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FEMININE VISIBILITY IN A MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an Indo-American author, works as a professor of English in the University of Houston. She is also a co-founder and former president of a helpline for South Asian women. She involves herself eagerly as a volunteer at women's center at Berkeley and assists battered women through the organization. MAITRI, the organization was begun in 1991 by her with the help of a group of friends. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an expatriate writer, pictures Indian womanhood how they are treated by men in their lives. An explicit attempt to retell the epic in novel form is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* which will be analyzed in the following. The present paper analyzes how women is treated by male as a lifeless thing in the novel. This study is an attempt to illustrate how revisionist mythmaking is a feminist endeavor to revalue the experiences of women in patriarchy and redefine women from feminist perspectives.

Keywords:Feminism, Indian Female Culture, Mahabharata, Women, Criticism, Male Dominance

Introduction:

Feminist criticism became a dominant force in Western literary studies in the late 1970's, when Feminist theory more broadly conceived was applied to Linguistic and Liberty Criticism has developed and diversified in a number of ways and is now characterized by a global perspective. Women has equal rights and she is not to be treated as a slave in the world. She is not a play thing and an object to be used and thrown as a waste. As a human being, women is endowed with emotions and passions, anger and fear, joy and sorrow,

laughter and tears. The novel not only invites criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but allows insight into the interaction of gender and Illusions reflects Draupadi's suffering in Divakaruni's point of view.

Divakaruni's works make us think and rethink about the contemporary predicaments and troubles of women. Divakaruni gives a, **"voice to female Asian immigrants and portrays the struggle with hybrid identities in her fictions."** (Mandal, 2006: 115) Once she says that she really wanted, **"to focus on women battling and coming out triumphant."** (Mandal' 116)

The novelist identity, particularly into the complex construction of femininity already inherent in the original text, while also challenging if form a contemporary perspective Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reconstructs the tale of *Mahabharata* in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. **The Palace of Illusions** by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such attempt to narrate the story of *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Panchaali (Draupadi), one of the most important but overlooked and misunderstood characters from Indian mythology. Divakaruni brings in a fresh perspective on the life of a strong but much neglected women who questions the overwhelming voice of patriarchy.

Mahabharata: an ancient Indian Epic

Mahabharata one of the two Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India. Draupadi who is the heroine of the epic, mysterious yet compassionate queen of five brothers and also considered as the sole reason behind the great Mahabharata war. Divakaruni reconstructs the story of Draupadi's suffering of *The Palace of Illusions* are love, marriage, revenge and death. Divakaruni makes Panchaali, another name for Draupadi, the protagonist of the story, narrate her struggles and heart breaks, joys and doubts, her achievements, the unique female way in which she see her world and her place in it.

Though a catalyst for the Great War, she suffers the most as a result of the war. Divakaruni recalls,

"Listening to the stories of the *Mahabharata* as a young girl... I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women. It wasn't as though the epic didn't have powerful, complex women characters... but they remained shadowy figures ...their roles subservient to those of their fathers or

husbands, brother or sons. If I ever wrote a book, I would place the women in the forefront... uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits." (PL Author's Note, XIV – XV)

Panchaali to Draupadi:

Divakaruni's Draupadi is iron-willed, intelligent, independent and courageous. The novel explores her psyche and revalues her experiences. Early in the novel she establishes her independent identity by calling herself 'Panchaali' (from the kingdom of Panchal) rather than 'Draupadi' (daughter of Drupad). This is the first significant step to establish her identity singularly defying male control on women's identity. Panchaali's critical thinking and independent mind is also seen in the way she tries to skip her lessons that are stereotyped for girls. Instead she join her twin brother Dhri (Dhristadyumna) to study Shastras and laws of governance, typically associated with the notions of 'male' education. She adamantly insists that she learn the same lessons taught to Dhri much to the discomfort of Drupad and her tutor, **"The lessons in singing, dancing were painful... with each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me..."** (PL 29) In another instance, she demands of her brother, **"... who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?"** and categorically states her plans, **"Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life."** (PL 26)

Draupadi: A weapon for revenge

The novel traces all events beginning with her birth from the holy fire, to her death at the foothills of Himalayas. Her birth is, however unasked for. Drupad king of Panchala, was performed a *Yagna* to get a son, with the sole purpose of destroying the Guru household that patronized Drona. But Panchaali came out of the fire with Dhri, her brother. Drupad hesitates to accept her, a girl, whole heartedly and stretches his arms only for Dhri, her brother. Deeply etched in her consciousness is her brother clinging to her, **"... so stubbornly that [her] father was forced to pick [them] both up together."** (PL 6) Draupadi the fire-daughter of Drupad. Draupadi born out of fire from the Yaga. She never had a childhood. She is born as an adult, with no appreciation of childhood or parenting. She is raised in hatred, designed for destroying a family. Thus as from the birth itself Draupadi, brought up for the sake of her father's revenge purpose. Her father never treat her with affection. There is a deal between the father-daughter relationships. The deal is only revenge.

