CHAPTER III

MYTH FORMATION IN CHITRA BANERJEE’S NOVELS.

“The Indian woman is depicted as a passive victim suffering in silence at home and abroad. She (Divakaruni) attempts to weave “the element of myth, magic and ancient culture alongside contemporary culture” (Ismat2).

A myth is a well-known story which was made up in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs. It is a story from ancient times especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of the people. It is culturally significant story or explanation of how things came to be for example, of how a god made a world or how a hero undertook a quest.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines myth as a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon. Myth is strictly distinguished from allegory and legend by some scholars, but in general use it is often used interchangeably with these terms. It is a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth. Also: something existing only in myth; a fictitious or imaginary person or thing. It refers a person or thing held in awe or generally referred to with near reverential admiration on the basis of popularly repeated stories (whether real or fictitious) and a popular conception of a person or thing which exagerates or idealizes the truth.

According to the definition of myth in Encyclopaedia Britannica, myth is a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief. It is distinguished from symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (temples, icons). Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is
understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience. The term mythology denotes both the study of myth and the body of myths belonging to a particular religious tradition. As with all religious symbolism, there is no attempt to justify mythic narratives or even to render them plausible. Every myth presents itself as an authoritative, factual account, no matter how much the narrated events are at variance with natural law or ordinary experience. By extension from this primary religious meaning, the word myth may also be used more loosely to refer to an ideological belief when that belief is the object of a quasi religious faith; an example would be the Marxist eschatological myth of the withering away of the state.

While the outline of myths from a past period or from a society other than one's own can usually be seen quite clearly, to recognize the myths that are dominant in one's own time and society is always difficult. This is hardly surprising, because a myth has its authority not by proving itself but by presenting itself. In this sense the authority of a myth indeed “goes without saying,” and the myth can be outlined in detail only when its authority is no longer unquestioned but has been rejected or overcome in some manner by another, more comprehensive myth. Moreover, The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines that the word myth derives from the Greek mythos, which has a range of meanings from “word,” through “saying” and “story,” to “fiction”; the unquestioned validity of mythos can be contrasted with logos, the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated. Because myths narrate fantastic events with no attempt at proof, it is sometimes assumed that they are simply stories with no factual basis, and the word has become a synonym for falsehood or, at best, misconception. In the study of religion, however, it is important to distinguish between myths and stories that are merely untrue.

In the light of the narrative perspective, myth is a communicative and experiential way that is submerged within the scope of the narration and not only in the mere description (Stolz, 1988). One of the authors that has adopted this approach is Blumenberg (41), who has argued that myths are stories that have a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and also some margins of variation. In addition, myths express the complexity inherent in the reality of the world and the human. In fact, “what has become identified by their names is released from its bleak and strange character
through metaphor, revealing, through storytelling, the meaning that encloses” (41). At the same time, mythic narrative reveals the early crystallization of the experiences of communities. In other words, it does not only give meaning to the actions of individuals always and everywhere, but also, and mainly, to groups. In fact, mythical stories, in the same way that media stories, provide community members ‘guidance’ and information that allows them to be placed through an identification process.

Mythology in Indian context is perhaps the most utilised and most admired for every generation and genre. History bears proof to every fact that Indians from every age, time and place and dynasty have expressed their ardent desire to be enriched and knowledgeable in myths, mythology, legends and folklore. Irrespective of belonging to the contemporary age or being placed in erstwhile era, Indian mythology and its umpteen sections have rested their permanent influence on Indian literature as a whole, which by their own right, can be considered a literary genre itself. Mythology in the Indian context is kind of an all-encompassing and all-inclusive subject, to which everybody wants to be a part of. The traditional, customary and highly esteemed view point of the grandmother-styled art of story-telling has been evolving with time since time immemorial, and this can never be an overstatement.

It is notoriously difficult to arrive at any single definition of myth. For example, myths can be stories about ancient events that define and sustain notions of community. However, a “myth” can also be a fabrication or act of false speech that is, nevertheless, ideologically persuasive. In Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship, (1999) Bruce Lincoln provides a thorough genealogical study of both these aspects of myth. As Lincoln demonstrates, the idea that myth is an ideologically weighted narrative about figures or events from a remote past which shape contemporary ideologies comes down to us from about the seventh century BC, through Homer and Hesiod (3). Myths are, by nature, both untrue and true. What separates a myth from any other kind of narrative is a peculiar affective quality or narrative potency that carries its ideological matter in disguise. This “affect” elevates myth above ordinary speech and aligns it with the rhetoric and matter of sacred narrative. As such, mythical narrative requires a
collective investment from its author and audience that elevates speech and story to the status of a myth.

The notion that myths were false speech emerges in the fourth century BC through the work of the Sophists, and later, Plato. Lincoln identifies the following lines in the *Republic* as characteristic articulations of the discourse on myth that emerged during this period: *Mythoi* are categorized as a form of speech that is “false on the whole, but still having some truth in it” (39). Lincoln goes on to suggest that this shift in the conceptualization of myth occurs in conjunction with the shift from orature to literature. Thus, when a myth is written, the immediacy of its affect diminishes as it becomes susceptible to analysis and interpretation at the intellectual level. The idea of myth as false speech is often set in counterpoint to the notion of myth as elevated, sacred narrative by postcolonial authors. The postcolonial reader is caught in the tension between the construction of myth as oracle or riddle, and the accompanying suggestion that mythical pronouncements are also nothing more than fiction. For example, in Yuson's *Café*, the central myth of the heroic revolutionary, Leon Kilat, is deflated through mock-epic narrative techniques that expose the internal ideological potency at work in contemporary literary constructions of the Cebu revolution. Yuson's narration of the Kilat story invokes the potency of myth while maintaining a subtle ironic distance from its subject. This double-speaking understanding of myth alerts us to the way postcolonial authors can invoke the power inherent in mythical narratives while providing strategic checks and balances that interrogate the ideological assumptions of myth(43). Reading myth in postcolonial fiction thus calls for subtle critical recalibrations that negotiate and expose ideological foundations while remaining conscious of the function of myth as a vehicle for collective and individual belief systems.

