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A Re-Study of the Character of Draupadi in Chitra Banarjee Devakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* in the Light of
Non-Existential Feminism

Abstract

Draupadi is one of the female mythological character of the most widely renowned epic *Mahabharata*. Though the main action of an epic always revolves around the male characters who are heroic and important but *The Palace of Illusions* depict the character of Draupadi as someone significant and important by being the omniscient narrator of the events of *Mahabharata* from her individual perspective. But as we read the novel, we witness a hidden anti-existential feminine aspect underneath her persona. Draupadi could never become what she really wanted to become. Her character was drawn on the canvas of society, coloured by people around her. As an individual she was inclined to completely different things which she could never actually realize due to the pressure of the society. She was an individual with great mental prowess and several hidden talents but she was forced to lead a completely non-existential life. She was moulded into a dependent woman who sacrificed everything for the sake of others.

Keywords: Non-Existentialism, Feminism, Objectification of feminine body, Marriage, Sex

The novel written by Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni retells the tale of Mahabharata from the point of view of Draupadi. Her character has never been given the required importance and attention by the writers at any age or time. Mahabharata has always been depicted as an epic tale which revolves around the action of strong and powerful male characters, in the typical convention and tradition of an epic. This research paper however, is an attempt to re-study the character of Draupadi, in the light of anti-

existentialist Feminism in context to the work "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banarjee Devakaruni. The novel as a feministic work tries to assert the individuality of Draupadi by giving voice to her otherwise suppressed identity. Through Draupadi's narrative of *Mahabharata* we come to know about the real factors and causes responsible for the non-existential aspects of her being. It was actually the society and the people around her who shaped the character and thus, the life of Draupadi, different from the real or actual one. She was forced to sacrifice her dreams and desires for the sake of her family and society. It is through her role of an omniscient narrator, in *The Palace of Illusions* that we come to know about her suppressed desires and aspirations which she could never express or fulfill in her life. The character of Draupadi has never been presented in a positive light or has ever been considered as an ideal role model of a female. Till now people remember her as a woman who married five men –it is a fact which tarnished her image forever. Although it was not her decision or wish to become a wife of five men yet her character has been constantly criticized by people directly or indirectly for it. She was actually pressurized and manipulated into this condition by the people around her for their own selfish motives. Her character has always been accused of unnecessary stubbornness and rebellious streak in her nature. Further, she is also held responsible for the deadly and heroic war of *Mahabharata*. But the fact is that the seeds of the war have been sown much before the birth of Draupadi. Everybody see Draupadi's desire for avenging her honour as a flaw in her personality and character. According to majority of people, Draupadi should have been more tolerant and patient rather than being assertive and revengeful as she was a female. According to our society a female is considered to be the epitome of unselfish love and sacrifice who is expected to fulfill her duties above than her needs and concerns. However, people mostly tend to overlook the fact that Draupadi led a superficial and non- existential life where she was denied even the most basic rights to take decisions for her own life.

According to the theory of Existentialism all the individuals have the right to live free, to decide and choose their decisions without the pressure or fear of any traditions or customs and to be also responsible for their actions or decisions. Existentialism implies a passionate return of the individual to his/her own subjectivity,

in order to extract the significance of his/her being. It studies our concrete individual actions and moods, in an intense attempt to understand people in their individuality and differences. 'Existence precedes essence' is the most popular existentialist credo. (*Wikipedia*, Existentialism) Existentialists claim that essence does not determine existence. An individual has no essential nature, no self-identity other than that involved in the act of choosing. Abstractions can never grasp nor communicate the reality of individual existence. The universe does not provide moral rules. Moral principles are constructed by humans in the context of being responsible for their actions and the actions of others. Individuals have complete freedom of the will. Individual cannot help but make choices. An individual can become completely other than what he/she is. Beauvoir in her analysis of the oppression of woman makes use of these existentialist perspectives. An existentialist feminism, Beauvoir believed, can offer an analysis of women's oppression and their freedom. One of the important insights given by Beauvoir is that woman is the product of civilization. In her own words: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No psychological or economical fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature"(De Beauvoir,1989,p.267) Beauvoir claims that there is no unchangeable feminine essence. There is no essential feminine character which is predetermined, but a woman is the product of a civilization. Beauvoir establishes this thesis, which she was building up in the analysis of the oppression of woman, by an examination of the formative years of a child. In her description of the childhood, Beauvoir views that the way children are born and weaned and nursed is the same for both sexes; they have the same interests and same pleasures. Therefore, if well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy woman seems to us to be already determined, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry, and maternity. A girl is taught to be a woman and her "feminine" destiny is imposed on her by society(*Wikipedia* The Second Sex)) A woman, from the very beginning, is taught that to be valuable she must try to please, she must make herself an object for men and so she should renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty. The mother while treating daughter saddles the child with her own destiny. The mother applies herself to changing the child into a woman like her. The treasures of female wisdom are poured into girl's ears; feminine virtues are instilled in her heart.

