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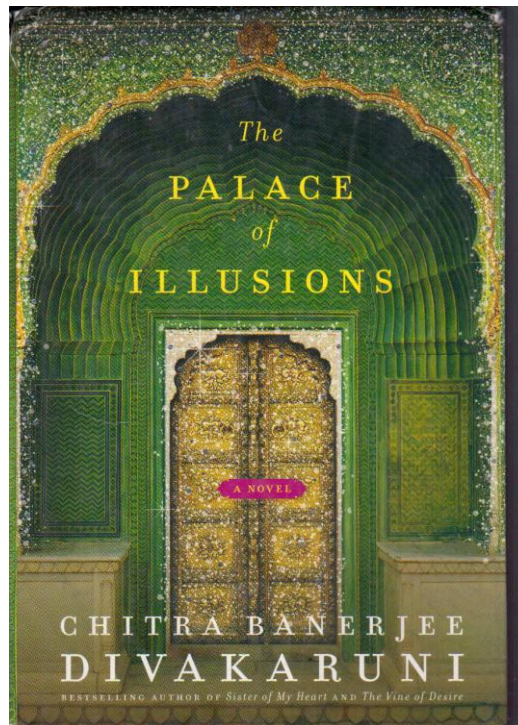
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## Agency, Narrativity Gender in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace Of Illusions*

L. Kavitha Nair, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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**The Mahabharata's Draupadi as the Sutradhari – A Revolutionary Role!**

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L. Kavitha Nair, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Agency, Narrativity Gender in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's - *The Palace Of Illusions*

The life of Draupadi, a celebrated woman characters of ancient India, comes close to, in fact almost reflects, the modern times. From the great seer Vyasa's version to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, which is the most recent portrayal of Draupadi, one can see remarkable differences. It is the fire and energy in Draupadi, the spirit to fight injustice and her multifacetedness that makes her the most mysterious and majestic woman for all ages. The interpretations her character has undergone in the various works since her conception are immense.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indo-American writer. She has won many accolades and awards in America. She has written around 17 novels, and has been translated into 16 languages. The latest rendering of the Mahabharata story is *The Palace of Illusions* by her, which captures the magical world of the epic for its twenty-first century readers. Divakaruni, in Author's note, says that, "I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women...they remain shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives 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. If I ever wrote a book ...I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits." (Banerjee Divakaruni xiv-xv)

## **The Novel**

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

"Through 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 me 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" (Banerjee Divakaruni 1).

Draupadi makes it clear that king Drupad, as a father, acted according to the dictats of Manu by 'protecting' and 'taking care' of Draupadi. This protective care Draupadi finds suffocating ("I couldn't breathe" Banerjee Divakaruni 1). For Draupadi the only meaningful activity of her life is to listen to the story of her birth. Dhai Ma, a typical grandmother figure, who is a source of both comfort and wisdom, is solicited to repeat the story of Draupadi's birth. Though Dhai Ma is a veritable storehouse of wonderful stories, at once entertaining and edifying, Draupadi does not want to listen to stories which do not bring her to the forefront. Such multiple narration of her own life's story provides Draupadi with a critical insight into her story. She not only responds to the events narrated but also critically views other people's responses to the events of her life.

## **The Assertion**

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Though king Drupad does not envision Draupadi's importance in the events to come, Draupadi considers herself specially chosen. It is supremely ironic that the role of Dhristadyumna, whose birth is celebrated by king Drupad because he is born with a mission to destroy the king's archrival Drona, is rendered almost insignificant when compared to that of Draupadi. It is Draupadi who will bring about changes in the lives of people who will associate with her in the future.

For Draupadi the only way to put an end to the dreadful monotony of her existence is to listen to the tale of her life and to believe that her birth is as significant as that of her brother's. This interest in her life later matures into a desire to be the writer of her own history and the controller of her own destiny. Unlike the speaker in Tara Patel's poem *Woman*, who says, "A woman's life is a reaction to the crack of a whip" (Patel 238), she wants to be an agent of action because she wishes to redefine the role of woman in the context of her life. She says, "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men... A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life" (Banerjee Divakaruni 26).

This assertion brings to light Draupadi's intention to script her own destiny and not be imprisoned in various belittling constructions of her self. Being the agent of action, she not only decides the course of action but also forces others to face the consequences of her actions. In Divakaruni's novel, Draupadi presents herself as one who will happily take over the reins.

### **The Accusation and the Prophecy**

Dhai Ma's accusation that Draupadi is full of herself is a significant point. Draupadi is seen critically analyzing the names that were given to her brother and to herself. The name Dhristadyumna for her brother meant 'destroyer of enemies' and the name Draupadi for herself merely meant 'daughter of Drupad'. Her brother's name succinctly brings out the mission of his life, which is to kill the incomparable Drona whereas her name, Draupadi, only gave her an identity tied to her father, King Drupad's. Draupadi is unhappy about this because she feels a woman who has been created to change the course of history must have been given a better name. The name Draupadi, for her, smacks of patriarchy. She aspires to a more heroic name. It is ironic that a name that she fancied for herself, "Off-spring of Vengeance", turns out to be true.

