

Feminist Perspective in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract: Feminist Criticism began as a kind of revolution against the traditional literary criticism. It was male centered that considered women's writing as inferior. A criticism advocates equal rights for women in a political economic, social, psychological, personal and aesthetic sense. On the thematic level, the feminist reader should identify with female characters and their concerns. Elaine Showalter begins her piece on feminist writings by saying that feminist criticism can be divided into two distinct varieties. The first type is concerned with the women as a reader of male produced literature. She calls this first type of feminist criticism as Feminist critique. The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with the women as the producer of texts, literature by women. She has adopted a French term namely, *la gynocritique*. Kamala Marakandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Nair portray the image of middle class women characters and provide an obscure picture of Indianness in the Indian women. Many Indian women writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have explored female subjectivity and the image of new women and their struggle for their identities. "Divakaruni is not a feminist in the sense her concerns were purely humanitarian". (Vinoda 174) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an expatriate writer, pictures Indian womanhood how they are treated by men in their lives. She insists on this theme in her novels, poems and short stories. Divakaruni's the novelist was inspired by Panchaali's Character after listening to the story of the Mahabharat in her childhood. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reflects Draupadi's sufferings in Divakaruni's point of view. It retells the epic Mahabharat's tale. The novelist reconstructs the tale of Mahabharat in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. The present paper analyzes how woman is treated by male in *The Palace of Illusions*.

Full paper

In ancient days, woman should not go outside and she should not literate. She had to do only her domestic works. She had to live for her parents, husband, and children. She sacrifices herself for her family members. She had no rights equally with men. "Feminist Criticism became a dominant force in western literary studies in the late 1970's, when feminist theory more broadly conceived was applied to linguistic and liberty matters. Since the early 1980s, feminist literary Criticism has developed and diversified in a number of ways and is now characterized by a global perspective. "(Criticism in Indian English Literature 6) "One group practices feminist critique examines how women characters are portrayed, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in the so-called classics and demonstrating that attitudes & traditions reinforcing systematic masculine dominance are inscribed in the literary canon". (Criticism in Indian English Literature 7)

Feminist Criticism began as a kind of revolution against the traditional literary criticism. It was male centered that considered women's writing as inferior. A criticism advocates equal rights for women in a political economic, social, psychological, personal and aesthetic sense. On the thematic level, the feminist reader should identify with female characters and their concerns. Elaine Showalter begins her piece on feminist writings by saying that feminist criticism can be divided into two distinct varieties. The first type is concerned with the women as a reader of male produced literature. She calls this first type of feminist criticism as Feminist critique. The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with the women as the producer of texts, literature by women. She has adopted a French term namely, *la gynocritique*. Kamala Marakandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Nair portray the image of middle class women characters and provide an obscure picture of Indianness in the Indian women. Many Indian women writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have explored female subjectivity and the image of new women and their struggle for their identities. "Divakaruni is not a feminist in the sense her concerns were purely humanitarian". (Vinoda 174)

"Male is by nature superior and the female inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled[...]. It is better for them that they should be under the rule of a master". (Politics 190) Aristotle advocated the subordination of women on these grounds for he believed that a women's biology justified the societal pressures that kept her in an inferior position. This biological determinism is the first hurdle that feminists have had to counter.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni an Indo-American author, works as a professor of English in the University of Houston. She is also a co-founder and former president of a helpline for South Asian women. She involves herself eagerly as a volunteer at women's center at Berkeley and assists battered women through the organization. Maitri, the organization was begun by her with the help of a group of friends. The organization *maître* was founded in 1991. Her significant works are Poems which are *Black Candle* (1991), *Leaving Yuba City* (1997), short stories that are *Arranged Marriage*, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) and her novels, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005), *The palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing thing* (2010), *Shadow Land* (2011), *Oleander Girl*(2013) and *Grandma Great Gourd*(2013). The present paper analyzes how woman is treated by male in *The Palace of Illusions*.

