

**Indian Mythological Metaphors in Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* and  
Mistry's *A Fine Balance***

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**Abstract**

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Rohinton Mistry make use of mythological metaphors to accentuate the liveliness of experiences that their characters undergo in most of their novels. The present paper focuses on the Indian mythological metaphors used by Divakaruni and Mistry in the novels of *Sister of My Heart* and *A Fine Balance*. They have enriched Diasporic literature through artistic ways, structural perfection, narrating myths, technical excellences, contextual relevance, symbols, significance and consequence in their novels. In India legends are all the more notable one and they assume an intriguing role in the life and literature of the nation. Its principles have enlivened the Hindu society and have formed its mind. The Indian identity of Mistry and Divakaruni inevitably root them to the Indian spirituality.*

**Key Words:** symbol, myth, India, tradition, story

**Introduction**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Rohinton Mistry, as celebrated diasporic writers have reflected the lives of the Indians and the immigrants in their fiction. As the novelists have been spending most of their time outside India than in it, they have been accepted as Asian American writers, living with a hybrid identity and writing partially autobiographical work. All their works are interwoven in the chief sense that they are written with the same purpose, which is to internationalize Indian literature, culture and tradition. Another common aspect is nostalgia; the two novelists' feeling of homesickness towards India lies as the basis for all their writings. These great writers who have settled in the United States and Canada feeling nostalgic for their life in India, decided to put it into words, write it down so that they can get it out of their system. The process of writing it down is also a quest for a sense of the self, to nail it down, and define it to oneself.

**Myth**

Legend has consistently had a huge state of affairs in the psychology of human and society from its start as crude strict account to its ongoing adjustment as a lead in the investigation of the unconscious psyche. According to the eminent psychologist, Carl Gustav

Jung, “the study of myths reveals about the mind and character of a people. And just as dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of the individual, so myths are the symbolic projections of a people’s hopes, values, fears and aspirations” (qtd. in Guerin 183).

### **Narration of Indian Myth**

For more than twenty years now, Divakaruni has been telling stories of Indian woman from her home in California. She uses myths not only as hold to associate herself with India but also to re-evaluate more reflectively on those surrounding the good, self-effacing and self-sacrificing Indian women. Divakaruni shows relevant issues that are of the Indian mind set. The world famous ancient Indian epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, myths, folk tales are sources with which Divakaruni writes about Indian mysticism in *Sister of My Heart*. She gives references in her novel on myths i.e., “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).

Divakaruni reveals the glorious stories of Rani of Jhansi through the voice of Sudha to Anju at the time when she is depressed because of her miscarriage and helps her to regain her strength. Sudha narrates it also to her daughter Dayita, on their way to America, in a different way. She even reveals the story of Lord Krishna who helped his sister Draupadi in times of need and considers the lost child of Anju to be Lord Krishna in the symbol of a star in the sky - thus leading Dayita to a bright future. Nilanjana S. Roy in an article entitled “Mushy Sister Act” comments:

If you’re a disciple of Gurumayi, as Divakaruni is, and a fan of the kind of New Age literature that believes in “twin souls”, and a believer of woman’s lib so long as it includes a handsome, faithful, sensitive prince in the storyline, this novel is the perfect present to yourself. Followers of feminism, both the Indian version, and the imported kind, will find Divakaruni’s arguments as easy to digest and harmless as regurgitated pap. (28)

When Sudha is confirmed by tests of carrying female baby, her mother-in-law tries to force her into an abortion. But to protect her baby, Sudha leaves her husband’s home for her parental home in Calcutta. She transforms herself from the Princess in the palace of the snakes to the Queen of swords. Sudha refuses to return to Ramesh, she also turns down the conditional offers of Ashok to marry her. Sudha’s journey to America is really the

beginning of her journey to a new world of women. In an interview with Arthur J. Pais in *Emory*, Divakaruni confesses:

I have been watching how Indian women were forced to do certain things -- as the stories of sacrifice and devotion in the mythology demand from them... And then there are inspiring stories about women like the Rani of Jhansi that offer women refreshing role models -- and the strength to fulfill their own destinies. (7)

All the three mothers enter this new world of women. This is symbolically shown when they sell their dilapidated, ancestral house and move to a new flat. The change in them after moving to their new home is amazing. "Along with the old house, the mothers seem to have shrugged off a great burden of tradition" (SMH 296). All the three moms start to lead a satisfying existence with a social reason. They tune in to the music that they like and go for strolls where they please and they no longer stress over the social shame appended to a divorced person and keep Sudha with them. They affectionately deal with Dayita, her little girl.

Divakaruni achieves in making her women characters something more than cardboard cartoons. Abha Pishi, the selfless widow who is shouldered on in an unfair social system for years, is allowed an outburst towards the end that is, indeed, clichéd - but is also humanizing. Nalini's flaws make her believable, though Gouri Ma absolutely refuses to come into relief. Divakaruni makes the lives of these young women as mesmerizing as those of any hapless maids in a Mills and Boon story.

