

Building and Breaking Illusions in Patriarchal Universe: An Explorative Insight into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract: In patriarchal universe, through the process of building and breaking illusions, a woman visualizes the reality of internalized and naturalized oppressive, repressive and suppressive gender rules subjecting her to exploitation as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has revealed it through Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* by reflecting a new color of her creative imagination. Broken illusions, like rejected hypotheses, take a woman to a paradigm shift wherein with a new dawn she thinks to change the course of history and the world. Parents and family, education and social system, economic and political conditions, religious and cultural constraints, scriptures and literary texts contribute significantly to gender discrimination resulting into woman's exploitation. In order to disrupt patriarchy, a woman will have to exercise her intellectual, rational and spiritual powers with great care and skill to kill the great warrior or Yuga-Purush of the time, otherwise, she may also be killed in this terrible deed. For this, she will have to convince him about his past wrong-doings and at the same time she must realize her own reproachful sorceress-weaknesses to prove her graceful womanhood. All her illusions, as they are built and broken, are eye-opener experiences to her leading to a new kind of material and spiritual reality that is different from the world of delusion and Maya. To her, there is no glory like the glory of illusions in this world but she becomes wise and enlightened to change the world as her illusions are shattered.

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From the time immemorial, the entire life of a woman since the instant of her birth till funeral has been a play of building and breaking illusions in the male dominated world founded upon the assumption that "gender rules are predetermined and the woman is trained to fit into those rules" (Nayar,83) which are reinforced and naturalized by the scriptures, family and education system as well as by social, economic and cultural structures in such a way that they create an indelible imprint on her female psyche, who consequently with passivity internalizing them as something preordained, allotted and unavoidable; willingly and silently imposing them on herself becomes the victim of oppression, repression and suppression which ultimately take her to inferiority and exploitation. Consequently, as Fiona Tolan in her essay "Feminisms" concludes that a

woman becomes “culturally conditioned to accept an artificially constructed inferiority” (Waugh,333). The masculine domination of God in the universe; father, brother ,husband and son in the family as well as the patriarchal social set up with many restrictions, always making a woman's psyche fear-ridden, reduces her to the 'other' in relation to her male counterpart in the society. In patriarchal universe under such conditions her representation as weak, meek, sentimental, irrational, seductive, a sex-object or a child bearing and rearing machine virtually pushes her into deplorable condition as the French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* reflecting the whole system in her encapsulated seminal sentence rightly asserts that “ One is not born ,but rather becomes ,a woman” and she also argues that “This humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being.”(De Beauvoir 31, 16) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is an explorative insight into the nature of the problem wherein by placing Draupadi in the forefront of the action she reveals these hidden contours of a woman's life as in “Author's Note” to the book she writes:

I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of men's exploits. Better still, I would have one of them 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. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*. (xv)

The issue of discrimination against women has been touched upon by various writers claiming social justice by disrupting patriarchy. Michael Meyer Ibsen expressing his serious concern about moral and legal implications and highlighting the predicament of a modern woman comments :

There are two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men and one , quite different, for women. They don't understand each other, but in practical life , woman is judged by masculine law, as though she weren't a woman but a manA woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint. (Ibsen, Micheal 466)

Throughout the whole text of *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni, presenting an interplay of illusions forming and illusions breaking in the life of a woman through Draupadi, not only reveals the causes of her deplorable condition in the patriarchal universe but, reflecting a special color of her creative imagination, also portrays Draupadi's character with her challenges and questionings in such a way as to 'change the course of history' which ultimately leads to the point what Patrocínio P. Schweickart thinks “*to change the world*” (Lodge and Wood,446). The creative reading process with contemporary critical approaches being used as a methodological tool taking place between building and breaking illusions reflects the creative power of the author as Wolfgang

Iser thinks that in the text it is “interplay of illusion-forming and illusion-breaking that makes reading essentially a recreative process” and “when illusion is punctured, reading reflects the process by which we gain experience”. (Lodge and Wood, 218, 219) The unpacking of the text in this way with such critical tools reveals the experience as described by George Bernard Shaw that “You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something.” (Shaw, 316) This kind of reading, as Iser Wolfgang opines, is “active and creative” (Lodge and Wood, 208) in which reader's imagination is engaged in author's work. This process starts from the birth of Draupadi when Dhairya Ma tells her that how unwillingly and unwanted she was received in this male dominated world as she was taken as “Unexpected One” or “the Girl Who Wasn't invited” (Divakaruni, 1), her illusion of being daughter of great king Draupad is broken because one who was wanted was a male child, Dhairya, not Draupadi. Taking Draupadi as a typical character representing every woman and Dhairya as every male, Divakaruni reflects this discrimination, starting from the instant of the birth, through the words of Dhairya Ma :

