

**Autonomy labelled as Transgression: A Probe into the Female Characters in
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions***

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Abstract:

Novels, written as retellings of epics and myths have gained momentum in the last few decades, creating an opportunity to rethink the previously established versions of stories, from varied and less delved focal points. Among these retellings, especially in the Indian literary scenario, many writers have brought the female characters and their stories to the limelight, by using those women themselves as the narrators. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wields the voice of Draupadi as a powerful weapon to show the other side of the story of Mahabharata, thereby bringing in elements of surprise and awe to the readers. In this research paper, the instances of female characters and their lives are analysed, wherein the question of individual autonomy is addressed. This study reveals the inability of the female characters in the novel, to live and act according to their freewill and how their roles and duties are discriminated gender wise by patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Gender, Transgression, Autonomy, Patriarchy, Dharma.

Introduction:

Women and their role in the progress of their family and society is one of the extensively analysed topics. As societies undergo changes, the role of women as a dormant segment of population has been subverted. From being an invisible unit of a family to an eminent leader, women's progress has undergone a giant leap. This progress is made possible due to the recognition of their individual talents and the brimming aspiration of expressing her abilities according to her own choice. Deepa Subramaniam, an entrepreneur says,

“People (both men and women) tend to make choices from within the menu card that is handed over to them. The menu of course is limited to the culture, environment and beliefs that you are brought up with. To be able to see beyond that and make a self choice of what you want to be is a power that you grant to yourself. Sadly, that power is snatched away in the name of gender, culture and societal norms.”

According to her, restoration of the power of deciding for oneself is the empowerment which every woman dreams of. Empowerment of women undoubtedly takes a major space in the list of prospective social changes to bring about human development. It includes the space offered to decide for their life and career and to freely live with a sense of self-worth and dignity. A woman is said to enjoy freedom when she is offered equal chance to be a part of religious, social and public activities.

In the West, men and women are measured as naturally and indisputably defined beings having definite psychological and behavioural tendencies. The division between the two genders with regard to differences in labour, attitudes and behaviour form an obligatory yet complementary part of social organization. The structural arrangements of a society are also found to be sensitive to the differences mentioned.

Among the various hypothesis and findings from the study of sex and gender, role theory has a special mention in attending to the social constructions of gender roles. Through the insights of Linton, Parson and Komarovsky, the theory has explained the social and dynamic aspect of role construction and enactment. Roles are found to be ‘situated identities’ that are liable to changes, according to the demands of the situation. In opposition to situated identities stand ‘master identities’ that remain fixed regardless of varied situations.

The conventional actions are termed as gender display which Goffman defines as follows: “If gender be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex...then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (69). Such conventional portrayals are not a result of the ‘essential nature’ but are rather the ways in which humans wish to cast themselves. Hence, gender could be derived as a “socially scripted dramatization of the culture’s idealization of feminine and masculine natures...” (130).

The wide use of the term gender was after the various revolutionary measures taken, to prevent the marginalizing of women and their abilities. In the earlier research in social sciences, the asymmetrical treatment of men and women was not considered essential as the aspects of race, social class and religion. In the text named *Understanding Gender: a Sociological Perspective*, the genesis of gender differentiation and its cult is discussed as follows:

The world of man and a woman has been divided into two halves, forming many pairs of binary opposites. It is a world of body verses mind, nature verses culture, emotion verses reason, private verses public. These dichotomies stand in chain to each other that shape the culturally constituted roles for men and women. (6)

In patriarchy, women are seen as delicate and emotionally prone beings who are always meant to be under the protection of men. Men, on the other hand who are seen as strong, tough and rational are deprived of a few of their feminine expression like being gentle and soft-spoken. This stereotypical thought undoubtedly becomes a burden and a man-made impediment to the natural forms of life and expression. This issue is discussed under gender performativity by Judith Butler, who affirms that there is no natural body that exists without any cultural influence. Butler's definition of gender is quoted in Sara Salih's essay 'On Judith Butler and Performativity' as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being"(55).

The *Mahabharata*, in the views of Chaturvedi Badrinath, never posed any restraint to the voice of Draupadi. Though this cannot be completely contested, the voice of Draupadi as presented in the epic does not sufficiently defend her stance as a cursed woman, caught in a complicated matrimony. Uma Chakravarti observes that "while recourse to violence is actually necessary to tame or break the resistance of men who need to be subordinated, the mere threat of violence is enough to silence women" (Jagpal 254).

