

Chapter 2

New Feminine Myths as Builders of New Transcultural Horizons

Metka Zupančič

Abstract In contemporary women's writing, mythical models of self-empowerment and personal growth permeate a number of novels from various cultural backgrounds and geographic areas. I will focus on the transformation of a major legend, that of Orpheus, which had influenced all Western literature since Greek and Roman times. Orpheus, the poet, who mourns the untimely death of his wife symbolizes the divide between the male and the female in the West, with Eurydice relinquished to the underworld. In contemporary women's literature, we witness a radical shift from this paradigm, with a new Eurydice emerging from the unseen, in order to expound her vision of the world she wants to live in. This new figure is linked to various other feminine mythical figures of empowerment, including a new Ariadne and even new forms of Mahadevi. From a transnational perspective, women writers contribute to a reinvented transcultural dialogue that better represents the new conditions of our lives, as do Ananda Devi (Mauritius, France and Switzerland), together with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (a North-American author of Indian descent), both important builders of connections between East and West, especially in their rewriting of the figure of Draupadi and other major mythical paradigms.

Keywords Transformation of myths · Eurydice · Draupadi · Mahadevi · Ananda Devi · Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

In contemporary women's writings, new mythical models of self-empowerment and personal growth permeate a number of novels from various cultural backgrounds and geographic areas. Regardless of the necessary differences in the narratives, style, language or topics, similar phenomena continue to emerge. Old mythical patterns are being transformed to generate new networks of

M. Zupančič (✉)
Department of Modern Languages and Classics, University of Alabama,
Tuscaloosa, AL, USA
e-mail: mzupanci833@gmail.com

interconnectedness. They may merge into new forms with somewhat modified contents: while their basic structure remains recognizable, they carry a refreshing new energy that helps promote new values and new awareness. In this sense, we are definitely positioned in the transnational and transcultural space that echoes Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, in which the author calls for a "larger transnational history" (Casanova 2004, p. 53). The "transnational space" offers in her opinion "a new tool for the reading and interpretation of literary texts" (Casanova 2004, p. xii). This new approach demands that especially gender issues be considered in a new light, through new lenses for which the observation of the new mythical paradigms may in fact be very relevant.

This essay will thus expose a number of hypotheses about contemporary women writers situated at the crossroads of many cultures and interested in contemporary issues such as they pertain mainly to women and their place in the world. I am looking particularly at writers who deliberately choose to be inspired by female mythical figures, mostly those from their own heritage. Yet, in their literature, these mythical figures most often appear as transcultural, already adapted to the new conditions, especially because of various forms of diaspora and global migrations. This pertains especially to the novelists who are directly or indirectly connected to the Indian cultural legacy. Quite frequently and most deliberately, the goal of the authors who rewrite ancient myths is to provide the appropriate literary space for their characters' awareness building. On a larger scale, we may hope that such literary endeavours will have an impact on the collective awareness and will bring about changes in the paradigms of thinking and behaving, both in the East and in the West.

In this regard, albeit largely focused on manifestations of the new paradigms in predominantly French and Francophone contemporary women's writing, my interests do not preclude authors from other linguistic and cultural environments. During these past decades, contemporary literature in general, and novels written by women writers in particular, displayed a variety of modalities by which ancient myths, together with archetypal paradigms, are being reconsidered, reactivated and profoundly morphed. One of the major mythical patterns of the West, related to the figure of Orpheus, has marked its literature from Greek and Roman times onwards. Its most salient characteristic appears to be the separation between the female and the male principle, with Orpheus' wife Eurydice relegated to the underworld, from which Orpheus does not succeed to bring her back to this life. Yet, in contemporary French and Francophone literature, a number of women writers have recreated a powerful new feminine figure. This new Eurydice is not only capable of rising from the underworld but is also a gifted literary persona.

In cultural history, the dismemberment of Orpheus, the last phase in the myth as we know it from the Antiquity, may signify the dismantlement of contemporary values and literary forms (Hassan 1982). The Eurydice of the contemporary women's literature, in conjunction with some other mythical figures such as Demeter and Persephone and in particular a new Ariadne (Zupančič 2010), acts as a connector and a healer. She endeavours to bring together the dismembered symbolic body of the West, thus initializing or rather embodying a new phase in the Orphic

myth. As I have noticed it, the possibility for this new dimension may be considered as somewhat inscribed in the traditional myth. Orpheus' head, after his dismemberment by the wild Maenads, continues to sing as it floats towards the island of Lesbos. It may be conceived that the Orphic voice was meant to pass on to the inhabitants of this island, which stands for the creative community of free women poets (Zupančič 1997). The notion of "rememberment" such as I propose in my research is nevertheless new. It conjoins the notions of memory and the limbs of the symbolic bodies, to be reconstructed through literature, predominantly by women writers (Zupančič 2013b).

