

Re(Visioning) Draupadi: Resistant Interpretation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract: The figure of Draupadi in the Mahabharata has fascinated authors, commentators and scholars for the complexity of her character. This enigmatic figure has been the subject of many contemporary writings wherein she gets a new lease of life in the hands of feminist writers who see her either as a victim of patriarchal social ideology or as a woman who is strong and resists oppressive power structures with strategies unique to her personality. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is one of the recent attempts by an Indian diasporic writer who tries to rewrite the grand Indian epic from the perspective of Draupadi and providing the contemporary reader with an insight into Draupadi's complex personality.

Keywords: Rewriting, grand narratives, feminist, agency, revision, resistant interpretation

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are culturally foundational texts and continue to hold sway over the minds of millions of Indians even in the twenty first century. These grand narratives have inspired a plethora of writers for centuries and one can easily identify not only references to these texts but also complete rewritings of them from contemporary perspectives. For instance there exists the *Chandrabati Ramayana* written in the sixteenth century Bengal that narrates the Ramayana from Sita's perspective. In recent years Samhita Arni's "Sita's Ramayana" (2011) is a retelling of the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. Similarly Arshia Sattar's *Lost Loves* (2011) and Navaneeta Dev Sen's *Site Theke Suru* (1996) are attempts at rewriting the *Ramayana* from contemporary perspectives. The *Mahabharata* too has been retold from various perspectives by Indian writers. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) Sethu's *Panadavapuram* (1982), Shashi Deshpande's *The Stone Women and Other Stories* (2000), Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* (2005) are some of the significant works that re-render the *Mahabharata* from contemporary perspectives. Karna and Draupadi, of all the characters in the *Mahabharata*, have fascinated the contemporary Indian writers the most. Whereas Karna is represented as a victim of a feudal and brahminical social and political structure in works like Shivaji Sawant's Marathi novel *Mrityunjaya* and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* numerous mutations of the character of Draupadi can be seen in works like Bachint Kaur's *Draupadi* (1990), Surendra Verma's *Yudhistir and Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' (1997), Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, (1995) P.K. Balakrishnan's *And Now Let Me Sleep* (1973) and Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997). One can classify the

representation of Draupadi in contemporary literature into two categories. Whereas in works like Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi', Kaur's Draupadi, Sethu's *Pandavapuram*, the character of Draupadi is transplanted from classical context to the contemporary one, in works like Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Balakrishnan's *And Now Let Me Sleep* and Deshpande's *The Stone Women and Other Stories* the context and setting of the epic era are retained. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is one of the recent attempts at rewriting the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi by retaining its classical context. These rewritings or 'revisions' of the grand narratives is an ideological act. As Adrienne Rich states,

Revision-the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction...is for a woman more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival. (Rich, 1975, 90).

Thus, these "resistant interpretations" (Jain, 2011, 29) of the classical texts ideologically counters the dominant feudal, patriarchal and casteist notions of womanhood, honour, purity so on and so forth filling the gaps in the metanarratives that results not only in the production of an altogether new text but also makes the contemporary reader reflect on the grand narratives in a much more critical manner. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indo-American novelist and poet, has the distinction of writing more than seventeen novels and many collections of poetry. She has been a Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Programme and has received prestigious awards like the American Book Award and the Crawford Award. Born in Kolkata in 1957, she studied at the University of Calcutta, Wright State University and University of California. She is known for her works like *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart* and *Arranged Marriage*. Much of her writing revolves around the experience of South Asian immigrants, especially women. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni takes a different turn by attempting to rewrite the *Mahabharata* from the point-of-view of its most important and enigmatic woman character, Draupadi. Divakaruni expresses her fascination with the grand Indian epic, the *Mahabharata* in the 'Author's Note':

...the epic weaves myth, history, religion, science, philosophy, superstition, and statecraft into its innumerable stories-within-stories to create a rich and teeming world filled with psychological complexity. (Divakaruni, 2008, xiii)

She further comments on the genesis of the novel:

I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women [in the *Mahabharata*]... 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. (Divakaruni, 2008, xiv)

Her creative engagement with the *Mahabharata*, she says, 'would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits'. (xv) This leads her to rewrite the grand epic with Draupadi or Panchaali at the centre:

It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*. (Divakaruni, 2008, xv)

