

## **Attainment of Spiritual Maturity through Journey to the Interior: A Special Reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Conch Bearer***

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### **Abstract**

Journey is one of the predominant features in Fantasy fiction. Journey in Fantasy genre is based on the act of travelling from one place to another especially the protagonist's adventurous journey for a long period of time. In real life, the inner life of journey is an indispensable part and parcel of every person's life. Fantasy fiction comes under Children's literature. Journey is the motif in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Conch Bearer*. In the novel, *The Conch Bearer*, she tries to explore the reality of life through the young protagonist, Anand and how he overcomes all the struggles which is in the process of attaining Spiritual maturity. This paper tries to enhance the inevitable part of life that is recognition of identity in terms of spiritual growth especially in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Conch Bearer*.

**Keywords:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Conch Bearer*, life, journey, inner life, spiritual maturity

### **Introduction**

Stories are indispensable to human existence. Being the only species to express in verbal language, stories are an interwoven part of human civilization. Fantasy fictions are vastly available in children's literature. The genre of fantasy fictions exhibits the interior life of the worldly beings and the betterment of their existing unawareness life, and also it always involves talking animals, magical powers, often set in a medieval universe, possibly involving mythical beings. Fantasy novels may be romantic, historical, and action-packed or all three, but the sole purpose is to instill moral values in the course of life journey.

### **Life- a Journey**

Every man has to pass through various stages of his life with the experience of the Interior growth which is quintessential to lead a reformed as well as a peaceful life. It includes not just the physical growth but also the mental maturity of a person. It happens only in life journey. As the

journey of life is metaphorical, it varies as if it appeals to one a tiny tot may not appeal to one as one grows up. Concerning these factors, novel, a genre is an important apparatus in exhibiting human attitude and instigating them to comprehend social, political and personal realities. Life is a journey of one's dream and ideal, hopes and aspiration, one's failure and disappointment, motives and passions, one's experience and observations, and one's assertion and strife. Through their life journey all human beings can achieve a different sort of experience though they faced a lot of struggles and day to day boredom tug of wars.

A life is made up of a number of heroic journeys that occur over the course of that life. Journey is a lifetime learning process. Rainer Maria Rilke says, "The only Journey is the one within" (35). True hearts, true words, True love and also being a true man can achieve the finishing point of the successful journey. In every human being's life, soulful happiness and being alive is inevitable which leads to spiritual life. Spiritual in one's journey is none other than being a moralistic person even though the temptation dominates. Being a Spiritual person, it is another form of leading a life in a moral way. In this process of attaining purgatory level, everyone comes across unimaginable as well as unbearable troubles, which can mould a person like a statue which gives shape for one's thoughts and aims to pursue their goal in a form of pure heart without any worldly darkness.

### **Spiritual Maturity- Process of Recognizing True Identity**

Spiritual journey provides a forum in which individuals can grapple with their personal queries on good and evil, experiencing them in events and characters they might never physically encounter in reality. Interior growth can be traced well in Children's Literature as their spiritual growth with their physical growth measure the level of maturity. Ursula Le Guin considers Fantasy as "the natural, the appropriate language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul" (64).

Spiritual maturity is intimately integrated with Interior growth which is belonging to the mental or spiritual life that is mandatory to survive amidst the chaotic world. Spiritual maturity is the process of boosting the courage and desire to face the truth about themselves and their lives, instead of running from it. They are motivated on their own to seek morality and they care more about their insides than their outward appearance through which they could recognize their real identity of knowing their true calling.

### **Children's Literature**

Children's Literature, the term recently of much vogue needs contemplation as it has gained unprecedented momentum and relevance. More broadly it encompasses the whole content of the child's imaginative world and that of his daily environment and the sentiments that fill it. It is significant in a century of utter despair and futility, where people are hopelessly moving from a bitter stage of existentialism towards a still remorseful absurdism. Children's literature, at par with literature for adults, began to spread its tentacles, with its varied genres. Truly children's literature originates with "such retellings and adapting the familiar stories of a culture- folktales, legends and

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stories about historical and fictional individuals memorialised for their heroism or holiness, adventurousness or mischief” (John Stephens 91).

