Revisiting *The Mahabharata*: Draupadi's voice in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to read Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Palace of Illusions *as a feminist interpretation of the Indian epic* The Mahabharata. *In the Indian scenario, women have been encouraged to follow the ideal women of the past: Sita, Savitri, Draupadi but their stories are given to us by the male writers from a male perspective. One wonders what these women would have had to say about their lives and here comes into focus Divakaruni's novel. The paper seeks to look at the delineation of the character of Draupadi and the textual strategies used to give prominence to the voice and thoughts of one of the central figures of this great epic. The paper seeks to answer whether* The Palace of Illusions *is a resistant text or a revisionist one, and how far it includes women in storytelling which hitherto has been male-centred. The paper uses the method of discourse and context analysis to arrive to the conclusion that Divakaruni has ably articulated the thoughts and voice of Draupadi and has successfully brought the story to the audience from a female's point of view.*

Keywords: revisionism, postmodernism, resistant text, historiographic metafiction, feminist perspective

A sub-genre of postmodernist literature is the revisionist narrative in which established narratives are re-written from a perspective for which they did not account. This term goes beyond "historiographic metafiction" to include fictional narratives, because both historical and fictional narratives can illustrate many possible representations for the event in question. Historiographic metafiction represents not just a world of fiction, however self-consciously presented as a constructed one, but also a world of public experience. The difference between this and the realist logic of reference is that here that public world is rendered specifically as discourse. How do we know the past today? Through its discourses, through its texts… On one level, then, postmodern fiction merely makes overt the processes of narrative representation - of the real or the fictive and of their interrelations. (Hutcheon 1988: 33-34) The treatment of space and place are central points at which revisionist narratives expose dominant power systems during the author's own era and offer new possibilities of reality to the readers.

Revisionism in literary studies has been utilized mainly in order to oppose traditional cultural views and give voice to marginalized groups, dealing

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with concepts such as race, class and gender, specifically within feminist literature (Mileur, 1985: 5; Mudge, 1986: 245; Shawcross, 1991: 18). An important aspect of revisionist narratives such as these works is that they expose other views that do not fit into the dominant structure. Additionally, by exposing the underlying power structures inherent in traditional representations of events, revisionist narratives then open up to the reader or audience member a myriad of possible representations and perspectives through which to view the social conventions in their culture.

Revisionism is closely connected to Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction", but this paper looks at revisionism as a term that allows for a broader scope of what is culturally considered historical to include other narratives that are caught between the categories of history and fiction, such as traditional legends and epics, because these too have become cemented in culture as a sort of "cultural truth." And this is the point where Chitra Bannerji Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* comes in the frame of reference. This text is a retelling of the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. Riding on the wave of the deconstruction of one of India's oldest mythological tales and epics is *The Palace of Illusions*, the story of Mahabharata as told by Draupadi- the Queen of Queens, the woman married five times over to the five sons of Kunti, the Pandavas. *The Mahabharata* has been handed down to us through generations and brought to us in popular culture from an essentially male perspective, where women were either shown as characters to be avenged, sympathized with or gambled in a game of dice. Written from a feminist point of view, Divakaruni explains in her author's note her motivations for the book. Hearing the tales *of the Mahabharata* in her youth, she felt that the female characters were underplayed, underused, and underdeveloped. This formed the inspiration to not only retell an epic for a new audience, but to explore it from a woman's point of view, choosing the proud queen Panchaali (or Draupadi) to illustrate the frustrations, passions, and experiences of a woman in a man's world. It traces her life from her unusual 'birth' right through to her equally unusual death and adds another dimension to a piece of literature with worldwide importance.

Divakaruni gives voice to the woman who had a crucial role to play in shaping the course of the greatest tale of our continent but not before carrying us through her journey from an ordinary woman of desires harboring a secret and possibly only true love for an unsung hero she could have never had. What is most fascinating is the author's touching upon the life of a princess with the concerns of run-of-the-mill marital life-power struggles with her mother-in-law, craving love of the only husband who had rightfully won her, but never truly loved her or jealousy over her husbands' taking other wives. The book delves into the loneliness of the woman with five husbands who were only truly married to a life of duty, leaving her no real companion but her place in history.

The novel not only invites criticism for the ambitious attempt this poses on a formal and structural level, but allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity, particularly into the complex construction of femininity already inherent in the original text, while also challenging it from a contemporary perspective. Divakaruni retells the epic from the point of view of one of its heroines, Draupadi, thus reclaiming female agency in the famous tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives. The text highlights a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it displays the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders, all the while showing the illusionary nature of borders imposed by history and gender.

