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REVISITING THE MAHABHARATA: A STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S
THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS AND SIVAJI SAWANT'S MRITYUNJAYA

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ABSTRACT

Ramayana and Mahabharata are an integral part of the great literary tradition of our country. Both still continue to exert their influence on the social, political, literary scenario of India in one way or another. The never-ending retellings and Mahabharata inspired writings are a proof to this. But the focus of current writings, especially fiction is notable, instead of merely copying the *vyasa Mahabharata*, the authors of these retelling tries to unearth new dimensions to the epic characters. Marginalized characters are brought to the Centre of the narrative and given a chance to narrate their stories. Challenging the dominant perception these narratives offer an alternative version of the epic. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the palace of illusions* and Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror* are two such novels in which Draupadi and Karna feature as the central characters. While Draupadi was marginalized on account of her being a woman, karna suffered discrimination in the name of his caste. Karna and Draupadi are two characters in *Mahabharata* who fascinated authors from time immemorial. Karna is Arjuna's dark shadow- deprived of his birthright, cast into war against his true brothers, his dazzling skills are counterbalanced by his resentment. Draupadi on the other hand is a complex character whose story doesn't fit in to a simple 'good wife' role. Shivaji Sawant portrays karna as the tragic hero of *Mahabharata*. A man crucified for his unintentional mistakes; Karna is a classic example of destiny's cruel play. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to retell the entire story of *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. The original *Mahabharata* almost entirely neglects her back story, the part until her marriage is completely omitted. Draupadi of *The Palace of Illusions* on the other hand, is an articulate character, who powerfully voices her opinion at various crucial points in the epic. This study attempts to focus on the way these novels give a different dimension to *Mahabharata* story and how they provoke us to think differently.

Keywords: Draupadi, Identity Crisis, Karna, Mahabharata, Marginalization, Retelling.

An epic par excellence, the Mahabharata is the legendary narrative of the Kurukshetra war that chronicles the fate of the Pandava's and Kaurava princes. Several versions of Mahabharata story are prevalent across India in a wide variety of literary, performative, ritual and political context. *Mahabharata* is not simply a text but a literary tradition. Retellings have always been an integral part of the *Mahabharata* tradition. Moreover, the narrative Mahabharata doesn't follow a fixed pace; it is composed of many substories which the character within the narrative tells each other.

Draupadi Unbound: An Analysis of Palace of Illusion

Indian authors have been influenced and inspired time and again to retell and recreate the stories of Mahabharata to narrate the experiences of the modern-day India. Hence Mahabharata continues to be a living tradition in Indian society exercising its influence over the socio-political and cultural spheres of the country. Some of the major re-telling of Mahabharata in fiction include Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra*(2005), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*(1989), P.K. Balakrishnan's *Ini Njan Urangatte*(1973), M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham*(1997) to name a few.

The proud and passionate heroine of Mahabharata, draupadi has always been a victim; her swayamvara ends in fight; a fivefold marriage is imposed upon her; she is humiliated in the royal court of Hastinapura twice over; she loses all her children in the war and dies alone without her husbands. Her name says a lot about the characteristics she bears. The word draupadi literally means 'Daughter of Dhruvad'. But she preferred to be known as panchali, the princess of Panchal kingdom. Her name yajnaseni explains her divine birth from the fire and the name Ayonija denotes that she was not born from a woman's womb.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel offers the viewpoint of a woman living in a man's world. It traces panchali's life story from birth and lonely childhood to her adulthood and death. Her companionship with Dhai Ma, friendship with the Krishna and her boundless love for her Dhri- all these find a place in Divakaruni's story, something that the real epic forgets to tell. While there are several female characters in *Mahabharata*, they are all made to stand behind the male shadows. Draupadi's case was no different. As a result of her unusual birth, she was marked out from the very beginning. Her father Dhruvad accepts her with much hesitation and unwillingness. Dhai ma describes her as 'the uninvited one'. But being the spirited girl she is, Draupadi used to make up fancy nicknames for herself like 'the offspring of vengeance', 'the unexpected one' to name a few.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is in no way less than Bheema or Arjun in strength and spirit, valor and virtues but still she has been victimized by fate and downtrodden by her own family members. Vyasa's Draupadi was tolerant, and she has been accused of being sole reason for the entire war of Kurukshetra. It can be clearly observed from the retelling that Draupadi was not the only reason behind it. Unlike the Vyasa's Draupadi that highlights her decisive role in bringing about the war, Chita Banerjee focuses more on the humane side of Draupadi. Beginning from her relationship with her brother Dhristadyumna, divine connection with Lord Krishna, her budding friendship with Subhadra and her final reconciliation with Kunti; multitude of relationships and its impact on her persona are highlighted by the author. Written in first person the entire story unfolds through her words.

