



Myth Retold, Women Re-centered: Narratology and Draupadi's Feminism in The Palace of Illusions

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Abstract:

Narration is an inseparable part of human life. Narrating stories, sharing experiences, opinions, emotions, anecdotes etc. is an attribute of human nature. The beliefs and perceptions of human mind are formed by the narratives which the human mind accepts. The art of narrating is as old as human history. Narratology is the study of narratives and their structures and how it develops human perception. As narratology is the structural study of narratives, it does not have any space for gender implications, and it started agitation amidst a feminist literary circle. Susna Lanser's seminal publication, " A Feminist Narratology", is often credited with initiating the field of "feminist narratology" (1986). Susan S. Lanser wrote this article to criticize narratology for its lack of attention to women's perspectives. This study analyses Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi, wife of the five Pandava brothers, in Mahabharata in her novel 'The Palace of Illusions'.

Key Words : *Feminism, Feminist Narrative, marginalised, mythology.*

Narrating stories is as old as human history. We love to share experiences, opinions, emotions, anecdotes etc. Storytelling is an inseparable part of human life. We humans are story narrators and listeners. The present study is also based on a story of a woman character from Indian mythology who narrates her own story from her point of view. The present paper aims to discuss a feminist narrative, a character of Draupadi, the prominent yet marginalised character in Mahabharata. The story of Draupadi is a retelling of Mahabharata. Epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata shaped and developed beliefs, perceptions and mindsets of Indian society. People consider the characters in these epics by their personality traits rather than their names. The same thing can be said with different perspective that these characters represent the virtues and vices. Stories of Rama, Krishna, Shiva and Arjuna and their heroic deeds inspired many minds. Panchatantra stories have enriched the childhood of almost every Indian. All these stories narrate heroic qualities of male characters in the epics. Authors across India have re-narrated these epics from different perspectives in number of languages. There are number of versions of Ramayana and Mahabharata not only in India but across the South Asia. Mahabharata is even translated in Persian language, All these versions of epics narrate or re-narrate the stories with different thoughts. It helps us to study the feminist narrative in a mythological fiction with reference to the narrative theory'.

The present study will implement the analytical method to analyse the protagonist character of Draupadi portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her recounting of Mahabharata, "The Palace of Illusions", with reference to Susan S. Lanser's paper, 'Toward a Feminist Narratology'. Narrative or Narratology is considered as a field of study which overviews the stories, texts, events, creative work which expresses a story.

Gerald Prince in his article, 'Narrative Analysis and Narratology', rightly said,

“...any narrative is the representation of real or fictive situation and events in a time sequence”.¹
(pg. 179)

Narratology or the theory of narrative was coined by Tzvetan Todorov (Grammaire DuDe Cameroon) in 1969. According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan,

"Narratology is a branch of narrative theory”

Mieke Bal in his 'Narratology — Introduction to the Theory of Narrative' defines,

'Narratology as a field of study is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events — of cultural artefacts that tell a story' 3 (pg. 1)

The study of stories and how they work is known as narratology. These entire theories speak about the theory of narrative as the theory is more structural and studies the structures in the narrative. The theory studies the narrative elements in the narration or story.

While Susan S, Lanser in her paper, 'Toward a Feminist Narratology' put her thoughts differently, '...narratology has had little impact on feminist scholarship, and feminist insights about narrative have been similarly overlooked by narratology' .³ (pg. 341)

Susan questions the theory of narratology,

When asked, ...upon what body of text, upon what understandings of the narrative and referential universe, have the insights of narratology been based'? ⁴ (pg. 343)

Narratology, structural term has not considered any gender therefore Susan S. Lancer made charges against narratology that,..the foundation of narratology have been either men's text or text treated as men's text...a narratology that cannot adequately account for women's narratives is an inadequate narratology for men's text as well.'⁵ (pg. 343, 346)

The character of Draupadi is portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian author and professor of writing at University of Houston. 'One Amazing Novels Thing' like 'The etc. Mistress By Chitra of Banerjee Spices, 'Sister of my Heart', 'Queen of Dreams', Divakaruni are works of literary genius. One of the main characters from the Ramayana is retold in her work, 'The Forest of Enchantments', Sita. The recounting of the in the novel 'The Palace of Illusions' is told from Draupadi's point of view. Draupadi, 'First person/ protagonist (Autodiegetic) narrator'⁶ (pg. 349) (Susan Lanser) narrates her story about her birth, childhood, marriage, events that shaped her life including life in exile with her five husbands and a mother- in -law, disrobing by Dusshasana, and the Great War between Pandava and Kaurava.

Draupadi, the central figure in the novel, often considered as ayonija, took birth from the fire sacrifice performed by her father Drupad. Draupadi speaks about her dark Complexion and felt ashamed to take part in religious processions. Krishna helped her to overcome from despondent mood by saying,

'A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself'. (pg.9).

She enjoyed her childhood with her caring and loving brother at Panchal.

She was the slave of her destiny. She was forced to learn the sixty-four skills and rules of comportment. She was attracted to Karna. Her brother told story of Karna against Krishna's wish. Karna participated in the Swayamvara to win her hand but Draupadi herself stood against him and asked him about his parents.

Draupadi had to confront difficult circumstances after marrying Arjuna, who disguised himself as Bramhin. This was in stark contrast to her existence at her father's palace. She describes her condition as,

"My feet were bleeding. I'd never walked barefoot on common streets, over thorns and stones.... Each footstep on the cracked, burning path was agony" (pg. 98, 99)

Draupadi fought her own battle by using her womanly powers. She has to get married to five Pandava brothers after her mother in law's order. She feels as

".. a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not". (pg. 120)

She faced adverse conditions, obeyed the orders of her mother-in-law, undergone the hardships of exile, followed her husbands wherever they go, worked as a maid, enjoyed being the empress and the magic of palace and then lost it. She was considered as an Object and staked by her husband at the game of dice.

"The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave.(pg.190)

Duryodhana misbehaved with her by showing his bare lap, Karna called her whore' Dushasana disrobed her. Pandava brothers were helpless; they could not save her from being disrobed. Krishna supported and protected her. She cursed Kaurava and took oath as she lifted her long hair,

"I will not comb it, ... until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (pg. 194)

After losing in dice game Pandava brothers had to face an exile for twelve years. Darupadi had to leave her palace and followed her husbands. She kept the fire of revenge lit in Pandava brother's minds. She tested them by using her womanly powers and displayed her anger to Yudhisthir.

Conclusion:

Draupadi, the beloved Mahabharata queen who was set as a prize in an archery bout, is famous for starting the biggest war of her time, is a tragic figure. Draupadi reluctantly agrees to her mother in laws wish to share herself with five brothers. Though she was queen but she was publically disrobed. Her life was riddled with inconsistencies. She left her mark on history yet not a single

girl child is named after her in Indian society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni by giving voice to the prominent yet marginalised character put forth the condition of women. In the contemporary world many Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari can be seen who sacrifice their lives, for their companions. Indeed, The Palace of Illusions is a true feminist narrative presented by the leading female novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

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