Due to the preponderance of twentieth century novels that draw attention to their use of myth through magical realist narrative strategies, reading myth via discourses on magical realism has become common critical practice. However, scant distinction is maintained between notions of “magic” and “myth” in the critical material that surrounds this body of work. Lincoln defines, “Magical realism is often used as a catch-all phrase that encompasses a gamut of narrative strategies from sophisticated modernist
experimentalism to the presence of indigenous folklore or myth in a text. Each of the novels in this study would be categorized as magical realist fiction due to particular narrative characteristics that have come to associate with magical realism. Each novel draws on a recognizable mythical system. Likewise, the form of each novel (as tragedy, romance or satire) fosters particular “affective” responses to the central thematic of each text. In each case, myth serves a radical purpose and is used in a revisionist, subversive manner that provides alternative narratives to the historical moments that the novels explore” (34). However, precisely because myth is used to narrate revisionist alternative histories, the differing magical realist approaches to myth can signal the various ideological preoccupations of a text.

Lincoln says the relation of myth to magical realist narrative strategies is a complex issue that has been largely under-theorized because of the extremely slippery nature of notions of “magic” and “myth”. Criticism that deals with magical realist narrative strategies has, in the main, conflated the two categories of mythical and magical narrative in such a way that the two terms are virtually interchangeable. This study attempts to maintain a critical differentiation between the two terms for the purpose of demonstrating that the central issue at hand (the function of ideology in mythical narrative) requires a conscious reading practice that locates myth within its socio-cultural context and remains aware of the power of mythical narrative when employed as artifice(37). Magical realist narrative strategies afford a rich experimentalism which can contain and interrogate myth, if read primarily as narrative strategies rather than representations of a “mythified” local. The sense of the gaps and absences that are invoked in the hesitation between categories of the real and the fantastic provide a sense of willing disbelief that is distinct from an unmediated narration of myth. This hesitancy is helpful when negotiating some of the more difficult ideological pitfalls of a mythic consciousness in contemporary fiction.

The magical realist narrative strategy does not seem to assume a shared mythical space between author and reader. While it is critically fallacious to suggest that magical realism is a single definitive narrative act, there is a key characteristic that is shared by all magical realist texts – the understanding that the magical real is a figurative device, albeit
a device with varying levels of rhetorical potency. Likewise, in the magical realist text, the reader encounters myth primarily as a form of figurative speech even in situations where an author can claim a “representative” vision of a mythical narrative. The magical realist narrative strategy may attempt persuasion with the mythic as part of its aesthetic, but it allows the reader to decide if the fantastical events of the narrative are “true” – it invokes hesitation and negotiation. For example, Yuson constructs the character of Leon as a Christ figure. However, he dismantles any sense of sanctity in this allusion by framing the significant mythemes of the Christ story in bawdy humor. Therefore, Leon does not go to a willing sacrificial death because he wishes to save all humanity but because he wants to bed another beautiful woman – his motives are anything but sacred (198). Yuson’s use of comic irony affords the reader the ability to participate dialogically with the narrative because it dismantles the rhetoric of persuasion that one experiences in myth.

In the field of postcolonial studies, the study of myth is intimately tied to the process of writing and imagining back to the center. However, the employment of indigenous myths or legends in postcolonial novels also brings up questions about authority and representation that are difficult to ignore. Barthes in Mythologies says that we have to contend with issues of appropriation and adaptation that arise when certain mythical systems are privileged over others. Furthermore, reading with a consciousness of the location of a text and authorial bias in relation to indigenous myth is particularly important in situations where myth narrates a history of the disenfranchised. The problem of cultural erasure and appropriation alerts us to the difficulties inherent in reading myth in a postcolonial context. As discussed, my approach to reading myth lies between structuralist notions of myth as archetypal racial narrative and a Barthesian reading of myth as ideological vehicle. A middle ground is necessary between two such polarized readings of myth because it is present in postcolonial fiction of the late twentieth century. Thus, while Yuson uses myth to comment on the ideologies behind the construction of identity politics in the Philippine context, Harris negotiates syncretic visions of the self/other binary as imaginative recuperation through myth. Yuson’s novel is an exploration of myth as artifice, while Jonestown (employing artifice) provides more of a negotiation of the archetypal potencies of myth. However, Sealy and Ondaatje
demonstrate uneasiness in their narration of myth that fits neither reading. Such strategic manipulations of myth require a new critical negotiation of the problem of ideology in myth which explores the relation of archetype to artifice.

The markedly hybrid approach we encounter in these novels depends, in some degree, on the narration of myth. Quite often, narrative complexity and the author's experimental style of narration are developed through an intertextual dialog between embedded myths and the thematics of the novel. Such myths are drawn from indigenous traditions as well as from the larger body of classical mythology from the “West”. For example, Sealy invokes the Nepali folktales of the Yeti as trickster and savior while Ondaatje draws on the Grail myth. An analysis of myth in these postcolonial texts necessarily involves an engagement with the question of inherited narrative traditions that are both indigenous and other. However, postcolonial criticism about myth focuses almost exclusively on an archival approach that identifies indigenous myths and legends in texts and scrutinizes their relevance within the thematics of the texts.

