



## Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusion* Vs Sashi Tharoor's the Great Indian Novel: A Comparative Analysis of Characterisation of *Draupadi*

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### Abstract

Indian English literature has grown progressively with a myriad ways of representations, different means of articulation, embedded with many metaphorical images, figurative language, allegorical representations, etc. Towards the end of the millennium, the writers tried to make their hand at more emerging concepts, post-colonialism and post-modernism.

The present paper is a comparative analysis of two different texts from Indian English Literature that came out during the phase of the above-mentioned concepts, *The Palace of Illusion*, *The Great Indian Novel*, written by Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni and Shashi Tharoor, respectively. Main focus of the paper lies in the writers' portrayal of the character 'Draupadi' in their novels. While analysing the writers' way of characterisation, the paper tries to plunge deep into other feminist perspectives that each of the writers' articulations tried to focus upon.

**Key words:** Indian English literature, Draupadi, feminist, characterisation, articulations.

### Introduction

Indian English literature had grown digressively with a myriad ways of representations, different means of articulation, embedded with many metaphorical images,

figurative language, allegorical representations, etc. Towards the end of the millennium, the writers tried to make their hand at more emerging concepts, post-colonialism and post-modernism. The present paper analyses the way

two of the Indian writers, Tharoor and Divakaruni, tried to create fiction within the framework of the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Focus is laid on the way both the writers tried to look the character of Draupadi.

### Power of Myth and the Myth of Power

Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks, "In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the modern novel developed in the west, The problem of how to write appeared bigger than to what to write, that is, simply put it, The technique of writing became the primary concern for many writers in the modern period." (39) Myth, thus turned into an area from a term as many of the anthropologists, literary critics, socialists and philosophers tend to use the term according to their moulds. In Indian English literature, the winds of technique of writing with the use of 'myth', though emanated from the west began from 1930s with Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*.

The term 'Myth' derived from the "Greek word 'Mythos', which implies any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology - a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin a particular cultural group believed as true and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (Abrahams 230)

According to the definition, Myths are ancient stories that happened in the distant past, which are used to justify the ways of man.

Indian soil is rich with a myriad legends and myths, which are used in multipurpose tasks. Myths are part of human life, especially the "stories from the ancient epics *Ramayana* and

*Mahabharata*, even today are mouth pieces and bedtime stories. The characters from these epics form archaic type patterns in representing many virtues." (qtd in Salat 127) For instance, an Indian wife is compared to the Earth goddess, implying that she should have the patience of the Earth goddess. The relationship of a father and son is compared to that of the respect to even go to the forests, a task done by Lord Rama. For the representation of good brotherhood, the example of Ram Lakshman is used, etc.

These myths from the ancient epics serve the purpose for both good and bad. If the former serve as examples of ideal virtues, examples like Lord Krishna in his act of stealing and his choice of marrying sixteen thousand women, Draupadi for polygamy, Duryodhana for his thirst for power, etc. In Indian English Literature, especially Indian English Fiction, projection of history within the framework of 'myth' appears as a recurrent theme as the Indian freedom struggle and other contemporary issues offered a lion's share in gaining the attention of the writers. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* served the purpose for many of the writers of the Indian soil to carve their creativity with a "western born technique of myths giving it a native flavour. The Radha Krishna legend, an allegory based on Draupadi's choice of husbands" (Mukherjee 40), Battle between Rama and Ravana, the Kurukshetra are a few myths that appear in some of the novels.

It is here essential, at the very outset that to identify the kind of myth used by the novelists of the present study, Tharoor, Divakaruni in their novels before going into the analytical part. Meenakshi Mukharjee divides myths into two types, the conscious myth and the unconscious myth. The conscious myth, as Meenakshi puts it,

... is an easily recognizable literary device employed by the modernist writers like T. S Eliot in *The Waste Land*, James Joyce in *Ulysses*. These writers,

although differ in their intention of their work possess a common element of employing mythical stories and legends. The reader who intends to read the work becomes conscious of the myth once he is indulged in it" (Mukherjee 126).

