

The palace of illusion english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells the great epic from the point of view of Draupadi, who is the central character in Mahabharata. " The Mahabharata in its current form has eighteen sections, of which the first section establishes the content of rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. . . The epic is made of one hundred thousand verses, making it an epic longer than the Greek epic Iliad and Odessey put together" (Pattanaik, xx). It is an unambiguous attempt to reinvent the longest poem in novel form, that too in a feminine perspective. Divakaruni shows Draupadi as a fiercely independent, rebellious woman, who wants to take her destiny into her own hands. The novel opens with the story of Draupadi's abnormal and unexpected birth which she always wants to hear from Dhari Ma, who is the nurse of Draupadi from her childhood. She was born as a daughter of king Drupad, in a best mythological way, emerged from the fire unexpectedly, sticking with her twin-brother. Even in her birth she feels the hesitation by her father that her father wants only her brother Dhristadyumna and she utters that, " It was only my brother he meant to raise up to show to his people. Only my brother that he wanted. Dhri wouldn't let go of me, however, nor I of him. We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together."(6)Her father named her brother " Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies", while she is called " Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (5), a name she considers unsuitable when compares with the prophecy made at her birth: " she will change the course of history" (5). She abhorrences living alone in her father's palace and dreams of possessing her own palace one day. When she feels lonely she gets comfort with the company of her brother Dhri and Krishna, who is also severely dark-

skinned like Draupadi. Full of self-doubts about her exterior appearance, which, deviates radically from the ideal of the fair woman, she asks Krishna " if he thought that a princess afflicted with a skin so dark that people termed it blue was capable of changing history" (8). This question witnesses to an awareness of double marginality, a felt inequality of the heroine in both ethnicity and gender. Once when she interrupts the lessons, her teacher insists her not to interrupt the classes with angry, Dhri apologizes on behalf of her and recites that, " Most learned one, please forgive her. As you know, being a girl, she is cursed with a short memory."(24) This is the general erroneous opinion on women and a great disrespect. And Draupadi dislikes the statement of Dhri and her master and expresses that, " Additionally, I resented the tutor's declaration that women were the root of all the world's troubles" (24). Her tutor comments her that " A kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life. . . If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfill the heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on battlefield." (26) She burst out that who decided that a women's highest purpose is to support men, I would never do that and I promised myself not to pray for their deaths instead I would teach them to be survivors, which shows Draupadi as a greatest feminist of that period. As she consults a sage she was foretold about her future that she would marry the five heroes of her time, she would be queens of queens, envied even by goddesses. She would become the mistress of the most magical of the palaces, and then lose it. And she would leave a mark on history. And finally would die alone, abandoned. Moreover, in her lifetime she would encounter

three moments that can potentially mitigate the misfortune to come; significantly the sage's advice is related to not speaking and controlling her emotions in those moments. But she never follows that advice which leads to a big war at the end. Panchaali feels very excited when she was informed that she is going to choose her own husband in swayamvar. But the reality pricks her heart that her father had to have a test for the skill, which is a archery contest, only who wins can marry Draupadi. She furiously says that, " why even call it a swayamvara then?" (56). In the name of swayamvar her father wants to get a great warrior Arjun for Panchaal, he is the one who can win the archery contest. Draupadi thinks that, " How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole." (57). All five Pandavas are married to the beautiful and headstrong princess Draupadi after Arjun, the handsome warrior, wins her hand in an archery contest. They do not even treat her as a human being but as " alms (bhiksha)" (Ahuja, 30). She expects that she would get love from her husbands but later she comes to recognize the limits of her husbands' feelings 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" (195). After Yudhisthir's the incurable loss in the game of dice, Duryodhan takes possession of the kingdom, Panchaali's palace, and the Pandavas themselves. Panchaali is informed that she has been gambled away like a property, " no less so than cow or a slave" (190). When she is dragged into the hall, the whole court stares her, but worst of all is that her husbands send " tortured glances but sat paralyzed" (191). She is stripped of all ornaments, yet the ultimate shame is the

command to take of her sari, the only item of clothing protecting her from " a hundred male eyes burning through me" (191). The scene of Draupadi's disrobing is also a crucial one in Mahabharata and it is obvious how her humiliation is rendered as a distinctly gendered shame. She is forced to expose her vulnerable body to male eyes, reduced to the status of an object lost by her husband. In the novel, Panchaali describes her situation thus: " The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me - I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time" (193). What furthers her rage is the silence of all men present, nobody answers her question if Yudhistir actually still had the right to lose her after he had already lost himself. Consumed by her anger and the desire to restore her dignity, Panchaali commits the prophesied third mistake and utters the dreadful curse of the battle, which will destroy everybody and vows not to comb her hair again till " the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (194). Significantly, she chooses to give up part of her traditional femininity for revenge, as particularly in India shiny fragrant hair symbolizes female beauty. When Draupadi was insulted, Krishna appears as an answer to her prayer, saving her from shame by miraculously extending her sari, the endless folds preventing the final satisfaction of the voyeuristic stares. The question of divine intervention usually takes priority in readings of the scene, which is rarely interpreted from a feminist perspective. In the novel, Panchaali deals with the shame of exposure by remembering Krishna's advice; she finds the mental strength to cut herself off from the reality of the situation, instead focusing on people dear to her. From the beginning, Panchaali starts to narrate her life story and dreams of possessing her own palace one day.

