

COUNTERING FEMININITY IN DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSION*

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ABSTRACT:

*Myth is “a story from past times, especially one about gods and men of courage” (“Myth” Dictionary). Myth has been a favourite theme of the writers of the whole world. They create, recreate, write and/or rewrite myths. Moreover, all the human beings take interest in it. Myth or “Story-telling is as old as mankind, and in all oral traditions, it is a favourite form” (Gowda, 200). However, they should be constructed for the betterment of all the living creatures, let alone the women. It should not be the aim of creating a myth to defame some or other race or gender. All the stories and myths up to the nineteenth century, consciously or unconsciously and intentionally or unintentionally, were the tools to manipulate the women psyche and consequently their energy to survive the patriarchal culture. It is the culture where women are suppressed inhumanly. Every act of women was expected to encourage patriarchy. Consequently, the women become, first mentally and then physically, slaves to men. They themselves started rearing up new born baby-girls as the culture wanted. For this training of converting a baby-girl into a woman, old myths contributed a lot. In the course of time, new myths were created by both male and female to train a girl as a woman. The clever women, who used their conscience and knowledge, were burnt or murdered brutally being named as witch. There are many evidences to prove the existence of matriarchal culture in the ancient India. However, many such myths which prepare the psychology of women for patriarchy are found in Indian culture also. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her *The Palace of Illusion* (2008) tried her best to deconstruct such myths.*

Keywords: Myth, Patriarchy, Culture, femininity, Naming, Female Identity, Panchaali

The Palace of Illusion is the myth of Panchaali, the supposed cause of the greatest battle recorded in the longest Epic, the *Mahabharata*, in the pre-historic period in India. An epic is believed as a fictional story based on some real historical events. Divakaruni retold the story of the *Mahabharata* from Panchaali's point of view. No doubt, Panchaali was born with an extraordinary powers and blessings of gods to re-establish the reign of the Dharma, i.e., truth and justice. She was the motion to bring about positive changes in the would-be history for the betterment of the whole human community. However, it is the matter of a separate research whether the reign of truth and justice was really established after the civil war between the Kaurawas and the Pandwas.

Being a part of an epic and myth, the novel involves many magical incidents. It focuses on the different incidents and the myths from a feminist point of view. In author's note, Divakaruni writes about women in the age of Mahabharata (pre-historic period of India), 'they remained 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' (Divakaruni: xiv). Panchaali and other female characters, and the myths associated with them were the major concerns of the writer to 'uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits' (Divakaruni: xv). However, in novel, male characters and the myths related to them are but only to enhance and elevate the significance of female characters and myths of women. Although, the novel is a kind of retelling of the greatest Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, a poem full of males, the writer never makes us feel the absence of the females in the whole plot. In fact, the whole plot revolves around the first-person narrator, Panchaali and other women.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* very aptly said, "One (woman) is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (17-18). From very beginning, Panchaali was drilled not to ask questions, not to laugh loudly and so on. Such type of drillings transformed a normal baby into a female. Panchaali was born with her twin brother, Dhristadyumna, from fire. However, unlike her brother, she was reared up like a girl. Her brother took lessons of military operations and grew up as a great brave warrior.

Women were considered as property of men: Father, Brother or Son. Men used to play with the emotions and often with women's body without their consent or proper longings. The Pandwas gambled with the Kauravas and lost a bet on Panchaali. Her consent was not taken for the bet. This bet was the real cause of destruction on both the sides. Had the Pandawas not betted Panchaali in gambling, the Kaurawas would not have humiliated Panchaali. Consequently, the Kurukshetra would not have seen the eighteen-day fierce civil war. However, the patriarchal mentality accuses Panchaali for bringing the devastation upon the Hastinapur Empire.

When Panchaali was born, voices from Fire of altar (yadnya), were heard by the priests present there. They addressed to King Drupad and informed him to "Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history" (Divakaruni 5). However, as the novel describes, Panchaali was not so much happy with the name, Draupadi, meaning the daughter of Drupad, given to her by her father. Her twin brother was named Dhristadyumna, meaning the Destroyer of Enemies. Therefore, she was expecting her name something like Celestial Victor or Light of the Universe (Divakaruni 5). It shows that in Indian myths and present Indian culture, a woman gets her identity from her father, brother or son. However, a man gets his own distinct identity like Dhristadyumna.

Not only in India but also in the whole world, a girl-baby was not welcomed till recently. In Maharashtra, many girls are named 'Nakoshi' by their own parents. The literal meaning of the word 'Nakoshi' is 'Unwanted'. It shows the resentment of parents towards daughters. In the novel, Drupad named and sometime treated Panchaali as an unwanted (girl) child, who came out of fire unexpectedly (Divakaruni 6).

Panchaali and Krishna had dark faces. However, Krishna had no negative effect of darkened face on his personality or lifestyle. He impressed more than 16100 women and married with

them. But Panchaali considered herself the most unfortunate for being dark, and longed for milk-and-almond hues (Divakaruni 8). Dark-complexed Krishna becomes an inspiration for dark-complexed Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) by Gita Hariharan.

