

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**DISCARDING THE OBJECT AND BECOMING THE SUBJECT: DRAUPADI’S PERSPECTIVE
IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI’S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS***

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ABSTRACT

The Palace of Illusions is an interesting attempt by the Indian American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novel is a rendition of the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata* from one of the important, but neglected, character, Draupadi’s point of view. Though Draupadi was a major cause behind the war of *Mahabharata*, still she was not given a proper treatment in the earlier versions of the epic. All the earlier versions seem to focus only on the male heroes of the epic while the female characters are put backstage. They are discussed only when they affect the lives of the male heroes. Such versions reflect a marked prejudice against the female gender. Divakaruni tries to bring forth this prejudice as well as other loopholes in the earlier narrations. She chooses Draupadi to be the narrator and the ‘sutradhari’ of this novel, who in the process of narration raises questions against the male-dominated aura of the *Mahabharata*. This paper makes a study of Draupadi’s perspective in the *Mahabharata* and her struggle to come to the centre from the margin. Consequently, Draupadi discards the position of a passive ‘object’ and takes the central position becoming the ‘subject’ of the novel.

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a famous Indian American author whose works mainly focus on the experiences of the South-Asian immigrants, and their related problems of adoption and adaption. She writes for adults as well as children and her fiction covers a wide spectrum of different genres like fantasy, realistic fiction, magical realism, and historical fiction. Divakaruni’s first notable attempt in the field of literature was a collection of stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995), which won an American Book award and many other prestigious awards. This collection of stories established Divakaruni’s literary reputation. Her major novels include *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), and *Oleander Girl* (2013).

Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* is a retelling of the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* from Draupadi’s point of view in novel form. It has been a very interesting as well as challenging task for the author. It was interesting because a retelling of the great epic from a fresh and new perspective would obviously be an exciting and pleasant assignment. But it was challenging because *Mahabharata* (along with *Ramayana*) is the oldest and longest epic of the world. It maintains its status of a ‘culturally foundational’ text in the hearts of people. *Mahabharata*, apart from bearing philosophical, spiritual, religious, and educational values, propagates the ideals of moral ethics (dharma), social norms and gender roles. It has established its reputation as a ‘mythological canon’ or the ideal of

all Hindu mythology. Any changes or modifications in this religious text would have called for harsh criticism for the novel and the author too. Moreover the enormousness of the epic *Mahabharata* (which consists of 100000 stanzas in verse, structured into 18 books) is a further challenge. To match the spirit of such a vast epic in a novel of 360 pages was a hard row to hoe. However, Divakaruni very successfully overcame this challenge. *The Palace of Illusions* became a national bestseller for over a year in India and earned great acclamation for the author.

Though there are many different versions of the epic, there is a persistent vagueness about its origin and authorship. However, it is commonly attributed to Ved Vyas, who also appears as a character and narrator in the epic. Instead of a number of versions of the *Mahabharata*, one common trait among all these versions is the dominance of patriarchy. It seems that *Mahabharata* has an androcentric set-up where the centre of attraction are only the male heroes. Though the epic consists of many powerful and charismatic women characters, but it seems as if they play only a side role or roles that are subservient to the strong and virile men. The women characters are given attention only when their actions or deeds affect the lives of their male counterparts. The women characters in the *Mahabharata* are given a 'relational' identity – an identity which is not independent, but dependent on someone else's life. Their identities are not a 'complete whole' but are inter-relational. Other than that, they live a shadowy life, living at the backstage. Divakaruni herself believes that the women characters in the epic :

remained 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. (Divakaruni xiv)

She further writes that she had, very early in her life, decided that if, ever, she got a chance to write a book she would bring the women characters in the limelight and give them an opportunity to express themselves fully and freely :

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)

Many other writers and critics also affirm this idea that *Mahabharata* disseminates the idea of gender-discrimination and sets up a frame for gender-specific roles. It classifies the roles and duties that are to be played by 'males' and 'females'. Brodbeck and Black assert that :