Woman has equal rights and she is not to be treated as a slave in the world. She is not a play thing and an object to be used and thrown as a waste. As a human being, she is endowed with emotions and passions, anger and fear, joy and sorrow, laughter and tears. These messages are conveyed in Divakaruni's recent novel the *Palace of Illusions* and she retells the epic story of *Mahabharata*. She reconstructs the story of Draupad's suffering of *The Palace of Illusions* are love, marriage, revenge and death.

Divakaruni makes Panchaali narrate her joys and doubts, her struggles and her heart breaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it.

Swayamvar is also a kind of marriage ceremony in which women selects her husband's. Marriages are made in heaven. Divakaruni has retold the study feminism in her writings. Feminism is an emotional segregation of women and women, which led to the development of a female world. She brings out many aspects of feminism encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right for self determination. Draupadi's love and her marriage are themes of Divakaruni's. *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi's love for karna is secret till her death and her love is not encouraged by her brother Dhri. Karna's low caste is the only reason for Dhri's negligence to advise his sister Draupadi. After her brother's counsel, she hides her love and does not propose counsel, she hides her love and does not propose her love to Karna, but Draupadi is an independent woman. Therefore she has privilege to select her life partner in Swayamvar. Lord Krishna and others ask her to choose Arjun as her husband in Swayamvar. Her marriage alters her name as Panchaali. Who has married the Pandavas as per Kunti's order. Kunti says, "All five of you must marry this woman". (PI 108) The word 'this woman' distresses Draupadi and she retorts as though I were a nameless servant. It angered me, but it also hurt. (PI 108) Is it possible for a woman to lead a married life with five men? But this had occurred in ancient days. Woman's desire is not completed and she has to adjust with the situation. Sometimes her inner feelings of desire are suppressed by her. It reveals the position of an Indian woman who is ready to obey her mother in laws order. Woman comes out as a survivor of subjugation. When woman has problems in her family, she has to survive in her life. Wives are considered as a movable property. This concept is highlighted through the character. Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusion*. The novelist mentions about virtuous women in *The Palace of Illusions* in the following statement.

Virtuous women were sent directly into their next birth, where if they were lucky, their next birth, where if they were lucky they reincarnated as men. But I thought that if lokas existed at all good women would surely go to one where men were not allowed so that they could be finally free of male demands.(PI 155)

Chauhan quotes in 'Lengthening Shadows' about women in the society.

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their dependence in correct ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting upon still solid economic and social foundations-Simon De Beauvoir (203).

After her marriage, Draupadi's name has been changed as Panchaali which denotes the spirit of the land and also a peacemaker.

The five-fold role of Panchaali is rebellious daughter-in-law, the queens who ruled in the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna and the woman obsessed with vengeance. (PI 229)

Draupadi laughs at Duryodhan who visits Indraprastha to see the palace of Illusions and slips down carelessly. She watches him and ridicules him loudly with her friends. It is her great mistake. Kunti scolds her, "Let her suffer the results of her folly". (PI 174) Her loud laughter and sarcastic comments and Duryodhan induce the spirit of vengeance in Duryodhan. "Encouraged by my smile one of the younger women cried out in her gay, clear voice it seems the king's son is also blind.....". (PI 173)

Generally women are ill-treated as slaves by men in the world. There is a challenge between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the game of dice, wherever the Kauravas accomplish with the help of Sakuni. She ventilates her passions after she knows about the failure of the Pandavas. She says, "The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave", (PI 190) The novelist sketches the Indian woman's position after her marriage and another idea has noted that the woman is not a plaything in the hands of a male to be used for his convenience.

The novelist presents a feminist perspective in the Palace of Illusions. Draupadi has been humiliated by Duryodhan's act of tyranny in the court in front of all the elders. "I found myself in court, a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disordered saree around me, I demanded help from my husband's" (PI 191) She screams to everybody to rescue her but it is in vain. She sincerely prays to Lord Krishna to save her from the embarrassing position. To prove her virtue and chastity, Lord Krishna consoles her, "None can shame you, he said, if the court represents the society which is insensitive to the shame and humiliation experienced by women. Perhaps it is Lord Krishna or the male feminist who understands women for her suppression.

