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Silenced No More: Decoding Female Agency and Narrative Voice in Divakaruni's the Palace of Illusions

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Abstract:
Taking a cue from postmodernist writing from across the world, and considering the postmodern concepts of fragmentation and deconstruction, it is possible to recognize and appreciate some of the recent works of Indian English writing that deals with retelling the Myths as its main theme. Myths have always been a source of fascination to its readers as they represent the flawless nature that makes one God-like. The present day works that 'revision' these Myths seem to give the celestial beings a near human form and voice. The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni' s (Divakaruni) one such novel written with the backdrop of the mythical tale of Mahabharata. The author brings in the identity catastrophes by re-telling the story through the eyes and voice of Panchaali (Draupadi) from a feminist point of view giving it a 'woman centered' slant. The tale otherwise renowned for the masculine skill of manipulation in war, finds a totally diverse approach. The paper argues that the appropriation of the narration by Draupadi, is an instance of re-visioning of the master – narrative of Vyasa Mahabharata, in order to retrieve the muted voice of Draupadi.

Keywords: Female Agency, Fragmentation and Deconstruction, Myth Retelling, Postmodernism, Narrative Re-visioning, Mahabharata, Woman-centered Narrative, Identity and Voice.

INTRODUCTION

Taking the cue from postmodernist literature across the globe—and informed by the postmodern concepts of fragmentation and deconstruction—contemporary Indian English writing has increasingly embraced the retelling of myths as a central theme. Myths have long captivated readers with their portrayal of idealized, god-like figures. However, modern retellings tend to humanize these celestial characters, granting them relatable voices and emotional depth. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions is one such novel, set against the mythic backdrop of the Mahabharata. In this reimagining, Divakaruni retells the epic through the eyes and voice of Panchaali (Draupadi), presenting the narrative from a distinctly feminist and woman-centered perspective. The traditionally masculine tale—known for its glorification of war and strategic manipulation—is thus transformed into a story that foregrounds female identity, inner conflict, and emotional truth. This paper argues that Draupadi's appropriation of the narrative represents a deliberate re-visioning of Vyasa's master text, aiming to recover and amplify the long-silenced voice of one of its most pivotal female figures.

The Palace of Illusions is written with the milieu of the mythical tale of Mahabharata. In her 'Author's Note', Divakaruni tells the purpose of retelling the epic, Mahabharata, in unambiguous terms. She had

read the epic, heard the stories and was unsatisfied by the portrayals of women. The conventional versions had kept the women in the fringes of the narrative as if they were trivial. Hence, Divakaruni's prerogative in The Palace of Illusions is to place the women in the forefront of the action. Better still, the author showcases the novel with the female narrative voice by re-telling the story through the eyes and voice of Panchaali, "with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it" (XV).

Directed by her persistence, Divakaruni magnifies the personality of Panchali who is stanch in her beliefs and determined in her actions. Panchali's sense of self-importance is highlighted right from the beginning. As a young girl, she makes her accomplice, Dhai Ma, narrate the story of her birth. She derives narcissistic pleasure out of it. She has untiring belief in the prophetic voices which had predicted that she would change the course of history. As she grows into adulthood, she feels that she is above the conventional duties which women are supposed to perform. Nurturing the belief that her life would unfurl uniquely; she equips herself for it. Her inquisitive and introspective nature makes her probe into the people around her and their motives. She reads volumes of Nyaya Shastra, and takes lessons from her brother's tutor and later from the sorceress which prepare her for the future tasks. They also toughen her personality and sharpen the edge of her vengeance enabling her to achieve the destruction that becomes the goal of her later life. During peaceful times, Yudishtir turns to her counsel in matters of governance. Soon after the war when Yudishtir stands helpless, unable to face the anger of the war widows, it is Panchali's speech which appeases them. Owing to her innovative idea of creating a separate court for women, the war-torn Hastinapur becomes a place where women gain self-sufficiency.

In contrast, there are instances to show how Panchali's sense of self-importance crosses limits. In one part of the story when the sage Vyasa offers her a special vision with which she could see the war, Panchali accepts it, and says, "I will watch this war and live to tell it. It's only just since I've helped bring it about" (254). Vyasa replies by saying, "Don't give yourself so much credit" (254), driving home the point that she is only a pawn in the divine design. Once again, when Arjun, awe struck, reveals the wonder of the cosmic vision of Krishna, Panchali questions herself, "Why hadn't Krishna whom I believed to be my dear friend and protector allowed me to see his cosmic form?" (265).

At an introspective moment she goes on to analyze the miscellaneous roles she has played in her life thus: "The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled in the most magical of places, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance. . ." (229).One more dimension gets added subsequently because the war begins. She thinks that the women look upon her as a "harbinger of ill luck… a witch" (258).

