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A Postcolonial-Feminist Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), presents a radical postcolonial-feminist retelling of the *Mahabharata*. The novel centers Draupadi's voice, which has been ignored, in order to question patriarchal and colonial hegemonies. The purpose of this article is to examine how the novel dismantles epic traditions in order to reclaim subaltern subjectivity, hybrid identities, and gendered spatiality. Additionally, this study engages with theoretical frameworks developed by Spivak, Bhabha, and Said. The narrative of Divakaruni transforms Draupadi from an object to an agency. This transformation is shown in her defiance during the *cheer-haran*, where she says, I would not let them see me weep. This particular moment exemplifies Spivak's requirement to unlearn privilege whenever subaltern representation is being discussed. The text's historiographic metafiction, which is comparable to that of Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Morrison's *Beloved*, reveals the ideological foundations of canonical myths while simultaneously employing Bhabha's interstitial perspective to negotiate cultural hybridity. Architectural places, such as the palace, woodlands, and thresholds, serve as contested areas of patriarchal power and feminist resistance. These spaces mirror Lefebvre's counter-space and Rose's paradoxical space. The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate how the novel not only decolonizes epic traditions but also critiques modern gendered and colonial power structures. This is accomplished by comparing the narrative of Draupadi with contemporary counter-narratives from postcolonial literature, such as those written by Roy, Achebe, and Rushdie. Last but not least, *The Palace of Illusions* is a prime example of the transformational potential of feminist revisionist mythmaking. It bridges the gap between ancient myth and contemporary discourse in order to reclaim agency for voices that have been historically suppressed.

INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, is a postcolonial-feminist reworking of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi. This book not only addresses postcolonial problems such as identity, resistance, and the reclaiming of voices that have been marginalized, but also questions traditional patriarchal narratives.

Postcolonial theory is a paradigm that has been established by academics like as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. This theory provides a framework for analysing how Divakaruni's work subverts patriarchal and colonial systems while simultaneously reclaiming agency for its protagonist. It is the contention of Said's theory of Orientalism that the East is portrayed in Western discourse as the Other, a foreign and inferior alternative to Europe (Said 3).

The novel written by Divakaruni challenges such simplified depictions of Draupadi by presenting her as a figure with multiple facets, rather than only a symbol of pain. This paper examines *The Palace of Illusions* through the lens of postcolonial theory and compares it to other works of postcolonial literature in order to demonstrate how the book deals with topics such as hybridity, cultural reclamation, and subversion. According to Gayatri Spivak's assertions in her book *Can the Subaltern Speak?* the subaltern, and by extension the marginalized individual whose voice has been silenced throughout history, works toward the goal of being heard within the dominant narratives (Spivak 104). The book written by Divakaruni specifically addresses this issue by providing Draupadi with the ability to tell her own story without being confined by male chroniclers. This is accomplished by offering Draupadi narrative authority.

Reclaiming the Subaltern Voice

The representation of the subaltern constitutes a significant concern in postcolonial literature, with extensive contributions from Gayatri Spivak on the topic. The author contends that colonial and patriarchal systems often suppress marginalized voices, questioning the

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ability of the subaltern to articulate their experiences within oppressive power structures in her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak 106). Similar to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), which amplifies the voices of women such as Ammu who resist societal conventions, *The Palace of Illusions* confronts this suppression by highlighting Draupadi's viewpoint. Roy writes, Her heart was free of locusts. That is certain. She was a woman characterized by the fury of the injured and possessed a temperament typically associated with men (Roy 45). Draupadi's defiance during her *cheer-haran*, or public humiliation, exemplifies an act of resistance. I would not let them see me weep. I, Panchaali, would not give them that satisfaction(Divakaruni 145). This is evocative of Offred's wordless defiance in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which she vows, I intend to survive, despite the fact that she is being oppressed from the outside. My objective is to persevere. I plan to outlast whatever it is that I'm not supposed to outlast (Atwood 112). The assertion that Spivak makes about the struggle of the subaltern to express themselves inside oppressive frameworks is evident in both of these books.

Hybridity and Cultural Identity

The notion of hybridity, which was developed by Homi Bhabha in 1994, is a key component in gaining an understanding of how postcolonial individuals negotiate their cultural identities. According to him, the experiences of colonialism lead to identities that are fragmented and hybrid to the point where they are difficult to categorize (Bhabha 114).