Panchali, who from her birth, was no more than an adorable timid princess in compliance to the norms of royalty, finally breaks her silence only after the heinous crime of disrobing in public. Every man in the Kuru court including the great *Pitamah* and the King were of no support to the wailing queen of the Pandavas. Draupadi is pledged like an object and lost by Yudhishthir, due to the cunning plot of Shakuni and Duryodhan. The silent Draupadi decides to comprehend the injustice done to her honour, her female pride and identity. From the incident, the readers could find a change in her attitude from a liberal to a radical feminist. "The politics of space and security, advocated by the society in the institution of marriage and family, gets exposed here in its most deteriorated way" (Jagpal 265).

Draupadi, who was then distraught with her husbands' entrapment and her own abuse at the royal court, was left with two choices either to end her life or to avenge the insult borne. She firmly chooses the latter – to keep herself inflamed and to save her name and the respect of women in future. With such farsighted ambition in her heart, she accelerated the Great War of Mahabharata, despite her knowing the curses she would beget.

Draupadi's initial stage of life is characterized by a sharp contrast with regard to her personal desire and what her father and the royalty expected her to be. Draupadi's autonomous temperament is found right from her times of education, where she wants to learn the art of statecraft and wielding weapons that are completely detested for women. Such desire for obtaining the knowledge restricted to a *kshatriya* is kindled by the prophecy that she would be the cause of many great changes in the course of history. If she had to be of such worth, then she feels it is necessary to prove it by gaining almost a comprehensive knowledge of everything under the sun, without discrimination.

Panchali resents the fact that her desires had been ripped under the feminine codes of conduct and that she is almost held a captive within "the thick gray slabs of the walls—more suited to a fortress than a king's residence"(Divakaruni 6). In *The Palace of Illusions*, Dhai Ma always checks on Draupadi's words and behaviour and asks her to "contain herself and not to have very high hopes about her future lest they should incite her to transgress the boundaries fixed for women" (Jagpal 257).

Gender transgressions describe behaviours that are considered as contravening gender norms or as wrong ways of exercising gender. It can lead to severe penalties and social disrespect. The classification of behaviour as being non-confining differs in accordance to cultures and time periods. The abstract of the essay 'Gender Transgression' in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, explain the different views of critics:

"Some scholars have focussed on identifying forms of gender transgression and their ideological impact, whereas others have critiqued applications of gender transgression for mischaracterising people of trans or non-binary experience enacting ethnocentrism and overlooking individual experiences such as the internal and unexpressed aspects of gender." Transgression according to the Oxford Dictionary refers to the act of going against the law, a rule or code of conduct. It is derived from Middle English, Middle French and Latin, which means an act of crossing or passing over. The transgressive female behaviour was defined and measured in accordance to the prevailing social and moral values in a particular time period. A woman is addressed as fallen, sensational and a *demimonde*, which means a class of women in nineteenth century France, who were considered to be of doubtful social standing and morality as mentioned in the *Oxford Dictionary*. Apart from the act of writing, female transgression took a variety of forms. Such transgressive women represented a challenge and more of a threat to the existing cultural myths of gender, in reality and in fiction.

In the palace of Panchal, leading a sort of cloistered life, Panchali is constantly craving for her father's approval and affection. In *The Palace of Illusions*, she is believed to be a peril that emerged out of the sacrificial altar and is shunned as an ill omen by the family.

Yet, she builds her own character as a strong-willed woman and joins the royal procession to the Shiva temple with gleaming pride of her grace and assertiveness. Her beauty became the talk of the Panchal citizens and as Divakaruni describes, she became a celebrated beauty overnight.

Draupadi becomes aware that only with her physical charm that she becomes visible and sought after by people. Thus, she wields the same beauty in order to turn the various restrictions, favourable to her. She uses her physical appeal and punishes her brother's tutor who ridiculed women to be "the path to ruin" (24).

The contrast between desire and dharma is the main conflict with which the narration of Draupadi acquires gravity. In Divakaruni's novel, she is bewitched by the physical enchantment and emotional likeness of Karna, which creates an immense sense of remorse, when every time she had to put him to shame on account of her fidelity to her husbands'. During her *swayamvar*, she had been warned by her brother not to make a wrong choice that would make their father's efforts and dreams go futile. Hence, she had to restrict herself and limit her choice to Arjun, though it was Karna's image on the portrait and in her heart that set her heartbeat faster.

Apart from the autonomous and rebellious nature of Draupadi, she willingly exercised almost all the wishes of her father and brother without objection. But destiny played its sport when Kunti declared her to be divided among the five brothers equally. In *The Palace of Illusions*, she is a typical possessive mother who is always keen to check on her daughter-in-law's influence on her sons. Her declaration, in the novel is found to be a deliberate attempt to prevent Draupadi from having absolute right over the mighty Arjun. It had sealed the fate of Panchali once for all and she could never forgive Kunti for this act.

