

Futuristic Amalgamation of the Past and Present in Literature -Draupadi as Historian: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

In India, the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are seen as both history and Kavya. In both the epics subversive readings of the major events are part and parcel of the main text. The dominant and rocentric world of the epics is constantly demystified and re-presented by many women characters of the epics. In this sense both the epics can be read from multiple points of view owing to the multiple perspectives that the characters have in the works. The character of Draupadi in the Mahabharata is continually fascinating because she consciously undermined the discourse of patriarchy. Many literary writers have taken recourse to Draupadi for a feminist reading of the epic. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among them. She empowers her Draupadi in her 'The Palace of Illusions' to such an extent that she will topsy-turvy the and rocentric world and provide us with fresh visions and assessments. Draupadi, in the novel, questions the veracity of one history and promulgates the view that what one should look for is many histories and so, many perspectives. My Paper will study Draupadi as historian, in Divakaruni's novel The Palace of Illusions, who will put things in the right perspective. The paper will show that *her-story* is the real *history*.

Keywords: Androcentricism, Subversiveness, History as an art, Narration as Power, Paradigm shift.

Draupadi as Historian: a Paradigm Shift

In the traditional paradigm of art, history which dealt with the regional and the particular had to be transmuted into art which is universal and generic. The greatness of artist was measured in terms of his/her capacity to universalize the particular. So the time bound-space bound phenomenon of history had to become timeless and universal. Keats's expression 'Sylvan Historian' in Ode on a Grecian Urn, succinctly puts across this idea of transmutation. In other words the real reality of history had to be transformed into art reality or what is called virtual 'entity' by Susanne Langer. History was seen as a mere background enabling the foregrounding of literary texts. But in recent times, history is not considered as a background or context but as an essential co text which will provide newer perspectives to both art and history. A literary text is seen as being subversive as it contains multiple narrations of the same historical event.

The two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are an integral part of the cultural ethos of India, influencing and shaping it. Veda Vyasa's 'Millennial Banquet' – the Mahabharata, also hailed as the Fifth Veda – has proved its universal significance and timeless appeal by virtue of being the source of many retellings and renderings. William Radice in Poetry and Community: Essays and Lectures, says, "No book on Indian myth and legend can ignore the Mahabharata...a bridge between mythology and history; and as an endlessly expandable vessel into which every kind of story can be poured". The Mahabharata deals with the universal while assimilating the socio-cultural history of the nation. It is not a story about a particular set of events but a story of civilization and the human condition itself. It documents the human predicament which is beyond time. Aurobindo says, "...Mahabharata is the creation and expression of a collective national mind.

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It is the poem of a people about themselves... which also proves the close link between the epic and the history of the nation” (1991: 245). This “close link” allows the epic to be claimed by every age for itself, thus, discovering new possibilities and meanings in it. The Mahabharata displays an array of great men and women who have a universal appeal, especially in their moral dilemmas. Margaret Chatterjee, in her Preface to Matilal’s book, *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*, points out that, “The situations in which an Agamemnon, a Jephtha or a Brutus found themselves do not seem to have gripped the imagination in the way in which the fate of a Sita, a Draupadi or a Yudhishthira haunts us... Here (Mahabharata) we have a story of extreme complexity, characters that are unforgettable, and a cosmic context in which Gods and men alike grapple with destiny... The women characters, as in everyday life, seem to bear a very heavy load of the burden of life and to stand in a key position in almost every conflict” (1989: vii). Any situation in the Mahabharata can be developed into a full-length text, just as any character can become the protagonist of other tellings. The centre can be constantly shifted such that the margin of one text becomes the centre of another. The women characters, in particular, have provided scope for multiple creative interpretations. For the women of the twentieth century and later, however, these women have symbolized self-assertion and freedom. The women of Mahabharata are more complex and interesting than the stereotypical images of them would convey. It is in this context that the character of Draupadi comes under a spotlight. It is through her character – a dynamic, assertive, active and evolving one – that an assessment of the position of women can be made. She is a character of the “virangana” type, bringing about a real paradigm shift in the construction of womanhood. It is only in the recent times that a change towards the dynamic, assertive, and active self has emerged in the literary works. The Mahabharata portrays the problems voiced by feminists in nineteenth and twentieth century through its characters and plot, especially through its central character, Draupadi. It is in this context that a study of contemporary re-presentations of Draupadi becomes significant.

