

## The Pity and the Passion, The Power and the Position in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Palace of Illusion*

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### Abstract

Emphasizing upon the isolation and adaptation, the melancholy and the trauma, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* illustrates the unifying and innumerable diversifying problems attached to the lives of women from time immemorial. Be it Sita or Draupadi, Surpnakha or Kunti, women have always been a prey to destiny. The pristine glory of Draupadi gradually evolves from the shadowy backdrop of pain and anguish, subjugation and humiliation, distress and devastation. Although *The Mahabharata* is basically the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas but it is Draupadi who stands the test of time – the queen whose subjugation and humiliation touch the ethics of humanity.

**Keywords:** subjugation, humiliation, exploitation, universal, discrimination, transformation, universal

A rendition of the Hindu epic, *The Mahabharata*, told from the point of view of Draupadi (Panchali), Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee has very vehemently expressed the importance of the epic stories in our lives and how magically these stories seeped into our blood and became timeless and powerful as they slipped from one generation to the other:

*The first stories in our lives are magical. They go deep into our soul, especially when they are powerful and timeless, like those in the Mahabharata. [The Palace of Illusions, Author's Note, p. xiv]*

Without touching the storyline and the concept of the master epic, Divakaruni tries to bring out a new perspective by narrating it through the eyes of Draupadi – the woman whose existence led to disaster and sacrifice. And as Draupadi unveils the nuances of experiences and the depth of emotions, Chitra Divakaruni focuses on how these powerful women, who have been the source of destruction of the male chauvinistic power, have always remained a murky figure though so much in prominence and power:

*And who, some might argue, by her headstrong actions helps to bring about the destruction of the Third Age of Man. But somehow all these women remained shadowy figures, their thought and motives mysterious, their emotions described only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. [The Palace of Illusions, Author's Note, p. xv]*

And that is where Chitra Divakaruni had taken the promise of recreating the story of the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi – the unheard story that lies hidden and

unnoticed within the powerful male dominant lines – and as a writer she fulfills her wish and nourishes her satisfaction:

*I made a promise to myself all those years ago. If I ever become a writer, I thought, I will recreate the story of the Mahabharata. But in my Mahabharata, I will place a woman in the forefront of the action. I will uncover the story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. She will narrate the entire story, colouring it with her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs, her heartbreaks and achievements, her strengths and her faults, and the unique, timeless way in which she understands her world and her place in it.[The Palace of Illusions, Author's Note, p. xv]*

Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupad, ruler of Panchal, was the 'Girl Who Wasn't Invited'. A name given by her Dhari Ma, Draupadi had known the fact through her stories and adhered to it with submissive emotion and unexposed feelings. The contradicting approach, the unwanted expressions, the astonishing dilemma, the abrupt denial, everything pointed at the unwantedness – the surprise and shock of her presence. The welcoming applause for Dhari, the brother of Draupadi, who came out of the fire first, stand in contrast to the astonishing stares for the girl who stepped out of the fire holding the hand of her brother and walking behind him:

*"When your brother stepped out of the sacrificial fire onto the cold stone slabs of the palace hall, all the assembly cried out in amazement."*

*"An eyeblink later," she continued, "when you emerged from the fire, our jaws dropped. It was so quiet, you could have heard a housefly fart." [The Palace of Illusions, p. 1&2]*

The unacceptance of a girl child in as overwhelming a place as a palace is unthinkable and unethical but this is how Draupadi steps into her father's domain with the support of her brother and the prediction of the divine – *"Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history."* And it was for these two reasons the father was forced to accept her – Dhari and the Divine making way for the unwanted towards acceptance:

*A gaunt, glittering man walked toward my brother and me as we stood hand in hand. He held out his arms – but for my brother alone. It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted. Dhari wouldn't let go of me, however, nor I of him. We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together.*

*I didn't forget that hesitation, even though in the years that followed King Drupad was careful to fulfill his fatherly duty and provide me with everything he believed a princess should have. Sometimes, when I passed him, he even allowed me privileges he kept from his other daughters. In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, maybe even indulgent. But I couldn't forgive him that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I*

*grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn't trust him completely. [The Palace of Illusions, p. 6]*

It is obvious for a girl, thus denied by her father, to have not just a negative reaction but also a detached countenance for whatever comes her way. Draupadi hated everything – from the grey thick walls of her palace to the massive furniture from generations, from the barren grounds to the dimly lit corridors – more than a king's palace it looked like a fortress to her. Her survival there would have been difficult had it not been for Dhri. How can she ever forget the feel of her father's unwanted clutching of her hand? How can she overcome the feeling of his refusal to abandon her? The harrowing and distraught memories fill her life with skepticism and resentment, and she feels how difficult it would have been for her to continue at her father's house had not Dhri been there in her life and by her side always. The intensity of affection that she has for her brother is immensely visible in her expressions and expectations, love and longing. She knows that the essence of her existence is the presence of an invisible cord tying herself to her brother. Unknown to the fact that this love will be analyzed one day and how much it might cost to both, she keeps weaving the net of attachment with so much of affection and devotion that it seems to her that they both are a single entity.