“When your brother stepped out of the sacrificial fire on to the cold stone slab of the palace hall, all the assembly cried out in amazement....An eye blink later,” she continued “when you emerged from the fire, our jaws dropped. It was so quiet, you could have heard a housefly fart.” (1-2)

No sooner did her father get a chance to greet her brother, she appeared and she seemed “as dark as he was fair” (4) but the invisible divine voices said “Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take care of her, for she will change the course of history.” (5) but reversely they were given the names - the son, Dhristadyumana, 'Destroyer of Enemies', the Celestial Victor or Light of the Universe' taken as the son of God; and Draupadi as the daughter of Draupad, a man. This discrimination starts with the discriminatory outlook of the parents and patriarchal social set up from the instant of birth which gradually goes on creating an indelible adverse damaging effect on the female psyche which Draupadi does realize as regardless the fact that her father has been very careful to her in the following years she expresses her resentment against this initial rejection by articulating “But I couldn't forgive him that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl into a woman, I didn't trust him completely.” (6) It is a warning by Divakaruni through Draupadi to the parents who at the initial stage shape a girl child as a woman and she starts preparing herself for the role of a woman. The male and the female child at the initial stage don't know any discrimination as Draupadi says “Dhairya wouldn't let go of me, however, nor I of him. We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together.” (6) But soon they were separated and set aside in palace wing by the paternal authority, and the father's house - the palace turned out a prison in isolation and this broken illusion led her to the realization of two different kinds of worlds—one for man and another for woman. But a woman is all love without any desire of domination or hatred as Draupadi expresses it in her letters to her

brother "*I'll love you, Dhri, until the great Brahman draws the universe back into Himself as a spider does its web.*"(7) Divakaruni also feels disgusted on finding a discriminatory treatment of skin-color in case of male and female as Draupadi argues that both Krishna and she were dark skinned but in her (a girl) case it is taken as a drawback whereas in Krishna (a male) it becomes celestial beauty. Giving an inkling to a most indecorous love letter written by princess Rukmini, the great beauty of the day, to Krishna who was already married, Divakaruni is not only attacking polygamy -a privilege to man but also reveals the internalized feeling of weakness and inferiority in woman which reduces her to the 'other'. If woman thinks that she is weak, irrational and inferior, the world will take her so and if she thinks that she is strong, rational and not inferior in anyway, she would be looked upon like that and would become the same as Krishna said, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself."(9) and in spite of her dark skin when she thinks that "*I, too, am beautiful*"(10), overnight she becomes 'a celebrated beauty', hence it is her belief that makes her weak or strong.

Divakaruni also attacks the institution of education that engenders inferiority in woman as well as it propels the male into destructive and wrong direction. It was surprising to Draupadi that both her father and her tutor did not like the idea of her studying with her brother; and their opinion that "A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn?"(23) She is also taken aback on the tutor's lesson on vengeance to Dhri that "he must bring renown to his forefathers by avenging the honor of his family."(23) Becoming reactive she recollects the prophecy of Krishna made at the time of her birth that she is "to get the education beyond what women were usually given and that it was the king's duty to provide this to me"(23). But Dhri, her own brother, seemed confused to think about her education with him as he thought that she "took up a woman's life with its prescribed, restrictive laws."(23) Being inquisitive and hungry to know about the mysteries of the world beyond the senses, her queries irritate the stereotyped tutor, who in return is cooled down by her brother with the words that "Most learned one, please forgive her. As you know, being a girl, she is cursed with a short memory. Additionally, she is of an impulsive nature, a failing in many females. Perhaps you could instruct her as to the conduct expected of a kshatriya woman?"(24) and the tutor's reply that "That is not my area of expertise, for it is not fitting that a celibate should think too much on the ways of women, who are the path to ruin." (24) strikes her mind with resentment by thinking that in male perception "women were the root of all the world's troubles"(24) as they are considered inferior, irrational and even root cause of all evils and sins. The tutor in revengeful mood instructs Dhri to tell her one rule of conduct that "A kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband and sons....Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield."(26) Challenging this

