



SEEKING SELFHOOD: DRAUPADI'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS.

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Abstract: Re-visioning a mythical character through the lens of contemporary sensibilities is a brave attempt. It gives not only a fresh outlook to the character but a different experience to the reader. Many modern writers have successfully re-told the ancient stories with their creative contributions. In the context of Indian epic, Draupadi is one of the favorite characters of writers. Her unconventional marriages and instrumental role in the fatal battle made her different from others. Though she has been re-interpreted by many, very few writers approached her without changing the original plot. This paper analyses the intricacies embedded in the characterization of Draupadi by Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Pallace Of Illusions*. The paper further argues that the audacity of Draupadi is the expression of her feminine strength and her complex relationships with Karna, Krishna and her palace are the unfathomability of her enigmatic psyche.

Key words: revisionist mythology, women characters, psychoanalytical study

I. INTRODUCTION

The binary concept of male domination and female subservience is one of the most dominant themes in the Indian Epics. The analysis of a woman's psyche and her brave attempts to survive in the domestic and social structure has been an all-time relevant topic for research. Woman in mythology has a fascinating and eventful life, initially fought with problems but ultimately endowed with peace and enlightenment. Among the women characters in mythology, Draupadi is very significant. She is a woman with an unbending will who speaks her mind in the world of men. Throughout history Draupadi has been remained an enigmatic woman of substance. Anu Simlote says, "Fragile, with a granite will, compassionate yet volcanic enough to reduce her enemies to ashes." (Reading the fifth Veda 227) She is one of the most misunderstood women characters in epics and other texts which privilege her only because she is polyandrous and possesses angry disposition. Draupadi's life is not only troubled by her conjugal concerns, but also the insurmountable structures of patriarchy. She bravely challenges patriarchal notions which are an affront to her womanhood and achieves remarkable success when she deconstructs patriarchy. Benu Verma observes, "As and when Draupadi has been interpreted differently from her classical trajectory of a mythic queen, she has represented new meanings for social and political lives of people. Many renderings on her life story especially some particular episodes in it are created, recreated, interpreted and constituted in the larger narrative universe" (57). Within the peripheries of patriarchy, Draupadi is exceptional, and singular, as Spivak called her as odd, unpaired and uncoupled. It is this singularity of Draupadi that is foregrounded in Mahaswetha Devi's *Dopdi* "by placing the tribal woman Dopdi first in a comradely activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape" (387)

Significantly Draupadi as a character has served as a creative impetus for many artists. Each of them has responded from either an emotional point of view or an ideological position. Subramanya Bharathi, the Tamil poet, in *Panchali Sabadam* sees the disrobing of Draupadi as the tribulation of Mother India, whose body has been 'invaded' and 'stripped' of dignity. Bharathi sensitized the nation to wake up and retaliate using Draupadi as a source of inspiration. He claims that she relied on her inner strength and strong convictions. On the contrary, *Yagnaseni-The story of Draupadi* written by Pratibha Ray is an anti-feminist work despite being told from a female

perspective. She endures hardship because of her gender. Pratibha Ray seems to perpetuate a stereotype. Draupadi's sad predicament is also portrayed by other writers. Amreeta Syam's poem *Kurukshetra* is an example.

Draupadi has five husbands - but she has none -
 She had five sons - and was never a mother ...
 The Pandavas have given Draupadi ...
 No joy, no sense of victory
 No honour as wife
 No respect as mother -
 Only the status of a Queen (Otd in Roy)

Barring Bharathi, the other representations seem to perpetuate a stereotype. Unlike these narratives, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace Of Illusions*, a reading of the epic story through the gendered eyes of Draupadi offers a fresh perspective. Draupadi wants to shape her own destiny though within the confines of epic narrative. This act of creativity responding to an earlier version of a story is deemed Re-visioning. Adrienne Rich, in her essay *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as re-Vision*, says 'Revision-the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival' (18)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi deconstructs previous narratives and narrative modes in order to foreground her 'self', a self which is complex and multi-layered. Her version of herself becomes a source of empowerment which finally leads to her emancipation. The process of empowerment begins with the validation of material itself. That is, the life and experiences as a woman. Here Draupadi initially challenges the male dictum and celebrates her femininity.

