

## COMBATING ‘OTHERNESS’ : REVISIONARY MYTHMAKING IN DIVAKARUNI’S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

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### Abstract

‘Revision’, as defined by Adrienne Rich, is ‘the act of looking back’ to an already existing text to construct a reality which has been deliberately ignored in patriarchal narratives. It inevitably involves a re-reading and re-writing of earlier texts from a feminist perspective. By becoming a ‘resisting reader rather than an assenting reader’ women writers and critics undertake to revise male assumptions through subversion of androcentric ideology in male writings. Thus revisionist mythmaking enables writers across the globe to re-write myths and fairy tales which serve to perpetuate and promote an asymmetrical relationship between men and women. The strategy of re-ideologizing has been successfully employed by a host of post-modern and post-colonial writers including Margaret Atwood, Marina Warner, Ann Sexton and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

This paper seeks to examine how the revisionary framework in Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* helps to reconstruct the female identity. Divakaruni’s ardent attempt at correcting the ‘constructed images of what women collectively and historically suffered’ can be deciphered in the narrative. The paper intends to study how the various references to mythic characters and tales, and the appropriation of mythic content serve to centralize female experiences and sensibilities.

**Key words** : revisionary, re-ideologizing, asymmetrical.

The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting reader rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us. (xxii).

The tone of defiance rings loud in Fetterley’s voice as she implores women to interrogate male assumptions informing the male literary canon. In fact, she advocates one of the numerous feminist approaches to literature, which can be identified with the revisionary re-reading of

texts. Revision is the act of looking back at an earlier text from a new perspective . Adrienne Rich defines revision in the following way :

Re-vision , - the act of looking back , seeing with fresh eyes , of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history . It is an act of survival (18).

Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking is distinct and different from ‘gynocriticism’ as it focuses only on malist writings . Feminist critics and revisionist mythmakers argue that mythology is the language of patriarchy to subjugate women . In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir observes : “Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling class than the myth of woman : it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse” (285) .

Interestingly , from the Renaissance to the Modern Age literature has continually drawn upon myths and mythologies . Pinsent explains the relevance of myths in the contemporary world by the fact that they “satisfy some psychological need” (12) of mankind . Mythologies of the ancient world have continued to have a great impact on human psyche and human societies across the globe probably because they “justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs” (Graves 21) .

Regarding the origin of myths , C. G. Jung ,the noted psychologist , explains that myths are the projections of the collective unconscious of the human race . To quote 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 an individual , so myths are a symbolic projection of a people’s hopes , values ,fears and aspirations” ( qtd. in Guerin , 83) . The collective unconscious , as explained by Jung , is a part of the human psyche which consists of primordial images or archetypes that find expression in dreams , fantasies , instincts and mythologies . The noted Canadian critic , Northrop Frye , differs from Jung in his views on archetypes . In defining archetypes he focuses on the literary rather than on the psychological aspect . An archetype is a recurring pattern in literature which he defines as “ a symbol , usually an image , which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (365) . Myth critics acknowledge the fact that myths have been and continues to be an undeniable source of expressing the values and norms , and moulding behavioural patterns in societies . However , feminist critics and theorists hold that myths are powerful tools devised by patriarchy to marginalize women . Kate Millett , in her work *Sexual Politics* recognizes mythology as one of the causes of male indifference and the inferior status of women in patriarchal societies . She observes : “Patriarchy has God on its side” ( ch. 2) . Referring to the story of Fall in Christian Mythology she states : “This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering , knowledge and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes” ( ch. 2) . Therefore in Millett’s view mythology reinforces the superiority of man over woman . Both mythology and fairy tales are informed by male ideology and continue to shape our patterns of thought and worldview. This ideology has been internalized by male and female alike.

