

**DRAUPADI'S INVINCIBLE APPROACH: A VOICE OF
COMMON WOMAN (The *Palace of Illusions*)**

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Abstract

*Every author has an idiosyncratic approach to express her/his own view point through the protagonist. There can be some common stories, points and perspectives regarding Draupadi /Panchaali, the most ever powerful queen of Hastinapur as depicted in the greatest Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's approach, however, needs to be recoded as to what fired her imagination to rewrite the classic story of Draupadi, her doubts and dilemmas, struggles and triumphs, achievements and failures and more importantly her feeling of revenge and later on her sense of forgiveness and regret at her final journey along with her five husbands towards the Himalayan region for penance. Chitra's book *The Palace of Illusions* deals with the journey of Draupadi from a haughty, renowned, indomitable figure in to a sober, mellowed personality.*

Keywords:-*Draupadi, the Mahabharata, Panchaali, Karna*

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Every author has an idiosyncratic approach to express her/his own view point through the protagonist. There can be some common stories, points and perspectives regarding Draupadi /Panchaali, the most ever powerful queen of Hastinapur as depicted in the greatest Indian epic, *the Mahabharata*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's approach, however, needs to be recorded as to what fired her imagination to rewrite the classic story of Draupadi, her doubts and dilemmas, struggles and triumphs, achievements and failures and more importantly her feeling of revenge and later on her sense of forgiveness and regret at her final journey along with her five husbands towards the Himalayan region for penance. Chitra's book *The Palace of Illusions* deals with the journey of Draupadi from a haughty, renowned, indomitable figure in to a sober, mellowed personality.

Born of ceremonial flames Draupadi goes through strange, lonely childhood, unusual marriage to five men with execution problem, her dominating mother-in-law, her coveted freedom and bliss at her magical abode and her endless tortures and traumas. Distressed by her dark complexion fourteen year old girl tries to decipher when people term her 'blue' capable of changing history. Once reticent, conscious of her colour Draupadi turns into a confident lady when her soul mate Lord Krishna releases her tension "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself."¹The story of Panchaali, as she is fondly called, is told in the first person in Draupadi's voice by the author. The epic shows Draupadi as strong headed and opinionated and Chitra supports when she writes for her protagonist "the more people dissuaded me, the more determined I became. Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. (*The Palace of Illusions: 343*) In the novel Chitra shows Draupadi as argumentative, brave and inquisitive. She disagrees with her brother Dhri's tutor that "women were the root of all the world's troubles." (*The Palace of Illusions: 24*) In moulding her personality Krishna and her brother Dhri play a vital role. It is they who introduce her to the outside world paving the way to think beyond narrow confines unlike her counterparts "wrapped in the cocoons of their unimaginative lives, not even knowing enough to want to escape." (*The Palace of Illusions: 43*) Her knowledge of world is stupendous and she can argue confidently on any topic.

Chitra follows classical story that Draupadi's life was predestined and she had 'no control over what was to happen.' In Veda Vyasa's prophecy for young Draupadi "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" (*The Palace of*

Illusions: 39) stands true and has far reaching consequences for growing Draupadi. Her 'pride', her 'temper', her 'vengefulness' speed up and shape up her future destiny. In the unfortunate disrobing incident her humiliation and insult at the court leaves a deep and lasting scar on her mind and this bitterness does not get easily blurred by any kind of compensation. Rather she coaxes and reminds her husbands by symbolically keeping her 'uncombed striated hair to be washed away by the blood of Dushshan through Bheem. The emotional and psychological damage continue to affect her and Chitra's narrative does manifest her trauma and her torn soul. She can never be meek, submissive or overlooked. Even after her marriage she dexterously holds her position as a wife and her husbands seek her advice in stately affairs and she knows "if they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung." (*The Palace of Illusions*: 151)

Chitra's depiction of Draupadi does indicate flawed patriarchal system at practice. The radical feminist Ann Oakley firmly believes that the social, cultural and psychological factors are "determinant of gender roles and unequal relationship between the sexes."² The sociologists also believe that this segregation and dominance by male sex is largely directed and determined by culture. The norms, values and roles are culturally determined and socially transmitted. So Ann Oakley rejects that biology is destiny. Draupadi, in that time period tries to establish her feminine grit and determination to convince that she has her entity and rejects the notion of absolute authority of husband over wife and therefore her husband Yudhishtir cannot stake her in the game of dice. She shows her indomitable courage while addressing the court "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." (*The Palace of Illusions*: 190) Her revolt is justified because years and years of narrow thinking has gone in to moulding society's minds. Unless women represent their point gender discrimination cannot be minimized.

