

# Representation of Women, History and Myth: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Palace of Illusions



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### Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a rendition of the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Divakaruni has taken a male-centered story and breathed new life into its female characters, giving us a rich tale of passion and love, power and weakness, honor and humiliation. The story is complex, as political relationships grow and develop, and friends and enemies are created, leading to battles and wars that will eventually destroy them all. The novel traces the life of the princess Panchaali, beginning with her birth in fire and following her spirited balancing act as a woman with five husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom. Panchaali is swept into their quest to reclaim their birthright, remaining at their side through years of exile and a terrible civil war involving all the important kings of India. Meanwhile, we never lose sight of her strategic duels with her mother-in-law, her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna, or her secret fascination for the mysterious man who is her husbands' most dangerous enemy. Panchaali is a fiery female, redefining for us a world of warriors, gods, and the ever-manipulating hands of fate. The novel gives us an entirely different interpretation of the ancient tale. The original epic was about gods, demi-gods, kings, princes, warriors, and other noble men. But Divakaruni's interpretation provides a humanistic touch to the epic, making it more realistic, more relatable, and more personal. Through her narrator Panchaali, the wife of the legendary five Pandavas brothers, Divakaruni gives us a rare feminist interpretation of an epic story. Though popularly known as Draupadi (literally meaning daughter of Drupad), she quickly reasserts and renames herself Panchali (meaning from the Kingdom of Panchala), rejecting the egoistic name her father gave her and refusing to accept that her identity was to be bound by the men in her life. Draupadi has been portrayed as a negative character in Hindu society. Many believe that it was her headstrong actions that brought about the destruction but Divakaruni rejects such interpretations and provides a new outlook to Panchali. Divakaruni portrays Panchali as a powerful, strong, and independent woman, an equal to the men around her rather than subservient. She presents Panchali's life as a series of choices made by Panchali, and not by the people around her, giving her a voice in the overwhelmingly patriarchal society that was ancient India. Divakaruni's interpretation of the epic provides a complete narrative, sometimes missing from the original epic, giving a stronger role to the women of the story, and portraying them as equals in society. Divakaruni very thoughtfully discloses the different layers of patriarchal system and struggles of female characters who fight for honour and dignity. The present paper aims to discuss the representation of women, history and myth in *The Palace of Illusions*.

**Keywords:** History, Myth, Patriarchal System, Women, Struggles, Honour and Dignity.

### Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* takes us back to the time of the great Indian epic The Mahabharat—a time that is half-history, half-myth, and wholly magical. These epics not only comprise the mythological stories but also acquaint us with the social system of those times. The story of this great epic is well-known to all but the fascination of this novel lies in the unique way in which a female looks into this world, observes it and how the world confines the space for a female. The author makes an attempt to place the woman in the forefront of the action. *Mahabharata* is about the fierce rivalry between Kauravas and Pandavas. The novel, *The Palace of Illusions* is a kind of retelling of the epic from Draupadi's point of view. Definitely the epic contains complex

women characters that affect the action in major ways. . Chitra Banerjee discloses Draupadi's joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumph in a simple and lucid manner. Draupadi, the protagonist of the novel, unfolds the different layers of *The Mahabharata* through conversations, stories and dreams.

The rivalry between kauravas and pandavas converts into bloody battle of kurukshetra, in which most kuru kings and soldiers have been perished. Heroes of this epic are larger than life. Vyasa, the creator of the Epic, himself appears at the crucial moments in Epic. Krishna, mentor of pandavas, incarnation of Vishnu performs his duty as the best friend of Draupadi. Bhishma is bound to the throne of Hastinapur to protect the kuru dynasty. Guru Drone is teacher of kauravas and pandavas. King Dropad, father of Draupadi, is crazy to take revenge from guru Dronacharya and many more characters who are not only interesting but also very much impressive. Their virtues and vices change the destiny of kuru dynasty. Chitra banerjee has remained always fascinated by the stories of Indian epics but a little disappointed with the portrayal of women. She feels that they always remained shadowy characters in epic but at the same time it does not mean women characters are weak. In fact we have widowed Kunti who bring up her sons without anybody's help, queen Gandhari who blindfolds herself to respect and feel her husband's blindness and of course Panchali, a woman married to five males and turned down the dynasty of kuru vansh. In this way we are not only confronted with the character of Draupadi but also with other female characters who are powerful and impressive.