As Franco Moretti’s study of Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1968) in *Modern Epic* (1996) demonstrates, there is a particular predisposition in the novel's “Western” audience to read myth as a form of resistance to the onslaught of imperialism and the epic of progress that forms the plot of the novel. It is in this sense that Moretti suggests that “myth...is the sign and instrument of symbolic resistance to Western penetration” (247-248). While Moretti does not claim to speak for the novel's reception in Latin America, he points out that the unprecedented success of Marquez's novel points to a very interesting characteristic in the reception of “magical realism” in the so-called West. For Moretti, the critical reception of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* demonstrates the neo-colonial desire for consumption of the indigenous other via categories of the imaginary. In his evaluation, the reception of magical realism in the “West” is built on desire: ... the desire of contemporary societies for 'meaning', imagination, re enchantment. A wish that, in Europe, comes up against centuries of Weberian coldness, and is therefore hard to fulfill; but which can quite well find an outlet in stories belonging to another culture. Especially if that culture is a perfect compromise formation: sufficiently European ('Latin') to be comprehensible – and sufficiently exotic
(‘American’) to elude critical control. (249) Moretti’s argument would suggest that the act of narrating the so-called fantastic requires a similar engagement with ideological codes of representation. The issue of recuperation and resistance via the narration of myth is thus extremely complex as we are forced to encounter, over and again, the difficulty of locating myth, and producing a “located” reading of myth, in a postcolonial context.

Jung's imagistic metaphor for individuation “the squaring of the circle”, symbolically captures the kind of critical effort required to read myth in postcolonial literature. Jung Two Essays on Analytical Psychology used this symbol to suggest the eternal tension and play between collectivity and individual consciousness. If a circle symbolizes the universal and eternal, the square is the finite, individual, “containing” frame of the circle. (117) For Jung, the square symbolized the conscious negotiation of the infinite power of archetype. For the postcolonial writer, the narration of history via myth has produced a preoccupation with cyclical themes that hint at shared anxieties over the dialectics of dispossession that lurk beneath the specificities of local historical moments.

The discomfort with the notion of archetype springs from the foundational theoretical explorations on the construction of otherness in colonial discourse. For example, few would disagree that Sir William Jones's Third Anniversary Discourse (1786) invokes a symbolic reading of the colonized other that simultaneously magnifies and diminishes the vast plurality of a multiracial, multicultural and multilingual people into a monolithic symbol of an original culture (demonstrated via Jones's philological theses). Essentially, Jones constructs a myth that serves a vital purpose in the colonial project of British India. It is in response to such colonial frames of reference that postcolonial critical practices outline the way discourse produces, defines, and sustains the notion of the “other” in relation to colonial knowledge systems. Thus, when Homi Bhabha in his The Location of Culture outlines the construction of colonial stereotype, he provides an analysis of the way unifying images contain the radical, polysemous nature of otherness. (118) Read another way, we might say that Bhabha recalibrates the myth of the “other” by exposing the dialectics of power at work in colonial discourse. Bhabha correctly identifies stereotype as a frame that invites rupture. However, rupturing stereotype is a relatively facile process because the image of the stereotype, unlike
archetype, speaks in recognizable binaries. Thus, the recognition of stereotype produces the relatively clear boundary between “self” and “other” which is far easier to negotiate than the polymorphous boundaries of archetype.

It is suggested that the method of reading myth can be productively used in a far greater variety of contemporary fiction to demonstrate the difficulty of negotiating the gaps and resonant silences of mythical pasts within a postcolonial present. It is hoped that the evolution of this method of reading myth in literature will eventually include inter-regional studies of fictions from around the world that will further probe and question our reading practices. The future readings can only serve to further enrich our understanding of the depth and complexity of the function of myth in postcolonial literature.

The theme of interest however in contemporary times lies with the modern Indian literature and its utilisation of the mythological theme in an extensive sense. This task has too been smoothly accomplished, owing to the ingrained influence of myth and legend to every Indian born in the country or overseas. Every one likes to come back to the Indian context and backdrop when reminiscing their regional literature. Mythological theme in Indian English literature or regional literature has time and again mesmerised and captivated the section of readers in general. The gigantic proportions, the setting, the concept of families residing in a joint method, or the magnum opus work of art, make these contemporary Indian writers stand out in an entirely different genre altogether. As in Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, or Shashi Tharoor with his The Great Indian Novel, have time and again and recurrently regained stronghold with mythology in their novels. Symbolism and implicit references to mythology is one guiding factor that presently counts in contemporary Indian literature, known to be quite a hit amongst all ages of readers. The authors are far from taking the readers on a fantasy ride into the past. The premise of their fiction remains well grounded in the reality of the present situation.

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gamut of narrative strategies from sophisticated modernist experimentalism to the presence of indigenous folklore or myth in a text. Myth is also one of the most prominent narrative techniques adopted by most novelists of merit and so does in all her novels. Myths for Chitra Banerjee have a specific purpose. Myths are so much part and parcel of human self that doing away with them is almost impossible in India. The mythological references in her works really help the readers to transmit the traditional and cultural values. The demythification of breaking the traditional rules which she applied in her novels do not mean to do away with myth but to crusade against the conventional concepts against women which hurdle their way against their progress.

Myths are actually reflections of a profound reality. They dramatically represent our instinctive understandings of truths and provide a message for mankind. They form a tradition and culture, which in fact is that binding and limiting factor of Indian feminism. In India, myths have an extraordinary vitality continuing to give people some truths about themselves and about the human conditions. They make use of the significant discoveries of anthropologists and psychologists. Finally, what is to take account of historical development of myth and of the culture within which they were told. Human beings might have grown or developed in the technological aspects but the emotional and the physical problems that being undergoes remains the same till date. Mythologies came into existence with the growth of language, man and society. However they give man very importantly the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe. The modern man who has actually understood the nature of the nature better and the writers like Chitra Banerjee have reflected his truth through the comparisons and have reflected life in its true colour.

