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A Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* as a Discourse on
Marginalization and Rebirth

Abstract: The myth of Draupadi is grounded in the history of the Mahabharata. It is a written discourse on the interaction between God and human being. It is an action oriented tale where most of the things are ideological with political intentions. The Mahabharata by Vyasa signifies Draupadi as the root cause of the Kurukshetra war, a negative image is being signified to this character. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes this object that is subjected to various kinds of discrimination, trials and tribulation as the subject of her fiction *The Palace of Illusions*, signifies the marginalized position of women in society. The novel also celebrates Draupadi's relationship with Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu which signifies the glory of god. The

present paper explores and interprets the significance of the myth of Draupadi and that of Krishna in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* using the ideals provided by the cultural critic Roland Barthes.

Keywords: Discourse, History, Myth, Patriarchy, Sign, Rebirth, Question and Signification.

Indian history is inseparable from myth. The narratives of the epic Mahabharata occupy a major space in Indian popular culture. It carries powerful ideological significance. In the words of B.Black, "Mahabharata is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since"(11). It is believed to have been written by the sage Vyasa, who is also a character in the epic. It provides a historical account of birth of Hinduism and code of ethics for human life. Vyasa has described it as being *itihasa* which means history. The crux of the epic is that of the devastating war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. What Vyasa has written is the praise of the noble deeds of men; women are always shown as individuals of utter obedience and service. Draupadi of the epic was portrayed as the sole reason for the Kurukshetra war which resulted in death of thousands of men. Divakaruni through her narrative traces the reason behind her vengeance towards the Kauravas by tracing her emotional journey of being a woman in a male dominated society. In her introductory note to *The Palace of Illusions* she clearly states that she is re-telling the story of the Mahabharata through the voice of Draupadi. She writes, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into *The Palace of Illusions*"(xv). The birth of *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is very much significant.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction occupies a unique space in the galaxy of Diaspora Literature. She is an Indian-American writer who has spent nineteen years in India and has

migrated to America. When she was in India, she grew up listening to the tales of the epic from her grandfather. But after moving to America, she feels that she has forgotten most part of India that is Indian mythology. As an attempt to remember India, she began to weave mythical tales into her narration. Whenever Divakaruni reflected on the story of the Mahabharata, she was left unsatisfied by the portrayal of the women characters. The epic celebrates the deeds of the male heroes and women are remembered only for their subservient roles. She in her mind visualized to place a woman in the forefront of the action. She chose Draupadi as the protagonist of her fiction. She writes in the introductory note to *The Palace of Illusions*, “I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali?”(xv). Re-telling the epic from a female point of view is both challenging and complex task. Indeed she has done a lot of reading and re-search on the epic. She is faithful to the original version in matters of the public incidents and combined her fancy when it affected the private life of the heroine. The novel is then a discourse on the life of Draupadi. To Barthes every discourse conveying thing is a myth.

Roland Barthes contribution to the understanding of myths is very significant since the publication of his book *Mythologies* in 1957. In the second section of his *Mythologies*, titled “Myth Today” Barthes gives an in-depth analysis of the meanings and manifestations of myth in contemporary society. He defines the function of myth in relation to semiology where myth works as a speech, signifier leading to the process of signification. While ancients see myth as classical fables associated with gods and heroes, to Barthes myths were the dominant ideologies of our times. To him myths are extended metaphors which help us to make sense of our experience within a culture. The life of Draupadi is a signification of female subordination that is prevalent in Indian culture.

The novel opens with the discrimination/rejection of a girl child. Dhai Ma retells the miraculous story of how Panchaali and her brother Drishtadyumna were born out of the sacrificial fire and adopted by King Drupad. Draupadi is introduced as the “Girl Who Wasn’t Invited”(1). When Drishtadyumna stepped out of the fire all the assembly cried out in amazement. But when she emerged later, everybody drooped their jaws. Draupadi’s rejection at her birth signifies female infanticide. Drupad named the boy Drishtadyumna meaning the destroyer of enemies and her, Draupadi meaning the daughter of Drupad. The name given to her signifies women as second sex.

Draupadi is brought up in her father’s palace as a typical traditional girl. Drupad wants her to learn dance, music and sewing. But she is more interested in learning statecraft, the art of war and the intricacies of ruling a kingdom. When she revealed her interest, Drupad says, “A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard in the royal family of Panchaal!”(23). Being willful, she learns what was taught to her brother by sitting behind a curtain. When the tutor asked her brother about the duties of kshatriyya, Draupadi prompts him to complete the answer. The tutor is disturbed by the idea of a girl supporting a man. He argues that a woman will never be able to be with him in his chariot and help him in war. As she smiles at his comment, Drishtadyumna scolds her saying, “ ‘Boys are different from girls ... When you will accept that?’ ”(25).as the tutor prompts her brother to advice his sister about the expected role of a woman- that is support a man, Draupadi bursts, ‘ “And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men?’ ”(26). All these incidents signify denial of education for girl children and expectation of household activities from the same.

