



Foregrounding Draupadi, the Female Protagonist: Re-envisioning *The Mahabharata* in *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusion*, the retelling of Vyasa's *The Mahabharata* has a uniqueness of its own. It takes us back to a time that is half history, half myth, and wholly magical. The great epic the *Mahabharata* is written from a male point of view and Draupadi's voice has been neglected. All earlier versions written focused on male heroes and keep females backstage. With the rise of different psychoanalytic theories, feminist theories, cultural theories etc. writers began to reinterpret epic narratives and characters from new perspectives. Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusion* is one such retelling of the *Mahabharata* that keeps Draupadi at the centre stage. Told in first person point of view, Divakaruni is recreating the epic from the perspective of Panchaali. The novel is about male domination, discrimination against women, their struggle, identity and position of women during the period of the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi's life shows in the epic how women have to accept tradition and culture without any question. Draupadi tries to break the shackles of a stereotypical patriarchal society. Banerjee explores the rebel in Draupadi from the *Mahabharata*. Far from being docile and fragile, we see Draupadi as an iconoclast. This paper attempts to show how Draupadi encounters an existential crisis in the patriarchal hegemonic society and her quest for establishing her identity in that hegemonic structure. It also tries to parallelize the similarities between Banerjee's Draupadi to that of contemporary women who quest against the shackles of tradition and convention. This study also analyses Draupadi's feminine strength, and her complex relationships with Karna, Krishna and the palace. It also tries to portray myth and modernity clashing with each other to give birth to a new face.

Keywords

revisionist mythology, gender, identity, female subjugation, feminism

Introduction

Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have been orally transmitted from one generation to another. These epics are potent enough to offer oodles of themes for modern writers to reinterpret and fit into the contemporary scenario. Even today, the story of Mahabharata caters its charm and appeals to the writers. This reinterpretation and recreation have given birth to various versions of Veda Vyas's *Mahabharata*, each concentrating on a particular theme. Some of the very well-known versions incorporate Devadutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustration and Retelling of Mahabharata*, Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen*, Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Role of the Dice*, Sharath Komarraju's *The Rise of Hastinapura*. A revisionist literary text attempts to reinterpret the source text with contemporary sensibilities. It tries to deconstruct the traditional characters and exhibit them with a renewed outlook and sensibility. Therefore, the great epic *Mahabharata* with its reinterpreted tales continues to be a source of ample pleasure and fascination. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a retelling of the great Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's point of view. Instead of choosing any male character as a protagonist in the novel, Banerjee has come up with a female character providing the readers with a different approach to look at the already-known story of the great epic. Divakaruni introduces Draupadi by saying, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into" (*The Palace of Illusions*, Author's Note xv). As Vyas's *Mahabharata* focuses on the battle of Kurukshetra and its male heroes, Draupadi becomes a marginal character here. But she is a woman with an unyielding will who raises her voice against a male-dominated patriarchal society. On one hand, she is kind and compassionate but on the other hand, she is iron-willed to take revenge on her assaulters. She falls prey to the strategic scheming of patriarchy and she is often time misunderstood and misrepresented. Renu Verma points out, "As and when Draupadi has been interpreted differently from her classical trajectory of a mythic queen, she has represented new meanings for the social and political lives of people. Many renderings on her life story especially some particular episodes in it are created, recreated, interpreted and constituted in the larger narrative universe" (Verma 57). She is at loggerheads with patriarchal notions which repeatedly assault her womanhood and make her vulnerable. But she is doughty enough to win her battle against patriarchy and its devotees by deconstructing the patriarchal ideologies. Spivak valorizes Draupadi as "odd, unpaired and uncoupled" and points out that this unique trait of Draupadi is also exhibited by Mahasweta Devi in her *Dopdi* "by placing the tribal woman Dopdi first in a comradely activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rapes" (Spivak 387).

Vyas's *Mahabharata* centralizes its focus on the epic battle of Kurukshetra providing the male heroes, the Pandavas to exhibit their prowess. But Divakaruni retells the epic in the first-person narrative of Draupadi focusing on Panchaali's thoughts and emotions. Here, Draupadi becomes the 'hero' and offers a gendered

rendering of the epic the *Mahabharata*. By making Draupadi the new hero, Divakaruni deconstructs the stereotypical image of women and displays an extraordinarily fresh perspective of the narration. Banerjee's protagonist struggles her best to gain control in a patriarchal world. Divakaruni herself states- "I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the portrayal of women in the epic- the numerous powerful and complex women that affect the action in major ways... But somehow all these women remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions described only when they affect the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. I made a promise to myself all those years ago. If I ever become a writer, I thought, I will recreate the story of the Mahabharata. But in my Mahabharata, I will place a woman in the forefront of the action" (*The Palace of Illusions*, Author's Note xiv-xv).

