



BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE: A SEMIOTIC EXPLORATION OF MYTH AND MODERNITY IN DILIP CHITRE'S POETRY

Dr. S. RAJU

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

GOVERNMENT ARTS AND SCIENCE COLLEGE, TITTAGUDI 606106

CUDDALORE DISTRICT – TAMIL NADU-INDIA

Abstract: Dilip Chitre (1938–2009), a towering figure in Indian literature, crafts a poetic universe where myth and modernity collide, coalesce, and converse. This article examines four of his seminal collections—*As is Where Is* (1960), *The Mountain* (1964), *Post Climactic Poems* (1975), and *Traveling in a Cage* (1980)—to unravel how Chitre employs semiotics to interrogate the sacred-profane dialectic in postcolonial India. Through close readings of 20 key poems, including *The Felling of the Banyan Tree*, *Father Returning Home*, and *Ode to Bombay*, the study argues that Chitre reconfigures mythic symbols as sites of resistance, critique, and renewal. Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotics and Mircea Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy, the article reveals how Chitre's poetry bridges cultural memory with the fragmented self of urban modernity, offering a transformative vision of resilience.

Keywords: Dilip Chitre, sacred-profane, semiotics, postcolonial poetry, myth, modernity.

Introduction: Myth, Modernity, and the Postcolonial Self

Dilip Chitre's bilingual oeuvre—written in Marathi and English—occupies a liminal space between the sacred (myth, tradition, collective memory) and the profane (urban decay, existential alienation, mechanized modernity). Born in 1938, Chitre witnessed India's transition from colonial rule to postcolonial nationhood, a period marked by cultural dislocation and rapid urbanization. His poetry interrogates this tension, reimagining mythic archetypes as dynamic symbols that critique modernity's erasures. By employing semiotics—the study of signs and symbols—this article deciphers how Chitre's work dismantles and reanimates cultural narratives, positioning myth as a living, evolving force.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotics of the Sacred-Profane

Roland Barthes defines myth as a "second-order semiotic system" that naturalizes cultural ideologies, transforming history into depoliticized "nature" (Barthes, 1957). Chitre subverts this process, exposing myth as a contested terrain. Mircea Eliade distinguishes the sacred (transcendent, eternal) from the profane (mundane, temporal), yet Chitre blurs these boundaries, sacralizing the everyday and profaning the divine to critique postcolonial modernity. Ashis Nandy's exploration of colonialism's psychological violence further contextualizes Chitre's interrogation of cultural erasure (Nandy, 1983).

Dilip Chitre's poetry navigates the tension between erasure and endurance, probing how cultural and personal histories persist even as their physical embodiments crumble. Through *The Felling of the Banyan Tree* and *The House of My Childhood*, Chitre crafts a poignant meditation on fragmentation—of landscapes, memories, and myths—while underscoring the resilience of roots that anchor identity amid upheaval.

Fragmented Myths: The Violence of Erasure

The Felling of the Banyan Tree opens with a visceral act of destruction: the systematic demolition of a centuries-old banyan tree, ordered by the speaker's father. The tree, a symbol of ancestral wisdom and ecological sanctity ("Trees are sacred," the grandmother insists), is reduced to a "problem" by modernity's relentless march. Its annihilation mirrors the fragmentation of cultural myths—the grandmother's reverence clashes with the father's pragmatism, a generational rift. The tree's physical

enormity—its trunk’s “fifty feet” girth, roots “deeper than all our lives”—evokes a mythic stature, making its slaughter a visceral metaphor for colonial or capitalist violence that severs ties to tradition. The “raw mythology revealed” in its rings lays bare a 200-year lineage, now splintered. Yet, migration to Bombay transforms the tree into a spectral presence, its “aerial roots / Looking for the ground to strike” in dreams. Here, fragmentation births a haunting resilience; the myth adapts, persisting in the subconscious.

Similarly, *The House of My Childhood* depicts abandonment—a home stripped of life, its furniture gone, leaving only the grandmother’s grindstone and gods. These relics, like the felled tree’s remnants, are fragments of a fractured heritage. The “death of all birds” contrasts with the enduring “bird-cries” that “fill the mind,” illustrating how absence amplifies memory. The house, a hollow shell, becomes a palimpsest of loss, where “words distribute their silence” among “glyphs”—symbols of unspoken histories. The grandmother’s voice, “shiver[ing] on a bare branch,” merges the natural and human, suggesting myths linger even in desolation.

