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Children's Chimera: Ethics, History and Science as Tools in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Brotherhood of Conch* Trilogy.

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Abstract

In recent times, children are not aware of Indian history. They do not know about the relationship between Indian history and Indian myth. But the author makes the readers to be familiar with that relationship in a precise way through her novels. Chitra Divakaruni in this series illustrates much about Indian culture, myth and history to the foreign readers and Indian readers as well. Among the different attributes of culture, food has been given much importance by Chitra Divakaruni. Namita Bhandare admits that, “where the book comes alive is in its description of Calcutta and its food; Divakaruni clearly is a mistress of spices as she moves and shakes when she remembers the flavours and smells of her childhood. Even a simple khichuri dish fills the senses with its redolent spices and the wholesome goodness of its basic ingredients” (Bhandare 186).

Keywords

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Magic Realism, Childhood Fantasy, *Brotherhood of Conch* Trilogy.

**Introduction**

Chitra Divakaruni is a multi-talented person who is known as a novelist, poet, professor, essayist, short story writer, book reviewer, columnist, and activist. She is the author of eleven novels which includes her latest novel *Oleander Girl* (2013). She has won many awards like American Book Award, Pushcart Prize, and one of her novels *The Mistress of Spices* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize. Her works mainly deal with the immigrant experience, fantasy, magical realism, history and myth. In particular *The Conch Bearer*, *The Brotherhood of Conch Book I* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, *the Brotherhood of Conch Book II* (2005), and *Shadow Land, the Brotherhood of Conch Book III* (2009) deal with childhood fantasy.

Fantasy is one of the most important genres in children's literature which commonly uses magic and other supernatural phenomena as a main aspect of the plot or theme. Most of the works which deal with fantasy take place in the imaginary world where magic is quite normal.

Since last century, critics and educationist in particular have been ambivalent about the status of fantasy. Many regard it as an inferior, regressive literature, which perhaps explains why it is so strongly associated with children's literature. Yet in the close of the twentieth century, Magic Realism, a version of fantasy was highly regarded. Indeed, it could be argued that some modern novelists have turned to fantasy to find an appropriate idiom for contemporary fiction, pointing to an important function of children's literature in culture. (Reynolds 42)

J. Russ in his *The Penguin Book of Modern Fantasy by Women* advocates that,

Fantasy is reality. Aristotle says that music is the most realistic of the arts because it represents the movements of the soul directly. Surely the mode of fantasy (which includes many genres and effects) is the only way in which some realities can be treated. (Reynolds 43)

Chitra Banerjee uses fantasy to convey the reality such as moral values, history and science to the children which makes it interesting to the readers. “While fantasy as a genre may be defined in terms of other worlds and magic, it is the ways these are used that gives impact. The other worlds reflect the impinged upon the evolving inner worlds of fictional characters and by implication, real readers. Stephen’s distinction between ‘fantasy as a *metaphoric* mode and realism as a *metonymic* mode’ (248)... whereas realism presents aspects of the real world, ‘a slice of life’, fantasy suggests parallels, resemblances. Magic can, then, be regarded as a metaphor for maturation, the protagonists’ magical development offering a model of growth for readers” (Reynolds 142).

In *The Brotherhood of Conch*, trilogy Anand, a twelve-year-old boy who lives in the slums of Calcutta strongly believes in magic and loves to read fantasy books. Abhaydatta, a master healer and a magician from Himalayas seeks Anand’s help to return the magic conch shell to its equitable place high in the mountains. Each of us in our childhood days might have imagined a world or a school full of magic to exist somewhere in the world like Anand has. In the novel *The Conch Bearer* Anand goes to the Himalayas on a mission and finds out the Silver Valley, which is a school of magic.

These novels resemble the *Harry Potter Series* (1997-2007) and *Lord of the Rings Series*. *Harry Potter* is the series of seven fantasy novels written by the British author J. K. Rowling. In this series, Harry Potter with his friends Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger goes on so many quests to triumph over the dark wizard Lord Voldemort. In a similar way in *The Conch Bearer* Anand with his friend Nisha goes on a quest to save the magic conch shell from Surabhanu, who tries to steal the mystical conch. In the *Harry Potter Series* whenever the evil rises

it ought to be solved by Harry alone and even in *The Conch Bearer* all the troubles are solved by Anand alone.

