

Divakaruni's Fire Borne Prodigious Princess Draupadi: A Woman of This Time

Dr Prachi Sathe, Asst. Professor
Medi Caps University Indore MP

Abstract

Literature reaches to sky heights only when subjects of life and nature are revised, revisioned and re-written with different perspectives. It not only gives a revival to literature but to human race too. Writing about myths and history of any nation has been ignited in this rejuvenated literary world. In Indian writing in English, many women writers have tried their hand in retelling the history and mythology with distinction. Through the novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells the epic Mahabharata with female perspective, which is a scholarly comprehensive picture of epic character Draupadi, who is always a topic of contemplation and comprehension for literary people.

Divakaruni's Draupadi represents a new woman portrayed with all feminine flaws. The readers enjoy the journey of her life and growth from childhood to final destination in Parva of Mahaprasthan; the path of great departure and witness her materialistic, intellectual and spiritual escalation. The great characters of this epic and their heroic acts are very close to the hearts of every Indian. Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata are the treasures of didactic anecdotes and ethical statutes. Reinterpretation of these chauvinistic myths from female angle is with the intention that many hidden unsung stories and episodes would be unveiled. Thus great mythological stories are read with nuances of context without hurting or damaging their original preaching and verve.

Key Words: Contemplation, didactic, prodigious, anecdotes, verve, escalation

For creative writings, Indian history and mythology is a gamut of unlimited mysterious and historical narratives and appealing themes to work upon. Divakaruni's *The Place Illusions* retells the Mahabharata through Draupadi's vision. Many Indian writers have tried their innovative imaginations to draw a different sketch of Draupadi. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni very artistically, aesthetically and skilfully demystified the story by deglamorising the male characters and making it suit the assertion of female of twenty first century. Her Draupadi is a very powerful and intelligent lady, at the same time she is cunning and diplomatic also. The purpose of retelling of myths of queen Draupadi, the prodigious fire borne lady is to revise the unique character of hers and to make young readers familiar to this mysterious but indisputable devotee of lord Krishna.

Many stories of Indian mythology have been revised and rewritten; such as Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad's *Yajnaseni* in Telgu, Pratibha Ray's *Story of Draupadi*, Mahashwetta Devi's *Draupadi(Dopadi)*, and Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister Urmila*, "The World of Urmi" with a complete novelty. Such efforts are actually

a voice to the unvoiced, an eye over the unseen sketches, and a reinterpretation of some skipped words between the lines. Stories of myth and history are always very fascinating and at the same time, judicious and thoughtful source of curiosity for both the writers and the readers. The sacrifices and the heroism of such celebrated characters of that time provoke the present readers too. And this disposition gives the new paradigm to the literature.

Without hurting the religious taboos and with no hampering the decorum of cultural ethics, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depicted the character with new voice and vision. Draupadi herself tells the story and reveals various phases of her life reflecting her multi dimensional personality. Being a female Divakaruni's Draupadi has been sketched with all regular feminine instincts such as hatred, hesitation, doubts, ambitions and their fulfilment, voracity, seductiveness, jealous, unrequited affection for Karna etc. But at the same time her devotion and trust upon her childhood friend Krishna and unshakeable faith on him gives a thump to her portrayal.

Draupadi, the fire borne princess is a lady of dark complexion and very sharp features; extraordinarily intelligent and a lady of versatile arts. Right from the birth everything of hers is different but charismatic. She is not an unobtrusive and reticent lady always but a lot more. Chitra states, “[Daupadi] is a fascinating character. For me, she is the epitome of a timeless woman. I spent quite a lot of time thinking about her; I tried to get in to her mind.” (The Banyan Trees: Interview) At many places Draupadi has been portrayed as an apple of discord when she behaves cunningly and hurt the male ego that inference into an atrocious historical war. Like the other common woman of this time, she has also been the victim of chauvinistic gush whether it was her marriage with five royal and powerful Pandavas which was for political benefits only or her departure of final journey.

From Veda Vyasa to twenty first century, even up till now an adequate explosion has been listed but it is still much difficult to judge and justify Draupadi. Chitra Banerjee also acknowledges that “...Ultimately spirituality is beyond gender”. (The Banyan Trees: Interview) All these characters of the Mahabharata have been approached differently especially the female protagonist Draupadi. The novel moves around a composite character of Draupadi. Even it would not be an exaggeration that Shrimad Bhagvadgeeta would have been told to Draupadi instead to Arjuna.

