

## **Reading ‘The Palace of Illusions’- A Feminist Perspective**

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### **I. INRODUCTION**

Ever since man, the thinking animal, began to do so, it was a hectic hunt for ideas to improve life. These intellectual exercises got etched in his ethos as myths. Hence myths as a rule ingrained pragmatic solutions for ensnaring puzzles, encapsulated as exciting artifacts which appealed to human aesthetic sensibility and served as stimulants for man's thought process and as an ideal base for framing ideas. Mahabharata, the magnum opus of Indian Culture, consists of over 100000 slokas and long prose passages. The myths ingrained in The Mahabharata are not mere stories, but morals aimed to highlight the right path.

Retelling of myths has of late become a fascinating trope for creative writers. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions is a judicious retelling of the Mahabharata myth in a feminist perspective. Mahabharata is retold from the perspective of Draupadi or Panchali, the wife of Pandavas. Mahabharata considers Panchali as a kṛitya or a female demon who lead to the destruction of the third generation of mankind. Divakaruni retells the whole incidents from her childhood to her final moments through Panchali's perspective. The readers can see the spiritual and intellectual growth of Panchali, an innocent princess to a queen who can be equated to, if not outsmart kings. If Vyasa's tale is about gods, demons and kings, Divakaruni's tale is more realistic and humane. Not only Panchali, but the other female characters such as Kunthi and the other wives of Pandavas are also described in detail.

Divakaruni uncovered the story that lay invisible between the lines of men's exploits in Mahabharata. Draupadi is also known as Yagnaseni. It means princess who leaped out of the sacrificial fire. Vyasa, the great sage who wrote Mahabharata considers her a woman of curiosity, as one who takes her decisions without much consideration. Her actions, which are above the levels of a queen causes all the problems. In her novel, Divakaruni is giving her the chance to express her point of view, her thoughts and emotions. She is the woman of fire, the lady with strong mind and decisions.

King Drupad conducted Putrakameshti yajna to be blessed by a son, who is able to kill Drona. From the sacrificial fire leaped Drishtadyumna, a son as he wished. In addition to that, he got Draupadi too. From her childhood onwards, she was elated by the fact that the prophesy at the time of her birth said that she will change the history. She wants to be famous as the prediction says and at the same time, she desires to be a beautiful queen. She thinks largely about her not so fair complexion. She wants to know the world much more than the society allows a woman to. She desires for a name which suites more to a princess who is going to change the history. In her, we can see all the desires for growth that the entire women have in their mind. Juxtaposed with this is the delicate zone of compassion, perturbed at the thought of the imminent war. She does not want to be the cause of great destruction.

Social divides among classes were more evident at that time. However, all these classes were equal in subjugation of the women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the lower classes as well to show how they suffered in the male dominated society. Right from the beginning of the novel, we can see Dhai Ma as the perfect maid and mentor for Draupadi. Dhai Ma introduces her to the society and makes her aware of the rules of conduct for a princess and how it differs from that of a maid. Whenever Draupadi involves in Dhai Ma's homely chores, she stops her and reminds her of the difference in social construct of classes. She dresses her like a queen and tells her stories. When Draupadi tells her that she wants to visit the sage in the village, Dhai Ma feels that it may cost her job. Dhai Ma's dissatisfied marital relation with Kallu, the palace cook shows that lower class women are neglected by their husbands. She complains that Kallu often harasses her. When the Kshatriya women are neglected between war and power, the destitute working class women are harassed by the men folk.

Draupadi's life as Sairandhri for the queen Sudeshna sheds light to the problems faced by the maids. When she approaches the king for help from Keechak, the king ignores her because he cannot disappoint

Keechak who is the chief of his army. For him, the stability of his kingdom is more important than the problems faced by a maid. When Draupadi approaches queen Sudeshna, she requests her to satisfy Keechak. Sudeshna tells her that her husbands may not accept her and Keechak can provide her with happiness as if it is the right of the king to exploit the maids.

The enraged looks of the warrior's woman is another instance of the problems faced by the lower class women. Just before the war Draupadi happens to see a warrior's woman she looks Draupadi as if she is the cause of all the problems. While war and power are the matters of pride for the kings, the soldiers face its consequences. According to the soldier's woman, he is the pillar of the family. Whoever wins the war does not make any change to their situation. For the kings, the success or failure in war is a matter of pride. The soldiers alone suffer the wounds for the rest of their lives.

