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SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN IN
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

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ABSTRACT

Indian women in the majority leads a truncated life based on her gender roles. They are ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized and so on. The unnoticed injustices to women necessitated a study of the status and role of woman in India. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi, even being a princess she clings to the old values and becomes a victim of patriarchy. She tries to rebel against the social set up but she was forced to follow the old inscribed rules in a patriarchal society despite her free thoughts and self-respect. These notions are passed from generation to generation as a woman's actions are closely scrutinised and is under constant censorship.

Keywords: Patriarchy, submissive, oppression, humiliation, immanence, freedom.

Women are categorized as a group on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals rather than biological. On the whole there is something common among all women is their political struggle against the class, race, gender and imperialist hierarchies. All women cannot be placed on a single or a common platform because they are differently affected under different situations.

The women's writing of the time revealed the state of mind with which the women took their daily lives as well as of their experience with the patriarchy. Nowadays women writers are more noticeable than they were before. They write about their situations, their struggle for education and also about the control imposed on them by culture, family and community. The Indian women writers began to assert an identity of their own and to create separate feminist literary traditions. Thus many writers voice their personal desires, thoughts, opinions and their experiences.

In the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni we find women protagonists, who

struggle for their identity. They are seen to be in search of self-fulfilment, meaning and security amidst the confusions and uncertainties of their new conditions. A voice of protest against the marginalised condition of woman is also audible in her works. Through her work she has defied and destroyed the stereotyped image of the angel in the house, of a submissive housewife, mother and of writers writing only about women and expressing their revolt against the patriarchy world. Her protagonists show a conflict between tradition and modernity. They fight to bring in new ideas in this patriarchal set up but always in vain.

One of the main reasons for the poor status of women in India is the value system by which women abide. Devotion to the husband is cultivated among girls of all religions, but it is particularly idealized and firmly institutionalized in the Hindu concept of —*pativrata*. The images of Sita, Savitri or Ahilya were the women known for their exceptional devotion to their husbands. Parul and Jaskiran Kapoor in *The Indian Express* on 10th May 2008

in an article, "I'm Every Woman: The Supermoms Diary" articulate:

Parenting, career, home . . . it's a tough call and a challenge that takes not just physical, but emotional toll as well. But for many women it's worth the effort and at the end of the day, there is a satisfaction of playing many roles, to perfection. (1)

Indian women are known for their extreme patience and fortitude. These two are considered to be highly desirable virtues by the patriarchy. A woman has some significance as a daughter, or a sister but as a wife she submits completely to her husband and his family. Marriage, as a social institution in Asia, traditionally, entails severely submissive roles for women. They are caught in the dominant patriarchal tradition. India is known for its strong inclination for tradition, women are expected mainly to live for others because 'others' controlled and moulded the social structure.

Even women in literature voluntarily surrendered to the ideal of self-sacrifice. The traditions are sometimes so deeply ingrained in women that it does not occur to women to rise above them and make a change when they question the nature of their lives, and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals.

The mythologies, the epics and the folklores of India present the image of a woman whose first priority lies in harmonizing her relationship with her husband. Sita and Draupadi are mythological characters who are role models for the Indian women to follow. These characters are no wonder created by men and hence the mythological characters too faced the male domination.

The ideal of the traditional, oppressed woman persisted in a culture permeated by religious images of virtuous goddess devoted to their husbands. The mythical characters like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi and Gandhari were known for their chaste, patient and self denial. These characters are followed by Indian women and they are silenced by patriarchy as long-suffering wives and mothers. The Indian women are trapped in repressive institutions such as child marriage, dowry, prohibitions on women's education, arranged marriages and enforced widowhood.

