

# The Palace of Illusions – A Feministic Purview

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## **Abstract**

*An eccentric abolishing of cultural and psychological repressions on women with unconscious potentiality to close the phallogocentric language is ecriture feminine. Production of literary genre by a woman writer explores the diversity with fluidity and rationality. Recreation of epics in the hands of Women writers incarnate the story from women's perspective and recreates the women characters to attain female consciousness in the patriarchal society. The Palace of illusions humanizes the character of Draupadi rather than feminizing and attributing feminine qualities. Draupadi's inner voice and secret desires reveal the liberal human and her spirit to be liberated for the cause. Even though there had been social injustice caused to Draupadi in Mahabharatha, the very effect of the affront reveals the determination of one-woman character among the five irresolute men. The story truly revolves around how Draupadi rises above the destiny designed for her and liberates her soul with an overwhelming rendering of support to the women community. Purpose of life relies highly on the existence of humanism amidst the existing difference in the name of caste, colour, class, creed and most significantly gender. The paper aims to discuss the psyche of Draupadi that transforms, liberates and survives as Paanchali and gives voice to the desired change of humanistic attitude to maximize the well-being of women.*

**Key Words:** *Ecriture Feminine, Feminism, Survival, Gender, and Humanism.*

## **I. Introduction**

Literature delineates human significance, inclusiveness and events of human life in the society. The characters are the mere manifestation of real life human beings. The observer of literature is kindled with a desire to dwell in the depicted society and critically comprehend oneself by understanding the characters. Action in accordance with the characters and appropriate narration reveal the socio-cultural themes. Perception and gender of the narration becomes significant as the story would unveil the spirit through the lens of society. The retelling of *Mahabharatha* in Draupadi's perspective in *The Palace of illusions* divulges the feminine thoughts and expression that relates to the existing predicament of the society. Any form of literature is capable of rendering resolution to the individual, societal and universal tribulations.

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Where do we seek answers to all questions that life arises? Can a work of art provide answers? If so, does art have absolute authority over life and is life subordinated to art? Or is art a mere reflection of life?

Mikhail Bakhtin (1990)

Bakhtin's emphasis on art as a medium of societal change essentially represents the act of turning society around through textual communication in literature. The rhetorical question provides answer by itself and kindles the minds of the readers to rethink the purpose of art and literature with an instinctive understanding of life. An elevated life of thought and expression is eventually the result of good literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni leaves an everlasting memory of Draupadi through her innate qualities as a woman. The perception of a woman is brought to life and enlightens the society about the desired change in the attitude of men and women in the contemporary world with the delineation of an epic story, *Mahabharata*.

Narrated by Draupadi, the legendary woman character, *The Palace of Illusions* influences women to be determined and develop the spirit to fight injustice. The novel starts and ends with Fire that reflect the energy and spirit of Draupadi throughout the novel. Meanwhile, the titles never failed to arouse the anticipation with its ambiguity as it unfolds in the course of the story. The story uncurls through the tales, dreams, fears, keenness and emotions let out by Draupadi. Initially the birth story of Draupadi which she listens from Dhari Ma reflects her unexpected and unwelcomed arrival along with Dhri, her brother. Yet she loved to hear the story and the story was her pass to enter into her past from the gripping clasp of her father's palace and present.

Through the long, lonely years of childhood, when my father's palace seemed to tighten grip around me until I couldn't breathe, I would go to my nurse and ask for a story. And though she knew many wondrous and edifying tales, the one I made her tell over and over was the story of my birth. I think I liked it so much because it made me feel special, and in those days there was little else in my life that did. (1)

The traces of inequality are reflected in the unexpected birth and difference even in naming accolade. Draupadi's remarks on naming her Draupadi, signifying the daughter of king "Draupad" whereas Dhristadyuma signifying destroyer of enemies, the purpose of his birth, "*But Daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn't been expecting me but couldn't my father have come up with something a little egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history?*" (5). The retort of gender on the arrival of the baby in the society is still in existence relating to Draupadi's contemplation. Her inner desire to be located in her own palace and to fulfill the purpose of her birth kindles the spirit of a woman not to conceal within the four walls instead march ahead to find and accomplish their dreams. The self-doubts and questions that arise in her mind reveals the existent society had defined fairness as an embodiment of beauty. But her self-doubts are clearly answered with her assured stand in being dark and beautiful stands a testimony to the contemporary women.