Thus she claims both a place for herself and narrative agency, seeking to establish her identity by rootedness in a location and control over her life and its presentation to others. Tellingly, she imagines her future palace full of "colour and sound", mirroring her "deepest being" (7), a statement which hints at the desire for dramatic significance. Panchaali appears as a character who wants to take center stage in her own play; she is aspiring lead actress and not satisfied with a supporting role in someone else's script. The metaphor is appropriate because Panchaali's life and the self-perception of her character are constructed around a dual struggle. This concerns, on the one hand, the attempt to harmonize different, conflicting roles into one stable identity, on the other hand the constant fight for the attention of others. With regard to her desired audience, she attaches a special importance to the men in her life, i. e. especially the unattainable lover of her dreams, Karna, her friend Krishna, and her husbands. The seeking of male attention, as well as the struggle to balance her different roles according to the requirements of specific situations, are themes running through her life, causing much suffering. The rebellious, yet also somewhat naïve girl eventually becomes a governess and wife, whose advice is frequently sought by her husbands. Apart from the plot-changing moments when her passions take control of her words, she mostly manages to temper her outspokenness, and "having learned more of the workings of women's power", is "careful to offer my opinion only in private" (148). After a decade of married life and being mistress at the eponymous palace of illusions, Panchaali appears noticeably liberated. This is not just due to the power to rule over a place and family of her own but because, as Vyasa tells her: "You

no longer care what people think of you, and that has given you a great freedom" (180). It is an, at least partial, liberation from outside judgment. Her identity is no longer primarily constituted in relation to the expectation of others. This gives her some of the independence she perceives as being granted naturally to men, and so she feels that, " in some matters, I was equal" (180). From a gender-theoretical point of view, it is interesting that her change and her transgression into male realms, are reflected in a transformation of her demeanor and outward appearance; she turns from beautiful, desired woman into one which is feared or rather sought to be avoided due to " my tangled hair, my accusing sighs, my pepper-hot tongue" (216). She is herself aware that she loses some of the attributes of traditional femininity and continues to compare herself to other women, who appear " better", i. e. softer, and more patient or content. Again the narrative presents a dialogic negotiation of judgment, mediated through the voice of the heroine, revealing the contradictions between inward and outward perception. Torn between her own desires and the expectations of the feminine roles lived by the women around her Panchaali comments: " But is better the word I was looking for? At what point does forbearance cease to be a virtue and become a weakness?" (210). Often, she is shown to fluctuate between passivity and activity, as the following statement about her husbands illustrates: " I followed them into the forest and forced them to become heroes. But my heart [...], I never gave it fully to them" (213). Relevant with regard to this aspect is her obsessive romantic yearning for Karna, which is a revolving point for the plot action. Although it appears, as most critics have noted, in many ways no quite plausible, it seems to fulfill

an important function by offering her an escape fantasy which protects her from emotional abuse und complete surrender to her husbands and her situation. This becomes clear in the climatic scene of her public shaming in court. The fact that Duryodhan takes over her beloved palace increases her hatred and unhappiness to such an extent that she describes her emotional state thus: " She's dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear" (206). It is significant that for the first time she describes herself as seen from the outside. The quote underlines the importance of the experience of shame and loss of her palace, which had formed such an integral part of herself, as catalysts for the tragedies to come. Although the focus on compensation and revenge henceforth give her a clear sense of purpose, she is still missing a feeling of stable selfhood: it seemed that everything I'd lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance - none of them were the true Panchaali. (229)The last part of the narrative adds another dimension. During the battle Panchaali is most shocked to find that her self-perception is completely at odds with the opinion of the women around her, who, consumed by their own suffering gaze only in fear at " the witch who might, with a wave of her hand, transform them into widows" (258). The portrayal of the battle of

Kurukshetra and its aftermath present perhaps Divakaruni's most radical modification of the plot of the original epic. The focus on the subjective female consciousness is here broadened to draw attention to what is omitted in the older text: " But here's something Vyasa didn't put down in his Mahabharata: Leaving the field, the glow traveled to a nearby hill, where it paused for a moment over a weeping woman" (298). Highlighting the grief of the women, the narrative presents a different angle of the morale of the battle between families and thoroughly blurs the distinction between kin and enemies, between winners and losers. After the battle, the grieving widows try to jump onto the funeral pyres. Faced with a mass sati, which would add unimaginably to the tragedy of the war, king Yudhisthir is rendered helpless: " If it had been a battle, he would have known what kind of command to give his men. But here he was at a loss, paralyzed by guilt and compassion and the ancient and terrible tradition the women had invoked" (312). This crisis forces Panchaali to finally prioritize sisterhood over her own interests and emotions. She steps forward to address the crowd, speaking as a woman and mother sharing their grief and manages to avert more deaths. The devastation of the war, which had made Hastinapur " largely a city of women" (322), triggers a further change of Panchaali. She takes action, but this appears now to be driven less by personal than political interest and feelings of community: " It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women" (323). Divakaruni's feminist agenda underlines this almost utopian vision of a new city rising from the ruins, now a haven of safety and respect, a place of equality for women: " And even in

the later years ..., Hastinapur remained one of the few cities where women could go about their daily lives without harassment" (325). This is sustained through another plot change. Whereas in the original the only remaining heir to continue the Pandava line, is a son, Divakaruni turns Parikhshit into a daughter, who takes on Panchaali's legacy and realizes a peaceful female supremacy. In this novel Divakaruni shows Draupadi as a hard headed and impulsive woman who wants to enjoy her life as a mistress in her own palace. But she was the one who suffers a lot other than anyone. She searches for her own identity throughout the novel. Since her unexpected birth she fails to get fatherly affection from her father, at least she expects that love from her husbands, who doesn't even care for her. She had a passionate love towards Karna who was the archenemy for her husbands, even though she would think about Karna " An insidious voice inside me said Karna would never have let you suffer like this" (99). Only in her death she feels her true identity. At last she states painfully that " I am beyond name and gender and imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali" (360).