

A STUDY OF HOME IN INDIAN DIASPORIC LITERATURE: RE-VISITING MYTHS THROUGH MEMORIES

Juriti Goswami

Research Scholar, Department of English Gauhati University, Assam, India.

Abstract

The idea of home has always occupied a central position in diasporic literature contributing to the array of work that attempts to represent the complex nature of identity. The indigenous myths, in this respect, are a significant troupe that the diasporic writers use to revisit the memories of the motherland. This 'going back' to one's homeland through the means of myths becomes a challenging task as it threatens to identify nostalgia with reality. The critical western approach coupled with a yearning for home create a space of conflict in literature where the writers' attempts to re-imagine their motherland constantly confront their inability to re-create the authentic picture of home. Bringing in the ideas of diasporic sensibility and postcolonial theory this paper will argue that, myths, in the hands of these writers, become a useful tool of navigating a fresh postcolonial identity which is more relevant and contemporary.

Keywords: Home, Identity, Memory, Myths, Postcolonial.

The yearning for the lost country arises from a sense of dislocation of people who live in a foreign land, the experience of which is often marked by a lack of belonging. Martin Baumann writes: "The idea of Diaspora has been celebrated as expressing notions of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity, fragmentation and (re)construction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multi-locationality and so forth" (324). Though going abroad and settling in another country has become quite a common phenomenon, the literature produced by the expatriates is yet to establish a complete break from the mythological past of the home country. Diasporic communities often carry their culture, beliefs and traditions, myths and legends along with them. These memories of the homeland create a bridge through which they try to negotiate the gap between the ideal and the real. However, this can also be seen as recourse for the diasporic writers to shelter themselves from the hostility of the host country. Jasbir Jain states in "The New Parochialism: Homeland in the Writing of the Indian Diaspora":

Diasporic presence is dispersal, a scattering, a flight and has to take root elsewhere, especially if it seeks sustenance and growth. But it continues to depend on the bits and pieces of its origin to hold itself together in the face of the onslaught, rejection or domination by the "other", by the world which both frightens and fascinates. (79)

Therefore, they shift their attention to the myths and legends of the home country. This urge to re-live them in the host country can be seen in many diasporic writers among whom Salman Rushdie, Amitabh Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are some of the most celebrated names. This paper will particularly look into the selected novels of Divakaruni in order to see the re-telling of myths as a possible source of channelling the postcolonial discourse of resistance towards a more relevant direction. Incorporating a feminist perspective she re-defines the narratives of her home by chiefly focusing on the condition of women in modern Indian society. While the recent history of the nation is filled with the sagas of women's many virtues, she attempts to go further back to the mythical past of the country in search of her roots. However, this tracing back to one's origin is often fraught with discomfort and dissatisfaction as the memories of the past are often shrouded in mystery. Divakaruni re-reads the epics of India from different sources and substantiates her re-creation with enough details. The vision of Indian mythical women that she carried in her memory is re-fashioned with a new vigour and a distinct modern perspective. But this urge of 'going back' to the mythical past is not exclusive to Divakaruni's writings.

The myths and legends of the motherland evoke multiple meanings once it is speculated from a distance and with a lens of unfamiliarity. Divakaruni, an India born American author, is celebrated for her fresh take on Indian epics – the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Commenting on this fascination with the Indian epics Mukherjee writes:

Certain concerns of the modern Indian novel- for example, conflict between an individual's social function and personal predilection, smoldering (sic) anger of strong women trapped in restrictive

gender roles, questioning of caste as identity marker, transgressive sexuality, corruption in politics-all seem to be prefigured in this amazing text that has existed in some form or other for at least two thousand years. (603)

In her writings, Divakaruni's women characters are not entrapped in their mythical past; rather they talk and think like the modern Indian women who navigate their social position according to their own standards. In her two novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *Forest of Enchantments* (henceforth referred as *Palace* and *Forest*), Divakaruni has re-created the epic heroines, their worlds and their thoughts in such a way that it is at once thought-provoking and refreshing. Her physical distance from India and an exposure to the western ideas have contributed to her critical outlook on Indian women and their condition in society. Though she is deeply influenced by the memories of the past, her recollection of them in the two narratives offers a new vantage point in mapping the culture of India. As Salman Rushdie puts it, "the shards of memory acquires greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities" (13). By re-creating a fierce Draupadi and an unconventional Sita Divakaruni has introduced a new India where women are more resourceful, determined and strong.