Draupadi's polyandry was quite different from polygamy of a man. In the swayamvara she had to marry the man who won the impossible task set down by her father. For the sake of her father's vengeance, she gave up her desires. Her loss was her father's gain. Another dilemma that she suffers is the indifference shown by Arjun towards her. Arjun who truly weds Draupadi puts the entire blame on her by avoiding her presence. He even refuses to talk to her properly as if it was her decision to marry the five brothers. Arjun who could have prevented such a decision puts Draupadi on the receiving end only because she is a woman. Later when Arjun marries Subhadra, he acts very normally and does not express any concern over the emotional torment that Draupadi undergoes. The double standard of the society is clearly visible in Arjun. Out of the Pandavas the only person Draupadi could love was Arjun. Arjun on his part found happiness in neglecting her. Draupadi's marriage with the five Pandavas was never completely happy affair. She was the queen of the Pandavas but her husband's polygamy was a matter of concern for her. Like any other women she too wished that her man must stay true

to her and wanted his complete attention. For several reasons all the Pandavas married after being wedded to Draupadi.

Draupadi's displeasure and reluctance have been clearly articulated in *The Palace of Illusion*, in the scene where she is asked to get married to all the five brothers. Her words were defiant. She was not at all comfortable with the second wives of her husbands. Just like her marriage, she had no control over whom she slept with. Everything was predetermined by vyasa's orders and like a cattle she was passed over between the Pandavas. Her likes and dislikes were never a question. The importance given to the concept of virginity is highlighted when Draupadi is blessed with the gift of regaining her virginity for each of the year when she goes to her next husband. The words spoken by Draupadi challenge the society's notion on chastity and virginity: "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 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" (Divakaruni120). These lines are clearly indicative of Draupadi's reluctance towards other pandavas and hope of being valued by Arjun.

Her mind is always curious, always in search of new knowledge; she is unable to make sense of the world around her. This curiosity proves to be the reason for her downfall and torment. As a youth she believed that her man will only be devoted to her if she ever gets married. But just like a butterfly flies from one flower to the next one in search of nectar they just move around in search of pleasure. Initially this truth was hard for panchali to digest, later she comes to terms with it when Arjun takes in Subhadra as his second wife.

Though Draupadi has been presented as a fusion of a modern and traditional women her conscience is more active in the retold version of the epic. As a character blessed with critical thinking, she never took anyone on face value. Bhishma's case can be taken as an example. As a man who parted with desire so easily panchali fears that Bhishma will not protect her husband by compromising his words. After all he was responsible for Amba's death as he refused to break his pledge over a women's life. However, from Bhishma's character and her husband's utter devotion to him she deduced a crucial fact about the pandavas- their ultimate yearning to feel loved, to be cherished and to be valued. Panchali is endowed with such an alert mind that she does not miss the importance of even in the minutest gestures. She draws wisdom from insignificant events. Draupadi questions the logic behind Gandhari's decision to go blind-folded following her blind husband Dhritarastra. As a practical woman she opines that, when a husband has some physical impairment, the wife should show him the right path in life. Draupadi commands and earn respect to assert her individuality in the society. The ancient epic shows her calm and moderate nature but has never focused on how she rose from troubles like a phoenix from ashes.

She boldly voiced her opinions without fearing the consequences. For a woman a true freedom meant a world free of male demands and virtuous women need to be reincarnated as men as every woman is perfect the way she is. Draupadi is not a wife who is begging for her privileges. In vyasa *Mahabharata* Draupati endures the dishonor, she questioned but she didn't rebel as she does in *The Palace of Illusion*. Draupadi questions how she can be gambled by Yudhishthira when he himself was slave. Only Krishna came to her rescue and Draupadi concludes that even the laws are designed for the benefit of men. Unable to understand her situation there in the court; her inner voice prompts her to question her identity- "I'm a queen. Daughter of king Dhrupad, sister of Dhritadyumna, mistress of the great palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (Divakaruni 190).

