

Feministic Recreation In Mythological Retelling: Draupadi In The Palace Of Illusions

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Abstract

Myth and mythmaking have been an ever-interesting topic for every epoch throughout history and hence scholars, critics and writers turn to myth; to define, discuss, revise and rewrite it. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a retelling with the mythological heroine Draupadi as the protagonist. The feministic overtones in her character come to the forefront in the retelling. The difference in treatment based on gender which is evident from Divakaruni's narrative substantiated the opinion of the feminist theorists on gender disparity. In the retelling Draupadi is a subaltern who refuses to succumb herself to patriarchal hegemony.

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I. Article

Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* is a modern woman, independent, stubborn, rebellious and even aggressive at times and is also tormented by the question of her existence as an individual. She is bold and assertive, questions, rebels and revolts against the culturally imposed gender restrictions from her young age, onwards. She is a woman who asserts her individuality, one who takes responsibility to her actions, and one who thinks that she has the power to change history.

Her fate was inextricably linked to the fate of her brother, Drishtadyumna, who was born out of the sacrificial fire to fulfil his father's revenge. She was also an offspring of that revenge, and she was accepted only for his sake. She desires herself to be different from other women of her times. She learns the lessons from behind the curtain while the Guru teaches only her brother, though she is more intelligent, sensible and diligent. Her mind rebelled against the norms of society which contributes to the systematic gender discrimination. The famous dictum of Simon de Beauvoir is relevant in the context, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that there is no pre-established female nature or essence" (*The Second Sex* 295).

The difference in treatment based on gender which is evident from Divakaruni's narrative substantiated the opinion of the feminist theorists on gender disparity. According to Kate Millett, "gender roles are created by patriarchy and the continuation of these rules is also sustained by this ideology" (*Sexual Politics* 26). She noted that patriarchy continually reduces women to a secondary position to justify men's superior position and this ideological oppression is maintained by various means by patriarchy as de Beauvoir remarks in *The Second Sex*. Kate Millett too, maintains that early in their lives boys are encouraged to be aggressive and active while girls are prepared to be wives and mothers. This early indoctrination of gender roles later continues and is reinforced in the educational and social system which is evident in the discriminatory treatment in providing education to the boy and the girl.

The pervasive effect of patriarchy makes this discrimination as something natural and normal. The boy has to be brought up in a systematic manner to associate him with everything masculine. He is the heir to the throne, and he has to be given a man's education. "Dhri was called away more and more to his princely duties and I was left behind" (*Palace of Illusions* 12). Gradually and systematically, she was moved away from the companionship she had with Dhri. As he is a son it is proper for him to be placed at the centre of a man's world; she being a daughter, a woman, moved to its periphery. He has given an education to acquire the 'male traits' and to make him conscious of his masculinity and to live up to the dictates of his gender.

Even their tutor was particular about the fact that since one of his pupils is a girl, she has to behave accordingly. Her promptings to her brother from behind the curtain where she was seated for her studies angered the tutor. He disapproved her 'unfeminine' behavior. The fact that she is more receptive, quicker and more eager to respond disturbed and irritated the man. A girl has her limitations, and she has to follow the rules. He talks to the princess through her brother. Even after the girl's apologies for her 'improper' behavior, the tutor was not appeased with her. When Dhri intervened for her sake it was all the more insulting and humiliating to her. "As you know, being a girl, she is cursed with a short memory. Additionally, she is of an impulsive nature; a failing in many females" (24). These misogynistic statements and disparaging comments are part of the methods of the

patriarchal authority to restrain the women who transgress her limits, and her experiences created revulsion in her to the system from her younger years onwards.

In Vivien Gornick's view, "the conviction that men by nature take their brains seriously, and women by nature do not, is based not on an inborn reality but on a cultural belief that has served our deepest insecurities" (Nov 9, 2008, Los Angeles Times). An androcentric world always fails to recognize the worth of a woman and ignores her individuality. Even Dhri was not able to understand and to accept his sister's individuality. "Boys are different from girls", he said with stolid patience, "When will you accept that?" (*Palace of Illusions* 25). His education made him more gender conscious and he emerged more and more masculine and became more conscious of her femininity. She couldn't accept unquestioningly the words of the tutor that a Kshatriya woman's purpose in life is to pray for the heroic death of the men in her life in the battlefield.

Her father tried to establish the companionship of his courtier's daughters with her in the hope that they can transform the strange and abnormal interests of his daughter. But his attempts to inject feminine interests in her did not create any impact on Draupadi. She believed that a woman's empowerment is through other means, though she had no access to all such means. She astutely and diligently read books and studied them wholeheartedly as she wants to be different from other women who have more feminine interests. Prasanth Chakraborty in the "Shades of Violence in the Palace of Illusions" observes, "the more Paanchali was given lessons on womanly conduct, the more rebellious she became, her disagreement with her trainers widened though not always expressive" (305).

Culturally, Paanchali was unlike other royal ladies and historically far ahead of her time- so much so that she was misunderstood by the womenfolk of her time while men were worried as she was no longer subservient to her men before and after marriage (304)

In a male hegemonic world, the heroine of *The Palace of Illusions* made her voice heard. She had her own opinions, ideas and concepts in the construction of the greatest palace of their times. She was the mistress of that palace and she made sure that her own dominating mother-in-law should not have any authority there. Her actions can be considered as the rebellions of an emancipated woman who wanted to break the fetters that chained her down. The life of this female protagonist is an instance of the helpless and miserable predicament in which a woman is placed by a phallogocentric society .

