

Draupadi: An Epitome of Feminine Assertion in Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indo-American writer. She has won many accolades and awards. Among her novels *The Palace of Illusions* captures the magical world of epic for its twenty century readers. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes that she is unsatisfied by the portrayal of women in the Mahabharata. The present paper makes a study of Draupadi's perspective in the Mahabharata and her struggle to come from the suppression. Indians are fond of talking and celebrating their magnificent history. *The Palace of Illusions* is a story of friendship, freedom, betrayal, war, rage and revenge. Breaking free from the trends, retellings are the genre where a character like Draupadi has been presented as a heroic sovereign in the epic of Mahabharata. The character of Draupadi in the book *The Palace of Illusions* has been narrated as one who was firm and a woman with rigid determination. It is to interpret the identity and individualism of a woman in the society.

Keywords: Gender, Subdual, Feminism, Assertion, Identity

Indian epics are fabulous gifts of the Indian people to the literature of the world. Epics always mesmerize and attract both readers and writers. Epics may deal with such various subjects as myths, heroic legends, histories, edifying religious tales, animal stories, or philosophical or moral theories. With the rise of different psycho analytic theories, feminist

theories, cultural theories etc., writers began to explicate and refurbish the various epic characters. This brought about new and new retellings of the epics. The Indian epics the Mahabharata always allured the writers because of the complex characters and the various issues discussed in these epics. These peculiarities give rise to fresh interpretations of the epic stories and characters.

An epitome of feminine assertion is exemplified in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. The American Book award winner, Divakaruni refuses to accept traditional and idealistic approach in her work; rather she excavates the disturbed psyche of the ancient mythical heroine, Draupadi. Endowed with a critical thinking capacity, the writer raises her voice against social evils prevailing in the patriarchal society. Draupadi is a good vantage point from which to observe the depth and power of an oppressed woman.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a retelling of the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's point of view in a novel form. It has been a very interesting as well as intricate task for the author. It was interesting because a retelling of the great epic from a fresh and new perspective would obviously be an exciting and pleasant assignment. But it was challenging because Mahabharata (along with Ramayana) is the oldest and longest epic of the world. It maintains its status of a 'culturally foundational' text in the hearts of people. Mahabharata, apart from bearing philosophical, spiritual, religious, and educational values, propagates the ideals of moral ethics (dharma), social norms and gender roles. It has established its reputation as a 'Mythological Canon' or the ideal of all Hindu mythology.

Mythology has been very preliminary point of many ethnicity and civilizations. The western world has inherited the base from the conventional mythology of Greek and Roman evolution but for India this is all about the rich inheritance of its own mythology which is culturally and religiously much more vivacious. In this project, the retellings, refolding and revisiting of mythology has been greatly emphasized which shows the especially perception of women. It is also describing the changing position of women in our society. Divakaruni exploits this omnipresence of the narrative of *Mahabharata* to re-interpret the text from the eyes of female.

In this novel *The Palace of Illusions*, she has redefined the old Hindu mythological saga 'Mahabharata' from Draupadi's viewpoint. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi occupies a

central stature with all human qualities. The life of Draupadi, one of the celebrated women characters of ancient India, comes close to the modern times. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a novel which attempts to redraft the epic. Apart from the normal andocentric focuses of the epic Divakaruni's Draupadi becomes the 'hero' and offers a gendered description of the epic. She creates a narrative world where Panchaali's feelings and sentiments comes into question and thus she fills up with an extra – ordinary new viewpoint of narration. The novel chooses as its medium one of the most representative women characters of the world mythologies. Divakaruni's novel facilitates in foregrounding Panchaali and thus to conquer the ancient conventional icon. Divakaruni's Panchaali struggles hard to make her voice heard in a patriarchal world.

Mahabharata, one common trait among all these versions is the dominance of patriarchy. It seems that Mahabharata has an andocentric set-up where the centre of attraction is only the male heroes. The women characters are given attention only when their actions or deeds affect the lives of their male counterparts. Divakaruni herself believes that the women characters in the epic : remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. (Divakaruni xiv)

In the introductory note of *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni herself believes and writes that the women characters in the epic. She was unsatisfied by the portrayal of women in the Mahabharata. Divakaruni says:

“I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women... they remain shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. If I ever wrote a book... I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits” (POI xiv-xv).

Divakaruni's Draupadi is highly self-centered and anxious and the one who was rigid and a woman with an unwavering will. The Proud and angry heroine of the epic Mahabharata, Draupadi has remained an enigmatic woman of substance. She diagnosticates her place in www.ijellh.com

changing the history as prophesied at the time of her birth. Therefore, she has an almost stubborn interest in her life's story. DhaiMa, a laudable grandmother figure who recapitulates the story of Draupadi's birth, reveals her nature to lead the circumstances and remain in the front. She not only responds to the events narrated, but also critically views other people's responses to the events of her life. King Drupad, father of Draupadi is the first man in her life whom she looks with animosity.