According to Kirk, a true myth is an explanation of some natural process made in a period when such explanations were religious and magical rather than scientific. (41). Myths grant continuity and stability to a culture. They foster a shared set of perspectives, values, history – and literature in the stories themselves. Looking back at the many myths, cultures have spawned, provides an interesting glimpse into humanity of the past as well as interesting parallels to the present and the future. The three genres in mythology: myths, legends and folk tales provide unique purposes for cultures. Cultures
use these narratives as gateways to deeper exploration and understanding. Tales like that of *The Princess of the Snakes* in *The Sister of my Heart* and other mythological tales in the novels provide us with measuring sticks of strength, morality and many other qualities we strive for. By continuing to examine these narratives, we promote the evolution of humanity.

The craftsmanship of Divakaruni’s usage of myth is examined in order to drive home how the writers have drawn copiously these ideas this from their respective myths and conveniently fictionalize them to strengthen the plot structure in their writings, in other words, myths have been used as tools to portray the predicaments of the modern man. The writer seems to be potential craftsman to create situations that display their skilful artistic creation. Myths serve as the backdrop fictionalizing.

The mythic framework of her novels contributes to the creation of a female universe. The world of myth is essentially feminine in nature as opposed to the cerebral world which is masculine. In her novels there is an attempt to create fresh myths or at least give new interpretations to existing ones. The new myth symbolizes the feminine world that Divakaruni envisages. It is a world where women rescue other women and do not wait helping for the men. She uses myth not only as hold to associate herself with India but also to re-evaluate more reflectively on those surrounding the good, self-effecting and self-sacrificing Indian women.

Myth has always had a very significant position in human psychology and society from its beginning as primitive religious narrative to its recent adaptation as an aid in the exploration of the unconscious mind. According to the eminent mythologist, Carl Gustav 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 the individual, myths are the symbolic projections of a people’s hopes, values, fears and aspirations” (Guerin 183). In India myths are more powerful and play a suggestive role in the life and literature of the country. Its tenets have inspired the Hindu society and have fashioned its psyche. Shashi Deshpande in her essay “Telling Our Own Stories” says, “Myths condition our ideas so greatly that often it is difficult to disentangle the reality of what we perceive from what we learn of ourselves through them; our behavior is often,
and to a great extend, dictated to by them” (88). The 1980s were the era of the so called myths busting. Many writers began to re-evaluate more reflectively the myths and stereotypes surrounding Indian Women. One such writer is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Chitra Banerjee is fond of using myth. There are many mythological references in her novels. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the turmeric is mentioned about the mythological characters such as the *devas* and *asuras*, its origin and the incident to Tilo:

> I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the *devas* and *asuras* churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the nectar and before the poison and thus lie in between. (M.S:13)

In order to prevent the accident which she visualized, she decided to give a charmed *kalo jire* to Haroun. When she mentioned about the spice, it was referred with Hindu mythology as Ketu is one of the nine planets in astrology: “*Kalo jire*, I think, just before the vision comes upon me again, blood and shattered bone and a thin cry like a red thread strangling the night. I must get kalo jire, spice of the dark planet Ketu, and protector against the evil eye.”(M.S:32)

The mythological character, Agni, god of fire and the place Lanka which had its own etymological significance are referred in the novel. Chili spoke and sang in the voice of a hawk circling sun bleached hills where nothing grows:

> I lanka was born of Agni, god of fire. *I dripped from his fingertips to bring taste to this bland earth.* (M.S:39)[…] “That is why I hold on, lanka, whose name the ten headed Ravana took for his enchanted kingdom. City of a million jewels turned at the last to ash. Though more than once I have been tempted.”(M.S:39)

When the first mother asked Tilo the meaning of her name ‘Tilottama’, she said that she knew its meaning. She explained that ‘til’ means the sesame seed which ground into paste with sandalwood cures the diseases of heart and liver. She said that she would be Tilottama, the essence of ‘til’, life-giver, restorer of health and hope. The First Mother explained further that her name “takes on the name of the most beautiful apsara of Rain-
god Indra’s court. Tilottama is most elegant of dancers, crest-jewel among women. Or had you not known?” (MS: 44) She warned her that she must set her heart only on service to humanity. She said, “When Brahma made Tilottama to be a chief dancer in Indra’s court, he warned her never to give her love to man but only to the dance.” (M.S: 45)

Tilo wished to change her old body into a youth to fulfill the desire of Raven who was her lover. She decided to call on the others like abhrak, laki to remove wrinkles and blacken hair and firm the sagging flesh and makaradwaj, the king of all spices which was described: “rejuvenator whom the Ashwini Kumars, twin physicians of the gods, gave to their disciple Dhanwantari to make him foremost among healers.” (M.S 85)

Knowing that the fennel equalizer can take power from one and give it to the other when two people eat of it at the same time, Tilo entreated it to work for her to help Ahuja’s wife. She called it when she was gone. She reached into the bin and lifted up a fistful. The author says about fennel: “Fennel which the sage Vashistha ate after he swallowed the demon Illwal so he would not come back to life again.” (M.S 111)

In India, it was the belief that the early morning before the day break is considered as ‘brahma muhurta’ an auspicious time for starting anything new. It is regarded as the holy moment of Braman, the god of creation. When Tilo came to America she was given the frayed saris, color of stained ivory, in which she greeted her customers. When she desired to attire herself in America, she selected ‘brahma muhurta’ to start her work with poppy seeds to put them into flame so that the smoke would wind around her, to form itself into a web on her skin. The cloths took shape:

And so today at the brahma muhurta, the holy moment of Brahman when night reveals itself as day; I take poppy seed, khus khus that sticks to my fingertips unwilling as wet sand, and crush and roll it with jiggery to form afim. (M.S: 135)

In her shop, Tilo had hung the picture of ‘Krishna and Gopis’ which proclaim the nationality and culture of India. She had lifted down a picture of Krishna and his gopis hooked it into the waiting nail, with a dupatta draped carefully over it. (M.S: 248) At the end of the novel, Tilo had broken so many rules that she did not know what the spices
would. She would again in this life light Shampati’s fire and step into it. She recollected the advice of the First Mother not to break open the red jar. She thought that she should not have released its power into this city that has too much anger in it already. But she replied that the anger of the chili is pure, impersonal. Its destruction is cleansing, ‘like the dance of Shiva.’ (M.S:250)

