

DRAUPADI-AN ICONOCLAST-A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

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ABSTRACT

Women's writing has surely gained momentum in the present age. Moreover, a fresh introspection of the female protagonists from mythology has shattered some misconceptions about Indian Women. Far from being submissive and fragile, we now see them as iconoclasts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has explored the rebel in Draupadi from *The Mahabharata*. We see her as the fierce princess who wanted to take hold of her destiny. An inquisitive learner and an able business woman that she later proved herself to be is critically analyzed in this research paper

KEYWORDS: Women Writing, Iconoclast, Mythology, Tradition

INTRODUCTION

Women's Writing is a medium of expression and an outlet for one's emotions and desires. Women writers chose to write their own narrative can be attributed to the fact that they were not happy with some of the prejudices by male writers. Since literature has a cultural impact on the socio-economic filigree of a nation, it would not be inappropriate to say that some of the major ancient texts do not justify the portrayal of women characters and that still impacts the society we live in today. There is a sense of rectification that defines women's literature rather than criticism of male writers which is a popular accusation nowadays. The focus is; if given a chance, how would women write their own narrative. And even if it is in contradiction to what male writers write, then it should not be considered as a revolt against men but rather a revolt against a biased narrative. Women's writing celebrates the right of telling one's story. It does illuminate some dark corners of a woman's heart and soul and surprises the readers with new facts about history and fiction. On the very first page of *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi reminiscences about her childhood stories she heard from her Dhai Ma,

And though she knew many wondrous and edifying tales, the one I made her tell me over and over was the story of my birth. I think I liked it so much because it made me feel special, and in those days there was little else in my life that did.(1)

It is this feeling of importance that had been denied to women right from the beginning. There have also been very few women protagonists in literature where women played the central role or even if they did, women did not identify with it. Hence women took on the baton to rewrite their stories and encouraged other women too to do the same, Helene Cixous say in the *Laugh of Medusa*

I shall speak about women's writing: About *what it will do*. Women must write herself : Must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement (2)

Divakaruni has portrayed Draupadi's side of the story, her marital woes, and pleasures, her desire for revenge and her relationship with her husbands, five in number and their other wives in her novel, *The Palace of Illusions*. In fact 'Draupadi' was one of her motivations to write the novel which by large is modeled on the original epic for except the fact that the reader gets an opportunity to read Draupadi's mind. In an interview, the author explained

If we are to put the woman in the center of the work, we have to show her in all her complexity. She is not the perfect gender, as we all know, but she is worth celebrating – with her flaws, as long as there is some kind of growth, as long as she is aware of the ways in which she can become not only a better woman by her own definition, but a better human being, ultimately a better spiritual being. In some way, that is Panchaali's journey in *The Palace of Illusions*. From a position of little power, she wishes to move to autonomy, but autonomy brings its own challenges, with negative aspects that she has to recognize.

Badrinath says in his book *The Women of Mahabharata The Question of Truth*

That she was born from the flames of a yajna fire, a most unusual form of human birth, is to be understood metaphorically; for her later life, at any rate the greatest part of it, would be lived in the flames of one kind of human fire or another, mostly in the flames of hatred and revenge that she let burn in her heart for thirteen years. (171)

Born in unusual circumstances, Divakaruni describes Draupadi as an impatient princess eager to know everything. She was obsessed with her origins and loved to listen to the story of her birth which fascinated her,

I thought of the prophecy then, with yearning and fear. I wanted it to be true. But did I have the making of a heroine-courage, perseverance, an unbending will? And shut up as I was inside this mausoleum of a palace, how would history even find me? (5)

And also she felt suffocated in her father's lifeless palace devoid of any plants and trees.

