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Re-Historicizing Women from Myth: A Study of Chitra
Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions

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Abstract-

Helene Cixous said that, "Woman must write her self; must write about women and bring women to writing, women must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history by her own movement" (Cixous 254), and the mythical narratives which forms a large part of tradition and history is defined by the roles played by women in shaping the events and stories that continue to influence the contemporary culture and society. The two great epics of India – The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are now studied for the thematic complexities and nuances regarding gender politics, marginalization, motherhood, transexuality, marriage, which forms a large part of modern literary discourse. Contemporary writers especially women, while trying to reconstruct these narratives focuses on the changing perspectives, and adopts textual strategies that best suit their purpose of unveiling the silent voices and powerful presence of women in a world that is purportedly composed of emasculated ideologies and values, and breaks down certain cultural formations that are legitimized and predetermined in the original texts.

Introduction

The transition from the epic to the novelized version of the mythic narratives have gained prominence and continues to regenerate, which changes, subverts, and even dismantles the previous myths. Mircea Eliade says that rewriting and reinventing the stories and characters from any grand narratives, be it myths or history "tends to restore the initial instant, the plenitude of a present that contains no trace of history" (76). The genre of mythological fiction which have gained much traction in the contemporary literary world of India, especially women writing about women of a mythic past, a history previously unheard or undocumented in the scheme of 'grand narratives' occupy a unique socio-political space within the culture that is veering towards cosmopolitanism.

There is a renewed interest in the literary history of women, and the resurgence of feminism in recent times compels to rethink, rewrite, and retell literature through an emphasis on intersectionality, encouraging exploration into the relationship between race

and gender, caste and gender, gender and religion which acknowledges the importance of narratives centered around women that embraces the melange of issues in fiction, history, and the literary tradition as a whole. The literature of the epic age of India (circa 2000 to 700 BCE) requires restudy in light of the available historiography that has shaped culture and the gender dichotomy in relation to the position of women in the society, as well as in the larger narratives that continues to be read, re-read, and re-interpreted so as to determine the ideology, power, and patriarchal structures that dominate them. Iravati Karve in the preface to her scholarly work on Hindu mythology – *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (1969) says, “*The Mahabharata* does not show that there was any attitude of chivalry towards women.”

The term ‘rehistoricizing’ itself carries some ambiguity if tried to situate it in a mythological background, but in the context of the present study, it will be based upon the framework of how women in mythic literature and contemporary mytho-fictional narratives has shaped the values of gender, feminism, and of women throughout literary history and has influenced and changed the socio-cultural behaviours regarding sexuality, power, and womanhood in general. A refreshing aspect of this recent proliferation in re-examining these epics is that authors are aiming their literary scrutinization towards the minor women characters who remain overshadowed by their more renowned counterparts. The characters of Suparnakha, Mandodari, Urmila, Amba, Menaka, Ahalya, and even the iconic figures like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari are now being reimagined as women who carved a place in the mythical history populated by men. It is through the voices of these women that contemporary female authors give a new perspective to the layered complexity of the epic narrative, challenging the stereotypes and rigid cultural values which was earlier deemed as irrefutable truth throughout the progression of history. The primary objective of these rewritings/retellings in fictionalised form is to be heard as women within a female discourse rather than as subjects in the discourse of men, which takes the shape of “écriture feminine” in literature. Sandra Gilbert, in her introduction to *The Newly Born Woman*, discusses the new place for the new woman, “the new born woman, transcending the heresies of history and the history of hysteria, must fly/flee into a new heaven and a new earth of her own invention” (Gilbert 14).

The women writers like Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Saiswaroopa Iyer, deals with the mythic tales through an empowering feminist perspective disrupting the male-centric nature of the epic narratives, subverting the tropes of femme-fatale, the wife, the mother, and project emboldening perspectives regarding love, desire, sexuality, freedom of choice, which were either shadowed or frowned upon on the grounds of ethical, theological, or moral values and standards pertaining to the great culture and tradition of ancient India. Kavita Kane’s debut novel *Karna’s Wife: The Outcast Queen* (2014) tells the story of Karna’s life and his role in the war through his wife Uruvi, who is an entirely fictionalised character absent from the epic. Kane also explores the neglected characters from the *Ramayana* in works like *Sita’s Sister* (2014), *Lanka’s Princess* (2017) which narrates the story of Urmila and Suparnakha, one who remains as a devoted wife, and the other a promiscuous, lustful demoness in the epic. Kane remoulds the marginalized characters of these two women and shreds the misogyny and chauvinism that dictates the place and nature of women in the society and the world.