Initially, Draupadi has misgivings about the prophecy, though she evinces an obsessive interest in it:

"I thought of the prophecy then, with yearning and fear. I wanted it to be true. But did I have the makings of a heroine – courage, perseverance, an unbending will? And shut up as I was inside this mausoleum of a palace, how would history even find me?" (Banerjee Divakaruni 5).

Draupadi, who experiences mixed feelings with regard to the prophecy (with yearning and fear) like a modern feminist, wishes to position herself as a subject who desires and not as an object of desire. But her only worry, at this point is, how the spotlight of history would fall on her when

she was leading a cloistered existence in the “mausoleum of a palace”. She does not want her life to be recorded in the annals of history as a mere victim of circumstances. It is significant to note that in most constructions of Draupadi, in both literary and non-literary texts, she is seen as a victim of patriarchy which is perpetuated by the dominant discourses of the time. In Divakaruni’s version, Draupadi wants to be a maker of her own history.

### **The Validity of the Myth**

Reading against the grain, Draupadi questions the terms of the myth which records her existence, by bringing out what it represses or excludes. In other words, she wishes to give an authentic account of her life which would radically question and consistently undermine the previous constructions of her life. All that she requires now is an account of history which will represent her truly and will articulate her real life. So she decides to narrate her own version of the story, which according to her, is the most authentic. Identifying her father’s palace with a prison house, she expresses her wish to create an alternative reality which will cancel out the misery of her real existence:

“Staring down from the rooms at the bare compound stretching below, I’d feel dejection settle on my shoulders like a shawl of iron. When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different. I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of color and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flitting among jasmines, and in the midst of it- but I could not imagine yet the shape that my future home would take. Would it be elegant as crystal? Solidly precious, like a jewel-studded goblet? Delicate and intricate, like gold filigree? I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home” (Banerjee Divakaruni 7).

At this point one can identify the palace in which Draupadi lives, with the previous versions of the Draupadi story, at once belittling and stifling. Draupadi’s desire to have a palace of her own can be seen as her desire to have a story of her own, a story of her life which does not typecast her and make her life a cliché. According to Draupadi, the story of her life must be one of “a riot of color and sound.” Draupadi considers her life to be dramatic and significant. The words color and sound hint at the brilliant theatricality of her life by suggesting the ‘drsyā’ aspect (color) and the ‘sravyā’ aspect (sound). She wants her life to be seen as a Nataka, which privileges her character using the multimedial narrative mode of theatre. Significantly, Draupadi, in keeping with the Indian Nataka tradition, would like to be the sutradhara who will also don the main role in the play.

### **A Deliberate Design of Indian Drama**

Discussing the structure of a classical Nataka, Lockwood and Bhat say, “...our view is that the prologue of a Sanskrit drama is carefully crafted by the playwright so that by aesthetic design the sutradhara must take a specific leading role... – not just some role” (7). The authors then adapt

Abhinavagupta's dictum, "The sthapaaka himself is the main character. After performing the prastavana, the sthapaaka should assume the role of the main character and appear on the stage. This being the case, don't distinguish them!" (7). They go on to argue that from its beginning to its end, "the Sanskrit play thus reveals an unfolding continuity and unity in its structural development which commentators have perceptively compared with the development of a living organism" (7).

### **Seeking to Play Only the Leading Role**

Draupadi in Divakaruni's novel does not want to play 'some role' but rather the leading role, whose presence determines the action of the story, thereby demanding an unwavering attention and focus on her. In other words, she does not want to play a role in someone else's script which will cripple her movement and diminish her impact. Knowing well that 'script is destiny', (that is, a character in a play neither has choice nor freedom to lead an individual life not dictated by the script), Draupadi does not want to be a mere character in somebody else's script. She considers all the earlier versions of her story as scripts which denied her freedom and progress. So in the new palace that she envisions, 'birds will sing in apple and mango orchards and butterflies will flit among jasmynes' to suggest the freedom she yearns for.

It is also noteworthy that Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions* is also called Panchaali's Mahabharata. As the sutradhari, who plays the lead role, Draupadi wants to freely sing the song of her life which is colorful, complex and multivalent. She says,

"I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardship in Khandav. I'd helped them design this unique palace which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner" (Banerjee Divakaruni 151).

### **Divakaruni's Draupadi – An Authentic Character**

Divakaruni's novel creates an impression that among all the versions of the Draupadi story, this one is the most authentic because Draupadi herself narrates and enacts the story of her life seemingly without an authorial intrusion. She brings into the frame of her narrative Vyasa, the author of the first version of the Mahabharata story, to suggest that there could be two authors operating in tandem to bring out the most authentic version.

