

Reimagining Female Identity: Deconstructing The Mahabharata through Fiction

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Abstract

Myths form the basis for the cultural and ethical codes of any modern society. These behavioral standards transferred by myths through oral or written traditions have remained unchallenged for centuries. The grand epics of India, for instance, authored by men encodes a patriarchal power structure where women characters though powerful and intelligent fades away in the grand narrative of male heroism and valour. Revisionist mythmaking attempts a subversion of dominant binaries by bringing into highlight the devalued or the marginalized. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* offers a narrative of the grand epic *The Mahabharata* in the point of view of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas. In contrast to the patient, passive and silent Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*, Divakaruni's revision brings forth a confident, defiant, and outspoken Draupadi at the center. The re-reading brings to light the sacrifices and initiatives of women which lay hidden in the original text. By subverting the canonical power structures, Divakaruni attempts to reveal the impassivity and assertiveness of women. This paper is an attempt to read Divakaruni's work in the light of Feminist theory to analyze how far revision, subversion or re-reading helps to challenge the gender stereotypes embodied in the myths.

Key Words: Mythology, Patriarchy, Epic, Feminism, Revisionist Writing

A mythology is a system of stories of ancient origin, believed to be true by a particular cultural group, which gives reason for the happenings of the world in terms of the supernatural and the deities; which also provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and establishes sanction for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Hence, beyond question myths form the basis for the cultural and ethical codes of any modern society. These behavioral standards transferred by myths through oral or written traditions have remained unchallenged

for centuries. The canonical texts often play a significant role in transcending these standards over generations. In an Indian scenario, one may look back at the grand epics – *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* as the benchmarks for these mythical traditions that prescribe the Indian societal standards, morals, and perspectives. The origin of the patriarchal lineage in India thus dates back to these canonical texts authored by men. These texts encode a patriarchal power structure where women characters though powerful and intelligent, fade away in the grand narrative of male heroism and valour. Questioning these unchallenged codes of the society is one among the crucial challenges undertaken by feminist literature.

Feminism looks at literature through two different angles as mentioned by Elaine Showalter in her essay ‘Towards a Feminist Poetics’. She distinguishes between feminist critique (women as reader) and gynocriticism (women as writer). Feminist critique is rather passive as it opens not what women have experienced, but what men have felt. Gynocriticism offers a stronger mode of resistance against the masculine interpretation of the feminine, because it “begin at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary theory, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition.” (Showalter 28). It is supported by the practical view that women are essentially different from men, and hence feminine experience cannot properly be represented in a literary work by men. Usha Bande, too maintains a similar view in feminist resistance. According to her “If feminist resistance is shown through articulation, the most important aspect of it is to break the silence and to re-discover the female self. The desire is reflected in women’s writing and it is this desire that provides context for resistance. (Bande 15 -16).

Of the varied paradigms of resistance, which aims at decentring of power and thereby seeks a space for feminine experience in a world overpowered by masculinity, revisionism demands a prominent place. Decentring, as Derrida points out, does not require the abandonment of a subject but a reconceptualization of it within a newer paradigm. What he suggests is to overturn the traditional concept. This is where revision gains its prominence. Instead of abandoning the subject, revision subverts the existing norms by re-imagining the older one in a newer light. It offers fresh critical directions to old texts which according to Adrienne Rich is “...more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival” (Rich 35).

Feminist revisionist mythology offers resistance by subverting the dominant binaries and bringing into highlight the devalued or marginalized. Such re-readings bring to light the sacrifices and initiatives of women which lay hidden in the original text. Subverting the

canonical power structure helps revealing the impassivity and assertiveness of women. Subversion is affected in any of the following ways -- by narrating the story in the point of view of the main female character; re-creating the story by painting women as active and assertive, in contrast to being the submissive lot; or by employing a female satirical narrator, who is able to mock at the follies of men.

The grand epic *Mahabharata* authored by Sage Vyasa, narrates the destiny of the virtuous and scrupulous kings and queens of Bharat, offering merely a male perspective. Amidst the description of male heroism, the reader lose track of the feminine experience. Ironically enough, the success of these heroes are recounted by the presence and intelligence of their female counterparts. This brings to question where and how has these feminine powers been hidden. Divakaruni attempts to rekindle this flame by subverting the canonical power structure through *The Palace of Illusions*, by retelling the story through a feminine perspective. Draupadi or Panchaali, the wife of the Pandavas, who had been a powerful presence, leading the Pandavas through the difficult of the situations in their life, has been chosen as the narrator. The narratorship accoladed on one of the important and powerful women characters has helped to open up a vista of experience of women mangled up in the chain of patriarchy. Divakaruni makes Draupadi speak out her heart, thereby breaking the virtuous-lady-figure imparted to her by the male dominated society. She had been unwomanly many a times by not being the perfect mother dedicated to her children, and the perfect wife sincere to her husbands. She also tumbles up the societal notions of virginity by being wife simultaneously to five, invariably shattering the stereotypical woman image. Divakaruni's Draupadi questions the way she was misrepresented in the grand epic as a silent endurer of her fate.

The princess of Paanchal, Panchali had shown nonconformity to patriarchal standards right from her childhood. Her curiosity and inquisitiveness was despised by her loved ones, including Dhai ma, who used to provide unrelenting support in other matters, out of the fear that she may turn man-like in her speech. Draupadi spent hours reading books,

...which described in diligent, morose detail complicated laws concerning household property...I was determined to learn what a king was supposed to know...How else could I be powerful in myself? So I ignored summer's blandishments and battled with the book (Divakaruni 54).