Chitra pierced through the heart of Panchali and disclosed many secrets. She was born to change the history as per the predictions made by Gods at the time of her birth. She was close to her father and her relationship with Krishna is of a different kind sometimes a friend and a guide and sometimes a fatherly figure, convinces her to his point of view as if he is controlling her future. When she was watching portraits of different kings for her swayamvara, she comes in the contact of portrait of Karna and she is really impressed with him. Suddenly Krishna rebukes the painter for showing the portrait of Karna and not making her familiar with the Panadavas. Typical patriarchal laws dominated the society during those times and women were not allowed to enter into the arena of male dominance as Dhri says to Draupadi "Boys are different from girls...When will you accept this." (Divakaruni 24) But Draupadi had already decided to be different from these notions saying that "Myself I plan on doing other things with my life" (Divakaruni 26).

Vyasa predicts about the upcoming events in Draupadi's life and he warns "Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be just before your wedding, at that time hold back your questions. 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 ashamed as you had never imagined possible, at that time, hold your curse." (Divakaruni 40). These three events changed the future of Kuru dynasty. She feels something special when she comes to know that she has the right to choose her husband but she is

shocked after knowing about the test and says "why even call it a swayamvar, then?" ... "Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I will marry." By nature she is quite aggressive and wants to know everything. When a sorceress teaches her to cook food with available ingredients, to wear cotton sari, to sleep on the floor, when to lie and when to speak the truth, how to behave with husband and how to discover the hidden male's tragedies by reading the tremors in his voice, Draupadi is very confused with all tactics and asks "Teach me how to love my husband, and how to make him love me." (Divakaruni 63)

Sorceress make her confronted with Kunti. Drupadi is moved with the story of Kunti, seeing this, sorceress says to Draupadi "I understand what drove a woman like her. What allowed her to survive when she was surrounded by enemies what makes a queen- and beware?" (Divakaruni 64) Draupadi really wants to see Kunti but the artist did not have the picture of her, in fact, on the place of Kunti, he shows the picture of Gandhari. "The picture was small, about a hand span square, and ill executed, as though painted by an apprentice. Perhaps there was not much demand for the picture of women, once they were married off, even if they were queens" (Divakaruni 75). She was not in the favour of Gandhari's decision to blindfold herself instead of it she says "If my husband couldn't see, I'd make doubly sure to keep my own eyes open."

On seeing the portrait of Karna she is attracted toward him but interruption of Krishna stops her feelings to flourish, later on the occasion of swayamvara she stops the Karna from entering in the test by asking his identity and that was a bold step for any lady to question in the midst of full assembly. This is another thing that after marrying Arjun she repents several times for discarding Karna. There was no one, other than I, who might be able to stop it. But what should I do? (Divakaruni 95)

After marrying Arjun she is not sure about his identity so when she was crossing the jungle with Arjun she tries to see any scar on his body to prove his identity as Kshatriya. Her relationship with Kunti is of rivalry, anger and competition. After marriage when Draupadi enters the home with Arjun, Kunti, without seeing them and what they had brought orders them to share whatever they had brought. "All through my life- even in the hardest of times - everything I said, I made sure it was done. I told myself I'd bring you up as princes in the halls of your forefathers, and no matter how much harassment I faced, I held on to my promise. Soon if you value what I did for you, you must now honour my word. All five of you must marry this woman" (Divakaruni 108).