Tilo after consuming Makaradwaj, the most potent of the changing spices for three days, she was getting back her youth to give pleasure to her lover Raven who loved her sincerely. When the transformation was going on in her body, she felt the pain. But Tilo was too confident, who thought she could absorb the poison like “Shiva of the blue throat, who had risked all for nothing.”(M.S:278)

Tilo got astonished feeling at her beauty. She was dazzled by the face looking back at her, young and ageless at once. The author described Tilo’s “forehead was flawless like a new opened shapla leaf, nose tipped like the til flower, “mouth curved as the bow of Madan, god of love, lips color of there are no other words for this crushed red chilies.” (M.S:297) When Tilo and Raven were indulging in love making, the spices encouraged her. The spice spoke to her in my ears, “Use everything. […]Give and take back, teasing. As did the great courtesans in the courts of Indra the god king.”(M.S:307)

Tilo felt that she was doomed to live in this pitiless world as an old woman, without power, without livelihood, without a single being to whom she could turn. For one to be happy, another must take upon herself the suffering. She spent her whole life for the welfare of others. Tilo, once, had the desire to live for her. She would make herself as ravishing as Tilottama, “dancer of the gods, for Raven’s pleasure.” (M.S:318)

A tale came to her from Tilo’s forgotten childhood: In the start of the world, searching for the nectar of immortality, the gods and demons churned up halahal, bitterest poison from the primal ocean. It was said: “Its fumes covered the earth, and all creatures, dying, cried out their terror. Then the great Shiva took in his cupped hands the halahal and drank it. The dreadful poison burned in his throat, turning it a bruised blue that remains to this day; even for a god it must have been painful. But the world was saved.” (M.S:318) Tilo felt that she was no goddess but an ordinary woman only. But her
stance was like that of Siva, the god of Provider, who drank the poison for the welfare of people. She had a little satisfaction that she had only brought brief happiness into a few lives. (M.S:318-9)

One morning, Gopal left very early and was gone for three days. He returned with the ruby. He shouted for the household members all to come and see what he had with him. Chitra Banerjee described about the beauty of the ruby which rolled across his palm. She said: “the ruby must have sparkled like fire and ice together, ‘Like a teardrop wept by Jatayu, the mythical dragon-bird.” (S.H:43) Sudha’s mother was silent while he told the household about the cave. When Bijoy accompanied Gopal for ruby-hunting, pishi kept that lamp lit every day, she prayed each morning and night to Ganesh, remover of obstacles, and Kali, protector against evil (S.H:51). When they stood in the senior girls’ assembly line at school, Anju whispers to Sudha to skip class in the afternoon and go to see the new film. When Sudha was afraid, Anju encouraged her not to be a coward. Sudha was speechless and thought; ‘What words can I speak with my throat that has turned blue as Lord Shiva’s from the poison I’ve swallowed (S.H:70).

There is significance in the names of Anjali, and Basudha: “Anjali which means offering, for a good woman should offer up her life for others. And Basudha, so that I will be as patient as the earth goddess I am named after.” (S.H:21) When the parents of Sudha and Anju came to know about their skipping to the school in order to see a movie, they immediately decided to find bride grooms for them after the completion of their school education. Sudha worried much as she had already fallen in love with Ashok whom she met at the theatre. She started worrying in spite of Anju’s encouragement:

Lying in bed in the midst of my suffocating rage, I think, strangely, of Hercules. At school we have been studying the legends of Greece and Rome.[...] I have felt the blue air rushing beneath Icarus’s wings, the ominous Persephone when the black vaults closed above her head, and then wept again when ceres took her in her arms the way my mother never does with me. (S.H:84)
At home the parents of Sudha and Anju were very strict. Both Sudha and Anju were allowed to go and come only by their car. Sudha wished to meet Ashok but it was impossible. One day when the car was stopped for the signal, Ashok rushed to the spot. Sudha was already at the open window and Ashok hurried over to take her hands. Anju was amazed at how swiftly that happened. It was as if they had known each other for years. The incident reminded her of the stories Pishi told about them: “the great lovers of the myths Shakuntala and Dushmants, Nala and Damayanti, Radha and Krishna, how they would appear to each other in dreams and share their deepest secrets.”  (S.H: 96)

When the marriage proposal was fixed to another man, Sudha was normal without any opposition. Anju was perplexed and she sat down hard on the bed, at once terrified for Sudha and amazed that she had taken such a bold step. Sudha said hopefully that she just got the news of her troubles to him and replied, “Like the princess Rukmini did with Lord Krishna, remember that story? Ashok is doing all the rest.”  (S.H:123). Sudha searched the sky desperately, and then on the last strike she saw a falling star which believed that one falling star for fulfilling one wish. Opposing desires battled in her heart for Anju and herself. But finally she asked for a wonderful marriage for her cousin, a husband whom she would love with all her being: “On the breath-end of that wish, just as the star burns out, comes a startling thought. If only Anju and I, like the wives of the heroes in the old tales, could marry the same man, our Arjun, our Krishna, who would love and treasure us both, and keep us both together.”  (S.H:131)

It is true that throughout Anju and Sudha’s childhood, the mothers disagreed on how things should be done, and sometimes even argued hotly. But the next day they would be the best of allies, if not friends, united against them. Sudha and herself used to joke about how ‘they were like the holy trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, keeping out little domestic world on track.’(S.H:152). The traditional way of putting sindur on the forehead is the mark to show her a married woman. Both Anju and Sudha got married on the same day. When Anju went through the motions of the rest of the wedding ceremony, Sunil marks her forehead with Sindur. She slipped a ring onto his finger. They chanted more prayers for conjugal bliss. When Sudha passed by them, following her husband with listless steps, Sunil’s voice faltered as he said: “And I will protect you and treasure you
and love you as my Lakshmi, my goddess of prosperity.” (S.H:168) When Anju was in California, Sudha dreamed of Prem who was an assumed name given to the unborn baby of Anju: “Prem was blue as Krishna and floating like a snowflake in milky light.” (S.H:294) He stretched out his little hands to Dayita, an unborn baby of Sudha. She woke up in tears, not knowing why she was crying. Later her dream came true that Anju lost her son due to the miscarriage.

