

Narrative Deviations in the Modern Retellings of *The Mahabharata*: An Analytical Study of *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract. The present research paper takes into account the narrative perspectives, points of view and divergences in the modern retellings (novels) of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, directing attention to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel "The Palace of Illusions" by comparing it with the actual epic. The paper investigates the effect of different perspectives in shaping the plot, themes, events and portrayal of characters. The paper attempts to conduct a comparative analysis of the point of view in the novel with that of the original epic '*Mahabharata*'. Through this comparative study, the paper aspires to shed light on the diverse interpretations, reinterpretations, and re-imaginings found in contemporary literature, which significantly deviate from the storyline of the original epic narrative.

Keywords : *Mahabharata*; deviations; interpretations; narratives; perspectives; divergence.

The epic *The Mahabharata* contains around 20,000 verses, making it one of the longest epics across the globe and is considered to be one of the greatest literary texts due to its extensive narrative, profound storyline, philosophical teachings, large number of characters and events, giving room to adapt into countless literary adaptations and interpretations over the centuries. The epic narrates the story which revolves around the two branches of the same family, namely the Kaurava led by Duryodhana and the Pandava led by Yudhishtira, their complex family dynamics and the constant struggle to ascend the throne of Hastinapur. *The Mahabharata* is the story about a war preceded by years of bitter rivalry, political alliances, and betrayals. Every character in the epic *The Mahabharata* is important, as each one provides a new perspective to the story, framing the storyline and contributing to the climax.

In contemporary literary discourse, the narrative perspective and point of view have gained relevance in the West by unconventionally presenting the familiar story thus paving the way to explore the stories

from diverse viewpoints. The narrative perspective plays a vital role in the reader's engagement by influencing the way a reader analyses, interprets and understands a story. This concept of narrative perspective when examined within the framework of the ancient Indian epic *The Mahabharata* it can be noticed that such concepts were even prevalent long ago, demonstrating their enduring presence in Indian literary tradition.

The selection of perspectives for the contemporary adaptations including novels from a vast range of perspectives represented in *The Mahabharata* becomes significant as varied perspectives can challenge the established norm, subvert the conventional notions prevalent in the society and reflect contemporary sensibilities and concerns. But when these perspectives are not carefully employed in an adaptation, it sometimes lead to disagreement, conflict and misunderstanding, thereby hindering the ability of the reader to extract the meaning effectively. Often, readers misinterpret the story of adaptations as that of the original epic, thus complicating the understanding of the moral and philosophical teachings of the epic without verifying the adaptation against the source.

This research paper through the novel *The Palace of Illusions* explores the interplay between the narratives and representations of characters, events and themes, contrasting them with the original epic by exploring the viewpoints of characters as presented by the author. Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* is narrated from the perspective of Panchal princess Draupadi. This new focalization creates slight divergence from the main storyline thus creating room for intervention and research.

An Overview of Traditional Narrative Perspective in the Epic *The Mahabharata*

The narrative perspective of *The Mahabharata* played a pivotal role in the framework of the epic's storyline by incorporating the omniscient narrator which provided an account of a wide range of events, stories and characters, encompassing the entirety of the epic's storyline. This narrative technique allows the readers to have a panoramic view of the entire story by allowing them to have insights into diverse perspectives, plots, subplots and themes. Ved Vyas (composer of the epic) grants the freedom to the readers to decide the perspective or point of view through which they

prefer to comprehend the story. The omniscient narrator acts as a guiding voice providing insights into narrative contexts and moral guidance throughout the epic also making it easier for the audience to understand the thoughts, dilemmas, conflicts, complex web of relationships and motivation of the characters which offer readers to delve inside the thoughts of characters, their actions and decisions within *The Mahabharata*. One of the most important aspects of having an omniscient narrator is that it allows readers to get the perspective of multiple characters altogether, enhancing their understanding of the story.