The Palace of Illusion, which is also the title of the novel, was built by Maya with many illusions in it. The structure of lake and its bridges in the palace are also illusions. The chapter 'Lake' describes the remarkable incident in the history of Mahabharata, the incident when Duryodhan was laughed at by Panchaali. She describes, "... I failed to notice what Duryodhan was doing until I heard the splash. He must have stepped onto an illusory bridge, for now he was floundering about in the pool.... My attendance burst into peals of laughter. I could have stopped them, but I couldn't help smiling myself, he looked so comical" (Divakaruni 172-173). Even this laughter would not have brought the most massive disaster to Indian histories. However, as Panchaali describes in the book, one of her attendances spoke out, "It seems the blind king's son is also blind!" (Divakaruni 173). Because of this statement the disaster befell on not only the Indra Prastha, the newly built capital of the Pandawas and its citizens, but also the Hastinapur and its citizens. It is very common heard that the above quoted statement was spoken by Panchaali. However, the book favours Panchaali and lessens the intensity of her guilt. It also tells that the attraction towards Karn, the king of Ang and elder brother of the Pandawas, caused losing the chance to ask to Duryodhan for excuse on behalf the attendance. She could have also punished the attendance, but her unconscious attention to Karn forbidden her from doing any such thing. If she could have succeeded in confiscating this misunderstanding of Duryodhan, neither the gambling/bet nor the battle would not have taken place. This way, the narrative wipes out the blame of becoming the culprit of the battle of Kurukshetra from the forehead of Panchaali.

Generally, a story has a hero who is adventurous, and the heroine is feeble, fragile, submissive, gentle and dependent. However, the character of Panchaali, is the heroic in the novel. She is strong, independent, and thoughtful, and does many adventures. She encourages and supports her discouraged husbands. She is the main motivational power behind the revenge of the Pandwas against the Kaurawas. Once Vyasa told Panchaali, "I've always known you to be stronger than your husbands". (Divakaruni 329)

Myths glorifying femininity are less in number in both the famous Indian epics. In the present novel, Divakaruni describes a myth of a poor mother. She gave her son the milk made of water, flour and jiggery on his demand (Divakaruni 13). It shows that a woman-mother does everything for her children, without any expectation of the return from him.

The novel has many myths about female characters. The most famous ones are about Gandhari, Kunti, Madri, and so on. The biography of Gandhari, itself is an epic. She was the most beautiful princess of the Gandhar Empire of ancient India. She dreamt a young, strong and handsome prince as her husband. However, she was forced to marry a blind parasite, Dristarashtra. She could not bear this trauma to her delicate emotional dream. By binding cloth on her eyes for the rest of her life, she decided not to look the things that her husband could not look at. Her sacrifice is not counted as a feminine strength to carry out her resolution, rather her sacrifice is seen from the patriarchal views. Her sacrifice is counted as an acceptance of male superiority over female. It is stereotyped as a woman's mandatory denial of all the pleasures, which her husband could not relish. And the later woman is expected to scarify, as a duty, everything for her husband.

Myth of Kunti is not less significant than the myth of Gandhari. She is an unyielding and leading character in the epic. The established culture forced her to be mother in childhood, to conceal her motherhood and her first son from the society. She let her new born baby flow in the river, just because she was a woman. However, the child was protected by his biological father, the God Sun, who had no existence in the day-to-day life. In the same epic, Vidur, popularly known as the Dasiputra, was son of Vyasa. But he was not abandoned, rather was given a place (counsellor) in the king's court.

Divakaruni depicted the character of Kunti as stern and strong. She had courage to keep mum even after her eldest son was killed in battle. After the famous battle of Kurukshetra, she decided to accept acetic life. No amount of pleading could change her mind. (Divakaruni 333)

Conclusion

Being a woman-writer, Divakaruni exceeds sometimes the liberty of writing. It is common to describe obscenity in modern fictions. However, speaking an old woman to a young girl alluding sex seems exceeding the social taboos, at least in a fiction on ancient Indian culture. In the present fictional novel, Dhai Ma said to young Panchaali, "... I didn't want to die before I'd experienced the joys of having a man in my bed." (Divakaruni 3).

When Karna wins the contest /swayanwara of Panchaali's marriage, she asks him of his parents and humiliates. However, Divakaruni makes Panchaali arise sensuous feelings towards Karna. This is also heroic episode in the feminist novel. (Divakaruni 92, 93)

Duvakaruni also wipes out the blame over Panchaali of being the real cause of the destructive battle by telling us that the statement (the blind king's son is also blind!) was not her utterance rather was spoken by one of her attendances.

However, Mishra criticised the novel in very harsh words. He, in his review, writes, "Once the sleep goes away, begin writing in a somewhat workable language that should be too cheap to be the language of an epic. Once the writing is done, time to cheer because people with angst against a PERFECTLY documented dharmik epic in their hearts would cheer whatever you vomit".

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