While Hastinapura suffocated her, she feels that the palace of illusions was her only true home and as time passed it started to impact her thoughts too. And she begins to see her husbands as one single unit they would protect her no matter what. Later in the story this belief is shattered, and she never trusts anyone blindly. Divakaruni represents draupadi's role as a mother in a revolutionary way. Draupadi loved her children but wasn't particularly maternal. Having received no maternal affection, Draupadi probably is not to be blamed for being less motherly towards her children. She never excuses herself for delegating the task of her mothering of her kids to other women. The extraordinary circumstances in which she grew up stripped her of many usual womanly qualities. But she never forgave her conscience for choosing her husband over her children.

The novel also addresses the special relationship Draupadi shared with Lord Krishna. A constant presence in her life, Krishna guides her, console her and even confuses her at times with his indirect replies. Krishna and Draupadi's relationship are something that transcends the physical and reached the spiritual level. To conclude, the image of Draupadi that Divakaruni projects is not one of the meek, all too willing to suffer archetypal women. Rather she is someone who is outspoken and recognize her mistakes and analyses it so as to acquire a mature understanding of everything.

Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror

A man who craved for legitimacy throughout his life, Karna was the eldest of the pandavas. He was a kshatriya destined to live like a sudra and Duryodhana's loyal friend. Greatness eluded him throughout his life- his mother, brothers, his teachers and even God conspired against him. Though he was as good as Arjun with weapons (even better than Arjun) Karna was neglected. Rejected by his biological father, Karna was the son of surya(the sun god) and princess Kunti. As he was born to Kunti before marriage while she was still in her teens, she abandoned her first born in the River Ashwa out of concern for her reputation. Later he is adopted and raised by the Suta couple, Adhiratha and Radha. Vyasa presents Karna like an ordinary character in Mahabharata ignoring his extraordinary feats and complex life experience. Hence the need of an alternative version of Karna's story becomes important. Several retellings of Mahabharata explore the different episodes of Karna's life and personality.

Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror is the story of Karna, the most complex character of Mahabharata. The novel is divided into nine books, four out of these are narrated by Karna himself. Portrayed as a normal human being dwell on his action, his mistakes and questions regarding his real identity. Karna is presented along the lines of a tragic hero, everything he deserved was forbidden to him in the name of low birth. He never loses his hope. Karna dedicated his heart and soul to his parents, yet he was subjected to constant humiliation by being addressed as the son of a charioteer. Shivaji Sawant explores how the identity crisis faced by Karna is closely tied with his sense of humiliation and the resultant inferiority complex.

The narrative of *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror* begins in a very thought-provoking manner. Karna, who is long dead, return from his eternal sleep to talk about certain things. A warrior forever, he compares his life to a quiver and each of the arrows stand for the events in his life. He is totally aware that not every arrow of his life is shining and attractive, but some are tainted. He had a feeling that death had made him wiser. The story follows the growth of Karna from his childhood till his death at the Kurukshetra warfront. Childhood was a relatively happy affair to Karna. He fondly recalls the adventures he had with his brother Shona, the unconditional love of his foster mother Radha and the fascination he had with bows and arrows. He senses a strong connection with the sun god right from his childhood. The very thought of sun's absence was enough to create uneasiness in little Karna's heart. The first seeds of his identity crisis are sown in Karna's mind during the same period. He stood apart from others by his *kavacha* and fleshy *Kundalas*. Confused, he asked his brother Shona 'who am I?'. The first of the many times he utters the question in the novel. As the story progresses Karna recounts the deep neglect he suffered at the hands of Drona, the Royal Teacher who taught archery to Kauravas and Pandavas. His humiliation at the day of the archery demonstration at Hastinapura is another significant incident that stays fresh in his memory and its echo haunts him throughout his life.