Draupadi is a floating character, who lives multiple lives in the different versions in which she figures. All the versions of Draupadi present her as a revolutionary figure, who relentlessly questions the value systems which demean her both as an individual and as a woman. Draupadi’s power lies in her capacity to represent the value systems and ideologies of different times. The main purpose of this study is to explore her multifacetedness and her “infinite variety”. Each version in which she appears brings out a new dimension of her complex character. To throw light on the evolutionary transmigratory existence of Draupadi two contemporary novels – Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* are studied.

1. Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni* – Tradition And Modernity

Pratibha Ray’s novel is written in the last quarter of the twentieth century (1984), when the role of women within the Indian society was beginning to be re-assessed. Ray chooses to keep Draupadi largely within the framework of Vyasa’s text but then seeks to give her a depth and a dimension that would speak to the twentieth century context and audience. The emotional inner life of Draupadi is what contributes to this richness and so Ray enters imaginatively into Draupadi’s mind and creates, to use Susan Langer’s idea, a “virtual space” (1953: 77), which she then goes on to explore. In the novel, Draupadi raises certain important questions about her own life. Having put herself in the predicament of serving five husbands and remaining faithful to each one of them, she is shattered when she slips and falls during the last journey of her life and her five husband’s do not turn back. It is this incident that impels Draupadi to look back at her own life and search for the meaning of all the trials and tribulations that she has undergone: “What agonies did I not suffer for preserving dharma? I had thought that on the strength of my adherence to dharma and fidelity as a wife I would be able to accompany my husbands to heaven. Yet, I had but touched the golden dust of Himalaya’s foothills when my feet slipped and I fell!”

Pratibha Ray attempts to look at Draupadi not as a mythical character, but as a flesh and blood woman, who lived an extraordinary life in which she is forced to make difficult choices, choices filled with ethical and moral dilemmas, at every point of time. It is these choices that guide the future course of events throughout the epic. Furthermore, whether willingly or unwillingly, she often causes events of historical significance to happen. Therefore, Ray’s Draupadi, or rather *Yajnaseni*, – by narrating the story of her life to Krishna at the very moment of her death and by attempting to justify the choices she made at important junctures in her life – seeks to relive it and interpret it, as much to herself as to others. The novel tries to give us a glimpse into the mind of *Yajnaseni*, by tracing her emotional journey from being a much admired and loved princess in the palace of Drupada through becoming the wife of five men, the descendents of one of the most powerful race in the Bharatavarsha, to realizing her own spiritual position as the friend, “*sakhi*”, of Krishna.

Draupadi in Yajnaseni says, “I became the subtle thread for keeping the five flowers bound together, whom no one would see; whose pain and anguish no one would know; word of whose torment would reach none” (68). This line summarizes the construction of Draupadi in Ray’s Yajnaseni. She feels that she is just a thread, whereas her husbands are the flowers; and the world would not see or hear her pain or anguish. Very painfully Draupadi describes her prefatory existence where she has to conciliate for a subservient life rather than the Virangana life.

2. Panchaali’s Mahabharata = Divakaruni’s The Palace Of Illusions

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a retelling of the story of the Mahabharata from a different perspective. It is Draupadi – ‘queen of queens envied even by goddesses’ (39) – who is celebrated as the central character here, the only heroine, with no other leading male character reaching her heights. She attempts to redefine womanhood in terms that defy the usual constructions of women found in scriptures. Divakaruni says that in her writings she would like to position, “women in the forefront of the action” and she wants to “uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men’s exploits” (*Author’s Note xv*) and bring out the real bold, beautiful and independent woman of all times, Panchaali. For this purpose Divakaruni makes Panchaali narrate her own story thereby providing authenticity to her version.

Draupadi is no more interested in listening to stories which, however edifying they may be, do not bring her to the forefront. Such multiple narration of her own life’s story provides Draupadi a critical insight into the story. She not only responds to the events narrated but also critically views other people’s responses to the events of her story. She believes that her birth is as significant as that of her brother’s. This interest in her life later matures into a desire to be the writer of her own history and the controller of her own destiny. Unlike the speaker in Tara Patel’s poem *Woman*, who says, “A woman’s life is a reaction to the crack of a whip” (1999: 238), she wants to be an agent of action because she wishes to redefine the role of woman in the context of her life. She says, “And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men... A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life” (26). This assertion brings to light Draupadi’s intention to script her own destiny and not be imprisoned in various belittling constructions of her self. Being the agent of action, she not only decides the course of action but also forces others to face the consequences of her actions. In Divakaruni’s novel, Draupadi presents herself as one who will happily take over the reins.