After listening to the stories of *The Mahabharat* Divakaruni was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women. She felt that these powerful and complex women characters are not given enough of importance in the epic. In her essay "What Women Share" Divakaruni expresses:

The aloneness of the epic heroines seemed strange to me even as a child. . . . I find focusing my writing on friendships with women, and trying to balance them with the conflicting passions and demands that come to us as daughters and wives, lovers and mothers. (Divakaruni)

In the author's note before the novel *The Palace of Illusions* (PI) she explains about the women characters in *The Mahabharat*. The women characters always remained shadowy figures:

There was the widowed Kunti, mother of the Pandavas, who dedicates her life to making sure her sons became kings. There was Gandhari, wife of the sightless Kaurava king, who chooses to blindfold herself at marriage, thus relinquishing her power as queen and mother. And most of all, there was Panchaali, King Drupad's beautiful daughter, who has the unique distinction of being married to five men at the same time- the five Pandava brothers, the greatest heroes of their time. (PI xiv)

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* is based on the same story of *The Mahabharat* but narrated through the female consciousness of its female protagonist Draupadi or Panchaali. Divakaruni expresses that the entire story is about Draupadi's joys, doubts, her struggles, her triumphs, her heartbreaks, and her achievements. It also represents the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it.

The women are marginalised in the society. This is clearly depicted in the epic *The Mahabharata* during the time of Draupadi's birth. Her father King Drupad, the ruler of the Panchaala kingdom conducts a yagna to get a powerful and heroic son as an offspring of his fire for vengeance against Drona, his one time friend- turned- foe. He wanted to avenge his enemy Drona in the war. But unexpectedly along with the male offspring a female offspring also appeared which was not expected by

either the priests who performed the ceremony or King Drupad. The son is christened Dhristadyumna (Dhri) and the daughter is christened Draupadi. Her birth is unwelcomed by her royal father. He bestows so much of care and love on his son Dhri but not on Draupadi. It was only Dhri who held her hands so stubbornly that King Drupad was forced to pick both of them together. Hence Draupadi describes her reception by her father:

The ancient hall smelled of incense, and under it, an older smell: war-sweat and hatred. A gaunt, glittering man walked toward my brother and me as we stood hand in hand. He held out his arms- but for my brother alone. It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show his people. Only my brother that he wanted. (PI 6)

Dhai Ma, the nurse's narration about Draupadi's birth makes it clear that all the people in that hall were unprepared for her arrival. The contrast that Dhai Ma draws between Draupadi and her brother clearly creates a negative image of Draupadi. But the voices claim that Draupadi will change the course of history. Draupadi critically analyses the names that were given to her brother and to herself. The name Dhristadyumna for her brother meant 'destroyer of enemies' and the name Draupadi for herself merely meant 'daughter of Drupad'. Her brother's name succinctly brings out the mission of his life, which is to kill the incomparable Drona whereas her name, Draupadi, only gave her an identity tied to her parent, King Drupad. Draupadi is unhappy about this because she feels a woman who has been created to change the course of history must have been given a better name.

In those days Indian women are denied education the same way Princess Draupadi was also denied. The position of women in the Indian society is restricted to the home and hearth and all kinds of adventures like war, hunting, expeditions, and unlimited freedom are meant for men. This strict division of gender roles is resented by Draupadi, who is eager to gain all the knowledge and education of the world. The strict division of thing does not allow her this opportunity.

She was given lessons in singing, dancing and playing music. She was taught to draw, paint,

sew and decorate the ground with age old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival. When she expresses her wish to take lessons with her brother Dhri she meets with opposition from everybody including Dhai Ma. Whenever she wanted to attend the classes of Dhri instead of her lessons Drupad tried to discourage her. He said a girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal.

Draupadi protests against the restrictions of women in the patriarchy world. She expresses her frustration of her confinement to her father's large and gloomy palace. When she felt the world of women tightening its noose around her she openly discussed it with Dhai Ma. She was shocked and surprised and said, " Besides, don't you know, a woman must be prepared for her destiny in a different way" (PI 30). Dhai Ma herself taught Draupadi the rules of comportment:

how to walk, talk, and sit in the company of men; how to do the same when only women are present; how to show respect to queens who are more important; how to subtly snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the other wives of my husband. (PI 30)

The women in the societal setup leading to their marginalization by the hegemonic patriarchal power is manifest in the incident of swayamwara or Draupadi's marriage. When Draupadi heard that her father has planned to get her married at the earliest, she imagined it would be similar to weddings arranged by elders. But when she came to know it was a swayamwara where she can choose her own husband she was filled with exhilaration. Inwardly she had a question "Why would our father, who delighted in control, allow me so much freedom?" (PI 55).

