**Research Paper**

# Deconstructing the Mythic Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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## ABSTRACT

*Myth, like history, has an inclination to repeat and recreate itself. Myth serves as a magnanimous ideology which provides a meaning and affinity to the illustrated literary works.*

*Here in this paper I want to examine Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusions" and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi", in order to analyze how they have recreated the classical myth of the Mahabharata.*

*Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" revisits the past and recreates the characteristic features of the mythical Draupadi to draw up an account of a helpless woman who must hold her own stand unlike the mythical character Draupadi who was saved by Lord Krishna as her savior. Both these characters- 'Dopdi' of Mahasweta Devi's stories and the mythical character 'Draupadi' represent victimization at the hands of patriarchy. Dopdi, in her story, "Draupadi" is a changed and demythicised embodiment of the epical Draupadi, who belongs to the Santhal race. On the other hand "The Palace of Illusions" by Divakaruni is an endeavor to retell The Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, the Pandava Queen. It is through these mythical studies, one not only lives through again the age of the great epic but also is authorized to scout the present through the past and is assigned with thoughts to think over the future. Draupadi's life demonstrates in the epic how women act as repositories of a given culture and are the bearers of patriarchal values. But Divakaruni's Draupadi is an independent persona. Her perseverance and fearlessness has been explained all through the novel. Draupadi's life strives to break the boundaries of stereotypical conventions. She represents herself as a fearless character in the wake of the injustices meted out on her. It is her potentiality to overcome adversity in a venerable manner that sets her apart from other women.*

*The ultimate goal of this paper is to showcase by confronting these narrations the hegemonic Brahmanical discourse which has established essential models of masculinity and femininity. Divakaruni and Devi's texts go a step forward and hark back to the traditional Brahmanical patriarchy that has implemented supremacy over the feminine throughout history. Moreover, I want to demonstrate that how these two texts offer a formation of counter discourse by questioning and deconstructing gender based ideas and exposes with their resistant voices the limits of male ascendancy and provides us a more precise understanding of women's conditions in contemporary India. Through this paper I will also analyze the reason behind the use of myth in order to recreate the historical past.*

## I. Introduction

Indian Mythology is one of the distinct constituent of Indian tradition and society. Through the ages, different stories in Indian Mythology have been passed from generations to generations verbally or in written forms. Throughout the history of Hindu puranic narratives, gender division has been portrayed as a powerful and manipulating part of patriarchal culture. In the traditional Hindu Brahminical society a woman is always represented as a mother figure who nurtures her children. She is also forbearing and self-sacrificing like the mother earth. She is the *Grihalaksmi,* typifying the prosperity of *Griha* (home). A mother is the figure of *Sakti,* the indispensable source of power. She is *Kshetra,* an open object for her husband's necessity. But when the female figure is seen to steer her life in her own way and not in accordance with the stipulations assigned to her, society projects her as an outsider and she becomes a fallen woman. The woman is always projected as an object, a subordinate figure to the priority of the male. Simone De Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that man has the power to mystify the female figure. This mystification and categorizing, she explains, is significant in establishing

patriarchy. According to Wollstonecraft the representation of gender in society is not natural but social. The female figure has been socialized and psychologically conditioned so as to accept the role constructed by society. But concurrent writing of Hindu Mythology deconstructs and reconstructs the mythical framework and also rejects the ancient patriarchal tradition completely in order to establish a new identity for the women in classical stories, thereby constructing the new independent and agentic subject resisting objectification through the structure of their writings.

## The Reason Behind the Use of Myth

Literature is the synthesis of imagination and truth. It endeavors to demonstrate the reality of human beings and existence. It correlates conflicting human experiences with one another through the use of myth. Eliot established the mythical framework as a "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity"(Eliot 177) which suggested "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history"(Eliot 177). By focusing on a classical myth, an author can beseech a prefabricated structure of meaning that the reader will understand. The mythic tale is then transmuted into a historical illustration of incidents and political issues. There are female authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni with her novel *The Palace of Illusions (2008)* and Mahasweta Devi with her short story, "Draupadi" (1997) –assembled in the compilation *Breast Stories (2010)*-, who have recreated the Hindu epic from the perspective of Draupadi, the indomitable protagonist, in order to deconstruct the sexual politics of denigrating women to the status of commodity and victim by patriarchal society. They redefine the patriarchal myths and subvert the imposition of gender hierarchy, and argue that what people designate as reality or 'regimes of truth'[1] in Foucault's terms, are nothing but fabricated stories and myths. Thus, myth appears to recreate the ancient human affairs that would carry forward new understandings for the present society by way of contrast, differentiation, or direct reference.

