

Refinement of Draupadi into a New Woman

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Abstract: *The traditional and mythological character Draupadi is analysed and equated to the Indian women of the modern era. It depicts the picturisation of Draupadi in the postmodern era with regard to the prominent writer Chitra Bannerji's novel, The Palace of Illusions. This article traces the incidents experienced by the protagonist, Draupadi in the chronological manner. The physiognomies of the protagonist undergo transformation reflecting the technique of bildungsroman where Draupadi emerges as a new woman towards the end of the novel that highlights the mind of today's Indian women.*

Keywords: transformation, independence, identity, life and death, New Woman

1. Introduction

In India the recent trend among the Indian English writers is to pen down their creative works based on the Indian epics, namely the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Using the mythical tales, the writers of post modernity alter and modify the original story highlighting the view on Women. The construction of the archaic story is based on the relevance to the contemporary needs and desires. Banani Chakraborty clarifies the purpose of retelling:

India has a rich treasure of mythological stories having admirers across the countries. Mythological stories of the great epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are not merely tales of Gods, demons, demigods, miracles and mysteries; these also provide us knowledge about the social structure and cultural beliefs of the ancient time and people. Retelling of the Indian mythological stories re-establishes their significance in the modern Indian social context. (108)

Critics feel that the phenomenon of retelling and rewriting is never a recent activity since the folk tales and legendary tales of the past are carried from one generation to another generation. When oral tradition existed, there was a tendency to include handful of imaginative elements to the original story.

Numerous telling and retellings of the *Mahabharata* exists in the oral tradition. At present the oral tradition has reduced chiefly due to the dominative hand of the print culture. Whereas in print culture the practise of epic-rewriting has increased gradually. Precisely there is a concrete purpose for undertaking such a herculean task.

Writers like Pratibha Ray, Shashi Tharoor, R. K. Narayan, Mahasweta Devi and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have contributed much more to the genre of epic-rewriting. The status of these alternate mythology writers is that they undergo the tedious task only after understanding the Hindu texts which is in relevance to the Hindu tradition and culture. Multiple readings are done before penning the changing narratives and some writers decide to break the taboo whereas others stick to the original storyline so as to remain safe.

The task of renewing is done by the party who feels that certain characters are portrayed unjustly or by the people with revisionist approach to change the conventional ideals. This revisionist approach is applied so as to gratify the modern readers who live in the midst of technology but still find mythical plots interesting and fascinating.

Epic-rewriting is carried out for purpose of pleasure and to enrich socio-cultural responsibility. The sense of newness is imbibed in the rewriting concept by altering the genre of the original epic or at times the point of narration is shifted. At times the perspective of characters changes or the name of the characters gets modified so as to denote novelty. The rewritten work of art comprises of its own flaws and one cannot assume that rewriting could replace the original. Since the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are considered as authentic text it will never be replaced.

The meanings associated with the concept of post modernism gives rise to plethora of connotations. The contexts and meanings are not static since it is subjected to change. Post modernism never tries to announce a new dawn instead it helps to revisit and re-evaluate certain ideas.

Living in the Post-Modern era, the writings associated with it are essential to remake or rewrite the authentic texts so as to make it reach for the readers of all age. The Itihasas or the epic poetry were considered as legendary tales passed on from one generation to another. George C.M. Birdwood mentions, "The two great Itihasas are the *Ramayana*, "the adventures of Rama", and the *Mahabharata*, "the great [war of] Bharata" (6) and further he calls these poems as "additional limbs" of Vedas (6) which is assumed to exist from the early Aryan tradition. The authentic legends showcase the patriarchal society along with the heroic stages of Indian civilization.

The *Mahabharata* is said to have 2,22,000 lines altogether which is written in eighteen voluminous books. The voluminous book has recorded the battle between virtuous Pandavas and vice Kauravas. The essence of the epic lies in the battle of Kuruksetra where the vice and virtue compete. Reckoning the role played by the epic in lives of people, Anju Jagpal quotes C.R. Deshpande who has asserted, "The *Mahabharata* has not only influenced the literature, art, sculpture, and painting of India but it has also moulded the very character of the Indian people" (253).

