

Identifying Gender Dichotomy And Obscure Self In Chitra Devakaruni's Novel *The Palace Of Illusions*

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Abstract: *Indian Mythology is one of the unique elements of Indian culture which enriches it further and makes it a unique one in the world. Through generations, different stories in Indian Mythology have been passed from generations to generation orally or in written scriptures. Gender dichotomy has been reflected as a dominant part of patriarchal society in these mythologies. As a result, this factor creates dangerous consequences which limit a person's full potential and wellbeing. Male or female because of these fixed identities imposed by the society, are forced to ignore their personality traits, temperament and unique characteristics and have to follow the fixed social and cultural notions of 'Masculinity' and 'Femininity'. This paper attempts to read Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Palace of Illusions as an attempt to reinterpret the gender and psychological issues which testifies unawareness of a double marginality, an inequality felt by Draupadi both in terms of gender and psyche. It redefines the roles and parameters of women as a challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. The inner thoughts and resentments of Draupadi in various stages of her life are given voice by the novelist. Different from the epic, this Draupadi has been presented as one who questions the terms of the mythology which records her existence, by bringing out what it represses or excludes. Her life has been described in her own way which radically questions and consistently undermines the previous constructions of her life, being a victim of patriarchy which is perpetuated by the dominant discourses of the time, examining the power relation of Indian culture where gender is the basis of determining the role in society.*

Keywords – *Mythology, Gender dichotomy, Patriarchy, Fixed identities, Psyche.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian Mythology is one of the unique elements of Indian culture and society which makes it a unique one in the world. Through generations, different stories in Indian Mythology have been passed from generations to generation orally or in written scriptures. At various stages, in the history of Indian Mythology, gender dichotomy has been reflected as a powerful part of patriarchal society. As a result, this gender dichotomy creates dangerous consequences which limit a person's full potential and wellbeing. Male or female because of these fixed identities imposed by the society, are forced to ignore their personality mark, attitude, and unique characteristics and have to follow the tendency of the fixed social and cultural notions of 'Masculinity' and 'Femininity'. Contemporary writing of Hindu Mythology do not treat it as only a sacred and spiritual text, there are creative interpretations and explanations and the stories are analyzed, interpreted, explored into vague and unexplored areas and derived meanings are justified keeping in view the individuality. The epics are reinterpreted in a way

that makes them less godly and more human. The beauty of these reinterpreted texts is that the protagonists possess all human emotions including the weaker ones. Their struggles and battles may not always be seen driven by higher purposes.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper attempts to read Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* as an attempt to reinterpret the gender and psychological issues which testify to her unawareness of a double marginality, an inequality felt by the heroine Draupadi both in terms of gender and psyche. This narrative has changed as universal journeys of her and are retold from her individual point of view, bringing out the more human side and relating them to the readers in a different and more realistic way, connecting it with contemporary ideologies and issues.

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study a systematic review of literature of ancient times *Mahabharata* and the latest research data, papers and trends are considered. Also the status quo and the differences of narrative analysis done in recent translations and retellings are also considered. By screening the titles, keywords and related areas a thorough study of online available material is also done. Also the interviews and feedback available in form of videos on the social sites were included to understand the recent trends accurately.

The Unexplored Contemporary Perspective

This revisionist work is an effort to spell out the myths which commonly prevail in Indian Mythology by a series of stories through the reinterpretation of Draupadi's character in contrast to the earlier one. This surge includes analysis of episodes in *Mahabharata*, re-reading and deriving unexplored meaning from a contemporary perspective. This book attempts at retelling the narratives from the perspectives of marginalized voice of Draupadi, infusing the old with new meaning and purpose. The purpose behind this paper is to define the true meaning of life as perceived by the ancient stories which were woven around the great teachings of life to keep the reader entertained and thinking at the same time. In the contemporary trend of reinterpreting mythology in Indian literature, Draupadi too became the central character of many novels and these novels examine how the portrayal of Draupadi in these works were influenced by the accepted notions of womanhood of the respective periods in which they were written.

