

Triple Alienation of Draupadi, Karna, Kunti and Sikhandi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's - *The Palace of Illusions*

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ABSTRACT: Diasporic dilemmas have been a part and parcel of life ever since the earth's formation. Alienation, one of the diasporic dilemmas faced by immigrants, can be well deciphered from the Great Indian Epic *Mahabharata*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has given a new dimension to it in *The Palace of Illusions* through Draupadi.

Key words: diaspora, dilemma, alienation, rejection, resentment, vengeance, fulfillment

“Literature is a powerful tool in the hands of creative writers to modulate and change the societal framework”.

Affirming this is, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, author of the Bestselling novels, *The Mistress of Spices*", *Queen of Dreams*, *Sister of My Heart*, the prize -winning story collections - *Arranged Marriage and The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. She undoubtedly has created a space for herself among the writers of the Indian Diaspora. Her novels exude the fragrance of diasporic dilemmas faced by women - Identity, Nostalgia, Alienation, Assimilation, Patriarchal dominance with a judicious blend of shedding stereotypes and transforming her women characters into the enlightened and emancipated woman.

The novelty of Chitra Banerjee's novels lies in the exquisite portrayal of her characters without compromising on Indian Culture, women characters are seen upholding the values of dignity and self-respect despite the ordeals of life. She also articulates and subtly expresses her thoughts on women and women issues thereby creating and spreading awareness in society. Thus, like Alice Walker, Chitra Banerjee can also be considered as a womanist of her times, as she highlights women and women issues.

The characters in her novels are authentic, as an outcome of her constant association with [Maitri](#) in the San Francisco area and [Daya](#) in Houston, organisations that work for the welfare of South Asian women afflicted by domestic violence. She teaches her characters to live a successful life and face challenges with grit and determination. Her writings are a revelation that boundaries, if not completely dissolved have

definitely been narrowed down. Projecting Draupadi as a devoted wife, doting on her five husbands acknowledges Chitra's desire to stay close to her roots.

The Palace of Illusions is a re-telling of the great classical Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, through the eyes of the woman protagonist, Draupadi. It depicts that women with courage and resilience can climb the pinnacle of success. The essence of her novels lies in creating such resilient and stimulating women characters breaking free from the shackles of Patriarchy, simultaneously instilling virtues, reinforcing the values of Indian culture and emerging victorious. Her skilful use of symbols, dreams and myths add exotic flavour to her novels.

This study is an attempt to explore the triple alienation experienced in the lives of Draupadi, Karna, Kunti and Sikhandi that changed their destiny. Alienation at birth, in life and death bind the quartet together. Every human being male or female is filled with the desire to belong and be loved. As mentioned in *The Palace of Illusions*, "Desire is a powerful magnet" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 176). It also depicts their reactions to circumstances that led to their alienation, candid debates with conscience and their ultimate transformation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has successfully portrayed a striking similarity in the threefold lives of the quartet.

Rejection forces Draupadi into becoming a rebel and initiating the greatest war of her times. As the story unfolds, it is evident that it is her continuous struggle with rejection that leads to alienation and lends itself in the form of rebellion; resentment and vengeance. Seeds of rejection are sown the very moment she steps out of the Yagna fire. Rejection leads her to seek solace in the frequent narration of the story of her birth by Dhairya Ma. This is the balm for her wounded ego. "The one I made her tell me over and over again was the story of my birth. I think I liked it so much because it made me special" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 1). These words also affirm her desire to be uniquely identified unlike the birth of the other women in her father's kingdom.

Draupadi reveals that King Drupad suffers a set back at the Yagna fire ceremony. He is astonished when Draupadi emerges from the flames with her twin brother. He hadn't expected her, as the name suggests, he named her ordinarily as Draupadi, "Daughter of Drupad" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 5) while Dhrishtadyumna meant, "Destroyer of enemies" (5). Her words echo her disappointment coupled with resentment. She says, "Couldn't my father have come up with (a name) something a little less egoistic?" (5) This marks the beginning of her rebellious journey.

