

A Revisionist Study Of Indian Epic With Special Reference To The Palace Of Illusions By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

Indian myths are not merely fables; they hold moral values and cater to different ways to find solace. The study of mythology is no longer seen as an escape from reality to a world full of fantasy but as a journey to the past in search of truth and reality.

The present study focuses on the retellings of Indian Mythology concerning the tales of Mahabharata and how these tales have undergone remarkable change over the years. Mythological works are inflexible, but nowadays, Postmodern writers select such characters from the Epic that need to be given due importance and try to narrate the whole story through the perspective of the selected characters. This provides a voice to characters unheard or unspoken in the Grand Narrative.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* portrays Draupadi as an authoritative, strong, stubborn, and independent woman who shares an equivalent platform with men rather than merely being pliant and submissive. Divakaruni's interpretation of the Epic provides an impartial platform, giving the character a fair opportunity to speak her mind. The struggles and challenges that Draupadi faced in her life are relevant for women even today.

Keywords – Myth, Revisionist writing, Indian Mythology, Retellings.

INTRODUCTION

An epic is a historical document written in a dynamic form so that it is relevant to humankind for all time. Ramayana or Mahabharata are live stories that we can relate to even today. It is genuine learning from the past because the basis of being human is that we can learn from somebody else's experience and engineer required course corrections in our lives, avoiding all those mistakes and errors. Indian Epics are not merely ethereal stories that are told to create a fantasy world among the readers. Instead, they depict a code of ethics and act as a guiding light for upcoming generations. Epic is a historical past that preaches how to lead a noble life. The stories, folktales and sagas not only delineate different problems and obstacles a person faces during his lifetime but also pave a path to inspire future generations to a meaningful life. The core value of Hindu culture lies in Vedic texts, Puranas, Kavyas and Epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. Particularly in India, the Epic acts as a credence table upon which cultural values, customs and norms are piled together. It influences and inspires people socially, psychologically, and culturally. Our Epics have been placed in the genre of Myth, which depicts something that is not true, but it is strongly believed that Myth is our historical past and the embodiment of absolute truth. The tendency of people to revisit the past again and again denotes that our epics are not merely a figment of imagination; instead, they showcase the elements of our history and steer the forthcoming generations on the right path. Mythology has always aligned itself to promote certain voices, viewpoints, and perspectives over others, which results in a dichotomy between the articulate and inarticulate voices. Women's voices are ignored and neglected to a certain extent in our Epics. Their stories are written in water and passed over in silence. Women's tales have always been composed and narrated by men. These stories present a set of rules showing how women must be and, more importantly, how they should not be. Numerous characters in our Epics share the same fate, even being a part of two different eras or yugas. Some of the representative cases are Sita, who was questioned and forced for Agni Pareeksha not once

but twice; Kaikeyi, who was denounced as an evil witch; Amba, who got rejected by her father, her lover and ultimately by her abductor.

Now-a-days, many writers try to take up characters, particularly women, whose voices get submerged in the Grand Narrative of the Epic and attempt to rebuild the character in a dominant and vocal one. Such retellings of the Epic try to subvert male voices, allowing readers to re-vision the whole story through female perspectives and experiences conveniently neglected earlier. Revisionism implies retelling a conventional or established narrative with significant variations that deliberately rescript the panorama shown in the original work. Postmodern Feminist writers endorse the revisionist approach to rediscovering the ancient text through female perspectives. The Postmodern Feminists used the technique of Revisionism to deconstruct the patriarchal notions that are viewed while reading our Epics. Lisa Tuttle has interpreted feminist theory as asking, "new questions from the old texts." She mentions the goals of feminist criticism as

1. To develop and unwrap a female tradition of writing,
2. To interpret the symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be pushed aside or ignored by the male perspective,
3. To rediscover old texts,
4. To analyse women writers and their writings from a female perspective,
5. To resist chauvinism in literature
6. To increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style.

