



(Re)animating the “Human” in Fantasy and The Crusading of the Self in Fiction: A Critical Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Brotherhood and the Conch Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT:

India as a nation stands against many odds and upheavals. It is unpalatably acknowledged that a country like India where thousands of children have been suffering from illiteracy and starvation the term “Children’s Literature” in India as a specified genre sounds bit indicting and fanciful. The children should get rudimentary education and basic amenities to struggle for their existence and this paradoxical nature of the term makes it more lively and relevant. India has a rich tradition of “oraliture” (oral literature) that knocks over the modernized and printed form of children’s literature conforming to the present day styles and subjects. Indian folklores and imaginative collection of stories like *Panchatantra*, written in Sanskrit in 200 B.C., the *Jatakas*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* epics, along with a large number of ancient Indian Sanskrit classics are the examples of India’s literary heritage. There is a similarity between Norwegian folklore, *Norse Folkleeventyr* and the Indian mythology which are not written especially for children but they are very much popular among children. Fantasy in Contemporary children’s literature in India has set a benchmark in shaping the identity of the nation in the world literature itself. The Indian American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was deeply embedded with the mythological and fantastic tales often narrated by his grandfather in her childhood. She tries to inject those unrealistic or improbable mental images in response to psychological needs in her fiction and this paper aims to deal with specifically with her fantasy series, *The Brotherhood of the Conch* trilogy consisting of *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire* and

Dreaming (2005) and *Shadowland* (2009). This paper also looks for the importance of the journey of Anand and his companions Nisha and Abhaydutta embarking on a journey towards fantastic world to know the interior of their minds and the importance of traditions and values of homeland.

KEYWORDS: Children’s Literature, Fantasy, Folklore, Homeland, Humanism, Self, Tradition

I. INTRODUCTION:

Children’s literature is a vast genre of mainstream literature written in various languages mainly dealing with the fantastic imaginations, real imaginations and the surreal imagination of the children in the books. It sometimes carries the deeply embedded socio-political issues which is much relevant and cabalistic in the arena of world literature. There are various forms of children’s literature for instance *fables*, fantastic stories, moral stories, *Jataka* Tales, the adventurous stories, the family stories, children in exile, the children of colour stories and the list goes on. Children have consumed, and still consume, a huge variety of material – from fiction to textbooks, from Shakespeare to the scriptures, from verse to adverts, from picture books to computer games. Taken in its widest sense, the term ‘children’s literature’ covers all these forms, and many others. Some are so expansive, and have generated so much critical discussion, that they demand a whole book to themselves – fairy stories and folk tales, for example – and so they do not feature here. Others are only partially represented by this book’s seven chapters: for instance war stories and historical novels are



subsumed into the chapter on adventure stories. Still others do not feature at all: comics, plays and films for example.

The classic fable is a short, fictional tale which has a specific moral or behavioural lesson to teach. This lesson is often explained at the end of the tale in an epigram or 'moral'. Some are about humans: 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf' for instance.

But most feature animals as their main characters, representing human beings, or perhaps particular types of people or kinds of behaviour. In these 'beast fables' the animals are generally fairly lifelike – except that they can often talk – and they do not usually encounter humans. This distinguishes them from animals in

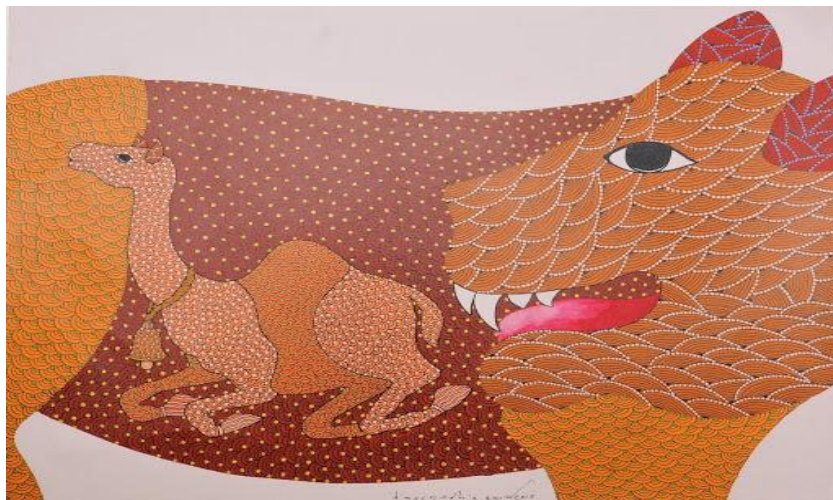


Figure 1: Painted Fables in India

fairy tales, often enchanted in one way or another, who interact with humans and live what are essentially human lives. Like fairy tales, fables probably had their origins in an oral folk tale tradition and were not originally intended only for children. Also like fairy tales, fables subsequently came to be associated primarily with the young. Fables are still being written, mainly for children,

but sometimes with the hope of appealing to a mixed-age audience. These modern fables can be much grander affairs than the short, allegorical animal stories that first defined the genre. They are often novel-length, with many characters and intricate plots, like Robert O'Brien's *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971). They can have complicated themes