The hypothesis about the rememberment as a crucial component of the contemporary women's literature would not be complete without the inclusion of a vaster field of Indo-European mythical patterns. Only some initial postulates will doubtless be possible in the present study, with all due respect to the differences in the functioning of mythical schemes in various contexts. We cannot ignore a number of postcolonial women authors who revert to stories, symbols and especially intertexts that differ profoundly from those we have studied or to which we have been accustomed in the West. In this regard, Julia Waters uses the notion of "non-Western intertextuality", which she connects to the statements proffered by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Waters 2004, p. 52). This type of intertextuality is clearly still not considered in its fullness, both in theory and in practice.

With this particular notion in mind, let me approach one of the central feminine mythical figures from the Indian lore, such as it is introduced to the Western audiences by two very different writers, one writing in French and the other in English. The myth of Draupadi is featured in the very title of Ananda Devi's novel *Le voile de Draupadi* (1993), "Draupadi's Veil". For her part, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) revolves entirely around the character of Draupadi and her story borrowed from the *Mahabharata*. As I will show later, both writers are also interested in other mythical paradigms that profoundly shape their prose writing, consciously from the perspective of gender in an intercultural setting.

Ananda Devi, born on Mauritius Island, with her real name Ananda Nirsimloo-Anenden, is an important contemporary author of Indian heritage who currently resides in Geneva, Switzerland. She holds a PhD in social anthropology from the University of London. Her name is an indication of the cross-pollination of cultures, together with her occupation and her literary concerns. As a professional translator, she could have chosen to write in any of the languages from Mauritius Island, yet she decided to compose her literature in French. *Le voile de Draupadi* is one of the texts she situated on her native island, with at the centre of the narrative a female protagonist by the significant name of "Anjali" (explained in the book as "prayer"). Anjali is pressured by her husband and her in-laws to save her little boy, Wynn, who suffers from a severe form of meningitis, by accepting to walk on the coals during the *agni pariksha* ceremony.

The reference to a ritual that we in the West only know from some exoticized accounts could appear as quite natural for Indians who speak French and would eventually have read this novel. Another dimension of this novel might still remain obscure. Why do we see the name of Draupadi appear in conjunction with the

cleansing ordeal, why is it her veil that will protect Anjali and carry her over the burning coals? In just one mythical name, a whole new world comes forth. It challenges our perceptions of gender in conjunction with mythical symbolism and it also questions our capacity to approach it properly and understand its many bearings, multiple layers of significance and multiple interpretations within the culture that generated it in the first place.

In contrast to Ananda Devi's approach, the nonresident Indian writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni certainly brought the character of Draupadi closer to the Western readership, in her novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), both in the United States and abroad, thanks to its translations into a number of languages. To mark the difference between the classical epic of *Mahabharata* and this novel, we see here a *woman* placed at the centre of the story, with her joys and sorrows, but mostly with her progressive understanding of life and her own responsibility for her actions, through the multiple challenges placed before her.

In both cases, in Divakaruni's enactment of Draupadi's fate and in Ananda Devi's reference to Draupadi as the protectress of those who seek purification by the fire, Western readers, without much preparation, are exposed to a set of unfamiliar and rather unknown intertextual references. They will eventually take those references for granted and focus on other dimensions of the story, which will often be the case not just in average readership but to some extent also in Western scholarship (see Mathieu-Job 2004). They may also try to become familiar with the vast domain from which these narratives are drawn, and then eventually encounter many contradictory explanations, while also receiving valuable insights that confirm some initial intuitions about these texts.