When I had my own palace I promised myself it would be totally different. (7)

One finds Draupadi active from the beginning although she had boundaries but she dreamt of escaping them and struggle for her own identity, hence the 'palace of her own' Her disapproval over her name which she felt affirmed to the patriarchal norms and didn't go along with the divine prophecy at her birth. She despises the fact that her brother was getting trained for royal life, justice, power and also to avenge their father's honor by killing Drona while she was trained for more womanly duties like painting, sewing and poetry Even her brother's name 'Dhristadyumna', meaning destroyer of enemies and her name 'Draupadi', Daughter of Draupadi irked her as it clearly demarcated the gender boundaries for her and her brother. She even had her own self-doubts regarding the color of her skin and asks Krishna if a queen so dark was capable of changing history but she doesn't let insecurities overrule her mind for long and she learns quickly her feminine power and soon her inferiority complex of a dark skin which is considered desirable for men but hampers a woman's prospect of finding a groom, fades away.

I examined queen Sulochna, the youngest and prettiest of my father's wives, as she walked ahead of me, carrying a platter filled with garlands for the god. I observed the confident sway of her hips, the elegant grace with which she inclined her head in response to a greeting. *I too, am beautiful*, I told myself... (9)

Her inquisitive nature is also brought forward by the lines

He brought me news of the world that no one else cared to give me, the world I was starving for—even news that I suspected would be considered improper for the ears of a young woman. (12)

Her determination to educate herself despite the fact that women of her times were forbidden from reading the scriptures or learn warfare is visible when after not being allowed to participate in any lessons; Draupadi eavesdropped while her brother received his lessons. Later it was at Krishna's instance that she was allowed to share some space with Dhir. While the tutor taught Dhir various skills which he thought was not appropriate for a princess and it would make her man like and argumentative. Draupadi realized how different she was from the women around her with her zeal for learning and art of contestation. She resented her tutor's declaration that women were the root cause of the entire world's trouble and made her avenge the tutor with her brilliant smile which left him astounded. This was also the discovery of her feminine and seductive powers. These instances tell us the stuff Draupadi was made of. She combined her feminine powers with the new lessons from the tutor. This makes her an iconoclast in a time period dominated by men.

There are few women in Hindu mythology who were aggressive and who spoke their mind in a world of men. Draupadi was one of them. She is considered by many as the first feminist from Indian mythology but she was also a heroine thrown in unusual circumstances. Her marriage was more of a contest arranged by her father who had a secret wish of marrying his daughter to Arjuna. So the whole design of a winner, lifting a heavy bow and aiming at rotating fish and piercing its eye with the arrow was cleverly planned by him. Again it is ironical that it was called 'Svayam-vara', a ceremony where a girl chooses her husband but Draupadi was not even consulted; a complete case of injustice but then justice was something that eluded Draupadi for rest of her life. And also the svayam-vara was the only celebration in her life till death. At last as per her father's wishes, it was Arjuna who won Draupadi. One interesting fact that Divakaruni brings here is Draupadi's secret admiration and longing for Karna which otherwise was never mentioned and is the important point in the narrative making it more heroine-centric as one gets to see the desire of a woman considered by many as authoritarian and revengeful. Many references show her inner feelings for Karna. When for the first time she saw the portrait of Karna, she was mesmerized by his sad eyes and Krishna at once knew what Draupadi was nurturing in her heart. So he tried to dissuade her by downplaying Karna as a chariot driver's son. These were one of the few times when Draupadi who had undying faith in Krishna wasn't convinced,

For the first time, I was unconvinced by his words. A man who sat with such unconcern among princes, a man who had the power to perturb Krishna, had to be more than merely a chariot- driver's son. So I turned to Dhri to check. His eyes flickered and fell. Ah, there was a secret, something Krishna wasn't telling me! I'd have to extract it from my brother later. (70)

And later when her brother tells her Karna's story and his instance on barring him from Draupadi's mind;

Through the long night, out of love for Dhri, I tried harder than ever before to bar Karna from my mind. But can a sieve block the wind? Fragments of stories floated in my head, women who had saved her husband's by countering their ill luck with their virtue. Perhaps I could do the same for Karna? (88)

During her Sywambhar, when Dhri was calling her to the dias, Draupadi felt divided between loyalty and desire.