The "*Mahabharata* is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since" (Brodbeck/Black 2007: 11). The desire for revenge is a central trait linking the sexes who are otherwise assigned clear differences in appearance, behaviour, as well as character. Fighting being one of the main gender-distinguishing activities, the masculine ideal is commonly represented by the virile husband and fearless warrior. This is complemented by the portrayal of the epic's principal model of femininity, the ideal of the loyal, devoted wife (cf. Brodbeck/Black 2007: 16-17). A striking example for this is Gandhari, who decides to follow her husband, king Dhritarashtra, into blindness and sacrifices her sight by wearing a silk scarf over her eyes till her death. But the story is not just a binary one of a silent, following female and an active, battling male. Draupadi and her mother-in-law Kunti play dual roles with its inherent tensions. And so while Draupadi is a chaste, demure, devoted wife on one hand, on the other she is shown "to be intellectual, assertive, and sometimes downright dangerous" (Divakaruni 2008: 213).

With regard to female education and knowledge, a significant ambiguity can be found in the epic. As Brian Black points out, the women undergo a second-hand instruction as they are usually a constant presence in all scenes, watching when men receive important teachings and hearing their stories, yet this eavesdropping "is far from passive" (Black, 2007:53). Therefore, Black argues, the central female characters, though mostly confined to the background, emerge to shape the story in significant ways and the stance taken towards their agency appears thoroughly ambivalent, as:

> for both Gandhari and Draupadi there is more to being a listener than merely their symbolic presence. The way in which both of them are constituted as subjects shows that they are not merely defined and portrayed in relation to male characters, that what they hear and say is linked up with their specific duties and circumstances as queens: […] Draupadi's role as listener […] educates her for her role as *dharma* queen (Black 2007: 73).

Divakaruni's novel portrays the education of Draupadi and her transformation from ambitious princess to revenge-seeking queen in subjective detail. Following first her brother's and then her husbands' lessons, she also receives many instructions on her own (e.g. by a sorceress, a sage, and Krishna, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu). Regarding the multi-dimensional presentation of femininity, Divakaruni's narrative appears in many ways merely faithfully modelled on the original, but reverses the perspective by granting the reader an insight into the mind of the listening Draupadi.

The opening chapters present Draupadi's obsession with her origins. They introduce her rebellious character as well as her struggle for a self-constructed feminine. Indeed, listening to the story of her birth and her prophecies about her destiny seem to signify as "the only meaningful activity for her" (Nair 2011: 151). She dreams of leaving her father's palace, a suffocating place for her, which "seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe" (Divakaruni 2008: 1). Her nurse calls her teasingly "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (1), as she was born as daughter to one of the richest kings in India, yet — in best mythological fashion — emerged from the fire unexpectedly, clinging onto her twin-brother, the long awaited heir. While her brother is named "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies", she is called "Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (5), a name she considers to affirm patriarchal dependency and to be unsuitably at odds with the divine prophecy made at her birth: "she will change the course of history" (5).

From the beginning the narrative highlights an important relation between names, gender, and identity. Draupadi envies in particular the power and agency inherent in her brother's name, the implied mission of his life to kill the archenemy Drona, while hers merely symbolizes patriarchy. Full of self-doubts about her outward 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 testifies to an awareness of a double marginality, a felt inequality of the heroine in both ethnicity and gender (if not, obviously, in terms of class/caste). From the start she fights "to position herself as a subject who desires and not as an object of desire" (Nair 2011: 152). But the results of her refusal to be a victim of circumstances and her aspiration of attaining "a more heroic name" (Divakaruni 2008: 5) are shown to be deeply ambiguous as the story unfolds, fusing justified claims of equality and liberation with guilt, vanity and cruelty. Finally, it will prove almost "ironic that a name that she fancied for herself, 'Off-spring of Vengeance', turns out to be true" (Nair 2011: 152). She consults a sage about her destiny and learns that: she will marry the five greatest heroes of her time, be envied like a goddess, become mistress of the most magical palace, then lose it, start the greatest war, bring about the deaths of millions, be loved, yet die alone (Divakaruni 2008: 39). Moreover, in her lifetime she will encounter three moments that can potentially mitigate the catastrophe to come; significantly the sage's advice is related to not speaking and controlling her emotions in those

moments ("hold back your question", "hold back your laughter", "hold back your curse"). The name given to her by the sage, "Panchaali, spirit of this land" (41), excites her due to its power, it is "a name that knew how to endure" (42).

Draupadi, also known as 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 and "brilliant theatricality of her life" (Nair 2011: 153).

