

## **Disintegrating the Patriarchal Hegemony in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Palace of Illusions**

<sup>1</sup>Dr. R. Vadivukarasi <sup>2</sup>Ms. A. Amreen Farjana

<sup>1,2</sup>Assistant Professor of English

A. P. C. Mahalaxmi College for Women

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Thoothukudi

### **Abstract**

Hegemony is an ideological system that has an overreaching influence over what we think. "Patriarchal hegemony" refers to the dominance of male power and control in society. The patriarchal power is the male-dominated structure. The term is often used in feminist theory to describe how patriarchal systems perpetuate inequality and oppression of women and other marginalized groups. The character of Draupadi in *Mahabharata* has attracted the attention of many modern feminist writers. One such writer is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-born American author and poet. Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage* has won the American Book Award in the year 1996. Her novel *The Palace of Illusion* 'A mythic tale brimming with warriors, magic and treachery' is the rendition of the longest epic Mahabharata as told from Draupadi's (Panchaali's) viewpoint. Patriarchy has its own norms. Many women were mistreated in the name of foolish customs and traditions made by the male dominated society. They are being mistreated in present and will be mistreated in the future. Draupadi along with many women is the victim of the male chauvinistic society. This paper proposes to examine the condition and status of women amidst men. It further scrutinizes how Divakaruni projects Draupadi with strong feminist undertone.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Hegemony, Oppression, Male chauvinism, Feminism, Marginalism

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for projecting the strong female characters through her works. She creates female characters as a heroic epitome. Divakaruni re-narrates the epic *The Mahabharata* to give a picture of the female position in the patriarchal society. Divakaruni through her own perspective shows how Draupadi struggles for identity in Patriarchal society. Not only Divakaruni, but also Saoli Mitra in her *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector*, recreated Draupadi as a strong women who determines to restore justice and resist patriarchy. In an interview with Metka Zupancic, Chitra Banerjee said,

*As in many epics, the central position was reserved for men, with wars, weapons, strategy, and court maneuvers. I remember from quite a young age, even before I could have articulated the idea, how I was always concerned about the women. What was the*

*story of all these interesting and complex characters, all these strong women who are never at the center of the narrative? What were they feeling? What were they thinking?*

(Zupancic)

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* deals with the identity crisis of women, male domination and gender discrimination. The epic is the struggle for jurisdiction between two groups of cousins, Kauravas (son of Dhritarashtra, descendant of Kuru) and Pandavas (son of Pandu). On the other hand the novel is all about the ill-treatment of female-selfhood, where a woman (Panchaali) is made as a common property among five brothers. It looks as though she is sold in a gambling. But with strong feminist undertones, Divakaruni presents Draupadi as a passionate woman who struggles to come to terms with her unique situation of being married to five men. According to Hindu epic, Draupadi is considered to be a misfortune to her clan. She was often considered as the ultimate reason behind the Kurukshetra war, and it happened because the patriarchal hegemony had not allowed to see the truth. But, Divakaruni brings out the new dimension of Draupadi (Panchaali). She presented Draupadi as a headstrong and female role model who provokes her husbands to take revenge on Kauravas. She plays the role of a revolutionary character, who breaks down the traditional gender role.

On examining the status of women in the Rig Vedic age, one understands that women enjoyed freedom to the highest degree. There was no restriction on women receiving education in the age of Upanishads. The same was continued during the period of Sutras and Post-vedic period. But as time goes by during Buddhist and Mughal periods men were considered superior to women. Woman reminded as the mistress of the household. The concept of male dominance in the life of Draupadi starts from her father performing the role of fatherhood. Her struggle for identity starts from her birth along with her twin brothers. Her father named her brother as “Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies” and Draupadi as daughter of Drupad. Even here she is made to gain her identity through her father. She is deprived of having her self-identity. She wants to overcome this domination so she named herself as Panchaali ‘Queen of Panchaal.’

Divakaruni has shown Panchaali as a modern woman, who wants to express her thoughts and ideas to the contemporary world. Secondly, she is treated inferior to men when she wishes to learn the war skills. She wants to prove her majesty to the world. Also when it is the matter of education only her brother is given the priority. Education was not given to women as for men because their duty is to take care of their husbands and to pray that they die with glory on the battlefield. Her father playing the role of male dominant denied her of obtaining those skills. According to him, “*A ksatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life : her father, brother, husband, and sons*” (TPI 26). Instead of

Disintegrating the Patriarchal Hegemony in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* 16  
accepting it Panchaali decides to change the history of women. Divakaruni portrays Panchaali as a strong woman who raises her voice in the large patriarchal society of ancient India.

