

## Re-visiting *Mahabharata* via Literature, Critical Theory and Visual Presentation

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### Abstract

This paper examines how dominant narratives shape collective consciousness and marginalize alternative voices. It focuses on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* as a feminist re-reading of the Mahabharata. The study interrogates how patriarchal discourses have historically constructed Draupadi's identity and relegated women to the margins of epic narratives. Through a critical engagement with theories of representation by Judith Butler and feminist critiques, the paper argues that Divakaruni reclaims Draupadi's voice, foregrounding her subjectivity, desires, and resistance. By reimagining key events and relationships, the novel destabilizes grand narratives of heroism, honour, and war, exposing their gendered biases. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how alternative storytelling can challenge hegemonic ideologies, recover silenced experiences, and reconfigure cultural understandings of gender, power, and identity.

**Keywords:** Representation, Feminist Rewriting, Draupadi, Mahabharata, Gender Politics, Narrative and Power

Alan Sinfield in his seminal work *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post War Britain* (1989) contemplates upon the issue of identity and representation vis -a- vis stories. He says that, "It is hard to challenge the prevailing stories- you will be thought implausible. Powerful stories- those useful to powerful groups- tend to drive out others" (Sinfield 25). He contends that the stories which ideology of the power wielding authorities circulate within a particular society shape and maneuver the prevalent attitudes and create a miasma of stereotypical notions about both the people and events. These attitudes function as veritable blinders which very conveniently reveal as well as conceal the half picture and thus connive in the process of giving validity to the faulty notions about identity of a certain class/group. He writes:

...stories are lived...They make sense for us- of us – because we have been and are in them. They are already proceeding when we arrive in the world, and we come to consciousness in their terms. As the world shapes itself around and through us, certain interpretations of experiences strike us plausible because they fit with what we have experienced already. They become common sense, they 'go without saying'" (24-25).

Critical minds always remain alert to the sedative influence of such politics latent within the stories because they are well aware of its implications which manifest themselves in the societal attitudes and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such instance of the critical and conscious writers. In her groundbreaking work *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes up the magnum opus *Mahabharata* for the purposes of both critical scrutiny and reinterpretation.

The great epic *Mahabharata* has always been a subject of fascination for the people of entertainment industry too. A whole generation has fed its imagination on the B.R. Chopra's highly successful visual presentation of the epic. The visual series made the story of Kauravas and Pandavas available to every household without demanding the labour of any serious and critical reading and understanding on the part of the spectators and audience. The same story has time and again been presented on national television and the ready to devour viewers have swallowed the dose of myth with expected eagerness. These shows contain all the ingredients which are prerequisite for the success of any television drama. High on glamour, emotion, sensation and dramatics, these shows have time and again reaffirmed the stereotypes and conservative thought processes.

Over the years and with the preponderance of rational approach in certain areas of literature and critical theory, a change has been witnessed in popular culture also. People now are ready to question the well entrenched myths and to feed the desire of inquiry of these conscious viewers, certain people of entertainment industry have tried to come up with a different approach to the great epic. *Dharamkshetra*- a series based on the epic imaginatively captures the trial of both Kauravas and Pandavas after their deaths in the court of the Dharamraj. The show deconstructs many narratives of valour, sacrifice, greatness, supreme love and devotion which the earlier shows had built so confidently for the viewers. The show through its critical approach makes the viewer conscious that the same story can have varied interpretations and one needs to be alert against falling into the trap of conventional 'knowledge' which claims to be the only and true knowledge.

