



THE DOMESTIC SPHERE AND THE PROPAGATION OF PATRIARCHY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

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Abstract: In contemporary times, the re-tellings of ancient epics in India can be seen to be prominent among many writers of the 20th and the 21st century. A prominent female writer among such a group of writers is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The epics of the Mahabharat and Ramayan has been a constant commentary on India in the popular imagination throughout the years. It is the ability of such re-tellings to delve into serious concerns of the contemporary society that makes such fiction relevant. In the Novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, authored by Divakaruni, King Draupad's family is at the centre of an authorizing power that dictates the traditions and views of the society. The women who had previously stayed in the periphery of the narrative gains power through Divakaruni's narration of the old epic from Draupadi's perspective and unmask the very role played by the familial space in propagating inequality between the sexes.

Index Terms – women, gender, family, power politics

I. INTRODUCTION

In such a literary environment of adaptations of ancient materials in the 20th and 21st centuries, the popular imagination of the epics become able vehicles to analyse the contemporary society. Such works have the ability to undercut hidden political or social concerns of human civilization through the mode of fiction writing. The original epic of the Mahabharat that takes place between the 9th and 8th century BCE is a pregnant text which has inspired multifarious works of art and literature and modern fiction is no exception. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a 20th century re-telling of the ancient epic of Mahabharat. In a divergence from the old imagination of the epic, the novel by Divakaruni published in 2008 has Draupadi as the narrator. Family played a very important role in the lives of the women in the ancient times and even at present in India. As such, women as individuals had hardly any voice as an individual in the patriarchal society. Feminism is an effort to bring the attention the inequalities perpetuated by patriarchy and to rectify the neglected stance of women's individuality in the society. The word feminism was coined by the French philosopher Charles Fourier in 1837. Broadly speaking, the first wave of Feminism between 1830s to 1920s witnessed the suffrage movement, the second wave from 1920s concerns about seeking social equity and legal rights for women. The third wave also attempts to fight for the equal rights of women. Literature has always been integral to social criticism. And through approaches like Elaine Showalter's 'gynocriticism', women's subdued voices in literature are given due prominence. With the help of literature the contemporary society can examine the very claims that institutions like patriarchy promote in the societal, spatial, geographical, political and psychological space. Family propagates patriarchy in insidious ways and shape the position of the women as disadvantageous rendering womanhood to be an undesirable position. The article is about how women are rendered powerless against the implicit forces working inside patriarchal families. Such forces exert considerable influence in shaping a society that is not egalitarian.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based on the readings of critical texts on feminism and bodies of writings that deal with the marginalised condition of women. It has adopted a qualitative method with secondary sources and employs tools of literary criticism along with cultural reading of the Indian domestic sphere and refers to prominent literary theorists.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

The article shall try to analyze the role of the domestic sphere and the society in general in propagating patriarchy in Divakaruni's Novel *The Palace of Illusions*.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article draws mainly on Feminist theory. Feminism as it began in Europe wants equality between the genders in all spheres of life. The first wave feminism that advocated for equal rights challenged officially mandated, gender-based inequalities, particularly restrictions on women's voting and property rights. While the second wave feminism that began in the United States and spread all over Europe brought into the spotlight the unofficial inequalities, such as domestic gender roles and standards of beauty. Feminist literary criticism that came into being due to the women's movement of the 1960s, recognized the significance of the image of women promoted in literature. Thus, women's movements have always been crucially concerned with books and literature. In the 1970s, Feminist criticism focused mainly on exposing the mechanisms of patriarchy. Then the concerns shifted from attacking male versions of the world in narratives to exploring the inner world of the female. A new canon was constructed by giving prominence to women's writings. Feminist critics re-oriented the study of women's experience and challenged the representation of women as the "Other" and examined various power relations. In the 20th and 21st centuries there has been a surge of women writing fiction and their criticism has also adopted various methods of analysis through Psychoanalysis, Marxism and Deconstruction etc. In the Indian context, the essence of democracy has not been fully realized and the rights and identities of women are still to be valued. So, through literary writings the women writers try to realize the issues inherent in the Indian patriarchal society.