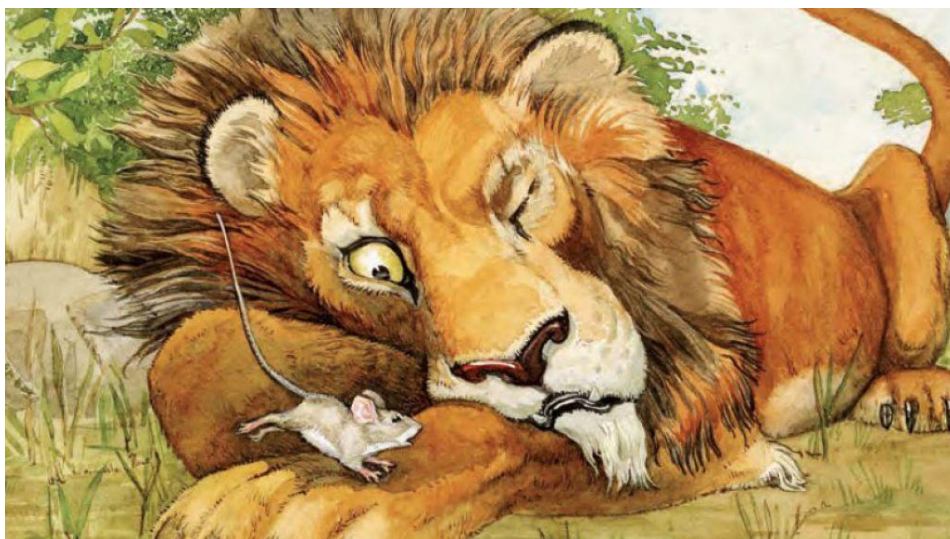


Figure3: There are more of fables



and enigmatic meanings, like E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952). Sometimes they seek to give much more scientifically accurate representations of animal life, as in Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972). They have sometimes taken their lessons from a much wider range of animals than generally feature in Aesop, as in *Those Other Animals* (1892) by G. A. Henty, who preferred to draw lessons from animals 'whose good points have been hitherto ignored' – like the bacillus – and 'to take down others from the pedestal upon which they have been placed'.¹ And often they are very political, as with George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). But what is more remarkable than the developments within the fable tradition are the continuities. However sophisticated the fable has become it remains fundamentally a didactic form, designed to draw in its readers through a compelling story and appealing, even cute, characters, and to teach important lessons through allegory. It is this consistency, within a general pattern of evolution that this paper will trace.

There are good reasons for regarding fables as the first children's literature. They were written down as early as two thousand years BCE on the cuneiform tablets used by the Sumerians in what is now Iraq and Iran. According to Gillian Adams, the fact that fables were written on unbaked clay tablets in relatively unformed writing demonstrates that they were used by children in school lessons. The relationship between all the different fable traditions is incestuous, with versions of the same narratives, characters and morals cropping up in Indian, Greek, Roman and other later collections, such as the French 'Reynard the Fox' series (c.1174-1250). However, by the later medieval period in Britain, almost all fables were being marketed as having come from Aesop. Sir Roger L'Estrange nicely summed up the situation in his important edition of 1692:

"the Story is come down to us so Dark and Doubtful, that it is Impossible to Distinguish the Original from the Copy: And to say, which of the Fables are Aesops, and which not; which are Genuine, and which Spurious."