The second type of myth, the unconscious myth is quite contrast to the former type. In the unconscious myth, "the writer may not have been aware of the usage of myth but critics discover the unconscious way in which myths have operated on them." (Mukherjee 127) Out of the two, the conscious myth is the one widely in use and with respect to the present study, Tharoor had used the former type, the conscious myth, by projecting the 20<sup>th</sup> century history through the myth of *Mahabharata*. Mukherjee in the process of drawing the importance of myths in literature puts forward Richard Chase's views that are convincing. According to him, the most important reason that the writers are attracted to myths is that "myth is literature"(qtd in Mukherjee 127), which in turn literature is a reflection of life and times. It is the reflection of the past times, Tharoor had attempted through the age old epic, the *Mahabharata*. Tharoor's epigraphs suggest his very intention in writing a history and taking his inspiration from myth, *Mahabharata*. Tharoor gives a hint in his choice of *Mahabharata* as a source text to project the Indian history that could be seen in the epigraphs,

The *Mahabharata* has not only influenced the literature, art, sculpture and painting of India but it has also moulded the very character of the Indian people. Characters from the Great Epic ... are still household words (which) stand for domestic or public virtues or vices ... In India a philosophical or even political controversy can hardly be found that has no reference to the thought of the *Mahabharata*." (C.R. Deshpande.

*Transition of the Mahabharata Tradition.*  
Qtd in Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 7)

The essential *Mahabharata* is relevant in the second half of the twentieth century. No epic, no work of art, is sacred by itself; if it does not have meaning for me now, it is nothing, it is dead." (P. Lal, *The Mahabharata of Vyasa*. Qtd in Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 7) as Gunter Grass rightly points out

Our past and present and future problems are much more crowded than we expect...I think in India, some stories should be kept alive by literature. Writers experience another view of history, what's going on, another understanding of 'progress...Literature must refresh memory. (Gunter Grass, *speaking in Bombay* Qtd in Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 7)

Tharoor, thus finds it relevant to project the Indian history by combining 'myth' and 'history' which I refer as 'Mythicizing History'.

By Mythicizing history, it is the phenomenon in which the history is the main focus and fused with either mythical characters or incidents. It is relevant in this juncture to discuss Tharoor's experimentation of history and myth. I strongly support Salat's detail analysis of Tharoor's 'Mythicizing History.' "For the Euro-American white world, History and Myth are different entities. History is what is recordable and hence constitutes a rational construct whereas 'myth' is considered a pre-historic, fictional or irrational construct." (Salat 128) To be more specific, Myth, as Northrop Fry states, "For me a myth is a certain type of story in which some of the beings are Gods or other chef characters superior to man; its action takes place in a world above." (30) This is a western ideology and as Salat notes, "Although the internalization of Euro-American ideology has conditioned our thought, there is no such distinction of history and myth as separate

entities in Indian context. For Indian minds, characters from the two epics 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' are not mythical (as western historiographers believe) but are historical personages and historical realities." (128-29) Tharoor, however in the novel by "allowing his historical fiction to move freely from the ancient epic to the modern narrative, Tharoor asserts the unitary concept of Indian historiography." (Salat 129) The historical time period that Tharoor covers in the novel, from the emergence of Bhisma (Gandhi) to the assassination of Indira Gandhi (Priya Dhuryodhani). Tharoor has included all the major historical events like Jalianwala Bagh Massacre, the Salt Satyagraha, the Indian partition, major wars with Pakistan and China, birth of Bangladesh, the Emergency until the assassination of Indira Gandhi. All these incidents are given a mythical flavour in *The Great Indian Novel*. Tharoor's historical characters with mythical dresses include: Gandhiji (Bhisma), Nehru (Dhritarashtra), Subash Chandra Bose (Pandur), Sardhar Vallabai Patel (Vidur), Indira Gandhi (Priya Duryodhani), Jaya Prakash Narayan (Drona), Krishna Menon (Kanika Menon), Lal Bahadur Shastri (Shishupal) etc. With all these historical characters with mythical dresses, *The Great Indian Novel* becomes the MOD Bharata –The historical epic.

#### Tharoor's Characterisation of Draupadi:

The character Draupadi is very important and is quite recurrent characters in the presentday literature. Like the Pandavas in the novel, Draupadi is another major institution depicted by Tharoor. Tharoor's heights of characterization is reflected with the creation of Draupadi Mokrasī a representation of democracy. Tharoor himself says in the symposium of opinions on the novel, "To take characters and situations that are so laden with resonance, and to alter and shape them to tell a contemporary story, was a challenge that offered a rare opportunity to strike familiar chords while playing an unfamiliar tune." (Tharoor, Yoking Myth into History 5)

