

Crafting Enchanted Realms in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Brotherhood of the Conch Series* through Tolkien's Foundational Theory of Fantasy

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Abstract

Children's Literature, a unique genre created for children provides a long platform to amuse and entertain young readers. Fantasy holds a special place, offering a realm of boundless creativity where the impossible becomes possible. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series is a testament to this tradition. This series weaves a rich tapestry of fantasy, drawing inspiration from Indian mythology and folklore. This fantasy series, comprising *The Conch Bearer*, *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, and *Shadowland* whisks readers to a mystical world. By employing fantasy as a narrative device, Divakaruni ignites one's sense of wonder and enables the readers to explore the themes of heroism, destiny, and the eternal struggle between good and evil. Through the lens of Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" theory, this study focuses on Anand's journey as a protagonist who travels to the secondary world allowing him to see with a new outlook. It also introduces to epic quests, mythical creatures, and intricate worlds with its own rich histories and rules.

Key words: Children's Literature, Fantasy, Good and Evil, Tolkien, The Secondary World, Mystical Creatures.

Children's Literature creates a space where children can enjoy reading or listening to stories, allowing them to enter worlds of imagination and dreams. It has a long history that dates back to the 18th century and has seen as a crucial method for exposing children to both real and imaginary worlds. Fantasy has received widespread recognition across various fields of art forms including literature, films, video games and is heavily influenced by myths, legends, and folklore. Fantasy stories are heavily influenced by myths, legends, and folklore. The author chosen for the study is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a renowned Indian-American novelist born in Bengal. She is known for her poems, novels, and short stories across various genres in her literary works. Her storytelling methods set her apart from other contemporary writers. Among her various techniques, magical realism, fantasy, and myth are the most effective techniques. She has primarily used dreams as a strategy to enhance the magical elements in her works, blending magic and supernatural creatures into the real world setting to impart a sense of fantasy.

Divakaruni's *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series explores the realm of fantasy. It ensue the adventures of Anand, a twelve-year old boy who has new authority as conch keeper of The Silver Valley. Despite his involvement in *The Conch Bearer*, Anand embarks on a new adventure with his friend Nisha and their teacher Abhaydatta. This paper weaves fantasy with reference to the J. R. R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories", which discusses the critical concepts for understanding an author's imagination and the societal value of fantasy literature. Tolkien emphasized key elements of fantasy integral to its narrative power. Tolkien's work "On Fairy Stories" is often regarded as a foundational text in fantasy theory, providing key principles that explain the narrative power, structure, and cultural significance of fantasy stories.

The concept of Faerie has been focused on Tolkien's essay as an essential element in the author's diction. In his essay "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien states that there are four primary elements. The most significant among all is fantasy, which consists of conflicting aspects of magic and ordinariness. The ordinariness of the narrative connects the readers back to the primary or real world and creates the background for magic and the other worldly characters which are being presented in the fairy story.

According to Tolkien, the first element 'fantasy' is represented as "The human mind [which] is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present. The faculty of conceiving the images is (or was) naturally called imagination" (22). In *The Conch Bearer*, the protagonist Anand imagines magical scenes and stories, inspired by reading fairy tales his mother once purchased from him. Tales from Persian Fairy Tales sparked his imagination as he works at the tea stall, he envisioned the magic apples that can cure any disease when a person smells it and the telescope capable of revealing anything in the world that the person wishes to see. These are the examples of elements that exist only in the imaginary realm, fitting within Tolkien's conception of fantasy literature.

Anand secretly hopes to cure his sister Meera, who is mentally affected by the accident with the help of magical apple and he wish to see his father through magical telescope who went abroad for work and lost communication with his family. Anand wishes that someone would arrive and give him both the magical apple and the telescope. According to Tolkien's concept, magical apples and telescope are unrealistic things in the primary world, but the human mind imagines such things that are actually not present while reading fantasy stories.

When Anand reveals his secret desire to his mother, she tries to make him understand that these things happen only in the fictional world and not in the real world. Despite his mother's advice, he hopes that magic could happen someday. Magic happens in everybody's life, but most people do not notice them. He could often sense the sound of the invisible hummingbird and wished to figure it out, catch and carry it along with him to prove to others that magic exists. Anand continues to believe in the transformation power of magic embodying the child's innate capacity to perceive wonder in the mundane. His visions of magic illustrate humanity's creative impulse transcend material limitations. He believes that it would change his entire life by curing his sister's illness and re-join with his family.

