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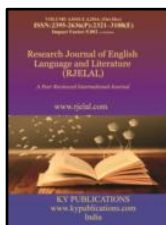
CHITRA BANERJEE'S DRAUPADI: THE EPITOME OF FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an acclaimed and illustrious Indo-American writer. Her novel, *The Palace of Illusions* portrays the story of Mahabharata from the view point of Draupadi. The novel positions the reader in a world that is old and new, magical and real at the same time. The novel is written in first person, giving Panchali's own thoughts on her own life. She has been illustrated as the epitome of Feminism. Breaking free from the chains of male chauvinist society it is a story of friendship, freedom, betrayal, war, rage and revenge, where Draupadi has been presented as a heroic sovereign in the epic of Mahabharata. Chitra Banerjee persuades the reader to further investigate the issue of female and male identity and the ruthless employment of man's social power over a woman.

**Key Words:** Feminism, chauvinist, epitome, heroic, sovereign, males, females, identity.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions* is the epitome of feminism. It retells the story of Mahabharata from the view point of Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupad. The delicate threads of her life have beautifully been interwoven to bring forth a grasping story. Chitra Banerjee has herself written "I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. Better still I would have her one of her tell it herself, with all 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 place in it."(XV).

King Drupad, ruler of Panchaal, one of the most prosperous kings of the continent Bharat was the father of Draupadi. The very birth of Panchali is marked with revenge and redundant. An offspring of vengeance and an expected one she trails after her brother Dhristadyumna out of the sacrificial fire and is often called as Yagnyaseni. She was also known as Krishnaa because she was copper skinned, fiery eyed

and had long black hair. She was gifted with blue lotus fragrance and hence called Yojangandha. Her own father had not expected her as he had long prayed to the Gods for a son to avenge Drona. Along with a dutiful son Gods had presented him a daughter whose future had been prophesized to change the course of history. "You will bring about the death of evil kings-and your children's and your brother's. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes indeed, you will leave a mark on history." (39) Draupadi, an unexpected gift from the holy fire had always felt unwelcomed both in the heart and house of her father, Drupad. Both as a child and later as a young, beautiful and grownup woman she never forgot how her father had initially hesitated to welcome her and shower his fatherly affection on her. She grew up as a woman lacked entrustment towards her father.

Simone de Beauvoir has justly said in her famous essay '*Becoming a Woman*' "One is not born, but rather becomes, a women." It is

patriarchy that makes use of sexual difference as to maintain an inequality between men and women. This saying correctly accounts for the nurturing Draupadi received at her father's house. King Drupad, as a condign father had never neglected Draupadi's upbringing as best suited for a princess. An unending stream of women flowed into her apartment attempting to instruct her the so called noble ways of a royal princess. She was customarily given lessons in singing, dancing, playing music, sewing, painting and drawing. The lessons were dreadful and painful for both the student and the teachers. With each teaching Panchaali felt the world of women tightening around her. The education that she craved to learn was the education of a man, that is, the education of governing a kingdom, its politics and the world. Only her best friend Krishna prepared her for a burdensome future by at times giving her lessons on the political condition of Bharat. He kept a close watch on Draupadi as she was the one who would be responsible to bend the gyre of time. Krishna's love was like balm in the life of Panchaali. It was like moonlight over parched landscape.

The male chauvinist society has its own conventional parameters into which it expected Draupadi to fall and fit. She was time and again reminded by all those around her that she was a girl. Falling within the framework of a kshatriya woman, her main desideratum in life should be to support her father, brother, husband and sons. During the emergence of war she should be blissful to send them to accomplish their heroic duty. It is her utmost duty was not to crave for their safe homecoming but for their glorious death in the battlefield. Dhri, an affectionate and attentive brother, who had always supported her when others had not, also had second thought about her upbringing. Being engendered in the patriarchal society he often wondered if his sister's learning was fallacious. "Boys are different from girls.....when will you accept that?"(25). Twain her father and the tutor constantly discouraged her from learning the ways to govern and rule a kingdom. "A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard in the royal family of Panchaal!"(23).The canonical established standards

of the society could not crunch her spirit. Draupadi was a head strong and imprudent woman who refused to abandon her lessons. Her perception was that her education was as substantial as her brothers.