When she heard the plan that there would be a test of skill and the king who won it would be the one she would garland. She spoke bitterly "We're nothing but pawns for King Drupad to sacrifice when it's most to his advantage. At least I'm just going to be married off. You- he's willing to push you to your death just so he can have his revenge" (PI 58). She says her father cares only for power and not for his children.

Arjun, the third pandava wins the archery contest to marry off Draupadi. Drupad's intention of this swaymvara is to allure Arjun because he was the greatest archer in the world. By the help of Arjun and his brother it is easy to achieve his vengeance against Drona. Draupadi was very upset that her father has arranged this marriage to benefit for his sake and not for the better life of his daughter. "But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit- or harm- them" (PI 118).

Drupad's wish is fulfilled but there arises a problem when Yudhisthir declares that all the five brothers will marry Draupadi according to the instruction of his mother Kunti. All were shocked to hear this because polygamy was common among kshatriyas but polyandry was unheard of. Hence Drupad hesitates to accept this proposal. Their argumentative conversation made her realize that this marriage is mere a political arrangement than an alliance. Vyasa, the wisest of the wise sent a prompt verdict that Draupadi has to marry all the five brothers and would be wife to each brother for a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively.

Draupadi was very angry of this arrangement but being a woman she is helpless in this male dominated society. She has to accept what men decide. Her thoughts or desires are not even respected and there is no one to pay heed to her. She is a mute sufferer in the patriarchal society. After hearing Vyasa's verdict Draupadi was shocked and surprised. "I was surprised at how angry it made me feel- and how helpless . . . Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (PI 120).

The widowed queen Kunti, mother-in-law of Draupadi, regarded her as her adversary. Draupadi's relationship with Kunti is typically that of daughter-in-law -mother-in-law scenario. Like other mothers-in-law she too tested the patience of Draupadi. She gave her a pulpy brinjal, along with a lump of salt and a minute amount of oil, and told her to prepare it for lunch. When Draupadi asked for turmeric and chillies Kunti replied, "This is all there is. This isn't your father's palace!" (PI 107).

Draupadi passes in this test and is praised and applauded for her culinary skills by the pandava brothers.

Daughters are customarily regarded as guests of their natal families who will be "given away" in marriage, while sons are permitted (and often expected) to remain in and part of their natal families for life. "The girl is repeatedly made aware that her time in her father's home is measured, and that there is another home that will one day be hers" (Nabar 64). Because of this custom, a married woman may not be able to depend on her natal family coming to her defence, and may find she has few allies in her new family. Endurance, suffering, and sacrifice have long been propagated as womanly virtues, and it is common place for Indian women to accept neglect, abuse, infidelity, and even abandonment at the hands of their husbands and their in-laws.

Draupadi suffers the greatest humiliation in her life when Yudhisthir gambles away all his material. He also pawns his own brothers and finally Draupadi without any hesitation. Dharmaraj conveyed that Yudhisthir lost everything in the game. Draupadi is unable to tolerate the information. "I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (PI 190). When her husbands were already taken as slaves by Duryodhan, obviously she, the wife too becomes the slave of Duryodhan. "The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave" (PI 190).

Dussasan, brother of Duryodhan forcibly brought Draupadi to court, where hundreded male eyes are burning through her. Her husbands are asked to remove their fancy clothes and jewelry. Karna, friend of Duryodhan suggests, "Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too" (PI 192). She clutched her sari in her fists to save herself and felt this is the worst shame a woman could imagine in her lifetime. Divine Krishna's intervention saved her from the shame.

