

**FEMINISTIC READING OF THE EPIC THE MAHABHARATA:
THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS**

LATHA.S

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

MYSORE UNIVERSITY,

MYSORE, INDIA.

ABSTRACT

"Panchaali's narrative provides a radiant entrée into an ancient mythology virtually unknown to the Western world. Divakaruni's impulse to flesh out the women of the Mahabharat results in a charming and remarkable book." (The Houston Chronicle). In Palace of Illusions Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes us back to the Indian Epic the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi. The novel begins with the magical birth of Draupadi , daughter of King Drupad, in fire .Her marriage to five husbands who lose everything and seek to reclaim as it their birthright. The novel being written by a woman and narrated by Panchali is given a modern outlook-the character with all her faults is acceptable to the reader. The story is complex, with Panchali being a powerful, strong and independent woman, an equal to the men around her -complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna, we never lose sight of her stratagems to take over control of her household from her mother-in-law or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husband's most dangerous enemy- Karna. This approach to recreate the epic Mahabharata no doubt is feminist reading covering most of the major incidents of Mahabharata in the novel.

Keywords- epic, feminism, mythology, illusions, modernism

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In *Palace of Illusions* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes us back to the Indian Epic the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi. The novel begins with the magical birth of Draupadi, daughter of King Drupad, in fire. Her marriage to five husbands who lose everything and seek to reclaim as it their birthright. The novel being written by a woman and narrated by Panchali is given a modern outlook-the character with all her faults is acceptable to the reader. The story is complex, with Panchali being a powerful, strong and independent woman, an equal to the men around her -complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna, we never lose sight of her stratagems to take over control of her household from her mother-in-law or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husband’s most dangerous enemy- Karna. This approach to recreate the epic Mahabharata no doubt is feminist reading covering most of the major incidents of Mahabharata in the novel.

‘Literary study differs from historical study in having to deal not with documents but with monuments’ and that the literary critic ‘has direct access to his [sic] object’, while the historian ‘has to reconstruct a long- past event on the basis of eye-witness accounts’ (Wellek 1963, 14-15).

The chapter draws information from history referring to Chitra Banerjee’s *Palace of Illusion*. There are many ways to read a book, and the above definitions explain that facts were interpreted and through the various interpretations we have been able to understand facts. Cultural critics take time to make good judgment of the different rigid practices of reading. This study too is an attempt to understand the interpretation of the novel.

In *The Palace of Illusion* Draupadi's emotions are what every woman of South Asian origin encounters in regard to her independence and will to survive. The hate and revenge that stimulate Draupadi in *Mahabharatha / Palace of Illusion*, which led the bitter war have resemblance to the Indo-Pakistani war. The bitterness insult and loss caused, drove people to realize that nothing but revenge can convince them.

PALACE OF ILLUSION (2008)

History ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that 'liken' the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture.... By the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure. (91-92)

Stephen Greenblatt argues that literary works themselves should be understood in terms of negotiation, rather than in the conventional (romantic) sense of 'pure act of untrammelled creation' - negotiations which are 'a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations' (7).

The Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Upanishads are the great epics of the Hindus. The Mahabharata known as India's "incredible stories", or "the great stories of the Bharatas / India" is believed to campaign the moral commitment to "dharma". This ancient epic not only celebrates war between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, but speak of human relationship, the good and bad of life and that the fundamental human nature remain the same, desire and anger shape our lives, cause extreme suffering only to understand life and self.

The epic is told and retold in the form of myth and religious discourse for thousands of years. It has been translated and transformed to cater to the needs of people and the changing times. In most cases the writers stuck to the preset main points of the story, but the interpretation of the characters, their actions and approach to the text varied.

The Palace of Illusions, a novel by feminist writer Divakaruni retells the story of the Indian epic Mahabharat from the position of Panchaali, the wife of the five brothers of the epic tale, an extraordinary princess born out of Fire and destined to "change the course of history."

Divakaruni's historic and transporting variation adds new and truly revelatory psychological and social dimensions to the great epic's indelible story of sacrifice and spiritual awakening, giving us a rich tale of passion and love, power and weakness, honor and humiliation.