Panchaali rebels against an education of typically female skills (painting, sewing, poetry), which she perceives as useless in comparison to the knowledge taught to her brother (lessons about royal rule, justice, power). Again she uses a metaphor of suffocation to describe the life awaiting her: "With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me" (Divakaruni 2008: 29). Yet after her father reluctantly agrees to let her partake in Dhri's classes, she starts to notice how these transform her further and deepen the difference to what she has been trained to perceive as feminine. She observes how it was "making me too hard-headed and argumentative, too manlike in my speech" (23), and finds it increasingly harder to resign herself to the restrictions of royal womanhood. In response to the tutor's idea that "a woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life" (26), Panchaali realizes that her ambitions makes her an outsider of her own sex: "Each day I thought less and less like the women around me" (26). Repeatedly, the narrative refers to her perception of differences and the awareness that: "For better or worse, I was a woman" (139). As she learns to employ her femininity strategically, e.g. to dazzle and manipulate through her looks, she forces acceptance on both men and women around her: "I who had been shunned for my strangeness became a celebrated beauty!" (10). Soon afterwards, a sorceress makes Panchaali recognize her central flaw, her vanity, and the power of women, as despite all their dependency on men, "you're wrong in thinking of woman as an innocent species" (66). But the main lesson she tries to teach Panchaali is the control of her passion and her own destructive power, reminding her that she does not "have the luxury of behaving like an ordinary star struck girl. The consequences of your action may destroy us all" (88).

Throughout the narrative Divakaruni has her heroine ponder on the inevitability of fate, the discrepancy between the perception of others and her self-image. The central tension exists between her desire for independence and the attempts to please and conform, which is increased by recurring confrontations with gender differences. Watching her husbands for the first time after her marriage, she observes: "I was a woman. I had to use my power differently" (99). This is followed by recognition of her inequality with regard to freedom, as well as reputation. Despite being granted independence from her father and the status as queen, her unconventional polyandrous marriage bears the risk of being seen as an insatiable whore (118). Moreover, according to the

special marital arrangements, Panchaali is split between her husbands, spending a year with each, her virginity restored each time when entering a new husband's bed. She becomes aware that in contrast to her husbands, she "had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when" (120).

Narration is another area of focus. Generally the story is narrated in the first person through Draupadi. But there are times in the text when Vyas appears to remind the readers as well as the narrator of the fixed outcome of the text. Changes in perspective highlight the importance and the illusionary nature of perception and narrative transmission. There is always the possibility of deception, just as there is always another angle to the story. The novel opens with three narrators (Panchaali, her brother, and her nurse), presenting different versions of the tale of Panchaali's birth and destiny. While trying to gain power over the narration, Panchaali's reflections, her dialogic engagement with her implied listeners, also include meta-narrative comments on the nature of truth and narration: "At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing" (Divakaruni 2008: 15). Throughout the narrative one finds a dual view on stories as powerful and "true", as well as subjective and refusing to be fixed in time or space, likely to change with each telling. Creating a parallel between storytelling and identity, the narrative situation reflects on the process on an inter- and metatextual level. Furthermore, regarding the prominence given to dialogic negotiation, it is noteworthy that Divakaruni captures this element of the original epic in her first-person narration. Analysing the inherently dialogic structure of the *Mahabharata* Laurel Patton argues for a correlation between the multiple perspectives and an emphasis on a plurality of identity. Basing the argument on gender theory, she refers to "the dialogical, gendered self" as "a multiple self, with a variety of momentary roles to choose from" (Patton 2007: 198). Such a discursive, performative notion of gender, which might appear as a theoretical given nowadays, and which lies at the heart of Divakaruni's novel, can be seen to operate already in the ancient epic through its construction of characters and narrative structure.

The scene in the court where Draupadi is shamed presents a clear assertion of female strength and agency. The silence of her men makes her recognize the limits of their feelings for her. "There were other things they loved more. Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering" (Divakaruni, 2008: 195). She also notices how she had been consumed by passionate anger, in contrast to her husbands who stoically suffered the humiliation and controlled their desires for revenge by submitting to the expected protocol, patiently waiting for the circumstances to turn in their favour. The situation triggers a painful act of emancipation for Panchaali who is forced to protect herself as men fail her, while also learning how "emotions are always intertwined with power and pride" (195). Furthermore, 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).

