



DEMYSTIFICATION OF DARAUPADI THROUGH REWRITING IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

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ABSTRACT

Mythologies can be used to look into reality in new contexts and give them new kinds of meanings. Indian epics like *the Ramayna* and *the Mahabharata* have influenced the Indian cultural tradition immensely. The stories of these epics revolve around the heroes and their acts of heroism. Myths have always been a source of collective male fantasy. The writers of these great epics have mythologized the women characters. But recently, many women writers have chosen to challenge the well-established myth structures. They have retold these stories from feminist perspective keeping women characters in the centre of the stories. The self-respect for a woman is important to be identified as an independent individual in the society. There is always a different side to the mythological stories, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's noted novel *The Palace of Illusions* is the representation of Draupadi's side of the story. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who found the tale of Mahabharata an irresistible target of revision, wrote *The Palace of Illusion* from Draupadi's point of view which raises very pertinent questions, especially about the patriarchal practices, that in some or the other way, continue to bind us till date.

Key words: Myth, Demystification, Rewriting, Patriarchy, Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Myth is a part and parcel of Indian cultural tradition. It was speculated that mythologies may not survive because of new scientific evidences but they have not only survived but also have impacted on all aspects our lives considerably. Myths have been looked as symbolic consciousness. Scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski, Roland Barthes, and Levi

Strauss contend the symbolic meaning and the function of myth. According to Roland Barthes, myth is a form of 'speech' with secondary meaning. For him myths are 'historically produced and conditioned', 'myths are always political' and the 'result of specific power structures in a certain society in a certain time'. The meaning of myth has its own value and it belongs to a certain history. Throughout histories myths

continuously have been referred to in order to clarify the situations that we come across. Mythologies can be used to look into reality in new contexts and giving them new kinds of meaning. The emergence of different postmodern theories like psychoanalytic theories, feminist theories, cultural theories etc. have given rise to fresh interpretations of the mythological stories and characters. Indian epics like the *Ramayna* and the *Mahabharata* have influenced the Indian cultural and literary scene through translations and retellings. Recently the women writers such as ShashiDespande, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pratibha Ray, Amrita Pritam, AjitKaur, Mahasweta Devi have appropriated and redefined myth to project 'female self-exploration'. They have retold the stories of the epics to bring into light the various shadowy women characters that deserve special attention. Many women scholars have examined the gendered aspect of the two epics and have brought about a change in this perspective. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is such a retelling from feministic perspective which beautifully analyses the mythical heroine Draupadi, one of the most important but overlooked characters of Indian mythology. The novel highlights a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity and individuality in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of those imposed by history and gender. Divakaruni's version of the *Mahabharata* portrays Draupadi as an intelligent, educated, beautiful and wise character and her transformation from ambitious princess to revenge-seeking queen in great detail.

Discussion

Myths and epics always fascinate and attract both readers and writers. The stories of these epics revolve around the heroes and their acts of heroism. There was no dearth of powerful and complex women characters who affected the actions in major ways. For instance, there was the widowed Kunti, mother of Pandavas, who dedicates her life to making sure her sons become kings. There was Gandhari, wife of the sightless Kaurava king Dhritrashtra, who chooses to

blindfold her in marriage, thus renouncing her power as queen. And most of all, there was Panchali, the beautiful daughter of king Drupad, who has the unique distinction of being married to five men --the five Pandava brothers at the same time. These women -- "no less than the men -- faced the challenges of their lives they had never imagined. But in some way, they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and feelings unheard unless they affected their men of their lives. The depiction of women remained as symbol of daughterhood, sisterhood, wifehood and motherhood. These mythological stories have depicted women surrounded with pain and suffering of conventional order.

The purpose of retelling the epics appears to fuse together the mythological facts and fantasy to attract the mass towards their own culture and also to give voice to the unvoiced. Revision and rewriting is a feminist strategy of subverting proclaimed patriarchal values. It can be a re-interpretation of the androcentric myths from the feminist angle. Modern women writers redefine women in different epics from the feminist perspective. They recreated the women characters by giving them their voices, by making them independent and strong enough to express their own choices and opinions. For example, Samhita Arni's acclaimed *Sita's Ramayana* retells the epic from the point of view of Sita, wife of the earthbound deity Prince Rama. Arni's novel portrays Sita as a strong, powerful woman who takes fate into her own hands. Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and *Karna's Wife* explore the epics -- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* -- in a fashion which is almost a retelling of the two representative epics of India. In Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* the world of Urmi, Sita's sister -- not Laxman's wife or Ram's sister-in-law -- discards the male heroic grandeur of the quasi-historical narrative. In *Karna's Wife*, the author tries to meticulously lend a voice to the doubly marginalized Uruvi, the second wife of an unsung hero Karna. Arshia Sattar, a self-described feminist, in her book *Lost Loves*, which looks at Rama and Sita as humans rather than gods and dissects Rama's actions dispassionately. These contemporary women authors

