



## **I shall tell you all: Draupadi as the Protagonist of the Epic in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions***

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### **Abstract**

From time immemorial, it has been an established fact that the protagonist of an epic always has to be a man. Epics all over the world, whether it is *The Iliad* in the west or *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* in the east; have always valorised the male and portrayed him as a larger-than-life quasi-divine figure whose actions determine the future of the entire human community. The scops have sung of the heroic glory of Achilles and Arjuna who have been the saviour-figures and also been instrumental in changing the destiny of an entire community as well as the history of immense topographical spaces. Paradoxically, on a closer look into the epics, we decipher the fact that the whole action revolves around the women, who knowingly or unknowingly bring about the destruction and massacre and consequently the heroic code of warfare which bears the unmistakable stamp of masculinity. Strangely enough: Helen, Sita and Draupadi; the epic women have forever occupied the periphery of the broader epic structures and have been considered as mere epic accessories. Pale shadows of their male counterparts, they have been denied an agency an active agency to voice their inner turmoil, fears, sorrows, emotional conflicts, anxiety and rage at a time when the heroic men were engaged on the battlefield fighting in the name of honour, bravery, power and glory and transforming the destinies of humankind.

This paper attempts to show how, in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits the Indian epic *The Mahabharata* by retelling the whole narrative as viewed by Draupadi, the Pandava queen. It focuses on how Divakaruni destabilizes the epic paradigms of the heroic code and problematizes subject positions by providing an agency to the female voice. It also raises questions whether the epic parameters undergo any major changes when seen through the eyes of a daughter, a wife, a mother and most importantly a woman trapped within patriarchal boundaries and rebelling against them.

### **Keywords**

epic, women, heroic code, epic paradigms, patriarchy

M.H. Abrams defines an epic as “a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depend the fate of a tribe, a nation or the entire human race” (81). In the words of Peter Toohey, “An epic hero is of a superior social station and physique, is pre-eminent in fighting, courage and perhaps in intelligence. Usually, as a result of a crisis or a war or an unforced quest, this hero undergoes some form of a change in status” (10). After a period of being at odds with his human and divine community he assumes his responsibility and his duties to both groups. In primary epics, the narrative centres around a tribal or national larger-than-life protagonist who exhibits immense bravery and valour on the battlefield to liberate the whole tribe or nation and it is generally assumed that this protagonist always has to be a male. Whether it is the Greek warrior Achilles in *The Iliad* or his eastern counterpart Arjuna in *The Mahabharata*, their solemn oaths on the battlefield as well as their acts of superhuman abilities have earned them everlasting fame and glory and have been soulfully rendered by many a minstrel in their songs. However, a closer look reveals that “behind these heroes, goading them into action, inspiring them to heroic deeds or taunting them bitterly till they launch wars or combats of tragic dimensions, are women” (Hughes 40). All these acts of intense masculinity on the battlefield are brought about by the epic women who knowingly or unknowingly become the cause of the war and lead to the projection of their male counterparts as the saviour of the people. Paradoxically enough: Helen, Sita and Draupadi; the epic women have always been marginalized as the secondary, insignificant and passive citizens of the epic world, who provide the pretext for masculine warfare and honour but are never a part of it, following the Aristotelian directive where women are prohibited from being the subject of tragedy because of their inferior status to men even though they are the agents through which masculine power and glory are consolidated. Their inner conflicts, anger, grief and regrets have been portrayed only as they affected the lives of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons thereby limiting them within the prescribed roles of mothers, daughters, sisters and wives and denying them any kind of individuality. Consequently, their stories have remained untold as they have been found lacking in the heroic qualities required to be the saviour figure. This paper endeavours to explore how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusions* retells the whole narrative of *The Mahabharata* as seen by Draupadi, the Pandava queen and how she challenges and destabilizes all the established paradigms and problematizes subject positions by providing an agency to the female voice who is a daughter, a mother, a sister, and a wife but most importantly a woman trapped within patriarchal boundaries. Here, Draupadi becomes the central driving force, the quasi-

divine figure monopolized by males in the epic traditions, causes the war that ends the Third Age of Man and ushers in the Kali Yuga and changes the course of history earning power, glory and fame in her own right.

