

Myth, Memory, and Female Agency in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*: Reclaiming Draupadi's Voice Through Feminist Myth-Making

Anchal Behera¹, Dr. Brahmananda Padra²

¹PhD Research Scholar, School of English, Gangadhar Meher University, Amruta Vihar, Sambalpur, Odisha-768001, India

²Assistant Professor, School of English, Gangadhar Meher University, Amruta Vihar, Sambalpur, Odisha-768001, India

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Abstract— Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) retells a mythical tale of Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, making the traditional epic narrative a tale of women's consciousness and rebellion. In this paper, I would like to discuss how the author uses the concepts of myth as a living cultural memory and the idea of reconstruction of female agency through the revival of Draupadi's voice. Based on the theories of cultural memory, feminist myth criticism, and Indian Knowledge Systems, the study shows that Divakaruni does not deny mythology or simply update it but recovers myth as a vibrant memory space which gives women an opportunity to navigate their identity, power, and subjectivity. In order to do so, the following three interconnected aspects will be discussed: myth as cultural memory, memory as resistance to patriarchal historiography, and agency of women as self-narration. It will be shown that *The Palace of Illusions* turns Draupadi into a conscious subject who reinterprets the concept of dharma, desire, and fate. Therefore, this reinterpretation proves that myth is an important means of reconstruction of female history while keeping the philosophical basis of Indian civilization.



Keywords— Myth, Cultural Memory, Female Agency, Feminist Retelling

Throughout history, myths have served as the cultural archive which preserved the philosophy, ethics and social consciousness of any civilization. In the Indian tradition, *Mahabharata* is not only an epic, but the archive of collective memory wherein such ideas as dharma, karma, justice and human relationships are constantly reinterpreted from generation to generation. At the same time, the preservation of cultural memory has been carried out on the grounds of the patriarchal narration leaving women only symbolic roles and not allowing them to be autonomous subjects. Feminist mythological retellings attempt to revive the silenced voices by giving women an opportunity to tell their own stories. In that way, the retellings do not deny the authority of the traditional texts but simply offer new interpretation of the texts. The cultural memory, in this regard, is never closed and fixed, and therefore, the process

of retelling is actually the act of negotiation between the tradition and consciousness of contemporaries.

The Palace of Illusions written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni can be considered one of the most influential feminist reworkings of the *Mahabharata*. Choosing Draupadi for the first-person narrator, Divakaruni creates myth through memory, feelings and experience of its heroines. The novel shifts the focus from the heroic warfare to the inner drama of a woman struggling with the duty, desire, power and her identity in the patriarchal world. Instead of discarding the epic tradition, the novel reinterprets it using female memory and proves that mythology is an evolving discourse able to accommodate the voices of marginalized people. The importance of Divakaruni's intervention, thus, consists in the change of the narrative perspective. The epic survives intact but the centre of consciousness changes – the heroine is not just a

character narrated from the outside but the heroine telling her own story.

Cultural memory is a term which means the exchange of shared beliefs, traditions and historical consciousness across generations. In *The Palace of Illusions*, mythology becomes active memory and not just history. Divakaruni retells familiar stories like the birth of Draupadi, swayamvara, the dice game, exile and the war at Kurukshetra in order to redefine the emotional meaning of these myths and not to change the historical order of events. This way mythology becomes an active repository of memories in which personal memories intermingle with collective cultural memory. Draupadi understands and remembers humiliation, longing, love and political violence differently from the heroes in the epic. This is why readers will encounter the Mahabharata not as a history of kings but as a story of feminine survival. Mythology accordingly turns into the place in which forgotten emotions become historical memory. Personal memory accordingly becomes a link between the individual and the collective because the experience of Draupadi gets its importance due to the fact that she reveals those aspects of the epic which would remain unnoticed in a heroic narrative. Her memory doesn't substitute collective memory, but complicates and enriches it through bringing to light those emotions of a woman who participated in the events and was not usually given the chance to express herself.

Memory in the novel is an instrument of struggle against patriarchal historiography. It's

typical for traditional version of the *Mahabharata* to emphasize masculine heroism and regard

Draupadi only as the one who provoked the war. Divakaruni refuses this simplification through

allowing Draupadi to remember the events through her emotional experience. Her memory of the

humiliation in the dice hall becomes the act of feminine rebellion and not just a political

catastrophe. Likewise, her memories about Karna, Krishna and the Pandavas show the complexity of feminine desire that is usually suppressed by patriarchal narrative.