Draupadi as portrayed by Divakaruni is a liberal minded free-thinking woman not quite ready to be weighed down by the social norms which objectify women and thus ensure their inferior position. The issue of the discussion of her marriage with all the five Pandava brothers was a moment of revelation to her. Her father opposed it, based on the fact that it is a matter that questions his honour. The fiercely rebellious and independent Draupadi feels disillusioned. She was annoyed and disturbed as the decisions were based on the concerns of others, their benefits and harm. She feels that her right as an individual is denied and found herself objectified in these discussions. Her life is discussed as if it is the sale of a commodity and she has no say in it. Her self-assertive spirit, with its strong individuality, craved for its rights as a human being. To her utter dismay, she realizes that in the hegemonic institutionalized patriarchy, woman is just a tool used to serve certain higher purposes. She is just a political pawn.

The events at the court of Hastinapur on the day of the dice is an attempt to teach a woman, who dared to cross the limits, where her proper place is. It is also an attempt to make her understand her worth in a patriarchal power structure. Such incidents are an open statement of the subaltern predicament and the ruthlessness of the system. Her rebellious mind did not provide Draupadi with her heart's contentment. She was not able to lead a satisfied family life with Arjun as her only husband. The offended Arjun found in Subhadra a woman solely his own. The patriarchal power structure which granted him the freedom to do so was biased towards Draupadi by denying her the same right. She could not turn to Karna for her heart's contentment solely because she is a woman and though in her thoughts, she is a rebel, she was not powerful enough to break the shackles of the society to be rebellious in her actions.

Heidi Hartmann defines patriarchy as a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them in turn to dominate women. Patriarchy is not simply hierarchical but hierarchy in which particular people fill particular places (*Women, Work and Wages* 103)

Draupadi has the resilience and power that is seen as a threat to men. Draupadi's experiences in *The Palace of Illusions* highlight abuse of women, particularly within the family. Silence disempowers women and because men know that most women would suffer in silence they continue with their tyrannical deeds. However, Draupadi stood her ground and voiced her disgruntlement whenever she felt wronged. That was very brave and impressive of her considering the time, place and the community she lived in. In the midst of the humiliation, torture, suffering and abuse, Draupadi found strength in herself to fight the injustices meted on to her by cruel, insensitive males in a male-dominated androcentric society. It is the resilience and valour displayed by Draupadi that transforms her into a paragon of gender and resistance. The discrimination, humiliation, objectification and marginalization she experienced as a woman shattered her notions on gender justice and faith in humanity.

To the patriarchal culture a woman's feelings are insignificant and not to be taken seriously. There is revulsion on the part of women to this imposed subalternism. Their final responses are their vengeance to the society which values patriarchal norms and cares too little about women and her sensibilities. Draupadi was a woman who longs to establish her mark in a man's world with her sheer intelligence and knowledge which will be accepted if it is in a man. The reinterpretation narrates how the systematic nurturing of the gender discrimination transformed her into a bloodthirsty, war mongering, and vengeful woman in mythology. It was the patriarchal society which moulded such a woman who during her adolescent days wished to be known as Draupadi, the peacemaker. She was one who believes in the equality, justice, equal opportunity and fairness in society which sadly remains as her unfulfilled longings. The revisioning of the mythology clearly states how the enforcement of the patriarchal norms constrained the feministic aspirations of a sensible, sensitive and intelligent girl. The rejection of the society coupled with the authoritative decisions of the patriarchy choked the sensibilities of a girl who has feministic spirit.

The life of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* is replete with the binaries-she is the cause of the sustenance of life and also the cause of its destruction. The woman, who brings to the earth a new life, nourishes and sustains it, finally becomes the main cause of its destruction. The woman who was born to change the history, having great pride in it and thwarted her heart's love for the sake of this pride, felt disillusioned towards the end of her life. She realized that life has transformed her from a liberal minded, intelligent, noble individual who firmly guarded gender equality in a patriarchal society to a scheming, revengeful woman whose thirst for revenge brought about untold sufferings to millions. The fulfilment of her vengeance never brings her contentment; rather it troubles her more, by contributing to her dissatisfaction and sorrow. Though she was not able to satisfy her ambitions and her notions of gender justice, she was a relentless fighter for a woman's role in a man's society. Though the outcome of it was not pleasant to her she succeeded to imprint herself in a staunchly male dominated world.

The totality of the myths in which women are unmistakably secondary in importance can be considered as evidence of the patriarchal standards of their cultural background. Patriarchy is generally considered as a natural and timeless reality owing to its universality. The patriarchal ideology is also a historical creation and thus, it can be asserted that myths are ideological narratives in which specific gender roles are created. When Draupadi admits her faults, explains the reasons for it, loses everything after the battle though her husbands won it, feels terribly humiliated and hurt when her own subjects treated her as an evil omen, the formidable woman of the mythology becomes a more amiable person in the retelling. In the process she lost the aura attached to her character and emerged more feminine; and her struggles to treat her at par with men in many matters is her revolt to the oppression of the system which discriminates individuals based on their gender. Draupadi in the retelling is a subaltern who refuses to succumb herself to patriarchal hegemony, even though she is conscious that she will not emerge victorious in her fight against it.

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