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Draupadi: A Study of *The Palace of Illusions*

Battula Sneha
PG Student,
Pursuing M. A. in English,
Bhairab Ganguly College,
West Bengal State University,
India.

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Abstract:

History has always been believed as one of the greatest sources of information. But somewhere women aren't blessed with an important place in history. The writers have always chosen to keep the women in the back seat prioritizing the men. But with the changing times, the position of the women has changed. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni comes up with a fresh take on the character of Draupadi. The narrative portrays Draupadi in such strength and valour that she overshadows not only Pandavas but many other great warriors of her time, elevating her position in the narrative of the epic Mahabharata.

Keywords: Draupadi, Women, Pandavas, Freedom, History, Colonialism.

Introduction

Women have always been perceived by men as a territory that could be conquered easily even before the word colonialism was invented or better to say from the day the earth was formed. The women in earlier times had no existence of their own and were often recognized as the daughter, sister, wife and, mother. The writers have favourably chosen the male protagonists for their novels but with the changing times, writers came forward and decided to make the female characters the protagonists of their novels. One such work is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work *The Palace of Illusions*.

The condition of women could be better understood if we compare it to the instance of colonialism. Colonialism is an experience of nightmare for any country. When a country falls prey in the hands of colonizers the people of the country come together to fight against it, ultimately fetching independence for themselves. Once they are free their task is to carry on with the process of decolonization. As Franz Fanon in his work *The Wretched of the Earth* says that

In order to ensure his salvation and to escape from the supremacy of the white man's culture the native feels the need to turn backwards towards his unknown roots to lose himself at whatever cost in his unknown roots and to lose himself at whatever cost in his own barbarous people. (Fanon 175)

In these lines, Fanon is clearly highlighting the need to look at the past so that the natives can decolonize. The women since the very beginning have been a part of colonialism by men. A state due to which they even couldn't gather the courage to stand up for themselves. But now with the changing times the position of women is changing too. But the problem that remains is now when women look back into history to make the method of decolonization a bit easy, as suggested by Fanon, women face difficulty. As it is very difficult to trace such confident women, even if they could be traced not much is written about them. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes this mission into hands and through her *The Palace of Illusions* voices Draupadi. Though the work is fiction but as James R. Nichols rightly says "Fiction, because of its rigorous selectivity and its single-minded reflection on the core of human experience, is indeed more real than the actual experience that forms its subject" (Nichols 9). The work comes as a true means of liberation for modern-day women, as this portrayal of ancient women like Draupadi helps the readers to change their perspective regarding conventional women, also adding to the boldness and freedom of thoughts and choices for the present-day women.

The unconventional birth

History has highlighted the birth of Draupadi as the divine gift that the gods have bestowed upon Drupad. But that harsh truth is he never wanted a daughter. He desired a son to avenge Dronacharya. This unwanted daughter didn't manage to get the love of her father which her twin brother Drishtadyumna received in abundance. Also, she never had a mother but this hollow was compensated by Dhai Ma as narrated by Divakaruni in this novel. As a reader or a commoner, we perceive the birth of Draupadi as a divine act that makes her a larger-than-life character. But Divakaruni aptly highlights that nothing in this universe can make a girl, a female, or a woman a blessing. Rather in case of Draupadi her being born from fire is an added difficulty. She doesn't have a mother and none of Drupad's wives come forth to take care of her. Instead, her birth makes them mischievous towards her. Also, the predictions regarding her that she would be the reason of the great destruction makes



everyone maintain distance from her. All these things disturb her lot which is clearly reflected in her words as she says

I began to notice things, though. My maidservants—even those who had been with me for years—kept their distance until summoned. If I asked them anything of a personal nature—how their families were, for instance, or when they were getting married— they grew tongue-tied and escaped from my presence as soon as they could. The best merchants in the city, who routinely visited the apartments of the queens, would send their wares to me through Dhai Ma. Even my father was uneasy when he visited me and rarely looked directly into my eyes. I began to wonder whether Dhri’s tutor’s nervousness at my interruptions had a less flattering cause than my beauty. And whether my lack of friends and visitors was due not to my father’s strictness but to people’s wariness of someone who wasn’t born like a normal girl and who, if the prophecy was correct, wouldn’t live a normal woman’s life. (Divakaruni 32)

This entire stanza vivifies how since birth she is treated as a disease or a curse. This takes a big deviation from how she has been portrayed in the different television shows. Thus, Divakaruni begins the narration of the tale of Draupadi highlighting that she may be a royal princess and a divinely born individual but the ultimate truth is that she too is a girl and like every girl is the victim of constant negligence.