The representation of Draupadi is unique and intriguing in this novel. In a feministic point of view, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, highlights Draupadi's strong appeal, her strength, making her character free from fragile and passive nature. Draupadi's character takes a new turn in *The Great Indian Novel*. Tharoor tries to reflect the relationship of Dhritarashtra with a Vaishya woman from whom Yuyutsu is born. Tharoor takes this particular incident as a base to create a character Draupadi Mokrasī suggestive of both Draupadi and democracy. She is born to Dhritarashtra and Georgina Drewpad, a relation between the Indian national leader and the wife of British viceroy. As Tharoor narrates it, "At last, on 26 January 1950, as the Constitution of the new Republic of India was solemnly promulgated by its founding fathers. Georgina Drewpad, her face awash with tears, delivered herself of a squalling, premature baby." (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 244)

This uncertain parentage and the natural parent's rejection to have an open acknowledgment of the baby makes Draupadi to be raised under the protection of a low caste servant named Mokrasī of Dhritarashtra who served them at this sensitive hours. The way the girl is named represents the novelists hand at the representation of Indian democracy. The baby was called Draupadi, a subtle Indianization of her mother's family name, and she took the uncouth patronymic of her adoptive father, Mokrasī, Draupadi Mokrasī. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 244) Draupadi Mokrasī, thus born on January 26, 1950 hints the birth of a major institution, 'democracy' in India after independence. Premananda Kumar comments the Tharoor's depiction of reality through the characterization of D. Mokrasī where he puts it,

Tharoor sees the reality of independent India also as the desecrated Draupadi in the Kuru Court...In the glaring light of shabby reality, the Indian Republic has

become Draupadi Mokrasī (Democracy), the child shorn of some limbs (Karnistan-Pakistan has been cut off from Hastinapur-India) born on 26 January, 1950 to Lady Georgina Drewpad Mountbatten and Dhritarashtra-Nehru, ill-treated as much by avaricious Priya Duryodhini-Indira Priyadarshini. (20)

Draupadi, with her mixed parentage of pink and brown grows to be a beautiful woman. Tharoor describes the beauty of Draupadi Mokrasī in which there is embedded reflection of the beauty of 'democracy' after Indian independence.

The gleaming darkness of her skin lit up her beauty, so that she shone like a flame on a brass lamp. Draupadi was like the flame of a brass lamp in a sacred temple of the people. A flame nourished by a ceaseless stream of sanctified oil and the energy of a million voices raised in chanting adoration. A flame at an evening aarti, at the end of the puja, a flame offered to the worshippers as bells tinkle and incense smoke swirls, and a hundred hands reach out to receive its warm benediction; a flame curling and moving towards these hands, glowing ever more brightly as it breathes their reverence. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 244)

After the death of Dhritarashtra, the secret father from whom Draupadi receives money for protection, in the novel, it is Priya Duryodhini who proposes Draupadi's marriage with her chosen young man Ekalavya, to V.V. However V. V tries to memorize the nocturnal visits of Ekalavya in the past. In spite of Draupadi's marriage to Ekalavya, V.V again goes into his fantasy to dream the marriage of Draupadi that was arranged as a kind of Svayamvara. As V.V puts it,

I have a vision of a vast canopied hall, filled to overflowing with teeming,

cheering multitudes; of nobles and princes assembled in their finery to vie for the hand of our heroine; of Draupadi herself, resplendent in a simple cream sari with a striking red border, her long hair hanging loose to her waist, adorned by a solitary rose. She held a garland of white jasmine in her hands, fragrantly poised to be draped around the neck of the deserving victor. A large wooden box, slit at the top, sat in the middle of the hall, and everyone in attendance moved forward, in a silent ethereal procession, to drop a folded slip of paper into it. This done, Draupadi approached the box, and I with the expansive gestures of a magician at a fairground, elaborately placed her inside it. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 313)

Tharoor converts the episode of testing Draupadi's suitors efficiency to shoot the eye of a fish into a contest to open the lid of the box in which Draupadi Mokrasī is seated. Like the episode in *Mahabharata*, it is Arjuna who wins the challenge and the same is seen in the novel as Arjuna tries to open the box and win Draupadi's hand.

