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INTERROGATING PATRIARCHY: A STUDY OF *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has secured an important niche in the annals of Indian English Writings. Her novel, *The Palace of Illusion* is the retelling voice of Maharishi Ved Vyasa's epic *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi. It points out discrimination with women, patriarchal domination, identity crisis and condition of women during the period of Mahabharata. The life of Draupadi demonstrates how women are forced to surrender meekly before the setup of society. Draupadi, the protagonist of the novel who was born as a princess, married to five husbands had to suffer in her life. The game of dice and the happenings henceforward, hold her responsible for the battle of Kurusathra between Kauravas and Pandavas. The paper endeavours to analyse how women are marginalized, dominated, considered as second sex in those days. Further, the paper seeks to unfold various methods which are used to subdue the status of women.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Discrimination, Identity Crisis

The most loved, most discussed and the most inspiring ancient epic is The Mahabharata which has been provided themes of writing to a number of other writers. *The Palace of Illusion* is also retelling the story of Vyasa's Mahabharata. It is a masterpiece which is written by Indian born, American writer Divakaruni. She holds a prominent place in the galaxy of Indian diasporic writers. During her stay in India, she heard the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata from her grandparents in her childhood. These stories have lasting impression on her mind; as a result, she missed such stories in America. In order to recollect the story, she recreated the story of epic Mahabharata as she opines that the original Mahabharata is the story of the Pandavas and Kauravas. She endeavours to write story from the perspective of Draupdi who is chief protagonist of the novel. It is first person narrative and the novelist has attempted to embed past into present by weaving insinuated love, friendship, revenge, war and freedom. Chitra in author's note herself asserts, "It is her life, her voice her question, and her vision that I invite you into" (xv)

The novelist subtly point out social taboos and archetypal roles assigned to the woman. Though she remain faithful to the main story line but deviates at some point to add some new hues and probe in the psyche of the characters, Elianor Zeliot in her poem "Slave," "Where the houses are ornamented with little flaming oil In that country a woman is still a slave Where Sita entered the fire to prove fidelity Where Ahilya was turned to stone because of Indra's lust Where Draupadi was fractured to serve five husbands In that country a woman is still a slave" (72). Draupaddi, in the novel, starts facing discrimination at the very time of her birth and at her father's home she always sensed his father's favouritism towards her brother. She seems to interrogate now and then. She has to face strong opposition when she expresses her willingness to study with her brother. Education was not considered necessary for woman because if they get education, they may start questioning

hegemonic set-up. But Draupadi is not a submissive, introvert and meek girl. When she was denied to teach and asked education was not for woman, she probingly retort in which book all this is written. Despite her all efforts, she was not taught the ways of governing a kingdom rather she was encouraged to learn painting etc. A woman is expected to submit meekly without any question otherwise something disastrous might happen. This is evident in the suggestions of sage Vyasa when he prophesized three dangerous moments in her life. He advises her to hold back her questions at the time of her marriage, he asks to restrain her laughter at the peak of her husband power and hold back her curse at the critical shameful moments of her life.

The story of the novel is as it is in ancient epic Mahabharata. What make it unique is the treatment of theme and presentation of the chief protagonist. The novel starts with the birth of Draupadi who is born in quite strange circumstances. She is always eager to know her true identity. She insists her maid servant, Dhai, to tell the whole incidence of her birth. She utters, "I thought of the prophecy then, with yearning and fear. I wanted it to be true. But did I have the making of heroine- courage, perseverance, an unbending will? And shut up as I was inside this mausoleum of a palace, how would history even find me" (5)? The king of Panchala, Draupad, bears a grudge against Guru Drona and to take revenge, he wants a son. For this purpose he performs a yagya, consequently, Draupadi and Drishtadyumna were born out of the fire. Draupadi is introduced as "the Girl who wasn't invited" (1). Draupadi believes that her brother was born to take revenge of his father and she was born as the curse for her father. She registers her anger towards her father as she says, "In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, may be even indulgent. But I couldn't forgive him for that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl to a young woman, I didn't trust him completely" (6). When Draupadi intends to talk to her step mother, she badly rebukes her and it was only Dhai maa who consoled her. She was the only guide, mentor, nurturer, friend of Draupadi and teaches her way of the world. Draupadi recollects, "Dhai Ma herself taught me rules of comportment- how to walk, talk and sit in the company of men; how to do the same respect to queen who is more important; how to subtly snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the older wives of my husband" (30). Draupadi reply is quite confident and surprising when she vouches, "I don't need to learn that! My husband won't take another wife- I'll make him promise that before I marry him" (30).

