

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Feminist Persona of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of history, myth and magic is affirmed in one of her best seller, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi. The novel is written in first person, giving Panchali's own thoughts on her own life. Though popularly known as Draupadi, whose literal sense is the daughter of Draupada, she is one who easily reasserts herself and renames herself as Panchali, which is derived from the kingdom of Panchala. She therefore opposes the shallow label that her father gave her and refuses to accept that her personality is tied by a man in her life.

There are those who claim that it was her head-strong behaviour that contributed to the destruction of the Third Age of Man that is the Dhupara Age, and that she is considered to be a Kritya, one who brings doom to her clan. But Chitra Banerjee is moving away from such interpretations to have a new perspective on Panchali. The author portrays Panchali's life as a series of choices made by herself, not by the people around her, giving her a voice in the largely patriarchal society of ancient India. Divakaruni's interpretation of the epic offers a full plot, often absent from the original epic, giving women a stronger presence in the story and presenting them as equals in society. This approach of the author emboldens one to argue safely, without much fear of contradictions that *The Palace of Illusions* is a feminist reading of Mahabharata.

Feminism as a theory of literature evaluation was well underway in the late 1960s. It is an attempt to characterize and understand the experience of women as depicted in different kinds of literature, particularly novels and, to a lesser extent, poetry and drama. It challenges the long standing, dominant, masculine, phallocentric philosophies, patriarchal attitudes and masculine interpretations of literature. According to Toni Morrison in *Sula*, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself"(26)

Mahabharata is a tale of friendship, independence, deception, war, anger and revenge. This epic revolves around the heroes and their valiant deeds. Breaking free from trends, retelling is a genre in which a character like Draupadi has been portrayed as a sovereign heroine in the epic of Mahabharata. Draupadi rises from the fire with a sacred declaration from the heavens that she will be the cause of the destruction of evil warriors. It is necessary to recognize a woman's self-respect in an independent society. Draupadi never claimed to be a frail, ignored

and shameful 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 losses a great clap. The role of women in the Mahabharata makes an interesting study providing an idea into the strength and weakness of their character. *The Palace of Illusions* provide a deep insight to the feminist ideology of women characters.

CHARISMATIC IDENTITY OF DRAUPADI

Mahabharata, the magnum opus of Indian culture, consists of over one lakh slokas and long prose passages. The myths ingrained in the Mahabharata are not mere stories, but morals aimed to highlight the right path. Shashi Tharoor comments on his book *Bookless in Baghdad: Reflections on Writing and Writers about Mahabharata* as “The Mahabharata declares, what is here is nowhere else; what is not here, is nowhere”(167). Mahabharata is retold from the perspective of Draupadi or Panchali, the wife of Pandavas. Divakaruni retells the whole incidents from her childhood to her final moments through Panchali’s perspective. Divakaruni uncovered the story that lay invisible between the lines of men exploitation in Mahabharata. Draupadi is also known as Yagnaseni, which means princess who lived out of sacrificial fire. Badrinath says in his book *The Women of Mahabharata the Question of Truth*, that “She was born from the flames of a yajna 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 for thirteen years.”(171)

Social divides among classes were more evident at that time. However, all these classes were equal in subjugation of the women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the lower classes as well as to show how they suffered in the male dominated society. Draupadi liked to know and solve the problems of the poor workers of the palace. But, they also hesitate to share their feelings to her as she is a woman in high position, a queen. Later, when Draupadi becomes the queen of *The Palace of Illusions*, we can see her solving the women’s issues with greater dignity and righteousness. As a woman she can understand the problems faced by other women in the male dominated society and she proves to be extraordinary in finding a solution for them. Polygamy was not a wrong notion at that time. In RK Narayan’s *The Indian Epics Retold*, the scene is portrayed thus:

Karna, Dussasana and Sakuni laughed at her and uttered jokes and also called her ‘slaves’ several times. She looked at their family elder, Bheeshma, pleadingly and said, ‘O daughter of Draupad, the question of morality is difficult to answer....a husband may have the absolute right to dispose of his wife in any manner he pleases, even if he has become a pauper and a slave...I’m unable to decide this issue....’(263).

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi says that she tried to resist when Pandavas take other wives, by starving and breaking off expensive objects. But, being a lady of intelligence she can identify the importance of these marriages and she is able to understand the political reasons

behind them. Draupadi's thinking is ahead of her times. Even in the age of Mahabharata, when war was highly glorified, she perfectly understands the futility of it. She is surprised why men must fight in order to give evidence of their glory and greatness. When the society permits man to marry as many women as he wants, the same society considers a woman who marries more than three men as a whore, when Kunti announced the idea of Draupadi marrying all her five sons, King Draupad hesitated because it was not an idea prevailing in the society. Draupadi compares her life with a man as "My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with and when. Like a communal drinking cup I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (120).

The life story of Sikhandi has a lot of complications to the problems faced by the woman at the time. King Salva who loved her rejected her only because Bheeshma touched her hand. Through *The Palace of Illusions*, author shows how these methods of suppressing women were used by the society from the ancient times onwards and how they were forced to fit into the norms prescribed by them.

CONCLUSION

Through *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shows how the methods of suppressing women were used by the society from the ancient times onwards and how they were forced to fit into the norms prescribed by them. Story of Panchali is the story of the assertion of female will. She detests the fact that she was not desired by her parents. This thought of her connects her with prevailing modern tendency in our society where girl child still is unwelcomed. She is also disguised with the fact that she has not been given any meaningful and purposeful name. She resents the prevailing customs that does not attach significance to the life of female. There are many who believe that it was her headstrong actions that brought about the destruction of the Third Age of Man (Dhupara Age) and she is known to be a Kritya, one who brings doom to her clan. But Chitra Banerjee moves away from such interpretations to provide a new outlook on Panchali. Another instance of feminism can be felt when the tutor of Dhri comments for Panchali that the greatest purpose of the kshatriya woman was to support all the men in her life. This incidence proves that Divakaruni's Panchali is not only a strong woman who can take a stand for her sake unlike other women of her time but also is consistent with the modern contemporary concepts like modernism and individualism.

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