Sudha was telling her life struggle in the name of a queen’s story to Anju over phone about her brave decision to leave from her mother-in-law’s home when she insisted Sudha to abort the female foetus. She came to a halt before completing the story and told her cousin: “The words I’ve been following through the labyrinth of memory, like Theseus followed his ball of string, have run out. What shall I do now?” (S.H:310) Then Anju continued the rest of the story to support her friend. The religious reference is found in the novel: When Sudha was about to leave from home to America, the mothers wiped their eyes with their sari edges as they whispered blessings: “May Goddess Durga keep you! May you be always happy and brave as the Rani of Jhansi” (S.H:324). Sudha felt that she and Anju had travelled the vale of sorrow, hoped that the baby would save them, and had saved them already like Madonna with a child.

A dish without salt is useless and the salt enhances the flavour of the food. Like wise a novel without myth which carries traditional value to inculcate moral in the young minds at the right time is very important. Sudha tells the story of The Ramayana to her baby as she heard the story of Damayanti from her aunt Pishi. There are some references of myth in Chitra Banerjee’s The Vine of Desire. When Sudha and Anju were teenagers, Pishi, the aunt of them had told the tale of Damayanti. Likewise Sudha narrated the story of Ram and Sita to her child Dayadita, and there are some other mythological references such as, Savitri, and Jambavan. The latter is the name of the bear in The Ramayana. Pishi had also told Sudha and Anju about the tale of Damayanti, a queen so beautiful that the gods grew jealous of her husband. The gods took away all he had and forced him to wander in the wilderness for many years. Pishi had ended: “A woman’s beauty can be her wealth, but also her curse.” (V.D; 69)
Sudha had grown disenchanted with stories, the way her life veers away from the ones she longed to emulate. But once in a while, remembering Pishi’s request, she told Dayita tales from the Ramayana. She thought she enjoyed this and she was not scolding. She did not know whether she understood or not. Still, it made her feel motherly and good. The story she told her was about how the demon Ravan stole Sita from her home: When Sita saw the golden deer outside her forest hut, she desired it. She said to her husband, Ram, “If you loved me as much, you would catch the deer so I could have it as a pet”. [...] Do not step outside this boundary”, he said to Sita. (VD 75)

She continued the story: As soon as he went away, the demon Ravan, disguised as a *sannyasi*, came to the hut and begged for alms. He tricked Sita into crossing the circle, captured her and took her to his island Kingdom in Lanka. It would take many years of sorrow and searching, war and death, before Ram and Sita would be united again (V.D:79). Anju talked about feminism and the predicament of women to Sudha. She added: “Talk about male fantasies! You won’t believe this woman Griselda. No, actually, you will – she’s a photocopy of so many of our Indian heroines: Sita, Savitri, Damayanti. It’s like they all trained at the same academy, got the same M.R.S.degree”.

Sudha decided to leave from her home as she had the guilty consciousness of having yielded to the desire of Anju’s husband Sunil. When Sudha left from Anju’s home to find a job, she took some of her things and reluctantly a toy bear which was given to her daughter by Sunil. Sunil named it Jambavan, after the bear in *The Ramayana* (V.D:202). In some other occasion, Ashok got a chance to meet Sudha in California and she was surprised at the drawings of Ashok in his artist’s note book. Without looking at her he was answering to her. He gave reason that she might vanish like Eurydice if he looked at her. When Sudha asked him when he learnt to draw well. He answered without turning: “I was afraid – like in the story of Eurydice- that you might disappear.” But he does look. (V.D:333)

Sudha, in her dream, told her daughter the story of Sita’s trail by fire and her own comment of it: After Ram had rescued her from the demon Ravan, he claimed he could not take her back because she might have slept with him. When Sita refused, Ram asked
for the proof. Believing her own chastity, Sita allowed Ram to lit fire on her. She said, “Light me a fire then, she said. I don’t want to live anymore.” (V.D:313) Chitra Banerjee commented on this in an ironical way: He obliged. She stepped into the flames. But she didn’t burn. The god of fire himself brought her back and vouched for her innocence. Ram and Sita were happily reunited. (But, having been doubted that way, can a woman be happy again?) (V.D:313).

Sunil had reluctantly agreed to the ceremony to propitiate for his dead father, mostly to please his mother. He did not have any faith in it. At that time the priest told about the traditional value of the ceremony and the myth behind it: “Ah, you modern boys returned from America. […]. “Don’t you know the story? When Mother Ganga, river of heaven, was asked by lord Vishnu to come to earth to save us, she wept and said, lord, don’t ask me for this, earth people will put all their dirt in me, physical things and their disgusting sins also. And the Lord said, see. I bless you with my touch, nothing can make you dirty. Never mind what-all they do, you will be most holy always.” (V.D:325)

Anju was given an assignment to write a piece in which she was expected to reinterpret a music or epic character by envisioning her in a scene of her own creation. For writing it, she chose Draupadi who is a character from The Mahabharat. In return, she got appreciation from her staff that she had quite a gift for writing, and he wished her success in developing it further. In her assignment, Anju had described about the life of Draupadi and also posed question in the feministic vein, “what right has a man to gamble away his wife as though she were a mere piece of property?” (V.D:343)

She was born from fire […]. She will leave her hair untied and uncombed; a shroud of knots to remind her husbands how they failed in their most important duty. […] After the great battle of kurukshetra, after every member of the kuru dynasty is killed, Draupadi will finally tie her hair. […] Draupadi long with her husbands start on their fated journey up the Himalaya Mountain, where she will perish. (V.D:345)