The supporting women in the older generation, including Sudha's grim, controlling mother-in-law, are realistically sketched. Pishi who was widowed young, has in old age a vehement outburst on the iniquities of traditional attitudes – but Anju and Sudha remain silly and self-absorbed. They are still in adolescent mode, and preoccupied with their inner love agonies. In spite of Anju's early questioning of convention and Sudha's vivid imagination, their aims in life are centered first on finding perfect union with the right man and then on making dreams come true for their children.

Divakaruni has also brought out the importance of the position of stars for good fortune and this is associated with good luck in Indian tradition. Watching her aunt's fixation on every single visionary issue, Anju amusingly remarks: "Our stars must be really well aligned this month, Aunt Nalini keeps saying. First Sudha's marriage is all set, then I get a proposal, and now someone wants to buy the bookstore" (SMH 124).

### **Puranic Myths**

Myths associated with child - rearing have also been presented in *Sister of My Heart*. These myths incorporate the rituals and vice versa and it also to a great extent reinforces the concreteness of the Hindu social structure. Divakaruni for instance has described the ritual of *Shasthi Puja* and the wait for the *Bidhata Purush*, a ritual which seems to have evolved from old Puranic myths. They say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born as:

The Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be. That is why they bathe babies in sandalwood water and wrap them in soft red malmal, colour of luck. That is why they leave sweetmeats by the cradle ... If the child is especially lucky, in the morning it will all be gone". (SMH 3)

Pishi has her own superstitious beliefs and she is enwrapped in the consciousness of the past. Her belief reflects ironic contradictions inherent within the Hindu socio-cultural situation. Rupinder Kaur in the article, "Poetic Echoes from the Indian Diaspora in North America" examines:

Divakaruni thinks of the cultural encounters as an enriching though complicated and difficult experience. She emphasizes that an interaction between cultures can help to tone down and modify the negative elements of both the Indian and American manners and morals. She still upholds certain values and virtues of her Indian way of life. (12)

### **Telephone Story on Legends**

Divakaruni has documented an important issue of arranged marriage and the way matrimony is associated with horoscopes as a final resort. Though Anju and Sudha are educated, no one really has a say in terms of marriage. Gouri Ma promises Anju that she will marry her off to a man who will let her study further, and then consults astrologers to match horoscopes. Marriage tears them apart and Anju moves to America while Sudha to rural Bengal. Men separate them effectively in terms of geography and their lives are shattered when they attempt to conform to the rules of the masculine society. When Anju is in America, she loses her psychological dependability and in India, Sudha loses her independence and it is just when they choose to move to a female universe very expelled from male geographic definitions, though representative, that they start to discover answers for their issues. When Anju is agitated with her unsuccessful labour (the death of unborn blue Krishna baby in her womb), Sudha considers her by the use of telephone and discloses to her a story of Jhansi, once there was a princess who spent her girlhood in a disintegrating marble

castle set around with watches. They mentioned to her what was appropriate and what was not, and held up their toxin lances before her face on the off chance that she endeavoured to wander outside the limits they had drawn for her. In this phone story, the disintegrating marble castle is emblematic portrayal of the bound space which men have designated to women in their universe. The princess in the legend attempts to live by the guidelines of the male world. She weds the King picked for her and considers, however, when it is realized that the hatchling is female the men choose to devastate the child. At that point the sovereign agitators to ensure her infant and she leaves the realm and arrives at the sea's edge. In the wake of tuning in to the story, Anju recuperates from her downturn and proceeds with the fanciful story that the sovereign had overlooked that she had a twin sister who lived in the land over the sea. The sister was sending her all her affection as this rainbow. The two protagonists, Anju and Sudha discover security just past the male world. Sudha wants the women of the Chatterjee home to favour her to resemble the Rani of Jhansi, the Queen of Swords.

### **Mirroring of Marriage with Indian Traditions**

Divakaruni has attempted to scrutinize the long services related with marriage which describe Hindu traditions. Multifaceted nature and length of the antiquated marriage ceremonies are introduced in the entirety of its real wealth. The way Divakaruni has mirrored the way toward wedding and the intriguing Indian food likewise centres on the convention of India which is rich and fluctuated. *Sister of My Heart* is an intriguing novel, rich with family bonds and multifaceted nature of relations that every individual in a family encounters that microcosm in an unexpected way. Divakaruni capably examines the sorts of Indian families and the mind boggling connections and their job especially in man centric family structure. Her demeanour towards her native land is not deprived of positive thinking or confidence. Divakaruni's longing for the place where there is her starting point i.e., birth place, her pride in its rich writing and old stories, and her worship for her religion are communicated through the various nostalgically authored cradle songs, axioms, stories and mythological references.

Divakaruni has explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. She depicts both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The work of Divakaruni is significant in making society aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression. Divakaruni has related the Indian diaspora and the very idea of a diasporic literature is pregnant with two relationships: One, the relationship to its motherland that gives rise to nostalgia and reminiscences; second, the forged relationship with the new land and its people, which gives

rise to conflicts and split personalities. Her writings of diaspora deal with myths, alienation, exile, loneliness, cultural conflicts, sense of rejection by the host community, their efforts at assimilation, sprinkled with descriptions of home again which become sometimes romantic outpourings of nostalgia and longing.