Several feminist writers adopted the revisionism technique and employed it in their work. Some of them are Pratibha Ray, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Divakaruni wrote several novels, such as *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *A Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Queens of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), and *Oleander Girl* (2013), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). All the novels deal with the dilemmas and challenges individuals face.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's bestselling novel "The Palace of Illusion" is the story of the magnum opus, Mahabharata, retold from the viewpoint of Panchali. A common phenomenon among the ancient versions of Mahabharata is the dominance of the patriarchal system. The genre of retellings gives a fresh approach, simultaneously breaking the traditional vogue of mythology. The concept of retelling provides a vantage point for the reader through which one can observe the flip side of the same story. In the magnum opus, Draupadi is depicted as submissive and plaint who embodies self-immolation and tolerance. Divakaruni's version of Mahabharata bestows Draupadi with a contemporary and complex voice. The character Panchaali, who is mistreated, at times, abandoned and disgraced in the Grand Narrative of Mahabharata, is portrayed as a strong-headed and dominant character in this retelling. Divakaruni depicted Panchali as a warrior who does not tolerate the injustices done to her and a bruiser who similarly gives back the offence made to her. Divakaruni portrays Panchali as a rebel who is outspoken about the injustices done to her, and she ultimately acquires solace after the war of Kurukshetra. Divakaruni narrates the story of the Great Epic Mahabharata with a blend of her Revisionism and feministic approach, making this concoction a treat for the readers. In one of the interviews, on being asked about the relevance of retellings for 21st-century readers and how the female voices are represented in our epics, Divakaruni remarks, "The epics continue to be as powerful, if not more, in our time perhaps because so many other things in Indian society and global society are changing, shifting, and breaking down. Epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata touch us deep in our souls because they deal with timeless ethical issues. It is particularly important, for me, to reinterpret these epics in a way that highlights the women characters, who have so often been neglected in the original telling. These major women characters and how they have been interpreted by society since the original Ramayan and Mahabharata were written have shaped the psyche of Indians and diasporic Indians and often contributed to our attitude towards women. Sometimes these attitudes are negative or stifling towards women and put an unfair burden on them to be "perfect." It is important to re-examine these powerful characters and thus re-examine what we feel about the lives of women, the rights of women, and the value of women in our society."

The character of Draupadi has been woven beautifully and presented fascinatingly in Divakaruni's "Palace of Illusions." The story encircles the whole life of Panchali, right from her birth to her isolated childhood to her marriage and friendship with Krishna and her strange attraction towards Karna. Divakaruni re-conceptualise Panchali's image and persona. She remarks:

"I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of men's exploits. Better still, I could have one of them tell it herself, with 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 Panchali? It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*." (Author's note p xv).

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

Panchali and Drishtadyumna were both born out of the fire. Drishtadyumna got a warm reception, but the birth of Panchali was an unexpected gift for Drupad. However, the prophecy said about Draupadi that "she will change the course of history" (5). This created a sense of bafflement among the people at the time of the Yajna about how a princess could create history. Draupadi often hears her birth story from her nurse, Dhai Maa.

"You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm. Coughing from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari, grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling, too—" (Divakaruni 4)

Dhai Maa compares Draupadi with her brother in terms of their skin colour. Draupadi suffers from an inferiority complex due to her skin colour. She once gathered the courage to ask Krishna "if he thought that a princess afflicted with a skin so dark that people termed it blue was capable of changing history." (Divakaruni 8)

Draupadi has been denied many pleasures as a child and as a princess despite her royal status. She is also deprived of the paternal love that a child requires in her growing age. While providing proper care and attention to his son Drishtadyuman, who would avenge Drupad, Draupadi gets neglected and ignored by the royal clan.

"A gaunt, glittering man walked toward my brother and me as we stood hand in hand. He held out his arms—but for my brother alone. It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted. Dhri wouldn't let go of me, however, nor I of him. We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together." (Divakaruni,6)

Draupadi is treated differently from her brother, Drishtadyuman, because she is the uninvited girl child. She is lonely, isolated and abandoned. All her bitterness and discontentment grow day by day, and she gets frustrated with her father's palace.