FAMILY AND SOCIETY AS THE PERPETRATOR OF PATRIARCHY

A process of "Othering" of the women takes place in the novel *Palace of Illusions* by Divakaruni leading to disenfranchisement of the women in the novel. Beauvoir draws similarities between the process of slavery and the marginalised condition of women. In patriarchy as well as slavery one section defines the "Other" and the "Other" submits to that foreign view and internalises it. The narrator of the novel is Draupadi who is never allowed the choice to be "valiant" or learn "politics". As Simone de Beauvoir quotes George Bernard Shaw, "The white American relegates the black to the rank of shoe-shine boy, and then concludes that blacks are only good for shining shoes". (Beauvoir, 33). There is also a lack of solidarity between the women even within the family. Women like Sulochana and her family could accept men like Draupadi's brother Dhri despite being divinely born and respect his destiny as an avenger. But they detest women born with a similar destiny to usher change in the world. She is restricted to the fortress of her father and the physical restriction is also a restriction on her mental abilities. Since a son is needed for the throne and no female child can be the King and win battles, Draupadi becomes a baggage to King Drupad. This is a prominent reason for not wanting a female child in context of the wider society. Dhri is the "son one asks for" who shall bring the vengeance one desires and the "unwanted baggage" of a girl child is Draupadi. The daughter is unwanted because she is not empowered. She cannot fulfil his goal for revenge. Just as women weren't allowed to study or given a platform to realize their potential.

The physical space of her father's home confines Draupadi both physically and psychologically. The women of the Panchaal royal family isn't allowed to go outside the palace among the commoners. Her father's palace held her like a prisoner. Metaphorically it also means that the tight grip of her father's ideals suffocate her similar to the 'unimaginative' palace that her father built against the very 'imaginative' mind of the girl. Similarly, women and girls are taught not to breach boundaries set by society from a very young age. The best way to control their mind in order to prevent them from transcending boundaries is to put bars on them physically. Enclosed in the small space, Draupadi hates the thick grey slabs of the walls, the narrow windows and dimly lit corridors. The palace neither has trees nor flowers. King Drupad believes that trees and flowers are a hindrance to safety which shows his controlling and overprotective nature. Draupadi as a child displays her rebellious attitude within such confines by promising herself that her own house would be totally different mirroring her deepest being reflected in myriads of colors.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is another area of the domestic sphere where hypocrisy is maintained regarding the genders. The society in the novel has never heard of a woman with more than one husband and the *Shastras* do not consider women with respect who has a 'precarious' nature. It is unacceptable for a woman to commit polyandry. Yet men sleep with a different wife each day of the week in the novel although for political alliances. The society is constructed on such worldviews that puts the women in a unfavorable position in the marriage. The Pandavas had many other wives other than the primary wives: Hidimba, Kali, Devika, Balandhara, Chitrangada, Ulupi, Karunamati are among many. Duryodhan is also married multiple times including a very young wife. Dhristarastra takes one of her maids as his mistress when Gandhari fails to give birth to his children. In a polygyny Madri is inevitably favoured by Pandu over Kunti although both perform the duties of a faithful wife through all kinds of hardships. In a final act of rejection of Kunti, her husband dies by embracing Madri and Madri decides to kill herself. Kunti, although devastated does not follow suite and decides to raise the five princes including Madri's sons as her own. Surrounded by enemies and grave dangers, she is determined to get the children their birth rights. Although the swayamvar makes it seem like the woman has the

power to choose the groom in marriage, Draupadi's swayamvar is monopolized by her father and her husbands. The use of the *Kindhara* bow to select her groom is not reasonable as she is not a kingdom to be won with prowess. The role of a king and husband loses all its demarcations in such a set up. The marriages usually are more of a political alliance for the benefit of the males in the life of Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi.

RIGHTS OF THE WOMEN AS INDIVIDUALS

The women in such a politically disadvantageous position are rendered helpless against the conventions of the society. The act of Yudhishthir gambling Draupadi away in a game of dice affirms their view of women in which, "The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave" (Divakaruni, 190). With her education in law and study of scriptures, she tries to resist the injustice of being gambled away and states that Yudhishthir no longer had any jurisdiction over her after losing himself in the gamble. But her honour is called "false modesty" because Duryodhan and others view her marriage to the five husbands as a shameless conduct and thus consider her free to be ravished. She begs for support like Amba does in front of the crowded court but even her husbands turn a blind eye.

Princess Amba's story also poses the questions that if someone holds her hand against her will, like Bheesma had done, does it make her the property of the perpetrator. Bheesma blatantly refuses to protect Amba's honour due to the promise he made to his father. His ruins the life of Amba and farther forces her to commit suicide. Even a princess of her stature isn't safe in such a society. In her next birth as Shikhandi, she is determined to avenge herself which no man dared to do. She advises Draupadi that a man cannot avenge her honor meaning strong women cannot always rely on men for their empowerment because the society as a whole contributes to the making of it.