Divakaruni paints the characters of women of Mahabharata, in *The Palace of Illusion*. Like the adventures of Homer Divakaruni retells the story of Mahabharata- the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas, to rule the Hastinapura kingdom. The war that was fought, due to Duryodhana's insult towards one woman -Draupadi which led her thirst for revenge that eventually wiped out humanity. But the Mahabharata do not tell us what went through Draupadi's mind during all these events that altered history. The fictional novel *The Palace of Illusions* dramatizes the internal war between emotion and reason from Draupadi, the central female character's point of view.

Draupadi called as Panchaali in the novel, is elegant, pliant, and determined. Panchaali, is portrayed as strong-willed women of the Mahabharata, in *The Palace of illusion*, starting in childhood, born of fire along with her brother Drupad, is portrayed as an individual who did not want to live life like other women merely supporting the men around them. "And who decided that a women's highest purpose was to support men? A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life." And as a kshatriya women's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, bother, husband and her sons, be happy they have the opportunity to fulfill a heroic destiny and die with glory on the battlefield Panchaali promised herself she would never pray for their deaths, instead teach them, to be survivors. And questioned has to why a battle was necessary at all? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men? I'd teach them to search for those. (26)

She wanted to be tutored alongside her brother in the art of war and the maneuverings of ruling a kingdom. Drupad, Dhri and even her Dhai Ma who knew her well, all of them were apprehensive of her being tutored.

"A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of panchall! Only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at my birth required me to get an education beyond what women were usually given, and that it was the king's duty to provide this to me, did he agree with reluctance. Even Dhai Ma, my accomplice in so many other areas of my life, regarded the lessons with misgiving. She complained that they were making me too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech. Dhri, too, sometimes wondered if I wasn't learning the wrong things, ideas that

would only confuse me as I took up a woman's life with its prescribed, restrictive laws."(23)

When Panchaali could not follow from behind the curtains and would interrupt, the tutor wished she did not join them when he taught, as she was not helping Dhri to learn, sometimes Dhri would talk in favour of her. "Dhri hid his smile and said Most learnt 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." (24) Panchaali resented the tutor's declaration that women were the root of all the world's troubles, and when he was about to leave she gave him a brilliant smile as she bowed, that the tutor jumped as though he was stung.(24)

Divakaruni narrates the stereotype understanding of women that has been followed and accepted till date. She gets to know that her father is worried because she is beautiful, from her conversation with Dhri. And when Dhri did not want to comment on looks he said with stolid patience, "Boys are different from girls, when will you accept that?" (25) As they grew Panchaali could not spend much time with Dhri. Dhri was given other lessons which Panchaali could not share them with him. She was tutored separately in the lessons in singing, dancing, playing music, painting, sewing, drawing but she was not much inclined to do these with each lesson she felt the world of women tighten its noose around her. She felt she too had a destiny to fulfill and the need to prepare her for it is as important as Dhri's. Most of time, she watched Dhri perform, practice and try to discuss what she saw and heard with him. Sometimes he would answer but manytimes he would say, "You don't need to know about that! I have told you too much already. Why do you want all this information, anyway?"(26)

Panchaali, a rebel as a child would feel unwanted and lonely because she did not know the purpose of her birth, except the prophecy she would "change the course of history". Panchaali's and Dhri's conversation as a child tell the events outside Panchaal kingdom that happened before their birth and Dhri's destiny to kill Drona . But as the story continues we hear a mature Panchaali's voice.

In the subject of marriage to, her circumstances led her decisions differently from the normal course. She could not marry the person she wished too- Karna the famous warrior and it is surprising that Panchali desired other man after having five husbands. Karna too loved her since the day he saw her in her Swayawara, and Panchaali also deeply regretted that she avoided Karna from participating in her Swayamwara. It is Draupadi's profound

fascination for Karna that she supports Yudhishthira to accept Duryodhana's invitation to Hastinapura to play dice. The writer commits Panchaali in this decision of Yudhishthira.

But she is deeply hurt when she learns it was Karna who played a role in insulting her in the sabha – her disrobing the sari. The other face that pushed into her mind was of karma, his eyes hot with hate- he had taught a lesson too well that the desire for vengeance is stronger than the longing to be loved.