However, a new India often emerges in the works of the diasporic writers as Rushdie says, "physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions and actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indian of the mind" (10). But Divakaruni's India is distinct as she brings women's voices to the forefront of her narratives. Pushing the stories of men in the background she subverts the patriarchal definition of a postcolonial nation. Elleke Boehmer says:

Establishing himself as at once an inheritor and a remaker of cultural traditions, the male nationalist writer both fashions his identity as a citizen of his modern nation-state and, setting himself against the European canon taught in university colleges across the colonised world, claims rights of literary paternity. (27)

Though, a wide range of fiction has already been created by the diasporic writers; none of these renders Indian culture, specially Indian myths from a feminist perspective. Divakaruni's works dissent from the stereotypical ideas associated with Indian femininity and question the relevance of the traditional social structures where a woman never voices her resistance. Moving beyond the norm, Divakaruni searches for a medium through which women will be able to design their own worlds in their own narratives. Therefore, in her two novels she allows her heroines to narrate their own stories from the first person point of view. However, writing about the Indian myths with an aim of subverting the patriarchal undertones becomes an audacious task for a diasporic women writer because it involves a crucial aspect of her own identity. As a women migrating to another place women are required to take forward the legacy of the home country, which in this case, is the tradition of maintaining the passivity and tolerance characteristic of Indian women. Amba Pande States:

Indian women usually migrate within the patriarchal framework and cultural considerations, and are supposed to preserve it as the 'bearers of Indian tradition,' yet the process of migration and economic self-dependency give them an opportunity to assert independence, and redefine roles and perceptions of the self.(1)

Therefore, Divakaruni's concept of women characters is distinct from that of her contemporaries. There are a number of Indian women writers who have also re-imagined the epics and introduced some amount of autonomy in their characters' choices. But none has emphasised on the use of the body as a site of contesting ideologies as she does. Her female characters redefine their lives and evaluate it from the modern feminist consciousness. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi appears to have a control over her body which is otherwise seen through the male gaze only as a source of beauty and as a site of possession. She assumes control over her life by not by a radical refusal to play her role but by altering the way of accepting them. She offers a critique of the patriarchal society which tried to dominate her since the moment of her unusual birth. Smriti Singh states: "Though she doesn't switch genders like Shikhandi, she has definitely moved away from traditional femininity towards vengeance which is one of the important strands in reading this epic through feminist lenses" (130). Divakaruni narrates the entire story of Draupadi capturing the most significant moments of her life. Even though Divakaruni does not change the original narrative of the epics, she does include a sense of agency in the characters.

She brings to light the secondary position of women in Indian society where they are not allowed the luxury of choosing their own life partners. Marriage as an institution of granting social stability and validating women's identity is severely criticised by Draupadi. While the original narrative maintains silence concealing the internal thoughts of the heroine; Divakaruni sheds lights on those complicated feelings. After her absurd marriage with the five Pandavas, she realises how the society has commoditised her as she reflects: "like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (*Palace* 120). This feeling of powerlessness is

acknowledged by Draupadi but she is a proud woman who is intelligently calculates her approach to all the situations. Divakaruni handles the most debated issues of the epic story with a brilliant narrative technique where she uses the fluidity of stories in order to keep the mystery intact. For instance, the story of her swayamvar arranged by her father and the subsequent events leading up to the victory of Arjun is narrated in the first person point of view. But by introducing the story of the bard who later sings about the same event from a different perspective Divakaruni has essentially challenged the authority of a single story (*Palace* 95).