have not crafted the women characters of the epics – Uruvi, Urmila, Rati, Draupadi, Sita – to challenge the status quo but to ensure that their voices are listened to and not just heard and also register an acknowledgement of their roles and identities within the larger patriarchal and male-dominated order of the day.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent diaspora writer and poet, finds myth as a source of inspiration and as a source of themes for creative writing even in the modern world. In this attempt she wrote *The Palace of Illusions* which retells the *Mahabharata* through the eyes of Draupadi, fondly called as Krishnaa and Panchaali. Certain other works like *Draupadi* written in Telugu by Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad, and *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* by Pratibha Ray have also been written on Draupadi as major character. But Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi is more appealing because she adheres to the archetypal myth and yet narrates feminine side of the myth in contemporary Indian context. Divakaruni has skilfully demystified the story of *Mahabharata* by deglamourizing the male characters and making it suit the assertion of the female self of the twenty-first century India. Almost all mythic characters of the great epic the *Mahabharata* are demystified by Divakaruni in her novel, *The Palace of Illusions* to create a ring of contemporaneity in the ancient myth. The novel *The Palace of Illusions* projects Draupadi's journey of taking revenge and catapulting her suppressed desires to fight with conviction in a strong-headed way. It is the story of a woman in love; a woman who sacrifices herself for the integrity of her family and people. Divakaruni looks at Draupadi from a modern woman's point of view. This image unravels a different and new facet of Draupadi's life. In fact, *The Palace of Illusions* reflects Divakaruni's desire to portray women as powerful and intelligent forces in the world.

Divakaruni uses mythology to reciprocate the feminist desire and show their worth through Draupadi's narration. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay "Myth as Technique" explains that there are two ways in which myth as technique has been used in fiction, one is "digressional technique" and other is

using "structural parallels" (Mukherjee 1971: 136). Divakaruni, more or less, uses the technique of "structural parallel" where the plot of the novel, as a whole, runs parallel to the plot of the *Mahabharata*. For instance in the epic *Mahabharata* we come to know about Draupadi and story of her birth when Pandavas go for her Swayamvara in Panchhal, but in the novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, the story starts with the birth of Draupadi and progresses with events happening in her life along with the events which are part of the *Mahabharata*.

The stories of the *Mahabharata* revolved around the heroes and their heroism; their friendships, betrayals, wars, sacrifices, mind games, politics, rages, and revenges. The wars conducted in this great epic are primarily for the rescue and revenge of women particularly. But Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni demystified the role of women and the causes of the great war of Mahabharata. In Vyasa's *Mahabharata* Draupadi has been accused of being the reason for the entire war of Kurushetra. But in the rewriting of this epic Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives evidences that Draupadi was not the only reason behind it, though her humiliation in the Kauravas' court leads the Kauravas towards the destruction but the entire war has different dimensions. Divakaruni's rewriting of the *Mahabharata* takes us back from today's life to the time that seems remote but actually speaks to us of our contemporary quest for truth and understanding of life. In the epic Panchaali was never at the center of the story. But Divakaruni has put her in the centre and has narrated her character as one who is firm and who is a woman with rigid determination. She is the embodiment of woman's pride, sharp intellect and strong will. Draupadi appears from the flames with a divine announcement from the heaven and she was prophesied to be the cause of destruction of evil warriors. Her name "Draupadi" was derived from the name of her father, king Drupad. In her narrative in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi brings into light the trials and tribulations suffered by her. Under the guise of mythical fantasy, Divakaruni tells the realities of female agony in a very realistic

mode. She reinterprets the familiar image of Paanchali in an entirely different perspective. Divakaruni's main motive of writing her novel *The Palace of Illusions* appears to foreground and overthrow the ancient stereotypical image of Draupadi. Divakaruni herself states:

But always, listening to the stories of the Mahabharata as a young girl ... I was left unsatisfied by the portrayal of the women. It wasn't as though the epic didn't have powerful, complex women characters that affected the action in major ways....but in some ways they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. (*The Palace of Illusions, Author's note xiv*)

Divakaruni finds the tale of the *Mahabharata* an irresistible target for revision and demystification of women characters especially that of Draupadi. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni makes Draupadi tell her story herself revealing different phases of her life reflecting her multi-faceted personality. She makes Draupadi tell her joys and sorrows, her doubts and beliefs, her struggles and triumphs, her love and hatred, her ambitions and fulfilments, her hesitations and trepidations, her dreams and reality and her voice and questions in her own unique way. Divakaruni clearly states her desire and aim of portraying the character of Panchaali:

If I ever wrote a book...I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? (*Ibid ix-xv*)

In *The Palace Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee sheds light on the lesser known aspects of Draupadi's life, like her adoration for her brother Dhri, her love at first sight

with Karna, her unrequited love or obsession for Karna, the relinquishing of her yearning for Karna for the sake of her brother and to fulfil her destiny to "change the course of history", her love and devotion to Krishna without understanding the reasons, her valuable opinions and judgments the Pandavas turned to her for advice on governance, her brain behind the making of the Palace of Illusions, her pride in the Palace she gets built according to her whims and fancies, hate relationship with her mother-in-law, Kunti, her gift to view the Great War of Kurukshetra, and her final journey to heaven in Parva of the Mahaprashtan, the path of great departure. There are more of such hiding features of Draupadi's life and character Divakaruni fills with imagination and brings in dimensional value to Draupadi. By describing Draupadi's fearlessness and uncompromising nature, Divakaruni makes her of great importance in the history of mythological women and of women today.

In *The Palace of Illusions* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has portrayed Draupadi as the unforgettable heroine who is no way inferior to Bheem or Arjuna in strength and spirit, valour and virtues but still she was victimised almost every stages of her life by her own kith and kin. In her attempt to demystify the archetypal figure of Draupadi, Divakaruni added many new stories and new characters. One such character is Dhai Ma, the maid of Draupadi, whom Divakaruni has used as a device to understand the inner conflicts of Draupadi. This particular character helps Draupadi to overcome several problems in her life journey. She stays constantly by Draupadi like her shadow. At every step she seems as her helper. In fact, Dhai Ma plays a major role in bringing Panchaali's real identity. It is Dhai Ma who narrates the story to Panchaali of her birth which makes Draupadi realise the discrimination on even the names given by her father to her and her brother: "Dhristryumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad".(5) Dhai Ma who teasingly calls Draupadi "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" while narrating the story of the birth of Draupadi and her brother Dhri, who also emerged from the flames with a

divine announcement from the heavens, says, "When your brother stepped out of the sacrificial fire onto the cold stone slabs of the palace hall, all the assembly cried out in amazement." She continues, "when you emerged from the fire, our jaws dropped". (1-2)

In the great epic the *Mahabharata*, VedVyasa failed to recognize the sacrifices and pain of Draupadi who had no other choice other than to live and surrender herself to five men. But in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi, in course of time becomes aware that her marriage was politically arranged so Draupadi's marriage to the Pandavas was never a cheering event for her and her displeasure and reluctance is extremely reflective in the given lines:

I finally began to see what the wily Kunti had in her mind when she insisted that I was to be married to all of them, and though they never made my heart beat widely, the way I'd hoped as a girl, I committed myself totally to the welfare of the Pandavas. (152)

Chitra Banerjee highlights the plight of Draupadi, a woman with five spouses and who has been gifted with a boon to regain her virginity each time she goes to new brother of the Pandavas. Draupadi is angry and feels helpless at Vyasa's verdict to be passed from hand to hand without her willingness. Divakaruni speaks through the protagonist of her novel, Draupadi, that,

If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother I'd be free of the memory of the previous one. And along with that I'd have requisitioned that Arjuna be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with. If he had loved me back, I might have been able to push aside my regrets about Karna and find some semblance of happiness. (120)

The above lines clearly indicate Draupadi's reluctance towards other Pandavas as well as her desire to get Arjuna as her first husband with whom she could have fallen in love if he had loved her back. The lines also make us reflect on her unexpressed passionate

love for Karna which she had to hide and suppress and for which she had to regret for lifelong. The five Pandavas though married to Draupadi and gave her the dignified designation of their head queen but they got married to their other wives also. "My husbands took other wives: Hidimba, Kali, Devika, Balandhara, Chitrangada, Ulupi, Karunamati. How naïve I'd been to think I could have prevented it! Sometimes there were political reasons, but mostly it was male desire" (151).