If Arjun wasn't here, what right did Krishna and Dhri have to insist that I not choose Karna? (93)

Years pass, Draupadi and her husband live in their grand palace in Indraprasth. Kunti would make Draupadi visit other women indulging in regular gossip but here Divakaruni makes the readers aware of Draupadi's yearning for meaningful conversation:

I hungered for someone with whom I could have an intelligent and frank conversation. (128)

Later, on the insistence of Bheeshma, the Pandavas were leaving for their land. Krishana visited them and Draupadi was jealous of her husbands who were rejoicing with Krishana. She wanted to be a man so that she could clap like them at each other's back but then she said to herself,

I'd have to find a woman's way to force him to notice me. (139).

Draupadi's meeting with Bheeshma is also an important episode in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. She learnt some great lessons from him which would later help her in winning over her husband's. She realized the bond that existed between her husbands' and Bheeshma and how he helped her in understanding her husband's. And Draupadi held on to this knowledge forever,

Your childhood hunger is the one that never leaves you. No matter how famous or powerful, my husband's would always long to be cherished. They would always yearn to feel worthy. If a person could make them feel that way, they'd bind themselves to him-or her-forever (133).

Later as the grand story progressed, Pandavas regained much of their lost glory and built magnificent palaces, particularly the Mayasabha, the palace of illusions in the city of Indraprastha. The Mayasabha became a symbol of Draupadi's identity. It gave her a feeling of a powerful governess and her husband's admired her governance skills and consulted her on important matters. Draupadi became a mother of five sons, one from each husband. But her husband's took on other women too, but Draupadi was a practical woman she knew that her husband's could not wait for years for their turn to be with her. History had no place for a woman's heart. Pandavas could have more wives but Draupadi had to conceal her love for Karna, perhaps this was one of her reasons for being an aggressive wife and she made sure that she held her supremacy over other wives with her tantrums. We also get a glimpse of Draupadi's feminist theory or as some would say her sense of humor. When her brother's tutor opined that virtuous women were sent directly into their next birth, and if they were lucky, they reincarnated as men. But Draupadi has a different opinion:

But I thought that if lokas existed at all, good women would surely go to one where men were not allowed so that they could be finally free of male demands. However, I prudently kept this theory to myself. (156)

Mahabharata has always been a man's story where downfall was due to a woman and in a way created a myth about women in history. So when Divakaruni chose to rewrite Draupadi, she made Draupadi rise like the phoenix from the imposed identity and created a new one without any gender biases. In the hands of the author, Draupadi comes across as an

individual in her own right. And this new form was obvious to Bheeshma, the grandfather when Pandavas visited Kaurvas and he said:

Why, you've become a true queen now, equal to the best of us! You no longer care what people think of you, and that has given you a great freedom. (180)

And finally, the day comes which has been vividly described in *Mahabharata*...Duryodhan proposed the game of dice to Yudhishtira who had a weakness for gambling. But he was no expert and went on losing all his assets, even his brothers and finally he lost his kingdom. But he lost Draupadi also. The question is thus, "Who gave him the right to gamble his wife? Isn't this malign way of treating women as objects? But instead of submissively obeying her husband Yudhishtira, she sent back a query which none could answer. She questioned her husband Yudhishtira, if he had pledged her before or after he had lost himself in the gamble. She argued that if he had pledged himself first, he had no right over her as he was already a slave.

If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife. (190)

Draupadi was not an unlettered girl, ignorant of the law, she was sure that elders would know the rule she referred to and come to her rescue. But she forgot that neither the rules nor laws were in favor of women. Finally, Duryodhan ordered Dusshana to drag Draupadi by her hair to the royal court before the great assembly of people and then to disrobe her completely. In my email conversation with Divakaruni, she told me that Draupadi with all her qualities suffered from big ego. We get a glimpse of this attribute when Draupadi's honor was at stake. She could have asked for Karna for his help but no Draupadi wouldn't lower herself

He had the reputation of helping the destitute. But wouldn't lower myself to that, not if I died (193)

But the dreadfulness of her humiliation was uncalled for. To quote from *Mahabharata* retold by C.Rajagopalachari,

Panchali rose trembling, heart-stricken with sorrow and started to fly for the refugee to the inner apartments of Dhitrashtra's queen. Dusasana darted after her, caught her by the hair and dragged her to the assembly. It is with a shudder of repugnance that we relate that the sons of Dhritrashtra stooped to commit this vilest of crimes.

