

**REDEFINING EPIC NARRATION OF GENDER POLITICS: A STUDY OF CHITRA
BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS AND MAHASWETA DEVI'S
"DRAUPADI"**

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Abstract

Irrespective of its western over statements Feminism is a key factor in dispelling patriarchal bias much prevalent in a country like India. Major contributions have been rendered by feminist writers to redefine such a bias in Indian Epics. Epic portrayal of Woman characters is either weak or side-lined, and if at all powerful they are portrayed through the patriarchal mind set. The present paper aims to present, how writers Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Mahasweta Devi deal with the most dauntless heroine, Draupadi of The Mahabharat. They redefine female identity and gender politics in their own unique way. The texts for discussion are The Palace of Illusions (an abbreviation POI is used) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and "Draupadi" from the "Breast Stories" by Mahasweta Devi.

The Name "Draupadi" In Hindu mythology resonates with myriads of characteristics. "Krishnaa" as she is known to be, is remembered for events good and bad in the epic. Being the major cause for the outbreak of Kurukshetra war, her assertive nature is often subject to criticism. Feminist writers often grapple with the predicament of Sita of Ramayana and Draupadi of the Mahabharat. Sita is the ideal, the Godly while Draupadi is more human. But more than Sita, the character of Draupadi invites more fascination for the "rebel" in her. The present paper attempts to trace out the unique voice of two writers Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Mahasweta Devi, who have grappled with the character of Draupadi in order to redefine female identity and gender politics in the epic narration of the Mahabharat. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions is a racy, romantic tale, it is Mahabharat narrated through Draupadi's voice. While Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" is a radical, unsentimental, story of a marginalized tribal women in a political context.

Chitra Banerjee's very title is suggestive of the "individuality" she bestows on Draupadi the novel is named as The Place of Illusions and not as Indra prastha. Banerjee dwelves deep in to the psychological labrynth of Draupadi's mind pacing through different stages of her life. What is unique about. The Palace of Illusions, is the narration of the epic Mahabharat through Draupadi. The author's intention in her own words is this.

"If I ever wrote a book, I remember thinking, I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men exploits. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique

female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? (xv)

Chitra Banerjee presents Draupaid as no ordinary women, she is everything for “the makings of a heroine - Courage perseverance, an unbending will” (POI,5). Being a woman of unique individuality, she is highly introspective and critical too. Banerjee’s minute portrayal of events, shows how Draupadi’s life is tossed between male interests and exploits. Her name, her education and finally her marriage at the swayamvar happens that way. She even grows resentful at the kind of name her father gave her, ‘Draupadi’ meaning ‘daughter of Draupad’ unlike her brother’s name which means destroyer of enemies’. Draupaid; remarks “but could n’t my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? (POI.5)

Finally there was the enigmatic Krishna to save her out of critical situations. It was upon his insistence on her prophecy and his recommendations that she gets her education. Draupad had exclaimed: “A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn/ such a thing had, never been heard in the royal family of Panchaal!” (POI, 5). But what was distinct about Draupadi is her attitude. She was very different from other women of her time. Matters of governance and power interested her more than the sixty-four arts a royal women was supposed to learn.

A big twist that Chitra Banerjee attempts in her narration is the unfolding of Draupaidi’s love for karna, who is her husband’s arch rival. There was something irresistible about karna, infact her love- hate emotions for him stems out of two reasons. Firstly Draupidi and karna are children of parental rejection. Secondly she had a deep sympathy for him on account of his birth, as an abandoned child. Draupadi’s marriage with the plandavas was yet another complication. Her only interest was Arjun and her relationship with the others were solely on the grounds of marriage. She confesses:

He was the only one of the pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with. If he had loved me back, I might have been able to plush aide my regrets about karna and find some semblance of happiness.

Karna was more like a ghost haunting her. Even the entire kurukshetra war for Draupadi centered around karna, and the war itself became meaningless after his death. Draupadi was unable to control herself after karna’s death. Her subconscious mind unfolded itself as follows:

But that part that was a girl at a Swayamvar facing a young man whose eyes grew dark with pain at her words, the part that didn’t owe loyalty to the pandavas yet, couldn’t hold back her tears. (POI 297).

The dice game in the Kaurava Palace triggered, sea of changes in Draupaid’s mind. Wherein she was dishonoured in the open court and saved by the super power of Krishna. For Karna she became the object of gratifying his vengeance and for her husband she was one of their valuable assets to be auctioned. Then on karna, the kauravas and the pandavas

aligned in one common concern of “gratifying the male ego”. To her they meant one and the same,

The Palace of Illusions was something very special to Draupadi. It was she who gave it a name and it was the only place that gave her the dignity she longed for, making her dreams, wishes and will come true. Bannerjee gives a final twist by adding what vyasa had not written. Banerjee makes it a place which finally unites Draupadi and Karna, enabling her dreams come true:

I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable - but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I’m truly Panchaali. I reach with my other hand for karna - how surprisingly solid his clasp! Above us our palace waits, the only one I’ve ever needed. (POI, 360).

If Chitra Banerjee deals with Draupadi as a romantic, historical queen, Mahesweta Devi strips Draupadi out of her historical context, clan and sophistication. Mahasweta’s “Draupadi” is an unsentimental, practical short story set in a political backdrop. Dopdi, is a tribal, peasant rebel, a naxal heroine in the story with scythe in her hand. Mahasweta deliberately dismantles Draupadi out of the patriarchal, epic structure to give her more freedom and power to act. Dulna and Dopdi are husband and wife, notorious and wanted by the captain Arjan Singh. Mahasweta describes: “both are suspected of attacking police stations, stealing guns, killing grain brokers, landlords, moneylenders, law officers and bureaucrats. A black-skinned couple ululated like police sirens before the episode (B.S.20) Mahasweta’s Dopdi is an extraordinary peasant rebel of unbending will.

Mahasweta picks up one episode from the epic Mahabharat and redefines gender role of Draupadi.

First she removes the mythical savior the patriarchal representative ‘krishna’ out of the episode. Second, she gives an extraordinary will to Draupadi, to raise beyond her physical torture and humiliation. Dopdi unlike Draupadi is subjected to acute torture physically and mentally.

“Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years, opening her eyes after a million light years. Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. (B.S,35).

Though Dopdi is tortured physically and mentally her will is undisturbed,” shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye”(BS,35).

What these feminist writers have attempted in these texts is to redefine gender politics, the relation between man and woman in this patriarchal society. They try to reconstruct and redefine patriarchal notions of female honour dignity and chastity, which serves as a constraint on the female identity. Their woman characters rise above these constraints and carve out a space of their own. They insist on how a woman can never be humiliated or dishonoured, unless she yields to it. What Bannerjee makes Draupadi say:

“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”. (POI, 193) or what Mahasweta makes Dopdi comment: “There is n’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me - come on, kounter me - ? (B.S, 37). Shows their will to redefine female identity and gender politics.

References

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