This paper analyses three levels of Draupadi's self-empowerment; (1)her unique kinship with Krishna, (2)her secret admiration for Karna and (3)her obsession with Palaces of constructions. She is in a relentless search for selfhood since her unusual birth. Though it is jeopardized by the patriarchal constructions, she redeems herself in the final analysis. Her emancipation results from transcending the negative impact of false constructions.

Draupad's life is constructed around a dual struggle; an attempt to harmonize different, conflicting roles into one stable identity on the one hand and her constant fight for attention on the other. Her struggles to balance her different roles according to the requirements of specific situations make her audacious but her complex and contradictory nature make her unique. She attaches a special importance to the men in her life. She influences and is influenced by these men, especially the unattainable lover of her dreams Karna, her enigmatic friend Krishna and her heroic husbands. Her deep bonding with her twin-brother Dhri saves her from the deep despondency of neglected childhood. His patience at her audacity, composure at her indignation and his support to her quest for learning strengthen their relationship.

The epic narration of Krishna – Draupadi relationship is steeped in divinity and devotion. On the contrary, Divakaruni's Draupadi sees Krishna not as a savior but, as a friend and one who really fathoms the intricacy of her complex mind. His visits mitigate her abhorrence for the lonely life in her father's palace. Even she wonders they share a similarity as they are both dark-skinned. Draupadi realizes how much Krishna is important in her life during the *yagna*. "When I thought you had died, I wanted to die too."(166). In her final journey she again realizes that all men in her life value their virtue more than hers. There is only one love that exists in the world-her love for Krishna. Krishna clears her confusion and ignorance and gives her salvation.

Her conjugal life teaches her that a woman does not have the choice or freedom from a polygamous wedding. Her freedom was her curse. It was not Arjun who married Draupadi. He won the difficult test so as she chose him as her husband. But later she was degraded by Arjun who remains silent when Kunthi asked his brothers to share her. Yudhishtira further insults her by carrying out their mother's wish by treating her as if she were an object won in a contest. Her marriage requires tremendous self-control and a great deal of adjustment. She had to bear the wifely responsibilities of five great heroes with equanimous temper. "Dreaded or desired or even demanded by the male, virginity is the highest form of the feminine mystery"(Beauvoir 206). The virginity boon bestowed on Draupadi preserves her nobility both in the epic and in the novel. But she sees her polyandry as an injustice to her self-esteem. In turn she yearns for a gift of forgetting as she feels the virginity boon benefits her husbands than her. "If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting" (120)

Draupadi breaks the stereotypes of womanhood through her admiration for Karna, the arch-enemy of her husbands. She empathizes with Karna, the quintessential tragic hero who has suffered rejection all through his life.

The pain of rejection is not new to Draupadi also - her unwanted birth, Arjuna's acceptance of his mother's whimsical advice of sharing, her heroic husbands' numbness when she is humiliated and so on. Her secret affair with Karna is no longer illicit. The undefined attraction to Karna is engendered in her mind long before she meets him. But she was forced to insult Karna and to reject him at her *swayamvar* only to save the life of her dear brother. The equanimous and dignified temper of the crestfallen Karna at her insult brings her mind close to him. He gradually becomes an unfulfilled desire in her as a mode of her retaliation against her polygamous wedding. Her repugnance of being a 'communal cup' (120) in the hands of men triggers her yearning to be the wife of a single man. Karna is more of her imagination. She sees him as an outlet to placate her stormy mind. "An insidious voice inside me said, Karna would never have let you suffer like this."(99)

Beauvoir observes, "It is only by a negative relation to her that man is rendered productive in his ideal endeavors. Negative reaction with woman can make us infinite"(240) Draupadi's unintentional hurts and mistaken response to her humiliation bring him closer to her. Karna loves her though he gets angry at her insults. "I told myself I hated her [...] but I was only fooling myself" (276)

Thus the tragic hero; orphaned by mother, insulted by society, cursed by teacher and tricked by gods and the fiery woman, unwelcomed by father, subjugated by society, betrayed by husbands and humiliated by her enemies share a mysterious and secret bonding for each other. Rational reading of a text sans of belief in supernatural matters, questions 'supernatural' and tries look for rational explanations of supernatural events based on rational clues in the text itself or taking into account traditional rational explanations of them. Such rational reading of Draupadi and her relationship with men, confers on her evolutionary psychological interpretations. Bandopadhyay argues that she is an example of woman's evolutionary psychology in full splendor. But Divakaruni's Draupadi seems to contradict it. Draupadi's search for her own self is the fundamental search for womanhood, born and brought up in a hegemonic patriarchy. In a story of power, politics and carnage the true portrayal of characters shorn of their divinity and virtuous status gives them a façade of ordinariness. Hence viewing Draupadi as an ordinary woman with extra ordinary will power elevates her to an unparalleled personifying womanhood. Simultaneously she becomes a site for affirming and challenging the ideologies of patriarchy as she is victim of it and a person who wishes to free herself from it. "[...] I was surprised at how angry it made me feel-and how helpless."(120)