Draupadi vehemently opposes the centrality of men her story. Rather than focusing on the patriarchal rendering of the stories of Nal and Damayanti she questions the idea of justice which is rendered invisible in the story. She probes deeper into all the issues that are taking place around her and try to offer a refreshing perspective. For instance, Kunti's character through Draupadi's eyes appears to be an incarnation of female power that can exert her political influence even from the narrow confines of domestic walls. It was essentially because of Kunti that Draupadi was ordered to marry the five Pandavas. However, Divakaruni's Draupadi realizes the pressure of society and customs but keeps assuring herself, "I was a woman, I had to use my power differently" (*Palace* 99). Challenging the idea of chastity, Draupadi expresses the mechanisms through which female sexuality is appropriated in order to fit into the constructs of the family. It is crucial to note that "her own sexuality is curtailed as she had to yield to the fantasies and desires of five men" (Rao 396). The idea of chastity is bent and twisted in accordance with the needs of the family and Draupadi's narrative exposes the politics behind this. She notices Kunti's motherhood as a political contract where her body is used to secure king Pandu's lineage. The angst and pain of Gandhari's delayed motherhood is also analysed by Draupadi as a subtext of the political power struggle. By breaking away from the conventional means of measuring motherhood and family politics, she calls into question the postcolonial nation's persistence on establishing a normative feminine identity symbolic of the motherland. She breaks the myths of passivity and tolerance as inherent feminine quality by showing her female characters as aggressive, power-driven and revenge-seeking women. Even one of the most celebrated women like Sita appears in a completely different light in her later novel *Forest of Enchantments*.

Sita is perhaps the most stereotyped character in Indian literature throughout generations. Though she is a key figure in the *Ramayana*, Sita's voice remains unheard for the most part in the narrative. She is seen as an epitome of tolerance and sacrifice—the two virtues which are glorified in the collective unconscious of Indian people. Therefore, re-creating her character from a feminist perspective appears to be a daunting task. But Divakaruni has attempted her best narrative means to bring out a strong and determined aspect of Sita's character that does not conform to the patriarchal paradigms of womanhood. Her Sita does not jump into fire; rather stands upright as asks legitimate questions claiming her innocence:

"O King of Ayodhya, you know I am innocent, and yet, unfairly you're asking me to step into the fire. You offer me a tempting prize indeed- to live in happiness with you and my children. But I must refuse. Because if I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they are not guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even queen Sita went through it". (*Forest* 357)

The familiar story of Sita as a docile, weak and self-sacrificing woman is challenged in such strong dialogues. However, the difficulty of a diasporic writer in retelling the stories arises from her complicated sense of belonging. She is influenced by the western modern ideas of feminism and she tries to place them within the discourse of the third world countries. As Pande carefully brings out, "the diasporas are embedded in both host and homelands, the natural corollary is that factors from both the host land and the homeland—including gender relations and gender hierarchies—impact the diasporic women" (6). As an Indian woman, Divakaruni tries to re-establish women at the centre of her narrative with a clear awareness that in doing so, she cannot totally disregard the Indian traditional perceptions. Her dislocation from the native culture gives her a space in which she can critically present her observation in a non-threatening manner.

In the later novel *Forest of Enchantments*, published in 2019, Divakaruni's attitude to Indian culture seems to have undergone a change. She presents a nuanced perspective of the male characters that are also torn between their duty and love. It is not only Sita who seeks to liberate herself; rather search for liberation from the shackles of society makes the male characters resonate well with modern Indian men. This change of tone in her voice of resistance can also result from the central character's irreversible place in the collective imagination of Indian people. She is one of those many stereotypes that stay with a culture irrespective of any generation. Divakaruni does not deviate much from this stereotype as her Sita too remains quite silent during her time of humiliation. Divakaruni re-creates Sita's agony, her troubled conscience when Sita witnesses the mutilation of Surpanakha by Ram and Lakshman. Yet here too, Sita refrains from speaking aloud. She is painfully aware of her silence and states: "I blamed love, too, for my silence. How it makes us back down from protesting because we are afraid of displeasing the beloved. . ." (*Forest* 151).