From the fifteenth century many different collections were published under Aesop's name, mostly, apparently, for a sophisticated, adult audience. William Caxton's 1484 translation (one of the first books printed in Britain) was in large format and expensive; Robert Henryson's *The*

Morall Fabillis of Esope in Scottis Meter (1570) was addressed to 'worthie folk' and 'lordis of prudence'; and John Ogilby's *The Fables of Aesop* (1651) and Jean de La Fontaine's *French Fables Choiesies* (1668-93) were written in stylish and sophisticated verse. But throughout the Renaissance period in Britain, Aesop's Fables was also the text most commonly used in schools to teach elementary English.⁴ Indeed, Sir Roger L'Estrange admitted that he had started to amass his late seventeenth-century collection by pilfering 'the Common School-Book'

Settling the Ground: Children's Literature in India:

The canon of children's literature in India is very much rich and is filled with an assortment of themes and contemporary issues. It has gained momentum after a long crusade of colonialism, exile, the horrors of partition and other issues. India is a country of hundreds and thousands of children who are still deprived of education, food and proper hygiene and who are still working in factories, tea shops, hotels, motels and resorts. In this context 'Children's Literature in India' as a specific genre is quite paradoxical. Still with the help of the popular media and the internet India has become successful to regain its cultural heritage of oral literature and stories relate to children. Indian folklores and imaginative collection of stories like *Panchatantra*, written in Sanskrit in 200 B.C., the *Jatakas*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* epics, along with a large number of ancient Indian Sanskrit classics are the examples of India's literary heritage. There is a similarity between Norwegian folklore, *Norse Folkleeventyr* and the Indian mythology which are not written especially for children but they are very much popular among children. Fantasy in Contemporary children's literature in India has set a benchmark in shaping the identity of the nation in the world literature itself.

The *Panchatantra* tales in the oral narrative form are believed to have found their way into traditional folklore of almost every country in the world. Animal fables from this source are predominant and remain as always society's traditional vehicle of social and moral instruction. Tales of animal wisdom, cunning, and foolishness, in which conventional animal characteristics are ignored, are peculiar to India. Thus it is not at all

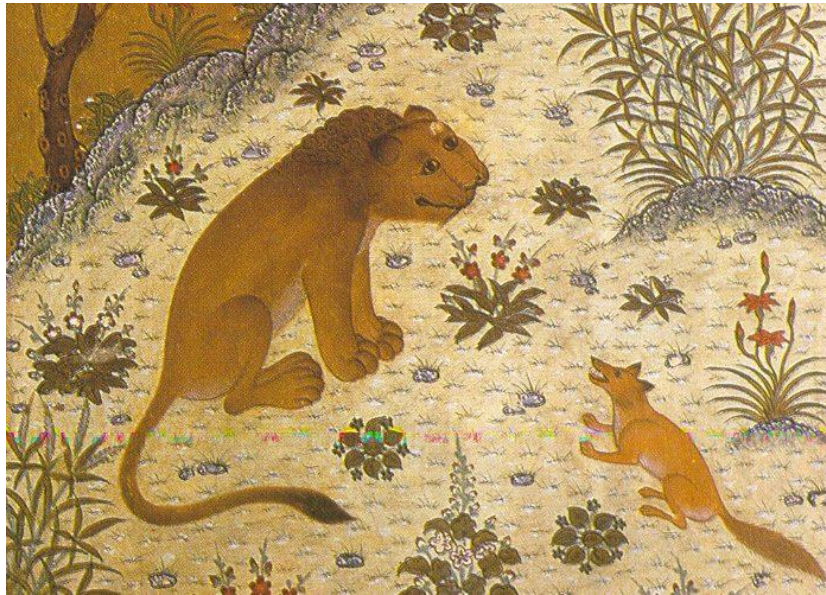


Figure 2: The Panchatantra as a 'Nitishastra' in India

unusual to find a clever quail, an intelligent crow, a smart jackal, or a stupid tiger; the owl is regarded as an ill omen, but not the raven; the peacock, far from being vain, is said to weep because he has such ugly feet, and the snake is not considered dangerous and vile but a protector of the innocent. These fables are retold in many languages and are universal to the country's multilingual literature.

Indian folklore, much of which has yet to be printed, remains a curious mixture of tradition and pure fantasy. Stories of ogres, ghosts, restless spirits, and other such representatives of the underworld as Yama the God of Death, and holy sages, "rishis," and