The *Mahabharata* begins with the portrayal of two races the Lunar and the Solar race. From the Lunar race descends Bharata, son of Dushyanta and Sakuntala. Sakuntala was the tragic heroine of Kalidasa's play which is praised even till date. From them the story moves to Bhishma who has abducted Amba, Ambika and Ambalika for his brother Vichitravirya to marry them. Ambika and Ambalika was sent to Vyasa in order to linger the lineage. Out of which Dhritarashtra and Pandu was born and Vidura was born to a slave girl since Ambika and Ambalika would never go to Vyasa again fearing his appearance and austerities.

Dhritarashtra was the father of Kauravas who were hundred in number. Pandu was the father of Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjun, Nakula and Sahadeva. Both the sons of Pandavas and Kauravas grew under the guidance and care of blind King, Dhritarashtra since Pandu died early. Dronacharya taught the Pandavas and the Kauravas and sent Pandavas to reprimand King Drupad, the King of Panchaal.

King Drupad and Drona were in friendly terms until one day Drupad offended the reputation of Drona. Drona after capturing King Drupad forgave him, but King Drupad was unable to bear the humiliation. Yagnas and penance were performed by King Drupad to beget a male child in order to defeat Drona. The feud amongst the close friends assisted as a primal source to beget Draupadi.

The Gods were pleased with the yagnas conducted and they delivered King Drupad a handsome son named Dhritadyumna and a daughter named Draupadi. In Kuru dynasty, the Kauravas grew hatred on Pandavas and wanted to destroy the Pandavas for the crown. Much importance was given to the trial and tribulations underwent by Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. The compass points at Draupadi only during the royal dicing game. Draupadi was put into shame which led to the great curse in the history. Pandavas were sent on exile for twelve years and one year of concealed life since Yudhishtira lost their kingdom and property while gambling.

There comes description about the heroic journey of Pandavas who met various Gods to avenge the insult smeared upon Draupadi. Krishna visits the Pandavas often to assist and council them during the war period. The Kurukshetra war lasted for eighteen days and the battle and deaths were portrayed in a grand manner. In the end Duryodhana, Duhsasana, Drona, Karna and many warriors were slayed. After ruling the kingdom for few years, the clan of Pandavas were terrorised by the ghosts of the past then they realised it was time for them to leave the earthly place.

The Pandavas along with Draupadi began their eternal journey stated by George C.M. Birdwood as, "First walked Yudhishtira, then Bhima, then Arjuna, then Nakula, then Sahadeva, then Draupadi, and last their dog" (21). As soon as they stepped the foothills of Himalayas, Draupadi stumbled and fell down. It was Yudhishtira alone who reaches the heaven abode. About which George C.M. Birdwood points:

Their sins and moral defects prevented them, First by the wayside fell and perished Draupadi, "too great was her love for Arjuna"; next Sahadeva, "he esteemed none equal to himself"; then Nakula, "he esteemed none equal in beauty to himself"; then Arjuna, "for he boasted, 'In one day could I destroy all my enemies, and fulfilled it not'; then Bhima, "because when his foe fell, he cursed him". (22)

In the heaven Yudhishtira witnesses Kauravas for they fought the battle fairly and he reunites with his brothers and wife. Thus, the fratricidal fight between Pandavas and Kauravas came to an end. George C.M. Birdwood recalls the belief of Hindus':

It is called Mahabharata because once upon a time the gods placed the Mahabharata on one scale, and the Vedas on the other, and because the Mahabharata weighted heavier, it was called by that name, which signifies the greater weight. (23)

The heroine is addressed as Yajnaseni in the novel which is titled after the name of the heroine since she was born out of sacrificial fire. The novel *Yajnaseni* addresses the agonies and anguish of Draupadi through her voice which accelerates the pity and fear. Draupadi is exposed to both the conventionality and modernity that exist within her.

Yajnaseni was originally written in Oriya which was later translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharya. The novel, *Yajnaseni* just like any other epic begins in the middle, where Draupadi slips and none of her companion strained to rescue her. Draupadi's heart gets devastated and so she embarked to ponder upon the pains she endured to preserve dharma. In the ending of the novel *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi understood that she was a victim of abuse, scorn, curse and mockery. The narration begins where Draupadi announces herself as the unasked child of King Drupad.

The infamous Draupadi whom the bards sang as meek and gentle broke her silence and made the elders tremble with her interrogations. When Yudhishtira lost Yajnaseni in gambling she was forlorn and none of her five husbands came forward to defend her since they were adhering to dharma. According to the Pandavas, their dharma was to cohere to the words and deeds of Yudhishtira which gradually inflames Yajnaseni making her deliver a vengeful curse. Anju Jagpal in resistance to patriarchy boldly questions, "Had she chosen death, instead of revenge to reclaim her self-respect, who would have set the moral order right in favour of the poor woman?" (255).