Divakaruni transforms Panchaali from being an Object to a Subject. This at once connects the readers to not only a mythological but also a contemporary understanding of feminine identity. The author moves away from the notion of Draupadi being called 'Kritya' (one responsible for the destruction of the Kurus) and represents her as a character who takes the Pandavas to their destiny.

Identity of her own:

The strong desire to have an identity of her own is seen in her dislike of her name Draupadi – daughter of Drupad. She dislikes the pervasive nuances of patriarchy and says, **"...Couldn't my father have come up with (a name) something a little less egoistic?" (PL 5)** Her desire to have a palace of her own can be seen as an extension of this desire for an independent identity. She often dreams of a palace of her own someday, **"...I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home."** (PL 7) This desire to have a palace of her own is not a desire to show the pomp and splendor of her palace of her own. Through this dream she claims both a place for herself and a narrative agency seeking to establish her distinct identity by belonging to allocation and be in control of her life.

Draupadi's Marriage: A Thraldom

Talking about Draupadi's Swayamvar in *Mahabharata*, we observe that it was designed to lure Arjun. Drupad father of Draupadi wanted to take revenge on Drona. Drona's disciple was Arjun, and to gain confidence of both Arjun and Drona the easiest thing was to tie him in the nuptial bond with Draupadi. This would strengthen the position of Drupad against Drona. Panchaali is excited at the prospects of her *Swayamvar*. She is delighted to know that she was practicing her free will- she would be making her own choice. Her dreams are shattered after knowing that the whole process was being done to attract Arjun so that her father could take his revenge. The whole idea of *Swayamvar* and the liberty of a woman to choose her groom is a farce and she vehemently questions it, **"Why even call it *swayamvar*, then? ...it's my father, not I who gets to decide whom I will marry."** (PL 56) The *Swayamvar* is a political strategy devised by King Drupad – the patriarch and she is merely a trophy, a prize to be won. She feels cheated and says, **"My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole."** (PL 57) She was being used not just by Drupad but also by the Pandavas who won her to gain a strong ally against Kauravas.

Draupadi: A Thing of Sortition

when the Pandavas reach home and tell their mother Kunthi jokingly that they have brought something. Kunthi without seeing her, ask them to divide whatever they have brought amongst themselves. Even when she realizes that Draupadi is not a thing but a woman, she did not budge. She orders them all to marry her. Draupadi, describing the incident, laments at her own helplessness and objectification and says,

“I stared at her, my brain trying to take in what she had said. Was she joking when she said they must all marry me?

No, her face made that clear. I wanted to shout, five husbands?

Are you mad? I wanted to say, I’m already married to Arjun!” (PL 108)

Draupadi: Men’s Drudge

when the Pandavas go back to Drupad to ask him to marry Draupadi to all five of them, Drupad outraged. He does not agree. However, Pandavas in that case wanted to leave “married” Draupadi with Drupad only. After much of a debate, Drupad agrees to marry her with all five brothers. Draupadi here did not have the authority over her own body. Her agency before marriage was with her father and which got transferred to her husband Arjun when he won her- Arjun, who now was supposed to share her with other brothers. Her fate was debated and discussed without considering her consent or dissent as that was not needed Draupadi sees her destiny being discussed and says,

“I didn’t fear the fate they imagined for me. I had no intentionsof committing honorable self-immolation. (I had other plan for my life). But was distressed by the coldness with whichmy father and potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit--or harm--them.”

(PL 118)

A Special Marital status:

Vyasa designs a special marital conduct for Panchaali and her five husbands that she would be wife of each brother for a year at one time, from the oldest to the youngest. During that period others won’t touch her or look at her. Panchaali laughs off at this arrangement and says,

“I can’t say I was surprised by vyasa’s verdict. ...I was surprise at how angry it made me feel--and how helpless. Though Dhai Ma tried to console me by saying that finally I had the freedom men had had for centuries, 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 drinkingcup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not.” (PL 120)

The evolution of a special code of marital conduct to keep harmony among the brothers and a special boon of virginity granted to Panchaali is a clear indicator of the extent to which men control women’s bodies and sexualities. Her helplessness is seen in the lines.

Confirmation: To her, No Entitles upon Her

To add to her injuries, Vyasa gives her a boon that each time she went to a new brother, she’d be a virgin again. She questions for whom that particular boon was designed. Was this for her or her husbands? Of course, it was nothing to do with her desires but the sexual desires of her husbands who would be elate to have a virgin. Draupadi comments on Vyasa’s boon and says, **“Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed, more for my husbands’ benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women were handed to us like presents we hadn’t quite wanted” (PL 120)**