Indian women are usually passive serene and silent in nature, but when injustice arises in the world, she becomes furious as fire, abandons her tolerance and bursts out her emotions as goddess Kali. Draupadi damns the Kauravas as Kannaki in Silappadikaran. "I lifted up my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm now because I knew that everything; I said until the day. I bathe it in Kauravas blood" (PI 194)

Women suffer in a male dominated Society all around the world. This point is appropriate to Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*. During their disguise, Draupadi works as a maid to Queen Sudheshna in the King Virat's Palace. She is in her usual dress of a maid servant and Yudhisthir has worn a Brahmin's white dhoti. Nakul and Sahadev are working in the king's barns. Arjun is a dance working in the King's barns. Arjun is a dance tutor to princess Uttara and Bheem serves as a cook. Draupadi has finished her duties assigned by the Queen Sudheshna. Keechack, Queen Sudheshna's brother, teases Draupadi often and irritates her because of his infatuation for her charm. Draupadi informs about his torture to Yudhisthir, "If Keechack touches me again, and I'll swallow Poison". (PI 231) This signifies her suffering by Keechack. Bheem assures her to execute him in the morning of the next day. In this way, her problem is solved by her husband Bheem. Draupadi suffers terribly by Keechack. Women are treated as powerful intoxicating drugs in the male dominated world. Draupadi in the Palace of Illusion is treated by Keechack as object of

intoxication. Draupadi Indian woman suffers in the modern world whether she commits mistakes or not. The novelist depicts Draupadi as an Indian woman, who is traditionally bowed but remains virtuous and obeys her husband and her mother-in-law. Yet she is independent to choose her husband and curse the Kauravas against injustice. On like the epic *The Mahabharat*, *The Palace of Illusions* throws light on the female characters and their role in the domestic life. They not look after their domestic life but also are the harbingers of the battle. The various roles that a woman plays in her life as a daughter, sister, friend wife, mother is depicted in this novel and woven intricately.

Woman being victimized by the male is illustrated through Damayanthi's character in the concept of Nal's interest in gambling which perishes both Nal and Yudhisthir's pleasant lives Draupadi's Damayanthi to inform Yudhisthir to be careful in his life.

Nal, the Nishad King loved Damayanthi, a charming princess, who in turn also opted for Nal in her Swayamvar. Goddess Kali was annoyed to look at this event and her trick made him squander to regain his kingdom. He lost his property in the game of dice and name he was compelled to renounce. Damayanthi and his son Nal was in disguise as a charioteer for king Rituparna, who was an expert in the dice game. Nal learnt thoroughly about the game from the King. Damayanthi sought for her husband Nal, and once his daughter. On this occasion he had a chance to meet her husband. Nal regained his kingdom. The moral of the story is that one should face the problem courageously in life. According to Yudhisthir, Damayanthi was not an ideal wife. But according to Draupadi, "she was a better woman than I". (PI 210) Generally, women never abandon their self image but Draupadi Utters the fact. Jealousy is the main theme of Nal-Damayanthi story in which the goddess Kali is envious of the Cordial relationship of husband and wife, Nal Damayanthi. This even proves that *The Palace of Illusion* is a story within a story.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* itself serves as a general metaphor for life. Maya is an illusion, human being continue to sustain with much efforts and pains, through conflicts, meanness and humiliation. The novel is written in first person, giving Panchaali's own thoughts on her own life. Panchaali is a fiery female redefining for us a world of warriors, gods and the ever-manipulating hands of fate. She is swept into their quest to reclaim their birth right remaining at their sides through years of exile and a terrible civil war involving all the important kings of India. Nowadays women are equal to men. She is rebellious and modern women finds success in her life.

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