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**FROM OBJECT TO SUBJECT: A FEMINIST STUDY OF CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS***

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Abstract

This paper analyses Draupadi who has carved herself as a woman with self-esteem. There are women in Hindu mythology like Draupadi who were assertive and could speak their mind in a world dominated by men. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) explores Feminine sensibility in its best form. The life of Draupadi as a queen of Hastinapur and wife of Pandavas, reflects the modern times. Divakaruni has convincingly retold Draupadi's tale from feminist perspectives. It is the fire and energy in Draupadi, the spirit of injustice and her multifacetedness that makes her the most mysterious and majestic woman.

Keywords: Multifacetedness, Assertive, Majestic, Injustice, Feminine Sensibility.

Liberal feminist wants women to be treated as autonomous decision-makers. Liberals say society must provide women with the same civil liberties and economic opportunities that men enjoy including equal opportunity for education. Social inequality they say is not the result of nature's decree but of society's customs and traditions. Liberal feminists want to free women from oppressive gender roles- those roles that give women a lesser place in the academic, political and economic sphere. Women's education, legal, professional and occupational reforms were a few of the gains.

Such a feministic perspective can be seen in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) tells the story of Mahabharata from Panchali's point of view. She believed that the epic had powerful and complex women characters that affected the action in major ways but were always treated as 'shadowy figures'. She mentions in the author's note:

I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women. They remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motifs mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons.(Divakaruni xiv)

Woman plays a vital role in the family. She supports her husband, children, and becomes a great homemaker. She remains with them in any dire circumstance and boosts courage in them to face the consequences through her moral support. She has the potential to create history by making or marring the relationships. One such woman is Panchali. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes Panchali narrate " her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs her heart breaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it" (Divakaruni xv). In the author's note, she says, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in "The Palace of Illusions" (xv).

Divakaruni wanted to place the strong woman character in the forefront of the action and uncover the story that lay in between the lines of the epic with socio-political background. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) takes us back to the ancient times of myths where Panchali, daughter of Drupad, the fire-born princess narrates her deeply humane story and the adjustments she made in a man's world; her view about crime, punishment, loyalty, promises, love, and vengeance.

The novel begins with Draupadi's almost obsessive interest in her life story:

Though the long, lonely years of childhood, when my father's palace seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe, I would go to my nurse and ask for a story. And though she knew many wondrous and edifying tales, the one I made her tell over and over was the story of my birth. I think I liked it so much because it made me feel special, and in those days there was little else in my life that did. (Divakaruni 1)

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But Draupadi makes it clear that King Drupad, as a father, acted according to the dictates of Manu by 'protecting' and 'taking care' of Draupadi. This protective care Draupadi considers to be suffocating. Draupadi like every woman who strived for freedom, wished to break away from the monotony of her life. Panchali's critical insight into her life giving her a feeling of empowerment. She even critically examined her name 'Draupadi', as she wanted a name that could bring out the mission of her life. She wanted a heroic name:

The story inspired me to make up fancy names for myself: Off-spring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One. But Dhai Ma puffed out her cheeks at my tendency to drama, calling me the Girl Who Wasn't Invited. (Divakaruni 1)

Divakaruni subjectively incarnates Draupadi's education as well as her transformation from ambitious princess to revenge-seeking queen. Draupadi's zeal and enthusiasm to change the course of history leads her to Ved Vyasa's hermitage to learn the secrets of her future. He foretells several disturbing things, which would happen in her life. He tells that she would marry five of the greatest heroes of that period at the same time and cause a terrible war affecting the whole of India. He also bestows her with the name Panchali. On returning to the palace, she insists that everyone address her Princes Panchaali.

The name, Draupadi would link her to the father whose control and authority represented the claims of patriarchy while the name, Panchali would bestow her with a unique identity connecting her to the land in which she was born. Hence this new name transforms her way of thinking, and a new kind of independence comes to her which she could not have experienced with her previous name.

