

Draupadi's Secret Love: A Feminist Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

V. Gunasundari

Research Scholar

VIT, Vellore

guna0992@gmail.com

Dr. N. S. Vishnu Priya

Assistant Professor (Senior)

VIT, Vellore

Abstract

Retelling the great Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is carried out over many generations. The contextual study of these great myths interprets distinct ideologies according to the creed of generation after generation. In the lineage of retelling the myths Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to portray the saga of Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective in the genre of novel. *The Palace of Illusions* titled by Divakaruni which is meant to be her dramatic recreation is the central element for discussion in this article.

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

Mahabharata has been retold by many personalities and it has different version which highlights the affiliated theme. Every retelling differs by its narrating style and even by the plot which add aesthetic value to the text. The sub plots of Mahabharata began to receive greater attention and reputation after in Post-Independent India. Some of the famous retelling includes *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of 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 an original retelling of Mahabharata from Draupadi's Perspective. *The Palace of Illusions* is known for its first person narration of Draupadi's life from her birth from fire to her death. Divakaruni consistently puts forth women characters as the lead in all of her works and in *The Palace of Illusion* Draupadi is celebrated as exquisite feminist icon. Divakaruni manifests her characterization of Draupadi as "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions* (The Palace of Illusions, Author's Note xv).

One of the remarkable differences seen in Divakaruni's version from the Vyasa's version is the confession of Draupadi's love towards Karna. In the novel *The Palace of Illusions* published in 2008, Draupadi questions the injustices meted out to her instead of silently suffering like a conventional woman. "Divakaruni transforms Panchaali from being an Object to a Subject. This is at once connects the readers to not only a mythological but also a contemporary understanding of feminine identity (Beena G). Nevertheless, casting the celestial characters and incarnations of gods and goddesses in the entire drama, Draupadi is portrayed as a skeptical personality of ancient myths and rituals in *The Palace of Illusions*. Divakaruni's Draupadi is robust, rebellious and more realistic in nature and refuses to accept the unfortunate future of getting married to five husbands foretold by the great foreseer Vyasa. One can see the perpetual bitter thought of Draupadi towards her father Drupad's initial denial when she is born from the fire which he raised and chanted for the sake of his son Dhristadyumna. "In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, maybe even indulgent. But I couldn't forgive him that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl to a young woman, I didn't trust him completely (6)".

Persisting in a powerful patriarchal society Draupadi never allowed herself to be oppressive and vulnerable. The knowledge of reason behind her father's initial rejection that a girl child is useless in earning allies to his kingdom perturbed her enough and so Draupadi gradually moulds herself to establish her identity. She develops interest in hearing her birth story from Dharmaraja. Gods have foretold her future during her birth that she is born to change the history, which pacifies her womanhood and hence she always tries to connect her life happenings to the prophecy to come true. While the other versions of Mahabharata accuse Draupadi for being cause of great destructive Kurukshetra war, Divakaruni's novel elevates Draupadi's adversity to the adversity of all women in world and Draupadi's inner questions to the questions of all women in world.

The myth had predestined her marriage with five Pandavas irrespective of her will and wish but Divakaruni emphasizes Draupadi's feminine love and feeling towards Karna. Still Krishna dominated and fantasized Draupadi's mind with ideas of Arjun as if he is the only person to win the challenge of Swayamvar and that Draupadi can fulfill her childhood dream of changing history only through him. In spite of all this Draupadi forgets herself on seeing Karna's portrait and she describes him as

"as my eyes were caught by the figure 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 a dangerous place. Though in the midst of a court, he seemed utterly alone. His only ornaments were a pair of gold earrings and a curiously patterned gold armor 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 (69)".

Women in India were never given freedom to choose their life partner. The societal construction favours men by imposing chastity as the only holy possession of women whereas men have no such bound and so the infidelity of husband has become a common factor in many families. Draupadi, being born in a royal family has been told by Dharm Ma that her husband (prince of any kingdom) may fall into a circumstance to marry many wives to which she should accept. But Draupadi being a feminist icon expects her husband to be loyal to her and love her alone, which she sees in the eyes of Karna. Ancient culture objectifies woman saying that a woman whose body is devoured by a single man is portrayed to be the epitome of virtue. Draupadi is trapped by the highly praised masculinist 'dharma' to choose her life with five husbands, and she is gifted by Vyasa with a strange boon that she would become a virgin every time when she moves from one brother to the other. The boon merely helps her husbands, but not her because her memory is not validated by any patriarch surrounded by her "Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine (120)". The novel reveals Draupadi's love for Karna throughout her life and so whenever her husbands let her down, she thinks of Karna and imagines that he would not have let her down.