Throughout the narrative, the desire for and the execution of vengeance is presented as the central trait transcending the boundaries of gender, yet affirming them at the same time. While Panchaali spends her life struggling to control her passionate temper and her thirst for revenge culminates in causing the killing of thousands, her husbands are constructed as her counter images in terms of patience and stoic obedience of rule and custom, all the while, of course, enjoying the freedom of action attached to their status as men. Although Panchaali's desire and speech trigger the war, she does not actively fight in it but remains confined to a position of eyewitness. At various points in the story it is implied that a woman's body is incapable of fulfilling a mission of revenge. One night during battle, Panchaali dreams of killing her brother who is disguised as a Kaurava prince. The dream expresses her feeling of despair from watching everybody close to her die, from facing her own impotence and guilt. Transformed into a man in the dream, she experiences a feeling of sameness, a kind of gender-empathy, because she feels the familiar hatred and desire for revenge, yet now she is actively able to kill. In contrast to this brief imaginary switching of gender, Panchaali's half-sister, Sikhandi, undergoes a permanent change, being transformed into a "great and dangerous warrior" (44) in order to partake in the battle. Although her appearance and behaviour are markedly different, she describes her new identity thus: "When I awoke, I was a man. And yet not completely so, for though my form was changed, inside me I remembered how women thought and what they longed for" (46). She retains this ambiguity about her gender. Watching her in battle, Panchaali notices how she still looks "male from a certain angle, female from another" (256). Like Panchaali, Sikhandi is driven by vengeance and rebellion against men's greater freedom of action. Early in the narrative she describes an insight in the inevitability of emancipation, similar to the one Panchaali has during her shameful disrobing in court. She argues that women need to fight for themselves to restore their dignity because, "wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you'll wait

forever" (49). Inspired by Sikandhi's sex change as the ultimate liberation from the restrictions of womanhood, Panchaali is aware from the start that: "I, too, would cross the bounds of what was allowed to women" (51). As shown above, her behaviour frequently transgresses the boundaries of traditional femininity, e.g. her outspokenness, her education and her polyandrous marriage. Furthermore, she fails to display a strong attachment to her children, valuing her independence higher than motherhood. To be at the side of her husbands, she leaves her sons behind, barely recognizing them years later.

Draupadi challenges the traditional formulations of what a woman and wife should be. Though she doesn't switch genders like Shikhandi, she has definitely moved away from traditional femininity towards vengeance which is one of the important strands in reading this epic through feminist lenses.

The last part of the narrative adds another dimension. During the battle Panchaali is most shocked to find that her self-perception (as the brave woman wronged, admired for enduring hardships) 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. Draupadi is given special powers to witness the great battle. This again brings her to the centre of the action rather than making her a passive listener to daily events. 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 travelled 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 (314). 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.

The analysis has shown that Draupadi is far from a univocal representation of the ideal Indian female, always torn between devoted wife and independent, outspokenly critical woman. Nancy Falk writes: "She is a throwback; her stories come from a time when women were more highly respected than in the days of the meek and submissive wifely models" (cited in Brodbeck/Black 2007: 16). Divakaruni's narrative can be seen to highlight this perception of femininity. Moreover, the plurality of roles (wife, mother, queen etc.) within the story can itself explain the shifts and inconsistencies in Draupadi's character. Divakaruni makes this tension one of her focus points and presents Panchaali's distress and suffering caused by the fragmentation of her different selves. This is illustrated once more by Panchaali's decision to follow her husbands on their final journey. Again she is both loyal wife and rebellious woman, as no other before her had ever attempted to climb the Himalayan Mountains. When her strength starts to desert her, she reflects:

> "Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what was the alternative? To sit among bent grandmothers, gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves with toothless gums as I waited for death? Intolerable! I would rather perish on the mountain. […], my last victory over the other wives […]. How could I resist it? (Divakaruni 2008: 343-44)

The quote shows the complex mix of emotions and demonstrates the ambiguous, finely tuned assessment of Panchaali's character in the novel. It portrays her as a model of female empowerment and courage but casts a clear critical-humorous glance on her vanity and desire for admiration. Even her death is staged ambivalently in this regard. When she jumps from the pathway it appears to signify a brave acknowledgment of having reached the end of her powers and as a final cry for attention because her last tormenting thoughts are about which men in her life would have turned around to come to her rescue. But the arrival in heaven brings a surprising relief for Panchaali, who notes: "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 the various passions that distinguished them in life" (358). The gods are presented as people without a sex, beyond passions, and thus in a state of androgynous, peaceful balance. Finally, emotions are singled out as the element marking character and gender differences, beyond all other deceptive guises. Panchaali's death appears as liberation and resolve of the contradictions of her identity: "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali" (360). It remains for

the reader to decide whether this ending appears spiritually consoling or pessimistic, as the reconciliation of her troubled female identity and recognition of her 'self' is denied to her on earth. Divakaruni's novel manages to convey the "great psychological depth" (Dasa 2009) of the *Mahabharata* and reflects on the various illusions the characters have about themselves, about romantic love, about heroism, war, and vengeance. If "in most constructions of Draupadi, in both literary and non-literary texts, she is seen as a victim of patriarchy" (Nair 2011: 153), Divakaruni modifies this view and makes the question of female agency a more complex one.

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