Draupadi is shocked on hearing this and felt insulted. Here Draupadi seems very pathetic when she is ordered to marry the five Pandus. To keep foster harmony, Vyasa designed a special marital conduct for them and she is also blessed with a boon that each time she would be virgin again, here Chitra satirically comments that Panchali couldn't understand whether it was for her or for her husbands. It is very pitiable that she wants Arjun as her first husband as she is emotionally attached with him. When Panchali confronted with Bhishma she is

not very sure about his loyalties towards pandavas and thinks as he left Amba, he would do the same with them when time comes. It shows that she does not believe anyone blindly. She makes every decision very logically and critically. She wants to move from the palace of Hastinapur as she is not comfortable here. She wants a palace of her own, so Khandavprasth is given to Pandavas where they can make their own palace. With the help of Maya a unique palace is prepared and it was named as Palace of Illusions. Kunti's over possessiveness regarding her sons developed a kind of jealousy in Panchali. The Palace of Illusions is completely Draupadi's domain in which nobody can enter. When her husband marry other women she feels deplorable as she says "I did not win all my battles. My husband's took other wives: Hidimba, Kali, Devika, Balandhara, Chitrangada, Ulupi, Karunamati. How naive I had been to think I could have prevented it! Sometimes there were political reasons, but mostly it was male desire" (Divakaruni 151). But she had a different kind of confidence over her relationship with her husbands. "If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung" (Divakaruni 151).

Panchali enjoys her status and her palace with supremacy but that is not long lasting Dhyurdhana snatches everything from Panadavas in the game of dice including Draupdi. "I am a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhrishtdyumana. mistress of the great palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (Divakaruni 190). In the court nobody is to help her, her five husbands or elders of the Kuru dynasty. She is insulted physically as well as mentally, in both ways. Her esteem has been crushed and this trodden soul cursed the Kuru dynasty "all of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mother and wives will weep far more piteously than I have wept....."

After twelve years in forest and one year in disguise according to the agreement, when they returned to Hastinapur they were denied their share so war was obvious. Draupadi could stop the war but, "...I didn't want to heed anything that might keep me from the revenge i had waited it for so long." For eighteen days she witnessed the war very closely. Most of the warrior's kings and princess perished in this battle. Panchali also lost all her sons and she is

left with thousands of dead bodies in the battle field. In the end of the epic when pandavas decided to leave Hastinapur for their last ride together she reminds all those memories which were connected with Hastinapur. First time she left Hastinapur when she got her own palace, second time when that palace has been snatched and this time when everything has been ended. In the end she falls down while climbing the snow mountain and she realizes that her end is very close, at this time she recalls her past from beginning to the end. No one stopped for her. Throughout her life Draupadi performed her duties and in return she is rewarded with a life full of struggle. As Kavita Sharma says "What was her fault? She had saved her husbands, endured hardship with them, inspired them to fight for their rights and guided them to the throne. Perhaps her fault was that she had never surrendered her independence and had made the journey of life as their equal" (Sharma 107). She wanted love, affection, attention and a person as her guardian, lover and friend. Panchali married to five males but could not get these things in her own way. Pandavas gave her own palace but that palace proved an illusion for her life. Illusion that she is safe, an illusion that she is mistress of that palace, illusion that nobody can harm her in her personal domain.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus the story of this epic is retold from Draupadi's point of view in the novel. She observes and feels the behaviour of other persons whoever comes in her contact or affects her life in any way. The female characters like Kunti, Gandhari, Amba or Shikhandi were very powerful and strong ladies in their roles. Though they have to suffer a lot in this male dominating society, we cannot ignore them as subordinate characters in this epic. They play significant roles for changing the course of incidents in this epic. Marriage locks them in this patriarchal society and makes their feminine autonomy very limited. So the novel *The Palace of Illusions* is a enthralling account of our myths, history and ideal mythological women characters representing them as strong not weak personalities.

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