man made rule of conduct she strongly and rationally asserts that “I promised myself I'd never pray for their deaths. I'd teach them, instead, to be survivors. And why was a battle necessary at all? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men? I'd teach them to search for those.”(26) As a true female, through Draupadi Divakaruni establishes the intellectual superiority and spiritual sublimity of a woman in the world that underestimates her as sentimental and irrational. Draupadi as a postmodern woman with her intelligence, rationality and inquisitiveness appears in the role of 'Milton's Eve' as Richard A. Posner states that “Milton's Eve is intelligent” because “she has an inquisitive mind.” (Posner,260) On the other hand she also attacks the rules of the male conduct as observing them in the behavior of her brother she comments that “He visited the homes of courtesans, where he partook of drink, music, dance, and other pleasures”. It shows man's uxorial nature which ultimately leads him to sin as C. S Lewis in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* commenting on Adam, as Draupadi comments on Dhri, says that “Adam eats the fruit because he can not bear to live without Eve. Uxoriousness leads him into sin” (Lewis,126) When she sees her brother bowing to the sun-god for power and chanting *mantras* from the *Manu Samhita*, she can not help speaking satirically that “*He who has not conquered himself, how will that king conquer enemies.*”(27).

Divakaruni also dwells upon the power politics game between man and woman. Man always learns those lessons that confer power as Draupadi observes her brother who remains engaged in them whereas she is taught to 'draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival.' But Draupadi realizes that “With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me.”(29) Whenever she entertains the idea that she is not less than Dhri and she should be given the same education, it is Dhai Ma who curbs her by saying that 'a woman must be prepared for her destiny in a different way.’”(30) Dhai Ma also teaches her how to 'walk, talk, and sit in the company of men', 'how to show respect to the queens who are more important; how to snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the other wives of your husband' but Draupadi protests all these things by building an illusionary world of her own as she says “My husband won't take another wife—I'll make him promise that before I marry him!”(30) But this dream of her is sure to be broken as Dhai Ma reveals the psychological reality of the male world that “Kings always take other wives. And men always break the promises made before marriage.”(30) Dhai Ma becomes a psycho-analytical tool in the hand of the novelist to reflect male ideology as well as to show how the male created values are internalized and naturalized unconsciously in the female psyche; and in this way she depicts the series of breaking illusions of the women's palace.

Vyas, the great sage and seer, has also been designed as a powerful critical tool to make a dig in the scriptures, fatalism and destiny. He invites spirits for prediction about Draupadi's life and yellow whispers come to her through the smoke:

You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it. You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time. You will bring about the deaths 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. You will be loved, though you will not always recognize who loves you. Despite your five husbands, you will die alone, abandoned at the end – and yet not so. (39)

The dubious, diabolical and paradoxical nature of the statements by the great sage who is well versed in scriptures ensnare a woman in the illusive web of fatalism and pre-determinism which hamper her creativity and free thinking. When Draupadi requests him to change the future fore-telling, the sage shaking his head and reinforcing the idea that all things are prefixed by the divine decree says that “Only a fool meddles in the Great Design.”(40) Moreover, reducing her to subaltern position by internalizing the quality of passivity in her thinking and doing, he advises her to observe silence on three occasions which are most important in a woman's life. He suggests:

The first will be just before your wedding : at that time, hold back your questions. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be :when you're shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. May be it will mitigate the catastrophes to come” (40)

These are means devised for the repression and suppression of women whereas in the female space as Elaine Showalter suggests that attempts should be made “to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak.”(Lodge and Wood) On bearing the harshness of the prophecies, the sage also gives her a parting gift that now-onward she will be known as Panchaali, 'spirit of this land' symbolizing Mother Earth to bear and suffer. Draupadi imagines the relationship between land and the king as what the king wants “is more land and more power.”(65) Slapping her forehead on imagining of having five husbands, and in the light of shastras she will be looked down upon as a whore, she starts thinking in a challenging mood that “though no one seems to have a problem when men sleep with a different wife each day of the week!”(42) Thinking about the birth of the learned sage, Vyas the Compendious who was born on a dark island of a union between an ascetic and a fisher princess, she takes an insight into the unjust power game in the patriarchal universe. Moreover, she also sees power politics in swayamvar as she thinks that “It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry”(56) and she is being used as “a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole”(57) to achieve his goal as Krishna tells her that once Arjuna is married to her, he will become her father's ally and will not fight against him, therefore, she concludes about her father that “Power—that's all he cares about, not his children”(58) who are nothing but pawns for him. King Draupad was so

fond of his crown(symbolizing power) that while he was fasting for a son and was living on the holy Ganga water without eating anything and became as thin as the point of a sword with sunk-deep eyes into their sockets, but he did not “remove that monstrosity of a crown,...not even in bed”(2) Gandhari, Kunti, Madri, Bhanumati, Dushala and even Uttara were used as precious gift offered to the princes or the kings with pragmatic political sagacity.