In *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Divakaruni gives the plot a fictional space portraying age old traditions confining women in patriarchal construct, reciting epic from the protagonist Draupadi's point of view. She expresses women's thoughts, actions, and their efforts to sustain their voice which have totally ripped their stature in the world which is accustomed to look at the things from male-centric prospective. (Kumar 84)

Draupadi wanted to be an agent of action who wished to redefine the roles of women in the society. She was never interested in learning drawing, painting, sewing and decorating rather felt attracted to solving riddles, responding to witty remarks and writing poetry.

The position of women in the Indian society is restricted, this strict division of gender roles is resented by Draupadi, who is eager to gain all the knowledge and education of the world. When she expresses her wish to take lessons with her brother Dhrishtadyumna she meets with opposition from everybody including Dhaima, her nurse, "a girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing has never been heard in the royal family of panchal!" (23) However Draupadi is given the opportunity because Krishna knew that she was special and different from other women.

Draupadi analyses her own feminine power during her unique marital arrangement:

Though Dhaima tried to console me by saying that finally I had the freedom men had had for centuries, my situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, 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. (Divakaruni 93)

Despite the constraints of patriarchy she aspires to be an agent of action because she wishes to redefine the role of woman. She says, "And who decided that a women's highest purpose was to support men... A man, I would wager! Myself. I plan on doing other things with my life" (26). This assertion brings to light Draupadi's intention to script her own destiny. In Divakaruni's version, Draupadi wants to be the maker of her own history.

Being a woman, Draupadi tried her best to complete her duty towards her husbands but she realizes that somehow she could not justify her role as a wife. . She was with them; she devoted her entire life for them. She says;

Looking back, I see that I didn't love any of my husband in that way. I was a good wife. I supported them through good times and bad; I provided them with comforts of

the body and the mind; when in company, I extolled their virtues. I followed them into the forest and forced them to become heroes. But my heart was it too small? Too tickle? To hard? Even during the best of our years, I never gave it fully to them. (Divakaruni 213)

The real identity of a wife may be identified in the worse condition when she stands boldly with their family members. During the period of twelve years forest and one year secret hiding life she firmly stands with her husband's leaving all the worldly pleasures.

Ultimately Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee's books highlight the strength of women who become not only independent and autonomous but also lend support to others around them to find their better and truer selves. Her books transcend the Indian cultural experience and provide a multilayered site where they can be successful as individuals, and as members of the new community of which they are a part. (Saiffee vi)

Thus Draupadi proves that no problem is so great that it may not be dealt with. After the incident of her insult, she never abandons her husbands, regardless of the condition they led her in to. She remained concerned about the common good of her family working as a unit. Her devotion reached its heights when she followed them into exile and endured the hardships of the forest. She even looked after Gandhari, whose sons had wronged her in every possible way. She learns to refine her ego to reach a higher spiritual life.

Panchali all her life remained by the side of the Pandavas. In the end also it was Yudhishtira who decided it was time for their *Mahaprasathan* though Panchali urged him to spend some more time on earth but then she readily agreed to go. She wanted the generations to know that she was the only consort who dared to accompany the Pandavas on their final adventurous journey to heaven. She wanted to bid farewell to the world like a noble queen, who had the courage to admit her mistakes. She wanted people to remember her:

I made sure to wear my finest clothes and all the gold I owned so that the eyes of onlookers would be dazzled. I wanted the people of the city to remember me as heroic, majestic. The woman around whom, history would gather itself. I wanted them to make up stories about the beautiful Panchali, to weep because I was leaving them for something better. (Divakaruni 341)

Draupadi never gives up her efforts to come up in life. She presents a character that is bold enough to face the hurdles. She was ready at every step of her life to accept challenges like first neglected by her own father, grow with the company of Dhaima, accepting five husbands and at the time of her humiliation, she realizes that her all husbands are not in a position to save her and then call her true friend Krishna.

Draupadi is a true warrior and an ideal woman who has sacrificed her life for the sake of family and for society. Apart from this she tries to fulfill her responsibility boldly and never leaves the path of truth till her last breath. Draupadi is a true representative of Indian women.

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