



Reimagining Draupadi: A Feminist Perspective on *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a novel that challenges the epic's usually patriarchal representation of women by reimagining the Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view. The study examines Draupadi's persona as a strong, independent woman who opposes and questions the social mores of her deeply patriarchal society. Through an examination of Divakaruni's feminist, cultural, and psychoanalytic interpretations of the Mahabharata, this essay makes the case that the author portrays Draupadi as a feminist symbol who triumphs over the constraints of a society controlled by men. The book gives the female characters of the epic a fresh voice by portraying Draupadi as a brave ruler and sharing her ideas and experiences with the reader. To provide light on Draupadi's hardships, sacrifices, and victories, the research delves deeper into her ties with other figures, such as Lord Krishna, Kunti (the mother of the Pandavas), and her five spouses. This study seeks to demonstrate how Divakaruni's reinterpretation of Draupadi's character acts as a potent representation of feminism and opposes the traditional patriarchal conventions of the Indian society depicted in the original epic through a thorough analysis of the novel.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divyakaruni is an acclaimed Indo-American writer. *The Palace of Illusions* portrays the story of *Mahabharata* from the view point of Draupadi, who has been presented as a heroic sovereign in the epic. The novel puts the reader in a world that is old and new, magical and real, both at the same time. The novel is written in first person, giving Draupadi's own thoughts on her own life. She has been illustrated as the epitome of Feminism, who breaks free from the chains of male chauvinist society. It is a story of friendship, betrayal, and revenge. Chitra Banerjee further investigates the issue of female and male identity and the ruthless employment of man's social power over a woman.

In this paper, I would like to focus on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel centering around the life of Draupadi, depicted as a feminist questioning the norms of her society which is severely patriarchal. The novel begins with Draupadi (princess of the kingdom of Panchaal) recalling the events leading to her birth through the mouth of her Dhairya Ma who calls her the "Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (Divakaruni, 11).

Chitra Banerjee Divyakaruni has analyzed *Mahabharat* from a feministic, cultural, and psycho-analytic aspect. The women characters of this epic have been presented as an ideal epitome of patience and tolerance. Also, women were kept at the bottom of the social ladder. Their existence was neglected, suppressed, and undermined. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the story of an extraordinary woman, Draupadi. *Mahabharat* has been revised and redefined. The female characters Have been given a new voice, by making

them strong, stubborn, and independent. The novel centers on the life of Draupadi, the daughter of the king of Panchal. The book represents Mahabharat from Draupadi's perspective.

The original epic tells us that Draupadi's birth story is laden with motifs that indicate that she was responsible for the peripheral conditions into which she was pushed. In her previous birth, she repeatedly asked Shiva five times for a husband. She asked Shiva the very same question five times, and Shiva granted her a wish each time. That is how she ended up having five husbands. The author emphasizes that she was destined to be the wife of the five Pandava brothers. But Divakaruni redefined her image as a strong determined persona. The book is the epitome of feminism. Divakaruni states "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 palace in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision, that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*" (Divyakaruni, 15).

King Drupada, ruler of Panchal, was one of the most prosperous rulers of Bharat. Draupadi's father, Drupada wanted to avenge his humiliation against his friend-turned arch enemy Drona. Drupada merely prayed for a son who would kill Drona, it was as if the gods had other plans. It needed a central link that was missing in Drupada's strategy for a son. That link was Draupadi who allied the Pandavas and Drupada possible. The birth of Draupadi was marked with revenge. The symbolism of her emergence for the sacrificial fire is very significant because it signifies her all-consuming desire to destroy her enemies. Furthermore, it forebodes the ensuing conflict between right and wrong.