However, there are a number of instances where Divakaruni gives Sita a sense of agency even in her confined domestic space. She uses her bedchamber as a space where Sita exercises her power to influence her husband. Divakaruni creatively builds up an environment where Sita's characteristic calm demeanour overpowers Ram's values regarding duty. When Ram was banished from the kingdom, Sita is thrilled at the prospect of experiencing a life full of adventures amidst forests. She does not hesitate to manipulate Ram's notion of duty in order to get her desired outcome. Sita tells Ram that by virtue of being his wife, she should be allowed to serve him. It is evident from such instances that Divakaruni tries to give Sita a semblance of agency in her oppressive situations by filling the gaps left in the epic narrative. However, Janaki Nair states: "Posing the question of female agency-consent, choice or solidarity-within patriarchal structures defers the question of advancing the possibility of an escape from patriarchal oppressions altogether" (93). This inability to break free from the discourse of patriarchal representational politics is characteristic of a diasporic writer's constant struggle with the imagined and the real. Even if Divakaruni intended to offer a fresh perspective of the heroine Sita, she superimposes a futile sense of agency in Sita's character. However, any concluding remark must take into account the fact that Sita's character is quite distinct from the fire born rebel Draupadi. Therefore, the apparent restraint that Divakaruni has in Sita's narrative results from her unwillingness to disrupt the traditional beliefs of her home country. Ellen Banda Aaku states: "To me resistance means changing beliefs, traditions, and values that place women below men in terms of being heard, making decisions and choices" (qtd. in Hernandez et al. 6). In this regard, Divakaruni achieves her goal of introducing a new India where women are making their own choices even if they are surrounded by oppressive elements of the society.

Divakaruni re-creates her childhood memories of listening to these mythical stories. But in doing so, she changes the negative connotations associated with such stories. In her narratives Draupadi is not a sharp-tongued, shrewd woman and Sita a mere victim. She presents an India that is changing its approach towards reading and appreciating the stories and struggles of the marginalized faction of the society.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baumann, Martin. "Diaspora: Genealogies of semantics and Transcultural Comparison", *International Review for the History of Religions*, vol.47, no. 3, 2000. pp. 313-37.
- [2] Jain, Jasbir. "The New Parochialism: Homeland in the Writing of the Indian Diaspora", *The Diaspora writes Home: Subcontinental Narratives*, Springer, 2001. pp. 61-69.
- [3] Mukherjee, Meenakshi, "Epic and Novel in India", *The Novel: History, Geography and Culture*, edited by Franco Moretti, *Princeton University Press*, pp. 597-631.
- [4] Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, Grantha Books, 1991.
- [5] Boehmer, Elleke. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, Manchester University Press, 2005.
- [6] Pande, Amba. editor, *Women in the Indian Diaspora: Historical Narratives and Contemporary Challenges*, Springer, 2018. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-10-5951-3_1
- [7] Singh, Smriti. "Revisiting The Mahabharata: Draupadi's voice in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*", *Cultural Intertexts*, vol.3, 2005. pp. 123-132
- [8] Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*, Picador, 2008
- [9] Rao, Gorkvika. "Reconstructing Signs and Images : A Feminist Interpretation of *Mahabharat*" *Modern Research Studies: An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol.2, no. 3, Sept. 2015, pp. 390-399.
- [10] Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Forest of Enchantments*, Harper Collins, 2019.
- [11] Nair, Janaki. "On the Question of Agency in Indian Feminist Historiography", *Gender & History*, vol.1.6 no.1 April 1994, pp. 82-100.
- [12] Hernandez, Jennifer Browdy et al., editors. *African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.