The instant response of the eldest Pandava - Yudhisthir was to defend his mother and their dharma. In Divakaruni's novel, he resolutely gives two ultimatums to King Drupad as to either have his daughter married to the five of them or to have the princess back in their palace. "Admittedly, this is an unusual agreement. But how can it be heinous to obey one's mother...Haven't our scriptures declared, the father is equal to heaven but the mother is greater?" (117).

Divakaruni raises a very relevant issue of the physical and ideological space of a woman. Draupadi, in *The Palace of Illusions* feels the need of having a palace of her own, a home where she could perform her duties as a wife and queen according to her fancy. This desire is not very strange for a married woman to dream about. Her sense of belonging as the mistress of an enamouring palace is evident when she describes how Kunti reacted on seeing the palace:

“She saw that in this palace, I was mistress. Where my husbands’ had once relied on her, they now depended on me. She could not disrupt this state of affairs without causing her sons serious unhappiness. Perhaps, the palace laid its calming finger on her, making her realize that she loved them more than she resented me. Had we remained in Hastinapur, in her husband’s palace, I am sure she would have fought me fiercely for control. But the palace of illusions was my domain, and she accepted this...” (150)

Her stoicism towards her female autonomy is another mode of affirmation of female identity against the oppressive mechanism of male-dominated society. Neglecting all social conventions, she challenged the dignitaries and respectable elders. She cries out, “Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought, why I should care? They not, I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds, decency” (193).

Draupadi’s duties as a faithful wife is never faltered, though the bitter incidents at the royal court of Hastinapur could never be erased from her memory. Her humiliation and objectification made her a rebel. But the duties of a wife to men, who would avenge her insults gave her courage to complete the term of exile. The decision of accompanying her five husbands was itself strange for a woman of high birth and she detested the thought of returning to her birthplace leaving her husbands’. “...I wouldn’t leave the forest, not even for a brief visit. I told a disappointed Dhri that my place was with my husbands. That I could not bear to live in luxury while they suffered the hardships of forest life. It wasn’t however, as simple as that” (207).

The novel having Panchali narrating her own moments of hardship and resistance, is open to the life stories of other women who divulged from the standards of the then society. In the chapter titled ‘Incarnation’, she provides an account of the mythical character Shikandi. The whole palace of Panchal was in turmoil as she had returned from the forest with the appearance of a sturdy man. “His fingers were slim, like a woman’s, and callused from stringing a bow...I noticed that we were of the same height, and somehow this consoled me for the loss of the sister he was supposed to be” (46).

On narrating his life history, Shikandi brought in more fantasies to the eyes of Draupadi. He compared himself to the donkey that covered itself in a lion’s hide and a wolf that used sheep skin to mingle with its prey without being detected. He had to get transformed into a man in order to avenge the greatest warrior of that time namely Bheeshma-the terrible. The birth of Shikandi as the daughter of Drupad is actually a rebirth in which she would kill Bheeshma for her self-immolation in her previous birth as Amba.

The pitiable state of Shikandi is that she is disowned by her father Drupad on gaining knowledge about her past life by wearing the everlasting garland. When Drupad’s vengeance against Drona was just, Shikandi’s vengeance towards Bheeshma was transgressive and

unjust. His stay in their palace was short, yet its influence on Draupadi and Dhri was enormous. On seeing her sister transformed against the norms of tradition, Draupadi was able to foresee that even she would one day be forced to transgress the codes of feminine conduct, prescribed by the Hindu tradition. Both of their lives were intertwined as Shikandi's final words to Draupadi explain his foresight:

You'll bring about the Great War where I'll meet Bheeshma and kill him...but I should have begged your pardon instead for all the humiliation you'll suffer before the war and all the sorrow afterward. And much of this you'll endure because your destiny is linked with mine.
(52)

Women were accused of divulging from the standards of men and are believed to be rightly punished by fate by their abandonment and death. In that case, questions could be raised on men for they themselves have broken the codes of shastras. Their ultimate motive was to quench the thirst of vengeance and to uplift the dharma which had no space for women and their requirements.

The women in the novel are mostly the passive receivers of both boon and contempt at the behest of men and their desire. Women, especially Draupadi and Shikandi are seen as transgressive as they never give them up to the conditions of men. Especially the character of Draupadi is not of a readily submitting nature. Her freedom of expression is used to the extent that her opinions become a detestable topic to be conversed further. The inevitable nature of women's suffering cannot be contested. Yet, suffering contains the rudiments of resistance and reaffirmation. On being muddled in the pangs of life and death, did the women in the *Mahabharata* find a solution to the issue of exercising freewill though it is marked as violation of norms in the eyes of the old and clichéd society.

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