Recalling the story of her birth Draupadi believes that her father, the king of Panchaal is so focused on pleasing his subjects and hence does not outrightly disapprove of her. King Drupad is left with no better option than to accept her, as his much awaited son clings on to his twin sister. "Deeply etched in her consciousness is her brother clinging to her, "We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 6). Rejection drives her into a world of alienation and she takes it on herself to constantly rebel against her father's wishes. Firstly, she drives her father into granting her permission to attend lessons along with her brother Dhrit. She unintentionally humiliates the tutor by

interrupting his lessons, smiling at him from behind the curtain, causing him to lose his nerves and drop his palm leaf manuscripts. She further extends the boundaries of rejection by feeding on her desire for the forbidden fruit, Karna, in spite of his unknown parentage. Even after marriage, she secretly admires him and desires his friendship and love which is fulfilled after her death, as heavenly beings.

King Drupad never loses an opportunity to affirm the rejection of his daughter. He arranges for her Swayamvar which once again accentuates the excessive importance he pays to his subjects and the fear of their disapproval. The polyandrous marriage of Draupadi is a thorn in his flesh. He is not concerned of the welfare of Draupadi but he fears the reaction of his people. He fears that they may reject him as king. He understands the concept of rejection but fails to see the cancerous growth of rejection spreading itself as a banyan tree in his daughter's heart. On the contrary, he remarks, "Draupadi would most likely have to take her own life, and then we'd have to hunt you down and kill you in revenge" (Divakaruni, 118). King Draupad proved himself a good king to his subjects but not a good father to his unwanted daughter.

Drowning in the sea of rejection, she reaches out to her twin brother, Dhri. She finds no solace in him either, as he also succumbs to social laws and customs of his time like his father, King Drupad. Speaking to his tutor, Dhri's manly feelings are exposed, "Most learned one, please forgive 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" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 24). Dhri, strives to bring Draupadi to her senses by saying, "Boys are different from girls, when will you accept that?" (25). One cannot but empathize with Draupadi. Her spirit of alienation deepens her restlessness and she continually strives to be "loved" and longed for. This is evident with her decision to meet the Queens, the wives of her father which unfortunately ends in failure. She is made to wait for a long time in the visitor's hall and they hardly entered into meaningful conversation with her. Rejected and dejected by their indifferent attitude to her, she resents them. Her sense of desperation is conjured up in the following words, "What use was all this dressing up when there was no one to admire me?" (36).

At the Swayamvar, Draupadi tries to console herself with her marriage to Arjun. Happiness is truly fleeting and she experiences this in every cell of her being. Even before she realizes that she is the wife of Arjun, she is faced with the stark reality that she is the treasure booty of all the five Pandava brothers. As days pass, each of the Pandava brothers does marry other Princesses. This deepens the wounds of rejection which further breeds resentment. This resentment is the cause of her harassment of the Princes' other wives. Time is the greatest healer but in Draupadi's case, the intensity of alienation only increases with each passing day. She finds herself rejected once again by her husbands' and feels alienated when she discovers that they have gambled her "like a bag of coins" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 190) for the sake of a game of dice. Surprisingly, they do not pawn their other wives, the question that arises then is, why Draupadi? This further asserts that Draupadi was common property. It is an indicator of her significance in the lives of the Pandava brothers. Despite her steadfast devotion to her husbands' and her stoic presence with them amidst trials and tribulations, she is awarded the prize of 'Silence' when she is disrobed at the royal court in Hastinapur. "Half of her died the day when everyone she loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her

being ashamed” (206). At this juncture, in her alienation she seeks vengeance which takes the form of the Great War.