In *The Palace of Illusions* Divakaruni has portrayed Draupadi as a modern practical woman who accepts the other wives of her husbands without getting much upset because she is aware of political motive and male desire and moreover her importance in her husbands' lives. Draupadi has never claimed herself as a weak, ignored, and disgraceful woman of her time. The ancient epic shows her calm and moderate nature but has never focused on the strong suit as she gives her patience, tolerance and intelligence. As the "sutradhari" she has played the lead role. She says:

I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd share their hardship in Khandav. I'd helped them design this unique palace, which so many longed to see. If they were pear, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner.... But, together, we formed something precious and unique. (151)

As a matter of fact, Divakaruni's retelling is an attempt to deconstruct and demystify Draupadi's character and questions the traditional Indian female stereotypes. For example, when Yudhishtir tries to persuade Draupadi to be virtuous and suffer for causes unseen by narrating the story of Nal and Damyanti and praising them as being the epitome of endurance and righteousness, Draupadi questions the righteousness of Nal's actions: "And how did he repay her? By abandoning her in a forest. How was that righteous? (209). Further, like her Dharm Ma, Draupadi considers Gandhari's decision to tie over her eyes and her rejection "to enjoy the pleasures her husband had been deprived of" as an unintelligent act of sacrifice.

Divakaruni's Draupadi resented her tutor's declaration that women were the root of all the world's troubles. She dislikes the view that "A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her brother, father, husband and sons". (25 - 26) But Draupadi had long decided to be different from these notions — "Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life". (26). Her strong conviction to break the traditional male hegemony over women and refusal to be docile and overly traditional, was strengthened by Shikhandi, the royal father's (Drupad's) eldest daughter who has turned into a great and dangerous warrior and who is determined to avenge Bheeshma, is a source of inspiration to Draupadi. Shikhandi says, "a woman's life is tougher than a banyan root, which exists without soil or water" and "wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you'll wait forever" (48-49).

In Vyasa's *Mahabharata* Draupadi endures the dishonor, she questions but she has not acted in a rebellious way as she does in Divakaruni's retelling. Like a modern woman, Divakaruni's Draupadi who understands the world through the miseries she suffers, is surprised to see the most truthful and intelligent husband, Yudhishthir pawn her at the court in the game of dice. The defeat in the game of dice made Yudhishthir the slave of the Kauravas who lost Draupadi along with his other brothers. The Kauravas having won, Duryodhana ordered that Draupadi be dragged into the court. But instead of meekly obeying this disgust, she sent back a query which no one in the court could answer. She reflects: "I am a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on the earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (190). She also raises questions on the credibility of the Nyaya Shashtra: "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife" (190). She orders the servant to go back to the court and ask the elders: "Is it not true that once Yudhishthir was Duryodhan's property, he had no right to wage me?" She later challenged the game as illegal as she argued that Duryodhan, a Kaurava, had not placed his brothers and wife as a matching stake. Still

she is dragged into the court and was put to shame and insult. Now Draupadi remembers what she had read long ago: "*The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave*" (Chitra B. Divakaruni.190)

After the 'games' when the Pandavas lost everything, Panchaali realized the fact that she is alone in this world as no one comes to her rescue except her friend, Krishna. She is almost dead from that day. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with the loss of her beloved home, the Palace of Illusions. Nevertheless, she followed Pandavas to the forest and supported them through good times and bad. She provided them with comforts of the body and the mind. In spite of this, she was left alone during her final journey. Draupadi stands fairly apart from her five husbands and none of her husband came to her rescue when she was falling, not even Sahadeva of whom she took care with maternal solicitude, nor her favourite Arjuna - remains by her side when she falls and lies dying yet unprotected, on the Himalayan. The suffering of Draupadi at the last hours of her final journey makes her remember the queries she made to Vyasa and the falsification of his assurance:

Will I find love? They'd assured me I would. But they'd lied! I'd gained glory, yes, respect and fear, yes, even admiration. But where was the love I'd longed for since I was a girl? Where was as the person who'd accept me completely and cherish me with all my faults? (351)

To distract her mind from the feeling of her death she places her mind on Krishna who asks her to remember something pleasant and happy moment. After her imagined conversation with his dear friend, Krishna, death appears to her as a liberation which will solve the contradictions of her identity and she feels, "I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable — but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali" (The Palace of Illusions 360).

Conclusion

Divakaruni's retelling of the epic proves a comprehensive picture of the epic character Panchaali. *The Palace of Illusions* is definitely a feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewritten and retold from a female point of view. Here, Divakaruni humanizes Panchaali and presents a representation of an Indian woman who is always torn between her role of a devoted wife and that of an independent outspoken woman. Divakaruni's narrative personalizes the epic and gives a sensible and lifelike portrayal of Panchaali. In fact, *The Palace of Illusions* revives the mythological character of Draupadi from being an object to a subject. By making Draupadi the narrator and agent of action, Divakaruni recovers the voice of womanhood. Thus, Divakaruni has rightly called her novel *The Palace of Illusions* as Panchaali's Mahabharata.

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