Draupadi was also brought up in the typical manner to become an ideal and perfect female. She was treated just like an object with no feelings or desires of her own. She was taught to surrender her whole life for the sake of others- sometimes as a daughter, sometimes as a daughter-in-law, sometimes as a wife and sometimes as a mother. Even after playing these multiple roles devotedly, she was denied true love or respect in return. She sacrificed her desires to marry Karna whom she admired and was secretly in love with. Even though she was a princess and later the queen and wife of five strongest men in the world, still she was disrobed and humiliated in front of everyone in the court. Even at that time, nobody comes forward to defend her. When she found herself alone and helpless she dared to speak few sentences in order to protect her honour which were turned to deaf ears, even though the point of defenses mentioned by her(to save her honour) were logical and apt. But as the women were considered to be mere passive followers and dumb headed slaves to the desires of men, she was looked down by everyone as rebellious.

Our traditions and customs since ages have provided more liberty to males as compared to a females. We have distinct set of rigid stereotypes prescribed for the role and image of a perfect woman or wife but there are almost no such prescribed and standard parameters for judging the ideal role of a male. Deviation from these norms are acceptable on the part of males in any case but such kind of freedom has never been granted to the females since ages old. Our society wants a woman to follow the footsteps of Sita or Savitri, the very incarnation of non-assertion, self-sacrifice, virtue, loyalty and unconditional love. The character of Draupadi however has never been chosen or acclaimed for such status as she is much near to the realistic portrayal of a female. She possessed some natural hidden desires and feelings which she could never really express in her life under the pressure of the customs and traditions of society. But Draupadi made a lot of sacrifices in her life. Though she was a princess yet she never exploited her independence or free will even when she could have and should have. She never questioned the discriminatory and cold attitude of her father towards her. Even as a daughter, Draupadi felt alienated in her father's home. She always craved for her father's love and a sense of belongingness. She

always dreamt of the future home of her husband where she would have a sense of belonging and security:

But I couldn't forgive him that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn't trust him completely. I turned the resentment I couldn't express toward my father onto his palace. I hated the thick gray slabs of the walls—more suited to a fortress than a king's residence—that surrounded our quarters, their tops bristling with sentries. I hated the narrow windows, the mean, dimly lit corridors, the uneven floors that were always damp, the massive, severe furniture from generations ago that was sized more for giants than men. I hated most of all that the grounds had neither trees nor flowers. King Drupad believed the former to be a hazard to security, obscuring the vision of the sentries. The latter he saw no use for—and what my father did not find useful, he removed from his life. (Divakaruni 6)

But just like a submissive girl she was never able to give voice to her likes or dislikes even in front of her father. Her father like a typical male chauvinist, least bothered or cared for his daughters' desires or dreams. He snatches her right of choosing a husband also. Although a Swayamvar was organized to show that she has a right and freedom to choose her life partner but in reality she could not marry the one (Karna) whom she liked. She surrendered her desire and wish to marry Karna because of her father and because of the reputation of her family as Karna was considered to belong to an inferior family. She has to treat him with disrespect although she loved him so much. Because of the social traditions and customs she could marry a person belonging to the higher status or royal blood. Whereas these rules were not applicable to the males. They could marry anyone and as many times as they wanted. Bhishma's father married the daughter of a fisherman without facing any opposition from anyone. Further, there are many examples of males marrying more than one times and thus practicing Polygamy. Not only this the rules can be broken or made according to the convenience of males or the so called society by making a woman marry five men. Draupadi was forced to marry the five Pandavas by Kunti just for the sake of keeping her word or indirectly for her selfish motive. Thus, Draupadi is merely treated like a doll with no desires or freedom of her own. She was denied even the right to live her life according to her terms and wishes. This non-

existentialism is very well evident in the character of Draupadi, where she is not even treated like a living being with a right to live on her own terms and conditions:

I didn't fear the fate they imagined for me. I had no intention of committing honorable self-immolation. (I had other plans for my life.) But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit—or harm—them.(Divakaruni 118)

Further, the mindset of the society is very well evident through Kunti who manipulates the exploitation of Draupadi despite of being a woman herself. Draupadi has been portrayed as a helpless pawn whom everyone exploits for his or her own selfish motives. She is shown as a submissive person who could not express herself or take an independent stand for her in her life. It is through this novel that we get a peep into her character and being. Thus, society had a huge impact on the actual carving of Draupadi's character. The novelist has adopted psychoanalytical technique to give expression to Draupadi's non-assertive personality as the only means of expression to her otherwise non-existential existence. Draupadi could not even show her resentment regarding the decision of her marriage with five men. She surrenders herself to her destiny:

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! But Vyasa's prophecy recoiled upon me, robbing me of my protests. I recognized, too, the thinly veiled insult in Kunti's words. This woman, as though I were a nameless servant. It angered me, but it also hurt.(Divakaruni108)

The above lines very well show the treatment of a female by the society or people around her. Being a girl she had no freedom to make choice even for her own life. Her fate was decided by other people who were entitled by the society to make choice on her behalf. Draupadi's silent indignation due to sheer helplessness is well evident in these lines. From the very beginning of the novel we see Draupadi being pushed and pressurized into learning the various roles and behavior which she was not even inclined to learn. Though she was intelligent and talented just like her brother but still she was dissuaded from receiving higher education as it was the privilege of the future kings and princes only. A female didn't require education as directly or indirectly her future was dependent on her

husband. Had she been just an ordinary female, she would never have been provided education along with her brother. But Draupadi was given some extra privileges due to her birth and the purpose of her birth. She appeared from fire as she was meant to change history. Both, her brother Dhri and she were born for a special purpose but even then she was not desired or wanted by her father like her brother. The discrimination between the upbringing of her brother and Draupadi is very well evident. Being a girl she was discouraged to attend the classes which were provided to her brother Dhri. It is only after Krishna insistence that King Drupad allows her to attend and learn the same lessons but only from behind the curtain. Further, whenever she answered or asked something out of curiosity she was always discouraged by the tutor even:

He was always trying to discourage me from attending Dhri's lessons- and he wasn't the only one. At first, no matter how much I begged, King Drupad had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal! even Dhai Ma, my accomplice in so many areas of my life, regarded the lessons with misgiving. She complained they were making me too argumentative, too manlike in my speech. Dhri too sometimes wondered if I was not learning the wrong things, ideas that would only confuse me as I took up a woman's life with its prescribed, restricted laws (Divakaruni 23).

In her family life, she is introduced to the relative rank and the hierarchy of the sexes. She is made to realize that she is a woman and that she must acknowledge this difference between the genders. The historical and literary culture to which she belongs, and the songs and legends with which she is lulled to sleep help to confirm superiority of the male in the eyes of the little girl. Just like any girl she is introduced to the notions of physical beauty, colour complexion, marriage and the dreams regarding her would be husband by Dhai Ma and people around her. Even being a princess could not set her free from these socially formulated ideals meant for females. She is told that display of beauty and physical appearance are important parameters and factors for determining the fate of a girl. And also that being a girl she should surrender her life on her husband. And that she should know the art of pleasing her husband for a happy and secure future. Due to this, Draupadi started to feel inferiority complex for her dark complexion and she started looking for other ways to look attractive. She tries to learn those skills which women

should know in order to present them as an attractive sex object to lure and attract a male . Even though she was very different earlier. She never bothered for these frivolous things, instead she was pleased to utilize her time in reading books and thinking on some serious issues. But soon she is made to realize by the society that this is something different and abnormal kind of feminine nature. As a result, she has to learn even those things which she never wanted to learn in reality," With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me"(Divakaruni29). She has to learn those arts which make a woman's body presentable and look attractive to a male:

Toward the end, she taught me seduction, the first role a wife must play. She demonstrated how to send out a lightning-glance from the corner of the eye. How to bite, slightly, the swollen lower lip. How to make bangles ring as I raised my arm to pull a transparent veil into place. How to walk, the back swaying just enough to hint at hidden pleasures. She said, "In bed you must be different each day, sensitive to your lord's moods. Sometimes a lioness, sometimes a trembling dove, sometimes a doe, matching its partner's fleetness." She gave me herbs, some for insatiability, some for endurance, some for the days I might want to keep a man away. "What about love?" I asked. "The stalk of the blue lotus, ground into honey, will make a man mad for you," she said. "That's not what I meant." She gave me the name of an herb to arouse my own desire. (Divakaruni 62)

Woman has always been treated in terms of her body or as a sex object. This objectification of her body has been ages old and is prevalent even today. To get true love- a relationship of equal give and take, of true companionship is a dream for a lady. In every relationship she must be ready to give and sacrifice without any expectations to get anything in return. This curbs her right to live her life as an individual and thus, as an independent being having her own desires and aspirations. Draupadi wanted nothing more than true love. She wanted a true companion in the form of her husband. She had normal human emotions like- feeling sad and happy, being smitten in love and attracted to someone etc. which she could never express freely:

“No. Teach me how to love my husband, and how to make him love me.” She laughed out loud. “I can’t teach you that,” she said. “Love comes like lightning, and disappears the same way. If you’re lucky, it strikes you right. If not, you’ll spend your life yearning for a man you can’t have. I advise you to forget about love, princess. Pleasure is simpler, and duty more important. Learn to be satisfied with them.” (Divakaruni 63)