Further Tolkien explains that the purpose of fantasy is to combine "with images of things that are not only 'not actually present', but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there . . . That the images are of things not in the primary world (if that indeed is possible) is a virtue, not a vice" (23). In *The Conch Bearer*, a creature called Surabhanu is portrayed as an evil character that can't exist in the primary world. When Surabhanu appears for the first time, Abhaydatta describes him as a malevolent being who has stolen the conch from the Silver Valley. He became an evil creature with the conch's magical power. He then disguises himself as an old man to deceive Anand to stole the conch from him when his true form is revealed he is vividly described as

His voice was young and hard, and Anand saw that he had changed further. His face was clean-shaven and unwrinkled now . . . his forehead he wore a diadem with a red stone. His robe was also a matching red, and fell to his feet, shimmering like flames. The fabric had a strange design on it: figures, both human and animal, caught in positions of agony. (TCB 68-69)

This characterization emphasizes Surabhanu as fantastical and wicked person who exists only in the secondary world of fantasy and not in the primary reality. This existence affirms Tolkien's notion that fantasy enables the readers to experience realities that lie beyond the limits of ordinary perception.

Similarly, in *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, Divakaruni introduces the jinn as a supernatural being rooted in Middle Eastern mythology often known for its ability to shape-shift and influence human destiny. Within the novel, the jinn embodies dark, destructive energy that serves as a spiritual and moral threat to the protagonists. It functions as both a symbol of temptation and a manifestation of evil that tests human courage and wisdom. According to Tolkien theory, if such creatures are said to be present in the primary world, then it must be wicked in nature. It becomes true that both Surabhanu and jinn depicted as an evil creature invisible to others but perceivable only to Anand and Kasim. Kasim speaks to the jinn as, "O great jinn! O Ifrit! the stranger called. I have given you one more spirit today, (TMFD 68), underscores the other-worldly nature of these interactional.

Tolkien states about the mental power of imagination. He believes that the "verbal distinction is philologically inappropriate," and he adds that "[t]he mental power of image-making is one thing or aspect; and it should appropriately be called Imagination" (Northrup 155). In *The Conch Bearer*, when Anand meets an old man for the first time, he feels that the atmosphere and wind are unusual. In order to protect himself from the impending danger, he runs as fast as possible to reach his home. After reaching his home, he hides behind the closed door until he heard a sudden thunder of knocks. Anand and his sister fears that some evil creature has arrived at to attack them.

When a voice from outside placed Anand for the entry and assures that no harm would come to them, he immediately recalled the warnings of his storybooks, "That's what all the evil beings in his storybooks said, the monsters and witches, the dakinis who drank blood" (TCB 19). Little does Anand know that neither monsters nor witches are knocking at the door, but Abhaydatta patiently waits for him to unlock. Steeped in the tales of fantasies, Anand's mind began conjuring images of the fictional beings he had read about despite knowing that such monsters and witches do not exist in the realm of everyday life.

Tolkien's describes on the secondary world as a world which is "more sub-creative; but at any rate it is found in practice that 'the inner consistency of reality is more difficult to produce, the more unlike are the images and the rearrangements of primary material to the actual arrangements of the Primary World'" (23). With the presence of the primary things in the secondary world it becomes easier for the author to showcase magical realism. In *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series, Divakaruni exemplifies this challenge by blending ordinary elements of the primary world with the ordinary features of a magical realm.

In *The Conch Bearer*, the setting of the Silver Valley is described as being present in the secondary world. While explaining the history of the Silver Valley to Anand, the old man mentions that the healers with magical powers dwell amidst in the Silver Valley to heal people all around the world. The old man explains the appearance of the Silver Valley with reference to the images of the primary world. He explains,

It began six thousand years ago in a hidden valley of the Himalayas – the Silver Valley, as it is called by those who know it. The Silver Valley! Even now it is most beautiful place in the world, protected by the jagged, icy swords of

the mountains that form a ring around it. Only a few people know the secret passes that lead into its fragrant groves and the shinning lakes of clearest water from which it takes its name. (TCB 24)

The reference to Himalayas, mountains, lakes etc., mirrors the real-world imagers in the secondary world. The Himalayan Mountains are very well-known in the primary world, but the presence of its hidden valleys are known to few. The author has weaved a make-believe plot that the Silver Valley is the fantasy world which was hidden behind the Himalayan mountains by the special magical powers of the healers. This makes the readers visualise the fantastical scenario with realistic images in awe.