Draupadi was known by several names- "Yojangandha". She had a blue lotus fragrance, "Yagnyaseni" because she was born out of the sacrificial fire, and "Krishna" because she was dark-skinned, fiery, and bold-eyed and had long, luscious black hair. She grew up to become a beautiful woman who decided the fate of the Kuru clan. Both as a child and as an adult, she remembered how her father was initially hesitant to welcome her. She grew up with a lack of trust and faith in her father. She came with the prophecy that "she will change the course of history" which was confusing since she was a "girl". Nobody was able to understand what the prophecy meant. During her childhood, she was kept in a different palace, separated from others. She never received the proper amount of love and affection. The entire royal family ignored her and treated her differently. All because she was "the unexpected one". Draupadi's swayamvar was organized by King Drupada. This shows the cynical side or aspect of the society. It was a competition to test the skills of the country's most celebrated warriors. The participants had to pierce the eye of the metal fish using the heaviest bow in existence, Kindhara. Draupadi felt like a prized trophy, which was used to lure Arjun to avenge Drona. She felt like a bait that was used to hunt.

The book talks about how Draupadi was a rebellion from the very beginning. She did not comply with the patriarchal norms and wanted to bridge the unequal gap between men and women. The male chauvinistic society expected Draupadi to follow and fit into its set conventional norms. She was time and again reminded of her of her gender. She was repeatedly reminded that as a Kshatriya woman, she must support her father, brother, husband, and sons. Women around her constantly reminded her of the so-called noble ways of a princess. She was given lessons in singing, dancing, painting, and sewing. The lessons were painful for her. She felt trapped in those lessons. She instead craved education that would teach her about the world of politics, governance, and the world. Draupadi stands apart from the other characters. She was a true princess who raised herself from all hardships and challenges.

2. Exploring Draupadi's Relationships

2.1 LIFE BEFORE MARRIAGE TO THE PANDAVAS

Before her marriage to the Pandavas, Draupadi was known as the daughter of King Dhruvad. Draupadi was born out of fire along with her brother. She was born to change the history of Bharat. Throughout her childhood, she frequently asked her nursemaid to reiterate the tale of her birth. She firmly believed that her life's purpose was to change the course of history. A dark-skinned girl, she was fixed on fulfilling her destiny and therefore tried to attain all the possible education and knowledge that she thought would be useful to fulfill the prophecy. As a child, she was devoid of affection from her father and his queen. She grew up to be an impatient, hasty, and short-tempered girl who kept on rejecting the plausible notions and norms held for women in society. She was an imaginative person who dreamed of having a place of her own in society and an adventurous future. The idea of five husbands first came into the picture when she visited a sage in an attempt to know more about her future. However, this Prophecy was rejected straightforwardly by her Dharm Ma as she explained that the patriarchal society only allows the male gender to take up several Queens however a woman is only limited to a single man.

2.2 RELATIONSHIP WITH KRISHNA

Draupadi was customarily given lessons in singing, dancing, playing music, and drawing. These lessons according to Draupadi were dreadful and painful. With each teaching, Draupadi felt that this "education" was tightening around her. The education that she craved was the one that would give her insight into the world and its politics. Krishna is considered as the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu. He is the Lord of protection, compassion, and love. He was the only person who prepared her for a bird in some future by giving her lessons on the political conditions of Bharat he kept a close watch on Draupadi as she was the one who would be responsible for bending the Gyre of time. In Draupadi's Swayamvar organized by King Dhruvad, she felt like a bait that was used to hunt the Lion. Dhruvad wanted Draupadi to get married to Arjun and therefore Draupadi was the bait and Arjun was the Lion in this case. Krishna was the one who convinced Draupadi that her real happiness was in getting married while her father's happiness was in seeking revenge. He convinced her to get married for her and her family's happiness. During the infamous Vastraharan, Draupadi deals with the frightening attempt to harm women's belongingness and shame of exposing by remembering her friend Lord Krishna who advised that no one can shame you if you don't allow it. He takes care of her dignity with his divine and magical powers, and miraculously Draupadi's saree is extended into endless force. His love for Draupadi was like a balm. It soothed her pain. It was like the moonlight over a landscape and provided warmth and love- something she always craved for. He was her protector.

