Deconstructing the Myth of *Mahabharata*: Reviewing *Panchaali* From a More Humanitarian Perspective with Divakaruni

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ABSTRACT

The myth of *Mahabharata* flows through our veins; it is the one epic in which everyone can get his/her answers of every type of crises. But whenever we start talking about this mythical epic, a severe patriarchal notion comes about the responsibilities of such a dread affair at Kurukshetra. And it is no wonder that most of the society hold Draupadi responsible for such a disastrous battle between brothers. In their debates, they often forget the pains and pangs Draupadi had to undergo, both in her father’s palace and in her husband’s place. She was respected by all, but was never loved as a beloved wife by any of her husbands. Rather she was considered as a connecting thread that connected all the brothers with the sameness of sentimental attitudes towards enemies. So, my purpose through this paper is to show the other side of the myth, the humanitarian site in which Draupadi has been brutally suffered helplessly all through her life. That’s why I have applied here Derrida’s theory of ‘Deconstruction’ to break away the prevalent conceptualized notion of Draupadi from a catalyst to a sufferer, a pathetic personality who at the end only, found her true identity. Divakaruni’s narration of Mahabharata is quite deviated from the UR-text. And my humble endeavor in this paper is to analyze the character traits of Draupadi following Divakaruni’s version of retold *Mahabharata*.

KEYWORDS: Deconstruction, Patriarchy, Myth etc.
The *Mahabharata*, that is, the great Bharata, is one of the two most important ancient epics of India, the other being the Ramayana. One of the greatest Indian sages, named Vyasa is believed to have composed the work. At the core of the epic *Mahabharata*, as Divakaruni states before beginning her best-selling novel, *The Place of Illusions*, “lies the fierce rivalry between two branches of the Kuru dynasty, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The lifelong struggle between the cousins for the throne of Hastinapur culminates in the bloody battle of Kurukshetra, in which most kings of that period participated and perished.”(Divakaruni, p.vii)

But Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the renowned Indian born South-Asian Diaspora writer was never quite satisfied by the portrayals of the women, and especially of Draupadi; who, as some might argue, by her headstrong actions brought about the destruction of the ‘Third age of man’. Not even that, popular perception states that she was a ‘Kritya’, an ill fated omen, a dark stain in the history of Bharat, and that’s why still now no girl child is named after her. Divakaruni, however, provides new perspectives to this epic allowing ‘a daring but smooth and spontaneous interaction between various worlds and ways of existence, those considered as ‘real’ and those as ‘supernatural’ or ‘imaginary’. (‘Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices: Deploying Mystical Realism*’). And this is particularly obvious in her retelling of the most sacred Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, with the significant title, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). *Los Angeles Times* too, significantly marked that,

The Palace of Illusions…is as grand and tragic as the epic poems by Homer. The story is complex, as political relationships grow and develop, and friends and enemies are created, leading to battles and wars that will eventually destroy them all…I was captivated by the tragic storyline and the fate into which Panchaali was born. This admirable attempt to recreate the epic Mahabharat from the viewpoint of a strong woman is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s best work yet. (14Aug, 2010)

The major novelty brought by Divakaruni lies in the fact that the story is focused on the legendary woman Panchaali, who, right from the beginning received the prophecy that her life
was to change the course of history. So, my purpose through this paper, following Divakaruni, to find out her joys and doubts, struggles and triumphs, achievements and despair, through an unique female way in which she is forced to recreate her own world; learning through mistakes, hubris and especially from her deep yearning, though never exposed, for another man, whom for social reasons she could not accept in her youth.

So, before deconstructing the myth of Draupadi, I need to give a brief detailing of what is called ‘deconstruction’ and in what senses I’ve used this theory to read behind the episodes presented in Mahabharata. Following the basic tenets of Saussure, who declared that, in each linguistic unit, sign consists of a signifier and a signified, and ‘the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary’, Derrida announces that language is ‘self-referential’ and meaning emerges out of the differences between linguistic units, and also that in each sign ‘present’ there are ‘traces’ of the signs ‘absent’. According to Derrida, each sign performs twofold functions, ‘differing and deferring’. Hence, “the structure of the sign is conditioned by differing and deferring and not by the signifier and the signified. This means that a sign is something that is unlike another sign and something that is not the sign. Each sign differs from another sign and it has the power of deferment, the capacity to postpone. Thus, a sign is something that is not there.” (‘The Theory of Deconstruction: An Appraisal’; Prof. B.K. Das). Therefore, in spite of the differences, which includes, both ‘differment’ and ‘deferment’ a writer can never express his meaning accurately, and thus, ‘The business of deconstruction is not to deconstruct the text but to show how the text has deconstructed itself’ (‘The Theory of Deconstruction; An appraisal; Prof. B.K. Das). Derrida too, suggests in Deconstruction and Criticism:

A text (…) is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric or traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. (p.86)