The feminist movements of the twentieth century have given an impetus to feminist writers and critics to interrogate the representation of women in various literary genres as ‘inferior’ or ‘lack’. A major emphasis of feminist critics lies in altering the way in which a woman reads literature . Encouraged by these movements many women writers have attempted a revisionary re-reading of texts including myths . Women re-read myths for manifold reasons . Feminist revisionist mythmaking provides women writers a context to rectify the male construction of female identity as natural . It aims at defying gender assumptions and promoting

gender consciousness . It seeks to reveal the misogyny embedded in mythological tales . Alicia Ostriker remarks in *Stealing the Language* : “ the motivating force behind women writers’ revisionist myths is the subversion of the dominant ideology’s hidden male bias” (214) . Alicia Ostriker suggests revisionist mythmaking as an effective strategy to re-define female identity , and to make “corrections” to constructed “ images of what women have collectively and historically suffered” (73) . Revisionist mythmaking involves a re-reading of old texts . A revisionary text works at three levels : re-visioning , re-imaging and re-interpretation . The subversion of the male author’s intentions and ideology by changing the narrative perspective is re-visioning . It is , in fact , a re-reading of myths through a feminist lens , thereby displacing the male elements from the centre to the margin in favour of the female elements . Feminist revisionist mythmakers include Angela Carter , Margaret Atwood , Marina Warner and Ann Sexton . Angela Carter’s revisionist version of fairy tales foregrounds the female voice . In her collection *The Bloody Chamber* Carter overturns the sexual mythology in stories like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Snow White* . Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* is the re- telling of the story of Ulysses from the point of view of Penelope , the wife of Ulysses and the mother of Telemachus . Re-visioning inevitably requires a re-imaging of male –defined characters and a re-interpretation of the androcentric myths from a feminist angle . Re- imaging involves the subversion of gender specific qualities , i.e , a re-defining of the female identity . It may lead to the creation of a new character , quite unlike the patriarchal stereotype of a ‘demon’ or an ‘angel’ . Re-imaging makes it possible to create covetable and exemplary images of women . Re –interpretation of the mythic content as part of re-visioning is done by deciphering a completely different meaning in the already existing tale . For example , Ann Sexton in her re-interpretation of Grimm’s tale ‘ Rapulzel’ seeks to dismantle the patriarchal myth of female passivity and subservience by focusing on the different facets of women’s relationship with one another . The focus is deliberately shifted from the world of romance to the lesbian world . Warner has also attempted to create new myths in her novels *Indigo* , *Mapping the Waters* (a rewriting of the Prospero myth employed in *The Tempest* ) and *The Leto Bundle* . In the process of voicing the female experience these writers have created new stereotypes to replace the existing ones .

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni , a postcolonial writer of Indian origin repeatedly reverts to myths , fairy tales and folk tales in her works. She is an acclaimed and prolific writer who has been widely published . Though settled in the USA for almost thirty years , her imaginative and cultural roots are still in India . As a child she had been nourished by myths , legends and folk tales for she says in her essay “What Women Share” in *Bold Type* , “ when I was a child in India my grandfather would tell me stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata , the ancient Indian epics” (n.p.) . She even confesses that she found the portrayal of women characters in the epics quite unsatisfactory. So she says , “If I ever wrote a book . . . I would place the woman in the forefront of the action” (*The Palace of Illusions* xv). An analysis of her fictional world reveals the subtle re-working of popular patriarchal myths , thereby , placing her in the tradition of the feminist revisionist mythmakers . This paper seeks to examine how Divakaruni employs the revisionary framework in *The Mistress of Spices* to subvert the phallogocentric ideology informing Hindu mythology .

