

Elements of New Womanhood and Ecofeminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract. New womanhood represents a woman in a light of confidence who is not afraid to voice out her opinions. She is independent to take decisions of her life and has her own identity. She cannot tolerate injustice against her and is brave enough to fight battles of her life and taste the fruits of victory. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fifth novel *The Palace of Illusions*, is about the life of Draupadi, the mythical character of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Divakaruni makes an attempt to reinterpret the epic from woman's perspective. The novel deals with Draupadi's feelings. The novel shows how Draupadi evolves to be a stronger woman from her previous self. She delineates instances where Draupadi questions the system of patriarchy and its treatment of women, their assigned roles and expected behaviour. Overcoming all these, Draupadi develops a clear understanding of herself and thus accepts things as they come in her life. And finally, she grows as a woman who wants to dedicate her life to the service of people in her kingdom. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism and political ecology. It has grown as a concept to study the mind of a woman and to analyse how closely she is related to nature.

Keywords: Perspective; delineation; ecology; feminism.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta on July 6, in a Bengali Hindu family. Her schooling was at Loreto House, a convent school run by Irishmissionary nuns. She did her graduation at Presidency College in Calcutta. For pursuing her higher studies, she moved to the United States in 1977. She completed her Master's degree in English Literature from Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio and received a doctorate in English Renaissance Literature from the University of California, Berkley. Staying in America, observing the lives of Indian immigrants and women chiefly, she wished to help the battered women and so set up MAITRI in 1991. Being its cofounder and president, she has been serving the South Asian women for almost two decades. She worked as a professor of English and taught writing and composition at Foothill College in Los Altos, California. Since 1997, she has been teaching creative writing at the University of Houston. Being a postcolonial diasporic writer, focuses most of her writing on the problems faced by women immigrants. She also focuses

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her writing on gender issues, social inequalities, ideological structures and biases.

She saw that the condition of women in an alien land is not much different from that of India. The difference in cultures of India and America set them with different notions and are in a shock initially but later they adjust and adapt to the new land. Moreover, if a diasporic woman stays at home, she doesn't have direct contact with the chic and fashionable American society and hence feels quite comfortable. Sometimes, it is like double displacement for her; from her family to the new land. She also came across atrocities against women in their marital life. Many women are subject to problems of various kinds, especially due to the stereotypical male counterparts who wish women to be submissive and confined to homes. They are denied much exposure to the outside world. The male counterparts take the liberty of exercising their own will. Unable to bear the humiliation meted out to them, sometimes women break the shackles and desert home. Divakaruni's works not only show the problems of women but furnish solutions to problems. Her women characters play a major role in expanding the vision about their predicament.

The Palace of Illusions is narrated from Draupadi's perspective. The writer says about the character of Draupadi and the women characters she has delineated:

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. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all 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. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali?... It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*. (*The Palace of Illusions*, 4)

The novel represents how Draupadi evolves to be a strong woman who invests her life for the welfare of women. She starts her narration by highlighting the preference of male child over a girl child. Male child

preference present in traditional Indian households, in the present times owes its origin to the ancient period. In the dvaparyug, the age of the happening of the Mahabharata war, one can witness this issue. A male child is preferred in families, as people believe that he will be the heir to continue the family legacy. A female child is considered to be 'duhita,' the one who takes away everything from the family. Parents feel they have to work a lot and earn money for getting their daughters married by meeting the exorbitant demands of the in-laws. Since ages, the condition of girl children has almost been the same. In the case of ancient epics like *the Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana*, the situation is a little different. They need the male child to continue family legacy and to satisfy the previous revenges. To be blessed with a male child, people perform many sacrifices, rituals and even take up fasts for days together. King Drupad, Draupadi's father, feels extremely happy at the birth of a boy, whom he names as Dhristadhyumna, " i.e., destroyer of enemies. Though a female child was not expected at the birth of Dhristadhyumna from the fire, they take care of her well. A mystifying voice says that the girl would change the course of history. The girl child is Draupadi. After Draupadi knows about her birth, we see a questioning Draupadi who doesn't like the name given to her. About this, she feels: "Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history?"(9)