Draupadi is being insulted among men throughout her life. The incident of Swayamvar plays a prominent role. When Arjun wins the swayamvar she gives her heart to him. But when Kunti asks Arjun and brothers to divide Draupadi as wife among themselves, she expected that Arjun will support her but he denied and obeyed the words of his mother. The same happened when she was humiliated in the Kuru court she expects Karna would protect her. But Karna also abuses her by calling her as a 'prostitute'. Draupadi says,

*For men, the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride. That was why Karna waited for me to plead with him though he could have stopped my suffering with a single word. That was why he turned on me when I refused to ask for his pity. That was why he incited Dussasan to an action that was against the code of honor by which he lived his life. He knew he would regret it—in his fierce smile there had already been a glint of pain (TPI 195).*

The concept of polyandry introduced through Draupadi's marriage with Pandavas as a strict adherence to Kunti. It makes us wonder of marital rape in mythology. Panchaali says, "*I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not*"(TPI 120). Myth is the product of the patriarchal society and cannot be devoid of power politics. It plays an important role in forming gender conventions and in granting gender hierarchies.

Gender is the foundational pillar in *The Mahabharata*. The novel narrates several tales where sex and gender is the main reason for the suppression of voices. The polyandry of Draupadi is a cause that got her publicly humiliated as a whore. Gender relationships are those defined by marriage and other forms of kinship ties, which reflects the status of the partner in a social hierarchy (Malinar 79-80).

The most striking trait that comprises masculinity is that "men are virile husbands and fearless warriors"(Brobdict 17). The men in the epic are often considered to prove their 'manliness' through their participation in wars. One of the main reason for encouragement is the female characters. In reference to this one can see that Draupadi condemns Yudhishtra for his docile nature during the time of exile (Johannes).

One must not come to a conclusion that women in Mahabharata were illtreated. This epic puts forward a paradigm of femininity which contains connotation of female independence. It portrays woman as reason behind a husband's success. The two main female characters kunti and Draupadi play a dual role in this epic; they both play the role of perfect wife. Draupadi commits her whole life for the welfare of the kingdom. But men in Draupadi's life from her

father to husbands, used her as a tool to fulfill their own purposes. For king Draupad, she was important for the political alliance with the Pandavas and for her husbands she was a way to bind them together.

During ancient India and the very beginning of the Mahabharata, women were highly respected. However this changed over the centuries. In the Christian era, Hindu society initially started to form a patronizing attitude towards women. According to *Manu*, women were considered to be highly dependent and were not allowed to work or do any activities either inside or outside the house alone. “*During childhood, a women belonged to her father and after marriage, she belonged to her husband*” (Wendy 148). Men are always overpowered with the sense that they are strong, tough, self-sufficient, while women on other hand is weak tender and needful. Divakaruni changes the viewpoint of the society through her character Draupadi. When her husbands fail to save her from the public insult she says,

*I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. The choice...I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was much from them as from our enemies* (TPI 195).

This paper depicts how women were dominated and subjugated. Despite these discrimination women were powerful by nature. They are stronger in nature than men. They have the power to tackle any situation. Only they become helpless and powerless in certain situation. They are able to create identity of their own. They reject the norms and values that have always marginalized the women. The novel projects Draupadi as an archetype of resistance and resilience for those women who are suppressed. Draupadi's femininity emanates from her resilience. Divakaruni highlights how the norms are formed to maintain patriarchal hegemony and by re-voicing Draupadi breaks those boundaries. On the whole Divakaruni's revision introduces us to the modern Draupadi, who was determined not to suppress her expectation as a female.

### **Works Cited**

#### **Edition Used**

Banerjee, Chitra (2018). *The Palace of Illusion*. Picador, India. ISBN: 978-93-86215-96-3.

1-360

#### **Other Sources**

1. Brodbeck, Simon and Black, Brian. “Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata”

The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. Page 17. (2007)

2. Doniger, Wendy. “The Law of Manu”. London Penguin. Page 148. (1991)

Malinar, Angelika. “Arguments of a Queen- Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata”

The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. Page 79-80. (2007)

3. Mitra, Saoli. *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector & Timeless Tales: Twoplays*. Kolkata:

Van Buitenen, Johannes. "The Mahābhārata. The book of the assembly hall"

University of Chicago Press. Vol. 3. (1981)

4. Metka. "The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni", 7 Aug 2011,

University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, USA