Saiswaroopa Iyer made her mark in the feminist mytho-fiction trend with her notable work *Abhaya* (2016) based on the myth of Krishna and Narakasura. Iyer reimagines the character of Satyabhama as a fearless princess and formidable warrior who defeats the tyrannical Bhauma alongside Krishna. Iyer blends myth, history, and theology seamlessly into a narrative that feels compellingly modern while treating the issues of religion, ideology, and power. In the novel, Abhaya says, “The constraints of tradition cannot limit those taking up the cause that seeks the welfare of the universe”, which is reflective of the battles fought by women in this country to this day, against the injustices, discrimination,

and violence perpetrated by the patriarchal society. Iyer doesn't shy away from depicting the harsh brutality from history against women in cases of honour-killing, forced conversion, rape, which continues to haunt the nation still. Abhaya herself is symbolic of all the women who rages and fights a long battle for justice, equality, and respect in a world that sees women as merely frail and fair.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's two prominent works on Hindu Mythology – *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) retells the two great epics of India through female perspectives of Draupadi and Sita respectively. Divakaruni doesn't restructure the story of the epics, rather she reinvents the two iconic women from myths and lends them a strong, confident voice that tells a deeply personal story against the giant backdrop of two great wars fought between men, where women are portrayed as pawns in the masculine gaze of power. The voice of both Draupadi and Sita are passionate and intense revealing the joys, sorrows, desire, love, of motherhood, of being a wife, facing loss and exile, and violation in the hands of men. The novels portray how women are expected and forced to accept the concept of tradition and culture without any questions, and, Divakaruni's interpretation bestows a humanistic touch to the epic, making it more realistic, more relatable, and more personal.

The works of the women authors who subverts and reconstructs the mythical narrative, thus, rejects the past/previous patriarchal structure completely in order to create new history for the women in myths as well as for themselves, thereby creating the "new woman" through the body of their texts. Writing hence is a sort of escape from the material reality to create a new reality – the author's own consciousness of her body, her own text, which creates the new space, a textual space that moves towards a revolution required for a world free of the expectations dictated by the society. Helen Cixous states that with the revision of narrative, an alternative history can be written, a woman's history of herself, in the opposing tradition by assessing her own feminine sexuality and identity. In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous states – "all you have to do to see the Medusa is look at her in the face and she isn't deadly. She is beautiful and she laughs." (p 130) "Ecriture feminine" in the form of contemporary mythofictional narratives is hence, oppositional to tradition and creates disruption in the linguistic and narrative paradigm, and it is through this dismantling of the male authorial hegemony they rehistoricize themselves by writing about themselves.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a retelling of the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi. This novel is highly relevant piece of literature when it comes to the field of gender studies and growing feminism. The novel explores all the important events from the birth of Draupadi, the great-war, her role in the turn of events, and to her death. Most exquisitely, Divakaruni has given us a beautiful and a poignant glimpse of Draupadi's secret love for Karna. It is an intense saga of psychological musings, introspection of a woman in a male dominated world of ancient Bharata.

Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history (*The Palace of Illusions* p 4-5).

Throughout the novel Divakaruni makes Draupadi brood over the inevitability of fate, and the dilemma between perception of others and her own self-image. The chief ambivalence is created by her desire for independence, and at the same time her attempts to please and conform. Her identity consciousness is strictly reflected when she observes her husbands for the first time after her marriage. She speaks to herself – "I was a woman. I had to use my powers differently." It is a clear recognition of inequality with regard to status and freedom. Here, Draupadi is a woman rather than a princess stuck with five husbands. Divakaruni moulds her as a character who leads the destiny of the Pandavas. She says –

I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardships in khandav. I'd helped them design this unique palace which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner (*The Palace of Illusions*, p 151).

This strong assertion of feminine quest for identity reciprocates their own worth and desire. Here, Draupadi narrates her own side of the story which we are ignorant of. Right from her birth, the prophecies, her forbidden yearnings, and agonising conflicts of the heart. She yearns to position herself as a subject who desires, not as the object of desire. Through different chapters, Divakaruni discloses Draupadi's contemplation on events happening in her life, and tries to point out the gender-indifferent social construct. As Draupadi's 'swayamvara' and the incident of the 'vastraharan' show, the patriarchal society was in complete control of women's lives. But, at the same time, Draupadi does not conform to established gender roles by quietly accepting everything as her fate, but fights for her dignity. Also, Draupadi, as a mother, is not given the same importance as Draupadi the wife. Here she is subverting the value accorded to a woman as a mother in patriarchal society. No texts mentions her as a motherly figure, rather as a fierce complicated woman who fights for her rights and dignity in a male dominated world.