Challenging Gender Dichotomy

It redefines the roles and parameters of women as a challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. The inner thoughts and resentments of Draupadi in various stages of her life is given voice by the novelist. Draupadi is a woman – who has faced torment, insult, mental and emotional drama at every stage of life. The novel *The Palace of Illusion* (2008) presents Draupadi who questions the terms of the mythology which records her existence, by bringing out what it represses or excludes. Her life has been described in her own way which radically questions and consistently undermines the previous constructions of her life, being a victim of patriarchy which is perpetuated by the dominant discourses of the time. She wanted to be an agent of action because she wished to redefine the role of Woman in the context of her life.

Patriarchy and Her Identity

Born from the same fire, Draupadi and her brother Dhristadyumana's name also brings out the elements of gender dichotomy operable in the society. The name Dhristadyumna means

'destroyer of enemies' whereas the name Draupadi merely means 'daughter of Drupad, an identity merely tied to her father. Her desire to learn Veeds, Archary and state affairs is crushed by her father, saying she has to behave like a female who is restricted to learn the art which is exclusive reserved for males. But the complete novel describes her mental plight and wishes to position herself as a person who desires and not only as an object of desire. "In Draupadi's Era, there was no question of woman's equality with men. The wife was the counterpart of her husband and both together became a complete person. There are few women that complete with the beauty of Draupadi; all those that met her adored her. Her beauty was so great that she delighted all of the woman senses. Alf Hiltbeitel states this of her beauty: "The very sight of her was magnetic due to her irresistible beauty and fragrance" Draupadi was as skilled in the arts of being a woman, and everything that was associated with womanhood, as she was gifted in beauty. Her opinions were well respected and supported by her family. Due to her vast knowledge of many subjects. Unlike many women in her era, Draupadi's father, Drupada, allowed Draupadi to be educated. Bhawalkar comments on Drupadi's education, "Drupada has engaged learned Brahmanas for the education of his sons. Draupadi also joined them and became an expert in Political Science" (Bhawalkar 3).

It is possible that the unique qualities that Draupadi possessed, such as strength and audacity, are a result of being educated. Having such a complete education would have given Draupadi a sense of confidence unfamiliar to most women. Also Draupadi was quick to learn and thirsted for knowledge; she had a keen memory and had a vast knowledge on many subjects. Bhawalkar comments on the success of Draupadi as a student: "She became known as Pandita (learned and wise) and grew up a charming maiden admired by all" (Bhawalkar 4). Draupadi's ability to overcome adversity in a venerable manner that sets her apart from other women. In the Mahabharata she proves that no situation is insurmountable, and she never abandons her husbands, regardless of the positions they lead her into. After the incident at the court of the Kurus, Draupadi emerges as a much more powerful character and this is seen in the interactions with her husbands.

The other side of the Coin

Different than original epic, she has been portrayed as an intelligent and bold woman who is well aware of the ways in which others use her for their own needs. She resists these injustices by questioning them but finally gives up accepting all of it as her duty. As the daughter of King Drupad, Draupadi is a conscious and alert character. Many injustices were done to her during her role of a daughter. Soon after her birth from the fire her father named her Krishnaa and offered her to Krishna. Draupadi is delighted by the thought of becoming the wife of Krishna. But later on was married to his friend Arjuna, the greatest warrior of Aryavat. She had no right even to take decisions in her own life. As a daughter she was always bound to protect her father's dharma. She was hurt by the idea of displaying herself as a gift for game in front of the lustful eyes of many men on the day of swayamvara. When she asks her brother how she would marry the Brahmin youth when she is already betrothed to Arjuna in her mind, he tells her that father's dharma is daughter's dharma and she has to honour her father's vow being a dutiful daughter, ignoring her desires. She is much disturbed by the thought that "even if my dharma was destroyed, my father's dharma must be preserved".