According to Beauvoir a woman is not born passive, secondary, and non-essential, but all the forces in the external world have conspired to make her so. Every individual self, regardless of gender, is entitled to subjectivity; it is only outside forces that have conspired to rob woman of this right. Being husband and thus, the master of his wife's fate Yudhishtira never asks for Draupadi's permission before putting her honour on stake in the game of gamble. He treats her like a property or asset over which he had the sole proprietorship. Women always have a sense of insecurity associated with their genders as they are always considered weak and timid by males. Not only this their individuality and gender is categorized as "incomplete" and "other". (Beauvoir 300) It is stamped on her mind that her supreme necessity is to charm the masculine heart. She equips herself for this by adorning herself. The delights of passivity are made to seem desirable to the young girl by parents and educators, and through books and myths. This indoctrination even seems to continue in her marriage and sexual initiation. Again the agony of Draupadi being a female in being treated like an object for sexual gratification is very well reflected in these lines:

I can't say I was surprised by Vyasa's verdict. (Hadn't his spirits threatened me with such a fate years ago?) But now that it was to become an imminent reality, I was surprised at how angry it made me feel—and how helpless. Though Dhairya 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 drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not. 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—they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted. (Divakaruni 120)

Beauvoir, in her open treatment of sexuality agreed with Sartre that physical desire is not a simple physiological response. Desire comes first and the physical manifestation of desire later. Sex cannot be seen as simple subjective pleasure, like scratching an itch or drinking a glass of water.(Bowden Tom Butler,2013) The sex act Beauvoir argued, forces a woman into a particular role, that of a passive object. Furthermore this disability may then infect all her other non-sexual dealings with the world. A woman is put in the position of making a choice: she will be aggressive and successful or she will be sexually attractive. The two are not compatible. There is, in the act, always passivity on woman's part. Therefore, a woman in sex must always feel herself as a thing, an object, and in conflict with her professional assertive self. Her moods must match and support her male partner's whims and fancies without contradicting or challenging his masculinity—that is must for any successful relationship, and especially in sexual relations. And this is possible only when a woman is objectified by her male counterpart. (Felicity Joseph, 2008)

Draupadi wanted to be considered as Arjuna's wife only as he was the one who married her and won her. But without her wish she was forced to marry other Pandavas as well. Further, being a wife, she was expected to be completely dependent on her husband (Arjuna) to speak for her and defend for her interest rather than taking the initiative herself. She could not speak that she is not an object or property to be possessed or divided but a human being who has every right to decide and choose a sexual partner for herself.

She however, as a dutiful and loyal wife surrenders all her desires and comforts for her husbands. The way she had to offer her body as an object to five different men, against her wishes very well show Draupadi's non-existentialism. She stood by her husbands' side as a dutiful and devoted wife. She tried to win their hearts by her sincere wifely devotion, thinking that one day they would also love her truly and would consider and accept her as an important part of their life. But, all her hopes were dashed to ground when, she ultimately realizes that she stood nowhere in their lives. Instead, she was treated like a pawn by her husbands who stake her honor and pride for the sake of their manly pride and whim to win in gamble. She is shattered completely when none of her husband comes forward to save her honor:

All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. I'd believed that because they loved me they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me—as much perhaps as any man can love—there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought.

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. But then I remembered what I'd read long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me. The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave. (Divakaruni190)

Even though she was deeply hurt and wounded by her husbands' irresponsible and disrespectful behavior towards her yet she could never stop her dependence on them due to the typical norms and conventions of the society. She accompanied them to the forest like a dutiful wife and performed all her duties sincerely. Even though so much wrong was inflicted on her, still she kept her patience and trust intact on her husbands to avenge her dishonor. The way she was insulted and disrobed by her own people in front of everyone including her husbands can be the highest kind of atrocity that can be thought of or can be inflicted on any female. She suffered greatly, the torments of this incident inwardly relentlessly, which kept on revisiting in her conscience again and again. She suffered a lot being a female vested in a variety of roles. Further, she was also the worst sufferer in the war as she lost her father her brother (whom she loved so much) and her five sons. Even in the end when her husbands decided to renunciate all the worldly things and went on a spiritual journey and final journey of their lives, in the Himalayas she accompanied them like an ideal wife. During the journey when she slipped into the unfathomable icy valley, she was neglected and ignored by her husbands who accused her for being disloyal and secretive for having feelings for some other person. Thus, even though she sacrificed her whole life for others, she received only disloyalty and hatred in return. The

character of Draupadi was thus, grooved and designed into a kind of female, whose only purpose in life was to sacrifice and serve by assuming different roles and leading a non- existential life.

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