### **Symbol of Quilt**

The readers admire at the symbol of quilt in *A Fine Balance* as Mistry sketches the making of quilt beautifully. Once at Dina Dalal's house there seems to be a revival of hope in the tailor's lives. As the tailors go on to transform the lengths of cloth according to specified patterns, Dina patiently collects the left over bits and pieces for making quilt. Maneck remarks:

“Too many different colours and designs,” he said. “It’s going to be very difficult to match them properly... But that’s where taste and skill come in. What to select. What to leave out – and which goes next to which,” replies Dina. (FB 311)

Each colour and each design in the quilt has a story to tell that has a direct bearing on Dina. When the stack of remnants sinks, Dina resorts to all those rejected pieces of chiffons to stitch the quilt. When the chiffons too run out, the quilt ceases to live. Dina begins to empathize with the tailors with Maneck giving voice to her muted sympathy. She offers them her verandah to live in when they return to her in a state of shock and Om and Maneck are delighted to be living under the same roof. Now the quilt breathes life again as she sits with the patches after dinner, “These new pieces are completely different in style from the old ones,” said Maneck (FB 403).

The quilt maker has shed several of her defenses and pretensions. Very soon she even shares her kitchen with them. And as Ishvar begins to trust her with bits of their past, more pieces are joined to the growing story of the tailors. “Sailing under one flag” and getting busy with the quilt making, days pass by “as comforting and liquid as a piece of chiffon” (FB 185) between one's fingers.

Dina, back at her brother's, covers herself with the unfinished quilt recollecting the events and experiences concealed in the rightly knit patches. However, frightened of thinking aloud of the past, she decides to lock it away:

God is a giant quilt-maker, with an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don't fit well together anymore, it's all become meaningless. So he has abandoned it. (FB 340)

Mistry uses literary devices such as irony, humour and intertextuality to make his narratives effective. For example, irony of the society is added into the novel, especially in the conclusion. His humour is participative but not scorning. It is very apt to describe in the words of Dodidya:

Mistry's metaphorical unfinished quilt is the central message of the story. This is a novel given much to occupational metaphors, so the pattern is not just a sheet pattern, but also a pattern of interweaving itineraries and narrative threads. As the quilt is made of patches, the reality particularly Indian social reality is made of various patches of different shapes and shades. All those patches put together go into the making of the whole. It becomes a suitable metaphor to describe reality in fictional terms. (78)

In fact, *A Fine Balance* is a criticism of contemporary life and literature. The summing up of the novel is excellent and nowhere the reader comes to realize whether it is the beginning or the end. Sometimes the surprise emanates from the linguistic mode of thought used by the characters that have dramatic overtones and undertones. V. K. Sunwani examines the novel:

Though it could not make it to the Booker Prize, for critics felt it was a Canadian book about India – a bit like cosmic sick joke, *A Fine Balance* is a good read and as Mistry claims rightly, it is a fine balance between hope and despair; the novel ends certainly on an optimistic and hopeful note. (112)

Mistry also uses the flashback technique to co-ordinate different events scattered here and there in this epic novel. Most of the events *A Fine Balance* revolve around a predicament of a layman and Shiela Mani in her article “Moral Dimensions in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*” exhorts:

Mistry narrates the story in a masterly fashion and the reader is shuffled between various time phases that mark each major historical upheaval. He highlights crucial events in the country's chronicle by depicting the background of each of the major characters. Each member of this quartet aspires in a changing society to transcend the constraints of birth, caste, sex in a modern, urban world where anything seems possible. (195)

Mistry's novels are characterised by both ethnocentric and minority discourse features. Naturally, his works clearly portray the anxieties, alienation and feeling of insecurity of a modern day Parsi. He uses different narrative techniques. In *A Fine Balance* he employs the third person narrative. He does not name the city Mumbai in the novel.

Mumbai is called 'City by the sea.' In the structural strategies employed by Mistry in the process of creating a clean, linear narrative, the locale forms a significant part in *Such a Long Journey*. Mumbai is the city which most of the Parsis have adopted as their own and it also offers a vantage point for observing the change in the socio-political context. However, he does not use the name Mumbai but calls it Bombay for he loves that name. He gives autobiographical touches to portray the characters in his novels.

### Conclusion

Divakaruni and Mistry have added a new flavour to English language and they have experimented with the language and fused Indian spirit in the foreign language. Form and style are equally important to these writers and they have penned down their experiences in their new alien land. Symbols and images are used adeptly by the two novelists. The language skills, verbal brilliance, word power, writing capacities, symbols, controlled imagination and writing skills help Divakaruni and Mistry to emerge as the distinguished Creative Indian diasporic artists. A novel must have meaning and purpose. As creative artists, the two novelists achieve this objective admirably and adequately through their fictions. Divakaruni and Mistry are nostalgic and diasporic novelists who have drawn their vision of the Indian society frequently from their memories of early home life and of their relationships with their kith and kin. Their novels bear the air of Hindu tradition, mythology and are reminiscent of the Indian family scene. They excel in craftsmanship of language, and imagery.

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