

Draupadi's Quest in Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract: The Mahabharata, one of India's great epic is the foundational text for philosophical and spiritual values, educational and religious instructions, ethical obligation (*dharma*), social norms and gender roles. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is an explicit example to retell the epic in novel form. To sum up, the length and spirit of such a vast epic was a challenging job for a writer. *The palace of Illusions* became the bestseller and earned a lot of praise from the critics. Traditionally, Indian society is patriarchal-oriented so the issues related to the suppression of women remained always the main subject of writing. Divakaruni, in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, provides a fresh perspective on the life of Draupadi. This novel tells the story of the epic from the female perspective.

Keywords: patriarchal, female, identity, struggle

Introduction: It is Panchaali's Mahabharata as mentioned on the front page of the novel. It is a wide canvas on which Draupadi is given a voice in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. Principal themes of this epic are the results of vengeance and the human potential. The story of this great epic is well-known to all but the fascination of this novel lies in its unique way in which a female observes this world and how this world creates restrictions for a female. The novel is an ambitious attempt of the efforts of a female to search for her identity. The war of the Mahabharata has been fought between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who are the progeny of two brothers. All five Pandavas are married to the beautiful and determined princess Draupadi. Climatic scene of the epic is game of dice in which Yudhishtra gambles away all his

properties, his kingdom as well as Draupadi. She vows revenge for her insult in the courtroom. In the final battle of Kurukshetra, everybody dies except Draupadi and her husband's. Parikshit is their only remaining heir, peace is restored, the brothers and Draupadi embark on a final journey into the Himalayas where they find eternal redemption. However, Divakaruni's real skill lies in the exploration of the deeper and finer aspects of Panchaali's mind that otherwise lay submerged in the enormity of the epic.

The text highlights the crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. The novel opens with three narrators (Panchaali, her brother, and her nurse), presenting different versions of the tale of Panchaali's birth and destiny. Her father's palace is a suffocating place for her who, "seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe" (Divakaruni1). Her nurse calls her jokingly "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (Divakaruni 1). She was born out of the fire after her brother has been named "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies", while she is called "Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (Divakaruni 5), a name she considers to affirm patriarchal dependency. A divine prophecy has been made at her birth, "she will change the course of history" (Divakaruni 5). She dismisses the name Draupadi and renames herself Panchaali, meaning 'from the kingdom of Panchal'. This is her first step towards refusing to let the men in her life shape her destiny. The Draupadi is shown in the epic as a determined, independent and progressive woman. The novel highlights an important relation between names, gender, and identity. Draupadi shows resentment on her brother's name which implies the mission of his life to kill Drona, while hers merely symbolizes patriarchy. From the start, she fights "to position herself as a subject who desires and not as an object of desire" (Nair 152). She consults a sage about her destiny and learns that: she will marry the five greatest heroes of her time, be envied like a goddess, become the mistress of the most magical palace, then lose it, start the greatest war, bring about the deaths of millions, be loved, yet die alone. Moreover, in her lifetime she will encounter three moments that can potentially alleviate the catastrophe to come.

Divakaruni significantly portrays Panchaali's anguish and pathos in the novel. Sage advice her, "hold back your question", "hold back your laughter", "and hold back your curse". She rebels against an education of typically female skills (painting, sewing, poetry), which she perceives as useless in comparison to the knowledge taught to her brother (lessons about the royal rule, justice, power). Then a sorceress tries to teach Panchaali to control her passion and

her own destructive power, reminding her that she does not “have the luxury of behaving like an ordinary star-struck girl. The consequences of your action may destroy us all” (Divakaruni 88). When she watches her husband’s for the first time after her marriage, she observes, “I was a woman. I had to use my power differently” (Divakaruni 99). Moreover, according to the special marital arrangements, Panchaali is split between her husbands, spending a year with each, her virginity restored each time when entering a new husband’s bed. She becomes aware that in contrast to her husbands, She “had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when” (Divakaruni 120). Panchaali secretly desires Karna. Her heart aches to see his melancholic eyes. On the one hand, she has the secret feelings for Karna while on the other side; she celebrates the platonic love for Krishna. He is her confidant and advisor during her early life and a savior who saved her from the worst humiliation ever for a woman.

There is no doubt that her burning desire for vengeance ends with the Great War of *The Mahabharata*. Divakaruni justifies Draupadi’s clarion call for revenge in the face of the humiliation that she faces in Duryodhan’s court. When Yudhisthira lost everything in the game of dice, Duryodhan takes possession of the kingdom, Panchaali’s palace, and the Pandavas themselves. Panchaali is informed that she has been gambled away like property, “no less so than a cow or a slave” (Divakaruni 190). When she is dragged into the hall, the whole court stares at her, but worst of all is that she is stripped of all ornaments, yet the ultimate shame is the command to take off her sari, the only item of clothing protecting her from “a hundred male eyes burning through me” (Divakaruni 191). In the novel, Panchaali describes the situation thus, “The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me – I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time” (Divakaruni 193). What aggravates her rage is the silence of all men present; nobody answers her question if a woman is reduced to the status of an object lost by her husband. Krishna appears to give the answer to her prayers and to save her from the shame by extending the cloth of her sari. Raged in her anger and the desire to restore her dignity, Panchaali commits the prophesied third mistake and utters the dreadful curse of the battle, which will destroy everybody and vows not to comb her hair again till, “the day I bathe it in Kauravas blood” (Divakaruni 194). Despite the image of victimization, the scene presents a clear assertion of female strength and agency. She tells her emotional status of losing her palace:

She's dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her, sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear. (Divakaruni 206)

She concentrates on the revenge thus gets a clear vision of her purpose.

