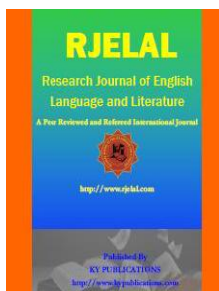




CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*: REVISITING THE EPIC
THROUGH THE EYES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY WOMAN

PRIYANKA P.S. KUMAR

M.A., English Literature



ABSTRACT

Epics always fascinate and attract both readers and writers. Various and various interpretations of the epics are prominent in the literary world. With the rise of different psycho analytic theories, feminist theories, cultural theories etc, writers began to explicate and refurbish the various epic characters. This brought about new and new retellings of the epics. The Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata always allured the writers because of the complex characters and the various issues discussed in these epics. These peculiarities gave rise to fresh interpretations of the epic stories and characters. Among the two epics, the Mahabharata is one in which we meet many strong women characters. This specialty of the epic equipped the writers to retell the epic using various feminist theories. Usually epic narratives presented women on an idealistic viewpoint. Women are presented as epitomes of patience and tolerance, as the silent sufferers of all the miseries that fall upon them. But the contemporary women writers contributed much to bring about a change in such a perspective. They recreated the women characters by giving them their own voice, by making them independent and strong to express their own choices and opinions. With the emergence of post modern theories, the notable women characters in the epics were looked into or appraised with fresher outlooks and with deeper insight. The main motives behind these explorations became the search for identity and self exploration. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is such a retelling which beautifully analyses the mythical heroine Panchaali. Told in the first person point of view, the author is recreating the epic from the perspective of Panchaali.

Key Words:- Epics, Retellings, the Mahabharata, feminist theories, *The Palace of Illusions*

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Ancient epics provide a good number of themes and situations for the modern day writers to interpret and re- create. The Mahabharata is a great epic that always enthrall people, especially, writers of all times. The story of Mahabharata continues to attract and charm us. It is a work of art that provides ample scope for retellings and re-creations. Chitra

Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is such a retelling of Mahabharata which helps in relooking at the events from a different angle.

The epic narratives created an idealized version of women. They present women as epitomes of patience who had tolerated the traditional belief systems and the age old rules and

regulations. These depictions of women remained as symbol of wifehood and motherhood. This type of depiction has created along with them a model of accepting patriarchy as a law to be observed. Such representations of women restated the gender dichotomy and its various manifestations. This made many of the women writers of modern era to rethink these narrations. Thus many of the epic stories are retold with the view to bring into light the various shadowy figures in the epic that deserved special attention. Most of the women writers retold these tales as a good tool to inquire into women's predicament. They brought to light the various characters that were thrown to the margins by the mainstream literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is such an attempt where Draupadi, also known as Panchaali becomes the 'hero'.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a novel which attempts to rework the epic. Apart from the normal andocentric focuses of the epic Divakaruni's Draupadi becomes the 'hero' and provides a gendered version of the epic. She creates a narrative world where Panchaali's thoughts and emotions comes into question and thus she fills up with an extra – ordinary new perspective of narration. The novel chooses as its medium one of the most representative women characters of the world mythologies. Divakaruni's novel helps in foregrounding Panchaali and thus to overthrow the ancient stereotypical image. Divakaruni's Panchaali strives hard to make her voice heard in a patriarchal world.

Divakaruni herself states:

I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of women in the epics. It wasn't as though the epic didn't have powerful, complex women characters that affected the action in major ways..... But in some way they 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. (*The Palace of Illusions*, Author's note xiv)

Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* ponders into Panchaali's character in order to measure the strength of Panchaali's mind which she failed to bring out because of the social conventions and of the patriarchal system which ruled over her. Divakaruni makes Panchaali tell her story herself revealing all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heart breaks, her sorrows, her achievements and the unique ways in which she sees the world and her place in it. Thus Divakaruni's narration becomes a gendered re-telling which tries to look at the epic through the eyes of Panchaali. Divakaruni clearly states her aim in the author's note to the novel, "If I ever write a book, I remember thinking.... I would place the women in forefront of the action And who would be better suited for this than Panchaali?" (*The Palace of Illusions*, Author's note xiv-xv).

