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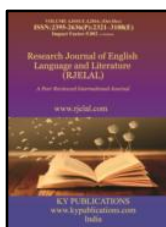
SYMBOLIC AND ALLEGORICAL FANTASY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
'THE CONCH BEARER'

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the influential writers of the Indian Diaspora has produced Children's literature with a view to educate, entertain and create a sense of belongingness about Indian culture and its roots in the children of the 'exile' in America. The notion of 'home' doesn't seem to exist in the younger generation of the Indian Diaspora as they are born and brought up in the multicultural space, which they consider as their 'home'. This disconnectedness in the roots of one's own culture, specifically Indian Culture makes Divakaruni interested in writing about children in her fictional work, 'The Conch Bearer'

Divakaruni gives voice to the child protagonist, Anand and explores the world of myth, magic, fantasy, fables, fairy tales, illusions, spiritualism connected to Indian Culture, mythology and cosmology. This paper tries to put forth the ways in which this symbolic and allegorical fantasy have been used and represented through Abhay, the child protagonist and other principal characters in the novel.

Key words: Myth, allegory, fantasy, magic, spiritualism, illusions

Snowy White Himalayan mountains, luscious green trees, flowing serene rivers, the eternal silence, atmosphere of adventure, a sanctum sanatorium of peace and happiness; the narrow, crowded and filthy streets of Calcutta, the cold evenings and nights with eerie atmosphere mark the setting of Chitra Divakaruni's children's novel, 'The Conch Bearer'. 'The Conch Bearer' was written and published in 2003. About the novel, in an interview, the writer says: "If children are able to appreciate the characters in books, in real life too, they can be tolerant towards people of other cultures" (Interview with Divakaruni) The novel is basically for the reading of the younger generation in America, both white Americans and especially Indian Americans who lost ties with their home country, India. Divakaruni attempts to revive its culture, tradition in the minds of the young children. Anand,

a twelve year old child protagonist, the 'Conch Bearer' in the story sets on a journey of adventure to the Himalayas to restore the Conch in its rightful place. In the process, Anand attains a spiritual outlook on life and decides to be away from his family and native city, Calcutta. This paper tries to explore the novel from the writer's use of symbols, imagery, cultural aspects, dreams, fantasies, stories, fables, fairy tales to bring out the theme of the novel, 'Good wins over Evil'.

The Conch in the story serves as a symbol or a clarion call for the humanity to live in peace, harmony without having egoistic or evil way of living. The Master healer, Abhaydatta appoints Anand to be the Conch Bearer to protect it from the evil hands of Surabhanu, a healer who turns greedy for power for his selfish ends. Abhaydatta says to Anand, "I need an assistant, someone to journey

with me. To protect my back, as it were. There are things I'm not able to do that you might be able to do for me. Places you might be able to enter. And if there comes a time when the thief does catch up with me, you might be able to get away with the conch. Because no one would expect a mere boy to be the Conch Bearer" (The Conch Bearer: 32) 'Conch' in the Hindu mythology is used by Lord Vishnu to eliminate the evil from people's mind. Sanchita Chowdhury, in her article, 'Significance of Conch Shell in Hinduism' says, "The Conch shell is a significant instrument in Hinduism. The Conch shell is known as the 'shanka' in Sanskrit. It is a symbol of purity, brilliance and auspiciousness." And adds that "The conch is said to contain the five elements i.e., water, fire, earth, sky and air. When the conch is blown, the sound that comes from it is a symbol of creation" The Conch which is white in colour symbolises purity and gets its properties after some thousands of years of being in the depths of ocean waters, which shows that it takes so many years to be a righteous human being. Human beings have the tendency to oscillate between good and evil. It takes lot of efforts for them to awaken the sensitivity in themselves to attain higher consciousness in life. The sound that emerges from the conch is pure, divine, gives peace of mind, alertness signifying the fact that the mankind needs to monitor his/her correct and wrong ways of life.

The Conch has got special powers in the story. When Abhay brings back Anand's sister's life to normalcy by making her remember her past and to speak coherently, Anand and his mother develop faith in him and thus Anand's journey to the Himalayas begins. The Conch symbolises the power to transform the lives of people and to heal the world. When Anand holds the Conch in his hands, it radiates and there is an aura around it; and he wishes to touch it. " 'Just for a moment, just for comfort,' Anand says in his mind and realizes he's speaking to the conch" (The Conch Bearer: 109). In a way it reflects that if human beings are good in nature, helping people, positive vibrations spread from them creating an environment of understanding and liking for one another. Surabhanu tries to cast a magical and evil spell on Anand to trace where he was and fortunately, the

power of conch protects him from becoming a prey to his deeds evidently showing good triumphs over evil in most of the circumstances in life.

Anand wishes to get 'telepathic powers', 'mind energy', 'ability to change base metals into gold', to watch the universe and night skies through 'telescope'; and to even see what his father was doing in another country leaving their family. (TCB: 92) When he was on his journey to restore the conch, he once sees the image of his mother crying, in the bonfire that lies before Nisha and himself; and calling him back to their home,. He could get these visionary powers due to the presence of conch with him. Divakaruni here tries to dissolve the boundaries between the normal human beings without any power, and the people with the universal power of God; by showing how the later can have immense power and energy within them to be blessed by God. Indian culture is deeply connected to spiritualism as a way of living which seems to be lost in the present times.