Divakaruni also uses Sikhandi and Bheeshma as critical tools to reflect the rules of the male structured social system. Sikhandi who has seen the world through the eyes of both –man and woman and now is neither a man nor a woman reflecting the reality tells Draupadi that in this world “the power of a man is like a bull's charge, while the power of a woman moves aslant, like a serpent seeking its prey” and “in the world that I knew, men just happened to have more of it.”(52) For men, the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride.”(195) Sikhandi tells her that as Amba how she was forcibly taken by Bheeshma for his brother Vichitravirya who refused to marry her by saying that “A woman who has embraced another in her heart is not chaste”(48) and in what an insulting way King Salva refused to accept her as his wife because she became contaminated by the touch of Bheeshma's hand, without taking it into consideration that it was against her will and as a woman she was helpless before the bull's charge Words from scriptures also pricks Draupadi whenever she imagines of Karna as her husband as she thinks: “*a wife who holds in her heart desireful thoughts of a man who is not her husband is as unfaithful as a woman who sleeps with such a man.*”(185) She also remembers the quaint patriarchal law she read somewhere in the book that “*The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave.*”(190) To Sikhandi (Amba) Bheeshma stands for all the patriarchal values responsible for her deplorable condition in the society, therefore, Sikhandi has decided to kill Bheeshma, the greatest warrior of the time, who is a rock solid symbol of the patriarchal values which weaken the foundation of the society by contributing injustice to woman. But Sikhandi also thinks that “To kill the greatest warrior of one's time is a terrible deed”(51), therefore, it has to be accomplished through trickery very carefully. He also atones for it in advance as he knows that 'it's very likely that I, too, will die in the process”(52) is an oblique inkling to the postmodern woman. Sikhandi encourages her for this Great War in which Bheeshma, the Yug Purush is to be killed though she will have to suffer humiliation before the war. Bheeshma, who falls on the bed of arrows never to rise again, is bound by his own act as Krishna speaks to him 'O Vasu, by your own act you bound yourself.”(270) Draupadi, whose illusions are being broken as she is getting important lessons in her practical life, being a woman she decides to approach the problem aslant with power and freedom as allowed to humans in this world. Realizing her strength as a postmodern woman she emerges as powerful and bold as Krishna's inspiring words “*No one can shame you, if you don't allow it*”(193) provide her fresh energy.

Sorceress has also been designed as a critical tool to highlight the process of internalization of the negative skills in a woman by a woman which ultimately weaken and degrade her. She teaches her seduction, when to lie and when to speak truth, how to assume different moods in bed. She cunningly advises her to forget about love and think of pleasure by telling that 'Love comes like lightning and disappears the same way'(63). She also gives her two gifts—a story, the tale of Kunti and a parchment, a map of Bharat's many kingdoms—both are highly symbolic. Kunti, who has a mysterious story of giving birth to her sons, regarding Draupadi as her adversary, orders her sons in a patrician accent to honor her word, by saying that 'All five of you must marry this woman'.(108) The word '*this woman*' was very insulting to Draupadi because it reflected as if she were a nameless servant or a thing. The five brothers "preferred to share a wife rather than break their mother's word and her father, King Draupad, accepted it to keep his crown safe without caring about the marital life of his daughter as she remarks about him that 'He seemed more concerned about losing his new allies than about my marital misfortunes'".(124) Therefore, it is true, as Levi-Straus theory advocates, that 'woman functions as currency exchanged between men'.(Lodge and Wood,448) Moreover, she finds the 'courtyard of the palace filled with statues of the dancing women frozen in torturous poses' and Kunti tells her that "every item here was sacred, having belonged at one time to King Pandu"(127) which is indicative of the fact that women have been taken as object of sex and pleasure for a long time in the past. She was also suspicious about Bheeshma who transferred his love to his father taking him the king and his savior because Bheeshma was told that he was saved by his father when his mother was about to throw him into the water of the river Ganga, and perhaps she thought, that that had led him to hate every woman. Moreover, 'a man who has plucked frailty and desires so easily out of his heart' can not be dependable and sympathetic to others because he can't have compassion for the faults of others, nor he can understand other's needs. To such a man, keeping his words is more important than human life. Such a well-meaning man, who believes in the rightness of what he does, is dangerous one and may turn out 'an honest rascal.'

