



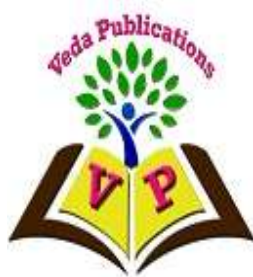
MYTH AND MODERNITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

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ABSTRACT



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni holds a prominent place in Indian English Writing. Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions*, the re-telling of Vyasa's The Mahabharata has uniqueness of its own. *The Palace of Illusions* is about women discrimination, their struggles, identity, male domination, unique female perspectives and position of women during the period of The Mahabharata. The humiliation that went through is given as the challenges of life. Draupadi's life shows in the epic how women need to accept the concept of tradition and culture without any questions. The views of Draupadi are totally different from these of ordinary women and the outcomes are as powerful as she is. Her determination and courage has been explained all through the novel. It has its own charm to and hold on the reader. Whether it is ancient or the modern period the life of women has not had any changes, it has had only challenges to face and act according to the context. It shows how a woman born as a princess suffered in her life. Draupadi's life seeks to break the shackles of stereotypical concept of how women can be women. Our paper is a sincere attempt to explore myth and modernity clashing with each other to give birth to a new face. It offers a new interpretation of the voice of Draupadi as depicted by the novelist.

Keywords: Gender, Humiliation, Identity, Myth, Modernity, Tradition.

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The reappearance of myth has been presented with a modern perspective by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions*. A combination of traditional mythology and modernity of the present world is presented here through the retelling, which is a predictable message for those who are rooted in the accepted traditionalism and also for those who remain uprooted from the moral ethics of their own culture. Divakaruni has shown Draupadi as a contemporary woman who wants to express her thoughts and ideas to the world. Divakaruni has tried to bring out the past into present in a different way by showing the story of love, betrayal, revenge, war, freedom and friendship. In the book review of *The Palace of Illusions* James Purdon says that "A little jejune at times, Divakaruni's languid and elegant prose remains seductive as it reimagines the woman at the heart of the story and weaves myth into a modern idiom". (Purdon)

A Revisionist literary text seeks to restructure the traditional characters which have been marginalized in the original text. They help to bring out the different characters in an enhancing way and express it in a different prospect. It gives the reader an irreplaceable experience to read the revisionist literary text as the vision and concept are altered. Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions*, was a national best-seller for over a year in India and is a re-telling of the Indian epic *The Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. *The Palace of Illusions* is about the clear path sought by inspiring feminist voices which are powerless and mute. It is about the strong and self-centred voice of Draupadi from the Vyasa's *The Mahabharata*. She includes the sequences and stories from *The Mahabharata*.

Divakaruni wrote this novel as she was not contented with the portrayal of women characters in mythology she says "I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of women characters... they remain shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. If I ever wrote a book... I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits" (Divakaruni,

xiv-xv). The centre of focus is always on men in the great epic *The Mahabharata*. Divakaruni presents Draupadi's life as a series of choices made by herself and not by the people around her, thus giving her a voice in the overwhelmingly patriarchal society that prevailed in Ancient India.

In the novel, *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi's character is not as a woman who suffers within herself and is not able to speak about her views. She brings out a strong trajectory of her own. Her first impact was on education which is not given to her as her brother was given priority over her. Her tutor told her brother to inform her that "A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life" (Divakaruni. 26). Her father and tutor neglected her education. When she questioned her brother "who decided that woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (Divakaruni. 26). The brother replied that is what I'd like you to do. This shows that nobody cared about the education of women and women were required to do what men wanted them to do. Here Divakaruni tries to bring out the old practise of every woman of those periods whether she was a queen or a normal woman. Education was not given to women as for men because their duty is to take care of their husbands and to pray that they die with glory on the battlefield.

Marriage is taken as their decision to abide by social regime and family acceptance. Swayamwara means the practice of searching their own groom. Draupadi was subjected to Swayamwara, but she was already pledged for Arjun by her family and Krishna. To fulfil her father's desire she is forced to surrender herself to whatever her father points out. Divakaruni conveys that in this male-dominated society, a daughter is a toy in the hands of her own family, the feelings or emotions of women are not given importance as the priority was on the words and promises given to others. Women were taken as slaves by men to obey their orders without any comment. She was burning with inner anguish. In some places Draupadi failed to express her views when Kunti asked her to marry all the five. She was waiting for Arjun to stand up for her against marrying all the five as they were committed to each other but nobody protested against the words of Kunti. Thus,



she becomes a victim of a social evil polyandry. In those times it was a common thing as many women were subjected to polyandry.

