

**IMPARTING MORALS AND CULTURAL VALUES THROUGH CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE: A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE  
BROTHERHOOD OF THE CONCH* TRILOGY**

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**Abstract:** *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a postcolonial, diasporic woman writer whose works for children are influenced by the folk and fairytales her grandfather used to narrate to her as a child. The grand heroes and heroines with their virtues and vices etched many cautionary morals into her child-consciousness. She incorporates these morals through the messages that she imparts in her literature for children. These messages are inspired from values, ethics and spiritual insights from Hindu mythology and Indian philosophy. The present paper explores and examines these messages conveyed by Divakaruni in her trilogy, *The Brotherhood of the Conch*.*

**Keywords:** *Ethics, morals, values, children, humanity.*

Morals and values are an integral part of children's literature. Childhood is considered to be the best age for inculcating ethics, values and morals among children. Thus books for children and messages imparted through them have a great role in the building of their characters and in making them responsible and conscious beings who respect not just their own self but all their fellow beings and work towards the cause of making the world a better and a worthier place. One such effort has been made by an Indian-American author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, through her works for children. Divakaruni is a postcolonial, diasporic woman writer whose works have continued to cast a spell on the readers across the world through her works such as *The Mistress of Spices* (1998), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010) and *Oleander Girl* (2013). Her works blend myth, magic and folklore of her native Bengali culture with the present-day reality, dealing with contemporary issues. As a diasporic writer, she mainly writes about immigrant experience and within that, she is most concerned about the predicament of women immigrants who face greater difficulties being embroiled in the patriarchal structure of their society.

Divakaruni has also penned some significant books for children. Her first novel for children was *Neela: Victory Song* (2002). It depicts the magical feats of a twelve-year-old girl, Neela, to find her missing father and also her involvement in India's struggle for freedom in 1939. Divakaruni has also written a picture book titled, *Grandma and the Great Gourd* (2013), for very young children. It retells an old Bengali folk tale about a grandmother and her adventurous journey through a jungle to meet her daughter. Her most significant work in the field of children's fiction is however her trilogy for young-adults, *The Brotherhood of the Conch*. This includes *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) and *Shadowland* (2009). The series follows the fantastic journey of a young Indian boy named Anand, his friend Nisha, and their mentor, Abhaydatta, on a mission to return a magical object, a conch, stolen by the evil Surabhanu, to its original place in the Silver Valley in the Himalayas and to save the world from annihilation. The characters on this journey discard many doubts and gain insight about their true selves and attain realization.

The aim of this paper is to explore and examine the morals and spiritual messages that have been incorporated by Divakaruni in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* trilogy.

Divakaruni's novels for children are inspired by the folk and fairy tales of her Bengali culture, mostly narrated by her grandfather during her childhood days. She inherited from him, a rich reservoir of mythic tales from the epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and also the Bengali folk and fairy tales such as *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Sack of Stories). Divakaruni wanted to keep bringing back this rich part of her culture to show how magic shapes the thinking of people and their manner of seeing the world. Her main aim was to pass on morals and cultural values of her native culture to the young generation. Divakaruni shares:

I spent childhood vacations with my grandfather in a little village three hours outside of Kolkata. At night, he would bring me and my cousins together, light a kerosene lamp, because there was no electricity, and tell us wonderful stories from folktales, fairytales, and epics. . . . It made me understand the power of storytelling, and how, through stories, so much is communicated and passed on from generation to generation. ("Sisters and Spices")

Folk and fairy tales provide an insight about the world around us and about the workings of a society. They also provide an escape from the frustrations of the society into the world of imagination. The main aim of these tales has been to impart values, ethics and religious knowledge, especially among children during their formative years. Divakaruni has also been influenced by the morals she imbibed while listening to and reading such tales. The grand heroes and heroines with their virtues and vices etched many cautionary morals into her child-consciousness. Divakaruni infuses in the series these morals, values, ethics and spiritual messages inspired from Hindu mythology and Indian philosophy. Uma Krishnaswami states in this regard:

*The Conch Bearer* and its sequels are unusual in that they draw from the cultural and literary history of their setting in a consistent, organic way. The conch itself, the visitor who creates a feast out of minimal offerings of food, the rejection of a heaven-like place in favor of loyalty and friendship—each of these aspects echoes aspects of Hindu mythology, so culture and myth in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* feel structural and not merely decorative. (par.1)