In *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, Divakaruni describes fantasy through the concept of ‘time travelling’. Through time travelling, the author takes the readers to the ancient kingdom in the secondary world. However, the setting and appearance of the Durbar resembles the typical court of a palace as seen in the primary world. The fusion of magical elements with reality and the presence of supernatural creatures bring the sense of a secondary world. Banerjee clearly describes the setting of Nawab’s palace as the reflection of the primary world. The synthesis of realism and magic establishes a credible world that adheres to Tolkien’s demand for inner consistency of reality.

The presence of the jinn and conch makes the entire series of *The Brotherhood of the Conch* as a fantasy fiction. Tolkien’s concept of good versus evil is one of the elements of fantasy. In *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series is represented the conch as a good spirit and the jinn as an evil spirit. The conch uses its magical power to heal the people whereas the jinn wickedly desires to rule the kingdom of Nawab seeks dominion and chaos. Anand with the help of the conch tries to save the kingdom of Nawab against the jinn. However, as every traditional fairy story ends, the conch defeats the jinn in the end. The conch punishes the jinn with the damnation to hell, where he would wander and suffer the way he tormented others. The final victory of the conch over the jinn reaffirms Tolkien’s view that fairy stories culminate in consolation.

According to Tolkien, creating a fantasy world is a challenging task and if one is able to create a perfectly knit fantasy world, then it has to be appreciated and considered as a rare accomplishment. Thus he says, “To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft” (23). Divakaruni has an immense skill of producing awe-striking fantastical plot. She beautifully crafts the innovative setting of the Future dome in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series. She describes its appearance as “At the tallest, sternest-looking steel tower, there were more guards, and of course more machines” (SL 46). The people who are locked up in the rehabilitational prison are given voice sensitive devices in order to prevent them from talking to each other. In *Shadowland*, the future is entirely pre-developed with scientific technologies. Divakaruni also provides the essence of magical elements to bring the shade of fantasy in a world that looks similar to the primary world. In the primary world, there is always a contradictory lifestyle between the upper-class and the lower-class people. Similarly, when Anand enters the Futuredome, it appears to be a totally different place compared to the streets of the Shadowland. The streets of the Shadowland are polluted with toxic air and people breathe through masks. Contrastingly, when Anand enters the Futuredome, he is amazed by the rich and quality life of the people.

Scientists have created an artificial sun and moon behind the artificial clouds that look like real ones. Through the eyes of Anand, Divakaruni describes that “. . . the sun shone down cheerfully from a blue sky where a few lazy clouds wafted by. If he had not travelled through a dreary wasteland just a few minutes back, Anand would have believed it to be real thing” (SL 45). This illustrates the challenge of constructing a secondary world that retains believability despite its other-worldly qualities. By fusing science fiction with mythic symbolism, Divakaruni modernizes Tolkien’s framework demonstrating that the secondary world can evolve beyond medieval motifs while preserving its moral and imaginative essence.

Authors have their own style and imagination while depicting a secondary world designed by themselves in their works. They have the ability to imagine different worlds that makes the readers to escape the harsh realities of real world and engage themselves in the fantasy world completely. However, the secondary universe must be based on universal rules of logic and reason to ensure a consistent, coherent, and believable reality, regardless of how unbelievable it may be. It must also have specific constant components such as characters, settings, and themes to make the readers get familiar with the fantasy world. In *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series the author uses Tolkien’s idea of creating maps, languages and histories in the secondary world. In *The Conch Bearer*, the master healer Abhaydatta draws the maps of Silver Valley using his magic. The shimmery lines on the floor fades immediately when the old man draws the map of the Silver Valley to Anand and Nisha.

In *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, the author discusses the ancient history of Nawab’s kingdom. The setting of the Durbar and the people reflects the historical representation of the ancient period. People in the kingdom convene at the court to get Nawab’s help or justice for their problems. For instance, a needy widow arrives to the court with an envelope and pleads financial assistance for her elder son’s education. A shopkeeper complains about a trader who had taken all his money without delivering the goods and asks for compensation for his loss. For every complaint, the Nawab discusses with his minister before declaring the judgement. The presence of historical evidence for the imaginary Silver Valley in *The Conch Bearer* is the technique used by the author to show reality in a secondary world. Here, Tolkien’s suggestion of employing history in fantasy makes readers to believe in the existence of secondary world.