The beginning of the life of Draupadi

The complexion has always been a matter of discussion when it comes to women. The same hurdle is faced by Draupadi too, since her birth she had a dark complexion. This was like a barrier to her. She narrates how she was forced to change herself

In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl. I paid for it by spending hour upon excruciating hour being slathered in skin-whitening unguents and scrubbed with numerous exfoliants by my industrious nurse. (Divakaruni 8)

But later she overcomes the situation and wears her confidence as the jewel undermining the societal rules and prioritizing her own beliefs over everyone. This makes her amazed to see

how things changed and she narrates the instance by saying “Overnight, I who had been shunned for my strangeness became a celebrated beauty!” (Divakaruni 10).

Draupadi and her take on the various situations in her life

As the life of Draupadi moves a bit further she senses the superiority of men over women in every sphere of life. She denies suppressing herself and rather shows the courage to put forth several questions saying “And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men?” (Divakaruni 26). Women over ages have had a mental conditioning that their life is destined to be dedicated to the service of the male member that is her father, brother, husband, and son. But Draupadi here seems to strongly challenge this notion and prioritize her life over everyone else.

After a while in the story, Draupadi is married to the Pandavas. Along with that, she is granted a boon that each time she would go to the new husband she would turn into a virgin again. From the perspective of Dhairya Ma, it is a ‘boon’. Here Dhairya Ma represents the women of the society who might think this as a blessing because this is how she could satisfy each of her husbands without having to hear any harsh words for them. But for Draupadi, she sees it as a ‘curse’ because this won’t benefit her in any way rather it was something that would be profitable to her husbands. Thus, she reveals the politics of the situation without consoling herself by getting manipulated by the false idea that society tries to put on her. Her anger is evident when she says “Nor was I Particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands’ benefit than mine” (Divakaruni 120).

The strength of Draupadi and the meekness of Pandavas

The disrobing episode in the sabha or hall of Kauravas is one of the most discussed parts of the life of Draupadi. The episode shows the failure of Pandavas in every respect. The Pandavas were considered the greatest of the warriors of their time. Despite of that, they turn impotent when it comes to the protection of their wife. She narrates how “Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than [her] suffering” (Divakaruni 195). Yudhishthira is the personification of dharma but he fails in the time of need Mory Brockington comments on Yudhishthir saying that

the stubbornly pacific Dharmaraja scarcely fulfils the ksatriya’s dharma, which is to fight and protect the weak, especially here, where he makes no attempt to



intervene to save Draupadi, and his self- control and punctilious adherence to his interpretation of dharma when his wife is in danger seems to contrast oddly with the impulsiveness which has placed her in that predicament. (Brockington 254)

Among all the husbands Yudhisthira or Dharmaraja was the first one to have a right over Draupadi in every respect. But when it comes to her protection he takes a back seat and chooses to stay silent. Despite of that Draupadi tries to save herself and doesn't lose hope. As a result, she is saved by Krishna. This highlights the weakness of Pandavas and the strength of Draupadi quite contrary to the perception of the society. Life gives Yudhisthira one more chance to compensate for his mistake, when Pandavas and Draupadi are in disguise in the court of Virat and Kheechak tries to harm Draupadi in front of Yudhisthira but this time too, the laws to Yudhisthira are greater for him and he chooses to stay quiet and do nothing.

Draupadi's choice to follow Pandavas to the forest is not an act of devotion but a revolt

Pandavas as a result of losing to Duryodhan have to spend twelve years in the forest and one more year in disguise. If they are found in that one year of disguise they have to spend another twelve years in the forest. The Punishment was only for the Pandavas but Draupadi too decided to go with them. It is generally perceived that she goes to the forest to share the hardships and difficulties with her husbands. But Divakaruni presents an altogether fresh perspective on this entire situation. She tries to show this entire situation through Draupadi's point of view. Draupadi's brother Dhristadyumna proposes to take her with him when her husbands are abiding by the punishment. She rejects and the following questions come to her mind.

What was the real reason I rejected my brother's entreaties to return with him to the simpler environment of my childhood? Why did I give up the opportunity to create memories with my children that would give them—and me—solace in the long years that stretched ahead? Why, even as I thought longingly of burying my face in her copious bosom, did I refuse to visit Dhai Ma, who had dedicated her life to caring for me and mine? Was it the fear that my husbands would learn they could live without me, that they would heave a sigh of relief at the quiet peace of my absence? Or was it a different kind of fear: that if I gave myself to softer emotions, I would blunt the edge of my vengeance and fail to achieve the destruction that had become the goal of my life? (Divakaruni 207)

Draupadi was well aware of the fact that the Pandavas were well accustomed to the forest life from their very childhood. So, it might have happened that without Draupadi they could have forgotten the reason for their stay in forest and could have taken it for the reminiscences of their younger days. And this punishment would have turned into enjoyment. And Draupadi was well aware that her presence would prick them every day so that they continue to remember their deeds and mistakes. This shows Draupadi's cunningness and her tendency to exercise power over her husbands. The society has always expected a woman to forgive her husband for their faults. But Draupadi chooses not to function according to the beliefs and constructs of the society. Rather she writes her own rule book where there is no punishment assigned for the act of her husbands.