The Objectification of Women

Her situation is not much changed in her husband's household also. Her mother in law asked her sons to divide her amongst the five brothers which were more than any other shock for her. Listening to Yudhishtira's call that they had brought a priceless object she detested the

word 'object'. She was well aware that her father, her brother and her husband were all treating her as an object. All the five brothers were ready to marry her. She wondered whether she did not have any say in such matters. Even in the end while she lay dying in the Himalayas, none of her husbands came to help her as she fell in their last journey and Yudhishtira asks the brothers not to turn back. Then she realises that how false was this bond between husband and wife where affection, love, sacrifice and surrender was ignored for the sake of religious duty. Thus this paper explores the different dimensions of Draupadi's personality as an obedient daughter, wife and female. The character of Draupadi reflects all the shades of acceptance, resistance, revenge, and most importantly the patriarchal notions of womanhood. The mother in Draupadi has been completely ignored. Divakaruni's Draupadi is an independent, rebellious and fiery woman with a streak of stubbornness, who thinks for herself and protests against all the injustice she has to suffer. This novel testifies to unawareness of a double marginality, an inequality felt by the heroine both in terms of gender and colour. But one day suddenly she realizes the power of her beauty and learns to use its power on the people around her. She never has good relationship with her father in the novel. Unlike other women in the palace, she was interested in learning texts and preaching taught by a tutor who came to teach her brother. Her inquisitiveness and her hunger to learn moved her in the path of education. She wanted to change history but she did not want to become the cause of the war that will cause yuganta. She did not want to bring about the death of her father and brother. She was fascinated about the idea of the palace she would own and lose. She begins to connect all her dreams with the idea of the beautiful palace she is to own. She dreams her palace to have everything her father's palace was not. After marriage she does succeed in being the queen of the palace of her dreams – the palace of illusions. She identified herself very much as the proud owner of the great palace ever. She forgot the disappointments she had in her married life as she enjoyed her palace. Krishna warns her not to identify too much with palace but she never listens. When Yudhishtiraloses the palace too in the game of dice a part of Draupadi is also lost forever. She was not able to afford her loss and this was multiplied by the insult she faced in Kauravasabha. During the vastraharan episode, the most private space of womanhood was encroached and the silence of the royal members present in the court as well as the paralysed reactions of her husbands ignited her fury. Consumed by her anger and desire to regain her lost dignity, she propounded the fatal and dreadful curse of war. She pledges to take revenge on the Kauravas who insulted her and deprived her of her beloved palace. During the period of exile, she constantly reminds her husbands of the insult in fiery language. Divakaruni also introduces an imaginary love story between Karna and Draupadi which forms an important aspect of her narration. She falls in love with Karna the moment she sets her eyes on his statue. Arjuna was not of any interest for her. At the time of swayamvara in order to save her brother's life, Draupadi forsook her amorous feelings towards Karna and rejects him as his parenthood was in question and he developed enmity towards her. But even after her marriage with Pandavas she was not able to forget Karna and regretted her decision all along her life. She was actually forced to choose Arjuna as her husband.

Crisis of an Unstable Selfhood

Her marriage was only a process to strengthen her father's political situation. All through her life she compared her husbands with Karna. Draupadi in the novel also faces crisis of an unstable selfhood. It seemed that everything she h'd lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance-none of them.

Divakaruni has taken a male-centred story and breathed new life into its female characters, giving us a rich tale of passion and love, power and weakness, honour and humiliation. She questioned the injustices committed against her and also voiced her stand very clearly. Draupadi begins to be recognized for this aggressive attitude and her enemies are wary of her power. Although Draupadi was desperate for revenge on those who harmed her. Her distinction between right and wrong was rarely clouded and she was often in pursuit of justice.