The history of the conch is explained by Abhaydatta, who says that the conch was found in the ancient era of great heroes. The heroes are “the sons of gods – and their fathers often gave them magical gifts. Two such heroes were named Nakul and Sahadev. Their fathers, the AshwiniKumars, who were the physicians of the gods, gave them the conch” (*TCB* 26). Both the heroes Nakul and Sahadev healed men and animals as well as cured the land of famine and drought with the magical conch. At the end of the great battle called Kurukshetra, they used the power of the conch to bring back the dead warriors alive. As the power of conch was misused, the heroes are punished by taking it back from them and buried deep in a valley of the Himalayas. The gods felt that the heroes were not handling such a gift in a proper manner. Thus, it becomes clear through these evidences that the setting and the plot of the fantasy world created by Divakaruni are inspired by the real-world myths and histories. Another historical and cultural representation in the novel is a royal procession of the birthday celebration of the Nawab’s son, young Shahzada, by distributing coins to the people who were gathered in the kingdom’s streets to honour him. As Divakaruni describes, “It is the young shahzada’s birthday, Allah grant him a long and healthy life! . . . I’ve heard he will distribute coins to all to all who have gathered to honour him” (*TMFD*).

The concept of folklore is also represented in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series. In *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, the village people of SonaDighi hold a strong superstition that if thus venture into the mysterious Shal Forest will never return. Even if they do they would have a strange appearance and refuse to interact with anyone in the village including their family members. When Anand enters the village with the help of the conch, he stands nearby the forest. When Ramu’s grandmother questions Anand, “what were you doing near the Shal Forest?. . . Hasn’t your grandma told you to stay away from that place?” (*TMFD* 44). Ramu explains to Anand about the forest and the wise woman of the village. This shows that the author has employed folklore events in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series. The fusion of history and folklore as Tolkien recommends reinforces the credibility of the secondary world and becomes the hallmark of his theory into the fabric of fantasy.

Tolkien introduces the aspect of “arresting strangeness” in the name of “Enchantment,” and he distinguishes this term from ‘Magic’: Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside, but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. . . (25) Similarly, the presence of magic in *The Brotherhood of the Conch* series reflects the world of fantasy.

In the Silver Valley, the healers preach their magical skills to their students. Thus, to learn such magical powers, Anand attends the classes of Vayudatta, who is the master of wind watchers. Here the author brings the presence of magic also in a tree. The tree called ‘The watchtower tree’ can sense the fear of a person and can comfort him/her by utilizing its healing power. The healer teaches about the eight major and minor winds that help in collecting the news from all over the world. Enchantment and fantasy are an exciting blend of magical world. This concept of enchantment and fantasy is seen when the healer asks one of his apprentices to chant the spell to call the winds. A boy stood up and started to chant the spell, From east and west, south and north, Marut, wind spirit, I call you forth From sky and earth, far and near, Bring me the news I need to hear. (*TMFD* 10)

The presence of magic and the magician appearing in the secondary world brings enchantment in fantasy. Thus, Tolkien discusses fantasy, stating it that “remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (27). The combination of fantasy and magic in the secondary world makes the readers experience such adventures at least once in life through reading. This proves to be an achievement of the writer who has the expertise of blending both fantasy and magic. Fantasy acts as a mirror to the human condition. It reveals that the extraordinary is not opposed to reality but an extension of it.

In the end, fantasy reminds that the human spirit thrives on dreams and believes in the extraordinary. They encourage to embrace the magic in own lives, to seek the extraordinary within the ordinary and to keep imaginations alive. Readers embark on a timeless journey of discovery, inspiration, and wonder in exploring the realm of fantasy. It put forward a unique and immersive world where magic is in decline and the protagonist commences on a quest to restore it, delving into the consequences of a world devoid of enchantment. This study deals with the concept of moral ambiguity in a fantasy setting where characters are faced with difficult choices and conflicting motivations, blurring the line between heroism and villainy. It also sets as an example to develop a story that combines elements of historical fiction with fantasy, transporting readers to a past era. The trilogy’s synthesis of folklore, history, and spiritual allegory illustrates that fantasy is not a mere escape from reality but a higher form of management with it. The enchanted setting of Divakaruni reminds readers that imagination is a one that Divakaruni reminds readers that imagination is a one that bridges the human and the divine, the real and the possible. This work thus reaffirms fantasy as a genre of profound aesthetical value capable of inspiring wonder while fostering moral reflection.

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