Draupadi as a commoner in the court of Virat

Divakaruni's Draupadi isn't only highlighted as a larger-than-life character but also an ordinary woman in many instances in the novel. When she was in the court of Virat in the year of disguise, she found herself as a victim in the hands of Keechak. When he stares at her she feels very uncomfortable and wonders. "Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then? Women they considered their inferiors? A new sympathy for my maids rose in my mind. When I became queen again, I thought, I would make sure common women were treated differently" (Divakaruni 228). This condition of Draupadi is synonymous with the condition that women face to this very day. This makes her a queen who thinks of ordinary women too in her times of crisis.

The Battlefield

The battle is one of the biggest focus points of Mahabharata. After the exile, the Pandavas along with the Draupadi are preparing for one of the greatest battles which the history of mankind was about to witness. The women in the battlefield are expected to be in a state of fear. But here the urge of Draupadi to avenge her disrobing is so strong that she doesn't have any fear in her heart. Even if any such thought came to her mind the thirst for revenge overpowered it.

Even when her husbands the Pandavas were going through a series of nightmares she tried to deviate them from their thoughts of fear. The tool she used here was to hurt their male ego, the greatest of all egos in the world. She taunts them by saying "I didn't expect such superstition from the foremost heroes of Bharat!" (Divakaruni 239). She doesn't stop here but continues saying "Of course there will be blood. Of course there will be death. As kshatriyas,



isn't that what you've trained for all your lives? And are you afraid now?" (Divakaruni 239). These instances aptly highlight her strong mental construct. Here it is not only Draupadi taunting their husbands but Divakrauni is challenging the entire world for the age-old allegation that the men have tried to claim over women saying women are emotional creatures and that they are mentally weak.

In a war, it is expected from people to break emotionally and mentally. But the Pandavas being uplifted by Draupadi is a narrative that adds up to the courageous and practical side of women which has often been neglected.

The women as the followers of patriarchy

The society has a very strong impact on the minds of people. In the case of women society has an even stronger effect because from the very childhood society takes up the responsibility of shaping the mind of women as a holy or divine task. They successfully manipulate women. This could be well understood from the concept of colonialism. According to the coloniser the act of colonialism is a divine charity that he is doing for the natives, but in reality, he ends up ruining them. As Sherrill writes "Has not the time come to make frank admission that the 'White Man's Burden' is after all only a smug phrase coined to cover exploitation of weaker races for the benefit of the white one?" (65). In the same way society especially men play with the minds of women. One such instance of the patriarchal control on the mind of women is witnessed when, Draupadi narrates an instance about how a woman saw her "Then, all of a sudden, she turned and fled, flinging up her hands in a gesture [she] recognized with a shock. It was a sign against the evil eye!" (Divakaruni 257).

Draupadi was not the only reason for the war. The Pandavas, the Kauravas, Bheeshma, Dronacharya, Karna all these men were equally responsible. But society and to make things even worse a woman chooses to consider the other woman as an evil figure. The idea of seeing women as a evil figure has been carried forward since the time of Shakespeare as Lady Macbeth has been perceived as the fourth witch. But people tend to overlook Macbeth and his desires. Macbeth delivers an aside in Act-1, Scene-4 where he stands in front of King Duncan and says "Stars, hide your fires, Let not light see my black and deep desires" (Shakespeare 152). These lines are uttered even before he meets Lady Macbeth this shows that he had deep and dark desires from the very beginning and it is a doubt that Lady Macbeth could have an influence. And even if she had the influence, an influence without desire can do nothing.

In a similar way here too the perception of Draupadi as an evil figure is a mere sham in to hide the faults committed by these warrior men. The women are manipulated by society in such a way that they first try to see the other woman as culprit but not victim and here the same thing happens with Draupadi.

Conclusion

The world has always been unkind to women. But it was never the case that women didn't dare to stand up for themselves. Draupadi's journey begins with negligence and the small everyday problems like the loss of confidence or the complexity regarding her complexion and as her life moves further the problems take a larger shape. But she stands in front of every situation with her head held high tackling it with the best of her capacity. Divakaruni's Draupadi comes forth without any societal filters of meekness, cowardice, helplessness, or fear. Instead through the text, she brings to us Draupadi as an individual who is strong and courageous and most importantly she portrays her as a woman who isn't ailing for help or comfort from others. Divakaruni as a writer wins as she portrays Draupadi as present-day woman who fears none and is self-sufficient believing in herself more than anyone else.

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