The author has tried to show that Draupadi and Karna had very strong feelings for each other, but they never express it to each other or to others. This interpretation has never been heard from anyone but shown in this novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *Palace of Illusions*. In the novel, Draupadi of this time reveals disobedience and waywardness sometimes before Kunti. Unlike Vyasa's Draupadi, she has differences with her mother-in-law. Divakaruni's Draupadi struggles between her desires for Karna and her duties towards her five husbands; Yudhishtira, Bhim, Arjun, Nakul and Sahdev. Author also adds another element in the story by giving multiple twists to the relation between Draupadi and Krishna and the

relation of Kunti and Draupadi. So Divakaruni's Draupadi is having Karna, Krishna and five husbands total seven men moving around and influencing her life.

In the introductory note, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes that she was unsatisfied by the portrayal of women in the Mahabharata. This foretells the agenda that she had in her mind. She further says that if she ever writes a book, she would place the women in the forefront of the action. Draupadi is a centre with all humanly virtues and vices and does not lead a sexualized existence. Divakaruni explores the hidden gaps of Draupadi's mind. In an interview on 14 February 2013 in Kochi, taken by S. Priyadarshani in *The Hindus* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni opines, "I want people to be sensitive about how women feel and think. Panchali (Draupadi) is an extremely intelligent woman but she has been kept in the background. I want my books to force readers to recognize the fact that a woman is human being just like them".

In *The Palace of Illusions* young Draupadi has been drawn as an ambitious girl who wants to be famous and desires to be beautiful. She has an adequate wakefulness of social and state affairs along with politics. Despite this, she registers her presence in fine arts and on domestic front too. In all sense she is a child prodigy. In Divakaruni's novel Krishna has been introduced as Draupadi's childhood friend. She is enormously mesmerized by the captivating traits of Krishna. Draupadi here carries some complex for being dark complexioned. But it was Krishna, who is even darker than Draupadi, raises her self confidence and motivates her to treat her complexion as lucky sign. He says, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself" (*Place of Illusion* 9). Not only for Draupadi, it is an apt suggestion for all the females who find themselves inferior.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is the lady of versatile arts and many skills. Her trainer named Sorceress teaches her how to seduce a man; an important job a woman should do to sustain her marriage. She has been taught how to cook delicious food, how to cure illness, mannerism to seduce husband, when to speak and when to remain silent and how to sleep comfortably on floor. In a way Draupadi has been skilled for different roles; role of a queen, role of a wife of five men as well as a difficult life of exile in the forest. She has been advised about the illusion called 'love' as she says, "Love comes like lightning and disappears the same way. If you are lucky, it strikes you right. If not, you will spend your life yearning for a man you can't have" (*PI* 63).

Though young Draupadi had very strong sentiment and attraction for Karna for his bravery and fame but she had to withdraw her emotions since he was not of royal family. After her marriage, she is in dilemma as her duty towards the Pandavas and infatuation with Karna pulls her mind in different directions. She says, "I confess; in spite of the vows I made each day to forget Karna, to be a better wife to the Pandavas. I longed to see him again. Each time I entered a room, I glanced up under my veil...I could not stop myself...hoping he was there" (*PI* 130).

Divakaruni's Draupadi accepts the virtues of Arjuna, the greatest archer like being courteous, noble, brave and handsome and convince herself that she would no longer waste time on regret. She should face to future. She expects Arjuna to stand up for her and claims that she is only committed to him. But she is very disappointed when all her five Pandu sons marry her and Arjuna does not say anything. Throughout the novel, she owes Krishna who plays the role of friend, philosopher and guide to Draupadi. The unfathomable depth of Krishna's personality mesmerizes Draupadi most as she admits, "I was fascinated by Krishna because I could not decipher him" (PI 11) The fascination of young girl for charming personality of Krishna is described in her own words,

... I adored the way he laughed ... I often forgot that he was much older than me. He had been friend of my father's....He was genuinely fond of my brother; but I had the impression that it was I whom he really came to see. He called me by a special name, the female form of his own; Krishna. It had two meanings; the dark one, or the one whose attraction can't be resisted. Even after he returned to Dwarka, the notes of his flute lingered in the walls of our cheerless quarters. (PI 12)

During the period of exile, Draupadi does not let the fire of revenge cool down. She keeps provoking Bhima now and then as she says, "...recognizing Bheem's weakness, I took advantage of it. I wept more loudly when he was around, knowing it would make him rail against Yudhishtira" (PI 213). Divakaruni's Draupadi kept provoking Pandavas, showing her rigidity and impulsive nature. The female protagonist Draupadi of the novel is repainted in feminist light. In a way it can be said that this heroine Draupadi is a 'mysterious woman' (Interview HT).