The original version of *Mahabharata* constructs the decree for women by imposing the divinity to Draupadi who is worshipped as the goddess of chastity whose virtue is ridiculously tested in the court of councils by dismantling her. The text also projects the prophecies during the birth of Draupadi that she is going to change the history. But how is she going to change the history is kept a mystery until Draupadi is helplessly humiliated in front of great legends like Beeshma, Dhrona and especially Karna. Here the strong feminist question arises: Is this the only way that Draupadi can change the history of world.

"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 still remains that the public sector is more important, at once rational and mysterious, and, generally, more masculine, than the private. The feminist, reversing this hierarchy, must insist that sexuality and the 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 institutionalized sex discrimination that seems the hardest stone to push (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak)".

The humiliation of woman in such a great epic evidences the fact that women are highly discriminated in public sphere than in the private sphere. Divakaruni concentrates on Draupadi's passion in *The Palace of Illusions* which the original text did not consider. Draupadi's foremost passion from her girlhood after Vyasa's foretold prophesy is to become the queen of world's most beautiful palace.

"often I imagined of my own palace, the one I would build someday. What would it be made of? What form it would 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. (113)".

When Draupadi learns that being girl is the sole reason for Drupad's disregard of Draupadi's birth, it cultivates the speculation to own the unique palace and to become the queen of queens. Draupadi throughout her life struggles to uphold the power as a woman whether it is being the daughter to the great king Drupad or the wife of the world's five great warriors. This happens in the life of every woman where the patriarchal society denies treating her equally right from her birth which becomes the root cause of major social and domestic crisis of woman and her struggle to attain power and recognition. Though Draupadi grows strong and powerful she fails to choose Karna as her life partner during the Swayamvar in order to save her brother Dhri. The anxiety of prophesy that she will become the reason for her brother, father, and children's death prevented her love for Karna when Dhri becomes ready with his sword for fight during Karna's attempt in Swayamvar. Though Draupadi loved Karna she forsakes him to protect her brother Dhri who was her only companion and well-wisher from the birth when every one of her father's relatives abandoned her. It displays her feminine nature. Draupadi feels herself lost when she posed the most hurtful question to Karna for which she regretted in silence till her death to make Karna retire from the challenge and to stop the fight that risks Dhri's life "Before you attempt to win my hand, king of Anga, it said, tell me your father's name. For surely a wife-to-be, who must sever herself from her family and attach herself to her husband's line, has the right to know this (95)".

Being distressed in numerous ways of engaged life with five husbands and dominant mother-in-law Kunti, Draupadi often reclines from the eyes of Karna which she faced during Swayamvar. Fate doesn't allow in establishing a healthy liaison between Draupadi and Karna as their encounter always ends in a discontented way due to the crucial circumstances that made Draupadi to infuriate Karna. As a result, Karna remained silent when Draupadi was badly in

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need of help during the humiliation in Hastinapur that shook Draupadi's longtime love to Karna. Karna's vengeance on Draupadi can be seen from the way he provoked Dussasan by saying, "Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too (192)". Hearing this Draupadi learns a lesson for her life and develops hatred towards Karna "Karna, I said to myself you've taught me a lesson; and you've taught it well (194)". Draupadi's hatred doesn't last long. Draupadi is satisfied with her life only after learning that Karna was also attracted towards her and desired Draupadi when Karna reveals it 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 honor, everything! I had to use all my will power to remain silent! (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? (277)".

Draupadi attained both extreme happiness and sorrow in her life which is not common in the lives of ordinary women. Though Draupadi is celebrated for her strength and confidence after all terrible odds of her life Draupadi's self-desire is expressed in *The Palace of Illusions* through her secret love. The author celebrates women as a being to live the life whole heartedly in the novel by exposing Draupadi's fascinations whereas the society always stereotypes women as scarifying community for the sake of men's welfare. Despite knowing that her love towards Karna is unlawful, Draupadi constantly develops certain ambience for Karna throughout her life and because of that she fell off first from the mountain in the final journey to heaven which she accepts willfully. 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" (Beena Agarwal).

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