In my reading of Ananda Devi's "Draupadi's Veil", the most complex issue to apprehend was the appearance of the veil that will protect Anjali during her perilous crossing of the fire. The novel insists on Anjali's loss of faith in these rituals, at an early age of sixteen when she saw her cousin perish in flames. Powerful mystical dimensions clash with the constant reminders of how Anjali deconstructs even her own behaviour, in preparation for *agni pariksha*. As she slowly drifts away from her husband and his entire family, she is painstakingly aware that she will not be able to bring her son back to life, yet she is decided to follow through with her promise and the sacrifice. The novel includes references to Indian (or rather Hindu) rituals and symbolic forces at work, also with mentions of both Draupadi and Sita, with the respective epics to which they belong. Yet, the writer, who grew up listening to stories from these sacred texts, does not engage in long explanations of the importance and the value of these feminine mythical figures. In other words, she does not find it necessary to completely reveal her sources or to explain how Draupadi, in particular, has acquired a new identity of not just a mythical figure from the past but of a living archetype that holds the power to guide and protect her followers. The existing scholarship, for example by a specialist of *Mahabharata* who wrote a number of volumes on the "cult of Draupadi", Alf Hiltebeitel, may not account for the dimensions explored with regard to this myth by contemporary women writers analysed in this article.

The veil of Draupadi that protects the devotees during *agni pariksha* does not seem to be a generally known fact. It is of course Sita, and not Draupadi, who enters into the fire and exits from it unscathed, which proves to her husband Rama that during her abduction and captivity she has remained loyal and faithful to him. During my research stay in Kolkata, Sanghita Sen pointed out that Sita is not really a human being but is considered a manifestation of natural forces. As her sacrifice did not convince Rama of her innocence, she returns to the earth, her true and only mother. Draupadi, born unexpectedly out of *yagna*, is a human being, but this initial fire has already made her invulnerable to flames. Hence the possibility, in the complex workings of the imaginary, that she may indeed protect those who will walk on fire.

Furthermore, it is presumed that over centuries, and especially among Indians in diaspora, both myths, that of Sita and of Draupadi, somehow merged and were transformed into a true cult. Draupadi was thus elevated to the status of a goddess, at the centre of a powerful belief system used in particular for *agni pariksha* in locations such as South Africa, the islands of Reunion and Mauritius, but also in Singapore and Malaysia (see Diesel 1991, especially for “fire walking” in Natal, South Africa). Hildebeitel, in his second volume dedicated to these rituals, *The Cult of Draupadi* (1991a, b), sees them as a manifestation of popular Hinduism, to be found in Tamil Nadu (also see Hildebeitel 1999).

What does this mean for other manifestations of gender-based cultural phenomena, in particular for the veneration of female deities as they are described in contemporary novels by women, or may be observed from an anthropological point of view? To revert back to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who did not make Draupadi into a goddess, while taking the freedom to render this character’s psyche and her quest much closer to the modern perception of self-affirmation, how does this new archetypal figure reflect the altered perspectives about women in Divakaruni’s country of birth? What liberties in rewriting the story of such an iconic character is this writer taking *because* she has lived in the United States since her postgraduate studies? What dangers may there be for a *woman* writer who is reconsidering an ancient myth, for which there exist so many versions and interpretations? The author often cites the anecdote of a thunder that struck the fireplace in her home, in Houston, Texas, while she was in the process of writing the novel (Zupančič 2012): a warning or an empowerment?

When entering into the vast and uncharted domain of archetypal energies, especially when they are being transferred from their initial environment and placed in a new context where they may be misunderstood, made exotic and by this same token foreign, disturbing and thus unwelcome, how much freedom does a woman writer hold, how much is she to explain? I am referring here both to Ananda Devi and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In Ananda Devi’s case, her novel *Pagli* deals with the Indian diaspora on Mauritius Island (see Waters 2004), with the title that refers to (feminine) madness that may not be immediately understood by Western readers. The madness here pertains to the imposed or sometimes chosen “otherness”, that of being in a world that will consider a woman as unbalanced, weird or particular. A very similar breaking of taboos dominates another