Being a woman of this time, the feministic anguish has been aired out by Divakaruni's Draupadi who shows her resentments and registers her woo against the chauvinistic society whenever her opinion is not even asked and directly been imposed. Nobody concerns to Draupadi's yearning. She is angry with men's world, where women's aspirations are not considered important. Krishna directed the whole drama of making such arrangement of her marriage and her married life with all brothers without losing her virginity at the cost of true love. She finds this marriage is the marriage of convenience.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is not at all delighted at the boon of getting her virginity back whenever she goes to a new husband. She rather prefers a boon of forgetting previous conjugal associations than the renewal of virginity. So that she would be free from guilt of being disloyal to other husbands. She believes that it has been designed more for her husband's benefit than her. Though Draupadi has been convinced that only she is having freedom that men had for centuries, i.e. having several wives, she is with five husbands. But in both the situation she realizes that her situation is different. She had no choice of selection with whom to sleep and when. Like a 'communal drinking cup' she would be passed on.

In this male dominating society, this is the irony that there are no admonishments for the husbands or men who are having many wives or having relation with a lady who is having many men. But if a lady rears

infatuation for someone it is considered as a blunder. That's why Draupadi's infatuation for Karna makes her feel guilty as she remember the words of the scriptures which says that if a wife desires a man who is not her husband, she is as unfaithful as a woman who sleeps with such a man. (PI 185)

When the Pandavas takes their wives, Divakaruni's Draupadi feels jealous. When Arjuna marries Krishna's sister Subhadra and Bheema weds Hidimba, Draupadi was really shaken. She felt betrayed by Krishna and accuses him of encouraging Subhadra to snatch Arjuna but she also admits that she never wished other four for her as their spouse. But she is aware of her special position that none of the other wives can take in their lives. As she herself says, "If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner. They would have pursued separate interest, deposited their loyalties with different women. But together we formed something precious and unique" (PI 152). Draupadi realizes that together they are capable of doing what none of them could do alone. Later she realizes the reason of Kunti's decision of marrying her to all five brothers.

Every now and then it has been portrayed that her wishes and existence are not above 'Dharmayuddha' and the ambitions of Kunti and Krishna. It must be the reason that she imagines about a place where men do not exist. She says that if *Swargloka*, *Brahmloka* really exist, a good woman would rather choose to go to the *Lokas*, where men were not allowed. So that finally they will be free from male impositions and demands. The stripping episode changes the relationship of Draupadi with her all husbands. She then realizes that political things in the lives of her husbands which they value more than her honor.

Since her heart is brimmed with feminine features, she aids her husbands all the way; stands their side through years of exile and a terrible civil war. But she frankly accepts her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna or her secret attraction to Karna who is pandava's most dangerous enemy. Her gift to view Great War of Kurukshetra as of Sanjay blessed with and her final journey to heaven in Parva of Mahaprasthan, the path of great departure makes her matchless amongst all heroines in Indian history and mythology.

Draupadi, the Kuru princess is undoubtedly a phenomenal personality who is an epitome of exceptional manifestation of spiritual soul in Vyasa's Mahabharata. Even so Chitra Banerjee's Draupadi is no less in any way to the Draupadi of Mahabharata. Divakaruni's Draupadi believes in rationale and behaves rational like someone of this time. On the one hand where she goes rebellious and breaks the silence by reproaching all the influential and powerful males of the age for their unfair decisions against her and using her as a second sex and a commodity for political benefits, on the other hand, as a responsible and sensible spouse she were with them in all atrocities till Parva of Prasthan. Since she was the contemporary of Godhead, Lord Krishna, how can she be so deprived of the 'Krishnabhavanamrut' (devotee of Godhead Krishna) and high spiritual quotient!

Indian religion and mythology are interlinked and go as a lifeline in Indian hearts and mind. No doubt that Indians pay a great reverence and honor to the idealistic character Draupadi of Mahabharata and owe to her. But the female protagonist Draupadi of the novel *The Palace of Illusions* is painted entirely

with new colours and shades. At the same time Chitra Banerjee took care not to impair the religious sentiments of any community and very skillfully draw the characteristics of realistic Draupadi. She is not an archetypal of Indian mythology as Sati, Savitri, Anusuya, Sita, and Ahilya were. Divakaruni stirs up the minds of readers of this age towards this realistic Draupadi and tries to win their favor to her. The princess of Kuruvansh Draupadi was no doubt a holy soul and depicted with adequate care and justice; Maharshi Ved Vyasa's Draupadi is idealistic and of deserving spiritual quotient and Divakaruni's Draupadi has been portrayed as a modish and realistic new woman with commendable intelligent quotient.

List of Work Cited:

- Divakaruni, Citra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusion*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. Print.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Interview by Renuka Narayan. *Hindustan Times*. New Delhi, April 13, 2008. Print.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Interview by Neila C. Seshachari. "Writing as Spiritual Experience: A Conversation with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni". *Weber Journal* (Vol.18.2), 2001. Print.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Interview in *The Hindustan Times*. January 31, 2011. Print.