The next chapter is spoken by Kunti who is tormented by the unforgivable mistake that she did to her eldest (but illegitimate) child. Karna resumes his story in the third chapter again and recounts his growth into a handsome talented youth. Karna meets his future wife, vrishalini for the first time and speaks like a love-struck young man enjoying all the happiness in the world. While he agrees that it was the happiest period of his life, he feels something lacking. It didn't matter that he was the king of Anga. After all he was a sutaputra, he was upset of his clan and why was it he never found out. Karna is totally disappointed when his first child Sudama turned out to be without kundalas. It becomes clear to him that the kundalas have got something related to his identity.

In the chapter of Duryodhana the author attempts Duryodhana's account of their precious friendship. What Karna believes to be the magnanimity was in fact Duryodhana's cunningness for Karna offered a powerful counterpart for Arjun. Their relationship was strengthened by feelings of obligation, gratitude and appreciation.

Duryodana grabbed the opportunity to get a skilled warrior on his side. As Karna pledges lifelong loyalty to the Kauravas, Duryodhana got somebody who will kill and die for his sake. To Karna Duryodhana was akin to God, but Duryodhana's love always had selfish motives behind it. By offering Kingship of Anga Rajya to Karna, Duryodhana sealed Karna's fate forever. In fact, even Duryodhana's mind is clouded by caste prejudices, and it is out of his own need that he made Karna his friend.

Karna always had a respectful attitude towards women, and this is evident from his relationship with the women of his life. His deep attachment with his foster mother Radha made him reject the throne of Hastinapura and the subsequent glory that came with it. Vrishalini was the love of his life. Even Draupadi, with her beauty fails to kindle love or lust in his mind, since his mind was already filled with the love of the simple vrishalini. His second marriage with supriya, a decision imposed on him by Duryodhana as Duryodhana's bride Bhanumati had insisted that the Anga Raja Karna should marry her friend. Out of his loyalty towards Duryodhana Karna had to agree to the condition. Even then he seeks the permission of Vrishalini as he doesn't want to upset her.

When Dussasana insults Draupadi in the kaurava sabha karna feels like a strong urge to protect her. One part of his mind had always wanted to repay the insult Draupadi had directed towards him during her swayamvara. The other part was morally bound to protect the honor of women in distress. The memory of his humiliation, together with the fact that Draupadi did not seek his help in to save her honor makes him utter cruel words against her in the Kaurava Sabha. He thinks that even if the most ordinary female of Hastinapura sought his help in distress, he would have helped her. He was ready to save Draupadi at all costs, but karna's ego was deeply hurt as Draupadi ignored him completely while seeking the help of many others who were of lesser stature. Overcome with anger he calls her 'unchaste' and 'whore'. But when she is stripped by Dussasana, karna is over-whelmed with the desire to cover her body with his own shawl. In the place of panchali he sees his own wife Vrishalini and suffers great mental agony at having insulted her.

This brings out the inner conflict suffered by Karna. He is torn between revenge and moral duty. While the moralist in him advises him to protect Druapadi's honor, the anger in him seeks to insult Draupadi, so that she may also suffer humiliation like him. His conscience is divided between these two decisions. Such a thought of Karna to save Draupadi's honor is not discussed in the actual epic.

Vrishali's account on karna is perhaps the most endearing one. It through her words that we get an intimate picture of the complex nature of karna's persona. Karna possessed a heart of gold according to her. He adores, admires and respects vrishali for the strong woman she is. Contrary to the positive influence exerted by Vrishalini, panchali's actions and words leads to the mortification of his self-esteem. Bhishma's comment regarding the sixth pandav rekindles the flame in Karna's mind. Unconsciously he hopes of being a person of high origin. But when he realizes that he is the sixth pandava it becomes unbearable for him, and the situation seems inappropriate. Finally he rejects the path to glory and permanence opts to side with the people who stayed with him through thick and thin- Duryodhana, his parents, vrishali, shona and the people of champagnagari, his birthplace. Sacrifice and duty defines karna's very existence and to leave means he is leaving his 'Karnatva' the essence of his personality.