Metka Zupancic in her paper, "Ethics of Wisdom and Compassion in the selected works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" affirms the same:

In today's world ruled by self-absorbed individuals, with egoistic preoccupations that foster divisions, conflicts and separations, Divakaruni's depiction of deep, albeit often unseen connections, with interdependence and necessary reliance upon the most honourable features in ourselves, is not just refreshing but a powerful reminder of a potential that humanity needs to uncover at the earliest to avoid more crises and catastrophes. In this sense, Divakaruni's prose writings, especially some of the more recent ones, carry profound ethical values and the promise of a world that we could all build together, with literature, understanding and love as a binding force that may perform miracles. (107)

Divakaruni's works however do not bore the readers with continuous didacticism. She believes that a message needs to be dramatic and not didactic. A message can only have an impact on children if it rises out of a young and an inspirational character's understanding of the situation. It should be an outcome of a dilemma that the young protagonist has been battling with a decision to be made or an obstacle to be passed.

Divakaruni's two young sons, Anand and Abhay, inspired her to write novels for children with characters they could relate to. They were fascinated by the world famous *Harry Potter* series by the renowned British writer, J. K. Rowling, and wanted Divakaruni to write about something similar. *The Brotherhood of the Conch* was the outcome. The series however is unique as it is set in Indian background, depicts Indian landscape, describes Indian people and showcases Indian values. Divakaruni as an immigrant wanted to project her native culture and its people in a positive light so that children from

minority cultures living abroad do not develop inferiority complex. Also, the incident of 9/11 attacks in New York, America, and a personal incident of racial abuse pushed her to present an authentic picture of the India, its culture, people and positive values in order to reduce suspicion against people from minority cultures during such times.

Barbara F. Harrison in her essay, "Why Study Children's Literature," observes that 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" (243). The most appealing and enticing feature of children's literature is that they "are written by adults who have brushed the dust from the past and have looked long and hard at what they have found. They are wise in memory" (243). Harrison also notes that literature is a means that "allows us, as it does our children, to hold life in our hands, the whole and the parts, to gather them into a coherent pattern" (243). It provides an insight into the ambiguities and ambivalences of life and makes us stronger to confront life with greater courage and strength. This becomes possible through the messages and morals that are imparted through stories for children.

In Harrison's opinion, the misconception about children's literature as simple and direct is partly because of the myth of childhood as an idyllic stage, devoid of responsibilities and pressure of life. Peter Hunt, a British scholar and a writer of children's books, in *Understanding Children's Literature*, notes that it is wrong to believe that writing for children is not so challenging and toilsome. He observes that children's literature has been assumed to be "blissfully free of the "oughts" what we ought to think and say about them" (1). Hunt is of the view that books for children are more than just a source of personal pleasure and entertainment. They are the result of direct or indirect social, cultural and historical factors. He says:

They are overtly important educationally and commercially with consequences across culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development. (1)

Thus, Hunt considers children's literature as a complex area and even more complicated he says "is the position it finds itself in between adult writers, readers, critics and practitioners, and the child readers" (2). Even though the language they opt for is simpler, the process of writing for children is in fact more extensive and painstaking. Writers employ metaphors and parables to connote some profound and deep ideas, thoughts and emotions. Divakaruni also makes use of such metaphors (for eg; the conch and the mirror). Zupancic says in this regard:

The magical objects such as the conch and the mirror are metaphors for the need to acknowledge the existence of other dimensions and forces at work in the universe, but especially a call to all of us to understand that we would be lost without these dimensions-as they cannot function without our cooperation-again, without our deepest commitment to love and understanding. (115)