The novelist focuses on the merits of eavesdropping in the life of a woman. Draupadi exhibits a yearning to know what happens 'out there'. But, no one tells her those things because they believe that a queen has nothing to do with it. Her desire to know beyond queen's right forces her to practice eavesdropping. She opines that it helped her to know a lot of things. Only Krishna insists that Draupadi should know the worldly matters, the matters concerning the kings because these things have something to do with her future life. In the later life, Draupadi remembers how she desired Krishna's visit and his description about what is happening to the rest of the world. The general perception was that women has nothing to do with the worldly matters and what she needs to know are related with how to satisfy her husband and how to bring up her children. Class difference can also be found here. She liked to know and solve the problems of the poor workers of the palace. But, they also hesitate to share their feelings to her as she is a woman in high position, a queen. They try to make it sure that the rumours they share would not reach the ears of the queen. Later, when Draupadi becomes the queen of The Palace of Illusions, we can see her solving the women's issues with greater dignity and righteousness. As a woman she can understand the problems faced by other women in the male dominated society and she proves to be extraordinary in finding a solution for them. Even in the last phase of the Kurukshetra war, it is evident how eavesdropping helps her to know the secrets in Karna's mind when he reveals them to Bheeshma.

Drishtadhymna and Draupadi both were raised from the same fire. According to prophesies both of them have significance in history. But, even then, the education provided is different for them. King Drupad had balked at the thought of her studying with Dhri. When the tutor taught Dhri, Draupadi used to hide behind the curtains as the tutor was not willing to teach these to a queen. She will dictate the answers faster than Dhri. She could recollect those lessons with clarity and the tutor became angry that a girl is not supposed to learn such things. When Dhri gives the explanation that all women are cursed with short memory, the tutor seems to be satisfied. The tutor says that he doesn't think about the ways of women and if a celibate thinks of the ways of women they are on the path of ruin.

When Dhri was given education about the rules of war, Draupadi was given a different type of education. Tutors from various places were invited to teach her music, dance and different types of embroidery works. King Drupad also sent bards to her apartment, hoping that their songs would instill appropriate attitudes in her and warn her off the dangerous ones. In the later life, she remembers how hectic those classes were for both the student and the teacher. She was not able to learn those things because she was not interested in them. Rather, she desired to know when the righteous war should be fought and when it should not. Even, Dhri hesitated to tell her these things.

Polygamy was not a wrong notion at that time. It was common that a king marries three or four women. No stories depict the problems faced by the wives. It is believed that they should live happily together and pray for the long life of the king. When Draupadi visits her father's other wives, they hesitate to talk to her. The other wives did not like her because they believed that the king considered her more important than their own children. The jealousy between these wives was not depicted in any ancient stories. The society restricts the duties of women to giving birth to children and supporting husband. It is the same whether the woman belongs to high class or low class. The novelist depicts the same problems when the Pandavas take other wives. In The Palace of Illusions, Draupadi says that she tried to resist these multiple marriages by starving and breaking off expensive objects. But, being a lady of intelligence she can identify the importance of these marriages and she is able to understand the political reasons behind them. In most cases, marriages were aimed at strengthening the relationship between countries. As she was aware of these reasons, she tried to mingle with the other wives of her husbands.

When the society permits man to marry how many women as he wants, the same society considers a woman who marries more than three men a whore. When Kunti announced the idea of Draupadi marrying all her five sons, king Drupad was hesitated because it was not an idea prevailing in the society. Moreover, the society will consider his daughter as a whore. As a father, he did not want this to happen. The same social constructs were the reason that forced Kunti to abandon Karna, her first child. She knows that the society would

not accept the child born outside a marriage contract. Karna, one of the bravest Kshatriyas of the time was doomed just because he did not know about his parentage

Swayamvara is the practice that existed in the ancient periods among the Kshatriyas. 'Swayam' means self and 'varan' means bridegroom. It is the practice such that the queen can select her husband from the large number of kings who are present for the function. But, Draupadi's swayamvara is conducted with a test to find the most brilliant among the princes. Those who can shoot the eyes of a wooden fish moving above the stage seeing the reflection from a bowl of water are only eligible for marrying her. The likes of the bride is not important. All that matters is the talent in archery. Even the word swayamvara is distorted by the patriarchal society. King Drupad knows the fact that only Karna and Arjuna are capable of completing this challenge. Since, Karna is not sure of his parentage, he can be avoided and so Panchala kingdom can create a relation with The Pandavas. So, swayamvara or the marriage of Draupadi was conducted by king Drupad only to lure Arjuna to Panchaal. Arjuna also participated in the swayamvara to attach Panchaala army with them to equip them for the imminent war against Kauravas. Here, Draupadi was only a weapon for both Panchaala and Pandavas to strengthen their kingdoms. At the swayamvara, the one who wins the task is a Brahmin and she was forced to marry the man according to the rules of swayamvara. She did not know who that man is. He enforces that he cannot reveal his identity without the consent of his family. According to the social norms, Draupadi was forced to dress in simple clothes like the man whom she just married. The man denies all the wealth and gifts given by king Drupad and she follows the man on foot. The social norm of the time was such that she did not have the right even to know the name of the man whom she marries. Ironically, Draupadi who questioned Karna of his parentage marries the man who does not reveal even his name.