Resilient Roots: Memory as Reclamation

Chitre’s work resists nostalgia, instead framing memory as an act of reclamation. In *Banyan Tree*, the uprooted past infiltrates Bombay’s urban sterility, the tree’s roots “seething” in dreams. This subconscious resurgence defies erasure, asserting that roots, though displaced, regenerate in psyche and language. The child’s “terror and fascination” during the tree’s felling mirrors the duality of witnessing cultural dismantlement—a rupture that also exposes hidden histories.

In *The House of My Childhood*, the speaker, an “elderly infant,” navigates vacant rooms, embodying the paradox of age and innocence. This figure, suspended between past and present, sifts through fragments—grindstone, gods, silence—to reconstruct identity. The “colourless crack before morning” symbolizes liminality, a threshold where memory and oblivion intersect. The grandmother’s enduring voice and the “intricately clustered glyphs” suggest that myths, though fractured, are not inert; they demand reinterpretation.

Mythic Ascent, Existential Descent: The Duality of Human Striving in Chitre’s *The Mountain*.

Dilip Chitre’s *The Mountain series of poems* navigates the tension between transcendence and impermanence, weaving a tapestry of mythic aspiration and existential unraveling. Through stark imagery and existential paradoxes, Chitre interrogates the human condition—our yearning for meaning amid chaos, our fragile constructions of self, and the haunting solitude of creation. The poems oscillate between ascent (the climb toward enlightenment, truth, or artistic purity) and descent (the confrontation with mortality, futility, and the disintegration of meaning). At the heart of this duality lies the mountain—a symbol of both luminous aspiration and crushing existential weight.

The Mountain as Mythic Paradox

In *The Mountain*, Chitre subverts the archetype of the summit as a site of triumph. The speaker declares, “This is no mountain. / This is light itself,” transforming the climb into a confrontation with the sublime. Yet the ascent is Sisyphean: the climber is “the fool / Who dares to climb it,” trapped between the impossibility of reaching the light and the compulsion to try. Similarly, in *A Poet’s Task*, the mountain becomes an existential mandate: “With my kind of voice / There’s no other choice / But to clench the truth / While the reality crumbles.” The poet’s ascent—the act of creation—is inseparable from the descent into chaos, as structures “totter” and “crash” around him.

Existential Fragility and the Architecture of Self

The warehouse in *I Built A Warehouse* mirrors the psyche: a flimsy construct “like a human mind,” its “creaky planks” and “ghostly whine” echoing the fragility of identity. One door faces civilization, the other the mountain—a metaphor for the self’s liminal state, straddling societal order and primal wilderness. The warehouse stands “in the middle of nothingness / Like the pangs / Of the cactus,” its isolation underscoring the existential void it seeks to contain. This tension between construction and collapse recurs in *Love Leaves Nothing Recognisable Behind*, where love’s “primordial anger” erodes all traces of itself, leaving “no skeleton no shard of pottery.” Even divinity, in *A Weeping God*, is rendered helpless, “weeping blindly” as creation transcends its creator, leaving only a “landscape of mortality.”

The Poet’s Exile

Chitre’s speaker exists in radical solitude, marked by societal alienation. In *It Was Then That I Reallised*, the poet becomes a pariah—a “suicidal drunk,” “promiscuous lunatic”—misunderstood by a world that cannot fathom the divine madness of creation. Yet this exile is also a form of grace: the poet is “blessed by you / Driven by you alone,” tasked with witnessing the ephemeral. In *Witness* crystallizes this role: to “see / what others do not,” to preserve life’s “withering event” within the “opaque” stone of art. Here, ascent (vision) and descent (mortality) merge: the poet’s clarity emerges from embracing transience.

Rituals in the Ruins: Memory, Survival, and Reclamation in Chitre’s Mumbai

Dilip Chitre’s poems *Mumbai: A Song* and *Ode to Bombay* are incantations to a city caught between the spectral echoes of empire and the visceral chaos of postcolonial modernity. Through fragmented imagery, historical hauntings, and a tone oscillating between elegy and defiance, Chitre constructs Mumbai as a site of ritual—rituals of survival, remembrance, and

artistic reckoning. These poems do not merely describe a city; they perform its contradictions, enacting ceremonies of resistance against erasure and decay.