2.3. RELATION WITH KUNTI

Kunti was one of the principal female protagonists of *Mahabharata*, who was known as the mother of the Pandavas and Karna. She was described to be beautiful, intelligent, and shrewd. Kunti played an essential role in Draupadi's life. Her action was the foundation of the marriage. The tale places Kunti in the center as she was the one who put forward her voice for such an eventful marriage to take place. Kunti had ordered her five sons to share "whatever they had got" and therefore Draupadi got married to all five sons. "We also see her attitude towards her sons and her constant efforts to keep the Pandavas under her own thumb. She asked them to keep the honor of her words and therefore Draupadi was divided between the five sons." (Raj, Sushree) 'I recognized, too, the thinly veiled insult in Kunti's words. This woman, as though I were a nameless servant. It angered me, but it also hurt. From the stories I'd heard about Kunti, I'd admired her. I'd imagined that if she did indeed become my mother-in-law, she would love me as a daughter. Now, I saw how naïve I'd been. A woman like her would never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away.' (Divakaruni, 108)

The novel highlights the hatred that Draupadi had towards the mother-in-law for the decision she made. In the novel, we see numerous examples in which Kunti attempts to humiliate Draupadi-

1. Kunti taunts Draupadi for being inexperienced in the kitchen. However, Draupadi proves her worth by establishing herself as a good cook in her very first attempt at making lunch for the Pandavas.
2. During the war, Draupadi offered to massage Kunti's feet with oil. Instead of being polite to her, Kunti snapped at Draupadi and treated her as no more than a servant.
3. Kunti treated Draupadi as a commodity. She asks her sons to divide her to keep the honor and value of her words.
4. She further offers Draupadi as his wife as a "reward" for Karn if he agrees to be on his brother's side i.e., Pandavas in War. This offer was made to him without Draupadi's permission and knowledge.

Kunti was an experienced and cunning woman. She very well understood the patriarchal mindset and knew that a wife who was shared by multiple men would never let Draupadi get the love she deserved. The decision to get married to all five sons not only left Draupadi angry but also, she lost control over her own feet and life. Neither her husbands nor her father dare to put down their self-esteem and reject this idea.

2.4 RELATIONSHIP WITH HUSBANDS

Dhrupad always intended to get Draupadi married to Arjun. Arjun, who was disguised as a sage won Draupadi's hand. Further, we see Draupadi's marriage to the Pandavas was the consequence of Kunti's command to share the so-called "reward". From the very beginning, Draupadi's married life was a walk full of thorns. She had no say in her own life and was treated no more than a commodity or an object. Marrying five husbands was an unthinkable and heinous act. In a patriarchal society, a man was allowed as many wives as he wanted, but a woman having more than one husband was unacceptable. She married the Pandava brothers together at the same time and became one of the most powerful women in the country. She played a vital role in bringing her husbands to their destiny, that is, to become the greatest warriors of Bharat.

Vyasa had predicted that Draupadi would have five husbands. He designed a special marital conduct code according to which Draupadi had to wife each brother for a year at a time starting with the eldest to the youngest. During this time, the other brothers would have to keep and maintain a safe distance from her. If her and her then husband's privacy was intruded then the other was to be banished for a year from the household. Sage Vyasa gave her a boon that every time she went to a different brother, she would become a virgin again. It felt like the boom was made for her husband and not Draupadi herself. "The boom benefited her husband's more than herself." (Vanitha, V)

Draupadi's life as a married woman was not an easy one. She remained faithful, loyal, and chaste to her husbands. With each passing day, she tried to forget Karna however somewhere in her heart of heart she longed for him. Every time she entered the court, she glanced around in the hopes of catching a glance of him. She questioned this action of hers and constantly reprimanded herself that the Scriptures say "a wife who holds in her heart desireful thoughts of a man who is not her husband is as unfaithful as a woman who sleeps with such a man." (Divyakaruni, 185).

From the very beginning it was clear that Yudishtir being the eldest brother had the foremost right to Panchaali. He misused his rights and gambled his wife away during the chess game. The author also narrates the relationship between Bheem and Panchaali, the most. Time and again we see that Bheem showered his wife with love, whether it was while building the palace of illusions or during exile. Draupadi in return heaped his plate higher with more food. She allowed Bheem to break the nit-picky rules of arrangements of their marriage during the exile. Draupadi is said to have charmed every one of her husbands, however none of them made her feel fulfilled and complete. Though the husbands kept her and her demands in high regard and respect, she felt incomplete until her death. She bore their children, accompanied them to the forest, and stood by them through thick and thin, yet she felt something was missing.