Desiring to change the course of history, Draupadi's palace of illusions will become the hub of both domestic and political activity. This palace, which has already been seen as her telling of her life's story, will creatively and critically respond to the other versions of the same story.

When Draupadi says that this palace will mirror her deepest being what she means is that Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, which is also Draupadi's own, will be the closest to Draupadi's life.

In an attempt to counter the misinterpretations of the previous versions, Draupadi decides to be the author of the drama of her life. Significantly there are three narrators in the first part of the novel, Dhai Ma, Dhri and Draupadi. All the three narrate, intermittently, the same story, each choosing to focus on an event or a series of events to bring out their point of view. Of the three, Draupadi alone is very anxious to give a factual account of the things past. This anxiety is because Draupadi does not want either a sanitized version or a distorted version of the past events.

“Were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing...Perhaps that was why it changed with each telling. Or is that the nature of all stories, the reason for their power” (Banerjee Divakaruni 15).

### **The Process of Construction**

Draupadi wants to reflect on the process of constructing a story. That is why she says, “Were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At best of times, a story is a slippery thing.” (15) This statement clearly shows that no story can claim either authenticity or finality. She argues that the story is a slippery thing because it cannot be fixed in space or time.

Draupadi, in *The Palace of Illusions*, is aware that there are many entrances to a story and prefers to go through all the entrances. So when Dhai Ma or Dhri narrate a story, she is quick to pounce on them if they indulge in a one-sided narration. She wants to re-appropriate her rightful place as the narrator of her own story, and also of those who are active participants in her story, she, in fact, pushes Dhri to the margins. When Draupadi begins to narrate, and thus inscribe, her own history, she begins the process of supplanting him in history—a process which will reach fruition in the Kurukshetra war. Instead of being the all-important agent of Drona’s death, who, through this action, would strike a decisive blow in the Great War, Dhri will be reduced to an insignificant performer on the sidelines. Dhri, whose birth was considered more significant by Drupad, the patriarch of the family, will recede into the background and he will become merely an actor who has a limited role to play in Draupadi’s script.

### **Female Agency**

At this point, Draupadi is like the *prastavana-sutradhari*, who is expected to give away the title and the author of the play to the audience. In this case, the title is *The Palace of Illusions: Panchaali’s Mahabharat* and the author is Draupadi herself. The agency now shifts to Draupadi who, by narrating her own story, actually seeks to wrest back the initiative to action. The concept of female agency is an important one in current sociological and anthropological studies. “...A revised understanding of agency has long been the explicit or implicit concern of feminist research devoted to the uncovering of the marginalized experiences of women” (McNay 10). Draupadi, the *Sutradhari*, transforms herself into the leading actor. As already discussed, the *sutradhari* in the classical performative tradition holds together the strands of continuity in the

narration and goes on to take the lead role in the play-proper. Thus, narrativity and agency come together in the person of Draupadi.

### **Self-Identity**

The construction of self-identity through an appropriation of interpretations is commented upon by Lois McNay thus:

“With regard to gender identity, the hermeneutic idea of the pre-interpreted nature of experience provides a way of considering how the ambiguities of the process through which the individual appropriates gender norms are worked through at the level of self-identity...The one-sided nature of certain constructionist accounts of subject formation does not capture these ambiguities sufficiently;” (77).

In the case of Draupadi, all the previous versions of her story have been “constructionist accounts” which served the cause of a patriarchal hermeneutics. That is why she attempts to turn the apparently complementary male narrations into conflicting female narrations which bring out the tensions the male narrations seek to smooth over. An instance of this can be found in the novel when Draupadi is interrupted by Dhri in her narration of her father’s story. She condescends to allow Dhri to take over: “Having shaped our father’s motivations the way he wished them to be, he was willing to let me tell the rest” (Banerjee Divakaruni 17). By the mere act of recording this incident, Draupadi manages to transform seeming complicity into resistance. She raises doubts regarding the authenticity of Dhri’s story. By opening up the gaps in Dhri’s narrative, she prepares the ground for establishing a self-identity through self-interpretation.

### **Realizing the Prophecy in Her Own Terms**

Though Vyasa prophesies Draupadi’s future, it is Draupadi, who, through her agency, realizes the prophecy in her own terms. She, in fact, endows Vyasa’s words with meaning thus turning “his story” into “history” by living it. Vyasa drops hints regarding her future, which, though they turn out to be true, do so not in the way he envisioned but in the way Draupadi wanted them to.

Draupadi, in Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*, journeys from being a woman repeatedly made the subject of narration by patriarchal narratives to becoming a woman who subjectivizes narration itself, in the process, overthrowing the narratives that have constructed her womanhood through centuries. By becoming both the narrator and agent of action, Divakaruni’s Draupadi recovers the voice of womanhood.

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L. Kavitha Nair M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai Campus  
Tamilnadu, India.  
[kavitha1113@rediffmail.com](mailto:kavitha1113@rediffmail.com)  
[kavithanair.ismart@gmail.com](mailto:kavithanair.ismart@gmail.com)