



Reverberation of the Cultural Scripts in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract: Diasporic writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni who is of Indian Origin from West Bengal, migrated to America. Though settled down in the foreign land, she couldn't forget her roots of native village she has spent life there. This native connection inspired her to become a writer. Divakaruni's visit to Kolkata as a place of her olden roots with her American husband fills her mind with new refreshing memories. *The Palace of Illusions* reflects of the social conditioning of a woman regarding her position and the cultural paradigms in which she is destined to recreate new identity challenging the patriarchal norms of *Dwapara Yuga*. Divakaruni talks of social setup and norms in which a woman to negotiate her space created through undergoing agency. This agency is propelled by the patriarchal norms from time to time and woman has to fit herself in that social cage. The literary discourse plays significant role in changing these assignments keeping in mind the demand of the time. Divakaruni, in her text, advocates that migration in any form for woman is significant which make her feel new experience as well as liberating her from tradition, culture and social scripts. Through this paper. I have tried to abolish the olden and traditional spaces of inherited social constructs and establishing the moulded forms in new ideological setup. Jasbir Jain in his work *Writing Women Across Cultures* fixes the condition of a woman who wants to be diasporic, wishes to renegotiate both the cultures simultaneously primarily because it is not possible to relate to the new reality without altering inherited constructs. You simply cannot relocate them as they are. (Jain, 141).

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Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* opens with the chapter *Fire* picturing about the situation of Panchali (Draupadi) historical and mythical character from Hindu's great historical epic *Mahabharata*. Panchali, the wife of five Pandava brothers becomes the prey to patriarchal system and inherited cultural system. Divakaruni, on her own basis, has honestly tried to give these silenced women characters their suitable place among all mythical characters. She has recreated their new identity from suffered and subjugated identity. Apart from Panchali, there are a number of women characters in the epic. All the characters are either silent or kept silenced for the supremacy of the patriarchal system. No one can challenge this patriarchy for the social progress and especially women are totally denied to raise their voice only they have to accept it interestingly or uninterestingly. All social duties are performed following the tradition which is considered to be coming from the ages. This is the assumption which is prevalent in the society. Women are denied from their rights and equal places and they are kept within the four walls. In this respect, Virginia Woolf's masterpiece *A Room of One's Own* focuses on giving them social, political, cultural rights so that they should not be considered as the property of men which they can purchase or sell when they needed. The Great epic *Mahabharata* has the relevance in the present scenario of social and cultural paradigm of the society. Of course, Divakaruni has left no stone unturned to bridge the vacuum of tradition and modernity in her novel recreating history in a new way of India.

The Palace of Illusions is a mythic text through which writer has given a humanistic touch to narrate the story from the female mouth. Divakaruni has put Panchali in the forefront of all the actions which were kept hidden between the men's exploits in *The Mahabharata*. As for the main story is based on the inappropriate partition dealing with the life of Kaurava and Pandavas familial story. From the very point, the story shows that both have complex relationship regarding their birth as well as becoming the king of Hastinapur. In Divakaruni's

Text, the story is told from the Draupadi's mouth and her resistance to avenge her insult in king's court. Divakaruni remembers her childhood how she was told the story by her grandfather and how these memories uprooted in her to give them new shape from the patriarchal setup. She has strong desire to study great Indian *Puranas* and *Mahakavya* which are the source of olden traditional rules, rituals and culture. These traditional scripts left a deep impression on her especially thinking about the female characters how they are kept away from the main domain. Discussing about her text, she recreates Draupadi as a new Panchali in patriarchal ideology to raise her voice against her disgrace and avenge her chastity from the Kuru dynasty. Thinking about the disrobing situation of Draupadi in the Kaurava court and felt helpless to all family members' watch in stupefied silence. Being dissatisfied from all, she prays to Lord Krishna who is able to salvage the last fragments of her dignity. Divakaruni, in her text, has analysed the patriarchal ideology where women are underestimated from men even today following the olden traditional rules and conventions of mythical eras culture. Women are always portrayed as the negative part only to fulfil males' desires and to progress their clan. All social restrictions and natural rules are imposed on females ignoring their suffering and pain. In most of the states, women have to keep fast praying for the long life of their husbands for they will receive honour and respect till their husbands are alive. In patriarchal society all the concept is related to female. Another example in South India is that a woman having long hair causes destruction to her husband and for the reason cut hair woman is appreciated even today as a bliss. All the precepts show that women have to surrender themselves in fulfilling the desires of males and sacrificing life for the sake of husbands. In Mahabharata, Draupadi is presented as submissive and devoted wife following social rules as *Dharma*. In Nicholas Suttan's Book *Religious Doctrine in the Mahabharata* it is written there as:

She devotedly serves her husbands and their other wives without pride, anger or desire. With affection and self restraint, she waits attentively on their wishes without any selfish thoughts. She works hard to manage the home never speaks harshly, never laughs loudly, never causes offence and is never idle. She never cooks food her husbands do not like, and she is dutiful in performing the offerings to the ancestors and in serving guests. Even though they are gently by nature she treats her husbands as if they were venomous snakes, always prone to anger the eternal *dharma* for a woman is to serve her husband in this way, for he is her god and she has no object in her life other than his service. (423)

Draupadi's name is considered as taboo in social discourse as well as not preferring to give this name to their daughters. The birth of such girl brings doom to the family destroying the whole kingdom. But, on the female perspectives, Divakaruni presents her Panchali full of power, zeal and sanctity uncaring herself to fight for her liberation, disgrace and respect. She is filled with self-esteem and honour as her birth. In the story, we see Panchali's defeat and lack of confidence in her character when she loses herself in the dice played by her husband. She becomes helpless to save her chastity from removing her sari by the opponent princes in the assembly of Hastinapur. But, here also she kept on fighting and screaming among her family members including her husbands. It was more than sexual harassment as representing the male supremacy in patriarchal society. Being dissatisfied from everyone sitting there, she, lastly prays to lord Krishna to protect her. We are also introduced other female characters in the story named as Kunti, Gandhari who remained silent over this incident present their condition as accepting and respecting the orders they are given. They don't have the power to ask great ones (present in the dice assembly) to release her from this stigma throughout her life. Draupadi's humiliation in the dice shows male supremacy over female in the society where there is no grip over male's actions.

Of course, such harassments are the examples of establishing male supremacy over females so that they do not attempt to challenge the social norms of patriarchy. A silent woman is praised by male in the society whether she must be undergoing so many physical and mental agonies. Before praying her friend lord Krishna, she attempts to her best with her miserable condition to release herself from the cruel and merciful hands of Dushasana who brings her dragging with her plait in the assembly. She screams and curses everyone sitting there about the evil doing. Not on the side of male, other females also remained silent from her disrobing. Draupadi's character is the strongest female characters in the epic Mahabharata than Kunti, Gandhari and others. Draupadi is born with multiple aims to fulfil her duties on the wish of God. Kunti and Gandhari who are present with single role with substantial manner in the story. Gandhari's life is an example of devoted wife who blindfolds her eyes in respect to her blind husband to show her love and devotion who becomes the mother of the Kaurava brothers. Kunti's single aim of her life was to support the Pandava brothers to become the king of Hastinapur after Pandu's abandon of the throne to his brother Dhritarashtra.

So, here, these historical and mythical precepts prove about women's worries regarding themselves instead of placing others wellbeing higher. As the *Palace of Illusions* is written with feministic perspectives or from the mouth of female to advocate her position and challenging old traditions and culture which consider women are weak and minion of men. Divakaruni has raised the issues behind the story the spirit of women

(keeping them silent in all the occasions) in the great epic *The Mahabharata*. Draupadi's pain was not able to marry Karna instead of Arjuna as she was all the time interrupted by Krishna who was having his motives hidden behind. She was told not to allow Karna to hit the target of fish's eye. She addressed Krishna in the story saying, "But Krishna was a chameleon." (11) That moment must be excessively conflictful for her and in the last spur of the moment she turned without knowing the reason. Before this marriage competition, there was a little meeting of Karna and Draupadi and they concluded as duties were more important than birth of people in highest dynasty. But he was disgraced in front of the kings and curses her for misbehave. What Draupadi did here was not her consent but a political agency through which she had to convince herself to adopt a different identity as lotted in her luck. She couldn't receive love of her choice and became a base for destruction through multiple upheavals of the political agency of patriarchy. She didn't know that after her marriage she would be divided among five Pandava brothers which she had to accept following the duties of dharma and elder ones. Her negation to reject Karna became a curse in her future life. But the choice of kshatriya clan made person more arrogant in society even today. These unsocial practices are still prevalent in society which make differences between the human beings. So, Draupadi did in the story and accepted the social fabric of her time.

