Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Palace of Illusions

A feminist perspective

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Abstract— Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most significant literary voices of contemporary times. She is gifted with rare capacity of critically looking at social and cultural issues in her creative works. She has championed the cause of feminist rights in her own way in her celebrated novel Palace of Illusions. The events of Mahabharata are narrated by Panchaali and so they derive a new significance and value. Panchaali presents a feminist perspective. It enables the readers to reaccess reinterpret and revalue many of issues of mythological time of Mahabharata. It is to be appreciated the problems and marginalisations that women suffered at the time of Mahabharata has noy been much altered even today. Therefore Panchaalis voice acquires universal significance. She emerges as spokesperson for millions and millions of women all over the world who despite their capacity and talent have been relegated to secondary position and are forced to live a life of subservient by men. The present paper critically analyses Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from feminist perspective.

Keywords— Mahabharata, suppression, feminist, equality, feminism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The time of Mahabharata represents one of the most crucial crises in entire civilization. It was the turbulent time of the great war of Mahabharata in which all the important figures of the time were essentially involved and almost each of them went through intense crisis of personal and public loyalties. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is gifted with rare cultural consciousness. All the significant men of that time fought on the battle field of kurukshetra. The novelist can see beyond. She examines this crisis in mythology from a feminist perspective. Relevant to today’s war torn world, The Palace of Illusions takes us back to the time of the Indian epic The Mahabharata – a time that is half history, half myth and wholly magical. Through her narrator Panchaali, the wife of the legendary five Pandavas brothers, Divakaruni has given us a rare feminist interpretation of an epic story.

The novel traces Panchaali’s life, beginning with her magical birth in fire as the daughter of a king before following her spirited balancing act as a woman with five husbands who have been cheated out of their father’s kingdom. Panchaali is swept into their quest to reclaim their birthright, remaining at the brothers’ sides through years of exile and a terrible civil war. Meanwhile, we never lose sight of her stratagems to take over control of her household from her mother-in-law, her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna, or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is her husband’s most dangerous enemy. Panchaali is a fiery female voice in a world of warriors, gods, and ever-manipulating hands of fate.

This novel is also the novel of the assertion of the will of Panchaali and thus symbolically is the text of assertion of the will of millions of women of past and present who have been forced to the margins of culture due to men folk who always seem to control the currents of culture. Through Panchaali’s perspective, when we look at this crucial period of mythology, it compels us to reinterpret and re understand many of our notions. Panchaali who emerges as a fiery character also metaphorically represents the quest of females to assert their identity. Thus aspect of novel connects the distant past of Mahabharata with the contemporary society.

II. SCOPE OF THE PAPER:

The great epic Mahabharata is narrated by Vyas Muni Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes an attempt to look at the events and happenings of this great epic through the eyes of Draupadi, perhaps the most significant female character in the epic. Psychology has clearly established that there is a difference the way men and women look and interpret life. Draupadi’s interpretation of happenings in Mahabharata gave new insights into understanding the interpretation of the epic. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni being a female herself has succeeded in capturing the subtle and complex working of the female mind. It is to be remembered that Mahabharata represents one of the most complex crises in the human history and it makes Draupadi’s narration of the time more interesting. It was the time when each major character in the epic is intricately associated with the question of discovering,
defining and asserting his or her identity. Taking into considerations the conventions and norms of those times the quest for the identity became all the more difficult. The careful reading of the novel ‘Palace of Illusions’ demolishes the commonly accepted notion that the life in the past was characterized by simplicity as against the modern life which is complex one. Life even in that antiquity was by no means less complex than the contemporary times. This is well demonstrated by the novelist by revealing Panchaali’s perspective on various issues.

III. PALACE OF ILLUSIONS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Feminist movement arose out of discrimination that was practiced by men against women. It is strange to observe that throughout the human history, women have been treated as secondary. They have not been given equal rights and opportunities in the society. It was this realization of their less significant status in socio-cultural set up that has primarily inspired feminist movement. Feminism has travelled a long distance. It was started with the objective of demanding equality with men and in course of its development it has taken into its fold every walk of life. Today any issue can be interpreted and understood by feminist perspective. Meaning does not arise in isolation. The text is produced in the context. Understanding the contextuality of the text is important. Conventionally, male perspective determines and defines the context. Even the great epic Mahabharata is not an exception to this fact. By choosing Panchaali as the narrator of this novel, Divakaruni has made female as the producer of the context. The novel is capable of giving new insights to understand and interpret the same events of Mahabharata of which we are already familiar as the context here is defined and determined by the female who herself is one of the characters in the drama. Her observations of the happenings give us a different interpretation and we begin to look at the events from a fresh angle.