In this novel we feel that Draupadi not only remains in the epic as a passive being but also rises up to become a symbol for modern woman figure in recent times. Draupadi raises her voice in Duryodhana's court where she was gambled away by her husband. She questioned the elders in the court that once a person was sold as slave they had no right to wager others, but she was mistaken to discover that the laws of men would not save her. The description of the scene in the novel as it proves that the law which was equal to all would not be same for women. This brings before the reader a society which surrendered the rights of women. Draupadi stays as a strong person and shows that she never lowers herself to them by begging for her dignity. She re-invents herself as a powerful woman that is not dependent on her husband in the hour of need. She ever got an answer for any of her questions in the court. Her anger and revenge for the shameful act against her was the reason for the war which ended in the death of Kauravas.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, we see Draupadi not only as a strong woman but also a sorrowful person who wishes to be with Karna, comparing her husbands with Karna and always is apologetic for the insult that she threw on Karna's way during her Swayamwar. She says when she fell on the way to Himalaya that "Karna would never have abandoned me thus...He would have happily given up heaven for my sake" (Divakaruni, 347). Till her death, Draupadi keeps a special place for Karna where she regrets not having divulged her feelings to him. Her feelings for Sri Krishna are also more those of a friend. Sri Krishna has a companion, caretaker and guide in every deed from the beginning to the end. This may be the reason for her to fall for Sri Krishna.

Karna who is delineated as an undesirable character in *The Mahabharata* is seen as a love-sick person after meeting Draupadi. Their love for each other has been explained in a different way from the view of Draupadi herself. In this novel Karna confesses to Bheeshma about his desire for Draupadi, which is a difficult part to accept as Bheeshma was the grandfather of Karna and it is not

possible to express the feelings for his brother's wife which is against the law and to confess it to the elder is less predictable because everyone respected the elders in those days and it was not a good phase where he strayed into thinking about his love for Draupadi in the middle of the great war.

Divakaruni has shown Karna as a tragic hero as he had all the skills but could not defeat enemies and the one who is longing for the love of Draupadi. He died by knowing all the truth and not able to react or accept any of it.

Kunti's character is given as the plotting mother-in-law in the novel where Kunti always thought only about her children's honour, wealth and happiness. It can be interpreted as the love of mother towards her children and against the betrayal of Duryodhana. Kunti did not try to understand the sufferings or feelings of her daughters-in law in any part of the novel, she acts an authoritative mother-in-law.

In Draupadi's view Kunti was trickery, her decisions to lure Karna were also successful and she was even ready to give Draupadi to Karna. This shows that Kunti is ready to do anything to save her sons. But if we look from the side of Kunti we may find reasons for her decisions. Relationship of Kunti with Karna before the war stays as a secret till the end between them. It had a great impact on the war. From the character of Kunti it can be seen that the love of mother is unpredictable; whether it is good or not she tries her own ways to save her children.

CONCLUSION

The Palace of Illusion is a revisionist text which re-tells women's value in society and re-examines what we feel about women's lives. Draupadi's emancipation from the cage of perfection and so-called divinity has been shown up clearly by Divakaruni. The character of Draupadi didn't wait for any males to rescue her from misery like most women. They help themselves by identifying and solving problems. They re-write the fate of womanhood by re-setting themselves against traditional agreements.

This revisionist literary text helps to bring out the modern issues like identity, marginalization and discrimination of women folk in the patriarchal society. This is shown through a mythological



character. Draupadi's character was not at all a prominent one in the Mahabharata. In the original text, Draupadi has no voice, choice or identity of her own but Divakaruni brings out all these and give a life to the character of Draupadi, who stands as a person with unwavering courage and strength to stand in any situation. In *The Palace of Illusions* we can see her courage to question existing restrictive laws and to show the world that every woman has an identity of her own. Divakaruni questions and states that the marginalize character of Draupadi is a symbol for the failure of the male dominated society to understand the suffering and emotion of women. By giving a voice and space to the suppressed, it opens new imaginations and possibilities in the literature world. It highlights the neglected women character in the Epic. Ms. Banerjee has said in an interview about women that "women should always be strong – we hope we can be strong, but when we are not, there should be a space for us. For centuries, it's okay for a man to do all kinds of things, but for women not so much." (CWW)

Vyasa's *The Mahabharata* shows Draupadi as a character that took birth to destroy the Kauravas. *The Palace of Illusions* shows her as a reasonable person who was not able to stop the destruction of Kauravas. In a review Tariqa Tandon says that "Divakaruni's interpretation provides a humanistic touch to the epic, making it more realistic, more relatable, and more personal" which gives new insight to the epic.

When we read the novel, we can understand the Draupadi's personality and power and we can have a soft corner for her. In her view whatever she did was acceptable as there was no other way to stop. From re-telling's we are able to think that women have not been given any priority. No one is willing to accept their views or ideas as it is their duty is to obey their husbands at any cost and the dignity of the family is all that matters in the end and women are taken as weak and disempowered. Draupadi is presented as having a very impressive, brilliant and strong personality and is projected as the primary cause for the battle of Kurukshetra. Not only is her having the perfect gender but also has in all the complexity. The death of Draupadi is because of ego, jealousy and lust has been explained. It's shown that,

whether it is a main character or negative one, human beings are not completely perfect. Draupadi comes out as an ordinary woman with lots of imperfection in this novel.

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