Sage Vyasa prepares a special marriage conduct for Draupadi as she marries five princes. Vyasa prepared the marriage conduct in such a way that Draupadi will be the wife of each one in each year. At that period no one else should touch her or face her eyes straight. He also gave her a boon that she would be virgin again the next year for the next husband. Even though it was given as a boon for Draupadi, it was really the idea for making the princes happy. Vyasa also adds that since Yudhishtir is the eldest, she would be his wife for the first year and it continues according to their hierarchy. Draupadi was attracted by the physique and caring nature of Arjuna. But, she was denied the right to choose with whom she beds. Even though she preferred Arjuna to the others, he becomes her husband only in the third year. Here, she is having her sexuality based on the laws fixed by a sage. Her desires are not important in the scenario.

Sikhandi, the eldest daughter of King Drupad was the rebirth of Princess Amba of Kasi. Amba had promised King Salya to marry him in swayamvara. Just before her swayamvara, Bheeshma abducted her and her sisters for marrying his step-brother Vichitravirya. On reaching there, Amba reveals that she already loves King Salya. Bheeshma allows her to go back. When she returns to Salya, he is reluctant to marry her because Bheeshma abducted her by hand and she is contaminated by his touch. She goes back to Bheeshma and requests him to marry her. Then Bheeshma apologizes that he cannot marry her because of the vow that he will remain celibate throughout his life. Amba grew angry. She requests all the kings in that period to help her by taking revenge against Bheeshma. But, they are all scared to revenge against him. She performed austerities at The Himalayas and child god Karthikeya gave her a garland. He gave a boon that anybody who wears the garland would be able to defeat Bheeshma and she can't find anyone willing to wear the garland. So, she commits suicide after putting the garland in the gate of king Drupad's kingdom. She was reborn as Sikhandi, the eldest daughter of king Drupad. By the time she saw the garland she wore it for herself and took revenge. Fearing the defeat by the hands of Bheeshma, king Drupad abandoned her to the forest. She believed that she had to be a man to complete her task so she invoked the yaksha and asked for the boon to change into a man. She was granted the boon.

The life story of Sikhandi has a lot of implications to the problems faced by woman at the time. King Salya who loved her rejected her only because Bheeshma touched her hand. It throws light to a period in which women were valued only based on her virginity. Even when she got the garland, no man in the earth is willing to trust the words of a woman. No man is ready to challenge for a woman. Sikhandi also finds that a woman is incapable to fight against Bheeshma. The tenderness of female mind and body cannot defeat such a great warrior of the time.

These feminist viewpoints expressed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni can also be seen in the characteristics of second wave feminism which began in United States in the early 1960s. When the first wave feminism focused just on enfranchisement, the second wave addressed more domestic issues. Women did not seek employment in that period because of their domestic duties which made their life estranged from politics, economy and law making. The domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and bringing up children were considered as their primary work. Even though they desired for a job with salary, they could not materialize it as they were busy with their household work. The after effects of Second World War triggered the second wave feminism. As men were engaged in war, women were given the industrial work. But, after the war, men came back to their job. At this time there was a difference in wage for men and women even though they were doing

the same job. This forced women to protest for equality. Sexuality, work place conditions, reproductive rights and inequalities were the major issues raised during the second wave.

The women writers in this period extended their ideas to the whole world. Simon de Beauvoir published Second Sex in 1949. In her work, she writes, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman." This points to the societal norms and standards that determine what a woman should be. The patriarchal society conditions the child to fit into the shoes of femininity. Second World War showed that women should come out of the house as it was the need of the hour. But, after the war, women were forced to take their previous roles. Simon de Beauvoir questions the right of society to use her according to its requirements.

Betty Friedan, after studying about the unhappy married life of her friends, wrote the essay Feminist Mystique in 1963. She was able to get into their lives and analyse their problems. She found that their lives were obsessed only with child care and household work. They didn't have any leisure time activities as they were fully engaged in their primary responsibilities. She questions the white, middle class ideals about motherhood and the duties related to this.

These feminist writers brought forth the sufferings of women to the world. Their literary works analysed the characteristics of patriarchal society and found out how women were denied their basic human rights. Their roles were determined by the society even before their birth. In all possible ways, the society suppressed them and considered them as inferior to men. Through The Palace of Illusions, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shows how these methods of suppressing women were used by the society from the ancient times onwards and how they were forced to fit into the norms prescribed by them.

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