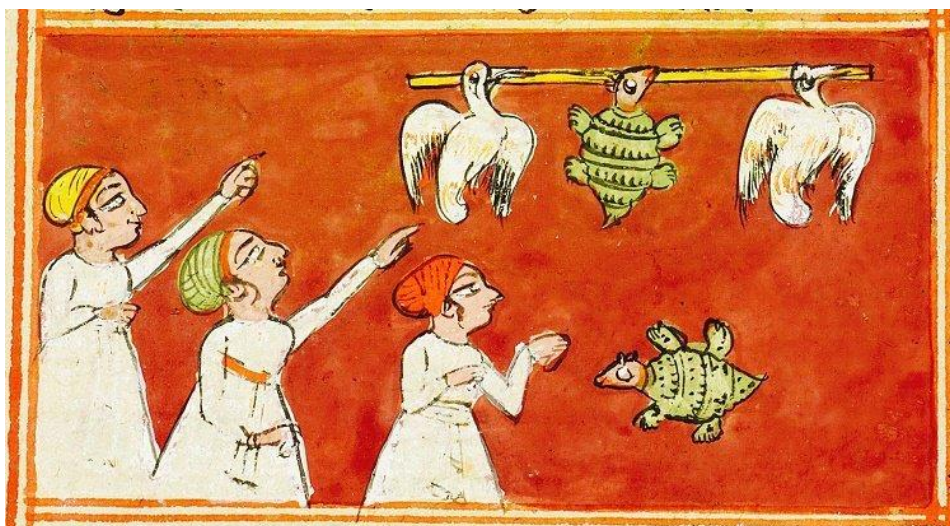


Figure3: Stories depicting morals in Panchatantra

"munis" who could curse a whole kingdom to ashes or bring alive the dead with a mantra, are chronicles of India's enriching face in the genre of Indian fantasy literature.

The Brotherhood and the Conch Trilogy: A Critical Study:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American author, poet, and the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Programme.



Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. She writes for children as well as adults, and has published novels in multiple genres, including realistic fiction, historic fiction, magical realism, myth and fantasy. She is well known for her book, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). Divakaruni patiently constructed a worldview through many years of astute observations, together with the remembrance of traditional teachings that she received from her Bengali community and family; she often mentions the influence of her grandfather's storytelling as the biggest stimulus for the reactivation of her own memories, through her own literature. She is thus capable of bringing together her scholarship and high literary standards, in order to generously offer her own wisdom and compassion in her writing, with her understanding of the past that is intrinsically connected to the future on this earth.

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)

***The Conch Bearer* (2003):**

The Conch Bearer is a famous novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and it deals with the journey of a penniless boy Anand, a self-willed but resourceful street girl Nisha and an intriguing, and of indeterminate age but wealthy man Abhaydutta. The old man was on his mission to send the conch to the brotherhood of Sliver Valley. To complete his

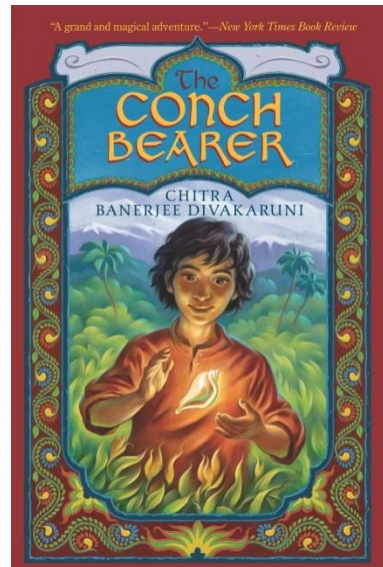


Figure 4: *The Conch Bearer*, the novel

mission he has taken the help of these two children. The journey was all arduous and full of throttling adventures. Divakaruni has used the 'magic-realism' a post modern tool to fascinate the readers and to fulfill her aim to reanimate the 'human' in this particular fiction. Anand is such a character who is always in favour of magic and while working in the tea-stall he thinks himself as a magician and he wishes to punish that brutal shop owner. When he met an old man who was hungry Anand felt:

"The old man looked at him. His eyes were...blue? Green? Shimmery brown like the eyes of a tiger? Anand couldn't tell. He knew only that something tinged through him like an electric current when the old man looked at him" (*TCB*.Page 11)

Abhaydutta chooses Anand for the adventure and he told about the conch which has been hidden somewhere in the valley. Nisha has accompanied her in this journey. At a time Anand and Nisha found themselves all alone after the first obstacle and they are exposed to so many strange creatures around them. Divakaruni's dexterity lies in her handling of creatures speaking in human languages for instance squirrel, the apes, the speaking conch etc. In a chapter when Anand met the Ape king and was asked about the conch,

"Anand couldn't help shuddering as the ape crouched over him. The ape grinned, showing sharp, glittery teeth, growling in that half-human language. 'Is frightened man-ything? No need, Grishan no hurt you. Grishan only want treasure. (Page 157)"



Divakaruni has also used some scathing terms to criticize the humans also. When the keeper of the conch died, the conch remarked,

“Ah, death! The conch gave a sigh. ‘You humans are always making such a hullabaloo about death. His body was cold and tired- it was time for him to crack that mold and emerge from it, to take on higher form. He knew this as he was going, and was not sorry- and nor was I- for he died performing his duty.’” (TCB.24)

Thus Divakaruni in this particular fiction has talked about the reanimation of ‘human’ in fantasy using her favourite tool ‘magic realism’.