Like other epics, *Mahabharata* eulogizes the valour, honour and gallantry of its heroes while the women protagonists are relegated to the background. A critical analysis of the world epics will show that the thoughts, emotions and motives of women never come to the forefront except when they are associated with the lives of male heroes. Their lives are presented as an un-heroic saga which is subservient to the lives of their fathers or husbands. Women in these epics are shown to have the capacity to motivate, instigate or trigger off a chain of incidents which generally culminate in a war and their role is never promoted to the status of a gallant warrior. They are mere instigators who are 'incompetent' to carry out the onerous call of duty. To protect or salvage the 'honour' is men's task and their privilege too. Woman's individuality is considered to be too weak to inspire any epical treatment. In epics women serve a purpose which is no better than mere ornamentation and decoration. Women have a shadowy presence in such tales which has often led to a blurred perception and warped understanding of both their lives and their sense of individuality.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her novel *The Palace of Illusions* attempts to understand the character of Draupadi- the female protagonist of the great epic *Mahabharata* - from a new perspective. Divakaruni's effort is aimed at rectifying some of the wrongs which the historical and the mythological representations have done to the individuality and identity of women in general and Draupadi in particular.

The novelist is well aware of the politics of representation. She is acutely conscious of the misrepresentation which women have been subjected to in literature as well as in culture. Discursive constructions have bracketed masculinity with strength, reason, assertion, domination and action and femininity with weakness, emotion, passivity, subservience, obedience and self

negation. David Glover and Cora Kaplan in their book *Genders* (2007) puts forward this contention in the following words:

These negative associations of inferiority and worse, which so stubbornly cling to the subjective and objective representations of women, have been one of feminism's strongest *raison d'être*...(5).

In league with the feminist agenda, Divakaruni seeks to disassociate the term woman from its negative connotations; connotative meanings which have resulted from the arbitrary pronouncements and representations of women by patriarchy. In other words, the novelist has attempted to re-present the character of Draupadi from a new stand point. In doing so, Divakaruni is grappling with the tricky concept of representation. Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) dwells upon the issue of representation of women in literature. She elucidates:

On one hand, *representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or distort what is assumed to be true about the category of woman (3-4).

While dealing with the issue of representation, one must not lose sight of the social, political, religious and cultural locus standi of the writer. One must also be conscious of the privilege which a writer's position affords in the matters pertaining to representation. Realities at times get entangled with distortions in the complex web of representation. A writer's selective sifting of the material from the available sources determines the structure of representation. One must also be alert to the indelible impact which these representations leave on the political and cultural fabric of the society.

Draupadi has always been seen from the perspective of men. This perspective certainly involves gender politics. This politics very shrewdly pronounces Draupadi as the chief culprit behind the disastrous war and chooses not to take into cognizance the hatred which was brewing between the Kauravas and Pandavas much before Draupadi's entry into their lives.

Divakaruni sets out to re-tell the story of the great epic *Mahabharata* in order to re-direct the societal emotions and interpretations on a broader platform; a platform where Draupadi's discourse has also been ensured a sensitive and sensible hearing. When told from a woman's point of view, the epic acquires entirely new contours. Unlike the grand narratives where the glorification of war and valour relegate the human concerns and motivations to the background, this narrative brings to fore the human as well as the humane element.

It is Panchali's story told by none other than the epic's heroine herself. She redefines the whole world of Kauravas and Pandavas and the power tussle which culminated in the great war of *Mahabharata* at Kurukshetra. The grand canvas of *Mahabharata* with its heroes and gods is laid bare before us and this time Draupadi is not staggering on the margins. She is here telling the reader her side of story; that story which has otherwise not been found befitting to have even the slightest mention in the great epic. In *The Palace of Illusions*, she is at the centre, voicing her anguish and disgust against the unjust society which crushes the aspirations and dreams of a promising woman with impunity. Divakaruni's Draupadi prods the reader to interrogate some of

the notions and institutions which the society hold in high esteem. Concepts of marriage, valour, masculine ambition and sense of honour are all made to pass the litmus test.

In this woman's epic saga, the novelist culls Draupadi out of the morass of patriarchal verdicts and makes her stand on a new podium wherein we see her through the prism of feminist understanding. Here is a Draupadi who asserts:

The more people dissuaded me, the more determined I became. Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. (TPOI 343).

