

# CULTURE AND GENDER IN THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

<sup>1</sup>Dr. N. Jagadeswari, <sup>2</sup>L. Visvanthan.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, <sup>2</sup> Ph.D Research Scholar & Assistant Professor

<sup>1</sup>PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai, India, <sup>2</sup>PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai, India.

**Abstract:** Indian writing in English which was made possible by the British rule has grown phenomenally over the years. Indian writers who live in India and abroad have been drawn to capture the essence of India in their works of art. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is no exception and has taken it upon herself to highlight various aspects of India that make India unique. This paper focuses on the culture and gender aspects presented by her in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has taken on the herculean task of narrating the epic *Mahabharata* through Queen Panchali and has brought the other women characters into the limelight and has provided a whole new perspective to the epic. Culture and gender are intertwined in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel and the modern manner of narration adds colour to the complex tale.

Keywords: Gender, culture, feminist, Indian, male.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has taken on a tedious task of retelling the epic poem *Mahabharata* from a female perspective using the first person voice of Queen Panchali in *The Palace of Illusions*. Gender and culture are two themes that are closely intertwined in all her works including this novel. The rich ancient Indian culture is replete with gender bias and gender discrimination with the patriarchy dominating in every walk of life. *Mahabharata* has been an integral part of the spiritual life of Indians for more than thousand years and to have an Indian settled abroad rewrite it from a different perspective is not just refreshing but also quite unsettling and leaves the audience wondering whether she would stumble anywhere but interestingly her work has won admiration from readers all over the world.

Women protagonists have had their roles underplayed as the stories themselves were narrated by men and so it is quite rejuvenating to hear Draupadi – Queen Panchali's childhood name – narrate her tale from her lonely childhood days, her beloved brother cum companion, her complex relationship with Krishna, her secret attraction towards Karna and the choices she made. Queen Panchali is viewed negatively by the audience who has read the *Mahabharata* and it takes them a while to comprehend the positive version seen in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel. Dr S.G. Puri (2015) who teaches at the University of Lucknow narrates how Draupadi is not a name that Indians would "name their daughters" as she is known to be a *Kritya* - "one who brings doom to her clan" (Puri 2015). Draupadi unlike common belief is portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a strong, powerful, independent woman who is an equal to the men in the story. She is responsible for the series of bold choices rather than the people who are around her.

By listening to the thoughts and words of Draupadi and witnessing her bold actions the readers are introduced to the female characters in *Mahabharata* who probably were not noticed much in the original epic as the male characters dominated every segment. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni voices this concern in the epilogue of the novel:

I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women...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. If I ever wrote a book ...I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. (TPOI xiv-xv)

The opening lines of the first chapter 'Fire' spoken by Draupadi, are both dramatic and sad:

Through the long, lonely years of my childhood, when my father's palace seemed to tighten its grasp around me until I couldn't breathe, I would go to my nurse and ask for a story...I made her tell me over and over was the story of my birth. (The Palace of Illusions 1)

Draupadi was not happy with her plain name which meant “Daughter of Drupad” while her brother Dhristadyumna’s name meant “Destroyer of Enemies” (5). Draupadi was thus inspired to make up names that she would have liked to be named: “Offspring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One” (1) but her nanny Dhai Ma was more realistic and called her “the Girl Who Wasn’t Invited” (1). This name clearly reveals that girls and women were not given importance during that period and it was the older generation that was reconciled to this fact and not young girls like Draupadi. Dhai Ma narrates how when Draupadi’s brother came out of the sacrificial fire the people watching “cried out in amazement” but a second later when Draupadi stepped out of the fire, the audience in the hall turned quiet that “you could have heard a housefly fart” (2). The voices which were heard when Draupadi was born had mentioned that she would change the course of history and keeping that in mind Draupadi felt she needed a “more heroic name” under those conditions. Draupadi wanted the prophesy to be true as she probably felt that she would gain importance only then.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has focused not just on Draupadi and her life in this novel but also on other strong female characters such as Kunti – Panchali’s mother-in-law who brought up her sons and the sons’ of her husband’s second wife equally and grooming them to become kings and the tale of Gandhari – blind king Dhritarashtra’s wife who decided to blindfold herself on the day of her marriage and continue life blinded as she wanted to go through life in the same manner as her husband. Thus these women characters have been provided with exceptional power as their choices and decisions are responsible for the existence of the epic *Mahabharata*.

Women being delegated subservient roles and being harassed is not just a thing of the past but it still remains in many parts of India. Though Queen Panchali was probably not raped she was humiliated by being wagered and lost by her own husband and further insulted by the opponent who tries to remove her sari. Queen Panchali reacts saying:

I am a Queen, Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyuma, mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can’t be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like dancing. But then I remembered what I’d read a long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me. The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave. (The Palace of Illusions 190)

Similar incidents prevail in India and there are many unfortunate tales where young girls and women are sexually harassed, molested, raped and brutally slaughtered by men who are demons in disguise. Queen Panchali’s prayers were heard and her sari was so long that her honour was intact but not many Indian women are lucky. Just as the men watched Queen Panchali being harassed, modern India remains a silent spectator as women are tortured publicly and not a single man has the courage to stand up for the rights of the women being harmed. Women need to be protected rather than be ill treated and this is felt when one reads the feminist narrative of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It is sad that the plight of women has not changed much from the times of the *Mahabharata* till now.

Though the original epic depicted gods, demi-gods, kings, princes, warriors and nobles, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel is more humanistic and realistic and has a personal touch that most readers can relate to. The original epic which seemed to sing the praises of the male characters is on a different level whereas this novel which provides a feminist perspective is on a totally different level and does not in any way compete with the original but rather is another different version that clearly highlights cultural beliefs and the gender difficulties that existed and that still exists in India.

## WORKS CITED

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