nisha is also a powerful metaphor. Divakaruni in her interview with Zupancic states that the hero here “becomes two, male and female, coming out of our ancient tradition of Lord Shiva, where Shiva is portrayed as half male and half female” (2012: 97). Both the male (Anand) and the female (Nisha) are needed to achieve the quest, “to save the world” (97). Though most of Divakaruni’s writing has been from feminist perspective, here she brings together the male and the female to bring home the point that at certain point both are imperative to accomplish crucial tasks (saving the world in this trilogy). Each of these metaphors is indispensable in understanding the overall meaning and is not merely used for ornamentation.

Divakaruni aspires to engender awareness among people (young adults, adults and old) to bring about a change in society that saw everything in binaries of subject/object, powerful/oppressed, good/bad, superior/inferior, male/female etc. She works to deconstruct these binaries by bringing the marginalized and the powerless to the forefront. In the first book, *The Conch Bearer*, the young heroes strive to survive in Kolkata slums. The second book *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* is deliberately placed in time of Muslim India to bring to the forefront a number of Muslim characters (especially after (9/11). Muslims were being seen as a threat and as untrustworthy. In the final book, *Shadowland*, Divakaruni’s focus is on the dilemma of powerless, oppressed people living illegally without any papers or means to obtain them. The novel depicts a completely depredated world. Divakaruni says about the third book:

In this third book, certain people are in power while many others do not have any place in the new society. People in power live in a dome, within an artificial universe where everything is beautiful. All the other people who live outside the dome are literally marginalized and ostracized. In many ways, the book is about them and how we can, perhaps, bring the two back together—those in the dome who have become heartless, and those outside who hold onto their traditional skills for survival, who have heart but no power, who are about to be destroyed. (2012: 97)

Early phases of children’s literature depict that it was bent on being didactic. But the writers are much more experimenting in this field. The moral is inherent but only as one part of the larger purpose. Divakaruni’s writing for children is not explicitly didactic even though she intends to convey a message. In her interview with Krishnaswami, Divakaruni opines that a message “has to rise out of a character’s understanding of the situation”. This message “should be something that the protagonist has been struggling with for a while, maybe a decision he or she needs to make, or a problem he or she has to overcome”. So the lesson has to be ultimately “dramatic” and not “didactic” in order to touch a cord with the reader (Divakaruni). These morals are mostly ambiguous and subtle and require slow and gradual syncing in. In *The Conch Bearer*, Anand struggles to come to the realization that the three virtues – honesty, loyalty and compassion need to exist side by side. All three are needed to collectively save the mankind from destruction:

Without one, the others lose their flavor. Honesty without compassion is too harsh to do any good. Compassion without loyalty lacks power...Loyalty without honesty may make you follow the wrong person (2003: 203).

Zupancic views Divakaruni’s final message as clear and precise: “it is the present that shapes the future, as our lives of today reflect the accumulation of our past experiences and responsibilities” (2013: 114). With the growing globalization and industrialization, the division between the rich and the poor has advanced to dangerous levels. The consequences are going to affect the entire planet if immediate steps are not taken collectively. Zupancic perceives Divakaruni’s biggest fear as the complete dissolution of values and traditions in the emerging era of utterly scientific world ruled by intellect and devoid of wonder and magic:

She points at the separation between power-seeking science that wants to control everything and everyone, privileging the intellect and smothering the heart, and the spiritual quest, the “magic”, the “tradition” that has been alive for millennia and maybe eradicated in the very country in which it originated” (2013: 114).

Divakaruni’s literature for children asserts the need to revive and maintain these values and traditions and to keep the belief in magic and wonder intact. Divakaruni’s works especially for children, affirm the need of a world to be built collectively “based on mutual understanding and love as a binding force that may perform miracles” (Zupancic 2013:107). By providing a spiritual aura to her trilogy, Divakaruni succeeds in passing on the legacy of bounteous and exuberant folklore as means of awareness and recognition of the ‘self’. Her principal desire is to motivate people, especially children, from contradictory cultures to get together in the common aim of making the world a peaceful and a worthier place. That’s the message she conveys through one of the healing prayers she learnt as a child and which she reiterates in *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*:

Sarvebhavantusukhinah
Sarvesantuniramayah
Sarvebhadranipashyantu
Ma kashchitdukhhabhagbhavet.
May all beings be happy

May all beings be healed
May all behold only what is good
May no one experience sorrow. (2005: 312)

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