

A Feminist Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion*

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Abstract

Orally, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana of India are passed down from one generation to the next. The historical backdrop of these epic tales, which have been created in accordance with the philosophies of succeeding generations, can be used to infer various ideologies. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, writing in the tradition of fictionalised retellings of classic tales, focuses on the events of the Mahabharata in a novel written from Draupadi's perspective. The majority of the study in this essay is focused on Divakaruni's theatrical recreation, "The Palace of Illusions," which serves as its focal point.

Introduction

The Mahabharata exists in several different forms, with each rendition emphasising a unique set of ideas. Each fresh telling's narrative tone and plot thread add to the text's overall aesthetic. India's post-independence acceptance of the Mahabharata's supplementary tales led to the epic's increased notoriety. Famous retellings of the Mahabharata include *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* by Devadutt Pattanaik, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* by Anand Neelakantan, *The Rise of Hastinapura* by Sharath Komarraju, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* by Kavita Kane, and *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a creative reworking of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. *The Palace of Illusions* is a first-person narrative that tells the tale of Draupadi from her flaming origins to her tragic demise. Draupadi, whose feminism is extolled to the greatest points in *The Palace of Illusion*, is one of several powerful female heroes in Divakaruni. It is Divakaruni who, in *The Palace of Illusions*, invites readers into Draupadi's universe by proclaiming, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into." (Author's Note, *The Palace of Illusions*, xv)

One of the significant differences between Divakaruni's interpretation and Vyasa's is the confession of Draupadi's love for Karna. In the 2008 book *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi questions the injustices meted out to her rather than bearing them in silence like a proper lady. Panchaali is changed by Divakaruni from an Object to a Subject. The reader is immediately connected to both a mythological and modern concept of feminine identity through this. Despite the fact that the entire play features celestial figures and god and goddess appearances, Draupadi is portrayed in *The Palace of Illusions* as being sceptical of ancient myths and rituals. In Divakaruni, Draupadi is more powerful, defiant, and realistic in

personality. She rejects the horrible destiny of being married to five men, as predicted by the renowned prophet Vyasa. One may see the enduring resentment in Draupadi's thoughts at her father's original rejection when she gives birth to Draupadi from the fire that her father Drupad constructed and sang for the sake of his son Dhristadyumna. He was kind, perhaps even indulgent, in his own severe and obsessional manner. However, I was unable to make amends for his initial rejection. Maybe for that reason, as I developed from a little girl to a young lady, I didn't entirely trust him. (Section 6) The Palace of Illusions

In a fiercely patriarchal society, Draupadi maintained her status and never allowed herself to become oppressive or frail. She was so angered by learning the real reason for her father's first rejection—that a female kid is useless for gaining supporters for his country—that she gradually changed into the person she is now. She becomes fascinated by Dhai Ma's birth story. Her birth was foretold by the gods, who informed her that she would change the course of history. This satisfies her need for femininity, and as a result, she is continually trying to connect her experiences with the fulfillment of the prophecy. In contrast to other readings of the Mahabharata that hold Draupadi responsible for the horrible destructive Kurukshetra war, Divakaruni's book connects Draupadi's struggles to those of all women around the world and Draupadi's inner struggles to the concerns of all women.

Despite the fact that the plot foretold Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas against her will and preference, Divakaruni emphasises Draupadi's feminine affection for Karna. As if Arjun were the only one who could succeed in the Swayamvar challenge and the only one who could assist Draupadi in realizing her childhood dream of changing the course of history, Krishna continued to dominate and occupy Draupadi's mind with visions of Arjun. Despite this, Draupadi loses herself when she sees Karna's picture and describes him as the man who attracted my attention on Duryodhan's right; older than the prince and austere-faced, the man sat upright, his thin frame alert, as though he understood the world was perilous. Although he appeared completely alone during court. His only accessories were a set of oddly patterned gold armour and gold earrings, neither of which I had previously seen. His eyes were filled with a grief from long ago. I was drawn into them. My irritability vanished. I had lost interest in seeing Arjun's portrait. I was more interested in how those eyes would appear if the man grinned. I had an absurd desire to be the cause of his smile. (TPI 69)

Women were never allowed to select their life partners in India. By declaring virginity the exclusive holy possession of women while exempting men from this duty, society benefits men. As a result, spouse infidelity has developed into a persistent issue in many households. Despite coming from a royal family, Dhai Ma advised Draupadi to accept the possibility that her husband, a prince of any kingdom, might be compelled to wed multiple women. But as she can see in Karna's eyes, Draupadi, a feminist icon, wants her husband to be devoted to her and to love her only. A woman whose body is consumed by a lone male is seen as the epitome of virtue in ancient custom. Because of the highly regarded masculinist "dharma," which grants Draupadi the rare benefit of always being virgin as she shifts from one brother to the next, Draupadi is forced to choose between five husbands. Since no patriarch in her immediate area has confirmed her memory, the boon only benefits her spouses; it does not benefit her personally. The virginity boon, which seemed to be intended more for my husbands' than for my benefit, also didn't particularly excite me (TPI 120). T Draupadi has

reportedly adored Karna her entire life, according to the literature. Because of this, anytime one of her spouses let her down, she thinks about Karna and assumes he wouldn't have.