In her novella *The Penelopiad*, which asserts the autonomy of Penelope in the kingdom of Ithaca during the long absence of Ulysses, Margaret Atwood lures the readers into the narrative by her guiding question "what was Penelope really up to?" (Preface, xiv). Similarly, here Divakaruni invites us to Draupadi's life, questions and visions. She tells us in the preface itself:

Her destiny that was foretold when she was born, her insistence on doing what none of the other women around her were doing and her unique situation--- being married to five brothers--- all made her the perfect choice. I was also interested in the fact that she was the catalyst for the great war---- and perhaps the one who suffered the most as a result of it. (Preface, xiv)

Right from the moment of her birth, when she emerges out of the flames of the sacrificial fire, the voices told her father, King Drupad, "take good care of her, for she will change the course of history"(Divakaruni, 5). Divakaruni foregrounds the fact that here Draupadi will not remain confined within the patriarchally prescribed boundaries of womanhood when she claims of her need for a "more heroic name" (5) to change the course of history as the name Draupadi makes her dependent on the patriarchal father even for her existence, whereas her twin brother is named Dhristadumna, the destroyer of enemies, a name bearing the hallmark of heroism right from his birth. This quest for a new heroic identity subverts the epic convention of women being completely overshadowed by their male counterparts as they fight and ravage all in the name of honour and duty and their masculine code of conduct. Draupadi's quest for a new identity makes her a rebel against the established conventions of the ornamental presence of the epic woman and simultaneously links her with the masculine epic protagonists like Achilles and Arjuna who were ever hungry for heroic glory and everlasting fame when she declares "I had a destiny to fulfil that was no less momentous than Dhri's" (Divakaruni 29). Here, Draupadi refuses to be the subservient, insignificant other and remain in the periphery, only praying for glory for her male counterparts. She demands her fair share within the epic narrative when she vows to herself "I want to leave a mark on history, as was promised at my birth," (39) which is pointed out by Toohey when he says Draupadi is "not the Andromache of Hector fit only to be loved and employed at the distaff"

(99). Besides, her quasi-divine origin and her rise from the sacred fire foregrounds her as the daughter of Agni, encompassing the flames of one kind of fire or the other, the fire of the hearth, the fire of defence, the sacrificial fire and most importantly the flames of hatred and vengeance which will determine much of the later course in her life. It is precisely because of her association with both the fires of the hearth as well as the ever burning, ever singeing flames of revenge that Alf Hildebeitel depicts her as an incarnation of Kali and Sri or Lakshmi, the goddess of destruction as well as the goddess of domesticity.

Margaret Beissinger traces the role patterns of the epic women and infers that most of the female figures are confined within the stereotypes of mothers, sisters, wise maidens and wives of heroes. As the wife, she is either “the passive and eternally loyal and devoted mate” (Beissinger, 57), a prototype of Penelope and Gandhari, or she is the treacherous and unfaithful woman, bringing downfall to her close ones, a prototype of Clytemnestra. Neither paradigm is complete in itself as they construct women as mere epic accessories, and indicate their chief function as only to propel the action forward. Epic women have been forcibly defined by these two stereotypes as the wives of heroes, or portrayed as receptacles for births of majestic heroes and lamenters of dead warriors, qualifying them only as inferior and secondary inhabitants, always subjugated and relegated to the margins of the epic world. Divakaruni deviates from and negates all these paradigms and empowers her Draupadi with an agency which explores her dilemmas, her angers, her anxiety and her fears as well as those supreme moments when she becomes the saviour of the men associated with her, whether her brother or her husbands and determines the action of the narrative in her own terms.

No epic is complete without a terribly destructive war or a perilous journey undertaken by the male protagonist where he undergoes moments of self-discovery, battles numerous adversaries, both human and supernatural and emerges a winner, earning superhuman dimensions, everlasting fame and is looked upon as the saviour of the people which provide a cosmic dimension to the whole narrative. As G.R. Levy says in *The Sword from the Rock- An Investigation into the origins of Epic Literature and the development of the Hero*: “The hero, though circumscribed by destiny and guided or thwarted by the Gods, must fight the battle of his life, intensified by the actual warfare in which it is set, along a way not travelled in the divine wanderings” (174). Since time immemorial, war or undertaking this perilous journey has been depicted as an essentially male prerogative, and the pertinent question arises how does a woman partake in war or undertake such a journey which would place her in the same vein as the male epic protagonists. In a supreme master-stroke