*The Mistress of Spices* is an award winning debut novel by Divakaruni which narrates the story of an ordinary girl with an extraordinary power . Tilo , the protagonist , undergoes several transformations of the self to arrive at an ultimate definition of selfhood . The novel abounds in references to Hindu mythology with which the author is well acquainted . Like her Western counterpart Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter , Divakaruni , too , employs the mythic

framework with a revisionist intention . Tilo , the mistress of spices has multiple identities and this has been rendered symbolically through the image of the mythic bird Phoenix. When the novel begins we are introduced to Tilo the spice mistress – an old woman trying to provide herbal remedies to her customers . She says , “They do not know this , my customer , nor that earlier I had other names”(5) . She was born as Nayantara . From Nayantara to Maya is a long journey , and each transformation is like a death and re-birth like the Phoenix . Born to middle-class parents in rural India , Nayantara could never make sense of the mundane and ordinary life that was ordained for a girl . She despised such an existence and longed for adventure and freedom . Nayantara becomes Bhagyavati after her abduction by the pirates . Before long boredom engulfs her again urging her to seek something new . In a desperate attempt she reaches the spice island to be trained as a mistress of spices . Then as Tilo begins a new life in Oakland , California . But finally she finds her true identity in Maya .

The text alludes to several mythic figures like Lord Shiva , Naarad and Tilottama , the divine danseuse at the court of Indra . Divakaruni’s attempts at a re-working of the mythic tales concerning these characters cannot be overlooked . A re-imaging of the male-defined stereotypes , and a re-interpretation and appropriation of mythic events inform the act of revisioning in *The Mistress of Spices* . Revisionary mythmaking uses various strategies . Divakaruni employs the device of inversion to dismantle the andocentric tendency to centralize male values and paradigms . As inversion implies a change in perspective , as well as an attempt to defy , so the readers get to see things in a different light. There are two instances in the narrative that exemplify this premise . When shipwrecked Bhagyavati swims across the water in a desperate attempt to reach the spice island , one is reminded of the story of Naarad in Hindu mythology . In order to understand the enigma of Vishnu’s maya , the sage Naarad had once plunged into water and experienced a different identity altogether . Here Divakaruni appropriates the experience of the mythic sage with that of her protagonist who metamorphoses into a new being after crossing the water . On reaching the island , wet and unclothed , she says , “Who was I ? I could not say. Already my name has faded in the rising island sun , like a star from the night that has passed away” (33) . The sea had stripped her of everything – “ clothes and magic and for the moment arrogance also”(32) . This suggests the idea of a re-birth ; it was as if she gets a new lease of life. Thus begins her apprentice life under the guidance of the Old One , the senior preceptor , to learn about the secret power of the spices. Rejecting her previous identity to emerge with a new sensibility she chooses to re-create herself and this process of transformation has been rendered through the water symbolism. To quote Heinrich Zimmer :

‘ . . . the significant trait was the transformation worked by the waters. This was to be read as an operation of Maya ; for the waters are understood as the primary materialization of Vishnu’s Maya energy . . . ’  
(34) .

Bhagyavati (Tilo) traverses the ocean to become transformed , re-born . This transformation is a significant step for Tilo towards the quest for ultimate selfhood.

The island where the First Mother imparts training to the would be spice mistresses is described in completely unconventional terms . The magical and exotic picture of the spice island with its “ green slumbering volcano , and red sand of beaches , granite outcrops like grey teeth”(23) is a striking contrast to the real geographical world where green and red have a different significance . The spice island is a topsy-turvy world – a world dominated by inverted images – as compared to the very known and real male universe . Here on the island the dormant

volcano has no dangerous red hue . It is a soothing green , while the sea beaches are unconventionally painted in red signifying danger . Again , the Old One seemed to Tilo “ at once oldest and most beautiful of women with her silver wrinkles” , but Tilo says , “ . . . she was not beautiful the way men use the word”(33) . A subtle re-working of the beauty myth is to be perceived in this assertion . Both in the portrayal of the island and the First Mother one can decipher a deliberate shift from the male aesthetics and values . The Old One standing on the shore with the sun that seemed “ a halo behind her head and shimmering many - coloured in her lashes” (32) is the ultimate authority on the island . She is described as “ a pillar of burning” whose hands “sends the thunder –writing across the sky”(32) . This is an inversion of sorts because according to the Hindu mythology it is Shiva , the male deity , who is depicted as the pillar of fire . Divakaruni’s attempt at interrogating the male hegemony informing Hindu mythology cannot be overlooked .

