

Reinterpretation of Myth: Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion*

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ABSTRACT

Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusion* throws light on the external and internal conflict resulted from her own desire and destiny. Draupadi the eponymous heroine mentioned in Mahabharata is the most misinterpreted character across centuries.

A myth is often described as a metaphor for a mystery beyond human understanding. It is a comparison that helps us to know some aspect of our mysterious selves. Christopher Vogler says "A myth, in this way of thinking, is not an untruth, but a way of reaching towards a profound truth." The culture of the world is enriched by the myths and legends which have given human society an order to live and survive. Myths and legends are mostly passed on to generations through oral tradition in the form of stories. These stories have acquired a prominent place in human history and later on they have taken a permanent place in the human psyche. Literature has also celebrated the presence of myths and legends and the stories have placed this literary creation in order to evaluate and to find out the impact of them on the human mind. Myths and mythology have always been among the elements which gives a shape to the lives of people in the society. They are stories that are produced by great men and women. They deal with forces of good and evil and a magical world interfere with the real. Supernatural elements often play a great role in deciding the destiny of the characters. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who has authored a number of works of fiction as well as poetry, is known for creating up a world of fantasy in her novels. Her subjects revolve around Indian migrants experience settled in the US. In *Palace of Illusion*, [2009] Divakaruni meticulously bring forth a reinterpretation of myth of the epic *Mahabharata* compose by Ved Vyas. The novel is definitely a feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewrote and retold from a female point of view. Mythological stories that we grew up listening definitely reverberated about female marginalization be it Kunti and Draupadi and many other female characters. Focusing on portrayal of women in literature Virginia Woolf writes:

"I tried to remember any course of my reading where two women are represented as friends.... they are confidantes, of course in Greek and Racine tragedies. They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by

the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex."(Woolf)

In this novel Divakaruni provides the point of Draupadi from female perspective. Divakaruni rewrites the tale of suffering in Mahabharata and breaks the stereotypical image of Draupadi and redefined her unique self. Divakaruni beautifully combines the traditional theme of *Mahabharata* with flashback postmodern narrative. As an Indian immigrant novelist Divakaruni's delineation of mythological characters like Draupadi can create an uproar and illusion. She provides explanation of rituals and religious practices that might be misunderstood in western world. By adjusting and reinterpreting postulates of Mahabharata that discriminate women, Divakaruni enables both herself and her Indian American readers to reclaim their feminist values and beliefs as continuous with rather than separate from their ethnic identities. The character of Draupadi is sympathetic and human. Draupadi is admired and adored by all her five husbands equally. She finds herself buoyant and expensive and uncontrollable. However, she still remained an object in the point of view of Kunti, the mother of five Pandavas. Similarly, Draupadi's feelings remained unfulfilled. First, she cherished her love for Arjuna and then Karna and candidly accepts her feelings. She says:

It was draupadi, and as she spoke, she stepped between her brother and Karna, and let fall her veil. Her face was as striking as the full moon after a cloudy month of nights. But her gaze of that of a swordsman who sees a chink in his opponents' armour and does not hesitate to plunge his blade there. And every man in the assembly, even as he desired her, thanked his fate that it was not he who stood before her. [Divakaruni.95]

Draupadi's attempt to unveil herself before Karna shows her fearless attitude. She defies the societal code of morality prescribed for women. Her gaze is compared with that of a swordsman.

She expresses her feelings to Krishna how she has been objectified and humiliated. Throughout the novel Chitra Divakaruni brings out role of destiny in deciding the fate of the women characters like Draupadi, Sita, Ahilya and Kunti. She emphasized that human beings are destined to follow their Karma and bear its fruits in this mundane world. Draupadi's realization that she cannot escape her destiny awakens her to accept the truth as she was the one who have been witness of all the suffering, bloodshed and destruction.

It became too late when Draupadi realizes her mistake in humiliating Karna. She recalls Vyas's prophecy and wants to stop the war of Mahabharata. She accepts the truth that we all are pawn in the hands of time. She heard the laments of the people of Hastinapur but finds herself unable to undone the tragedy caused by her oath. She accepts the truth as she said she who sows vengeance must reap its bloody fruit.