Within the context of *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's identity is influenced by a number of factors, including her birth from fire, her political marriages, and her dual roles as queen and exile. Within the pages of *Midnight's Children* (1981), written by Salman Rushdie, Saleem Sinai demonstrates a hybridity that is comparable when he says: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to- me (Rushdie 9). Similarly, Bhabha's concept of cultural negotiation is shown in the way that Draupadi's identity is always evolving. This dual nature is exemplified by her relationship with Krishna, who is both a heavenly figure and a political strategist. In his advice to her: “You must learn to hold two opposing truths in your mind at once “(Divakaruni 89). This is a reflection of the inner turmoil that Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, experiences as a result of the conflict between Igbo customs and colonial constraints: “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers” (Achebe 176). A major theme in postcolonial literature is the conflict that arises between tradition and transformation, which is portrayed in both of these writings.

Resistance and Rewriting History

It is common practice for postcolonial literature to participate in the practice of rewriting history in order to question dominant narratives. A critique of the way in which Western discourse creates the East as the Other, so perpetuating colonial power relations, may be found in Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) (Said 3). In a similar manner, *The Palace of Illusions* deconstructs the *Mahabharata* by refocusing on Draupadi's point of view, much how Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) rewrites Jane Eyre from the perspective of Bertha Mason. Rhys's Antoinette expresses her regret: "There is always the other side, always" (Rhys 106). Draupadi similarly questions historical narratives: History is written by the victors, but what if the vanquished write their own? (Divakaruni 201). This revisionist impulse is also seen in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), where Sethe reclaims her narrative from the erasures of slavery: She had to do something with the weight of her baby’s tombstone, so she carried it on her back (Morrison 5). The revisionist narratives in *The Palace of Illusions* and similar literary works illustrate how postcolonial and feminist retellings effectively deconstruct dominant historical paradigms.

Edward Said illustrates in *Orientalism* that prevailing power systems create uniform historical narratives that bolster their authority while suppressing disadvantaged viewpoints (Said 3). Divakaruni's inversion of the *Mahabharata* tradition parallels Jean Rhys's radical reinterpretation of Jane Eyre in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as both authors utilize what Linda Hutcheon designates as historiographic metafiction to reveal the ideological foundations of canonical literature (Hutcheon 118). By emphasizing Draupadi's subjectivity—especially during her resolute internal monologue in the *cheer-haran*: I would not let them see me weep (Divakaruni 145)—the text exemplifies what Gayatri Spivak characterizes as the essential postcolonial feminist endeavour of learning to speak to rather than listen for or speak for the historically muted subject (Spivak 292). This narrative technique parallels Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, whereby Sethe's terrible recollections she had to do something with the weight of her baby's tombstone (Morrison 5) reshape the official history of slavery through corporeal, gendered experiences. Likewise, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* subverts nationalist historiography by presenting history through the perspective of female transgression (Roy 45). These writings collectively illustrate how postcolonial feminist revisions utilize Homi Bhabha's concept of the interstitial perspective (Bhabha 4)—navigating the voids in prevailing historiography to express alternative epistemologies. By strategically appropriating canonical narratives and emphasizing marginalized perspectives, such works not only augment hegemonic history but also fundamentally contest its assertions of objectivity and completeness, exposing history as what Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes as an exercise in power (Trouillot 2) that is

inherently gendered and colonized. The palimpsestic quality of these revisions—where the new narrative supersedes yet remains visibly influenced by the original—exemplifies the continuous postcolonial endeavour to, as Dipesh Chakrabarty posits, provincialize Europe (Chakrabarty 3) while concurrently decolonizing indigenous patriarchal customs.