Mahabharata is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous telling and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since. (Brodbeck and Black 11)

Thus, there is the need of a version in which the epic would be retold from a feminist perspective. A perspective in which the shadowy figures would deconstruct the older 'patriarchal' versions and reconstruct an identity for themselves. Divakaruni comments in this regard :

I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs . . . the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? (Divakaruni xv)

Divakaruni picks Panchaali (or Draupadi) as the narrator of the novel because it was she who, somehow, was the cause behind the great war of the *Mahabharata*. It was she, whose birth was predicted to bring a great change in the general course of history. It was she who, somehow, bore an 'untraditional femininity'. Therefore, she is the most suitable choice. It is 'Panchaali's Mahabharata' (as mentioned on the cover page of the novel). The way she describes her story makes us feel that she was impatiently waiting for this chance to narrate her story 'herself'. The novel's opening chapters present Draupadi's obsession with the story of her unnatural birth. She is very much interested in her origins and asks her nurse, Dhai Ma, to tell her the story of her birth. Among the many other stories, she is obsessed only with her 'birth story' and the prophecy related to that, because it makes her feel 'special' and important, and actually gives meaning to her existence :

And though she knew many wondrous and

edifying tales, the one I made her tell me over and over was the story of my birth. I think I liked it so much because it made me feel special, and in those days there was little else in my life that did. (Divakaruni 1)

Draupadi doesn't want to listen any other story because in them, she is not in the forefront. Her story makes her the protagonist and the 'doer' of the action – not a passive receptor. In a story of one's own, one becomes the all-powerful 'subject', who controls the action and its consequences. He is not the weak 'object' who waits for the action to be done. Thus Draupadi, indirectly, has a desire to be all-powerful, to come to the centre and control and manage everything willingly. Draupadi wants herself to be heard and thus she requires a platform where everyone can see and hear her. That's why she decides to be the narrator in the novel. Draupadi takes the power in her hands and now she will decide how to narrate the great epic – which events to highlight and which not. It would be her choice to choose the important and unimportant events. Thus Draupadi 'discards the object' and 'becomes the subject' herself.

The struggle for power and the 'centre' reflects Draupadi's rebellious character and her sense of framing a 'self-identity'. She feels suffocated in her father's palace because there she always suffers prejudices and unwantedness. Dhai Ma teasingly calls her "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (1). From her very birth she was taken as a responsibility that needs to be carried out, rather than someone who was actually needed or waited for. Though she was provided with all the comforts and pleasures, that a princess deserves, still she didn't relish them because they were all superficial. She was deprived of an 'identity' and an 'individuality'. This could be seen from the name that she was given. Her brother had a specific aim, a motive in life. He had to take a revenge for his father and thus he was symbolically named, 'Dhristadyumna' – destroyer of enemies; while she was nothing, but one among the many daughters of King Drupad. She was no individual, but a 'type'. And so she was simply and aimlessly named 'Draupadi' – daughter of Drupad. Draupadi's name has withheld within it the ever-pervasive nuances of patriarchy. She herself detests this chauvinism

and says, "... couldn't my father have come up with [a name] something a little less egoistic?" (Divakaruni 5). She critically analyses the names and thinks that her birth also has a marked importance and so, a woman who is going to affect history itself, must bear a heroic name – something like "Off-spring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One" (1). This interest in her life, creates a desire in her to be the writer of her own history and ruler of her destiny. Though her future has already been predicted, still Draupadi herself wants to be unpredictable. If she is born to change history, she would like to do it in her own way – not in a predestined manner. Nobody else is going to decide the path. In Divakaruni's novel she is going to take over the reins and become the "subject who desires" rather than being the "object of desire" (Nair 152).