Her liking for Karna is another remarkable point which deviate the novel from ancient epic story of Mahabharata. Being a dark girl, she often wonders who will marry her as she is aware about the ways of the society. She shares her apprehension with Krishna who shows her the portrait of Karna. She instantly falls for him but Krishna refutes the idea by telling her that he is a son of chariot driver. The novelist highlights Draupadi's sentiments and feminine love as Draupadi describes Karna as:

As the figure caught my eyes on Duryodhan's right, older than the prince and austere-faced, the man sat upright, his lean body wary...His only ornaments were a pair of gold earrings and a curiously patterned gold armour, unlike anything I'd seen. His eyes were filled with ancient sadness. They pulled me into them. My impatience evaporated. I no longer cared to see Arjun's portrait. Instead, I wanted to know how these eyes would look if the man smiled. Absurdly, I wanted to be the reason for his smile (69).

Despite the fact that Draupadi liked Karna after seeing her portrait in Krishna's hand, she humiliates her addressing "suth putra" because Draupad wishes to marry her with Arjuna. She subdues her emotions for Karna as she can't let down pride of her father. Though she humiliates him in swayamvar, yet, she harbours desire for him till last. She finds similarity in their fate when she says, "We'd both been victims of parental rejection- was that why his story resonated so" (78). Further, she submits, "I confess: in spite of the vow I made each day to forget Karna, to be a better wife to the Pandavas, I longed to see him again (130).

As everyone know that Arjun wins the contest held for swayamvara and hand of Draupadi. But incidents take turn and after swayamvar she has to marry five pandavas to keep her mother-in-law words. She was shocked at the judgement of her mother-in-law to marry five husbands, she recounts, "I stared at her, my brain trying to take in what she had said. Was she joking when she said they must all marry me? No, her face made that clear. I wanted to shout, five husbands? Are you mad? I wanted to say, I'm already married to Arjun!"(120) As marital arrangements she has to spend one year with each husband. She compares herself to a public drinking cup and complains, "I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not... had no choice as to

whom I slept with, and when" (120). The novelist not only mocks societal authority where father and husband decide the fate of daughter and wife but also successfully give voice to the anger and contempt of Draupadi. She even mocks the whole concept of Swayamvars. Draupadi comments, "We are nothing but pawns for king Drupad to sacrifice when it is most to his advantage" (58).

Draupadi's fate takes another ugly turn when she is gambled by her husband Yudhishthira in game of dice. Villainous Duryodhan invites Yudhishthira to play game of dice and with his maternal uncle Sakuni, traps him to lose everything including his own self, whole state, brothers and wife. Duryodhan commands Dussasana to bring Draupadi in court by dragging from hair. Outrageously, she questions, "If perchance a man has lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife" (190). He started to enrobe her and she begged everyone to help but all kept mum. It was Lord Krishna who saved her from disgrace but this day ensured the battle of two clans. She roared, "All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work...I lifted my long hair for all to see...I will not comb it, I said, "Untill the day I bathe it in Kaurva blood" (194).

Draupadi's desire to make palace of her choice symbolises her desire to create her own identity in the chauvinistic society. She aspires:

Often, I imagined my palace, the one I would build some day. What would it be made of? What form would it take? Krishna's palace in Dwaraka was pink sandstone, the arches like the ocean waves that boarded it. It sounded lovely, but I knew mine would have to be different. It would have to be uniquely mine (113).

She has keen desire to enjoy her selfhood and wants to live in patriarchal free world. She yearns for autonomy when she ponders, "I thought that if lokas existed at all, good women surely got one where men were not allowed so that they could be finally free of male demands" (155)! Here, the novelist projects a modern, empowered woman who doesn't need any reliance, no need of any hand or shoulder to support. She wants to live by own. The novelist endeavours to come out from the perception of the society which Simone de Beauvoir also points out as, "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject; he is the absolute. She is the other" (6). This liberty is attained when death approaches her and she affirms, "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali" (360).

To conclude, it can be safely submitted that the novelist is quite successful in portraying a self which remain caught between a patriarchal world and a modern world. What makes the text most interesting is the novelist radical attempts to get woman free from the shackles of prejudiced world. No doubt, the chief protagonist is bound in the shackles of patriarchy; she behaves accordingly but through her rebellious spirit she herald a new era for the woman of today. She does not accept everything meekly and blindly. Her arguments provoke the reader to think deeply. From her birth to death, she has to undergo numberless sufferings and humiliations but she never let down her indomitable spirit. Beena Agarwal aptly writes, "Divakaruni within the plot of *The Palace of Illusions* exhibits her specific concern for those female characters who were subjected to torture and neglect in Mahabharata. The feminist consciousness becomes the voice of humanity at large" (67).

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