Towards the end when she is accompanying her husbands to the Himalayas, on her final journey Panchaali recollects an event of her interest towards karna, the year of disguise in queen Sudeshna's palace away from Keechak's hot eyes. She had not seen her husbands for days that left her frustrated and lonely. In her confusion she wondered if all this suffering had descended upon her as punishment because in her heart of hearts she had been unfaithful to her husbands. (355)

Marrying more than one husband was suspecting of a woman those days and today too. Arjun, the only warrior who is able to shoot the fish's eye, wins her in archery competition and when brought home Kunti tells her children to divide among the five brothers, is unassuming to today's readers considering the period she lived. This led to her marriage, against the tradition, with all five heroic, Pandava brothers. And also it was improbable of women to get such attention as love and respect from her husbands but Panchaali gets all of it.

The novel does not only narrate Panchaali's emotional war; but also the Pandavas agreeing to battle to put an end to Duryodhan to avenge her insult is narrated along with Duryodhan's obsession with the need to cheat his cousins out of their rights because he is worried he would lose Hastinapur one day to its rightful owners, his blind father Dirdhirashta's blind love towards him (Duryodhan) and the fact that he could not overcome Pandu being made the King over him.

Trying a balancing act as a woman with five husbands, she is by their side when they were cheated out of their father's kingdom, and swept into their quest to reclaim their birthright, remaining at their side enduring a long exile in the wilderness, instigates a catastrophic war, as prophesied and slowly learns the truth about Krishna, her mysterious friend.

The title of the book can be dealt with the theme of identity. In a world and society dominated by men, where the role of the wife was just about taking care of her husband and family and their needs, Divakaruni's novel gives us a chance to take a look into the mind of the women who changed it all. The Palace of Illusions, which was the beautiful

palace that was built specially for the Pandavas and Panchaali by the asura Maya, is in so many ways the only place she calls home. The feeling of displacement and searching for a home is one that is very common throughout South Asian Writing. The palace, which disintegrates to when Duryodhan tries to claim it, was the only place where Draupadi, Princess of the Pandavas, was truly herself and found a sense of peace and belonging.

Kunti is portrayed as a passive aggressive who raised her sons with the sole aim of claiming back what was theirs. Mahaswetha Devi and Iravati Karve etc have their own rewriting of Kunti, Gandhari and other characters, but here the chief focus is the relationship between Kunti and Panchaali. The image is of a mother who does not lose her sons to a wife. Every move that is made from the statement that causes Draupadi to be wife to five brothers to the tough circumstances Kunti faces and triumphs, shows that their relation between the daughter-in law and mother-in-law.

Another prominent feature in the novel is Karna, the man who wanted to belong and found peace only in death. Draupadi's guilty attraction to her husbands' most dangerous enemy cause her to live with the regret and eventually the knowledge that Karna is all that he is because of her rejection at the *swayamvar* where she found her husbands. The novel also bring out the wonderful relation with Krishna and the special bond and the colour of the skin that he shares with Draupadi.

"Perhaps the reason Krishna and I got along so well was that we were both severely dark-skinned. In the society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and - almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl. I paid for it by spending hour upon excruciating hour being slathered in skin- whitening unguents and scrubbed with numerous exfoliants by my industrious nurse." .. It was clear that Krishna, whose complexion was even darker than mine, didn't consider his color a drawback" (8).

She had heard the way he uses his wits and charms into the hearts of the women and also to pacify even those who curse him and how he never forsakes his believers are all very appositely touched upon in the book. Most of her questions were answered with an enigmatic smile that forced her to do her own thinking, and commented only when she looked distressed or confused. His answers can be answers to Panchaali and also to the readers too, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself". Even when panchaali was humiliated in the sabha she thought of Krishna though she did not owe him anything, nor were they related, she fixed her mind on him without being swept away by the anger that arises from expectation. "She thought

of his smile.....His glance was bright and tender. *No one can shame you, he said, if you don't allow it.*"

The novel's every character is reflected in today's society. While the setting is an epic tale the characters and their traits are very modern and relevant. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni said once, "The art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about." And that is exactly what *The Palace of Illusions* manages to do while remaining true to all things Asian.