Fantasy genre is the most contemporary and nondescript; it is harder to define by canon than by example. They are tales that demands acceptance of elements that cannot be true and so require willing suspension of disbelief. It is the most acclaimed as well as criticised genre especially as far as literature for children is concerned. Children generally are more imaginative and therefore capable of getting fascinated towards the marvelous. Being innately curious and exploratory in nature, fantasy stories are alluring. Childhood is the time to learn bridging the immense gap between inner experiences and the real world. Bettelheim in his *The Uses of Enchantment* emphasizes the vicarious function of fantasy stories:

When the entire child’s wishful thinking gets embodied in a good fairy; all his destructive wishes in an evil witch; all his fears in a voracious wolf; ...all his jealous anger in some animal that peeks out the eyes of his archrivals – then the child can finally begin to sort out his contradictory tendencies. Once this starts the child will be less and less engulfed by unmanageable chaos. (13)

From time immemorial, many writers contributed their writings to the world of children in which they tried to explore their level of maturity from innocence to experience. Recently, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has evolved as a remarkable children’s fiction writer. As a prominent 21<sup>st</sup> century Diasporic Indian- American writer, professor, novelist, poet, essayist, short-story writer, non-fiction writer, book reviewer, and columnist, her writing is fueled by her own experiences as a first-generation immigrant and a woman between cultures and traditions.

### **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**



Courtesy: <https://www.governancenow.com/news/regular-story/in-conversation-author-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni-author-mistress-of-spices>

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956 - ) was born in Kolkata (Calcutta) India and currently lives in Houston, Texas, where she teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. She is also an award-winning and bestselling author. Her works have been published in over

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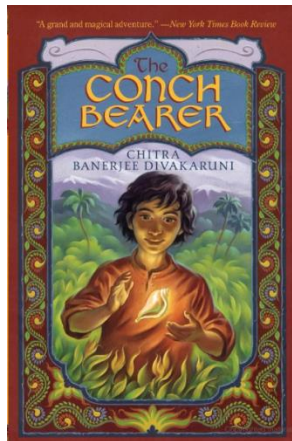
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50 magazines, including the *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, and her writing has been included in over 50 anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories*, *the O. Henry Prize Stories* and *the Pushcart Prize Anthology*. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Bengali, Russian and Japanese, and many of them have been used for campus-wide and city-wide reads. Several of her works have been made into films and plays.

Divakaruni's story collections include *Arranged Marriage* (1994) won the American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, and the PEN Josephine Miles Award for fiction, and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001). Her other novels are the best-selling *Mistress of Spices* (1997); *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and its sequel, *The Vine of Desire* (2002); *Queen of Dreams* (2003); *The Palace of Illusions* (2008); *One Amazing Thing* (2009); and *Oleander Girl* (2013). Her themes include the Indian experience, contemporary America, immigration, history, myth, and the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural world. She has given much importance to spirituality (i.e.) recognition of identity through inner self maturity.

### Exploring Children's World- *The Conch Bearer*



Courtesy: <http://www.chitradivakaruni.com/excerpt-conch-bearer/>

In the novel, *The Conch Bearer* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has made an innovative attempt in attitude and approach which aims at the genre of growing up fiction complementing the bildungsroman aspect of Anand whose transformation from an innocent boy maturing in years and experience on way of his adulthood. The journey hones him psychologically as it offers mighty power to the mind where Anand at the beginning, seems to be timid, carrying the reminiscences of his past life, and wants to get relief from his own problems.

As 'Bildungsroman' focuses on the growing up or 'coming of age' of a sensitive person who goes in search of answers to life's questions with the expectation that these will result from gaining experience of the world. Anand's endeavour is to have 'Bildungsreise' or 'educational journey' which denotes his level of maturity and he tries to seek out the experience of the world. He has started his journey as all ordinary people would do and end up in many struggles that let his physical

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body weak, yet his staunch and ardent faith will never let him down and it boosts him to move steadfastly without any respite.

The novel *The Conch Bearer* deals with the journey of a twelve year old young boy named Anand and his adventurous task of reaching the Brotherhood of Healers to handover the magical conch which he unexpectedly receives from Abhaydatta, an old man. The story begins in Kolkata, India, where Anand works long hours in a tea shop for a harsh master. Anand with his mother and sister Meera in a shack instead of in the nice apartment, where his family lived before his father mysteriously disappeared. Anand helps Abhaydatta when he has been abused by the shop's owner Haru and his adventurous journey to another world begins. Abadhyatta acknowledges something special in the boy and entrusts him with a conch shell that possesses mystical powers. Anand's task isto return the shell to its rightful home with the Brotherhood. He crosses many hundreds of miles away across arid plains and turbulent rivers, past powerful spirits and fantastical creatures, and finally into the secret Silver Valley, high in the Himalayas.

On the way, Anand goes through so many hardships. In Anand's life everything begins to change when he meets Abadhyatta, a mysterious man who turns out a member of the magical Brotherhood of Healers. Abadhyatta assists Anand at all crucial times. He is a savior to stretch out his generous hands to preserve him from perils. The end of the journey is the beginning of their life as the journey has taught him to realize his 'true-calling'.