Our ancient Indian history and literature are replete with the instances of gender discrimination. Society and literature are intertwined as latter is a mirror to the world. We know that the women in primitive societies controlled the reigns of household as well as food production activities. The post Vedic Period, however, saw a crucial change that directed and determined the present status of women in India. Legally assigning the specific roles for women the most influential laws of Manu imposed that the highest duty i.e. "*dharm*a of a woman is to obey and serve her husband." Even in the twenty first century, Indian women have not been able to get rid of this web of Hindu orthodoxy. The Indian culture either bestows woman the status of *Devi* or denigrate her to the level of a slut. She has not been treated as an ordinary human being. The greatest Indian epic the *Mahabharata* tells us that Karna calls Draupadi as a slut in the assembly during the disrobing incident as she shared five Pandavas as her husbands. Gurucharan Das argues that "Karna's revolutionary remarks show how a patriarchal culture divides women into two types: angels and whores. Ever since the defeat (in the game of dice) of Pandavas, Draupadi is considered to be in the latter category."³ He writes further that "the attempted disrobing is a clear insult to womanhood." (*The Difficulty of Being Good*: 43) That reminds us of Euripides' Andromache who is expected to sleep with the son of her husband's (Hector) killer. She was not as fortunate as Draupadi. Sita's ordeal of *Agnipariksha*, in the epic the *Ramayana*, is also a cruel reflection of the patriarchal culture

in practice. Encouragingly we have also seen the autonomy of women during the Mauryan and post Mauryan era. Romila Thaper's *Early India* tells us that the women were the spies, archers and ascetics and were allowed to have an easy access to the court as well as to the Buddhist monasteries. This surprising freedom remarks Wendy Doniger, "enjoyed by the epic's feisty women is a feminist's dream and some of this open-mindedness towards women may have existed in the society of those times."⁴

The *Mahabharata's* women Satyawati, Gandhari and Kunti are assertive women who save the Bharat dynasty at crisis. Draupadi herself is very bold and protects and fights like Kalito free Pandavas and herself from slavery at the court. She has the courage to question the court and her husband Yudhishtir-

"Whom did you lose first yourself or me? ⁵(Book-II. chapter 60.7 CSL]

In those days wife was husband's property and had no independent entity. During that period one cannot expect a legitimate answer to Draupadi's question. But Draupadi was no 'unlettered girl, ignorant of law.' She forcibly argues that since Yudhishtir had lost himself first hence legally he had no authority left to stake his wife. Moreover Draupadi was the wife of five Pandavas. Chitra tries to read between the lines that Draupadi learns at the court that women's love is complete and unconditional. She was confident that her husbands doted on her but at the attempted disrobing incident she realizes that she was loved but "there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me; yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame." (*The Palace of Illusions: 195*)

Pundit Rama Bai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888) criticizes Manu's position and exposes its in-built gender biases and the nature of man's authoritarian role over woman. Simone de Beauvoir comments that the history of humanity is a history of systematic attempts to silence the female. She opines "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.....which is described as feminine."⁶The system, therefore, makes women suffer at various levels. Draupadi also has her share of sufferings. Draupadi's five husbands get a barren portion of kingdom i.e. Khandav that they convert into a sheer magnificent palace of illusion, having unparallel magical properties. The grand palace becomes the envy of every king of Bharat. It gives Draupadi the much awaited freedom and she no longer cares what people think of her. After the defeat in the game of dice they have to part with their invaluable palace. The idea of living at forest is distasteful. "To be happy any where else was a betrayal of my beautiful palace". Her helplessness drains her completely and she feels "She's dead. Half of her died the day when every one she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear. The woman who has taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history than naïve girl ever imagined." (*The Palace of Illusions: 206*)

The book offers a deep layer of self-examination by the protagonist. The crux of her life is that she remains in the web of illusions for marriage, power, her magical palace not knowing that all this is 'maya' that is elusive and transitory. She learns crucial lessons of life and gets disillusioned when her pride and haughtiness melt. She always sees herself as "the wronged one." The journey towards the Himalayas, however, is time for retrospection. "Should I forgive those who harmed me? Should I ask forgiveness of those I'd harmed?" (*The Palace of Illusions: 350*) She cannot palm off the responsibility that she is the cause of destruction. She repents that "she who sows vengeance must reap its bloody fruit" (*The Palace of Illusions: 306*) and bloody fruit is the heinous killing of her own sons by Aswatthama. The gamut of emotions grip her and finally Krishna, her soul mate consoles

"Just as we cast off worn clothes and wear new ones, when the time arrives, the soul casts off the body and finds a new one to work out its karma. Therefore the wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead."
(*The Palace of Illusions: 258*)

Draupadi's destiny, thus, brings many twists and turns in her life and she withstands the thick and thin phases with equal grace. For her rejection and humiliation of Karna during her marriage she has to pay the heavy price and Karna gets the opportunity to repay the haughty princess of Panchaal 'hundredfold.' Her 'ill chosen words-*sutputra*' has deep repercussions and she would regret rest of her life. In the similar vein her laughter and support to younger women's comment at Duryodhan's falling at an illusory bridge "it seems the blind king's son is also blind." (*The Palace of Illusions: 173*) damages and unknowingly becomes the cause of the huge blood shed at Kurushetra. During her journey of penance she realizes that unknowingly she has become the breeding ground for vengeance. She also regrets that traveling to Hastinapur was 'one of the biggest mistakes of their life' and the war would not have happened had this disrobing incident been avoided. Though she leaves a mark on history, at twilight of her life she cannot forgive herself for the cause of deaths of her kith and kin, making many widows.

The book is, thus, an "admirable attempt to recreate the epic the *Mahabharata* from the view point of a strong woman."⁷ Chitra gives us a feminist interpretation of an epic story in which the female voice amidst the world of gods, warriors and her ever changing fate is never marginalized.

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