Arjun stepped forward with the spring of youth in his step, and placed his hand on the clasp of the box. Then, with no visible effort, he calmly lifted the Draupadi. The lid of the box sprang open, and amidst the excited cries of the throng, Draupadi rose within, her graceful sari-clad body glowing like a white flame. As she bent forward to place the garland around Arjun's neck, the half erupted in prolonged cheers; the other Pandavas, watching amongst the crowd, leapt to their feet; and Arjun, the strength and suppleness of his limbs evident in each lithe movement, lifted Draupadi Mokrasī out of her confinement. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 314)

The interesting and Tharoor's creation of the Pandavas and Draupadi as walking metaphors of major institutions is followed by the marriage of Draupadi to Arjuna. Chaudari comments on the marriage of Draupadi and Arjuna says that, "The marriage of Draupadi and Arjuna is given a modern meaning by presenting it as a union of democracy and the voice of the people, whose medium is the Press. The modern Arjuna is a journalist, a representative of the powers and weakness of the Indian Press." (Chaudhary 111)

It is the words of Kunti to "Share whatever you have brought amongst the five of you equally." (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 314) That Draupadi is confronted with a critical moment of marrying all the Pandavas, though she loves Arjuna. In the novel also, Tharoor's representation attains full meaning as Yudhishtira, the virtuous man of Dharma, Bhim the military man, Arjuna the journalist and the twins Nakul and Sahadev the bureaucracy and Foreign service are the protectors of Draupadi Mokras, the democracy of the country like that of the relationship of a husband and wife.

#### **Divakaruni's Droupadi-The Panchali in The Palace of Illusion:**

Chitra Banerji Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusion' is one among the best novels penned by the Indian women writers, which retells, revisits the age old Indian ancient epic Mahabharata, a perennial source text for its embedded moral, ethical obligations, values. Striking feature of this novel lies in its way the novel is old i.e. the Mahabharata being told from the perspective of Droupadi, one of the important characters of Mahabharata. In other words, it is no exaggeration to tell that Divakaruni had reflected a feminist approach to the novel by making Droupadi one of the narrators in the novel. Search for identity by Droupadi is the core aspect in the novel.

The novel while narrating the story of Panchali, takes the perspectives of three

narrators, Panchali, her brother and her nurse. Panchali who was called 'the girl who isn't invited' (Divakaruni 1) by her nurse, finds the differentiation with a reference to the names: her brother named, Dristudyamna meaning the destroyer of enemies while Droupadi is named after her father's name meaning the daughter of Droupadi, which she feels the affirmation of patriarchal domination and hence she renames herself 'Panchali' meaning from the kingdom of Panchal, Divakaruni, right from the beginning of the novel depicts the character of Panchali as the most powerful, gifted, ambitious, strong determined and historically prominent figure. This assertion is evident with Droupadi's birth prophecy as 'her birth changes the course of history' (Divakaruni 5), the novelist highlights the importance of her birth. As Droupadi consults a sage to know her destiny, she was told that she will marry the five greatest heroes of her time, be envied like a goddess, become the mistress of the most magical palace, then lose it, start the greatest war, bring about the death of millions of people, be loved and die alone. Further, she was warned about three things as an advice from the sage: "hold back your question, hold back your laughter, hold back your curse" (Divakaruni 5). Divakaruni's Panchali, right from her childhood rebels against receiving an education which the king feels to be meant for a girl. Most depressing is the way a sorceress's remarking Droupadi not to behave like an ordinary girl: the consequences of your action will destroy us (Divakaruni 88).. Droupadi's marriage is further more intricate as she has to marry five pandavas and as Divakaruni rightly puts the views of Droupadi as "I was a woman and has to use my powers differently" (Divakaruni 88) and as per the special marriage arrangements, Droupadi is split between her husbands, spending an year with each and her virginity restored each time she enters a new husband's bed feeling that 'she had no other choice at with whom she slept' (Divakaruni 192) Panchali has to confront the worst humiliation in the court of Dhuryodana where Yudhistir gambles away everything

included Panchali, the most looked upon princess of the magical palace. Divakaruni reflects the powerful Panchali, her strong vengeance against Dhuryodan, the person who made her helpless, showing her the worst shame that a woman could ever have by stripping her in the court where she utters the curse which she was warned to hold back, the battle of Kurukshetra, leaving her hair untied until it is bathed with the blood of Kauravas. (Divakaruni 194). Towards the end, Panchali assumes the position of a powerful queen ruling the people who are deprived of their men and empowering the people in her kingdom

#### Conclusion:

Although Tharoor and Divakaruni dealt with the ancient Indian epic, Mahabharata, to sculpt a new story, to carve the history of pre- and post-independent India, Panchali's Mahabharata, respectively, the depiction of the character of Droupadi is quite distinct. If Tharoor had personified the democracy of the nation as Dmokrasi, while Divakaruni tried to tell the ancient epic from the point of view of Panchali – the Panchali Mahabharata.

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