Gendered Spatiality in *The Palace of Illusions*

In her novel, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni methodically dissects the connection between gendered power dynamics and spatial arrangement. Architectural environments serve as both potential sites of resistance and instruments of patriarchal control, as this work demonstrates. The novel's depiction of manufactured environments, from the opulent *Hastinapura* palace to the forest exile's false sense of freedom, is a prime example of what architectural historian Daphne Spain calls gendered spaces (Spain 7). The purpose of these areas is to consciously uphold social hierarchies. The epitome of this spatial knowledge is Draupadi's keen understanding that walls have ears, and palaces have long memories (Divakaruni 112). This knowledge is similar to Michel de Certeau's differentiation between the tactical resistance of individuals navigating institutional places and the strategic power of those spaces (Certeau xix). The symbolic weight of the palace of illusions expresses what Gaston Bachelard calls the poetics of space on multiple levels (Bachelard xxxv). The manifestation of psychological and political reality through physical structures is referred to here. The palace, a golden prison and architectural wonder, is a perfect illustration of what feminist geographer Gillian Rose calls the paradoxical space (Rose 140) of female subjectivity under patriarchy. This area is both central and peripheral. In Divakaruni's reimagining of the forest exile, traditional power relations are temporarily suspended in what Henri Lefebvre would refer to as a counter-space (Lefebvre 382). Comparing this dualism to the exile in the jungle makes it more obvious. The statement made by Draupadi that the trees gave me what the palace never could—room to breathe without being watched (Divakaruni 203) emphasizes this freedom of space. According to Bell Hooks, the margin is a space of radical openness (hooks 22), which is consistent with this observation. The representation of thresholds and transitional spaces, such the gates, corridors, and courtyards that mark the divisions between gendered realms, is where Divakaruni's spatial narrative reaches a particularly high degree of complexity. Anthropologist Victor Turner associates these transitional spaces with ritual and metamorphosis (Turner 95), and Draupadi uses these spaces to subtly exercise agency. By whispering alliances in the palace antechambers or adopting strategic silences in the royal court, she accomplishes this. Thus, the book represents what architectural theorist Jane Rendell calls the subversive potential of in-between spaces (Rendell 54) for overlooked issues. The sculpting of social relations through built environments (Young 134), as feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young puts it, is ultimately revealed in *The Palace of Illusions*. This is achieved by applying this spatial analysis.

Divakaruni imagines alternate geographies of female power in addition to challenging the patriarchal spatial order of epic traditions by charting Draupadi's changing relationship to natural and architectural places. This is what Doreen Massey may call a progressive sense of place (Massey 146), a sense of location that takes into account the action of women.

The Significance of Retelling

The act of retelling in the novel constitutes a radical intervention in literary tradition. It challenges millennia of patriarchal storytelling by putting Draupadi's suppressed perspective at the centre of the narrative. In this revisionist perspective, what was historically a backdrop of male heroics is transformed into a foreground of female consciousness, so revealing the ways in which epic narratives have systematically neglected the experiences of women. It is the novel's ability to undermine the perceived objectivity of legendary texts that gives the novel its relevance.

Instead, it reveals these books to be created objects that perpetuate particular power structures. The retelling that Divakaruni has provided is significant because it gives a character who has been historically characterized by her victimhood the ability to regain her agency. This event becomes a psychological watershed in *The Palace of Illusions*, as Draupadi exclaims. In the original *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's that she would not let anybody see her cry, disrobing is used as a plot device to encourage male action through the use of the phrase I would not let them see me weep. I, Panchaali, would not give them that particular satisfaction.

(Divakaruni 145) A prime example of the greater goal of narrative reclamation that the novel is attempting to accomplish is this change from passive object to active subject. The work is given a greater significance as a result of its participation in modern feminist discourse. By imbuing Draupadi with contemporary sensibilities and a profound sense of introspection, Divakaruni successfully bridges the gap between the ancient text and contemporary problems around gender, power, and representation. In order to confront historical silences that continue to reverberate in contemporary culture, the novel explains how mythological retellings can act as cultural correctives. It is important to note that this novel is significant because it exemplifies how writing can simultaneously criticize tradition and propose alternative possibilities. Divakaruni's work demonstrates how revisiting the past with a feminist consciousness may revolutionize our knowledge of both history and contemporary gender dynamics. This is particularly relevant in a

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cultural context in which mythological narratives continue to define social norms. The book demonstrates that retellings are never objective; rather, they are always acts of cultural interpretation and, in certain cases, of freedom.

Final Thoughts

The Palace of Illusions engages with fundamental theoretical problems, such as subaltern voice, hybridity, and historical resistance, through its feminist and postcolonial revisioning of the *Mahabharata*. At the same time, it positions itself within a larger historical tradition of postcolonial counter-narratives. The novel written by Divakaruni does not only recount the story of Draupadi; rather, it completely dismantles the patriarchal and imperialist frameworks that have traditionally relegated her to the periphery of the epic. The text enacts what Gayatri Spivak refers to as the unlearning of privilege that is crucial for subaltern representation (Spivak 9). Additionally, the text transforms Draupadi from an object of myth into a subject of history by granting her narrative power. Arundhati Roy's portrayal of Ammu in *The God of Small Things*—a character who defies caste and gender conventions while challenging hegemonic institutions—is a good example of how this reclamation of agency is akin to what Roy has done.

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