"I turned the resentment I couldn't express toward my father onto his palace." (Divakaruni 6)

Draupadi never understands the patriarchal norms of society. A series of questions pop up in her mind - Why is she being deserted from a father's love and affection? Why are boys treated in a different manner than the girls?

Once, Draupadi resents the tutor's declaration that "women were the root of all the world's troubles." (Divakaruni 24). On her resentment, the tutor preaches Draupadi, the code of conduct for a Kshatriya woman, saying

"woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfill a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield." (Divakaruni, 26).

To this statement, Panchali utters the bias of Dhri's tutor and questions- "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (Divakaruni 26).

MARRIAGE AND COURTSHIP

Panchali's marriage was a diplomatic and political event. She married Arjuna after he won the challenge of piercing the fish's eye. Afterwards, she had to marry the other four brothers of Arjuna to keep Kunti's

behest. Marrying all five Pandavas was unethical and was not an accepted norm of the then society. But this marriage somehow was justified, to which Draupadi sarcastically comments

"To keep me chaste and foster harmony in the Pandava household, Vyasa designed a special code of marital conduct for us. I would be wife to each brother for a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively. During that year, the other brothers were to keep their eyes lowered when speaking to me. (Better if they didn't speak at all.) They were not to touch me, not even the tips of my fingers. If they intruded upon our privacy when my husband and I were together, they were to be banished for a year from the house-hold. In a postscript he added that he would give me a boon to balance the one that had landed me with five spouses. Each time I went to a new brother, I'd be a virgin again." (Divakaruni, 119-120).

Through the character of Draupadi, Divakaruni tries to sketch the annoyance of a woman for putting her in such a situation without her consent. Draupadi is well aware that without any fault of hers, she has been put into a difficult predicament that would impact her whole life. Also, her reputation would be tainted for the epic and the posterity. Draupadi's resentment is portrayed when she says she has not been free to choose whom she wants to be with and when. She has been treated as a commodity which can be passed among the five brothers according to a rule made for her.

"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).

GAME AND THE GAMBLE

Draupadi has been subjected to severe insults throughout her lifetime. Firstly, she has not been given due attention in her childhood. So, she places all her hopes for happiness in her married life. However, this also does not work out for Draupadi. When Yudhishthira loses his palace and kingdom to Kauravas in gambling, he uses Draupadi as bait for the next chance. Draupadi could not believe she could be gambled like this. She speaks

"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." (Divakaruni 190).

Divakaruni's Draupadi firmly stood before the Kauravas and announced the most significant war that would change the course of history. The ignominy she receives in the Kuru Sabha changes everything for her. She comes out of this situation being bolder and more assertive. In the disrobing episode depicted in *The Palace Of Illusions*, Panchaali is not affected by shame and embarrassment, unlike the original saga, where she is portrayed as a maiden in anguish and misery. Her boldness is depicted in the lines when she remarks.

"Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency." (Divakaruni 193).

Draupadi's hopes get shattered when she is used as a scapegoat merely for a gambling game. The lord of Dharma, Yudhishthir, put her honour at stake, and nobody came forward to rescue her, not even her other husbands.

"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. The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relation-

ship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies." (Divakaruni, 194-195)

The patriarchy continuously challenges Draupadi's fate. However, she stands as a rebel princess and a strong-headed queen who overcomes all her path's hardships, challenges, and struggles. She never surrenders in front of any adverse situation. She is not a victim but a conqueror.

CONCLUSION

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a reshaped version of Vyas's *Mahabharata*. No new character has been added or removed from the old epic. *The Palace of Illusions* tells the story of the yore in a different manner and viewpoint. It imparts feminist interpretations as the novel revolves around the protagonist, Draupadi. The protagonist's perspective has been boldly depicted in many incidences, and she emerges as a powerful character. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has raised many questions, thereby giving the readers an understanding of the significant episodes of the epic through female lenses.

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