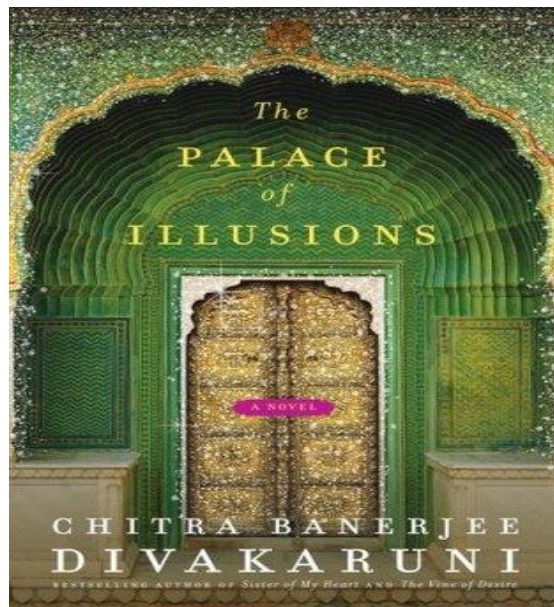# Transcending Grand Narratives – A Study of Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace Of Illusions* as a Re-telling of Mahabharata

Keerthana V., II M.A. English

Courtesy: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1774836.The_Palace_of_Illusions

Abstract

Jean François Lyotard, in his work "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" (1979), introduced the term 'grand narrative' or 'meta narrative'. Grand narratives are narratives created by power structures that conveniently ignore the heterogeneity that marks human existence. The oldest examples of meta narratives are myths and legends. These narratives lead to legitimization of knowledge and tend to project one idea as "the norm", thereby excluding the story of other groups. This idea is contested by Lyotard through the concept of postmodern condition, which is characterised by an increasing skepticism towards the totalising nature of the grand narratives.

Mythologies are part of grand narratives. The epic Mahabharata primarily deals with the rivalry between Pandavas and Kauravas and gives a detailed account on the lives of kings, warriors, gods and

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noble men. Divakaruni's novel is a refreshing take on the epic. She not only foregrounds Draupadi as the protagonist of the novel, but by giving her a voice, she presents her life as shaped by the choices made by her and not by the people around her. While Mahabharata, in accordance to the epic conventions, lays emphasis on the grandeur of the characters and the tale itself, but the novel *The Palace of Illusions* is placed in a contemporary setting, thereby staying relevant to the twenty-first century readers. This paper attempts to look at how the novel taken for study, a re-telling of Mahabharata, transcends the grand narrative of the epic and questions the patriarchal setup that remains relevant even in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Chitra Divakaruni, *The Palace Of Illusions*, grand narrative, heterogeneity, mythology, re-telling, epic.

Introduction

Literature has continually drawn ideas from mythology. According to M. H. Abrams, myth "… provide(s) a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (170). A myth does not merely tell a tale but contains within it a set of symbols that have political, social, historical and cultural bearings. C. G. Jung, a noted psychologist, explains myth as the projections of the collective unconscious of the human race. Myths enable in internalizing a set of values as "the norm" and mould the behavioural pattern of a society. However, in the past few centuries, feminist theorists consider myths to be the tools created by patriarchy to marginalise women.

The twentieth-century feminist movements have encouraged female writers to look into the representation of women in various literary texts. The fascination for a new outlook of the existing stories made writers to re-vision popular myths. This re-visioning is an attempt to redefine the female identity which is invariably constructed by the male sex. According to Adrienne Rich, re-visioning is "the act of looking back, seeing with fresh eyes... It is an act of survival" (18). She also goes on to say that "we need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (19).