Story-telling colored in male-didactic world also naturalizes and strengthens the shackles in which a woman is imprisoned, and every story in its retelling process, comes out with more fresh and new strength from a particular point of view. The sage in the forest telling the story of Nal and Damayanti philosophizes that 'All through the history of the world, the virtuous have suffered for causes unseen'(209) and Yudhishthira appreciating the story says that "Nal never swerved from righteousness, no matter what happened. And Damayanti never rebuked him for his losses but gave him all the support a man needs when in trouble."(209) Draupadi attacking the justified righteousness of male in the diplomatic narration of the story raises a query against Nal by saying "And how did he repay her? By abandoning her in a forest. How

was that righteous?"(209) In Arjuna-Urvashi tale applying psycho-analytical approach as a critical tool with the assumption that "when you(women) share a man's pillow, his dreams seep into you"(209) she surfaces the reality of the man's heart. When Urvashi entered Arjuna's bedroom, and catching him by the hand asked him to love her, Arjuna respectfully replied that being "the beloved of Pururava, my ancestor" she was "like a mother to me" but smiling at his folly she retorted in the voice of a postmodern woman revolting against age-old traditions that "the rules that bind earthly women do not bind us. While Pururava lived, I was faithful to him. But he has been dust for many ages, and I am free to choose the man I want. Come, let us not waste time."(220). Though her tempting presence was like the dazzling moon yet Arjuna remained firm and unmoved; and earlier Draupadi was under the illusion that his power to resist Urvashi was for the sake of her love to him but her illusion was broken with the dawn of reality as she says "O vanity! Now in my dream I knew the truth. Arjuna was determined to show the gods that he was stronger than their strongest enchantment, a worthy recipient of the astras they'd promised him .against the sharp metallic seduction of instrument of death, what chance did Urvashi have?"(220)

In the light of phenomenological approach, Draupadi takes this world as the palace of illusions as she listens it from Krishna who says that "All things in this world change and pass away—some after many years, some overnight. Appreciate the Palace of Illusions by all means. But if you identify so deeply with it, you set yourself up for sorrows"(149) and she is reminded of the promise of Maya that "no human would be able to harm our palace, no natural disaster lay it low. No one could wrest it from us. As long as we—or our descendents—lived in it, it was indestructible, and in turn, it would protect us."(149) Exploring it at the unconscious level with Freudian approach, it is what as Draupadi takes it that 'We'd poured our hearts into designing this palace. It was an embodiment of our most intimate desires, our secret wishes. It was *us*'(169) and she thinks "had Maya laid a spell not upon the palace foundations but on us so that the beauties we doted on had no existence outside of our own longing?"(169) Her illusion of being faithful wife of the great five is also broken at the last moment when she follows them into the secret recesses of Himavan and as she falls down, Yudhisthir gives a warning to his brothers not to stop to help her. She realizes that "Such was the implacable law of this final journey, they had chosen to undertake"(343) Then Karna comes into her mind as she thinks that '*Karna would never had abandoned me thus. He would have stayed back and held my hand until we both perished. He would have happily given up heaven for my sake.*'(347) On asking the reason by Bheema, Yudhisthir tells that she married us all but she loved Arjuna more than everyone else. She observes that it is the second lie of Yudhisthir's life time which not only reveals the suspicious nature of man but also deems it good as he could not penetrate into the truth of her heart where Karna was sitting. She thinks that the palace and her husbands whom I used to take as a source of joy "ultimately had

brought me only sorrow.”(352)At the last moment she remembers Krishna whose “love was a balm, moonlight over a parched landscape”.(356) and as she regards her body not her real palace, the illusion is broken and a new reality dawns as she realizes that ‘I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego.’” It was also an anticipation of the broken illusion of the feminist critics who thought as Elaine Showalter puts it that they “were on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all text would be sexless and equal, like angels.” (Lodge and Wood, 345) And for the first time she saw with some other eye that “Above us our palace waits, the only one I’ve ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its centre everywhere.”(360) Hence, the process of building illusions fills a woman’s life with illusive charms and fleeting glory, and when they are broken she becomes wise and enlightened to change the world.

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