Draupadi becomes close to Krishna, and she feels that the major cause of this great connection is their severely dark-skinned connection. Krishna's charm of winning the hearts of the women, including the greatest beauty of that time, Princess Rukmini, and his having more than a hundred wives enralls Draupadi, and she wonders whether even darkness has its own magnetism. On the other hand, she also notices the ritualistic discrepancies – when the royal family would go on a procession, it was the men in front and the women behind. On such occasions it is Krishna's approach and confidence that gives her the power and dignity to embellish herself in the most gorgeous way. Although Draupadi learns the art of charisma and decorum and she executes them through her expressions and command, gender discrimination stays strong in and around her and she finds it hard to believe and follow the diversified rules and obligations that chain the mind and motive of the people. And so when Draupadi wished to receive the same training as her brother Dhri would be adhering to, there is a kind of amazement and negation in King Drupad's attitude and approach –

*A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchal! Only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at my birth required me to get an education beyond what women were usually given, and that it was the king's duty to provide this to me, did he agree with reluctance. Even Dhri Ma, my accomplice in so many other areas of my life, regarded the lessons with misgiving. She complained that they were making me too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech. Dhri, too, sometimes wondered if I wasn't learning the wrong things, ideas that would only confuse me as I took up a woman's life with its prescribed, restrictive laws. [The Palace of Illusions, p. 23]*

And it is not just the end. Women have been looked down upon always even though they strive as hard as Draupadi, trying to keep pace with the male gender around. More than

receiving any kind of praise, they are humiliated and abused, deprived and taken for granted. Draupadi fights back her lessons though the world disapproves of it. She wants to rip open the amazing, mysterious world – she knows that the lessons and her guru can pave her way from darkness to light. But her abundance of questions is not appreciated, rather she is shamed not just by her tutor but her brother too. But Dhri is aware of her sister's credibility; he knows very well that Draupadi can go to any extent to get her questions answered and will not yield till her thirst for knowledge is quenched. Draupadi's continuous interruptions create an aura of exasperation and Dhri tries his best to save his sister from condemnation, but in doing so endangers the trust and respect of women –

*Dhri hid his smile. "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. Perhaps you could instruct her as to the conduct expected of a kshatriya woman?" [The Palace of Illusions, p. 24]*

And to Draupadi's dismay the tutor, considered to be a man of knowledge and intelligence, is completely against the exposure that Draupadi has been enlisted upon. For him a lady should adhere to the rules and regulations imposed upon her under the dictates of the society and one who tries to cross that boundary is the cause of concern and devastation. It is totally unbelievable that a teacher whose responsibility is to impart education without any bias is chained with discrimination and injustice. Standing on the crossroads of adaptation and struggle, Draupadi finds herself shaken and shattered with the societal misconceptions and prejudices. What can she do when her revered teacher devastates her hopes and overwhelms her spirits? What can she do when she knows that her cry will not be answered? Who will understand 'how much she resented her tutor's declaration that women are a path to ruin and root of all world's troubles'?

It was her Dhai Ma who had imparted to her the training that a woman is supposed to acquire – an education completely different from the male world. Draupadi does not want to attain such knowledge where she needs to focus on various intricacies that will help her to be a competitor for her other rivals. With the confidence and complete faith that her husband will not remarry or even ditch her, she believes that this kind of learning makes neither requirement nor sense. But the experienced Dhai Ma knows the truth behind every exceptional extravagance and curtained enclosure – the destiny of women, no matter whichever class they belong to. The truth is painful but true, unbelievable but obvious. Dhai Ma's opinion is enriching and cautioning –

*"Your arrogance, girl," she said, "is only exceeded by your optimism. Kings always take other wives. And men always break the promises they make before marriage. Besides if you're married off like Panchal's other princesses, you won't even get a chance to talk to your husband before he beds you." [The Palace of Illusions, p. 30]*