Rejection is an appendage of Draupadi, her husband Yudhisthir is a silent spectator once again at Virat’s court. Draupadi flees from the evil advances of Keechak, Sudheshna’s brother and enters the court room of Virat seeking refuge. Keechak even pushes Draupadi to the floor and kicked her for having despised him. To this, all that Yudhisthir had to say was, “Return to the women’s quarters and stop weeping like an actress” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 230). Also, during the Great War, she finds herself longing for recognition and to be loved. She watches a camp follower gathering wild cactus at night, she beckons to her vying positive thoughts but feels ostracized as the woman flees with her hands raised, symbolizing Draupadi as the evil eye. Alienation and Draupadi are inseparable. She suffers the pangs of it once again after the Great War. In contrast to Kunti, who loses only one son, Karna, Draupadi loses her whole family - father, brothers - Dhri and Sikhandi, all her sons and her secret lover - Karna. Sadly, no one sympathises or empathises with her or shows genuine interest in her existence, even the Pandava Princes, are poor comforters to the lonely soul. She is a jelly fish tossed at sea and haunted by dreams and visions of the past.

Finally, in pursuit of spiritual liberation, Draupadi accompanies her husbands’ in their last journey of life; this is the unspoken revelation of her constant desire to belong, mirroring the vacuum that exists in her life. As they head to Mahaprasthan, the path of the great departure, Draupadi finds it difficult to keep pace with them as her feet are stuck in the snow. She tries to free herself but realizes that she has stepped away from the path and into the air below. As she begins her lonely and downward descent she notices that Bheem tries to rescue her but is stopped by Yudhisthir. Draupadi anxiously listened to the conversation between Bheem and Yudishthir. Bheem questions Yudhisthir, “Why did Draupadi fall? Why couldn't she walk any further? Was it because her woman's strength gave out?” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 347). To this, Yudishthir the man with a passion for righteousness, remarks, “It's because although she had many good qualities, she had one major fault. She married us all. But she loved one man more than everyone else” (347). “It was Arjun. She cared most for” (348). Yudishthir's answer to Bheem pierced her already fragmented heart and soul. Draupadi, a truly enigmatic character and epitome of the emancipated woman, no longer swells up with rejection, resentment or vengeance. Her final words exemplify it, which are words of wisdom, “When I'd had the chance to appreciate them, I'd spent it venting my dissatisfaction. Now it was too late” (349). These words are a clarion call to all human beings to pursue positive fulfillment in performing their daily duties and strive for the heavenly abode, whose, “walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere” (360).

As a diasporic writer, *In the Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee has proved herself in sensitizing people to the diasporic dilemmas faced by Draupadi. She traverses different diasporic stages of her life from Panchaal - Hastinapur - Khandav - the forest life - Matsya - Kurukshetra and back to Hastinapur after the Great War. Her diasporic life is well expressed in the words of Robin Cohen, “Diaspora signified a collective trauma, banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile.”(Cohen, IX). Alienation is not only the diasporic dilemma faced by women but by men too. Draupadi and Karna’s birth, life and death bear semblances to each other. They seem as the different poles of a magnet and it is this emanating magnetic

force that draws them together. Karna and Draupadi made their appearance into this world, when they were least expected. Their birth is unique and god centered. Karna is born with gold rings in his ears and gold armour that covered his chest while Draupadi was a gift offered to king Drupad along with Dhrishtadyumna, during the fire ceremony. Karna was born to Kunti when she was a young, unmarried girl. She was the adopted child of her uncle Kuntibhoj. As a lonely and rejected child with no one to share her secrets, and afraid of rejection by her uncle and society, she secretly disposes Karna. Forming mental connections with Karna, Draupadi says, “We’d both been victims of parental rejection- was that why his story resonated so?” (78).