The last part of the story is alerted from the original. Amid the fight Panchaali is most stunned to observe her insight toward oneself that as the daring lady now she is seen as the wronged one- women sympathized for the insults she would suffered at the hands of Duryodhan- admired her for her continuing hardships was totally conflicting with she looked down the huge Pandava host on the battle field, she was a harbinger of ill luck for the ladies around her, "the witch who may, with a wave of her hand, change them into widows" (PI, 258). This illustration of Panchaali after the Kurukshetra war is brought out differently from the original towards the end of the novel by Divakaruni. Lot of attention is given to women characters and their suffering. "However here's something Vyasa didn't place down in his Mahabharata: Leaving the field, the shine headed out to an adjacent slope, where it stopped for a minute over a sobbing lady" (298).

Divakaruni gives a positive note so that women are given their dues: Highlighting the distress of the ladies, the account introduces an alternate plot of resolve of the fight in the middle of families. After the war, the lamenting widows attempt to bound onto the burial service fires. Confronted with a mass sati, which would add to the awfulness of the war, Yudhisthir reaction towards these women was dreadful:

"Aghast Yudhisthir stared at what was happening. If it had been a battle, he would have known what kind of command to give men. But here he was at lose, paralyzed by guilt and compassion and the ancient and terrible tradition the women had invoked. I could see on his face a further concern: the tragic death of so many women at the very beginning of his reign would be a stain on his kingship, a devastating karma for him to bear (PI, 312)." In this emergency movement Panchaali's intended to stand beside Yudhisthir, as he seemed alone. But the crowd suddenly stopped fighting to get to the pyres and turned towards her. If she did not speak at that moment when she had the attention it would be lost forever. Recollecting the discussion between Dhri and the tutor about the powerful words which is the sharpest and subtlest of weapons, crucial for rulers to use them correctly,

"I started too loud and too loud.... I found myself mentioning the bereavement we shared—for I, too, like them had lost a father and brothers. I admitted my guilt about the part I'd played in bringing this war about and asked for their forgiveness.....

I'd started to address the women as a queen might her subjects, but as the words formed in my mouth, I spoke as a mother among mothers, and together we wept."(314)

The other turn in the novel is the exploitation of women that is narrated "Hastinapur after the war was largely a city of women, widows who had never dreamed that the survival of their families would depend on them. .. without male protection, they found themselves exploited... Men would appear from nowhere claiming to be relatives and take control of the family fortunes. The women became unpaid servants. Sometimes they were turned out.... I'd see them on the road side, often with children in their arm, begging. There were others that I didn't see, but I heard of the street corners they frequented at night, selling the only thing left to them."(322-323)

It was time for Panchaali to shake off her self-pity and do something – to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women (323). with the help of Kunti and Gandhari, further Subhadra and Uttara join them.

Divakaruni gives us a rare feminist interpretation of an epic story. This study settles on the understanding of the epics that are wedged in Hindu tradition. And for a western reader the Mahabharata remains a riddle and a complicated mythical story. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* make the old myth more understandable at a rather unanticipated level. The novel narrates Panchaali's quest for the meaning of life that addresses our own doubts, fears, and hopes of renewal and love in the world. The study tries to inform that the ancient epic which is a mystery to a westerner and would not make an effort to read the lengthy epic will read this novel and follow the ambiguous subject.

Luce Irigaray's *Between East and West* 2002, she says one of the rare attempts in Western philosophy to bridge the many gaps between the basic values promoted in various areas of the world, the initial cultural differences, and thus limitations, are not easily uprooted, although they may be partly overcome.

The title is a metaphor for 'Maya' - life as illusion. Panchaali is given sight to view the important events of her life and the war that takes place in the end by the narrator of Mahabharata, Vyasa, gives this foresight to Sanjay, Dhritarashtra's charioteer too. The role of Draupadi is already destined is been emphasized by Vyasa the narrator in the epic at various junctures. This has been also emphasized by Krishna, with whom she shares a

platonic relation. Draupadi too admits her role time and again that she is enslaved by desire and hatred and cannot or will not distance her. Thus the author's foreshadowing through the eyes of Panchaali enhances the intensity of the tale. With Vyasa's gift, Panchaali is able to see all that occurs in the war. On the ninth day, she watches Bheeshma, the grandfather, battle Arjuna, who had been loved and cared for by Bheeshma as a child. The novelist brings out the filial love between the Old Warrior (Bheeshma) and Arjuna although they are placed opposite.