The realization in Draupadi dawns gradually as her eyes open to her subdued self in a male dictating ambience and this consciousness becomes more inherent when her father terminates her lessons with the tutor of his brother, 'declaring that she needed to focus on more feminine interests'. Draupadi decides to fight her own battle knowing very well that

she cannot be like the other girls and so she should be different from them. But determination fails its power when it is crushed in the hands of fate and the sage predicts the worst – to be the wife of five husbands; to be in the magical of the palaces and then losing it; to be the cause of the greatest wars; to be loved and abandoned; and to die alone despite five husbands – is this fate or curse? Be it Shikhandi or Kunti, Madri or Gandhari, like Draupadi fate had played its trick in various ways on all these princesses despite their relentless struggle to fight with destiny.

Draupadi's struggle to keep herself away from the yearning thoughts of Karna, her submission to her unjustifiable fate to accept the five Pandavas as her husbands, her realizing the truth that she is the cause and reason of a great war ahead – Draupadi never loses her control on herself; rather she tries to make her existence matter in the lives of others. At times fighting odds, at times embracing comfort, she is the queen who is looked up with power and courage, determination and diligence. The special code of marital conduct the Vyasa creates for her – that she would be the wife to each brother for a year at a time from the oldest to the youngest and each time she went to a new brother she would be virgin again – has a pinch of sour salt in it. Though Dhari Ma tries to console her saying that she has finally attained a freedom that men enjoyed for centuries, Draupadi was not delighted by the virginity blessing because it seemed intended more for her husbands' advantage than hers and she also has a sympathetic consideration for Kunti realizing that even the benediction showered on her was so male-centric. It's obvious that the rules created were more from the point of view of the men though the boons were specifically given to women –

*Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women – they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted. (Had Kunti felt the same way when she was told that the gods would be happy to impregnate her?) [The Palace of Illusions, p. 120]*

Throughout facing the agony and challenges of being a subordinate in a male-dominated world, women have tried to find out the path to sidestep but have failed in their endeavor as the escape mainly meant a getaway from the father's realm to the husband's domain. With the hope and longing that maybe the situation will be a little favorable for them at the husband's place, the women stepped out to find themselves in a stricter and stingier ambience. Consolation was a prize they never could think of achieving, consideration for them never knocked their doors, contentment avoided the path they stayed, and bliss got lost in their jungle of misery. Yet they survived, not knowing for whom and why. The frustration and the fury, the fragmentation and the fragility, the fickleness and the frivolity – everything seemed encased in the small, capsuled world of these lonesome non-existent entities. No one who would care for, no one bother – yet they existed, just for the sake of existence. And thus, Draupadi's yearning will definitely be the longing of every woman, whichever generation or whichever locality they belong to –

*Dhri's tutor was of the opinion that virtuous women were sent directly into their next birth, where, if they were lucky, they reincarnated as men. But I thought that if lokas existed at all, good women would surely go to one*

*where men were not allowed so that they could be finally free of male demands.[The Palace of Illusions, p. 155]*

Throughout Draupadi realizes the pain of a woman – no matter whichever clan or dynasty she belongs to. Women has always been considered a property that is under the custody of the father, brother, or husband –

*I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadhyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl.*

*But then I remembered what I'd read long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me.*

*The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave. [The Palace of Illusions, p. 190]*

Even when the contempt of court happened and Draupadi had to face the embarrassment of the shameful act of Dussasan, no one had come to her rescue except Krishna. Some feared away, some dared not; with prayers on her lips Draupadi submitted herself into the sublimity of the almighty. At this juncture of prayer and pleading Draupadi realizes, as any other woman would have done, how the character of a man is so different from that of a woman – a woman would try to lend out all that she has including her emotions and feelings when someone is at crisis whereas a man would wait for an opportunity when the revenge can be appropriately taken keeping his heroic fame into consideration. This incidence changes the life of Draupadi and her outlook towards her husbands; maybe she becomes stronger in her own determination but becomes weaker in her conjugal devotion –

*Their notions of horror, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. 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 they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies.[The Palace of Illusions, p. 195]*

And then when the Pandavas lose everything and Draupadi's anguish and despair increases. To find herself placed from a queen to a maid – it was a difficult and tormenting transformation altogether. At least as a queen she had been successful in guarding her self-esteem and protecting her dignity. But becoming a part of the lower class of women she understands their vulnerability and helplessness. Never had she been treated thus even by the worst of her enemies. She feels exposed and defenseless, unable to guard herself from the penetrating eyes of the vultures around her. With extreme agony she realizes the pathetic situation of the downtrodden women –