Game of Gamble: Draupadi an Abiotic Thing

In the chapter ‘Sari’ which is the *Sabhaparva* Panchaali spits venom. Though the scene portrays Panchaali’s victimization Divakaruni presents female strength towards the end of the scene. The tragic humiliation and assault on her body is the worst of the trauma which Draupadi goes through. Yudisthir in a game of gamble with Gauravas not only loses his kingdom but also his brothers, himself and Draupadi. When Draupadi comes to know about Yudisthir losing her in the gamble, she could not understand what was done to her as an individual, in her own denial mode she talks to herself, **“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.” (PL 190)**

The fact that Panchaali identifies herself through her relationships with the men in her life (father, brother, and husbands) is an indication of the conflict within herself. Despite her

fierce struggle to retain an independent identity, she is curbed and conditioned to define herself through identities derived from the men in her life. She orders the charioteer and asks him to go back and ask the elders, **“Is it not true that once Yudisthir was Duryodhan’s property, he had no right to wager me?”** (PL 190) She asks that **“the wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave.”** (PL 190)

Without providing her an answer, she was dragged by hair to the *Sabha* filled with all men with only a cloth on. She finds her husbands sitting quiet and helpless almost as slaves. Furiously, she asks everyone present there if Yudisthir had a right to lose her if he had himself lost. The silence of the entire court infuriates her. The implication of her question is that if he had lost himself first, then he was no longer free to stake her. Her question disturbs everyone with the notions of *dharma* (right and wrong) and the authority to decide this.

Ultimate misery of Panchaali:

The ultimate shame is the command to disrobe her, exposing her to, **“... a hundred male eyes burning through [her].”** (PL 191) Overcome with fury and helplessness, she calls for Krishna silent soul-heartedly. In a trance-like state she surrenders to the thought of Krishna. She finds the strength to be exposed, the strength to cut herself off from her horrific surroundings, strength to let her nakedness be, **“Let them stare at my nakedness ... Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency.”** (PL 193)

Consumed by anger, Panchaali curses everyone, **“All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from the day’s work ... This entire kingdom will become a charnel house...”** (PL 194) Later in the forest where she keeps her revenge motive alive and expects her husbands to get her justice. She vows not to comb her hair until she take bath from the blood of Kauravas. She rages, harping on revenge and in the process moves beyond the social requirements of a woman. She, with her burning rage seems to break away from being conditioned by societal norms. She is forced to rage and protect herself as all men failed to protect her. Each day sleeping and walking she pictured only her revenge, **“a fire-strewn battlefield, the air grim with vultures, the mangled bodies of the Kauravas and their allies.”** (PL 199) She thus keeps alive vengeance and hatred.

The Gurushetra War: Panchaali as a symbol of Feminism

The last part of the narrative brings in a fresh and contemporary dimension. During the Great War Panchaali gets a new perception of her own self. To the wailing women of the war, Panchaali was not a victim, but a, **“witch who might with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows.” (PL 258)** This is the most radical angle brought in by Divakaruni, who makes the perspective multidimensional. Though victors, the Pandavas are left with a land filled with wailing widows jumping into mass funeral pyres. It is here that Panchaalimoves completely beyond the personal – a common chord of feminine togetherness binds her to the women. Divakaruni brings in the idea of feminine solidarity through Panchaali who finds her true purpose in lending a helping hand to heal the suffering of the women of Hastinapur. She was instrumental in working to establish a women’s market which became a flourishing center of trade where the new proprietors took pride in their goods and were fair in their dealing. **“Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment.” (PL 325)**

Panchaali’s end of the Journey:

Panchaali traverses her journey through plural roles; however, it is the role of a wife that is dominant over her role as a mother in the narrative. The emotion of vengeance is higher than the emotion of motherhood. Panchaali’s fierce struggle to be independent is seen during her climb to the Himalayas along with her husbands. She falls into the snow and reflects upon her life when she is alone waiting for death,

“...that has always been the problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what was the alternative? To sit among bent grandmothers gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves with toothless gums as I waited for death? Intolerable! I would rather perish on the mountain ... my last victory over the other wives...How could I resist?

(PL 343-44)

Her independent is thus the most valuable choice to her. Death finally liberates her and just before death the most important person in her life, Krishna reveals to her his divinity. **“I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I’m truly Panchaali.” (PL 360)**

Conclusion:

Divakaruni reviews and redefines the image of Panchaali which Patriarchy has popularized. Panchaali is the narrator and the chief actor in the narrative – the female agency that adds new meanings and perspectives in uncovering the experiences of marginalized women and reclaiming the voice of womanhood in the grand events of epic. By making her woman characters speak about their sexual desires, Divakaruni delimits the boundaries of sexual desires set by men. Divakaruni's Draupadi writes herself and her body and reveals her own sexual desires and fantasies. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity 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. Clearly, Divakaruni's Panchaali is the voice of feminine consciousness in the epic, a fact manifested in Panchaali raising her voice not only against injustice done to her but against the subjugation of women at the hands of patriarchal powers. Panchaali's quest for the meaning of life, addresses our own doubts, fears and hopes of renewal of peace and love in a world that is at the end of the old cycle and the beginning of a new era with the core concern being the good of all.

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