

Draupadi's Quest for Identity and Selfhood in Divakaruni's "*The Palace of Illusions*"

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Abstract

Our ancient text plays an important role in creating a conservative image of women, which is one of the main reasons why women have been deprived of their rights from the beginning, as these ancient texts still impact our society in different ways. Writers have constantly questioned this conservative image created by these ancient texts. Rewriting and rephrasing of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is the most common practice performed by many authors. These epics are transcended from one generation to the next in various forms and genres. These epics are presented in our society in various genres such as poems, folk tales, paintings, novels, and television series. Every time a writer reviews these epics, it gives a new dimension to make them relevant to contemporary times. This paper attempts to explore Draupadi's feminist journey by examining her attempts to establish her identity as woman.

Keywords: Rewriting, Epics, Contemporary, Feminist, Identity

Introduction

As the primary text is a revised work of *Mahabharata*, It is important to familiarize with revisionism as a genre. Retelling the epics gives an opportunity for marginalized female characters to tell their perspective of the story. Revisionist mythmaking is an important instrument to explicate and reinterpret canonical or hegemonic texts and within the case of

the study in question, Revisionist writing is in itself a revolt against the social organization. This reinterpretation of the epics provides an alternative critical dimension to them and offers voice to the feminine characters which went unheard within the epic. In the Revisionist narrative, the events are reviewed through the feminine perspective and it subverts the patriarchal conceptions of the women.

The epic only concerns about valour, chivalry, brotherhood among the male characters. An important feminine character like Draupadi is also marginalized and didn't get recognition like many other feminine characters such as Uruvi, Kunti, and Ganga. Writers in this contemporary era carry these marginalized characters to the main spotlight and retell the epic via their point of view which indicates the different angle of the story. A new dimension to these texts makes revisionism as a genre more fascinating. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* during which Draupadi tells her perspective of Mahabharata is one of the example of this genre.

Analysis

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions, Mahabharatha* is retold by the perspective of Draupadi, one of the most misunderstood and overlooked character in Indian Mythology. This novel portrays her journey from an ambitious princess to a vindictive Queen. She is portrayed as an ambitious, ruthless, and proud woman perpetrating the Great War. Draupadi is born to "change the course of history." Draupadi is the central character who, with her pride, temper, and vengefulness, brought the destruction of Kauravas. She is considered as the epitome of vengeance along with Dhrishtdyumana. This novel depicts the transformation of Draupadi from a proud, self-respecting, helpless, humiliated, and wronged woman to a raging kali, who seeks only vengeance and destructions of her oppressors.

Draupadi established her identity by calling herself Panchali, name given to her by Vyasa rather than Draupadi, name given by her father. She dislikes the pervading variation of

patriarchy and says "...Couldn't my father have come up with (a name) something a little less egoistic?" (Divakaruni 2009:5). This is the first step of defying the superiority of men over her and establishing her own unique identity. She protests against the lessons of singing, dancing, and sewing, given to her like other stereotyped girls. She is rather more interested in lessons given to her brother, of Shastras, and laws of Governance. Most girls of her age are busy in gossips, sharing recipes of love potions or chewing betel leaves to redden their lips but Draupadi reads "NyayaShastra" because she believes that she can only become strong, powerful and different from other girls if she learns what a king should know to rule his kingdom. These lessons transform her and she finds it impossible to cling herself to the restrictions on her as a woman of Royal family.

The lessons in singing, dancing were painful ... I was not musically inclined...I was better at composing and solving riddles...with each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me...(Divakaruni 2009:29).

The uneasiness and suffocation of Panchaali with the 'world of women' depicts a denial of the rules of patriarchy. Her first resistance is her rejection of lessons on singing, dancing, and art that were intended for girls rather she preferred getting tutored in lessons on law and Shastras. In another instance, when she was told, that the greatest purpose of a woman's life is to support the men, she questioned her brother "... who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?" and firmly projected her plans "Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life" (Divakaruni 2009: 26).

She disapproves, questions, and humiliates Karna based on his caste to save her father and brothers' honor. Despite the fact that she accepts the restrictive conditions of swayamwar, Her feminist tendencies can be clearly seen when she challenges her lack of independence and her options over her swayamvar being transformed into a contest of her father. Her

feminist resistance is seen when she refuses to accept the trophy status that she gets from the swayamwar.

The last part of the novel brings in a new and contemporary dimension. During the Great War Panchaali receives a new perception of her own self. To the wailing women of the war, Panchaali was not a casualty, but a “witch who might with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows” (Divakaruni 2008: 258). This is the most radical perspective brought in by Divakaruni, who makes the interpretation multidimensional. Despite being coming out as victors, the Pandavas are left with a land full of wailing widows cursing them and jumping into mass funeral pyres. The violent annihilation caused by the War blurs the meager line that isolates victory and defeat, kin, and enemy. This enormous tragedy renders every triumph insignificant. It is here that Panchaali moves completely beyond her self- a common chord of feminine togetherness binds her to the women.

Divakaruni conveys the idea of feminine solidarity via Panchaali who discovers her true purpose in imparting a helping hand to heal the pain of the women of Hastinapur. “It was time I shook off myself of pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women” (Divakaruni 2008: 323). She played a vital role in establishing a women’s market which becomes a flourishing center of trade wherein the new proprietors take pride in their goods and are impartial in their dealings. Women who are interested in becoming tutors are given training “Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment” (325).

The subsequent transformation is a kind of reverse development. Having moved into the domain of violence, she realizes a larger purpose and a greater good in helping others. This quest for harmony, solidarity with women who were victims of war gave her the larger purpose of her life beyond the individual quest for liberty. Panchaali’s extraordinary battle to

be independent is seen in her last journey to the Himalayas along with her spouses. She falls into the snow and reflects upon her life when she is alone waiting for death:

...that has always been my 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? (Divakaruni 2008: 343- 344).

Panchaali's independence is thus the most valuable choice for her. Death finally liberates her and just before death the most important person in her life, Krishna reveals to her his divinity. Two emotions stand out in the book, beyond Panchaali's relationships – the secret and undying love for Karna through the journey of love and hate along with the soul mates of her 'Sakha' Krishna "If what I felt for Karna was a singeing fire, Krishna's love was a balm moonlight over a parched landscape" (356). Both these emotions are very distinct and beyond ordinary making Panchaali truly liberated, in the modern sense of the term.

Conclusion

The paper endeavored to delineate the individual excursions of Draupadi towards framing her identity and discovering her unique 'self'. Draupadi did not choose between the two extremes of oppression and impossible freedom. She negotiated, defied norms, and reworked on them to their advantage (Geetha 2007: 109). She didn't desire freedom at the expense of her family rather she negotiated for space and identity that is her own well within the male-centric structures that she lived in. She operated from the inner spaces of domesticity and also resisted from the same space in terms of relationships, education, and marriage. Draupadi opposes suppression and patriarchy in one way or the other without defying the norms, yet she made her own choices in pursuit of her identity. (Jain 2011: 97)

References

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