While inside the household of Kunti, Bheem's little trick gives Kunti the opportunity to keep the brothers united and make them share their wife like a commodity "equally" among them disregarding Draupadi's opinion. Yudhishthir claims that Draupadi can either be a respectable daughter-in-law of Hastinapur or accept death. She shall also be shamed by society while the scantily clad dancers, sura, opium, gambling in the sabha of Duryodhan in which the Pandavas take part in are not considered with public disgust. She is discussed like a property with the outcomes in terms of profit and loss for themselves. Draupadi is determined that she will never kill herself even if her husbands leave her alone as she is angered by her helplessness. She has no right in her in-laws' nor will be welcomed at her father's house at her time of need. Neither did she have the choice to remain unmarried. Besides, given the boon that she'll become virgin each time she goes to a new brother, yet she has no choice as to whom she sleeps with and about the time like the men had. She expresses her grief at her helplessness as, "Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (Divakaruni, 120). And, "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). None of the husbands stand up for her, instead Arjun directs his frustration at her that he cannot express towards his elder brothers and mother for having to share a wife. Kunti's lack of sympathy for Draupadi also causes a lot of political turmoil inside the household between the two women. Draupadi is made to suffer in the kitchen and made to sleep in a torn mat by the feet of the Pandavas. Although both of the women care for the Pandavas, they have insidious ways to do that and that leads to the harming of the other in some way or other. Since the women cannot directly influence the society, they exert power by manipulating the men in their lives which is defined as the 'feminine way' by Krishna in the novel.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PARENTS

A family cannot exist without the parents. But the concern is at what point do the family or inheritance of traditions become a hindrance to development of individuality in the children. Dhritarashtra's parental love makes the Kaurava's to turn towards evil. Drona on the other hand, out of love for his son Aswatthama gets on the side of the Kauravas. Drona, by taking advantage of Ekalavya's respect and love, asks for Guru Dakshina in the form of his thumb to achieve his ulterior motive. While Bheesma's parental love turns him inactive in crucial moments. Dhri is also a victim of patriarchal burden. He is a gentle man and has harsh expectations laid on him by his father and society for being the 'Son'. It pains him to think that Drupad admires Arjun and wishes Arjun for a son because of his fighting abilities. Draupadi fiercely defends her brother who gives up his entire life for King Drupad's senseless revenge. Finally, it is the anger that the fathers carry within them, which becomes the sole reason for their births and even contributes to the great war of Kurukshetra.

ARTIFICIALITY OF THE NARRATIVES

The artificiality in the conventions of the society is also seen in the mode of Story-telling that is explored in the novel. Oral story telling has been one of the most fascinating traditions in India. It is stories that save Draupadi from the loneliness she suffers at her father's house. The stories testify how the myths created through stories belong to men, as created by men, mostly to keep the men in charge. The old scriptures create binaries attributed to the sexes and contain myths that are created in order to justify male domination and superiority over women. Stories told in such manner also makes women see the world through the eyes of men and internalize their own inferiority. In the novel, it is also through stories that Draupadi tries to rediscover herself from her very undesirable identity of being Draupad's daughter. She likes to tell stories of her birth over and over again because those make her feel special. She also makes up fancy names for herself like "Offspring of Vengeance", or "the Unexpected One", because she absolutely abhors the name she is given after her father. So, narratives have the power, but they are not used to empower women. Instead they are used to justify and legitimize male dominance. Their biased nature is again highlighted as Dhri is trying to paint his father favorably in his versions of their stories. There is always a kind of promise of freedom that is supposedly on the other end of marriage for women. Thus, a mere transfer of power happens from father to husband and the empowerment of women is deferred with marriage. Getting married is the sole goal given to women so that physical beauty and following the social conducts to the utmost becomes most important. Throughout the novel, Draupadi is never reluctant to display her fragility through her emotions. Thus, her intention is never to be a "man" by wanting to learn, by demanding her freedom, by being opinionated. She does, like Dhri exhibits ambiguous qualities that undermines the dichotomy of the subordinated and the dominant sex as determined

by the society .Later ,we see that she has a good eye for matters of governance and provides advice to Yudhishthir in tricky judgments . Yet she is careful to offer her counsel only in private because for being a woman, her judgements will not be considered seriously.