Divakaruni engraves a complex character—strong, powerful and self-willed with multiple reputations to carry the narrative forward. In spite of all these, it is Panchali, the woman, who encompasses the action of the plot and so the text acquires a definitive feminine colour. The following inferences prove this preposition. Firstly, with an unmistakable emphasis on aesthetics Panchali talks about looks, dressing, make-up, hairdo, jewelry—not only hers but of the other women too. She throws light on her transition—from a shy diffident young girl who is conscious of her dark complexion to a confident celebrated beauty. She does not fail to make a mention about dress and the jewelry she adorns, on every occasion—whether joyous or adverse, descriptions which would have, otherwise been brushed aside, by the unrestrained sweep of incidents that crowd the epic.

Subsequently, like a common woman of the proletariat class—she dreams of a home for herself. She exhibits a marked aversion for her father's palace-—dull and drab, so manly, with no trees or flowers. Here starts her dream for a palace of her own that would mirror her deepest being: "I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of colour and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flitting among jasmines . . ." (7). Again, she restates, "Palaces have always fascinated me. . . we grow to become that which we live within … mine would have to be different. It would have to be uniquely mine" (113). More disappointment awaits her at the Hastinapur Palace which she inhabits soon after her marriage. She is put off by the gaudy draperies, oversized bolsters and the gay pomp. She even senses something gloomy and slavering about the place that wished her husband ill. Hence when the Indraprastha Palace gets designed, she spells out "This creation of yours that's going to be the envy of every king in Bharat—we'll call it the Palace of Illusion" (146).

Panchali's dream comes true with the Palace of Illusions acquiring a charm, appeal and magic which is like no other. She lovingly speaks of it thus: "I loved my palace, and in return, I felt its warmth embracing me as though it were alive. Some of its serenity seeped into me, some wisdom, so that 1 learned to be happy with my lot in the world" (148). Description of its garden and water bodies are sprinkled throughout the text and palace assumes a thoughtful importance in the narrative as Panchali flaps back to it in moments of pain and anguish. "Lost now, all lost: the grove of banyans, fully grown, thanks to Maya's magic; the ketaki flowers, palest gold; the sisumpa trees that whispered my name" (227), wails Panchali, sitting in Sudeshna's garden, as her servant. She acknowledges that it is the "one place where I had belonged, where I had been truly a queen" (206). This is precisely why the book is named after it.

Panchali's focus on culinary skills also lends a feminine touch to the tale. The first test that Panchali faces in her mother-in-law's house is the preparation of brinjal curry. The forest years where Panchali manages to run the household with the barest minimal requirements and the occasional feasts they enjoy get narrated. And in another incident, there is an interesting game of one-upmanship between Panchali and her mother-in-law, Kunti, which gives a mundane turn to the epic. Panchali had heard stories about Kunti and had admired her. She had even expected her to be the mother whom she never had. However, Kunti's firm treatment of Panchali as soon as she enters the household shocks her. When Kunti tests her cuisine art of food Panchali passes it with flying colours and cries triumphantly, "I'd won the first round" (111). Kunti initially comes across as a cautious mother trying to protect her sons from the luring daughter-in-law. "Kunti and I had frozen into our stance of mutual distrust" (115). Later, when the story shifts to the Palace of Illusions, it is Draupadi's turn to be in-charge. However, the war brings a sense of solidarity between them. When Kunti is pained over Karna, Panchali feels that, "by some inexplicable osmosis Kunti's secret had become my secret too (281). And for once, Panchali treats Kunti with genuine affection when she is tormented by the thought of Karna's looming end.

The characterization of Krishna remarkably catches the attention of the reader. What happens in this novel is actually a demystification of the image of Krishna. Krishna remains very close to Panchali's heart no doubt—more so in a human way than in a divine way. She even calls him a chameleon. Krishna calls Panchali by a special name, the female form of his own. Panchali sums up her relationship with him thus, "he'd been to me as the air I breathed— indispensable and unconsidered" (70). Again, "often when I was fearful and didn't know what to do, I thought of Krishna" (201). However, when someone talks about his divinity, she does not pay much attention: "the sceptic in me was unable to accept that Krishna was divine" (332). As Krishna speaks of his previous births, Panchali dismisses them as incarnation of Vishnu. On those occasions when Krishna philosophizes, she wonders it is "mystifying that Krishna knew such things"

(67) or “where had he learned so many philosophies? When had he made their wisdom his own?"(263). However, Panchali experiences a transcendental union with Krishna at crucial moments of her life. The altercation between Krishna and Sisupal tums bloody. The scared Panchali closes her eyes. Later, she tells Krishna, “When I thought you had died, I wanted to die too” (100). She is disrobed. She mentally transforms herself to a garden, where Krishna plays the flute. He assures her, “No one can shame you, if you don’t allow it” (193). During the forest years, he saves her from sage Durvasa’s anger by appearing exclusively before her. Finally, at the throes of death, she recollects moments filled with her warmth for Krishna and his for her. In spite of all this, the final question lingers in her lips is, “Are you truly divine?” (309). In Rajagopalachari, in his narrative uses names like ‘Govinda’ ‘Madhava’, ‘Purushothama’ freely. There, all the characters, except the evil ones readily acknowledge Krishna’s divinity.