As soon as she came to the assembly. Draupadi controlled her anguish and appealed to the elders gathered there:

"How could you consent to my being staked by the king who was himself trapped into the game and cheated by wicked persons, the expert in art? Since he was no longer a free man, how could he stake anything at all?"(53)

She is aghast at the elders whom she ceremoniously saluted and who gave sermons on 'Dharma'. But now when their own royal daughter-in-law is publically disrobed not a word is uttered in her defense. It was Lord Krishna who saved Draupadi from disgrace but this day sowed the seed of vengeance in Draupadi's mind and she said to the assembly:

All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do a defenseless woman. (194)

She further said,

I lifted my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm n now because I knew that everything I said would come to pass. "I will not comb it," I said, "Until the day I bathe it in Kaurva blood. (194)

The vengeance gave her a mission to strive for and a purpose to her life which had become directionless and it also made her more determined to create a place for her in the history which had always belonged to men. And thereafter she understood men better and ways to tackle them. She constantly played the card of honor with them reminding them of how they had failed her and how Kaurvas humiliated her. She kept the memories fresh because she knew she could instigate them only by challenging their pride. She did a fine job out of that even when in banishment for twelve years leaving her children with their uncle. She became synonymous with qualities that have always been considered manly. She sacrificed her motherhood so that she could keep the fire of vengeance burning. She valued her independence over motherhood, so instead of being with her sons and creating their childhood, she chose to be with her husband's because she feared they would learn to live without her and deviate from the goal that Draupadi had ingrained in them.

Draupadi had many philosophical debates over dharma and righteousness. She doubted what the sages said. We come across certain questions that Draupadi asked herself. She thought of Sita from Ramyana and realized that she could never be like her. She never felt devoted to her husband's like Sita rather she held them responsible for her woes and directed all her energies in preparing them for her revenge. Whenever she found her husband's in self-doubt, she made them more alert:

But I didn't want to heed anything that might keep me from the revenge I'd waited for so long. When my husband's hesitantly mentioned their nightmares, I laughed. (239)

She didn't want to be an ideal wife who wanted to sacrifice everything for her husband. Draupadi did sacrifice her comforts but only to employ her husbands' to take revenge even at the cost of endangering their lives. Draupadi used everything that came her way to fuel her ambition.

Finally, the much awaited day of The Great war arrives, Draupadi unlike other women was curious to view the site of the great adventure that was about to begin and wanted to spend as much time with her husband's before the war took all their attention. Before the actual war happened Vyasa gave a special boon to Draupadi to view the war, which the blind king refused because he couldn't bear to see his sons die, but he knew Draupadi was no ordinary woman. But she knew what war would bring, all the people she loved and cared for were on the field and how many of them would survive the war, even she didn't know. She was also aware of the reputation that she had made for herself especially the wives of the soldiers who might become widows in the span of eighteen days.

Undoubtedly Draupadi faced the consequences of her own actions and that is how Divakaruni completes her metamorphosis. In fact, the after-effects of war complete the process of identity for Draupadi as she is shocked to face the gaze of the widows left by the war. All her humiliation and revenge seem farcical in the presence of wailing widows who thought of her as "the witch who might, with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows" (258).

Finally, Draupadi resolved to give up her self-pity and did something for women by setting up a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women. They set a market for women too. Here we see the business sense of the women headed by Draupadi and assisted by Uttara and Kunti. Divakaruni here shows the remarkable fortitude of women who moved on and proved once again their ability to embrace adversity. All this gives them a sense of community. Finally, the true Panchali is revealed, her strength is also evident from the fact the Vyasa told her many prophecies which he didn't tell her husband's. In his words words

I only tell people what they can stand. Knowing Parikshat's fate now, just when he's recovering from his long dejection, would break Yudhishter. And his brothers wouldn't be able to bear that. But you-I've always known you to be stronger than your husbands. (329)

And that's why Draupadi decided to go on a journey with her husband's into the secret recesses of Himalayas. It also proves her loyalty to her husband's till her last breath and her fearlessness which had always been her quintessential feature right from the beginning and makes her an iconoclast.

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