Very often it is seen that major ancient texts do not justify the portrayal of the female characters and this injustice results in the misrepresentation of female characters of the ancient epics. Here, women writers often appear on the stage with their own version of the narrative because of their grave disapproval of the male version of the narrative. They attempt to rectify the biased representations by unbolting the hidden facts and secrets of history. Divakaruni wrote this novel because she was not satisfied with the portrayal of women characters in mythology as she herself said- "I will uncover the story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits" (*The Palace of Illusions* Author's Note xv). In the very first chapter of the novel, Draupadi recollects the story of her birth as told by Dhairya Ma- "And though she knew many wondrous and edifying tales, the one I made her tell me over and over was the story of my birth. I think I liked it so much because it made me feel special, and in those days, there was little else in my life that did" (Divakaruni 1). This focus on woman's rights in the works of women writers becomes the site of resistance. Divakaruni comes forward with her female protagonist and rewrites history from her female hero's perspective. Helen Cixous writes in *The Laugh of Medusa*- "I shall speak about woman's writing. About what it will do. Woman must write herself: Must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history- by her own movement" (Cixous 875).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi

Draupadi is one of the most complex and polemical characters in the *Mahabharata*. In some South Indian culture, she is worshipped as a goddess. Divakaruni has portrayed Draupadi as one of the most important women characters in the *Mahabharata*. She is kind, generous, and compassionate but she is not submissive. She is valiant and confident enough to achieve her goal. She is able to create history that will be remembered year after year. There are three narrators in

the novel- Draupadi, Dhai Ma and Dhri and each of them is telling the same story from their point of view. But Divakaruni makes Draupadi the most appropriate and favourable narrator. She is not an average one, she is Panchaali- the fire-born princess. She is self-reliant and decisive enough to raise her voice for her rights despite being dominated in a patriarchal society. Commenting on the character of Draupadi, Renuka Narayanan writes in the Hindustan Times- “Told in the first person, Divakaruni’s tale takes us through the epic in Draupadi’s voice. From being born of the sacrificial fire (thus her beautiful name ‘Yajnaseni’, though the author doesn’t use it, preferring ‘Panchaali’), to her strange, lonely childhood, her tricky marriage to five men with a persecution problem and a control freak mother, her own, lovely home at last, and then the unbelievable traumas that follow that nobody should have to go through (but millions of refugees do)” (12). Badrinath Chaturvedi remarks in his book *The Women of Mahabharata: The Question of Truth*- “That she was born from the flames of a yagna fire, a most unusual form of human birth, is to be understood metaphorically, for her later life, at any rate, the greatest part of it, would be lived in the flames of one kind of human fire or another, mostly in the flames of hatred and revenge that she let burn in her heart for thirteen years” (Chaturvedi 171).

In the novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee has delineated Draupadi’s life, her sorrow, and her desire and explained the epic battle from her protagonist’s point of view and it offers the reader an opportunity to peep into the shady life of Draupadi. In an interview with Metka Zupancic, Divakaruni illustrated- “If we are to put the woman in the centre of the work, we have to show her in all her complexity. She is not the perfect gender, as we all know but she is worth celebrating with her flaws, as long as there is some kind of growth as long as she is aware of the ways in which she can become not only a better woman by her own definition, but a better human being ultimately a spiritual being. In some way, that is Panchaali’s journey in *The Palace of Illusions*. From a position of little power, she wishes to move to autonomy, but autonomy brings its own challenges, with negative aspects that she has to recognize”. Divakaruni projects Draupadi as bold, determined and eager to know the story of her birth and she repeatedly tells her Dhai Ma to tell the story- “I thought of the prophecy then, with yearning and fear. I wanted it to be true. But did I have the making of a heroine- courage, perseverance, an unbending will? And shut up as I was inside this mausoleum of a palace, how would history even find me?” (Divakaruni 5).