Divakaruni re-imagines and re-constructs the life story of Draupadi. She takes the aid of fantasy to re-structure the life pattern of her heroine. She deliberately moves away from the actual narrative and visualizes Draupadi's birth and life from a new perspective. In order to challenge and subvert the hegemonic influence of grand stories which inform and influence the very fabric of society, it becomes quintessential to take a detour to fantasy. Alan Sinfield's opinion as expressed in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post War Britain* (1989) is pertinent in this regard. He opines, "The wish of women for power over their lives cannot be expressed plausibly within dominant discourses, only in fantasy." (25) Divakaruni deliberately swerves away from the actual story of the epic and introduces some new elements into the storyline. Panchali's friendship with enigmatic yet dependable Krishna, her unconditional love for her brother Dhristadyumna and her attraction towards Karana are some of its examples.

The protagonist of *The Palace of Illusions* is ill at ease with her very name i.e. Draupadi. She thinks it to be below her rank and stature to be named simply after her father- Dhrupad. She finds it very unimaginative to be named thus especially when she has been prophesied to have been born to change the course of history of Bharata. She likes to be called Panchali instead, thus rejecting the egoistic name which was given by her father and at the same time refusing to believe that her identity is bound by men in her life.

Divakaruni's heroine refuses to carry the stigma of a *kritya*, a woman brought forth into the world to destroy, the one responsible for the destruction of a whole clan. Rather she persuades the reader to revisit the whole scene and to observe the silent, muted agony of womenfolk. Instead of focusing on the action which takes place in the battlefield, this tale takes us deep into the world of women. Dealing with a woman's heart, her emotions, priorities, thoughts, concerns, aspirations, dilemmas and relations, the novel is an explicit statement on the price which women pay in the clash of masculine egos or honour.

The imaginative re-visitation of Draupadi's life makes many crucial observations on the life of a woman trapped in a 'men's world'. Draupadi's dreams, her insatiable curiosity, emotional as well as intellectual aspirations, her seething anger and defiance, her love and friendship, her revenge, her helplessness are all presented in a manner which is not only engrossing but also thought provoking. The novelist has tried to free the image of Draupadi from the erstwhile symbolic meanings which has placed her on a terrain where revenge rules the roost. The novel in other words is an attempt on Divakaruni's part

To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change. Such questioning and exposure can, of course, be carried on only by a

consciousness radically different from the one that informs the literature (Fetterley 566).

The novel in question no doubt interrogates and even topples down many common- place perceptions surrounding the great epic, *Mahabharata*. The novelist however does not lay claim to her version being the final one. She has in fact proved with example that stories when heard from different people can surprise us with the variety of meanings and observations. Draupadi at one point in the novel says, “There were things Arjun kept to himself. (Isn’t it thus with all stories, even this one I’m telling?)” (219). Locus standi of the narrator, his/her religious, political, regional, cultural and social affiliations strongly impact their stories. Besides many other factors, one learns to make sense of his/her existence and the society through the knowledge contained within these stories. “Were the stories we told each other true?” thinks Draupadi while contemplating over the fantastical stories surrounding her and her brother Dhristadyumna’s birth. “Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing. ...it was the tale we most needed to know. It was after all, the reason for our existence. It changed with each telling. Or is that the nature of all stories, the reason for their power?” (TPOI 15). Since Knowledge is never innocent, its political alignment and nexus with Power have serious ramifications for the society at large and individuals in particular.

The experience of women has often been considered too trivial to secure any strong depiction in literature. But Divakaruni’s re-imagining of Draupadi’s life counters this notion by showing women’s inner experience to be a storehouse not only of humane emotions but also of self-assertion and self-respect.

Annals of history do not chronicle the experience of women because they did not go to the war nor did they clash head on with the enemy. The role of women remains cleverly understated. The bitter battle of life which they are forced to fight almost every day gets at most a slight and at worst a slighting mention. Strictly denied the basic right of education of political, military, administrative or economic affairs, these women were ordained to confine themselves in their chambers “gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves” (TPOI 343). Inquisitiveness and intelligence on a woman’s part was at best ignored or at worst snubbed and crushed. By blocking all the channels of opportunity, what excellence or brilliance of acts can we expect from an individual? Draupadi from her childhood showed a spark and a knack for learning. Her fond desire to learn all that which was being taught to her dear brother Dhri by esteemed tutors made her to eavesdrop on the lessons. Her act was considered improper for a woman of genteel birth and invited chagrin of elders. But she was adamant. Growing up with the illusions of grandeur, as the one who was prophesized to change the course of history, Draupadi craved for more than that was miserly granted. Her Dhai Ma thought that her lessons were making her “too headstrong and argumentative, too manlike in my speech” (TPOI 23). Draupadi’s obstinacy to acquire knowledge met with disapproval.