In the first chapter 'Fire' there is a sarcasm on the social status of woman in comparison to man. It is along with her brother that she thrived at her father's palace, and being a girl was the reason for Drupadi's resentment that he was not able to love her like Dhristadyumna. In the novel we also find Krishna, who acts as Draupadi's friend and mentor, providing answers to the self-conscious questions of Draupadi. She was reluctant to believe and react in the way a girl ought to do, without any questioning. But, she being born out of fire possessed an uncanny mind which delighted in the discovery of things beyond herself. She is a rebel, who critiques every illogical rule and convention, and tries to establish herself with equal confidence like a man. Her constant nudging's to Dhai-ma to tell the story of her mysterious birth is in fact a search of her own identity.

In the novel, we also find Krishna who is portrayed as the same enigmatic saviour who saves Draupadi in the moments of utter distress. Another aspect which we get to view in the novel is about the issue of female education, which was restricted only to the homely arts. Draupadi is the one who wishes to learn equally with her brother and acquire all forms of knowledge which would help her in the preparation of her future endeavours. She envisions herself as a great queen gifted with love and wisdom towards her subjects.

Draupadi's quest for identity is given a new paradigm by Divakaruni in the swayamvara episode, addressing the suppressed female desires of all women under the patriarchal system, which gets lost and entangled in the cob-webs of manipulative politics. Draupadi's desire for Karna is also akin to this. She has no choice in her own marriage, but to abide by the code of family honour. She is mesmerised by the portrait of Karna. It was since seeing his picture that the image of love left a lasting impression on her heart for ever. She thought that unlike any other woman she could love Karna. In her heart, she never defied her secret desire, but did only for maintaining family honour and the greater cause of changing history. But, every details of Karna's story hooked to her flesh and soul like silent sufferings that prayed to wish a happier life for him. Draupadi says to herself – "Absurdly I wanted to be the reason of his smile" (p 69). Draupadi's secret desire for Karna unfolds the dominated voice of womanhood. It is important for us because, we get to hear the echoes of the feminine voice that is silenced and never given a proper answer in the name of honour-bound ethics and family conduct.

Divakaruni's attempt to portray a radical view of gender consciousness inherent in the mythical character of Draupadi, shapes the identity of woman in India and their feminine response to it. The title of the novel itself *The Palace of Illusions* mirror Draupadi's deepest being, and all her desires, and sense of identity which seems like a fleeting magic

dream to her. It conveys a great psychological depth, and reflects on the illusionary perceptions of the characters that they have about themselves – about romantic love, heroism, honour, loyalty, war and vengeance.

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. (*The Palace of Illusions*, p 228)

In the patriarchal social power structure, Divakaruni reappraises the position of a woman through Draupadi, which have been a constant issue of discrimination and dislocation. With the myth of the Mahabharata, Divakaruni blends the melange issues of feminism. *The Palace of Illusions* keenly dives into the humanistic desires and conscious accounts of Draupadi's traumatic life. Draupadi audaciously refutes the gender parochialism, and vehemently admits that she is not just a shadowy figure of mere myth or history. When she asks Krishna – 'Are you truly divine?' Krishna with a smile replies her – "Yes, I am. You are too, you know" (p 359). Then, at the end she says with a deeper insight-

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. (*The Palace of Illusions* p 360)

This statement of Draupadi embodies the entire value of universal womanhood that exist in all societies. She is the icon of empowerment, reverence and courage. It is above the petty rumblings of faults and demands. It is like an ever burning flame that will illumine the hopes of humanity, where everyone would cherish a place equal to that of being in heaven in the afterlife. Apart from a queen touched by misfortunes and the surging anger for vengeance, torn between love and apathy, pride and passion, Draupadi emerges as a woman, a woman she wanted to be, denouncing the futile earthly barriers of freedom and equality. Her faith, hopes, and dreams mingled with the *Palace of Illusions* were a far cry from the ultimate truth, which she realised at her end. She was renewed again, not from the fasting and penance of a ceremonial fire, but in a golden light of immortality that transcends all the notions of space, time and desire.

In the giant backdrop of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi resumes her stance as an independent woman and chronicles the incidents as they might have happened and as they have happened. Divakaruni envisages her heroine as an ideal character of flesh and blood, with the flaws and beauty, who receives her ultimate liberation and wisdom in the final journey of life. This novel is definitely a path-breaker, where we hear the reasoning voice of a woman that has been unheard in a millennia. It is a great tale that carries the utopian dreams and hopes of a woman in an age, in which we were mere spectators.

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