History talks about the discredit imposed upon Duryodhan and Karna but neglected to present the distress of women such as Amba, Gandhari, Kunti and more. In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi is smitten by Krishna first but he dismisses her and articulates about the honour of Arjun, the third Pandava brother. Yajnaseni endured dejection but then she assembled herself for swayamvar. There Yajnaseni encounters Karna and falls for him but then her family wanted her to wed Arjun and so she has to subdue her sentiments once again.

Happily, Draupadi made progress with Arjun after he has right royally won her hands. To her dismay Kunti suggests a polyandrous marriage which blurred her future with Arjun. In *Yajnaseni*, the protagonist wonders if her life “would ultimately turn into such a farce” (91). Later Yajnaseni realizes that the wedding was entirely due to the intervention of divine and approves, “I became the subtle thread for keeping the five flowers together” (68).

The news of polyandrous marriage spread over and Draupadi was blamed and made fun of the rumours which stated that she had extra marital affair with Krishna. The role of Draupadi’s husband changed to each Pandavas annually meanwhile Krishna remained to be the sole companion of Draupadi till the end. Draupadi perceives that it was the fault of Arjun who failed to assert Draupadi to be his wife alone but he failed. Just like all the five Pandava brothers failed her when Draupadi was dragged to the court of Kauravas and they shamed her dignity.

History branded Draupadi as the primeval cause of the war which led to great destruction in the archaic era. History failed to trace the underlying cause behind the destruction which is the annihilation of the evil. Krishna saved the chastity of Draupadi by providing fabric and in the end when she falls in the foothills before entering the heaven it was Krishna who endows salvation.

Draupadi renounces her ego, doubts, grudges, fears and attains salvation by accepting the reality. In the climax of the novel *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi before salvation prays, “no woman will ever have several husbands at a time” and “let no other woman in the world ever have to go through this. Make women beautiful, but do not make men so lustful” (396). The prayer of Draupadi intensifies the struggle and suffering underwent and the self-realisation she attained in the end.

During the Post-Independence period the occurrence of New Woman were traced in the writings of novelists like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and so on. These writers have done their best in depicting their lead female characters not as a blind follower of tradition instead makes them question their surroundings as well as the purpose of their existence.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is best known for her revisionist approach in epic rewriting. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) according to V. Vishnu Vandana Devi and N. Usha is an “innovative imitation of the original epic from the psyche of Panchaali, the stubborn and independent princess” (93). The tale is entirely the voice of one woman, Draupadi which was silenced in the male centred epic. Beena Agarwal comments, Chitra richly grabbed the opportunity in “reconstructing the voices and identities of the mythical characters like Panchaali but the narrative structure follows the track of postmodern canons of narrative with open ending possibilities of the narrative mission” (104).

Resurrection of the misunderstood and mistaken heroine was the focal point of Divakaruni. Images of Sita and Savitri is always held high in esteem for their service to their

husbands but women like Draupadi and Amba are judged and mocked by the androcentric society. Divakaruni was left unsatisfied with the picturization of female characters in both the epics since childhood. In the authorial note of *The Palace of Illusions* Divakaruni admits:

But always, listening to the stories of the Mahabharata as a young girl in the lantern-lit evenings at my grandfather’s village home, or later, poring over the thousand-page leather-bound volume in my parents’ home in Kolkata, I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women. It wasn’t as though the epic didn’t have powerful, complex women characters that affected the action in major ways. For instance, there was the widowed Kunti, mother of the Pandavas, who dedicates her life to making sure her sons became kings. There was Gandhari, wife of the sightless Kaurava king, who chooses to blindfold herself at marriage, thus relinquishing her power as queen and mother. And most of all, there was Panchaali (also known as Draupadi), King Drupad’s beautiful daughter, who has the unique distinction of being married to five men at the same time – the five Pandava brothers, the greatest heroes of their time. Panchaali who, some might argue, by her headstrong actions helps to bring out the destruction of the Third Age of Man. But in some way, they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. (PI xiv)

If proper space was allotted to women then their words and lives would have inspired many and remained timeless. Unfortunately, only male characters were given ample space to live and last their legacy.

