Myth Symbolizing Feminine World In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how myth has been handled to explore the inner and outer world of women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions (2008).* Myth has strengthened literature and has great affinity with it. Both myth and culture are the products of human intellects and are aesthetic expression of man. They have great similarities that represent social problems. Indian mythology is vast and scattered among many literary works like Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Mahabharata,* the *Ramayana,* Buddhist writings, etc. Retelling of the Indian mythological stories re-establishes their significance in the modern Indian social context. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni does not tend to invent a totally new world out of Veda Vyasa's *Mahabharata*. The novel honestly continues the story-line of the epic without introducing any new character. But she re-invents those aspects of mythical epic which otherwise seemed to remain unnoticed so long by the readers. She attempts to focus on those aspects which did not get much attention in the original narrative.

keywords : obsession, vengeance, myth, discrimination, identity

Introduction

The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos', which has a range of meanings such as 'word', 'saying', 'story', 'fiction', and a traditional tale common to the member of a tribe, race, or nation. It usually involves the supernatural elements to explain some natural phenomenon in boldly imaginative terms.

Every culture has a myth. There can be no myth without culture. In myth alone one finds perfect warriors, perfect teachers, perfect wives and perfect sons. Myth constructs a worldview for a people. It serves as a looking glass through which life comes to order. In other words it constructs a pattern so that the apparently chaotic world comes to possess a structure. Every culture has its own set of sacred narratives, symbols, and rituals to condition the mind of its people and make them look at the world in a particular way. In this way every culture distinguishes itself from the rest by having its own paradigm. With a paradigm comes the idea of perfection: what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. This discrimination establishes a hierarchy in the material world between the desirable and undesirable. Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Indian Mythology* states:

The vital role of myth in our culture is best understood by considering a world without myth. In such a world nothing is sacred, not even our homes or our bodies. Everything is sinful, open to violation. There is no holy river, no promised land, no chosen people. Nothing is taboo: fathers can eat their children; mothers can make love to their sons. There is no ultimate truth; everything is provisional. There is no perfect society; there is no sin, no afterlife, no rebirth, no redemption, no release. There is no motivation to do the right thing; no heaven to attain… It teaches us how our ancestors and our contemporaries have given meaning to the experience called life, how they have responded to the challenges posed by life. (62-63)

For ages, the human kind has depended on stories for transmission of information, attitude, values events, ethos, worldviews, cultures, etc. In the context of India, there are the two great epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which were handed over generations and it is widely acknowledged that *Ramayana* portrays about how 'to be' *Mahabharata* depicts how 'not to be'.

The Indian mythic tradition spans over a period of over thirty-five hundred years. Every culture has its own mythology that includes the legends of its history, religion, heroes and notions on the creation of the world. These stories have immense symbolic power which has made them stand the test of time since the beginning of the universe.

Mahabharata is a unique epic which reflects the ancient culture of India. It has been the richest storehouse of myths, legends and tales. The epic effortlessly weaves myth, history, religion, science, philosophy and superstition into its innumerable stories within stories, thereby, creating a rich world with psychological complexity. It deals with all the four main aims of human life, like *Dharma* (righteousness)*, Artha (*economy*), Kama (*pleasure)*, Moksha (*salvation*).

Mahabharata, also depicts the life of women in all its colour and variety, dealing with their status, education, aims, field of activity, marriage, family life, social life, social codes, economic condition, political life, style of life, etc. They are women of integrity and have the essential quality of living a life of simplicity. Each one of them in her own way is a teacher to mankind with their goodness and many dimensions. The women of *Mahabharata* are incarnate in the women of today as modern women too are struggling between social norms and individual freedom. The characters like Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi reflect the vision of the society about women and reveal a most serene profile of Indian woman in the epic.

In the *Mahabharata,* Draupadi is a heroic princess and is known by several other names such as Yajnaseni, Krishna, Panchali, Sairandhri, Prasati, Mahabharati, Yojanagandha. She is considered as one of the panch-kanya of ancient Hindu epic along with her mother-in law Kunti. Draupadi with her extreme beauty, intelligence and virtue is also one of the most complex and female character in Hindu literature. On the one hand, she is womanly compassionate and generous and on the other, she wrecks vengeance on those who did her wrong. She was born to uproot Kauravas and mark a change in history by establishing the rule of religion. She never compromised on either her rights as a daughter –in law or even on the rights of the Pandavas

remained ever ready to fight back. At the very moment of her disrobement, she vowed and promised herself that one day she would definitely seek revenge on the injustice meted out to her.

There are few women in Hindu mythology who were aggressive and could speak their mind in a world dominated by men. Draupadi was one of them. She is the only one in the epic who enjoys a unique relationship with Krishna, addressing each other as Sakha and Sakhi. The possession of strong qualities such as strength of character, determination and fearlessness makes Draupadi a natural ideal for young women. She remained at the same time the most enigmatic personality, who did what she felt was right and just. It was her strength of her will and unshakable faith in God that gave her the power to overcome the innumerable and unimaginable sufferings she had to face throughout her life.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indo-American author having published her novels in multiple genres, including realistic and historical fiction, magical realism and fantasy. Her themes include immigration, struggles of women, South Asian experience, history, myth and diversity. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions (2008)* tells the story of *Mahabharata* from Panchali's (Draupadi) perspective. She believed that the epic has powerful 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).

The Palace of Illusions takes us back to the ancient times of myths where Panchaali, 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 moves back and forth between flashbacks and present time frames. At the beginning, we find Panchaali remembering her obsession of listening to her own story from *Dhai Ma*. This provided Panchaali a critical insight into her life giving 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 Vengence, or the Unepected One. But *Dhai Ma* puffed out her cheeks at my tendency to drama, calling me the Girl Who Wasn't Invited. (Divakaruni 1)

She was an unwanted child for her father who only desired a son to take revenge on Drona. Drupad was forced to accept Panchaali because her brother Dhrishtadyumna was not ready to leave her hand when they emerged out of fire. Panchaali could never forgive her father for that initial rejection: "He held out his arms- but for only my brother alone. It was only my

brother he meant to   raise up to show his people. Only my brother he wanted……(Divakaruni 6)"

Panchaali unconsciously had an urge to shine through history by changing its course but at the same time was always doubtful if she had the capacity to bring changes in other lives: "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?" (Divakaruni 5). Panchaali's death appears as liberation and resolve of the contradictions of her identity. She happily says: " I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet for the first time, I'm truly Panchhaali" (360).

Conclusion

The Palace of Illusions is about women discrimination, their struggles, identity, male domination, unique female perspectives and position of women during the period of The Mahabharata. Draupadi's life shows in the epic how women need to accept the concept of tradition and culture without any question. Her determination and courage has been explained all through the novel. It has its own charm to and hold on the reader. Whether it is ancient or the modern period the life of women has not had any change, it has only challenges to face and act according to the context. It shows how a woman born as a princess suffered in her life.

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