

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com**Indian History, Myth and Panchaali in *The Palace of Illusions*****Mamta Srivastava**

Sri Tika Ram Kanya Mahavidyalaya,
Aligarh, Affiliated to B.R. Ambedkar University,
Agra, India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.4.05**Abstract**

The Palace of Illusions, a rendition of the great epic *Mahabharata* subtitled as Panchaali's Mahabharata', provides a powerful voice to Draupadi. She was a proud princess of King Drupad, obedient daughter in law of Kunti, graceful wife of Pandvas and a true Sakhi of Lord Krishna but she had no voice at all. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the Indian American novelist revealed her inner core heart which was unheard and unseen by the patriarchal society of the time. Hayden White argued that historical writing was influenced by literary writing in many ways, sharing the strong reliance on narrative for meaning, therefore eliminating the possibility of objective or truly scientific history (White Hayden, Winter 1973) "Interpretation in History" *New Literary History*.4:281-314.). This paper discusses whether the re-creation of Panchaali's narrative in *The Palace of Illusion* would provide a new meaning to her character , consequently bring a change in Indian society or influence Indian myth and Indian culture in future.

Keywords- Reinterpretation, Rendition, Revisiting, Historicity, Womanhood

The legendary epic *Mahabharata* attributed to Rishi Vyasa was composed by 4th century BCE. It is an historical and socio-cultural document swollen with Indian philosophy of 'Karma'. It states that it is dictated by Rishi Vyasa and penned down by Lord Ganesha; first recited at Takshashila by the sage Vaisamapayana, a disciple of Vyasa to the King Janamejaya. Many years later, the story of Mahabharata was recited by Ugrasrava Sauti to the sages at Naimisa Aranya. It is the longest epic poem ever written, consisting 1000,000 slokas and prose passages. Since then a number of manuscripts were created and recreated to narrate the great saga of Mahabharata.

Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute published a critical edition in 1919 in which nearly 1259 manuscripts were critically examined. Afterwards, in 1925, Vishnu Sitaram Suthankar became the general editor of BORI, Pune; he devoted his day and night in collating the manuscripts of Mahabharata written by various scholars in various languages and produced Textual Criticism 'Prolegomena to Adi Parva' in 1933. Further with his scholastic assistance, the BORI academicians produced the complete Critical Edition of 'Mahabharata',

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

though after his death. They found many incidents spatial and temporal which were added time to time in the re-created works of later writers.

The Palace of Illusions is a re-creation of the epic 'Mahabharata', the same historical and social document garbed in the vesture of myth, delved in malice, malignant contrives and mal-ambitions of courts and kingdoms. The difference lies in narration; it is narrated by Paanchali; it narrates her feelings, her emotions, her view points towards life and other characters. It reveals Paanchali as a woman of flesh and blood, her love for Karna, who is more valorous and courageous than Arjuna whom she wooed in swayamvar.

Revival of Myth

The story of eighteen Parvas of 'Mahabharata ' is retold in forty-three chapters in 'The Palace of Illusions'. It begins with chapter Fire and ends with the chapter Fire. Krishna is the sutradhaar or string-holder of the story which raises many questions and provides many answers to social and moral problems. The novel is replete with numerous instances of mythical allusions, though they are not dealt with the same grandeur as they were dealt in the original work. About the origin of universe, Chitra Banerjee writes in the chapter 'Cosmology' about the heaven, which is certainly a mythical analogy--

Above are the heavens, abode of Indra and the gods who sit around the throne. There in the Centre of the seven worlds peopled by celestial beings, lies the milky ocean on which Vishnu sleeps, waking only when the earth grows overburdened with unrighteousness. (22)

The birth of Draupadi, Dhristadyumna, Pandavas, Kaurvas, Bheeshm Pitamah, Karna and Shikhandi are overshadowed by myths. King Drupad, the hundred priests invited from Kampilya, the queens, the ministers and servants had been fasting for thirty days. On thirtieth day, when King Draupad poured the last pot of gheè in fire, a voice came out from the black smoke saying-- "Here is the son you asked for. He'll bring you the vengeance you desire, but it'll break your life in two" (4). "Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history" (5).

In the same way, Kunti received the boon from Durvasa that she could invoke any God and he would provide her a son as a gift. Before her marriage, she tested Durvasa's boon out of curiosity and invoked sun -god and he gave her Karna. From the fear of society she left him. After her marriage, Pandu became impotent, due to a curse, so she received Yudhisthira from god of righteousness; Bheem from god of wind; Arjuna from Indra the King-god. Madri invoked twin healer-gods and got Nakul and Sahdev. Gandhari gave birth to a huge unformed ball of flesh; it was cut by a holy man into a hundred and one pieces 'And that's how Duryodhan and his brothers-- and their sister Dushala-- were born.