Karna is projected as duty-conscious man, and he overcomes all temptations to stay with Duryodhana till his death. Krishna's revelation about the secret of karna's birth never prompts karna to leave his friend in distress. As a loving friend he had pledged unfaltering loyalty to Duryodhana. Similarly, he takes pride in being Vrishali's husband and even the heavenly beauty of Draupadi fails to tempt him. He chooses his foster mother Radha over Kunti for she rejected him at the moment of his birth while Radha lavished all her attention upon him. Fully conscious of his responsibilities as a son and as a husband, as a brother and as a king Karna makes a difficult choice. There are several other incidents that foreground his sense of duty. During the battle with the Gandharva king Chitrasena, Karna flees seeking safety. While the epic describes Karna's as cowardice of the great warrior, Karna in *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conqueror* reflects on the incidents in a different light. It was necessary for Karna to remain alive so that he could avenge his son Sudaman's death by killing Arjun, his arch enemy. On this occasion he gives up Duryodhana and gives importance to his fatherly duty over his allegiance to Duryodhana. There is a purpose behind his decision here. One thing has to be remembered here his sense of

duty towards Duryodhana holds him back from leaving the Kauravas, despite the request of Krishna, Kunti and Bhishma, a clear evidence of how much he values the friendship with Duryodhana.

Karna's name is synonymous with his charity. He shows no hesitation in giving away his natural 'kavacha-kundala' and this incident is portrayed in great detail in the novel. Surpassing the warning of Suryadeva himself, Karna sacrifices his protective shield to keep his word. He was ready to risk his life for being true to his word. It is true that the knowledge of his birth let him have some contentment, he feels honored to be the son of Suryadeva, the centre of his worship. But he resolves to stick to his ideals even if it meant self-destruction. He loses the meaning of life and everything he valued by the time he realizes the truth. He tries to remember all those moments of humiliation to get rid of the guilt feeling that torments his mind.

By placing Karna at the Centre of the story, Shivaji Sawant recounts the life story of Karna, the great warrior and benevolent hero. Karna in *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conquerer* is not a perfect man. As a human being he possesses merits as well as imperfections. What Shivaji Sawant attempts to do is to provide an explanation for Karna's action by letting him an opportunity to tell his story. All the events and characters are viewed from Karna's point of view. Even the monologues spoken by other characters are viewed from Karna's point of view. All these serve to throw light on a never-before-seen aspect of Karna's personality.

Conclusion

The two novels chose for the study *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conquerer* and *The Palace of Illusions* challenges the narrative of *Mahabharata* by choosing to focus on two characters who are marginalized. Divakaruni presents Draupadi on par with a contemporary woman. In *Mahabharata* her identity is established very much in relation to her status as the wife of Pandavas. In other words, Draupadi exists so that the heroism of her husband can be properly highlighted. On the other hand, Divakaruni introduces Draupadi as a woman who will change the course of history. She is normal and extra ordinary, for she simultaneously sympathizes with the plight of women who are less fortunate than her and has the courage to question the decisions that others force upon her. Draupadi's experience teaches her to never wait for a man to save her but to grab the opportunity on her own.

Instead of making her shadowy figure destined to stand behind her husband's Divakaruni portrays a different Draupadi. She exerts her independence by being defiantly vocal throughout her life. Divakaruni articulates Draupadi's thoughts and shows us how practical she is. Draupadi's story is an eye opener as well as an inspiration for every woman who is subjugated. In fact, it can be seen as a war-cry to rise up and embrace the real you, with all the imperfections. On the other hand, Karna's misfortune had much to do with the place he belonged. Brought up in the Adhiratha's house his foster parents loved him with all their heart. But the ignorance regarding his true parentage frustrated him. The resulting bitterness led him to a disastrous life story. If he had known his parentage Karna would have behaved nobly and retained the integrity of his character till the end. In *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conquerer* Shivaji Sawant presents Karna as a man torn apart by the tragedy of his birth. Caste haunted him throughout his life, and he was forced to do things that compromised with his beliefs. Karna tells his own story in *Mrityunjaya: The Death Conquerer* and this leads to a major shift in the perception of the events of *Mahabharata*. While Karna is glorified in the narrative, Sawant provides enough justification for doing so. In the end the readers are left to contemplate whether Karna deserved the pathetic death in the battlefield and the blame that was stamped on him regarding the humiliation of Panchali. Unlike the epic, these retelling focus on minds of characters. Both the novels present its protagonists as normal human beings. Individual characters are isolated from the epic, and they form the Centre of the novel. Both Draupadi and Karna are portrayed as people who are bound to commit mistakes and the retelling give them an opportunity to reflect on their deeds. The characters growth is clearly visible, and this is a sure sign of empowerment.

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