The social discourse for positioning the women to their strand of life is politically the patriarchal script and cultural heritage of social norms and customs which females had to yoke on their soldiers with no complaints. Women are bearer of traditions and old customs through their different stages of life from childhood to old age. For this process, they are provided social support and an honourable place of their own so that these pathological tools contribute in the form of justification in their social life. The discussion between Dhristadyumna and Panchali shows this about Duryodhan, "So this was the notorious Kaurava prince, Arjun's cousin!" (69) In this artefact, Panchali's character can be assessed for bridging the gap of tradition and modernity at different stages. Panchali's character has been a great example in the present society how a woman's life is a social panorama of sufferings and pains which they could not go unaffected. Their parental residence offers them enough space and time to broom their personality while their husband's home are experiences of suffering loss and problems which they had not learnt at their paternal homes. This social system is guided by the patriarchal norms and old conventions which are very strict and unchangeable. One of the familiar contemporary feminists have articulated the views in this direction as regarding the social discourses and their existences. On the other hand, feminist activist and social thinker Simone de Beauvoir has expressed her feministic views defining the woman and her identity. She writes her views as:

Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female-this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature; on the contrary, he is proud if someone says of him, He is a male! The term 'female' is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex. (The Second Sex 35)

Panchali in *The Palace of Illusions* has been presented as a bold and strong. She asks questions about herself as "*Princess Panchali*. A name strong like the land, a name that knew how to endure." (42) Further in the story she remained shocked about the prophecies and asked herself, "Who would I marry? Would I ever be mistress of my own home? Would I find love? Were these the kind of desires hidden in my heart? How puerile they were, things my maids might have wanted! It was mortifying thought." (42-43) Pandu's attraction towards his second wife Madri, a beautiful lady became a curse by a Brahmin foretelling if he would touch a woman in desire, would perish soon. Pandu's first wife Kunti was a devoted lady towards him and was blessed by the sage Durvasa. If she chanted unique mantra invoking any divine being to provide her with son. Pandu left the palace and went to forest accompanied by Madri. Pandu death resulted as his intention towards Madri. The death of Pandu made the two women suffer throughout their life due to the social traditions. There was no fault in both of the women but they had undergone many agonies.

The approach I have taken to lionize that women are sufferer in all the parts of life and relationships either they have to surrender or sacrifice for the traditional systems of patriarchy. Panchali in not legged behind is this relation, also presented as a sufferer in spite of her loyalty and devoted wife to the Pandava brothers. Panchali's desire remained unfulfilled not to marry Karna for he was not of kshatriya clan. Draupadi's swayamvara was only the deeds of political agency of the patriarchal setup where she had left without selecting her own choice. The irony of the story, Divakaruni has dealt with was that women won't have freedom of choice, freedom of expression and freedom of rights which were easily available for men. The Mahabharata a great epic of the Hindu Scriptures is a sacred one, Divakaruni has taken a challenging task to relate the story to every human heart without any opposition and objection.

Draupadi's character is portrayed within the patriarchal walls of the palace where she is taught to sacrifice herself on male's permission. Divakaruni's women in *The Palace of Illusions* learn the experiences of love, loss and longing through bitter tastes of the world. Scriptures, myth and traditional customs give place to our cultural paradigms which are difficult to challenge. Divakaruni has noticed an emotional upheaval through the character of Panchali about discussing her friend Krishna. She says:

I was fascinated by Krishna because I couldn't decipher him. I fancied myself an astute observer of people and had already analyzed the other important people in my life My father was obsessed by pride and the dream of getting even He had absolute notions of right and wrong adhered to them rigidly (This made him a fair ruler but not a beloved one His weakness was that he cared too much about what people might say about the royal house of Panchaal. He was overly protective of me (but I forgave him that) His weakness was that he believed completely in his destiny and had resigned himself to fulfilling it. (11)

The question still arises in the minds of the readers how women can be viewed in the public places. If they have free space in the corrupt society, Panchali is culprit or she is a representative of the society. Can this system not be changed keeping in mind the freedom for them so that they can also breathe like other human beings. No doubt, Panchali has changed her identity but couldn't succeed in establishing her own horizon where she can be respected like males. All these social issues are the basic points to put question through the mythical text of Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. The society is, of course, bearer of these customs and culture through ages transferring from one generation to another.

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