



Feminism In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace Of Illusions: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are passed down orally from one generation to the next. Various ideologies may be gleaned from the historical setting of these big stories, which have been done following the beliefs of successive generations. In the tradition of fictional retellings of stories, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes a book from Draupadi's point of view, focusing on the events of the *Mahabharata*. The essay centres on Divakaruni's theatrical reproduction, titled "*The Palace of Illusions*," which is the subject of most of the analysis.

Keywords: Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* Feminism, culture, history, system.

INTRODUCTION

There are various versions of the Mahabharata, each focusing on a particular set of themes. The narrative voice and the storyline of each new telling contribution to the text's overall aesthetic. Post-independence India gave more credence to the Mahabharata's ancillary stories, and the epic became more well-known. Famous retellings include Devadutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, Sharath Komarraju's *The Rise of Hastinapura*, Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen*, and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is an innovative retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view. The story of Draupadi, from her fiery beginnings to her tragic end, is told in first-person perspective in *The Palace of Illusions*. Divakaruni often has strong female protagonists, and Draupadi, whose feminism is lauded to the highest heights in *The Palace of Illusion*, is no exception. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni invites readers into Draupadi's world by saying, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into." (*The Palace of Illusions*, Author's Note xv)

The declaration of Draupadi's love for Karna in Divakaruni's rendition is one of the striking contrasts between it and Vyasa's version. Instead of suffering in silence like a typical lady, Draupadi challenges the injustices meted out to her in the 2008 novel *The Palace of Illusions*. "Divakaruni transforms Panchaali from being an Object to a Subject. This at once connects the readers to not only a mythological but also a contemporary understanding of feminine identity". *The Palace of Illusions* portrays Draupadi as a sceptic of old myths and rituals despite the whole production featuring heavenly figures and god and goddess manifestations. Draupadi in Divakaruni is stronger, more rebellious, and more realistic in character. She rejects the terrible fate of being wedded to five men, as the great foreseer Vyasa prophesied. When Draupadi is born from the fire that her father Drupad built and sang for the sake of his son Dhristadyumna, one can perceive the eternal bitterness in her mind at her father's initial refusal. "In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, maybe even indulgent. But I couldn't forgive him for that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl to a young woman, I didn't trust him completely." (*The Palace of Illusions* 6)

Draupadi maintained her position in a strongly patriarchal culture and never permitted herself to be tyrannical or weak. Knowing the reason for her father's original rejection that a female child is worthless for helping his country win allies upset her enough that she progressively changed herself to become who she is now. She becomes intrigued by Dhai Ma's account of her birth. Gods predicted her destiny before birth, telling her that she would be born to alter history. This satisfies her femininity, and as a result, she constantly seeks to relate her experiences to the prophecy's fulfilment. The book by Divakaruni raises Draupadi's hardship to the adversity of all women in the globe and Draupadi's inner problems to the questions of all women in the world, in contrast to other interpretations of the Mahabharata that blame Draupadi for the terrible destructive Kurukshetra war.

Even though the story foresaw her marriage to the five Pandavas against her choice and wishes, Divakaruni highlights Draupadi's feminine love and sentiment for Karna. Still, Krishna continued to control and occupy Draupadi's mind with images of Arjun, as if he were the only one who could overcome the Swayamvar challenge and the only one who could help her realise her childhood ambition of altering the course of history. Despite this, when Draupadi sees Karna's image, she loses herself and characterises him as

as the figure caught my eyes on Duryodhan's right, older than the prince and austere-faced, the man sat upright, his lean body wary, as though he knew the world to be dangerous. Though during court, he seemed utterly alone. His only ornaments were a pair of gold earrings and a curiously patterned gold armour, unlike anything I'd seen. His eyes were filled with an ancient sadness. They pulled me into them. My impatience evaporated. I no longer cared to see Arjun's portrait. Instead, I wanted to know how those eyes would look if the man smiled. Absurdly, I wanted to be the reason for his smile. (TPI 69)

In India, women were never permitted to choose their life partners. Society favours males by making virginity the exclusive sacred property of women, while men are exempt from this obligation. As a result, husband infidelity has become a regular problem in many homes. Dhai Ma informed Draupadi that despite being born into a royal family, she should embrace the possibility that her husband a prince of any kingdom might be forced to wed several women. However, Draupadi, a feminist symbol, wants her husband to be devoted to her and to love her exclusively, as she can see in Karna's eyes. According to ancient tradition, a lady whose body is consumed by a single male is depicted as the model of virtue. Draupadi is forced to select between five spouses because of the highly acclaimed masculinist "dharma," Vyasa bestows upon her the unusual benefit that she would always remain a virgin when she switches from one brother to the next. The boon only benefits her spouses; it does not benefit her since no patriarch in her immediate vicinity has verified her recollection. "Nor was I

particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine (TPI 120)". According to the literature, Draupadi has loved Karna her whole life. As a result, whenever one of her husbands disappoints her, she thinks about Karna and believes that he would not have disappointed her.