Devi's novel, *Indian Tango* (2007), set in Delhi and disturbingly deconstructing a series of social interdictions. The first-person narrator is a writer from France, but originally from Mauritius Island, "*Mirich Desh*" (Devi 2007, p. 55). With "words of flesh" ("des mots de la chair", Devi 2007, p. 53), the she-narrator underscores her poignant desire to find herself in other Indian women. Within the political background of Sonia Gandhi's election in 2004, Devi manages to paint a vast array of feminine archetypes, with this politician, a foreigner, possibly called to change Indians (Devi 2007, p. 146). The narrator, an intruder in her own way, also hopes to enable transformation: she focuses on a woman of 52, caught in a typical Indian marriage, torn between her children, her husband and her mother-in-law who is pushing her towards abnegation and demise. Yet, this character, Subha, is only discovering the core of her being such as inscribed in her name, "dawn" ("l'aube", Devi 2007, p. 145). For the narrator, this woman is almost a deified reincarnation of Bimala (Devi 2007, p. 32–33), the character from Satyajit Ray's film *The Home and the World* (1986 [1984]). Considering that Ray based his film on Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* (1916), were the two artists aware that their character bore the name of a goddess related to the Shakti worship? Here again, Ananda Devi proves how deeply immersed she is in many aspects of Hindu spirituality, which allows her to rewrite the old mythical patterns and to fully give value to women's energies.

In terms of intercultural interactions, a number of Divakaruni's novels, such as *Sister of My Heart* (1999), its sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002) and her latest novel, *Oleander Girl* (2013), continue to break social norms. Divakaruni places women in new situations and conditions, between countries and languages. Nothing from the tradition and the upbringing prepares the characters for the necessity to redefine themselves in radically new situations. *Sister of My Heart* depicts a deep friendship, quite typical of relationships in Indian joint families, between two girls, Anju and Sudha, born on the same day, just after both their fathers died in an accident. The girls are raised as sisters by their mothers and a widowed aunt, with the three maternal figures barely able to guarantee the appropriate social standing the fathers might have provided for them. However, Anju belongs to a higher caste and will receive a much better education. She is destined to become an intellectual who will live abroad with an Indian husband chosen for her, but whom she manages to see beforehand and subsequently fall in love with. The other girl, truly the "sister of my heart", as the title of the novel suggests, is very beautiful, but has to accept a much less auspicious union with Ashok, a disturbed man. She becomes a servant to her rather heartless mother-in-law, in a situation that might be perceived as stereotypical, were it not for the richness of Divakaruni's style and of the symbolism she builds in the novel. When after a long period of uncertainty about possible offspring, in a marriage that brings little joy to this young woman, the pregnancy test shows that a girl is to be born, her mother-in-law insists on an abortion. Sudha decides to keep the baby against all odds and to move out of her wedded home. In the meantime, Anju, the companion of her youth, moved to California where she lost a baby boy in a miscarriage that is followed by a deep depression. Although distance somewhat affected the initial

closeness between the two “sisters”, Anju hopes Sudha could bring her back to a balanced existence. From a Western perspective, Sudha may be considered as a Persephone or a new Eurydice who rises from her own hell to help others. It would be interesting to find South Asian mythical models that pertain to the help such “sisters” are to provide one another, especially when the foundations of their closeness are being destroyed.

There is a secret that will come to light in the next novel, *The Vine of Desire*. Life is becoming too difficult in Kolkata for a divorcee with a baby girl, and the option of visiting her “sister” in California appears as a viable solution. It turns out that the young husband, Sunil, has been attracted to the less fortunate of the two girls since he first saw her during the marriage ceremony to his wealthier bride. Now that the three of them live in close quarters such as newcomers can afford in California, the young man transfers his affections to Sudha’s daughter. But he will not be able to hold back his desire for the young mother and will have a short-lived affair with her, which will of course destroy the now rather frail relationships among the three.

In search of independence, Sudha opts for an illegal occupation in a household where a successful American businesswoman does not know how to deal with her Indian father-in-law. With patience, Sudha cares for the despondent elderly man, a widower whose son felt obliged to bring him into his American home. In this situation, Sudha will be able to play her archetypal role of a guide from the underworld, with the help of her own baby daughter Dayita. This situation leads to new possibilities for Sudha who finds a new father in the old man, but also a grandfather for her daughter: returning to India with him will allow her the opportunity to restore her life in a new context. Here, we may speak of the fire of the emotions that was on the verge of destroying close-knit relationships, but symbolically, there is also the fire of inner transformations between cultures and countries that allows a woman, a mother of a little girl, to rebuild herself outside of the cannons prescribed not just in India but also in the United States.