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* opens with the Draupadi being obsessive to hear about her tale of birth. Draupadi was much interested to listen to the tale of the archetypal caretaker.

Draupadi would be the reason to change the history and, in such case, she could have come with a celestial or a victorious name. Even Draupadi’s days and nights were filled with the thoughts of being courageous, bold and never to fear so as to fulfil the prophecy. The name given by King Drupad visible the less importance given to a woman although prophesised as the one who changes the course of history.

The restricted space a woman was given in the society is evident when Draupadi scowls for her complexion. The dark complexion brings shame and inferiority in Draupadi just like the native people had towards their colonizers. It is expected that women should have “milk - and - almond hues” (PI 8) but being dark-skinned was thought to be unfortunate. The sorrow is doubled if it is a girl since the question about marriage arises. Draupadi spent most of the

session in preparing skin-whitening ingredients but it was all in vain. The feminine conscious of colour complexion was cured by Krishna's words, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself" (PI 9). After learning the grace in walking and inner beauty which matters the most Draupadi is transformed into "celebrated beauty" (PI 10). Divakaruni skilfully mingles past and the present especially in the sequence of storytelling.

Draupadi secretly learned the lessons when her brother received education from the learned men. Dhri, her brother found it difficult to answer the questions posed by the tutor and so Draupadi used to help him. Krishna who observed this spoke to King Drupad to tutor Draupadi too. Drupad denied, "A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal!" (PI 23). Upon Krishna's insistence King Drupad agreed to allow Draupadi to receive fair treatment. Draupadi was reluctant in her path despite facing social gender adversities. The learned men displayed the conventional belief of not tutoring women since "women were the root of all the world's problems" (PI 24). A screen like partition was placed in order to prevent Draupadi facing the learned men. The tutor was growing irate towards the playful tactics and childish display of acts presented by Draupadi. Although Draupadi was well versed in the mantras and lessons taught she was never appreciated by her guru.

Being a woman with vision Draupadi felt nobody in the palace bothered to prepare her for changing the course of history. As it is clear that the concept of New Woman heralded after the advent of education as it cures ignorance and strength to rebel against androgynous society.

In the novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, she grants Draupadi her own palace which is associated with her own identity. In the boundaries of King Drupad there was only androcentric view of the world which silenced Draupadi. The uncomfortable palace offers Draupadi to access her mind which resonates louder to rebel against the hegemony in the society.

Sooner or later Draupadi's education ceased due to her subtle rebellious nature. Instead of scholarly men, ladies started swarming the palace to teach her about the sixty-four arts women were expected to learn. Mostly it comprises of singing, dancing, drawing, music which was tiresome and painful. Draupadi remarks "I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities" (PI 29).

Since women are not expected to display beyond the code of conduct for feminine behaviour and Draupadi's restless spirit of inquiry made Draupadi's parents arrange a swayamvar. Draupadi was both excited and nervous about the news. For the first time the princess of Panchaal felt that her father has given the freedom of choice. It was heart wrenching when Krishna and her brother revealed that it was a marriage based on politics. Realising that Draupadi was just a pawn for her own father to fulfil his revenge pained

her even more. This depicts the commodification of woman where woman is used as an object to obtain one's ambition.

Draupadi laid her eyes on Karna but Krishna made sure that her focus should be on Arjun. Divakaruni felt that the whole idea of swayamvar and the liberty to choose suitable groom is a farce so she makes Draupadi question, "Why even call it a *swayamvar*, then?" (PI 56). Unlike the Draupadi in classical age, the modern Draupadi is never a silent observer instead she poses questions to make the patriarchal symbols guilty. On the day of swayamvar, Draupadi received a news that the Pandavas were killed in a fire accident. Draupadi could sense her life dangling in front of her just like the fish caught in a hook. Seeing Karna trying to partake increased her hopes that her dignity would be protected.

Draupadi fell for Karna once again when she witnessed him in the hall where the task was conducted. Unfortunately, Draupadi's brother Dhri and Krishna insulted and provoked Karna to withdraw from the competition. Karna was equally skilled in archery parallel to Arjun and both of them were trained by the legendary warrior, Dronachariya. Participation in the contest during Arjun's absence would prove Karna to be victorious. Krishna calculated the move in advance and asked Dhri to stop the advances of Karna.