Divakaruni strategically turns the epic parameters inside out, interrogating all the normative gender roles in a subtle manner and makes Draupadi combat a self annihilating psychological war even before the bloodbath of Kurushetra. At the time of her swayamvar, Divakaruni portrays Draupadi armed in all finery, where all her adornments meant to enhance her beauty can be conceptualised as a parallel to the arming of the epic hero. She herself says “I feel like I’m in battle armour” being completely ignorant of the significance her own words will convey in the later course of the narrative. It is from here that the psychological battle begins for her, as her swayamvar turns out to be a mockery and a travesty of the custom; it translates to only a means of a political alliance, where Draupadi is reduced to only a pawn. She is denied even the privilege to choose her own husband and is forced into marriage with the five Pandavas though only Arjuna wins her. The trauma of being a wife to all the five brothers and the daughter-in-law of the formidable Kunti as well as being cordial to the co-wives of her husbands, specially Arjuna, the warrior prince who won her at the swayamvar and is her husband in the truest sense become no less than a war which Draupadi has to battle and win every day for her survival.

However, it is at this swayamvar that we get the first glimpse of the inversion of gender roles that reinforces and cements itself in the later course of the novel. Draupadi raises questions about Karna’s parentage and line of descent only because she could not let her brother Dhristadumna perish at the hands of Karna, the superior warrior. As she herself puts it, “I saved Dhri, yes, so that he could go on to perform heroic and terrible deeds” (Divakaruni 96). This is a complete subversion of the paradigmatic epic conventions where the daughter of Drupad, who does not even possess a heroic name, saves her brother, a man whose name propounds him as the destroyer of enemies. This emergence of the female as the saviour figure thereby foreshadowing the heroic male deconstructs all the phallogocentric connotations of the male saviour figure and anticipates the reshaping and remoulding of the narrative in significant ways which challenges normative gender roles. In the climactic moment of her life, when she is disrobed in the Kaurava Sabha, Divakaruni problematises all the stereotypes associated with gender constructions by her discreet manoeuvrings. Despite being victimised, it is Draupadi who asserts herself, voicing her innermost anxiety and subdued rage in impassioned anger while her husbands display stoic endurance of their humiliation. It is she who is engulfed by the flames of revenge and anger in stark contrast to her stoic husbands. It is she who utters the dreadful and prophetic curse of the destructive battle which eventually brings about imminent apocalypse and retribution:

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. (Divakaruni, 194)

It is she who vows to bathe her hair in Kaurava blood, choosing to surrender a part of her traditional femininity for revenge, challenging feminine boundaries (without invoking spirits to unsex her) even before her warrior husbands swear to avenge her insult. It is she who emerges as Nemesis, the divine personification of the righteous indignation of the gods at human presumption. In a complete reversal of the epic tradition, it is Draupadi again who emerges as the saviour of her husbands as she frees them from the clutches of Duryodhan. Here, extreme binaries are juxtaposed as the same woman who is the victim is transformed to the saviour who overshadows and overpowers her valiant husbands, whose destiny depends on her as the victor of this war fought within the domestic space. Divakaruni's Draupadi reminds us of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* where Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal woman, who is gang-raped in police custody transforms her battered, bruised, naked body into the subject of a powerful counter-narrative in the face of authoritative state power symbolised by the Senanayak. As she has nothing more to lose, nothing more to be ashamed of, she interrogates and reverses the entire notions of victim and oppressor. Shaking with "indomitable laughter" and bleeding from her 'ravaged lips', she marches on with her nude, blood-smearred body towards the Senanayak and challenges him in a "terrifying, sky splitting" (Devi 37) voice: "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" (37). Spitting at his white shirt, she continues: "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do?" (37) thereby becoming the voice of resistance. Almost in a similar vein, Divakaruni's Draupadi becomes a soul sister of the Santhali tribal woman, emasculating the heroism, the warrior selves and the spirits of vengeance of her husbands, disrobing them of the traditional markers of masculine prowess and rendering them powerless before her female voice of resistance, wrath and retribution.