Yet central to the argument that this paper develops is that issue which can either be taken as an ingenious piece of Divakaruni’s imagination or as an appalling alteration of the popular legend. Divakaruni makes Panchali fall in love with Karna. It is not just a passing fancy of an immature girl, but a sustained emotion that runs like an undercurrent dictating Panchali's actions. Before the Swayamvar, when portraits of the suitors are shown to her, Panchali spots Karna and falls in love with him at first sight. “His eyes were filled with an ancient sadness I wanted to be the reason for his smile” (69). As she learns about his lineage, she finds a commonality between them: “We’d both been victims of parental rejection (78) “Each painful detail of Karna’s story became a hook in my flesh binding me to him” (87).

Ironically, Panchali insults Karna at the swayamvar and prevents him from taking part in the contest. However, even after being married to the five Pandavas, memories of Karna refuse to be uprooted from her heart. She makes mental comparisons between Arjun and Karna, now and then, wondering how Karna would have reacted to a particular situation. When Karna visits the Palace of Illusions, as a part of the Kaurava retinue, Panchali longs for his attention, in vain. The next meeting happens in the Hastinapur palace. Even though, Panchali realizes the fact that she is an older woman now, and married five times over, the attraction is irresistible. She reprimands herself by recollecting words from the scriptures: “. . . a wife who holds in her heart desireful thoughts of a man who is not her husband is as sinful as a woman who sleeps with such a man (185). That evening, with Kunti's presence distracting her, Panchali insults Karna the second time, by not returning his greeting.

At the disrobing scene, it is Karna who instigates Dussassan to remove Panchali's clothes. At that moment, she decides that she would not long for his attention again. “What happened today had stripped away all ambiguities from my heart” (194). Surprisingly, she forgives Karna with the passage of years and is helpless about the emotional adultery she commits. She justifies her behaviour by saying, “The heart itself is beyond control. That is its power and its weakness” (213).

When she understands the truth about Kama’s birth and the anguish he had been suffering over the years, her heart melts for him. As she eavesdrops to the conversation between Bheeshma and Karna, Panchali, finally, hears Karna confess his love for her. “Wasn’t this what I’d secretly wanted all my life, to know that he was attracted to me, even against his will” (277).

Divakaruni, thus, sketches an attraction between Panchali and Karna that is noticeably physical. To strike a balance, she adds the spiritual element by saying how the glow that leaves Karna's dead body travels to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over the weeping Panchali. Later, when Panchali dies she is shown joining hands with Karna in the nether world. At this juncture, it is very pertinent to analyze how a purist would react to this Panchali-Karna interlude. He would certainly scoff at it. Panchali herself interjects and says that it is something that Vyasa had not put down in his Mahabharata. Divakaruni could

have introduced this in the plot to show the desirability of Panchali. Furthermore, it also creates a palpable tension in the narrative and makes the reader curious.

Elsewhere in the novel, in a conversation between Panchali and Dhri, Divakaruni gives clues as to how a story should be looked at. "At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing" (15). She indicates the fact that there could be many interpretations to a story by saying, "You're looking at the story through the wrong window… You've got to close it and open a different one" (15). That she is not worried about the reaction of the readers is hinted at through these words, "…believing is not important. . .. That's not why stories are given to you" (63). Moreover description of a story as a "slippery thing" reminds one of the Derridean definitions of a "text as gas" (qtd. in Krishnaswamy 35), thereby providing deconstructive cues to the Panchali-Karna relationship.

It is interesting to analyze how Divakaruni improvises her narrative devices to move forward with her story. The story is told from Panchali's point of view. However, the author has to purview of Panchali. To counter this problem, she makes Panchali eavesdrop. "I took to eavesdropping and found it a most useful practice" (34). At other times, she makes Panchali dream the events, such as the dissolution of the Palace of Illusions and a crucial meeting between Karna and Kunti. In a magic realist fashion Divakaruni makes Panchali declare "When you share a man's pillow, his dreams seep into you" (211). To narrate the war Panchali gets endowed with a special vision, a state of trance through which she sees, not only the outer action but also the inner deliberations of the characters. At the swayamvar scene and the disrobing scene Divakaruni intermingles a third person narrative voice, may be to provide an objective account, of these two important episodes in Panchali's life.

Finally, through Panchali's voice, Divakaruni avails herself of every opportunity to take an ironic dig at the ways of men. "They lived by strange rules" (57). As a young girl Panchali protests: "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men? I plan on doing other things with my life" (26). Much later, the same Panchali speaks in an appeasing tone: "For men the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride" (195). The words of Panchali, "a story gains power with retelling" (20), provide a fitting conclusion to this paper. The retelling of the story of Mahabharata by Divakaruni may strike a singular chord at times, and may have a few idiosyncratic traits here and there. On the whole, it is certainly a rich addition to the literary canon

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