The Polyandrous Relationship

The sufferings of Draupadi started with the contest arranged by her father Drupad. She was further insulted by Yudhishtira by carrying their mother's wish by treating her as if she were an object won in a contest. She was a victim of circumstances and had no control over the situation when she was told that she had to marry five men at the same time. Her cruel fate divides her as a possession among five husbands and cuts up her personality. She was living not only in a polyandrous relationship but a polygamous one as well because her husbands had other wives. During Sabh Parva, Yudhishtira was enticed to play a game of dice, one by one he lost all his possessions but like an intoxicated gambler he went on playing. He lost his brothers and then himself. When he stated that he had nothing to stake, Shakuni suggested that he still have Draupadi and by staking her, he could win his freedom back. Shakuni plays very cunningly with Yudhishtira, he almost have him in his grip and Yudhishtira stakes Draupadi and while staking her, he describes her beauty and qualities. It is indicative of the way women were perceived and treated during the period as is evident from the verse. Draupadi is the most complex and controversial female character in Hindu literature. On the one hand, she could be womanly, compassionate and generous and on the other, she could wreak havoc on those who did her wrong. She was never ready to compromise on either her rights as a daughter-in-law or even on the rights of the Pandavas and remained ever ready to fight back or revenge high-handedness and injustice meted out to her modesty. She secretly vowed that one day she would definitely seek vendetta on the injustice meted out to her. She did it by igniting the spark of revenge in the hearts of the Pandavas. If the Mahabharata is an intricately woven saga of hatred and love, bloodshed and noble thoughts, courage and cowardice, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat, then Draupadi is its shining jewel, casting the shadow of her towering personality over the epic poem and the all-destroying war it describes. Both women are in the same situation and are tortured by the male members of the society. It will also focus on the hollowness of the male attitude towards women in every phase of life and trying their luck on female oppression but alas failing! The character of "Draupadi" in Mahabharata, the Hindu epic needs no introduction. Draupadi was the daughter of King Drupada and the wife of Pandava Princes. Pandavas lost Draupadi in the dice game played between them and the Kauravs. Thus Dushasan, the Kaurav Prince tried to disrobe and rape Draupadi in front of all other Kings, Princes and other present in the palace. It tries to unveil the naked truth of Patriarchy and female oppression. It answers to the questions, why a victim is changed from a subject to an object. Pandavas treated her as their property and lost her in the bet of dice game with Kuaravas. She is humiliated and tortured in the palace full of kings and princes, but no one came forward for her help, not even anyone from her five husbands. She was deeply affected and was very emotional. Bhawalkar comments on the emotional side of Draupadi: "Draupadi, unlike the mythological goddess or the ideal heroines of our ancient literature, was quite human with human emotions and feelings like anger, love, hate, happiness and grief. Her life was full of ups and downs and she maintained her dignity in both the situations"(Bhawalkar 141). This shows very clearly that the situation made Draupadi strong. Her inner strength came in front of everyone present in the court.

4. CONCLUSION

In the novel Draupadi explores the hidden mysteries of the society and explodes at the objectification of Woman in the patriarchal society. She is shown as a well-groomed, princess born out of fire, intelligent and educated, beautiful and wise but is former bound by the law of submission laid by the society. She has been presented as a victim of patriarchal society reflecting the pain of a female who is compelled to live and surrender herself to five men. Not only this but also for her whole life, questions is raised on her character being wife of five Pandawas. The author in her book attacks both the patriarchal molded image of woman and the patriarchal culture that supports it. The famous disrobing scene in spite of questioning on the males present there, questions the status of Draupadi as a prostitute or a slave and in such discourse of man she has no right to ask or question her existence or this status. She has been made easy target because of polyandry. She cannot protest against her husband's deeds without considering her emotions.

The patriarchal society has laid down the sanctioned ways of womanhood where a woman who denies her femininity has to accept the disapproval of man and society, in respect of a threat to man's power and superiority. At the same time, he cannot even fulfill his duty to protect his wife in the name of Dharma. This character examines the power relation of Indian culture where gender is the basis of determining the role in society. Through this character this novel raises questions on sex and gender dichotomy. The bizarre but stirring character of Draupdi had signs of intelligence with desire to become a learned scholar and warrior like her brother of father. But being a girl, she was forced to be a wife, a mother but not a scholar.

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