Karna’s unknown parentage was the spoke in his wheel of life and harbinger of his happiness and success. While he was a child, Drona rejected teaching him the nuances of archery because he was of a low caste and belonged to a Chariot driver. His passion for archery drives him to the ashram of Parasuram, Drona’s own teacher. Away from his homeland, as any other diasporic individual he experiences loneliness and rejection. Karna deceives his teacher unintentionally due to his unknown parentage and incurs a curse. At Hastinapur, the impact of this unknown parentage cost him his fame as a great warrior at the great tournament conducted by Drona. Presuming the victor to be Arjun, the blind king Dhritarashtra rises to garland him. He is stopped short by Karna’s presence who seeks permission to participate in the tournament. Karna proves to be more skillful than Arjun and challenges him to a duel. Sensing danger, Kripa, the royal tutor forces Karna to give an account of his lineage mentioning that “Prince may be challenged to single combat only by another prince” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 82). Among the august crowd, Kunti is also present but still determines to remain silent. Her silences at all the odd times have been the cause of downfall in Karna’s life. Nevertheless, Duryodhan rescues Karna from this dishonour by crowning him as the Ruler of Anga, which is the turning point in Karna’s life, resulting in positive and negative outcomes. The prize of rejection, Karna had to pay as Kunti lacked the courage to stand up for him. Karna once again steadies his hand and calls out to Arjun but Arjun turns his back on him, leaving behind a lonely and rejected soul. Karna was a true and great warrior not easily vanquished with insults is seen in his attitude to life.

Rejected at birth like Draupadi, unlike her, Karna tries to add meaning to his life by attending the Swayamvar at Panchaal. He desired to win Draupadi’s hand and live a happy life. He effortlessly lifted the mighty kindhara and tested the bowstring. Everything seemed to be moving in his favour until the fatal moment when Dhri refused him permission to continue due to his low caste and Draupadi challenged his parentage by acidly remarking, “Before you attempt to win my hand, king of Anga, tell me your father’s name” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 95). Rejected and humiliated, Karna silently steps out of the marriage hall but does not fail to deposit the seed of vengeance in his heart. From then on in every circumstance, Draupadi never ceases to compare her husbands’ with Karna. Many times in her life, she tried to keep her unruly mind from straying away in search of Karna. “But can a sieve block the wind” (88). She acknowledges this weakness, as she confesses, “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” (130).

Karna knew that he would not survive the ‘Great war’ nor did he desire to live. His lonely existence coupled with alienation forced him to believe that he was insignificant and unlike, Draupadi, Karna, sought peace in almsgiving. Once again, before the “Great war” Karna treads the path of rejection. His unwanted birth is affirmed by Kunti’s visit. These long years of separation fail to stir her motherly instincts. Driven by a compelling desire to protect the life of her other cherished son’s force her to meet Karna and unravel the dark secrets of her life. Unlike Draupadi, Karna always positively channelizes his thoughts and emotions. He forgives Kunti by symbolically raising her up and kissing her hands of supplication. At the start of the Great War, Karna is forced to stay away from the battle field for his friend Duryodhan’s sake. All along he is the object of alienation. Even in death, he suffers the bitter fruit of loneliness. When his driverless chariot gets stuck in the battle field, he jumps down to free it. Simultaneously, Arjun goaded by Krishna strikes him down. Karna falls to the ground seeking forgiveness and “despite the brutality of his death, his face held an enigmatic smile” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 297). Karna’s qualities, In the *Place of Illusions* call for admiration. He was a respectful adopted son to Adiratha and obedient disowned son to Kunti. He was a good friend and philosopher to Duryodhan and valued friendship more than fulfilling the desires of his heart. He did not want to abandon Duryodhan even though he was aware that the Pandava princes were his brothers. Even Draupadi as bait nor Bheeshma’s words of encouragement could not make him change his decision.