2.5 RELATIONSHIP WITH KARN

Draupadi and Karan's relationship is undoubtedly the most complex of all. Karan, the eldest son of Kunti, was the offspring of the Sun God and was originally known as Vasusena. He was born before her marriage to King Pandu. To escape from the harsh and evil tongue of society, Kunti, a mother, still abounded him. Karan had to live his life in obscurity. He had to suffer from discrimination and indifference because of his caste and class. His only fault was his timing of birth, something he had no control over. Even though he was not married to Draupadi, he was always attracted to him. She too felt a strong attraction towards him but was bound by the social norms of the patriarchal society. She had no freedom to marry Karan. From the very instance, she had laid eyes on his portrait and later when she learnt his story from her brother Dhri, Draupadi was inclined toward Karn

In her long and tragic journey of life Draupadi time and again compared her present life with the life she could have had if she had not stopped Karan on the day of her swayamvar. Karan was a suitor at her swayamvara. Unlike most of the contenders, he could have easily wielded and strung the bow, but Draupadi stopped him from doing so. She rebuked him and denied being the wife of a suta-putra. Draupadi's attitude towards Karna bordered him for the rest of his life. He harbored great jealousy for Draupadi and the Pandavas. Suspicion and detest lead Karna to do the most unforgiving act of supporting Draupadi's disrobing at the Kaurava court after the game of dice. "Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too. A woman like Draupadi, who is married to five is not a wife but a whore, and a whore has no honor." (Divyakaruni, 192)

Draupadi's love for Karna was such that she forgave him for committing such an awful action. Draupadi and Karan both were extremely transparent in their feelings for each other. Even Kunti could see through their secret love and Draupadi's admiration for Karan. Kunti even went to the extent of promising Draupadi's hand in marriage to Karan if he joined his brothers in the Great War. Draupadi knew that love comes like lightning and death appears the same way. She says, "Yes, I broke the first rule, the unwritten one, meant not just for warriors but all of us. I took love and used it as a balm to soothe my ego." (Divyakaruni, 229).

Karan also confessed his desire and love for Draupadi to dying Bheeshma "...I desire her! I can't forget her shining, haughty face at the swayamvar- ah how many years has it been." (Divyakaruni, 276). The death of Karan in the battle was a fatal blow for Draupadi. She no longer had the desire to live and seek revenge. Her yearnings for Karna throughout the novel symbolize of her incomplete desires and unfulfilled wishes.

Conclusion

The novel begins by Draupadi recalling the events leading to her birth through the mouth of her Dhai Ma who calls her the "Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (Divakaruni 1), as she fancies different names which could be attributed to her. Living in today's world women feel equally unwanted as Panchaali did at the time of her birth when her father held out his arms only for her brother Dhristadyumna when she too came out of the holy fire beside her brother, destined to "change the course of history" (Divakaruni 5). Even today when practices like female foeticide have been abolished, many Indian parents still showcase their unwelcoming attitude towards a female child compared to a male one who is expected to fulfill the dreams of their parents just as King Drupad wished for a male child to instrumentalize his revenge.

The next issue which perhaps is all the more pertinent in our lives is our complexion. From people judging us based on our skin colors to the different fairness creams available in the market, one's complexion holds more significance than her personality even in a Postmodern society. Draupadi too is a victim of colorism as she says "In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl" (Divakaruni 8). Nevertheless, under the guidance of Krishna, Draupadi does not consider this as her drawback when she confidently holds "I, too, am beautiful, I told myself, ...Overnight, I who had been shunned for my strangeness became a celebrated beauty!" (Divakaruni 9-10).

Panchaali also recalls taking lessons from behind the curtains while Dhri was being tutored and how it has been a challenge for her in a society that could not even think of women's education. The teacher rebuked at her prompting answers to her brother alongside her father, brother, and DhaiMa who thought "... they were making me too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech" (Divakaruni 23). The fact that women can voice their own opinion is still unacceptable today especially when we try to break out of bars of male suppression. She also rejects the notion of polygamy in a society where multiple marriages are customary, though ironically, by saying "My husband won't take up another wife- I'll make him promise that before I marry him!" (Divakaruni30).