The first part of the trilogy, *The Conch Bearer*, begins the adventures of Anand and his companions, Nisha and Abhaydatta. The novel opens in the city of Kolkata with young Anand struggling to make ends meet by working at a tea-stall in order to provide for his financially unstable family. This was not the case when Anand's father was around. His family had led a comfortable life in a small apartment until the receding business opportunities in Kolkata forced his father to take up a job in Dubai. After sending letters and money for a few months, the father suddenly disappeared. As the money stopped coming, the family confronted a financial crisis. Anand's mother had to take up a job as a cook in a rich household. Things got worse when his sister had a mental breakdown after witnessing a murder. The entire saving of the family went in his sister's treatment. Anand was forced to leave school and help his mother. Anand is fed up with his life and is eagerly waiting for some magical intervention to transform his life's circumstances. Opportunity comes in the form of Abhaydatta, a healer, who tells him about a magical

world called the Silver Valley hidden in the Himalayas. This place is run by the Brotherhood of Healers, who are endowed with magical abilities and teaching the same to young apprentices. Abhaydatta wants Anand's help in returning a magical object, a conch, stolen by an apprentice, Surabhanu, who has turned evil. This conch was the source through which the healers of the Brotherhood drew their magical powers and helped people in solving their problems. Without it, the powers of the healers are weakening and the world is on the brink of destruction. Anand is overjoyed at the exciting chance of helping Abhaydatta to save humanity and to escape his difficult situation.

Divakaruni weaves several values, morals, and ethics into the fabric of this novel. These aspects come to the forefront during the fantastical journey of the characters. One of the values that children are taught from a young age is to be kind to others. That is also one of the values that Anand had been taught by his mother: "Sharing what you have with others really makes you feel good" (CB 13). As the novel opens, Anand is shown to be feeling extremely hungry and cold while working at Haru's tea-stall in the cold weather. He is eagerly waiting for lunch that comprises of leftover stale food from the stall. However, when Anand sees a poor old man wandering around the tea-stall, he assumes that the man is hungry and gives his share of meial food to him. This act of kindness makes him feel warm suddenly and even his hunger subsides.

Another very significant value that Divakaruni imparts through the novel is that goodness does not crave for power or break the promises made. Anand's goodness is revealed through the fact that he decides to accompany Abhaydatta and help him return the conch not out of any ulterior motive but out of his genuine concern for humanity. Abhaydatta entrusts him with the responsibility of keeping the conch on their journey, as he knows that Anand will never use it for his personal purpose. Though Surbhanu tries to lure Anand throughout their journey, Anand is able to overcome his strong urge to use the conch to gain power and fulfils his promise of returning the conch to its original place in the Silver Valley.

Another important message that Divakaruni communicates through the novel is to believe in one's self and in others. Throughout his journey, Anand is inflicted with self-doubt. Initially, when Abhaydatta asks him to accompany him on the mission, Anand is not sure whether he is the right person for such a crucial task. He also doubts Abhaydatta and his mission. He doubts Nisha's loyalty many times. When Abhaydatta gives him the conch, he feels humiliated but is not sure whether he can do justice to this important position "I'm really a Conch Bearer?" "What if, when the time came, he failed the old man?" (CB 104). He also is unable to think of himself as worthy enough to be talked to by an object of such great power. When Anand is unable to cross the river, he is again filled with self-doubt about his magical abilities as only a Being of Power could cross it. He thinks of himself as "an ordinary boy who couldn't make it past even the first obstacle the Healers had set on the way to the hidden valley" (CB 148). Anand again doubts the existence of the Silver Valley when he does not receive a reply to his request of permitting entry. However, gradually, he comes to realize that doubting things had been his biggest weakness on this entire journey: "All through this journey he'd doubted the words of the Master Healer and trusted his own intelligence, the little, tiny voice of logic that said this isn't real. And each time it had led him into one trouble after another, had cause him to ruin everything" (CB 194). He learns to trust himself and others around him.

The writer also stresses on the need to have faith in magic and the miraculous in the age of *Kali Yug* (Age of Darkness and Disintegration). Even when the going gets tough, Anand does not let go of his faith in the magical. In this, he is inspired by the folk and fairy tales that led him to believe in the presence of magic. His mother on the other hand has lost faith in magic after a series of difficulties that she confronted in her life. It is Anand's faith in magic and his earnest wish for things to change that transforms his life completely.