The success of the novel is that it does not deviate from the original but still differs completely, mainly because the focus of the epic here is from the perspective of women, Draupadi or Panchaali (as known in the novel) to narrate the instances of the ancient epic. The readers don't get a feel that they are reading a lengthy boring epic but a novel which has relevance to day in today's situation. Divakaruni apparently wishes to accentuate how the characters continue to challenge human minds and behaviors.

It is Panchaali's wounded pride in the first place that is the cause of a major catastrophe, the battle at Kurukshetra that will deprive her of her brother, her father and her five sons. But is the prophecy avoidable, and could Panchaali, such as we know her from the legend, have transformed herself so as to prevent the carnage? In her interaction with Krishna, god and man, and truly a guide and a friend, she learns that "wrongdoing in spite of good intentions" is the consequence of "*anger and desire, our two direct enemies*" (264).

Divakaruni's Panchaali is treated as ordinary women today who commits mistakes and have the normal behaviour as man. When men make mistakes or think of women is accepted, so do Panchaali be considered similarly. Plus the way Draupadi rebels against customs and conventions is similar to the way these days girls have to fight against centuries old customs that hinder their growth.

Panchaali who along with her brother was born out of fire and received the prophecy that her life was to change the course of history, bore a greater responsibility. The question of finding her identity does not come here into existence when fate decided that she would become a wife of five brothers and go through that period of history with the war. The only option for Panchaali is to develop multiple qualities that will allow her to live as harmoniously as possible with her five husbands and society she is exposed too.

Divakaruni's foundation for the development of her ideas in this novel is not difficult to assimilate: it is the present that shapes the future, as our lives of today reflect the accumulation of our past experiences and responsibilities. Such a position is not to be linked exclusively to a writer's native background, with the basic understanding of *karma* as an unavoidable dimension of our lives that may be influenced and shaped appropriately if we observe our actions and choose to act ethically, also in the sense of the Yogic principles of Yamas and Niyamas. Divakaruni certainly does not "preach" any specific philosophy or even worldview; rather, as a highly aware and responsible person with a great heart and an exemplary literary gift, she understands life and draws from this understanding in bringing forth precisely those elements that will produce change in our own hearts and minds.

In the end, Panchaali as seen by Divakaruni manages to understand the issue: being different from men (as Panchaali finally becomes a true subject in the novel), she accepted many ordeals that proved her loyalty to her husbands and to the system that decided the course of her life. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, she sees what she needs to learn, a true ethical notion that "the desire for vengeance" should not be "stronger than the longing to be loved" (194).

Later, as she follows her husbands on their way to death, in the Himalayas, even this longing subsides as the major breakthrough occurs at her passing. With the help of Krishna, who manifests himself at her side, she finally opens herself to the true nature of love, totally different from the nostalgia she had experienced in the past (356). She realizes that the same love pushed her into existence when it was her turn during her childhood to step out of the fire and into the earthly existence (357). She finally sees that from a vast, cosmic perspective, her fate was that of "the instrument" (357) beyond which there were other doers, other forces at work. So she is not to be blamed for the fact she forgot the origins of her being and that she caused pain and devastation (358). When she slips into the space beyond earthly existence, "something breaks," with "a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below." She is "buoyant and expansive and uncontainable"—and she sees who she is "beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego"—and yet "for the first time, I am truly Panchaali" (360).

The major reason resides in Panchaali's position at the battlefield as an observer, but may also be found in the general influence of the Bhagavad-Gita on Indian philosophy that could not be easily dealt with in a contemporary novel. As we have seen, Divakaruni nevertheless assigns Krishna a major role in Panchaali's life and especially during her

passing. The revelation that comes to Panchaali in the end, that of peace and love, with all conflicts gone, makes her understand the before and the after, together with the nature of the cosmic fire of transformation through which she was pushed into earthly existence.

The study appreciates the writer's success to describe the emotion of the character really well. The most important thing, unlike the previous interpretations of Mahabharata, this book doesn't talk about the loser and winner. Everyone's a loser in a war this huge, everybody's hurt.

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