From the very beginning Draupadi in an attempt to assert her individuality and uniqueness bores an 'untraditional femininity'. She was born with a dark complexion, which was considered to be improper for girls. However, with Krishna's motivation she starts realising her beauty. Later she insisted in being educated like her brother. In that too Krishna helped her. But nobody was in favour of her education. They considered this, too, improper. Dhai Ma complained that the lessons were making her "too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike" in her speech (23). But Draupadi was a determined girl and she had already decided to be an agent of action, as she wished to redefine the role of women in the context of her life. When Dhri's tutor complained about the impulsive nature of Draupadi and suggested her of the typical role a woman plays in a man's life, she retorted :

And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men . . . A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life. (Divakaruni 26)

Thus Draupadi declares that she has a right over her life and she would be the decision-maker in her life. Draupadi takes an initiative to retell her life's story because she thinks that if she is the one who effects history, then she herself should be the narrator. She wants to give an authentic account of history which would radically overturn all the

previous narratives and fill the 'blanks' and loop-holes in the great epic. Rather than being a recipient of action, she flips her role and holds the central position, being the most important character of the story. She will represent herself truly and will articulate her real life. She craves for a portrayal, that would make her character multi-dimensional – not a 'typecast' or cliché, as represented in earlier versions. Her character should be 'ambiguous', which provides a chance of various possible interpretations. She does not want to be a predictable character, rather a 'round' character, which is able to surprise as well as entertain the reader, by its every move. She wants to be full of life and thrill. All these actually highlight Draupadi's desire for the attention that she was always deprived off. This 'unpredictability' and 'multi-dimensional' nature of Draupadi would put her in the position of a 'subject' who has got the power to change and control other's destinies too. She claims the right to be the actual 'sutradhari' in the novel.

That's why she dreams a palace of her own which would be a vivid reflection of Draupadi's inner dreams and desires. That would be actually a portrayal of Draupadi's true identity that she could not express in her father's palace. She identifies her father's palace with a prison-house which tried to curb her growth as an individual. During her childhood she felt that her "father's palace seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe" (1). At that time she promised herself that her palace would be completely different from this. Her palace would be a realisation of her repressed dreams. She imagined :

I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of color and sound, birds singing in mangoes and custard apple orchards, butterflies flitting among jasmines . . . I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home. (7)

Throughout the novel, Draupadi asserts her importance in the course of events. She regards herself an important character and disregards the earlier versions which didn't give her due credit for the crucial role played by her in the *Mahabharata*. She says :

I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardship in Khandav.

I'd helped them design this unique palace which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner. (151)

While narrating the story Draupadi makes an impression that this representation of the great epic is the most authentic one because she "herself narrates and enacts the story of her life seemingly without an authorial version" (Nair 154). To further assert the authenticity she brings in Vyasa also, who was the author of the first and original version, thereby suggesting that two authors co-operatively would produce the most authentic representation. Another aspect that gives authenticity to Draupadi's version is that she never seems to manipulate any fact or feeling. Though she sometimes feels guilty, still she never hides her passionate feelings for Karna, her husbands' staunch enemy, from the reader. It doesn't seem that she is putting herself in any favourable or advantageous position. She very truly puts forth every like and dislike of hers. Moreover to prove that a story can be manipulated and retold by various points of view, Draupadi cites the example of Dronacharya and Drupad's story. The story is narrated from Dhri's point of view as well as Draupadi's. This shifting of narration from one person to another suggests the slippery nature of a story. This example puts light on the fact that how language can be used manipulatively to propagate one's own ideas and favour one's prejudices. Whenever Dhri narrates the story, he puts Drupad in a positive light, while Draupadi narrates the incident in a just manner. That's why she says :

Were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing . . . Perhaps that was why it changed with each telling, or is that the nature of all stories, the reason for their power. (Divakaruni 15)

As Draupadi isn't partial while narrating the story, we are inclined to believe that her retelling of the *Mahabharata* must be a genuine one. She is interested in giving a factual account of the things past, because she "does not want either a sanitized version or a distorted version of the past" (Nair 155). Therefore it may be concluded that, in Divakaruni's novel, Draupadi takes a

balanced initiative to take the narrative power in her hands and rather than being the “subject of narration by patriarchal narratives . . . subjectivizes narration itself” (Nair 156).

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