He proved to be a good brother to Yudhisthir, Bheem, Nakul and Sahadev by sparing their lives on the battlefield. After the Swayamvar, Duryodhan married Banumati and the former counseled Karna to follow suit but Karna remains unmarried which showcases his true love for Draupadi. This is revealed in his secret disclosure to Bheeshma, “But worst still is this: even knowing what I know, I desire her! I can’t forget her shining, haughty face at the Swayamvar – ah, how many years has it been” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 276). He adds that he provoked Dussasan to disrobe Draupadi to avenge her for humiliating him at the Swayamvar. .But is disheartened when Dussasan started to pull her sari, he actually wanted to knock Dussasan down. Words tumble from his mouth like a river in spate; he talks of the twelve years he slept on the ground because Draupadi was in the forest. He fondly recalls the days he wanted to beg her to become his queen but found it difficult because Draupadi was very loyal to her husbands’. He is a devoted disciple of Parasuram. Out of love and respect for his teacher, he bears the scorpion sting as he did not want his teacher’s sleep to be disturbed. He was a true warrior who took care of his team. He visited their tents, comforted the wounded and motivated the warriors. His only regret being that Kunti should have shared the secret of his birth much earlier because the damage had already been done and there seemed no way out of it. He sadly comments, “It would have kept me from making the terrible mistakes that continue to haunt my life” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 274). He is a generous soul who freely distributed his possessions to the poor. Indra takes advantage of his generosity and asks him for the amulets. Karna is aware that without the amulets, he could not defeat Arjun nor survive the Great War. Nevertheless, he cuts the amulets from his body and donates it to Indra. Indra was shocked and grants Karna his Shakti and a boon that, “As long as the land of Bharat floats on the ocean; you will be known as the greatest of givers” (241).

Walking closely in the footsteps of Draupadi and Karna is Kunti. Kunti's rejection at birth ensures that History repeats itself. She is rejected at birth when her father Sura gives her away to his cousin, the childless Kuntibhoj. Like Draupadi, she is named after her adopted father, Kuntibhoj. She is bereft of motherly love, brothers and sisters. This rejection is the cause for the many mistakes she commits in her lifetime. Kunti presumes marriage to be the light at the end of the tunnel to her lonely life. At her Swayamvar, she chooses King Pandu but her marriage to Pandu fails to bridge the gap of rejection and loneliness. Her misery is double fold when Pandu immediately marries the beautiful Madri and lavishes his love on her. His love for Madri is further endorsed when he cannot resist his desire for her in the forest. Pandu's curse leads Kunti and Madri to resort to sage Durvasa's boon conferred upon Kunti. Similar to Draupadi, Kunti begets Yudhishthir, Bheem and Arjun while Madri begets Nakul and Sahadev. Pandu's weakness for Madri results in his death and loneliness for Kunti, "For years she struggled, a widow alone and in disfavour" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 64).

The rejection and alienation that she suffered manifests itself in Draupadi's harassment. The minute her daughter in law steps into her life, she feels challenged for space. To prevent herself the pangs of separation from her sons and the cave of alienation, she asks Draupadi to prepare lunch with a pulpy brinjal, a lump of salt and minute amount of oil. This reveals her desperation to belong and her inability to let go of control over her son's lives. Kunti has traversed the mental harassment of being impregnated by different gods. Hence, she decides to get Draupadi married to all the five Pandava brothers. She does this for fear of being rejected by Draupadi and her sons should they get to know of her dark secrets in life. Kunti shows her disapproval of being alienated when Draupadi and her five sons embark on their journey to Khandav. Draupadi is asked to leave Dhairya in Hastinapur. It is her indirect way of ensuring that Draupadi understands the pain of separation and loneliness. She says, "She'll keep me company until I'm able to join you" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 138).

After her sons' marriage to Draupadi, Kunti senses her secondary position in their lives as they no longer seek her counsel but Draupadi's word is final. "We'll go," Nakul said to his brother, "Since you and Panchaali both wish it" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 177). Yudhishthir confirms this independence of theirs by brushing aside his mother's overbearing and overpowering decision to leave Draupadi with her at Khandav. He says, "You're always imagining the worst. Panchaali will be just fine. In fact, she'll make sure that the rest of us don't do anything imprudent" (178).