Therefore, deconstruction is more a practice than a bound theoretical concept which brings ‘to light what had remained unperceived by the author and his followers’ (“Blindness and Insight: Essays on Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism” by Paul de Man. p.16) freeing the text from the ‘fixity’ of meaning, making it a ‘free play of significations.’ Here, in the same way, I want to focus the novel from Draupadi’s point of view, her desire to find true love throughout her life, her disgust at her paternal house where she was
sacrificed in the name of *Swayamvara*, but in reality which was nothing but an political contract, her utter helplessness when she was forced to marry all the Pandava brothers, where no one asked the question, what she actually wanted, her jealousy at her husband’s taking other wives, her resentment towards Kunti who treated her as a ‘trophy’ to share equally among brothers, and her earnest yearning of unexpressed love towards Karna, her desire to be equally by him and of course, the shame she experienced in Hastinapur after Yudhistir lost his everything, including Panchaali in a game of dice. Though, the narrative of the original epic is much different from what represented by Divakaruni, still, the title itself, ‘The Palace of Illusions’ indicates the ultimate barrenness of her heart, symbolizing as the palace itself was the creation of Maya, Draupadi’s life too, an instrumental tool in designing the basic sketch of *Mahabharata*. Unlike the original epic, Vyasa is presented here as an omniscient narrator who has already written Draupadi’s fate long before her coming into the earth. Not only that, her birth was not even wished for, she came out of the celestial yagna fire with her brother Dhri, for a purpose of taking vengeance against her father older enemy, Drona, and in her own house her voice of protest, willingness to learn Nyaya Shastra, taking part in armor activities, and even her right to chose her better-half were vehemently silenced, instead she was taught ‘the rules of comportment—how to walk, talk, and sit in the company of men; how to do the same when only women are present; how to show respect to queens who are more important; how to subtly snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the other wives of (her) husband.’ (Divakaruni p.30); diminishing all her contradictory protests that, ‘men always break the promises they make before marriage. Besides, if you’re married off like Panchaal’s other princesses, you won’t even get a chance to talk to your husband before he beds you.”(p. 31). Apart from this kind of suppression of her voices, she was foretold by Vyasa himself of the curses thrown against her life:

You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it.

You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time. You will bring about the deaths of evil kings—and your children’s, and your brother’s. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history. You will be loved, though you will not always recognize who loves you. Despite your five husbands, you will die alone, abandoned at the end—and yet not so. (39)
And her entire life revolves round these prophecies, at her Swayamvara, though she was keenly attracted to the apparently simple yet handsome personality of Karna, she could not averted the textual bonding where she is bound to marry the greatest of warriors, Arjuna, though all through her life she secretly cherished the desire of loving and getting loved by the baser born ally of Duryodhun. None of her five husbands, except Bheem, loved her; not even Arjuna uttered a protest against her getting married to all the five brothers; instead held Panchaaly responsible for this event. It was Bheem, the most powerful and most straightforward among the Pandavas is devoted to her. She takes her revenge on her perpetuaters through him. She allows him to fulfil her demands. Which Bhima always cherish to do. It was Bhima who fights with Yakshas for the Saugandha flowers for her. He kills Kichaka, who molested her. Divakaruni”s Draupadi admits that she do not love Bhima as much Bhima loved her and she in fact used Bhima. During the period of exile, Draupadi do not let the fire of revenge cool down. She keeps provoking Bhima now and then as she says, 

“....recognizing Bheem”s weakness, I took advantage of it. I wept more loudly when he was around, knowing it would make him rail against Yudhishthira” (Divakaruni, p.213).

But she has her excuses, including Bheem, none of her husbands stood by her when she was shamed in the Sabha, and therefore uttered that fatal curse which ultimately led to the battle of Kuruksetra:

“All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day’s work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I’ve wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman.” (194) And we follow the consequences.

Apart from this limitation of textual bounding, another longing for which she had to utterly suffer is for her unexpressed and unreciprocated love for Karna, Her attraction towards sad, simple and masculine personality of Karna is described in her own words, “I longed to look into Karna”s face to see if those eyes were indeed as sad as the artist had portrayed, but even I know how improper that would be. I focused on his hands, the wrists, disdainfully bare of ornaments, the powerful battered knuckles” (93).
But later on, to save her brother from a mighty battle with Karna she insulted him asking her parental identity, which ultimately incited him of her disrobing before the public eye. Karna’s infatuation for Draupadi is finally revealed through a dialogue between Karna and Bhishma, lying on the bed of arrows. During this dialogue Karna confesses his infatuation for Draupadi, which Draupadi overhears. When Draupadi hears that Karna finds her irresistible, a part of her mind is satisfied, but at the same time she also feels guilty that she nurtures an unfaithful thought. The stripping episode changes the relationship of Draupadi with her husbands. She now realises that there are certain things in the lives of her husbands which they value more than her honour. They will avenge her, but only when it will bring heroic fame to them. The only soothing balm in her tragic life was Krishna, who from the beginning of her life to the end of Mahapraasthan journey, was there to console her, to guide her choosing the right path in future. Panchaali herself admitted she was fascinated by the charming personality of Krishna:

I adored the way he laughed … I often forgot that he was much older than me... He had been a friend of my father’s for many years; he was genuinely fond of my brother; but I had the impression that it was I whom he really came to see. He called me by a special name, the female form of his own: Krishnaa. It had two meanings: the dark one, or the one whose attraction can’t be resisted. Even after he returned to Dwarka, the notes of his flute lingered in the walls of our cheerless quarters. (12)

Later, as she follows her husbands on their way to death, in the Himalayas, the only one she is reminded of is Krishna. With the help of Krishna, who manifests himself at her side, she finally opens herself to the true nature of love, totally different from the nostalgia she had experienced in the past. She finally sees that from a vast, cosmic perspective, her fate was that of “the instrument” (p.357) beyond which there were other doers, other forces at work. So she is not to be blamed for the fact she forgot the origins of her being and that she caused pain and devastation. When she slips into the space beyond earthly existence, “something breaks,” with “a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below.” She finally able to understand who she is, and therefore realizes “beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego”—and yet “for the first time, I am truly Panchaali” (p.360).
Thus, through this paper, I endeavored to deconstruct the popular receptive notion of Draupadi, not being a catalectic personality causing war between brothers but a very much a helpless one victimized by the wrong doings of fate.
WORKS CITED