Colonial Relics and Postcolonial Rites

In *Mumbai: A Song*, the city emerges as a palimpsest of imperial violence and postcolonial disarray. Chitre juxtaposes the “garbled relic / of someone’s empire” with the “estranged millions” who now inhabit its ruins. The horse of Mountstuart Elphinstone, a symbol of colonial authority, is reduced to a spectral memory, while the “railway lines / going from here / all over the peninsula” evoke the veins of a fractured subcontinent. Mumbai becomes a ritual space where history is both venerated and exorcized. The “gothic foundation” of Victoria Terminus, standing “majestically / in the midst of native squalor,” embodies this duality: a colonial edifice repurposed by “coolies and poets,” its stone arches now resonating with vernacular voices. Chitre’s Mumbai is a city of layered rituals—the “lingering ring” of imperial laughter in army mess halls, the “slick castrates” of editorial sycophancy, the “beggars” criminalized as “foreigners.” These rituals are not passive inheritances but acts of survival, as the marginalized reclaim spaces once designed to exclude them.

The Poet as Sacrificial Actor

Ode to Bombay transforms the poet into a ritual participant, his body and art a site of offering and dissolution. The poem opens with a vow—“I had promised you a poem before I died”—that becomes a dirge. The city is both muse and devourer, demanding the poet’s fragmentation: “Piece by piece I fall at my own dead feet / releasing you like a concerto from my silence.” Chitre’s metaphors—bridges unfastened from bones, railway lines freed from veins—evoke a visceral symbiosis. The poet’s body merges with Mumbai’s infrastructure, his creative act a ritual of self-immolation. The city’s “crowded tenements,” “temples and brothels,” and “smouldering biographies” are not just observed but metabolized, rising as “essential fire and smoke.” Here, the ritual is one of artistic surrender: the poet dismantles himself to reconstruct the city’s essence, even as it “reduce[s] me to rubble.”

Kali’s Tongue and the Hunger of the City

Both poems invoke the goddess Kali, her “tongue red as Kali’s own / unsuckled / for forty years,” as a metaphor for Mumbai’s insatiable appetite. The city is a “hungry goddess” devouring histories, identities, and dreams. In *Mumbai: A Song*, this hunger manifests in the “teeth in your mouth” of the island goddess, a reference to the city’s underbelly of poverty and exploitation. Yet Kali is also a deity of creation-through-destruction, and Chitre’s rituals acknowledge this paradox. The “funeral progressing towards the end of time” in *Ode to Bombay* becomes a rite of renewal, where “innumerable petals of flame undress your dark / Continuous stem of growing.” Mumbai’s chaos is not merely ruin but a generative force, its slums and riots feeding an inexorable, if violent, vitality.

Epic Failures and Fragmented Rebirths

Chitre rejects the colonial fantasy of the “epic,” instead embracing fragmentation as a form of resistance. *Mumbai: A Song* mocks the grand narratives of empire and modernity—the “Asian menace” or Indira Gandhi’s hollow promises to “wipe out / Bombay’s slums.” Similarly, *Ode to Bombay* laments, “Once I promised you an epic / And now you have robbed me,” substituting the epic’s coherence with a “concerto” of fractured beauty. The ritual here is one of anti-monumentality: the poet’s surrender to rubble mirrors the city’s refusal to be contained by singular stories.

Confinement and Mythic Flight: The Duality of Human Existence in Chitre’s Poetry

Dilip Chitre’s poems *Traveling in a Cage* and *Father Returning Home* explore the tension between existential confinement and the yearning for transcendence. Through stark, visceral imagery and a haunting interplay between the mundane and the mythic, Chitre illuminates the human condition—trapped within societal structures, temporal routines, and physical decay, yet perpetually reaching toward liberation through memory, imagination, and ancestral echoes. These poems are not merely portraits of alienation; they are meditations on the cages we inhabit and the flights we dare to envision.