Deviation from Vyas’s Mahabharata

Banerjee has served the old myth with a mould of modern perspective in *The Palace of Illusions*. She has mixed up traditional mythology and modernity and retold the epic battle of Kurukshetra from Draupadi’s point of view. She has brought out the past into the present in a different way through the mouth of Panchaali who becomes the symbol of contemporary women. Keeping the basic story same, Banerjee has

deconstructed the old mythology and she has added some new stories in the novel to bring Panchaali's story to the forefront. These stories become conducive to reveal Panchaali's thoughts, emotions, woes and struggles.

The character of Dhai Ma becomes crucial in Draupadi's life as she starts moulding Draupadi's outlook from early childhood. Dhai Ma explains to Draupadi the story of her birth and this narration pokes Draupadi to think about the discrimination done to her. Dhai Ma tells the story of how the two children are named- "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (Divakaruni 5). Dhai Ma explains to Draupadi that the king could have chosen a more heroic name for her like her brother. Dhai Ma also tells Draupadi that the king has made the prayer and yagna for a son, so Draupadi is an unwanted one.

Another added story is Draupadi's love for Karna. When she sees the portrait of Karna, she is attracted towards his eyes 'filled with an ancient sadness' (Divakaruni 69). Divakaruni explains how Panchaali is prevented from marrying Karna and Arjun is chosen for her. Though she is married to five Pandavas, she bears her love for Karna till the last day of her life.

In R.K. Narayan's *The Indian Epics Retold*, Yudhishtira narrates Panchaali as "the goddess Lakshmi herself in stature, grace and complexion; eyes like lotus petals" (Narayan 260). But, Divakaruni annihilates the conventional idea of female beauty in her novel and Panchaali claims "I too am beautiful" (Divakaruni 9) like dark-skinned Krishna. She is fascinated with the name 'Krishnaa' (the female form of Krishna) given by Krishna. It has two meanings- "the dark one or the one whose attraction can't be resisted" (Divakaruni 12).

Gandhari's sacrifice is also interpreted by Draupadi in a different way. She explains that Gandhari does this sacrifice not out of love but she is forced to do so by patriarchy. According to Dhai Ma, "Maybe the thought of marrying a blind man disgusted her-but being a princess, she couldn't get out of the match. Maybe she did this so she wouldn't have to look at him every single day of her life" (Divakaruni 44).

Draupadi, a Rebel Voice

Hindu mythology offers very few women characters who can raise their voices vehemently for their rights in front of women but Draupadi is one such character. She is sometimes considered the first feminist character from Hindu mythology. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni endeavours to offer a fresh perspective of *Mahabharata* through the gendered eyes of Panchaali. This outlook generates a feminist reading of the novel. Feminism as a literary theory questions female subjugation, gendered violence, oppression and stereotypical notions about the role of women in society. Divakaruni incorporates the feminist perspectives in her novel and revises the events of *Mahabharata* from a female point of view. In the epic version, Draupadi is considered as Kriya (one who brings doom to her clan) but Divakaruni deviates from such interpretations and offers a new outlook on Draupadi.

Banerjee's Draupadi attempts to change her destiny within the confines of epic narrative and this attempt of retelling is counted as re-envisioning. Adrien Rich, in her essay, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as re-Vision', states- "Revision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival" (Rich 18).

Divakaruni deconstructs the epic narrative in order to provide her protagonist Draupadi a medium to express her self and this exhibition leads to her emancipation and empowerment. By celebrating her selfhood and femininity, Draupadi challenges the norms and maxims of patriarchy. Women of all ages undergo discrimination at different stages of their lives. Draupadi too faces domination and discrimination in the male chauvinist society. But she is bold and confident enough to assert her self-identity and change the course of history. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir has talked about the condition of a 'woman' and how a woman is defined in society. She says- "Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is sufficient to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet 'female' sounds like an insult; but he not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: 'He is male!' The term 'female' is pejorative not because its roots woman in nature, but because it confines her in her sex" (Beauvoir 21).

Women are often defined in relation to men, she does not have her own identity. Divakaruni brings here a female character who is decisive enough to challenge the male-dominated society. One can find Draupadi, a deviant from the very beginning, who dreams of escaping societal boundaries. She disagrees with the idea of recognizing a woman by the name of the man in her life. She strongly disapproves of the fact that her brother has been chosen to avenge their father's honour and she does not like the name given by her father. She abnegates her identity Draupadi (meaning the daughter of Drupad) and renames herself Panchaali (meaning derived from the kingdom of Panchaal). This resentment is evident in the novel- "He said to your brother, I name you Dhristadyumna. He said to you. I name you Draupadi. And when we had the best feast, his kingdom has ever seen... Dhri's name fell within the bounds of acceptability- though if I were his parent, I might have picked a more cheerful appellation, like Celestial Victor, or Light of the Universe. But daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something like less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change the history? I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice. But in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name" (Divakaruni 5).