Draupadi's swayamvar , organised by King Drupad, portrays the cynical side of the society. It was a competition to test the skill of applauded and celebrated warriors of the country. The proficient and great champions had to pierce the eye of a metal revolving fish set on a high ceiling with the help of Kindhara, the heaviest bow in existence. Draupadi who earlier had rejoiced by the news of her marriage later felt like a prized trophy, which her father was using to lure Arjun in order to revenge Drona. She felt subjugated and as a bait that was used to hunt the lion. "I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole."(57). Krishna was the one who convinced Draupadi that her real happiness was in getting married while her father's happiness was in seeking revenge.

Draupadi and Karan's relationship is undoubtedly the most complex and platonic of all. Karan, the eldest son of Kunti, offspring of Sun God, was originally known as Vasusena. He was born a foretime her marriage to king Pandu. In order to escape from the harsh and evil tongue of the society Kunti, being a mother still abounded him. Karan had to live his life in obscurity. He though a male had to suffer from the discrimination and indifference of the society because of caste and class. The only fault was his timing of his birth, over which he had no control. Though not married to him Panchaali was always attracted towards him. She always felt a strong attraction towards him but bound by the social norms of the patriarchal society she had no freedom to marry Karan. From the very onset when she had laid eyes on his portrait and later when she learnt his story from her brother Dhri, Panchaali was inclined toward Karan. "Each painful detail of Karan's story became a hook in my flesh, binding me to him, making me wish a happier life for him"(87). In her long and tiresome journey of life Panchaali 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 for Draupadi at her swayamvara. Unlike most other

contenders, he could have easily wielded and string the bow, but Draupadi refused him the honour of doing so. She rebuked him and denied to be the wife of a suta-putra. Draupadi's attitude towards Karna bordered him for the rest of his life. He harboured 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 honour."(192) Draupadi's love for Karna is such that she forgives him such an awful blunder. Draupadi and Karan both were so transparent in their feelings for each other that even Kunti could see through their secret love and Draupadi's admiration for Karan. Kunti goes to the extent of promising Draupadi's hand in marriage to Karan his if he joins his brothers in the Great War. Panchaali knew that love comes like lightning and death appears the same way. If you are lucky, it strikes you. If not, you will spend your life yearning for a man, you can't have. 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 sooth my ego."(229). Karan had 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."(276). The death of Karan in the colossal battle was a fatal blow for Panchaali. She no longer had the desire to live and seek revenge.

Draupad had intended to marry Draupadi to Arjun. Arjun disguised as a sage wins Draupadi's hand. Her marriage to the Pandavas was the consequence of Kunti's command to share the prize. From the very onset Draupadi's mated life was a walk of thorns. She had no say and was treated no more than a commodity. Married to five husbands was an unthinkable act, a heinous action. In a patriarchal society a man was allowed as many wives as he could afford to keep, but a woman having more than one husband was an unheard act. She married Yudhisthir, Arjun, Bheem, Nakul and Sahadev, together at the same time and became one of the most powerful women of the country. All

along the enormous epic it was Panchaali, who played a vital role in bringing her husbands to their destiny, that is, to be the greatest warriors of Bharat. She was a true virgin and a mind and say of her own. Vyasa the prophet had predicted that Panchaali would have five husbands. He designed a special code of marital conduct according to which Draupadi had to wife each brother for a year at a time starting with the eldest to the youngest. During this period the other brothers were to keep and maintain a safe distance from her. If the privacy was intruded when Draupadi was with one her husband then the other was to be banished for a year from the household. To balance Vyasa gave her a boon that every time she went to a different brother she would be a virgin again. "Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not."(120). Even the virginity boon was more designed for the benefit of her husbands than hers. It brings out the sarcastic face of the male dominated society. "That seemed to be the nature of booms given to women- they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quiet wanted."(120). Her conjugal life was strictly regimented, requiring tremendous self-control. All her sentiments and emotions needed a great deal of adjustment when she changed her lifestyle for each husband. Her situation was very different for a man who had several wives. Unlike him Draupadi had no right of choice with who she slept. It would be too difficult to realise the tremendous responsibility that she had to bear as a wife of five husbands. Draupadi was not the only one living a polygamous life but also her husbands who over the years took more wives. Their relation with Draupadi was most precious and unique. "If they were pearls, I was the wire on which they string."(151). Draupadi's life as a married woman was not an easy one. With each passing day she tried to be more faithful, loyal, loving, and chaste and a constant companion to her husbands. With each passing day she tried to forget Karna but in her hearts of heart she longed for him. Every time she entered the court she glanced around in the hope of catching a glance of him. Time and again this unknown desire for Karna kept knocking in her mind and heart. Was she not a married woman and that too five times over? What right did she have to