A woman's role in traditional India was to be an obedient and submissive daughter or wife. Even in the ancient times, the condition of woman was almost the same. She was destined to learn only feminine skills like sewing, knitting, and painting to fit perfectly in the role of a wife. Draupadi is seen as a woman who is not happy with her present status. She wants the palace walls to be low so that she can see the worldly things. Draupadi is portrayed by the writer as one who can satiate her desires by getting educated and knowing more about the worldly affairs. This interest of hers makes her secretly listen to the lessons taught to her brother, Dhri. Draupadi puts her aspirations thus:

But I hungered to know about the
amazing, mysterious world that extended
past what I could imagine, the world of
the senses and of that which lay beyond
them. (23-24)

Discrimination against women is seen when Draupadi's father doesn't want his daughter to learn the worldly ways. In the words of Draupadi:

A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchal! (23)

Treating women secondary to men and assigning only specific roles where she has no place to enter the man's domain are seen in the novel. A self-respecting woman, she retaliates when she comes to know that people consider women inferior. In an attempt to ridicule the tutor who had such opinion on women, Draupadi makes his documents fall to the ground. She sees energy in her, a power she feels she didn't know earlier. When tutor tells her that a Kshatriya woman's duty is to pray for her kith and kin to die with glory in war, Draupadi says:

I'd teach them, instead, to be survivors.
And why was a battle necessary at all?
Surely there were other ways to glory,
even for men? I'd teach them to search
for those. (26)

A strong and powerful woman can face any impediment in her life. Inner courage of a woman is essential to fight against any situation. This inner strength in Draupadi enables her to know her future. After coming to know that she would be the cause of destruction of mankind, she doesn't get deterred. Instead she wants to change her fate by remaining unmarried. A woman is considerate to the conditions and situations of others around her; she doesn't want to bring destruction to the world and asks for a solution. Sage Vyasa gives her the solution:

Three dangerous moments will come to you. The first will be just before your wedding: at that time, hold back your question. The second will be when your husbands are at the height of their power: at that time, hold back your laughter. The third will be when you're shamed as you'd never imagined possible: at that time, hold back your curse. May be it will mitigate the catastrophes to come. (40)

As she bore the truth of the prophecy quite boldly, he gives her the name 'Panchaali.' Draupadi who can understand the turmoil in her life is quite careful about her actions, but due to the inherent qualities of being

restless and edgy, she could not put her words in control. Draupadi breaks her resolutions in future.

A woman is expected to bear her suffering with patience and provide solutions. Though suffering and compassion are seen in Draupadi, it is the flaw of 'impatience' that changes her destiny. Draupadi had the propensity of becoming angry and restless. Krishna tells the way Draupadi asks for one boon five times from Lord Shiva in her previous life. As such she gets five of everything she wished. Thus she gets five husbands. Impatience in women is not accepted. Woman is expected to be an epitome of forbearance, sacrifice and love which keeps her balanced and composed. Impatience only brings destruction.

A modern woman thinks and feels differently from the traditional stereotypical images of woman's duties. As her husband is blind, Gandhari blindfolds herself. Draupadi doesn't appreciate Gandhari's idea and more says if she herself was blind, she would be more cautious to know the things happening in the court. Draupadi also has concern for Gandhari and empathizes with her condition. Keeping Kunti and Gandhari in mind, Draupadi feels that powerful women end up in disastrous marriages. Though Draupadi seems to be a woman who detests traditional way of living, she has the attitude of being a true wife and companion to Arjun. A woman's destiny is with her husband. If he takes her to riches, she can enjoy them. If he does some mistakes, she has to go along with him. A woman is always bound to her relations, to her father, brother, or son or husband. Draupadi as a girl has been trained in that way, and when she gets married to Arjun who was in the disguise of a Brahmin, she decides to leave all her princely ways of living by being an ordinary wife:

I am no longer a princess. I'm your wife,
and content with my lot, whoever you
may be. (103)

If polygamy is one of the social issues which reduces the status of a woman, the phenomenon of woman perpetrating polygamy is quite excruciating. Without knowing the feelings of Draupadi, Kunti asks her to marry her five sons. Draupadi detests this idea but she cannot help, and suffers within herself :

Five husbands? Are you mad? I wanted
to say, I'm already married to Arjun!"
She doesn't like her husband listening to
his mother's words. Draupadi also
acknowledges the power of Kunti who

exercises her will: "Here was woman's
power at work! (108-109)

An Indian wife is not allowed to express the pain, anguish and suffering at being a common property of five husbands. This deplorable condition of a woman is brought out by the writer through the life of Draupadi. Even King Drupad doesn't accept this marriage but is compelled to, as the Pandavas threaten him. They say if Draupadi doesn't want to marry, she can stay back in her father's palace. Such kind of threatening of girl's parents is seen even in the epics and not only in the present-day Indian society. A woman considers it a big disgrace if she has to leave her marital home and live in her maternal home. The society would also treat her and her family with condescension. This condition is not limited to the proletariat women but is experienced by royal women like Draupadi too. A woman is not allowed to take a decision of her own though she feels like objecting to it. Seeing her pain, Sage Vyasa gives a solution. Draupadi says about the solution given by Vyasa, "Each time I went to a new brother, I'd be a virgin again."(120)

Ecofeminism has grown as a concept to study woman's mind. According to this theory, women are closely related to nature. Women have been bestowed with some powers like giving birth to a child. They are considered divine and spiritualistic. Eco feminists view women as part of nature. In fact, the feminine qualities, the delicate nature, ability to bear pain and suffering come to her through nature. It is quite obvious if a woman loves and is closely connected to nature. Draupadi had a penchant for act, greenery and gardens everywhere in her palace. Even when they were to build a new kingdom in 'Khandav,' she was when they much worried as the animal kingdom was put to loss. The Pandavas cut down the forest and burnt it up.

It is the fate of women to accept her situation without complaint. But here is a daring and self-respecting woman like Draupadi who questions the injustice done to her. The faith and love she had for her husbands seems to be lost with this incident. Draupadi questions:

I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister
of Dhristadhyumna. Mistress of the
greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled
away like a bag of coins, or summoned to
court like a dancing girl. (190)

Divakaruni shows us how a woman can be strong even in times of distress. A woman who cannot and has no hopes of husband being a protector resorts to someone else who has been a guiding force in her life. Bheeshma, Bheema, Karna and others cannot help her. She recollects the words of Krishna that no one can dishonour a woman unless she allows them to. Thus she relies on Krishna's support. Krishna helps her out by providing endless cloth so that Dushasan gets tired of removing her saree.

Draupadi is a *shakti* born out of 'fire' with blessings of God. 'Curses' are something which sages and powerful women had with them. Seeing her own plight, Draupadi curses that the whole kingdom will be destroyed. Kunti could get a son by praying to Sun God. Gandhari can have immense power, if she opens her eyes. The curse of Draupadi comes true with the Kurukshetra war and the killing of Kauravas.

The woman who has a changed perception of life, who now turns towards society rather than herself, decides to set up a women's court for women to speak about their sorrows. The new woman is also able to seek the help of other women around her and thus lives in a spirit of new womanhood and sisterhood. Kunti, Gandhari, Uttara and Subhadra extend their support. Uttara gives her jewellery for the betterment of women in Hastinapur and sets up a 'destitute in homes.' Draupadi says there was a change in the condition of women, "Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment". Like Tilottama who helped the Indian immigrant women to stand up for themselves, Draupadi helps the women in her kingdom. She makes unremitting efforts to see the condition of women improve. Divakaruni thus shows the inner capacity of women to bring about a change in society.