Lord of the Rings is a series of three volumes written by British author J. R. R. Tolkien. In this book Biblo Baggins, a hundred and eleven year old magician chooses Frodo Baggins to keep the magic ring secretly with him, whereas in *The Conch Bearer* Abhaydatta an old magician and master healer had chosen Anand to keep the magic conch safely. There is a back story to the ring and the ring itself is one of the rings of Sauron, the Dark Lord (Manlove 167). It is certain that Chitra took her idea of the mythical conch from the Indian myth. Divakaruni says in the author's note that,

“Like many Indian children, I grew up on the vast, varied, and fascinating tales of *Mahabharat*. Set at the end of what the Hindu scriptures term DvapurYug or the Third Age of Manu, a time when the lives of men and gods still intersected, the epic weaves myth, history, religion, science, philosophy, superstition, and statecraft into its innumerable stories-within-stories to create rich and teeming world filled with psychological complexity” (The Palace xiii)

The conch's myth belongs to Nakul and Sahadev, the youngest of the Pandava brothers.

“.. Two such heroes were named Nakul and Sahadev... With it, Nakul and Sahadev could heal both men and animals and cure the land of famine and drought..., and in punishment the conch was taken from them and buried deep in a valley of Himalayas... ” (The Conch 26)

Frodo leaves his town to keep the ring safe with his friends Sam, Pippin, Merry and Fatty. Anand leaves his hometown as well with Nisha to keep the conch safe. Though there are many similarities between Chitra Divakaruni and the other foreign writers she gives a feast for the Indian children by setting India as a background for this series.

The Conch Bearer

The first book *The Conch Bearer* teaches ethics through fantasy. Anand, the central character of the novel works in a teashop due to his poverty. As a little boy he wished to go to school like any other boy of his age would do and also had a great belief in magic. “He had spent many blissful hours reading about a magic apple that could cure you of any disease if you smelled it once, and a telescope that could show you anything in the world that you wanted to see” (The Conch 4). When he says about his secret faith in magic to her mother, she makes it clear to him that such magical things would happen only in the story books. Yet, he had a strong belief in magic, but does not let out his desire to his mother. When Abhaydatta asks Anand for help he obliges and gets ready for the adventurous journey. Like many fairy-tales Anand meets animals like one-eyed deer, the talking ape, and a magic river.

“The floor was stony, and it hurt, but Anand was too preoccupied to pay attention. What the ape said sounded almost like human speech. But ape couldn’t speak, could they?” (The Conch 156)

Anand even witnesses that a human takes the shape of other creatures. Abhaydatta changes himself into a mongoose and Surabhanu acquires the shape of a snake. Throughout the novel he endures so many struggles and hurdles, but never goes in a wrong way. Whenever Surabhanu tries to hypnotize Anand’s mind, Surabhanu fails because the conch shell guards him from the evils. Then Surabhanu captures the mind of Nisha and forces her to get the conch from Anand. However, Anand wins Surabhanu with the help of the magic conch.

Finally, when Anand reaches the Silver valley to return the conch shell he undergoes a moral test. He heard a voice saying, “set the conch down on the step and return where you came from” (The Conch 195). He got disappointed and angry, but the conch makes him realize that the hardship may be a test to check his true nature and emotions. He remains calm and explains the voice that he would never give up the conch until the healers help his friend Nisha and Abhaydatta to get cured. The voice asks him to answer a question and instructs to solve the puzzle before daybreak. The question was “Which of these three virtues is the most important: honesty, loyalty or compassion?” (The Conch 197),

and after a profound thinking he said that he didn't choose any of the three virtues.