It seemed that everything I'd lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance – none of them were the true Panchaali. (Divakaruni 229)

Her struggle does not end here. She had to face many problems in her future life. During their disguise, Draupadi works as a maid to queen Sudheshna in the King Virat's Palace. She is in the dress of a maidservant and Yudhishtra has worn a Brahmin's white dhoti. Nakul and Sahadev work in the king's barns. Arjun becomes a dance tutor to princess Uttara and Bheem serves as a cook. Keechack, Queen Sudheshna's brother, teases Draupadi often and irritates her because of his infatuation with her charm. Draupadi informs about her torture to Yudhishtra, "If Keechack touches me again, and I'll swallow Poison". (Divakaruni 231) This problem is solved by her husband Bheem. Divakaruni depicts Draupadi as an Indian woman, who is traditionally bowed but remains virtuous and obeys her husband and her mother-in-law. *The Palace of Illusions* throws light on the female characters and their role in the domestic life. They not only look after their domestic life but also are the harbingers of the battle. The various roles that a woman plays in her life as a daughter, sister, friend, wife, mother are depicted in this novel and woven intricately

The theme of vengeance has been presented as the central trait in the novel. On the one hand, Panchaali spends her whole life struggles to control her passionate temper and her thirst for revenge while her husbands are enjoying the freedom of action attached to their status as men. Although Panchaali does not play the role of a soldier she becomes the eyewitness of the war. Divakaruni truly explores Draupadi's inner feelings. She presents her journey from a princess to revenge-seeking queen with every minute detail. From the beginning, Panchaali starts to narrate

her life story and dreams of possessing her own palace one day. The rebellious, yet also somewhat naïve girl eventually becomes a governess and wife, whose advice is frequently sought by her husband's Vyasa tells her. "You no longer care what people think of you and that has given you a great freedom" (Divakaruni 180). So she feels that "in some matters, I was equal" (Divakaruni 180).

Panchaali's half-sister, Sikhandi, undergoes a permanent change, being transformed into a "great and dangerous warrior" (Divakaruni 44). Watching her in battle, Panchaali notices how she still looks "male from a certain angle, female from another" (Divakaruni 256). Like Panchaali, Sikhandi is driven by vengeance and rebellion against men's greater freedom of action. She argues that women need to fight for themselves to restore their dignity because, "wait for a man to avenge your honor, and you'll wait forever" (Divakaruni 49). Inspired by Sikhandi's sex change as the ultimate liberation from the restrictions of womanhood, Panchaali is aware from the start that: "I, too, would cross the bounds of what was allowed to women" (Divakaruni 51).

The portrayal of the battle of Kurukshetra and its aftermath present perhaps Divakaruni's most radical modification of the plot of the original epic. The focus on the subjective female consciousness is here broadened to draw attention to what is omitted in the older text, "But here's something Vyasa didn't put down in his Mahabharata: Leaving the field, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman" (Divakaruni 298). After the battle, the grieving widows try to jump onto the funeral pyres. The devastation of the war, which had made Hastinapur "largely a city of women" (Divakaruni 322), triggers a further change of Panchaali. She takes action, "It was the time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women" (Divakaruni 323). This is sustained by another plot change. Whereas in the original the only remaining heir to continue the Pandava line is a son, Divakaruni turns Parikhshit into a daughter, who takes on Panchaali's legacy and realizes a peaceful female supremacy.

Often, Draupadi is shown to move between passivity and activity, as the following statement about her husbands illustrates, "I followed them into the forest and forced them to

become heroes. But my heart.., I never gave it fully to them” (Divakaruni 213). Her personality is torn between devoted wife and independent, frankly critical woman. Her different roles clearly the shifts and inconsistencies in Draupadi character. Divakaruni explores Draupadi's psychological condition very nicely. She discovers Panchaali's distress and suffering caused by the fragmentation of her different selves. This is illustrated once more by Panchaali's decision to follow her husbands on their final journey. Again she is both loyal wife and rebellious woman, as no other before she had ever attempted to climb the Himalayan Mountains. When her strength starts to desert her, she reflects:

Perhaps 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 it? (Divakaruni 343)

The quote shows the complex mix of emotions and demonstrates the ambiguous, finely tuned assessment of Panchaali's character in the novel. It portrays her as a model of female empowerment and courage but throws a clear critical-humorous glance on her pride and desire for admiration. Panchaali's death appears as liberation and resolve of the contradictions of her identity: “I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali” (Divakaruni 360). It is really tragic that Panchaali faced the struggle for her identity throughout her life on this earth and felt the sympathetic consolation after the life.

Conclusion: Divakaruni's novel reflects on the various illusions of the characters, about romantic love, about heroism, war, and vengeance. If “in most constructions of Draupadi, in both literary and non-literary texts, she is seen as a victim of patriarchy” (Nair 153). Divakaruni develops her protagonist's identity through narration which appears as a kind of self-interpretation. She struggles throughout the novel for her self-respect and identity in this patriarchal world. In this novel, Draupadi is not portrayed as a victim in the patriarchal society or only a vengeance seeker that she is often portrayed to be. She is shown as a

fiercely independent, rebellious woman, who wants to take her destiny into her own hands.

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