## The Presentation of Draupadi in The Mahabharata

Gayatri Spivak in *In Other Worlds* states that Draupadi is portrayed as a valiant woman who fearlessly breaks the repressive gender barricades by going against the constitution of her time. However, masculine societal customs, established by Brahmanical doctrines, are so ingrained into the cultures of the patriarchal society that far from identifying Draupadi as a positive female figure, it is the ceaseless oppression she encounters which is celebrated. It is her victimhood that is foregrounded. Male-dominated society establishes Draupadi as an astounding figure for the mockery and subjugation she receives. Beauvoir states that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychical, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and eunuch that is called feminine"(Beauvoir 330). Draupadi is a princess yet she is considered an ordinary figure and has to undertake the custom of the 'swayamvara' in which she is the prize. The five Pandavas have to share the body of Draupadi and what bothers her is whether she will be good enough to serve them. She is also subjugated and considered as a "Fallen Woman"[2] for defying the societal conventions and patriarchal norms. Men are repeatedly demonstrated as an ideal figure with the sense of "I am man; she is woman. I am strong; she is weak. I am tough; she is tender. I am self-sufficient; she is needful"(Ruth 55). It has to be highlighted that Brahmanical doctrines have perpetually endorsed this traditional portrayal of femininity in which suffering becomes a heroic criterion. The ceaseless reiteration of this myth and the glorification of Draupadi specifically, a woman who tolerates humiliation, has encouraged the making of established societal barriers of masculinity and femininity.

## Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi: Power of an 'Adivasi' Woman

Dopdi, the title figure in Devi's sensational text "Draupadi"[3] is a reconstructed and demythicised manifestation of the classical Draupadi. Dopdi is portrayed as an 'Adivasi'[4] female figure who gets imprisoned between the feudalistic-modernist patriarchal society and its allied social structure. Dopdi, a Naxalite informer-activist, is a Santhal. She, together with her husband Dulna, had revolted against the feudal nexus. Unlike her mythical namesake, Devi's protagonist is disrobed by the police officials in the gloomy and awful brutal world of a forest where no godlike figure comes to her rescue. She gets imprisoned into a state of affairs where she is compelled to act for herself. Corporeal oppression, verbal exploitation and other forms of subjugations have inevitably been subsumed as equipments to manipulate a women's physique. Dopdi is incarcerated, oppressed; gang raped and brutalized all through the nights and neither anticipates nor gets any redemption from any quarter. She does not wash herself and refuses to be clothed by the rapists. She disallows her oppression, rape and barrenness to unnerve her and uses these as weapons to abuse and intimidate the enemy. Sundar Rajan states: "It is, instead, simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape, shame, fear, loss) and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter-effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy" (Rajan 352-353).

Gayatri Spivak states that "the ancient Draupadi is perhaps the most celebrated heroine of the Indian epic Mahabharata. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the cultural credentials of the so-called Aryan civilization

of India" (Spivak 387) and have carried forward the legacy of Indian patriarchal tradition until today. But Devi's Draupadi ironically reconstructs the semiotics of these signs to demonstrate a sense of incertitude, incomprehension and shock for the male-dominated hegemonic power structures. The mythical Draupadi provides the only model of polyandry, an unconventional marriage system in patriarchal society. Within a patronymic and patriarchal condition, she is unparalleled, indeed "singular"[5]in the sense of weird, uncoupled and unpaired. Her spouses, since they are partners rather than lovers, are legally pluralized. Devi's story interrogates this "singularity" by settling Dopdi first in an activist, monogamous, comradely marriage and then in a position of multiple rapes.

Draupadi beautifully deconstructs the epic in respect of the ravages that are included and also borne upon by the sufferer. Dopdi, in the fit of anger, cuts the cloth into pieces and brutally disdains to cover herself up with the patriarchal conceptions of 'shame' and 'female modesty'. Senanayak is bemused to see her "Naked walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high" (Spivak 402). Dopdi comes nearer and states- "The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?" (Spivak402) She blatantly spurns to wear clothes and states "what's the use of clothes? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (402). If she covers herself up, it would have been a fortification or a reaffirmation of the patriarchal approach of morality, sanctified by the masculine culture that colonize 'female honor' and female subject hood.

Spivak re-establishes the power of Dopdi when she "acts in 'not acting'" (*In Other Worlds* 95). Nevertheless, the efficacy of Dopdi's defiance is not the denial to act, but the denial to act predictably. She stands erect as a fearless character against the oppressive patriarchal culture and questions "what more can you do? Come on, counter me- come on, counter me-?" (402) She deconstructs the traditional 'sexual honor' of a female body when she confronts Senanayak with her naked body. He is outright astonished by the way Dopdi pushes him with her damaged breasts, and it is for the first time that Senanayak 'is afraid to stand before an unarmed target terribly afraid'. Mahasweta's Dopdi subdues the egomania and manliness of her oppressors by completely rejecting the semiotics of her multiple rapes. By doing this Dopdi deconstructs the entire patriarchal culture and re-establishes herself as a rebellious figure. Her rebellious attitude strongly declares, "My honour does not lie in between my legs"(Sinha 4).