The concept of Polyandry is also there in the novel. Polyandry is defined as the state or practice of having more than one husband or male mate at one time. Polygamy was quite a common phenomenon during those times however Polyandry was limited to folklore and stories. To marry five men, was an alien concept and was regarded with contempt in those times. The rules were different for men and women, favoring the men, while restricting a woman to a single man only. As mentioned earlier, to keep her chastity secure, Vyasa designed a special code of conduct. Vyasa further granted her a boon of virginity allowing her to become a virgin before taking another husband at the end of a year. Her husband kept her in high regard, but still she felt alone. Her freedom was taken away from her. She had to continuously seek gratification and approval from her five husbands. The boom of virginity was a hypocritical move by the chauvinistic society. It further revealed the ego-centric ideologies of the patriarchal society. Vyasa put the requirements of the patriarchy first and did not consider inquiring about what Draupadi wanted.

The novel showcases the commendable effort put to portraying the mental and emotional status of the female who suffered a lot under male supremacy. The birth of Draupadi was exceptional and magical as she arose from the sacrificial fire with her twin brother. Soon after her birth, she came to know that her father King Drupad wanted only her brother- Dhrishtadyumna, who was prophesied to slay Drona (his father's enemy). Draupadi was forcefully given to Drupad by the gods and the prophecy made at her birth was that she would change the course of History of Bharat. She was the "unwanted child." Draupadi has been portrayed as a tremendously beautiful and intellectual woman. Draupadi feels proud on the part of the story of a birth however she remembers her father's hesitancy towards her at the time of her birth.

Her childhood was full of self-doubt. Divakaruni characterized Draupadi as having a dark complexion. She was insecure about the other Princesses with fair faces and cheerful banter. The novel reveals a sequence of gender and ethnicity inequality. This point is supported by the example of the book itself where in it is written the Draupadi from the very beginning was given classes in dancing painting and singing, unlike her brother who was given classes about politics, sword fighting, and how to defend oneself and his state. The culture and institutions were designed in a way where women did not have access to the best knowledge. *The Palace of Illusions* exposes the discrimination between the education given to Dhrishtamdhun and Draupadi. The tutor gave her an orthodox patriarchal suggestion with anger and also claimed that the woman was the root cause of all the problems in the world. He further said that the woman's highest purpose in life is to support men. All the anti-feminist opinions made her angry and questioned who decides what a woman's highest purpose in life will be. Draupadi portrays the sad plight of anyone who tries to defy the norms of the patriarchal, chauvinistic society. She became a sad victim of the inequalities that existed between men and women which are not natural but social and not preordained but created by men to retain their power and supremacy over women. It also fed their egos.

Draupadi's marriage was a vital link to her destiny it brought Draupadi to the calendar of the historic tale but also its shape's the destiny of all the others involved in the epic itself. Draupadi constantly struggled in the patriarchal society. She along with the five husbands were banished to the forest for twelve years followed by a year of living in an Incognito after another round of dice came. She was separated from her children in the period of exile. However, they survived every discomfort and difficult situation with grace. "The lack of love, lead Draupadi to have a secret attraction to Karna and felt regret to reject Karna at the time of her marriage and choose Arjun instead of Karna." (Vanitha, V)

Draupadi was a heroic woman who had developed the strength to bear the hardships of life. She had a lightning and bold personality which was no less than Arjun and Bheem in value and virtue. Her story is of suffering. She took all of the humiliation to her stride and vanquished the perpetrator who caused that humiliation and agony. "Divyakaruni offers to show Draupadi's evolution as a woman who is loyal and unbreakable. She changed the course of history of mankind. In this particular adaptation of Mahabharata, Myth functions as a new voice for feminism." (Raj, Sushree)

The novel beautifully portrays the theme of feminism whose key assumptions are that these general rules are supposed to be maintained and women are supposed to fit into them. They are trained to fit into them. Draupadi, from the very beginning of their life, finds that the roles assigned to women are not for her. Roles like that of a "daughter" or a "wife" were not natural but social because the woman has to be trained to think, talk, and act in a way the society wants them to act like. Feminist theory argues that the representation of women is rooted in and influenced by actual social conditions where a woman has no power and is treated as an object.

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