It is significant to understand author's willingness to reflect Draupadi of every contemporary woman through the epic character. Since her birth carried mysterious beginnings and tales, her transformation is well conceived but her voice to be liberated could be heard through out the novel. The four-caste system of the society revolving around the myth, "When the Supreme Being manifested Himself, the brahmin was born from his head, the

kshatriya from his arm, the Vaishya from his thigh and the sudra from his foot.” (22) reflects the predefined divisions and roles of men under the same. Despite being a princess, she was rejected by the tutor to listen to the lessons of Dhri and Dhairya referring her as “...too hard headed and argumentative, too man like in my speech” (23) reiterate the constraints of patriarchy. She redefines the role of woman in the context of her life inspiring contemporary women. She had been the catalyst of change in the story and leads others to be the victim of circumstances. The transformation of an ambitious Princess to the revengeful Queen happens naturally revealing her sweltering psyche displaying various emotions. At Draupad’s palace she was treated as royal woman and taught the 64 arts that a noble woman must know but her interests laid elsewhere as she describes “...I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry,... with each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me.” (29) She was pampered but her impatient heart desired for the manly woman. Shikandi’s character and her portrayal reveals the man of a woman that sought revenge and the remark, “remember that, little sister: wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you’ll wait forever.” (49)

Divakaruni reveals the ensnared affection of Draupadi towards Karna brought out only through the ecriiture writers. She empathizes with Karna who struggles for name, respect, identity, family and love. At hard and happy times Draupadi desires to be with Karna and often her psyche suffers the guilt of rejecting and insulting him as his parenthood was enigmatic in the swayamvar. Divakaruni has portrayed Draupadi’s interest in Karna but the caveats from Dhri evidently show that the choices given to women were mere illusion and they are actually exploited for state purposes. Rather, she had to go for the man who could help her family achieve vengeance against their enemies instead of letting her marry the one she loves and desires. When she endures the fate of being the wife of five Pandavas, her regret towards Arjun’s silence is expressed in comparison to Karna, “when inside me a voice whispered, Karna would never have let you down like this, I did not hush it.” (109). Initially Draupadi had to endure the pain of becoming the wife of five husbands and when she was given a virginity boon, her weary psyche reveals the woman’s identity and says,

Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands’ benefit than mine... If the sage had cared to inquire, I’d have requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother I’d be free of the memory of the previous one. And along with that I’d have requested that Arjun be my first husband. 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 push aside my regrets about Karna and find some semblance of happiness. (121)

She relies on Krishna and loves to have his complete attention in his company but her girlhood restlessness pops up when he visits the Pandavas and his attention is dissipated amidst her husbands, “if only I could have been a man... for better or worse I was a woman” (139) She had anticipated to be him, Dhri and a man many times. The freedom men enjoy ignites the yearning to be a man of a woman in the psyche of Draupadi. The fatal loss of Yudhishthir in the game of dice with Duryodhan had aroused the vengeance in the Queen when she was informed that she has been gambled away. Divakaruni describes her situation as “the worst shame a woman could imagine as about to befall me- I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings.”

(193). Consumed by anger and desire to regain her lost dignity, Panchaali propounded the fatal and dreadful curse of the battle, which proves to be a “Yuganta” and will destroy everybody. Paanchali’s illusions about her life, palace, dignity and mere existence sealed at the moment with pure vengeance. The men fail in their duty and she makes them pay with an act of revenge and she exclaims, “*emotions are always intertwined with power and pride.*” (195). This moment evokes the change of personality from Draupadi to the vengeful Paanchali. The voice of Draupadi carries courage to confess, “*I didn’t love him (Bheem), not in the way he longed to be loved. Looking back, I see that I didn’t love any of my husbands in that way.*”(213) She used love as a weapon to sharpen Bheem’s skill and she deliberately does that. The portrayal of the battle of Kurukshetra and its aftermath present perhaps Divakaruni’s most radical modification of the plot of the original epic. Ecriture feminine focuses on the female consciousness and when Divakaruni says,

But here’s something Vyasa didn’t put down in his Mahabharat: Leaving the fiels, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman. Before it soared in to the sky and disappeared...it wasn’t sorrow or rage, perhaps,..Karna’s spirit knew what I hadn’t ever been able to tell him. (298)

The intense relationship between Karna and Draupadi had been explicitly portrayed with these above words. The devastation of the war, which had made Hastinapur “largely a city of women” (322), triggers a further change of Panchaali. Divakaruni’s feminist agenda underlines this almost utopian vision of a new city rising from the ruins, now a haven of safety and respect, a place of equality for women: “*And even in the later years [...], Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment.*” (325) “*The air is full of men – but not men exactly, nor women, for their bodies are sleek and sexless and glowing. Their faces are unlined and calm, devoid of the various passions that distinguished them in life.*” (358) The Gods are presented as people without sex, beyond passions, and thus in a state of androgynous, peaceful balance. Finally, emotions are singled out as the element marking character and gender differences, beyond all other deceptive guises. Victorious end does not evoke happiness but emotions that transformed Draupadi and Vyasa’s remarks, “*-I’ve always known you to be stronger than your husbands*”(329) truly proves right at the end as she herself survives and accepts her identity. “I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I’m truly Panchali.” (360). Panchaali, in Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, journeys from being a woman repeatedly made the subject of narration by patriarchal narratives to becoming a woman insisting on treating women as humans. Thus proving the opening philosophical quote translated from Sumerian by N.K.Sandars, “Who is your sister? I am she. Who is your mother? I am she. Day dawns the same for you and me - Inna’s *Journey to Hell*”

## REFERENCES

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