

Feminine Sensibility in Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's

The Palace of Illusion

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Abstract:

The study of standardized models of interpreting and analyzing women herself, is said as feminism. Mythology is the main reason for the foundation of culture and tradition. The two epic which greatly influenced Indian people are Mahabharata and Ramayana. Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's *The palace of Illusion* is the retelling voice of Saga Vyasa's Mahabharata in Draupadi's perspective. The protagonist Draupadi, born as princess suffers in her life by marrying five men. Draupadi's fate reveals that she is the major reason behind the bloody battle of Kurusathra between Pandavas and Kauravas. Krishna, who was a beloved mentor to the Pandavas, was an embodiment of the God Vishnu and her beloved Karna's untold love story are the main characters that help her in every struggle. The paper is about analyzing how women are dominated, lose their identity, sensibility and not considered as living creatures in those days. Women have to follow tradition and culture blindly without knowing any reason behind it.

Keywords: Identity, Tradition, Culture, Male domination and Struggle of women.

India's greatest and the most inspiring epic is Mahabharata. *The Palace of Illusion* is the retelling voice of Vyasa's Mahabharata. Divakaruni is an Indian born American author. She is one of the great Indian Diaspora writers in English. When she was in India, she heard most of the epic stories from her grandparents. After, she settled in America, she feel that she loses the memory of the stories. So, she wanted recreate the story of the epic Mahabharata. Divakaruni feels that the original Mahabharata is the tale only about the Pandavas and Kauravas and by retelling them in the voice of Vyasa in Draupadi's perspective as the feminism. The protagonist of this novel is Draupadi. The novel is in the first person narrative. Divakaruni has tried to bring out the past into present in a different way by showing the story of untold love, revenge, war, freedom and friendship.

The novel opens with the birth of Draupadi. Draupadi, is born in unusual circumstance and want to listen to the story of her birth from Dhai her maidservant. "I thought of the prophecy then, with yearning and fear. I wanted it to be true. But did I have the making of a heroine-courage, perseverance, an unbending will? And shut up as I was inside this mausoleum of a palace, how would history even find me?" (Divakaruni 5). Draupad, the king of Panchalaa, wants to adopt a son to take revenge on his friend Guru Drona. Draupadi and Drishtadyumna were born out of the fire. Draupadi is introduced as "the Girl who wasn't invited" (1). Draupadi felt that her brother was born to take revenge of his father and she was born as the curse for her father.

Dhai, a maidservant of Draupadi, was the only person that Draupadi could share her feeling and experience in that palace. One day when she decided to meet her step-mother, she insulted her very badly. Dhai was the only person who consoled her. She also teaches Draupati how to be and how to be not. "Dhai Ma herself thought me rules of comportment-how to walk, talk and sit in the company of men; how to do the same respect to queen who are more important; how to subtly snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the other wives of my husband" (30). Draupadi deliberately gave answer to Dhai as, "I don't need to learn that! My husband won't take another wife- I'll make him promise that before I marry him!" (30). Later her fate had changed everything even her wish.

Once Draupadi met the great saga Vyasa at her palace, he advices her,

Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be before your wedding: at that time, hold back your question. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be when you're shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. Maybe it will mitigate the catastrophes to come. (40)

Draupadi at the beginning did not understand what he is saying and later she questions to Vyasa as, why he is writing her fate without informing her. But his words seems to be true for her.

Women were treated as the second sex. Women are supposed to obey their parents decision. They have to take care of their husband and children and do household works. They were not educated. Women simply followed the customs and traditions which were laid by the ancestors blindly without raising any questions. Elianor Zeliot in her poem "Slave" Hira Bansode, "a major Dalit woman poet of Bombay" writes:

Where the houses are ornamented with little flaming oil
 In that country a woman is still a slave
 Where Sita entered the fire to prove fidelity
 Where Ahilya was turned to stone because of Indra's lust
 Where Draupadi was fractured to serve five husbands
 In that country a woman is still a slave. (Zeliot 72)

Women were educated with limitation. She studied painting and arts. Draupadi when she felt alone she would sit near the pond and start to weep in view her own life. She was consoled by her friend Krishna. Krishna, who was a beloved mentor to the Pandavas, was an embodiment of the God Vishnu. Krishna was the only friend of her. Krishna pays continuous visits to the palace of Panchaal. As he has friendly relationship with King Draupad.

Draupadi was dark in colour. Krishna was also called as *Karuneela Kannan* by his parents and others. So she shares her experience with him. Once she asks question as, who will marry the dark women. Krishna gave the simple and logic answer as whom you loved the most. He also asks her about her dream husband. She revealed her wish as she wanted to marry a man who is very loyal, a caring person, a great warrior,

beauty, and knowledge man. Poonam S. Chauhan quotes in “Lengthening Shadows” about women in the society.