The entire novel is interspersed with moral dilemmas confronted by Anand. He needs to make some important decisions in order to move ahead in life and also to grow as an individual. Initially in the

novel, he is confronted with first such predicament. When Abhaydatta offers him a lifetime opportunity of experiencing magical adventures that he had always wish for, Anand is caught in a big fix. He will have to choose between his family and his desire to help others. Through this dilemma, Divakaruni asserts the significance of family and responsibilities towards loved ones in Indian context and also the concern for the greater good of mankind. Towards the end of the novel, Anand has to choose between his friends and his dream of entering the secret domain of the Silver Valley. He chooses the former. Anand practices what he preaches. On being asked a question by the healers as a part of the final test to gain entry into the Silver Valley, his reply is befitting and the main message of the novel. On being asked that which of the virtues out of honesty, loyalty and compassion is the most important, Anand replies that they all are important and interconnected. His answers form the biggest lesson of the novel:

The three virtues are connected one can't exist fully without the other. Without one, the others lose their flavour. 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. (CB 203)

Divakaruni emphasizes that the virtues of honesty, loyalty and compassion hold power only when practiced together. Independently, any of these virtues may become a vice. Anand realizes that. He also practices the same by deciding to stay with his friends during their difficult time rather than choosing a life of power. The final dilemma that he is caught in is to decide between an adventurous life that promises power and fame as well as a chance to help the entire mankind and a life with his family back home where everything is back to normal with his father having returned from Dubai. He finally decides to stay back in the Silver Valley and be the Keeper of the conch even though he is pained to lose his family. But in order to gain something beloved to gain his self and become a healer, he will have to sacrifice something equally cherished

Divakaruni also imparts some spiritual messages from Indian philosophy to acquaint children growing far away from their native country with their spiritual culture. Some of them are: humans should be patient and not fret over minor problems and issues; they should not think of themselves as all-powerful and in control of everything that happens in their life as the events in their life are decided by a supreme power; however, having said that, every human being has to make her/his own happiness; one should wish for magical intervention only when one has made all efforts in improving circumstances. Other insights such as, everything is pre-destined and death is the beginning of another journey, are also delineated through the conch. A very important spiritual revelation is made by the conch towards the end, explaining why it did not prevent Surabhanu from stealing the conch in the first place even if it could easily have done that:

... everything's connected in the universe... Sometimes bad things or things that seem bad have to happen so that wrongs elsewhere can be righted or other good things come to pass. Sometimes an action is set in motion, and it must be allowed to run its course. To stop it forcibly would wrench the design of the web. (CB 263)

The second part of the trilogy, *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, continues the quest of young protagonists, Anand and Nisha. As they both begin their lessons as apprentices at the Brotherhood in the Silver Valley, Anand gets a rare message from a black wind, warning him about something evil happening nearby. Anand and Nisha sneak out of the Silver Valley to help their mentor Abhaydatta in the village of Sona Dighi, where a sorcerer, Kasim, and his jinn, Irfit, are making the village men dig up the ruins of a palace and are sucking their souls to gain entry into the world of Nawab Nazim that existed three hundred years ago. In order to find Abhaydatta and his apprentice Raj-bhanu, Anand follows them to this world with the help of a magical mirror called the Mirror of Fire and Dreaming. When there, he discovers that his companions have lost their memory and have assumed different identities. Thus, the responsibility of finding the lost conch, and saving Nawab Nazim and his family as well as the villagers of Sona Dighi from

Kasim and Irfit, falls on the shoulders of Anand.

This novel is also interspersed with several importance messages. The importance of kindness, love and compassion is again highlighted in the second part. Ramu, a poor village boy, lets Anand stay at his place and shares his meagre meal with him even though he is too poor. Ramu's grandmother divides the food in three equal portions instead of two: "The portions were too small to satisfy anyone's hunger, but the boys took them with good cheer. When the grandmother's back was turned, Ramu scooped a surreptitious handful of food from his plate to hers" (MFD 64). Towards the end of the novel, Anand is willing to sacrifice his life in his fight against the jinn, Irfit, to protect humanity. His love for his fellow human beings affects deep change upon the energies of Bismillah's world. Tara Ma risks her life in order to protect other villagers out of sheer love for them.

Divakaruni also stresses on the significance of honour and friendship in the novel. Nawab Nazim and his Chief Minister, Haider Ali, share a strong bond. When lured by noblemen to take over the kingdom, as Nawab Nazim is growing weak in health, Haider Ali refuses to betray his friend and does not consider it an honourable thing to do. Later, however, he does betray him after joining Kasim but soon realizes his fault after Nawab Nazim apologizes to him for earlier refusing to betroth his son, Mahabet to Haider Ali's niece, Paribanou. It takes "no more magic than a bit of human kindness and humility, and a remembrance of friendship" to solve a problem (MFD 265).