The idea of a female universe as opposed to the male one has been wonderfully encapsulated in the portrayal of the spice island. But as the snakes say , “This island has been there forever . . . the Old One also”(23) , therefore the unreality of the female world is rejected. Obviously , it follows that the author emphasizes the existence of a parallel universe which has never been recognized by the hierarchical societies . Such a world exists only at the symbolic level , and is not a material reality. To counter the othering tendencies of the misogynist phallogocentric world Divakaruni emphasizes on female bonding through the projection of the magical spice island . The trainees on the island learned to bond with one another while sharing common household chores like “sweeping and stitching and rolling wicks for lamp , gathering wild spinach and roasting chapatis and braiding each other’s hair”(52) . The novelist seems to drive home the fact that this is how it has been through generations . In Tilo’s words , “ Most of all we learned to feel without words the sorrows of our sisters , without words to console them . . . now sometimes I wonder if it might not have been the most worthwhile of the skills I learned on the island” (52) . Throughout centuries women have bonded with one another in ways unknown to men , and it works as an excellent support system to women for self assertion and (re) – creation of identities.

On the completion of her training on the island Tilo takes on her mistress name Tilottama . Tilo says that her name is derived from Til , the sesame seed , the spice of nourishment . It is appropriate for her as her vocation was to provide nourishment to the Diasporic Indians residing in the bay area of Oakland . Again , her name alludes to the divine dancer , Tilottama , at the court of Indra the rain god. The unorthodox life of Divakaruni’s protagonist parallels the extraordinary life of this divine apsara . The novelist intends to revise the myth concerning this divine dancer who is branded a rebel and seen as an archytype of the fallen woman . In the Hindu mythology. Tilottama , the dancer at Indra’s court was created by Vishwakarma at the behest of Brahma to entertain and amuse the gods . She was warned by Brahma not to give her heart to any mortal but to her dance. As the story goes , she violated the order and “ was banished to earth to live as a mortal for seven lives . Seven mortal lives of illness and age , of people turning in disgust from her twisted , leprous limbs”(43) . The misogyny embedded in the myth is clear as Tilottama’s suffering is effected by her transgression of the patriarchal order . The author draws parallels between the lives of her protagonist , Tilo , and the mythic Tilottama . The relation between Tilo and the spices can also be rendered in patriarchal terms . The spices who obey her command also impose certain restrictions on her . The spices demand complete devotion from her . The First Mother had forbidden her to give her heart to anyone but to the spices . Again , like the apsara Divakaruni’s Tilo is not an ordinary mortal . She cannot live the

life of an ordinary woman. The mission of her life is different from any other woman. She is required by the Order of Mistresses to serve her folks without getting emotionally involved with them . Though she vows never to violate the rules , she fails . Like the dancer she too falls in love with a man . Also , in trying to reach out to Haroun and Geeta she steps out of her store in violation of the Order . She even uses the spices for herself which is again a transgression of the rules. Finally when she realizes that the lonely American (Raven) is her true counterpart , she decides to choose love over duty . She rethinks her role as a mistress , and on realizing that it is not her true identity , she willingly abandons it . She even decides to atone for her sin by piling up all the spices in the middle of the store and trying to invoke Shampati’s fire : “This is my atonement. Willingly I undergo it. Not because I have sinned , for I acted out of love , in which is no sinning . Were I to do it over , I would do the same again” (298).