Draupadi, who is regarded as the goddess of virginity and whose purity is outrageously tested in the court of advisers by disassembling her, is given divinity in the original Mahabharata in order to impose the law for women. The poem also foretells how Draupadi's birth would change the course of history. However, it is unclear how Draupadi intends to change history until she is utterly humiliated in front of legendary figures like Beeshma, Dhrona, and especially Karna. Is this Draupadi's only opportunity to change the path of human history? The compelling feminist question starts to take shape at this point.

A reversal of the public-private hierarchy is frequently emphasized in the interest of the women's movement's efficacy. This is due to the sustaining argument that the public sector is more significant, logical, mysterious, and generally more male than the private in typical sexist households, educational institutions, or workplaces. Reversing this hierarchy, the feminist must explain that sexuality and emotions are actually so much more significant and dangerous that a masculist sexual politics is required to maintain all public activity in a restrictive manner. The institutionalized sex discrimination that appears to be the hardest stone to push is the most "material" sedimentation of this repressive politics. (89) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Women experience more discrimination in public than in private, as shown by the treatment of women in such a significant epic. Divakaruni highlights Draupadi's passion in *The Palace of Illusions*, which was underemphasized in the original tale. Due to Vyasa's prophecy, Draupadi's main objective has been to rule the most beautiful castle in the world since she was a young child.

I often thought about the palace I would one day construct. What would be its composition? How would it look like? The arches of Krishna's palace in Dwaraka were made of pink sandstone, resembling the ocean waves that surrounded it. It sounded lovely, but I understood that mine would need to be unique. That would mean it would be entirely mine. (TPI 113)

Draupadi's ambitions to own a magnificent palace and succeed as the queen of queens deepen when she realises that Drupad's disdain for her birth is only motivated by the fact that she is a woman. Whether she was the wife of the five finest warriors in the world or the daughter of the great king Drupad, Draupadi had struggled her entire life to hold onto her position of authority as a woman. Every woman encounters this in her life when the patriarchal society denies her equal treatment from the moment of her birth, which becomes the primary cause of serious domestic and societal issues for women as well as their pursuit of control and recognition. Draupadi does not choose Karna as her life partner during the Swayamvar to save her brother Dhri, despite her growing strength and might. Karna tried to attack Dhri in Swayamvar, but she was unable to join him out of concern that she would kill her brother, father, and kids. Despite her love for Karna, Draupadi left him behind to protect her brother Dhri, who had been her only companion and supporter since birth because her father's family had all turned their backs on her. It makes her appear more feminine. Draupadi asks Karna the most stinging question, which she regrets in silence until the day of her death: "Before you try to win my hand, King of Anga, tell me your father's name." This is done to urge Karna to back out of the challenge and put an end to the conflict that could imperil Dhri's life.

Because it is obvious that a bride-to-be who is required to elope from her family and marry into her husband's line has a right to know this. (TPI 95)

Due to her busy life with five husbands and the controlling mother-in-law Kunti, Draupadi frequently reclines from the eyes of Karna whom she first met at Swayamvar. Fate prevents Draupadi and Karna from getting along because of the important occasions that made Draupadi enrage Karna. As a result, they always leave their meetings feeling unsatisfied. Karna remained silent as a result during Draupadi's humiliation at Hastinapur, which made Draupadi's enduring love for Karna uncomfortable. Karna demanded, "Why should Draupadi be treated differently?", infuriating Dussasan. Take her clothes, too (TPI 192). When Draupadi hears this, she gains a lesson in life and starts to dislike Karna, telling herself, "Karna, I said to myself, you've taught me a lesson; and you've taught it well (194)." Draupadi's hatred is transient. Only after learning that Karna was similarly drawn to and craved Draupadi, as recounted by Karna to Bheeshma, is Draupadi pleased with her existence. "I wasn't enticed when Kunti said that if I joined her sons, I would rule instead of Yudhistir. But when mother used her final weapon—saying that since I was her son, I would also marry Paanchali—I was prepared to renounce my honour and my reputation in a single fell swoop. I had to use all my resolve to remain silent!" (TPI 276-277) The fulfilment of Draupadi's lifelong desire is revealed in her remarks, "Wasn't this What I'd Secretly Wanted All My Life, to Know That He Was Attracted to Me, Even Against His Will?." (TPI 277)

Conclusion

Peaks and valleys of emotion unheard of in the lives of most women characterize Draupadi. Even though Draupadi is praised for her fortitude and confidence despite the terrible odds of her existence, her hidden love serves as a representation of her self-desire in *The Palace of Illusions*. The author praises women as beings who should live life to the fullest and challenges the notion that females should be submissive to men and sacrifice their interests for the good of the community by stressing Draupadi's desires. Draupadi accepts voluntarily the results of her illicit love for Karna: she is the first to plunge down the mountain while travelling to paradise. In a word, "Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* narrative demonstrates her unique sympathy for those female characters who were tortured and neglected in Mahabharata. The voice of the entire human race is transformed into the feminist consciousness. (67 Agarwal)

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