It becomes the concern of the community, which demands that one ask whose version of the past is being heard. Divakaruni demonstrates that the process of recovery of women's memories leads to recovery of elements of the cultural heritage that were overlooked. It becomes even more essential in a mythological narrative, since what is remembered and forgotten affects interpretation of the past by the community. The process of remembering is central to the plot of the novel; Divakaruni situates Draupadi's memories in the context of the novel. Therefore, in this

novel, memory becomes a means of gaining influence. Not only does Draupadi recount the events, but she evaluates them, questions them, and interprets them by attributing meaning to events, which were previously seen from a patriarchal perspective.

The most prominent feature of *The Palace of Illusions* is that women acquire authority in the narration. Their authority is represented through narrative voice. The deeds of Draupadi become important not as such, but as an interpretation. The character has a chance to interpret her own life and give it shape. When Draupadi narrates, she does not remain an object of interpretation made by others. Her authority is represented by many means. She challenges patriarchal interpretations of dharma. She gives expression to her feelings and aspirations that were considered inappropriate. She participates in the decisions that affect the group. She defies the expectations regarding marriage and maternity. At the same time, she retains her self-image in spite of becoming a queen and a wife of five husbands. Divakaruni creates an image of the character that thinks and participates in the discussion, rather than a suffering heroine. Feminine agency is not based on awareness and interpretation and the ability to talk, but on physical force alone. This distinction is important. Not only freedom from social constraints can grant agency. Draupadi remains within the confines of royal obligations, marital obligations, kinship relations, and patriarchy. Still, she learns how to challenge these forces. She also learns how to talk back and make choices within them. In this way, her agency shows up through pushback, bargaining, reflection, and her refusal to let a social role fully set her identity.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's story is tied to the *Mahabharata*. Divakaruni reshapes that larger tale so Panchali becomes the focus. This retelling tries to open space for women inside a world that often keeps women in place. It also lets the feminine self speak in ways that confront the epic's male order. In that setting, the line "I was born of fire but that did not mean I did not feel pain" (Divakaruni 5) hits hard. It undercuts the old idea that a divine or special birth means no real emotions. Fire birth may give her myth weight, yet her words insist that deep greatness does not cancel bodily pain. Divakaruni shifts the story toward the private and the psychological. She makes the well known woman easier to reach as a person, while keeping her place in cultural memory.

Divakaruni writes with mythic figures so we can feel what they go through. Their heroic side becomes easier to grasp when their emotions are clear. The author also draws from the experiences of the women in the past not as an additional feature, but as part of the same trajectory. It looks like the tradition changes, but it does not obliterate the

previous one. In *The Palace of Illusions*, the characters do not confine themselves within one interpretation. With the privately held views becoming the primary focus, the older stories get a new dimension. This is not only the transformation of the story for a new audience; this is rather an interpretation of the same events from a different perspective. The old version provides a basis for the culture/meaning, while the new one brings up the new issues. It asks about gender, about selfhood, and about how feelings shape experience. Myth keeps going because it can talk with the world as that world changes.

The mythic female figure is made human through psychological and feminist re-visioning. Draupadi who emerges from fire in the *Mahabharata* represents divine birth and power because She possesses both divine and human qualities which serve as her ultimate fate. The symbol of birth exists in Divakaruni's work as she presents maternal suffering which lead to the creation of mythological female figures who endure pain. The statement challenges the male dominant belief which requires that women who achieve exceptional status through divine or powerful or sacrificial labels must remain emotionally strong at all times. The line demonstrates that people use symbolic praise to create falsehoods which hide actual events because they consider trauma to be concealed by the social norms of strength and honor. Fire (agni) is viewed as a purification and transformation tool while Divakaruni interprets fire as a force which creates suffering that leads to personal transformation. The line establishes a connection between historical times and current times because it maintains ancient mythological symbols while demonstrating current psychological truths which enable Panchali to emerge as both a mythical figure and a complete human being who requires recognition of her pain in order to receive ethical treatment.