The relationship between Kunti and Draupadi is a typical mother and daughter-in-law stance. Kunti thrusts her idea of marriage and places Draupadi in a complicated position. In the initial days, Draupadi was made to sleep in a nibbled mat nearby the legs of Pandavas. Also tests the cooking abilities of Draupadi which is put to an end when Kunti's sons praises Draupadi's culinary skills. Draupadi won the hearts of her five husbands but winning Kunti was beyond expectations since Kunti was dangerous.

When Karna was insulted by Draupadi in the swayamvar, Divakaruni described, "And when time came for him to repay the haughty princess of Panchaal, he did so a hundredfold" (PI 95). Karna suggested to take the clothes of Draupadi too when the Pandava brothers were stripped. Instead of invoking human aid Draupadi searched for assistance from the divine. It was Krishna who saved her dignity by voicing "*No one can shame you, he said, if you don't allow it*" (PI 193).

The wrath of Draupadi resembles to that of Kannaki, a character in the Tamil literature titled *Silappadikaram*. Kannaki is best known for her love towards her husband, despite him having a concubine. Likewise, the love of Draupadi towards her five husbands knew no bounds. The curse of Kannaki destroyed the Madurai Empire in which the ashes were only left. The bards and poets sang praises of Kannaki for her wrath, chastity and rebellious nature. Since no other bard decided to sing no more than the disrobing scene of Draupadi, Divakaruni took in charge to portray what the people of the past has failed.

Arjun and Bheem took their oath of revenge following Draupadi. Since Draupadi gave a dreadful curse which later led to loss of lives and bloodshed, she is addressed as the perpetrator of war. Draupadi being a typical Indian woman believed that her husband's loved her but she realised that

they obeyed dharma more. The love of husbands of Draupadi proved to be a mere illusion just like the palace she owned. The Pandavas and Draupadi left their palace, family and children to live in the forest for twelve years. Draupadi grew more and more remorse since she has left all her belongings somewhere. Draupadi scolded and insulted Yudhisthir not to forget the insult smeared upon her since he was known for forgiveness and philosophical notions.

The last memory of Draupadi in regards to the earthly life was when Bheem questions about the flaws of Draupadi to which Yudhisthir says that she valued Arjun more. Draupadi understood that Yudhisthir had lied in order to save her. Yudhisthir did know that Draupadi longed for Karna since he was a keen observer. And each Pandavas fell for their flaw, "Sahadev's pride for learning, Nakul's is vanity for his good looks, Arjun's is his warrior's ego, and yours is your inability to control yourself when you are angry" (PI 349).

Draupadi recollects the honour and glory she gained in the temporary life but the love she longed for from a little girl was never acknowledged. Shifting her thoughts to Krishna, Draupadi wonders whether she was dying but Krishna mischievously addresses it as waking and not dying. Krishna commences in *Yajnaseni* that, "life does not end in death: it begins there; it puts on a new dress" (398).

Draupadi understands that death is the liberation and the knot between life and death breaks the ties of Draupadi with earth. Draupadi was no more the wife of Pandavas or mother of her children. Realising the truth Draupadi held her hand out for Karna who grasps her hand solidly. There waits a palace for Karna and Draupadi which both of them accepted happily. Thus, the literary technique of bildungsroman has been put to effective use.

Draupadi who has suffered more than anyone in the history deserves a happy ending. Since all the Pandava husbands preferred one thing or the other it was Karna who loved Draupadi the most and she loved him selflessly. Divakaruni feels that Draupadi deserves Karna for everything she has suffered. The *Mahabharata* perceives woman as pawns in their male dominated world and use them to obtain political and personal pleasures. Draupadi's birth was unasked for and her marriage was considered by her father for political reasons. Husbands of Draupadi gambled her in the dicing game like they do with the palace, jewels and any other obsession. Manipulated by all means there was least chance to choose and live her life since from birth to death counselling was given that she serves as an instrument for the Supreme power. Draupadi possess the traits of new woman in the initial stages by displaying feeble protests which eventually became a larger force.

2. Conclusion

As a New Woman Draupadi not just challenges the tradition but takes efforts to breathe a new life to it. Overcoming the norms of the past and present including the personal turmoil and dilemmas, she emerges as a matured character with a clear vision in her life. The character refinement of Draupadi also serves a good purpose to prove that self-analysis and self-growth is the step towards change.

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