



RECREATING THE FEMALE IDENTITY: A FEMINIST APPROACH TO CHITRA DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

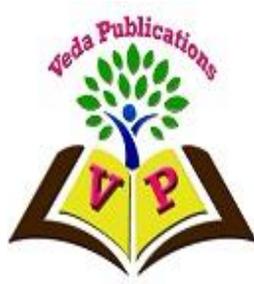
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ABSTRACT



Revisiting Myths has always promised greater sense of history, culture, and values to the society. In the time, when the pluralistic world is trying to bring in multidimensional thoughts and interpretations to life and there is a lack of unifying concept of what constitutes culture, Indian myths are revisioned and recreated for interrogating the traditional notions, registering their dissenting voices and adding fresh perspectives. Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* expresses the dissent against the androcentric myth by revisiting the character of Draupadi created by Vyasa in the war epic Mahabharata. Chitra has recreated the character of Draupadi in her novel interrogating the patriarchal ideologies and other societal structures which were cleverly created by the male dominated society. As an epic tale of the domestic and the external power structures that serve as the onslaught on women, Draupadi wrestles with the illusions of the world of equity and the bitter realities of discrimination against women.

Keywords: *Myth Revision, Power structures, Patriarchy Fractured Identity.*



The epic tale Mahabharatha has provided endless fascination for the readers and lent itself to innumerable interpretations. Chitra Divakaruni makes this epic tale of Draupadi in a far fetched conceited way seemingly taking a feminist angle but as an amorous longing of her for Karna. The deconstructed image of Draupadi takes on a new avatar as a female with her true longings, disappointments, betrayals and her stand for preserving the Dharma in the Panchala. Draupadi, the fire altar born out of yajna vedi of the king Draupada emerges as a polemical figure. Born to wreak vengeance against the earthly villains, she metamorphoses into the panchakanya who would stand for virtue through the kurukshetra war.

As an unexpected and unprayed for was her birth along with Drithirashtra and treated as an icon of prestige and victimised in the name of regal honour. 'Though her birth story of her raising from the flame is what she desired to be repeated, it also indicated to her the stigma of being born a girl'. She felt insulted that father tried to raise his arms to pick up Dhriti than Draupadi. Unexpected was her dark figure and yet the most attractive for so many princes to compete for her in swayamvara. She feels that in a society that looks for milk and almond hues, she was so unwanted to spend her time trying all kinds of concoction to become white. The stigma of attaching white as colour of beauty for female is dealt here.

Draupada was only careful to fulfill his father's duty and provide me with everything he believed a princess should have. But the space for her was so resentful that she bursts out, 'I hated the thick grey slabs of the walls-more suited to a fortress than king's residence...narrow windows, dimly lit corridors, severed furniture more suitable for giants and most of all there were no trees nor flowers but more sentries'. (6) Her birth place did not mean home and she dreams of her own space according to her desire and accompaniments of what would impress her idea of home. When she walks on the road in disguise to meet the astrologer, Dhriti Ma was taken aback and says, 'Don't you know the women of the Panchal royal family are supposed to remain hidden even from the gaze of the sun?' (36)

The girl who thinks of her life unfolding uniquely, learns that kings always take other wives. Men always break the promises they make before marriage. (30). Draupadi reacts to the tutor's instruction that the highest purpose of women's life is to support men. 'she retaliates that she has got other purposes in life'. (26). The tutoring for her brother was different and she was made to learn other activities which were assumed to be her duty unsupportive of her desired educational domain. She was made to draw, paint and sew, sing, dance and play music though she was least inclined to learn all these things. She foresees a momentous destiny and finds that none prepares her to meet it.

The female identity rests on the father and later to her husband and hence she is cunningly forged into these identities for which Draupadi too falls a prey. The patriarchal society defines her identity and destines her path. Chitra characterises her as a sensuous, undecided, submissive with a lot of ineffective monologues which shape her as a weakling. Her characterisation does not make an impact for the readers to see her being the strong reason for the Kurukshetra war. Shelly Parul Badwal makes a brilliant observation after the reading of Manusmriti that Vyasa tried to create the female identity where she is identified through her paternal family and later through her husbands. Her bodily space, physical space and her psychic space were mapped by the prejudices of the male oriented society. Quoting Manusmriti, 'She is seen as a mere source of the continuity of the race and clan—as the mother of sons who would carry the baton of the family's name and honour. It is interesting to note, that the daughters find no mention in the designs of the male-order. There is hardly any verse that mentions the 'putri' as desirable or significant. The discourse thus created, silences the daughter even before she is born, for it is only the 'putra' who is desirable and primary to the functioning of the society. This strangulated identity of the 'putri' then gives birth to a culture of silence, which continues throughout a woman's life. It is this deafening silence that fills the void of her existence. (2)