Panchali's defiance of the established gender norms would display how her actions create a divide between what society expects from her and personally claimed freedom: "Why did the word woman always have to be followed by obedient?" (Divakaruni 92)

The question operates as a feminist examination of *The Palace of Illusions* which contains two elements from epic tradition and social discourse that still maintain their patriarchal structure.

Divakaruni uses this rhetorical question to demonstrate that people expect women to submit to male authority which shows that society creates gender roles instead of using biological differences to decide them. The question requires the epic's moral framework to disintegrate because female purity depends on total obedience to male authority which includes fathers and husbands and kings while male power

exists through their ability to act and make decisions. The question serves as a postcolonial feminist critique because it demonstrates how traditional norms which people mistakenly believe to be cultural authenticity actually function as instruments of female oppression within societies that appear to possess superior moral and spiritual standards. This query raised by Panchali helps her refuse the assigned role. This is done because she needs to express her views about womanhood. In her opinion, it lies in her right to disobey any order.

This makes the concept of obedience not a simple moral commandment but an interesting debate topic. Moreover, it combines the old tradition-based ideology and the new feminist ideology. Divakaruni is very good in mixing these ideologies in her work. She manages to portray the epic as a dialogue between two sides. This text is not a closed one but the one open to discussion. It is more like a dialogue rather than a monologue. The image of Panchali created by the author is such that it is not totally freed from tradition or submitted to it blindly. Her voice signifies a contemporary woman who has negotiated a place for herself, thus claiming her right to choose albeit under limitations:

"I would not disappear into someone else's story." (Divakaruni 214)

The proclamation functions as a metaphorical tool that allows the speaker to reclaim narrative control which epic patriarchs previously possessed. The battle of Panchali represents modern women who use their traditional knowledge to assert their rights against oppressive forces.

Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* appears as a background character whose existence creates male motivations for war and honor and revenge yet her character belongs to the Paṇḍavas and Krishna.

Panchali defies destiny by asserting her right to shape her own identity through her resistance against those who claim she belongs in their narrative. Feminists following a psychoanalytical approach would say that the utterance comes up as a denial to disappear within the patriarchal symbolic order where females are become objects instead of being able to express their minds.

The epic story reveals its hidden elements through a process that allows the character to reclaim his voice from unconsciousness. The phrase postcolonial feminist perspective because it challenges historical and cultural accounts which ignore women to create a heroic narrative of the collective and masculine. The storytelling process serves as a battleground according to Divakaruni because sharing one personal story functions as an act of defiance. The statement connects the past with the present by turning epic legacy into a place for the writer's own authority through his declaration that existence and identity depend

on both remembrance and the right to speak oneself. As if speaking through feminine consciousness, Panchali's musings on fate and free will resonate nothing but the living experience rather than the theoretical law:

"Was it destiny, or had I made these choices myself?" (Divakaruni 71)

The Mahabharata uses fate and cosmic law to show how both forceful divine powers and human behaviour operate throughout its narrative. The two forces create a situation that exonerates people from their ethical duties. In particular, the two forces let men keep their power over women. The question shows how Panchali examines moral teachings which assert that her misfortune results from destiny while ignoring the social forces that operate through patriarchy. The woman in this inquiry discovers her true self because she understands her wish and participation and the hidden option of her position which brought her to her present situation. The process of going from passive acceptance to active agency begins when people start examining their unconscious beliefs about fate. Divakaruni uses her narrative technique to connect historical events with contemporary society while her epic character transcends destiny.

This transformation allows people to treat fate as a psychological and moral study. It also enables contemporary feminists to show their ability to make choices and develop their identity.

Divakaruni uses dharma to show how the concept exists as a psychological and moral battle. The epic gets experienced through IKS because it gets told through oral tradition which preserves Indian itihasa as a framework for dialogue and interpretation. Psychoanalytic feminism supports the interpretation of these texts as attempts to reveal female desire and their experiences of repression and trauma and their processes of self-expression within patriarchal systems. Panchali's narrative voice is considered by feminist psychoanalysts to be the return of repressed feminine voices. Her emotions of anger, desire and resentment which are often silenced in the epic tradition emerge again and again:

"Anger burned in me, sharp and dangerous, but no one asked me what I wanted." (Divakaruni 156)