A similar topic, albeit structured in a very different manner, is at the centre of Divakaruni’s 2013 *Oleander Girl*. The only daughter of a venerable Kolkata family, Anu Roy is allowed to study in the United States, where she falls in love with a black man. Expecting a child, but having sworn to her father that she will not marry without his blessing, she returns to India to be freed from her promise. Her father’s rage is the probable cause of her premature death. The little girl, Korobi, is raised by her grandparents, and believes her father also died before she was born. When eighteen, on the verge of getting married to Rajiv Bose, from a nouveaux riches environment, she learns about the existence of her American father. Her quest, on a perilous journey to the United States, leaves her shattered: two major taboos were broken, since she is of mixed blood, intolerable in itself, and born out of wedlock. She still decides to return to India, daring enough to face prejudices, mistrust and oppositions (Sriram 2013). With yet another woman at the forefront of her narratives, Divakaruni continues to explore the connections between East and West, in this case seemingly from a more pragmatic point of view. Yet, Korobi, as the characters in Divakaruni’s other novels, is an embodiment of the feminine determination to brave the challenges and choose a life better suited for her.

Such is the case in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). Observations about this novel allow me to draw a number of conclusions about the new transcultural horizons created through the reconsideration of ancient mythical paradigms. Written from a mythical and rather mystical perspective, the novel received the designation of "mystical realism" (Rajan 2002), which does not explain the rituals and the spirituality that define the main character. The suggested exoticism is even more accentuated in the film based on the novel (Nayar et al. 2007), in which the central female character becomes a flamboyant beauty (played by Aishwarya R. Bachchan) that caters to the Western perception of Oriental aesthetics (Zupančič 2013c).

Both in the novel and the film, a key issue that remains unquestioned pertains to feminine spiritual lineage, to the presence of communities that do not seem to depend on male supremacy. These communities nevertheless function on the principles of hierarchical order where a female teacher is the keeper of the tradition and of ethical norms. Such spiritual values permeate Divakaruni's novel, with a young girl who after a number of incidents and experiences, which may be considered as her past lives, finds herself on a remote island. Here other young girls are trained to become healers, under the guidance and strict ruling of a female elder. The girls are to recognize and utilize the non-anthropomorphic powers of spices, divine beings in their own right. The female elder possesses high wisdom and knowledge, but she nevertheless abides by some higher principles, which she passes on without ever questioning them.

Tilo, the central character in *The Mistress of Spices*, is transported through fire to a new location in Oakland, California. The "mother" figure, certainly a manifestation of Mahadevi, remains her distant judge and ultimate authority. The transition from one existence to another in the book is probably more closely related to the *yagna* ritual. In the movie, the opening scenes remind us of *agni pariksha*, with potential familiarity of Western audiences with this practice. In the book, it is through progressive rebellion against the rules previously imposed upon her on the island that Tilo becomes a new person; however, this transformation is rendered less drastic in the movie. In the book, spices are often the ruling forces that impose values upon Tilo. On the screen, we are clearly reminded of "mother's" admonishing when the beautiful young woman starts to question the interdictions, in hopes to reconcile her role of a helper with her personal yearning for love and acceptance.

In the new interculturality, or rather transculturality, are we to understand that the new women who emerge from the transformed, combined conditions, from amalgamated cultures, are to place themselves not only against the prevalent masculine norms, but even against the principles that are passed on to them through the *feminine powers*, as we have seen in Chitra Divakaruni's and also in Ananda Devi's novels? What do these feminine powers convey in terms of social, moral, spiritual or archetypal order that has been maintained so far, and for what reason may it have been maintained? And how is this Mother, such as depicted by Chitra Divakaruni, different from the archetypal Mother represented in so many small or larger temples in India? I am thinking in particular of all the figures of Kali in

Kolkata and of the worship that she induces. Which are the powers behind the Kali that people—women or men—bow down to? What advantages may faith procure to the followers of a particular cult, and what happens to the worship once the foundations of a belief system have shifted?

I presume Kali is not any longer the incarnation of the “fearful strength” (Sarkar 2001, p. 253), such as depicted by Bengali’s nineteenth century author Bankim, in his *Anandamath*, where she appears as “a measure of ... shame, deprivation and exploitation” (Sarkar 2001, p. 255). She is most probably one of the more positive manifestations of Shakti, of Mahadevi, of the mother capable of sustaining her children. But how will these dimensions be maintained, and how will they be modified in the present and in the future? These are the questions that I would like to explore further, in an open dialogue with other scholars, for all of us to benefit from the intercultural and transcultural interactions.

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