even think about him? Scriptures say “a wife who holds in her heart desirous thoughts of a man who is not her husband is as unfaithful as a woman who sleeps with such a man.”(185). But as to who were these so called voices if not the male dominated society, who had bound the women in such chains of do’s and do not’s.

The wheels of fortune take turn and soon prosperity arrived in the life of Pandus. Maya, who’s the name itself, is a metaphor of illusion was proficient craftsman in building God’s palaces, constructed the most magnificent palace for them named ‘The palace of Illusions’. A palace that was soon to become the envy of every king. For many years Panchaali sat at the throne of Indraprastha with her husbands and ruled the kingdom as a justly and wisely. It was their visit to Hasthinapur which leads them to the motif of most tragic events in their life. Yudhishthir lost everything in the game of dice to Duryodhan. He lost his palace, kingdom, his jewels, his brothers and even Draupadhi. She was gambled away like a bag of coins and was summoned to court like a dancing girl. She portrays the plight and condition of every woman in the world. “The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave.”(190). R. K. Narayan’s *The Indian Epics Retold*, portrays the sad and sorrowful plight of Draupadhi pleading the elders of the family, Bhishma for help. Bhishma’s reply “O daughter of Drupada, the question of morality is difficult to answer.....a husband may have the absolute right to dispose of his wife in any manner he pleases, even if he has become a pauper and a slave.”(263) brings forward the plight of Indian women in a society governed by the rules of men. Draupadi’s questions on her rights as a human being has many dimensions: does a woman have no identity of her own, in what sense does a wife belong to a husband or one human being belong to another. It appears that only a contemporary sensibility could discern this sub-text, particularly after the second wave of feminism, but the ancient patriarchal society also grasped the problematic moral inequities behind the institutions of marriage and slavery. Next what happened was even more shameful. She was dragged to the court by Dussasan in half caddied clothes. She tried to gather her

disordered sari around her and in vain she asked help from her husbands and the elders of the house. Even Karna with a mirthless smile said as to why should Draupadi be treated differently? Her clothes should also be taken away as the other’s having been. The ill treatment of a woman by the hands of male dominated society lead to one of the most terrifying and dreadful wars in the history of mankind, the battle of Kurukshetra. Draupadhi in fury of her anger cursed all those who have witnessed such hideous act “All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day’s work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I’ve wept.”(194). Draupadhi further proclaimed not to comb her hair till she had bathed in the blood of the Kauravas. Pandus accompanied by Draupadhi went to the forest for twelve years. She was never ready to compromise on either her rights as a daughter-in-law or even on the rights of Pandavas and remained ever ready to fight back or avenge high handedness and injustice meted out to her modesty. She secretly vowed that one day she would definitely seek vendetta on the abuse that she faced. She did it by igniting the spark of revenge in hearts of the Pandavas. The presence of Draupadhi next to them in the forest always reminded the Pandus how they had failed her. Each night she would recite the taunts of Kauravas so that they stayed fresh in her mind. There was a sudden transformation in Panchaali. Nothing and nobody gave her any pleasure. Even Dhir, who once knew all her dreams and fears could no longer apprehend and understand how Draupadhi felt. “She’s dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home.....The woman who had taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history than that naïve girl ever imagined.”(206). Twelve long years in forest and one year in king Virat’s palace left a permanent mark on Draupadhi. The end of exile was manifested with Duryodhan’s refusal to return Indra Prastha. The refusal brought the gigantic war knocking on the door. The combat for justice and truthfulness lasted for eighteen days. It was a massacre which took away countless breath.