At the outset, thus, the reader is initiated into a feminist version of the *Mahabharata*. What is interesting about Divakaruni's novel is that it makes the reader identify the various facets of the *Mahabharata* because of its close resemblance to its various popular versions. Yet her version is original in the sense that it reverses the perspective by making the reader gain access to the mind of Draupadi. Thus, the novel is partly psychological. Also it can be read as a *bildungsroman* too because it charts the growth of Draupadi from her birth through her youth to her final demise. In the process she is shown to have gained knowledge about her 'self' and the world. Divakaruni provides interesting twists in the 'original' narrative making it a kind of counter discourse. Simultaneously many of the much celebrated incidents and characters of the *Mahabharata* are downplayed or are presented in such a manner that the reader is left with doubt about the authenticity of such over-hyped representations in the popular versions. Although the novel has Draupadi as the chief narrator, Divakaruni also incorporates into it other narrators like Vyasa, the narrator of the 'original' *Mahabharata* and Dhri, Draupadi's brother in order to project the difference in perspectives. In this feminist rewriting of the *Mahabharata* Divakaruni attempts to fill many gaps in the *Mahabharata*. For instance she again and again highlights incidents and situations like Draupadi's obsessive infatuation with Karna, her intimate friendship with Krishna and her direct experiencing of the Mahabharata War through the special vision granted to her by Vyasa. Also sensitive issues like the plight of the widows after the war and her attempt at alleviating them find prominence in Divakaruni's version.

The feminist strain in the novel can be identified right in the beginning of the novel. Draupadi emphasizes again and again how her birth from the sacrificial fire was incidental, being born 'uninvited' to king Drupad. Her naming as Draupadi, daughter of Drupad, is in stark contrast to her brother's naming as Dhristadyumna, 'destroyer of enemies'. Thus, Divakaruni is able to problematize the 'important relation between names, gender and identity. (Hoydis, 2012). Despite the prophecy that 'she will change the course of history' she is given a raw deal in terms of her upbringing and choices. Divakaruni also highlights the difference in the kind of education that Draupadi receives with that of her brother. Draupadi comments on the restrictions placed on her education:

At first, no matter how much I begged, King Drupad had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal! (Divakaruni, 2008, 23)

Draupadi rebels against the education she receives – lessons in sewing, painting, poetry – which she considers useless and she longs for lessons on justice, power royal rule and so on. We see throughout the novel Draupadi's uneasiness with the 'roles' assigned to her sex. But she slowly learns to manipulate her 'femininity' from the lessons she receives from Dhai Ma and the Sorceress. She realizes that "I was a woman. I had to use my power differently." (Divakaruni, 2008)

One of the highpoints of Divakaruni's novel is that unlike other novels that re-present Draupadi as a victim, here she is portrayed as a woman who questions not only patriarchal norms of social behavior and propriety but also her own previous representations. The palace that she desires and acquires becomes 'my domain' and is symbolic of her alternative existence as against the claustrophobic life she leads in her father's palace and at Hastinapur after marriage. Divakaruni's Draupadi emerges as a figure of immense strength and agency in Divakaruni's novel. Despite repeated humiliation and victimization the reader is full of admiration for her because of her power to challenge patriarchal order. In the infamous disrobing episode she emerges much more powerful than all other male characters present in the Kuru Sabha. Her humiliation at the hands of Duhshasana, Duryodhana, Karna and the entire 'elders' along with her 'helpless' husbands leads her to her famous curse and vow that she 'will not comb it[hair] until the day I bathe it in the Kaurava blood'. (194) The reader is convinced that Divakaruni's Draupadi is destined to 'change the course of history'. Julia Hoydis in her essay 'A Palace of Her Own: Feminine Identity in the Great Indian Story' has shown how Divakaruni's Draupadi is 'far from a univocal representation of the ideal Indian female, always torn between devoted wife and independent outspoken critical woman'. (Hoydis 2012) Draupadi is presented in Divakaruni's version as an ambivalent character in the entire novel torn between conflicting emotions, desires and choices. Divakaruni does not attempt at projecting her protagonist as an ideal and points out her flaws and mistakes. This makes her Draupadi more credible. Moreover, by giving Draupadi agency Divakaruni, in the words of L. Kavitha Nair, 'recovers the voice of womanhood' (Nair, 2010, 131).

The Palace of Illusions not only throws light on the silent aspects of the *Mahabharata* but also explores issues that are highly contemporary. Issues like femininity, identity, narrativity and agency are critically explored through the life-like characters of the *Mahabharata*. In Divakaruni's novel gender becomes an important trope by which she is able to reorient the *Mahabharata* so as to make the contemporary readers critical of age old intuitions like patriarchy. And also by recovering the past the novel succeeds in forging a critical relationship between the past and the present, between myth and reality.

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