



Panchali as the figure of resistance: Reading “The Palace of Illusions” as an ecriture feminine text

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her novel, has represented the ancient, mythical story of the Mahabharata from a feminist perspective and with a philosophical melody. In this story, Panchali is the heroine who narrates her narrative of girlhood, womanhood, her role as a queen, dutiful wife of five husbands, a mother and mother-in-law. While portraying different roles, she considers herself an actress. She is the mouthpiece of the author who attempts to show how gender is a performance and patriarchal society decides gendered roles. Apart from portraying the various kinds of roles, she unveils her profound emotions, deep sentiments related to her desire, curiosity, sexuality, morality, heartbreak, failures, success and her unavoidable conflict between yearning, ethics and duty. Divakaruni does not represent Panchali as a meek, oppressed girl who goes through the process of becoming a woman. She is strong, rebellious, courageous, spirited and can take actions and decisions by herself. This epic story of the Mahabharata centres on the politics of war, conspiracy, kingship, power and greed. All the characters show a certain kind of magnificent charm to make a simple story of conflict among cousins a universal saga of struggle and survival. In the history books or the usually available story books, the readers cannot hear the voice of Panchali. This story highlights her side of the story of Shayamvar, her humiliation at the crowded court, the Kurukshetra war, the victory of the Pandavas, the valour of karna and the enigmatic mystery of Krishna. This book celebrates the human bond of friendship, romantic relationships, platonic relationships, brotherhood, relation between children and parents. At the same time, this book shows how all of these relationships are deeply political. Choice is a political act that even makes love a political and conscious decision. This novel is a novel of



ideas as well as actions. Along with the physical actions and movements, the characters, especially Panchali undergoes a severe psychological transformation. Through the subjective gaze of Panchali, the readers get to know the landscapes of Hastinapur, Indraprastha, the palace of illusion, and the battlefield of kurukshetra. She also comments on marriage, love, longing, respect, banality of war, dystopia, position of women, existential crisis and destruction. For the first time, the readers can understand the feelings of Panchali during her humiliation at the court or the Sabha.

Women were not allowed to be present on Sabha, and they had no part in the war except waiting, praying and cooking. This book demystifies the stereotypical gendered roles by inserting women in the men's world. During the war, Panchali examines the relationship between dystopia and women and how they were affected by the severe apocalypse. Women were relentlessly crying and accusing Panchali of being the root cause of their bereavement. When the soldiers died, and their wives became widows, Panchali felt for them. The rampant destruction and terrific horror at the battlefield made her feel empathetic and unified with the suffering women. From being a mere wife, she transformed herself into a true queen, a true woman. She established her own palace/court of women where the widows and mothers could vent out their sorrow and pain. This is the celebration of the idea of sisterhood. The wretched condition produced by the war made her anguish seem insignificant and tiny compared to the misery of all those women. She transcended the definition of a regular woman and became a universal mother, a universal queen. Influenced by the wisdom of Bhishma and Krishna, she contemplated the very meaning of grief and lamentation. She transitioned herself from an emotional woman to a mature stoic. In this novel, she yearns for the affection, glance and love of Karna, although it was forbidden. Karna's presence is as mysterious as Krishna's divine aura. After knowing the truth about Karna, she starts blaming herself as the sole reason behind the war. She suffers from a moral dilemma but sticks to her



duty. She blames her pride, honour, and sense of revenge as the culprits of this severe massacre. The historical war of Kurukshetra has shown how the victory of one party leads to the failure of the opponent.

The title of the book is symbolic as it examines how life becomes a Maya. Life is an illusion that hinders the mortal to find peace. Attachment to material objects and relations gives birth to negative, tumultuous emotions, and these emotions can destroy a person and a nation. Detachment is the key to leading a peaceful and noble life. She took pride in her decorated, supreme palace of illusion. But that palace has created a trance in her mind that she will have to overcome. This is the message of the story. At the end of the story, Panchali faces her fall during Mahaprasthan. She is the first to meet her unfortunate fall. This Mahaprasthan metaphorically shows the essential journey to heaven initiated by all the Pandavas. More or less, all the characters are morally corrupted. Panchali depicts how not a single soul in this book is pure and free from a brittle ego. Everybody is burning in anger, jealousy, pride and corruption.

Apart from Draupadi/Panchali, there are other women characters like Kunti, Gandhari, Uttara and others. After her marriage to five husbands, she tried to adjust to the rules and customs of her in-law family. She criticises how a married woman can never be the daughter of her in-law family members. She depicts how marriage is a socially and culturally constructed, political, meaningless institution that is more concerned with respect and duty than love. Though initially she maintains a sour relationship with Kunti, she later empathises with Kunti's situation. Through this episode, the author shows how women become the victims of the social codes of misogyny and patriarchy and how they become each other's support system at the time of their suffering. Although this novel has other female characters, the readers can only taste Panchali's version of storytelling. The act of vastraharan is a prime example of a violent attack on femininity and fragile womanhood. Panchali bursts into tears of



shame, but she still prays to god for help. This calm attitude of Panchali has made her a figure of resistance. She curses the Kauravas and pledges to see their suffering. She, along with her husbands also leads a normal life at forest during their exile and banishment. Then, she realises the pain and simplicity of a life of a regular woman. It broadens her insight and psychological horizon.

While discussing the above issues of the story, the readers find that this novel embraces the tendencies of *écriture féminine*. According to Helene Cixous, *écriture féminine* celebrates the story of woman and womanhood. It is written by the woman and is created to accept the voices, desires, experiences, and bodies of women. It is also about the suppressed voices and the bodies of women. *Écriture féminine* celebrates a certain kind of feminine language that pays tribute to the power of women. It revolutionizes femininity and feminine sensibility. From the coming-of-age story of Panchali, “The Palace of Illusions” transforms itself into the portraiture of the circular illusion produced by the impulses of all the characters. Life is a trance, an illusion that makes anyone blind. Panchali is not blindfolded. But she metaphorically becomes one as she becomes determined to take revenge against kauravas. This impulse of revenge has shut down the vast horizon of truth, existence, beauty, honor and common sense to Panchali. When she gets free from this trance-like situation, she realises the actual meaning of life, the futility of war and the purposelessness of attachment. Divakaruni writes a novel of *écriture féminine*, and Panchali utters her’ story through the trope of this mode of feminine writing. By disclosing the tragedy and suffering of the women, Divakaruni has given a contemporary tone to this historical epic drama. Panchali becomes the symbol of an assertive daughter, wife, mother, and queen who weaves her own story. From a woman of circumstances, she journeys to become a woman of her choice, and in this case, she does not fear to be a true woman of resistance. Not only is the hero/narrator of this epic saga a woman, but the author is a female. It is a kind of feminine writing that represents a different version



of the Mahabharata that culturally and historically has been silencing the experiences, bodies and desires of women characters. It is created by the woman, for the women and tells a universal story of oppressed women.

Works cited:

Divakaruni, Chitra. “The Palace of Illusions.” Pan Macmillan India. 2019

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