Draupadhi became a sign of evil eye, people fled their husbands away from the safety of their houses.

Chitra Banerjee has beautifully portrayed the theme of feminism, whose key assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined and women are trained to fit into them. Draupadhi from the very start to end of her life finds herself tied in these endless chains that are governed and controlled by the patriarchal society. Roles like that of a 'daughter' or 'wife' or a 'mother' are not natural but social because a woman has to be trained to think, talk, act and participate in a society to suit and fit into these roles. Feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational-sentimental is rooted in and influenced by actual social conditions, where she has no power, is treated as a object of sex or a procreating machine, has fewer political and financial rights and is abused. Draupadhi, who became the most powerful queen of Indian sub-continent being a daughter of a powerful king and then as a wife of five great warriors also, had to bear the fire of the male chauvinist society. She had no right even on her own individuality. "I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl."(190)

Draupadhi received another boon from Vyasa which enabled her to have a vision of the ferocious battle with her own eyes. Draupadhi's anger and desire, the two direst enemies of mankind that had made the day of the battle come alive. Draupadhi knew them as well as and their offspring revenge. With each passing day the battlefield turned into a graveyard. With the death of Karna Draupadhi no longer had the desire to climb up the hill and watch the war. She had accepted this gift only to spy Karna. The war was a devil let loose, it destroyed everything consuming in its rage the hundred sons of Gandhari. Draupadhi, the major cause of bloodshed was not left out, for she also had to face the deadly consequences. She who sore vengeance must reap its bloody fruits. Her sons perished in the war, they were killed by Aswathama. Vengeance did not bring happiness to Draupadhi. Happiness like an unhappy bird hopped from one

branch to other and continued to elude them. Duryodhan's last words to Yudhishthir always echoed in the ears of Draupadhi "I'm going to heaven to enjoy all its pleasures with my friends. You'll rule a kingdom peopled with widows and orphans and wake each morning to grief of loss. Who's the real winner, then, and who the loser?"(309).

Panchaali accompanied the Pandus in their last journey after ruling the great city of Hastinapur for thirty five years. She embarked on a journey which no woman had ever the courage to endeavour. When she fell on the roadside Yudhishthir cautioned that none should attempt to help her as by itself it was the inflexible law of the final journey. More the people tried to dissuade more determined she had become. "Perhaps that has always been my problems, to rebel against the boundaries society had prescribed for women."(343). She would perish on the mountain and it would be an end worthy of bard song, her last victory over other wives. On her fall Draupadhi could hear Yudhishthir consoling Bheem and reminding him of a much greater goal. Even in her last thoughts Panchaali could not stop thinking about Karna. Karna she thought would not have left her abandoned like this dying all alone. He would have hung around and held her hand till death came to both of them. He would have contentedly given up heaven for her. It was true love that she had actually wanted and craved for her whole life.

Life was not easy for her. Panchaali had endured all the hardships justly. She had brought about the death of many warriors and hence solidifying the prophecy and her fate. She had proven that a woman's life is tougher than a banyan root. The power of man is like a bull while that of a woman is like a serpent seeking its prey. Bheeshma had once said ".....you are a great flame, capable of lighting our way to fame- or destroying our entire clan."(136).

Draupadi had remained an enigmatic woman all her life. She justly portrays the sad plight of anyone who tried to defy the norms of the male chauvinist society. She becomes a sad victim of the inequalities that exist between men and women which are not natural but social, not pre-ordained but created by men so as to retain their power and

supremacy over women. Volcanic, she reduced her enemies to ashes. This fiery princess was bent on vengeance was conjointly both compassionate and generous. Draupadhi, though a woman was as famous as the heroic Pandavas. She had developed the strength to bear the trials and hardships of life. She had resolved firmly not to harm the good and not to spare the wicked. Her personality was one of lightning and thunder and she was in no way less than Bheem or Arjun in valour and virtue. Her story is a saga of suffering and disgrace. She took everything in her stride and vanquished the perpetrators of her humiliation and agony.

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