But the spices do not obey her. Laura Merlin in a review in *World Literature Today* says , “ Overcome by her attraction to Raven , Tilo yields to her own wishes rather than to those of the spices . At this flouting of their rules , the spices themselves rise up against her , demanding that she choose between love and power” (207) . She finds herself in a dilemma . But the intense mental turmoil of Tilo is ultimately resolved by the earthquake , and as she comes out from beneath the rubbles , she is a transformed being. Like the water symbolism Divakaruni interprets Tilo’s final transformation through the image of the earthquake . Burying her previous identity in the debris she emerges as a new being and assumes the name Maya . Thus unlike Tilottama , our Tilo does not ‘fall’ . She is re-born after the earthquake . The ultimate realization of selfhood is achieved as Maya begins a new life with Raven , the lonely American . Interestingly she retains her power over the spices , of which she was temporarily bereft . She can hear the spices sing . This change from Tilo to Maya , an extraordinary magical woman to an ordinary human being , is symbolic of the journey from ‘immanence’ to ‘transcendence’ . Breaking free from the shackles of patriarchal order she emerges as an emancipated woman . The name ‘Maya’ has immense philosophical significance . In Hindu philosophy ‘Maya’ means “illusion , spell , enchantment , the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day” (317) . The material world is an illusion , and anything earthly is defined as ‘Maya’ . Therefore the change from Tilo to Maya suggests a change from the superhuman to the human and earthly. By giving an alternative ending to the story of Tilo ( the spice mistress) which alludes to the mythic story , the author departs from the male tradition , thereby introducing a set of new values . This alternative possibility can be perceived as a narrative design to invite the readers to consider the ‘fall’ (of Tilottama) , i.e., the transformation from an apsara to an ordinary mortal , not as a degeneration but as a triumph over patriarchy . The feminist lens of Divakaruni provides a re-interpretation of the old myth . Tilottama becomes the new role model or stereotype of the emancipated woman . Revisioning removes the stigma of the fallen woman from Tilottama , representing her as a strong-willed and liberated woman . In the light of the mythic tale , Divakaruni attempts a constructed deconstruction of the female identity .

With the help of the magical power of the spices , Tilo brings happiness in the lives of the immigrants . And in doing so she oversteps her limits ; but she has no regrets for the punishment that will ensue this act of violation , for she says , “ I acted out of love , in which is no sinning” (298) . As she prepares for the atonement she is reminded of the myth of Lord Shiva drinking ‘halahal’ , a bitter poison churned up from the primal ocean , from his cupped hands . This burned his throat , which turned a bruised blue , but it saved the world . This is a popular story from Hindu mythology which looks upon Lord Shiva , one of the Trinity , as the restorer of balance and savior of humanity . This myth of Lord Shiva , the Saviour , is turned inside out

through the appropriation of ‘his’ story with ‘her’ story . Even Tilo suffers tremendously for going out of her way to enable her folks live better lives . She willingly undergoes the suffering for their sake : “ . . .I know that rules broken must be paid for . Balance upset must be restored. For one to be happy , another must take upon herself the suffering . . . Spices , for their sake I will take on whatever burden you wish to lay upon me . . .” (298) . The intense mental turmoil that she undergoes is symbolic of the suffering caused (to Lord Shiva) from drinking ‘halahal’ . The patriarchal ideology embedded in this myth is clearly disrupted as the author firmly establishes the idea that the sins of mankind can be redeemed by a woman alone , that too an ordinary woman :

“ I Tilo am no goddess but an ordinary woman only. Yes , I admit it . . .  
.And though once I thought I could save the world , I see now that I have  
only brought brief happiness into a few lives. And yet , is that not  
enough.” (298).

Divakaruni’s sole intention , here , is to underplay the patriarchal assumption of women as ‘lack’. The appropriation of the myth is intended to bring to light certain positive aspects of the nature of women which remained suppressed and ignored by the androcentric nature of the society at large . It is the inner strength and inherent divinity of women that can work wonders . The portrayal of Tilo as the Saviour of the immigrant community is an act of re-imagining the male –defined female identity .

The central motif of the quest for selfhood rendered through a mythic framework serves as a befitting strategy for revising the gender bias and correcting the negative portrayals of women in myths . Throughout the novel a persistent attempt at subverting the male traditions and paradigms is perceptible .

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