In the conclusion, Anju left by leaving some questions in which she mentioned about the terms which were related to myth such as agnirekha, parijaat, Indra, Krishna,
asha-lata, and so on. She compared desire to the asha-lata, the mythical desire vine which gives you whatever you wish for. She imagined: What would Draupadi plant in her garden? Would it be the agnirekha, flame-flower of virtuous courage, follower of the heroes her husbands have become? Would it be a sprig of the parijaat, the tree of fragrant bliss which their mentor Krishna wrested from Indra, the king of the gods. The asha-lata gives what you wanted, but it always turns out different from what you imagined it to be (V.D:346)

In The Conch Bearer, Abhaydatta, one of the brotherhoods, showed the magic conch to Anand. Abhaydatta started telling about the conch from where it had been got. The mythological link behind the conch is revealed as the conch is originally used by the mythological character such as Nakul, Sahadev and their fathers, the Ashwini Kumars: It came out of an ancient 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. (C.B:26)

When Anand was more curious to know what had happened to Nakul and Sahadev after the Kurushethra war. Abhaydatta replied that he didn’t know. He said that early part of the story was written in The Book of Heroes, but then the trail was lost. He hoped: “when time changed and the fourth age of man-the ink-dark Kali Yug that we now live in – began, it was time for the conch to be found again.” (C.B:26) During their enterprise, Nisha and Anand faced a lot of trials. On the way they saw someone had set up a big earthen pitcher of water and a dipper near Lord Ganesha’s Statue. Anand felt much tired and parched to drink water. There was a sign near the water: “BEFORE YOU DRINK, TRAVELLER, YOU MUST WASH YOUR HANDS AND OFFER A PRAYER AND A FLOWER TO GANESHA, AND THE REMOVER OF OBSTACLES.” (C.B:81)

When Anand tried to cross a particular way, he was stopped by a voice or voices which stated vehemently that only the deserving could pass through the way and demanded to reply. If he was able to answer correctly, then he might be permitted to enter the Silver Valley (C.B:196) The voice shot its questions: “Which of these three
virtues is the most important: honesty, loyalty, or compassion? (C.B:198) Anand had known the value of three. He could not choose just one. He replied that the three virtues are connected. He said, “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.” (C.B:202-3). Then he was appreciated for his right answer. (C.B:204)

Anand was admiring the beauty of a tree in the Silver Valley. The man on the left said that he was looking at the parijat trees. He explained: ‘It is said they were brought from the heavenly garden of Indra, and of all places on Earth, it is only in our valley that they have survived. (C.B:205). Then he urged Anand to come quickly as the auspicious moment of sunrise would soon pass, and then they must close the gate.

The novelist in the Queen of Dreams mentioned about the mythical characters such as Madusa and circe in the novel. When Rakhi sensed the evil glace of the manager from the Java café, she felt the malicious force which unable to pass through. She pointed out her father to see the lady. She didn’t inform him of the thought that went through her mind: “her thoughts like a lightning flash – if his eyes met hers, she’d turn him into stone, like Medusa, or enchant him, like Circe.” (Q.D:183-184). In the cave, the novices learnt to dream the dreams of others. When Mrs.Gupta was in it, the trainer Jahnavi’s expertise laid in the study of dreams out of history and myth. She would ask them what they meant, and what they revealed about the nature of dreaming and its relationship to their waking lives: “The dream of sage Narad who turns into a monkey, the dream of defeat and death, sent to him in warning – they all come back to Rakhi, though the years had eroded their details. But she remembered the dream of Tunga-dhwaja in the forest.” (Q.D:189)

Chitra Banerjee was interested in myth. In the abstract of the novel The Palace of Illusion itself, she had stated clearly that she had read over the thousand-page leather-bound volume in her parent’s home in Kolkata. She had presented all the characters without fail. She also explained the minute details as that of the original Mahabharat. Set at the end of what the Hindu scriptures term Dvapar Yunga or the Third Age of Man (which many scholars date between 6000 BCE and 5000 BCE), 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 psychology complexity. It moves with graceful felicity between the very recognizable human world and magical realms where yakshas and apsaras roam.

At the core of the epic, lies the fierce rivalry between two branches of the Kuru dynasty, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The lifelong struggle between the cousins for the throne of Hastinapur culminates in the bloody battle of Kurukshetra, in which most kings of that period participated and perished. Chitra Banerjee was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women. It wasn’t as though the epic didn’t have powerful, complex women characters that affected the action in major ways. For instance, there was the widowed Kunti, mother of the Pandavas, who dedicated her life to making sure her sons became kings.

There was Gandhari, wife of the sightless Kaurava king, who chose to blindfold at marriage, thus relinquishing her power as queen and mother. And most of all, there was Panchaali (also known as Draupadi), King Drupadi’s beautiful daughter, who has the unique distinction of being married to five men at the same time—the five Pandava brothers, the greatest heroes of their time. It was stated that Panchaali and her headstrong actions were the cause to bring about the destruction of the Third Age of Man. The original story of The Mahabarat is slightly changed as The Palace of Illusion as it is narrated through the point of view of Draupadi. (P.I:2)

The affection between Draupad and Lord Krishna was so close. It was clear that Krishna, whose complexion was even darker than Draupadi, didn’t consider his colour a drawback. She had heard the stories about how he had charmed his way into the hearts of the women of his hometown of Vrindavan about 16,000 of them. And then there was the affair of Princess Rukmini, one of the great beauties of their time. Draupadi wondered, “Could darkness have its own magnetism?” (P.I:8) When he came to visit, he teased her by playing the tunes of the most extravagant songs on his flute. But when she tried to thank him, he acted as though he didn’t know what she was talking about.
The other stories about Krishna were also revealed: how he had been born in a dungeon where his uncle Kamsa had imprisoned his parents with the intention of killing him at birth, how, in spite of the many prison guards, he had been miraculously spirited away to safely in Gokul, how, in fancy, he killed a demoness who tried to poison him with her breast milk and how he lifted up Mount Govardhan to shelter his people from a deluge that would have drowned them. (P.I:10) For the question what is the form of the world, the prince recited,