Draupadi was tremendously beautiful, intellectual and righteous woman. There are few women in Hindu mythology who were belligerent and who spoke their intelligence in a world of men. Draupadi was one of them. She is considered by many as the first feminist of Indian mythology. At the time of her birth, a celestial voice had proclaimed: "This unparalleled beauty has taken birth to uproot the Kauravas and establish the rule of religion". The circumstances leading to her birth began to take shape while her father was yet young. Draupadi feels proud on the part of the story of her birth in which the prophecy is made, but she also remembers her father's hesitation at the time of her and her brother's birth, "The voices said, —Here is the son you asked for he'll bring you the vengeance you desire, but it will break your life in two...They said, Behold, we give you this girl,... she will change the course of history" (POI 4). But strangely enough King Drupad held out his arms only for the brother. Draupadi couldn't forget his father's holding hand of his brother and not welcoming her.

The suppression process of women gets completed by appropriating the women in the patriarchal set-up. Hence women write but, under the confines of patriarchy and uphold the masculine tradition. This lack of awareness strengthens the masculine propaganda and hence, propagates the masculine agenda of authority. This kind of fictional rebellion forced women to raise their voice in the form of Second wave of French feminism, which brought with its fresh concepts of feminism. Cixous in her text *The Laugh of the Medusa* says that women should create a space for her in the text which simultaneously would create a place for her in the real world. They should stop this violence of feminine suppression by striking back through their writing. She calls for the women who are trapped in the patriarchal concepts. It is these women who should be recovered from the darkness of patriarchal values and traditions. They should be awakening from their slumber of ignorance, submissiveness and passiveness. As Helene Cixous in the same text calls upon this feminine move ferociously, "I am speaking of women in her

inevitable struggle against conventional man: and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (257).

Using dialogism, Divakaruni, here interprets the Mahabharata. Keeping Draupadi as the narrator, Divakaruni through the mode of constant interrogation, questions the positions and practices of other people. Her questioning makes people aware of their injustices, because of which, she is discouraged to ask questions. She is discouraged to think beyond the masculine restrictions. Tutor of Dhrishtadyumna in *The Palace of illusions* comments at Draupadi:

Prince I have recalled one rule of conduct which you may tell your sister .A Kshatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfill a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battle field.(25-26):

Draupadi retorts back with her protesting question towards her brother, “And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men? I burst out as soon as we were alone. A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life”(26) Divakaruni reveals the pitiable condition of women who are and would be defined by only men. After the war of Kurukshetra, Pandavas were left with the kingdom of only widows. The word “widow” itself reveals the lack of man in a woman’s life. Draupadi in *The Palace Illusions* is given education befitting for a princess. Draupadi’s hunger for knowledge is seen from her childhood. Her relationship with her brother and Krishna gave her insight into the world concealed for women. However, Draupadi with her own penchant for learning made herself fluent in different laws and the *Shastras*. Her father seeing her interest in the so-called masculine things terminated her lessons and declared that she needs to focus more on the feminine things. The culture and institutions are designed in a way that women do not have access to the best of knowledge. This point is amply highlighted by Divakaruni in *Palace of Illusions*, when she exposes the discrimination between the education given to Dhri and Draupadi.

It is supremely ironic that the role of Dhrishtadyumna, whose birth is celebrated by King Drupad because he is born with a mission to destroy the king’s archrival Drona, is rendered almost insignificant when compared to that of Draupadi. It is Draupadi who will bring about changes in the lives of people who will associate with her in the future. Draupadi makes it clear

that king Drupad, as a father, acted according to the dictates of Manu by protecting and taking care of Draupadi. Draupadi finds this protective care suffocating and she says: “I couldn’t breathe” (POI 1).

Draupadi in this work of fiction is deprived of her sexual desires by marrying off to five brothers. Her fate was argued and discussed without considering her acceptance. To add to her injuries, Yudhishthir in a game of gamble with Kauravas not only loses his kingdom but also his brothers, himself and Draupadi. When Draupadi comes to know this she asks: “The wife is not the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave” (190).

The self-respect for a woman is important to be identified as an independent individual in the society. Draupadi has never claimed herself as a weak, ignored, and disgraceful 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. She is not only claiming her privileges but she is conscious enough about her responsibilities as a wife. And she says: “I’d played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I’d share their hardship in Khandav. I’d helped them design this unique palace, which so many longed to see. If they were pear, I was the gold wire on which they were strung” (Chitra B. Divakaruni.151).

In the modern time it is necessary to be self-confident for a woman but in the name of audacity she should not uprooted from her base. The fusion of traditional mythology and modernity of the present world here presented through the retellings, which is a conventional message for those who are rooted to the orthodox traditionalism and also for those who are uprooted from the moral ethics of their own culture. Breaking free from the trends, retellings are the genre where a character like Draupadi has been presented as a heroic sovereign in the epic of Mahabharata. Draupadi appears from the flames with a divine announcement from the heavens that she would be the cause of destruction of evil warriors. Draupadi is always exposed to vehemence: her Swayamvara ends in strife; a fivefold marriage is imposed upon her; she is outraged in the royal court twice over; Through Draupadi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has shown the modern world that she is firm and a woman with a rigid determination.

Throughout the epic we visualize Draupadi questioning about her own endurance, her will, her preference and her aptitude to take resolution. Through the character Draupadi, Chitra Banerjee persuades the reader to further investigate the issue of female and male identity and the www.ijellh.com

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ruthless employment of man's social power over a woman. According to Draupadi of this revised epic there should be a world free of male demands and orders. The text is a wonderful example of feminine anxiety simulated in this epic.

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