The second part is also incorporated with spiritual insights like one should happily accept everything that life throws and resist pleasurable desires or fear of pain. This will bring true happiness. The Brotherhood teaches its apprentices to keep their emotions in check as they can destroy their self. This can be attained through self-control and endurance. The apprentices also learn to acclimatize themselves easily to all types of situations and endure under the toughest of circumstances. They are sometimes given a meagre meal or sent into forests to search for food. The Weather Masters keep regulating the weather to make them adapt to the rough weather conditions. Anand is continuously advised by the conch to wait patiently for his magical abilities to surface: "*One cannot rush it. One has to be patient*" (MFD 34). Some other insights include: If one suffers the result of a mistake in mind, one doesn't need to be caused further pain through punishment, there are always some mysteries and unanswered questions in the magical realm, and the drama of life lies in not knowing everything before time. Another important spiritual insight that comes towards the end of the novel is that one has to pay a price for every victory. The conch successfully destroys the jinn but is injured in the process. It develops a crack on its surface. The conch decides to keep the crack even though it can repair it. It tells Anand:

*Sometimes vulnerability inspires love more than perfection does. Seeing my cracked body might make Healers understand how every significant victory requires a sacrifice. It might make them fight harder to protect what I stand for, which is at once immensely strong and immensely fragile. And Anand, what I stand for is more important than me. You, especially, need to learn this.* (MFD 328)

In the third part of the trilogy, *Shadowland*, Anand and Nisha travel to the city of Shadowland (future Kolkata) to bring back the stolen conch and to restore their Silver Valley to its former glory. The citizens of Shadowland, called the city of Coal (or Kol from Kolkata), are living in utter poverty and breathing through masks and wearing body suits as the air has become poisonous. A cold war between the scientists who live in the domes and enjoy all luxuries and magicians who live in the slums and are struggling for basic needs, has augmented the situation. Anand and Nisha decide to stay back to prevent the impending war between them. *Shadowland* is a dystopian novel that predicts a dark future for Divakaruni's native city, Kolkata, and in fact for the entire world where the class division is stark, where people have become completely apathetic to values and ethics and where the environment has degenerated completely. Divakaruni's message is clear; the entire world will be turned into Shadowland (as projected in the novel) if measures are not taken to stop it.

The last part of the trilogy is also fused with messages. Importance of loyalty in friendship is again highlighted through Nisha's constant help and loyalty towards Anand. She always had the ability to calm him down in difficult situations:

Nisha squeezed behind him, her shoulder pressed against his spine. In spite of the dangers that beset them on all sides, her presence made him feel safe. As he gave in to the wave of sleep that broke over him, he wished he could tell her that. (S 62)

Importance of love is also highlighted again. Even though Anand urgently needs to return to the Silver Valley with the conch in order to save his home, he decides to stay back and help his new friend, Dr. S, who is in dire need of help to save the city of *Kol* from a serious clash anticipated between the scientists and the magicians. Divakaruni also stresses on the significance of fellowship and solidarity in resolving difficulties. The conch and the mirror remind both the scientists and the magicians of their previous camaraderie and urge them to revive it because the city can be saved from destruction only if both the parties work in alliance. Divakaruni also depicts some spiritual values such as trusting one's self, not being egoistic, accepting every situation calmly and making all efforts without getting frustrated, a situation can sometimes be changed through help, and pain is sometimes imperative for the greater good.

*Shadowland* suitably compiles the main message of Divakaruni's works for children. According to Zupancic, the author's works assert the urgency to collectively construct a world that is "based on mutual understanding and love as a binding force that may perform miracles" (107). Divakaruni's return to spiritual aspects of love, kindness, compassion and ethics is to motivate people, particularly children, from all parts of the world to come together and work towards the common cause of making the world a better and a happier place by acknowledging similarities and respecting differences between them. The allusion to a Sanskrit mantra at the end of *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* appropriately sums up the writer's ultimate message through her trilogy:

*Sarve bhavntu sukhinah*  
*Sarve santu niramayah*  
*Sarve bhadrani pashyant*  
*Ma kashchit dukha bhag bhavet.*

*May all beings be happy*  
*May all beings be healed*  
*May all behold only what is good*  
*May no one experience sorrow.* (MFD 312)

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