With the death of Bheeshm also, a curse is linked, Amba one of the three princesses whom he brought from Kashi cursed him that she would be the cause of his death. She took birth as Shikhandi and Bheeshm gave up his bow and surrendered; Arjuna threw arrow after arrow and made a bed of arrows for him. Shikhandi also burst into tears.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

The reference of Maya is also an example of Myth; at the suggestion of Bheeshma, Dhritarashtra gave Yudhishthira Khandav region to rule; it was 'the most barren and desolate portion of the kingdom'. Everyone expressed his desires and Draupadi said--"Water. I want water. Everywhere. Fountains and pools, ponds for birds to sport in. ...This creation of yours that's going to be the envy of every King in Bharat--- we'll call it the Palace of Illusions." (146)

Social- Revisiting

In the novel, the character of Karna is dealt sympathetically and vividly. He was humiliated again and again because, he was reared up by the chariot-driver Adhiratha. When the portraits of the aspiring suitors for swayamvar were displayed before Draupadi, her eyes were struck upon ' the austere faced prince' adorned with 'a pair of old earrings and a curiously patterned gold armour'. He had a queer gloom in his eyes that attracted her most. The artist introduced him as the ruler of Anga and the best friend of Druodhana, but Krishna interrupted him by saying, "He's just the son of a chariot driver."

In the Chapter 'Scorpion' also there is a reference of tournament to demonstrate the battle skills in which Karna challenges Arjun for combat at Hastinapur. Here also he was humiliated because of his parental lineage."Let the combat begin, says the blind King, raising his sceptre, but Kripa leaps to his feet". There are procedures to be obeyed first, he says. The lineage of the contestants must be established, for a prince may be challenged to single combat only by another prince. We all know Arjun's parentage. But valiant stranger, kindly tell us your name, and from which princely house you are defended" (82).

Duryodhan asks for holy water and pours it over his head and declares him, the king of Anga. Here also lies the point that the purification is done by sprinkling of holy water, it is also a mark of caste-discrimination. Besides, Drona also declined to teach him archery because he was the son of a chariot-driver; then he went to Parasuram and introduced himself as a Brahmin and became his most dear and devoted student.

Afterwards in Swayamvar, the great warriors were unable to lift Kindhara, the heaviest bow in the world, Jarasandha, Salya, Sishupal and Duryodhan were failed, then, Angaraj Karna stood and pulled on the string of mighty bow but incessantly Dhristadyumna prevented and said that his sister cannot marry a low caste man; Karna spoke calmly that he is a Kshatriya, his Guru Parasuram has revealed and Adhiratha has brought him up but Dhristadyumna drew his sword. Though Draupadi feels attracted towards him, she stepped forward and asked his father's name because she knew about the consequence of Dhristadyumna's objection and Karna's valour. To save her brother was her only motto.

In patriarchal society of the period of great epic Mahabharata, woman was regarded as a property of husband; that's why Yudhishthir puts her on the stake in gambling. She curses the quaint law of Hastinapur where the wife is not less than cow or slave. "The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave" (190).

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

The Palace of Illusions is a true reflection of political intrigues and mal-ambitions of epic-era. Dhritarashtra was blind to Duryodhan's blemishes. He wanted to be the king of Hastinapur but being blind he was deprived of the throne. He wanted that his son should be the heir of kingdom but Yudhishthira took birth before his son. Therefore, he remained ignorant deliberately of Varnavrat, humiliation of Draupadi, killing of Abhimanyu and injustice to Pandavas.

Re-Vision of Womanhood

The novel is known for Draupadi's assertion of identity because it is narrated in pronoun 'I' and she becomes the mouthpiece of the female-world. She was not interested in the lessons of singing, dancing and playing music. She had a great interest in philosophy, Nyaya Shastra and Rajniti; so Krishna advised her father that she should acquire knowledge of Royal affairs. On hearing about the Swayamvar, she feels very excited that she has got the freedom to choose her husband. But Krishna interrupted, ". . .but it may not be what you are imagining. Truth, like a diamond has many facets" (55).