Draupadi is determined enough to educate herself despite the fact that women of her time are not allowed to read scriptures. She starts eavesdropping when her brother Dhri takes lessons from his tutor. Later with the help of Krishna, she is allowed to take lessons along with Dhri. She fights for her right to education and she

says- “These were the lessons I most envied him, the lessons that conferred power. They were the ones I needed to know if I were to change history” (Divakaruni 27). But she is repeatedly demotivated by the tutor himself which is evident in the text- “O great prince,” he said now, “kindly ask your princess to refrain from prompting you. She is not helping you to learn. Will she be sitting behind you in your chariot in battle when you need to remember these important precepts? Perhaps it is best if she no longer joins during your studies” (Divakaruni 23). Despite being forced to concentrate on feminine traits, she is determined to learn the skills a king needs to know. Therefore, she secretly learns the war skills and political lessons which men are supposed to learn.

Divakaruni has presented Draupadi as a rebel who is ready to break the chains of male domination. She faces discrimination because of her dark skin but she is bold enough to claim that she too is beautiful like Krishna who is a dark-skinned man. She vehemently criticizes the traditional notion of beauty and says- “In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl. I paid for it by spending hour upon excruciating hour being slathered in skin-whitening unguents and scrubbed with numerous exfoliants by my industrious nurse” (Divakaruni 7).

Divakaruni brings here an important fact that is Draupadi’s secret admiration for Karna which is never mentioned in the original epic. When she sees him for the first time, she is mesmerized by the sad eyes of Karna and throughout her life, she bears her love for Karna, the arch-enemy of her husbands. She also compares herself with Karna as both have suffered rejection all through their lives. She always imagines of being the wife of a single man that is Karna. She says- “an insidious voice inside me said, Karna would never have let you suffer like this” (Divakaruni 99).

In the game of dice, Yudhishtra is lost, he loses his brothers, his kingdom and Draupadi also. Draupadi is an educated woman who knows the laws very well. But instead of submissively obeying her husband Yudhishtra, she questioned her husband- “If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife” (Divakaruni 190). Duryodhan orders Dushshana to drag Draupadi by her hair to the royal court and to disrobe her before the assembly of the people. Even after seeing this incident, Pandavas and the elders remain silent. Noticing her husbands’ indifference, Draupadi states- “Let them stare at my nakedness. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency” (Divakaruni 193). She does not remain silent after her humiliation; her question makes all present in the court silent. She questions the legitimacy of the trading of a woman like a commodity and says- “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 a defenceless woman” (Divakaruni 194). She further says that she will not

comb her hair until the day she bathes it in Kaurava blood. This vengeance gives her a purpose to struggle for and makes a place for her in history.

Draupadi, the Victim of Patriarchy

In Indian society, women are confined to the home and hearth as homemakers. Males are supposed to be independent, and self-reliant; whereas females are supposed to be the weaker sex. Males are the positive and neutral, but women represent only the negative. Divakaruni's female protagonist belongs to this biased society and she also experiences segregation and discrimination throughout her life. Some of the instances are poignantly evident in the novel.

King Drupad arranges the yagna and prays to the Gods for a son to avenge Drauna. But the king receives a son along with a daughter who will be used as a political ploy to change the course of history- "You will bring about the death of the evil kings and your children's and your brother's. A million women will become widows of you. Yes, indeed you will leave a mark on history" (Divakaruni 39). So, from the very beginning, she is unwanted and unwelcomed as a patriarchal society always desires a son. From her childhood, she lacks affection from her father and her father's wives and she clearly realizes the difference between a son and a daughter.