Body has been an instrument of subjugation since ancient time. But Draupadi transforms it into an instrument of power. This process of empowerment has been powerfully narrated by Lakshmi Kannan in her poem *Draupadi*.

She has done it
Has offended the supreme male
Into a sudden silence
By her terrible nakedness (212)

In *The Palace of Illusions*, the episode of Draupadi's disrobing is a fine example of objectification of womanhood and her pugnacious response to it. When she is forced to expose her body to the men around her she is reduced to a mere object. In fact, she is more wounded by the indifference of her husbands than the lusty eyes of men around her. "Let them stare at my nakedness. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency" (193)

She even questions the legality of the transaction when she was pledged like a chattel in the game of dice. Nobody answers her question if Yudhistir actually still has the right to loose her after he had already lost himself. So she chooses to give up her traditional femininity to restore her challenged dignity. "I will not comb it, until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (194)

Thus she becomes both a victim of patriarchy and a threat to patriarchy. She is at once a 'palimpsest and a contradiction' (Spivak 388) Draupadi's fiery temperament is triggered by her urge for self-esteem. The patriarchal conservative dogmas shackle her attempts of self-realization. But she keeps herself unwilling to be indoctrinated with the stereotypes of femininity. "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?"(26). It shows the invigorating feminism of Draupadi. Her experiences of rejection also accelerate her audacity. Ever since her birth she has been pushed to the background without being respected or recognized. "It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show his people."(6)

Domestic site is where the identities of womanhood are constructed deconstructed and reconstructed regularly. "Feminine magic was profoundly domesticated in the patriarchal family. Woman gave society the

opportunity to integrate cosmic forces in to it.”(Beauvoir 223) Ever since her childhood Draupadi dreams of possessing her own palace. She was seeking a space to establish her identity by rootedness and control over her life. Her search for ‘the’ palace is indeed her search for herself. “[...] my palace would be like no other” (113)

Vijaya Ramasamy in her introductory essay of the book, *Women and Work in Pre Colonial India*, observes, ‘In her management of her domestic space, a woman does not merely assert her agency but also achieves control and power’. (15) For Draupadi, constructing her identity happens through the exploration of possibilities of her palace. it is not merely an architectural edifice but an embodiment of her empowerment. There she gets the much deserved space and glory. She believes her identity is not primarily constituted in relation to the expectations of others. Bhishma tells her,” You no longer care what people think of you and that has given you a great freedom”(180). She appears visibly liberated when she becomes the mistresses of her palace. This gave her sense of emancipation.This helps her to forgive the perfidies of Arjuna (his other marriages).This emboldens her to win over her astute mother in law. “[...] and the palace of illusion was my domain, and she accepted this ” (150)

Her palace serves yet another important function by offering her an escape through fantasy and protects her from all emotional abuse and disenchantments.So the taking over of her palace by Duryodhana was more like an act of shattering of her ‘self’.The palace also is a catalyst in connecting the imaginative inner space and domestic outer space of Draupadi. Her efforts to construct a magical palace and her ability to comprehend the potency of the female self lead her to a self-sufficient and self-engaged individual.Thus her palace becomes a transformational space- a place of performance and a site of resistance.

It is clear then that Draupadi’s obsession with the palace is actually her keen scrutiny of the complex phenomenon called selfhood. The other palaces built for her besides being physical places which restrict and restrain her, they also represent the belittling constructions of her ‘self’ by ideological possessions such as patriarchy. The palace of her imagination represents her vast expansive self, freeing itself from all molding structures which issues out of her false consciousness which crystallize in ideological possessions such as patriarchy. In the final analysis, Draupadi ascending to heaven with Krishna and Karna on either side is both a spiritual and secular triumph which involve both her soul and body. In keeping with the name ‘Krishnaa’, she becomes the boundless,unnamable and indescribable self.

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