Chitra Divakaruni tries to provide voice to the silence but not so loudly or vehemently. She merely stands as a model who had perfectly internalised the patriarchal norms and willingly subjugates herself in the name of filial affection and honour till her lonely stand in the court. Swayamvara does not assign any decision making position for the princess as it is seen as a forum for political alliances and privileging the crown. It was Draupadi's refusal to admit Karna that brought a fatal blow and turning point to the story. Draupadi senses the escalating tension between Dhri and Karna and hence makes the most ruthless, venomous, devastating question, that of interrogating Karna's parentage. Karna, the nicest soul of all, recoils in humiliation and the seed for the war has been sown. Karna has firmly decided to take vengeance for life. The fabric of the epic was tangled with many Kaurava lives and slithers to spread its hood and attack with Sri Krishna as the guide.

The young girl has her dreams about her marital life. When Arjuna wins in the Swayamvar, she expects that he will protect his brother; as he is noble and handsome, he would be a fit husband and we will make a mark in history. She enters into the household full of mysteries for which she was never trained. But it is just taken for granted as a natural instinct to be adaptive for the girls. Arjuna was expected to be her champion but becomes the wife to five men.

The ever haunting question of Draupadi's polyandry is answered by mediating into the psychic space of her. She reveres I saw my husbands, too, differently. They were a unit together, five fingers that complemented each other to make up a powerful hand-a hand that would protect me if the need arose.....wasn't this sufficient to be thankful for?(148). These lame forgivings and passive acceptance as described by Chitra shocks the readers. Chitra makes a remark in Draupadi's own words, I loved my boys dearly but I was not particularly maternal'. The joys of motherhood, the tender feelings for the children her duty in the upbringing of the children fails. She could be seen only as a lady who is trifling with matters of vengeance and warring against the malicious men.

She feels elated that Yudhishtir often consults her in matters of governance.

Of course, Draupadi proves herself in the court of malignant men where we see her creating an identity for herself. Her humiliation of Karna in the Swayamvar was based on her filial affection. Her submissiveness to Kunti's unchallenged pronouncements that all five of the Pandavas will share Draupadi as their wife is simply dismissed with a slight reaction by Chitra owing to the predictions already known to Draupadi. The exhaustion is expressed through her lack of maternal affection as she was used by five husbands and a queen. *defacto*, Chitra describes Draupadi justification about Kunti's decision that she speculated that brothers if married to different girls would develop varied interests which in turn would mar the harmony between them. But the palace of illusions gave Draupadi the reprieve and identified herself as the mistress in front of the fading power of Kunti.

She asserts herself at the foolish gambling of her husbands and raises the most unchallenging question of history-How did my husbands who lost themselves can claim me and bait me in their foolish game? She quotes Nyaya Shastra, 'If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife.(190) But very soon she understood that laws of men would not save her from shame. It even occurs to her that she could stare at her nakedness because she is not ashamed of this act performed by bastardly people who actually needs to be ashamed for 'shattering the bounds of decency'. (193)

She cries that their silence during her disrobing was an act of meanness and notions of honour and loyalty are important for them. She expresses in her solitude and makes the most daring statement that she never loved any of her husbands in that way.' She was a good wife as she supported them and provided comforts of body and mind, extolled their virtues, followed them into forest which later made them heroes. But my heart-was it too fickle? too hard?(213). Even Draupadi's duel with Kunti is not impressive nor her stint in the court wreaking vengeance was described with energy. These important epic moments were dealt with rich



insights and Draupadi decides for herself manipulating the world to her ways. As Bell Hooks observes, 'Women need to know that they can reject the powerful's definition of their reality --- that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances. They need to know that the exercise of this basic personal power is an act of resistance and strength'.

The fine craftsmanship of Chitra fails at moments when certain enlightening moments of the epic passes as single line of facts without room for interpretation. The characterisation of Draupadi and her silenced desire does make its impact through her seething rage which results in destruction *enmasse*.. But her linear narration beginning from childhood, marital life and till her entry into her final destination is vividly described providing avenues to understand Chitra's recreation of Draupadi's multidimensional nature and fractured identities.

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