In the original Mahabharata, Draupadi, revered as the goddess of virginity and whose purity is absurdly tried in the court of counsellors by disassembling her, is given divinity to enforce the edict for women. The poem also predicts how Draupadi would alter history at her birth. But until Draupadi is hopelessly humiliated in front of legendary figures like Beeshma, Dhrona, and particularly Karna, it is unclear how she plans to alter history. Is this the only way that Draupadi may alter the course of human history? Here is where the compelling feminist question emerges.

In the interest of the effectiveness of the women's movement, emphasis is often placed upon a reversal of the public-private hierarchy. This is because, in ordinary sexist households, educational institutions, or workplaces, the sustaining explanation remains that the public sector is more important, rational, mysterious, and, generally, more masculine than the private. The feminist, reversing this hierarchy, must insist that sexuality and emotions are, in fact, so much more important and threatening that a masculinist sexual politics is obliged, repressively, to sustain all public activity. The most "material" sedimentation of this repressive politics is the institutionalised sex discrimination that seems the hardest stone to push. (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 89)

The treatment of women in such a significant epic proves that women face more discrimination in public life than in private life. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni emphasises Draupadi's passion, which was overlooked in the original story. Being the ruler of the most beautiful castle in the world has been Draupadi's primary goal since she was a little child due to Vyasa's prophecy.

often, I imagined my palace, the one I would build someday. What would it be made of? What form would it take? Krishna's palace in Dwaraka was pink sandstone, the arches like the ocean waves that boarded it. It sounded lovely, but I knew mine would have to be different. It would have to be uniquely mine. (TPI 113)

When Draupadi discovers that Drupad's disrespect for her birth is only due to her being a female, her aspirations to possess a special palace and become the queen of queens grow. Throughout her life, Draupadi has struggled to maintain her position of authority as a woman, whether as the wife of the five greatest warriors in the world or the daughter of the great king Drupad. Every woman experiences this in her life when the patriarchal society refuses to treat her equally from the moment of her birth, which becomes the main driver of severe home and societal problems for women and their quest for control and recognition. Despite her increasing strength and might, Draupadi does not pick Karna as her life mate during the Swayamvar to rescue her brother Dhri. When Karna attempted to attack Dhri in Swayamvar, she could not be with him because she was afraid that she would cause the deaths of her brother, father, and children. Even though Draupadi loved Karna, she abandoned him to protect her brother Dhri, who had been her sole friend and supporter since birth since all of her father's family had deserted her. It reveals how feminine she is. To get Karna to back out of the challenge and end the struggle that may endanger Dhri's life, Draupadi asks him 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." For clearly, a bride-to-be, who must divorce her family and marry into her husband's line, has the right to know this." (TPI 95)

Draupadi often reclines from the eyes of Karna that she encountered at Swayamvar because she is upset in many different ways by her active life with five husbands and the domineering mother-in-law Kunti. Fate forbids Draupadi and Karna from developing a happy relationship because of the significant events that caused Draupadi to enrage Karna. As a result, every meeting between the two of them ends in dissatisfaction. Consequently, Karna kept mute throughout Draupadi's humiliation at

Hastinapur, which disturbed Draupadi's longstanding love for Karna. Karna enraged Dussasan by demanding, "Why should Draupadi be treated differently? Take her garments as well (TPI 192)." Hearing this, Draupadi learns a life lesson and develops contempt for Karna, saying to herself, "Karna, I said to myself, you've taught me a lesson; and you've taught it well (194)." Draupadi's hate is short-lived. Draupadi is content with her existence only after knowing that Karna was also drawn to her and coveted Draupadi, as revealed by Karna to Bheeshma "When Kunti told me that if I joined her sons, I'd be king instead of Yudhistir, I wasn't tempted. But when she used her final weapon, when she said that as her son, I, too, would become Paanchali's husband I was ready to give up my reputation, my honour, everything! I had to use all my willpower to remain silent!" (TPI 276-277) Draupadi's longing all her life ends, and it can be seen through her words "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)

Draupadi's life was marked by peaks and valleys of emotion seldom experienced by the average woman. Draupadi's self-desire is represented in *The Palace of Illusions* via her hidden love, even though she is praised for her resilience and self-assurance despite the awful odds of her existence. By highlighting Draupadi's passions, the author honours women as a being to enjoy life to the fullest while challenging the idea that they should be submissive to males and sacrifice their interests for the sake of the community. Draupadi willingly accepts the consequences of her illicit love for Karna: she falls first from the mountain on the way to paradise. To put it in a nutshell, "Divakaruni within the plot of *The Palace of Illusions* exhibits her specific concern for those female characters who were subjected to torture and neglect in Mahabharata. The feminist consciousness becomes the voice of humanity at large." (Agarwal 67)

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