EDUCATION INSIDE THE FAMILY

Krishna is the only one who brings news to her that would be considered unfit for women to hear thus showing a clear demarcation between what is taught to boys and girls in the family . So ,education, knowledge and conducts are also gendered in the society. Conducts of a warrior, bringing honor to his family and forefathers are the lessons taught to Dhristadyumna , while the tutor and their father always discourage Draupadi from attending those lessons in fear of making her too “hard headed” and “argumentative” or , “too manlike”. According to such views , women cannot be argumentative, or that they do not have the mental capacity to take part in such discourses. Dhri also thought that she should learn the prescribed, restrictive laws taught to girls. He accuses women of being “cursed” with a short memory and being of impulsive nature. Draupadi in her hunger to know about the mysterious world learns to eavesdrop because people never tell her anything worth knowing. She refuses to give up the lessons with her brother , no matter who disapproves. Society creates biased notions and proceeds to cast both men and women into those standards forcefully. Their Tutor of scriptures feel that as men should stay away from women whom he considers as the path to ruin. Draupadi resents the tutor’s declaration that women are the root of all evil. He declares that woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the men in her life. Her identity is solely reliant on the men with their endeavors. Draupadi decides to do much more in her life than that. Although she taught only to dress properly and etiquette for the ladies ,she claims to teach her sons to be survivors instead of teaching them to fight in war for glory . According to her, marrying five husbands and making them the ruler of the entire continent of Bharat cannot be enough of a goal for a woman. Besides, Vyasa tells her that her own nature, pride, temper and vengefulness will accelerate the process for the war. Vyasa warns her to “hold back her question”, to “ hold back her laughter” and finally even when pushed to her limits of tolerance, to “hold back her curse” . So, she has to adopt “inaction” as a response to injustice she is subjected to in order stop the catastrophe. This suggests that only the women are held responsible to uphold the peace and harmony in society.

Finally , it is also a story of a woman longing for love and a home. Draupadi is surprised to find that inside her are the very “silly” , “immature puerile” hopes of her maids . She gradually starts to recognize traces of herself in the women around her ,suffering while enclosed in their unimaginative lives both physically and mentally. They do not even recognize nor want to escape the narrow world patriarchy has created for them. She gradually begins to find solidarity with other women from various section of society and age including Kunti .

CONCLUSION

From our analyses of the novel by Divakaruni, we see that women are rendered incapable of taking their stance in various insidious ways in patriarchal societies. It is a system where along with physical dominance ,the domination is psychological propagated by the family during the very early years of life. There is also the predicament of how a woman will be treated depending on how a woman conducts herself. She is put on a pedestal and judged acutely for the same acts done by their male counterparts. Culturally , the enticements vary in Western and the Indian Sphere for the behaviour of woman. They are taught to behave in particular manners. Works, knowledge, education are gendered in such societies increasing the demarcations between men and women. The very environment that patriarchy creates is hostile to women who wants to choose different paths in life. Women aren’t allowed to be ambitious outside the confines set by society. Men create myths to support the notion of masculine superiority and they discard any potential of ambiguity . Such myths create docile beings out of women and undermine any understanding that tries to question that authority. Such principles are biased . It is important to note that it is not just men who take part in the building of such a world but most women in the novel also deny other women the authority to chose anything other than “feminine”. It is as Toril Moi says , “It is after all patriarchy, not feminism which has always believed in a true female/feminine nature :the biologism and essentialism which lurk behind the desire to bestow feminine virtues on all female bodies necessarily plays into the hands of the patriarchs” (Moi, 109) . Physical restrictions prescribed by the family thus play a great role in restricting the female mind and disenfranchising them .It leads to the internalization of the masculine world view and the women start to view themselves as the “ Other” . Thus the powerful presence of parents and family impact the construction of society in a negative way in the novel. They are greatly responsible for shaping the ways and minds of the children. The child will act according to the environment created around it and so family becomes a forces acting inside the domestic sphere which binds the women to a constructed confinement both physically and psychologically.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mary Wollstonecraft emphasized on women's right to education in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* talks about the unprivileged condition of women to pursue their ambitions. Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* extensively discusses the treatment of women throughout history. She also talks about the myth created by men to support and promote patriarchy in society. Toril Moi talks about the constructed nature of the genders in "Female, Feminine, Feminist". She says that one cannot be Feminist just because she is a female and vice versa. In the Introduction to *The Feminist Reader* by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore history of Feminism has been summarised substantially where we get a glimpse of the very arduous journey women had to undertake in the fight for equality. In an essay in the same anthology, "The True Story of How I became My Own Person" Rosalind Cower talks about the importance of writing fiction by women. Women have been for the most part of history kept in the periphery of literary writing. As such, the concerns in literature has been from the point of view of the men. In the politics of power, women have been misrepresented and pushed to the margins in the dominantly masculine body of writing. The literary canon consists mainly of writings by men. Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana: A Treatise on Women's Suffering*, is an essay written by Shailaja B. Wadikar that reviews the original treatise written by Tarabai Shinde. CT Mohanty has extensively discussed how Western feminists have completely discarded the nuances of Indian society and the role of women as such. In "the Image of the Indian woman in the Mahabharata", Kalyanov talks about the presentation of women in Indian epics. Apart from the physical attributes of women described in the epic it also explores the presentation of the character of women with her "wisdom", purpose sacrifice and straightforward nature" about how the women maintained other active and independent role despite being within prescribed boundaries.

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