Discussion
Re-telling and Re-visioning of epics

There is an increasing popularity for the re-telling and re-visioning of epics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Iliad. These myths or grand narratives have called for a complete re-rendition as regards the contemporary world view. For instance, Mahabharata has been re-told in various fictional works such as Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Shashi Deshpande's *The Stone Women and Other Stories* (2000), and Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* (2005). The epic is known for the strong

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male heroes, but the women are relegated to the margins due to dominant patriarchal values. Chitra Divakaruni, in the author's note to her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, echoes the same idea – "they remained shadowy figures..., their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons" (xiv). The novel is a re-telling of Vyasa's Mahabharata; however, the story is narrated by Draupadi. In doing so, Divakaruni has raised Draupadi from the position of an object to a subject. The novel is in adherence to the idea of how change can be effected by working within a system and not outside it.

Focus of the Grand Narrative Towards Draupati

Divakaruni, through her narration, subverts the focus of the grand narrative. In the epic, the tale is told through a flashback to Janamejaya and the focus is on the Pandava princes, warriors and the battle. Draupadi is introduced to the readers in relation to the Pandava's forest expedition and her *swayamwara*. Divakaruni's novel begins with the story of Draupadi's birth and the novel progresses along the lines of her life. Though the novel narrates the same incidents as in the epic, the narrative is presented to the readers in relation to Draupati's life.

Divakaruni asserts Draupadi's individuality in many instances throughout the novel. Her thoughts about the name 'Draupadi' and how she goes on to rechristen herself 'Panchali' throws light on her refusal to be bound by the men in her life.

> … my attention veered to the meaning of the names our father chose. Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad … Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history? … I needed a more heroic name. (5)

Draupadi's autonomy is manifested in her emphasis on the importance of education and also in her *swayamwara*. Draupadi insisted that she learns the same lessons as her brother Dhri. When the tutor says that women were the root of all the world's troubles, through her question "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (26), Draupadi challenges both the tutor and the grand narratives that implanted these views. Although Draupadi's humiliation of Karna at the *swayamwara* portrays her as arrogant, Divakaruni's narration gives the chance to explain her action. Draupadi questions Karna, knowing full well that it would hurt him, as she thinks that it is the only way to save her brother. Nevertheless, Draupadi's desire for Karna is also a representation of the female voice that is silenced in the name of family honour and this relation forms one of the significant stories that are explored in the novel.

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As the novel progresses, it can be seen how Draupadi is more mature than the Pandava brothers. While referring to her husbands, she says, "Your childhood hunger is the one that never leaves you. No matter how famous or powerful they became, my husband's would always long to be cherished" (133). These words, coming from one of the characters in the story, reduces them from their larger-than-life stature as it lays bare the vulnerabilities of the Pandavas which, as can be seen, is no different from that of the common man's. Draupadi's character is juxtaposed with that of the Pandavas, and her maturity and independency is revealed through the lines *"Perhaps Time was the master player. But within the limits allowed to humans in this world the sages called *unreal*, I would be a player, too" (59).

In popular opinion, it is Draupadi's vengeance for her humiliation that caused the war. However, other characters like Yudhisthir and Duryodhan are not held accountable for their misdeeds. Divakaruni's novel tries to change this misplaced notion of Draupadi. The novel portrays Draupadi as the binding force of the Pandavas, the person who brings them closer to their destiny. In her words, "I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardship in Khandav… Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner" (151).

Conclusion

Divakaruni does not try to romanticize Draupadi. Her novel renders every character grounded in reality. Be it her relationship with Kunti, her mother-in-law, or her desire for Karna, Draupadi's actions and motives can easily be placed in the context of the lives of twenty-first century women. Draupadi and Kunti's struggles in the forest are given a purpose unlike how the epic portrays them as the sacrifice expected on the part of a woman/mother. The struggles of women, especially Draupadi's are portrayed realistically and this makes Draupadi a representation of Everywoman.

John J White, in his book *Mythology in the Modern Novel: A Study of Prefigurative Techniques*, explains that myth introduced by a modern novelist can help anticipate the plot. Divakaruni's intention to re-tell the epic suggests that myths are fluid as they undergo transformation through time. There is always a different side to a story, and this novel presents Draupadi's side of the story.

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