She says:

"When I'd stepped forward and looked into his face, there had been a light in it---call it admiration, or desire, or the wistful beginnings of love. If I'd been wiser, I might have been call forth that love and, in that way, deflect the danger or the moment...But I was young and afraid, and my ill-chosen (words that I would regret all my life) quenched that light forever. (96-97 Divakaruni) divakaruni provides a very painful description how Draupadi was humiliated and dragged to the court during the game of dice. Divakaruni writes: " A hundred male eyes burning through [her]. (191 Divakaruni) Arjuna the most powerful could not save her from disgrace. She was again showcased and objectified. She says:

"the worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me---I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time! Now they sat frozen as I struggled with Dussassan." (193 Divakaruni)

At the time of her suffering only Krishna miraculously becomes her savior. Divakaruni writes: " nonoe can shame you...if you don't allow it(ibid193) Draupadi pathetically recalls it what can horrify any women. She says:

" the bards sings of what occurred when Dussassan took hold of my sari to pull it away, exposing my nakedness to all eyes. How more and still more fabric appeared until he was exhausted with tugging. Was it a miracle? I don't know. I had shut my eyes. My body would not stop trembling though I willed it to. I clutched my sari with my fists---as though I could save myself with this futile gesture."(192-3)

The focus of this novel is on the inner life of women. Traditionally Draupadi has not been given the importance. Draupadi has been an archetypal symbol of the suffering and humiliation. Retelling her story in an autobiographical vein provides a new vision to the personal life of women and their tale of suffering. The story of Draupadi is imbedded in Indian culture/ tradition and always remained a matter of debate and

discussion among scholars. Divakaruni interestingly accords titles that to her iconoclastic novel that eulogizes bravery in women.

The character of Draupadi is the focal point. She tries to unleash her strength by preparing herself to become an instrument in demolishing the reign of Kuru Vansha. She is seen from different perspectives. As a daughter of Dhrupad she emerged from fire. Born from fire of sacrifice she is one of the most powerful and magnanimous characters in *Mahabharat*. She represented as fearless, obedient, sacrificing, and someone with heroic caliber who stands alone to fight the injustice done to her in the game of dice. Miraculously soon after her birth a forecast about the Great War and destruction of Kuru emperor takes place. The character of Draupadi automatically goes through retrospection and change. While growing up she strengthens her identity as a strong female. She prepares herself to face the greater tragedies. Her position as princess to the queen of five Pandavas and later wandering in forest with them creates a different Draupadi. Character of Draupadi have been immensely misunderstood across the ages. After marrying Pandavas she renames herself as Panchali. In her assertion one can perceive the dilemma of Draupadi as she create a new identity for her. Undoubtedly Divakaruni has given a humanistic feel to the character of celestial Draupadi. Height of her imaginative faculty can be seen that in humanizing the character of Draupadi she fails to understand the mythical and mystical identity which may be one of the reason of Draupadi's fate. Like Sita Draupadi too become the agent between the conflict of good-vs-evil. Very few women in Indian myth are seen to raise the voice of protest like Draupadi. Her fearless laughter at Druyodhahna's fall, her cherished desire for Karna, her questioning of Kunti all shows her undefeatable nature. Suhana PA writes in *Acceptance ,Resistance and Revenge: Draupadi in Contemporary Indian Fiction that in Hindu Mythology* very few women emerged like Draupadi. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as liberating agent although caught into patriarchal hegemony. She is the symbol of female suffering. The trial of Draupadi in Mahabharata can be identified with a number of women in the present time. Certainly, this character needs more debate and attention. It gives us an opportunity to reevaluate our cultural set up and society, belief system and the position of women in Mahabharat period. Still social evils like polyandry exists in many tribes like Jaunsar [Bogar Region in Northern part and Toda tribes of Nilgiri] in India . In the novel *Palace of Illusion* Draupadi's continuous acceptance and denial of her fate is woven beautifully by the novelist. What is inevitable is her destiny and this creates conflict. Her quest for perfect space/ palace reveals her feminine self. She hated the "thick gray slabs of the walls " that "suited more to a fortress than a king's residence." [Divakaruni] However, Draupadi's alienation in absence of mother, her love for Arjuna and then her admiration for Karna, her friendship with Krishna are dealt with a new perspectives. Draupadi represent a new image of femininity and her heroic journey, her constant struggle defines a women's constant conflict in patriarchy.

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