The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming (2005): A Critical Study:

This is the sequel novel of the previous one. In an immaculate valley lying on the Himalayas, Anand visualizes a ghastly scene. His only caretaker and the magical man Abhaydutta is in serious danger. What way is he ought to adapt. Abhaydutta is reluctant to deliver the message to the elders and does not wish to spend time. He again thinks it is not wise to handle matters into his own hands. Anand decides to embark on a journey adventurous and harsh that not only swipes him away across the border of India but also to the time of Mughal dynasty. There he came face to face with powerful magicians, an arrogant prince and a bad jinni of impeccable magic and power.

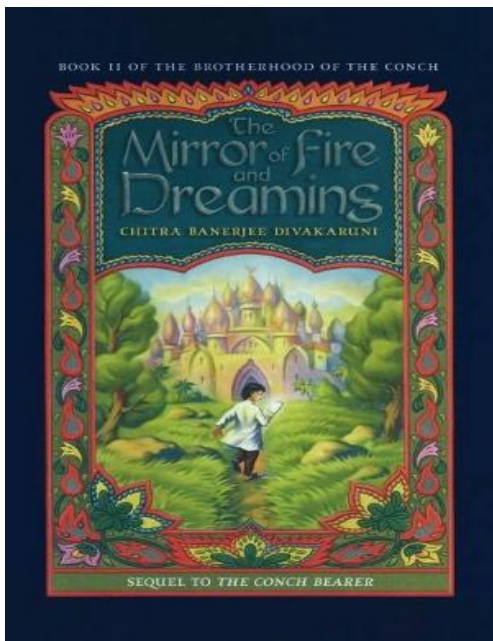


Figure 5: The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming (2005), a novel

Young Anand's ability to communicate with the mystical conch shell that empowers the brotherhood of the hidden valley has won him a place among their number, but as he struggles to learn the ways of their magic, he wonders if he really belongs there. His friend Nisha, the first girl allowed to stay in the valley, is taking to the study of plant magic like a duck to water...but Anand is having no such luck

But Anand doesn't have much time to learn new abilities. When his mentor, the Master Healer Abhaydatta, sets off to combat a newly emerged evil power, and doesn't return, Anand and Nisha ask the conch to take them to him, so that they can save him from whatever ill fate has fallen him (their loyalty exceeds their common sense in this, although with the help of the immensely powerful conch shell, they might have a chance...). Their journey goes awry, and throws them back in time to an era when the Muslim nawabs dwelt in palaces of amazing beauty, filled with deadly intrigue. It's especially deadly in this case--an evil sorcerer is bent on using an unholy jinni to gain power for himself.

Divakaruni shackles off the traditional storytelling method and evolved as writer with new techniques especially in children's literature. It's an engrossing picture of a long-ago part of India's history; the author is unstinting with the small details of the texture (and taste--there's lots of food) of everyday life. All three characters slip easily into roles in the past. Anand, for instance, finds employment as a punkah wallah--a fan puller), and there are no tricky difficulties of language or customs that sometimes beset time travelers, and slow the progression of the story. She realizes after the end of this novel that is enormously moral:

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

Shadowland (2009): The Last of the Trilogy:

In this book Divakaruni tries to end up the adventurous journey of Anand. When Anand lost his beloved conch, pulling out a destroyed the mystical Silver Valley and he is compelled to travel in a dystopian world to revive it- a world where the air and water are so severely poisoned that the upper



class leads a luxurious life under hermitically sealed domes, while the lower class strives to survive. Nisha and Anand again embark on a journey to rescue the conch again and set it in its rightful place. In this part Divakaruni especially critiques the age old feudal system and she also vehemently tries to draw the attention of the readers to ecological hazards due to the man made pollution and exploitation of natural resources.

II. CONCLUSION:

Divakaruni in this trilogy has rightfully voices her dexterity in delineating the copulation of fantasy and fiction, myth and reality and most importantly the characterization. Being an India-American she has never forgot her roots and the knowledge about her beloved country. She has inexplicably amalgamated the 'human in fantasy' and she says in one interview, "I see my writing as an extension of my activism." Divakaruni has also showcases the journey of the self like Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the resultant self identification out of it. Divakaruni is really a gifted storyteller. She beguiles us with sights and sounds of an exotic place and what she really does is to make us feel at home.

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