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their dependence in correct ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny in marriage, which still means practically subordination to man ... -Simon De Beauvoir. (Chauhan 203)

Krishna shows the portrait of Karna, who is the king of small place of Hasthinapur. On seeing that portrait she falls for him and decides to marry him. Krishna opposes and tells that he is the son of chariot driver. Krishna considers this proposal would insult King Draupad.

Women are supposed to abide by their parent’s decision in the marriage though the women like it or not. This is explained in Draupadi’s Swayamwar scene. Swayamwar is the function, in which a girl can select her own bride. Draupadi’s father wanted Draupadi to marry Arjuna, who was the son of Pandavas. In Swayamwar, Draupadi met Karna, and has fallen for him. He also did the same. But on thinking of her father’s pride, she insults Karna by saying him as *Suthra*. Later with heavy heart she marries Arjuna, who was disguised as a Brahmin. Arjun took her to Kunti, wife of Pandu (Pandava).

Fate plays its first role as Vyasa predicted. As Kunti is in pray, she did not know what her son has brought but orders to share with his brothers. Everyone including Kunti and Draupadi are shocked. She compares her position to that of a public drinking cup and says, “I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not” (120). As everyone in Panchaal did not accept the marriage but being a woman she had to follow the tradition and custom of the ancestor, she decided to accept the words of her mother-in-law. 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” (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” (120).

Meanwhile, Pandavas win the land Khandavprastha from God Indiran and named the place as Indraprastha or Mayashaba. Later, Mayashaba became the symbol of Draupadi's identity as the palace of illusion. Everyone was invited and that was called as the palace of garland. The second prophesy comes true when she laughs at Duryodhan. This increases the wrath of Duryodhan, he decides to take revenge on her. He cunningly invites them to Hasthinapur. During this time Draupadi's five sons were brought up in Panchaal and so they were called as Upapandavas. Though she is very loyal to her husbands, her struggle are not known to them. Divakaruni beautifully explains this in *The palace of Illusion*.

Third prophecy comes true in Hasthinapur. The evil Duryodhan plans with Sahuni, his uncle to invite Pandavas in gambling. In that game, Yudhisthira, the eldest son of Pandavas, loses everything including his four brothers, his wife, his land, and his wealth. On losing everything they become servants to Duryodhan. So, Duryodhan ordered his brother Duchathan, to drag Draupadi to the court of Hasthinapur. As everyone decided to ill treat Draupadi, she begged everyone in the royal court to save her but none of them rescued her including Karna, with who she had secret love. She argued that if Yuthishtra had lost himself first, he had no right over her as he was already a slave. "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife" (190). It was Lord Krishna who saved Draupadi from disgrace but this day sowed the seed of revenge in Draupadi's mind and she said to the assembly:

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. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do a defenseless woman. (194)

She further said, "I lifted my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm, now because I knew that everything I said would come to pass. "I will not comb it," I said, "Until the day I bathe it in Kaurva blood" (194).

Fate reveals that she was the reason behind the great bloody war Kurusathtra. Before the battle begins Draupadi wants to know about what is going to happen after the war. She asks Krishna about it and he explains that only she and husbands will remain in the battle. In that battle everyone died including her five sons and her beloved Karna. Draupadi had a secret love of Karna which were seen in three scenes the epic Mahabharata. Draupati loves Karna at the first sight when she sees the portrait. Karna also love her when he

sees her at Swayamwar. Next in the royal court, she begged everyone but not Karna, because she felt that he would help her without any request. Karna also helped her as everyone were ready to seduce her, he saw her and told that she was a *dasi*, who slept with five men. These words which said by Karna was not to hurt but to help her. At last their love was revealed during Karna's last moment of death in the battle field. She was the only woman who wept loudly in her hut were no one around her could understand the reason for her weeping. These are the three scenes were the secret love of Draupadi and Karna is revealed as it is the untold love story.

Divakaruni explores Draupadi's psychological condition. She discovers Draupadi's sorrow and suffering caused by the division of her different selves. This is illustrated once more by Draupadi's decision to follow her husbands on their final journey. Again she is a loyal wife. 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? (343)

This shows the complex mix of emotions, and finely tuned evaluation of Draupadi's character in the novel. The novelist portrays her as a role model of female empowerment. Draupadi's death appears as liberation and resolves to 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" (360). It is really tragic that Draupadi faced the struggle for her identity throughout her life on this earth and felt the sympathetic consolation after her life. This shows that Draupadi is the *kurunchi* flower among other women. Maya Angelou quoted that "Every time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all woman" (Feminism quotes page 5).

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