Additionally, the role of the omniscient narrator is not only restricted to the narration but goes beyond it by transcending the limitation of the individual's perspective and further advancing it to impart wisdom and encourage introspection. The concepts of familial bonds, trust, loyalty, duty and honour can be explored through the lives and experiences of the characters. *The Mahabharata* also encourages profound philosophical concepts for instance *dharma*, *karma*, *moksha*, *bhakti*, *atman*, *jeevan chakra*, *brahman*, *vairagya*, *tapas*, *maya*, *sadhana* etc. and thus offers comprehensive knowledge of human conditions and behaviour.

The narrative technique consists of dialogues and exposition, which helps the readers to comprehend the inner feelings of the characters. The dialogue between characters helps in their development (characterization) as they can be understood by their values, beliefs and desires. The exposition gives the insight of characters' past experiences, which in turn shape their present decisions and behaviour. Narrative techniques help to get a clear understanding of the character's portrayal by enabling the reader to connect emotionally with the character's struggles, motivations and experiences. It is important to note that the characters of the original story lie in the grey areas; they have quite an ambiguous characterization with a combination of both virtues and vices. These complexities add depth to the characters by portraying them as individuals who are not entirely right or wrong. By portraying the characters in this manner, the epic reflects the complexities of human nature and helps to understand the grey areas in their personalities.

Divergences in the Narrative Perspective of *The Palace of Illusions*

The novel *The Palace of Illusions* is a modern retelling of the Indian Classic epic *The Mahabharata* which re-interprets the whole story from the perspective of Draupadi, one of the strongest female characters in

The Mahabharata. While the novel stays true to the main events of the epic, Divakaruni focuses on Draupadi's thoughts, feelings and experiences making it a debatable female retelling. The novel shows the challenges she faces as a woman in a patriarchal society thus making the novel dependent on the perspective of Draupadi. The reader can only know what Draupadi would know, feel and perceive. While adapting the story of *The Mahabharata* into her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni has identified many events that she chooses not to include in her version, thus making it clear that there are many tales in the great epic *The Mahabharata* which are ignored purposely or unintentionally by the author to make a straight female storyline. The original story is very complex and requires a thorough understanding of all the underlying events to comprehend them.

Divakaruni in an interview 'Talk at Google' given at Google's Mountain View gave reference to the Bengali version of the *Mahabharata* where Draupadi confirms her love for Karna in front of Pandava and her dear friend Krishna. The first encounter of Draupadi with Karna in the novel is described in the following manner:

Older than the prince and austere-faced, the man sat upright, his lean body wary, as though he knew the world to be a dangerous place. Though in the midst of a court, he seems utterly alone. His only ornaments were a pair of gold earrings and a curiously patterned gold armor unlike anything I'd seen. His eyes were filled with an ancient sadness. They pulled me into them. My impatience evaporated. I no longer cared to see Arjun's portrait. Instead, I wanted to know how those eyes would look if the man smiled. Absurdly, I wanted to be the reason for his smile. (*The Palace of Illusions*, 69)

The novel right from the beginning shows Karna as Draupadi's love interest. While events in the epic indicate the encounter of Karna with Draupadi, the original *Mahabharata* rejects any instance of such a relationship between the two.

It is imperative to note that the novel deviates from the foundation of *The Mahabharata* in handling the concept of *dharma* (righteousness) which is the central pillar of the epic and thus holds a distinguished position. Yudhishtira, the eldest son of the Pandava clan is the symbolic representation of *dharma* himself in *The Mahabharata*, whereas the novel deviates from this concept of understanding *dharma* by limiting the role of Yudhishtira in the story. The man who is the embodiment of *dharma* and values is perceived as a side character of the story in Divakaruni's novel. Her Yudhishtira is presented as a partially weak and a negative character as seen through the eyes of Draupadi. When Pandava lost in the game of dice and his husband Yudhishtira and the other Pandavas didn't come to save her, she says:

All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. I'd believed that because they loved me they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me – as much perhaps as any man can love – there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of oyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies. (194-95)