On their way to the Himalayas, when Anand and Nisha take rest near a bonfire, Anand throws herbs and spices in it to shun the evil forces around them. Indian cuisine is well known for spices which can make the dishes delicious as well as have healing properties. Divakaruni, in her novel, 'The Mistress of Spices' deals with the spices such as cardamom, dalchini, pepper, red chilli, cloves elaborately and depicts how Tilottama, the Mistress of Spices works with spices and solves the problems of her American and Indian American customers. In 'The Conch Bearer' the spices have the power to drive away the evil. About spices and healing properties, the writer of a web article says, "Spices have always been believed to have healing and magical qualities. They have been used to cast spells, as incense in religious rites, to embalm corpses, to add aroma to perfumes and aphrodisiacs" (www.indianfoodsite.com) thus proving the fact that for ages man has been closely connected to nature and both are interdependent seeking help from each other.

Reference to Nakul and Sahadev, two of the five Pandavas of the Mahabharata is made in the story. Nakul and Sahadev have the power to bring the dead back to life. It is interesting to note that, in

the modern times, Cryonics, an emerging field in science has been working for decades together on bringing the dead alive. The Old man, Abhaydatta explains the story of the conch to Anand thus, "It came out of an ancient time, the time of myth, when, it is said, great heroes roamed the earth. These heroes were the sons of gods – and their fathers often gave them magical gifts. Two such heroes were named Nakul and Sahadev. Their fathers, the Ashwini Kumars, who were the physicians of the Gods, gave them the conch. With it, Nakul and Sahadev could heal both men and animals and cure the land of famine and drought. At the great battle of Kurukshetra, it is said, they even used it to bring dead warriors back to life. But in doing this, they overstepped their bounds, and in punishment the conch was taken from them and buried deep in a valley of the Himalayas, for the gods felt that men were not ready for such a gift. For centuries it lay there, lost, while armies and factions warred across the land, killing and maiming and laying the earth bare." Through the character of Abhay, Divakaruni tells the story of the origin of conch and arouses the curiosity in her young readers. The story of Nakul has a special significance, a moral that young minds need to take back home; that with goodness, righteousness, spiritualism, one can achieve anything they would like to in their lives.

Yet another fable of 'one-eyed deer' is narrated by Abhaydatta to Nisha and Anand. The deer was afraid of the lion in the jungle and was cautious of him but not the river and the hunter who killed it. Abhaydatta tells the story to them to prepare them for facing any kind of danger and to be cautious all the time. Divakaruni is successful in hitting the nail on the head by putting across the message children have to learn in life through Abhaydatta's voice and the one-eyed deer. The vision of anyone has to be multi-directional but not uni-directional.

Brotherhood of Conch is the group of spiritual healers protecting the Conch which bestows them with powers to heal people and the world. Anand becomes the protector of the Brotherhood. Here brotherhood acts as a symbol for Universal Brotherhood where the people of the

nation are interconnected and work for the well-being of the country as a whole. Divakaruni probably suggests that in real world too spiritual leaders such as The Dalai Lama, The Pope, The Mother of Pondicherry, Sri Sri Ravishankar, Sadguru exist to bring peace and harmony in the world. This peace doesn't come with ease just like restoring the conch but is fraught with obstacles and difficulties. Some babas, bereft of morals and values corrupt the world. Surabhanu is one such healer who violates the norms of brotherhood and turns selfish to attain all the powers to rule the world; ultimately showing that when man attains power, he tends to misuse it for his selfish needs.

Silver Valley, the village Nag Champa near the Himalayas, the river, the three peaked valley represent the higher world and higher consciousness in the human mind. The three peaks represent the holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. In Indian Cosmology, "The Universe is preserved by Vishnu (The God of Preservation) and destroyed by Shiva (The God of Destruction)" (<https://googleweblight.com>)

Snake and mongoose are eternal rivals. Snake is Surabhanu fighting for the Conch, Mongoose is Abhaydatta trying to protect it. When Abhaydatta was to resume his normal human self from being the mongoose, the Master Healers, Nisha and Anand offer constant prayers and chant mantras. Prayers have got immense power and Universe is guided by a strong and powerful supernatural force beyond our vision, reach and comprehension.

At the end of the novel, with his powers, Abhaydatta makes Anand's family forget about him and their expectations that he would return to their home. This recurring theme of 'Remembrance and Forgetting' is also seen in Divakaruni's 'Sister of My Heart' novel. Through this theme, she brings out the point that, on the path of spiritualism, one has to forego the emotional attachments and identify oneself with God, which in turn gives eternal bliss but not the pain and suffering of the real world. This thought supports the lines given in an article about Spiritualism: "Spiritual effort in most religions is based upon three main basic beliefs: 1. Our present state or reality is ridden with problems and suffering

We can overcome the suffering and impermanence to which we are subject and 3. Through spiritual effort and discipline, it is possible for us to transcend our limitations and experience higher states of consciousness and even discover the inner self that is hidden in all of us." (<https://googleweblight.com>)

Through the images, symbols and metaphors of the Conch, Snake, Mongoose, Fire, Spices, Brotherhood of Conch, One-eyed deer, Nakul and Sahadev's story, Spiritualism, Divakaruni makes us travel to a world of imagination and fantasy. It transports the individuals to a different world away from the dreariness of the world and live temporarily in a virtual world of serenity, calmness, adventure giving the readers a sense of happiness. Readers are engaged in a rapturous suspense, do not feel like coming out of this world; and feel that it should exist for eternity.

Thus Chitra Divakaruni, being a diasporic writer and rooted culturally in India, successfully brings out eastern mysticism, myth, magical element, spiritualism through symbolic and allegorical aspects in this novel, 'The Conch Bearer' both with an aim to keep up the native culture alive in her readers' minds and bring in a sense of belongingness and connectedness among the younger 'American Born Confused Desis'. Her portrayal of magic and spiritualism has a universal appeal which could be comprehended as an urgent call for universal brotherhood aiming at peace and harmony for a happy and better world.

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