“I can't choose just one, the three virtues are connected – one can't exist fully without the other. Without the one, the others lose their flavor. Honesty without compassion is too harsh to do any good. Compassion without loyalty lacks power, so you can't help the people you care for. Loyalty without honesty may make you follow the wrong person, or the wrong cause.”(The Conch 203)

He decides that his answer is wrong and leaves the place, but the wise men replies that his answer was right and he could stay in the Silver Valley. He joins the brotherhood of Silver Valley but Nisha as a girl had a trouble to stay there because the Silver Valley was filled with men. After some discussion, the master healers permit the first female inside the brotherhood. And the brotherhood decides Anand to be the conch bearer due to his power to communicate with the conch and his trustworthy character.

The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming

The sequel *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* is entirely about the Mughal history. Divakaruni makes the readers to travel into the Mughal history as Dr. Faustus roams in Pope's chamber at Rome. She uses time travelling concept which has the resemblance to the novel *The Time Machine* (1895) by H. G. Wells (Shailaja, 20). She pictures the Mughal culture before our eyes. In this novel Chitra Divakaruni introduces a new object of power, a mirror. Children generally fantasize a common object with some power. The mirror helps Anand to win his mission over the evil in the Mughal period. This novel starts with Anand learning the magic from magicians and gets frustrated for not having any special magical power in him. One day in wind-watching class, while he tries to hear the winds from faraway places he listens to a black wind say 'Evil stirs'. As soon as he says the message from the wind for everyone, they start mocking at him. Even in Abaydatta's class at 'The Hall of Seeing' he spots a disturbing vision. In his vision he has seen an old woman who was sitting in front of the fire, chanting and rocking. He could understand her worries and has seen tracks of tears on her

cheeks. She shares a message with him that there is a problem in her village and she has tried so many times to convey this message but something recoils upon her. People in their village disappear and returns without any memory of their own selves. Thus, they need some help from the Silver Valley.

In order to help the people in that village the healers send Abhaydatta, a master of remembrance and forgetting along with Raj-Bhanu, an apprentice. Before leaving the valley Abaydatta hands over the special pearls to Anand and says that as long the pearls are shiny he is well and if at all they grow dark it means that he is in danger. Almost immediately after they left the valley Anand had a vision in the waterfall that Abhaydatta was in a grave danger and he misses that pearls. As he wants to help Abhaydatta, he consults with Nisha concerning his vision. She advises him to take this issue to Somadatta, a chief healer. But Somadatta does not give much importance to his vision which leads, Anand to escape from the valley to help Abhaydatta along with Nisha. When he asks the conch to help them in this quest it accepts to assist them. Also the conch says that,

“... I have created a new, more powerful one for you. For not only must we travel in space, we must travel backwards in time as well if we are to save Abhaydatta, Remember what I said, and don't let go.”(The Conch 40)

Unfortunately, Anand misses the conch and Nisha somewhere while travelling and arrives at the village alone. A boy from that village helps him to stay there with him. When he walks with that boy in the forest all of a sudden he sees something blurred like a historical scene.

“Anand felt strangely bereft. The ladies had been so elegant, their reality so sheltered and beautiful, so different from what awaited him in this hot, airless forest...., he spotted a boy of about ten years, dressed in a beautiful red silk outfit – a kind of gathered tunic with fitted pants – inside a walled garden. He was playing at sword fighting with his companions... – there were gold ornaments around his neck and in his ears, on his head was a jeweled turban, and even

his pointed shoes were embroidered with gems... ‘Shahzada,’ she called to the boy in the red silk.” (The Mirror 58)

Then he finds out that the entire problem happens because of Kasim, an evil black magician from the Nawab’s world. Kasim has come to the present time in search of ‘the mirror of fire and dreaming’. He compels everyone from the village to search the mirror. Even Anand works for Kasim, but he does not give the mirror to Kasim after he finds it out. The mirror serves as a doorway to the other world and times. So he travels across time to find out the conch and his companions. When he arrives at the Nawab’s time he finds out that everyone from his world obtains a new identity in Nawab’s world. Nisha lives there as a niece of the chief minister and she has forgotten everything about her. She is called by the name Paribhanou. Abhaydatta does not forget himself, but he has lost all his magical powers and works in the Nawab’s elephants’ stable with the name Saleem.