**Questioning the Mahabharata: Divakaruni's Contemporary Retelling**

In *The Palace of Illusions,* Divakaruni represents Draupadi as a dominant figure who tells the story from her own perspective and writes back to the masculine culture. Divakaruni's novel more faithfully demonstrates an example of modern Indian woman who controls her life according to her own way and ceaselessly wrestles against vicious traditions, lack of ethics, selfish interests and global conflicts. Divakaruni's protagonist introduces herself as a figure who incessantly questions each and every action that endorses patriarchal culture. De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* proposes that women should take control of their own life. They must become subjects in their own prerogative instead of being dismissive, inferior "Other"[6]. Women need not be constricted by the identities and roles endorsed or imposed on them by patriarchy. From the start of the novel Draupadi acts like an insightful persona, questioning the values and practices of patriarchal society. She interrogates every figure which makes an appearance and speaks blatantly of her erotic desires, admitting that though she is a good consort she doesn't have any affection for her husbands. From the start Draupadi criticizes her name and states that her brother is designated by a name which means 'destroyer of the enemy' and she is just called 'the daughter of Drupad?': "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?" (Divakaruni 5)

We can conclude that Divakaruni's Draupadi's principal intention is to deconstruct the notion of female oppression and provide a stark contrast to the male-dominated culture of Mahabharata. In the patriarchal narrative Draupadi should spend one year with each of her husbands and every time she is thrown into the custody of her next husband she is permitted the gift of chastity. But Divakaruni's protagonist questions the preposterous exhibition since she perceives this act as a glass of drink moving from hand to hand. Draupadi sarcastically interrogates the award of her chastity and asserts that this peculiar gift admitted to women appears completely to comfort men. She understands that her husbands do not have much love for her: "there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering" (Divakaruni 195). Draupadi is also irritated and questions because her palace, the palace which renders the title to the novel, *The Palace of Illusions,* is an allegory of her life, as well as the lives of countless women who have Illusions. It represents a woman's position, the room of one's own according to Woolf; a female space that constantly has to be re-appropriated and re-created so that it cannot be colonized and destroyed in the fight against repressive masculinity. "The laws of men would not save me" (Divakaruni 191), she states when Kauravas are about to strip off her sari, Draupadi asks Lord Krishna for some help and adds: "Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency" (Divakaruni 193).

The notion of decency to which Divakaruni's protagonist refers would correlate to the paradigm of ideals, immensely necessary in present day society as Metka Zupančič states:

In today's world ruled by self-absorbed individuals, with egotistic preoccupations that foster divisions, conflicts and separations […] Divakaruni's prose writings, especially some of the most recent ones, carry profound ethical values and the promise of a world that we could all build together, with literature as an efficient and convincing tool for collective transformation based on mutual understanding and love as a binding force. (Zupančič107)

Bearing in mind that the *Mahabharata* presents the story of the origin of humanity, in this quickly changing scenario the position of women is also quintessential and needs to be presented impartially in local and global circumstances. We can conclude that Divakaruni's novel entwines the ancient facts of a particular period, together with magic and myth, while masculine principles like savagery, oppression, subjugation and the ascendency of the feminine traits are reconstructed. Divakaruni's concurrent retelling from the perspective of Draupadi, demonstrates a fearless act of revolt against Brahmanical culture and the orthodox Hindu society which endorses an unchanging Indian culture.

## II.    Conclusion

Both Mahasweta Devi and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wonderfully deconstruct the representation of Draupadi, and question the orthodox patriarchal narrative of the ancient epic text. Moreover, I also tried to highlight that with their subversive narrations, Devi and Divakaruni recreate a very substantial part of the myth of the Mahabharata, and present that the reconstruction of myths such as this not only incorporates one more voice or a different version or a radical position to the literary complexity, but also of taking the pulse of the same patriarchal discourse and displaying its limits and ridiculousness.

## Notes

[1]'Regimes of Truth' is a term which refers to a discourse that establishes certain aspects to be 'truths'; Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Penguin Books, 1991.

[2]A fallen woman can be a prostitute, or a figure who had sexual relationships before marriage, whether voluntary or against her will- in short, a woman who transgresses the traditional patriarchal norms.

[3]Devi's "Draupadi" is introduced by Gayatri C. Spivak in the collection Breast Stories (2010, first published 1997).

[4]The term 'adivasi' literally refers to 'the first settlers of India'. 'Adi' means first and 'vasi' means people.

[5] Lacan, Jacques, and Jeffrey Mehlman. "Seminar on 'the Purloined Letter.'" *Yale University Studies*, no. 48, 1972, p. 39

[6]The notion of Otherness is extracted from the work of Simone de Beauvoir. Otherness tries to investigate how majority and minority identifications are established. Identifications are again and again believed to be natural and inherent but according to Beauvoir it is not true. Female-identity is structured by patriarchal society to comfort men. Female figures are thus portrayed as the inferior other.

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