Sheila Murnaghan observes, "Spoken largely by women, laments are the medium by which a female perspective on epic action makes its way into these male-centred texts" (207). Although Andromache, Penelope, Sita and even Helen grieve for their lost husbands, (Murnaghan calls Paris Helen's nominal husband) they do not urge the men to war and slaughter, nor do they take any pleasure in bloodshed. Even at her last appearance in the

*Ramayana*, before retreating into the depths of the earth in dignified silence, Sita neither condemns, nor criticizes the father of her sons; rather “the boys have been taught to recite his praise, to recount his deeds of valour” (Hughes 45). Helen weeps for Paris to reclaim her own status since Paris is blamed by other Trojans, but she never thirsts for revenge, nor does she instigate the men for it. In a stark contrast to her epical counterparts, it is Draupadi who urges her husbands for the imminent war, never reluctant to motivate them towards the heroic code of warfare of the *kshatriya* clan. Draupadi, the daughter born from the everlasting fires, keeps the revengeful fires inflamed in her heart and ignites the flames of vengeance in her husbands, while her laments translates into the “dangerous voices” as Gail Holst- Warhaft calls them in the title of her book *Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature*, thereby transforming her into a rebellious transgressor of traditional feminine paradigms. Even during the twelve years of exile it is she who reminds her husbands of her insults at the Kaurava Sabha to instigate them to sharpen the spirit of vengeance, always retaining her insatiable thirst for revenge.

In his *Poetics*, while talking about the epic, Aristotle says that it “must divide into the same species as Tragedy... It requires Peripeties, Discoveries and scenes of suffering just like Tragedy”(81). In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni remaps the secondary location of the women within the epic structure and “makes the question of female agency a more complex one,” as Julia Hoydis observes (quoted in Hoydis). She constructs the character of Draupadi in the light of the epic heroes, thereby destabilizing subject positions and again diverts from the established paradigms in making a woman the protagonist. Like the paradigmatic masculine epic hero, always hungry for glory on the battlefield, where avenging a near and dear one’s death is the accepted code of masculinity and bravery, Divakaruni expounds Draupadi as a woman who is as determined for vengeance and revenge as the epic men are. The memory of her disrobing acts as her moment of discovery and continues to haunt her and ignites in her an utmost desire for revenge and she emerges as an avenger of injustice. A woman thirsty for avenging all the injustice she suffered is unheard of in epics which manifests itself in the erasure of the female from the essentially masculine domain of war. Here, Draupadi becomes the witness to this life-consuming battle by a special vision provided by the sage Vyas who believes her to be stronger than her husbands. This special privilege makes her a comrade to all her warrior husbands fighting in the name of honour and revenge, unlike Helen and other epic women who had to rely on messengers. She experiences all the power and the glory, all the hunger for fame, all the horror and hopelessness, all the jubilation

and laments associated with the battle of Kurushetra. It is here that she witnesses the most heinous murdering of Abhimanyu, the most unheroic massacre of Dronacharya by her brother, and the battle of the two most celebrated warriors Karna and Arjuna. After the war, it is again she and not Yudhistir who pacifies the frenzied widows of Hastinapur and Indra Prastha who curse the Pandavas out of despair, by her oratory powers. Admitting her pivotal role in bringing about the war she begs for their forgiveness, and becomes their kin in bereavement and shared grief when she laments the loss of her children. It is Draupadi who in her concern about these women, resolves to form a separate court for them, a forum which fostered sisterhood among the women of Hastinapur and led to the flourishing of the women's market. Till the end she rebels "against the boundaries society has prescribed for women" (Divakaruni 343) and ventures to accompany her valiant husbands on their final journey as "no woman had ever attempted it" (Divakaruni 343) validating the same desire for everlasting majestic glory which reverberates in her and would be her "last victory over the other wives" (Divakaruni 343). The ultimate plight of Draupadi does not differ from her husbands; all of them suffer from "the morass of depression" (Divakaruni 321), the same hopelessness, the same horror and the same self-reproach the war manifests into them.

In her retelling of the classical epic, Divakaruni deconstructs and rejects the subservient existence of the epic women and focuses on Draupadi as the force which changes the fate of an entire dynasty as well as becomes the agent of her own destruction. The whole narrative centralizes itself about her impassioned anger, her rebellious actions which transgress the traditionally prescribed boundaries of womanhood, her ever growing hunger for everlasting glory and fame and her final anagnorisis about the eternal truth about herself. It is she to whom we respond as the woman who dared to change the course of history, negating all the restrictions imposed upon her sex, determined never to fade into oblivion.

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