As a part of demolishing the archetypal figure of Panchaali, Divakaruni adds many new stories in the novel. These added stories help in establishing Panchaali's thoughts and emotions. The character of Dhai Ma plays a major role in bringing Panchaali's real identity. Dhai Ma is the one who explains to her the story of her birth. Dhai Ma's narration of her birth story makes Panchaali think about the discrimination even in the names given by her father to her and her brother. As Dhai Ma described the feast given by King Drupadi after the birth of the two children, Panchaali was thinking about the names – "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (*The Palace of Illusions* 5). Another added story is that of Panchaali's fascination for Karna. When Panchaali sees the portrait of Karna she is attracted by that 'austere faced' man whose 'eyes were filled with an ancient sadness' (*The Palace of Illusions* 69). Divakaruni's narrative depicts Panchaali's attraction towards Karna and illustrates how she was prevented from marrying him. Panchaali, in course of time becomes aware of the fact that her marriage is a politically arranged one. She cannot accept the fact she is going to be the wife of five men. But she had no other choice other than accepting it. By projecting this fact, Divakaruni questions the male dominated assumptions of female sexuality.

Divakaruni through her narration tries to subvert the very idea of female beauty and makes Panchaali assert "I too am beautiful" (*The Palace of Illusions* 9). Panchaali always wanted to be known by the special name with which Krishna called her- "he called me by a special name, the female form of his own: Krishnaa. It has two meanings, the dark one or the one whose attraction can't be resisted." (*The Palace of Illusions* 12).

Divakaruni's retelling tries to deconstruct and also questions the traditional Indian female stereotypes. For instance, when Yudhistir told her the story of Nal and Damayandi and presents them as the epitome of endurance and righteousness, Panchaali questions the righteousness of Nal's action. She questions, "And how did he repay her? By abandoning her in the forest. How was that righteous?" (*The Palace of Illusions* 209). The much praised sacrifice of Gandhari during her marriage is also interpreted by Panchaali in an entirely different manner. Panchaali cannot accept the fact that Gandhari's action is one which indicates her love and respect towards her husband. She feels that Gandhari did so because she was made to do so. According to Dhai Ma, "Maybe the thought of marrying a blind man disgusted her - but being a princess she couldn't get out of the match. May be she did this so she wouldn't have to look at him every single day of her life" (*The Palace of Illusions* 44).

Divakaruni's narrative tries to bring out the hopes and aspirations of Panchaali. Her thoughts and dreams are also given emphasis through out the novel. Panchaali, through the miseries she suffer, tries to understand the world. After the 'games' when the Pandavas lost everything, Panchaali realized the fact that she is alone in this world. She evaluates the incidents occurred in the Sabha. She contemplates:

All this time I'd believed in my powers over my husbands..... But now I saw that though they did love me as much perhaps as any man can love - there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering For men, the softer emotions

are always intertwined with power and pride. (*The Palace of Illusions* 194-195)

According to Panchaali, a woman will not think this way. She says, "I would have thrown myself forward to save if I had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought." (*The Palace of Illusions* 195) But later Panchaali realizes the fact that a woman's mind is also tainted with many negative emotions. After the incidents in the 'Sabha' she notices the changes occurred in her perspectives. Divakaruni's Panchaali is willing to assert the fact that a woman's heart is also not pure as she believed it to be. She realizes that the power of vengeance is acting upon her as she reflects, "but I too, was tainted with them, vengeance encoded in to my blood." (*The Palace of Illusions* 195)

After the war Panchaali realizes that Hastinapur has become "largely a city of women." (*PI* 322) This realization triggers her to form a separate court, "a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women." (*The Palace of Illusions* 323). Here Divakaruni depicts her protagonist as one who is striving to create out of the ruins to rebuild a lost life. Later when Pandavas set out for their last journey, every one requested Panchaali to stay back. But as she says the more people dissuaded her, the more she became determined. According to her, "perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women ... How could I resist it?" (*The Palace of Illusions* 343 - 44).

During the journey, Panchaali was the first one to fall. Death appears to her as a liberation which will solve the contradictions of her identity and she feels, "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali." (*The Palace of Illusions* 360)

Thus Divakaruni's retelling of the epic provides a comprehensive picture of the epic character Panchaali. Here Divakaruni humanizes Panchaali and presents a representation of an Indian woman who is always torn between her role of a devoted wife and that of an independent outspoken woman. Divakaruni's narrative personalizes the epic and gives a sensible and lifelike portrayal Panchaali

which creates an everlasting impression and a sympathetic attitude in the minds of the readers.

Works Cited

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- _____. Interview by Dru Ariel Banerjee, The Atlantic Monthly Company. n.d. Web. 21 June 2012.
- Jain, Jasbir, ed. *Women in Patriarchy: Cross Cultural Readings*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2005. Print.
- Nair, Kavitha. "Agency, Narrativity, Gender in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*." *Language in India* 1.1 (2010): n.p. 6 June 2011. Web. 27 June 2012.
- Sodhi, Meena. "Voice from the Margin: A Life less Ordinary." *Littcritt*. 34. 65. (2008):1 78-80. Print.
-