The test was not easy because the warriors had to pierce the eye of the metal fish revolving on the top without looking at the target. They could only see the reflection in a pool of whirling water. Krishna assured Draupadi that she was going to be the wife of Bharat's greatest hero. He said emphatically-- "As for being pawns, aren't we all pawns in the hands of time, the greatest player of them all?" (58)

When she saw the portrait of Karna, she fell in love, but Krishna stopped the artist to introduce Karna further. Meanwhile she heard many stories about his birth and scorpion-sting in the forest, when Parasuram was sleeping on his thigh. She was feeling more and more attracted towards him; when she entered into wedding hall, her eyes were searching for Karna. "I longed to look into Karna's face, to see if those eyes were indeed as said as the artist had portrayed, but even I knew how improper that would be. I focused on his hands, the wrists disdainfully bare of ornaments, the powerful, battered knuckles." (93) To save her brother's life she retorts Karna but her love towards him remains un-diminishable till the end of the novel.

Duryodhan protested against the insult of his friend and provoked other kings to leave the wedding hall. Meanwhile, Arjun disguised as a Brahmin accepted the challenge and pierced the eye of the metal fish. Draupadi, clad in a cotton sari, left all the luxuries of the palace and followed her husband without knowing who he was. Later on she recognized him by his battle scars. The irony of life is yet to occur; the exiled Pandavas welcomed her; to inform Kunti about her, Bheema played a trick. He said "Ma come and see what we've brought home today" (106). Now it was their turn of bewilderment, she replied, "Whatever you brought should be shared equally among all my sons" (107).

Draupadi was shocked "Five husbands " . . . I was uncomfortable, disillusioned most of all, angry with Arjuna . . . when inside me a voice whispered, Karna would never have let you down like this, I didn't hush." (109)

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

No brother dared to object mother. The relationship between Kunti and Draupadi is strained in the novel as depicted by Chitra Banarjee. Kunti gave Draupadi a torn mat to sleep and tested her cooking-skills by giving her brinjal to cook without spices. In Chapter 'Sari' the anger of Draupadi bursts out vehemently when she came to know that Yudhishthira lost his kingdom, his palace, his brothers and his wife in gambling. "I'm a queen. Daughter of Draupad, sister of Dhritadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl." (190)

Resurrection of a Woman

The novel does not disturb the historical facts; it gives new insight and new colouring to the relationship of Draupadi and Karna. In the chapter 'Secrets', Karna asserts his love for her to Bheeshma. In the Kurushetra, he was lying on the bed of arrows; Draupadi comes to meet him but she was amazed to see Karna sitting beside him. He addresses him as 'grandson'. She was stunned to know that he was the elder brother of Yudhishthir and Kunti knew it. Karna reveals that Kunti offered him the throne but he was unperturbed, then Kunti also suggested that he could be Draupadi's husband because she is wife of her all sons. For a moment, the offer throbbed his heart but he controlled his sentiments. To see Draupadi's humiliation in the court, Karna wanted to throw Dushasan on the ground. When Draupadi was exiled with Pandavas for twelve years, he slept on the mat and felt aversion for luxuries. To hear it she was much exhilarated, she was delighted, convinced and contented.

At the same time, I was gratified by Karna's response. Wasn't this what I'd secretly wanted all my life, to know that he was attracted to me, even against his will? That beneath his scornful exterior he held me in such tenderness? Why, then, did such a wave of sadness break over me as I heard his words? (277)

In the end when Draupadi with Pandavas was on the path of heaven, she fell down and Yudhishthir gave the reason that she was partial in love for Arjun among five husbands. Bheem agreed calmly that Arjun was more handsome and valorous than other Pandavas. But the fact was Draupadi loved Bheem equally. In last pages Chitra veers round the tale and ends with a philosophical note. She writes that by the touch of Krishana's hand the bondage of Draupadi's womanhood broke, she had no body, no name, no gender, she became a soul and clasped the hand of Karna tightly and dwelled in the universe for forever. The last chapter is deeply delved in Indian philosophy which pleads that we are instruments in the hands of Krishana. "Try to remember that you are the instrument and I the doer. If you can hold on to this, no sin can touch" (357).

Thus, no mark of history, no mark of myth of the Source work is disturbed yet Chitra provided an innovative and imaginary apparel to the relationship of Draupadi and Karna; the birth decides gender, society decides caste but in the other world we are none, only a soul; no name, no gender, no caste, no identity, Nothing.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

References

1. Divakauni, Chitra Banerjee, *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India, 2008.
2. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata>
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharat#Historical_Content