The Palace of Illusions presents a profound emotional and structural suppression of female desire. Divakaruni presents anger as a valid response to discriminatory systems instead of depicting it as an uncontrollable violent reaction which results from detecting threats against patriarchal authority. Panchali's anger represents her repressed needs and her existence which society has chosen to disregard because it views women as inferior to men. The absence of the inquiry "what I wanted" demonstrates how authorities

strip women of their ability to make choices between their personal needs and their societal responsibilities which affect their entire existence. The burning imagery evokes agni as a force which destroys and purifies because it shows how suppressed anger can transform into acceptance. The line uses its power to link past and present by transforming female anger into a moral insight which brings about resistance because women's needs must be heard to achieve genuine justice.

Through her feminine voice which she uses in the epic, Panchali breaks the male dominant structure of phallic symbols which controls the story. Her story functions as a healing process which helps her to reclaim her lost psychological state.

Panchali demonstrates Gayatri Spivak's investigation into the possibility of subaltern women being heard. By telling her own story, she is telling the world that she will not be silenced: "I would not be the shadow in someone else's legend." (Divakaruni 214)

The assertion examines both epic patriarchal systems and the colonial restatement of Indian mythological traditions which results in Panchali becoming a postcolonial feminist who reclaims traditional cultural authority through her research of existing customs. The text establishes a boundary which prevents narrative resources from being used to diminish women's existence in the male-dominated epic. Draupadī exists in the Mahabharata as one of the female characters but her existence only serves to showcase the battle accomplishments of the male heroes whom she accompanies. The situation which Divakaruni modifies exposes the historical tendency to exclude women from cultural memory while they existed only to assist men in their predominantly masculine narratives. The term "shadow" describes the hidden space which contains women's dreams and expressions and their ability to influence everything while the "legend" represents the patriarchal system which establishes who may share their experiences. She claims her right to communicate without following the established order. Here, the notion

of challenging older concepts which celebrate the act of being heroic is made. However, she also mentions the actual societal cost associated with these tales. Divakaruni moves the concept of the epic to become a call for equality. This narration links past events with the present day. This narration provides a voice, public awareness and identity formation.

CONCLUSION

The Palace of Illusions by Divakaruni is an example of how the modern reading of the myth can function as culture

preservation, criticism, and the act of empowering women to reclaim their voice. Thus, *The Palace of Illusions* allows us to understand the emotional and mental aspects of Draupadi's story, and at the same time keep the philosophical and cultural aspects of the epic alive. The novel thus shows how cultural memory becomes richer if voices that have been silent before are added to it. Draupadi's voice brings new relevance to the ancient myth and encourages us not only to rethink who we remember but also who has the right to remember and narrate. This way, the novel presents myth as an intellectual resource which allows one to explore the issues of gender, identity, morality, power, and human agency through the lens of the constantly developing Indian literary and knowledge tradition. At the same time, *The Palace of Illusions* shows that women's agency is not about being completely free of tradition. Draupadi is a part of such structures as marriage, family, kingship, duty, etc., and finds her agency in questioning, negotiating, interpreting, remembering, and narrating. Thus, Draupadi's agency is not absolute as it means both being a victim of patriarchy and being a modern woman projected into the past.

Under the rubric of Indian Knowledge Systems, the novel also shows the ongoing vitality of interpretation of the itihasa. Terms like dharma, karma, fate, duty, and ethics are not seen as fixed doctrines but rather as concepts that assume various meanings from one subject to another. As such, a feminist reinterpretation of the epic should not be viewed as weakening the tradition since it is indicative of the ability of the tradition to reflect on itself and renew itself.

Ultimately, in *The Palace of Illusions*, myth is rendered a dynamic source of intellect through which issues related to gender, identity, morality, power, memory, and human agency may continue to be explored in the changing context of Indian literary and intellectual culture. Through granting Draupadi the privilege of remembrance and speech, Divakaruni turns cultural memory from being an archive of what has been remembered in the past into a platform for asking about what has been forgotten. Ultimately, in this way, the novel implies that remembering in a different way can be a moral action in itself. By bringing back Draupadi's voice, the retelling is not only offering a new perspective on the past but is calling on the present to reflect on the ways cultural stories have been told and what traditions may accommodate.

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