Dhri, too, sometimes wondered if I wasn’t learning the wrong things, ideas that would only confuse me as I took up a woman’s life with its prescribed, restrictive laws. But I hungered to know about the amazing, mysterious world that extended past what I could imagine, the world of senses and of that which lay beyond them (TPOI 23-24).

Draupadi’s ambition mirrors the aspirations of those common women who are denied access to education. The disapproval of society and the restrictions which they impose upon

women is symptomatic of a deep seated insecurity. Proper education enlightens an individual about the rights, stimulates thought process and generates questions which in turn can spell anarchy for the preservers of status quo. Knowledge empowers an individual and patriarchy can never afford to designate women at the seats of power. In a very subtle and sly manner they allocate the domain of ignorance, passivity, sentimentalism and weakness to women by denying them education. Seeing their male counterparts swallowing the variety of knowledge, these women like Draupadi feel “These were the lessons I most envied him, the lessons that conferred power” (TPOI 27).

The original *Mahabharata* glorifies the gallant feats of warriors and inspires awe by its description of heroism shown by the princes and army in the war. Exhibition of heroic feats by the gallant men warriors in the battlefield is a common trait of all epics. Men in the epics are portrayed as the saviours who carry upon their shoulders the glorious responsibility of safeguarding the lives and rights of those who are under their protection. Women’s role is restricted to the realm of encouragement only. Mothers and wives of these heroes take pride in sending the latter to battlefield. Simone Brodbeck and Brian Black throw light on this aspect with reference to *Mahabharata* in their introduction to the book entitled *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata* (2007). They contend:

There is a strong connection between masculinity and fighting, and many characters are repeatedly obliged to demonstrate their manhood through their participation in battle. Most of the prominent female characters act in ways that reinforce this model of masculine, actively encouraging their husbands and/ or sons to fight (17).

These epics maintain a stubborn silence on the gory repercussions of a war. They choose to play down the agony which mothers and wives undergo when their loved ones head off for the war, perhaps never to return. The grand narratives of ‘unparalleled heroism’ conveniently brush aside the goriness, death, decay and misery which a war quintessentially entails.

This novel, however, builds an alternative discourse. Within it is depicted not only the misery which the wars bring about but it also ushers forth an outlook which is inclined towards a harmonious existence. As Draupadi says in the novel, “I’d teach them instead to be survivors. And why was a battle necessary at all? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men?” (26) Playing down upon the mockery and slight which women are subjected to because of their reliance on emotions, the novelist stresses that the world must acknowledge the worth of finer sensibilities. The propensity towards nurturing, loving, caring or peace- making should not be construed as weakness. The war torn and conflict ridden societies are in dire need of such fine emotions. Draupadi punctures the notions of glory and heroism associated with war and paints a nude picture of war to show its stark, gory and grim realities which are often clothed in the shimmering robes of heroism. She comes to a shocking realization that the men in their army are not propelled by any fine cause rather for these soldiers “it was merely a job, an alternative to poverty and starvation. Or maybe they’d been forcibly conscripted by their overlords” (TPOI 257). Shoulders of such poverty stricken soldiers are too frail to carry the baggage of honour. Fighting the daily battle of survival, these soldiers and their families are not even distantly concerned with the reasons which engineer a war. Grappling with their fate, they cannot afford to grieve at the exalted miseries of those ensconced at the seats of power and prosperity. Draupadi

realizes that wives of these soldiers are unable to empathize with her because poverty has browbeaten them "...for their wives, I was a harbinger of ill luck, the woman who had torn their husbands from the safety of their homes, the witch who might...transform them into widows"(TPOI 257-258).