Anand obtains a new name Abbas in the new world and becomes a punkah-puller in the Nawab’s chamber. He gets the chance to serve at the chief minister Haider Ali’s residence for a special occasion; there he happens to overhear the conversation between Kasim and Haider, which makes Anand to understand that Kasim tricks over Haider to take revenge on the Nawab. At that weak moment, he is directed by Kasim to present him before the royal court for the moon festival, thus satisfying the condition for causing retaliation on the Nawab and his family.

On realizing the situation Anand wants to utilize every second to save Nawab from Kasim’s conspiracy. He needs the help of Nisha. So he reveals the truth to Nisha and makes her remember her real identity. Then they both search for the conch based on the conch’s direction. They discover that the conch is locked inside the vault where the Nawab’s treasures are kept. With the help of Mahabet, the crown prince they go to the treasury. The mirror helps them to get inside all the doors without a great effort, which makes the search easy. During the festival to observe the proceedings, Anand climbs on a tree which gives a clear view. While presenting Kasim before Nawab, Haider Ali feels guilty and

gestures him to stop all the evil plans, but Kasim already has started his plans and made a lightning to strike the throne. The whole stage catches fire. There comes a conflict between good and evil. To save the Nawab, Anand lets him to sacrifice his own life which grants more strength to the conch while blowing it against the Djin, the evil spirit which helps Kasim from the beginning.

While trying to attack Mahabet, Kasim and the Djin enter into the unknown world and miss their way since the mirror was in Mahabet's hand. Anand, Nisha, Abhaydatta, and Raj-Bhanu get back to the present world. But they leave the mirror with Mahabet since he wishes to keep it with him, but the mirror promises that it would come to him when he is in danger.

“Yes, O wizard, I will keep him company. Over the years, as grows in wisdom, I will teach him how I may be used to help his people. But this much you can tell him now: if he ever needs you, he may do so by concentrating on your image and looking into me. And if you should ever need him, think of me, the mirror of fire and dreaming, and he will see your reflection here.”(The Mirror 206)

Shadowland

The final sequel *Shadowland* provides fantasy through science. This novel has the resemblance of *Brave New World* (1932), a science fiction by Aldous Leonard Huxley. In this novel people of the different world lose their identity and the scientists name them as Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and Epsilon. Alpha and Beta belong to the higher castes, remaining belong to the lower castes. Likewise, in *Shadowland* the people are named in the alphabets and numbers, hence forgets their own identity.

“... The Honorable Dr X-1, Chief of scientific affairs... the creator of the -Converter... Onstage, Dr X bowed elegantly... So this was the Dr S's boss, the one who swore by Hypnosserum.”(Shadowland 55)

The novel begins with the disappearance of the conch from the Silver Valley due to some external power from the faraway world. When Anand asks about the disappearance to a Hermit, he says that Anand and Nisha have to travel to that world to find the conch. Anand and Nisha goes on a mission to

rescue the mystical conch. As promised in the last novel, ‘the mirror of fire and dreaming’ comes to help them to travel to the far-off world. When they reach there they find out the difficulties of finding the conch shell. In *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* the readers travel into the past, a specific period in history, whereas in *Shadowland* they travel into the scientifically advanced future.

The futuristic world is under the control of the scientists. The scientists imprisoned all those magicians and people, who were against them. Anand could not use his magical power there since they have planted towers to prevent the magic spells. So Anand had to come up with another way to find the conch. Scientists were engrossed in the research to invent an X-Converter, a powerful machine of infinite energy. It was believed to harvest energy from the magical objects to make machines.

Finding the conch was not quite easy, because it was hidden by the scientists in a vault with the pass code, which can only be opened by the chief scientists. Soon after he finds out the conch, it instructs him to contact Dr.S who would help him to defeat the scientists. So he seeks help from Dr.S, but she declines his request. Thus the conch asks him to handover it to Dr.S, and the conch makes her to remember her past and her original name. When she comes to know all these, she helps Anand against Dr. X. He was the one, who made the city Kolkata into Kol and corrupts even the environment of the city for his self-centeredness. Dr.X comes to know that Dr.S has started an operation against him by gathering the scientists and magicians to help her. Thus he blocks all her contacts and isolates her. The scientists start to announce that,