“Above are the heavens, abode of Indra and the gods who sit around his throne. There, in the center of the seven worlds peopled by celestial beings, lies the milky ocean on which Vishnu sleeps, waking only when the earth grows overburdened with unrighteousness. Below it stretches our earth, which would tumble into the great void if it were not supported upon the hoods of Sesha, the thousand headed serpent. Further below is the underworld, where the demons, who hate the light of the sun, have their kingdom.”(P.I:22)

There is a reference of sage Narad in the novel. Draupadi knew enough to realize that there would be trouble when Sage Narad, had paid a surprise visit to Yudhisthir and said "No, great king, while visiting Indra's court, I didn't see the spirit of your respected father there. He had powerful family connections (emerging, it was said, directly from the brain of Brahma) and was a formidable devotee of Lord Vishnu. His favorite activity was to travel from court to court and world to world, collecting gossip and spreading mayhem.” (P.I:156) He had already contributed to the demise of several regimes, and was justly known as Narad Troublemaker. Draupathi wondered what he was planning (P.I:156). Narad exclaimed, "Ah, Krishna, the master tactician! How fortunate you are to have her as your friend! You do know that you are the incarnation of Vishnu himself, don't you?" (P.I:157) Arjun asked him curiously whether he was really an incarnation. He doubted to believe that Krishna as an incarnation of Vishnu as he seemed so normal, always joking around with them. Narad answered, "He only reveals his divinity to those who are ready for it," (P.I:157)
Yudhisthir asked Narad what they could do to ensure that their ancestors enter Indra's court. Narad said, "By a strange coincidence, that is just what I asked them. They said that if you performed the Rajasuya sacrifice, they'd be sent there." (P.I:156) Then Yudhisthir announced that he should certainly perform it and asked him to tell him how it was to be done. Draupadi was skeptical about the entire endeavor, and wondered if there were lokas, what proof was there that the dead could be promoted from one to the next based on what we did here on earth. Yudhisthir hesitated to that. Yudhisthir spent hours discussing philosophy with his wife and brothers. To divert their minds from their misfortunes, the sages also told them stories of people whose sufferings were far worse. Among the stories, Draupadi said, “My favorite was the story of Nal and Damayanti, perhaps because of its parallels to our life—parallels than Yudhisthir didn’t seem to see.” (P.I:208)

There are some references from The Ramayana in The Palace of Illusion: Draupadi found an asoka tree. Draupadi remembered that Sita had borne her sorrows under the same tree. When she had a moment, she sat under it, trying to draw upon her fortitude. She thought that Sita could lift her mind from the demonesses taunting her and sent it to her beloved Ram and found peace. But Draupadi didn’t know how to do that. The sun god appeared before Karna in his dream. Karna asked the sun god to tell him his father. Though the god refused to tell, he informed that he was nobly born and his mother was a queen and his father a god. He advised karna, “Before Indra speaks, forestall him by saying that you will give him anything but your armor. In this way, you will not break your promise”. (PI 240)

The sun god warned him to be cautious with Indra who would disguise as a Brahmin to beg for his gold armor and earring, would come to him to get his armour and earrings. He advised him not to relinquish them as they alone would protect him from the twin curses. Without them, karna could not hope to defeat Arjun, or to survive the war. That was why Indra wanted them. Finally karna said that he was triply blessed that the Lord of his heart, had chosen to warn him. But by following his advice, he would still break the spirit of his vow. When the sun god realized that Karna would not change his mind, he spoke with regret and admiration: “Do this at least: tell Indra that you know his
plan. In chagrin, he will offer you a boon. Ask for this Shakti, the weapon that even his son Arjun cannot withstand.”(240)

The next day, all went as the sun god had prophesied. When Karna had cut the amulets from his body, Indra gave him his power and one other boon: “As long as the land of Bharat floats on the ocean, you will be known as the greatest of givers. In this your fame will surpass Arjun’s.”(241) The god had given him a boon to negate the curse the Pandava queen had laid on him a long time ago. In other occasion, Dhrupadi’s sleep was a disturbed one on a night, but in between waking and dozing, she dreamed the last dream she would have until the war ended. In it, Krishna was talking to her. When he opened his mouth to speak, she could see the entire earth inside it, and the heavens with their spinning planets and fiery meteors. He said: “Just as we cast off worn clothes and wear new ones, when the time arrives, the soul casts off the body and finds a new one to work out its karma. Therefore the wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead.” (P.I:294) Vyasa wrote: At the moment when Karna died, the sun plunged behind a cloud so dark that people feared it would not return. A divine glow left his body and circled the battlefield as though searching for something before it discarded this world. Some have doubted his words, but I [Draupadi] can vouch for their truth. (P.I:297 & 298) this proved that he was a demigod, Prabhasa in the past.

Divakaruni has abundantly used the mythological characters in her novels to remind and recall our ancient culture including the sumptuous items especially the Bengali dishes which at one point seems to be called some of her works as culinary literature. The unquenched thirst of Divakaruni on myth has also seemed to be fulfilled with her novel, The Palace of Illusion which is basedon The Mahabarat. The novelist has gone ahead to remythification and demythification through her characters in the novels. In the same time, the undue descriptions of the preparation of dishes seem to project the identity of the culture of the place which keeps the immigrants away from the nostalgia. The use of myths and legends is the most outstanding part of the technique of Banerjee’s narration inher novels. It is through these subtle allusions, myths and legends that the narrative of Divakaruni’s fiction acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of Indian women.