Though she belongs to a descendant of the noble family she is succumbed to such a contemptuous situation as she is a woman, belonging to the weaker sex. She believed her

husbands who loved her would do anything for her. When she suffered they were just spectators as they loved their notions of honour, loyalty toward each other and reputation. She would have done everything to save them if she had been in their place. She cursed the Kauravas in an angry voice and this curse came true and changed the course of history. She cursed:

All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenceless woman. (PI 194)

Divakaruni shares her views about the curse of Draupadi in an interview with Metka Zupancic, "Interestingly, in the mythic and epic tradition, pride and desire for revenge are qualities of the male hero, which Panchaali takes on willingly. I mean, on some level, she *wants* to be the cause for the Great War" (93). After twelve years they have to live in a place without revealing their identity. They disguised themselves and took different jobs in the palace of King Virat. Draupadi was assigned to be the maid for Queen Sudheshna. Keechak, brother of Queen Sudheshna had wild desires for Draupadi. He wanted to fulfil his desire and Draupadi had to struggle with him to safeguard herself. She felt pity for the common women those who encountered such difficulty in their life. "Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then? Women they considered their inferiors?" (PI 228).

When Keechak grasped the hands of Draupadi, she ran to King Virat's sabha where the king would save a helpless, abused woman. Virat bent helplessly and even Yudhisthir remained silent. Yudhisthir consoled her by saying, "Be patient, lady. Your gandharva husbands will be freed of their curse soon. They'll help you then. . . . Return to the women's quarters and stop weeping like an actress!" (PI 230). His words pierced her like poisoned darts. She is averse to the thought of women being treated in a degrading way. Bheem came to rescue her by killing Keechak.

In ancient days women were treated as slaves and silent sufferers. They were not allowed to raise questions for their equal rights or rebel against the injustice. Women were given little importance and they had to remain subservient to their male counterparts- fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. Woman plays a vital role in the family. She supports her husband, children, and remains with them in any dire circumstance and boosts courage in them to face the consequences through her moral support. She has the power potential to create history by making or marring relationships.

In Divakaruni's version, Draupadi wants to be a maker of her own history. Draupadi in Divakaruni's novel does not want to play 'some role' but rather the leading role whose presence furthers the action of the story, thereby demanding an unwavering attention and focus on her. In other words, she does not want to play a role in someone else's script which will cripple her movement and diminish her impact. She does not want to be a mere character in somebody else's script. She considers all the earlier versions of her story as scripts which denied her both freedom and progress. Draupadi wants to freely sing song of her life which is colourful, complex and multivalent. She said:

I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardship in Khandav. I'd helped them design this unique palace, which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner. (PI 151)

In a patriarchal society, women are under privileged and they are deprived of their rights and identities. In a male chauvinistic society, over the centuries, women have been treated as an object of sex, being born to satisfy the needs of men, being denied her identity and individuality; she has always been treated as "The other".

Patriarchal ideology succeeds in presenting woman as immanence and man as transcendence. Hence women are forced to struggle for their own space and freedom. The Indian women born and brought up in Indian social setup have to undergo all the rituals and practices enshrined in their Hindu

religious system. If any Indian woman tries to deny the practices and customs, established by the patriarchal society, she would be treated as a 'sign of sin' or a 'curse' to the society.

The hierarchical structure among these women can confer the right of power and privilege among them. Even though their identities are also contingent on the patriarchal social systems that they live within, the women have to also face various discrimination and power struggles among both other women and the men. The home, also considered in the culture as the women's domain, is the ideal place for such struggles and power negotiations to take place.

Divakaruni tries to create a female universe out of the conventional male world. She successfully projects the longings, dreams, desires and suffering. She portrays the psychological claustrophobia and the emerging and conflicting tendencies in that condition of Indian women who are sensitive to feel the pain. She poignantly explores the struggle of Indian women as they seek new pastures in a world that would have them remain submissive.

Her women characters are lyrical, desperate, complicated, wonderful and memorable. They experience love, loss and longing through tangled marriages, bitter divorces, childbirth, abortion and abuse. She prospects every possible angle from which women are made targets of patriarchy. She projects the patriarchal and social limitations imposed upon the women as it moulds their thoughts and actions in accordance to its rules. Her characters struggle to release themselves from a tradition bound society in order to gain an independent identity. Even though her characters try to break the traditions most of the time they fail because they are deeply rooted in familial ties.

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