More than once she has proved that her intelligence and power pars that of her twin brother Dhri. She has also proved meticulous in providing support to Yudishtir in administering

Indraprastha. She says “Yudishtir began to ask my advice when a tricky judgement had to be delivered” (148).

The ‘Panchaali Swayamvar’, one of the scintillating episodes in Mahabharata, shrouded with brilliance of Kings and Princes narrates but little about the courage shown by Paanchali in preventing Karna attempting the test. But in the revision, one barely gets to see this submissive Princess. She, though a girl with romantic notions about her life and her would-be-husband, was but keen in recognizing the trap in her swayamvar. She realizes that herself as well as her brother Dhri are “nothing but pawns for king Drupad to sacrifice when it’s most to his advantage” (58). Though her feelings were for Karna, she rises to the occasion, outgrowing her emotion with practicality, and prevents Dhri from getting killed by raising questions to Karna about his ancestry, and shaming him enough to make him drop his arms and quit. Draupadi actually saved for Dhri, not only his pride, but his life as well.

Later, after Arjun wins the hand of Draupadi in marriage, and Kunti decides that she be shared by Pandavas, one finds how Draupadi was misinterpreted in the *Mahabharata* as a silent woman succumbing to her destiny. Though she reacts passively, her mind travels through a stretch of emotions. Her contemplation on the virginity boon conferred on her by sage Vyasa further reveals her reaction to the male-centered world. The boon that each time she went to a husband she would be a virgin again, she realizes is designed more for her husbands’ benefit than hers. What she wanted was the gift of forgetting,

...so that when I went to each brother, I’d be free of the memory of the previous one. And along with that, I’d have requested that Arjun be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could fall in love with. If he had loved me back, I might have been able to push aside my regrets about karna and find some semblance of happiness (120 -121).

When the grand epic praises Yudishtir as the righteous king ever, it blindfolds the reader of the efforts of Draupadi which lead him to the throne. The revision reveals that it was owing to Draupadi’s request to Bheeshma that Hastinapur was divided among the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and thereby Yudishtir become the king of Indraprastha. This has led to the creation of the beautiful ‘Palace of Illusion’, a creation so marvelous. Draupadi, unlike other queens, has become an unrelenting source of power and support to her husbands. Her elegance, determination and entrepreneurship has made the Pandavas turn away from Kunti to Draupadi for decisions in matter of administration.

Draupadi's firm determination is further revealed when she becomes the reason for the 'Kurukshetra War' – the most elaborate and key episode in the *Mahabharata*. When the war totally sidelines the female, and embosses the male power and strength in the grand epic, its revision highlights the role played by women in its outbreak. The war becomes a reality owing to Draupadi's determination to avenge the Kauravas for shaming her in front of the court by removing her veil. None of her husbands offer help as it will cause their fall off the pedestal of virtue. She throws curses at the Kauravas thus:

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 wept...Not one of the Kauravas will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman (194).

This makes the war inevitable. Draupadi, during their twelve years at Dwaita Vana, tries her best to keep the flame of revenge burning in the minds of her husbands. She enters a new phase in her life, where her only aim is vengeance. The darkened cave inside her revealed a spiteful Draupadi,

She is dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home...The woman who have taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history than that naïve girl ever imagined. (206)

Draupadi bravely receives the gift of watching "...the greatest spectacle of our times" (254), the War from Sage Vyasa, thereby becoming the only woman who knows truth about the war. The bravery she shows in accepting the gift, refused out of fear even by men praised for valour, proves her prowess. She accepts the gift by saying, "I accept your gift. I will watch this war and live to tell of it. It's only just, since I've helped bring it about." (254)

Just as she was the reason for the war, she had the power to stop it too, had she a chance. She is the only person other than Bheeshma and Karna, who knows the truth about Karna's ancestry. Had she but informed Arjun, she could have saved Karna from being killed by Arjun, but only destiny played otherwise. She is the only one to realize that the life of Pandavas is the charity of Karna. She understands that Karna in recompense to killing Abhimanyu,

...or because of the secret that clawed at him from within—he spared one after the other, Sahadev, Nakul, Bheem – and most important Yudishtir, when he had

him at his mercy... Only I saw the way he gazed after them in sorrow and tenderness. (293)

Apart from picturing Draupadi as an embodiment of power and determination, walking away from the concept of woman being the weaker sex, Divakaruni also emphasizes on her derailment from the concept of motherhood and an ideal wife. The revision shatters the virtuous-lady-figure of Draupadi, and presents her as being insincere to her husbands by adoring and loving Karna. She is deeply sympathetic for what destiny has brought him into. She confesses that, though she was a good wife, she had not loved them the way they wanted to be loved. She says,

I supported them through good times and bad; I had provided them comforts of the body and the mind; when in company I extolled their virtues. I followed them into the forest and forced them to be heroes. But my heart – was it too small?...I never gave it fully to them...Because none of them had the power to agitate me the way mere memory of Karna did. (213)

As a mother too, she had been a failure. She confesses many a times that she is more a wife than a mother. She gives more care in fulfilling her destiny than rearing up her children. Through the death of her children after the war, she pays the penance for it.

Divakaruni thus by highlighting the sacrifices and initiatives of Draupadi, blurred up in the *Mahabharata*, brings about a strong resistance to patriarchy. Though revision may not be a final solution, it can at least bring to light female experiences and prove that such experiences can overpower male experience and bring about a marked change in the male perception of the female. Thus, feminist revision proves itself a sharp tool to resist patriarchy.

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