*“You’re new, aren’t you?” he said. He was handsome in a fleshy way, with sensuous lips. He wore many ornaments and reeked of musk and wine. “Are you one of my sister’s new attendants? You’re pretty!” his kohl-lined eyes roved up and down my body approvingly. My face grew hot. Not even Duryodhan had dared to look at me quite like this in his sabha, for he’d known I was a queen. Is this how men looked at ordinary women, then? Women they considered their inferiors? A new sympathy for my maids rose in my mind. When I became a queen again, I thought, I would make sure common women were treated differently.[The Palace of Illusions, p. 228]*

Howsoever distant Draupadi might have been, she remained the cause and dilemma of the greatest of the warriors and her presence disturbed the mighty and the powerful, the magnanimous and the princely. The honored lost their dignity, the praised wasted their glory, the exemplary let go their excellence. Women can build and women can destroy but very few are capable of realizing this inevitable fact. Much have been said for and against their power and possibility but very few know the worth of their existence. Bheeshma had understood the root cause that might lead to misfortune and his warning sounds very pragmatic –

*“As you can see,” Bheeshma added, “I did worse than you – and paid for it. But I learned from my experience. In this lifetime, I never trusted women. I stayed away from them as much as I could. And even then a woman was the cause of my downfall! Take an old man’s advice: put Draupadi out of your mind and concentrate on the war.”[The Palace of Illusions, p. 278]*

The war took away everything: the city of Hastinapur turned into a tragic tale of nothingness. The women who lost their husbands in war initially wailed and then despised those who led them to this fate, but subsequently submitted themselves into the cruel hands of destiny. The city turned into a place of grieving widows who had never even dreamt of that their families would depend and survive on them. Exploitation of the weaker sex reigned as there was no male protection. Be it the poor or the affluent, they became easy victims – unknown men entering their lives, taking care of their fortunes, and harassing them endlessly – this became the story of this regal town. Afraid and shaken, these unpaid servants, begging on the roadside with children in their arms, had no idea about how to approach for justice. With blank faces they exposed the failure of authority and the collapse of humanity.

Draupadi realized the helplessness and the hopelessness that enveloped these forsaken women for she too had gone through the extent of wretchedness when she was almost exposed and humiliated, snatched off her dignity and respect once in the court and then in the forest –

*I knew how it felt to be helpless and hopeless. Hadn’t I been almost stripped of my clothing and my honor in this very city? Hadn’t I been abducted in the forest and attacked in Virat’s court when men thought I was without protection? Didn’t I, even now, mourn my blood-clan – dead, every one of them? And if I wasn’t careful, might I not turn into one of*

*these women – empty-eyed, capable only of churning through futile memories?[The Palace of Illusions, p. 323]*

Draupadi's conscience shakes her, and she overwhelmed with grief and sympathy. But she decides to stand strong, supporting the cause of women so much so that she decides to shake off her self-pity and do something that can help her gender with the endorsement and position that they deserve. And immediately she decides to form a separate court where women could speak their sorrows to other women. Embarking on the glory of power and position as a queen, enriching herself on the triumph and support of her husbands – Draupadi could have led a life far beyond what the common women adhered and accepted. But the agony and torment, crisis and compulsion, of a woman is so universal in this male dominated world that it doesn't matter where the woman is rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, married or married, intelligent or dumb. What matters is – a woman is a woman and becomes a prey to the society. If a lady like Draupadi, who could have achieved everything at the blink of an eye could be a victim of this inhuman society, what to say about any other woman!

Draupadi realizes that woman can only understand the pain and suffering of another woman, so thinks setting up a separate court for women. With whatever possession they had in the form of jewelry or anything else they came forward and finally situation improved and '*Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment.*' [The Palace of Illusions, p. 325]

*The Palace of Illusion*, Hastinapur, is not just the story of Pandavas and Kauravas and the great the great war they had against each other; it is the story of all those women who stood by, behind and beneath their male counterpart as a strong and un-defying support but were tortured and chastened at every juncture of their lives. It is, in fact the story of Draupadi, who unknowingly entered the lives of many and was destroyed and devastated for no reason at all. Draupadi the submissive queen of the five Pandavas, Draupadi the subjugated woman in the court of honor, Draupadi the deserted lady in the province of justice, Draupadi the devoted and the divine who ultimately stands tall and strong to protect and shelter her clan! Yes, it is Draupadi – the queen, the woman, the sufferer, and upholder – the universal and the special, the prey and the protector!

#### **WORKS CITED:-**

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