Here, Draupadi not only highlights the *adharma* that she fall victim to, but she also criticizes the *dharmic* conduct of his husband which led to her insult. At the end of the novel when the Pandavas and Draupadi ascend to heaven, Draupadi says:

I could have scrambled up to the path
somehow - but for what? To listen
to another of Yudhisthir's sermons?
Better to lie here, in relative peace, and
gather my thoughts. (346-347)

In the great epic *The Mahabharata*, *dharma* is the guiding principle. However, the novel portrays a struggle between Draupadi's inner feelings and *dharma*, thus creating a divergence in the storyline. The novel gives preference to Draupadi's inner feelings over *dharma*, which contrasts with the original epic.

Divakaruni distracts the story of Vyas and gives a different route to the story by portraying it from the perspective of Draupadi. It suggests the departure of Vyas as the narrator with the introduction of a new narrator 'Draupadi'. Although Divakaruni has given special preference to Vyas, the composer and compiler of *The Mahabharata* in her novel but this shift in the authorship of the story takes the authority from Vyas and hands it over to Draupadi.

The novel concentrates on the female figures of the story thus marginalizing the importance of male characters as women's counterparts throughout the novel. Starting from Bheema who loved Draupadi selflessly to her dear friend Krishna who was always there for her, concentrating only on the oppression of women, the significance of men seems to be ignored partially. Yudhishtira is portrayed as a drunkard, who stays under the influence of alcohol :

But Yudhisthir loved the games. He
threw himself into them with childlike
glee and made no secret of his pleasure
when he won. ... He would stumble into
the bed chamber ...reeking of wine....
When he did sleep, he tossed and turned
and cried out from nightmares. (170)

This scene demotes the character of Yudhishtira, the *dharmaraj* (a man who is the embodiment of virtue) from the status of a virtuous man to the position of a bland figure. The men and women are each other's counterparts and the significance should have been shown by Divakaruni to maintain the balance rather she focuses on the portrayal of female

characters making it women-centric novel, ignoring the relevance of men through her portrayal. Only the character of Krishna is given a little space for intervention but that is not enough to represent the existence and importance of men in general. When Arjuna marries Subhadra, Draupadi says :

More than Subhadra (who after all owed me nothing), more than Arjun (who perfidies I was used to by now), it was Krishna I felt had betrayed me. But when I accused him of having encouraged his sister to snatch Arjun from me, he was quite unabashed.

“Arjun’s not like a nose ring that someone can snatch from you”, he said sternly. He comes and goes of his own will. Besides, you know that no matter whom else he marries, his commitment to you remains the same. But most important, out of their union will come a great warrior, and out of him will come a king even greater. He touched my shoulder, perhaps to lessen the harshness of his words. Isn’t that more important than the brief heartache you suffer? (153)

In the epic, Draupadi’s faith in Krishna is portrayed as steadfast. However, there is an instance in the novel where she doubts her dear friend’s intentions and feels betrayed by him. This temporary loss of faith is a prominent example of deviation in the novel, highlighting Draupadi’s belief that men are not trustworthy. Despite Krishna being the only one to come to her aid when no one else supported her, she still had a moment of doubt. All these small yet significant departures highlight the deviations introduced by Divakaruni in her novel, adding twists and turns in order to provide a new perspective.

Conclusion

Divakaruni’s novel has a feminist approach to the adaptation of the Sanskrit epic *The Mahabharata* which leaves room for intervention and introspection as there are various deviations in the storyline. Manipulation

of the story directs it towards a female viewpoint and many important events are twisted to de-center the perspective of readers. Although ‘The Palace of Illusions’ presents a fresh point of view before its readers, it deviates the story from its original path and portrays Draupadi as rather a weak character who is slave of her feelings and her actions are the product of her emotional bondage. The philosophical concepts are distorted and some mishandling like that of *dharma* is demonstrated throughout the novel. Overall there are some deviations in “The Palace of Illusions” when comparing it with the original *Mahabharata* which makes it a source of interest in the field of research that is being conducted on the modern retellings of *The Mahabharata*.

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