Draupadi is silenced in almost all the crucial events in her life. There is the famous swayamvara, where she learns she will have no choice but to garland the one who gets through the archery test. Divakarunii shows her emotions vividly. Draupadi has already fallen in love

with Karna's portrait which the artist has shown her. She is overjoyed when Karna lifts up the bow and is about to shoot the arrow. But Krishna and Drishtadyumna opposed him. She had to reject Karna since he seems a danger to her brother's life. To stop Karna is to insult him in front of the kings of the country. She questions him about his parentage, puts him to shame. Arjun, disguised as a Brahmin, wins her hand. When the couple reached home, Kunti says, "All five of you must marry this woman"(108). Draupadi becomes the wife of five Pandava men. In a society where a woman is expected to be loyal and dedicated to her husband, a single man, she is forced to marry five men against her wish. She says, "I'd placed a garland around the neck of a man who hadn't even cared to tell me his name, and it had changed everything"(110). She is not happy as a new bride since the code of marital conduct by Vyasa said that she would be a wife to each brother from oldest to youngest, for a year at a time and would be virgin each year made her to panic. She compares her position to that of a communal drinking cup and says, "I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not"(120). Draupadi's marriage with the Pandavas signifies forced marriage on women.

Panchaali's life becomes more pathetic, as Yudhisthira loses all his possessions, palace, his brothers, himself and Panchaali in a game of dice. She is put to shame in the sabha of Hastinapur. Karna suggests that they strip her of her royal clothing and allow everyone to see her naked. No one came forward to rescue her when she is disrobed, except Krishna. Unable to bear this humiliation heaped on her by the Kauravas, she curses them: " 'All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead' "(194). In her later years, she is often reminded of that hateful day. She says, "I stitched discontent onto my features and let my hair fall, matted and wrathful, around my face. Each day as I served their meals, I reminded the Paandavas of how they'd failed me and what I'd suffered as a result in Duryodhan's

sabha”(199). In her year of disguise as the maid in Sudeshna’s palace, she resents the raving eyes of Keechak, brother of Sudeshna. These are evidences that signify how men treat women, sensual object.

The incidents that show Draupadi to be happy are those within the Palace of Illusions built by Maya and the years after the war when she was able to support the widows as the queen. On hearing of the death of Krishna, she realizes that it is time for her and the Pandavas to leave the world. She along with them climbs the Himalayas. As she climbs, she falls and was left unnoticed and rejected by others. While awaiting her death, she reflects on her life experience. It was nothing but a vain craving for love. As she steps into heaven, she realizes that there are no enemies, no relatives and that all are equal. It promotes the idea that the soul has no gender. She says, “I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego”(360). It looks as though a woman cannot escape from gender discrimination while living on the earth.

Another significant myth in The Palace of Illusions is that of Krishna. Krishna is introduced in the author’s note as an incarnation of Vishnu. Divakaruni brings the friendship between Krishna and Draupadi in such a way that often Draupadi is mesmerized by him without knowing his true form; it is only towards the end she realizes who he actually is. Perhaps the reason for them to get along so well was that they were both severely dark-skinned. Since dark skinned people especially girls are looked down by the society, Draupadi hesitates to go out on festivals. When she turned fourteen, she asked Krishna whether it would be possible for a princess afflicted with a skin so dark that the people termed it blue was capable of changing history. Krishna says, “A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself”(9). These words helped her to get away her fear of being dark. He was the one who brought her the news of the world that no one else dares to give her. He called her by a special name, Krishnaa. In one of her later days, she had a dream. She saw

Krishna, when he opened his mouth to speak she could see the entire earth inside it and the heavens with their sinning planets and fiery meters. He said, “Just as we cast off worn clothes and wear new, when the time arrives, the soul casts off the body and finds a new one to work out its karma”(258). When she was ridiculed in the sabha, she called on him and thus was saved from being exposed naked. The character Krishna in the novel signifies the concept of rebirth.

The novel at the surface level can be deciphered as that of marginalization of women but at the deeper level it is a signification of the Hindu belief on the concept of rebirth. In the section “Myth as a semi logical system”, Barthes describes the tri-dimensional pattern of language – signifier, signified and the sign. Let us apply this to the fiction The Palace of Illusions. The author Divakaruni is the signifier who has the intention of signifying the myth of Krishna and the eventual result is nothing but the belief on rebirth. Let us have a tabular representation to make it clear,

	I Signifier	II Signified
	3 Sign	
Language	I Signifier	II Signified
Myth	Divakaruni	Myth on Krishna
	III Sign	
	Belief on Rebirth	

The discourse on myth is very significant; arguments in the study propagate varying degrees of truth. It is not just about matters of the ancient world but is also very much a matter of today’s world. Divakaruni demystifies the stereotypical image of women by creating Draupadi as a woman who questions the traditional ideas attributed to a female gender which signifies the spirit of the 21st century women. Thus she pictures Draupadi as a timeless character relevant to today’s modern India. The picture of Krishna by Divakaruni signifies the Hindu religious belief.

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