Draupadi is happy that her life even at the time of her birth was considered to be great and significant. She critically analyses the names that were given to her brother and to herself. The name Dhristadyumna for her brother meant ‘destroyer of enemies’ and the name Draupadi for herself merely meant ‘daughter of Drupad’. Her brother’s name succinctly brings out the mission of his life, which is to kill the incomparable Drona whereas her name, Draupadi, only gave her an identity tied to her parent, King Drupad. Draupadi is unhappy about this because she feels a woman who has been created to change the course of history must have been given a better name. The name Draupadi, for her, smacks of patriarchy: “Dhri’s name fell within the bounds of acceptability... But Daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn’t been expecting me, but couldn’t my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history? I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice. But in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name” (5).

It is clear from this passage that Draupadi takes the prophecy that she would change the course of history quite seriously. With a desire to give herself a heroic name, Draupadi fancies names for herself such as “Off-spring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One” (1). It is ironic that a name that she fancied for herself which is “Off-spring of Vengeance” turns out to be true. It is Draupadi’s desire for vengeance that actually causes the Mahabharata war and also changes the course of history in the Indian sub-continent.

Draupadi, who experiences mixed feelings with regard to the prophecy (with yearning and fear) like a modern feminist, wishes to position herself as a subject of desire and not as an object of desire. But her only worry, at this point is, how would the spotlight of history fall on her when she was leading a cloistered existence in the “mausoleum of a palace”. She does not want her life to be recorded in the annals of history as a mere victim of circumstances. It is significant to note that in most constructions of Draupadi, in both literary and non-literary texts, she is seen as a victim of patriarchy which is perpetuated by the dominant discourses of the time. In Divakaruni’s version, Draupadi wants to be a maker of her own history. Reading against the grain, Draupadi questions the terms of the myth which records her existence, by bringing out what it represses or excludes.

In other words, she wishes to give an authentic account of her life which would radically question and consistently undermine the previous constructions of her life. All that she requires now is an account of history which will truly find her and articulate her real life. So she decides to narrate her own version of the story, which according to her is the most authentic.

An interesting manifestation of literary transmigration is seen when Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* are compared. The precedent for the understanding the evolution of a character across literary texts in terms of Literary Transmigration is found in Bhasa's plays.

3. The Literary Amalgamation

Bhasa, the illustrious predecessor of Kalidasa, is well known for his Mahabharata plays. He chose incidents from the epic, in order to provide a new perspective, often foregrounding the changes that the characters of the Mahabharata have undergone in his version. Among the characters from the Mahabharata that Bhasa re-visioned, Duryodhana is the most important. Bhasa wants to explore the innate goodness of Duryodhana which gets blurred when he acts impulsively. Not only does Bhasa want to present Duryodhana in a good light but he also traces the evolution of Duryodhana from an ill-tempered and war-mongering person to a good natured and peace-loving person. *Urubhangam*, is the most important play. It is here that Duryodhana emerges as a morally triumphant and spiritually evolved human being. Duryodhana, after the defeat in the war, is presented by Bhasa as a completely transformed man, who does not want to take revenge on Bhima and the rest of the Pandavas. Bhasa is interested in showing Duryodhana's spiritual metamorphosis. The names Duryodhana and Suyodhana that Bhasa uses for Duryodhana imply evil-mindedness and good-naturedness, respectively.

The transformation of Duryodhana into Suyodhana is seen as a step-by-step and a stage-by-stage spiritual evolution. In keeping with the theory of transmigration, Duryodhana, by living multiple lives and erasing the accumulated negative karma, attains to a spiritual state where he is able to encounter, master and beyond his unworthy passions. His final ascension to heaven, at the end of the play, suggests that he uses of his life's experiences creatively to have a grand vision of life which gives him both *Sat* (Existence), *Chit* (Knowledge) and *Ananda* (Bliss).