Though she is born as a princess, she never gets the treatment of a princess. Drupad is always concerned about his son Dhristadyumna. She desires for educating herself but she is barred from it again and again. Her teacher tells her that a woman should know how to conduct household work and take care of her husband. She is told to concentrate on her feminine traits which she does not like- "I was given lessons in singing, dancing, and playing music (The lessons were painful, both for my teachers and me, for I was not musically inclined, nor deft on my feet). I was taught to draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival (My paintings were blotchy, and my designs were full of improvisations that my teachers frowned at). I was better at composing and solving riddle riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me" (Divakaruni 29). Draupadi is excited of her swayamwara as she can choose her own life partner according to her wish. But she is unaware of the larger scheme of her father and brother. Drupad has already chosen Arjun as her son-in-law for defeating Drona. She dreams of Karna as her partner but she is ultimately forced to surrender to the desires of her father. She becomes a toy in the hands of her father and brother, and her emotions and passions are not given priority. Her swayamwara becomes a part of state politics. When Arjun wins Draupadi in the swayamwara, she feels like a commodity- "I was nothing, but a warm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (Divakaruni 57). Later she becomes the wife of five Pandavas and her polygamous wedding becomes a curse for her. Her marriage needs immense self-control and responsibilities. She remains the wife of each brother for one year and

every year she is bestowed with virginity boon. So, her husbands are benefited by this boon. Beauvoir says, “Dreaded or desired or even demanded by the male, virginity is the highest form of the feminine mystery” (Beauvoir 206). Her imposed marriage is an insult to her dignity and Draupadi laments over her fate saying- “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 requested that Arjun be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with” (Divakaruni 120). Her polygamous marriage is actually part of a larger political scheme. After her marriage, she becomes the mistress of the palace of Indraprastha and she laughs at Duryodhan during his visit to the palace. Her laughter and sarcasm sow the seed of vengeance inside Duryodhan. So, Draupadi is again used as a catalyst for the epic battle to take place.

In the game of dice, Yudhishthira loses Draupadi and Duryodhan orders to bring Draupadi to the court for humiliation. So, in a patriarchal society, husbands are allowed to use their wives to be transacted as commodities. Karna also supports the heinous act of Kauravas and says- “Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too. A woman like Draupadi who married to five is not a wife but a whore and whore has no honour” (Divakaruni 192). She becomes the puppet in the hands of the male-chauvinist society and Draupadi describes her condition as the following- “The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave” (Divakaruni 190). She questions the elders for her humiliation but all remain silent. So, in a patriarchal society, the rules are made by men and women are to follow the rules. Draupadi is no exception, she also becomes the victim of discrimination and segregation in the male-dominated society.

Significance of the Palace

It is a magical palace crafted by the asura architect Mayasura and is gifted to the Pandava brothers and Draupadi. The palace is an important part of Draupadi’s identity and it becomes a space of her own. Being a woman, she is excluded from public affairs but the palace becomes her domain; an embodiment of power and emancipation. Becoming the mistress of the palace, she feels liberated and finds a space to celebrate her emotions and passions. Through this palace, she can escape into the world of fantasy and illusion and it helps her to temporarily forget her pain and suffering. This magical palace is the space where she can exhibit her selfhood and it also becomes a site of resistance. From the very tender age of her life, she has experienced discrimination, and disrespect in her father’s palace and this has kindled in her a desire for her own palace- “Often, I imagined my palace, the one I would build someday. What would it be made of? What form would it take? Krishna’s palace in Dwaraka was pink sandstone, the arches like the ocean waves that boarded it. It sounded lovely, but I knew mine would have to be different. It would have to be uniquely mine” (Divakaruni 113). But this palace, the work of beauty is ‘maya’ for

Draupadi. After the terrible war, Draupadi leaves Hastinapur with her grieved husbands. The purpose of their lives is over now. Making the earth free of evil and having changed the course of history, their lives have become unnecessary.

Conclusion

The Palace of Illusions is a revisionist text that re-examines the experiences of women and their values in society. Divakaruni has humanized her heroine and represented the condition of Indian women who are baffled between their responsibilities imposed by society and their own aspirations. “Divakaruni within the plot of *The Palace of Illusions* exhibits her specific concern for those female characters who were subjected to torture and neglect in the *Mahabharata*. The feminist consciousness becomes the voice of humanity at large” (Agarwal 67). In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is presented as an object, a silent figure but Banerjee has made her a subject, a superior character. Divakaruni’s Draupadi is not only a victim of patriarchy but also a threat to patriarchy. Rejection from her early childhood has made her more determined to deconstruct her womanhood. Vyas’s *Mahabharata* sees Draupadi as an iconoclast who takes her birth to destroy the Kauravas. But Divakaruni’s novel retells the epic story with a humanistic touch, making it more relatable. Divakaruni’s representation makes Draupadi’s character more acceptable and humane who was not able to stop the destruction of Kauravas. She is also a woman of flesh and blood who is not completely perfect.

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