### **Journey to the Interior - Anand's Evolvment**

Bildungsroman focuses on its hero's education toward a meaningful idea of himself and his role in the world, Anand tries to set out a journey which is a journey of knowing his real identity. In the novel, *The Conch Bearer*, Anand is fatherless. His father has left two years before the start of the story. Anand is the bread winner of the family along with his mother. Moreover his sister, Meera, has been hurt mentally when she witnessed a murder. Anand does not have a happy life where he is supposed to be in.

The conversion experience, where the old self is transformed into a new self, is the most important factor in this realization process. Anand makes it very clear that at any moment a person can forget about his goal, about the invisible world and his twice-born juidentity and choose to follow his own way instead of Good path. Chitra Banerjee puts forward a factor that even out of one's control some external forces drive him to be in trouble that assists him to transform his old self. For instance, Surabhanu is a constant obstacle to Anand who prevents him to reach the Brotherhood.

In the middle of the novel, Anand's journey with Nisha has been interrupted by Surabhanu. Just as the serpent tempts Adam and Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree, Surabhanu presents Anand all the food he loves. He wants Anand to be enchanted after eating those food. He brings before him the deep fried poories, samosas, chicken and fried prawns. It is described as,

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There were piles of deep- fried -poories, golden brown and still steaming. There were the crisp triangles of samosas stuffed with spicy peas and potatoes, and green coriander-leaf chutney to dip in them. There were chickens cooked in yogurt sauce, and the biggest fried prawns Anand had never seen. Next to them sat sweets of several kinds-juicy red gulabjamuns and orange twists of jilebis, and, in a large, shining silver bowl, his absolute favourites: rice pudding studded with raisins and pischios, which he hadn't eaten in ages and ages. His mouth watered. (CB 66)

All these favourite food of Anand tempts him to eat. When Nisha sees them, Surabhanu like the serpent insists her to join with them. Unlike Eve, Nisha does not fall in the snares of Surabhanu as she intentionally warns Anand as, "Things are not what they seem" (CB 65). By killing the enemy, Anand is in one way killing a part of his old self, something that will make room for his new self. This does not mean that he is forever free of pride or arrogance, as the book reveals through his future struggles, it means that the chance of retreating completely into his old self is diminished. It is no wonder that Anand, a child, is temporarily tempted by Surababnu but he overcomes all these temptations with the help of Nisha and leans on the side of goodness.

At last, Anand arrives at the gate to the Silver Valley. There, in the final trial, he is made to choose between glory in the Silver Valley or his friends. Giving up the conch, he chooses to remain with the injured Nisha and the mongoose Abhaydatta. The Brotherhood declares that he has passed the final test, the trial within his mind, and welcomes Anand, Nisha, and Abhaydatta into the Silver Valley. Here Anand has proved his level of maturity. Besides when he is demanded to stay there as a healer, he must give up his family. In this crucial time, he decides to live for the welfare of the society by which he has chosen to safeguard the conch forever as a keeper of the conch. As a result, the Healers make his family forget he has ever been a part of their lives. Anand, however, is not allowed to forget them for, as a Healer, he should remember the pain and what he has given up for the Brotherhood. This shows his transformed self which exclusively comes out of its selfishness.

The very ending of the novel is the measurement of the protagonist's maturity from innocence to experience. It is evident that Anand eventually reach maturity by pursuing higher moral purposes and finding an identity in society. There is a search for meaning in his journey who at first selfish and inexperienced, has learnt the real purpose of his life and attain the maturation process of knowing the eternal values. When the voice from the valley asks Anand, "Which of these three virtues is the most important: honesty, loyalty, or compassion?" (CB 203). For that Anand replies,

I can't choose just one. The three virtues are connected-one can't exist fully without the other.... 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).

## Conclusion

Anand has faced many struggles both physically as well as mentally. The novels deal with thefts, murders, adulteries, false-swearers, suffering of nostalgia, doubts, fears, worries and other evil doers. From negative force only the protagonist can reach their destination. If the person is facing the failure to overcome their temptation, they should know the secret of Life. It is to fall seven times and to get up eight times. When we have overcome the defeats, we always filled with a greater sense of euphoria and confidence. Having disinterred our dream, having used the power of love to nurture it, all the inflictions can be overcome.

Anand accepts to go with Abhaydatta, with a condition that if he cures his sister only, he will accompany him. Too selfish at the beginning, the journey to another world has transformed his personas that helps him to reach and recognize his identity in the world and aids to make decisions accordingly. His spiritual journey through interior journey brings him to the destination of his own individuality and helps him to recognize his identity as well as inner self.

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## Abbreviation

### CB- The Conch Bearer

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