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 those imposed by history and gender. The novel is written in first person which adds a feminist essence to the entire novel. By making Panchaali the protagonist, she gives Panchaali’s own thoughts on her own life through her own words. The focal point is Draupadi (Panchaali), who is given a different presence by Divakaruni, yet also has a crucial, distinctly gendered function in the original. Taking the narrative situation and the dialogic textual orientation into account sustains the argument for a surprisingly (post)modern ambivalence and complexity of the gender roles conveyed in the contemporary text, which is already palpable in the ancient epic. Therefore, some issues in terms of gender and the relation of the sexes in the Mahabharata deserve consideration before turning to the novel.

This wondrous character of Draupadi is shown to have born/emerged out of a holy fire, a pious Yagna performed by the king of Panchala and his subjects to beget a son to avenge himself. Though she is remarked by dhai ma that she was the girl who wasn’t invited, she affirms the prophecy (Akashwani) at her birth that she would change the course of history. Draupadi hears the story of her birth often by Dhai ma as it made her feel special and unique. She is told that on seeing both of them, her brother and herself, the king of Drupad had picked them up and named her brother first as Dhrishtadyumna who was born to serve his vengeance and herself as Draupadi. She then ponders over the meanings of the names given to them; Dhrishtadyumna means destroyer of enemies. She considers that his name reaffirms or justifies the purpose of his birth/ his aim of life and thus is convincing/ acceptable, however Draupadi literally means daughter of Drupad. She rejects the egotistic name her father gave her and refuses to believe that her identity is to be bound by the men in her life. Draupadi quickly reasserts herself and renames herself Panchali (meaning derived from the Kingdom of Panchala). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays Panchali as a powerful, strong and independent woman, an equal to the men around her, rather than subservient.

Story of Paanchali is the story of the assertion of female will. She detests the fact that she was not desired by her parents. This thought of her connects her with prevailing modern tendency in our society where girl child still is unwelcomed. Birth of a son is celebrated with all the festivities while the birth of a daughter is a silent affair. She is also disgusted with the fact that she has not been given any meaningful and purposeful name. She resents the [prevailing custom that does not attach significance to the life of female. She is not believed to possess any different and distinct identity of her own her fate is linked with men folk. The quest for her true identity takes roots quite early in Panchali’s life. The rest of the story of her life does nothing but deepens and consolidates the quest.
There are many who believe that it was her headstrong actions that brought about the destruction of the Third Age of Man (Dhupara Age), and she is known to be a kritiya, one who brings doom to her clan. But Chitra Banerjee moves away from such interpretations to provide a new outlook on Panchali.

Another instance of feminism can be felt when the tutor of Dhri comments for panchaali that the greatest purpose of the kshatriya woman was to support all the men in her life. Panchaali denies this point of view and argues who had set such norms and hollowed/ flawed values for women and asserts that there were other greater purposes to serve in her life. This incidence proves that Divakaruni’s Panchaali is not only a strong woman who can take a stand for her sake unlike other women of her time but also is consistent with the modern contemporary concepts like modernism and individualism.

“In revenge, the tutor shot a last comment at me from behind the safety of the door that led to the passage. “Prince, I have recalled one rule of conduct which you may tell your sister: A kshatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfill a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield.”

“And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men?” I burst out as soon as we were alone. “A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life.”

Dhri smiled, but halfeheartedly. “The tutor wasn’t totally wrong. When I leave for the final battle, that’s what I’d like you to pray for.”

The word moved over me like a finger of ice. Not if but when. With what chill acceptance my brother spoke it. He left the room before I could contradict him.

I thought of the husband and sons that everyone assumed I would have someday. The husband I couldn’t visualize, but the sons I imagined as miniature versions of Dhri, with the same straight, serious eyebrows. I promised myself I’d never pray for their deaths. I’d teach them, instead, to be survivors. And why was a battle necessary at all? Surely there were other ways to glory, even for men? I’d teach them to search for those.”