Like Duryodhana in the Mahabharata plays of Bhasa, Draupadi also lives, as mentioned earlier, multiple lives through which she attains to a state of spiritual freedom. Her presence in *Yajnaseni* and in *The Palace of Illusions* can be seen as two distinct, successive births of Draupadi. Moving from a state of spiritual pre-maturity in *Yajnaseni* to a state of spiritual maturity in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi goes beyond a transmigratory existence to realize the pure state of being, in the latter work. The cherished dreams of Draupadi in *Yajnaseni* are realized in *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi's in *Yajnaseni* reiterates life within Ray's version, but it is in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* that Draupadi is truly reborn, this time not merely to reiterate her life but to re-vision it.

Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* operates within the frame of her own story, and is able to comprehend the larger implications of her role in the Grand Design of the Cosmic Drama. She appropriates the narrative and, by doing so, changes the course of not only her personal history but of History itself. Vyasa's Mahabharata, which is the history of Bharata, is re-inscribed such that it becomes Panchaali's Mahabharata. Contrary to Draupadi's reluctant acceptance, in *Yajnaseni*, of the opinion that a woman must always play a docile role in a man's life, Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* challenges the narrative that assigns an inferior role to women. Blaming patriarchy for such constructions which later take the form of a powerful discourse, Draupadi wants to break free from the shackles of such demeaning narratives. Draupadi, in *The Palace of Illusions*, is reborn with a new orientation which will enable her to have stunning perceptions of life. When Krishna challenges her rather traditional views in *The Palace of Illusions*, he does so, perhaps, to remind her of her previous birth as Draupadi in *Yajnaseni* and other such narratives. In her new avatar, Krishna feels, Draupadi must subvert orthodox and traditional narratives. Krishna wants the routine of Draupadi's existence to be convulsed by a gigantic upheaval, so that Draupadi understands that a human being, without any gender restrictions, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities.

4. Self-Denial to Assertion of The Self

It is evident that Draupadi's understanding of the concept of freedom, in the two novels, is very different. In *Yajnaseni*, her understanding of freedom is very limited and operates within accepted norms. She looks at freedom as self-denial. Even her attaining Krishna consciousness does not seem to be an individual, life-transforming spiritual experience but rather one which helps her have a nationalistic vision.

This vision, though it transcends the petty differences within Bharata, does not enable Draupadi to rise above contraries. The consciousness she talks of is not her own but a collective one which still operates within national boundaries. In *The Palace of Illusions*, freedom is more in the assertion of the Self. Freedom is the experience of Love, unconditional and all-encompassing. In the last chapter of the novel, titled 'Fire', she attains this higher freedom: "Above me there's light – or rather, the absence of darkness. The mountains have vanished. The air is full of men – but not men exactly, nor women, for their bodies are sleek, and sexless, and glowing. Their faces are unlined and calm, devoid of various passions that distinguished them in life... Duryodhana is positioned between Drona and my brother, all of them smiling as though at a recent joke. Four of my husbands are here... along with Gandhari, who holds Sahadev as one would a young child" (358).

At the end of her life, having overcome all passions, she achieves a calm of mind. She exudes boundless compassion and love for all of creation. She both participates in and is a witness of a spiritual state in which all distinctions are blurred and contraries resolved into a unity. She arrives at the understanding that it is passions that differentiate one human being from another. When these passions are stripped off, the underlying oneness comes to the fore enabling bitter adversaries to forget their earthly impulses of hatred and vengeance and walk hand in hand in eternal companionship. At this rare height, she is able to have an undifferentiated consciousness. She sees not only human life in this world but also the entire creation, right from the time of the emergence of the cosmos, as drama: "Spread out behind them are countless others, their bodies erased of their wounds that killed them at Kurukshetra, their faces evincing the satisfaction of actors who have successfully concluded their roles in a great drama" (358). The impulse of vengeance in her, which caused the war and the death of all these warriors, is now transcended. She is now able to see the Kurukshetra war itself as another scene in the cosmic play. This vision would come to her as relief to the action-wearied soul, as freedom from conflicting motives, as leisure to search out all problems and also as release from the toil of finding words for thought. It would come to her as the sole language of immortality, the only true utterance of the Infinite – *Infinite Consciousness*. It is for this reason that Krishna tells her: "You are going to have to learn a whole new vocabulary for all the things you will be undergoing shortly" (359). Her expansive consciousness is now like that of Divinity.

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