Thus the journey of Draupadi which is quite different from other women, mortals, ordinary women, comes to an end. Divakaruni seems to suggest that certain incidents in the life of Draupadi are quite similar to the predicament of a woman in the twenty-first century. But how women bear the odds against them, how they struggle for an identity of their own, and how they turn towards society seems to be the message which every woman has to receive. It seems that there should be another life where the roles are reversed so that women can enjoy complete freedom like men.

Kunti is another woman character portrayed by the writer. Draupadi considers Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas to be a powerful

woman. Her husbands decide to marry her following the advice of Kunti. To keep the word of their mother, they marry Draupadi. Kunti is a woman who can convince her sons of the importance of the words she had uttered. In those days, people used to keep their word, said either in ignorance or with purpose. It is considered essential for kingly men and women. Bheeshma who promises that he would not marry in his life sticks to his words and brings up the Pandavas as a grandfather.

Divakaruni portrays a change in Kunti's mind when she goes and meets Karna to stop the war. She promises him that he would be made the king. A son too longs for his mother's love. He has suffered a lot due to the society's humiliation. He now wants to be declared a legitimate child. Kunti is successful in stopping Karna to be the commander in chief of the Kaurava army only to prevent him from killing his own brothers. Kunti is portrayed by the writer as a woman with strong will who can chart out possible solutions for difficult circumstances. Had she, in the beginning itself, saved and kept her son with her, the war would not have taken place. She could have avoided Karna killing his own brothers. It is the fault of the mother to deprive a son of her love but when she wants, she can wield some influence and change her son's mind. In order to get rid of the earthly life, earthly possessions and bindings, Kunti decides to lead the rest of her life thinking of God.

Gandhari is another character who is the mother of the Kauravas. We are introduced to the character as a woman who has blindfolded her eyes for the sake of her blind husband, Dhritarashtra. A woman's life and happiness lies in the wellbeing of the husband. Gandhari satisfies the norms Manu has set up for women. A dutiful wife can forego her own wishes and pleasures for the sake of her husband. Gandhari's extreme love for Dhritarashtra makes her blindfold herself so that she will not see and enjoy the pleasures her husband has been deprived of. Draupadi doesn't approve Gandhari's idea and she feels she would all the more keep her eyes wide open, if she were in her place so that the things go right in the kingdom ruled by a blind king. Divakaruni retells the faith, love and affection an Indian wife had in the yester years for her male counterpart.

Bhanumati, Uttara, Subhadra and Draupadi live in a spirit of sisterhood. Uttara and Subhadra contribute to the establishment of the women's court in Hastinapur. Draupadi takes their assistance in solving women's problems. After the death of Duryodhana, Bhanumati goes back to her father's place. For a woman who has nothing to do in in-laws' place

after the death of her husband, her father's place is her home. Utara, Subhadra and Parikshit, the son of Abhimanyu take care of the kingdom after Draupadi's departure. Sikhandi is another woman character in the Mahabharata who turns into a man due to some curse. Draupadi is linked to Sikhandi as she is her sister, the daughter of one of her father's wives. Rebirths, deaths, myth and magic are certain aspects in the lives of people who belong to the primordial times. Rebirth has a great significance. If in one birth, the wishes are not fulfilled, people are born in the next life to achieve what they could not in the previous life.

Thus Amba takes a second birth. Born to King Drupad as Sikhandi, she decides to avenge Bheeshma. Since a man only can kill a great warrior like Bheeshma, Shikhandi prays to God and lives a very hard life and becomes a man in the forest. Shikhandi likes Draupadi and asks her to be careful when she needs to take further steps in her life. Thus one sister loves the as other and there is sisterhood seen between them.

There is loss and pain in the lives of myriad of characters, men, women and children in the Mahabharata. Divakaruni thus makes an attempt to re-tell the repercussions of such dreadful wars like the Kurukshetra in the voice of Draupadi. We get an insight into the lives of women: the pain and suffering, joys and sorrows of mothers, wives, daughters, both royal and ordinary. Divakaruni is one of the writers who could put forth the anguish of the mythical characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari and others.

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