After the Great War, when things settled down at Hastinapur and Kunti accomplished the goal of her life to see Yudhishthir as king, she decided to separate herself from all worldly thoughts and lead an ascetic life in a hermitage. Her journey of life which started on a lonely note ends up lonely. Kunti was a good and respectful daughter of Kuntibhoj. She was a good wife to Pandu and executes the duties of a devoted wife with dedication in spite of his obsessive love for Madri. Recognising Pandu's desire for progeny, she discloses her secret of sage Durvasa's mantra. She is a good mother to all the five pandava princes without discrimination. She brings up her children in the path of Dharma, no matter how much she was harassed. She foregoes the chance of heavenly life to save the lives of her children from the deceptive plans of Dhuryodhan

at the wax palace, “As for the sin of killing them, I swear it will not touch you. I take it all on myself. For the safety of my children, I’ll forego heaven” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 115). After Karna’s death, she musters courage and reveals the truth about his birth, even though it was too late. This act of hers is truly commendable. She also proved to be a good mother in law to Draupadi. She did not want Draupadi to lead a lonely life. In the afternoons, Kunti takes her to meet the other women in the palace. She even counsels her against Duryodhan’s vile behaviour and monitors her from close quarters. She was a good sister in law to Gandhari and accompanies her to the hermitage as her guide in her last days. Kunti also proves to be an exceptional Queen mother. She donates her artifacts that were a sole reminder of her life with King Pandu for the welfare of her subjects. She thus atones for her past.

Another rejected soul in *The Palace of Illusions* is Sikhandi, daughter of King Drupad, the re-incarnation of Amba, the princess of Kasi. Sikhandi picks up the garland of lotuses from the palace gates and wears it around her neck. The minute she places the garland on her neck, memories of her previous life torment her. She is banished by her father as he feared the wrath of Beeshma. Sikhandi alias Amba fondly remembers the day of her Swayamvar wherein her joy was turned to sorrow. She was in high spirits as she had mentally accepted King Salva as her husband and decided to garland him. However, the three daughters of Kasi were whisked away by Beeshma for his brother, Vichitravirya. Amba opposes the marriage with Beeshma’s brother and is sent back to Salva. She rejoices over the decision made by Beeshma but is set up for failure. King Salva refuses to take her back nor is King Vichitravirya, while Beeshma is bound by celibacy. Amba desperately moves from pillar to post seeking justice. Rejected by the triad, she seeks vengeance on Beeshma. Desiring a boon from Shiva she practices austere austerities and is promised the power to slay Beeshma in her next birth. An impatient, lonely and rejected Amba desiring re-birth then lights a pyre of her own and plunges into it. In the *Mahabharat*, Sikhandi shares some powerful words of wisdom that need to be treasured by women and draw sustenance from it in troubled times. She recounts that “A woman’s life is tougher than a banyan root, which exists without soil or water” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 48). His loneliness resonates in his parting words to Draupadi and Dhristadyumna, “Thank you for making me welcome. All my life, people have been glad to see me leave” (51). Interestingly, emanating from this study is the advice to humanity as shared by Sukracharya with his daughter, Devayani in *Mahabharata*.

He conquers the world, who patiently puts up with the abuse of his neighbours. He, who controls his anger, as a horseman breaks an unruly horse, is indeed a charioteer and not he who merely holds the reins, but lets the horse go wither it would. He, who sheds his anger just as a snake its slough, is a real hero. He, who is not moved despite the greatest torments inflicted by others, will realize his aim. He who never gets angry is superior to the ritualist who faithfully performs for a hundred years the sacrifices ordained by scripture. Servants, friends, brothers, wife, children, virtue and truth abandon the man who gives way to anger. The wise will not take to heart the words of boys and girls (*Mahabharata*: 27).

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