A warrior's death spells doom on the family. Beneath the veneer of glory lies a horrendous reality. *Mahabharata* is silent on the fate of those who survived the war. Predators like disease, deprivation, stigma, starvation were gnawing at the innocent victims. Widows with their children were groping in the dark. No saga of bravery could have embalmed their hearts. Glorified concepts of gallantry, martyrdom and heroic fall were beyond their grasp because they were bound in the thorny shackles of a dark present and a bleak future.

Hastinapur after the war was largely a city of women, widows who had never dreamed that the survival of their families would depend on them....they found themselves exploited...I'd see them on the roadside, often with children in their arms, begging. There were others that I didn't see...selling the only thing left to them (323).

Divakaruni's protagonist also brings the institution of marriage into dock and voices her angst at her *swayamvar*, five husbands and the insult poured upon her in the Kuru court. *Swayamvar* was a mere eyewash as far as the girl was concerned. It was a contest where the winner would take away his prize. Instead of having the liberty to choose her life partner, the woman was rather made to accept the winner of the contest as her husband. She was merely a thing to be won over; a coveted possession that would exalt the status of the winner. Besides this, women were also given in marriages to pacify the enemy. Draupadi on coming to this realization voices her disgust, "My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (TPOI 57).

Draupadi questions the double standards of society which "seems to have no problem when men sleep with a different woman each day of the week" (TPOI 42) but the society pours choicest of slurs upon a woman who has liaisons with more than one man. Married against her will to five *Pandavas*, she refuses to accept the consolation of being the only woman having five husbands in a society where only men can have more than one wife. Dismayed and disgusted thus she says, "Unlike them, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted or not" (TPOI 120). The glorified virginity boon given to Draupadi and boon of sons given to Kunti recorded in the original tale is also put under critical scanner which to Draupadi seemed:

...designed more for my husband's benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women- they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted. (Had Kunti felt the same way when she was told that the gods would be happy to impregnate her? (TPOI 120)

During her insult in the court of Duryodhana, she comes to the shocking and crude realization that for her husbands, their pride, honour and reputation are more important than their wife's honour. They could bear to see their wife getting naked in front of all rather than breaking the rules of the game. Their pride no doubt was hurt but why was not their love hurt. They were agonized to see the *Pandava* queen getting humiliated; a husband's pride was offended but the

pain of a woman simply remained unnoticed. Draupadi mocks that, “They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame” (TPOI 195). and this occasion came in the shape of the great battle fought between *Kauravas* and *Pandavas*. Draupadi was made the accused, a *kritiya*, whose deadly vow to avenge her insult culminated in the war. But why did not any one bother to peep inside the helpless, humiliated and wounded heart of a woman. Stigma stalks only the woman, whatever the circumstances be and who so ever the perpetrator be. A woman is made to carry the burdensome load of honour. Shame, slurs, mock sympathy trails a woman who has been subjected to physical and sexual abuse. Draupadi’s rebuttal of these societal norms is an eye opener. “Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency”(193).

The reimagining of Mahabharata from a woman’s viewpoint shatters many lofty conceptions and generates questions about the status of woman in society and her position in marital relationship. The glorified concepts of honour, war, duty when seen from the eyes of Divakaruni’s Draupadi, certainly lose much of their sheen. The protagonist or the novelist however does not make any boisterous claims about their version being the final one. Such a reading of the novel concurs with what Alan Sinfield says:

It is through stories, or representations, that we develop understanding of the world and how to live in it. The contest between rival stories produces our notions of reality and hence our beliefs about what we can and cannot do” (23).

The novel stimulates the reader to approach the given stories from different angles so as to achieve a more balanced and impartial understanding. It awakens the reader to the multi-layered structures of literary or cultural texts which hide within themselves a multiplicity of meanings. These meanings lay dormant there for the conscious reader to unearth them and to usher forth a new understanding and consciousness in the society.

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