Draupadi doesnot plead only for outward equality for women. Her spirit rises in rebellion whenever she observes discrimination or injustice against women. She registers her strong protest when she hears that women have to perform a subservient duty. She disagrees with the idea that woman’s duty is to offer prayer when their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons go to war. Instead of praying that they should come back alive, woman should pray that they should die a brilliant death on the battlefield for the sake of honor of Kshatriya. Draupadi quickly realizes that it is a strange cultural conspiracy against women that men should have glory and greatness whether alive or dead. It is really strange to expect women that they should pray that their men folk should die even when they fully knew that life without them would be nothing but miserable.

Draupadi’s thinking is ahead of her times. Even in the age of Mahabharata when war was highly glorified, she perfectly understands the futility of it. She is surprised why men must fight in order to give evidence of their glory and greatness. She shows the courage to think differently and makes a promise to herself that she would act differently when the time comes. She would never pray for the deaths of her sons in war. She says there are other ways to spend life fruitfully. She emphasizes on the need of searching and implementing these ways. Here, Chitra Divakaruni reveals altogether a new facet of Draupadi’s personality. Far from being one who was the cause of the great war as is commonly perceived, Draupadi stands for peace. She doesnot even remotely approve bloodshed and death in the name of war. It is important in the sense that though war is fought, won or lost by men, women have to suffer under all the circumstnaces. If men die, as heros in the war, their names are written in golden words in history. Women are always losers irrespective of the consequences of the war. Draupadi is capable of looking at war not as simply clash between two groups but she is aware of its social and psychological dimensions. Men who win war get land and resources, men who lose are entitled to name and glory. It is strange that women are expected to pray for the success in war. Draupadi fully realizes that so far is war is glorified in the world, women will always remain secondary. It is the regime of peace which can create the possibilities for equality and dignity of women. Draupadi emerges as a person who is gifted with foresight and critical thinking. She detests war and destruction. She is ready to discover different ways which will help men and women both to find peace in life. There is irresistible quest in her to search for her true identity. She cannot be satisfied merely to be a daughter of Drupad or sister of Dhristadyumna. She refuses to be a cattle who can follow what men dictate without a thought. Her intellect cannot find any justification behind a ridiculous idea that good women must pray that their men folk must attain glory even when they have to die at the battlefield rather than coming home defeated. Her mettle is revealed not because she simply refuses to be governed by traditional
ways, but she establishes the superiority of female intellect when she condemns war and believes that there are other ways that can ensure glory and greatness as well. She becomes the symbol of the suppressed female intellectual powers that have not been given sufficient scope to flower and flourish even in the contemporary times. Without even giving adequate opportunity to females, very often, conclusions are drawn that either they are unfit for the job or would not be able to do justice to it. Entire movement of feminism has repeatedly asserted that adequate opportunities be created for the flowering of women potential, equality would be natural and logical corollary. Feminist movement can succeed provided women like Draupadi feel the irresistible quest to discover their identity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Feminist perspective is concerned with asking new questions about the old texts. Mahabharata the epic of India is one of the most significant old texts that has come down to us. The epic by depicting the conflict between Pandavas and Kauravas thrives on universal issues and concerns; which though in the epic are depicted in the context of then old world but at the same time almost all the issues depicted in the epic invariably have universal and timeless significance. In conformity to the social tradition, the female characters in the epic though significant in their own accord are not shown to control the happenings. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has raised new questions about the old text of Mahabharata. She has made an attempt to understand the crises of Mahabharata by female perspective by choosing Panchaali to be the narrator of the novel.

In feminist literature, female character occupies a prominent place. She is the narrator and we see the world through her eyes. Palace of Illusions lends to feminist interpretation as entire novel is narrated by Draupadi. Being a prominent character in Mahabharata, it is not simply the account of her personal life but the novel gives her take on many of the prominent events in Mahabharata which are associated with her life as a daughter, sister, wife, mother and lover. The very fact that we are understanding the major events of Mahabharata from female perspective makes this novel not only different but an important feminist text.

REFERENCES