The Cage of Modernity

In *Father Returning Home*, the titular figure embodies the suffocating rhythm of urban life. His daily commute is a Sisyphean ritual: “Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light,” he moves through a world that renders him invisible. The “stained” raincoat, “falling apart” bag, and “stale chapati” symbolize the erosion of selfhood under the weight of routine. Even his body betrays him—eyes “dimmed by age,” hands trembling under “cold water”—as he navigates a “man-made world” that alienates him from both others and himself. The train, a metaphor for industrialized modernity, reduces him to “a word dropped from a long sentence,” an expendable fragment in the machinery of progress. His home offers no refuge; his children’s rejection and the “static on the radio” mirror the static of his inner life. Here, confinement is not just physical but existential—a cage of repetition, silence, and unspoken despair.

Mythic Flight: Memory as Escape

Yet within this confinement, Chitre seeds moments of mythic flight. The father’s dreams of “nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass” rupture the monotony of his existence, linking him to an ancestral past that transcends his cramped present. This imagery evokes a primal, almost epic movement—migration as both historical reality and metaphor for

liberation. The nomads' journey contrasts sharply with the father's truncated commute; their expansive traversal of landscapes mirrors the flight his soul craves. Similarly, the act of "contemplat[ing] / Man's estrangement" in the toilet becomes a paradoxical ritual of introspection, a fleeting escape into philosophical reckoning. Chitre suggests that even in the most confined spaces, the mind can soar into mythic realms, weaving narratives of belonging and freedom.

Traveling in a Cage: The Paradox of Motion

While *Father Returning Home* literalizes confinement through routine, *Traveling in a Cage* (implied by its title) interrogates the illusion of movement within constraints. The cage—whether societal expectations, aging, or existential futility—becomes a vehicle that moves without liberating. The father's daily train ride is a form of "traveling in a cage," a journey that promises progress but delivers stasis. Chitre's genius lies in revealing how even motion can be a kind of imprisonment when stripped of purpose. The father's body travels homeward, but his spirit remains suspended, "like a word" severed from meaning.

The Fragility of Transcendence

Chitre does not romanticize escape. The father's mythic flights are fragile, tempered by the inevitability of return. His vision of nomads is a dream, not a reality; the "narrow pass" of history is closed to him. Yet these fleeting moments of connection—to ancestors, to imagined futures—are acts of resistance. In *Father Returning Home*, the radio's static becomes a dissonant lullaby, a soundscape where the mundane and the metaphysical collide. The "greying hairs on his wrists" glisten with "a few droplets" of water, a transient beauty amid decay. Even the act of reading, though solitary, becomes a quiet rebellion, a momentary exit from the cage into the boundless world of ideas.

Conclusion: The Paradoxical Tapestry of Resilience

Chitre's poetic vision weaves a tapestry of paradox, where opposing forces—loss and continuity, confinement and transcendence, ruin and rebirth—coexist to illuminate the resilience of the human and cultural spirit. His work thrives in duality, rejecting resolution in favor of tension, where fragmented heritage and modern disintegration are met with tenacity. The felled banyan tree and abandoned house, symbols of shattered traditions, are not endpoints but sites of adaptive resurgence, their roots persisting in memory's fertile terrain. Similarly, Mumbai's ruins become altars of ritualized survival, where violence is transmuted into verse, and destruction fuels creation's "essential fire." Here, decay is neither romanticized nor mourned but ritualized, affirming art's power to forge meaning from chaos.

The mountain in Chitre's poetry epitomizes this paradox: to ascend is to confront the abyss, to seek light is to embrace its elusiveness. The poet's voice, dissolving into time, embodies contradictions—the tiger's arrogance and the lily's fragility—revealing grace in the act of striving itself. Likewise, the father's cage, a metaphor for routine and mortality, becomes a crucible for mythic yearning. Confinement, rather than stifling, unveils the possibility of flight; the human spirit, both caged and winged, discovers truth in the friction between limitation and transcendence.

Across these motifs—nature's remnants, urban decay, illusory peaks, and domestic cages—Chitre maps a landscape where erasure and persistence intertwine. His work asserts that myths evolve, rituals endure, and art transforms rubble into rhythm. The interplay of ascent and descent, disintegration and reinvention, confinement and liberation, forms a defiant dance. In this luminous tension, Chitre locates the heart of existence: a paradoxical beauty born not despite ruin, but within it—a testament to the enduring power of striving, remembering, and recreating amid the fragments of life.

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