“All citizens on the alert! As you know from our last Podflash, a group of magicians broke into the main laboratory of Futuredome a few hours earlier. They stole an extremely hazardous energetic object that the scientists had procured with great difficulty to fuel the machines that keep Kol alive. With this act of sabotage, the magicians have placed all our lives in danger. Additionally, they have kidnapped Dr.S, the senior scientist in charge of the lab. No one knows what they’ve done to her.”(Shadowland 109)

Since magicians were blamed, the situation became more complicated. Sumita a.k.a. Dr.S says to Anand and Nisha that they have to take back the conch to Silver Valley safely, once they are in safe distance she would take the blame for the loss of the conch. But Anand does not like the proposal. The conch instructs them to arrange a meeting to make the magicians and scientists to meet Anand by noon at the centre of the Maiden field and to inform them that he would demonstrate the conch's power, which would entice them. They invite even the common people and ask the scientists to bring the prisoner too. Sumita sends message through the Pod to all the citizens of the Kol city, "If you come with an open mind,' she said, 'I promise to show you something so amazing that it'll change your life.'"(Shadowland 111)

A big crowd gathers in the field, which includes the scientist and magicians. Scientists look at Anand as a troublesome person who wants to destroy the civilization that they had made with a lifetime hard work. On the other hand, the magicians think of him as a quarrelsome fool who is about to lose the conch, which would have saved them all. There was a sudden clash between the magicians and scientists. Without giving a second thought, Anand pulls out the conch and blows it as hard as he could. Then there was a silence around him. Everyone, freeze in mid-motion, even Sumita and Nisha. He feels like he is in a museum, encircled by wax figures. The conch asks him to shake them gently. And it made Dr.X and Vijay (a magician) to look into the mirror to and let them remember the past. When all the scientists come to know their original identity and all were magicians once, they stand by Sumita. Finally Dr.X accepts that Anand has won in the mission and with the strange smile, he has vanishes from Kol, unexpectedly.

The magicians were so happy and ask Anand and Nisha to stay with them. But they refuse their offer graciously and returned to the Silver Valley with the help of the conch. Again he misses the conch and Nisha, while travelling to the valley. When he reaches the Silver Valley he was surprised to know that he was away from the valley just for sixteen hours. He is happy that he has returned in the right time. And no one knows about the Shadowland and everything was

normal like before inside the Silver Valley and came to that the conch in the crystal hall.

“Anand’s heart expanded with happiness and pride. He had done it! He had fought his way into Shadowland, battled amazing odds, and brought back the stolen conch, the greatest treasure of the valley. He had saved the brotherhood”. (Shadowland 157)

Anand expects everyone to praise him for his great help for the Silver Valley; instead he is punished for being late.

All three novels are quest narratives, which make the readers to cherish the adventurous travel of Anand towards the school of magic, the historical period, the future Kol city. Divakaruni makes the childhood chimeras to come alive before the readers through her beautiful description. And it makes them to escape from the present world as J.R.R Tolkien says in his “The Essay ‘On Fairy-Stories’” that “The ‘true road of escape’ from our boredom and anxiety” (Manlove 166).

“is not to be found in the willfully awkward, clumsy, or misshapen, not in making all things dark or unremittingly violent; nor in the mixing of colours on through subtlety to drabness, and the fantastical complication of shapes to the point of silliness and on towards delirium. Before we reach such states we need recovery. We should look at the green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses – and wolves. This recovery fairy- stories help us to make”. (Manlove 166)

When the author narrates about India the readers could feel the richness of the Himalayan terrain, the taste of its food, intimacy of its culture, significance of its ethics, myth and history. She spills out everything through fantasy which made it as a successful narrative. Elizabeth Rigby says in her review that,

“The real secret of a children’s book consists not merely in its being less dry and less difficult, but more rich in interest – more true to

nature – more exquisite in art – more abundant in every quality that replies to childhood’s keener and fresher perceptions” (Hunt 20-21). Chitra even traces out the inconveniences of the scientific inventions which have made the people as machines devoid of moral values, and future uncertain for the present generation.

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